







# Whiskey Promises (Wine Country Alphas #1)

**Author:** Nichole Rose

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Fake dating her gay best friend to avoid the man of her dreams should be a piece of cake...right?

Zoya Mikhail

I was not supposed to fall for my sisters hot guitarist, Jareth Grayson. I wasn't supposed to kiss him, either.

But mistakes were made.

Asking my gay best friend to pose as my boyfriend at my sisters wedding is an act of desperation meant to keep me out of Jareths arms.

Until it fails spectacularly.

My bestie is MIA as soon as we land, and I'm pretty sure Jareth is stalking me. It's the only explanation for why I keep ending up in his arms.

He's a rockstar with a vineyard to run. I'm still in grad school, half a country away. This is never going to work. But God help me, I don't want it to end, either.

Jareth Grayson

The woman of my dreams skipping town after I kissed her? Brutal.

Finding out that she has a boyfriend? Ouch.

Watching her boyfriend dote on her at my familys vineyard? Oh, hell no.

Zoya Mikhail is mine. She can pretend she's in love with another man all she wants, but I know better. I see the way she looks at me like she's dying for another taste. She's wild about me, and she knows it.

As soon as I find out why she's lying to herself, I intend to put a stop to it.

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:57 am*

Zoya

At five-foot-two, most of the world is taller than me. But I've learned that it's a less intimidating place when people think I have my shit together. So my motto has always been to fake it until you make it...and talk a lot of crap if you can't.

But that was before my sister's stupidly hot guitarist, Jareth Grayson, strolled his fine ass into her dressing room. I've never been more acutely aware that my shit is not together than I am with him staring at me from across the room.

The only thing I'm faking now is a yawn while I discreetly check to make sure I'm not actually drooling over him.

Jesus. The man is gorgeous. And imposing. His tight black t-shirt stretches across the muscles in his chest, hinting at the body beneath. His long fingers wrap around his beer bottle in a way that shouldn't be nearly as hot as it is...and yet, it is.

Don't even get me started on his tattoos. They litter his body in devastating lines I want to trace with the tip of my tongue.

I think he knows it, too. Those jade green eyes have been locked on me all night. Every time he catches me staring, he smirks.

Like right now. He's smirking again.

And I'm scowling again.

My sister, Nadia, sees my face and chuckles. One long fingernail jabs me in the ribcage.

"You should talk to him, Zoya," she says, her hazel eyes dancing with amusement.

"What? Who?" I turn to blink at her like I'm oblivious. There's no way she's buying my bullshit, though. I don't even buy it.

"Jareth." She nods in his direction.

"No, thanks." I scrunch my nose up, sending him a disgruntled look. "Dad taught us not to talk to creeps who stare too much."

My older sister's laughter spills across the dressing room, a bright, happy sound. We both know she isn't really happy, though. Like me, she's gotten good at faking it, but I know her as well as I know myself. She hasn't been truly happy since Teo Kirby broke her heart six years ago.

I might not ever want to fall in love myself, but the two of them belong together. They're just too busy being hurt to see what the rest of us know. Some days, I'm not sure they'll ever find their way back to one another after everything they've been through. Other days, I'm certain they will.

Today? Well, today I'm choosing hope.

I mean, they have to figure it out sooner or later, right?

"Jareth is not a creep," she protests through laughter.

"Says you." I scowl at him again. Why is he still staring at me? Better question, why am I still staring at him? "But I stopped trusting your judgment when you told me that

Dad wouldn't lose it if I dyed my hair pink my senior year."

Her lips curve into a mischievous grin. "I just wanted to see if you'd actually do it."

Spoiler alert: I did it. It went over like a lead balloon. Dad is dramatic and overprotective every day of the week, but I thought he was going to have an actual heart attack that day.

"It is your body, your choice, but not your beautiful, beautiful hair, zaika !" Nadia mimics his deep baritone. She even manages a pretty spot-on facsimile of his horrified expression. "Make your daughter change it back, kisa ."

That's pretty much exactly how it went down. Except there was more dramatic gesturing and anxious pacing involved. He damn near wore a hole in the carpet. For a week straight.

"Have you ever noticed that we're always mom's daughters when we're stressing him out?" I ask, tucking strands of my curly hair—which is no longer pink, I might add—behind my ears.

"Uh, yes. He swears his daughters are angels. When we misbehave, it's all mom's fault."

"That's because it usually is her fault."

Nadia and I fall into a fit of laughter.

"What's so funny?" Jareth asks.

I jolt in my seat, whipping my head up. My eyes land on his dick. Of course they do. I tell myself to look higher, really, I do. But my gaze is just...stuck. The bulge in his

jeans is massive.

No wonder half of Nadia's fans want to sleep with him.

"Talking about our dad, right, Z?" Nadia says, elbowing me in the ribcage.

"Uh..."

Why am I still staring at his dick?

And is that my tongue darting across my bottom lip?

Betrayal of the highest order.

"Ah, Knox," Jareth chuckles. "Good man."

Nadia elbows me again, harder this time.

I finally manage to rip my gaze away from Jareth's cock. My eyes bounce toward his face so fast that it's obvious I was staring at things I shouldn't be.

He notices, dammit. Those jade eyes meet mine, full of amusement. "Nice to see those pretty eyes up here, princess."

"What? I..."

A wickedly deep laugh rumbles from his lips.

"I need to go check on...something," Nadia says, bounding to her feet like her ass is on fire.

I whip my head in her direction, pleading silently for her not to leave me alone with her guitarist.

"See you after the show," she calls, a bright smile plastered across her face as she scurries away, giggling to herself.

Oh, she is evil.

"So..." Jareth says.

"I wasn't staring at your dick."

One dark brow lifts, his lips curving into a smirk. "That's what they all say, princess."

Ugh. I just bet they do. He probably has a whole host of women ready to fall into his bed every single time he crooks his ridiculously long, talented finger.

I am not that girl. For one thing, my dad would lose his mind. For another, I've always had more important things to worry about, like school. I have plans for my life, and they do not include hopping into bed with a hot guitarist.

Casual sex just isn't for me, and I am never, ever falling in love. The heart is a liar, and I've seen exactly what a devastating fiasco that can be. It almost killed Nadia when she and Teo broke up. Literally. It took a major car accident and two stints in rehab to get her where she is now.

That will not be me. No way.

And that isn't jealousy I feel thinking about Jareth with other women.

Hell no, it isn't. Jareth Grayson can sleep with as many groupies as he wants.



I have more important things to worry about—like finishing my final year of college.

Hopefully without getting expelled or ending up in jail.

With me, both are real possibilities. I make terrible decisions.

Jareth Grayson will not be one of them.

The way he makes my stomach flutter is a problem best avoided.

"Well, good luck with that," I say sarcastically, slipping from my chair. "Make sure you wrap it up. I hear it's good for your health."

"What the fuck? That's not what I..."

I attempt to step around him, not interested in hearing what he has to say, but he grabs my arm, throwing me off balance.

I topple into him. Naturally.

"Fuck." He wraps an arm around my waist to steady me, sloshing beer over both of us in the process. "Sorry. Shit, sorry."

"Stop moving!" I cry as he basically hauls me up against his chest, still splashing us with beer.

"You stop moving first."

I tip my head back to scowl up at him when I hear the laughter in his voice. The smile on his face only confirms my suspicions. He finds this whole situation hilarious.

"You're getting me all wet," I complain.

Humor dances in his eyes when they meet mine. "Am I supposed to apologize or thank God?"

Oh. Ugh!

I shove him away from me with a glower, ignoring the heat in my cheeks. "That is not what I meant."

"You said it."

"I was talking about the beer you spilled on me.

" I grab the hem of his T-shirt, using it to wipe down my arms while he watches with a cocky smirk stretched across his face.

I try like hell not to peek at the tantalizing strip of golden skin peeking at me from beneath his shirt, but it's impossible to miss it.

There's no way he got that body from playing the guitar.

"Seriously?" he asks when I'm done.

I just shrug, tossing my hair over my shoulder. "You got me wet. I returned the favor. Now, we're even."

"You want to get me wet, princess?" His eyes darken, and he takes a step toward me, a predatory growl rumbling in his chest.

My fight or flight kicks in as soon as I hear that sound. It's way too damn hot. He is

way too damn hot. My whole body is singing for him. I cannot handle any of that.

"Enjoy wearing your beer," I practically squeak, bolting toward the door like the good little coward I am.

Two hours later, I meet Nadia at the side of the stage as the whole bar claps and cheers for her and the band. She sounded amazing up there. And dammit all, but Jareth looked amazing.

Hot and talented? God is not playing fair tonight.

"You did amazing!" I cry, shoving a bottle of water into my sister's hands. "They love the new stuff."

"Thank God." She pauses to inhale half the bottle, her cheeks flushed with exertion. "It'll be a bad tour if they don't."

"Please." I roll my eyes. "You've never written a bad song a day in your life."

Nadia grins at me as the rest of the band troops down the steps to meet us. Jareth's eyes immediately lock on me. I pretend not to notice, but it's impossible not to notice him staring when he's not even trying to be subtle about it.

He spent half the damn show staring at me. At one point, he winked at me, and the girls at tables on either side of me practically swooned. It was ridiculous!

"You were on fire tonight, Nadia," Lemmy, her drummer, says, holding out his fist for her to bump. "They fucking loved you, kid."

"Thanks." She pops the cap back on the water bottle, her gaze shifting to a group of women dressed in tiny shorts and crop tops waiting a few feet away. "You guys did

great tonight." She nods at the group. "Pretty sure they aren't here to meet me."

Lemmy grins, waggling his brows.

Surprisingly, Jareth doesn't even glance in their direction. He just shakes his head at Lemmy, his lip curled like he tasted something bitter.

"You need help breaking everything down?" Nadia asks him.

"Nah." He waves her off. "We've got Samson and Ace to help. You go visit with your sister." His gaze comes back to me, that damn sexy smirk plastered on his face again. The way his lips curl up on the right side is just...argh!

## Page 2

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I actually squeak out loud before looping my arm through Nadia's to drag her away.

"Stupid hot guitarist and his stupid hot smirk," I mutter to myself.

"Where are we going?" Nadia asks.

Away from your guitarist before I accidentally climb him like a tree.

"There's a shot of vodka over there with my name on it. We need to go get it before someone else does." My logic is sound.

"This is a nightclub, Zoya. I'm pretty sure they aren't going to run out of vodka."

"They might. You never know." See? Logical. I peek over my shoulder to find Jareth staring at my ass. Another squeak spills from my lips without my permission. "Walk faster."

Nadia glances back at Jareth, a slow smile spreading across her face. "You like my guitarist."

"What? No!"

"Oh my gosh. You do!"

"Filthy lies." The problem with fair skin is that it tells the truth even when you don't. I feel my cheeks flaming, telling Nadia plainly that I'm a dirty, dirty liar.

"Great show!" a pretty blonde says as we pass.

"Thank you," my sister calls before refocusing on me. "You do like him."

"Do not," I mumble, avoiding her gaze. "He's annoying. And smirky. And he won't stop staring at me."

"He's a good guy. Very interesting."

I huff as we slide onto two barstools at the far edge of the bar, away from most of the crowd. The bartender immediately heads in our direction, wiping his hands on a towel.

"He's not interesting. He's Satan," I mutter, peeking over my shoulder again. Jareth is breaking down equipment on stage, moving with a cool confidence that's fascinating. He's completely ignoring the women at the side of the stage who are still trying to get his attention.

Because he thinks he's taking me home tonight? Maybe.

Wait. What does Nadia mean by interesting?

"Two shots of Stoli, please," she orders for us. "Better make hers a double."

"Got it," the bartender says and then spins to take care of it.

"Interesting, how?" I finally ask.

"He has a twin, for starters."

I turn wide eyes on my sister. There are two of them? "Seriously?"

"Identical."

"Holy crap." God really doesn't play fair, does he?

"And he owns a vineyard."

"He owns a vineyard?" I gape at my sister, trying to wrap my head around that. I guess the body makes sense now. Jesus. Jareth Grayson owns a freaking vineyard. My friends own student loans and bad decisions. "Your friends are not like my friends, Nadia."

She laughs quietly. "Hollywood is a whole different world."

"No kidding. I thought Nashville was glitz and glam when you were first starting out, but this place is...

" I shake my head, glancing around the nightclub with wide eyes.

It's posh as hell, with tasteful décor and luxurious seating.

Considering most of the bars back home stick to the tried-and-true western motif, this place really is a whole new world.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to it. "

It's weird enough knowing that my sister is famous now. But her world is so different from the way we grew up. I guess maybe that's the point, isn't it? She needed something new and different to heal.

"Me either," she admits in a whisper. The sadness in her eyes squeezes my heart in a vise. She's thinking about Teo again. He was traded to the football team here in Los

Angeles recently. For the first time in years, the two of them are in the same city again.

Nadia and I have carefully danced around the subject since my plane landed, but I know she's thinking about him. Half the damn songs she sang tonight were about him. Just like always.

"I sent videos to Mom and Dad," I murmur, dancing around it yet again. "They're proud of you."

"I miss them so much," she says.

"You know they'll fly out again soon. There's no way Dad is going to let you be out here by yourself for more than a few months at a time without showing up to check in."

Her expression softens into a smile, but it doesn't really reach her eyes.

"Are you happy here?" I slip my hand into hers as the question spills out. I can't help but ask, though. After everything she's been through trying to survive without Teo, I worry.

Now, they're in the same city again. Of course I worry. But talking about him has always been strictly off-limits. She doesn't want to hear anything about him, especially not from the people who know her best.

"Yeah, I'm happy here."

Her answer is too quick, too...fake.

"Truly happy, Nadia?" I press, eyes narrowed on her.



The truth is right there in her eyes. She still misses him.

The bartender appears before she has to answer, sliding our shots across the table. I pretend for her sake that he's distracted me, but I already have my answer. She isn't happy here. She's just faking it like always.

But we learned long ago that we can't force her to face it. We tried that. She ran off to Los Angeles. We tried it with him, too. He got in a bar fight that nearly ruined his career. Now, we do this. We dance around it and pretend they aren't both miserable.

Fake it til you make it, right?

I scoop my shot up, arching one brow at her.

She groans, reluctantly grabbing hers. "You aren't getting me drunk tonight, baby sister."

"We'll see about that," I smirk.

"I'm serious! I have to be at the studio early."

"Then you better drink your weight in water because you're about to drink it in vodka." I bat my lashes at her. "Now, drink."

She scowls at me, tipping the shot back. The grimace on her face is hysterical. She hates the taste of vodka. I quickly down mine, letting the alcohol burn its way down my throat. It's strong, but I like the flavor.

"Gah!" Nadia shudders, slamming her shot glass down on the bar. "I don't know how you and Dad drink this!"

"It's not that bad."

"It's awful."

"Don't let him hear you say that," I say, giggling. "You can insult Russia all you want in front of him, but never let him hear you insult their vodka."

Nadia chuckles because she knows I'm right. Dad may hate his country of birth on account of them trying to assassinate his father, but he's passionate about their vodka.

"How are he and Mom doing?"

"Fine." I roll my eyes, fighting a grin.

"He's driving her crazy like usual. I don't know what possessed him to retire.

He's terrible at it. He just follows her around, annoying her all day.

Your He-Man will do that for you, kisa .

Kisa , come, let me do that. She said if he doesn't find a hobby soon, she's going to strangle him. "

"Taking care of her is his hobby."

"No, that's his purpose," I correct, motioning for the bartender. "Chasing her around is his hobby."

Nadia giggles because she knows I'm right.

Our parents have always been ridiculously, blissfully in love.

Sometimes, I think I want the same thing...

and then I remember everything Nadia's been through and change my mind.

I don't want to end up nursing a broken heart for the rest of my life like my sister.

That's a lot more common than happily ever after these days.

And given my track record with questionable decisions?

Well, better to skip it altogether than risk it.

"Hey, ladies."

We glance over at the same time to find a man with bloodshot green eyes and a wrinkled suit standing way too close to Nadia for comfort. Two of his friends loiter behind him. Even from where I'm seated, I can smell the alcohol on them.

Great. This is just what we need.

"Heard you up on stage," he says, leering at my sister. "You've got pipes."

"Thanks," she mutters, tense and clearly not interested.

He's either too drunk or too oblivious to take the hint because he steps closer, crowding her on her stool.

"Can I buy you a drink?"

"Thank you, but no." She smiles politely and leans away from him. "I've already ordered one, and that's my limit."

"Ah, come on," he tries to cajole, leaning down over her. "You entertained us for the last hour. It's our turn to entertain you."

And that's about enough of that. Why can't some people ever take a hint?

"How?" I ask, scowling at him. "Are you going to dance for us? Stand on your head? Juggle?"

He flicks a dismissive look in my direction and then glances back at Nadia, his smirk growing as his gaze flicks up and down her body, lingering on her breasts. "Oh, I can think of a few ways."

His friends snicker.

Oh. Gross.

"Yeah, no thanks," she mutters, stiffening in outrage. "I'm not interested."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not. I wasn't aware I needed to explain myself to you." Her eyes narrow on him, her patience at an end. Nadia may be soft-hearted, but she isn't a pushover. "I know this might not register in your current state, but no is a complete sentence."

"So is watch your fucking mouth, you fat bitch," he snaps, immediately flipping from trying to be charming to insults and threats.

Typical. Guys like him never handle rejection well.

Nadia is gorgeous, successful, and talented...

three things he'll never be. He insults her to make himself feel better about the fact that he'll never be in her league.

"I suggest you get out of her face before we call her security team over," I lie, trying to stay calm. Nadia doesn't have security tonight, even though she should, but she has the band.

I glance toward the stage, and my heart sinks. They aren't up there anymore. Crap.

I slap a scowl on my face and forge ahead anyway. "The three of you look like you've been drinking all night. I doubt you'd last a single round."

"Call them over," one of his buddies says. "We'll see who can last."

Well...shit. Note to self: check for backup before talking shit next time.

"Yeah, bitch," the one looming over her says. "Call your little security guard over. See if he can protect you from what I'm going to do to you and your little friend when I get you alone."

Oh, hell no. No one is doing a damn thing to me or my sister. I'll kick his drunk ass myself before he touches either one of us.

## Page 3

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I open my mouth to shout for help, only to swallow it back when I see Teo Kirby storming toward us with murder in his eyes.

Shit. Teo is actually here.

What is he doing here? Is he stalking Nadia now that they're in the same city? Are they talking again?

Why didn't she tell me?

She sees him not even two seconds later, her eyes locking on him like she's drowning.

"Mateo." His name shakes on her lips, full of years of pain and memories, making it clear they haven't seen each other in a while. Crap. This is going to be a disaster.

I'm not wrong.

Teo doesn't say a word as he grabs the jackass who told me to call security and flings him across the bar like a ragdoll.

Nadia cries out as the guy crashes into a table a few feet away. Everyone around us goes silent as Teo yanks his friend up by the throat before tossing him aside.

"You," he snarls at the jerk in the wrinkled suit. "Apologize. Now."

The man stares at him blankly.

"You threatened her." Teo hauls himself up to his full height, his fist clenched. The man is imposing as hell. He's played professional football for years, and it shows.

"Apologize. Now," he grits out, his voice a dark rumble.

"Fuck you and the bitch."

"Wrong choice." Teo snaps his arm back, smashing his fist into the man's face once.

Bone crunches, his nose breaking on impact.

Another soft cry escapes Nadia's lips as he crumples like a paper doll at Teo's feet, hitting the floor with a heavy thud.

I'm not surprised, though. This is what Teo does. It's what he's done over and over ever since he lost Nadia. His life is a trainwreck, and the damage just keeps piling up. But honestly? I think that's how he wants it. It's how he punishes himself for her accident.

But he's here now. They're in the same room. That has to be a good sign...right?

"I called the police," the bartender says, hurrying over to us. He eyes Teo warily, as if he's fully aware of who he is and his reputation for leaving places like this in ruins.

"They're on the way."

Teo ignores him, his eyes locked on my sister like he can't look away. "You okay, butterfly?" he asks her, his voice soft.

She jerks her chin in a nod, not speaking. I don't think she can.

"Zoya?" he asks, checking on me.

"I'm fine."

He and Nadia stare at one another for a long moment while he shakes out his hand. Neither of them says anything, but God...the way they look at each other makes me want to cry. It's obvious neither of them ever got over the other. It's equally as obvious they still belong together.

When are they going to stop destroying themselves and realize it?

"Thank yo—"

"Hire security. You need it," he interrupts Nadia before turning abruptly and walking away.

She gapes after him for a long moment before her eyes narrow in outrage. Before I can say a word, she's storming through the bar after him. I let them go, praying they finally work their shit out. They need to do it. Desperately.

"Hey." Jareth materializes at my side a moment later, fury stamped all over his face as he scowls at the three dicks the bouncer is trying to haul out. "What the fuck just happened?"

"Oh, sure," I mutter, rubbing my temples. " Now he shows up."

"We were loading up the equipment. Someone ran out and said there was a fight over Nadia. What happened, Zoya?"

"The Three Drunken Stooges there thought insulting and threatening us was a good way to get in Nadia's pants."

Jareth growls, taking a step toward them.



"Easy there, buddy." I roll my eyes, grabbing his arm. His muscles are tense under my palm. "Teo already handled it."

"Teo?" Jareth's eyes widen. "Teo Kirby?"

"That's the one."

He glances toward the doors, his eyes narrowed. "Should we go check on her?"

"Definitely not," I say before he tries to swoop into the middle of something he doesn't understand. "Believe me, whatever is happening out there needs to happen. Do them a favor and let it."

He stares at me for a moment before jerking his chin in a nod. He slides onto Nadia's vacant barstool, his thigh bumping mine as he turns toward me. "So, he's the guy, huh?"

"Yeah, he's the guy," I say quietly, cocking my head to the side in curiosity. "You know about him?"

"Nah. She hasn't said anything about him, but it's not hard to see it if you know her. You don't write like that unless you've been there."

"Ah." I glance down at the bar, tracing a water spot. "So you've been there, huh?"

"Fuck no," he says, chuckling.

Why am I not surprised? Of course he's never been in love. Guys like him aren't even capable of it. They just sleep around until they're too old to do that anymore, and then they die alone.

Ugh. Why do I care?

"Are you okay?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Three jackasses threatened you," he says, his lips pulled down into a frown as if it should be obvious.

"Oh." I wave him off. "I'm fine."

His eyes lock on my face, searching. "Are you?"

"Yes," I huff at him. "Trust me, Jareth, this isn't the first time some idiot said something nasty to me. It probably won't be the last either. That's what it's like being a woman in this world."

And when you're a curvy woman? Well, let's just say that you get used to nasty, unsolicited comments quickly.

The body positivity movement only works for those receptive.

Guys like the three the bouncer is hauling out will never see us as equals.

To them, we're something to use, and something to abuse, and that's it.

Jareth scowls like my comment pisses him off, reaching out to cup my cheek. His calloused fingers are gentle against my skin, his expression soft and warm. "It's still bullshit, princess. Fuck anyone who doesn't treat you like a queen."

"I..." I lick my lips, caught up in his gaze. My heart pounds an erratic rhythm. It's

truly unfair how damn beautiful he is. And how much I like him.

"Jareth," I blurt, trying to think of anything but the way his body felt pressed to mine earlier. "Isn't that the Goblin King?"

He scans my face, his expression impressed. "You know your '80s movies."

"Uh, everyone knows Labyrinth . It's David Bowie in tights."

He chuckles, his eyes locked on my face and his hand still pressed to my cheek. "My mom is a die-hard fantasy lover. You should hear my siblings' names."

"Khalessi? Aragorn?" I guess.

"Close." His lips quirk into a grin, his fingers sliding across my cheek in a way that I do not hate. "Try Bastian, Arwen, and Hermione."

"You're shitting me."

"Nope."

"So you have the coolest mom ever," I say, impressed. "But I have a question."

"Shoot."

"Does she know the babe? You know, the one with the power?"

His deep laugh rumbles through me like a gong, striking something deep in my womb.

"Of course you went there," he mutters.

"You got the name. I got the jokes." I shrug, but there's nothing casual about the way my heart is thudding against my ribcage like it's trying to break free.

I think he feels the same thing between us because his eyes drop to my mouth, his expression sobering. "Fuck," he groans, his thumb sliding across my bottom lip. "I've been staring at this mouth all night, Zoya. The more you talk, the more I want to know what it tastes like."

I don't know why I do it because I'm still completely sober, but I catch the pad of his thumb between my teeth. The result is instantaneous. He growls, that same predatory sound from the dressing room, and hauls me halfway off my stool. His lips come down on mine in a dizzying kiss.

I gasp in shock, allowing him to slip his tongue into my mouth. It tangles with mine, tempting me into a moment of madness. Even though alarm bells scream that I shouldn't be doing this, I press up against him, kissing him like he's offering salvation.

He tastes like mint and beer. It's an intoxicating combination on his lips, especially with his hands in my hair and a hungry growl vibrating in his chest.

The only thing that saves me from climbing his body right in the middle of the club is the bartender clearing his throat behind us.

We spring apart, breathing hard.

Jareth looks pissed at the interruption; his eyes narrowed on the smaller man like he's considering pulling him across the bar to choke the life out of him.

