Royal Academy

S. Cinders

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Read online: StoryPDF / Royal Academy.

Reading edition: 2026-10-28. Typography: Crimson Text (SIL Open Font License).

Chapter 1

“MY NAME IS AMELIA LOUISE VICTORIA MARIE VICENZA, AND I am the Princess of Hazenbak. I am pleased to be spending the next year with you to help further your education.” Lie.

It was all lies.

She pasted on a brittle smile and tugged at her orange and green striped sweater. Lia knew that the students really didn’t care what she had to say but honestly the halfhearted applause was disheartening. Looking out over the crowd of royals from all parts of the world she wondered for the umpteenth time why her father had insisted she pay her penance here at The Royal Academy.

Lia had hated the place when she was forced to attend as a teenager. It was just her luck that the most prestigious boarding school for royals just happened to be in her country. When Lia had attended it had been an all-girls school.

But progress and legislation had changed in the seven years since Lia had graduated. At twenty-five, she looked out over the sea of young, rich, privileged faces. Most weren’t paying her any sort of attention. Lia felt a smirk break free,

she had been the same at fifteen, so she couldn’t blame the little monsters for not caring.

However, with half of the school’s population now of the male variety, things seemed amped up from her Royal Academy days. She and her friends could rarely be bothered to get all glittered up for an assembly. Make-up and hairbrushes were reserved for out of school functions.

As Lia took in all of the push-up bras and thick catlike eyeliner, she realized that this was a different world from the Royal Academy that she had once known.

Clearing her throat, she continued on with her speech, “We are pleased to announce that the same faculty as the past few years will be attending to you, with one small adjustment. This year we are pleased to introduce a new Royal Affairs teacher, Professor Lehman.”

There was a low murmur of the crowd that Lia ignored as she finished her speech.

“Furthermore, we won’t tolerate misbehavior here at the Royal Academy, one infraction could mean the expulsion of the student and embarrassment for your country. Make your people proud, you are the leaders of tomorrow.”

There was another round of weak applause as Lia took her seat behind the podium. There was an empty chair beside her, one that should have been holding Professor Lehman. They received word at the last minute that he would be delayed.

Lia almost felt bad for the old gentleman. He was coming quite a distance and undoubtedly their chilly weather must have held him up. She took a surreptitious glance around her to see some of the teachers that had been there when she was a student.

Professor Sarah Peters was giving her an evil glare. Obviously, she wasn't over the time when Lia had written *Professor Sarah likes to lick Peters* on her assignments. Lia sent her an innocent smile, hoping that the old bitty would just let it go.

Lia had been fifteen and mad as a hornet that her father, the King of Hazenbak, insisted she attend the Royal Academy. She had done everything in her power to get expelled from the place, but nothing had broken her four-year sentence at the Academy.

When she graduated, Lia had assumed she had seen the last of the grim castle with its hallowed halls and grand staircases. Obviously, she underestimated her father's temper.

It wasn't that Lia was a bad princess, she was just a little unruly. Her older brother Benedict would inherit the crown, country, and headaches that were sure to follow. He was tall, brooding, and broad. Everything a prince should be.

Benedict was never involved in any scandals. He had been dating the same girl for what seemed like a hundred years. And he never made their father angry.

Lia was two parts hot mess and a third wild energy. She loved coming up with brilliant ideas. It could be anything from cooking, decorating, to new hair colors. Lia wanted to try it all. You only live once, she would try and reason with her father, but he seemed to think her idea of living wasn't in line with how a princess should behave.

It wasn't as if she had done anything truly terrible. Lia was wee bit soused, okay, she was plowed, and she might have danced topless on one of the tables at a local pub.

Honestly, how was she to know that it would be filmed and up on the internet before she was dragged home by her friends? Her father hadn't been amused. Anthony Roberto James Benedict Vicenza, King of Hazenbak, had no sense of humor whatsoever.

To make matter worse, everything Lia did seemed to irritate him. She had long since given up trying to impress the man. But when he threatened to cut her off, she knew that she had to toe the line.

And that is how Lia found herself as the new Manners and Deportment Instructor at the Royal Academy. She had an entire year to prove to her father that she could not only accomplish the task that he had set before her. But that she could do it scandal-free.

In exchange for paying her time, her father had conceded to allow Lia her own place if she proved she could handle the responsibility. The thought of not being under the royal statutes day in and day out was almost euphoric.

She had to make this work. Her future was weighing on it.

“Excuse me,” a deep rumbly voice interrupted her thoughts.

She turned to see the greenest eyes that she had ever seen. They were set in a handsome face that was covered with a neatly trimmed beard. He had tousled brown locks that couldn’t have been authentic and the most deliciously built body that a man could possess.

Holy sex on a stick.

He quirked a brow, “Are you alright?”

Lia blinked and to her horror muttered, “Good, fine— err, well.”

A smirk covered that face, and her knees felt weak. Who was this God among men and why was he at the Royal Academy?

“I was looking for someone in the faculty,” he left off and she realized a hair too late that she was supposed to fill in the blank.

“Oh,” Lia cleared her throat, “I’m faculty, I guess. What can I do for you?”

He wrinkled his brow, “Aren’t you a little young for faculty?”

Lia wasn’t very tall, in her stocking feet she stood three inches over five feet. Her long red hair was pulled into a messy bun and she hadn’t worn any make-up that morning. She knew that she looked young, but hell, did he think she was a student?

“Sorry to disappoint,” her tone held a certain chill. “But I am Princess Amelia of Hazenbak and I will be teaching, Manners and Deportment.”

His grin broadened, and she wasn’t sure why it irritated her so much, but it did.

“Who are you?” she demanded shortly.

He executed a little bow, “I’m Nicholas Lehman, your new Royal Affairs professor.”

Lia blanched, “You are supposed to be a little old man!”

He threw back his head and laughed which only served to set Lia more against him.

“I shall try to make it up to you,” he finally managed through a crooked smile.

Damn his straight white teeth, Lia bit the inside of her cheek to hold back her thoughts. He was too beautiful to be a teacher here. And to make matters worse, as the two newest professors they had been placed in the last two rooms in the faculty quarters.

Not only would he be living right next door to her, but he would most likely hear every little sound that she made.

How was she to ride Sir Shlong into oblivion if this sex God was right on the other side of the wall?

No, this would not do. She would talk to someone.

Surely, Professor Lehman could go somewhere else.

Chapter 2

"OF COURSE, DR. FUZZENBOMB, I COMPLETELY UNDERSTAND."

Nick fought the urge to roll his eyes at the older gentleman. Dr. Fuzzenbomb was the Dean of the Royal Academy and should be respected. However, the pompous older man was mostly made up of hot air and euphemisms that he loved to share in abundance.

Nick seethed that Princess Lia had already gone to the Dean and asked for him to be moved away from her. The last thing Nick wanted was to be at this ridiculous school in the first place. As Nicholas Hamilton Roberto Leham the third, Nick was a prince in his own right.

Although his country wasn't as large as Hazenbak, the rolling hills and sparkling lakes of Meron were spectacular.

The only reason Nick was even at this wretched place was that he had a penchant for losing stupid bets with his friends. The latest and greatest being a loss between himself and Benedict, Lia's older brother. Nick knew Benedict from graduate school, and they had something of a running joke between them as to who could pick up the most women.

Nine times out of ten it was a draw. Both men were handsome, titled, and rich. It seemed almost too easy at times, all they had to do was walk into a club and the women would flock, to them. On this particular evening in question, Benedict had gone on and on about his baby sister being in the suds again.

Nick had always pictured little Amelia with pigtails and braids, after all, Benedict seemed the see her that way. And Nick had never met the chit. He stayed away from sisters no matter what their ages might be.

Sisters always meant trouble and were best to be avoided. Nick firmly believed this and could hardly credit his poor luck that had landed him in this situation. Their other friend, Luke, the Duke of Hastings, had suggested to Benedict that he plant someone at the school where his sister was to be banished to.

That way they could keep an eye on her and report back to Benedict if there were any problems. It wasn't that Benedict was a tyrant. Nick knew that he loved his sister and if anything, he wanted to protect her from their father who was a bit of an ass.

According to Benedict, his baby sister could find trouble anywhere. And the king wasn't very forgiving of imperfections in his children.

As the drinks were kicked back and the night rolled on the three boys ended up making a bet. The person with the lowest amount of ladies numbers at the end of the night would be the undercover guard for Princess Amelia at the Academy.

It didn't dawn on Nick until the next morning that Benedict wouldn't have been able to lose seeing as his sister knew his face. That left him and Luke. But to his utter horror, Benedict had given every last number he had picked up to Luke.

It was stacked against him from the start. He should have known when Luke and Benedict were laughing their asses off the night before that something was up. And now he had to listen to Dr. Fuzzenbomb tell him that Princess Amelia felt uncomfortable with a single male residing on the other side of the wall.

Nick clenched his jaw, "I do understand the concerns that Princess Amelia has brought up."

Dr. Fizzenbomb went to launch into another long winded retort but Nick stopped him.

"However, I am in no way a threat to a woman. To even suggests such a thing is an insult, not only to me but to my country."

Dr. Fizzenbomb took a step back, "I would never mean to insult you, Your Highness."

Nick frowned at the older man, "No one is to know about that. I'm merely Professor Leham while I'm here."

He nodded profusely, "Of course, Your Highness, I mean, Your Majesty… err, Professor Lehman."

Nick clenched his fists, "Will there be anything else, Dr. Fizzenbomb?"

The older gentleman knew he was clearly being dismissed.

"Nothing sir, thank you, sir."

He turned rather swiftly for such a portly fellow and padded off down the drafty corridor.

Nick shut his door with just a bit too much enthusiasm and the pictured shook on the wall. He wasn't sure who had lived in these rooms before him, but he was guessing a crazy cat woman.

There were pictures of Calicos, Siamese, and even an Egyptian long hair, living framed on the wall. Nick was deathly allergic to cats, even the pictures made him itch. However, he didn't plan on staying long at the academy.

Surely there had to be a way to get out of this place? Luke would be better at teaching Royal Affairs anyway. Nick had never taught anyone anything, and sure as hell didn't know how he was going to teach a bunch of snobby royals. From what he had experienced, most royal families were almost impossible to deal with.

Finding friendships with Luke and Benedict had been akin to locating that needle in a haystack. Nick frowned, so why had they sold him out? Stupid assholes most likely thought they were being funny.

A pounding at the door brought Nick out of his thoughts, and he crossed over expecting to see Dr. Fizzenbomb back again.

But instead of the Dean, it was the princess herself. Her hair had escaped from the bun she had tied it in earlier. It seemed almost to be alive, there was so much of it. Long thick red tresses fell upon her shoulders and down her back.

Eyes the color of whiskey with flecks of gold were glaring at him. He fought back a smile. She looked like an avenging fairy with her hands on her hips and her mouth moving a mile a minute.

Shit, what was she saying?

“And furthermore, I will have you know that you haven’t won this round, not by a long shot!”

“Why are you so afraid of me?” Nick genuinely wanted to know. He hadn’t touched the poor girl and certainly didn’t intend to.

She was a sister, and sisters tended to need things like stability and marriage. Two things that Nick was also allergic to.

Puffing up Lia shoved a finger into his chest, “I am not afraid of you! I am not afraid of anything.”

He quirked a brow, not moving back and enjoying the way her cheeks had begun to fill with heat. She obviously was now noticing just how close she had gotten to him.

She cleared her throat and took a step back, “You just stay out of my way!”

Nick smirked, “Gladly, and I expect the same.”

Lia looked thunderous, “I have no desire to have anything to do with you!”

He leaned forward the smallest degree and suddenly the room seemed much smaller.

“But you see, this is my room and you came knocking on my door. So methinks the lady doth protest too much.”

Lia sputtered, “You pompous jackass!”

Nick pushed her further, “Whatever little crush you may have developed on me, Princess, you are going to have to get over. I’m not looking for a happily ever after.”

“Crush? You? Are you insane?” her color had become alarmingly red.

She itched to throw something at him. Nothing would make her happier than seeing him brought low.

Nick walked over to his door, “I assume you are done?” She blinked. No one dismissed her, she was a princess. And yet here was this nobody treating her like she was nothing to him.

It wasn't that Lia wanted to be something to him. But all the same, she had come over here to give him a set-down and instead she found that she was being asked to leave with her tail between her legs.

Glancing around his room she saw some of the pictures.

"And for your information," she marched over to the door he held open and looked up into his handsome face. "I hate cats, they are know-it-alls just like you."

She marched out the door and to her own slamming it behind her. His cat pictures rattled a little and Nick couldn't help the small laugh that escaped his lips.

Well, at least they had the dislike of felines in common if nothing else. It would seem that the princess was in possession of a rather fierce temper.

For the briefest of moments, Nick mused that the fiery ones made the best bed partners. But he quickly shoved that aside. There was no way in hell he was going to get mixed up with Benedict's baby sister.

Nick had to find a way to extricate himself from this situation and get the hell away from the Royal Academy and their new Manners and Deportment teacher.

With a small smile on his lips, he began to unpack his things, hoping that he would soon be repacking and on his way out of the door.

Chapter 3

"DID YOU LIKE, SEE HER CARDIGAN?" THERE WAS A TITTER OF laughter from the back of the classroom that Lia fought to ignore.

"OMG, I'm totes dying for her, like, I can't even look in that direction."

"Right? I mean who matches yellow with black and burgundy? She looks like a demented bumblebee."

More laughter from the whispered words that were clearly meant to carry. Lia had dealt with mean girls in school and she was used to being a little bit different than everyone else. It shouldn't hurt, the words that were being callously tossed her way. It shouldn't, and yet it did.

Lia had spent the first half of their class time going over rules and expectations. Then she split the students into groups of three or four to practice introductions. It was a get to know you of sorts that after a bit if hindsight proved to be wasted on the fourth-year students.

Obviously, they had spent the previous three years getting to know one another. Why hadn't she thought of that? Lia chided herself.

This was the first lesson of the day and she had three more to survive before she could hide in her room and pretend that she wasn't back in the place that had nearly scarred her for life.

Looking down at her yellow cardigan and black tank top she supposed that it was a little bumblebee-ish, but paired with the burgundy pants surely took the edge off. The sad truth was that Lia had never been much for fashion.

Her father had tried to press royal dressers on her, and Lia always felt that they were stifling her creativity. She had no wish to go about in pantsuits and linen frocks. Heaven knew that her time in the navy pleated skirts and white oxford shirts at the Royal Academy had been torture enough.

"I can't believe that she's the princess here."

The tall dark-haired girl was named Simone. Smooth dark skin and high cheekbones, Simone looked like a model and wore her uniform at least two sizes too small. One would think with such a willowy frame it would be near impossible to show off so many curves. She had been the one kind enough to point out Lia's resemblance to the flying insect.

Standing next to Simone, was Victoria. Long blonde hair and fragile blue eyes one would think she was the perfect princess in need of rescue. Until you get caught in the backlash of her caustic tongue. Victoria's mouth curved up into a mocking smile when she met Lia's eyes.

Don't show fear.

Don't show fear.

The moment she looked away Lia knew it had been a mistake, there was another titter of laughter. It felt just as terrible now being made fun of as it had back then.

The third in their group was a slender young man with

chiseled features and a haughty gaze. His messy locks and bad boy looks had garnered more than a few stares from some of the other young ladies and several of the young men.

Franklin was the God of Royal Academy and he wore it well. Walking into her class five minutes late he didn't bother to make an excuse just shrugged into his seat and smirked at his minions.

Lia looked at the clock, it was 9:47 am, she had miles to go before she was finished.

Tossing her shoulders back she addressed the class, "Back to your seats, students we are going to begin another exercise."

There was a low grumble as the twenty-two, fourth-years ambled back into their ancient desks. The same desk carols that had been there when Lia had been a student.

She cleared her throat, "We are going to now go around the room and each of you will tell us who the person is in front of you and something positive that you have learned about them."

They started with a small Asian girl named Asha who introduced a chubby young woman with startling black curls named, Hannah. Asha proceeded to tell the class that Hannah enjoyed basketball.

"Fat ass," it was meant to be some kind of a sneeze, but the words were clear. Lia whipped around to see Simone and Victoria laughing their asses off.

Franklin had a smirk on his face along with a defiant glare.

"Let me make myself clear," Lia was fuming and doing her best to hold in what she really wanted to say to these spoiled brats. "You are here because my country has been kind enough to extend the invitation to yours. I will not tolerate bullying of any kind."

Victoria tossed her blonde hair behind her shoulder, "You can't like, expel any of us."

She was correct, Lia couldn't do that of her own accord. However, Lia was a teacher and despite her father's abhorrence, older brother Benedict simply adored Lia. If push came to shove, he could do something.

"Just so I am understanding correctly, Victoria," she lifted her chin, surprised that Lia already knew her name. She plowed on, "Are you defying my rules?"

Infractions meant demerits, all of the students were placed in houses and when demerits were given it not only affected the individual, but it went against the house. Simone and Victoria were placed in Diamonds, it seemed that the highest titled and most affluent students were.

There were two houses for the girls, Diamonds and Rubies, and two for the boys, Emeralds, and Sapphires. In her day, when the Royal Academy was all girls, Lia was a Sapphire, hence the navy uniform. Now that the boys had taken up the other two houses they wore the navy and green uniforms.

The ladies were split into white and red pleated skirts. It reminded Lia somewhat of the Scarlet Letter. It was clear that if you were anyone you wore a white skirt. The girls in the red skirts like Asha and Hannah were treated like second-class citizens.

Victoria flashed those blue eyes in fake concern, "No, Princess Lia, I would never dream of breaking a rule."

Lia fought the urge to roll her eyes knowing that it was the height of unprofessionalism to call your students a bitch.

She looked over at Hannah who had her eyes glued to her desk, cheeks flushed with embarrassment. Remembering too late how awful it was when teachers tried to protect the weaker ones. It always meant more torment in the end behind closed doors.

Sighing, Lia decided to let it go and asked the next student to continue the exercise. Dutifully the students stood and did as they were required. It wasn't until Franklin that the exercise once again came to a complete halt.

"Yes?" Lia encouraged.

"I have social anxiety and am excused from oral participation."

There was a wave of laughter as the implications from his statement washed over the room.

Lia gritted her teeth. Coming from someone who honestly suffered from anxiety it infuriated her that he was taking advantage of the system.

"Quiet down! Quiet!" Once they settled, she continued, "How tragic for you Franklin. I'm sorry that you won't be participating in any oral situations. It can be a confidence booster and quite fulfilling if you have half a mind to try it."

The words were out of her mouth before she realized how they would be taken. Someone with a deep voice cleared their throat behind her. Lia turned around to see Professor Leham had stepped inside the classroom.

His face was stoic, but those eyes, damn those green eyes that shown with mirth.

"Princess Lia, we are edified to hear your enthusiasm for, what was it? Oral? However, the paging system seems to be on the fritz and it's time to switch classes."

The students couldn't contain themselves. One boy had tears in his eyes he was laughing so hard.

Lia's eyes narrowed on the man that chose to make fun of her in front of the entire classroom. She marched up to him and jabbed his chest. His rock hard and incredibly fit chest, but that wasn't the point.

"How dare you?" Lia seethed.

Nick raised a brow, how he managed to look so infuriatingly handsome Lia would never know.

"Did you come in here just to undermine my authority?"

Nick's eyes narrowed, "I came in here to alert you to the bell system being down. How was I to know you would be extolling the virtues of oral to your class?"

"Not sex you idiot!" her words were spoken between clenched teeth. "Now they are never going to respect me!" Nick scoffed, "I think you are overreacting." "Do you?" Lia's eyes blazed.

"Well, I just said as much," he tipped his head to the side.

Lia tried to ignore the quirk of his lips as he added, "Perhaps, Princess, if you took a less military-like approach the students would be more accepting."

Lia had never wanted to strangle a person before and yet right before her eyes, she could feel her hands wanting to reach out and grab the man's neck.

"Stay out of my classroom," she bit out the words before whirling around to see what someone had drawn on the desk.

It was a poor characterization, but the words written above made everything clear.

Princess Amelia likes cock.

Chapter 4

LIA COULD HARDLY RIP HER GAZE AWAY FROM NICK'S SCULPTED chest. How was it possible that someone that hot could be teaching at the Academy? It didn't make sense. Nor did his abhorrence to her. Lia knew that she wasn't traditionally gorgeous, but she was pretty.

A girl didn't make it to twenty-five these days without some indication of how the male species felt about her. Granted she believed that she might be the only twenty-fiveyear-old virgin on the planet but that was beside the point.

She had her older brother Benedict to be thankful for that little gem. He always had someone on the lookout for Lia if he wasn't there himself. The one night he left her on her own she just happened to get hammered and ended up dancing topless on a table.

Just one night! But the rest was history. Now she found herself being marched unceremoniously back to the castle in an athletic shirt that was strangely appealing despite the fact that it smelled of cologne, sweat and him.

Nick, what was it about that man that just wedged itself under her skin? Was it the condescending way that he spoke to Lia? Because she didn't like it, at all. Nor did she care for the way he was acting like an angry…

"Wait a minute," Lia stopped abruptly causing Nick to run into her.

"Damn it, woman, what is it now?" he demanded crossly.

Lia had turned and was just catching sight of those sixpack abs, scrumptious.

"Lia!"

Her eyes snapped to his blazing ones, "What?"

Nick looked like he wanted to wring her neck, "Why in the bloody hell did you stop?"

"Oh," Lia brightened as she remembered and then scowled, "Why are you acting like an angry older brother?

Are you friends with Benedict?"

Nick was looking like a deer in the headlights.

"I knew it! I knew that he wouldn't trust me to come here on my own."

She started off down the path again not waiting for Nick to follow. But looking down she realized that she still had his shirt on. Angrily she yanked it over her head and threw it at him.

"I don't need you or my brother's help!" Lia demanded hotly and then turned and began to run.

Nick grabbed his shirt that had landed in a tree rather than where Lia had intended and started after her. He was rather surprised at how fast the chit could run.

“Lia, stop it this instant!”

Lia scoffed to herself as she broke out in a faster speed. There was no way that she was going to do anything that Professor Leham wanted her to. Damn it, why didn’t Benedict trust her? It was bad enough that her father, the king, felt she was a screw-up.

Lia had always been rather good at running. And at top-

speed, few could catch her. She was just starting to see the castle come into view when she felt him gaining ground.

“Not today,” she muttered under her breath and put in a final burst of energy. There were students in the corridor that stopped what they were doing to stare at their new teachers racing at top speed.

Whatever conversation had been going on was silenced at the appearance of Princess Amelia racing into the gardens in nothing more than a sports bra carrying a bloody garment.

Not far behind her was Professor Leham who was also topless. The female students nearly swooned at the sight of his sculpted body and heaving pecs. This was indeed not something that they had been used to seeing from the previous faculty members.

“And another thing,” Lia whipped around to shout at Nick. “I don’t need your help, your shirt, or your babysitting. You can tell Benedict that as well!”

Nick was murderous, not only had that little termagant outran him, but she just humiliated him in front of half the students at the Academy. He felt some of the stares at his body and remembered too late that he hadn’t put his shirt back on yet.

Jerking it over his head, Nick stalked through the students not speaking to any of them. Lia’s eyes widened when she saw his face. With a squeak, she raced into the castle taking the stairs two at a time. She was almost to the top when her toe caught on the rim of the stairs and she went sprawling forward.

Nick, hot on her heels, didn’t have time to stop himself and he fell directly on top of her.

Lia cried out as her shins smacked the stone steps.

Nick was careful not to hit her head, but the impact had

to hurt regardless. Nick rolled to the side and looked down to see the Dean staring in horror at the debacle.

“I say,” Professor Whitten, a rather nice-looking man in his mid-thirties was standing at the top of the stairs. He motioned to the students that were gawking at the scene.

The Dean seemed to come to life at that moment and started ushering them away. Lia was moaning softly, still facing down on the steps. Nick got to his feet somewhat steadily and plucked Lia up and into his arms.

He would be damned if Professor Whitten was to get an unobstructed view of Lia in her sports bra.

Professor Whitten reached out a hand, “I can help.”

But Nick’s arms tightened, “No need, I have her.”

“What were you two running from?”

Nick had always felt that honesty was the best policy, however, he also could see that revealing his cards at this point might not be best for either himself or Lia.

“There was a bee in Princess Amelia’s shirt,” Nick lied through his teeth. “She is deathly allergic.”

Professor Whitten blinked stupidly as the Dean came blustering up the steps, “A bee? Are you telling me that you both were nearly splattered all over the steps for a bee?”

Nick drew himself up to his full height, ignoring the way that Lia was shivering in his arms. He had a sneaking suspicion that she was laughing at him.

“Would you like to explain to King Vicenza about her daughter's death? I know I would rather want to avoid that conversation.”

The Dean swallowed nervously knowing full well that the Academy existed through the sole patronage of the King.

He began to backpedal, “Of course, it was an emergency. You were only doing your duty.”

Professor Whitten didn’t look as impressed, “Don’t they have medicine that one can give if they are stung?”

Nick glared at the man. Not only was he standing entirely too close, but he was eyeing Lia’s naked midriff rather lecherously.

“Does it look like she has her epinephrine on her?” Nick said icily.

Professor Whitten backed up a step, “No, I don’t suppose she did. Rather careless of her, I should think.”

Nick felt his dislike of the man soar at his criticism of Lia’s supposed lack of response to her imaginary allergy.

The Dean stepped in, “I hate to be a bother, but it doesn’t look quite right for you to be holding her like that on the stairs. Are you okay, Princess Amelia?”

Lia's face was buried in Nick's neck and if the truth were to be told she was reveling at the nearness of the man. He was hard angles and smooth muscles. So very different from her smaller form that she wasn't about to move from his embrace.

She moaned softly, "Just take me to my room."

Nick gave the men a curt nod and then walked down the hallway to the end of the facility corridor and straight to her bedroom. Turning the knob which she obviously had forgotten to lock he marched inside and dumped her unceremoniously on the bed.

Lia squealed before turning to glare at him, "That wasn't nice!"

"Neither was playing possum out there," he retorted. His eyes locked on the bruises starting to form on her shins.

"Damn it, woman, you are a walking hazard area." Lia looked down and winced at the purple flesh.

"Let me see your arm," Nick demanded.

Lia flinched, "No, you have helped enough, thank you."

Nick had far enough of this woman to last him a lifetime, "Fine, if you decide to bleed out please put a shirt on. I don't want to have to save you again in your underwear!"

Lia threw her bloody t-shirt at him, but it only made it as far as the foot of the bed, "I don't need your help, and I didn't ask for it!"

Nick turned on his heel and proceeded to her door, "Bloody ingrate!"

"High handed pig!" she screamed back just as he slammed her door.

She glanced down at her arm, it really did hurt—and somehow she just knew that it was all his fault. So when he marched back into the room and grabbed her by the shoulders she was completely speechless.

As his lips crashed into hers, angrily kissing her and easily giving Lia the best snog of her life she really wasn't sure what was going on. Just as she was beginning to kiss him back he broke the kiss and clamoured out of the room as if the hounds of hell were after him.

Lia's hand went to her lips and she felt how swollen they were. Had that just happened?

Chapter 5

THE AMUSEMENT NICK HAD FELT UPON ENTERING THAT damned woman's classroom had been replaced with sheer irritation. How dare she accuse him of undermining her? The whole reason he was in this bloody castle was because of her.

Never in his life had Nick met someone so prickly before. The woman should come with a damn warning label! Do not approach, hazardous to your happiness!

He stalked back to his room and over to his desk. The students were milling about and had a few moments before he would have to begin his lesson. His father would be in hysterics to see Nick teaching Royal Affairs.

It was his least favorite subject and one that the King of Moren often insisted upon drilling into his head. Nick had never been one that enjoyed ribbon cuttings and pointless speeches given to the aristocracy. In truth, many royals had little control over the actual running of their countries. It was more about parliament, shoving the crown into a figurative type role.

This was half the problem with royalty in the modern age, according to Nick. If they had more responsibility and less money they would be more inclined to give a flying rat's ass about their people. Being a member of the royal family used to mean something, now it seemed that they were glorified figureheads.

Nick blew out a breath, glancing at his watch he realized that it was time to begin. He had the fourth-years, the class that had just come from Lia's room.

He stood, "I don't want any bullshit about non-existent disabilities. I have documentation for the students that fall into these categories."

They looked up at Nick in surprise and he winced remembering too late that cursing wasn't allowed. Not willing to back down Nick continued.

"Stand up, state your name, title, and reason for being here."

The students began to do as instructed, there were Dukes, Countesses, Princesses, a Viscount or two, and a myriad of other titles scattered about the room. As each student stood Nick took in their tone of voice, posture, and reason for attending the Royal Academy.

For many, their answer was *because my parents are making me.* He couldn't blame them, it would be similar to something he might have said himself.

There were others that seemed to try brown nosing to help make themselves sound important.

But overall, Nick wasn't overly impressed with any of them. The only one that caught his eye was a little girl named Asha. She had shiny dark hair and a soft voice, but her answer rang out clearly just the same.

I wish to help those that don't have a voice.

It was powerful. Nick had no idea who the girl was or what principality she came from. But her elegance and poise were spot-on. He knew that it wasn't always the biggest and strongest that made the most difference in life.

Nick had a gut feeling that little Asha would move mountains one day. He continued with his class only stopping once when some of the students got unruly. He quickly split up the trio of Victoria, Franklin, and Simone. It was obvious that they were used to ruling things and Nick wasn't about to have a child dictating his class.

One lesson seemed to blend into another until at long last he was finished with his first day. With a breath of relief, he grabbed something from the main hall for dinner not opting to sit with the staff. The last thing Nick wanted to do was to be inside a moment longer.

Changing into a pair of gym shorts and athletic shirt he laced his running shoes and slipped out the side castle doors.

The weather in Hazenbak had turned colder. Nick considered going back in for a hoodie but then decided against it figuring that once he got going he would be plenty warm enough. He started out at a jog until he began to feel that burst of adrenaline coursing through his veins.

As the endorphins kicked in Nick began to lengthen his stride, coming into his normal rhythm. Not being as familiar with the area, Nick was careful to watch where he was going on the paths. The last thing he needed was to get lost in the woods.

Running was freeing and for the first time that day Nick felt at ease with himself. Mile after mile, his feet pounded the earth. He couldn't help that his mind kept reverting back to that little fiery fairy that seemed hellbent on hating him.

There was something about Princess Lia, he couldn't put his finger on. It wasn't the ridiculous clothes, although clearly, she needed help in that department. And it wasn't her sparkling personality—obviously. But there was something almost vulnerable, perhaps it was in her eyes or the way her hands seemed to fidget.

Nick shook his head, he must be crazy. There was nothing soft or vulnerable about that harpy.

Rounding the bend he wasn't looking ahead and ran smack dab into another runner on the path. He reached out to grab the person before they fell but it was a lost cause.

They both smacked the hard ground, him sadly, on the bottom.

Gobs of dark red curls covered his face as he tried to replace the air that had been knocked out of him. Closing his eyes again he wondered if someone was out to get him.

His attacker moaned and it was definitely not one of pleasure. He could hardly countenance the feeling of firm breasts pressing into his chest and the rapid breathing against his neck.

“Are you alright?” the voice squeaked and immediately Nick knew who was sprawled across him. To make matters worse, his cock was beginning to take notice of the female who had sat up to straddle him. Her hands cupped his cheeks as she leaned down to…

“What are you doing?” he expostulated as his eyes snapped open.

Princess Lia was leaning in close, her sweet breath brushing his face and her hands were still cupping his whiskered cheeks.

“I was going to give you mouth to mouth resuscitation,” she said without hesitation. “You were unconscious.”

“I was still breathing!” Nick grabbed her by the waist and set her to the side of him.

The last thing he needed was Benedick’s little sister feeling his growing wood. What had come over him?

No, what had come over her?

Lia blinked in confusion, “Oh, I suppose you are right.”

Then she grinned, and he felt as if the sun had just decided to shine down upon him. This only served to piss him off further.

“Don’t you watch where you are going?” he demanded.

Lia’s smile dimmed and he wanted to kick his own ass for hurting her even in this small way.

“The same could be said for you,” she retorted and then winced when she brought a hand up covered in blood.

“You’re bleeding!” he panicked looking around as if a nurse would suddenly be popping out of the foliage.

“Brilliant, Sherlock, nothing gets past you!” her words dripped of sarcasm.

She lifted her elbow and there was a jagged cut from a rock she had fallen against. Not seeming overly concerned. Lia whipped her shirt over her head and pressed it to the wound.

Nick’s eyes bulged and he looked everywhere but at his friend’s little sister who had a surprisingly perfect pair of tits cradled in a hot pink sports bra. He could see her round nipples through the fabric, although he was trying not to look.

Who knew she had that under her granny clothes?

“You can’t get naked out here!” Nick demanded.

Lia had quite enough of his high handed attitude. Rising to her feet he noticed that her stomach was trim and flat. She wore tiny running shorts that would most likely be featured in his dreams that night. Long tone legs made up the perfect picture of sensual womanhood.

This was not good.

Not good at all.

She was Benedict's sister, hell that almost made her his sister.

Sister's didn't have tits. They were sexless like aunts and teachers. They didn't have legs that one could picture wrapped around their waist or even better their head.

Lia eyed him warily, "You look weird, are you alright? Did I hurt you?"

Nick's pride demanded that he rise to his feet and escort her back to the castle. Just as soon as she had a shirt on.

"Fine," he said curtly, "But you have to put your shirt back on."