"Sorry," the guy mutters. "But I need to know if you want Jett to hold the three of them for the police to get here."

"Let them go," I blurt, leaping to my feet. The last thing Teo needs is for the three of them to stick around long enough to press charges. He's been in enough trouble the last few years. "Nadia wouldn't want this all over the news."

I have a feeling it will be anyway. Teo was in a bar fight over her. That's going to make waves. People with their kind of fame don't get privacy during times like this.

The bartender nods before stepping away.

Jareth reaches for me, but I dodge him.

"I gotta go," I mumble.

"Zoya, wait."

I shake my head, backing away. "That shouldn't have happened."

"Why the fuck not?" he growls, rising to his feet.

"B-because..." I try to think of a good reason, but I highly doubt the panic beating at my chest is going to be enough to sway him.

Not with that look in his eyes. And I really don't want to admit to a man like him that I'm a virgin, not when I'm simply one in a long line to him. "Because I'm seeing someone."

He rocks back on his heels like I slapped him. "You're seeing someone."

"Yes," I lie. "Back home. At school."

I'm going to hell for lying, but at least I'll go with my dignity...right?

He stares at me, not saying anything, and I feel like the biggest jerk on the planet. But I don't take it back, either. Jareth Grayson and I can't happen. We just...can't.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, turning on my heel and practically fleeing from the bar.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:57 am*

Jareth

Three Months Later

"Nadia!" Zoya Mikhail cries, her sweet voice echoing across the stage like an aria from on high.

Nadia spins, her eyes locking on her baby sister. "Zoya! You're here!"

"God damn," I mutter under my breath, my eyes locked on Zoya as she rushes up the steps with her arms flung out wide. She isn't rushing toward me, though. Unfortunately. Her eyes are locked on her sister.

The two of them collide in the center of the stage in an excited ball of laughter and squeals.

Nadia is glowing with happiness. And Zoya?

Fucking hell, I've never seen anything prettier.

The bright smile plastered across her gorgeous face lights her up like the sun.

Her hazel eyes actually sparkle as happy laughter spills from her lips.

I discretely adjust my cock, trying not to think about the way those curves felt beneath my hands three months ago.

It's a useless attempt. I've thought of nothing but her since she ripped the goddamn rug out from beneath me in the middle of that nightclub and then skipped town like she couldn't wait to get as far away from me as possible.

I should be mad as hell that she kissed me back that night. That's the rational thing to feel, right? She kissed me like she was fucking starving for a taste of me, and it was all a lie. She's seeing someone else.

But that's not what's had me all fucked up in the head, oh no. I'm mad as hell that she isn't mine. That she kisses some other prick the same way she kissed me.

He's the one who gets to put his hands all over her perfect body.

He's the one she thinks about.

It's bullshit. She should be in my bed, wearing my ring.

"Stare any harder and your eyes are going to fall out like some fucking cartoon," Lemmy says, slapping me on the back.

"Fuck off," I mutter, turning a dark scowl on him. "I'm not staring."

"Right." He draws the word out, an amused smirk painted across his face. "And I wasn't balls deep in a pretty little blonde last night, either."

"Jesus Christ." My lip curls in disgust. "Knock it off with that shit, man. No one wants to hear about it." The last thing I need to know is who he's fucking or what they do together. The man is determined to sleep his way through every fan we've got.

That shit isn't me, as much as some people wish it were. I want what my parents have, something real. Something that lasts. I want Zoya Mikhail.



"I'm just saying. You're a piss poor liar." Lemmy holds his hands up, chortling to himself. "You were staring at her the same goddamn way back in Los Angeles a few months ago."

"You don't know what you're talking about," I mutter, my eyes locked on Zoya again. We both know I'm full of shit, though. He was there. He saw me kissing her at the bar. He hasn't stopped giving me shit about it since.

"Mmhmm." Lemmy shakes his head, strolling over to his drums.

I lift my guitar strap over my head and set it on the stand. For a long moment, I just watch Nadia and Zoya whisper back and forth. They look so much alike with their dark hair and hazel eyes, but they're night and day different. Zoya is fiery and full of life. Nadia is sweet and gentle.

My eyes narrow when Zoya shoots me a furtive look over her shoulder and then quickly positions herself with her back to me.

What the hell? Is she trying to ignore me?

Yeah, fuck that noise.

I stomp across the stage toward her, chuckling to myself when she casts another look over her shoulder and sees me coming. She squeaks the same way she did back in Los Angeles, her pretty eyes growing comically wide.

"Jareth, you remember my baby sister, Zoya," Nadia says as soon as she spots me. "She's hanging out with me while we're in town for the show."

"Cool," I say like I wasn't fully aware that Zoya goes to school in Knoxville weeks before our bus rolled into town.

Like I haven't been counting down the days to this show.

My gaze runs over Zoya again. She's still trying like hell to ignore me, looking everywhere but right at me.

Her cheeks are bright pink. Christ, she's beautiful. "What's up, princess?"

"Princess?" Nadia mouths, her eyes wide.

Zoya whips her head in my direction so fast she damn near topples over. The stubborn tilt to her jaw only makes my dick harder.

"Don't call me that," she says.

"Would you prefer queen?" My gaze tangles with hers. "I did tell you that you deserved to be treated like one, didn't I? I mean, after I got you wet and everything." I bet her little prick of a boyfriend doesn't treat her like a queen. He probably doesn't even know what to do with a girl like her.

"Oh my," Nadia whispers, her wide-eyed gaze bouncing between us.

Zoya growls at me—the cutest sound I've ever heard—and then grabs my arm. "He means after he spilled his beer on me . We'll be right back," she says to her sister before trying to haul me away.

I let her do it. Why the fuck not? Seeing her all fired up is doing a number on my cock. Might as well go with it, especially if it means getting five minutes alone with her.

Lemmy barely manages to stifle his laughter as she marches me past him, bristling like a little kitten. The rest of the band just watches the show with wide eyes.

Zoya releases my arm as soon as we're backstage, spinning to face me. "Have you lost your mind?" she hisses. "You can't say things like that!"

"Why the fuck not?"

"Because...because I have a boyfriend!"

"Is that so?" I make a show of glancing around. "Odd how your sister doesn't even know anything about this boyfriend of yours, isn't it?"

Zoya narrows her eyes. "You asked Nadia about my boyfriend?"

"Mmhmm," I hum, crowding her up against a post. Maybe it's a dick move, but it's been months since we were in the same room together. I want my fucking hands on her.

Judging by the way she whimpers when I'm pressed up against her, she wants the same damn thing. For some reason, though, she's determined to pretend she doesn't.

I tip her head back with a finger beneath her chin, forcing her to meet my gaze. "You look beautiful today, princess."

"Jareth," she whimpers. "Stop talking to my sister about me. And stop telling people that you got me wet."

"Tell you what. I'll lie about getting you wet in Los Angeles if you tell me why you lied about having a boyfriend."

"I'm not honestly sure if she is lying about the boyfriend or not, but I like the way she's glaring at me like she wants to set me on fire."

And I really fucking like the way she's trembling against me like she's two seconds from climbing my body.

I dip my head, running my lips up the side of her throat. Christ, she tastes like cherries and sin. The pulse in her throat pounds like a jackhammer when I touch my tongue to it.

"I didn't ask you to lie. I asked you to tell the truth. I was only wet because you spilled beer on me. And I didn't lie to you." Her voice shakes. "I just...haven't told Nadia about him yet."

We both know the beer isn't the only reason she was wet that night, but I let her think that. For now.

"Why haven't you told her about him? Aren't you two close?"

"She was going through things."

"Her and Teo are good now," I remind her, flicking my tongue against her skin again just to get another taste. Her sister and Teo got together or back together shortly after I kissed Zoya at the nightclub. Hell, he's proposed to her already. They're getting married a few days before Christmas.

"So?" Zoya scowls at me. "It's my decision when to tell her about my boyfriend, not yours."

"If he even exists."

She huffs like I'm pissing her off and then plants her hands against my chest, pushing as hard as she can. She only manages to move me because I take a step back so she doesn't hurt herself. The sexy little minx hardly even reaches my chest. She's fucking

tiny.

I watch in barely concealed amusement as she fishes around in her pocket before ripping her phone out of it like she intends to launch it at my head. Surprisingly, she doesn't. She stabs at the screen hard enough to break the glass and then turns it around to show me.

My heart twists in a knot when I see her background. It's her...cuddled up to some asshole with blue eyes in a baseball uniform who has his arm around her and a shit-eating grin on his face. He looks like a dick.

"See?" she says triumphantly. "My boyfriend."

Well...fuck.

Why do I feel like she just ripped the goddamn rug out from beneath me again?

"You're happy with him?"

"Why?" she asks suspiciously.

"Just answer the question, Zoya."

"Fine." She rolls her eyes. "Yes, I'm happy."

"He treats you right?"

"I...yes."

I jerk my chin in a nod, my throat tight as I reach for her phone. I hit the button to switch the screen off and then lean forward, slipping it back into her pocket. My lips

brush her cheek.

"If you ever change your mind, you know where to find me, princess," I murmur against her skin.

"Jareth..."

"Behave." I turn and stroll away before I do something she'll regret...like fuck her up against the post. As much as I want to do exactly that, I won't make a cheater out of her.

Instead, it's time to come up with a different plan. One that ends with her breaking up with the prick before I fuck my kid into her. Because, make no mistake about it, that will be happening. Soon.

"I need a favor," I say, pacing my hotel room early the next morning. The sounds of traffic drift up from the street below as half the city fights to get to work on time.

"Hello to you, too," Bastian says, his tone wry.

"Fuck off, Bastian. I'm serious."

"Clearly," my twin says with a soft laugh. "What kind of favor?"

"Nadia Mikhail and Teo Kirby are getting married."

"I heard. It's all over the news."

"I need them to get married at the vineyard."

"Don't they already have a venue?" he asks.

"That's beside the point," I growl. They're planning to get married at an estate in Beverly Hills, but they've been keeping the location under wraps to keep the paparazzi from descending en masse.

Convincing Nadia to change it won't be a problem.

She's already stressing about uninvited guests crashing the festivities, especially since her family is flying in for the two-week break we have from the tour.

She's pregnant. The last thing she needs is more stress right now.

"I need them to get married at the vineyard. "

"It's not exactly wedding season here, man."

"I'm aware of that," I grit out, my grip tightening on the phone. "But the vineyards are beautiful any time of year." Oliver and Lucy got married at Christmas last year, so it's not like it's unheard of for us to host a wedding in the dead of winter.

"When are they getting married?"

"Two days before Christmas."

Bastian's sigh sends static down the line. "Christmas is six weeks away, Jareth. Do you know how much work it's going to take to pull off a wedding in six weeks?"

"All you do is fucking work. You can make it happen.

Besides, you've got Ridley, Haven, Trystan, Jace, and Oliver there to help.

Not to mention, the rest of our cousins.

They can pull it off." There's a whole fucking army of our cousins working at the vineyard.

Honestly, I'm not even sure what half of them do anymore.

But whatever it is clearly works. The family business has become its own wine dynasty over the last few years.

Bastian is quiet for a long moment.

"The vineyard is as much mine as it is anyone's," I remind him.

When Mom and Dad decided to retire, Mom divided her share among all four of us kids.

Hermione is still in college. Arwen is currently living her best life with Granger and their little girl.

Bastian and I are the only two with any interest in running the place.

"And yet, I'm the one here while you're living your rockstar fantasies," Bastian says.

I scowl at the wall. "You know damn well that I spend most of my time there helping do what needs to be done. It's not like you're complaining about being in charge, anyway. We both know you fucking love getting to call the shots." It's the truth. If Bastian isn't in control, he isn't happy.

He's my twin, and I love him, but the man can be a nightmare sometimes. He's a cranky pain in the ass on a good day. Most days, he's a tyrant.

Oliver and Trystan handle his moods a helluva lot better than I do...which is to say



they haven't come to blows yet. Thank God Ridley is back from Italy. He's the only one who really knows how to handle my brother.

"I know," Bastian relents with another sigh. "I just don't understand why this needs to happen here if they already have a venue."

"The paparazzi won't be a problem at the vineyard.

It's half a state away from Hollywood." And having the wedding there means getting Zoya in my space for two weeks.

I don't tell Bastian that part, though. He'll never fucking agree if he knows that I haven't even run any of this by Nadia and Teo yet. But desperate times and all that.

I need time to convince Zoya that I'm the man she wants, not her little boyfriend. I can't do that in Los Angeles with paparazzi breathing down our necks.

"The whole goddamn world is curious about Nadia and Teo right now. Just imagine what having the wedding there will do for business," I say, dangling the carrot I know he won't be able to resist.

"Fine. I'll make it happen." He pauses. "But you owe me."

"Name your price."

"Not likely, you dick," he says with a grunt. "You'll know when I'm ready to call in the massive favor you now owe me."

I grin, not really surprised. No one negotiates like Bastian.

It's the only reason no one really complains about him being in charge even when he's

a pain in the ass.

He knows his shit. The vineyard is thriving under his care, just like it did when our parents and uncles ran it.

It'll be a multi-billion-dollar business soon.

I haven't told him yet that this is the last time I plan to tour.

If it weren't Nadia, I wouldn't be doing it at all.

I'd be back home doing what I promised to do when we took over for our parents.

But Knox Mikhail asked me to look after his baby girl, and I intend to keep my word to the man.

As soon as Zoya realizes that it's me she wants, I'll be looking after her for him, too.

He won't have a goddamn thing to worry about.

Six weeks , I tell myself. You'll have her right where you want her in six weeks.

Christ, it can't come soon enough.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:57 am*

Zoya

The dining hall is loud and crowded as I hurry toward the table that my best friend, Connor Anderson, and I claimed as ours almost four years ago.

He's already there, his baseball cap pulled down over his eyes as if that's going to keep anyone from noticing the way he's checking out Jessup Joyner, the quarterback, who is seated two tables over with several of the guys from the football team.

Maybe it works. We're graduating in a few months, and no one has caught on to the fact that their favorite pitcher is gay. Half our classmates think he's committed to someone back home. The other half thinks we're secretly dating...which is precisely why I need his help now.

My world is coming unraveled at the seams. Seriously. My sister's quickie wedding has officially become my own personal nightmare.

After reconnecting at her concert three months ago, Nadia and Teo finally worked their shit out.

They're getting married two days before Christmas.

I think they're rushing it because she's pregnant.

I've been totally on board with this plan...

until approximately half an hour ago, when she detonated a bomb in my life by

changing the venue.

To Jareth's winery. Where he'll be for the entire two weeks I'm there.

I haven't seen him since I lied through my teeth a few weeks ago before their show, but I was desperate. He looked so damn good. I wanted to climb him and pick up where we left off in Los Angeles.

Nadia still thinks I cut my trip to LA short because of everything going on with her and Teo. It's a dirty lie. I cut it short because I was terrified that I'd end up alone with Jareth again. I wasn't at all sure I'd be able to keep myself from falling into his bed if that happened.

Four months later, I'm still not sure. If I learned anything when I saw him a few weeks ago, it's that I am weak for the man. So weak! He's on my mind far more often than he should be...far more often than is healthy. My attraction to him has turned into a sick obsession I can't shake.

And very soon, I'll be on his vineyard for the entirety of my winter break. There's no way I'll be able to avoid him.

Like I said, my world is coming unraveled at the seams.

Connor is my only hope of not falling head over heels into something that'll probably crush me as well as Jareth's fancy machines do his grapes.

"Ordered your food," Connor drawls as soon as he spots me, pushing a burger and fries across the table toward me.

"Thanks." I slide into the chair across from him, out of breath from my mad dash from my dorm to the dining hall. Only one of us at this table is an athlete. It definitely

isn't me. He runs marathons for fun. The only time I run is from my problems. "I need a favor."

He tips his head back, his blue eyes narrowed with suspicion when they meet mine. "Last time you asked me for a favor, you nearly got my fine ass arrested, Zoya."

"I did not!" I protest through a shocked laugh, tossing a fry at him.

He cocks a brow at me as if to ask who I'm kidding.

"Okay, fine," I concede. "Maybe things got a little out of control."

"A little?" An amused look of disbelief stretches across his face. "We were running from the cops on a stolen golf cart. That is not a little out of control ."

"Borrowed, Connor. It was a borrowed golf cart. And mistakes were made." I shrug. "It's not like I knew there were houses back there and everyone could see us trying to rescue that alligator from the pond."

He opens his mouth to say something and then snaps it closed with a rueful chuckle. "You're right. Mistakes were made. I willingly followed your crazy ass out to a golf course to rescue a goddamn alligator from a pond."

"They were hitting him with golf balls!" I don't care if he is an alligator; no animal deserves to be pelted with golf balls all day by drunk golfers who think torturing a living thing is a good time.

I couldn't leave him there. We were just going to move him from the pond to the river, where he'd could live his life in peace.

Connor just shakes his head, chuckling at me. "What kind of crime do you want to

commit this time? A zoo heist? Pilfering the dog park? A circus smash and grab?"

I toss another fry at him, laughing. "I hate you, do you know that?"

"Whatever, bitch." He snatches the fry, popping it into his mouth. "You fucking love me."

He's right. I do. He's been my ride-or-die since the day I nearly knocked him down during our freshman year.

He was the popular new jock on campus. I was the...

well, definitely not that. I was the rebel with ninety-nine causes, and a famous sister.

I was trying my best to keep her secrets and stay sane.

I didn't people well. I still don't, honestly. But Connor gets me.

The day Nadia announced that she was checking herself into rehab again, I was a mess. I told him the whole heartbreaking story. He told me his secret. We've been joined at the hip ever since.

"Seriously, Z. What do you want this time?" he asks, sobering.

"For you to be my boyfriend?" I say, giving him puppy dog eyes.

"Uh..." He glances around before leaning closer. "Hate to break it to you, but gay means I like cock, cupcake."

"I know!" I cry, drawing attention from surrounding tables. I slouch in my seat until they all go back to their conversations and stop staring. "It wouldn't be a real

relationship. I just need you to pretend we're in love during Nadia's wedding."

"Why?"

"No reason."

"Why, Zoya?"

"Because my sister is evil and moved the wedding to Jareth's vineyard," I say, burying my face in my hand.

"Now, I have to spend two weeks trying not to jump into bed with him.

" I take a breath, peeking at Connor through my fingers.

"And I might have told him that you're my boyfriend when I saw him a few weeks ago? "

"Um, excuse me? You did what?"

"I panicked!" I cry quietly. "He was all hot, and he was touching me and kissing me and talking about getting me wet.

And then he said that he didn't think I actually had a boyfriend.

You know I can't do hot and arrogant. It's just not survivable.

So I showed him your picture and said you were my boyfriend.

" I inhale a deep breath. "Mistakes were made. "

"Fucking clearly. I like cock."

"I know!"

"I'm not kissing you, Zoya."

"You get to spend two weeks at a fancy vineyard with a hot rockstar. And he has a twin."

"Jesus Christ. He has a twin?"

"Identical," I confirm.

"Is the twin gay?"

"I don't know. But Nadia said he has a bunch of hot cousins. And one of them is married to a woman and a man. So maybe there's another one who swings your way."

"Hold up. He's married to a man and a woman?" Connor arches a brow.

"Yep."

"Well, I'm definitely going to this fucking wedding now," he mumbles, sitting back in his chair with wide eyes. "How does that even work?"

"Pornhub probably has the answers you seek," I suggest helpfully.

"Yeah, well, that's blocked in this lame-ass state now."

"Politicians are dicks."



He nods seriously and holds his fist out for me to bump...which I do. And then he settles back, his head cocked to the side.

"So...we're officially dating for this wedding. How is this going to work?"

"Um..." I honestly have no idea. I didn't think that far ahead. Panic set in, and I just reacted. "I guess we just pretend we're in love?"

His lips curve into an amused grin. "You know they aren't going to buy this shit, right? You don't do love, and I don't do women. It's going to be a fucking disaster."

"Did I mention that there's a winery?"

"Are you trying to bribe me with free booze?"

"I don't know. Is it working?"

He takes a bite of his burger, chewing thoughtfully, and then he chuckles. "Yeah, cupcake. It's working."

"Oh, thank God." My shoulders sag with relief. "Had you turned me down, I was going to have to engineer an entire messy breakup and fake my own death."

"You really like this guy, huh?"

"What? No." I scowl across the table at him. "Absolutely not."

"Right," he says with a soft chuckle. "You're just panicking and plotting to fake your own death for the hell of it."

"Yes! Exactly."

He shakes his head. "Lie to yourself if you want, but I'm not buying your bullshit, Zoya Mikhail. You like him."

"Do not." I shove a fry in my mouth, hoping that ends the conversation. Sadly, it doesn't. Connor knows me too damn well.

"When are we leaving?"

"After finals. Teo hired a private plane to get us all there."

Connor's brow quirks. "Your family is not like my family."

I reach across the table, squeezing his arm. His parents basically disowned him when he came out to them. The only reason he managed to make it to college was his scholarship.

Things have thawed a little back home...but not much.

There are places in the world where you're allowed to be gay and happy.

A small town in the Bible belt isn't really one of them.

His parents treat him like he's going through some phase and just needs to find a good woman.

It breaks my heart for him, especially since being an openly gay sports star isn't exactly welcome, either.

He spends every day pretending he's something he isn't just to keep from sinking his chances of going pro.

"It's not fair for me to ask you to do this for me," I whisper, guilt flowing through me.  
"You have to pretend enough already."

"Pretending to be in love with you for a free vacation at a winery in California with your pop star sister, her linebacker fiancé, and agents who can get me to the next level?"

" he asks, one brow arched. "Yeah, that's totally asking too much, cupcake."

" He rolls his eyes at me. "We're going."

"It'll be a disaster, but we're fucking going. "

"Well, when you put it that way..."

He lobs a fry at me, chuckling. "Get out of your head. If you were asking too much, I'd tell you."

"You promise?"

"Promise."

I exhale a breath, relieved I don't have to come up with another plan to avoid Jareth.

Crap. I'm going to be seeing Jareth again.

That is not excitement I feel fluttering in my stomach. Nope. No way. The fries were probably just bad.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:57 am*

Zoya

"Christ on a cracker," I whisper, my eyes practically bugging out of my head as soon as we pull up outside the vineyard and my gaze lands on Jareth. That's it. That's the whole thought.

The man is shirtless and sweating. Who needs to think?

"Fuck me," Connor mutters from beside me, sitting upright to gawk at Jareth. At least, I'm pretty sure it's Jareth hoisting a wine cask over his head outside of the winery and not his twin, but I could be wrong.

How are there possibly two of them who look that damn good shirtless and sweaty? And trust me, this one looks damn good.

His golden skin glistens in the sunlight slanting across the vineyard. His torn jeans hug his muscular thighs, hinting at just how powerful he really is. Fully clothed, he's a beast. Shirtless, he's something else altogether.

Life at the vineyard has clearly done the man justice.

I am so screwed.

It doesn't help that it's picture-perfect here.

Literally. This is the kind of place featured on postcards in rest stops.

Row after row of grapevines stretch right up to the mountains on one side.

The ocean blows in from the other. The winery and restaurant are situated in the middle of absolute serenity, with an office building, cabins, and family homes scattered all around the property. It's breathtaking.

And Jareth is shirtless right in the center of it.

Help. Me.

"Oh, Jareth is already here!" Nadia chirps from the front seat, lifting her hand in a wave when his jade eyes land on Teo's Escalade.

Even through the dark tint over the windows, I feel them burning into me, beckoning me toward him.

Or maybe that's the rivulet of sweat running right down the center of his rock-hard abdomen that's coaxing me toward recklessness.

How did he get even damn sexier in the last few weeks?

"Sexual voodoo. It has to be sexual voodoo," I mumble, more to myself than anyone, really. But Connor hears me and snorts softly.

Of course he's enjoying my waking nightmare.

Doesn't he always when I rope him into one of my bad ideas?

Pretending he's my boyfriend for the next two weeks might just be the most ridiculous thing I've ever done.

But there's no way I'm going to be able to resist Jareth on my own.

I haven't even gotten out of the car, and my panties are already suspiciously wet. I need reinforcements.

"I take it that's your man?" Connor whispers, leaning his head against mine to keep Nadia and Teo from overhearing him.

I shoot him a death glare. "You're my man, remember?"

His lips curve into an amused smirk. "Whatever you say, cupcake. But I might have to leave you for him." He waggles his brows at me. "Look at him, Zoya."

Believe me, I am looking. Dammit.

"He's not that good-looking." Good girls go to heaven. Liars keep their dignity. It washes in the end.

Connor snorts, shooting me a look that tells me that he knows I'm full of shit. But he doesn't call me on it. Instead, he glances out the window as Teo pulls into a parking spot. The amused grin stretched across his face grows. "I think it's showtime. Your man is coming this way."

"Christ on a cracker," I squeak, peeking through the window again to confirm that he's right.

Jareth ditched the cask and is striding toward the car.

Still shirtless. I quickly grab Connor's hand, squeezing for dear life.

Not because I'm trying to play the part of his loving girlfriend.

It's more out of sheer self-preservation.

If I'm clinging to him, I can't crawl through the window and climb Jareth.

"You okay back there?" Nadia asks.

"Fine," I squeak.