She raised the bloody object, "Not likely."

With a grumble, Nick reached up and pulled his own athletic shirt off his body and yanked it over her head.

"Then you will wear mine," he demanded. And when she started to argue he stepped in close giving her an intimidating glare.

It was then that her eyes registered that he was standing in front of her in a pair of running shorts slung low on his hips.

"Oh," her mouth popped open in a perfect oval and all Nick could think about was her enthusiasm for oral.

It was going to be a long trip back to the castle.

Chapter 6

LIA SAT AT HER DESK AS THE CLASS WATCHED AN ANTIQUATED film on proper dining etiquette. She vaguely remembered watching the same film when she was a first-year. So far this teaching assignment hadn't been horrendous. The curriculum was already laid out and all Lia had to do was follow the teacher plans.

What was disappointing to Lia was how boring it all was. She hadn't cared for the class as a student and certainly wasn't enjoying it as an adult. Who cared which fork you could pick up your watercress with? She hated the vegetable in any form—especially in soup.

Lia shuddered at the thought. Absentmindedly she scratched at the scab which had formed on her elbow. More than a week had passed since the accident in the woods. Lia had taken to running in the morning to avoid Nick.

Neither one had reached out to the other, and when they passed in the hallway there was a distinct electric charge. Whispered rumor among the students was that Princess Lia had been throwing herself at the handsome professor.

After all, why would someone as suave and charming as

he, possibly want with their scattered redheaded teacher? It was unfathomable that the feelings could be reciprocated.

Lia continued to dress in her own eclectic style. Stripes with florals, glaring patterns, and odd color combinations were something of a knack for Lia. It wasn't that she wanted to stand out like a sore thumb, only that she always had.

As the film progressed Lia tried to ignore the whispers from the students. They were supposed to be paying attention, but as time had gone on, Lia had lost more and more of the student's respect. She wasn't sure why they didn't like her.

It seemed that the harder she tried the worse things became. Especially with those fourth-years, Victoria, Simone, and Franklin. Biting her thumbnail, Lia contemplated on the upcoming meeting with the Dean.

She had been asked to report to his office immediately following classes that afternoon. Closing her eyes she wished for the umpteenth time that her father would just let her live her life. This challenge thus far had only gone to prove that he was right. And damn, that hurt more than she was willing to admit.

The credits rolled just as the bell system altered students that classes were over for the day. With a wave of relief, the students stood and began to exit the classroom. Lia noticed that one of her first-years was still sitting at her desk.

“Rachel, is everything alright?” Lia asked kindly.

Rachel was a quiet girl, a countesses daughter or some such thing, and just barely fifteen. Dark skinned with a body that Lia was secretly jealous of, Rachel was everything that Lia had never been.

“Princess Amelia,” Rachel looked her square in the eye, “Can I ask you something?”

Lia sat at the desk in from of Rachel, “Certainly, what can I do for you?”

Rachel’s brow furrowed, “I think it is more what I can do for you.”

Intrigued, Lia leaned back on her elbows in a decidedly unprincesslike manner.

“By all means, shoot,” Lia smiled at the girl.

“I don’t mean to be disrespectful, Princess Amelia,”

Rachel began, “But your clothes, they are awful.”

Lia choked a little and sat up, “Excuse me?”

Rachel nodded sadly, “They don’t fit you very well either. My mother was a fashion model before she married my father. I could help you if you would like.”

Lia looked at the beautiful, quiet, fifteen-year-old wondering how she could turn her down gently.

Rachel raised a hand, “I don’t want to take away your sense of style. Some of the things you wear are fun and edgy, it’s just the pairing that is atrocious. I’ve seen how the students treat you and I know what they are saying behind your back.”

Lia drew in a breath, “Is it that bad?”

Rachel made a face, “It’s pretty bad. I like you, Princess Amelia, and I know what it is like to be on the outside of things. Because my mother wasn’t born into royalty, there are some people that can be quite cruel. I am not ashamed of my mother’s heritage. She comes from a working-class family in the states.”

“Where is she from?” Lia hadn’t considered that there might be others who felt the same way she did.

Rachel smiled, “South Carolina, she was a tall black woman that began modeling at the age of sixteen. By the time she was nineteen she had reached international fame and had caught my father’s eye. They married two years later. My parents are incredibly happy, do not get me wrong. However, there have been numerous occasions through the years when my family has been scrutinized and treated as less than—Common blood and all of that nonsense.”

Lia’s eyes were wide, “I’m so very sorry.”

Rachel shrugged, “Don’t be, you learn to grow a thick skin. But growing up with a fashion model as a parent I know what looks right and what doesn’t. Princess Amelia, my mother always says that you have to dress the part of who you want to be.”

Lia shook her head with a wry smile, “Aren’t I supposed to be teaching you?”

Rachel matched her grin with one of her own, “I can’t ignore a cry for help.”

A laugh escaped Lia’s lips, “And I suppose I am the one crying out?”

“Your clothes certainly are,” Rachel retorted.

Lia looked at the girl ten years her junior. In truth, Rachel was one of the most beautiful girls she had ever seen. Clearly, she took after her mother. A part of her wondered if life here at the Academy might be a little easier if she had someone on her side. Even little Rachel would be better than nothing.

Let’s out a sigh, Lia relented, “All right. I have a meeting with the Dean but I suppose that I could meet you back here later?”

Rachel grinned, her bright white smile flashing and showing perfectly straight teeth, “After dinner. I have another friend Craig that I will bring with me if that’s alright?”

Lia nodded, “I suppose the more the merrier.”

“Perfect,” Rachel stood, a good five inches above Lia’s frame, “See you then!”

Lia smiled and waved wondering just what she had gotten herself into now.

MAKING her way to the Dean’s office she rushed knowing that she was a few minutes behind. By the time she arrived her face was flushed and she was breathing hard, “I’m sorry

I’m late, Dean, I had a student I needed to speak…” Lia broke off as she saw that the Dean wasn’t alone. Professor Lehman, or Satan Nick, was sitting in one of the chairs across from the Dean’s desk.

“I beg your pardon,” Lia turned and was about to leave when the Dean stopped her.

“No, no! You are just in time, come in, child, come in.”

Lia turned around with horror in her eyes. Had Nick said or done something to try and get her fired? Her hot eyes met his irritated ones. She couldn’t read his expression and wasn’t sure what to do.

“Have a seat, Princess Amelia,” the Dean encouraged, “I have something of importance to discuss with you.”

Over the next fifteen minutes, Lia was told in no certain terms just what a lousy teacher she really was. Her students were complaining about her. There wasn’t any discipline going on in the classes, and they had started to get parents calling in.

Lia fought back, outrage and surprising hot tears on her face. She had never wanted to come here in the first place. She wasn't trained as a teacher and hadn't wanted to be one. How dare they force her into a situation and then chastise her for not being the best.

This was just another instance of Lia not measuring up to expectations.

"I will pack things immediately," Lia said shortly and moved to rise.

The Dean shook his head, "No, my dear, you misunderstand. We don't wish you to leave, we want to help support you."

Then the older gentleman glanced at Nick and Lia felt the bottom drop out of her stomach.

"Professor Leham came at the same time that you did and is doing splendidly. I have consulted with your father, the king, and he wishes that you have a mentor of sorts. We will be pulling in a new teacher to help cover classes and Professor Leham and you will team teach Royal Manners and Deportment. What do you say?"

Lia sat in stunned silence. What did she say?

I'd rather be dragged through broken glass?

Is there an option where you just rip my toenails out?

Tar and feathering sound more appealing?

Her only consolation was that Nick looked just as miserable as she did. Lia did the only thing she really could do, "Yes sir, when do we start?"

Chapter 7

“HOW COULD YOU, BENEDICT? YOU USED TO BE MY FAVORITE brother!” Lia had spent the last half an hour berating her older brother.

Sadly, he had spent the last half an hour laughing, “Did you really run naked through the castle?”

“No!” heat filled her cheeks, “Is that what he told you?”

Benedict’s amusement shone as he shook his head at Lia, “I have other spies there, Lia. Besides, why are you so certain that I had anything to do with Nick Leham?”

“He’s awful just like you!” she sank down on the bed and glared into the camera of her laptop.

“That is not an attractive look for you, Stinky.” Lia made a piggy face and Benedict shuddered, “That is worse, much worse.”

“Benny?” Lia sank onto her elbows, “Do you think that there is anything wrong with the clothes I wear?”

Benedict’s eyes widened. The last thing he would ever want to do would be to upset his kid sister. Benedict was well aware that Lia didn’t really fit the princess mold or any mold for that matter.

But he felt that her originality was one of the best things about Lia.

“Why?” he asked guardedly.

She groaned and flopped her face into the comforter.

Whatever she said next, Benedict couldn’t understand because it was garbled with her face against the mattress.

“Cut it out, Stinky. Just tell me what is going on.”

Lia raised her head and to Benedict’s dismay, her eyes seemed a bit, glassy.

“Lia, what’s wrong?” he demanded, feeling that surge of overprotective brother coming on.

“Nothing, Benny, it’s nothing,” she grinned brightly, but he could tell that it was her fake company smile and not the crooked endearing one that tugged at his heartstrings.

“Put Nick on,” Benedict demanded.

He knew his mistake the moment she shook the laptop and everything became topsy-turvy for a moment.

“I knew that you had something to do with that man being here!” Lia growled at him, actually growled.

If she wasn't his sister, he would have thought she had flipped her lid. Granted, since Lia was his sister he already thought she was a bit unbalanced.

"What was it about your clothes?" he tried to change the subject but Lia wasn't having it.

"They hate me!" Lia wailed unexpectedly, "It's horrible here. The kids hate me and that man is making my life miserable."

She made quoting gestures with her hands, "And now I have to team teach with him. I'm a glorified assistant,

Benny."

He winced, "How did that happen?"

"Complaints," Lia grumbled and then scowled when his lips twitched.

"It's been less than two weeks, Stinky."

"I can follow a calendar, Benny, thanks for the update. Look, I have to go. One of my student's is staging a fashion crisis intervention."

Benedict burst out laughing, his handsome face clearly enjoying her misery.

"I want to go home," she said softly and he sobered up.

"Lia, if you come home now father wins."

She swallowed, "I know. I didn't say that I was leaving, only that I wanted to."

"Look, just wait it out a few more weeks and I will come and see you as soon as I can get away."

Lia sniffled, "Promise?"

Benedict rolled his eyes, "Have I ever broken a promise to you, Stinky?"

Lia's eyes narrowed, "Yes, there was the time you left me at a club with an underwear model. Or that other time when you promised to dance with me at the Royal Coalition and you took Zandria Turner instead."

Benedict grinned, "I wonder what happened to Zandria, she had great…"

"Ew! I am going now," Lia closed the laptop and couldn't contain the smile that pulled at her lips.

Benedict hadn't always been the most responsible with her, but he loved his sister and Lia knew that he would do anything for her. He had been with his current girlfriend for so long that it hardly seemed fair to dredge up things that he had done in the past.

But then wasn't that what siblings were for? Helping us to remember things we wished were long forgotten?

Feeling better she glanced at the clock and realized it was later than she thought. Getting to her feet Lia trudged back to her classroom, dreading what Rachel and her friend Craig might have to say.

An hour later, Lia found herself holding her side as Craig regaled them with tale after tale of horrible fashion emergencies from celebrities, foreign dignitaries, and everything in between.

Craig was a boy of medium height and sandy blonde hair. He was handsome in a boy next door sort of way. The boy knew his fashion though and had even made little improvements to his uniform that helped him stand out.

Rachel was twirling a strand of dark hair when she blurted out, "Do you see what I see here, Craig?"

Lia looked behind her expecting something incredible to be just past her shoulder. They were eyeing her like the next MonaLisa and Lia wasn't sure why.

Craig nodded, "Definitely a diamond in the rough, but it's rough. May I?"

He picked up Lia's hand despite the fact that she hadn't answered him and visibly shuddered when he saw her nails.

"Manicure is a must, and I am assuming pedicure as well. She needs a facial and then a lion tamer for that brow."

Lia raised her hand, "What's wrong with my eyebrows?"

Craig smirked, "Well, for starters there should be two."

Lia frowned at Rachel and Craig as they both dissolved into snickers.

"It's not that bad," she insisted.

Rachel waved a hand, "It's not horrible, Princess Amelia."

"It's not good either," Craig quipped and then stared at Lia intently, "But it could be. You have a rocking body and great facial features."

Lia gasped and crossed her arms, "That's not something you should be saying to your teacher!"

Craig rolled his eyes, "Relax, PL, you're not the flavor of ice cream that I enjoy."

"What?" Lia looked at Rachel who seemed to be hiding a smile.

"He's gay," Rachel added helpfully.

"Oh," Lia turned back to Craig, "Ice Cream?"

He grinned, "Yeah, if I had the hots for a teacher that new Professor…"

Lia raised a hand, "Say no more about that horrible man!"

Rachel and Craig exchanged a look before turning on her.

“What?” Lia said defensively.

Craig shrugged innocently, “Nothing. We need to see your clothes.”

“Okay,” Lia sighed, “No time like the present.”

They had another hour before lights out and the three of them spent the time with Lia begging for items to stay as Craig and Rachel threw more and more into the rubbage bin.

“I thought you said my clothes weren’t that bad!”

And this was how Nick found them. The noise from his closest neighbor becoming so loud that he had to investigate. Not only was the door open, but once he crossed the threshold he saw the massive pile of linens that Lia was trying to save from a tall dark skinned girl.

“You promised to listen to us,” the girl was insisting.

“She’s right, PL. We are doing this for your own good,” the boy looked up and cleared his throat, “Um, bitches, we have company.”

The admonition to Craig about the swearing died on her lips as Lia looked up into Nick’s amused eyes.

“Well, shit,” she breathed and a smirk broke out on his handsome face.

“I think it’s time we went to bed,” Rachel darted for the door and Craig was moments behind her.

He stopped before they left to call out, “Don’t go putting those things back, PL. They are off limits.” And then they were gone.

Nick raised a brow, “PL?”

Lia hated her fair skin as she felt her cheeks heat once again.

Why was it that she was always blushing in front of this man? “Princess Lia,” she huffed, “Why are you here?”

There was a scratching noise followed by a small whimper.

Lia had always been deathly afraid of mice. Living in a castle one tended to see them from time to time. Without thought or reason, she flung herself at Nick.

He had barely caught her when she tried scaling his body like a pole.

“Damn it, woman, your shoes are digging into me!”

“Meow.”

They both stopped, Lia balanced precariously on Nick’s shoulders.

“Was that a…”

Lia broke off as Nick sneezed so loudly that she lost her hold and tumbled down his body to the floor.

“You dropped me!” she insisted.

“You have a damn cat!” he accused.

From behind the massive pile of clothes, a thin orange and white striped cat peaked its head.

Nick sneezed again, “How could you?”

“You are the one that likes cats!” Lia snapped. Nick looked horrified, “No I don’t!”

Lia glanced down at the feline that had come over and started to lick her hand.

“You have to get rid of it,” Nick sounded stuffy and his eyes were pink rimmed.

Lia picked up the small cat and was surprised at how it curled around her arm.

“I think I will keep her.”

Chapter 8

NICK STORMED OUT OF LIA'S ROOM AND STRODE DOWN THE hallway without a real destination in mind. He couldn't understand how one small woman could be that infuriating. Just how in the hell had she managed to come up with a cat?

He knew that she was doing it just to spite him, and that caused his blood to boil. Grabbing his phone he passed a herd of giggling second-years and made his way outside. Benedict picked up on the third ring.

"I was wondering how long it would be until I heard from you."

His mate Benedict had always been a good friend. That was the only reason why he hadn't thrown in the towel for this stupid bet.

"She has a damn cat, Ben!"

Instead of the sympathetic horror that Benedict should have portrayed the rotten bastard let out a shout of laughter.

"Lia hates cats, Nick. She wouldn't keep one," the amusement in his tone grated on Nick's nerves.

"I just came from her room where indeed she was holding a cat and telling me that she was going to keep it." There was a moment of silence before Benedict asked dangerously low, "What were you doing in my sister's room?"

Nick immediately remembered her soft skin under his fingertips and the sight of her gorgeous tits in that pink sports bra. He almost screamed in frustration. Ben's little sister wasn't allowed to have anything appealing about her. And she most certainly couldn't have tits, that was not even a question up for debate.

"Look, man, do you trust me or not?" Nick was careful to make his tone light, but there was a sliver of steel in there as well. "Her room is next to mine and I went over there because of the noise that was coming from that direction."

Benedict's harshly indrawn breath was audible, "Who was in there?"

Nick felt relieved that he was off the hook, "A couple kids were in there throwing away a good seventy percent of her closet."

Suddenly it became clear to Benedict what she had been speaking to him about earlier on their video chat.

"She asked me what I thought about her clothes," Benedict said thoughtfully.

"What did you say to her?" Nick was honestly curious.

If he could separate the fact that she was his best friend's brother and look at Lia objectively. He would say that she had the quirky cute girl next door vibe. Her clothes were a bit terrible and she held herself like she was waiting for the next hit. But when she smiled her entire face lit and she was almost…

He didn't want to continue that thought.

"I didn't," Benedict answered, "And I think I hurt her feelings. Maybe it will be good for Lia to change up her style a little. Our father has tried for years but he always has gone with telling her what a disappointment she has been. That only served to make her cling tighter to things. I have often wondered what she would be like if our mother had lived."

Benedict rarely spoke of his mother and Nick felt a pang of regret that he hadn't the slightest notion of what to say. Luckily, he didn't have to say anything because Benedict kept going.

"Just keep an eye out for her. She said that you would be team teaching. I don't know if you can utterly understand what it was like for her there Nick. We had already moved on and the girls were horrible to her. Not only that but once the teachers understood that she wouldn't report back to our father they were often cruel as well."

"Why didn't you get her out of here?" Nick couldn't help but wonder.

Benedict cursed, "I didn't know the whole of it until she was almost finished. Lia had become more withdrawn at school but we were off at university and I was busy playing the field, living my own life. I abandoned her, and I feel terrible about it."

Nick felt a pang of remorse, it wasn't that he had been mean to Lia, but he certainly hadn't been kind. Well, besides that kiss, but he pushed that to the back of his mind. That had been way too friendly.

"I will watch out for her," Nick said gruffly.

It was as if even though he couldn't see Benedict he knew that his friend had visibly relaxed.

"You might want to start taking those allergy meds if she keeps the cat," Benedict warned.

Was there a hint of amusement in his voice? Nick chose to ignore it.

"Yeah," he replied gruffly.

"I told Lia that I would be out as soon as I can get away. Just keep her happy and out of trouble until then."

Nick rolled his eyes, "This might be the worst bet I have ever lost."

Benedict laughed, "Including the one where you had to wear a dress and steak across the ladies locker room?"

Nick felt a smile tug at his lips, "One of the best, not going to lie."

The friends exchanged a few more words and then ultimately the call ended. Nick knew that he could do anything for a year and it wasn't even an entire year that he had to survive just nine months.

He wanted to know more about which teachers had given Lia grief. Nick knew that Sarah Peters had been teaching at that time. She was in her late forties and pretended to be much younger. Professor Peters had blatantly come on to her several times since Nick had arrived.

He shuddered at the thought of getting mixed up with that barracuda.

Make a resolve to delve into the matter further Nick had finally calmed down enough to go back to his room. It was now passed lights out for the students and the halls were empty save for a few of the janitorial staff.

Nick pushed his door open and begrudgingly went to his chest to dig out the allergy pills that he hated taking. If Princess Stubborn was going to insist on keeping the damn cat he was going to need to be armed.

Right before he turned off the light the image of that damn cat curling around Lia's arm flashed into his mind. He couldn't help the small smile that played on his lips as he remembered the surprise that first flashed across her face followed by tenderness. Lia might think that she doesn't like cats, but that looks suggested otherwise.

WAKING with the determination to try and get along with Benedict's younger sister, Nick rushed to class. He had risen early to dress and eat while he went over the lessons that had been prepared for them. It took minutes for him to realize that Lia had been set up.

The lessons were so dull that he couldn't read through it without going back to sleep. It didn't give the students an excuse to be disrespectful, but Nick was starting to see why there was a problem.

Not only was the information out of date and more fitting for the eighteenth century. The suggestions for use in discipline were ridiculous and included such idiocy as *Remember they are royalty and deserve the utmost respect.*

While it was true that all of the students had royal blood flowing through their veins they were still guests in Lia's country. The county that she just happened to be the only daughter of the king. The more Nick flipped through the pages the angrier he became.

Lia was instructed not to move the students around or even to change the layout of the classroom. There were some students that should not be allowed to sit together for their own good. With a sigh, he had gathered everything up and he was going to be late if he didn't rush.

Students had already begun to fill the room. Several of them called out greetings which he exchanged kindly as he looked for Lia.

But she wasn't in the room yet. He found that odd but decided that perhaps she was still mad at him from the night before. As the minutes crept closer to the starting time, Nick was beginning to get nervous. Should he have stopped and asked her to walk with him? Had she gotten angry enough to leave?

Sadly, this didn't make him as happy as the thought once would have. Nick was genuinely worried about her.

There was a clicking that sounded like boots approaching, pushing the door open was a woman with a cloud of gorgeous red hair falling in soft waves halfway down her back. Her black silk tank made her breasts look like liquid was covering them, and it was paired with dark skinny jeans and black ankle boots. A wild pattered jacket was tossed carelessly over her arm.

And she had on a chunky necklace and bracelet that matched the jacket. Her makeup was minimal but highlighted her incredible eyes. And the lip gloss made her plump lips look wet and inviting.

She smiled and Nick felt like he had sustained a blow to the chest.

"Lia?" he croaked.

Chapter 9

LIA LOOKED UP TO SEE NICK STANDING AT THE FRONT OF THE room with his jaw literally dropped to the floor. She then noticed that it was silent in the classroom. Since she had started at the Royal Academy she had never been able to control her class quite like this.

With a confident smile that she certainly didn't feel, Lia continued to stride up to where Nick was standing. There was an appreciative murmur from the male members of the class when she walked by. Lia felt horrified and slightly giddy. Perhaps this was the nudge that she had needed after all.

"Professor Leham, how are you this fine morning?"

Nick blinked and then had to clear his throat before answering, "Excellent, thank you, Princess Amelia. And you?"

Lia grinned at him. She knew it was unprofessional, but Nick was still staring at her like he couldn't quite believe that she was the same person that he knew.

"Excellent as well," Lia responded politely, "We are happy to have you with us."

Nick smiled softly, and she felt butterflies erupt in her belly, but then, just as quickly, he turned to the class.

"Right there you had a rather everyday example of manners and deportment. Who can tell me a little? about what they saw?"

Asha raised her hand.

"Yes, Asha," Nick encouraged.

"Princess Amelia greeted you with a smile. Her posture was straight, and she inquired after your health."

Nick nodded, "Precisely, thank you, Asha." Turning to the class he continued, "The golden rule as archaic as it may sound is the key to good manners. Politeness is more than just a social expression. You are showing your character, grace, and good breeding."

Victoria raised her hand, before answering she flicked her hair over her shoulder and smirked, "I was always taught that honesty was the best policy. If I don't like someone, why should I fake it?"

There were a few snickers among the students and Simone was grinning from ear to ear.

Nick waited until the class calmed before answering, "Kindness isn't lying. If you don't like a certain aspect of an individual then, by all means, don't bring it up. But a true dignitary and leader knows that politeness is the language of the heart. Being 'fake' has nothing to do with a

genuine courtesy. I would indeed wonder, Victoria, if you needed to evaluate your motives for not liking the individual."

"Sounds like you are saying it's a personal problem," Franklin called out and Victoria cheeks heated with anger.

Nick shrugged, "There will always be those that we like and dislike. However, if you wish to help lead your countries you will find to put such petty selfishness behind you."

Lia's mouth was gaping. Nick looked over at her and

winked. She snapped her jaw shut uncertain if the wink was for shutting down the Victoria problem or letting Lia know that she too has a personal problem—with him.

The rest of the day passed much like their first class. Nick never once referred to the lesson plan and they had more classroom participation in that one day then we had all year so far. He was quick to refer to Lia and didn't take up all of the class time.

In fact, there were some lessons that he released the class early when they were finished instead of waiting for the bell. Lia resented his total lack of fear when it came to making decisions like this.

"What if we get in trouble?" she asked when the last student had walked out.

Nick laughed at her, actually laughed, "You are the princess of Hazenbak. Who is going to tell you what to do?"

Lia frowned, everyone, told her what to do. She pushed that thought away and continued, "Your freedom isn't riding on this, mine is."

He quirked a brow, "Do tell."

Lia suddenly realized that she was about to let something very personal out. She was thankful that she had stopped herself. The last thing she needed was for Nick to hold something over her.

"It doesn't matter," she gathered her things, "I need to check on Hank anyway."

Nick stiffened, "Who's Hank?"

Lia straightened her shoulders, "My cat."

He blew out a laugh, "They aren't going to let you keep that thing. It most likely has fleas and who knows what other diseases."

"Hank is perfectly well, thank you, very much. And they are going to let me keep him!"

Nick shook his head, "I will speak with the Dean." Her eyes widened, "Going to go tell dad?" He scowled.

Lia flipped her head back much like Victoria had during class before responding, “Go ahead, my brother has already called and informed the school that Hank will be staying.”

For the second time, that day Nick’s jaw fell open, “He wouldn’t.”

She sashayed over to the door, “He already did.”

After she left Nick could still smell the alluring scent of her perfume in the air. There was something so utterly irritating about the woman and yet he was drawn to her. Nick had almost made a fool of himself a dozen times during the day losing his train of thought just looking at Lia.

He cursed the students that had chosen now of all times to make her into a cover model. Nick had known she had a slamming body from when he carried her on the stairs. However, in her bizarre outfits, he could easily picture her as younger or even too strange to consider.

But it was different with the makeup and those damn skinny jeans that hugged every lithe inch of her.

The last thing he needed was to be getting a cock stand in front of the kids. He had to remember that Lia wasn’t really a girl, no she was a sister, those are so far off limits there are an entire species reserved for sisters.

The—do not look, do not touch—species.

It was too bad that his eyes and body weren’t willing to listen to his edict. She had reached out to show him something earlier and touched his arm. Nick had felt the heat from her touch all the way through his jacket.

There was another moment when she brushed past him, that pert little ass coming dangerously close to areas that could cause a major problem. When he had an urge to grab Lia and pull her close. It was unfathomable. That would be a nightmare of epic proportions.

Not only would Benedict have his balls, but it would ruin their friendship. No doubt something like that wouldn’t go over well with the school either. And then there was Lia herself. She was likely to kill him if he tried anything like that.

No, Nick needed to keep his eye on the prize. He wasn’t going to lose this bet because Benedict’s sister was hot.

As the future king of Meron, Nick knew that all good things came to those that waited. Now he just needed to wait it out. Everything was going according to plan.

Nick was almost back to his rooms when he heard an ear piercing scream coming from Lia’s chambers. He dropped everything in his arms and started sprinting. Thankfully, she had left the door ajar, Nick slammed into the room to find Lia in her tank and panties up on the dresser.

There were others running toward the room, no doubt having heard the scream. But he couldn't allow anyone else to see her like that.

Poking his head out the door he smiled reassuringly, "No cause for alarm just a stubbed toe."

Several of the kids gave him a dubious look, but the teachers and staff merely shrugged and moved away.

Another whimper came from inside and he steeled himself before going back in. Her creamy tone thighs were at his eyesight and he knew better than to glance further up.

"What happened?" he asked tersely.

Lia simply pointed, "There, do you see it? Hank, how could you?"

On the rug, the skinny feline sat licking its paws and ignoring the both of them.

On cue, Nick sneezed. However, he had taken the allergy medicine and didn't feel like he was going to die—yet.

"I don't see the problem," he looked all over the floor.

She grabbed his head, her fingers sinking into his hair, "On my pillow!"

Her voice was shrill and as he looked, Nick, grimaced at the sight before him. A plump dead mouse that appeared to be missing his head.

Hank meowed his delight.

Chapter 10

LIA COULDN'T WAIT TO GET OUT OF HER WORK CLOTHES AND into some running shorts. Working with Nick all day had been panty melting and she needed to work off some steam. Yanking the skinny jeans down her legs she threw them over the chair and removed her jewelry.

Just as she was reaching for the drawer Lia looked over and saw something on her pillowcase. Startled she took a step closer to get a better look and that was when she let out the most blood-curdling scream of her life.

Lia wasn't sure how she did it, but one second she was on the floor and the next she was perched on top of her dresser. Nick came slamming into the room breathing hard. She tried to tell him what it was, but her words couldn't quite come out.

"There, do you see it? Hank, how could you?" Lia eyed her new friend with betrayal.

Nick had come to stand beside her so that he could see what she was freaking out about. Lia sank her fingers into his hair and turned his head "On my pillow!"

The dead rodent was indeed a gruesome sight.

"A mouse," Nick said rather calmly for how fast his heart was racing. "You screamed like you were being stabbed because of a mouse."

"A dead mouse on my pillow, Nick!" Lia sank down on her heels covering her face. "You have to get rid of it."

He was careful not to look at her, "I will if you get down from there. You are going to hurt yourself."

Lia's eyes flashed, "No way in hell am I getting down until that is gone."

Nick fought to control his expression, "It is dead. I don't think the mouse cares where you are standing." "What if it has friends?" Lia wailed.

"Well then, your good friend Hank will be sure to introduce you," Nick couldn't help the little jab.

Lia looked back at Hank. He seemed to be grinning in delight.

"Just get rid of it."

Nick nodded, "I need to get something to scoop it up."

"The whole pillow has to go! I can't sleep where there has been a dead body. I don't even know how I'm going to sleep in the bed."

This caused Nick to laugh, "Well, you are going to need to figure something out. Just a second, I will take this out."

Nick carefully picked up the pillow and walked to the door, "You can get down now. And pants would be appreciated."

Lia felt the heat rise in her cheeks when she realized that she was only in her skimpy panties. As Nick went out the door she tried to climb down. But every time she did visions of dead things kept appearing in her mind. No, it was safer up here.

Nick returned a few moments later, "Now that's been taken care of…" he trailed off. "You are still on the dresser."

Lia lifted her chin in defiance, "Maybe I like it up here."

It could have been the way her hands were shaking or the fact that she was still paler than usual. Nick could somehow sense that she was still afraid—deathly so.

"Lia, it's okay, you can come down," he tried to coax her.

She wouldn't budge and with a resigned sigh, he knew what needed to be done. She was a sister, not a woman, surely he could handle getting her off the dresser.

His arms wrapped around her thighs and she squealed and cling to his head. He tried setting her down but she clung to him like a spider monkey. Her legs wrapped tightly around his waist and her breasts were smashed against his chest. Her arms were around his neck in a choke hold and she was whimpering into his neck.

"Lia, I can't breathe!'

She loosened her arms a fraction of an inch, and he was able to pull back enough to see her face. Plump full lips and wild eyes there was something so appealing about the girl. Something that in this close proximity he was having a tough time remembering something important.

But what could be more important than the minty breath that was caressing his face? Or the way she fit so perfectly into his arms like she was meant to be there. Her tone thighs wrapped around him had Nick envisioning scenarios where she wasn't wearing anything at all. Her fingers had slid into his hair and her eyes were wide and questioning.

Why had he even come in here?

Why hadn't he noticed how captivating she was?

Slowly he inched his way forward.

Her eyes darted from his to his lips and stayed. There was the slightest intake of breath and then she parted her lips in wonder.

A stronger man could have put her down, walked away, and gained some perspective. But Nick had been fighting these demons from the moment he had met Princess Amelia of Hazenbak. Surely one little taste wouldn't hurt anything, at least that is what he told himself.

She pulled him closer and he didn't resist as their breaths mingled and his stomach did summersaults. Was this what butterflies were supposed to feel like? Nick knew that there was supposed to be a reason that he pulled away.

But the moment she uttered that one word he was lost.

"Nick?"

It was more of a plea than anything else and he was powerless to resist it. His lips brushed hers in the tenderest of kisses. Once, twice, and then on the third he settled in. Going slow as not to frighten her, Nick marveled at the feel and taste of this woman.

Her cloying scent inflamed him and her sweet minty breath had him clamoring to taste more to get inside her mouth. His hands tightened on her hips, digging into the firm globes of her ass.

Her ankles dug into his back and spurred him onward. Nick nipped at her lips, begging for more and Lia opened for him. She was hesitant, innocent, and that sent such a raging heat of desire through him that he could hardly think.

Her mouth parted and he tasted the real her, heady and sensuous, her tongue tentatively began to stroke his. Nick wasn't sure of a time that his cock had ever been harder. The longer they kissed the deeper he fell into her spell.

She was becoming bolder, she moved more aggressive as she tasted him, got to know what it was like to be worshiped by his mouth. Her body rocked against him, tight nipples against his chest and her heated core against his abs.

He slipped a hand between her legs and found the spot that was aching so badly. She wished she was naked but this was every bit as good as any of the romantic escapades she had ever had, naked or not.

He needed to be inside of her, he was sure of it. Why were they wearing so many clothes? His hands slipped into the waistband of her underwear and he felt the slick heat of her core

Lia gasped, this was so much better. She mewled into his kiss which only spurred him on. Rubbing and kissing her until they were both ready to throw all caution to the wind.

Sadly, that was just as a loud knock sounded at the door.

It was more effective than a bucket full of ice water.

Lia snapped back, lips red and swollen. Her cheeks were flushed and her hair was decidedly mussed. She looked like she had been making out. They had just been making out.

Lia scrambled off of him and called out, “Just a second!”

“It’s Dr. Fuzzenbomb,” the Dean called out. “Do you have a moment?”

Lia looked over at Nick. The impressive bulge in his pants was a glaring indicator of what was going on.

“Put something on!” he hissed and motioned to her bottom half.

“Right!” Lia turned around and grabbed the skinny jeans from the chair. The moment she bent over to stick a leg in Nick was groaning softly.

“Are you trying to kill me?” he muttered.

She turned in confusion but hadn’t gotten her feet situated and the next thing she knew she had landed on her ass with a loud thump.

“Is everything okay in there?” the Dean called out.

Nick was holding back laughter as Lia wrestled with her pants.

“Yes, Dr. Fuzzenbomb, it was the cat,” Lia replied and finally zipped up her jeans and buttoned them.

Hank gave Nick and Lia a nasty glare and decided to move under the bed.

“You need to hide,” Lia hissed.

Nick’s eyes bulged, “Where?”

She shrugged, “Under the bed?”

Chapter 11

"PRINCESS AMELIA?" THE DEAN CALLED OUT AGAIN.

Lia shoved at Nick's shoulders until he got on the ground and slipped underneath the bed. It was a tight fit and he wasn't sure if his shoulders or junk would be the same. Both took a hard knock against the bed rails.

Lia raced to the door and opened it, "I'm so sorry, Dr. Fuzzenbomb. It was a, erm, girl issue."

The older man flushed and waved his hands in front of his face, "Oh nothing to worry about, Princess."

Lia was still standing in front of the doorway, "What can

I help you with?"

He tilted his head, "Might I come in?"

Gritting her teeth, Lia moved back and allowed the older man inside.

From where Nick was smashed under the bed he could see the deans shoes along with Lia's adorable naked toes.

His nose twitched and carefully he maneuvered his arm around until he could raise it to his face and wiggle it. Turning his head to the side his grass green eyes slammed into the glowing blue irises of his arch nemesis.

Hank lazily stretched out a paw, teasing Nick as his tail whipped back and forth. Nick could no longer pay any attention to what the Dean was speaking to Lia about because he was now in a showdown with Hank.

Nick's brows snapped together and bared his teeth. Surely if one showed dominance to the feline, Hank would back down.

The only way to describe the face that Hank made next was a smirk. His eyes narrowed and his whiskers jumped. If Hank could talk, a challenge had just been issued—bring it on.

Nick heard something about a 'field trip' that shook his concentration and for the briefest of seconds, he took his eyes off the cat.

"So, we will plan on you and Professor Leham taking the fourth years to the Everett Academy Ball?"

Nick shook his head but it was no use, it wasn't like Lia could see him.

"Um, sure, Dr. Fuzzenbomb, we would be happy to."

NO! Nick wanted to scream but he knew full well that getting caught in Lia's room hiding under the bed would cause all kinds of complications to his life.

Right at that moment, Hank made his move. In a flash, he had moved and placed his furry ass right on Nick's face.

Heedless of who was in the room, Nick swatted at the cat who in turn scratched right back.

"What is that?" the Dean had paused mid-sentence.

Lia gulped, "My cat, Hank, he has night terrors. Must be a bad dream, sir."

"Goodness," the Dean blew out a breath, "It sounds like a catfight."

Hank's fur had gotten into Nick's nose. Now instead of

worrying about the cuts on his hands, Nick was horrified that he would sneeze.

Lia must have sensed that something was dreadfully wrong because she tried to hurry the Dean out the door.

She clutched her stomach, "Oh, I think those lady problems are coming back."

The Dean was never one to stay around in a crisis, "I will just get out of your hair." "Aaachooo!" Silence.

And then another, "Aaachoo!"

"What was that?" the Dean looked around the room not seeing anything.

"Hank, my cat, has allergies," Lia replied praying that the Dean would just get the hell out of her room.

"That is incredible, he sounds just like a human!" Dr. Fuzzenbomb began to lean down as if he wanted to see Hank.

Lia clutched her stomach again. "Oh, ouch! It hurts really bad!"

The Dean popped his head up with a look of disgust on his face and quickly made his goodbye. Lia locked the door for once in her life and flew back across the room just in time to see Nick whacking his head as he tried to get away from Hank.

"Bad, Hank! Stop that this minute!"

Hank looked up at Lia and then shrugged his kitty shoulders before moving away to glare at Nick.

Nick was sporting a rather long scratch on his wrist and another on his cheek. Lia knew that this was no time to laugh, but the way they were looking at each other was rather hilarious. And then Hank whipped up his tail and began to lick his unmentionables.

Nick scowled and the peals of laughter escaped her lips. She couldn't help it. Her emotions had been all riled up with the kiss and then the dean visiting. Hank deciding that now was an appropriate time to get his rocks off was just too much.

Slowly Nick's scowl began to soften as he watched Lia struggling to regain her composure.

"It wasn't that funny," he said but his lips had begun to twitch at the corners.

Lia wiped a tear away, "What were you two doing under there?"

"He rubbed his ass on my face!" Nick burst out heatedly.

But all that did was cause Lia to laugh even louder,

"Nick, he is just a cat."

"He isn't a cat!" Nick insisted, "He's a bloody demon, I'm telling you that is not a normal cat!"

Lia stepped forward and grabbed a tissue from her dresser. Then moving closer she dabbed at his cheek. Nick sucked in his breath. He had thought that all of those crazy emotions from earlier had disappeared. But all she had to do was step closer to him and his body revved back up again for round two.

"I'm sorry he scratched you," her eyes were still glittering but no longer laughing.

Nick cupped her hand to stop the movement, "It's alright."

Her lips twitched, "Are you sure?"

Her full lips were all that Nick could think about. He wanted to press his own against them again. He wanted to feel them against his body, around his cock.

Leaning in, his mouth was a hairsbreadth away from her own when there was another knock at the door.

"Bloody hell," Nick growled, "How many visitors do you get in an evening?"

Lia shrugged helplessly, "Who is it?" "Craig and Rachel," they called in unison.

"Give me another fifteen minutes, would you?" Lia called back through the door.

"Sure," Rachel replied, "See you then."

Lia blew out a sigh, "I'm sorry, they are most likely here to pick out my outfit for tomorrow."

Nick smiled and shook his head, "Your personal fashion guru's?"

She laughed, "Something like that. I needed the help and they are all too willing to provide it."

He stepped back into her personal space and brushed a strand of hair behind her ear.

“For the record, you did look positively amazing today.” Lia felt a surge of pride and happiness fill her.

“However, you are just as beautiful no matter what you wear. They are just clothes, Lia, remember that. It doesn’t change who you are inside.”

Lia was frozen into place as Nick kissed her forehead softly and moved to leave. She turned to say something to him just as the door snapped closed.

Had he really just called her beautiful? Even when she was wearing her crazy styles?

Lia moved in front of the mirror and assessed herself trying to see through Nick’s eyes. Her hair really was her crowning glory. The red was laced with blonde and gold looking like a fire had been lit within it. Two brownish green eyes framed by brows darker than her hair was complemented by her high cheekbones and straight nose.

Lia was thin, that was the nature of a runner, but her breasts were full and round and she had rather long legs for her height.

She wasn’t sure how long she stood there until there was another knock at the door.

“You about ready, Princess Amelia?” Craig called out.

She nodded to the mirror as if making a personal declaration. Lia was going to look at herself through those nasty lenses that she always had in the past.

New job, new wardrobe, and maybe a new love? Only time would tell.

Only time would tell. Racing to the door she opened it to see Rachel and Craig with a knowing smirk on their faces.

"What?" Lia asked as they came in and made themselves comfortable.

"Nothing," Rachel said innocently right before she shared a knowing look with Craig.

"Out with it," Lia insisted.

"Was that Professor Leham's voice we heard in here with you?"

Shit.

Chapter 12

“EVERETTE ACADEMY IS FOUR HOURS BY BUS, ONCE WE HAVE arrived you will have about an hour to get the rooms sorted out and change for dinner. After the meal, the ball will begin immediately and end promptly at midnight.” There were a few groans from the back of the class.

“Didn’t know I was Cinderella,” Franklin snorted.

Nick smiled, “You are a rather unusual candidate for Cinderella. Now, wicked step-sister, well, that I could see.”

Instead of being offended Franklin laughed, “It’s better than being a pumpkin.”

Lia shook her head, once again astounded by the effortless way Nick had the kids eating out of his hand.

Victoria raised her brow, “Don’t you want to be Prince Charming?”

Franklin made a face, “That tosser? He dances with a chick all night and can’t remember her the next day.” Lia’s lips twitched. He did have a point.

Nick raised a hand to gain order.

Lia lifted the forms in her hand, “We will be passing out the list of what to bring and what things are off limits. Please be sensible if something isn’t on here that is needed you may bring it. Also, just because the list doesn’t exclude something that would obviously be bad doesn’t give you permission either.”

“No grenades, Princess A?” Franklin smirked.

Lia included her head, “Precisely.”

Some of the fourth years had begun to call her Princess A and Lia was flattered that they were actually opening up to her. The beginning of the year was such a fiasco that she had dreaded all of the months she was forced to stay.

As the weeks rolled by, Lia had begun to slip into an easy comradery with Nick. Sure, that one amazing life-altering kiss was never far from her mind. But it had been ages since Nick had disposed of Hank’s dead mouse.

Rachel and Craig had teased Lia much like younger siblings might do. When they accused her of having a man in the room, she had retorted that they were collaborating for the next day's lessons. She might have looked more convincing if her cheeks hadn’t heated so profusely.

Still, Lia insisted that they were merely colleagues— barely friends.

In truth, she had rather enjoyed their crazy situation. The more that she had gotten to know Nick, the more she liked him. It was the secret smiles when he was amused at something a student had said or the way he rolled his eyes when the Dean was pontificating that really melted her heart.

However, despite the fun flirty Nick that had made out with her and crawled under her bed she now seemed to be shoved into the friend zone. It was almost like she was his sister.

Lia had never been a femme fatale, hell, she was a virgin. However, Lia knew that this ball was her chance to

change all of that. She had specially ordered a new gown under Rachel and Craig's approving eye. She and Nick would be spending a tremendous amount of time together chaperoning all twenty fourth-years to Everette Academy and back. Surely they could find one moment to lock lips again.

Or maybe even… more?

There was a brisk knock on the door and Dr. Fuzzenbomb entered with a tall muscular man with messy auburn locks and a devastating grin on his face.

"Benny?" Lia breathed with excitement before flying across the room and jumping into her older brother's arms.

The students immediately stood and bowed showing their respect for the future king of Hazenbak.

"Please be seated. I didn't mean to interrupt."

Nick grinned at his best friend, "You are always welcome."

Benedict smiled back at him, "You look rather at home Nick ole boy. Maybe you missed your calling?"

Lia frowned in confusion and Nick scowled at Benedict. Dr. Fuzzenbomb went on as cluelessly as always.

"We will be meeting in front of the school to board the busses in two hours. If for any reason you are not there at departure time you will not be going on the trip."

The students nodded at Dr. Fuzzenbomb's statement and then dismissed to resume packing. Almost all of the girls had been packed for weeks so for them it was merely time to waste until their new adventure could begin.

Benedict still had an arm thrown carelessly around Lia's shoulders. The difference in height was astounding, but in their facial features, one could see that they were indeed family.

"So, Stinky, did I surprise you?"

Lia made a face, “Why did you have to come today? We are leaving in a few hours and I won’t have any time to spend with you.”

The Dean puffed up his chest, “His royal highness, will be coming along with you Princess Amelia as a third chaperone.”

Inwardly Lia groaned, there would be no master seduction with her brother in tow. But outwardly she smiled and squeezed his waist.

“I missed you, Benny. I’m glad you are here. I’ve got to finish up a few last-minute things. Do you want to come along?”

Benedict shook his head, “I will just hang out with Nick until you are ready.”

Lia smiled and with a final hug started back to her room with the Dean leaving close behind her.

“How are things?” Benedict asked grabbing a chair and flipping it around.

Nick didn’t seem as happy to see his old friend as Benedict would have thought. In fact, he was almost irritated in a way.

Interesting.

Nick cleared his throat and busied himself with some papers, “Good, I have kept Lia out of trouble just like you

asked and therefore will be winning this bet.”

Benedict rolled his eyes, “Only time will tell.”

“What is new with you?” Nick questioned, “How is

Melinda?”

A shadow fell across Benedict’s face.

“Fine, I suppose, I haven’t seen in her a while.”

Nick grabbed a chair and sat across from his friend, “You were practically engaged to the woman. How is it possible that you haven’t seen her in a while?”

The muscle in Benedict’s jaw twitched, “I don’t know, Nick. I’m just not feeling it. I know that we have known each other forever and have been off and on most of our lives. But I don’t love her, and I am almost positive she doesn’t love me.”

Nick blew out a breath, “How does one know they are in love anyway?”

“How the hell should I know?” Benedict scoffed. “But I sure as shit think that you would want to spend time with them. You would think about them when you were apart. Maybe even see a future together, at least I would hope so.”

"And you don't see that with Melinda?" Nick asked cautiously.

Benedict made a face, "We are perfectly content being apart. I know that you don't have to live in each other's pockets. But what does it say about us that a month can go by and we don't even call each other?"

"Have you talked to her about it?"

Benedict nodded warily, "She accused me of leading her on. She said that she was born to be the queen of Hazenbak. Interestingly enough, not once did she say anything about me breaking her heart. It was all about shattering her future as the monarch of my country."

Nick made a face, "I know you most likely don't want to hear this, but I think you made the right decision, mate."

"Is this the part where you tell me you never liked her anyway?"

Nick laughed, "I have nothing against Melinda. I know it's never been hot and heavy between the two of you, but I figured that was what you wanted."

Benedict grimaced, "I can't imagine spending the rest of my life with lukewarm sex. She would probably demand separate bedrooms. I don't even know her that well, not really. We were just two people that have been thrust together and I went along with it thinking it was my duty."

Nick nodded, "I know what you mean. My father has been pressing me to find someone."

Benedict's mouth curved up, "The permanent bachelor? I shudder to think that you are taking him up on the idea."

Nick rolled his eyes, "As Professor Leham it isn't likely I will be wooing anyone."

Suddenly Lia's laughing eyes flashed into his mind. Her perfect tits and tight ass that felt incredible in his hands. The silly way she jumped on the dresser and then laughed at him when he and Hank had it out.

"Hey, Nick," Benedict waved a hand in front of his face,

"Where did you go?"

Nick swallowed hard.

Lia was a sister.

Lia was a sister.

It was too bad that what Nick was feeling certainly couldn't be classified as brotherly.

Chapter 13

BENEDICT SLUMPED DOWN NEXT TO LIA ON THE BUS AND wrinkled his nose.

“Why is it about charter buses that reminds me of the inside of the guy's locker room?”

Lia smiled, “I don’t know, perhaps it’s the attached loo in the back that carries all of those treasures everywhere we go?”

Benedict gagged, “Eww, Lia!”

She laughed, “You asked.”

He looked her over, “You look good you know. Not different, simply happy.”

Lia thought for a moment. When she had first spoken with Benedict, she had been miserable. The students hated her the staff ignored her and she was homesick. But in the last few weeks, many of those things had changed.

The students were coming around, even Simone, Victoria, and Franklin weren’t as terrible as they had been. Lia supposed that it also helped she was spending so much time with Nick. Just thinking about him brought a smile to her face.

“Yeah, I am happy. How about you?”

He looked away and Lia immediately noticed that his shoulders had tensed.

“What happened, Benny?”

He snorted, “Nothing, I’m right as rain, Stinky.”

She poked him hard in the shoulder, “Stop lying and tell me the truth. Is everything okay with Father? Melinda?”

“Father is the same crusty bastard that he always has been,” Benedict said dryly.

Lia snickered, “Well, I don’t miss that. What about Melina?”

Benedict looked away again, “I’m sure she’s fine, we broke up.”

Lia was more than a little bit shocked. It was true that her brother and Melinda had a very on again off again relationship. Also, to be noted, Lia never had found Melinda particularly warm or even kind. But their union was practically written out when they were infants. Everyone knew that he was supposed to marry her.

It wasn’t written in stone or anything, but still…

“What happened?” Lia placed a hand on his arm and Benedict turned to look at her concerned face.

“Stop with the Sally Sad Eyes, Stinky. I broke up with her.”

“I don’t know if it matters who does the breaking up, it still affects two parties.”

He sighed, “I just, I know this sounds shitty, but I don’t love her. I don’t even like her very much, Lia. And why should I sacrifice my happiness to toe the line for Father? I already have to take the crown and it’s not that I’m not grateful you know I am.”

Benedict was a good man, Lia had always respected him and watched as he served others. But there was some-

thing restless about him. Something that she hadn’t seen before.

“Maybe you need a break,” she suggested.

He shook his head, “No, I have tried breaks with Melinda before and the next thing I know she is hinting

about china patterns and redoing the east wing.”

Lia’s eyes widened, “Mother decorated that wing.”

Benedict smiled faintly, “I know, and I wouldn’t allow Melinda or anyone else to touch it. She knows that it is important to me and it’s like she doesn’t care. Melinda is in love with being a queen, not the prince in line for the crown.”

“When I said that you needed a break, Benny, I didn’t mean from Melinda.”

Benedict looked at his little sister, “Oh, then what did you mean?”

Lia smiled, eyes dancing, “Maybe you need to run away from home for a bit. Take a vacation where nobody knows who you are.”

Benedict scowled, “Thanks to the newspapers and the internet I don’t think there is a place on God’s green earth that doesn’t know who I am.”

Lia pursed her lips, “Then you need to go far away like China or America.”

Benedict barked out a laugh, “They love celebs in America and China, Stinky.”

“America is a vast place, big brother. I’m sure there is some backwater town that has never heard of Prince Benedict Reginald Charles Worthington Vincenza of Hazenbak.”

He rolled his eyes, “I think my name alone would clue them in.”

Lia thought for a moment, “Not if you were Ben Worthington.”

“An assumed name?” he asked incredulously.

“It’s your name, Dummy, just shortened.”

Benedict thought on what Lia had been proposing. It was true that he had felt the heat of his relationship deteriorating and the pressure from his father to marry. What would it be like to go somewhere and not be recognized or mobbed in the street? How pleasant would it be to walk into a pub and order a pint without being expected to act like the crowned prince?

“Ah! You are thinking about it aren’t you?” Lia’s eyes sparkled.

Benedict smiled sheepishly, “You have to admit that it sounds pretty damn appealing.”

Actually, that was essentially what Nick was up to at the school. His country was nowhere near Hazenbak. Nobody at the school knew that Nick would one day be king of his own nation. Benedict started to think that maybe his little sister was on to something.

“Look, if you do something like this, you have to promise to tell me,” Lia pinched his arm to bring his attention back to her.

“Stinky! I’m offended that you would assume otherwise. I am your absolute best big brother in the entire world, am I not?”

Her lips tipped up, “You are also my only brother.”

“Semantics, Stinky, merely semantics.”

Lia gave him a final look of concern, “I mean it, Benny. I would worry something awful if I thought something had happened to you. I wouldn’t tell Father, I swear it.”

He felt a powerful brotherly urge to snatch her by the neck and squeeze under the guise of hugging slash head noogie.

“You are growing up on me, Stinky.”

She rolled her eyes, “I’m twenty-five, not twelve.” “Are you really? That can’t be right,” he teased.

The bus pulled into Everette Academy and the royal siblings looked out the window to see a massive castle similar to the one they had just left. But this building was clearly a replica and not original to the area.

“It’s lovely,” Lia said absentmindedly.

“It’s horrible,” Nick said coming up behind them.

Benedict and Lia both laughed.

“Don’t tell me you are an architectural snob,” Lia grinned at him.

For a moment Nick’s heart skipped a beat. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes sparkling.

Damn, she was beautiful.

Thankfully, Benedict saved him, “Nick’s undergrad was architecture, no doubt the whole modern age offends him.”

He made a face, “That is a lie. I’m fine if you can go back a century or two.”

The bus had begun to unload and the three of them found that the next hour was spent making sure that boys were rooming with boys and girls were in with girls. There was more than one group that needed sorting.

By the time Lia made it back into the room assigned to her she unpacked and was sorely late for dinner. Rather than rush and throw her new gown on. Lia took the time to shower, shave, and steam her dress. She carefully applied the thin layer of makeup just as Craig and Rachel had taught her.

Her long hair with a bit of styling cream was left in waves of glorious auburn curls and to top off the ensemble she wore her crown. It was an older style one that his mother had favored. Lia didn’t remember anything about the queen she had died when Lia was born.

But Benedict had some memories that he had graciously shared with Lia. She felt that through her brother she knew a little about the kind woman that had made her life possible.

Once she slipped her feet into some nude pumps, she eyed herself in the mirror.

Her dress clung to every curve she had. The material was thin but not see through, and Lia worried that if the ballroom was too chilly, she might be shining her high beams. There was nothing to be done about that now, she was more than a little late.

Blowing one last kiss to the mirror, Lia grinned and made her way to the ball.

Chapter 14

THERE HAD BEEN A FEW MOMENTS IN NICK'S LIFE THAT TIME actually stood still. When he walked in on his father fucking his press secretary that had been one of them. It was the train wreck that you just couldn't look away from. The sight that made you think you were dreaming or perhaps hallucinating.

Such jaw-dropping moments didn't always have to be of the horrible variety. There was the time that he took a first in all of his classes. He literally couldn't believe what the words were saying in the letter. It didn't seem possible, and yet there it was.

Moments such as these, freeze into your brain and no matter where life takes you or what comes along you will always be able to recall these times with clarity.

When Lia poked her head into the ballroom with the shy hopeful smile and looking like sin—everything stopped.

Okay, nothing stopped for the majority of the occupants. However, for Nick, it was as if time had frozen and she was the only thing left out of the spell. Her body was on full display in an evening gown that was meant to seduce and entice.

Her long auburn hair was left free and flowing down her back in soft waves. Nick wanted to wrap it around his fist, while he was kissing her and more.

The gentle curve of her hips and generous expanse of her breasts had him rock hard and thankful for the tuxedo jacket that he hadn't removed. Benedict was saying something to him, but Nick couldn't hear him.

The curve of her neck had him itching to place tender kisses, he wanted to lick the hollow at the bottom of her throat. And those tits, he needed to taste them as badly as he had needed anything in this world.

As if she sensed his gaze Lia's eyes locked on his. Her lips parted in a soft smile that went straight to Nick's gut. How had he worked next to this woman day in and day out without going completely out of his mind?

He knew that his feelings were getting into deep water. She was smart and funny, kind and loving, as well as sassy and determined. There was just so many things to like about her. He took a step forward before he knew what he was doing. And then as if his feet had their own agenda, he walked away from Benedict midsentence and beelined for Lia.

The closer he got the more his heart pounded. Her eyes widened but she didn't move away, in fact, Nick was pleased to notice that her eyes shone with something that looked a lot like desire.

He reached her and took her hand, slowly bowing over it. But instead of kissing her glove, he flipped her wrist so that when he kissed her his lips met with the bare skin near the button. A shiver ran through Lia, and Nick felt a surge of lust knowing that he was the one affecting her.

“You look beautiful, as always.”

Was that really his voice? Nick wasn’t sure that he had ever sounded so gravelly in his life.

“Thank you,” her voice was soft and hesitant, “You are looking very handsome.”

“Would you care to dance?”

The question was out before Nick even realized he had asked it. He didn’t even think about the implications of dancing with her. Benedict didn’t cross his mind, neither did the hoard of students that were present. His only thought was that he needed Lia in his arms.

He swept her into a tight embrace, his heart threatening to escape its cage. Her scent enveloped him, the blood orange and tangy sweet tones had him wanting to devourer her. He pulled her even closer until his body was flush against her own.

Just as he was lowering his head for a kiss it happened.

Benedict wrenched Nick away from his sister and planted a right hook directly into his jaw. Suddenly everything returned to him. The academy, the students, they were on a fucking field trip for hell’s sake and he was trying to ravish another teacher. His co-teacher! She would be ruined.

Nick blinked and saw the lights from many of the student’s cameras as they filled the entire debacle undoubtedly upstreaming as it went along. Lia was screeching about something, but Nick couldn’t seem to clear his head. It might have been because Benedict hadn’t stopped hitting him.

“He’s not fighting back, Benedict! Stop you hurting him!”

Nick winced for the poor bloke that was being taken down by Benedict. The man loved fighting as a hobby. A little unconventional as a prince, but then they all had their vices.

It wasn’t until red started to cover his eyes that he clued in the man getting beaten was himself.

Benedict was lying on the floor next to him looking like he wanted to go for round two. The staff of Everette Academy was ushering the students out of the ballroom to heaven knew where. And the three of them looked very much like they had been brawling.

“My fucking sister, Nick? You fucking bastard! How could you?”

As Benedict berated Nick he stayed silent. It wasn’t as if anything his friend was saying wasn’t true. He was a bastard. Friends didn’t prey on little sisters, everyone knew that. And yet here they were.

Lia was crying, and Nick didn't like that.

"I'm sorry," it was the first thing that came to mind and yet when he spoke the words seemed wholly inadequate.

Benedict scoffed, "Who are you even apologizing too?"

Nick lifted his head and tried to focus, "Everyone."

"Why? I fucking want to know why?"

Nick sighed, "I didn't mean to. I tried to stay away, told myself that she was off limits."

Lia sat up at that, "What? Why?"

"Friends don't fuck friend's sisters," Benedict groundout.

"We weren't fucking," Lia glared at her brother. "We were dancing. And even if we were, how is that any business of yours? Melina and I used to play together when we were younger. Are you saying you never fucked her?"

Benedict winced, "I don't like it when you use that word."

"What word? Fuck? Because you have been throwing it around like it's candy. And for your information brother of

mine. You are a fucking hypocrite. What is good for me doesn't apply to you? Nice, really nice."

Lia got to her feet, "Well, gentleman, I just want to say thank you for the worst night of my life. I had thought this kind of shit was behind me, but I guess not."

Her nude pumps left behind, Lia walked out of the ballroom dejected and fighting back a fresh wave of tears.

"I really hate you right now," Benedict muttered.

Nick would have laughed if he didn't feel so terrible.

"I hate myself enough for the both of us."

"You really aren't fucking her?" Benedict had to ask.

Nick shook his head, "No, we kissed once, but I thought I had her firmly stashed in the friend zone. I don't know what happened tonight. I just was drawn to her. I am sorry, Benedict, I really am. I guess the charade is over. You won the car."

"I don't give a flying fuck about the car! What happens to Lia when all of those videos go viral? The press is going to know who you are."

Nick gulped. He hadn't wanted to get married it wasn't even in his ten-year plan. But he wouldn't make her face this alone, he couldn't.

“I will offer for her, of course.”

“You damn well will!” Benedict huffed, “You can begin by calling my father tonight. You have no idea what a giant ass he can be. I have no doubt that the minute he catches wind of this Lia will be back at the castle and engaged to someone twice her age. I won’t have that for her. She doesn’t deserve it.”

Lia deserved to be loved. Nick just wished that he was the man to do it. He had strong feelings for her, but love, that was something he didn’t do. It was like a foreign language that one never really quite picks up.

“Get him on the phone,” Nick said curtly.

The conversation with the king of Hazenbak was short and to the point. The yelling and cursing ended the moment that Nick informed his majesty that he would be marrying Princess Amelia as soon as possible. Arrangements were made for staff from the Royal Academy to drive down that night to take charge of the students.

Lia, Nick, and Benedict would be flying directly back to the castle the next morning via the royal plane.

“I guess I can’t hate you,” Benedict grumbled, “if you are going to be my brother in law.”

Brother-in-law, Nick could hardly fathom where life would take them next.

Chapter 15

THE THREE OF THEM SAT IN SILENCE AS THE ROYAL JET FLEW them from Everette Academy to the palace in Hazenbak.

Nick's face had turned some lovely shades of purple and his eye was completely swollen shut.

Lia's face was pale, and she hadn't once looked at Nick or Benedict.

Benedict's face was thoughtful as he regarded the two individuals that had seemed almost entranced the night before. This morning they were acting as if the other had the plague. He wasn't sure what had happened to Lia, but she suddenly seemed quite different from the little sister he was used to.

And Nick, the normal laid-back playboy kept shooting surreptitious glances toward Lia. This new nervous Nick had Benedict fighting back a smile. The night before he had been livid that Nick betrayed his trust. But that was when he figured that his best friend was yanking Lia's chain. If anything, it seemed the opposite on the plane.

She was cool and collected while Nick seemed edgy and uncertain.

Thankfully, the flight wasn't of a long duration not even quite an hour. Once the plane touched down at the royal airport the airstairs were taken down and the three of them departed the plane. The roar of the crowd was the first surprise to the trio, followed quickly by the snapping of cameras as flashes momentarily blinded them.

Benedict automatically reached for Lia to tuck her under his arm. But he was a hair too late because Nick had already surrounded her.

At the end of the airstairs, security was thick on the ground as they walked to the limousines. Reports and fans shouted out questions.

"Who was the man with Princess Amelia?

"What was their relationship?"

"What was there a fight?"

And then Lia heard, "Prince Nicholas, are you going to take Princess Amelia back to Meron?"

She stopped walking right before she was to step into the limo.

Turning to the reporter she cocked her head to the side and asked, "What did you say?"

The man seemed thrilled that out of everyone there shouting at them, the princess had chosen to speak with him. It was too bad that Nick wasn't about to allow Lia to speak with the press. Not until he spoke with her in private first.

Picking her up, clean off the ground he shoved Lia into the limo where Benedict easily caught her before she fell.

Lia struggled to right herself, fuming mad, “Why did they call you Prince Nicholas?”

Benedict’s eyes widened, “For the usual reasons, Stinky.”

“Shut the hell up, Benny,” she retorted not even looking

her brother’s way. “I find it rather strange that you are suddenly now a prince. So was this all a joke to you?” Benedict spoke again, “No, no, Lia, it was a bet.” Nick could have killed Benedict with his bare hands.

“A bet?” her voice held enough venom to kill an army.

“It’s not what you are thinking,” Nick tried to explain.

Lia turned to Benedict, “Why was Prince Nicholas at Royal Academy?”

Benedict smirked, “He lost the bet. We had a few lads at the club and the one with the fewest amount of female phone numbers had to go to the academy and watch over you.”

Anger and pricked pride spurred Lia onward, “So, let me get this straight. Prince Nicholas had to babysit me because he lost a bet?”

“It was more than that,” Benedict shrugged, “If he stayed the year then he would get my car.”

Lia swallowed what felt suspiciously like tears, “Even better, you had to bribe him to fulfill the terms of the bet.

This keeps getting better and better.”

Nick blew out a breath, “It was nothing like that. You don’t understand. I just need a chance to explain.”

She nodded slowly, “I see. Well, Prince Nicholas, since I won’t be there to babysit you are no longer required to put your life on hold.”

Nick scowled, “Would you stop calling me that? I am Nick to you, not Prince Nicholas.”

Lia ignored him, “And now that we are home I should imagine that I won’t need to see you ever again.”

Benedict frowned, “Um, no, you will be seeing quite a bit of him.”

But the conversation was stilted when the driver pulled to a stop at the palace and opened the door. Several members of the staff stood outside waiting to greet the Prince and Princess. The butler, Greeves, approached.

“His royal highness has requested that you report directly to his office.”

Lia ducked her head, “I’m not feeling well.”

Greeves almost looked pained, “I’m afraid that he insisted, Princess Amelia. He is expecting all three of you.”

Lia glanced over at Nick to see his expression but the man’s face was stoic. With a grunt and roll of her eyes that she knew was childish and did anyway. Lia started up the stairs to the second floor to the king's private office. Again silence filled the trio as they went to face the music.

A footman at the door opened it as soon as he saw them and announced the arrivals to the king.

Still, a rather handsome man in his late fifties, King Leon’s gaze snapped up at the mention of his daughter.

“Well,” his voice could have inspired icicles in hell.

“What do you have to say for yourself?”

Nick wasn't certain what he had been expecting from Lia. But the cold silence she projected back at her father wasn’t one of them. Her chin was raised and her mouth set, Lia looked ready to do battle. Nick felt a pang in his heart when he saw the way King Leon stared at his daughter without the slightest bit of affection.

The king sneered, “Nothing? I should have known. Because of this current situation Amelia I have taken pains to announce your betrothal in every major press around the world.”

Suddenly Lia came to life, “I am not betrothed to anyone! How dare you?”

The king stood, “I am your father and your king. You will do what I tell you to.”

“You can’t expect me to marry someone that I don’t love!”

Nick felt the words like a blow to his heart. It wasn’t that he was in love, he knew nothing about love. But for Lia to shout her declaration with such vehemence took him back more than a little.

“You will do as I command and for once in your life, you will not be the laughing stock of the Vincenza family!”

Nick took a step forward wrapping his arm around Lia and yanking her against him.

“Excuse me, Your Majesty, you forget yourself.”

The words were low and dangerous, his arm was like a vise against Lia.

“How dare you?” King Leon spat, but Nick was faster.

"You are speaking to the future queen of Meron. If you want to continue to have friendly commerce with our country I would suggest you think before you insult my fiance. We have much to discuss, would you please excuse us?"

The next thing Lia knew she was being escorted out of her father's private office by a truly angry and terribly bruised man.