Teo meets my gaze in the rearview mirror, grinning like he knows I'm up to something shady. As much as I hate to admit it...he knows me too well. It happens when you've known someone since you were in diapers.

Nadia hops out to meet Jareth as Teo kills the engine.

"You ready?" Connor asks me as Teo climbs out.

"No."

"Sucks for you. This was your plan." He taps me on the nose. "We're being summoned."

"Shit," I mumble, peeking out to see Nadia motioning for us to join them. My heart pounds like a jackhammer as Connor pops open the door and climbs out before reaching for my hand.

I try like hell not to look at Jareth, but I do anyway.

He's staring at me with his jaw clenched and his hands shoved into his pockets.

His eyes meet mine, full of the same heat that drives me crazy.

Only...there's something else there this time, too.

Possession, like he's looking at something that belongs to him.

My stomach turns a flip.

Connor pulls me from the SUV, and I swear I hear Jareth's jaw flex from here. He is so mad.

Maybe this was a terrible idea.

Well, it's too late now. We're committed.

"Jareth, you remember Zoya," Nadia says to him. "This is Connor." She pauses like she does not want to say the next part, but as far as she knows, it's the truth. "Her boyfriend."

"Hey, man. It's nice to meet you." Connor extends his free hand toward Jareth, who hesitates for a second before taking it.

They do one of those guy handshakes, where they pretend they're being civil but they're really trying to see who has the biggest dick. To Connor's credit, he doesn't even flinch despite the way Jareth is glaring at him like he'd rather set him on fire than shake his hand.

He doesn't say a single word to Connor before releasing his hand and turning to me. "Princess," he murmurs, his eyes tangling with mine again. His expression softens. "It's always a pleasure to see you."

I narrow my eyes on him, annoyed at the way he says that like he's seen more of me than he should be seeing. My annoyance only grows when he pulls me right into his



arms for a hug, forcing me to drop Connor's hand.

"Let me go," I hiss beneath my breath.

"He doesn't fucking deserve you," he mutters, his lips brushing my ear.

"And you think you do?" I purposefully step on his foot before ducking out of his arms.

Connor looks like he's trying not to laugh as he wraps one arm around my waist, pulling me up against him. "Yep. This is going to be a shitshow," he whispers, his voice pitched so only I hear him.

I briefly consider stomping on his foot, too, before deciding I probably shouldn't. Jareth is still standing there. It'll look suspicious.

"Where are we putting these two?" Nadia asks Jareth, falsely bright.

I think she knows Connor and I aren't really dating, but I refused to admit it when she grilled me about him.

Just like I adamantly refuse to admit that her guitarist occupies far too much of my mind.

Just like I adamantly refuse to confess that we kissed.

Deny, deny until I die. It's my new motto.

"They're staying with me."

"Uh, what?" I whip around to face Jareth so fast I make myself dizzy.

His green eyes come to me, boring into mine. "You and your...boyfriend...are staying at my place while you're here."

No. He wouldn't.

"I already have rooms set up for you."

Jareth Grayson is the literal devil.

"Where's Nadia staying?"

"We gave her and Teo the guest house."

"I'd rather stay with her."

"Uh, no way." Nadia looks at me like I've lost my mind. "You are not staying with me and Teo for two weeks. We're getting married."

Why does she insist on betraying me?

"You won't even notice us."

"No way," my sister says. "I'm stressed out enough trying to do all the wedding things and deal with morning sickness."

"Please?" I turn puppy dog eyes on Teo.

"She's the boss," he says, grinning at me.

Jareth chuckles quietly, and I have to resist the urge to stomp on his foot again. We cannot stay with him for two weeks. There's no way I'm going to be able to keep up

this charade twenty-four hours a day!

"It'll be fine," Connor says smoothly while I'm busy glaring at everyone. "We appreciate it, man."

Jareth just grunts in response.

I narrow my eyes at him. Does he have to be so rude to Connor? "Maybe we should stay with Mom and Dad."

"They're in one of the cabins. There's only room for them and your brother."

"What about...?"

"The rest of the wedding party is booked into the other cabins. I have plenty of room," Jareth interjects before I can ask about Innessa or anyone else. "You won't even notice I'm there."

Well, now who's the dirty liar? It isn't me.

I don't know what Jareth is up to, but I don't trust the innocent look on his face in any way, especially when he winks at me.

Connor was right. This is going to be a shitshow.

"Will you stop pacing?" Connor asks an hour later, watching me from the bed in his room at Jareth's place. He's sprawled out across the tiny twin bed like he owns the place, clearly content with the situation.

I am not content. This room is basically a closet with a view.

The bed in the room Jareth put me in is plenty big enough for two people, but Jareth shoved Connor into this room like he couldn't freaking wait to get him away from me.

He acted all innocent about it, too, pretending like he was just giving us separate rooms to keep my dad happy.

Ha! Like I'm falling for that. He put Connor in a closet to keep him out of my bed, more like it.

"He's up to something," I mumble, turning to complete another two-step circuit across the hardwood floor.

Jareth's house is gorgeous. It's built like a cabin, with big windows looking out over the mountains, log walls, and gleaming hardwood floors.

It fits the vineyard like it sprung up from the ground.

It does not fit Jareth, however. I expected...

I don't know. Maybe empty beer bottles and notches on the bedposts, I guess. It's suspicious.

Jareth is suspicious.

The whole situation is suspicious.

What does he think he's doing?

"You think?" Connor laughs at me. "He was ready to rip my head off when he saw us holding hands."

"Exactly!" I cry, spinning to face him. "He was so rude to you, and you just agreed to stay with him for two weeks! He's probably going to murder you in your sleep and then chain me to his bed. I bet that's why he put us in different rooms. It'll be easier to overpower us if we're isolated."

"Uh...why are you complaining? Being chained to that man's bed sounds like a good time to me. And it's not like you want to share a bed with me anyway."

He's not wrong, but still. I launch a pair of his socks at his head on principle.

He snatches them out of midair like an annoying Batman, chuckling. "You must really like him if you're this worked up."

"I do not like him."

"Right," my best friend says, smirking at me. "And I don't want Jessup to blow my back out."

"Why do I even try to talk to you?" I groan, settling down onto the foot of his bed. "It's useless. You're way too chipper and horny."

"Well...yeah. Someone has to balance out all the attitude and aggression coming from your side of this friendship."

"I am not aggressive."

"You're right. You're not. You just hide behind a facsimile of it because admitting that love scares the shit out of you is absolutely not your style. You'd rather rip off your own fingernails than do that."

He might have a point.

"I don't hate love." What? I said he might have a point, not that I was going to admit it.

"Didn't say you did. I said it scares the shit out of you."

"And it doesn't scare you?" I arch a brow at him.

"You talk about getting laid all the time, but you never actually do it.

We both know that isn't because you're afraid everyone will find out that you're gay.

"Most days, I'm not entirely sure he cares if anyone knows.

He doesn't hide the truth because he's ashamed of it.

He hides it because telling the world severely limits his future options.

Sometimes, this world sucks.

"Touche." He locks his hands together behind his head. "Maybe I'm waiting for the right one."

"I thought you wanted Jessup to blow your back out?"

"Everyone with eyes wants Jessup to blow their backs out, Zoya."

"Not me." I wrinkle my nose at the thought. Jocks are not my type.

"Everyone with eyes except you wants Jessup to blow their backs out, Zoya," he corrects with a lazy grin. "The man is hot. It doesn't mean I'm stupid enough to think it'll actually happen. He's straight. I'm not. I'm not signing up for that shitshow."

"Why do you think Jareth put us in different rooms? He's up to something."

"Or maybe he put us in different rooms because your entire family is here and he's trying to be respectful." Connor rolls his eyes at me. "You're stressing me out with all this overthinking."

"I'm not overthinking." I'm totally overthinking. I huff out a breath, trying to get myself together. It's easier said than done when I know Jareth will be sleeping right down the hall. Probably naked.

Dammit. Why did I have to think about him naked? Why do I keep thinking about him at all? Like Connor said, I don't do love, and I'm absolutely not falling for a man who probably doesn't even remember the names of everyone he's taken to his bed. Hell no.

"Do you really think I'm afraid of love?"

"No," Connor says, hopping up from the bed. "I don't think you are. I know you are. The shit that went down with your sister and Teo didn't just scar them. It scarred you, too, cupcake."

"You didn't see her back then," I whisper, staring down at my hands.

I still remember when they were afraid she wasn't going to make it after her accident.

I remember Teo back then, too. I think if she hadn't made it, he wouldn't be here now, either.

He was a zombie with hellfire burning in his eyes.

That kind of pain...well, I'm not sure I'm strong enough to survive it.

Nadia almost didn't, and she's always been far stronger than I am.

And if anyone can screw up a relationship, it's me. "It was bad."

"Not every story happens like that, Z," Connor says softly.

"Sometimes, bad shit happens to people in love.

Sometimes, it doesn't. But you'll never know what your story contains if you're too goddamn afraid to live it.

" He strides toward the door and then pauses, glancing back at me.

"I bet if you asked her, she'd tell you that it was worth it. "

"Maybe," I acknowledge, and then frown at him. "Where are you going?"

"You said there are cousins. And a motherfucker wants to know if they look as good as your man does." Connor grins at me. "Have fun avoiding Jareth."

"Connor! You can't just leave me here."

"He isn't even here, Z. He left as soon as he showed us to our rooms. You'll be fine. Just don't do anything I wouldn't do."

" Is there anything you wouldn't do?"

"Not much." He grins at me before sailing through the door.

I groan, flopping backward on the bed. This is going to be the longest two weeks of my life.



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:57 am*

Jareth

"What are you doing?" Zoya demands, stomping into the kitchen with her hands planted on her hips and a scowl on her face.

"Uh, grabbing some water?" I arch a brow, lifting the bottle to show her.

Hefting wine casks is thirsty work, and Bastian has had me hauling the goddamn things all over the property since I got in two days ago.

I think it's my punishment for moving Nadia's wedding here. "Is that okay with you, princess?"

"I'm not talking about the water, and you know it, Jareth. You're up to something." Her hazel eyes scan across my face, rife with suspicion.

"You mean, aside from offering up my house for you and your little boyfriend?" I make a show of glancing around. "Where is he, by the way?"

"Busy," she grits out.

"Too busy to take you with him when he dipped out of here again?" I tsk, setting the bottle aside as I pace toward her. "You've been here for what? All of one day and he's already ditching you for other shit? Some boyfriend."

"You don't know what you're talking about." She lifts her chin in a stubborn display that has my cock aching to back her up against the wall and take another taste of her.

Not yet, I remind myself. Not while she's still tied to that dick.

I crowd her anyway, getting into her personal space. She pretends having me so fucking close doesn't bother her at all, but she can't hide the way she shivers slightly. She can't hide the way her eyes darken as her gaze dips toward my lips, either.

I bite back a groan, my cock pulsing in my jeans. Christ, having her in my personal space, unable to touch her, is going to ruin me. I'll either snap and haul her into the closet to get a taste or I'll just fucking...explode into pieces.

It took every bit of self-restraint I possess to stay out of her room last night. I wanted to slip inside and crawl in that bed with her. But I didn't. Instead, I tossed and turned all goddamn night, worried if I went to sleep, her fucking boyfriend would slip inside.

Maybe forcing her and her boyfriend to stay with me was a bad idea.

I don't regret it, though. Not when it means having her in my space where I can keep an eye on her.

I wish like hell I could have put him somewhere else entirely instead of in a different room, but that would have been too suspicious.

At least this way, I can keep him out of her room.

I'll just conveniently interrupt anytime he fucking tries to go near her door.

So far, he hasn't. He disappeared not long after they got in yesterday, and was gone again as soon as the sun was up this morning. It's suspicious as fuck. He clearly doesn't give a shit about her, and that pisses me off. She deserves better.

"You look beautiful today, Zoya." It's the truth. Her curly hair is wild around her

face, and her cheeks are pink. She's wearing a pair of jeans that hug her thick thighs and a pink blouse that clings to her tits.

"Stop it, Jareth."

"Stop what?" I take another step toward her, smirking when her back hits the wall.

"Telling you that you're gorgeous? Imagining your lips on mine again?

Thinking you want another taste as badly as I do?

" I dip my head, skimming my nose along her crown.

She still smells so fucking good. My cock throbs, desperate for relief.

For one single taste. "You don't want me to stop, princess. "

"Yes, I do," she lies, her voice shaking.

"No, you don't." I bury my face in her throat, unable to resist. "You fucking love that I'm wild about you."

"Jareth," she groans, shoving me away from her. Her eyes flash holy fire at me as she darts out from beneath my arm. "I have a boyfriend."

"You mean the guy who keeps leaving you here with another man?" I cock a brow, my lip curling in disgust. "If that's how he takes care of you, he deserves to lose you, Zoya."

She opens her mouth to say something and then snaps it closed again. I think she might be counting. She looks like she's counting. The only thing missing is the smoke

coming out of her ears.

Goddamn, I bet she's going to be a little hellcat when she's finally in my bed. At this point, I don't even care if her little boyfriend hears me fucking my kid into her. I'm that desperate.

"You don't know anything about him, and you don't know anything about me," she finally says. "Whatever game you're playing, just stop. I'm not interested."

"Liar," I whisper. "You're so fucking interested it's killing you."

"Is not. I'm with Connor, Jareth. Connor. Go find someone else to sleep with." She rolls her eyes as she ducks past me. "I'm sure you have a whole roster already lined up anyway. As soon as you get what you want from me, you'll be on to the next."

What the fuck? Is that really what she thinks?

I try to grab her arm, but she sails past me, rushing from the kitchen like she's trying to escape a firing squad. I stomp out behind her, determined to set her straight on a few things...but she's already hauling ass through the front door, leaving me staring after her.

"Son of a bitch," I growl, thumping my forehead against the wall.

Zoya Mikhail is going to be the death of me.

"How are wedding preparations going?" I ask Bastian, marching into his office a little while later. Trystan is stretched out in a chair across from his desk, bitching about something.

They both glance up at me, falling silent.

"What?" Bastian asks.

"Wedding preparations," I growl, pacing toward the window to peer out. My gaze catches on Zoya and her sisters, who are walking through the vineyard with their arms linked, laughing. Their little brother, Maxim, trails behind them like he's keeping a watchful eye on them.

Yet again, Zoya's boyfriend is nowhere in sight. Where the fuck is he? I scan the area, searching for him, but he isn't out there. That shouldn't piss me off, but it does. What kind of man leaves his woman to fend for herself like this?

"Are you even listening to me?" Bastian growls from behind me.

"What?"

A bark of laughter rumbles from Trystan's lips.

"Jesus Christ," Bastian sighs heavily. "First, you practically demand we have the wedding here. Then you show up two days ago, losing your mind over where we're housing everyone. Now, you're in here bugging the fuck out of me again. And yet, you haven't heard a word I said. What is up with you?"

"Nothing."

"Right. You're usually this big of a pain in my ass for no reason."

I turn to glower at him, only to find Trystan smirking at me like he knows something I don't. "What's so funny?" I grumble, crossing my arms to glare at him, too.

"You, motherfucker," he chuckles. "I've never seen you bent out of shape over a girl before."

"What girl?" Bastian asks, glancing between us. And then he growls a curse. "Son of a bitch." His eyes narrow on me. "Are we having this wedding here because of some girl?"

"What? No. Trystan is just an idiot who doesn't know what he's talking about," I say, which is only partially untrue. Trystan is an idiot, but he's got me pegged to a fucking T. "We're having the wedding here for safety reasons."

Trystan snorts softly, shaking his head.

I don't think Bastian believes me, either. But he just mutters another soft curse. "Wedding preparations are handled. I put Haven and Lucy in charge of overseeing plans. Trystan and Oliver have security handled. And the restaurant is handling catering."

"Good," I grunt. "Need help with anything?"

"Yeah, actually. We hired a new marketing person. I want her to film parts of the wedding."

"Fuck no," I growl. "The whole point of having the wedding here was to avoid it turning into a circus."

Bastian scoffs at me. "We won't turn it into a circus, and we won't film anything important or anyone in attendance. We need footage of the vineyard all set up, and shit like that."

I hesitate for a moment and then nod. "Fine. I'll run it by Nadia. Anything else?"

"Yeah. Who's the girl?"

Trystan cracks up at the question.

My future wife.

I flip them both off and stomp toward the door instead of telling them a damn thing.  
"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Jesus Christ," I mutter, gripping the edge of the stone bar as Zoya and her dick of a boyfriend stride into the restaurant with their arms linked and their heads together later that evening. He's grinning down at her, whispering something. And she's fucking laughing up at him.

That laugh should be mine. So should her smile.

She looks like an angel in a pale blue dress, her hair in a pile on top of her head. Every inch of her has me ready to stomp across the restaurant and haul her out of his arms like I did yesterday.

Am I jealous? Fuck yeah, I am. She's mine, goddammit.

As if sensing my eyes on her, she glances up, her gaze locking with mine.

The laughter dies on her lips, her eyes going wide.

I can't resist lifting my bottle in a mock salute. Something about the way she looks at me like I'm haunting her is cute as hell. Does she have any idea that I'm the reason Nadia and Teo are getting married here instead of in LA?

Judging by the suspicious scowl on her face, yeah, she knows.

The thought amuses me. I hope she's looking over her shoulder, just waiting for me to

appear like the goddamn Ghost of Kisses Past. That's pretty much the entirety of my plan.

I've got two weeks to convince her that she belongs with me, not her dick of a boyfriend.

If I have to play dirty to make it happen, I'm more than happy to do so.

"I have a plan to expand operations."

"Good for you," I grunt to my cousin, Ridley, as he slides onto a barstool beside me, his shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows.

I don't care about his plan. I'm too busy watching the way Zoya's hips sway as Connor leads her across the restaurant to the private dining room where the wedding party has convened for dinner.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:57 am*

Why the fuck did I open my mouth and practically demand that they stay at my place with me? That was a goddamn stupid decision. If he sneaks into her room and I hear them fucking, I'm going to lose it.

Christ. She wouldn't do that, would she?

Something tells me no, but I had to listen to her giggling for an hour while she was getting ready for dinner. I finally stomped out before I lost my mind.

I've been sitting at the bar since, trying to drink my way to sanity.

Waiting for her to show up. I can't keep my eyes off her.

Connor doesn't seem to be having the same problem.

There's just something...off about the man.

I can't even put my finger on it. But he looks at her like she amuses him.

And the way she looks at him is nothing like the way she looks at me. There's no heat, no intensity.

And the way he keeps ditching her? Yeah, no loving boyfriend willingly dips out on a girl like Zoya five minutes after arriving in a paradise like this unless he's up to some bullshit.

I don't like him, and I don't trust him.

"What crawled up your ass?" Ridley asks.

"The jock," I grunt, narrowing my eyes on Connor. "There's something off about him."

"What jock? Teo?"

"No. The other one. Corey or whatever his fucking name is."

"Connor."

"Yeah, him," I agree, like I haven't already looked him up online to see what I could find out. Sadly, there wasn't much outside of news about his college baseball career, which is admittedly impressive. He'll go pro when he graduates. "I don't trust him."

Ridley laughs softly. "So she's the girl."

"What girl?" I turn a dark scowl on him, only to find him grinning at me, his green eyes full of humor, dark locks of hair sweeping across his forehead like he's been tugging on them all goddamn day again.

It's a telltale sign that he's been dealing with Bastian today, too. The man stresses everyone out.

"The one that has you all fucked up in the head."

Jesus Christ. Do all my cousins know about her already?

"Don't know what you're talking about," I mutter, lifting my bottle to take a drink.

"Right. You're just a moody dick like Bastian every day," Ridley says, chuckling

again. His gaze drifts from mine to Zoya. "She's cute."

A growl rumbles in my throat before I can stop it, my bottle plunking against the stone bar top.

Ridley hears it and smirks at me. "Nope, you aren't at all fucked up about her."

"We met in Los Angeles a few months ago." No sense trying to deny it when he already knows I'm full of shit. "I kissed her, and then she told me she had a boyfriend and skipped town."

"Ouch. Is she the reason we're having this wedding here and Bastian is stressing the fuck out?"

I shrug instead of answering.

Ridley shakes his head at me and then glances back at Zoya and Connor. Zoya is chatting a mile a minute with her mom, sisters, and Teo's mom. Connor has wandered away from the group to talk to Huck, our bartender.

"You sure they're really dating?" Ridley asks after a moment.

"She has pictures of the two of them all cuddled up together on her phone."

"Doesn't mean they're actually dating."

"Does she look single to you?" I growl when Connor says something to Huck, making him laugh. "Her boyfriend is standing right fucking there, live and in person, talking to our bartender."

Maybe I should fire Huck for consorting with the enemy. Am I allowed to do that?

Fuck. Probably not.

"And yesterday afternoon, he was sitting right where you are, swapping numbers with Huck."

"What does that have to do with anything?" I narrow my eyes on Ridley, who is grinning like he knows something I don't.

"Help me convince Bastian that we need to expand, and I'll tell you."

"Expand how?"

"Our own alcohol line. Whiskey, vodka, tequila, all the good shit," he says. "Top shelf, limited runs."

"We don't have the space for that kind of operation."

"Who says it has to be done here?" He arches a brow at me. "Or that we have to do all the work? We partner with small manufacturers to offer vino-inspired versions. They get the backing of the Goodson brand, and we don't have to start from scratch."

It's not a terrible idea.

"I'll back you if you take it to Bastian," I agree. "Now, what do you know?"

"Oh, I know a lot, motherfucker. Huck is gay. Loud, proud. Gay."

"Wait." I blink at him, shock running through me in a current. "Are you telling me that...?"

"They weren't arranging a wine tasting, if you catch my drift." Ridley waggles his

brows. "Her alleged boyfriend is gay."

"Jesus Christ." Is that why he's been ditching her?

Because he's fucking around on her? I haul myself to my feet, ready to go confront him for being a cheating dick, but Ridley grabs my arm, yanking me back down onto my stool.

"What the fuck, Ridley? He's hooking up with men behind her back.

She deserves to know he's cheating on her. "

"Could be," he agrees. "But does it look to you like she doesn't know?"

I glance back over into the private dining room to see Connor and Huck making eyes at each other as they whisper back and forth. Zoya is watching them with an amused smile on her face, as if she knows exactly what's happening just a few feet away from where she stands.

"Holy fuck," I mumble, shocked all over again. "She knows."

"Looks like it."

"The little minx lied to me," I growl, shock turning to a slow-burning anger in the pit of my stomach. I've been losing my mind for weeks, and they're...what, exactly? Putting on a show to throw me off?

Do I even have to ask? That's precisely what the fuck she's doing.

We kissed, and it freaked her out so she made up the existence of a boyfriend to keep me at arm's length.

And I'm guessing he was a last-minute addition to the guest list because she only brought him once Nadia told her that the wedding was happening here.

"Looks like they're lying to everyone," Ridley mutters. "Before you spill the news, you might want to find out why."

Oh, I know why. She thought she could avoid me if she was with another man. Well, fuck that. I'm going to haunt her gorgeous ass all across this vineyard until she admits that Connor means nothing.

"I'm going to spank her pretty little ass."

Ridley's deep laugh rumbles across the bar before he slaps me on the back. "Good luck with that, man. Judging by the way she's glowering at you right now, it might be you getting spanked."

He isn't wrong.

If looks could kill, I'd be a pile of dust and bones right now.

Why does that turn me the fuck on? Oh, right. Because she's Zoya.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:57 am*

Zoya

"No sleeping with my daughter while you are here," my dad, Knox, tells Connor, his expression stern as he stares at him across the table after dinner. My little brother, Maxim, has been looking at him the same way all night. I swear, Maxim is going to grow up to be just like Dad.

"Dad!" I groan, my cheeks turning pink as everyone at the table turns to look at us. "Would you stop?"

"Yeah, He-Man," Mom says, lightly smacking my dad on the chest. "Leave the kids alone."

"Bah," he grumbles, still staring at Connor. "She is never too old to be smart, kisa. I want grandbabies, but not while she is still in college."

"I graduate in a few months," I remind him.

The reminder doesn't mollify him. My dad's worst enemy is the fact that my sisters and I are all growing up and don't need him as much anymore.

He hates that we're no longer home with a fiery passion.

If it were up to him, we'd have stopped growing when we were five, just so he could keep us close forever, and he'd always be our hero.

I don't think he realizes that we'll never be too old to consider him a hero, though. He

taught us everything we know about what a good man and a loving home look like.

"Jareth put us in separate rooms, sir," Connor murmurs to my dad.

Naturally, Dad's eyes light up like he just learned he won the lottery. "Jareth is good man. I like him," he says in his deep, rumbling voice. "Very smart."

"Jareth is a..." I trail off when I notice my mom and Nadia both looking at me like they're trying not to crack up. I don't think either of them is buying that Connor is my boyfriend. They know me too well. And Mom caught me staring at Jareth earlier. They aren't asking questions, though. Thank God.

I feel terrible for lying about Connor to them, but if I tell my mom, she'll tell my dad.

And my dad, apparently, loves Jareth. Who knows what he'll do?

Better not to risk it. And Nadia shouldn't be caught in the middle of this...

this...whatever this is, either. She still has to work with Jareth once the wedding is over.

All I have to do is avoid him for two weeks and then, with any luck, I never see him again.

Funny how much that thought stings even though it shouldn't.

The man is driving me nuts! He just had to corner me in the kitchen and work his sexual voodoo on me. I barely slept all night as it was, just waiting for him to sneak into my room and do it again. But he never even tried.

He's so annoying! And hot. And why the hell do I like it when he's in my personal



space, making me forget everything but how badly I want to kiss him? Oh, right. Because I've lost it, that's why.

My dad glances across the table at my little sister, Innessa, who is whispering back and forth with Teo's little brother, Maddox. "Jareth would be good man for you."

I manage to slosh wine all over the place.

Of course Nadia and my mom notice. So does Connor.

He chuckles under his breath.

"Which one is Jareth again?" Innessa asks, peering toward the bar where Jareth and a group of his cousins are seated in what can only be described as a hot vintner mecca. Seriously. Every last one of the four is flipping gorgeous.

"Tattoos, dark hair, evil smirk," I mutter.

Everyone within hearing range turns to look at me, except Teo's brother, Maddox, who is scowling at Jareth like he wants to set him on fire.

I don't think my dad realizes that he and Innessa have a thing going on.

They think they're slick, but it's obvious from the way he looks at her that he's wild about her.

Nadia buries her face in Teo's shoulder to keep from laughing. My mom just smiles like she has my number for sure now.

Crap.

Connor nudges me with his foot. "She means he's the one on the left."

"Oh. You mean Nadia's guitarist." Innessa stares at him for a moment and then quickly shakes her head. "No, thanks. Not my type."

Maddox relaxes slightly.

"Good man is not your type?" Dad frowns at her.

"Jareth is interested in someone else, Dad," Nadia quickly says, her eyes dancing with mischief. "He calls her his princess and everything. It's sweet."

"As if she's the only one," I mumble, earning another nudge from Connor.

"Actually, he doesn't date much."

I flick a surprised glance at Nadia and then narrow my eyes. "You don't have to be dating to fu...sleep around."

"He doesn't do that either." My older sister frowns at me, disapproval in her eyes. "It's not like he doesn't get a lot of offers from fans, but he always ignores them. The other guys in the band give him crap for it, but I think it's kind of nice that he isn't jumping into bed with everyone."

My gaze drifts back to Jareth to find him looking in our direction again.

Our eyes meet, and his lips lift into his signature smirk, like he knows something I don't. Like he's trying to get a rise out of me.

I just stare at him blankly, still trying to wrap my mind around the fact that he isn't hopping in and out of bed with everyone that comes his way. That should reassure

me, right?

Somehow, it has the opposite effect.

It makes the way he's pursuing me feel a little more...dangerous. Maybe because whatever this is between us feels too big, too real. He's in my head, and I can't get him out. I don't want him in there, dammit. I don't want to fall. I don't want to like him. And yet, I think it's happening anyway.

Connor was right yesterday. Love scares the shit out of me, especially when the possibility of it is staring me right in the face. Smirking.

"That is too bad," my dad says. "He would make good son-in-law."

"Are you serious right now?" Nadia grumbles, slack-jawed. "You spent half of Teo's life giving him hell. And now, you're just giving Jareth your seal of approval just like that?"

"Yes."

Nadia gapes at him, but he just winks at her, which has the whole table laughing.

My dad is a mess, honestly. He's always approved of Teo, but he did not make dating easy for Teo and Nadia when we were all younger.

My mom used to give him a lot of grief about it, but he always said that he was trying to make sure they were ready for everything life would throw at them.

Sometimes, I wonder if he knew that their road would be a rough one. He's smart like that.

"Innessa doesn't need a boyfriend," Maddox growls suddenly. "She's busy with school."

"Don't tell me what I can and can't do, Maddox Kirby," Innessa huffs at him. "I can date if I want."

My mom and Aunt Miranda share a knowing smile as my sister and Maddox scowl at each other.

My dad finally seems to catch on and sighs heavily. "All of my girls are growing too fast."

"They're never little for long enough," Uncle Jason agrees, glancing at Teo and Maddox's baby sister across the table. She just rolls her eyes and goes back to her phone.

I glance toward the bar again to see Jareth still talking with his cousins. At least, they're talking. He's still staring in my direction. I have the sudden, irrational urge to stick my tongue out at him, but Connor saves me when he nudges me again.

"If you want him to buy this whole story, stop staring at him," he whispers.

Right. I can do that.

I make a show of turning my back on him and rejoining the conversation. But before I can even pick up the threads of it, I feel his eyes burning into me. He's a damn eclipse, too obvious to ignore.

Dammit.

"I'm going to the bathroom," I mutter, shoving my chair back so suddenly that

everyone turns to look at me.

I don't wait for a response before hurrying off. I don't look at Jareth again, either. He can stare at my back disappearing into the dang bathroom!

Five minutes later, I've splashed water on my face, given myself a pep talk, and I'm still no closer to getting the infuriating man off my mind.

"This is impossible," I groan to my reflection in the mirror. My cheeks are flushed the same damn way they have been all day, and I can read the confusion and desire mingling in my eyes. Which means everyone else probably can too. But there's nothing I can do about that now.

I take a breath and spin toward the door, ready to go back out and pretend I don't notice Jareth. I don't even have a chance to take a step before the door pops open. I glance up...right into Jareth's eyes.

The lock clicks as he stares at me.

"What are you...?"

That's as far as I get before he's on top of me, backing me up against the door. His lips come down on mine in a hungry kiss, and I taste the beer on his breath. Part of my mind screams at me to push him away. The other part shouts for me to pull him closer. That traitorous part wins.

I shove my hands into his hair, kissing him back like he's oxygen. He groans against my mouth, pushing me harder against the door.

"You taste like wine," he mutters, flicking his tongue along my bottom lip.

"Then stop kissing me." Finally, something sensible.

"Make me."

I try. Really, I do. Or maybe I don't. I don't even know anymore. But we don't stop kissing. He runs his hands down my body, setting little fires everywhere he touches me. And I'm going to hell for it, but I melt to every damn touch, whimpering.

My dress slides up my legs, his fingers slipping against my skin.

I need to stop this. I need...

"Oh god," I whimper, my head thumping against the door as he presses his palm to my center, sending flows of lava through my veins. I don't mean to do it, but I grind against him, eager for more.

"If you love him, stop me, Zoya."

"I...I..."

His finger slips beneath my panties, tracing a decadent path down my slit, and I forget what I'm supposed to do. Why stop when it feels this damn good? What even is stopping at this point?

I moan against his mouth, sobbing in frustration. I can't think straight. I'm not even sure I'm breathing at this point. He's right where I need him, and it's not nearly enough.

How am I supposed to resist heaven?

His finger traces along my slit again. "Did staring at me all night make you this wet,

princess?"

"No. Yes." I whimper in frustration. "Please, Jareth."

"Please, what? Tell me what you want me to do to you."

"T-touch me."

He runs his finger along my slit again, nipping at my bottom lip, before he stops. He. Just. Freaking. Stops. "No."

I gape up at him, turned on, confused, sexually frustrated. And contemplating murder. It's justified right now. "No?"

"No," he repeats. "Not until you tell me that you're mine."

Oh, I am going to kill him. Slowly. Maybe drown him in the sink before I flush his body down the toilet. I doubt anyone would even miss him.

I stare at him for a long moment and then lift up on my toes, pressing my lips to his ear like I'm about to give him what he wants.

"I'm not yours," I growl in his ear instead, right before kneeing him in the thigh. Hard.

He grunts, doubling forward, which allows me to slip past him.

The loss of his heat against my body is devastating. But I'm too damn mad to care about that right now.

"Touch me again, and I'll smother you in your sleep."

"Just so long as it means you're in my room, princess," he calls, chuckling as I stomp out into the hall.

Naturally, Connor is standing right there. His eyes widen when they lock on Jareth standing in the bathroom doorway. He glances between us, clearly not sure how to handle the situation. "Uh..."

"Problem with the plumbing," Jareth lies. "It can be a little prickly at times unless you have the right touch. Luckily, I know just how to handle it."

I think I hate him. He's the literal devil.

He grins at Connor as he steps out into the hall.

"It's all taken care of now." He smirks as he strides past us, probably happy as hell that Connor caught us in the bathroom together.

In his eyes, he probably imagines it ending with a big dramatic fight and Connor dumping me.

I'm sure that's probably how the story is supposed to go.

Except for the fact that Connor and I aren't really dating, and he's more attracted to Jareth than he is to me.

Why did I think any of this was a good idea?

"We're leaving," I growl at Connor, looping my arm through his. "We have something important to take care of. It can't wait."

Jareth tenses, missing a step, and I know he heard me, exactly like I intended. But I



don't feel satisfied. I just feel...guilty.

Crap. Am I actually falling for him?

No. No way.

Except...that isn't hatred burning in my chest, is it?

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:57 am*

Jareth

The sun hasn't even crested the horizon before Zoya slips out the front door, moving like she's trying to avoid being detected. It's cute that she thinks she can sneak away and avoid me. That shit isn't happening though.

I let her get far enough ahead to avoid detection and then slip out behind her, following her path through the vineyard.

She strides toward the guesthouse, only to stop halfway there, muttering to herself.

She glances back over her shoulder, her eyes narrowed.

But I know she doesn't see me. I'm lurking in the shadows like they're my goddamn home.

After a moment, she mutters something else and then veers off the path, heading toward the section of vineyard that wraps around the winery instead.

"Where is she going?"

I follow, watching the way she stops periodically to run her hands over the dormant vines, the first inklings of sunlight spilling across her face. She seems deep in thought, like maybe she escaped the house just to clear her mind.

Did she sleep any better than I did last night?

Probably not. All I could think about was the way she felt on my fingertips and the look in her eyes when she whimpered my name.

I wanted to give her exactly what she wanted and make her come.

But...I'm a jealous, possessive asshole. I want to hear her say she's mine so fucking badly I can't stand it.

If denying her gets me what I want, I'm willing to play that game. Just so long as it ends with her admitting the truth. But Christ, I want her coming for me like I've never wanted anything before now.

I should feel bad that Connor caught us in the bathroom together.

I don't. His reaction confirmed what Ridley suspects.

They aren't really dating. If they were, he wouldn't have just stood there with a stupid look on his face.

He would have been throwing elbows and fighting for her.

Instead, he said nothing. That's not the behavior of a man in love.

Zoya starts walking again, circling around the back of the winery. And then she pauses to examine one of the old mechanical harvesters that's rusting in the field.

I pace toward her on silent feet, strolling right up behind her. I stop when I'm close enough to smell that cherry scent that makes my balls ache.

"I should have known it was you following me," she mutters without even turning around to look at me.

"Maybe I'm just out for a walk."

"Right," she snorts before pointing at the harvester. "What is this?"

"A mechanical grape harvester."

"What does it do?"

"You drive it over the vines, and it shakes them to separate the grapes from the leaves. The grapes drop into little conveyor buckets along the bottom and then are pulled up from there through the hose and dumped into large collection bins that get pushed along beside it."

"Oh." She cocks her head to the side, examining the machine, before glancing over her shoulder at me. "Doesn't that break the vines?"

"Not if you know what you're doing." I grin. "It saves a helluva lot of time, too."

"You just leave it sitting out during the off-season?"

"We don't use this one any longer. It mostly sits out here for photo ops and school field trips."

"Oh." She shakes her head, her lips quirking into a grin. "I can't believe you actually own a vineyard."

"I own part of a vineyard," I correct. "My mom and her brothers passed it down to all of us, so each of my cousins owns part of it, too."

"How did you go from all of this to rockstar?"

"Accidentally," I admit with a rueful laugh. "I always enjoyed playing, but I never intended to do it professionally. I had a buddy in college who needed a guitarist for a show and roped me into it. Things spiraled from there."

"How do you find time for both?" she asks, genuine curiosity in her voice as she turns to face me, her arms crossed over her breasts, pushing them up in her t-shirt. "This isn't exactly a small vineyard. You guys have a winery, a restaurant, and a whole wine line."

"There's always time for what's important, princess," I murmur, my gaze burning a hole in her.

She blushes, glancing away from me for a moment before her gaze naturally drifts back. It's like she can't help herself. She may not want to admit it, but she feels the same thing I do. I think it pisses her off a little bit that she feels it, but she feels it.

"This is my last tour."

"Really?" She blinks at me, surprise stamped across her face. "You're giving up the rockstar life?"

"I never wanted the rockstar life. I fell into it. It's not hard to give up something you never intended to keep."

"What about your fans?"

"You mean Nadia's fans."

"No." She shakes her head. "I mean your fans. Half the women who come to her shows are there for you and the band, not for my sister. They're obsessed with you guys."

"They don't know me, Zoya," I say softly. "They show up for the illusion, not the reality."

"Is there a difference?"

I narrow my eyes, pacing toward her. "You know damn well that there is, princess.

I play guitar because I enjoy it. I'm not defined by it, as much as people like to think I am.

The fame that came with it isn't my reality.

This place is reality. It's in my blood. It's my heart. This is where I belong."

She swallows hard, tilting her head back to look up at me. Her gaze drifts across my face like she's trying to figure me out, but doesn't quite know where to start. I don't like whatever she decides, though. It has her taking a step away from me, her expression almost...wistful.

"Well, good luck with that," she murmurs. "I should go."

I thrust my arm out in front of her, halting her. There's not a chance in hell that I'm letting her run off on me again. Not until she tells me what that look is about.

"Jareth..."

I ignore the warning in her voice, crowding her up against the side of the harvester. "What did I say that upset you?"

"Nothing. I'm not upset."

"You're a terrible liar, baby."

"I'm not lying." She rolls her eyes at me. "I just think your life is not like mine, that's all."

I process that for a minute, not entirely sure what she means. I don't think my life is like anyone's, frankly. But that doesn't mean she and I are all that much different. I'm not my job. I'm not the vineyard. I'm just a motherfucker trying to secure his future. With her.

"Why are you so determined not to like me, princess?"

"I'm not," she lies.

"Yeah, you are. You've convinced yourself that I'm chasing after you for the hell of it, like it's something I do regularly." I crook a finger under her chin, forcing her to see me. "It's not, Zoya. I don't fuck around."

"Good for you." She licks her lips, her gaze darting away again. "That has nothing to do with me."

"It has everything to do with you, and you know it," I growl, my chest brushing her tits as I lean down over her. "I don't want other women. Never have. But you? You're different."

"Well, too bad. I have a boyfriend," she mumbles.

"Right. And where is he again?" I make a show of looking around. "Because, gotta tell you, princess, you've spent more time away from him since you got here than you have with him."

"That's not your business. We don't have to spend every waking moment together," she growls. "Maybe I like my independence."

"Yeah, maybe." I pause, my lips hovering over hers. "Or maybe you're full of shit."

She growls at me, her eyes flashing with irritation.

I cut off whatever hot retort she's about to spit at me by slanting my mouth down over hers.

Like usual, she doesn't fight me. She doesn't even try to push me away.

She makes that sound in the back of her throat—the one that makes my blood steam in my veins, and then thrusts her hands into my hair, pulling.

"We both know you want me, not him," I growl, pinching her nipple. "We both know I'm the one you were thinking about in your bed last night. Did you touch yourself, Zoya?"

"Jareth," she moans.

"Did you whimper my name into your pillow when you came?"

She shakes her head, trying to deny the truth, but I know it because I know her. Because I felt how goddamn wet she was last night. For me. I know she didn't go to sleep like that. She took care of herself, fucking her fingers right down the hall while I jerked off, imagining that scene.

"Tell me the truth," I order her, biting her bottom lip as one hand slips down her body. "Tell me that you came all over your hand last night, wishing it was my hand."



"Yes!" she sobs in frustration, pulling my hair hard.

I groan, burying my face in her neck as I pop the button on her jeans.

I don't bother with the zipper before shoving my hand inside, desperate to feel her on my fingertips again.

She trembles against me, moaning my name when I flick her panties aside, cupping her hot cunt in the palm of my hand.

She's dripping for me, so fucking needy.

"Christ, princess," I growl, attacking her throat with my lips and teeth. "I want to hear you say my name like you did when you were alone last night. How many fingers did you use?"

"T-two."

"Like this?" I roll my thumb across her clit before slowly sinking two fingers into her up to the knuckle.

She's tight as hell around them, her inner muscles fluttering and clenching.

I pump them quickly, fully aware that anyone could walk around the corner and catch us.

Ask me if I give a fuck. At this point, the fucking Pope could catch us, and I don't think it'd stop me.

"Is this how you fucked your fingers last night, Zoya? "

"Jareth!"

"Tell me," I demand, curling them up to stroke her G-Spot.

"N-no," she stutters, her eyes glazed with lust. "It was harder, Jareth."

Ah, fucking hell. Maybe I'm not the only one who doesn't play fair, because that little confession lands like Kryptonite, weakening my knees.

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I spin her around, pinning her against the harvester with her cheek against the cool metal. Her zipper comes down this time, giving me room to work as I nudge her legs apart, kissing all over the back of her neck.

She writhes against me as I fuck her with my fingers, going harder just like she did last night.

The sounds are enough to drive me wild. It's a symphony of her whimpers and moans colliding with the wet suck of her dripping cunt around my fingers as I pump them into her, desperate to make her fall apart for me.

"Is this hard enough, princess?" I groan, grinding my dick against her ass.

I'm so fucking hard it's actually painful, but that'll have to wait.

Right now is about her. It's about breaking down those walls of hers and proving to her that she wants me just as badly as I want her.

It's about gaining a foothold in her soul, one she can't kick me out of even if she tries.

And we both know she's going to try. She's going to fight like hell until she runs out of fight.

It's who she is. It's what she does. Zoya Mikhail doesn't fall easily.

If I want her heart, I'll have to go to war for it.

That's fine with me. So long as it's mine when the dust settles, I'll fight whatever battles I need to fight.

"Is this how you fucked your perfect little hand while you were trying not to let me hear you moaning my name last night, Zoya?"

"Yes!" she cries, her head falling back against my shoulder. "God, yes, Jareth. Don't you dare stop."

"Don't plan on it. Not until you're all wrung out." I nip her ear, curling my tongue around the shell of it before planting my lips against it. "Not until you know you're mine."

"I'm n-n-not... Oh, sweet Jesus."

"You aren't what? Aren't in heaven right now?" I bite the side of her throat, sucking hard. I hope like hell it leaves a mark. "Aren't losing your mind over me? Aren't mine?" I soothe the bite with a flick of my tongue, curling my fingers up to stroke her G-Spot again. "Little liar."

"Jareth..."

"Say it, princess. Go ahead and lie to me again."

But she can't. She's too far gone to form the lie this time. All she can do is whimper and moan my name as I play with her, dragging her right to the edge of an orgasm.

"You belong to me, Zoya," I growl against her ear. "You know it. I know it. Soon enough, everyone else will too."

"Oh, God!" she cries, shattering apart in my arms so damn beautifully. Her inner

muscles clamp down on my fingers as she goes off like fireworks, detonating with a stifled cry of ecstasy.

I work her through it, petting her pretty little clit until she's mewling in my arms, her cheek plastered to the harvester and her knees trembling. Only when the last aftershock rips through her do I slowly pull my fingers out of her, bringing them to my lips.

I crane her head back, forcing her to watch me as I suck one and then the other into my mouth, licking her juices from them.

She whimpers again, her eyes glossy and dazed.

"Damn, my girl tastes good," I groan, holding her gaze.

She blushes bright red, squeezing her eyes closed as if that'll block me out. We both know it won't work, though. Just like nothing she's tried so far has worked. I'm stuck in her head. I'm under her skin. Exactly where the fuck I should be.

But I've pushed enough for now.

"If I catch you out here alone again, the same thing is going to happen, Zoya."

"Jareth..."

I brush my lips across her cheek before carefully stepping back. "Behave, princess."

I don't give her time to respond before I turn and stroll away, trying like hell to put a little distance between us before I overstay my welcome and send her running again. I don't want that. The only place she should be running is right into my arms.

We'll get there.

"You're late," Ma says as soon as I step over the threshold into my childhood home. She flings her arms around me in a fierce hug. "I had to threaten your dad and your brother to keep them from eating your food."

"Sorry, Ma," I murmur, kissing her cheek. "I had something to take care of this morning."

Her eyes shine with happiness as she tips her head back to look up at me. "Was it a girl?"

"Jesus, Ma," I groan, shaking my head as we bypass the living room, heading for the kitchen.

"I'm just asking!" she cries defensively. "Arwen and Granger won't give me another grandbaby. I need you or your brother to step it up."

I glance over her head, meeting my father's gaze. "A little help here?" I ask

He smirks at me, amusement written all over his face. "Fuck no," he retorts, chuckling. "Whatever your mom wants, your mom gets."

"Thanks a lot," I grumble, dropping into the chair across from him as he pulls my mom down onto his lap.

I just shake my head as she squeals, throwing her arms around his neck to kiss him.

They've been the same way my entire life.

When we were younger, it drove me nuts that they were always so affectionate.

Now? Well, I appreciate the hell out of it, to be honest. I want the same shit they have, the kind of blissful happiness they've managed to hang onto for twenty-seven years. It's rare in this world.

I glance over at Bastian, who is seated beside our dad, staring off into space. "Ridley wants to expand operations. His idea is solid. You need to hear him out."

"What?" He blinks at me like he didn't hear me.

"I said, Ridley wants to expand operations, and I think he has a solid idea." I frown at him. "What's up with you?"

"Nothing." He scowls at me. "You're late."

"You know, if you unclenched just a little, you might actually learn to smile," I suggest, snatching a piece of bacon off the platter in the center of the table. Something is definitely up with him. He's been extra moody lately, and that's hard to accomplish.

Bastian scratches the side of his face with his middle finger, his eyes narrowed on me. "I'm not clenched. I'm just not sneaking all over the vineyard, following a girl like some people."

Shit. Did he see me following Zoya this morning?

Judging by the way he's smirking at me...yes. Dammit.

"What?" Ma gasps, coming up for air. How the fuck did she even hear us? She cranes her head toward me, her eyes wide and hopeful. "What girl? Why don't I know about this?"

I shoot Bastian a dirty glare. The last thing I need is for Ma to get in the middle of this thing with Zoya.

She'll get my aunts involved. Before I know it, the whole goddamn situation will be out of control.

It always gets out of control when the four of them are involved.

They just can't help themselves. "He's just seeing things, Ma. "

"Oh, I saw plenty," Bastian drawls, lifting his coffee mug to his lips.

I kick him under the table. At least, I mean to kick him.

"Son of a..." Dad growls, glowering at me. "Why the fuck did you kick me?"

"My foot slipped," I lie.

He narrows his eyes on me like he isn't buying my bullshit. And then he just shakes his head, cracking a smile. "What girl were you following all over the vineyard this morning?"

"Jesus Christ," I groan, rubbing my temples. "I wasn't following a girl. We were just heading in the same direction at roughly the same time."

"Oh! Is she one of the bridesmaids?" Ma asks, bouncing on his lap. "They're all so beautiful. Which one is she, Jareth? I want to meet her. Maybe your aunts and I can..."

I shoot a pleading look at Dad when Bastian chortles into his coffee, the bastard. This is all his fault.



Dad takes pity on me, wrapping an arm around Ma's waist to haul her back down onto his lap before she can leap to her feet to go call my aunts and get them involved.

"Let it be, sweetness. If there is a girl, we don't want to scare her off before she and Jareth can give you that grandbaby you want, do we? "

"Oh." She bites her lip. "I didn't think of that. Maybe I shouldn't involve your aunts yet."

Thank God for that. I love them dearly, but the women in this family are a handful on a good day. Every other day, it takes a miracle and two sacrifices to rein them in. I do not need them sending Zoya running for the hills.

I shoot a sly glance at my brother. "Did you know that Bastian just hired a new girl to help with marketing?"

"What?" Ma gasps, turning to look at him. "When? Why didn't you tell me? Do you like her? I want to meet her!"

Bastian sloshes coffee across his hand, scowling daggers at me. I chuckle, popping another piece of bacon in my mouth. So that is why he's been extra moody. Interesting.

I fill my plate while Ma badgers him with questions and Dad just smirks at me like he knows exactly what the fuck I just did. I meet his gaze and shrug. Serves Bastian right if she's hounding him instead of me.

Eventually, she runs out of steam when Bastian keeps deflecting and dodging her questions, and turns to pout at my dad. "Your sons are no fun, Carter. They never tell me anything."

"That's not true," I protest. "We tell you plenty."

"You didn't tell me about the girl staying with you."

"We ran out of cabins," I lie. How the fuck did she find out that Zoya is staying with me?

Ma doesn't buy my shit. She just smiles, shaking her head. "Fine. Keep your secrets, but you better be good to her if she's the one, Jareth Caspian Grayson."

"She has a boyfriend, Ma."

"You know, your dad thought the same thing about me once." She giggles, looking at Carter. "He was wrong. Maybe you are, too."

"Yeah, maybe." I'm more convinced than ever that Zoya and Connor's relationship is total bullshit. But how the fuck do I get her to admit it? That's the million-dollar question, isn't it?

Zoya

"O h, Nadia," Mom whispers, dabbing at her eyes as Nadia steps out of the dressing room in her wedding gown. "Look at you!"