He didn't stop until he got to the end of the hallway and realized he had no clue where to take her. As long as he and Benedict had been friends they had never gone to Hazenbak. Nick was starting to see why his best friend hadn't wanted to come home.

It infuriated him that the King could treat Lia in such a fashion. He wasn't even there last night and didn't know that Lia was completely innocent. It was Nick that kept pulling her closer, and Nick that nearly kissed her.

He resolved at once that he would do anything and everything to help Lia. Even if it meant letting her go.

Chapter 16

LIA TURNED TO LOOK AT NICK, "WHY DID YOU STOP?"

A light flush painted his cheeks, "I don't really know where I'm going."

His chagrined admission seemed to loosen something inside of Lia. Taking him by the elbow she escorted him up the stairs and past more than a dozen servants. To one of which she requested a light tea be served in the library in a quarter of an hour.

Nick noted the kind tone Lia used when speaking with the servants and his heart warmed even further. This wasn't the spoiled princess that he had once thought her to be.

When they entered the library there was a lovely fire in the far fireplace along with a sitting area. Lia went directly there sinking down into the soft cushions of the sofa.

"I'm sorry about earlier," Lia wasn't looking at Nick when she spoke. Embarrassment and frustration coated her words.

Nick sat beside her, "Lia, there is nothing for you to apologize about."

She shook her head in disagreement, "There is always something to apologize for when my father is present."

Nick wasn't quite sure how to proceed. One didn't go about disparaging the king of another nation. However, this man was a shoddy piece of work.

"Is your father," Nick paused looking for the right words. "Has he always treated you in the same manner I saw today?"

Lia shrugged, "Yes and no. For the most part, he ignores me unless something terrible or scandalous has happened —or terribly scandalous which isn't out of the question."

Nick hated seeing the defeated look on her beautiful face. Even sitting next to her on the couch he felt drawn to her. His hands itched to touch her, his mouth wanted to taste her again.

"Look, Nick," Lia turned to face him and suddenly it seemed as if they were sitting awfully close. "I know what my father said. But you don't need to marry me. We didn't do anything wrong and besides this isn't Victorian times. No one is going to call you out for a duel for ruining my honor."

Nick frowned, "I know that."

Lia continued, "I'm sure that you are by no means ready to settle down and I completely understand that."

He continued to watch her face, "I hadn't planned on getting married soon."

She swallowed and averted her gaze, "Well, that is a relief, we can just pretend all of that nonsense never happened. In fact, you are free to go. This will blow over, it always does. I'm something of a laughing stock anyway."

Letting things go would have been Nick's preference had it been anyone but Lia. However, Nick found that it wasn't at all what he wanted.

"I don't want to pretend," he scooted a fraction of an inch closer to her.

Lia stiffened, "Okay, well, it's not like we will be seeing each other so if you wish to hold a grudge?"

Nick cupped her face bringing Lia's surprised gaze to his own, "I don't want to pretend that I can't see how beautiful you are. I don't want to pretend that you aren't someone that is important to me."

It wasn't a declaration of love by any means, but to Lia is was the sweetest thing any man had ever said to her. Perhaps it was the adrenaline running through her veins from the meeting with her father. Or maybe it was simply good old-fashioned hormones. But when Nick pressed his lips to hers, she kissed him back.

He tasted of desire and adventure and everything dark and dangerous that was so enticing. He held her firmly in his muscular arms, not once giving her the opportunity to rethink things or turn back.

But rethinking things would have been the very last thing on Lia's mind. She was too focused on the softness of his lips. The way his tongue caressed hers and demanded submission. She couldn't help but notice that her breasts were tingling the tips yearning to be touched by this man.

Her stomach was filled with more than butterflies, it was a raging zoo inside and she wanted to devour him much like he was doing to her. This man, this incredible man had stood up for her in front of her father. He wasn't ashamed or embarrassed about her. When Lia was with him she could almost believe that she really was beautiful.

She edged closer and he moved his hands from her face to her hips lifting Lia onto his lap.

Something extremely hard and firm was pressed against her bottom making her squirm with excitement. Nick tried to stifle a moan, her delectable bottom against his cock was almost more than he could stand.

Lia was so innately sensual. Everything about her seemed to spur him on to want to take her, make her his. Once she was seated on his lap his hands went up to cup her perfect tits over her clothes.

Visons of Lia naked as he pounded into her fogged his brain. He wanted her naked, under him, over him, just naked in general! He could make any situation work. Nick loved the feel of her hands on his chest. Tracing the lines and muscles, driving him nearly insane.

There was a slamming of the door that brought them both back to the present.

“Really Nick?”

Lia swore under her breath causing Benedict’s brows to raise.

“Where did you learn that?”

She looked up at him in annoyance. Nick couldn’t help but stare at her pink swollen lips.

“I’m twenty-five, Benny, not twelve.”

Lia went to slide off Nick’s lap and he grabbed her hips and held her steady. The last thing he wanted was his hardon flying the flag while her brother was in the room.

“Did you need something in particular?” Nick asked waspishly, “Or do you just enjoy being a cock-block?”

Benedict made a face, “When it comes to my sister? I will always be a cock-block. However, father has arranged for a round of interviews with the local reporters and they will be here any moment to set up in the library. As much as I do enjoy being the third wheel, I didn’t want them or father to be the ones to discover you. It might make for great press, but Lia doesn’t need to be humiliated like that.”

Nick’s arousal softened at the thought of reporters. He

knew that Lia wasn’t onboard with the plan. This time when she attempted to slide off, Nick let her.

She stood and made her way over to a mirror on the desk, grimacing when she saw the way Nick had mussed her hair. With a few practiced strokes, she pulled the masses of red waves into a bun at the nape of her neck. Reaching into the drawer she pulled out an elastic.

“Your father schedules interviews without Lia’s knowledge or permission?” Nick had to ask.

In his home, his mother would never have allowed such a thing. She would have needed ample time to prepare, choose an outfit out of dozens if not hundreds. A full makeup team would be on staff and the lighting would have been checked in several areas before the queen would allow the events to take place.

The King of Hazenbak was a shitty father, that much was clear to Nick.

Benedict cleared his throat, “I can try and stall them a little if you want, Lia.”

Nick's eyes went to hers. She was truly lovely. She didn't need teams of makeup and outfits to make her more appealing. What she did need was someone that helped her to understand just how valuable she was.

Lia looked at Nick, "I'm sorry about all of this. I will clear it up in the press that we are not engaged."

Benedict's eyes widened, "Lia, I wouldn't contradict father on this. Why don't you just let the engagement stand for a little while? A broken engagement is far better than father's wrath."

"I can't do that to…"

Nick cut her off, "I agree, we should let the engagement stand. In fact as soon as we can I want to take you to Meron to meet my family. You can stay with us until things settle down here."

Lia flushed, "I don't wish to lie to your family."

Nick shrugged, "Then don't. We can trust them. Come with me Lia, this will be fun. You can see the cliffs and beaches of my country, they are incredible. You will love it there, and it is extremely far from here."

She bit her lip, "It is tempting. But what about Hank? I can't just leave him here."

Her cat was even now holed up in her bedroom. The staff at Royal Academy were all too accommodating when she asked that he be returned to her immediately.

Nick had to think long and hard about this one. But if it meant that Lia would come there really wasn't any question. "You can bring the damn cat."

TO BE CONTINUED...

Chapter 17

LIA WASN'T SURE WHAT SHE WAS EXPECTING OF MERON. Perhaps another duplicate of Hazenbak? When the plane touched down her eyes were glued to the window. The vast rolling hills and agricultural land were flanked by quaint villages. It was something out of a fairytale that Lia hadn't even known still existed in the world.

Sure, they had all of the modern amenities that were offered in this day and age. But there wasn't a billboard, flashing sign, or even a monstrous skyscraper in sight. It was literally like stepping back in time. Even the airport was small and homey.

They weren't met by a team of limousines like they had been in Hazenbak. In Meron, there was a town car brought around and Nick was given the keys to drive them.

"Welcome back, Prince Nicholas," the older gentleman gave a little bow. He turned to Lia, "And welcome to Meron, Princess Amelia, we are happy to have you here."

Lia nodded and thanked the man while Nick clapped him on the back. "It's great to see you, Sam. I hope that all is well with you and Ruby?"

"Right as rain, and she will be pleased you asked after her."

As they entered the car Lia turned to Nick with a look of surprise on her face.

"How do you know that man?"

Nick shrugged, "He's worked for Meron Air Services for as long as I can remember. Nice man, has a wife and a few grandkids studying over in the states."

Lia tried to make it a point to know the servants that she came in contact with. But she had never thought to extend herself beyond that. She sat contemplating this whole new side of Nick as he drove them through some of the most beautiful countrysides she had ever seen.

The palace was more of a castle with a drawbridge and guards at the gates. Of course, the moat was no longer filled with crocodiles as if might have been hundreds of years ago. It was filed in now with gorgeous gardens.

"Your home in incredible," Lia murmured as Nick drove the car around a massive fountain and parked in front of the entryway.

A woman in her late forties came out along with a handsome man that bore a strong resemblance to Nick. Next came two twin girls that were perhaps seven or eight.

Nick came around the car and opened the door for Lia.

"Lia, I want to introduce you to my family. My father, King Ryan, my mother, Queen Stephanie, and my evil stepsisters Kate and Kylie. Family this is Princess Amelia of

Hazenbak."

The little girls launched themselves at Nick.

The one in blue yelled out, "I am not evil, Nick! You are just a troll anyhow!"

She kissed him soundly on the cheek and he faked choking to death while she giggled with glee. The other

sister in yellow was squeezing him tightly around his waist.

"Don't go away for so long, we are so bored when you are gone!"

Nick leaned down and picked her up, "I'm sorry, Kate. I promise to stay for a while this time."

Kylie looked up at Lia, "Are you going to stay too? Because we have some rules here."

Queen Stephanie looked mortified, "That will be all girls, why don't you give your brother a moment to come

inside before pestering him?"

They grumbled good-naturedly and let him go.

Nick approached his parents, rather than the grim way Lia was met by her father, they each enfolded him in their arms.

Queen Stephanie took his face in her hands, "You look tired, are you getting enough rest?"

King Ryan scoffed, "He's fine, fit as a fiddle. Now, you must be the lovely Lia. Your brother Benedict is one of our favorite guests."

It was strange to Lia that Benedict had been here numerous times over the years but she hadn't even known Nick existed until Royal Academy.

"It's wonderful to meet you, Your Majesties," she curtseyed in her best royal manner.

But Queen Stephanie was quick to usher her up, "There is no need to stand on such formality. We are thrilled to have you here. Please just call me Stephanie and this is

Ryan."

Lia didn't quite know what to do. She would no sooner call her father something that informal than cut off her arm. But she smiled weakly and nodded.

Nick wrapped an arm around her waist, the movement noticed by both of his parents.

"I think I'm going to take Lia on a tour of the castle. What time is lunch?"

Stephanie smiled, "The same time it's been since I married your father more than twelve years ago. Lunch will be at 12:30 sharp."

Nick grinned, “We will be there.”

“It’s been lovely meeting you,” Lia called out as Nick whisked her away further into the castle.

They were a short ways off when he rubbed the back of his neck subconsciously. “Sorry about that, they can be a little boisterous.”

Lia raised a brow, “Your sisters?”

He nodded, “They really are good girls. Well, good monsters for the most part.”

Lia thought for a moment, “Queen Stephanie said she married your father twelve years ago?”

Nick turned to look at her, “Yes, she is my stepmother.

My own died of cancer when I was young.”

Lia drew in a breath, “I am so sorry, I had no idea.”

He smiled kindly down at her, “There is no reason for you to have known. And while it was a long time ago, your kindness is appreciated.”

The walked through a few salons and he showed her the ballrooms. When they got towards the back of the castle he opened some french doors into a conservatory. The rich scent of flowers wafted over them.

“This is incredible,” she breathed moving in and getting down to smell some of the roses.

“My mother, I am told was always fond of it. I thought perhaps you might want to see it.”

It touched Lia’s heart that he would want to share something so personal with her. “Thank you, for sharing it with

me. Can we walk through it?”

He nodded and showed her different plants many of which she had never heard of. It was strange to see this side of Nick. She knew the teacher and even friend aspects of his character. She knew when he was on the prowl and what he was like when he was angry. But this Nick, the quiet at home version was one that she really was starting to like.

They talked and laughed until there was a commotion up ahead. The twins came barrelling into the conservatory. “Mom’s mad,” Kate taunted, “You are SO late for lunch!” “Damn,” Nick muttered.

The girls broke into peals of laughter.

Nick flushed, “I meant, darn.”

“Mom’s going to get you!” Kylie giggled.

“We might as well face the music,” Nick turned them by the top of their heads and pointed forward. “Lead on, soldiers. We may not make it out alive, but it’s been a pleasure serving with you.”

The girls’ giggles intensified as they began to march toward the dining room. Once inside they couldn’t wait to tell on their brother.

“Nick said a curse word!” Kate’s eyes glimmered.

Ryan turned to look at Nick. With exaggerated sternness, he asked, “Is this true?”

Nick shook his head, “I don’t think so. I don’t even know who these evil stepsisters are.”

They jumped on him hollering and denying that they were evil and he took it all in good fun.

Stephanie turned to Lia, “I’m afraid that you are seeing first hand how rambunctious the girls can be. I would love to say that this isn’t usual, but I’m afraid most days are like this.”

Lia spoke honestly, “I think it’s wonderful. The girls obvious feel safe and loved. They adore Nick and seem selfconfident and assured. You have a truly marvelous family.”

Stephanie put her hand on her heart. “How kind of you to say so! Is your family quite like this? We know Benedict and he fits in like he was born to it.”

Lia felt a little sad. Her family had been nothing like this. Not only that, but Benedict had come here for years leaving her alone with her father.

The bright halo that she always had surrounding her brother was starting to slip.

“I have a charity ball coming up on Friday,” Stephanie added, noticing that Lia hadn’t answered her previous question. “Would you like to help prepare for that?”

Lia nodded, “Yes, I don’t know very much about planning balls, but I would love to help.”

Chapter 18

"DO YOU THINK SHE'S ASLEEP?"

Lia was alarmed when she heard the door to her room creak open a little after midnight. But when the intruders began to whisper to each other her fears eased.

"Duh, she's old. Of course, she's asleep."

"What?" Lia started laughing and startled the girls. "I am not that old!"

She leaned over and flipped on the lamp on the end table. "To what do I owe this impromptu visit, ladies?"

Kate had something shoved behind her back and a guilty look on her face.

Kylie smiled brightly, "Oh, nothing. We, err, got lost on the way back to our room."

"I see." Lia fought to keep a straight face.

It was at that moment that Hank decided to make his appearance. The little girls ran to him and dropped what looked like a rubber snake on the floor. Hank, seeing the offending item immediately hissed.

"Wait!" Lia called out to them as she scrambled out of bed. She raced over to the snake and verified that it was indeed of the plastic variety. Then she picked it up and hid it from Hank.

He immediately calmed and allowed Lia to pick him up.

"Come over on the bed and I will hand him to you," Lia instructed, and they raced over bouncing and giggling all the way.

Once they were somewhat calm, Lia introduced them to Hank. Setting the cat on the side of the bed they watched as he sniffed and pawed at the girls. Seeing no cause for alarm Hank eventually allowed them to pet him.

"We have always wanted a cat," Kate told Lia, "But Nick is allergic."

Lia smirked, "Yes, I know."

"Can we share him with you? I bet our mom and dad would allow us to share a cat!" Kylie asked.

Lia nodded, "While I am here you both are part petowners."

The girls grinned.

"You are much nicer than we thought you would be," Kate said candidly. "We usually don't like the girl's Nick bring around."

Lia frowned, “Does he often do that? Bring a girl home, I mean?”

Kylie laughed, “Goodness, no! Nick’s allergic to cats and marriage, he tells us that all the time.”

A deep voice cleared his throat at the doorway, “Telling all my secrets, Monsters?”

The girls bounded off the bed and into their older brother, nearly knocking him over.

“What are you doing in Lia’s room?” he asked when they had settled down a little.

The girls became silent.

Kate looked over at Lia pleadingly.

Kylie was mouthing something to her, but she didn’t have the slightest clue what it could be.

“I asked them to come,” Lia blurted out.

Nick cocked his head to the side, “You asked my wicked stepsisters to come into your room after midnight? Are you working on an evil spell with them?”

Lia’s lips twitched, “If we were, do you honestly think we would tell you?”

The girl's face’s beamed with relief. Lia had found two fast friends.

“Go to bed,” Nick admonished the girls, “And I will think about not telling mom.”

They looked horrified, “You wouldn’t!”

He shrugged, “You have ten seconds before I call out. Ten, nine, eight…”

The raced down the hallway and a door slammed faintly in the distance.

Nick turned to face her. “I’m sorry about that. They are a handful.”

Lia smiled, “I like them. They are uninhibited.”

A ghost of a smile crossed his face, “Yes, they are certainly that. Why were they here really?”

His face scrunched a little and then Nick out a loud sneeze.

Lia brushed Hank back onto the floor, “I am sorry about that.”

Nick shook his head, “No worries, I did take allergy medicine. Now, why were my sisters tormenting you?”

Lia turned and picked up the plastic snake. “Before you get angry, I just want to say that we had a lovely visit, and I don’t want them to know I showed you this. Also, I’m giving you fair warning that I will be on a secret mission with your sisters to install this in your bed at some point. I want you to give the appropriate response when you find it.”

His grin deepened, “Abject horror?”

Lia nodded, “At least!”

Nick shook his head, “You don’t have to be so nice to them.”

She blushed, “I only had an older brother that was absent a lot in the past few years. It is nice to spend time with Kate and Kylie.”

Nick moved closer to Lia and pushed a lock of wavy red hair behind her ear.

“Every time I think I have you figured out, you go and prove me wrong,” he whispered standing entirely way to close to Lia.

Her breath quickened, and she was all too aware of standing there in a tank top and pajama bottoms.

“I’m not that hard to figure out.” Lia didn’t move back as he took a step closer. His breath now brushing her face in little puffs.

“Tell me to leave, Lia,” Nick wrapped an arm around her waist and yanked her body so that it was flush with his.

Her hands landed on his hard chest and her eyes widened as she felt his straining erection against her stomach. But she didn’t move back.

Lia leaned in and met Nick’s mouth, her hands moving up and locking behind his neck. The kiss sending ribbons of desire through her body. Lia was falling for this man. She knew it just as sure as she knew that she needed to keep her emotional distance.

But when he kissed her…

When he kissed her all rational thoughts melted away as need and desire started coursing through her veins. Her

nipples tightened, begging to be touched, her pussy dampened, and she knew she was helpless to say no to him.

Maybe she just needed one night. One fantastically glorious night that would get all of this out of her senses once and for all. Nick was a good man. She cared for him, maybe even loved him a little. She knew that giving her virginity to someone would alter things.

But if they both knew it wasn’t permanent?

He slid one of his thighs between her legs and put pressure on her core. Lia gasped at the sensation and began to rock shamelessly against him.

“You are so fucking sexy,” he whispered as his lips made a train across her neck.

Lia moaned trying to keep quiet, but the sensations inside of her were blasting off and she had little control over what was happening. Nick seemed to know every button to push that would send her closer and closer to the reward she had only dreamed about.

"Nick," she panted, "Please!"

He growled and nipped at her neck, "I love when you say my name like that."

Lia moaned, "Nick, I need…"

She broke off as his lips slammed down on hers again. His fingers toying with the front of her waistband until they slipped inside.

Lia's heart rate rocketed as he traced lazy circles across her lower abdomen getting closer and closer to the place where she was soaked for him. Where she needed his touch more than she needed her next breath.

He brushed the top of her pussy and she squirmed needing relief.

"I want you so badly," he murmured against her lips.

Lia pushed on her tippy toes trying to make room for his hand between her heat and his thigh. When his fingers brushed her clit, she jolted forward rocking her hips and letting out a little cry.

He stroked her, "You are so wet, fuck, Lia!"

She thrust her hips again needing more of his touch, more of something. The ache between her thighs becoming almost unbearable.

He bit her lip, "I'm going to carry you to the bed. I need to see you."

Nick hesitated a moment when she stopped moving.

Had he gone too far?

Lia's fingers dug into his arms, "What are you waiting for? Hurry!"

Chapter 19

THE MOMENT LIA'S BACK HIT THE BED SHE WAS YANKING HER pajama pants down. Nick's eyes flared as he took in her satin panties.

"Take your shirt off!" Lia commanded as she yanked her tank top over her head, and it went sailing across the room.

Her full breasts bounced from the movement and Nick was mesmerized by the sight of Lia in her underwear and nothing else.

Down to his boxers, Lia stared hungrily at Nick as he climbed onto the bed and stalked her like a panther. He kissed her stomach and then licked the underside of her breast, first one and then the other. Her fingers sank into his shoulders urging him onward. Her skin felt like it was on fire. Her nipples straining for his touch.

Nick flicked one of the hardened peaks with his mouth and she moaned low and loud. The sound so erotic that Nick did it again just to hear it. Then he took one of her breasts in his mouth. Lia's back arched off the bed as she basked in the sensations rocketing through her.

He sucked and licked the tender point until her panties were soaked and she was begging him for release. But he only moved on to the other breast doing the same thing.

Lia hadn't known it was even possible to be this aroused. Her hands were in his hair, on his shoulders, grabbing anything she could get ahold of.

He kissed a path down her stomach, and she squealed,

"What are you doing?"

The grin he gave her was positively predatory. Nick bit the soft skin above her panty line and then licked the slight pain away.

Pushing her thighs wide, he leaned down to smell her arousal. Her panties were soaked, and he couldn't help licking along the seam of her pussy that was visible through the fabric.

Lia was panting praying to God and anyone else that was listening to not let her die before he actually tasted her. She needn't have worried because Nick wasn't about to let her go. His finger hooked into the sides of her underwear and he gently pulled it down revealing her sex with a small landing strip above it.

He hadn't figured her for someone who would ladyscape, but fuck if it wasn't the sexiest thing he had ever seen. Using his thumbs, he opened her pink glistening folds.

"Nick," Lia whimpered, wanting to thrust her hips but his hands kept her still.

With the flat part of his tongue, Nick licked her from end to end.

Lia cried out and Nick grinned.

Before remembering that they were in her room at his parent's castle.

"Shh, Baby you have to be quiet unless you want company."

Her eyes widened in horror, "Do you think they heard me?"

Nick was positive that his parents wouldn't say anything, but he didn't trust the girls.

"Just a second," he hopped up from the bed and went over and locked her door.

Hank took a swipe at his ankle, but Nick wasn't in the mood to fight with the cat. Lia was naked and spread for him on her bed. It was a sight that he wanted to be burned forever in his brain. Nick yanked his boxer briefs off and Lia gasped.

He looked down in confusion, but it was only him. Granted he couldn't remember being so aroused in the past, but that was nothing to look horrified about.

"That will never fit," she hissed.

And then it dawned on him what the alarm was about, and he laughed.

Lia started to close her legs, but Nick was faster, jumping on the bed and shoving them wide with his large hands. He licked her again and again until Lia was no longer thinking about anything but the rising passion between her thighs. Nick kissed her intimately tasting her essence, his need was more than he could have ever dreamed. She was writhing beneath him. Sexy, and innocent she was the perfect combination of a woman for him. He wanted Lia in every filthy fucking way possible.

He slid a finger into her heat. She was tight but as he teased and played with her clit the muscles began to loosen. Nick brought her to the edge several times before backing back down again. A second finger was added and he curled his fingers upward to find that spot that would send her flying.

Her thighs clenched around his head and she began to come. Her cries were muffled by something and as he looked up, he saw she was biting her arm. His face was covered in her release it had even dripped down her ass. She was so responsive, so inherently erotic, he couldn't get enough of her.

Slowly he moved up to kiss her. Lia could taste herself on his tongue and it only aroused her more. She wanted this man. She needed him to come inside of her to make her his.

Her hips lifted, again and again, searching for his heat.

He broke away, "Are you sure?"

Lia's hands found his hard ass, her fingernails digging in. "Hurry, Nick!"

He placed the head of his cock against her folds and stroked back and forward getting the tip wet and driving Lia insane. Her breasts were rosy pink from his mouth and her body was flushed with the desire that shown in her eyes.

Nick pushed a little way inside.

Lia huffed, it felt full but not uncomfortable. “More,” she demanded.

Nick was trying hard not to hurt her. He wanted this to be good for her, he needed Lia to enjoy this, want this.

He sank a little deeper and she started breathing heavier. Her pussy was squeezing him impossibly tight and he wasn’t sure how much more he could take. Her hands on his ass tightened and she rammed her hips upward, impaling herself on his cock.

“Fuck!” he bit off, “Oh my fuck!”

He knew he was supposed to go slow, but the pressure was too much. He pulled out and immediately slid back in again. Lia gasped and held him tighter. Nick took that as the green light and began to thrust into her long and deep. Her pussy felt incredible, better than he had ever imagined it would.

This is what heaven was like, Nick was sure of it. He had been with other women in his life, but this felt completely different. A part of that being because he wanted her to love this every bit as much as he did. Nick had always been a generous lover, but with Lia, it was his mission to drive her wild.

He picked up her hips, “Wrap your legs around me.”

The moment she did he thrust deeper. Grabbing her hips, he pulled her up so that her back was arched, and her breasts jutted into the air. With every thrust, they would bounce, and he raced that much closer to the edge of oblivion.

“Nick, Nick!” she repeated his name over and over, moving her hips in rhythm with his.

He looked down loving the sight of his dick disappearing inside of her. She was his.

With every thrust he was marking her, claiming her as his own.

She was close, so awfully close.

This was nothing like how she imagined making love. This was raw, animalistic, and fucking incredible.

He moved her right leg up to rest on his shoulder and thrust deep.

It was all it took to send her flying. Lia’s pussy clamped down on Nick so hard that he had no warning before he was coming. He had intended to pull out. Sure, it was a stupid plan to tempt

fate in the first place. But he had never intended on coming in Lia's room for sex. He didn't have a condom with him.

And now he was shooting his load deep inside of her. And the worst part was that Nick wasn't sad. He worried what Lia would think. But the thought of her carrying his child made him come that much harder.

Lia rode out the waves of pleasure, not once aware of the thoughts going through Nick's mind. All she could think about was the stories that people told of a terrible first time.

Well.

Well.

If Lia could have a first time with Nick every day for the rest of her life. She would die a happy woman.

Nick flipped their positions so that Lia was draped across his chest and he wasn't smashing her.

"Are you okay?" he whispered, rubbing soft circles against the silky skin of her back.

She mumbled something against his neck.

"What was that?"

Lia moved back a little, so he could hear her, "Give me a minute, I want to do that again."

TO BE CONTINUED...

Chapter 20

“SON, CAN I TALK TO YOU FOR A MOMENT?” NICK’S FATHER, the King of Meron was looking at him with a particular look that Nick didn’t quite like.

Nick paused with a fork full of eggs hovering near his mouth. “Erm, sure.”

Lia looked up from her breakfast, her cheeks pink and perhaps it was just Nick, but her lips still looked a little swollen.

“I will be right back,” he assured her and followed his father out of the breakfast room.

The king could have easily passed for Nick’s older brother. He had the same broad shoulders and handsome visage, the biggest difference lies in the lines of his face and grey in his hair.

“Is everything alright?” Nick asked when they both had taken a seat in his father’s office.

The king smiled, “I should be asking you that question. We had the most interesting tale from the twins this morning.”

Nick paled.

“Apparently there was a slumber party in Princess Amelia's room.”

Nick started coughing, whether it was on the air or his own spit he didn’t know.

The king continued, “They weren’t sure what game you were playing…”

Nick raised a hand, “Enough!”

His father’s face broke into a wide smile, “Nick, as much as I like teasing you, and you know I do. This is no place to carry on a liaison. If you and Princess Amelia are going to have sleepovers, we need to have a wedding. And move you both to the guest wing and out of earshot of the twins.”

Nick nodded, “Yes, Sir, I understand.”

“Do you care for this girl?”

“Sir?” Nick’s head popped up, color suffusing his cheeks. “Are you in love with Princess Amelia, Nick?”

Was he in love? Nick wasn’t sure. He cared about her a great deal and wanted to marry her. Wasn’t that enough?

“I don’t mean to press you son, but there is a young lady out there that is falling in love with you. I think she could be a wonderful wife and queen. But life is too long to spend

with someone you’re not in love with.”

Nick nodded, “Yes, Sir, I understand.”

The king smiled at his eldest son. “You are always trying to do the right thing, Nick. I’m proud of the man you have become. But there are times when I wonder if you haven’t learned to trust your instincts.”

“How do you know you are in love?” The question came out in a rush.

The king considered it for a long moment and then answered. “When your happiness isn’t possible without her by your side. When you care more about what she needs than what you want. When you know if you never

saw her again your heart might literally crumble up and die.”

“That sounds terrible,” Nick responded honestly.

The king laughed, “Love is terrible. It’s terrible, exciting, heartbreaking, emotional, fulfilling, and utterly worth whatever it takes to find it.”

There was a knock at the door and the king bade them enter.

Lia stood there white-faced. “The queen asked that I inform you breakfast will be out for another fifteen minutes.”

The king nodded, “Thank you, Princess Amelia, we were just speaking of you.”

Nick’s eyes flashed a warning to his father, but he needn’t have. Lia had already caught much of the conversation before she knocked. The door hadn’t been closed all the way and she hadn’t meant to eavesdrop. But to her surprise when they were speaking about love Lia froze and couldn’t move.

Nick didn’t love her.

The thought went around and around her head until she felt dizzy and knocked on the door.

“Please excuse me,” Lia ducked her head and walked briskly back towards her room.

Nick called her name, but she ignored him. He was almost by her side when the queen came out of the breakfast room.

“Oh, Lia! Just the person I wanted to see. Shall we get started on the ball preparations?”

Before Nick could steal her away Lia had accepted the queen's generous offer and they had begun to walk away. Nick had a horrible suspicion that something was wrong with Lia, but he wasn’t sure what could have happened.

When he left her at the table, she was bright and happy. The girl that just walked away from him was broken and small. His chest ached, and he wanted to go to her. Had she overheard his conversation with his father? It didn’t mean anything. He cared about her deeply.

Hell, he was probably in love with her. He certainly had never felt this way about anyone else. Nick had made up his mind to steal her away from his mother so that he could speak with Lia, explain himself.

When he approached the small salon, he heard Lia's bright laughter. His heart started beating again and he realized that he hadn't taken a deep breath since the time he saw her stricken face. Perhaps the conversation could wait. Nick didn't want to disturb them.

A male voice interrupted his thoughts, "I cannot believe that I found you here, Lia. Of all the luck the most beautiful girl in the world is in Meron of all places."

She laughed again, but this time Nick felt like a knife had slid into his gut. He bounded for the door and swung it wide. Sitting on one of the couches entirely too close to Lia was his other backstabbing best friend Luke, the Duke of Hastings.

Not only did he have an arm resting on the back of the couch, but Lia seemed to be leaning into the bastard.

"Hastings," he spat.

Luke glanced up, his eyes usually so friendly held a hint of anger, "Nick, how are you?"

Nick ignored the pleasantries, "How good of you to come, were we expecting you?"

The queen drew in a harsh breath at Nick's rudeness.

Lia if anything leaned closer to Luke.

"I was invited to the ball your mother is having. But I

received a call from Benedict asking if I could come a little early and cheek on Lia."

"You know her?" Nick's tone was incredulous.

Lia's back stiffened, "Unlike some of my brother's friends, Luke took the time to come to Hazenbak and meet Benedict's sister. We have known each other for quite some time."

Jealousy flared hot in Nick's gut, "If you knew Lia, why didn't you…"

Luke stood abruptly, "I would be careful what you reveal, Nick."

The queen sat there with wide eyes wondering just what was going on with her usually placid stepson. Lia was fuming mad. Not only did Nick not love her, but he didn't think she was good enough to be friends with Luke. There were only so many insults that a person could take.

"When will Benedict be arriving?" Lia's tone was clear that the previous subject was closed.

Luke turned back to her and sat down, "He should be here in two or three days, Poppet."

She smiled at the playful term Luke had used for her over the years. It was almost like having Benedict here and after the morning she had, Lia had felt so terribly alone.

The queen began to talk again about the ball, but it was obvious that nobody was listening. Eventually, she gave up and excused herself to go see the twins. Lia feigned a headache and staunchly refused both men's offers to escort her to her room.

The moment she was out of earshot Nick rounded on Luke.

"I find it strange that I had never heard you and Benedict's sister were on such friendly terms."

Luke raised a brow, "Is that a problem?"

"No," Nick bit off even though clearly, it was a huge problem for him.

"Look, you should have told me that you couldn't do the job at the academy," Luke chastised. "I would have gone to help Lia in a heartbeat."

"Now you say that?" Nick raged, "Because that wasn't the tune you were singing last summer. And besides, when did I

say that I didn't want to help Lia?" Luke stared at his friend.

"I came here expecting to see the same sweet-hearted girl with the crazy red curls and intelligent eyes. But you know who I saw when I arrived? A girl on the verge of tears that looks broken, Nick. If you fucking broke her, I will kill you. Do you understand me?"

Nick and Luke were standing entirely too close, both men fuming at their perceived injustices. But Luke, he saw something in Nick's eyes. Something that he couldn't let go.

"You fucked her, didn't you?" Luke drew back and punched Nick straight in the eye. "You mother fucker."