"Mom!" Nadia cries, fanning her face. "Don't make me cry."

"Oh my gosh. Neither of you should be crying. Weddings are supposed to be happy things," Innessa says, shaking her head at both of them before she breaks into a big smile. "But you do look beautiful, Nadia."

"Yeah, you do," I whisper. The A-line style wedding dress features off-the-shoulder sleeves and a lace sheath that peeks through the leg slit. It hides her little bump beautifully, not that I think she cares who sees it. She and Teo are thrilled about the baby. "Like a princess."

Nadia spins in front of the mirror, looking at herself. "I feel like a princess," she admits softly.

"It reminds me of your prom dress," Aunt Miranda says.

Nadia glances down, smoothing her hands over the fabric. "That's why I chose it," she admits. "It reminded me of who we used to be and how far we've come since that night." She chews on her bottom lip, eyeing us in worry. "Is it too much? Maybe I shouldn't be bringing the past into this."

"Honey." Mom rises from the sofa, pacing toward her.

"You two have a lifetime of history. Some of it is beautiful, and some of it is devastating.

But you two made it, and you're so much stronger for it.

You're proof that love can survive time, distance, and heartbreak.

The kids you were that night deserve to be remembered because those kids are survivors.

If this dress helps you remember them, then it's the right one. "

Nadia flings her arms around our mom, hugging her fiercely. "Thank you," she whispers, her voice thick with unshed tears. "For everything." Her eyes come to me, Innessa, and Aunt Miranda, who is dabbing her eyes. "All of you. We owe all of you so much for not giving up on us."

"As if we would ever," Aunt Miranda says. "Jason and I love you like you're our own daughter. We always knew you and Teo would find your way back to one another."

"And Teo is the son we never had," Mom agrees. "Now, he'll be our son in truth."

"I can't wait to marry him," Nadia whispers, a happy smile tipping her lips up at the corners. "I can't wait to meet our little girl."

Mom hugs her tight again, laughing. "I know you can't, sweet girl."

I watch the two of them, my heart aching in a way that doesn't make sense. I'm beyond thrilled for Nadia and Teo. They deserve their happiness. But...I don't know. All I can think about is Jareth. My feelings for him are so damn confusing.

I keep telling myself I don't want this. I don't want to be the one in love. It'll never be me in a wedding dress. But looking at Nadia, seeing how happy she is now...I'm not honestly sure if that's true anymore. Part of me is envious, I think. And I don't know what to do with that.

My life made complete sense before Jareth appeared in it.

I was going to finish college and eventually open my own non-profit to rescue wild animals being held in captivity.

That was my plan. Now, it's all confused.

I still want those things. But Jareth keeps hovering on the edges of my planned future like a specter.

Like he said this morning, though, this place is his reality.

It's his home. It's in his blood. And my reality is back in Tennessee.

Even if I do want him, it'll never work.

We're from two different worlds, looking for two different things.

That shouldn't make me sad because he was never part of the plan. But it makes me sad anyway.

He just had to kiss me. He just had to touch me.

He just had to keep showing up, wrecking my defenses.

Now, he's in, and I can't get him out, and I'm seriously worried that I'm going to end

up just like Nadia.

Except there is no happy ending in my future.

There are just two different worlds and two people who were never going to work in the first place.

I'm going to end up with a broken heart. I can see it coming. But I think I may already be too far gone to stop it. Because I want him so damn badly it's driving me crazy. I want him all over me again and again and again. It's a terrible idea. I know it's a terrible idea...but I want it anyway.

"Maybe you'll be trying on a wedding dress next," Miranda says, nudging me.

I blink over at her to see her eyeing me with a bright smile. "What?"

"I said, maybe you'll be trying on a wedding dress next. You and Connor?"

"Yeah, maybe," I lie, glancing down at my phone like I'm checking it.

But I see my mom eyeing me, her expression full of empathy, like she's fully aware I've gotten myself into a situation I'm not entirely sure how to get out of.

The web I've woven isn't tangled. It's in freaking knots right in the pit of my stomach.

Yet again, I've made a mess of things.

"Um, I need to go," I lie, bounding to my feet before Mom can say anything. I don't have the heart to lie to her again. But the truth? Well, I'm not sure I have the heart to tell her the truth, either. Not when I know how it ends for me.

Jareth and I are impossible.

And somehow, I want him just the same.

I know I'm playing with fire when I slip out of my room in the middle of the night, too restless to pretend I'm sleeping. I pause outside of Jareth's door, contemplating pushing it open and stepping inside. But I'm not nearly that brave.

Instead, I scurry down the stairs and out the front door. He told me that if he caught me out here alone again, he'd do the same thing he did this morning. I'm not sure if that's what I want him to do or if I'm trying to escape the thought of it.

But when I don't even make it halfway down the path between his house and the guesthouse, and I hear his footsteps behind me, I'm not surprised. A thrill of anticipation goes through me.

I am in so far over my head.

I keep walking, pretending I don't hear him. Right up until he grabs me around the waist, pulling me off the path next to a shed.

I gasp quietly, my heart racing.

"I warned you, princess," he groans, burying his face in my hair. He doesn't turn me to face him, though. He just wraps his arms around me from behind, cradling me against his chest like I'm something precious.

So I spin in his arms, crashing my lips against his, driven by desperation and the wild spinning of my mind. It's been in snarls all damn day because of him. Because I shouldn't want this nearly as much as I do, but I want it anyway.

"Fuck," he growls, thrusting one hand into my hair to crane my head back. He licks into my mouth, setting every inch of my body on fire with his brandy and mint taste.

He pushes me up against the wall of the shed, boosting me up into his arms. My legs circle his waist, my hands tangling in his hair to keep him right where he is.

"I missed this fucking mouth today, Zoya," he groans, kissing me deeply again.

"Then do something about it."

"Plan to," he grunts, squeezing my ass.

One hand slips between our bodies, delving into my shorts.

"Fucking hell." His eyes snap to mine, his hand stalling in its quest. "You aren't wearing panties."

"I can go put some on if you prefer," I retort.

"Oh, you feel like being a smartass tonight, huh?" He parts my slit with his thumb, pressing it to my clit. "Maybe I shouldn't let you come."

I whimper in protest, ready to strangle him if he means it. I need this. I need him. My body literally aches for his touch at this point.

"Greedy girl," he whispers, reading the need in that sound. His lips touch mine again, his kiss wrecking me. Or, hell, maybe it's him wrecking me. Maybe it's the fact that he's relentless, and I love that. "You going to let me taste you, Zoya?"

I meet his gaze in the moonlight, my eyes wide, startled. "I...I've never..."



"Me either." He jiggles his thumb on my clit. "But I've had your taste in the back of my throat all day. I want more."

"Yes," I whisper, believing him. He isn't who I thought he was. He's something else entirely.

Mine, a little voice whispers. He's mine.

I think it might be right.

He grins at me, a predatory, wicked smile that has my stomach turning flips, and then presses a hard kiss to my mouth and lowers me down his body. Once my feet are beneath me, he drops to his knees right in the dirt and grass, looking up at me.

"Damn," he whistles. "You're even more beautiful from this angle."

"Jareth."

"I mean it, Zoya." He taps my hip, drawing me toward him. "Lift your leg over my shoulder. Hold onto the wall for support if you need it." His eyes glitter in the moonlight. "Don't let anyone hear you screaming."

Oh, my god...

I obey his instructions with my heart in my throat and a moan tumbling from my lips. The sheet metal is cool beneath my palm as I brace against it, but Jareth? He's hard heat, warm breath, and bad intentions between my legs as he tugs my shorts to the side, his gaze locked between my legs.

"Goddamn, princess," he breathes like he's looking at a masterpiece. "I can't wait to see you sprawled across my bed in the daylight, where I can see every inch of you."

I clutch his hair with my free hand, trying not to lose my mind even though he's barely touched me. It's him, though. It's the way he looks at me, the way he speaks to me, the things he says to me. It's like he knows I'm his, and he fucking loves it.

"Don't scream," he reminds me before yanking me closer to his mouth.

I choke on a moan at the first touch of his tongue to my clit. At the way he growls like I'm the best thing he's ever tasted. At the possessive way he holds onto me, his fingers digging into my flesh.

He licks me from top to bottom, groaning like he's in heaven. But I'm the one floating above the clouds. With the mountains on one side, the ocean on the other, grapevines all around us, and his mouth wrecking me, I'm on some plane of existence that shouldn't be real.

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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:57 am*

"Fucking hell, you taste so goddamn good," he growls, rapidly flicking his tongue against my clit before he drags it lower.

I groan his name, pulling his hair as he pushes the tip of it into me, teasing me with it. I can't fight the sound when he pushes it deeper, using his hands on my waist to rock me.

I understand what he wants and roll my hips, fucking his face.

He practically purrs against me in response, lapping at me like he's been starving for my taste. I gasp and shiver, clinging to reality by the skin of my teeth.

He rips that away with his teeth riding across my clit. The sharp sting blooms to pleasure, leaving me sobbing his name.

"That's it," he growls as I rock against him again, using my hold on his hair as leverage to help me move. "Fuck my face just like that, baby. Don't stop."

I can't stop. God help us both, but I don't think any force on earth could stop me from chasing the thrill right now. It's too damn good, like ecstasy poured directly into my veins. I feel him everywhere, igniting every nerve ending.

I fly over the edge with a soft shout, my legs buckling beneath me.

He grunts, wrapping his arms around me to keep me upright as he keeps going, licking me through the aftershocks pinging through my system.

By the time he finally releases me, I can't even breathe. I'm just a bundle of panting, shaking bliss.

"Did that feel good, princess?" he asks, pulling me down into his arms.

I curl up with my face buried in his throat, my heart still pounding. "Yes," I manage to whisper.

"Tasted good too." He brushes his lips across my crown, holding me tightly. For long moments, we stay just like that, locked together in the grass and dirt, the shed hiding us from view.

I feel like I should say something, but I don't know what to say.

Please don't break me feels a little too real. Perhaps because I'm coming to realize that this is real. That he has a power over me that no one ever has before. And that scares the shit out of me and doesn't scare me nearly enough at the same time.

"Did you come out here for this?" he asks, breaking the silence between us.

"No." I pause. "Yes." A soft breath huffs from my lips. "I don't know."

He tips my head back, forcing me to look at him. "What are you so afraid of, Zoya?"

"Nothing," I lie, before the truth immediately follows. "Everything. How much do you know about Nadia and Teo?"

"Not much."

"They've been in love forever," I whisper.

"Like, even as kids, everyone knew they were going to end up together.

But Teo decided to leave high school early when he was given a spot on the football team at UT for the next season, and it tore them apart.

Nadia was devastated. When he came home for Christmas that year, they got into a big fight.

She ran out of there and ended up in a car accident. "

"Jesus," he whispers. "I'd heard about the accident, but not everything else."

"Yeah." I sigh softly. "Teo is the one who pulled her from the car.

He wouldn't leave her side in the hospital until she started coming around.

He blamed himself, and I guess he figured she wouldn't want to see him.

But when Nadia woke up without him, she broke all over again.

She didn't want to hear anything anyone said about him.

We couldn't even say his name to her. She was convinced that he never felt the same way about her.

" I pause, gathering my thoughts. "That accident changed their lives in a lot of ways.

We lost part of both of them that night.

Teo started getting into fights. Nadia ended up in rehab twice, trying to deal with PTSD. It was...terrifying."

He listens quietly, letting me spill it all.

"I guess what they went through didn't just scar them. It scarred us all in some way."

"How did it scar you, princess?" he asks, searching my gaze.

I shrug helplessly. If I tell him the truth—that I don't do love—he'll know that Connor and I aren't real. But if I don't tell him, isn't that just as bad as maintaining the lie?

"I decided that wouldn't ever be me," I say carefully. "I never want to need someone so badly that not having them destroys me. I can't do that."

His expression softens before he dips his head, brushing his lips across mine. "If you're trying to warn me off, I'm not going anywhere, princess."

Isn't that the problem? He isn't going anywhere, but I am.

In ten days, I have to go back to Tennessee.

All of this ends. And I'm not entirely sure how I'm going to be okay with that if I keep falling for him.

I already feel like I need him too much, and that's dangerous.

If I keep tripping down this path, it won't lead anywhere good. For either of us.

Maybe I shouldn't have come out here tonight.

"I should go," I murmur, disentangling myself from his arms.

He hops up gracefully, pulling me to my feet. For a long moment, he doesn't say

anything. He just puts me back together, making sure my clothes are adjusted, and my hair is smoothed down. And then he tips my head back again, meeting my gaze.

"I'm not going to stop or back off, Zoya. I know you want this as much as I do. I see it in your eyes. You don't look at Connor the way you look at me. You want this. You're just too scared to let yourself have it."

"Jareth, I..."

He presses his forehead to mine. "If you don't want me finding my way into your bed, you better keep your door locked, because a motherfucker has had about enough of sleeping down the hall from you."

"Connor," I say, swallowing hard. Not because I'm worried about hurting Connor, but because having sex with him right down the hall seems...wrong. I brought him here to help me out. We're lying to everyone because of me. I can't just pretend that away.

God. I've made such a mess of everything!

"Fuck Connor," Jareth growls, kissing me hard on the mouth. "You don't belong to him."

He's right, I don't. But...

"That doesn't make this right," I murmur. It's the truth, even if not for the reasons he thinks.

"We'll see about that, princess. I already told you that I'm not going to give up. I meant it."

"Jareth!" I growl. "You aren't listening."

"No, you aren't listening," he says, yanking me closer to kiss me again before I even have a chance of trying to explain what I mean. "You're mine, Zoya. Fuck Connor. Fuck everything. I'm not stopping until you realize that what happened with your sister and Teo won't ever happen with us."

I groan in frustration, slipping from his arms. "You're so annoying."

"Yeah, and you fucking love it."

He isn't wrong, dammit. But I don't say that. I just shake my head and then turn and hurry down the path to the house. When I reach the porch, I glance over my shoulder, but he isn't following me.

I sneak inside like I'm breaking curfew, trying to keep from waking Connor. But he's already standing at the top of the stairs with a shit-eating grin on his face.

"Girl, you are so fucked," he says, laughing quietly.

"I know!" I cry, burying my face in my hands.

He chuckles again, and then I hear his footsteps retreating down the hall. I reluctantly haul myself upstairs, expecting to find him waiting in my room for all the juicy details, but surprisingly, he isn't.

I hesitate with my hand on the knob before quickly flipping the lock to keep Jareth out. I doubt it'll really do me much good if he really wants in, but at least it sends a message.

I'm just not entirely sure what that message is. Ten minutes ago, I intended to tell him the truth about Connor. And now, what? I'm running again?



"What the hell are you doing, Zoya?" I ask myself, falling into bed with a groan. It's a damn good question, and I don't have an answer. All I know is that I'm in way, way over my head, and I'm sinking fast.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:57 am*

Zoya

"What is he doing?" I mumble to myself, watching Jareth out of the corner of my eye as he strides toward the bench where my parents are seated, basking in the late afternoon sun. He flicks a glance in my direction, his lips quirking up at the corners in a way that suggests he's up to no good.

Crap.

I start to heave myself up from the picnic table, only to pause when Nadia laughs, her eyes coming to me.

"You can't keep your eyes off him," she says.

"What? Yes, I can."

"Oh, really?" Her smile grows. "Then how'd you know who I was talking about?"

"I..." I huff out a breath, plopping back down on the bench with a groan. I'm so busted. "He's the literal devil, Nadia. Why did you have to move the wedding here?"

"It was his idea."

I whip my head toward her, gaping at her in shock. "What?"

"It was his idea."

"I heard you the first time," I mutter, turning a dark look in Jareth's direction. He's chatting with my mom and dad now. My mom is laughing while Dad looks amused. And Jareth? He's still staring at me, as if taunting me to come and stop him.

I cannot believe moving the wedding here was his idea. Actually, scratch that. I can believe it. The man is determined to...what? I'm not sure exactly. Ruin me? Possess me? Make me homicidal? I think all three might be true.

"He's driving me nuts."

"Because you like him."

I don't deny it. Instead, my shoulders bounce in a shrug. "Doesn't matter."

"Why not?" Nadia asks and then narrows her eyes at me. "And don't give me any crap about being in love with Connor because no one except Dad is buying that."

I smile despite myself, glancing over at my dad. "He said something about me and Connor?"

"He's been complaining nonstop about you and Connor," Nadia says with a little laugh. "Did Connor not tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"Dad made him go for a walk with him yesterday."

"He didn't," I groan.

"Oh, he did." Nadia's smile is savage. "Teo says he was asking Connor about his intentions before they even made it two steps."

"Oh my god." I tip my head back, staring up at the cloudless sky. "Our father is a crazy person."

Poor Connor. I owe him big time for this.

"Well...yeah." Laughter spills from Nadia's lips. "But you did it to yourself, baby sister. You're the one who decided to bring him with you."

"I panicked," I mutter.

"Because of Jareth."

It's not really a question, but I nod anyway, stealing another glance at the man in question. He's still laughing with my parents like they're old friends. I guess in a way, they are. He's been playing guitar in Nadia's band for a while.

He looks in my direction again, and our eyes meet. Like usual, I get sucked into his vortex. His expression heats, his eyes softening. He doesn't even hide that he's staring at me. He doesn't try to hide his dirty thoughts, either. They're written all over his face for everyone to see.

I narrow my eyes on him, trying to pretend I'm annoyed. The reality is a lot more complicated than that. I love the way he looks at me. I love that he doesn't care who sees it. I'm playing with fire, desperately trying to brand him onto my skin and keep from getting burned at the same time.

Why is life so fucking complicated?

I'm falling in love with Jareth Grayson. I think I was falling before I even left Los Angeles. And I still don't know what to do about it.

Let yourself fall , a little voice whispers. You know it's what you want.

I shiver, wrapping my arms around myself as I tear my gaze away from Jareth.

"He looks at you the same way Teo looks at me," Nadia says softly.

"He shouldn't be looking at me at all," I force myself to say. "I'm with Connor."

"Is that why you and Jareth were sneaking around in the middle of the night last night?"

"What?" I gape at her, shock running through me.

"I saw the two of you when I got up to pee."

"Oh my gosh, Nadia. I..."

"You don't owe me an explanation," she says quickly, shaking her head. "It's not my business. But if you're really dating Connor, maybe you owe him one?"

"He's gay," I confess in a whisper, shooting a furtive glance toward Jareth to make sure he hasn't snuck up on me.

I planned to confess the whole truth last night until he wouldn't let me talk.

And then he annoyed me out of it. Now, I don't know what I'm doing.

Or trying to do. But my story is falling apart faster than a paper house in a rainstorm.

"He's just doing me a favor." I huff out a breath. "What am I going to do?"

"Are you asking for advice?"

"Maybe?"

"I don't know," she says simply.

"Well, gee, that was helpful."

She laughs at my snarky tone. "I just mean...I don't know what you should do. I don't know why you're so opposed to giving Jareth a chance. Maybe you should figure that out."

Isn't that the problem? I have figured it out. He isn't the problem here. I am. I'm always the problem.

"I don't want either of us to end up hurt. His life is here, and I'm going back to Tennessee soon."

"I think it's probably too late for that already, Zoya," she says, planting her hands on top of the picnic table to haul herself to her feet. "He's never been like this with anyone, and neither have you. Regardless of when it ends, it's going to hurt."

"Yeah," I whisper, glancing down at the scarred tabletop. I think she's right about that because the thought of leaving already hurts like hell.

How much worse will it be if I really let him in?

I'm not sure I'm brave enough to find out.

Five minutes after Nadia slips away, Jareth strolls toward me, his shadow blocking the sun. I tip my head back, staring up at him. He's dressed in a simple T-shirt and

jeans, his hair a little wild. He didn't shave this morning. The scruff on his jaw is damn sexy.

My stomach turns a flip as his lips curve into a wicked grin.

"You looked lonely over here."

"What were you talking about with my parents?" I ask.

"Hello to you, too, princess," he practically purrs, chuckling.

"I'm serious, Jareth."

"Worried?"

"No," I lie.

"Maybe we were talking about the weather. Maybe we were talking about you." He shrugs, his smile growing. "Can't remember."

I scowl up at him, tensing. "Are you always so infuriating?"

"Depends on the day."

My scowl slips, a tiny smile replacing it. "At least you're honest."

"What can I say? I was a good little Boy Scout."

"You are so full of it. You were not a Boy Scout!"

"I was. All the way up until I was fifteen."

I gape at him, shocked. He's serious. "I was a Girl Scout for five minutes."

"Five minutes, huh?" He chuckles, hoisting himself up onto the table beside me. "You get booted out?"

"I ran off to play with a dog." I laugh at the memory. "Our troop leader was not happy when she found me rolling around in the mud with a stray Rottweiler instead of picking flowers with the other girls."

Jareth laughs, his thigh bumping mine. "Why am I not surprised?"

"I liked the dog more than the flowers," I say, shrugging. "My parents decided volunteering at the animal shelter would probably be more my speed than Girl Scouts."

"Were they right?"

"Yeah," I whisper, smiling. "They were right. I want to open my own rescue someday." I sneak a glance up at him. "What were the three of you talking about?"

"Innessa."

I blink at him.

"Your Dad was trying to convince me that she needs a good man."

"He did not!"

"He did."

"Oh my god," I groan, shooting a look at my parents. My mom has her head resting



on his shoulder while he plays with the ends of her hair. They look so happy. "He is shameless."

And that isn't jealousy seething through me. Nope, not at all.

"He just wants the best for his daughters."

"Innessa is in love with Maddox."

"Jealous?" Jareth teases.

"Of Innessa and Maddox?" I ask, intentionally playing dumb as I hop up from the bench. "Not at all. I already have a boyfriend."

A soft growl rumbles from deep in Jareth's chest, his eyes narrowing on me. "You locked your door last night."

"Yes, because I have a boyfriend."

He growls again, his eyes flashing holy fire. "Who are you trying to convince, Zoya? Me or yourself?"

"I don't need to convince anyone," I lie. "You can think whatever you want."

"Leave your door unlocked tonight."

"Don't tell me what to do, Jareth."

"Leave the door unlocked, princess."

"No."

"Fine." He smirks at me. "Then I'll find another way to get you alone." He pauses, his expression taunting. "Or maybe I won't even wait until you're alone to put my hands all over you next time."

"I...you..." I snap my mouth closed, scowling at him before I turn and stomp away, my heart pounding. There's no way he'll follow through on that threat...right?

Jesus. Why does part of me want to find out?

I don't leave my door unlocked for him, and I'm not entirely sure if I'm defying him because I want to see how far he'll go or not.

But I do spend the next two days going to great lengths to avoid him, seriously worried he meant it.

He knows the property like the back of his hand.

I don't. I spend half my time looking over my shoulder for him as I race from one wedding-related activity to the next.

I try like hell to keep Connor at my side as often as possible, but my best friend keeps ditching me to make out with Huck. Considering what I've done with Jareth, I can't even be mad at him for it. I'd ditch myself too if I were in his shoes.

But by the time the third morning rolls around, I am stressed .

Jareth got my phone number from Nadia and started texting me last night. His filthy messages damn near tipped me over the edge.

I'm sleep deprived, horny, and slowly unraveling.

The sad truth is that I want him to follow through on his threat. I want him to chase me and fight me. I want him, anyway I can have him. It doesn't matter that I'm leaving soon. It doesn't matter that I told everyone that I'm dating Connor.

Jareth matters, far more than I'm prepared to deal with.

What is he up to?

My blood pressure spikes when I stumble into the kitchen in search of coffee, only to find him and Connor chatting at the island.

I draw to a stop, glancing between them suspiciously.

Why do they suddenly seem so friendly? Last I checked, Jareth was still being an ass to Connor.

"What are you doing?" I blurt when they both turn to look at me.

Humor dances in Connor's eyes. "Ah, there's my adorable girlfriend," he says. "I guess speaking of the devil does still work."

My eyes narrow further, my gaze shifting between him and Jareth. "Why are you talking about me?"

"Someone woke up cranky this morning," Jareth smirks at me. "Trouble sleeping, princess?"

If superpowers were real, I could murder him with a single look. He knows damn well that I didn't get any sleep last night. And he knows why.

Do you have any idea how hard it is to sleep when Jareth Grayson has just told you, in

lurid detail, how badly he wants to spread you out and keep you coming until you pass out on his cock? Because, gotta tell you, I know. And it's impossible!

I contemplated unlocking my door just to strangle him, but I wasn't brave enough to try my luck. I already knew that would end with us making that fantasy a reality, and I was just unhinged and sleep-deprived enough to refuse to let him win.

I'm stubborn like that.

The man is hell on my peace of mind. He's hell on my sleep schedule.

Jareth Grayson was sent straight from Satan himself to torment me. And dammit all, but I love every minute of it.

"I slept like a baby," I lie, batting my lashes at him. "Didn't even dream."

He grunts, hiding his scowl behind his coffee cup.

Finally, a point for me in this lopsided match!

"Why are you two talking about me?" I demand, still curious. And worried. God only knows what Connor said. Satan only knows what Jareth said.

"I was just asking your man," Jareth says, emphasizing the words in a way that has me bristling, "if I could steal you away for a while this morning. There's an issue that requires some attention."