Chapter 21

LUKE SPENT THE NEXT TWO DAYS EFFECTIVELY CUTTING NICK off every time he tried to get close to Lia. The queen sensing that something was off between the two asked her husband if all was well.

“My son is finding that not everything in life is handed to him.”

Stephanie blinked, “That wasn’t very nice.”

Her husband laughed, “I don’t mean to be cruel. It is only that Nick has always come up smelling like roses no matter what happens to him. I think Princess Amelia is good for him. He is less assured than I have ever seen him. It’s good for Nick to work for something. He obviously loves the girl.”

Stephanie took a sip of her tea, “And I suppose we are to continue ignoring his black eye?”

King Ryan’s eyes lit with mirth, “Of course! He wants us to ask about it, therefore you must not.”

“Is this a man thing?” Stephanie’s lips twitched.

“It’s about becoming a man,” he leaned over and kissed his wife. “Nick will thank us for it one day.”

She kissed him back, loving the way that he still made her feel like they did when they first met.

“I don’t get it, but I won’t say anything. However, Ryan, that poor girl is walking around with a pasted on a smile and looking like at any moment she will break into tears. If Nick hasn’t figured himself out by the ball, I will be stepping in.”

Ryan smiled. “Agreed.”

“ALRIGHT STEP MONSTERS, this is the plan.”

Katie and Kylie peered at the map Nick had drawn.

“Where is the ballroom?”

Nick rolled his eyes, “Katie, it’s right there, the big circle.”

“But the ballroom is square?” Kylie responded.

“Girls forget about the shape of the room. I need you to get Luke away from Lia. Tell him you have to show him something in the ballroom.”

“What do we need to show him?” Katie chewed on the ends of her hair.

“It doesn’t matter, do a magic trick or a cartwheel.” Nick pleaded with them.

“I don’t know how to do a cartwheel, but I can do a backward rollover.” Kylie grinned at her big brother.

“Perfect!” Nick high-fived Kylie. “I saw them near the gallery, I think they are still there. Go, go, go!”

The girls giggled as they ran toward the long hallway with paintings of past kings and queens of Meron. It was there they came across Lia and Luke. She was looking at a picture of Nick when he was younger, a sad expression on her face.

“Luke!” the girls squealed his name and raced into his arms.

Luke was barely able to stay on his feet with the twins jumping and hanging on him.

“You have to come see this, Luke!”

Kylie tugged on his arm and Katie grabbed his other hand, “It’s amazing you have to come see.”

Luke turned to Lia who smiled down at the girls. “Go on,

I will be there in a moment.”

The girls dragged Luke down the hallway and into the ballroom. The moment the door was closed Nick made his move. Lia turned to view the next painting and didn’t hear him coming.

“I’ve missed you,” his breath skittered across her skin.

Lia whirled around, “Nick, how are you?”

She winced when she saw his eye, “Are you feeling better? It’s so strange that you fell and hit your eye.”

Color bloomed in his cheeks as he responded gruffly, “Yes, well it was a freak accident.”

“If you say so,” Lia tilted her head to the side. “I had better go see what Luke and the girls are up to.”

“Wait,” Nick grabbed her arm. “Lia, can I talk to you?” She nodded rubbing her arms as if to ward off a chill. “Sure.”

Nick led Lia to a side door, and they walked out into the garden. The flowers were in bloom and there was a slight breeze ruffling the leaves on the trees.

“It really is beautiful here,” Lia turned to look at Nick. She could see the lines near his mouth and hated the way his shoulders slumped.

Nick turned to her, “I need to be honest with you.” “Okay,” She tried to smile but it didn’t reach her eyes. She didn’t want him to break things off with her. Not here, and certainly not now that she was barely holding on as it was. For a moment Lia considered making up and excuse and going inside.

But Nick's grasp held firm, almost as if he expected her to run away from him.

"These last few days have been terrible. I don't like being away from you and I really don't like not being able to talk to you and hold you. I am falling in love with you. Have I

ruined everything between us?"

Lia gasped, "Say it again!"

Nick blinked, "Which part?"

"All of it!" Lia grabbed his shirt and pulled him closer to her.

"I am falling in love with you," he said huskily as he cupped her face in his hands. "Please tell me I didn't ruin everything."

"No," Lia shook her head, "You didn't ruin anything. Nick are you sure?"

"Lia, I think about you all the time. I want to know what you are doing, how you are feeling. I love everything about you. Even your damn cat, which you're a cat lover, just admit it. I want to be able to hold you, to kiss you, and to fuck you until we both can's stand. And then wake up in the morning and do it all over again."

Lia tipped up on her toes and placed her lips against his. Nick growled low in his throat and kissed her with all of the pent-up emotion that had accumulated in the last few days. He had thought she no longer cared for him. Worried that she could never forgive him. It was unfathomable to him that he could have ever questioned his love for her.

"Marry me," he whispered against her lips, "Please."

Tears gathered in Lia's eyes, "Yes, I love you, Nick."

He picked her up and whirled her around. Lia was

laughing and crying at the same time and it was just then that the side door opened to reveal Luke and the twins.

"Did it work?" Katie squealed.

Lia could hardly contain the smile on her face, "What did you girls do?"

"We were the distraction!" Kylie beamed.

Luke shook his head, "And they did a fine job of it." "Did she say yes?" Katie prodded.

"Does she like the ring?" Kylie added.

Nick bent down on one knee and the girls started jumping up and down. Lia hardly paid them any attention as she listened to what Nick was saying.

“Princess Amelia, will you please do me the honor of being my wife, and future queen of Meron?”

Lia nodded, “Yes, always yes.”

Nick pulled the ring out of his pocket, “This is a family ring, I didn’t want any other ring on your finger.”

It was old and ornately carved with a large pink diamond in the center.

“It’s gorgeous!”

He slipped it on her finger and the girls ran over to see. Nick met Luke’s eyes half expecting another punch to be headed his way. But his old friend was smiling as he bent to kiss Lia’s check and offer her congratulations.

The door opened again, and King Ryan and Queen Stephanie came out into the garden followed by a tall muscular man with dark auburn hair.

“Benedict!” Lia flashed her ring at him, “I am getting married!”

Benedict raised a brow, “I thought we had that sorted back in Hazenbak.”

Nick rolled his eyes pulling Lia into him once again, “That was before she knew how much I loved her.”

Queen Stephanie covered her mouth, eyes shining with pride.

King Ryan clapped Nick on the shoulder, “Well done, son.”

Benedict looked more closely at Nick, “What happened to your eye?”

Chapter 22

LIA HELD AS STILL AS POSSIBLE WHILE THE MAID STYLED HER hair into a cascade of perfect ringlets. The dress she had chosen to wear was a deep oxblood color. Her fair skin was the perfect contrast to her deep red hair and the dress.

The bodice was fitted with elaborate beading and then flared out at the waist. Sleeveless, the dress showed Lia's beautiful shoulders and arms to perfection. With her long black gloves, she was a vision of loveliness.

"My dear, you are stunning!"

Lia caught Queen Stephanie's eye in the mirror and smiled shyly. "Thank you, and you look beautiful tonight,

Queen Stephanie."

"Just Stephanie, dear, we are going to be family soon." Lia nodded.

"I just wanted to see if you would like to wear this ruby necklace. It would be incredible with your dress."

Lia looked at the gorgeously cut stones in awe. "I couldn't!"

And then with a sigh, she looked over at the jewels she had planned on wearing. Her father had never lavished jewels on Lia.

"You will," Stephanie insisted.

The maid moved out of the way for the queen to place the necklace around Lia's throat. It was the perfect length and looked like it was made for her dress.

Lia lifted a hand admiring how beautiful it looked.

"Thank you, so very much!"

"Thank you, Lia. My stepson has never been happier and we have you to thank for that."

Lia reached out her hand and Stephanie took it with a comforting squeeze.

By the time Lia was completely ready her nerves had settled a bit. Hank had come out from under the bed to eye her critically.

"Well? Will I do?" Lia asked the finicky cat.

Hank tilted his head to the side as if considering and Lia laughed. It was then that the door to her room opened and Nick stepped inside. He froze the moment he saw her. This was another one of those times that would be frozen in his mind for always. He would remember the sparkle

in her eyes, the faint blush on her cheeks, and the way her breasts rose and fell with every inhalation.

"You are stunning," his words came out as more of a growl, and he certainly felt primitive towards her.

Lia smiled wide, "You are looking particularly handsome this evening."

He glanced down at his tuxedo that fit like a glove. "This old thing?"

She laughed.

"Thank you for wearing my gift," he murmured when he got close enough to kiss her neck just above the rubies.

"Gift?"

"I will admit that I asked Stephanie to bring them because I was worried you wouldn't accept them from me. But they are yours, and there are many more. My grandmother and mother's jewelry collections were left to me for my wife."

Lia felt overwhelmed, "But what if I lose something or break it?"

He caught her to him, "They are only things Lia, nothing is more important than you are."

Leaning down he softly kissed her lips so as not to disturb her lipstick.

They made their way down the stairs and were announced together as they made their way into the dining room. It was there that they met Luke and Benedict. The three friends together were hilarious and kept Lia laughing all through the meal. It was a lighthearted fun something that Lia had experienced far too few of.

After supper, it was time for the ball to begin. Lia and Nick were stationed in the receiving line where he introduced her as his fiance. There was more than one young lady that stared daggers at Lia. But she held her own and didn't back down for a single second.

When it was time for the first dance, a waltz, Lia and Nick glided across the floor in perfect harmony. Nothing could have possibly ruined their night, or so they thought. From the corner of her eye, Lia saw Benedict and Luke arguing.

"What is going on over there?"

Nick turned to see and immediately frowned, "I don't know. But look there is Melinda grinning like the cat who ate the canary."

Lia tugged Nick from the dance floor, smiling politely when they were greeted by one dignitary or another. As they got closer Benedict shoved Luke's chest and then turned and left the ballroom. Luke looked ready to follow him when Lia touched his sleeve.

"Can I have a word with you?"

Luke's expression softened, "Of course."

"Let's go to the library where it will be easier to hear," Nick suggested.

Lia nodded, "And less visible."

The three of them exited the ballroom and made their way to the library in relative silence. But as soon as they entered the library Lia couldn't hold back.

"What was that all about?"

Luke sighed running his hand through his hair, "Honestly, it's been a long time coming. I'm sure that Nick has figured it out."

Nick raised a brow. He had his suspicions but wasn't about to voice them.

"Lia, I have been in love with Melinda for a very long time."

She sucked in a breath, "Benedict's Melinda?"

He let out a harsh sound, "But she isn't Benedict's Melinda. She didn't love him and he certainly doesn't love her. He told me so himself. I don't know why he has to be so bloody stubborn about everything."

"What did Benedict say to you?" Nick replied.

"Only that she was using me to get back at him and that she didn't really love me. What kind of a prick just can't be happy for us?"

Lia gave Nick an uneasy glance.

Luke continued, "Melinda has had feelings for me the whole time but she didn't think that I reciprocated them. But I do, I always have. And now, this is our chance at happi-

ness. He's one of my best friends, why can't he just be happy for me? It's not like he wants her!"

Lia knew that she needed to be careful of what she said. The smirk that Melinda had on her face certainly wasn't an indicator that she was upset her new found love was arguing with her old boyfriend. It seemed far more evident that Benedict had been right.

"I wish you every happiness with Melinda," Lia said finally. "I will talk to Benedict, where is he?" Luke shrugged.

Nick drew her against his chest, "I will speak to Luke for a while if you wish to talk to Benedict alone."

Lia nodded and lifted her face for an all too brief kiss before she left the library in search of her brother.

"Do you think I am a fool?" Luke asked Nick.

“No,” Nick replied taking a seat opposite Luke again now that Lia was gone. “I knew you had feelings for her.”

“And she loves me in return,” Luke said earnestly. “Why can’t Benedict see that?”

Nick smiled faintly, “Let Lia speak with him. If anyone is capable of calming him down it is her. But Luke, I can’t promise that your relationship with Benedict will ever be the same.”

Luke scowled, “What is that supposed to mean?”

Nick shrugged, “Only that there are bad feelings between the two of them. In time, it might fade or it may not. Melinda is known for carrying a grudge. I'm not saying anything bad about her so stop balling up your fists. I already carry a reminder of the last time you felt there was an injustice.”

He pointed to his eye which had faded to a nice yellowish green.

Luke’s lips twitched, “You did deserve it you know.”

Nick laughed, “I am positive you think so. And perhaps I did. But I love her. And if you feel anything as strong for Melinda as I do for Lia, I have to say, I understand.”

"Am a fool as Benedict said? Do you think she is just using me?"

Nick was silent for a long moment, "Honestly?"

Luke gritted his teeth, "Yes."

"I don't know," Nick said softly. "I haven't spent enough time with the two of you together to know how she feels about you. I only know that she threatened Benedict that he would be sorry. It doesn't surprise me that he sees this as an act of aggression on her part to ruin your friendship. But that could be completely beside the point. I just don't know."

"She loves me, Nick. Just wait and see."

Chapter 23

LIA KNOCKED GENTLY ON BENEDICT'S DOOR AND THEN LET herself in. He was in the middle of throwing things inside of a suitcase when he looked up and saw her. Some of the frustration faded from his eyes as he looked at her.

"Hey, Lia."

"I heard about Luke and Melinda."

Benedict felt his temper flare again, "He's being stupid. She only wants to get back at me. Why doesn't he see that? I hate that she has the ability to hurt him like this. And he thinks I am jealous. Ha! I wouldn't want to get back with the viper for all the money in the world."

Lia closed the door behind her. "You aren't even the slightest bit jealous?"

Benedict scowled, "No, I'm not. Lia, I knew that Melinda and I weren't a good fit. But you know how father is. He decried it and so that is how it was to be. She never loved me, hell, I don't think she even liked me. Melinda wants the crown."

"Then why is she pursuing Luke?" Lia took a few steps into the room and sank down on one of the soft chairs near the bed.

"She thinks I'm going to get jealous and fight for her. Lia, the only person I want to fight for is Luke and he is too damn stubborn to see the massive mistakes he is making. I tried, I really did. But if he wants to crash and burn on this one, maybe that is a lesson he will need to live through."

"And so what happens to you?"

Benedict eyed his little sister. It was hard to reconcile the beautiful woman with the gawky teenager that he called Stinky. She had grown up on him when his back was turned.

"I'm not sure," he said honestly, "I don't want to go back to Hazenbak and listen to father rant and rave about how I'm ruining the future of our country. And I have no desire to watch Luke and Melinda implode."

Lia nodded, "Maybe you need a vacation?"

He laughed, but the sound didn't hold any humor. "We are royalty, we don't get vacations."

"What if you went somewhere that nobody knew your name?"

"Where is that?" Benedict scoffed, "Timbuktu?"

A brief smile crossed her lips, "Or America? Wasn't there a cabin in Kentucky or Louisianna that Nanna left us?"

“Tennesse,” Benedict rubbed his hand against the back of his neck, contemplating the idea. Could he really just up and leave it all? He had been to the cabin before it was just outside of Pigeon Forge at the base of the Smokie Mountains. Benedict had been once as a child, but that was an awfully long time ago.

“You could go there and get your barrings back,” Lia prodded, “I know you aren’t happy and haven’t been for a while. Maybe you need to get away from all the servants and

responsibilities and just remind yourself of what makes you happy.”

Benedict walked over to the chair opposite of Lia’s.

“When did you get so smart, Stinky?”

Her lips twitched, “When you were busy with Melinda.”

He scowled and then gave her a reluctant smile, “You never really liked her did you?”

Lia made a face, “Lord, no. She was condescending and rude to me at every turn.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” the regret was clear in his reproach.

“I don’t know that I felt I deserved any better,” she answered honestly.

Benedict looked about to protest when she stopped him.

“Listen, Benny, you were a great brother. But father has always been cold and cruel to me. When you were around he was a little better, but not much. And then as we got older you were gone more and more and I was the only one there to belittle and threaten. For me, it was almost all that I knew. People always assumed that I lived a charmed life because I was a princess. But I never felt like I was a princess. I was a disappointment, a mistake, the reason mom died, the bane of his existence.”

“Lia,”Benedict's broken voice interrupted her, “That isn’t true. You are none of those things.”

She took his larger hands into her own. “I know that now. Father is nothing more than a bully preying on those that were weaker than him. I’m through being weak, Benny.

I won’t be his punching bag any longer.”

“I should have been there for you,” Benedict shook his head, “How do you not hate me?”

“I could never hate you! I wasn’t your responsibility and besides, you did protect me when you were there. I have learned that I need to protect myself. It’s been a long road.”

“And Nick, he is a part of this?”

Lia nodded, “Very much so. I love him so much, Benny.”

Benedict leaned forward and kissed his sister’s forehead, “I know you do. I can see it in your eyes.”

She smiled at him and he raised a brow, "Are you going to tell me how he got that black eye? I don't believe for a second it was an accident. I saw Luke's bruised knuckles." Lia smirked, "Well, let me tell you…"

IT WAS another thirty minutes before Lia was able to leave and find Nick.

"Is everything alright?" he said right before he kissed her.

She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him back.

Nick wondered for a moment if he could just sneak her to a little alcove and have his way with her.

"Come," she whispered against his lips and dragged him back into the library.

Nick locked the door and then pushed her against it kissing her again, this time deep drugging kisses that Lia was helpless against. She wanted him, all of him.

Her hands fumbled with the fastenings of his tuxedo and she felt the breeze on her skin as he lifted her skirt. His mouth was everywhere, sucking the delicate hollow of her throat, giving her open-mouthed kisses on her neck and bare shoulders.

When his fingers reached her panties he didn't hesitate to slip them underneath the elastic and feel just how aroused she was for him.

Nick groaned as he felt her desire coating her pussy.

Lia had finally been able to get his pants undone and her hands wrapped around his massive length.

He picked her up and carried Lia over to the couch. Nick shoved his pants and underwear down his thighs and then carefully helped her remove her panties. She was still in her glorious dress and those amazing heels as she climbed onto his lap.

Her wet heat met his massive cock and she moaned as they rubbed together in erotic delicacy.

Lia couldn't wait, didn't want to have another moment without him inside of her. She sank down on his cock and gasped as his girth stretched her wide.

"Fuck, Lia, you are so tight!"

Lia sank further until he was nearly splitting her in two.

"I love you," she whispered, again and again, spurring him on so that Nick couldn't help thrusting his hips.

Lia rose up and sank down, fucking herself on his length until they were both crazy with need and lust. His hands slipped underneath the front of her bodice and teased the tender tips of her nipples. Lia kissed him hard tasting his essence and wanting to drink up every aspect of Nick. He was her light and her life and she couldn't imagine going on without him.

Nick encouraged Lia to grind her hips against his length. Her clit throbbing with every pass until suddenly she couldn't take it any longer. Her body began to convulse as her orgasm shattered every semblance of normalcy and she was lost to the passion raging through her body.

Nick's cock began to spurt his seed deep inside of her, his eyes rolled back and he fought to keep hold of her as he came hard.

As the struggled to find their breath and the last twinges of their release were rattling through them Nick laughed.

Lia was too tired to lift her head from his shoulder, but he felt her smile against his neck.

"I want to marry you, have babies with you, and never be apart. I'm just so fucking happy."

Lia's smile widened and she lifted her head to rest her's on his forehead.

"I want to marry you, have babies with you, and never be apart." She repeated and the words washed over him like a marriage vow.

"I don't think I can wait a long time to be wed," he said hoarsely.

Lia nodded slowly, "Then we had best get planning, hadn't we?"

Chapter 24

FLASH BACK: A LITTLE OVER TWO YEARS AGO.

"That one!" Nick yelled out to his friend Benedict, pointing to a leggy blonde with balloon sized breasts.

Benedict could barely hear his best friend over the thumping base at the club, but Nick's intent was clear. He was issuing a challenge. One that Benedict had no intention of missing. Throwing back his drink he stood and made his way through the writhing bodies.

The blonde's dress ended just below her ass cheeks and Benedict couldn't help but wonder if she was thong girl or commando all the way. In order to win the bet, he would have to know before he returned to his friends.

Nicholas Hamilton Roberto Leham, heir to the throne of Meron, and Lucas Renard, the Duke of Hastings had been friends with Benedict since graduate school. The three of them were each titled in their own countries, rich, and undeniably bored.

Benedict had a faint pang of guilt when the blonde smiled up at him, eyes sparkling with invitation. It wasn't a secret that he was in an on again off again relationship with Melinda a Duchess in her own right. His father fully expected him to marry her one day.

The only problem was that Benedict was fairly certain that Melinda didn't love him. And he certainly didn't love her. They had always been very understanding of each other's indiscretions, sowing wild oats and all that.

But somewhere, somehow, Benedict knew that there had to be something more to life than this. It was one pretty face after another, a never-ending parade of perfects tits and ass. It just felt

—empty.

The blonde frowned at him and he realized he had just been staring. With a cocky grin, Benedict moved to whisper something inane in her ear and like clockwork, she laughed, most likely not even hearing what he said.

She moved her body closer to his and began to dance. There were so many people that one could easily rub up on someone close to them and blame the logistics for the accidental bump and grind. It struck Benedict that he could care less if this girl had panties on or not.

None of this was real.

"Excuse me," he smiled kindly and began to move away.

The blonde shrugged and went back to dancing near her friends. But Benedict felt changed because for the briefest of moments he wondered if she was someone's daughter someone's sister. And that made him think of ol' Stinky Face who he loved more than life.

His younger sister Amelia had gotten herself into a shitload of trouble. Benedict couldn't help but shake his head, Lia was always getting into trouble. But this time there was footage on the internet, thank the Lord he never saw it. Benedict shuddered at the thought of his baby sister dancing topless at a pub. Lia had never been good at holding her drink.

Benedict frowned thinking of the punishment that their

father had thrust upon Lia. She was to go teach manners and deportment at the Royal Academy. It was only the most prestigious school of all for children of Royalty. A home away from home for every spoiled, manipulative monarch in the making.

Benedict had reigned like a king when he was there. Not only was Royal Academy on Hazenbak lands, the country that Benedict would one day be king of. But he was handsome and selfassured, the other students adored him.

His sister Lia hadn't fared as well. She was a quirky little thing, all awkward elbows, and masses of red curly hair. Think Merida in Brave... and then times that by two and you would get Lia's hair. She always liked to march to the beat of her own drummer. Lia wore loud, often obnoxious clothes that drove their father insane.

Benedict had tried to tell her once that the best way to handle father was to play his little games. But Lia wasn't built like that. She didn't have the poise and confidence that one would expect a princess to have. He wasn't sure if it was because their mother died young or because their father wasn't very attentive.

Only his baby sister was like a sheep before the wolves. No, he couldn't allow her to go back to Royal Academy by herself. It had been bad enough when she was a student there and they had tried to eat her alive.

He wondered for the briefest of moments if he might be able to go and protect her. But Benedict shook off the idea, Lia wouldn't allow it for one. And for another, their father would think he was interfering, which he was.

He needed to go covertly in and convince someone he trusted to go in his place. By the time he made it back to Nick and Luke who were tipping another one back, he had a plan. Screaming over the music, Benedict explained to them what he was asking of them.

It was rather simple really. The person with the least amount

of phone numbers at the end of the night would draw the short straw. There weren't any rules except that whoever went to Royal Academy with Lia had to be sworn to secrecy. Luke and Nick were just drunk enough to jump on the bandwagon.

And that's when the fun began.

Benedict cleaned house. He was a man on a mission and charmed the panties literally off every girl he met. He might have also planted a small herpes rumor about Nick—honestly, no rules meant no rules.

At the end of the night, Benedict had four unusual color lipsticks on his face and shirt collar along with a pocketful of napkins with phone numbers on them. Luke had given his share to Benedict when a call came in that he couldn't ignore.

Benedict made a mental note to thank the bastard when he next saw them.

Nick stumbled out of the club alongside Benedict as they piled into the waiting limousine.

"I don't understand it?" Nick clutched his hair, "It was like they thought I carried a disease!"

Benedict coughed, "No! Why would they think that?"

Nick frowned, he shook his head but it wasn't the best idea considering how much he had drunk. The inside of the car spun and Nick had to clutch the door to steady himself.

"Sorry, Mate, but you lost." Benedict didn't sound the least bit sorry. "Take care of my sister, will you?"

Nick grumbled something about sisters being evil or some such nonsense and then he laid his head back against the leather seat.

"What is your sister like?"

"Stinky Face?" Benedict thought for a moment, in truth he hadn't spent as much time with her in recent years. "She's quiet, shy, wears crazy clothes, and gets into trouble." Nick groaned.

"Be good to her, Nick!" Benedict warned.

"I will be the best bodyguard slash ninja prince you have ever seen or not seen since you know," he waggled his eyebrows

—ninja."

Benedict laughed, "How much did you have to drink?"

Nick blinked, "Dunno, not nearly enough because I still remember that I lost the bet."

"Don't be so sad about it, Nick. For all you know I could be doing you a favor."

Nick choked on his laughter, "F-favor? Only you, Benedict, could somehow wrangle an entire club to go against me, trick me into losing a bet that steals a year of my life, and then try and serve it off as if you are doing something kind for me."

Benedict grinned, "I suppose it's too early to say you're welcome?"

Nick shook his head, "You really are something else. I tell you what, I will do this for you. But you owe me one, and one day I am going to come collect on it."

Benedict was more than happy to owe his buddy a favor. After all, he lived a charmed life. His father ran the country and now Nick was going to take care of Lia. Benedict had all of his worries taken care of.

Well, besides Melinda, but he was going to do the right thing and break things off with her. Sicking his hand out he clasped

Nick, "I give you my word. You ever need anything, I will do it."

Nick smiled, "Done."

Chapter 25

"EXPLAIN TO ME AGAIN WHY WE ARE PACKING TO GO TO America?"

Lia glanced over at Nick who was now sitting on her bed.

"Because he is running away from home and we are helping him."

Nick snorted, "He is a grown man, Lia, nearly thirty years old. And he owes me a favor, not the other way around."

"I realize that." She snatched the lacy panties that he had picked up from the suitcase and began to examine. "But he asked if we would like to go along. He looked so sad, I couldn't say no. You wouldn't either. Besides, you go me, so I would say he paid you back in full."

Nick rolled his eyes, but grabbed her kissed her hard before starting to help pack. "Why Tenessee?"

"We have a cabin in the Smokies, it's outside of a tourist town named Pigeon Forge. Father never even remembers it's existence because it came to us through our grandmother on my mother's side. It's the perfect place for him to regroup and then we can go on to New York and do some bridal shopping."

Nick growled and pulled her against her chest, "I like the sound of that."

Lia rubbed her bottom against him.

"You are also a tease," he nipped at her neck and she giggled breaking away from him.

"Come on, we need to get finished before it's time to leave."

There was a knock on the door before it was immediately opened and two very sad little girls came into Lia's room.

"You just got here," Katie complained as she walked into the room and tossed herself dramatically on the floor.

"It's going to be so boring when you leave," Kylie moped as she flopped down beside Katie.

Lia brow furrowed, "We won't be gone long, I promise you that."

Nick went over and pretended to step on their bellies making the girls laugh.

"Just think of all the evil plots you can concoct while we are away!"

Lia smiled, "And perhaps you can think about what you might want to wear for the wedding."

Katie frowned, "Do we have to be flower girls because only babies are flower girls?"

Lia blinked, “I don’t see any reason why you cannot be bridesmaids.”

The girls raced up off the floor and wrapped their arms around Lia.

“You are going to be the best sister!” Kylie declared.

“The best big sister,” Katie corrected.

Lia hugged the girls close, it hadn’t occurred to her that she would be earning two new sisters. Having only grown up with Benedict, she didn’t know what sisterhood was all about. But if the warm feeling in her chest was any indication, Lia was going to like it.

Benedict stood at the open doorway, “Hey, that’s my sister, you can’t have her!”

The girls squealed and ran over to him leaving Lia free for Nick to wrap an arm around her waist.

Benedict looked up at the two of them, “Are you ready,

Stinky?”

“She’s not stinky!” Katie giggled.

Benedict leaned down to whisper in her ear, “She is the stinkiest sister I have ever had.”

Lia picked up a pillow from off the bed and tossed it at Benedict. “I am the only sister you have ever had.”

Benedict grinned, “Well, then it goes to show that I was right.”

Lia rolled her eyes dramatically before winking at the girls. They dissolved into giggles.

Nick closed the latches on Lia’s suitcase, “We are ready, my things are already loaded into the car.”

THE FLIGHT WAS A LONG ONE, thank heavens they were flying private and were able to sleep a little bit. By the time they arrived at the Gatlinburg/Pigeon Forge airport they were tired and a little sick of each other.

“I didn’t seem as busy when we were younger,” Lia wrinkled her nose as they drove through the town where minigolf and go-cart tracks seemed to litter every corner.

“Do you really expect to not be recognized here?” Nick’s tone was skeptical.

Benedict shook his head, “The cabin is in a remote location. As far as I know, there is only one other cabin within a mile of it. And I already arranged for the cleaners to go out this morning and freshen things up. They should have stocked the pantry as well.”

They drove the rented four-wheel drive up the canyon and away from all of the tourists. It was amazing to see the Smokey Mountains in all their beauty. The wildlife was abundant, they saw several foxes and even what looked like a moose.

The snow began to accumulate as they drove deeper into the forest. GPS only worked for so long before they needed to resort to other methods. The map helped them stay on course but driving was a bit treacherous at times.

Finally, they saw the flickering lights in the distance and knew that we were close. It was at that moment when the SUV began to slip, even in four-wheel drive. The roads were snow covered and it looked like they wouldn't be able to pull it out of the slide, but eventually, they did.

By the time they pulled up to the cabin everyone was on edge. The storm had become something of a white-out and they struggled to get their luggage from the car to the front door.

Benedict went to unlock the cabin and found that the front door was left open. With a wary feeling, he opened the door and called out.

"Is anyone here?"

A pretty dark-haired girl was lighting another lamp when she suddenly whirled around.

"Gracious! You scared the tar out of me!"

Benedict was transfixed. He started at the curvy woman who was standing there in black yoga pants and a sweatshirt that read, 'Maids for Hire.'

Lia shoved Benedict into the room, tired of standing out in the cold and Nick soon followed.

"Are you the maid?" Benedict asked and then immediately felt like an ass. He could read.

Her brows rose, "Not from 'round here are you? That is quite an accent. Are you English?"

Nick took a step forward to introduce himself, but Benedict was faster.

"Erm, we are from across the pond. I'm Ben, this is my mate Nick and my sister Lia."

'Ben?' Lia mouthed to Nick who shrugged helplessly.

The girl blushed, "It's nice to meet Y'all. I'm Sally Leanne but most folks just call me Sally. I was just finishing up the place when the power went out. I started a fire in the stove and lit your lanterns, but I'm afraid because of the storm you may not have electricity for a few days."

"The stove?" Lia asked faintly.

Sally motioned over to the fireplace where a roaring fire was happily blazing. "I lit the main fireplaces and then the pot belly stove in the kitchen just in case you wanted to cook anything. Do you know how to use a kerosine lamp?" "A what?" Lia croaked.

Sally smiled kindly, "You folks really aren't from the Smokies. It's just a lamp run on kerosene."

Nick looked pale, "Would you show us how to use that before you go, Sally?"

"Go?" Benedict frowned, "You can't leave in a storm like this."

Sally's smile broadened, "I have the snowmobile out back, shouldn't have any trouble getting back to my place.

They called me to come out here because I was the closest to such a remote location."

"How far is your place?" Lia asked as she took off her coat and hung it near the door.

The fire was providing a nice haven against the early winter chill.

"About a mile as the crow flies," Sally answered. "I stocked your larder as best I could on such short notice. I can bring more supplies when the storm lets up."

"I don't want you traveling in that storm," Benedict was staring out the window. It was hard to make out even the car from the cabin.

"Oh, I will be fine!" Sally insisted.

A large crack sounded in the distance.

"Oh, shit," Sally breathed.

"What was that?" Lia asked moving into Nick's arms.

"It was either a tree coming down or it could be an avalanche."

Benedict steadied himself on the wall, "Did you say

Avalanche?"

Sally nodded, "Well, yeah, it's where the snow slides…" "I know what an avalanche is," Benedict bit off.

"Maybe I will stay and wait out the storm," Sally bit her lip. "I'm sorry to be a bother."

"Nonsense," Lia smiled at the girl, "Why don't we sit down and get warm? I would love to learn how to use that lamp."

Sally nodded, "Sure, what is it Y'all do?"

Lia went to open her mouth when Benedict jumped in again, "We are educators." Lia gaped at him.

That was a bald face lie. Sure, she and Nick had worked

at the Royal Academy, but Benedict had never taught anyone anything in his life.

Sally smiled, "Education is a proud and noble profession. Y'all are so fancy I almost thought I was in the midst of royalty.

Nick choked on a cough, "Nope, just regular old teachers here."

Chapter 26

NICK WRAPPED HIS ARMS AROUND LIA THE MOMENT THEY GOT inside the bedroom they were to share. The small lamp cast a romantic glow in the chilled room.

“What is Benedict doing?” Nick asked in-between placing kisses on her upturned face.

Lia laughed, “We talked about going somewhere that nobody would recognize him. But as for the lie, I’m more than certain Sally is on to it. She is sweet to play along.”

Nick smiled, “Why do you say that?”

“First, Sally works for the company that cleans the cabin so she is bound to have knowledge about who owns the place. Second, she is young and I am certain in possession of a computer and a television.”

Nick cupped her tight ass in his hands, “He’s making an ass of himself.”

Lia gasped running her hands up and around his neck, “He doesn’t really know how to be one of the common people. But Sally seems kind and I can’t imagine that she will be upset about it.”

“How long are we to stay here?” Nick nipped at her lips.

Lia’s breath caught, and she raised on her toes to kiss him. Opening her mouth she melted into Nick as he deepened the kiss.

“It’s cold as fuck in here,” he murmured against her lips.

Lia smiled, “You had better do something to warm it up.”

In a flurry of movement, they both divested themselves of their clothes and then raced under the thick covers. Nick lost no time gathering Lia against him only this time when they naked flesh met it wasn’t because of the cold.

Nick laid Lia back and sucked on her tender nipple, circling it, and then pulling it deep into his mouth. She writhed under him, hands in his hair and on his skin. He moved to the other breast and when she didn’t think she could stand a moment more he started kissing a trail down her stomach. Licking and nipping at her skin until he was able to part her thighs and swipe his tongue against her wet folds.

Lia’s hips arched as she begged him for more, faster.

Nick used his fingers to sink inside of her, loving the way that she soaked his hands. Her passion was pure and beautiful, with nothing held back.

When her orgasm swept through her, Nick was there to lick and kiss her until every last drop of desire was captured on his tongue. Then flipped their positions so that Lia could ride his cock.

She sank down on him slowly still needing time to get used to his size.

“Fuck, Nick, this feels…” she moaned in appreciation.

His hands went to her breasts and began to mold them, pulling on her nipples and circling the tight peaks.

She started out slowly, but soon she was grinding on him. Her body frantic for another release, and his cock felt so fucking amazing inside of her.

His hands moved to her hips so that he could help increase the pressure by thrusting upward.

“Lia, shit, Lia, I love you, so much.”

The words combined with his upward thrust proved to be just what she needed to shatter above him. Her body contracting and the waves of pleasure and bliss washed over every inch of her body.

Nick hadn’t a chance, once her orgasm swept through her, he came and he came hard.

It took them more than a moment to regain their senses and when they did Lia noticed that all the blankets had been tossed to the floor.

“I suppose that’s one way to keep warm,” Nick growled and grabbed her again for round two.

“OH, YESSSSS! HARDER, NICK!”

“Baby, you are so tight, fuuuuuck!”

Sally looked over at Prince Benedick of Hazenbak and wondered what kind of rabbit hole she had stumbled into. Not only was he fucking amazing in person, obviously the media was nothing compared to the real thing, but he was blushing like a school girl.

“They are very enthusiastic,” she fought to keep a straight face as his flush deepened.

“Newly engaged,” he bit out. “I’m trying to remember that she is an adult and not my little sister.”

“Ben, maybe we could talk about something else? Take your mind off the goings on in there?”

He looked at her like she was his savior and Sally couldn’t help but feel a swelling of pride in her chest.

She had taken over her granny’s business ‘Maids for Hire’ about three years back. Usually, Sally was in charge of the accounting and marketing end of things while her granny hired the maids.

But when this last minute request came in from overseas Sally knew that she needed to make sure that everything was perfect.

Not only was their inclement weather in the forecast, but this wasn't just a celebrity guest. This is was granny's claim to fame, the royal family of Hazenbak. Sally's home wasn't far from here and she had been the one to check up on the property monthly to ensure that everything was as it ought to be. It was strange coming out today and removing all of the covers and dressing the beds. For the first time in Sally's memory, it actually felt cozy and not like a huge empty tomb.

Sally didn't understand why rich people kept places like this if they were never going to use them. But then, she had never been a rich socialite or famous, so what did she know about how they lived?

"What would you like to talk about?" she smiled at the handsome man.

Benedict looked up in panic.

He really was the worst liar that she had ever met. The devil inside of her knew that she wanted to prod further. "Tell me about teaching," she suggested.

The man choked on thin air, "Teaching?"

Sally nodded, "What subjects do you teach? What are your student's like?"

"Younger," he croaked, "the students that… they are younger. What I teach—I teach, Maths?"

She wondered if he knew it came out as more of a question.

"It is simply Math in Tennessee, not sure where the 's' escaped to."

He blinked at her, not understanding.

"It was a joke," her smile nearly blinding him.

"Oh, yes, of course," he rubbed the back of his neck, clearly sweating.

"Who is your favorite student?"

Benedict stared at Sally for the longest time. He was so far in over his fucking head that he couldn't breathe. He didn't know shit about teaching or students and tried to remember what Lia had said to him. What made things even more difficult was the way she would smile at him, all encouraging, it was damned distracting.

"A girl, um, Mia, yes her name is Mia," Benedict was absolutely proud of himself.

Sally covered her mouth for a moment with her fingers,

"How interesting that her name is so close to your sister,

Lia's?"

Shit.

Damn.

Fuck.

“Yes,” he said weakly, “One of the things that really stood out to me.”

Sally figured that she had tortured him enough for one night.

“Would you like me to fix a bed for you on the couch or in front of the fire? I’m sorry the fireplace isn’t lit in the master bedroom. But if you give me a moment I could get it going.”

Benedict placed a hand on her arm to stop Sally from getting up.

“No, you have done enough. I can build a fire.”

Sally nodded, “Let me show you where the kindling is.”

Benedict followed her up the stairs and into the master bedroom. The potbelly stove downstairs had a tough time heating all of the space in the cabin and it was rather cold.

Blowing on her hands Sally showed Benedict where the logs were and some kindling with matches. When she turned to leave he stopped her again.

“Where are you going to sleep?”

Sally shrugged, “I can fix a space on the couch, don’t worry about me.”

Benedict knew that the bedrooms without fireplaces would be too cold for her. The main floor bedroom was already taken up by Lia and Nick.

“I will sleep on the couch,” he decided, “the fire should start putting off heat soon.”

Sally shook her head, “I couldn’t. But…” “What?” he asked softly.

“This bed is exceptionally large, I don’t suppose you would be willing to share? Clothes on, of course!”

A wide smile broke across Benedict’s face, “Of course!”

Chapter 27

BENEDICT WAS STIFF AS A BOARD UNDERNEATH THE HEAVY quilts laid on the bed in the master bedroom. The mattress was excellent, so that wasn't the problem. And although they didn't have heat, he certainly wasn't cold. No, Benedict was suffering from a severe case of hard-on because he was in bed with a beautiful girl.

To make matters worse, Benedict's companion had promptly fallen asleep. However, that did not mean she stayed in her own spot. Sally had slid right up to his warm body like white on rice. He knew if he moved the slightest degree that she would be bound to run into his dick.

Shit, it was waving himself around like he was in a parade just trying to get a slight brush of her leg or the soft curve of her hand.

Never in Benedict's life had he ever suffered from such an unquenchable need for someone. Perhaps it was because he had been in a dry spell since he and Melinda split up. Benedict was sure this had to have something to do with it. Or maybe it was the way her ass bounced in those little yoga pants.

He had been tempted to grab it on more than one occasion during the past few hours. And then when Nate and his sister started moaning and groaning. Benedict felt like he had entered his own personal hell.

But somehow this was worse. Being this close to such a fucking hot body and not being able to do anything about it. This was sheer torture. He didn't want to move and wake Sally up. He had a feeling that she was a punch first ask questions later kind of girl.

A smile crossed his face as he imagined her in a fury. Her eyes would blaze and that long hair would whip around as she did. Benedict would catch her arm and yank her against him. Wrapping his hands into her thick hair he would tilt her face back and press his lips against…

Shit! He needed to stop thinking like that. His dick was never going to go down and he was never going to be able to explain himself. What could he possibly say?

There wasn't an easy way to talk yourself out of an embarrassing situation like that. And if the truth be told, Benedict wasn't sure how she would respond. How many ballsy teacher types could she possibly know?

He wanted her to cup his balls, as her mouth closed over the head of his cock. He wanted to feel her suck him in deep as she took long sucks on his dick making him feel so…

Damn it! Benedict had to pull it together. Maybe singing a song in his head would help? Or saying the alphabet backward?

He wanted to fuck her backward. Hell, he wanted to fuck her any which way he could, she was beautiful in that freshfaced girl next door vibe. Pure and gorgeous and he had flat out lied to her face.

Sally moaned and threw her leg over him.

There was no hiding how he was reacting to her now. She had the evidence smashed against her leg.

Sally's hand landed on his chest and she buried her face in his shoulder.

Benedict felt like he was in the furnaces of hell. Is this what happened to people when they lied?

"Fuck," he whispered more to himself than anyone. "I never should have lied to her."

"No, you really shouldn't have."

There was dead silence in the room as Benedict clued into the fact that not only had he admitted he lied, but that his comatose bed partner was actually wide awake.

"Fuck!"

As far as comebacks go, it wasn't the most original, but it did make Sally laugh.

She rolled off of him, much to Benedict's dismay, and leaned up on one elbow. He could faintly make out her features in the light from the fire.

"Did you know that every time you lie an angel dies?" She said saucily.

Benedict frowned, "But then they go straight back to heaven, so really, we're good."

Sally snorted, "Is this how all royals behave? You are sounding a bit like a politician."

Benedict sat up against the headboard, "You are right. I am acting abysmally and I owe you an apology."

Sally sat up and moved against the headboard alongside him.

"I totally agree. However, I have had so much fun teasing you, that I won't make you do it."

"How long have you known?" Benedict asked.

Sally grinned at him, "From before you arrived. The company that takes care of your cabin is owned by my grandmother. I do the books for her usually. But because I lived rather close to this cabin I also have been checking in

and letting her know when repairs were needed."

Benedict groaned, "I feel like such an ass."

Sally laughed, "You should, someone that is such a terrible liar shouldn't be in the business."

“I’m not a terrible liar,” Benedict retorted, his cheeks turning pink.

“You are,” she countered, “And just think about all those dead angels you are saving by telling the truth.”

“That is a horrible thought,” Benedict shuddered, “Who told you that?”

“My gran, the same one who has bragged my entire life about her famous clients, Hazenbak royalty. Did you honestly expect to get away with it?”

Benedict rubbed the back of his neck, “I had rather hoped I would.”

“So, why are you trying to go on the lam?”

He made a face, “I haven’t committed an unpardonable sin if that is what you are asking.”

She shook her head, “No, although there are rumors that you and the Duchess girl… What was her name, Margaret or Melanie?”

“Melinda,” Benedict bit out.

Sally beamed, “Right! The rumor is that you and Melinda are no longer a thing and that she has been seen with…”

“One of my best mates, Luke.” Benedict frowned, “How do you know all of this?”

She shrugged, “TMZ? I mean, we have internet and

American’s like to know all of the gritty details, we’re terrible that way.”

Benedict slumped back against the wall his head gently knocking it. “I was a fool to think that I could escape here. I just wanted some time to be me and not the prince of Hazenbak.”

“Is it so bad being him?” Sally asked with concern in her eyes.

Benedict found himself opening up about things that he normally would never dream of telling anyone let alone a stranger. There was something so comforting about this girl, he wasn’t sure what it was.

Sometime later after he had gotten up to throw another log onto the fire, Sally remarked, “Your father doesn’t sound like a very nice man.”

Benedict eyed her, “In my country, you could be court marshaled for that.”

Sally shrugged, “But we are not in your country, your high and mightiness. We are in the Smoky Mountains and you are just Ben, and I am just Sally.”

Benedict felt his heart lighten. He liked being Ben and Sally. He liked how easy it was to talk with her and how sweet she had been to listen as he rambled on for far too long about things that couldn’t interest her.

“I beg your pardon, Sally. I should never have lied to you.”

Sally smiled and shyly reached out to take his larger hand in hers, “I’m glad you did. Heaven knows I would never have had the courage to be so familiar with you otherwise. It was only that you were all stumbly and adorable as you tried to keep the ruse going. It was like a kid with chocolate all over his face insisting he didn’t eat the cookie.”

Benedict smiled, “That is quite an image you paint, but I think I know what you mean. And in response to your earlier comment, my father is one of the coldest individuals I have ever known. But in a lot of respects, he is behind me

running away from home.”

Sally squeezed his hand, “And why is that?” “Truth?” he whispered.

She nodded, “Only the truth between Ben and Sally.”

“I am terrified that I am becoming just like him.”

Sally drew back, “Why do you even think that?”

“It all began earlier this year, my sister Lia, she had gotten into some trouble and my father had sentenced her to teach at the Royal Academy. It’s an exclusive boarding school in Hazenbak that is only for royalty and the upper crust. He was trying to teach her a lesson about behaving as a royal should behave.”

“This sounds like his issue, Ben,” Sally said softly.

Benedict nodded, “It was wrong of him, he never considered us with any type of emotion unless you consider disappointment into the mix. But while my sister was at Royal Academy I couldn’t stand the thought of her going alone so I managed to get my mate, Nick to be a professor as well. It was there that they fell in love.”

“Still doesn’t sound bad to me,” Sally knit her brows together, “Am I missing something?”

Benedict laughed, but the sound didn’t hold any mirth. “No, it was when things got sticky and my father came down on her that I realized she had been living in much worse circumstances than I had thought. I spend years avoiding our home and staying with friends or living the life of the bachelor. All the while Lia had him on her back and breathing down her neck. I’m honestly shocked that something didn’t happen before this year. But, Sally, that isn’t the point.”

“Ben, what is the point?” Sally looked up at him with worry in her eyes.

“I was selfish and oblivious to my sister's circumstances. I was in a relationship with a woman I didn’t even like, and I didn’t give two shits about her. I was slowly becoming him. Is that how this works? We just repeat the same mistakes

over and over again, generation after generation?”

“And so you ran away.”

He nodded, “And so, I ran away.”

She reached up and brushed her fingers across his chin, “And did you did you find what you were looking for?” His gaze was locked with hers as he lowered his mouth. He didn’t want to take advantage but he was tired of being the nice guy and if Sally would let him he needed to kiss her, touch her.

He cupped the back of her head and she straddled his thighs, moaning when she felt just how hard he was for her. In a flurry of movement they divested themselves of their clothes and somehow he managed to slip on a condom and then he was inside of her. Time stilled as they became familiar with each other’s bodies.

She arched her back and he slid a little deeper and then he was fucking her long deep strokes that drove them both wild. Her hands were in his hair, on his shoulders, digging into his skin. It had never felt like this, never like this.

In the aftermath they lay there panting with little puffs of air in the frosty night wondering just how they were going to put their lives back together again when they both knew something major had happened.

Chapter 28

BENEDICT WAS SURPRISED THAT HE ACTUALLY FELL INTO A deep sleep after he and Sally talked for a few awkward moments. When he awoke the other side of the bed was empty and he felt rather disappointed. It was then that he realized the sun was up rather high. He wondered how long he had slept in.

Getting up he wandered to the bathroom and flicked the light out of habit. He expected the room to remain dark, but light flooded the area. It was nice and warm where he was, indicating that the electricity and power had been restored to the cabin.

Taking a quick shower and brushing his teeth, Benedict rushed to get dressed. He had an overwhelming urge to go and see Sally again. He liked being in her company and the way that she made him feel.

Rushing down the steps he smelled the familiar scent of bacon in the air and rounded the corner with a wide smile only to see Lia standing at the stove.

His face fell, "Oh."

Lia laughed, "Good morning to you too, Benny."

Benedict went over and ruffled her hair, "That wasn't what I meant, Stinky. Where is Sally?"

Lia shrugged, "She left earlier this morning once she was sure that we had electricity. She said she needed to check on some things."

Benedict looked out the window at the wide expanse of fresh powdered snow. "Did she have any trouble? Or say when she would be coming back?"

Lia gave him a funny look as she turned the bacon in the pan. "No, she said that a power line had been hit by a tree and that was why it had taken the electric company so long to get power going again. She also mentioned that we should have a generator for this place just in case we ever end up stranded for a longer period of time. But that was about it."

Benedict sank down onto a stool at the bar. "I can't believe she just left."

"Benny, we only met her last night. It's not like we know the woman."

He looked up and saw his sister's concerned gaze. Pasting on a smile he nodded, "Of course. What do I care? I just wanted to make sure she was safely home. Can I start anything?"

Lia pointed to where she had the ingredients for pancakes. Luckily, it was the easiest mix in the world, just add water. Soon the siblings had a massive stack of pancakes in all shapes and sizes along with some crispy bacon and freshly squeezed juice.

They gathered around the table just as Nick came in with a grin. "Did I miss fixing breakfast?"

Lia rolled her eyes, “Don’t worry, you can be on clean up.”

He groaned good-naturedly as she flicked him with the

kitchen towel and they sat down to eat. The rest of the day they spent out of doors all bundled up and exploring the woods around them. The snow wasn’t terribly deep and made for an awesome snowball fight.

When they were cold and miserable it was finally time to come inside and get warm. They kept the fireplaces going and played games of cards until the sunset.

Benedict was disappointed when Sally hadn’t returned.

When three days had passed and Lia announced that she and Nick really needed to get back, Benedict was resigned to the fact that the connection he had felt with Sally must have been one-sided. He didn’t like the feeling, not even a little bit. There had been something there, something powerful. And maybe if given the chance to grow, could have been great.

But now he would never know.

Day five they began to pack their things to return to their real lives. Benedict couldn’t help but look at the lamps and think of her. The bed where she had teased him nearly into doing something stupid, and even the fireplace where she had single-handedly kept all of them warm.

He wondered what it was like to live her life. All Benedict knew was royal edicts, a demanding schedule with an emotionally abusive father who did his damn near best to destroy any happiness in his path. What would it be like to get up and know that you could be anyone or anything you wanted to be?

In a lot of ways he envied Sally, she knew who she was, and that was something he was still struggling with.

As they locked the doors to the cabin they heard a snowmobile approaching and turned to see Sally barrelling up the lane with something tied to the back.

“Am I too late?” she asked breathlessly.

Lia grinned, “Nope, you are right on time. We are just getting ready to go. Why doesn’t Benedict help you get the snowmobile locked into the shed and Nick and I will grab your bags?”

Sally smiled and Benedict felt his stomach do a flip. She came back. Everything inside of him said to throw her over his shoulder and hold on forever.

Nick pulled her suitcases off the back of the snowmobile and then she rode it back around the cabin to the large shed where Benedict was waiting. He helped her settle it inside and then locked the shed so that it would be protected while they were away.

Benedict cleared his throat, “I don’t understand. Are you coming with us?”

Sally looked up at him, “Is that okay?”

How could he put into words how very okay he was with that?

“I am glad,” he practically stumbled over the words.

Sally suddenly looked uncertain, “Lia invited me to come and see Meron where she and Nick will live. She said that there were women there who might like the chance to learn more about creating and owning their own business.” “My sister said that?” Benedict sounded incredulous.

Sally bristled a little, “Princess Lia is a good woman. She will be the queen of Meron one day and is wise to want to help her people.”

Benedict held up his arms, “No, I am not arguing with you. I just, I guess I sometimes forget that she’s grown up.”

Sally didn’t look impressed, “Or you sometimes look at her through your father’s eyes.”

He stopped abruptly. Was he doing that?

Benedict watched as Sally walked away from him. The sassy curve of her hips making his jeans feel a bit tighter.

She wasn’t like the women that he had known and dated. There was a bite to Sally as well as a country sweetness that made her into an intoxicating woman.

“Stop looking at my ass,” Sally called out from over her shoulder and Benedict cursed beneath his breath. With a sigh, he began to follow her toward the rental SUV.

The trip back to the airport was rather uneventful. They were able to turn the rental car over and board the private plane with relative ease.

Sally laughed when she saw that there really was a small sleeping space, a bedroom of sorts on the plane.

“I suppose this would make the mile high club a whole lot easier to join,” she teased.

Lia laughed along, “I would think it might be tricky in those tiny airplane bathrooms.”

Sally shuddered, “I can’t even imagine the germs you would encounter.”

They took their seats and the stewardess alerted them that take off would be in a few minutes. Benedict had been rather quiet ever since they left the cabin. He thought long and hard about what Sally had said. Knowing perfectly well that it echoed much of their conversation from that first night.

Had he become desensitized to things? Was he becoming like his father? And if he was, what could he do to stop it?

About halfway through the trip, Lia moved to sit next to Benedict and leaned her head against his shoulder. “Is everything alright?”

Benedict’s hands were clenched, “You know that I think you are incredible, right?”

Lia pulled back, worry in her eyes, “Of course, I feel the same about you.”

Benedict shook his head, “No, Lia. I wasn’t there for you when you needed me. I have been selfish and self-absorbed. But I don’t want to be that way. I am so proud of the woman you have become.”

Lia swallowed, “Thank you, but what has brought this on?”

Benedict refused to look over to where Sally was sitting and more than likely listening in. He wasn’t doing this for her, he was doing this for himself. “It doesn’t matter, I just, Lia, you are going to be an amazing wife. I know that the people of Meron will be blessed to have you.”

Nick leaned forward and extended his hand to Lia, “He is right you know. Not only will my life be better, but you will do so much for our people. I love you, my family loves you, and soon my country will love you.”

Lia’s eyes glittered with tears, “I don’t know what I did to deserve this, but thank you.”

She kissed her brother’s cheek and he pretended to wipe it away before she went over and kissed Nick softly on the mouth.

“I love you, back.”

Chapter 29

SIX MONTHS LATER...

"Lia, do you want the photographer to come get pictures of you getting ready or would you rather wait until the ceremony begins?"

Lia looked up from the vanity where she was currently getting her hair styled. "I think when the ceremony begins, I don't want any wacky pictures of me looking stupid."

Sally laughed, "Make-up on half of your face?"

Lia grinned, "You know that is what would happen to me!"

The girls had formed a fast friendship over the past six months. Sally had come to Meron and fallen in love with the culture and atmosphere. She was able to pass on most of the responsibilities of the family business onto a cousin. And therefore was free to help Lia begin a women's initiative in Meron with Queen Stephanie and King Ryan's full support.

It was hard to imagine that six months had flown by and it was now Lia's wedding day.

Her long red hair was being swept up in a cascade of auburn curls, her make-up was already on and she looked flawless. Some of the students from the Royal Academy had been able to fly in for the wedding.

Lia was the most anxious to see Craig and Rachel. Asha was said to be coming as well. Lia had always thought she was a sweet girl and looked forward to seeing where life would take her next.

The hair stylist finished with Lia and sprayed her hair until she was certain it wouldn't be going anywhere. From there they helped her get into her wedding dress. It was an off the shoulder designer gown that cost more than Sally's entire college education. She had been with Lia when she picked it out in Paris.

Sally too changed into her maid of honor gown, a blush pink floor length evening dress with just the right amount of cleavage to get Benedict salivating.

Lia couldn't help but laugh at her brother. He clearly liked Sally and had visited Meron more often in the last six months than he had in his entire life. But he still seemed caught up in something. Lia wasn't sure what was holding him back.

When the veil was placed on Lia's head, Queen Stephanie drew in a sharp breath. "You are completely stunning, Lia."

Lia smiled tremulously in the mirror at her soon to be mother-in-law, "Thank you."

"Are you ready for this?" Sally asked from the doorway.

Lia glanced back at the mirror one more time before nodding. Once they were in the hallway she saw her father waiting impatiently. Lia had honestly considered not having him walk her down the aisle. But despite their differences, she had no desire to air their dirty laundry for the press to rip into a million pieces.

"You look like your mother," her father said shortly and then offered his arm.

While it wasn't a compliment, it could have been much worse and Lia was thankful the King had restrained himself. The wedding march began to play and the hundreds of guests rose to their feet as she began her walk down the aisle of the chapel.

Royalty from all over the world were in attendance as well as celebrities and famous musicians. But Lia didn't see any of them. Her eyes, once locked on Nick's, refused to go anywhere else. She couldn't tell you about her father giving her away or even the words that the priest had used.

But Lia could tell you what his shoulders looked like, broad and strong, or his smile how it lit his entire face. She could tell you about the way he whispered her name as he took her hand in his. And the glistening of unshed tears as he repeated his vows.

Lia loved this man.

Who could have ever known that Benedict's bet would ever have led Nick to the woman of his dreams?

The moment the priest said he could kiss the bride, Nick fairly devoured her. He was desperate to hold her, kiss her. Cheers ran up from the crowd and soon they were racing back down the aisle and into the limousine trying to avoid the tossing of birdseed from some of the children.

A royal dinner and reception were held at the Palace in Meron the gorgeous ballroom had been opened up and dressed to perfection. Lia and Nick began the dancing, it was beyond perfect, a dream come true.

And then they heard a muffled shout. Lia turned her head to see but Nick stopped her.

"Melinda and Luke, I have a feeling that there is trouble in paradise."

Lia leaned in, "Sally said that one of the maids told her Melinda was sleeping with an actor in hopes to make it in Hollywood."

Nick rolled his eyes, "She is certainly dramatic enough for Hollywood."

One would think that Benedict would be getting a kick out of being right, but he wasn't paying the slightest bit of attention to Melinda and Luke. His eyes were glued to the maid of honor with whom he was currently dancing.

"I have a proposition for you," he began.

Sally wrinkled her nose, "That is not something that one says to a woman very often."

Benedict frowned, “Not that type of proposition. This is more of a scholarly type situation.”

She nodded, “I am in intrigued, by all means, what do you have in mind?”

“I have been working with my father to revamp the Royal Academy in Hazenbak. I don’t think that it should limit its reaches to only royal families.”

Sally looked up, “That is very magnanimous of you.” Benedict sighed, “I am trying to not be a dick, Sally.

Please, just hear me out.” Sally nodded, a bit contrite.

“I want Royal Academy to be a place that any child might attend. I know that the cost is astronomical and most families could not afford it even if they were allowed in. But

I am trying to change that.”

“Is your father on board?” Sally asked hesitantly.

Benedict clenched his jaw, “For the most part he thinks I am ruining the future of our country. But I already leaked to the press my intentions so he can’t back out now. All he is waiting for is for me to fail and then he can rub it all in my face.”

Sally knew the tension between father and son. “I’m sorry Benedict, what can I do for you?”

“I would like you to come and help me. I will serve as the Dean for the first year. The current one walked as soon as he got the news of the changes that were coming. Said that he could do better elsewhere or something like that. I would like to see that happen. I doubt he will run so much as a Sunday School class after this.”

Sally was surprised at the request, “But why me? I don’t know anything about education.”

He pulled her closer to his body as the made a turn on the dance floor. “You may not know about teaching. But you are excellent with business and I know how you are with people. These are some of the skills that I need. I honestly don’t know the first thing about being a dean. I will need someone to help keep my head on straight.”

“When does this begin?” Sally asked in wonder.

Benedict cleared his throat, “As soon as possible. The next school year begins the first part of September.”

“I will need to think about it,” Sally said after a moment. “Can I give you my answer in a day or two?”

Benedict nodded and then the song ended and there was an announcement that they were about to cut the cake.

Everyone gathered around where Lia and Nick held a silver cake server and gently cut through the four layers of cream and butter frosting. The night went on and the merriment continued.

Champagne continued to flow until the early morning hours at some point Nick leaned in to whisper into his wife's ear.

"it's time to go, wife."

Lia startled and then turned and grinned up at him. "By all means, husband, lead the way!"

They made their way over to where the King and Queen were standing and said their goodbyes. The twins had long since gone on to bed, having stated that they loved being bridesmaids and would love to do it every day of the week if possible.

Hank, the wayward bachelor cat, had met a lovely Siamese out in the stables and was now expecting a litter of kittens. Well, the Siamese was anyway, Hank just lazed about looking smug and licking his balls. The twins had adored having Hank as a pet and Lia had acknowledged that they were part pet owners as well.

Nick was just so damn happy that he didn't have to share a room with Hank that he even attended the cat wedding that the twins hosted. It was a rather interesting affair.

As they went up the steps to change into something they could comfortably fly in. Nick grabbed Lia and carried her the rest of the way to their room.

"What was that for?" she asked breathlessly.

Nick growled against her mouth before kissing her soundly, "For being you. I adore you, Lia."

She kissed him back, "I love you too, Nick, now and always."

Chapter 30

NICK COULDN'T BELIEVE THAT LIA WAS ACTUALLY HIS WIFE. She had fallen asleep on the plane and he figured that it was best to let her sleep. With the stress of the wedding, Nick knew that she had been more than a little bit exhausted.

He had to wake her when the plane landed and they boarded a smaller one to take them to a secluded island near the Maldives.

White sandy beaches and crystal blue water for as far as the eye could see, it was truly a paradise. Nick reached over and grabbed Lia's hand as they entered the spa-like home that they would be staying in for their honeymoon.

There was a discrete staff that prided itself on not being seen unless absolutely necessary, and that was just how Lia and Nick wanted it to be.

He didn't even make it three steps into the house before turning and wrenching her into his arms. She laughed at his exuberance but it quickly was stifled when his lips sealed over her. Nick loved the feel of her against him. She was lithe and fit from her running but those tits, nothing even came close to competing with such perfection.

His tongue delved into her mouth loving the way she shuddered in his arms. The way that her hands sank into his hair and how she clung to him like she was drowning and he was her last hope of survival.

His body was strung tightly, all of the energy and need that had thrum through him during the wedding was pushing at his skin, demanding release.

Lia moaned into his kiss loving the way that he kissed her as if he needed it to breathe. His hand cupped her ass and brought her up against his massive erection. She rubbed herself provocatively against him, asking for trouble.

Nick cursed, "Fuck Lia, I need you so fucking much."

His hands were in her skirt, yanking down the fabric and disposing of her underwear. Fingers slipped into her wet folds, "You are so wet for me."

Not able to wait for a moment more Nick turned her over the edge of the couch and yanked her skirt all the way off so that he could see her gorgeous backside. She moved her legs apart and the breath caught in his throat as he eyed her pussy, wet and waiting for him.

Nick managed to get his cock out of his jeans and then he was thrusting inside of her. Pushing into her tight heat so fast that they both cried out. It was wild and frantic as he slammed into her tight pussy over and over again.

One of Nick's hands anchored her waist while the other slipped around to go up her shirt, yanking her bra down and pinching her already tight nipple.

Nick felt the intense heat pooling in his cock and knew that he wouldn't last long. There was so much he wanted to do to her, with her. The fantasies piling up in his mind as he rode her hard and deep.

When his legs began to shake and he felt his release at

the pit of his spine, Nick reached down and circled her clit, rubbing tight little circles.

Lia couldn't hold out a moment longer, it was too good, too intense. Her body splintered as the orgasm shook every inch of Lia. She could hardly stand with the waves of pleasure washing over her. It was a good thing that Nick had hold of her hip as he released his load. She relied on him to keep her in a standing position.

When they were able to catch their breath, Nick slipped out of her and lifted Lia in his arms carrying her to the bedroom where they showered together. Taking time to soap every inch, and then falling into shower sex as their passions got the best of them.

When they came out of the bathroom dried but still naked Nick pulled her into him so that they could stare out the window at their secluded beach. The waves crashing against the shore and the birds were the only sounds they could hear.

It truly was an island paradise.

"Thank you for bringing me here," Lia turned and offered her lips for a kiss.

Nick gladly took the opportunity, "Thank you for marrying me."

Lia smiled, "Best decision I ever made."

Nick's lips twitched, "I would have to agree with that."

Their honeymoon was filled with love and laughter. They didn't see a whole lot of the beach but when they did, Lia ended up getting a sunburn on parts of her that she was certain had never seen the sun before.

An idyllic week passed and before they knew it, life was again pressing them along.

They took the charter flight to the mainland and from there the private jet back to Meron. There weren't there for more than a few moments when Lia noticed that Benedict had called her twenty-seven times.

"Did Benedict call you?" she asked Nick.

He pulled out his phone, eyes widening, "Yes, you had better see what he needs."

Lia dialed his number and on the second ring Benedict picked up.

“Have you seen the papers?” Benedict rattled off before even saying hello.

“No, Nick and I just landed. What is going on?”

Benedict sighed, the sound was sad and Lia immediately knew that something dreadful had happened.

“Father had a massive stroke yesterday. I am sorry, Lia.

He didn’t make it.”

Lia sat stunned not able to respond.

“Lia? Lia?”

Nick took the phone from her, “This is Nick. What is it?”

“Our father, he’s,” it was hard for Benedict to get the words out, “he died late last night. There are arrangements to be made and appointments to fill. I’m sorry, Nick, but I need you both here.”

A large fat tear had begun to roll down Lia’s cheek.

“We will be there,” Nick said shortly and hung up the phone. He made arrangements for the plane to gas up and take them to Hazebabk. Then he called his parents to let them know.

Through it all, Lia sat beside him curled against his chest with silent tears coursing down her cheeks. When at last Nick could place the phone down he kissed the top of her head.

“I am so very sorry, sweetheart.”

Lia shook her head, “I don’t know how to feel. In some

respects, I am actually glad, what kind of horrible person is glad that their father is dead?”

Nick understood a thing or two about grief having lost his mother. But what Lia was experiencing was wrenching his heart.

“You have every right to the feelings that you are experiencing right now. The king was never a good father and we don’t need to pretend that he was just because he’s dead.”

Lia smiled through her tears, “I don’t think I have that good of an imagination anyhow.”

He kissed her forehead, “It will be okay, no matter what happens we will be together. We can help Benedict get situated as the new king.”

Lia drew back, “I had quite forgotten about that. How stupid of me. No wonder he is desperate to reach us, there is so much to be done.”

When they were able to board the plane again it was only a few more hours on to Hazenbak. By the time they arrived, it was dusk and a car was waiting for them.

Out of the car came a familiar face with a sad smile.

“Sally!” Lia threw her arms around her friend.

“I’m so sorry for your loss, Lia,” Sally said against her hair.