"What issue?" I ask, not buying his bullshit for a second.

"Catering," he lies with a straight face. "I had the most delicious dessert the other night, and I need an opinion from someone in the wedding party on whether it should

be added to the menu."

Oh, I'm not going to kill him. I'm going to do whatever comes after willful murder.

"You should ask Nadia and Teo," I say flatly. "It's their wedding."

"I'm not sure this dessert is to their taste. I'd rather not bother them with it." His eyes actually glitter with self-satisfied humor. "Connor said he didn't mind if I stole you for a taste."

I squeeze my eyes closed, counting to three. It doesn't really help. Especially when I open my eyes again to find Jareth still smirking at me and Connor hiding a smile behind his coffee cup, like he knows damn well what Jareth is talking about.

"We can do it here if you prefer," Jareth says, his tone polite. But I see the challenge in his eyes, and I know precisely what he's threatening to do here. Me. Probably on the freaking island.

"Fine," I growl, giving in gracelessly as I turn for the door. "Just let me get dressed, and we can go."

"Have fun!" Connor calls after me.

I'm killing him, too.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:57 am*

Zoya

"Y ou are a jerk," I hiss at Jareth an hour later, dragging him around the side of the restaurant and then pushing him up against the wall. " Steal me for a taste? Are you serious?"

"Worked, didn't it?" he growls, yanking me into his arms. "You're here with me right now, and your boyfriend doesn't have a clue that you're the delicious treat I tasted."

"Why do you keep saying it like that?" I demand, eyes narrowed on him.

"What?"

"Boyfriend. You emphasize it every time you say it."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do! You say it like...like..."

"Like what?"

"Like you don't believe it."

"What if I don't?" he taunts, crowding me up against the wall. Jeez. How did this end with me against another wall? I'm the one who is supposed to be on the offensive this time. "What if I think your little story about being in love with him is a crock of shit?"

"That's your prerogative," I say, shrugging. "But delusion doesn't look good on you, Jareth."

"You know what does look good on me?" He tips my head back, leaning down over me. "You, Zoya. You look damn good all over me."

"Jareth," I groan. "Did you drag me out here just to torment me? Was your text last night not enough?"

"So you read it, huh?" He grins triumphantly, and I want to kiss that stupid expression off his face. "How long did it take before you were coming all over your fingers, baby?"

"I didn't," I lie like the wind.

"Little liar." He dips his head, kissing me. "I bet you made yourself come so fucking hard, imagining it was me between your thighs."

"Did not." I shove him off me. "Do you actually have an issue with the catering or not?"

His eyes light up. "Come see," he says, trying to link our fingers together. And maybe I'm the delusional one, because I let him do it. I let him hold my hand all the way to the back door of the restaurant. And part of me thrills to that simple touch, eating it up like it's life-sustaining.

My stomach growls when we enter the kitchen, and the aroma of freshly baked bread wafts toward me.

"Sit here," Jareth orders, nudging me toward a stool pulled up at a prep station.

I reluctantly plop onto the stool, watching as he strides across the kitchen and disappears around the corner. He reappears two seconds later, juggling a covered tray in his hands.

"What is this?" I ask, eyeing him suspiciously as he sets it in front of me.

"Open it."

I hesitate a moment before curiosity gets the better of me. I reluctantly pull the lid off and then blink at the various dishes arranged on the tray. "Uh, this isn't dessert, Jareth. It's the whole damn menu."

"We need someone to taste it before the wedding," he says, shrugging.

"Again, that should be Nadia or Teo."

"She told me to ask you. She said she trusts your judgment."

"No, she did not." There are a million things Nadia may trust. My judgment is not on that list. It's not in the same dimension as that list.

"She did," he says earnestly.

Why is everyone working against me? First, Connor. Now, my own sister. It's like they're determined to throw me into Jareth's path just to see what I do. It's maddening!

"She's not feeling well today," he murmurs. "Morning sickness."

My irritation dissolves in a puff of smoke. "Fine, I'll taste it," I grumble. "But only because she doesn't feel well."



He grins as if I just handed him a winning lottery ticket. However, judging by the sheer luxury of this place, I don't think he needs a winning lottery ticket. His family is loaded, the kind of loaded that even Aunt Miranda and Teo can't compete with.

His grin slips as he stares at me, his eyes darkening. "You're so fucking beautiful."

"Don't," I whisper, breaking his gaze.

"Don't what? Tell you the truth?"

"Don't act like this is going anywhere," I growl, frustrated. "It isn't. It can't!"

"Why the fuck not?"

"Because...because...because I won't even be here in ten days!" I cry, throwing up my hands. "I'll go back to my life in Tennessee, and you'll still be here. So why keep heading down a path that only leads to heartbreak?"

"Are you so sure it will?" he asks, his eyes locked on my face. "Or is that just what you've convinced yourself to keep me at arm's length?"

I hesitate, weighing the question. Maybe I have been working overtime to convince myself that this is only going to lead to heartbreak, but it's not like I'm wrong.

I know myself too well to think I can love him from afar without cracking apart.

I haven't been running from the thought of it for so damn long for no reason.

If something can go wrong, it usually does.

And I'm usually the one who poured the gasoline that started the fire.

"Long-distance relationships don't work, Jareth.

Short-distance relationships rarely work. "

"Such a pessimist," he says, tsking.

"No, I'm a realist."

"Or maybe you're just afraid to take a chance and prove yourself wrong." He scoops up a bite of pasta on a fork, holding it out to me. "Maybe you've spent so long running from the possibility of love that you don't know how to stop."

"That's not true," I protest, biting the pasta off the fork with so much force that my teeth clack against the tines.

"Oh, really? Then why are you trying so hard to convince me that Connor is your boyfriend when we both know that the man is gay?"

I choke on the bite of pasta.

"Shit." Jareth drops the fork, snatching up the glass of water and pressing it into my hands. "Drink this."

I take a drink, cough again, and then manage to catch my breath.

I wipe tears from my eyes with shaking hands, trying to think.

What does he know? How does he know? Did Nadia tell him?

Did Connor? No. Connor may be the worst fake boyfriend ever, but he wouldn't rat us out like that, not without discussing it with me first. Neither would Nadia.

"I don't know where you heard that, but you clearly don't know what you're talking about," I finally mutter.

It's as close to a denial as I can get without flat-out lying.

I don't want to lie to him, especially since I intended to tell him the truth the other night.

But Connor's sexuality isn't my news to share, either.

"Right," Jareth says, shaking his head. "He just spends all his time anywhere but with you for the hell of it."

"Like I said, you don't know what you're talking about."

"You've never slept with him."

"So? That doesn't prove anything. There are plenty of virgins in the world."

"Yeah, I am one," Jareth growls.

"Seriously?" I gape at him.

"Is that so shocking? I told you before you came all over my face that I'd never done that before."

"I thought you meant that specifically, not all of it."

"You thought wrong. And you're still full of shit. Connor is gay."

"Whatever you say. Can we please just get on with this tasting so I can get back to

my boyfriend?" My head is spinning. Jareth is a legitimate virgin. I did not see that coming.

"Hell no," he snaps, his eyes flashing with deadly intent. "Your man is right here."

I open my mouth to argue with him and then snap it closed with a shake of my head. "It's too early in the morning to argue with you, Jareth."

"We wouldn't be arguing if you'd admit that you're wild about me already."

"You know what?" I growl, tired of denying it. Tired of fighting it. Just...tired. I am so damn tired of resisting this man when it feels futile. When he feels inevitable. "Maybe I am. Maybe you're all I think about anymore. And maybe it's driving me freaking nuts! But it doesn't change anything."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm leaving in ten days!" I cry again.

"I go back home, and you'll be here. And eventually, we both end up heartbroken.

Is that really what you want?" It's better to just end it now before I get in even deeper and can't get out.

It already hurts knowing I'm leaving in ten days, Nadia was right about that.

But I cannot deal with falling harder, just to lose him later.

I wasn't built for that. And maybe that makes me a coward, but I'll wear that label because the way this man makes me feel scares the hell out of me.

He feels vital to me. I can't lose myself in him and then lose him.

I'll end up right where Nadia was for the last six years, and I've already seen what that's like.

So, no thank you. I'm opting all the way out of that pain.

"You aren't hearing me, Zoya," he says softly, his gaze locked on my face. "I want you. Whether you're here, in Tennessee, or on the other goddamn side of the world, I want you."

I groan, burying my face in my hands. He's relentless. And I'm so damn weak because every time he says something like that, my defenses crumble. I crumble.

"This is going to end in disaster," I mutter.

He pries my hands away from my face, pulling me into his arms. "Or maybe it ends up being the best risk you've ever taken." His lips brush my crown. "Stop fighting me, baby. I know it's fucking killing you to pretend you don't want this."

"It is," I admit, my heart in my throat. "But...Connor."

A displeased growl rumbles in his throat. "Fuck, Connor, Zoya. You don't belong to him."

"He's important to me, Jareth."

His eyes flicker across my face before his expression softens. He groans, pulling me into his arms to kiss me. "You're lucky you're so goddamn beautiful, princess. You have until the end of the day to talk to him before I do it myself."

"Thank you," I whisper, not entirely sure what I just got myself into here.

Please, God, don't let him break me.

I spend all day trying to slip away to talk to Connor, but every time I think I'm in the clear, I get pulled into another wedding-related activity.

It's like the whole world is suddenly conspiring against me again, only instead of trying to throw me into Jareth's path, it's trying to keep me out of Connor's.

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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:57 am*

By the time dinner rolls around, I've helped make catering decisions, gone over security protocols with Oliver and Trystan, helped my mom convince my dad that he can't just move the family to LA to be close when the baby arrives, and helped make last-minute decisions about where to put the handful of guests Nadia and Teo invited.

I've also convinced Innessa not to strangle Maddox.

The only thing I haven't done is see Connor all day.

I set off in search of him, only to bump into Jareth. He immediately pulls me around the side of the restaurant, his lips coming down on mine.

I groan into his mouth, kissing him back with the same desperation. I can't help myself. Now that I've admitted defeat, I feel almost...giddy. I'm still scared as hell, but I shove those little whispers to the back of my mind, slamming a lid closed on them.

"Have you talked to Connor yet?" he growls, his hands all over my ass.

"No. I haven't had a chance. Apparently, Maid of Honor means executive decision maker around here. I was just going to look for him."

Jareth grunts, kissing me again before he pulls away. "Follow me."

"What? Why? I need to talk to Connor."

"Just follow me, princess."

I grumble at him and then reluctantly fall into step with him. He leads me around to the same door we entered this morning, only the kitchen is in full swing now. We duck the sous chef, popping out into a hallway.

"Where are we...?" I trail off when I hear Connor's voice coming from around the corner.

"Fuck," my best friend groans. "We gotta stop."

"We will. Later," someone growls to him.

"What the...?" I whisper, tiptoeing forward to peek around the corner. I bite my lip, fighting a laugh when I see my best friend pressed up against the wall with Huck kissing his neck.

I guess that explains why I haven't seen him all day.

Crap. I glance over my shoulder with wide eyes, meeting Jareth's gaze. I can tell by the look on his face that he isn't surprised by the show.

Holy crap. How long has he known about the two of them?

I slip back toward him, grabbing his arm. I don't know where I'm going, but I pull him into an empty office, pushing the door closed behind us before I spin to face him. "You knew!"

"So?" he responds, stalking toward me.

"Jareth! How long have you known?"

"Since they were making eyes at each other the day after you arrived."



I gasp, staring at him in shock. "You've known all along?"

"Pretty much."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Watching you squirm was more fun for me."

"Jareth!" I scowl up at him, but he just shrugs, completely unrepentant.

"I spent four months stressing the fuck out over his existence, Zoya. You deserved to squirm a little bit." He smirks at me. "Watching you try to keep up your little charade was amusing as hell."

"You are such a jerk," I grumble.

"And you're a terrible little liar." He hooks his fingers into the waistband of my jeans, yanking me into his arms. "Definitely don't go into acting. You suck at it."

"Whatever." I roll my eyes at him. "Don't even pretend it didn't drive you nuts when we got out of the car. I saw your face."

"Oh, I'm not denying it." He meets my gaze, his deadly serious. "I wanted to plant my fist in his smug face for touching what's mine."

"I'm glad you didn't," I whisper. "I would have been upset with you."

"Why'd you bring him?"

"I thought it'd help me avoid you."

Jareth chuckles, squeezing my ass. "Don't think it worked."

"Clearly not," I huff. "You've been stalking me all over this property all week."

He grins again, slipping his hand beneath my shirt. I shiver at the feel of his fingertips against my abdomen. "You fucking loved every minute of it."

"Did not," I lie, leaning up to bite his lip.

He growls, his eyes turning dark. "Keep that up, and you won't make it to my bed before I'm inside you, Zoya."

"Maybe that's the point."

He groans softly, his hands flexing against my body.

"You want me? I'm right here, Jareth."

"I imagined you in my bed for the first time, princess."

"Where's the fun in that?" I taunt, intentionally brushing against his erection. "We've been sneaking around all over the property already. Why stop now?"

"Jesus," he growls, thrusting one hand into my hair to crane my head back. He leans down over me, his eyes glittering with lust. "Is that what you want? For me to pop your little cherry right here in this office?"

"Yes," I moan, unable to deny it. I don't care where we are.

I just want him, with the same intensity that's been driving me mad for months already.

I don't need a bed. I don't need flowers and candlelight.

I'm quickly coming to realize that there is no such thing as perfect.

Life is messy, and maybe love is, too. But maybe that's the way it should be.

Maybe that's what makes it so damn good .

It's messy. It's flawed. It's push and pull and give and take.

That's what Jareth and I are together. We're radioactive particles, crashing into one another to create something new—something powerful. It's intense and terrifying, but if we're brave enough, maybe it's strong enough to sustain us.

I want to find out.

It'll break me if we crash and burn, but I think it's breaking me not to take that chance, too. I lose my mind a little more every day because I want him so fucking badly. If ten days of messy beauty is all I get, I want it. Every damn second.

No more running. No more pretending.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:57 am*

Jareth

I walk Zoya backward toward the desk, my goddamn heart in my throat.

Not breaking down her bedroom door the last few nights took every bit of restraint I have.

Now that she's right here in front of me, looking up at me like I'm the only thing she sees, I have no self-control left.

She tore it from me, strip by strip, leaving me wild.

I haven't gotten a damn thing done in days because all I do is think about her.

Does she even know that she's completely obsessed me?

Possessed me? Turned me inside out and upside down?

She's so afraid this will end in disaster, that I'll break her, but that shit isn't happening.

This isn't ending in ten days. It's not ending in ten years.

I feel that truth resonating in my soul, the same way it has since I met her in Nadia's dressing room. This is permanent, unalterable.

I thrust out an arm, sweeping all of Trystan's shit from his desk. Stacks of paperwork, pens, and office supplies crash to the floor around us as I lift Zoya up, dropping her

on top of my cousin's desk.

She shivers, her hazel eyes so dark with desire they're almost black.

I slip a hand beneath the hem of her shirt, my eyes locked with hers as I tug it upward, revealing acres of creamy skin. The shirt lands amidst the wreckage on the floor.

"Jesus," I groan, leaning back to look down at her.

She stares up at me, unblinking. Unashamed.

There's something so fucking sexy about her confidence and comfort in her own skin. She doesn't try to hide her curvy body from me. She knows she's beautiful.

"Get rid of the bra, princess," I rasp, palming my cock.

"Isn't that supposed to be your job?" she teases me.

"Next time. This time, I want to watch you bare yourself to me. Show me what you've been keeping from me."

She holds my gaze as she reaches behind her to unclasp the bra. Mischief dances in her eyes as the straps fall forward, the fabric caught between her body and her arm. She pulls it down slowly, tormenting me just because she can.

"Faster, Zoya."

The tops of her breasts peek into view, followed by her cherry red nipples.

I growl, palming my cock again. The bastard is so hard it's painful. "I'm going to

leave my marks all over them," I murmur, reaching out to run one fingertip down the center of her chest.

She shivers beneath my touch, moaning softly.

"You won't be able to deny who you belong to when I'm finished."

"Jareth," she groans like she's chastising me, but I see the way she squeezes her thighs together. I see the desire in her eyes. She knows she's mine, the same damn way I know it.

I pinch her nipple, and her head lolls on her neck, her back arching.

"Pants next, princess."

Her lips part, her expression dazed as she fumbles for the button on her jeans. I keep playing with her tits, driving her wild as she works the zipper down with uncoordinated fingers.

Her ass lifts from the desk, her fingers tucked in the waistband to pull the fabric down her legs. I help balance her so she doesn't tumble over backward, growling with impatience as she strips for me.

She has to stop to kick off her shoes before she manages to fight free of her pants, and then she leans back, her eyes meeting mine again. "Happy now?" she asks, her cheeks flushed.

"Not even close," I growl. "Spread your legs. Let me see all of you."

"This is beginning to feel very one-sided," she mutters even as she obeys, slowly parting her thighs.

I don't even hesitate before ripping my shirt off over my head, giving her what she wants. My eyes lock on her pussy, on the way her juices cling to her lips.

Fucking hell. I want to bathe in her, fucking anoint myself in her honey.

"Oh," she whispers, eyes wide as they run all over my chest and abdomen. They linger on my tattoos before slowly lifting to my face. "You're so damn big, Jareth."

"Don't worry, baby. You can fit me."

She rolls her eyes, but she can't fight a smile. "I said you were big, not your cock. I'm reserving judgment."

My eyes narrow on her. "Reserving judgment, huh?"

"Haven't seen it," she says, shrugging. "It could be the size of a grape."

I pinch her nipple hard, making her squeal. "My grape is going to split you in two."

"Promises, promises."

She stops giving me shit when I reach for my zipper, yanking it down. Her tongue darts across her bottom lip, her eyes wide with anticipation as I tug my jeans down, reaching inside to wrap my fist around my cock.

I grin, satisfied when I pull it out, and she gulps audibly.

"Go ahead," I growl, bucking my hips toward her. "Touch it, princess. See for yourself just how good it's going to feel inside you."

She reaches for me with trembling fingers.

I damn near come all over myself when she wraps them around me, squeezing. Fucking hell. Her hand looks perfect on my cock, her fingers straining to encase me.

"Jesus, Jareth," she whispers, a breathless hitch in her voice. "Did you win all the grape measuring contests?"

"Didn't participate," I grunt, planting my hand against her shoulder to lay her back. "I've been waiting for the right one."

"The right contest?"

"The right woman, Zoya." Her gaze flickers to mine as I lean down over her, trapping her on her back against the desk. "Looks like I finally found her."

I don't give her time to respond before swooping to claim her lips in a searing kiss. I devour her mouth, ravaging it as I run my hands across her, touching every perfect inch.

She moans into the kiss, her tits pressing against my chest. And that feels...fucking magical. Everything about her feels like magic. Does she even know that I'm completely gone for her? So much so that I'm willing to do whatever it takes to keep her?

If she doesn't, she will soon.

I break from her lips, kissing a trail down her body as she fumbles, trying to get her hand on my cock again. Her fingers brush the head as I wrap my tongue around one hard nipple, pulling it into my mouth.

We both moan when she squeezes my cock.



I bite her nipple and then pop off, planting my lips right beside it.

"Jareth!" she cries when I suck hard, marking her.

"I warned you," I murmur, running my gaze over the red splotch. "You're mine. I intend to leave my marks all over you to prove it."

"Yeah? Do I get to mark you, too?"

"Oh, fuck, yeah," I growl. "Mark me, baby. Let the whole fucking world know that I belong to you."

Her eyes light up as she wiggles beneath me. A second later, I feel her teeth in my skin. I growl, bucking my hips into her hand as she bites and sucks, leaving a mark right over my heart.

She pops off after a moment, humming in satisfaction when she sees her handiwork. "Damn," she breathes, her eyes drifting to mine. "I look good all over you, Jareth."

I groan, burying my face between her tits. This girl. Christ, this wild, willful, beautiful girl. My lips run down the center of her chest, my hands planted on her hips.

She gasps beneath me as I kiss lower, nipping at her soft stomach.

When I dip my tongue into her belly button, she loses her grip on my cock. It falls from her lax hand, but that's all right. It'll be where it belongs soon enough. Just as soon as I get another taste of her, anyway.

"Don't let anyone hear you scream," I murmur, kissing across her bare mound. I flick my gaze up to her face to find her watching me, breathing hard. "I won't stop if they interrupt."

"Oh my..."

She doesn't get to finish that sentence before I bury my face between her thighs, too goddamn impatient to wait.

I've been dreaming about getting another taste of her for days now, driving myself nuts thinking about it.

Every damn minute of the day, I think I taste her on my tongue.

Wine hasn't chased her taste away. Neither has whiskey.

"Jareth!" Her hips arch from the desk, but I ruthlessly press them back down, keeping her right where I want her as I lick her little cunt, eating like a madman. That's what I am. Mad. Rabid. Losing my fucking mind for her.

I spread her cheeks, fucking her hot little hole with my tongue until she's chanting my name and pulling my hair, begging me not to stop. As if I would. I want her soaking my face.

It doesn't take long to get what I want. As soon as I press my thumb to her clit, thrusting my tongue inside her, she shatters with a whimper, convulsing beneath me. I eat her through it, driving her right back to the edge.

This time, I keep her there, toying with her until she's trembling, only to back off and let the high fade slightly. I do it again and again, loving the way she goes wild beneath me, scratching and clawing, biting, panting, and begging.

It takes everything I have to rip my mouth away from her, leaving her on the edge. Her wild eyes meet mine, glittering with desperate malice.

"I'm going to murder you."

"Yeah?" I smirk, hauling her gorgeous ass to the edge of the desk. "Think you can do it when I'm nine deep, Zoya? Let's find out." I bounce my cock against her clit, and then groan, rocking my hips back and forth just to watch the way her juices coat me. "Christ, that's pretty, baby."

"Jareth," she whines.

I line up at her hole, flicking my gaze up to her face. "Look at me."

She fights to focus on me as I roll my thumb across her clit, tormenting her with pleasure. But she finally manages to meet my gaze.

"Keep your eyes on me, princess. I want you to watch me while I fuck my kid into you."

Realization flares in her eyes, a tiny gasp falling from her lips. "Condom!" she squeaks. "We need a condom."

"Fuck no." I push forward, the head of my cock slowly breaching her entrance.

"You are such a jerk!" she moans, but she doesn't try to stop me. We both know that's because she isn't really pissed. She doesn't want me wearing a condom. She wants me just like this—bare, raw, playing with fire. She wants to burn just as badly as I do.

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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:57 am*

I grind my thumb against her clit, watching the way she stretches around me as my cock slowly disappears inside her. Listening to the way she moans and whimpers. She's burning hot around me and so fucking tight it hurts and doesn't hurt nearly enough.

"Jesus, princess," I grit out. "You feel so fucking good."

"I know," she whimpers. "God, Jareth. I'm so full."

Precum spills from my cock and I groan. "You gotta stop talking or this will be over before I'm even inside you all the way."

Apparently, that's the wrong thing to say because it only eggs her on.

"You mean you don't want to hear how big you feel inside me? Or how much I love the way you're stretching me right now?"

"Fuck," I growl, bucking my hips.

She throws her head back, moaning as another inch disappears inside her. "So damn good."

I lean down over her, claiming her mouth in a hot kiss to keep her from talking. That mouth of hers is a deadly weapon, every word from it a missile aimed at my self-control. And the little minx knows it. She fucking loves it.

I work myself inside her slowly, so slowly I'm sweating by the time my hips come to

rest against hers. But if she feels any pain, she doesn't show it. She takes every inch like a champion, moaning the whole time.

I still pause for a moment to give her time to adjust. To give myself time to get it together. It's impossible though. She's wiggling beneath me, panting my name against my lips.

"Jareth, please."

"Please what?"

"Move!" she cries.

I stop fighting it and give us what we both want, pulling back until my cock damn near slips from her hot little body before I surge forward again. Our moans bleed together.

"You aren't locking your door tonight," I growl, pumping my hips again. "I'll take it off the fucking hinges to get inside you again."

She claws down my back, her inner muscles already clenching and fluttering around my cock. I lean back, drawing one leg up over my shoulder. The change in position opens her up to me, allowing me to go deeper.

I keep my eyes glued to her as I fuck her, bottoming out with every thrust. My thumb works her clit, desperate to get her there before I fall the fuck apart inside her. She feels too damn good.

"Harder," she begs, pulling my hair.

That plea snaps the rest of my control, leaving it in tatters around me. My free hand

digs into her hip, holding her still, as I snap my hips forward in a hard thrust, driving into her.

"Like this, baby? Is this how you need me to fuck you?"

"Yes!" she shouts.

I do it again and then again, pounding into her in one relentless strike after another. The sound of my balls slapping against her ass plays a counterpoint to her moans, driving me higher.

I drag her nipple between my teeth, biting and sucking.

She shatters around me with a soft cry of ecstasy, her pussy locking down around me.

"That's it, princess," I growl. "Keep coming on me just like that."

She does. Christ, her orgasm goes on and on as I fuck into her, ruthlessly dragging her right back to the edge before she even has time to catch her breath. She tumbles over with a startled cry, her nails embedded in my shoulder blades.