“How is Benny?”

Sally was quiet for a moment, “He’s not acting like himself.”

“What do you mean?” Nick asked.

“He’s closed off, short—I don’t know. I know that he is mourning but he doesn’t want to if that makes any sense?”

Lia nodded painfully, “I know just what you mean.”

Sally motioned for them all to get in the car, “Let’s just get to the palace and you can see what I mean. I thought about leaving, to see if my presence was bothering him, but he insisted I stay. He needs you, Lia, it’s almost like he’s lost and can’t find his way home.”

Nick placed a hand on Sally’s shoulder, “Thank you for being there when we couldn’t.”

“Was Benedict able to get in touch with Luke?” Lia asked suddenly remembering their other best friend.

Sally shook her head, “I don’t know. There is still a lot of strain in that relationship.”

Nick took a breath, “It looks like we have our work cut out for us.”

Lia nodded, “Indeed we do.”

Chapter 31

A YEAR AND A HALF LATER...

Sally brushed her sweaty palms against her short tweed skirt and cursed herself for not wearing dress slacks. For some reason, the more skin she had exposed in front of the man the more vulnerable she seemed to be. And this wasn't the time for vulnerability.

She had spent a large part of the night and all morning fretting about the conversation she was about to have with the King of Hazenbak, her employer and the monarch of the country she had lived in for the past two years.

He was also the man who stumbled into the cabin located in the Smokey Mountains during one of the worst storms that Tennessee had ever seen. He had lied to her, shared his bed—hot steamy sex—and single-handedly made her fall in love with him in less than twenty-four hours.

Sally had awakened that next morning and tore out of there faster than a cheetah chasing its dinner. She knew who he was, royalty. And she knew who she was, a maid, or at least their accountant and filler when needed. They couldn't have been further apart on the social sphere, and Sally knew how these things ended.

This wasn't a fairy tale, and there was no fairy godmother that was going to change the fact that she and Benedict were not meant for each other.

And then his sister Lia had called and insisted that she needed Sally's help. Sally remembered calling her granny asking her advice. Her granny told her to pull up her big girl pants and get on the damn plane.

Now a little more than two years later, Sally's life had radically changed. Sally had helped Benedict to implement a new program at the Royal Academy making it available for all students and not just the ones that come from royal families.

It hadn't been easy, but she knew that Benedict really believed in it and so she had worked her fingers to the bone. Okay, not literally, but she had put in an insane number of hours and the task had been accomplished.

However, now that the school was running smoothly, Sally no longer wanted to be there. She had taken on the project right when Benedict's father passed away. He was dealing with so many different things being the newly crowned king and she was happy to help.

She was.

At least, that is what she kept telling herself when week after week when he didn't call or email to check up on her. He had to be extremely busy. After all, there were a million things that a king was in charge of, wasn't there?

Sally sighed; it really didn't matter. She was homesick, she wanted to go back to her granny and to the Smokies. She wanted to cuddle up in her cabin and not feel sad that she just spent the last two years of her life trying to impress a man that was totally out of her league.

"His Majesty will see you now." The butler opened the door for Sally to enter the study. Sally hated that she couldn't remember the man's name. Normally it would just roll off of her tongue, but her nerves had gotten the better of her.

She rounded the corner and there he sat. The most handsome man she to date had ever seen in her life.

Her breath caught as she watched his massive hands scrawl something; the handwriting was bold and assured. His auburn hair was brushed back, and his muscular frame was fitted into a suit that would have made any of the James Bonds jealous.

"Miss Baker is here to see you, Your Majesty," the butler said in his dulcet tones before bowing and moving back.

Benedict's eyes snapped up and then he smiled; the green that was so like his sister Lia's always seemed to cause her stomach to tie up in knots. It was funny that Lia's never gave her that reaction. But one glance from Benedict and her knees turned to gelatin, her mind went to naughty places and her tongue seemed to run away with her.

"Sally," the deep rumble of his voice felt like a caress,

"It's really good to see you."

Sally sank into a curtsey. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

Benedict frowned. "Your Majesty?"

Sally bit the inside of her lip and forced her legs to move forward until she was in front of his desk. Reaching into the clutch she had brought with her, Sally pulled out a letter and wordlessly handed it to Benedict.

He opened it and began to read.

Dean Montes,

I have enjoyed my time at the Royal Academy. You have been an inspiration and I know that I am leaving the school and students in good hands. I am tendering to you my resignation, I will not be returning for the next school year.

I wish you every bit of luck and know that you will lead the students to great heights.

Best to you,

Sally Leanna Baker

Benedict's eyes widened as he read. When he had finished reading the piece of paper, he proceeded to crumple it in his large hand. "What is this?"

Sally swallowed, "My resignation, your Majesty. Dean Montes insisted that I give it to you."

"No," Benedict threw the note into the trash basket on the side of his desk.

Sally's cheeks heated, her temper flaring she walked over to the trash basket and yanked her resignation back out again.

"I wasn't giving you a choice," eyes flashing as she glared at Benedict, "I was stating facts. I am going home."

Benedict rose to his feet. "No, you aren't!"

"Yes, I am," she retorted, not backing away when he moved into her personal space.

"Why?" he asked. "Why would you leave us?"

Sally felt a wealth of emotion wash over her. She wanted to rage at him that he had been the one to leave her all alone. She wanted to cry because there was that underlying note of hurt in his voice. And she was lonely, so damned lonely in a country that wasn't her own.

"It's time."

"That isn't an answer," Benedict snapped, reaching out to take her arm.

Sally flinched away from him and Benedict froze.

"There is one more month until the students go home

on summer break. I will be leaving to return to Tennessee the day after. Good day, Your Majesty."

Sally turned on her pumps and started walking toward the door. Her hands were shaking so badly that she nearly dropped her clutch but she somehow managed to make it to the door before Benedict caught her.

"One more month," he said hastily. "You swear you will stay in Hazenbak for one more month, no matter what?"

Sally didn't want him to see her cry, she just wanted to get out of there and would have been willing to promise him anything.

"Fine, I will stay, no matter what. Now may I go?"

"And" he added, "You have to call me Benedict."

"I am not calling you Benedict," Sally huffed, her anger overtaking her sadness. "It implies a familiarity that doesn't exist."

“Benedict,” he demanded.

“Fine! Ben!” she snapped.

She saw his eyes blaze as she called him the name that he had given her the first time that they met. He was pretending to be a teacher, of all things, which turned out to be quite ironic since that is how she had spent the past two years.

Benedict nodded. “Agreed, it will be Ben. Harrison, have all of Miss Bakers things moved into the palace immediately.”

Sally gasped, “I will not be moving in. If I am not needed at the school, then I might as well go home.”

Benedict smirked. “One month, no matter what.”

Chapter 32

"I AM TELLING YOU, NICK, I AM TOTALLY FUCKED. I NEED YOU and Lia here!" Benedict ran a hand through his hair and tugged on the ends. "She is threatening to leave in one month. How in the hell am I supposed to figure out who is stealing money out of the treasury and convince Sally to stay in Hazenbak in thirty days? I need reinforcements."

"Give me the phone."

Benedict heard his sister's exasperated voice. "Is there a reason why you are calling us in the middle of the night?"

"It's ten thirty, Lia, you aren't eighty."

Lia snorted, "I have a baby, idiot. And thanks for asking after Anthony, your namesake, and Godson."

Benedict grunted, "You know I love the kid."

Lia snorted, "Yes, that is why you called him a stinky sad sack the last time we were together."

"He pooped on my lap," Benedict argued.

"He's a baby, newsflash, they do that." Lia sighed, "Look, grow some balls and tell Sally that you care about her. This isn't rocket science, Benny."

Benedict snorted, "What on earth could you possibly know about love?"

Nick's voice came on the phone. "Don't be a dick."

Benedict took a long breath. "You're right and I'm sorry.

Tell Lia I didn't mean that!"

"I still love you, Stupid."

"Am I on speaker?" Benedict smiled. "It would make things easier to talk to you both."

"It's necessary, Tony needs to nurse."

Benedict frowned, "You know that I find the idea of you nursing abhorrent."

"Because I have breasts or because I use them?" Lia retorted.

Nick cleared his throat, "As much as I love talking about my wife's breasts, this conversation is getting creepy. Can we get back to the issue at hand?"

Benedict sighed, "She was really mad, I don't know. I really fucked this up. I was so worried about making sure that everything went well with the transition and then we uncovered the

problem with the treasury, and I have been absorbed in it. She wouldn't even call me by my name. It was like we were strangers."

"Well," Lia said slowly, "You *are* strangers. Honestly, Benny, she said that she hasn't seen or heard from you more than a handful of times in the last two years. How long did you expect her to sit around?"

"It hasn't been that long!" Benedict stood up and started pacing. "Has it?"

"Earth to big brother, I had a nine-month pregnancy, your nephew is eight months old. It's been a long time. And what have you done to show her that you are interested in a relationship?"

Benedict was quiet because the truth was, besides his

terrible relationship with Melinda, he had never been in a committed relationship. He wanted something with Sally, but he had been dragging his feet because he was worried that he would screw it all up. In all honesty, Benedict knew how to seduce and how to fuck, but he didn't have a clue about romance.

Combine that with the fact that he had been dumped into the role of being king and all of its challenges; Benedict hadn't been up for air. It wasn't like he was seeing someone else. He cared about Sally, fuck, he wanted Sally.

"Shit," came his reply. "She's going to leave, Lia. I have one month, and I don't know the first thing about making her fall in love with me."

"I don't want to be the bearer of bad news, but isn't there bevy of beauties headed to Hazenbak?" Nick added. "You said that the council had been after you to get married?"

"Fuck!" Benedict punched the wall. "I think they did mention something about sending three or few debutantes sometime soon. I hadn't really bothered paying attention; I have real problems to deal with!"

Lia laughed, "You have Sally for one month and the foreign delegates are sending possible brides? Benedict, how do you get yourself into these situations?"

"He reminds me of you, Love," Nick said affectionately to Lia.

"I heard that," Benedict snarled.

"You were meant to," Nick added cheerfully. "I think

Benedict is right, Lia, he can't handle all of that on his own." "Are you going to come?" Benedict held his breath.

Lia groaned, "Of course, we will be there in a day or two.

Just Benedict, whatever you do, tell Sally the truth." "Which one?" Benedict asked.

It was Lia's turn to growl, "Tell her that you care about her. Tell her that you did not order the bevy of beauties and whatever you do, don't fuck this up!"

"Ouch," Benedict pulled the phone away from his ear, "I can hear you just fine. And good mothers don't talk that way."

Nick came on the phone. "I agree with Lia, you need to tell her before those girls show up and start causing trouble.

Do you even know who they are sending?"

Benedict flushed. "Not a clue. I said that I would look into the proposal of finding a wife. I mean, obviously, I want that to be Sally. But the next thing I knew the council was reaching out to foreign dignitaries. Well, you know how they can be. I was planning on going out of town to avoid the whole damn thing. But I can't with the treasury issue still not resolved and I certainly can't if Sally is here."

"Why did you tell her that she had to stay at the castle if you didn't tell her about being attracted to her?"

Benedict paused. "I didn't think she would believe me."

Nick was quiet. "You insisted that she stay with you and didn't tell her why?"

Benedict cleared his throat. "First of all, there are at least forty-five people who live in the palace."

"Seventy-eight," Lia called out, but it sounded muffled; she must have moved further away.

"Right, so there are seventy-eight people in the palace; it's not like she would be alone with me. And second, there could be a million reasons why I might need her assistance."

Nick laughed. "Name me one."

"Maybe I might redecorate?" Benedict croaked.

Lia came back on the phone. "Make sure you get him to burp or he will be cranky. Benny, she doesn't do redecorating. Do you even know her? And wait, before you answer, no, you don't know her. If anything, you should get her

advice on the treasury issue; she used to do a lot of accounting. Honestly, she is incredibly talented; if you got to know her you would be able to discern that for yourself."

Benedict frowned. "I do want to know her better.

Thanks, Lia, that is a good idea. I don't mean to be a dick."

"I know you don't." Warmth stole into her tone. "Look, we will be there in a few days. All you need to do is tell her the truth and tell her about the girls before they get there! I love you, Stupid."

"Love you too, Stinky." Benedict pulled the phone away from his ear and tossed it onto his bed. It seemed like the only time he was able to be alone was in his room.

The issue with the treasury was worse than he had even let on to Lia and Nick. There was someone stealing money. If his father was alive, he would have assumed that he had something to do with it. The more Benedict had uncovered when he first took the throne, the more he realized that his father hadn't any head for business.

The books had been riddled with mistakes and it had taken months to try and straighten them out. The political council wasn't happy with Benedict's father. He had taken a huge chunk of the assets and either spent them or hid them.

But the major concern was that money was still disappearing.

Benedict hadn't meant to ignore Sally. In truth, he had thought about her more often than not. Now he cursed himself for putting other things first. He wanted to get to know her better. Everything that the Dean had sent over to him praised Sally.

Indeed, there were times when Benedict felt jealous that the handsome Dean had spent so much time in her presence when he was locked up dealing with the country's affairs.

Benedict shook his head. He had really made a mess of things, but it wasn't too late.

Right?

The bevy of beauties, as Lia so aptly called the eligible women that were coming his way, were a concern. But if he was honest, surely, she would believe him.

Wouldn't she?

Chapter 33

SALLY STARED AT HARRISON, THE BUTLER AT THE PALACE, before repeating back to him what he had just told her. “Just so we are clear, you are placing me in the rooms reserved for the family because Benedict is searching for a wife?”

Harrison cleared his throat and took a protective step back. “Well, erm, yes. That is to say, they should be arriving this afternoon.”

“Where is he?” Sally bit out.

Harrison didn’t pretend that he didn’t know who she wanted. “In his study, Ms. Baker. He asked not to be disturbed.”

Her blood boiled, and she curled her hands into fists. “Then I highly recommend that you find somewhere else to be because I am going in there.”

Harrison looked like he might argue for half a second, but the fire in Sally’s eyes combined with the determined chin led him to believe that maybe the King would be better off fighting this foe. “I have an errand in the kitchens; I must go.”

Sally nodded. It showed good sense on Harrison's part; he obviously had some self-preservation. It was too bad that his Majesty didn’t exhibit the same.

She marched down the gilded hallway and didn’t bother knocking on the thick wooden door. With a loud crash, it sailed against the wall, most likely damaging the paneling that was behind it.

“Ben!” she barked out.

The two men that were sitting in the chairs in front of King Benedict’s desk gasped in horror at her familiarity. Sally didn’t care. “I need to speak to you, alone.”

Benedict blinked at the vision in front of him. Ruby red lipstick, bright blue eyes, and endless curls of thick dark hair. She was an avenging angel, and he could have watched her all day. But first, he needed to get rid of the idiots in front of him. He motioned for them to go and then glanced back at Sally.

“I see you have arrived.” he was smart enough to keep his desk between them.

“You’re getting married?” she spat out.

He stood. “Well, eventually. I actually wanted to speak with you about…”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

Benedict had never heard Sally speak with such vehemence before. “I wasn’t kidding.”

“Why am I here then? Do you want me to pick out your bride? For hell's sake, Benedict, I worked my ass off the last two years making sure that your educational program would be a success and the thanks I get is helping you find a wife? You are sadly mistaken. I am leaving.”

She turned on her red pumps and went to leave but Benedict caught her arm before she reached the door.

“No, that wasn’t it at all, Sally; please.”

Sally stiffened at his touch. “They are arriving this afternoon, Harrison already told me. So, whatever lie you are trying to concoct you can just forget it because it doesn’t matter. I was a fool to stay this long. But I am going to fix that immediately.”

“Sally--,” She stepped on his toe with the spike of her heel and he felt it even through the leather of his shoe.

“Ouch, fuck! That hurts!”

“It was meant to!” Sally retorted.

He gathered her in his arms and held her tightly against his large muscular frame.

“Let me go!” she insisted.

“Not a chance.” His voice was calm but the feeling of his breath against her ear caused her all kinds of strange feelings in her belly.

“Why are you doing this?” she hissed.

“I didn’t invite those girls here,” Benedict started to explain.

“Right,” she cut him off, “And you were a teacher too, right?”

He chuckled, “Are you ever going to forgive me for that?”

She shook her head. “Why should I?”

Benedict sighed. “Listen to me, I wanted to get to know you better. Please, I only have one month. I can’t have you hating me the entire time.”

Sally scoffed. “Ha! You lost that month!”

“I believe that you said, *no matter what,* did you not?”

Sally stilled in his arms. “You tricked me.”

Benedict knew that this was not the time to lie. “Yes, I did. I knew that the council was trying to force me into marriage and that they were sending foreign dignitaries and debutantes. However, I have no interest in any of them. Listen, Sally, I am interested in you.”

"Me? You don't even know me, Benedict. I have lived in Hazenbak for over a year. If you wanted to get to know me better, you had ample time. I am sorry, this isn't going to work. Besides, you are a king!"

Benedict nodded. "Yes, there is that; I had hoped you wouldn't hold it against me."

She pushed out of his arms and this time he let her. Sally looked up at him with such a hopeless expression that he wanted to move heaven and earth just to fix whatever he had fucked up.

"Please give me a chance; there was taking over the title and then a host of other things that have occupied my time. I never meant to be such an ass; please forgive me."

Sally sighed, "A smart woman would get on a plane and forget about all of this."

"Is it wrong of me to hope that you are not feeling smart right now?" He smiled, his eyes sparkling.

She turned and walked toward the window that overlooked the gardens and Benedict followed her.

"Lia and Nick are coming with little Tony; she said that he misses us." Benedict fibbed a little knowing that Sally had a soft spot for her Godson.

"I still can't believe that Lia named me as Anthony's godmother. It's truly humbling."

Benedict wanted to touch her, but he supposed that just being close to Sally would have to do.

"Please stay."

She turned and looked up into his eyes, searching for something, and Benedict prayed that whatever it was she would find it.

Finally, she answered. "One month, Ben."

He felt a wave of relief wash over him. "One month," he repeated.

"About the women," she blew out a loud breath. "I won't be rude, but you can't expect me to play a part in this farce. You have women showing up like your own personal

version of the Bachelor. Are you handing out roses as well?"

Benedict narrowed his eyes. "You watch the Bachelor."

Sally blushed, "Everyone has seen it at some point; answer the question."

"I am not handing out roses, going on dates, or even entertaining them. I am providing a place to stay and that is it. Sally, I want to spend time with you."

"What about all of the business concerns you were just regaling me with?"

Benedict ran a hand through his hair, "Actually I was hoping that you might help me there as well."

Her brow rose. "Really?"

He smiled at her tone, half interest, half incredulity.

"Yes, really. Would you mind having a seat? It's a long story and I want to do it justice."

Sally was intrigued and went back over to his desk sitting in one of the plush chairs in front of it. Benedict, rather than sitting behind the desk, sat in the other chair, and leaned forward.

From there he began a tale about his father and the accounting of the country's treasury. Sally paled when she heard the lot of it.

"Are you still financially sound?" she gasped.

Benedict nodded. "We are, but we won't be if I can't uncover the thief. I have let go everyone that should have access, and the money keeps turning up missing."

"You need to go over every step, every account, every username… Benedict, this could take forever!"

He laughed but the sound didn't hold any humor. "Believe me, I know. Will you help me?"

Sally swallowed. "I just have an accounting degree, Ben; I am not equipped…"

He cut her off. "Maybe not, but I trust you. And there are precious few that I trust these days. So, will you help me?"

Chapter 34

“YOU ARE THE SWEETEST BABY, EVER!” SALLY COOED AT Anthony who gave her a happy grin, sporting his one lone bottom tooth. “I swear, Lia, you should have a dozen! He is the prettiest baby I have ever seen.”

Lia gave Sally a ghastly look as she lazed on the veranda at the palace in Hazenbak and Sally played with eightmonth-old Anthony. “He’s rotten, I assure you. And a dozen?

I was thinking three or even two?”

Sally laughed as Anthony tried to grab at her earrings. “That would be a travesty, this child loves people; he needs siblings, not just one sibling.”

Lia rolled her eyes before reaching over to pick up her ice-cold drink. “Wait until you have carried one inside of you and then you might not be so gung-ho to have an army of your own.”

Sally ticked his chubby neck and Anthony let out peals of baby laughter. She turned to Lia, “See, how can you not adore this little creature?”

Lia smiled, “I do adore him. As does his nanny, Taylor, and his aunties and his grandparents. And that doesn’t even mention the one who spoils him most of all.” “His daddy?” Sally asked with a smile.

Lia nodded. “Nick is the worst.”

“Are you maligning me, my love?” Nick's voice came from the open patio doors.

Lia smiled up at him and received his kiss. “Of course, I am. Sally here is trying to convince me that we need to have a dozen children.”

Nick paled. “I was thinking three or four?”

Sally raised a brow. “I will agree with four, it’s a smidge paltry...”

“What is paltry?” Benedict asked as he joined them on the terrace.

“Sally is deciding how many children we should have,” Lia said good-naturedly.

Benedict laughed, “And what was the deciding vote?”

“Four,” Sally said with her chin tilted in defiance. “I suggested a dozen, but they aren’t up to the challenge.”

The minute she said that Sally wondered what it would be like if she and Benedict were to ever marry and have children. It was a ridiculous thought, one that she had no right entertaining. Sally wasn’t Queen material. But the thought of having a little boy or girl with his bright eyes and her dark curls quite arrested her.

"I think *you* should have a dozen," Benedict said huskily into her ear as he picked up his nephew and took him into his arms.

Sally felt flushed and wondered if Nick and Lia had overheard Benedict just then. But they had moved on to discuss the bevy of beauties that had arrived yesterday.

"I feel like they are a bit predatory," Nick was saying, "If

anything, I think Benedict should invite some single males to balance the tables."

Lia's lips pressed together. "If even one of them comes near you..."

Nick grinned at her, "Jealous, my love?"

"Determined, territorial, slightly crazy," Benedict offered, blowing his sister a kiss. Anthony tugged on his ear and started chewing on his tie.

Sally couldn't help but stare as Benedict played with his nephew. The large man was perfectly at home with a child in his arms. Lia had said it wasn't always like this and in truth, Sally remembered his christening, when Benedict had been afraid to even pick up the baby.

But obviously, things had changed—for the better in her opinion.

"Be careful, Benny, I am here to help, but I could always switch my allegiance and start assisting the brides instead."

Benedict's face fell. "You wouldn't! Stinky, I apologize!"

Lia laughed, "What for?"

"Everything," he said dramatically, making Anthony squeal and bat with his arms. "Just don't help them, I was hoping you could get rid of them. Start listing my faults, don't you have a list somewhere?"

Nick sat down next to Lia with a cold drink of his own that he had poured from the side table. "I made her stop keeping a list. It was taking up way too much room, Meron is a small country."

Benedict turned to Anthony, "Your daddy is evil; I'm sorry, kid, things don't look good for you."

Anthony slobbered and then got a particularly strained look on his face.

Benedict panicked, "Oh no! You are not pooping on me today!"

With the speed of a gazelle, he raced Anthony over to Lia's outstretched arms. Anthony passed some rather loud gas before trying to chew on his hands.

"Are you hungry, Little Man?" Lia stood. "I am going to take Anthony in, it's almost time for his nap. And it looks like your harem is coming around the gardens."

Benedict groaned. Lia was right, the tour of the palace did look like it was ending. There were five young ladies that were vying to be the next queen of Hazenbak.

The first, Auralia, was part of the Hazenbak monarchy. Auralia had grown up with nannies and tutors over the years while playing the tennis circuit, so she wasn't as familiar with Lia or Benedict as one might have guessed.

Auralia was Sally's favorite, and that had nothing to do with the fact that Auralia had a girlfriend that she loved very much. It was a tricky situation with her parents, the Duke and Duchess of Ridding, who were incredibly old fashioned and conservative in their beliefs.

Sally had spent some time the previous evening after dinner speaking with Auralia and found the tall brazen woman rather refreshing. Being a renowned tennis player, Auralia and had many funny stories about matches and places she had traveled to over the years.

The second woman, Maxine, was from a small country near Belgium. She was soft spoken and often averted her eyes when addressed directly. Sally wasn't sure what her story was because the woman was so tight-lipped. But she didn't like the way Maxine eyed Benedict when she didn't think he was looking.

The third woman was no other than his former girlfriend, Melinda, a duchess in her small nation of Trenton. She walked into the palace like she owned the place and hadn't stopped bossing people around since. Twice she tried

to give Sally direction. The first time Sally ignored her. The second time Benedict had overheard and told Melinda that if she was rude to any of his other guests she would be asked to leave.

The woman laughed and placed a hand on Benedict's chest, "Darling, you always were so cranky."

Sally huffed when she saw that Melinda was indeed in the group coming up to the veranda. The last thing she wanted to do was cuddle up with the black widow and listen to her nasty venom.

The last young lady was an American. Stacy's family owned a great deal of property in Europe and from what Lia said, her father was a shoo-in for president if he played his cards right. Sally really wanted to hate Stacy. She was pretty, thin, had gorgeous hair and an amazing smile. But that wasn't the worst part. Stacy was, Sally admitted, nice.

How rude was that? You can't hate someone that is utterly adorable!

Stacy caught her gaze as they made their way over to the seating area and came to sit beside her with Auralia in tow.

"We missed you on the tour," Stacy said, her blue eyes sparkling.

Sally smiled wanly, "I was, erm..."

“She was meeting me, my wife, and our son,” Nick stepped into the gap and proceeded to introduce himself. He explained that Lia would be around later and then asked questions about the girls and their countries.

Sally blew out a sigh of relief. For some reason, she felt like she needed to justify her place with these women. She knew it didn’t make any sense, but the feeling of not being good enough was almost strangling her.

Not only that, but Sally didn’t know what to say. She was Lia’s friend, not Benedict’s. She had wanted to be his friend, maybe even a little more, but that hadn’t worked out. And now she was to be his silent business associate? She certainly couldn’t tell them anything about that.

“How long are you staying?” Auralia asked, popping a tomato cherry into her mouth.

Sally eyed the veggie tray and wondered if it was worth getting up for. Lord, she felt lazy in the afternoon sun.

“I will be here a month,” Sally said with a smile, “How about you?”

Auralia shrugged, “Until Prince Charming chooses his

Cinderella, I guess.”

Sally’s smile fell as she looked over at Benedict, who was conversing with Maxine. Was she his Cinderella?

Suddenly she wasn’t hungry at all. “Please excuse me, I need to get something inside.”

Sally rose and began walking into the palace, her heels clicking on the marble floor.

“Sally, wait!”

She turned to see Auralia rushing after her with a concerned look on her face.

Chapter 35

"SALLY, WAIT!" SALLY TURNED AND TRIED PASTING A SMILE ON her face. "I just need to..."

Auralia shook her head. "Not here."

She tucked Sally's arm into her own and they walked past the servants who were in wait of the king and down the corridor until they reached the music room. There Auralia closed the doors and motioned for Sally to come sit on the sofa beside her.

"Sally, I must apologize, I didn't know."

Sally shook her head, "There is nothing to apologize for. There is nothing between King Benedict and me. I would be

a fool to even assume that there could be."

Auralia raised a brow. "What do you mean?"

Sally let out a long sigh. "I come from a family that runs a housekeeping service. Kings don't marry maids, not

outside of fairy tales they don't."

"And what if the king was in love with the maid?" she asked, playing along.

Sally shook her head. "Even if the king was mad enough

to fall in love with the maid, he couldn't marry her. She wouldn't have what was necessary to be queen."

"And who made those rules?" Auralia asked in an even tone.

Sally raised her hands. "I don't know, everyone?"

"I see," Auralia nodded, "because I should think that the same people that made those rules would be the ones that would say I can never be with Oliva. It doesn't matter that we are in love or that she is my soul mate. It isn't done and therefore we will never be together. Am I getting this right?"

Sally covered her mouth. "No, goodness, no! I would never think that."

Auralia smiled kindly. "Do what I say but not as I do?"

Sally's shoulders fell, "I don't know. There was once a time when I thought there might be something between us. But then his father died, and he needed me at the academy. Auralia, do you ever feel like your chance at happiness passed you by when you weren't looking?"

Auralia took a deep breath, but answered shortly, "No. And the reason why is that I think happiness is something you fight for. It's not handed to you on a silver platter no matter what walk of life you come from. Olivia and I will find a way to be together, I have no doubts about that. I will make it happen."

Sally looked at the tall brazen woman; she had fire in her eyes and passion in her voice. *Happiness is something you fight for.* Sally liked the sound of that.

"Do you have feelings for him?" Auralia asked point blank.

Sally nodded, "Yes."

A slow smile broke across Aurelia's face. "It looks like we are about to catch ourselves a king!"

"Don't hate me!" A voice came from the doorway and

Stacy poked her head inside. "I didn't mean to overhear you. Well, actually I did because I pressed my ear up the door.

But please don't be mad. I want to help."

Sally flushed to the roots of her hair. "You what?"

Stacy came inside shutting the door behind her. "The king stares at you in a way that my father looks at a steak. That man has it bad for you. And Sally, I don't think it matters where you come from. I have met a lot of royals that would sooner stab you in the back than spit in your eye."
"What does that mean?" Auralia asked.

"It doesn't matter," Stacy rushed on. "What matters is that you are good people. I can sense that. And you like him, don't you?"

Sally blew out a breath, "Yes."

Stacy beamed. "Perfect, now, I need to give you a little insight on those two that are out there. I know that you are aware he was in a relationship with Melinda. Well, she really did one over on his best friend Luke. And not only that, but she spread it around that she only dated him to make Benedict jealous."

Sally frowned. "That's pretty mean."

Stacy nodded, "I heard that he had been in love with her for years and she chewed him up and spat him out. Flat out told Luke that he was never going to be king of anything."

"What a bitch," Auralia wrinkled her nose. "I never liked her, but..."

Stacy nodded, "And don't count Maxine out. She is tricky. She likes to come across as sweet and kind, but I am telling you she is not to be trusted. There was this time when we were both at the academy that she told the Dean a bunch of us cheated on a test so that we couldn't go to the

dance. And there were loads of things like that. She was always saying someone hurt her feelings or was gossiping about her. Now, I know that is what I am doing right now."

Sally laughed. "You are full of information!"

Stacy grinned. "The world of aristocrats isn't that large. The girls are usually out for blood, I didn't know about your Olivia." She turned to Auralia, "But I won't say anything. I swear it."

"And you don't want King Benedict for yourself?" Auralia asked cautiously.

Stacy shook her head, "He's handsome and charming, no doubt about it. But there isn't a spark, not like there is when he looks at Sally. It would be wrong to try and chase a man I don't love. I know that's an old-fashioned idea these days. Who actually marries for love? But my parents did and that is the kind of relationship I want to have with my future husband."

Sally stretched out her hands to Stacy and then Auralia, "Thank you, thank you both for coming after me. I never in a million years thought I would make friends with Benedict's bevy of beauties."

Stacy and Auralia burst into laughter.

"Is that what he is calling this?" Stacy wiped her eyes, "I must admit, I like it."

Sally nodded, "He said that the council has been after him to marry."

Stacy smiled, "And so he shall."

Sally grimaced, "I don't know. I don't want to get my hopes up just to see them dashed."

"You said you were staying a month," Auralia reminded her. "Well, let's see what happens in a month."

"But she needs to seduce him," Stacy argued, "not just wait around."

Auralia smiled, "I agree."

Sally drew back. "What on earth would I know about seduction?"

Stacy beamed. "Well, child, you have come to the right place."

FOR THE NEXT TWO HOURS, the three ladies laughed and threw ideas back and forth. It seemed the longer they chatted the more ridiculous the ideas became. They may not have settled anything, but they did go a long way into establishing a firm friendship.

A little while later there was a knock at the door and then Lia entered.

"Did I miss the party?"

Auralia and Stacy immediately straightened their postures and put on their 'social' faces. Sally grinned now that she could tell the difference. Introductions were made, and Lia made it a

point to be kind to them both, but her main concern was Sally. Benedict told her that she had left the terrace abruptly and not returned.

But she seemed to be in good spirits and Lia felt a sense of relief. When she first saw Sally with two of the women that were prospective brides of Benedict, she feared the worst.

“Everyone is dressing for dinner, shall we?” Lia suggested.

They stood and went into the hallway; when Sally turned to go toward the family rooms with Lia, Stacy and Aurelia’s eyes grew wide.

Sally motioned for them not to say anything, but she heard their giggles as she walked away.

“I like them,” Lia announced cautiously.

Sally nodded, “I do as well. I hadn’t anticipated it, but they are actually quite fun. About dinner,” she cleared her throat, “I really don’t have things that would work for…”

“I sent some dresses to your rooms, they should fit, but if not, Mrs. Grant is an excellent seamstress.”

Sally blinked, “You can’t buy me dresses.”

Lia laughed, “Okay, I didn’t buy them. I am sent hundreds of gowns from designers hoping that I will wear them to one event or another. I only sent the ones I wouldn’t wear.”

She crossed her fingers behind her back. In truth, she had picked out the loveliest gowns for Sally to wear, but she needn’t know that.

“I also have some jewels that I left here that I will bring around.”

“I can’t,” Sally shook her head, “Lia, it’s too much!”

Lia scoffed. “Anything I had from before is literally collecting dust. I will be highly offended if you don’t.”

“You are blackmailing me!” Sally took her hands, “Lia, I can’t.”

Lia smiled into Sally’s worried blue eyes. “You can, and you will.”