I choke on her name, burying my face in her throat as my balls give up the fight. I come hard, rope after rope of cum pouring into her. I plant myself deep, rocking my hips...hoping like hell it's enough to get her pregnant. To tie her to me in this way, too.

It's what I want—her tied to me in every conceivable way. Mine, all the way to her fucking soul.

We're not even fully dressed before the office door flies open.

I yank Zoya behind me, trying to shield her from view as Trystan bursts into his office. His eyes come to me, bounce to her, and then to the mess we made of his office.

"Jesus fucking Christ," he mutters, eyes narrowed at me. "On my desk, Jareth? Fucking seriously?"

"My bad," I lie, not the least bit sorry.

"I work at that desk, you dick!"

"Go away. I'll buy you a new one."

"I want a whole new office." He scowls at me. "Your naked ass was on my desk."

"Technically, her naked ass was on your desk." My brows furrow. "You know what? You're right. You're getting a whole new office." There's no fucking way I'm letting him keep this one when Zoya has been naked inside it. Fuck that. "We'll trade."

Zoya presses her face to my back, her body shaking with laughter.

She's not laughing when Connor appears in the doorway behind my cousin.

Like Trystan, he takes a moment to assess the scene before drawing himself up to his full height.

He's maybe an inch shorter than I am, and just as broad.

Any other day, he might be a match for me, but I'm still riding a post-orgasm high. I'm bulletproof right now.

"What the fuck?" he growls, his eyes narrowed like he's pissed.

But there's too much relief in his gaze for it to be believable.

He's putting on a show he doesn't even want to be participating in just because Zoya dragged him into this.

But he's her friend, so he'll follow it through to the end anyway.

Huh. Maybe he isn't so bad.

"You're sleeping with my girlfriend?" he says, stalking toward me like he's ready to fight. He even has his fists clenched as if he wants to hit me. "How long have you two been fucking behind my back?"

"Oh shit," Trystan whispers, his gaze bouncing from Connor to me like he isn't sure if he should stop this or if he's pissed enough about the office to let it happen. I guess the prick decides to let it happen because he steps aside, shooting me a disgruntled look.

Who needs enemies when you have cousins?

"I'm going to kick your ass," Connor growls.

Zoya squeaks and then scurries out from behind me, her hands covering her boobs. I growl, trying to thrust her behind me again, but there is no containing the little spitfire.

Trystan quickly spins around, facing away from her so I don't have to gouge his eyes out. Connor doesn't even look in her direction. He's still coming at me, determined to follow this shitshow through to the end.



"Zoya, dammit," I growl.

"He knows, Connor," she says, completely ignoring me.

"He knows?" Connor asks, stopping midstep.

"Yes." Zoya bobs her head.

"Oh, thank God." Connor's shoulders droop, his hands falling to his sides. "If I had to fight his big ass for you, I was going to be pissed, cupcake."

"Jesus Christ," I mutter, snatching my shirt off the floor before yanking it down over Zoya's head.

Her head pops out, her eyes on Connor. "You were going to fight him for me?"

"Well...yeah." Connor shrugs.

Zoya beams, thrusting her arms through the sleeves of my shirt as she scurries across the office to fling her arms around him in a big hug. "You're the best."

"Seriously?" I ask, eyeing her sideways. "He was going to hit me."

"Suck it up," she says, smirking at me. "You're the one who was having sex with his girlfriend in your cousin's office."

Trystan laughs abruptly.

"You aren't his girlfriend," I mutter, scowling at Zoya. "Do I need to remind you again?"

"Okay, well," Connor quickly says, stepping away from Zoya. "That's my cue to get the fuck out of here." He shakes his head, glancing over at me. "For the record, it's your job to deal with her bad ideas now. I'm out."

"I do not have bad ideas," Zoya protests.

"Yeah, you do," Connor and I mutter at the same time.

She scowls at both of us, but Connor just chuckles and ducks out of the office, whistling. Trystan casts a glance over his shoulder, sees that she's dressed, and then turns around to face us again.

"So...busy week, huh?" he asks me, humor in his eyes.

"Trystan, get the fuck out."

"It's my office."

"Be nice to your cousin, Jareth."

Trystan's smirk grows. "Yeah, Jareth. Be nice to your cousin."

I reel Zoya back into my arms by the hem of her shirt, shaking my head. "Stop siding with the enemy, princess."

"Why the fuck am I the enemy?"

"You saw her shirtless."

"Oh my god." Zoya rolls her eyes at me. "They're just boobs, Jareth."

"Yeah, your boobs."

"Boobs are boobs," she says, not even sparing him a glance. "If you've seen one pair, you've seen them all." She shoots me a mischievous look. "Kind of like dicks."

"And that's about enough of that," I growl, silencing her with a kiss as Trystan cracks up. I kiss her until she melts against me and then release her. When I do, Trystan has vanished from the office. Thank God.

Zoya sighs, snuggling up against my chest. "I should go. We have the rehearsal dinner soon." Her gaze flits to mine. "Am I going to see you there?"

"Do you want to see me there?"

"Yes," she says, no hesitation in her tone. And then she bites her lip. "But maybe I should tell my parents the truth about Connor first."

"That's probably a good idea. He and Huck are making out all over the fucking vineyard. It's only a matter of time before your dad finds out. You should probably make sure Connor doesn't get taken eight miles out and dropped with bricks attached to his feet."

"Crap." She faceplants into my chest with a groan. "I've made a big mess, haven't I?"

"Yep," I confirm cheerfully, tipping her head back until she meets my gaze. "But it'll be fine. We'll handle it."

"Why aren't you mad about it?"

"Because you're in my arms right now, wearing my marks. It's my cum inside you. It's me you dream about every night." I shrug. "What's there to be mad about?"

Could I be pissed that she lied about Connor?

Yeah. Maybe I would be if Ridley hadn't clued me in to the truth days ago.

But I've known damn near since they got here that their relationship was bullshit.

I've used her lie to my advantage, backing her into a corner to get her where I want her.

And now, she's mine. What the fuck do I really have to be mad about?

"You're a strange man, Jareth Grayson," she mutters, pulling herself from my arms.

"No," I say softly. "I'm just one who knows what he wants."

She glances at me over her shoulder, her expression serious. And then she smiles, one full of hope. "We'll see," she says before sailing through the door.

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Jareth

"What are your plans after college, Connor?" Zoya's mom, Lauren, asks him at the rehearsal dinner.

"I'm hoping to go pro," he answers. "I have a good shot at the draft next year."

Knox immediately frowns, his brows furrowed. "You expect my daughter to abandon her dreams and follow you while you chase your dream?"

"Uh..." Connor shoots a furtive glance in Zoya's direction, at a loss about the game plan now that I know the truth.

She groans, taking a big gulp of wine before turning to face the music.

Her entire family is at the head table in the dining room, with the rest of the guests split between two tables on either side.

The entire room is full of laughter and raised voices as everyone relaxes, celebrating Nadia and Teo.

"I won't be following him," she says loudly enough for her whole family to hear.

They all look at her like they're waiting for an explanation.

"Um..." She actually squirms in her seat, her cheeks pink. "Connor and I aren't actually dating."

"Not dating?" Knox repeats, eyeing his daughter like she's not making any sense.

"I kind of asked him to pretend to be my boyfriend for...reasons?" she says, peeking up at her dad.

"What reasons?"

Her gaze flits to me and then away. "I was trying to avoid admitting something to myself."

Knox digests her response before he sighs.

"Ah, zaika ." He reaches out to rub her back, his gaze drifting in my direction as if he knows a lot more about the two of us than Zoya realizes.

I'm not really surprised. The man is perceptive as hell.

"Your spirit has always been so fierce, it drowns out your delicate heart. "

I don't think he's wrong about that. Zoya hides behind false bravado and her fiery attitude, but underneath, she's a scared little lamb, terrified of having her heart broken. She needs to be in control, and with me, she isn't. She doesn't know what to do with that.

But like I told her, I'm not going anywhere. She isn't something to break. She's someone I intend to keep close for a long fucking time. Forever if I have my way. I just need her to realize that's what's happening between us. This isn't a momentary interlude. It's forever.

"I'm not delicate, Dad," she says, rolling her eyes.

"Never," Knox says somberly. "You are fierce warrior like your mom. But you do not know how to let yourself be loved. You do not trust your heart." He pauses, shooting a glance in Lauren's direction. "Also like your mom. The right man will teach you."

Zoya's gaze flits in my direction and then away again. "Maybe," she whispers.

I groan softly, fighting the urge to scoop her into my arms. Going slow with her is impossible when I want everything, and I want it now.

I know she does, too. I'm already knocking down her walls, worming my way through the cracks. She doesn't have to soften for me. She can be just as fierce as she wants. But she doesn't have to guard her heart, either. I'll do that part for her.

"Sorry for not being honest," Connor says, nodding at Zoya. "I do what she tells me." His gaze darts around the table, a playful smirk on his face. "I don't know if you know it, but she can be terrifying."

"She's always been terrifying," Teo agrees. "She threatened to rip my balls off once. I'm still looking over my shoulder."

"She threatens me every week," Maxim mutters.

"I do not!" she cries in protest as her entire family laughs.

Bastian catches my eye from across the room, motioning for me.

I slide my chair back from the table as everyone teases Zoya, crossing the private dining room to my twin's side.

"What's up?"

"We have a problem," he mutters beneath his breath.

"What problem?"

"Paparazzi snapped pictures of Teo's teammate, Tyson Magara, arriving in town earlier. They also got photos of her and Teo's parents in town."

"Fuck," I growl. "How did they find out that they're here?"

"Don't know, but there is a whole line of cameras at the gates expecting a wedding. Trystan called the Sheriff's Department to run them off, but I don't know how long it'll last. We may very well have helicopters overhead by the time the wedding rolls around tomorrow."

"Fucking wonderful," I mutter, glancing over at Nadia. She's staring up at Teo with a soft smile on her face. He's got his hand on her pregnant belly. No one else in the world even exists to them right now.

"What do you want to do?"

"Keep the paparazzi off the property. I'll come up with something."

Zoya glances up and notices me talking to Bastian. Her brows furrow when I crook a finger, beckoning her over.

Bastian jerks his head in a nod. "Dad and Uncle Trevor are already out there with Trystan. We'll post up at every road leading to the property if that's what it takes."

"Thanks," I mutter as Zoya pads toward us, her hair bouncing around her head in a dark halo.



"What's wrong?" she asks.

"Paparazzi got photos of your parents and Tyson in town earlier. They're lining up at the gates," I murmur, keeping my voice pitched low so no one else overhears.

"Shit. How did they know where to find us?"

"I don't know, but Bastian is worried they may try to fly over during the wedding tomorrow."

Zoya's face falls, her gaze on Nadia and Teo. "What are we going to do?"

"We can move the wedding inside," Bastian suggests.

"No way," Zoya growls. "Nadia has been dreaming about this day for her whole life. They don't get to mess it up now."

"We could move it up."

Zoya and Bastian both look at me like I've lost my mind.

"Think about it," I murmur. "Everyone is already here. Everything is set up and ready to go for the rehearsal. If we do the ceremony tonight instead of the rehearsal, we can still do the reception inside tomorrow. If the paps get planes in the air tomorrow, they won't see a damn thing."

"It's not a bad idea," Bastian murmurs.

"It's a terrible idea," Zoya groans, shaking her head.

"Let Nadia and Teo decide. It's their wedding."

Zoya hesitates for a moment before sighing heavily and crossing to her sister and future brother-in-law to breath the news.

"Trystan told me that the two of you are switching offices," Bastian murmurs to me as Zoya whispers back and forth with her sister and Teo.

"Did he?"

"You going to tell me why, or do I have to guess?"

"Felt like a change," I lie.

"Right." My twin snorts softly. "I'm guessing your change is about five-foot-two with hazel eyes?"

I shoot a glance in his direction.

"I've been busy, motherfucker, not blind," he say. "Anyone with eyes can see the way you look at her."

"You mean the same way you've been looking at our new marketing expert?" I ask, one brow arched. He can't keep his eyes off Constance Maverick.

"Fuck," Bastian mutters, genuine surprise flickering in his expression.

"I've been busy, motherfucker, not blind," I say, smirking at him. "You like her."

"How about I mind my goddamn business, and you mind yours?"

"Fair enough." I pause. "You talk to Ridley yet?"

"About expanding?" He waits for me to nod before he sighs. "Yeah. It's a solid idea, like you said. But it's going to take a whole helluva lot of capital."

"We can swing it."

Bastian grunts noncommittally. He won't agree until he has thoroughly reviewed every detail himself. It's just the way he is.

Zoya catches my gaze, nodding slightly.

"Looks like we're having a wedding tonight," I murmur to my twin.

"Looks that way," he says as Teo rises to his feet, clearing his throat. "I'll get the judge here."

The next two hours are a flurry of activity as everyone jumps into action to pull this wedding off a full day ahead of schedule. Bastian calls in my mom and aunts for reinforcements. As soon as they hear what's going on, they spring into action.

Before I know it, they're rushing the bridal party away for hair and makeup while my Uncle Eli and Uncle Nathan help my cousins and Teo's teammates hang lanterns all over the property to light it up.

By the time they're done, the entire vineyard looks like an enchanted garden, with soft light flickering everywhere.

Deputy Warner pulls onto the property with Judge Haskins in tow, just as Zoya slips out of the winery in a red dress that hugs her curves.

Her hair is piled on top of her head, her makeup soft and smoky.

I groan softly, pacing toward her.

"You look fucking edible, princess," I growl, pressing into her from behind.

She gasps softly before melting against me.

My lips touch her shoulder. I don't really give a fuck who sees us. I need to touch her just to remind myself that she's real.

"You can thank Nadia," she murmurs. "She picked the dress."

"And you wear it like it was made for you. Christ. How am I supposed to make it through this entire wedding with you looking like that?"

"Oh, I'm sure you'll find a way." She peeks over her shoulder at me, grinning. And then her expression turns sober. "Is everything ready?"

"Yeah, it's ready. Guests are already dressed and filing out to take their seats. How is Nadia?"

"Excited," she says. "I thought she'd be upset about the change, but she didn't even bat a lash. I think she's just ready to be Teo's finally."

"They've been waiting long enough."

"Yeah," Zoya whispers. "I should go. Can you get everyone in place?"

"Already on it, baby." I brush my lips across her cheek. "Go support your sister. We've got it handled out here."

She turns to slip back into the winery and then pauses, grabbing my hand. Her eyes

meet mine, her expression brimming with gratitude. "Thank you," she whispers.

"For what?"

"For everything."

I cup her cheek, my expression soft as I stare down at her. "You don't have to thank me, Zoya."

She beams up at me, and it takes everything I have not to pull her into my arms and mess up her pretty lipstick. Instead, I release her with a groan, my eyes on her ass as she hurries back inside.

I'm not entirely surprised when Knox materializes at my side before the door even closes behind her. He crosses his arms over his chest, stretching his suit to the limit.

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"You are the one reason she brought Connor," he says.

"I am," I murmur, not denying it. I respect the man too much to lie to him.

He nods as if he expected the answer. "My Nadia had a rough road to love, but I always knew it would turn out well for her in the end. It has always been Zoya who worries me. She is stubborn. She tries to ignore her heart. It is not good for her."

"She's learning."

"This is good, but she is...special. She needs patience and laughter and independence.

" He pauses, watching me carefully. "But she also needs man willing to help slay her dragons with her so she can fly.

She will try to do it herself, of course, and man for her will lend his strength when hers fails.

She does not need to be changed, only loved and supported.

That is how she learns to listen to her heart. "

"I understand, sir," I say quietly, meeting his gaze. "She's perfect exactly the way she is. She always has been in my book."

"Good, then we are on same page." He claps me on the back hard enough to knock me forward a step. "I knew you were good man, Jareth. Take care of my daughter, or

maybe I turn you into wine." He grins at me like he's joking...but I'm pretty fucking sure he isn't kidding.

Maybe Zoya isn't the only terrifying one in her family.

I can't take my eyes off her throughout the entire ceremony.

She looks stunning up there with her sisters.

As Nadia and Teo exchange their vows under the moonlight, surrounded by the people closest to them, those who know their story and stood beside them through every messy moment of it, Zoya discreetly wipes tears from the corners of her eyes.

She catches me staring at one point, and our eyes lock. The whole goddamn world falls away. It's just me and her, caught in something too vast to ignore. It feels like the judge is speaking to us as he talks about walking into the future together.

By the time Nadia and Teo exchange rings, I'm fucking desperate to kiss Zoya. I know she feels the same way. I see it written all over her face. I don't take my eyes from her as Nadia and Teo kiss, and everyone breaks into applause, cheering them on.

I duck behind a post as Teo scoops Nadia into his arms, rushing her down the aisle with the rest of the wedding party following behind. As soon as Zoya steps into view, I hook an arm around her waist, hauling her into my arms in the shadows.

My lips come down on hers, our kiss frantic as we stumble away from the party, disappearing from the crowd.

"Jareth," she moans against my lips as I lift her into my arms, needing her closer.

"You feel it, don't you?" I ask, my heart pounding. I hurry around the side of the building, stopping beside the mechanical harvester where I first made her shatter for me.

"Yes," she whispers.

I groan softly, pushing her back against the cold metal of the machinery as I rake her dress up her thighs. She trembles in my arms, writhing like she's as desperate as I am. Her fingers pluck at my tie before she uses it to haul my mouth back to hers.

I slip her lacy panties aside, running my thumb up her slit.

"Don't make a sound," I breathe, balancing her on my thigh as I work my cock free of my pants. Within seconds, the hard bastard is in my hands, and I'm lining up at her entrance.

She buries her face in my throat, whimpering as I sink into her, thrumming her clit the whole time.

I growl softly, my eyes rolling back in my head as her heat strangles me, dragging me right to the edge. My hand digs into her hip, lifting her off my cock and then dropping her back down. I move like a man possessed, desperate to feel her coming apart around me.

"Give it to me, princess," I growl, nipping at her throat. Her collarbones. Everywhere I can reach. "Come all over me before someone catches us."

"God, Jareth," she moans, rocking against me to take me deeper. She clutches me to her as if she doesn't want to separate from me at all. "What are you doing to me?"

"Loving you, Zoya." It's the truth. I'm so fucking in love with her.



Is it too soon to tell her that? Will it send her running?

Maybe. But if she runs, I'll chase, the same goddamn way I have all week.

I plant my lips against her ear, giving her the truth threatening to shatter me into pieces. "I love you."

Her body locks down on mine as she flies apart, thrown over the edge by my confession. Her pussy milking my cock sends me over with her. I groan my way through it, holding her down on me as I spill inside her.

A rough chuckle leaves my lips when her eyes pop open, landing on my face. She opens her mouth, closes it, and then opens it again, but no sound comes out.

"Yeah, I said it, princess."

She gasps softly, her gaze flying to my face. "What?"

"I love you."

"You..."

"I love you." I brush my lips across hers. "Just thought you should know."

"Jareth," she groans, her inner muscles fluttering around me in a way that has me ready to fuck her all over again. "You don't play fair."

"Who said I'm playing, baby?" I lift her again, slamming her down on me.

"I told you months ago that you were mine."

I told you days ago that I'm not going anywhere.

And now I'm telling you the rest of it. I love you.

I love your smartass mouth. I love your attitude.

I love the way you think you can run from me.

I love the way you squeak and moan and shake for me. I fucking love you."

She chokes on my name, her eyes full of wonder. But I see the fear lurking beneath it. The worry that I don't mean it, that I'll break her heart. Her father's words float back to me, and I know exactly what I need to do to prove to her that it's safe to listen to her heart.

"Jareth, I..."

I slant my mouth down on hers, silencing her. "You don't owe me anything, princess. Not until you're ready."

"Why are you so good to me?" she whispers when I let her up for air.

"Mmm. Maybe because you keep letting me do this to you," I growl, bouncing her on my cock again. "A pussy like this makes a motherfucker want to be real good, Zoya."

"Jareth!" She smacks me across the shoulder and then shakes her head, smiling despite herself. "You are so freaking cocky and annoying sometimes."

"You fucking love it."

"Maybe," she whispers, wrapping her hand around my tie to haul me back to her

mouth again. "Or maybe it's all part of my plan."

"What plan?"

"To ruin you," she says sweetly, clenching her inner muscles around me again.

I growl, rocking my hips into hers. "Ruining your own property, huh? That's a helluva plan, baby."

"I know." She bats her lashes at me. "Thought of it all by myself."

"Has anyone seen Zoya?"

"Crap," she whispers, faceplanting into my chest as her mom's voice floats to us.

"They noticed we're missing."

"Then you better come fast."

"You wouldn't," she growls, her eyes narrowing on me.

I just smirk in response, lifting her off me. My eyes lock on hers before I yank her back down, proving that when it comes to her, there isn't a whole lot I won't do.

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Zoya

"Jareth," I moan, thrusting my hands into his hair as I rock on his lap, trying like hell to keep quiet so we don't wake Connor. Again. We've already woken him up three times in the last few days.

On Christmas, he told me that if it happened again, he was going to murder us both.

I'd prefer not to test his commitment to our demise.

Especially since the only time I've had with Jareth lately has been at night.

He's been busy working on something with his brother and cousins.

Whatever it is has been taking up all of his time.

Jareth growls beneath me, reaching up to thumb my nipple. "You look so fucking good riding my cock, princess."

If I look as good as he does with me riding it, he's probably not wrong. And he looks damn good beneath me with my claw marks all over his chest.

He slips a hand between my legs, his thumb pressing against my clit.

I gasp, slamming myself down on him as I detonate like a bomb. I try like hell to keep my eyes on him as I unravel, but it's impossible. They fall closed as he grunts my name, following me over the edge. I feel him pulsing inside me again and again,

and a shiver rips through me.

We fall in a sweaty heap, breathing hard.

"You coming all over me is the best part of waking up, Zoya," he groans rolling us until I'm sprawled across him with my head against his chest, listening to the wild thundering of his heartbeat.

"This isn't a coffee commercial."

He chuckles, swatting me on the ass.

I hide a grin against his chest, happy in a way I can't even describe.

Until he groans and sits up beneath me. "I need to go."

"Again?" I pout at him.

"Afraid so." He cups my cheek. "We're working on something important."

"Are you ever going to tell me what it is?"

"Expansion."

"Oh. Are you taking over another vineyard or something?"

"Something like that." He leans forward, brushing his lips across mine. "You going to be in my bed when I get home tonight?"

"Maybe."

He growls playfully, nipping my lip before he reluctantly hauls himself from the bed.  
"You better be."

I just grin at him until his naked ass disappears into the bathroom, and then I drag his pillow over my face, groaning. The clock is ticking down, counting down the days until I fly back home, but every time he touches me, he drowns out the sound. He eclipses everything.

I don't want it to end, and yet...the end is coming. Soon.

I'm not ready to face it.

"I've been thinking," he murmurs a moment later, appearing at the foot of the bed with damp hair, fully clothed.

"Did it hurt?"

He shakes his head, smiling softly. "You're going to pay for that smartass mouth one of these days, princess."

"Promises, promises. What have you been hurting yourself thinking about?"

"You leaving."

I flick my gaze up at him, my heart skipping a beat as my stomach twists with nerves.  
"What about it?"

"You'll be finished with school in a few months."

"Five," I whisper. It feels like a lifetime.

"What if...?"

"What?"

"You moving in when you were finished?"

I blink wide eyes at him, sitting upright. "You want me to move to California?"

"No. I want you to move in with me. The US leg of the tour ends in February. I already told Nadia I wouldn't be doing the overseas leg."

I stare at him, not sure what to say. My heart is screaming yes, but my head? Well, that's a little slower to agree. It's spitting questions like the Grand Inquisitor at a trial.

"What if...?"

"What?"

I want to ask what if he changes his mind about me, but I don't.

"What if I can't find a job here?"

"Then open your own rescue," he says like he's got it all figured out. "One of the biggest populations of illegal wild animals is in this state, you know. We have big cat rescues and sanctuaries all over the place."

"You can't just open a rescue, Jareth. It takes funding."

"Uh, look around, princess. I've got plenty of that."

"I'm not taking your money!"

"Why not? It's not like I'll miss it."

I huff at him, scrambling up from the bed. "Because I need to bring something to this relationship."

"What the fuck does that mean?" he asks, narrowing his eyes on me.

"It means I can't just live off you. I'd feel like a gold-digger."

He stares at me for a long moment before a bark of laughter erupts from his lips.

"It's not that funny," I say, scowling.

"It is if you believe that shit," he disagrees, grabbing me when I try to slide past him.

"I've spent the last four months trying to convince your infuriating little ass to give me a chance. You don't have a gold-digging bone in your body."

"That's beside the point."

"What is the point?"

"I don't know!" I cry, burying my face in my hands. "You just asked me to move in with you, and I'm freaking out a little."

"Why? Because you don't want it or because you do?"

"Because I do," I admit in a whisper. I want it so freaking bad it scares me.

"Then it's settled. You move in after graduation."

"What if we don't make it until then?" I ask, peeking at him through my fingers. "I



leave in two days. What if...?"

His fingers against my lips silence me. "You still doubt me, baby?"

I'm not sure I ever really doubted him. I just tried to convince myself that this couldn't happen.

Now it is happening, and I'm not sure what comes next.

How do I leave here in two days, knowing that I'm leaving him behind?

How do I spend five months half a country away, knowing that he's waiting back here for me?

It sounds like torture. And I've never been a fan of pain.

"Five months sounds like a lifetime."

He smiles gently, cupping my cheek. "You love me."

Tears well in my eyes as I bob my head in a quick nod. "It's terrifying, Jareth. I wasn't supposed to want this. I don't know what I'm doing!"

"You're safe with me, baby," he murmurs, pulling me into his arms. "I've got you. The only thing you have to do is let me love you. Can you do that?"

"I'm trying." I lean my head against his shoulder.

"You hate not being in control."

"Yes."

"Because you hate not getting to decide what happens."

"Yes."

"Maybe not everything in life has to be on your terms," he murmurs, rubbing my back. "Do you trust me to take care of you?"

"It's not that," I whisper.

"Then what is it? What are you still so afraid of?"

Myself, I want to scream...but I don't. I don't say anything.

Jareth sighs softly. "One of these days, you're going to trust me enough to tell me all your secrets, princess."

"Jareth..." My heart clenches, guilt ripping through me.

"I can wait for you to get there," he murmurs, brushing his lips across my crown before he steps back. "I gotta go."

I watch him stride from the room with my heart in my throat and tears in my eyes. Why do I keep fucking everything up? What's wrong with me? Everything between us has been so damn good, and I just...keep holding back, too damn scared that I'm going to mess it up to move forward.

"Hey, Mama," I murmur two hours later, plopping down on a bench beside her.

"Hey, baby girl." She marks her spot in her book before closing it. Her eyes run across me, narrowing behind her glasses. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Zoya."

I huff a breath. How does she always know?

"Jareth asked me to move in with him after I graduate," I blurt.

She nods like she isn't surprised. "What did you say?"

"I freaked out a little bit."

"Because you don't want to move in with him?"

"Because I do," I whisper, staring down at the ground. "But he's already planning the future, and I'm..."

"Worried about the present," Mom guesses.

"Yeah. We leave in two days." Tears burn at the back of my throat.

"I'm not ready to go. I'm not ready to leave him."

"Exactly what I feared would happen is happening."

Our time is up, and I feel like it might break me in half.

How am I supposed to think about the future when the present is killing me?

"Oh, sweetheart." Mom wraps an arm around my shoulders, resting her head against mine. "Falling in love is terrifying, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"It's beautiful, too," she says after a moment.

"So beautiful," I whisper.

"I was terrified to trust my heart when I met your dad.

My mom had me so convinced that there was something wrong with me, I didn't know how to let myself be loved.

You're a lot like me. You've always been so busy loving everyone else, you never learned how to let the people around you love you back. "

"I'm afraid I'm going to mess it all up," I admit. God, it's so easy to say it to her. But I choked this morning, unable to say the same thing to Jareth. It's not him I doubt. It's not him I don't trust. It's me .

"You can't mess up love, sweetheart." She smiles at me gently. "You're a smart girl. You're also one of the most determined people I've ever met. If he's the one for you, you'll figure out how to make it work until you can be together. All you have to do is trust yourself."

"That's the part I'm afraid I'll mess up," I mutter ruefully. "I don't know if you've noticed, but I make terrible decisions."

"Why do you think that?"

I shrug, glancing down at my lap. "Maybe because it's true?

You know how many times I've gotten into trouble doing things I shouldn't.

I don't want this to be one more thing I mess up because I'm not thinking it through or I leap without thinking.

It matters too damn much." I blink rapidly to keep tears at bay. " He matters too much."

And as I've already demonstrated, I don't think clearly when it comes to him. I rope my best friend into playing my boyfriend. I push and run and freak out. What happens if I get back home and it all becomes too much and I just...freak out and run again?

What happens when he decides to stop chasing me?

"Seems to me like maybe you've done a little too much thinking this time, baby girl."

"Is that even possible?"

"You tell me. Do you love him?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to be with him?"

"Yes."

"Then why are you thinking yourself out of it?"

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"Nadia," I whisper. "I don't want to go through what she did."

Mom sighs, slipping her hand into mine. "Nadia and Teo's story is their own, Zoya. It isn't yours. Don't let their pain become an albatross around your neck. They wouldn't want that."

"I know. I just..." I sigh. "I guess I'm just afraid of going through what she did, but maybe you're right. Maybe I am overthinking it."

"I think you are," she says gently. "Nadia and Teo had to go through what they did to get where they are."

That doesn't mean it'll happen to you and Jareth.

You're both older than they were. You know what you want in life and what you're willing to sacrifice to get it.

You know yourself in a way they didn't. They were just babies when they met. "

"Yeah," I sigh again, staring out at the empty vines.

She's right. But in a way, I think maybe she's wrong too.

I always thought I knew myself. But if the last few days with Jareth have taught me anything, it's that I don't know nearly as much as I thought I did because everything I swore I didn't want?

Well, it's suddenly become the thing I want more than anything.

Maybe that's my answer. He's been willing to fight for me this whole time. Even when I made it impossible, he fought. So...why am I so damn scared to do the same thing?

Because you're afraid to lose , a little voice whispers. And for once, you actually have something to lose.

It's not wrong. I am afraid to lose. But if I let fear rule me, I'm losing anyway, aren't I?

It won't be time or distance that breaks me and Jareth.

I won't have to run to push him away. My fear will do it for me.

I'll splinter us apart, the architect of my own demise, just because I couldn't get out of my own damn way when it mattered most.

I can't let that happen. If the cost of not trusting myself is losing him...then I have to trust. For once, I have to stop listening to the little voice telling me that I'm going to fuck it up. I have to start listening to my heart. And it is screaming that he's my future.

"I need to go," I mumble, leaping to my feet. "I need to talk to Jareth."

"Good luck," Mom calls as I hurry off in search of him.

I find him in the cellar of the winery with his dad, his twin, and his cousin, Ridley, thirty minutes later. They're standing next to a row of casks, arguing about something.

"Would you just trust us?" Jareth growls at his twin, glaring daggers at him.

Bastian mutters a curse, pulling his glasses from his face to pinch the bridge of his nose. It's spooky how alike they look. Except for Bastian's glasses, they really are identical. "Fine. Whatever. Do it your way."

"Finally," Jareth growls.

"It's a good idea, son," Carter Grayson murmurs to Bastian.

Ridley notices me standing behind them and murmurs something to Jareth. He spins on his heel, the scowl on his face softening as soon as he sees me. His dad looks in my direction, shooting me a grin.

I really hope Jareth looks like him in thirty years because damn .

"Hey, sweetheart," Carter calls to me.

"Hi, Mr. Grayson."

Carter immediately narrows his eyes on me. "What'd I tell you about that?"

"Sorry," I mumble, blushing. "Forgot."

He grins at me, winking.

Jareth and I spent part of Christmas with his parents and siblings.

I love his mom so much. And Jareth is just like his dad.

They made me feel like part of the family.



I'm going to miss them when we leave. Honestly, I'm going to miss everyone here.

His whole family is loud, rambunctious, and a little crazy, but they're so damn nice.

His cousins are wild. His uncles are hilarious.

And his mom and aunt are my new role models in life.

"Hey, princess." Jareth strides toward me, leaving his dad, his brother, and Ridley to finish their conversation. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes. Did you mean it this morning? Do you really want me to move in?" I ask before I lose my nerve.

His expression softens further as he reaches out to cup my cheek. "Yeah, baby, I meant it."

"Then I accept. I'll move in with you."

"Yeah?" His eyes light up with hope.

"Yes."

"Fuck," he growls, pulling me into his arms. His lips come down on mine in a drugging kiss that sets me on fire.

I pull back from it, dazed. "You didn't let me finish."

"Knock yourself out then," he says, grinning at me.

I open my mouth, but I'm not sure where to start. So I start with the obvious. "I love

you."

"Christ," he groans, pulling me even closer. "You going to say that to me while I'm inside you tonight?"

"Jareth! Your dad is right there."

"He's too busy listening to Bastian complain to hear a word we're saying. Answer the question."

"Maybe."

The heat in his eyes scorches me.

"I'm sorry for being a mess and taking so long to say it."

"Don't."

My brows furrow.

"Don't apologize to me for being who you are, Zoya. I fucking love you exactly how you are." He presses his forehead to mine. "I'd have waited a lifetime if that's how long it took you to decide you were ready."

"I don't want to be the thing that breaks us," I admit softly. "I don't want my fears to be the thing that pushes you away. I have no idea what I'm doing, but I know I don't want to lose you. I just want...you."

"You have me, baby."

"I know. But you asked what I was afraid of this morning, and I want to tell you."

" I expel a breath when he nods for me to continue.

"I'm afraid that I'm going to fuck everything up and lose you.

I'm afraid to trust myself. I've never been good at that, Jareth.

I didn't want love, so I never learned to listen to my heart.

Now, it's screaming at me and I'm just...terrified that I'm going to do it all wrong.

I'm afraid you'll get tired of chasing me, and you'll walk away.

And I'm really afraid that I'm going to crack once I leave. "

"Zoya," he says softly.

I hold my hand up because I'm not finished.

"But I've been so stressed about fucking it up and losing you that I've been fucking it up all along anyway.

I've done all the wrong things instead of just learning to listen.

" I meet his gaze. "I don't want to do that anymore, Jareth. I just want to be with you."

Love happens, but you have to choose to let yourself feel it.

You have to choose to embrace it and every messy part of it, every single day.

That's part of what makes it beautiful. We can ignore it.

We can pretend it isn't happening. We can run from it.

But the only thing that does is stifle and kill it.

I don't want to be the reason this thing between us dies, not when it's the best thing in my life. Not when he's the best part of every day. So I'm choosing him. I'm choosing us. And if choosing him means letting go of my fears and worries, then I'm letting go.

At the end of the day, it really is that simple.

"You think I don't know that you're afraid to listen to your heart?"

"He shakes his head, smiling gently. "I know, baby."

Believe me, I know. You've been running from the possibility of love for so long that it's an instinct with you now.

But it doesn't matter how far you run. It doesn't matter how big of a mess you make or how many times you fuck up or what wild shit you do, you aren't going to break us.

You can't break this." He touches my cheek, so much emotion in his eyes, it chokes me.

"I will never stop chasing you. I'm yours, princess. "

I smile up at him through tears. "I'm yours, too, Jareth. Every damn piece of me is yours."

"Fuck," he whispers, emotion flaring in his eyes. He scoops me up into his arms with a groan, his lips coming down on mine in a wild kiss. I cling to him, kissing him back with everything in me. And for the first time, fear isn't beating at me. It's completely

silent.

"I love you," I whisper against his lips.

"We're leaving," he shouts over his shoulder, earning laughter from his dad and Ridley. Bastian just sighs before chuckling.

"I thought you had to work?"

"Fuck work," he practically snarls, already stalking toward the stairs with me clutched to his chest.

I bury my face in his throat, laughing quietly.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:57 am*

Jareth

"Say it again," I growl, my thumb against Zoya's clit as she writhes beneath me.

"I love you."

I groan, slamming into her hard enough to scoot her up the bed an inch. That isn't what she's supposed to be saying...but I fucking love hearing it anyway. "Say the other thing," I demand, nipping at her shoulder.

"Your grape is amazing."

I bury my face in her throat, laughing.

Her soft giggle hits me right in the heart. Christ, I'm not going to survive without her. I already know I won't. I'm trying like hell to keep it together because I know how anxious she is about leaving, but I'm hanging on by a thread.

"I'll call you every day," she says. "Five times a day."

It won't be enough to satisfy me. Until she's in my arms again, nothing will.

I pump my hips, fucking her like a madman until she's coming all over me. That doesn't satisfy me either, so I flip her onto her hands and knees before yanking her back on my cock again.

She sobs my name, clawing at the sheets.

I drive into her again and again with my lips against her neck. "I'm going to lose my mind without you, Zoya. Every fucking minute of the day."

"Jareth," she whimpers.

I wrap her hair around my fist, craning her head back. "Are you going to keep my pussy ready for me?"

"Yes!" she sobs.

"You going to dream about me while you do it?"

"God, yes."

I groan again, taking her lips in a deep kiss as I move inside her, wrecking both of us. When she comes this time, I fall over the edge with her, pumping her full of cum.

She chants my name like a prayer, falling forward.

I follow her down, shifting her around until she's draped across my chest, panting for breath. She clings to me like she never wants to let me go, and I know I've made the right decision. I've made the only decision that I can live with.

"Five months," she whispers.

I should tell her...but I don't. Not until all the pieces are in place. Not until it's a done deal.

"We'll make it," I say instead.

"Yeah," she says, lifting her head to smile at me, her eyes clear and confident. "We

will."

"I love you," I murmur, tucking a curl behind her ear.

Her expression softens. "I love you, too."

I pull her back down to me, holding her tightly until Connor raps on the door, letting us know it's time to go.

Zoya tenses in my arms, sighing softly.

"We'll make it," I remind her.

"I know, but that doesn't make goodbye any less painful."

She isn't wrong about that.

Watching her get on the plane fucking kills me, but I do it. I don't take my eyes off the damn thing until it's a tiny speck in the sky, barely even visible.

"We'll make it," I whisper, more to give myself strength than anything.

I fucking need it right now. Jesus. I knew watching her go would be hard, but this is torture.

And that's exactly why I'm doing what I am.

Because as scared as she's been...well, she needs to prove to herself that she can do this. At least for a little while.

It damn sure won't be five months, though. With any luck, it'll be more like two



weeks.

I'm not afraid of losing her. That won't happen. I'm afraid of falling the fuck apart without her. She's the laughter in my life, the joy. I need her by my side the same damn way she needs me by hers. If I have to uproot and upend everything to give us what we need, then I'm doing it.

My dad is waiting when I finally turn around to head back to the truck. He meets my gaze, his full of concern. "You good, son?"

"Fuck no," I rasp. "I feel like I just said goodbye to half of my heart."

He strides forward, clasp my shoulder. "Then I guess we've got some work to do to get you back to her in two weeks, don't we?"

"Yeah." I clear my throat, nodding. "Fuck, yeah, we do."

"Does she know?"

"No. I don't want her to know until it's done.

" I told her I wasn't going anywhere, but I lied.

My place isn't here while she's in Tennessee.

It's not out on tour, either. I figured that shit out the day I met her.

Soon enough, she will, too. We've been working our asses off to arrange things to get me back to her as soon as possible.

She isn't finished school alone. She'll be doing it by my side.

My dad nods, grinning at me. "Your mom and I raised one hell of a man. You're going to make a damn good husband and father, Jareth."

Jesus.

I clear my throat, pulling him into a hug. "Thank you."

He just grins, patting me on the back.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:57 am*

Jareth

"Hey!" Zoya says, yawning into the phone. "I can't wait to see you in the morning."

"About that..."

"Jareth!" she cries. "You better not tell me that you aren't coming. You promised."

"I can't come tomorrow, princess," I say, leaning against the railing across from her front door.

She heaves a sigh. "It's only been two weeks, and you're already canceling on me. It's our first visit! Is this how the next five months are going to go?"

"I don't know. Depends."

"On what?" she practically growls, making me smile.

Fuck, I love her little attitude. I especially love that she's so pissed because she misses me.

The last two weeks have been hell without her.

Maybe I'm an asshole for being glad I'm not the only one suffering here, but I want her thinking about me when I'm not with her.

I want her missing me when I'm not by her side.

I want to be the only one she thinks about.

And when she sees me on her stoop, I want her to know that I will always move heaven and earth to give her what she needs.

And she doesn't need me out on tour. She doesn't need me back at home for the next five months.

She needs me right here, loving and supporting her.

Teaching her how to trust herself and listen to her heart.

She needs me , the same damn way I need her.

"On if my present wins me a stay of execution."

"What present?"

"It should be outside your door."

"What is it?"

"A present."

She huffs into the phone, making me chuckle.

"Stop being cranky and go see for yourself, Zoya."

"Fine, but just so you know, I'm not putting pants on before I open the door. If my hot neighbor sees my ass, you'll just have to live with it."

"What hot neighbor?" I growl, clutching the phone as I scan the complex, trying to figure out which of her neighbors I'm killing.

"The one who might see my ass because I'm not wearing pants."

"Don't make me spank you, princess."

"You could if you were coming tomorrow," she says, her voice falsely bright. "But you canceled on me so...good luck with that."

"Go get your present and stop torturing me."

Her soft laughter whispers down the line, and my fucking cock presses against my zipper. Christ, I can't wait until she's in my arms again. I can't wait until she's standing in front of me. I can't wait until I'm inside her again.

I hear her shuffling around inside her apartment and brace myself, anticipation curling through me. The deadbolt clicks and then the knob turns.

"Hello, princess," I murmur into the phone, grinning when she flings the door open. My gaze immediately skirts down her body. She wasn't lying about not having any pants on. But she is wearing my shirt, and it ends at her knees, so at least she's covered.

I flick my gaze back up to her face to see her staring at me in shock, the phone still clutched to her ear.

"Do you like your present?"

She drops the phone with a squeak, launching herself into my arms. I scoop her up with a laugh, my hands planted on her ass as she kisses all over my face.

"Oh my god! You're here!" she cries.

"Did you really think I'd cancel on you?" I ask, carrying her inside her apartment and then kicking the door closed.

"Hey. My phone!"

I set her on her feet long enough to retrieve the phone she dropped and then step back inside with her. She beams at me, her cheeks flushed.

"I can't believe you lied to me!" She jabs me in the ribcage with her finger. "I was ready to cry."

"I couldn't wait until tomorrow." I toss her phone onto the credenza before hauling her back into my arms. "I was losing my goddamn mind without you." My lips come down on hers in another hard kiss. "Longest two weeks of my life."

"Mine too," she whispers into my mouth as I press her against the wall, ripping my shirt off over her head. Her breasts spill out, her cherry nipples hard and begging for my mouth.

"Are you wet for me?"

"See for yourself."

"Intend to," I growl, dropping to my knees with her balanced over my shoulders. I immediately press my nose to her cunt, inhaling deeply. God, I missed her scent. I missed her taste. I missed everything about her.

I flick her panties to the side, parting her slit with two fingers. My tongue circles her clit, gathering up her juices.

"Fuck," I groan, her taste hitting my system like a drug. "You're even sweeter, princess."

"Jareth, please," she whimpers, clinging to my hair like it's the only thing keeping her from losing her mind.

I'm too damn keyed up to tease her the way she deserves for fucking with me about her neighbor, so I lift her closer to my face and feast. She shouts my name, pulling at my hair as I devour her, not being polite about it.

Within seconds, she's coming all over my face.

I lick up every drop she spills, greedy for it.

Before she has a chance to come down, I've got her pinned to the floor beneath me, my cock sliding through her swollen folds. I yank her leg up over my thigh, growling as I sink into her all the way to the hilt.

"Goddamn, I missed this pussy, Zoya."

"It missed you, too!" she cries as I fuck into her, pounding out two weeks of sexual frustration. The little minx has been torturing me on the phone every night, playing with herself while I listen. I damn near said to hell with the plan a few times and caught a redeye.

I'm glad I didn't because this was worth the wait. She was worth the wait.

She's wild beneath me, crying my name as she rocks her hips into mine and claws down my back.

I wrap my tongue around her nipple, sucking hard.

She flies apart with my name on her lips.

I plant myself deep, groaning as I follow behind her.

As soon as I can breathe, I pull her up from the floor, worried she'll end up with carpet burn. I run my hands across her body, just reveling in the fact that she's in my arms again.

She's reveling too, staring at me like she can't believe I'm really here.

"I should be so mad at you right now," she says. Her smile tells me mad isn't even on the radar.

"Yeah? Why is that?"

"Um, because you told me you couldn't come!" she huffs. "I thought you were canceling our very first weekend together."

"No, I said I couldn't come tomorrow. And I've been thinking about this whole weekend visit thing...I don't think it's going to work out for me."

Her brows furrow in confusion.

"Two days of you isn't enough, Zoya. I need more time."

"H-How much more time?"

"I was thinking five months."

She slow blinks at me. "What?"



"Five months," I murmur, tracing along her ring finger. "At least to start. I'm willing to renegotiate after that."

"Jareth!" She lunges for me, tackling me to the floor beneath her. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I missed you too goddamn much to spend the next five months away from you, Zoya," I say, grinning. "So I won't be doing that."

Tears spring to her eyes, her bottom lip quivering. "You're staying? Tell me that you mean it."

"Yeah, princess, I'm staying." I tuck a curl behind her ear before brushing a tear from her cheek.

"We've been working out the details since the day after the wedding.

Nadia is bringing on a new guitarist to finish the tour, and I'll be here, looking for a manufacturer for the vineyard's new venture. "

Zoya squeals, flinging herself down across my chest. "You're staying!" she shouts.

I laugh quietly, rolling her beneath me. "Did you really think I was going to let you spend five months over here by yourself?"

"Well...yeah."

I shake my head, tscking at her. "You've got so much to learn, princess. There's not a chance in hell that was happening."

"I'm so happy," she says.

"Yeah?" I slip my hand into my pocket, my fingers closing around her ring. "Think I can make you happier?"

"Oh, I can think of a few ways," she says, a wicked laugh rolling from her lips.

I tug the ring from my pocket, holding it up in front of her face. "Is this one of them?"

She gasps, her eyes widening. "Jareth, is that...?"

"Hell yes," I growl, grabbing her hand to slide it onto her finger. "And I'm not asking, princess. I'm telling you. As soon as you graduate, you're marrying me."

Her lips curve into a smile that damn near splits her cheeks in two. "Wow. You've gotten bossy in the last two weeks."

"Is that a yes?"

"I guess so." She shrugs casually, only to laugh wickedly again when I growl at her. "Yes, it's a yes!" she shouts. "Are you kidding me?"

I groan, leaning down to kiss the breath from her lungs. Christ, she's finally wearing my ring. She said yes.

"You get to break the news to my dad," she murmurs when I finally let her up for air.

"You really don't know me at all, do you?" I chuckle, shaking my head. "I made a pit stop on the way here. Your dad said to tell you congratulations." He also said some bullshit about not getting her pregnant before the ink dries on the license, but I'm ignoring that strongly worded suggestion.

"Wow," she whispers, impressed. "You thought of everything."

"Yeah, I did." I haul her up from the floor, standing her in front of me. "Now...you want to tell me about this hot neighbor of yours?"

"Hot neighbor? What hot neighbor?" She blinks innocently and then pats me on the chest before turning on her heel, her round ass swaying as she strides across the room.

I growl, taking a step in her direction. She sees me coming and squeals, darting down the hall. I grin, letting her get a head start before I chase after her...the same goddamn way I have been since the very beginning.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:57 am*

Zoya

Five Years Later

It's the middle of the night when I sneak out, my feet silent on the boards of the porch. The scent of grapes wafts toward me on the breeze, mingling with the sharper scent of the sea. I shiver and wrap my arms around myself as I hurry down the steps.

My feet immediately turn toward the winery, but I skirt around the building, sticking close to the vines.

I don't even make it halfway down the side of the building before I hear him following behind me. I smile to myself and hurry my steps, fighting a laugh.

He mutters a curse behind me when I slip around the side of the building, disappearing from his sight. By the time he clears the building, I'm behind the old harvester, carefully out of sight.

"What the fuck?" he mumbles, his steps loud as he searches around for me.

I hold my breath as he gets closer. His bare back gleams in the moonlight as he peers through the blooming vines for me.

"Looking for someone, handsome?" I ask, stepping up behind him.

"Jesus Christ!" He spins around like I just gave him a heart attack, his wild eyes falling on me.

A laugh bubbles from my lips as his eyes narrow on me. "Didn't anyone ever tell you that stalking is illegal?"

"Might have heard that a time or two," he growls, reaching out to pull me into his arms. "But chasing after my wife isn't stalking, princess."

"Oh, really?" I loop my arms around his neck. "What is it then?"

"Protecting what's mine."

My heart swells in my chest at his words.

God, I love him. He's just as wild for me now as he was the first time he followed me out here five years ago.

And just like then, I see the bad intentions reflecting in his eyes as he pushes me up against the side of the harvester, pinning me to the metal surface.

It's not like I'm complaining. His bad intentions lead to some of my favorite moments with him.

They're the ones where we're alone and the whole world fades.

We aren't parents to a four-year-old and two toddlers in those moments.

We aren't from two different worlds. We aren't defined by our jobs, our fears, or any expectations.

We're just Jareth and Zoya, wildly in love and free.

Those moments are some of the most beautiful in our story.

His lips come down on mine as his hands slip down my body. My robe falls away, fluttering to the ground at our feet.

"Don't let anyone hear you scream," he whispers.

I don't. I never do. Not even when he lifts me so high, I feel like I'm flying.

I float down in his arms much, much later, the sweat cooling on our skin in the summer breeze. His heart pounds beneath my ear, his arms steady around me.

"Thank you," I whisper, snuggling up against him.

"For what?" He glances down at me, his brows furrowed.

"For chasing me."

His lips curve into a grin, his expression soft. "What'd I tell you, princess? I'll always chase you."

I don't doubt him. I no longer doubt myself, either. He taught me how to trust my heart...and I finally learned how to listen.