Chapter 36

SALLY STARTED DOWN THE STAIRS IN AN OFF THE SHOULDER beaded gown in a deep purple. Her black hair had been styled in loose curls that fell down to the middle of her back. The purple of the dress made her blue eyes pop and the fitted gown hugged her every curve.

“You look,” Benedict trailed off as he moved forward. In a chivalrous gesture that belonged to another era, he picked up her hand and tenderly kissed her palm. “You look ravishing.”

Sally blushed, “Thank you. You look dashing yourself.”

Benedict was dressed in a navy suit that looked as if it was made for him, indeed, it probably was.

Tucking her hand in the crook of his elbow, Benedict walked with Sally the remainder of the way into the room where the others were mingling.

Auralia, Stacy, Maxine, and Melinda were already waiting in the salon along with a smattering of parents and other dignitaries. A great many of them frowned upon seeing Sally on the handsome king’s arm.

Auralia stood, with a broad smile, and walked over to them. “Sally, you look amazing.”

Auralia was clad in a tight red dress that showed off her impossibly long legs and gorgeous shoulders.

“You look incredible as well,” Sally motioned to her shoes, “Those are killer.”

Auralia laughed, “They are killer on my feet as well. You are looking well, Your Highness.”

Benedict smiled, “You are beautiful, Lady Auralia, as always.”

The honorifics always had Sally at a loss. In Tennessee, people were just people. You didn’t have to worry about offending someone when you didn’t address them properly.

“King Benedict, if you would excuse the interruption, I need a word.”

It was Habersham, one of Benedict’s advisors. With a nod and a word of apology to the girls, Benedict stepped to the side to speak with Habersham. Auralia took Sally’s arm and walked with her over to where Stacy was sitting.

“You look fierce,” Stacy looked like something out of a fashion magazine. Her svelte body was perfect for the dress with the plunging neckline and nonexistent back.

Sally whistled, “Girl, I think you are the one that looks fierce.”

Stacy grinned. “I love your accent!”

Sally blushed. “Is my southern showing again?”

They laughed together, and Sally felt some of her nerves untangle.

“Auralia,” Stacy bit her lip, “can I ask you something personal?”

Auralia raised a brow, “I suppose.”

“Where is Olivia?”

“Oh, well, she’s here. Not as in the palace here, but she

lives in Hazenbak. She’s a lawyer and a damn good one at that.”

“What type of law does she practice?” Sally asked.

“Something with tax I think?” Auralia blushed. “I should know that, shouldn’t I?”

Stacy laughed. “My brain tends to turn off when you talk about things like taxes or politics. I tend to hear white noise.”

Sally grinned, “My granny used to say that nobody does any thinking in politics these days.”

Auralia inclined her head toward Benedict. “Let’s hope that one uses his noggin.”

They looked over to see that Melinda had joined the conversation with Habersham. Sally narrowed her eyes. It seemed like Melinda was standing terribly close to Benedict. Her laughter was forced, and her tits couldn’t be real.

She was wearing a black gown that sparkled every time she moved and showed a tremendous amount of perfectly formed breasts. Sally gritted her teeth. The woman was a viper.

Lia and Nick entered the room along with a tall gentleman that Sally recognized as Luke, the Duke of Hastings. Lia smiled at everyone when she entered but walked straight to where Sally and her little group were standing.

“I love that dress on you,” Lia said with a sparkle in her eye.

Lia was dressed in an apple green dress that was the perfect foil for her deep red curls. There weren’t many that could pull it off, but Lia wore it brilliantly.

Introductions were made, and Luke immediately recognized Sally. “I was hoping to see you, Benedict mentioned

that he wanted you to stay on.”

Sally nodded shortly. “For a month.”

Luke smiled widely. “How fortunate for me then. I am afraid that I have been called in to help beat back the wolves.”

Stacy gasped but Auralia laughed. “I like you!”

He smoothed his blonde hair back and gave her a killer grin. “There is a lot to like.”

Stacy wrinkled her nose.

Dinner was announced and to Sally’s surprise, Benedict excused himself from Habersham and Melinda to come and take her arm.

Luke offered his arm to Auralia and then offered the other to Stacy who took it hesitantly.

“I don’t bite,” he winked at her, “often.”

Auralia burst into another peal of laughter, “Honestly, where were they keeping you?”

Luke shrugged. “I suppose that when they needed to call in the big guns, I was first on the list.”

Nick, overhearing the conversation, added, “He was the only one on the list.”

Luke sent a feigned scowl at Nick. “Don’t tell all of my secrets!”

He passed Melinda without saying a word. Sally knew of the brief affair they had conducted a few years ago before Benedict was made a king. She wondered if he still had any feelings for the girl. Sally also wondered about Olivia. It didn’t seem fair that Auralia was forced by her family to be vying for the king when she was deeply in love with someone else.

Things were different back home. People were free to be with whomever they loved. Sally had two incredibly good friends that had grown up part of the LGBT community. Her friend Bradley had both girlfriends and boyfriends depending on what relationship he was in at the time. Even-

tually, he ended up in a polyamorous relationship and as far as Sally knew, they were incredibly happy.

Her best friend in high school, Tara, came out their senior year when she started dating Danielle who was on the dance team. The relationship didn’t last awfully long, but Sally had been there every step of the way. Tara’s parents had been incredibly supportive. Sally remembered them hugging Tara and telling her how brave she was for telling her truth.

Sally was a huge proponent of not hiding who you really were. It angered her that Aurelia’s parents couldn’t see that they had a gorgeous, intelligent daughter who happened to be in love with another woman. They should be celebrating her and not forcing her to meet different men.

Dinner was a long affair that consisted of seven courses and a shit load of stilted conversation. By the time they retired to the salon, Sally had a headache and wished Maxine and her grating laugh to perdition.

She slipped out onto the balcony for a few minutes of peace and was quickly followed by Auralia.

“If I had any duct tape,” Auralia grumbled.

Sally laughed, “I would help!”

“Olivia would have died; she has little tolerance for fake socialites.”

Sally smiled, “Tell me about her.”

A soft smile broke across Aurelia’s face. “She’s a little taller than you are, much curvier, she would say fat, but the girl looks amazing. Her blonde hair is cut in a severe bob and hangs perfectly no matter what she is doing. She swears

like a sailor, drinks like a fish and is smart as fuck.”

Sally smiled, “She sounds wonderful.”

Auralia nodded. “She is.”

“Do you get to spend much time with her?”

Her smiled dimmed. “Not so much anymore, my parents suspected that something was between us and told her she wasn’t welcome at our home. Olivia doesn’t want to come between me and my parents. She loves me so much and worries that I would come to resent her. It’s not the case; the people I resent are my parents. I get sick of them telling me that I’m going to hell.”

“Please tell me you don’t think that?” Sally placed a hand on her arm. “Auralia, you know that isn’t true, don’t you?”

Chapter 37

AURALIA TOOK A SHUDDERING BREATH AND TRIED TO SMILE. But the pain of her parent's constant rejection and criticism shone in her beautiful eyes. It was difficult going through life knowing that no matter how hard you tried to please someone; no matter how much you faked being the perfect daughter, that you—the real you—would never be good enough.

Did she honestly believe that she was going to hell?

No.

Was life with her parent's sometimes a hell on earth?

Yes.

"I know that they are old-fashioned in their beliefs. But I cannot change who I am, and I don't want to be someone else."

Sally slipped her hand into Aurelia's. "You are stunning, smart, and one of the kindest people I have ever had the chance to know. There is not one tiny ounce of you that should change. Your Olivia, she loves the woman you are. And in these few days, I have come to think of you as a dear friend. So, at the risk of ruining that friendship, can I ask you something?"

Auralia looked away and then brought her gaze back to Sally's. The insecurity that Sally saw there only fueled her onward.

"Could you live your life going against your parent's wishes?"

Aurelia's eyes widened. "Come out, you mean?"

Sally bit her lip. "I don't know what it would look like, to be honest. But what if Olivia were willing to acknowledge the relationship publicly. Would you..."

Before Sally could even get the rest of the sentence out Aurelia's eyes were beaming and she smiled wide.

"I wouldn't care what my parents said. I love Olivia and I know that she loves me. She's just afraid and doesn't want to hurt me. She doesn't have very much family left and worries about my parents disowning me. How can I convince her that we are worth taking that chance?"

Sally smiled. "Leave that to me. If you are going to help me catch a king, or at least bed one. I will help you snag a curvy lawyer."

Auralia threw her arms around Sally. "You are heaven sent. Do you know that?"

"Hey, I can't believe that the two of you are having a love fest without me!"

Stacy stood at the open doorway to the balcony with a teasing frown on her face.

They motioned for her to come out and Auralia told Stacy about their new plan.

Stacy's cheeks pinked. "As long as we are discussing secrets…"

"Tell!" Sally demanded playfully. "What are you hiding?"

"What do you think of the Duke of Hastings?" Color tainted her porcelain skin as Stacy waited for them to answer.

"He's very attractive," Auralia said, "But I have to say, he has a reputation with the ladies. And I know he had something going with Melinda for a while after she broke it off with King Benedict."

Stacy's face dimmed.

"However," Auralia said kindly, "he seems to be very well spoken and his two best friends have grown out of their terrible reputations; maybe Luke will as well. What are you looking for from him?"

Stacy bit her lip. "I hardly know. But I do like him. There is something about his smile, the way his lips tilt up that has me thinking about naughty things. I don't believe in love at first sight. But I do feel that I have fallen hopelessly into lust at first sight. Is it wrong to want to know what he looks like naked?"

Sally burst out laughing. "If it is, I know plenty of other people that are as wrong as you are."

Auralia grinned. "Pretty much everyone with a pulse has wanted to see one person or another in the buff."

"So, you don't judge me for wanting to sleep with Luke?" Stacy's voice was timid, her eyes cast down. "I'm not a slut."

Sally frowned. "You are a healthy woman that has a healthy sexual appetite. There is nothing wrong with that. They don't call men sluts, and with the reputations that Benedict and Luke possess as ladies' men, it would seem that the shoe fits."

Auralia laughed. "That would make them slutty

Cinderellas."

Stacy looked up at Sally and Auralia. "It's not often that I can say how I am really feeling without someone judging my every move. I am so grateful that I came to Hazenbak."

Auralia nodded. "Me too. Who could have guessed that coming to a matchmaking farce would lead me to such good friends?"

"We need to toast," Sally decided, "Or make a pact. We have one month, and in that month, we are going to move heaven and earth to change our secret wishes into reality. Are you with me?"

Each of the girls shoved their hands into the middle, piling one on top of the other.

“To royal secrets,” Auralia called out.

“To royal secrets,” they repeated in unison, and then turned with determination to re-enter the salon.

BENEDICT WAS STANDING near the fire wondering where on earth Sally had disappeared to. He was tired of exchanging pleasantries with everyone but her. He was also more than certain that Habersham was shoving Melinda down his throat.

Tomorrow he would have a firm conversation with the man about boundaries.

Auralia, Stacy, and Sally came sailing back into the room. There was a unified confidence about them that caught everyone’s eye. Sally’s red lips were turned up in a smile and she met everyone’s gaze with her head held high.

She was stunning. Everything about her was gorgeous,

her body, her heart, her face, her soul. Before he knew it, Benedict was halfway across the room. Leaving Maxine trailing off in mid-sentence.

He stopped in front of Sally. Auralia and Stacy gave each other knowing looks and faded into the crowd as Benedict stared at his prey.

Sally’s chin went up. “Yes, Your Highness?”

Benedict’s eyes hardened. “Benedict or Ben, you promised.”

There were murmurs around the room, those that heard him were aghast at the implication that this American girl actually meant something to him.

Sally stood her ground. “Benedict, did you need me for something?”

His cock was growing thick and his hands itched to reach out and drag her luscious body against his. Did he need anything? That had to be the understatement of the year. He needed her—damn it.

He hadn’t had a woman in his bed since before that impromptu trip to Tennessee. His own hand didn’t staunch the ache in his balls to be deep inside of her. To fuck her so hard that he didn’t know where he ended, and she began.

Her concerned voice as she whispered his name, “Ben?” snapped him out of his thoughts.

In a snap decision, Benedict took Sally’s arm and fairly dragged her from the room. She stumbled to keep up with his rapid pace in her stiletto heels.

“What has gotten into you?” she panted as he pulled her into his office.

As soon as she cleared the door, in a masterful stroke of genius he had her pressed against the wall. The door shutting beside them and his body burning into her own. She felt his massive erection pressed against her belly.

Sally's core ached, and her pussy dampened at the thought that this man. He wasn't a king in this moment. He was all man, and he wanted her. She was nobody. A glorified maid from the country. Confusion and conflict spread across her face as she tried to read his eyes.

"Stop thinking," he growled.

Sally opened her mouth to respond but his lips silenced her.

The moment of contact was like an explosion of energy. Sally's knees shook, and her body felt oddly disconnected. She had never before been kissed with such heat. The fierce possession had her clinging to his shoulders, whether to pull him closer or to keep from falling she honestly didn't know.

His hands cupped her face as if he held the world in his hands.

He loved the way their lips met as if they were long lost lovers. This was how kisses were supposed to feel. This bone-melting, life-changing moment when everything became clear. Benedict would have given up everything, his life, his kingdom, his world just to spend five minutes in her arms.

He had been a fool to let things go for so long.

Sally moaned, low in her throat and his hands slipped down to her round ass, hauling her even tighter against him. That sound, dear heaven above, he needed her to make it again.

Chapter 38

29 DAYS...

Sally didn't know what she had been anticipating when Benedict had yanked her into his office. But this... this kiss had been wholly unexpected! She gasped as his mouth demanded a response. He wasn't just kissing her. He was devouring her. The hunger and need in his kiss spurred her on. Desire flamed in her belly; the spark of attraction was just more than she could stand.

Her breasts felt heavy and wanted his attention. Her pussy was wet with need. Of all dresses to be wearing at a time like this, the fitted purple gown was not one that she could easily maneuver out of.

She felt the impressive length of Benedict's cock against her belly and her hand moved to cup the front of his suit pants.

Benedict growled and rolled his hips against her palm. Never had he been so close to taking a woman in public in his life. His desire for Sally knew no bounds. There was a knock at the study door, "Benedict?" His sister Lia's voice rang out loud and clear.

Benedict's first response was to ignore her in the typical older brother, *I know better than you do,* fashion. However, when she pounded on the door, Benedict wrenched his lips away from Sally's.

He answered harshly, "What is it?"

"I need to speak with you about the project we had for

Sally. Nick is here to give his ideas as well."

Benedict groaned dropping a light kiss on Sally's lips before rearranging his massive hard-on and allowing them entrance.

Once the door was closed Lia stuck her finger into his chest.

"Just what in the hell do you think you are doing?" she hissed. "You can't ruin Sally's reputation like that. You almost carried her caveman style out of a room of your guests. The speculation and gossip began immediately."

Nick grimaced, "Sorry, Mate, I tried to cover and say that you had remembered something critical that needed to be discussed on a project Sally was going over."

Benedict didn't give a damn what others thought of him. But he would never want to harm Sally nor see her name muddied by the press. He bowed politely to Sally.

"I do beg your pardon," he said stiffly.

Sally sat there stunned with swollen lips and hair that was quickly falling from her chignon.

"It's alright?" It was supposed to be a statement, but Sally was turned all around from that kiss.

Nick cleared his throat. "You can't send her out there like that."

Sally blushed to the roots of her hair. A hand went up to touch the curls that had fallen from her fancy updo. Then her eyes went to Benedict's face and she saw the traces of red lipstick.

Nick pulled out a handkerchief, "Clean yourself up and you and I will return. Lia and Sally, can take the secret passageway."

Benedict wiped his face and straightened his suit. It was amazing how quickly he could pull himself together. Sally on the other hand still felt like she was reeling. That kiss, it was unlike any other. What was she doing getting involved with him?

Could she really walk away in twenty-nine days? Because that is how this was going to end, wasn't it? A cold feeling sank into the pit of her stomach.

Lia extended her hand to Sally. "Let's go."

Benedict moved to the fireplace and pulled a hidden lever. A door opened beside the mantle and they stepped inside.

Sally wasn't sure what she was expecting. Perhaps cobwebs and the scurrying of little feet below. But the passageway was clean and well lit. Her only complaint would be that it was a tad bit narrow. They went up a set of steps and took the second right. Lia pressed another lever and a door opened in an opulent bedroom.

It looked like something a king would have, and then it hit her.

"Is this Benedict's room?"

Lia nodded. "Yes, still gives me the creeps because of my father. Benny didn't do much to change it, said that was a waste of good money. You can tell that he's nothing like my father. All of this," she gestured to the gilded furniture and expensive decorations, "this was just another example of how my father liked to live. Appearances were everything, people were secondary."

Sally frowned. "I can't imagine. I grew up mainly with my granny and she thought the world of me. I am sorry that your father couldn't see what he had right in front of him."

Lia smiled. "Thank you for that. Now, I am going to be intrusive so please forgive me."

Sally winced. "Are you going to ask about Benedict?"

"Do you have feelings for him? Honestly, I know it's none of my business. But I have to ask, I am fairly dying to ask. Nick made me promise to keep my mouth shut, that's why I had to wait until we were alone."

Sally laughed despite her embarrassment. "This is to be our little secret?"

Lia grimaced. “That and the fact that I am fairly certain I am expecting again.”

Sally’s eyes widened in disbelief. “Are you sure?”

“Three pregnancy tests and morning sickness aren’t usually wrong,” Lia flopped down in a chair in front of the fireplace.

Sally felt odd hanging out in Benedict’s bedroom but followed suit. “Does Nick know?”

Lia shook her head, “Heavens no. We are just getting used to Tony, I can’t spring this on him.”

“Won’t he figure it out?” Sally asked kindly. “It’s not like he will be angry.”

Lia twisted her hands, “I know, it’s just if I tell him then it makes it more real and I’m scared. Babies are hard. I know what you are thinking, just hire another nanny. But from someone that grew up with constant nannies, it’s not what I want for my children. I am in over my head!”

Sally reached out a hand and gave Lia’s arm a comforting squeeze. “Did I ever tell you about Bonnie Mae?

She was a neighbor of ours in Tennessee.” Lia shook her head. “Not that I can recall.”

“Well, Bonnie Mae and her husband Keith were married

for ten years and were never once able to conceive a child. Thinking that they would never be able to they adopted a beautiful little boy. He was there maybe a month when she

discovered she was pregnant, with twins.”

Lia blanched, “Three at the same time?”

“It gets more interesting,” Sally warned. “Over the next seven years she had five more. So, in the end, she had eight children in the span of nine years. Bonnie used to say that she cried every Mother’s Day because she didn’t have any children. And after she cried because she had too many.”

Lia laughed despite herself, “What did she do?”

“I asked her once how she managed, and Bonnie said to me that the only thing you can do is your best to love them and keep them safe. They will break bones, cause grey hairs, fight, stumble, and be a pain in your backside. But if you love them, everything will be okay. Now I know that it’s harder than what she made it out to be. But there is good advice there.”

Lia nodded, “You are right, and I am excited to have a brother or sister for Tony. Benny means the world to me. I can’t imagine growing up without him. Which leads me back to you and him.”

Sally took a deep breath and blurted out, “I think I am falling for him. And I know that is ridiculous because he is a king, and I am nobody.”

Lia's eyes blazed. "I never want to hear you say that again."

Sally's mouth snapped shut. She wasn't used to Lia using such a firm tone.

"My father believed that people were lesser than us because of the circumstances of their birth. Benny and I are not under such illusions. The caliber of an individual is based on who they are, not their lineage. Please don't ever say you are a nobody. Sally, you are a dear friend of mine. You are a kind and loving granddaughter. You sacrificed two years of your life to change that bloody school into something Hazenbak can be proud of. You are quite possibly one of the most remarkable women I have ever known."

Sally felt a lump in her throat. Suddenly it became clear to her that the negative self-talk had been detrimental to her self-esteem. This wasn't who she was. In Hazenbak, she had been uncertain of where she fit in. And therefore, she had found herself lacking. Sally didn't stop to consider that she was the one who put herself in the category. It hadn't been Lia or Benedict.

"You are right," she said thickly, "I shouldn't have said it."

Lia leaned her head against the chair, "Is it wrong of me to want the two of you to end up together?"

Sally sighed, "Is it wrong of me to wish the same thing?"

Chapter 39

28 DAYS...

"You must be Ms. Galena?" Benedict welcomed the beautiful woman into his office.

"I am Olivia Galena, Your Highness. It is a pleasure to be at the palace. Please call me Olivia."

When Sally had asked him the previous evening if he would consider bringing the woman to the palace to help figure out where the missing revenue was going, he had been hesitant. The fewer people knew about their difficulties the better.

But Sally had been rather insistent. Perhaps it was seeing her waiting for him in his bedchambers that softened his resolve. Or the way that her eyes blazed when she spoke of Aurelia's friend. He really couldn't be sure what had done it. But he knew that his days were dwindling and if he wanted to build a relationship with Sally, he needed to trust her.

Olivia was a little taller than Sally and voluptuous. Her short blond hair fell perfectly against her creamy skin. She was truly lovely, and her eyes sparkled with intelligence.

Sally stepped forward. "It's nice to meet you in person, Olivia. Auralia has already told me so many wonderful things about you that I feel like I know you."

Olivia blushed. "It is the same for me. She speaks highly of you, ma'am."

Sally shook her head, "No, you insisted that I call you Olivia, please, call me Sally."

Olivia nodded, "Of course, thank you, Sally. Now, you said that you had need of my expertise?"

Benedict's lips pursed. "To be honest, Olivia, we aren't sure what we need. But Sally here thought that you might have an idea of what we can do. I must ask that you swear to keep the things that we are about to discuss, confidential."

Olivia's eyes widened. "Of course, Your Highness."

Benedict nodded. "Well, it began when my father passed away..."

He went on to talk about the missing funds, the misappropriated tax dollars, and the deficits that continued to grow. By the time he finished, Olivia was more than a little bit overwhelmed. But she was also determined to help her king and country. If someone was stealing from her homeland, she would do everything possible to stop them.

"I need to see the books," she said decisively. "Let's look at the percentage and how its rate has increased or decreased, when those seasons are; and then look at a different way of storing the country's assets."

For the first time in ages, Benedict felt a frisson of hope. Sally had been right, they needed someone working with them that had a better knowledge of how and where the money could have been stolen.

Olivia settled in right away and began to work.

Benedict excused himself for a moment and asked that Sally follow him. She rose with butterflies in her stomach

but made sure to remain confident and unruffled on the outside.

Sally loved the way Benedict's trousers hugged his perfect ass and sadly was spending so much time watching it that she hadn't realized he had stopped. Her body careened into his and she gasped grabbing him around the waist to keep herself from falling.

Benedict turned and clutched her in his arms. The feeling of her warm body against his was everything he had been waiting for. With a quick glance up and down the hallway he made certain that they were alone before grabbing Sally's hand and walking with purpose to a room that she had never entered before.

The moment Benedict had her inside the darkened room he pressed her body against the thick wooden door and his lips crashed into hers. Her taste invaded his senses, her lips parting in the sweetest surrender.

This was madness, he knew it as well as he knew that it could be moments before they were interrupted. But he desperately needed her, to touch her silky skin, to hear her gasps of pleasure and to feel the moment when she fully gave herself to him.

His hands moved to the back of her skirt as he continued to kiss her senseless. Her body tensed as his fingers brushed the lace fabric of her underwear.

Sally broke away.

"We can't," her breathing was labored. "We need to get back."

"Just let me touch you."

Sally knew that she shouldn't, but it felt to damn good to push away. Before she could utter another word, his lips were on hers once again and she was drowning in the perfection of his kiss.

His fingers cupped her firm ass and then slipped beneath the hem of her panties. The slick evidence of her arousal was all Benedict needed to know that she was every bit as invested in this as he was.

He stroked her softness, tenderly at first and then when she began to whimper into his kiss, he entered her. First one finger and then another, he stroked into her slick channel, his fingers doing what his cock ached to do.

Sally's skirt was around her waist and her legs were spread for him. She couldn't have been more vulnerable in that moment and yet she felt treasured by him. Maybe this was her one chance to see what might have been? All she knew that was that if he continued stoking her that way she would be coming apart in his arms.

Benedict withdrew his hand and she literally grunted in protest. But before any words were spoken Benedict had sunk to his knees and was shoving his face where his fingers had just been.

Sally's hands sank into his hair and she tried to stifle the screams that begged to be released from her throat. His wicked tongue taking her higher and higher until with a soft cry she came, shuddering, trembling, and it was glorious.

Benedict rose, his hair rumpled and his eyes dancing. "We need to get back."

Sally blinked at him, trying to gather her wits. "But you?"

He leaned down and kissed her softly. "This wasn't about me. It was for you."

SALLY, Benedict, and Olivia were closeted up in his office for most of the day. Olivia hadn't mentioned the disheveled look of their clothing when they reappeared. She only dove into questions about several different accounts.

There had been several times when someone tried to interrupt. Surprisingly, Habersham had insisted on the King participating in some of the events scheduled for the bevy of beauties.

Benedict eyed the advisor with disdain. "Habersham, when I say no interruptions that means no interruptions. So, unless it is my sister or her husband at the door, no one else will be welcomed."

When he closed the door on Habersham's face Sally wanted to cheer. She hated that sour-faced matchmaking idiot that treated her like the scullery maid.

Olivia was smart enough to keep her mouth shut about the interaction, but she had noticed that the lovely blackhaired girl named Sally seemed to be on very intimate terms with her king. She also noticed that her king doted on every word that the American said. It was oddly endearing.

Sadly, Olivia could only think about her impossible relationship with Auralia. She loved the tall dark toned woman. And it wasn't just her smoking hot body that drew Olivia in. Not that it didn't help, mind you.

Auralia was all legs, toned from long days on the tennis court.

But that wasn't the only thing that made Auralia special. She worried a little bit about what Auralia would think when she saw that Olivia had been invited to the palace.

Olivia was under no illusions that they would one day be together. How could that even be possible? It was only in the last twenty-five years that same-sex relationships could even be acknowledged in Europe. Before that, it was a crime punishable by death.

Hazenbak was not as up to date as the United Kingdom

or other parts of the world. It was true that homosexuality was no longer a crime, but it wasn't as commonplace as it might be in the United States or in larger countries.

Olivia knew that she was lucky, her parents had loved and accepted her. This was not usually the case and hadn't been Aurelia's experience when she tried to speak to her parents about her sexuality.

They had insisted that Auralia was going through a rebellious phase.

As if your whole DNA makeup could be described as a phase. It was intolerable, ignorant, and yet that was Aurelia's parents' take on the matter.

"Come along with me," Sally said cheerfully. "Before we dress for dinner there is someone that wants to see you."

Olivia felt excitement begin to build in the base of her stomach. It had been weeks since she had seen Auralia. They spoke on the phone, but it wasn't the same as seeing the one you love face to face.

Sally led her to the guest suite two doors down from the one that Olivia's things had been taken to when she first arrived. After knocking the door was flung open and Sally and Olivia were yanked inside.

Olivia was immediately wrapped in the taller woman's arms. The softness of her breasts pressing against her own and the heat of her thighs brushing up against Olivia's nearly had her seeing stars.

Aurelia's hands cupped her face and then Olivia was being kissed. The most tender, passionate kiss of her lifetime. She vaguely heard the faint sound of the door being closed behind Sally's retreat. All Olivia could do was hold on to the woman she loved and kiss her back.

Her breasts felt heavy and full as Auralia tugged on her bottom lip. Olivia's hands moved of their own accord, slipping beneath Aurelia's shirt, and cupping her large breasts in her palms.

Auralia gasped and began to kiss and nip her way along Olivia's neck.

Olivia wasted no time pulling the cups of Aurelia's bra down and releasing her tits so that she could pinch and twist those tender nipples.

Auralia moaned and kicked her heels off. Her mouth hardly leaving Olivia's skin as she began to undress her. In a flurry of movement, they both tore out of their clothing. Needing their skin to do the talking. There would be time for words later.

Olivia lips wrapped around Aurelia's breast and she sucked it into her mouth.

This was what mattered, she and Auralia were meant to be. As they moved together onto the bed, she knew it from the bottom of her soul.

Their bodies met and then passion overrode them. Hands were everywhere stroking, sliding, pressing their pussies together so that when they began to move back and forth against each other it was like an explosion of the senses.

It was always this way between them. Olivia had known what would happen if she came to the palace and yet she couldn't stay away.

How could love this honest and pure be wrong? It didn't make any sense to her.

She ground her hips against Aurelia's and grunted when her clit began to throb, it would be moments before she came and damn it if she wanted to come without Auralia coming with her.

A hand slipped between them and Olivia found the tender nub that was erect and needing its release. She rubbed furiously as they scissored together until her own body shattered and Aurelia's scream indicated that she too had cum.

The lay there in each other's arms sated, bodies slick with sweat, and hearts wrapped into one.

"I love you, Liv," Auralia said softly.

Olivia closed her eyes relishing the words, "Love you too, Rail. Always."

Chapter 40

27 DAYS...

"I think someone has been matchmaking." Benedict glanced over at Sally's blushing face. He loved the way her cheeks colored, and her mouth opened and closed as if trying to come up with something, but he had genuinely surprised her. "Do you honestly think I wouldn't know?"

In truth, Sally hadn't considered that Benedict might know of her matchmaking plans for Auralia.

"I can see you didn't," he teased. "I am glad that you insisted we send for Olivia."

Sally let out a sigh of relief. "You aren't mad at me?"

Benedict shook his head, "Not in the slightest. She has an excellent head for figures and has come up with some sound suggestions on how to make the treasury perform better. I should be thanking you."

Sally smiled, the dimple on her left cheek poking out. "There isn't any need for that."

Benedict couldn't help but stare when she first walked into his office that morning. He had insisted that she wear something informal if they were to be locked away working all day. Sally had come in with worn tight blue jeans that hugged her every curve. The V-neck sweater that she had paired with it was a soft pink and looked like cashmere, but somehow, he doubted that Sally would waste the money on the expensive fabric.

Sally cared about people more than she cared about things. It was a trait that Benedict not only admired in her but longed to be better at himself. His father had been such a horrible selfish man, and Benedict had feared that he too was turning into the same type of person.

Thankfully, Benedict's younger sister Lia and her husband Nick, the prince of Meron, were always quick to let Benedict know when he was being a complete ass.

"Shall we get to work?" Sally nervously rubbed her palms on her jeans.

"About that," Benedict said with a smile, "I am supposed to check in with the Royal Academy today. I was hoping that you wouldn't mind going with me?"

"Dressed like this?" Sally looked down in dismay at her casual clothes.

Benedict referred to his own jeans and a sweater. "Yes, I am afraid that the fourth years have challenged the staff to a friendly kickball competition."

Sally was familiar with the game, hell, she taught it to them. And having served as a liaison at the school for the past two years she had attended a few of these *'friendly'* games. She even played in one last term. But there was nothing friendly about it.

“Have you played kickball before?” Sally asked hopefully.

Benedict shrugged. “Surely I must have at some point?”

Sally wasn’t too sure about that. In the United States kickball was a staple in the public-school system. One could

hardly make it through without playing this or dodgeball, which Sally still had nightmares about.

“Do you have tennis shoes or what do you call them, sneakers?” Sally asked.

Benedict looked down at his loafers. “These won’t do?”

She snorted, “No, you also want to change into something that allows you to move better. I will too and grab my

gym shoes. You’re not a bleeder, are you?”

Benedict’s eyes widened. “I beg your pardon?”

“Kick balls to the nose tend to cause nose bleeds; if you are a bleeder let’s make sure to take the first aid kit. Actually, scratch that, we will take one anyway, Lord knows they could always use it. Are you sure you are up for this?”

Benedict straightened. “I am the king of Hazenbak, certainly I can play a simple game with the children.”

“IT’S TOO bad about your leg, King Benedict. But we are sure glad you brought Ms. Baker!”

Benedict eyed his teammate Timothy. The boy was nearly seventeen and looked to be the sort that spent way too much time in the weight room. The shining admiration in his eyes when the boy talked about Sally made him smile.

“I hadn’t known that I was bringing a ringer,” Benedict said before turning and watching the game again.

His leg was sliced open from someone’s cleats and although Sally didn’t think he needed stitches, she insisted that he sit out until the bleeding stopped. Benedict was having a fantastic time. The first game was students against faculty and the students barely won with 28-26. The next game they had mixed the students up with the teachers to create two balanced teams.

Benedict wasn’t surprised when they both fought over who got Sally. She was an excellent pitcher and despite the many times she had been kicked in the face with the ball, she always managed to catch it.

The students had been so excited to see their Ms. Baker. It was another testament to just how much she had done for the school and his country. A horn sounded, and the outfielders came

running in. Sally was in black yoga pants and a long sleeve workout top. Honestly, there wasn't an inch of inappropriate skin showing on her. And yet...

Benedict's mouth watered as he watched her run back to their bench. Her breasts bounced with every step and her glorious curves were perfectly showcased in those pants.

He briefly considered making a decree that they were mandatory wear. However, he did have a small hold on his senses—albeit tiny.

"How are you feeling?" Her chest heaved as she tried to catch her breath. The other members of the team gathered around, grabbing their drinks, and jabbering away about this, that and the other.

Benedict could hardly remember a time when he had spent such a fun day with his people.

"Amazingly well," he said honestly.

Sally gave him a look and removed the pad she had used for covering his injury. "Well, I think you will live."

He laughed, "Thanks, Doctor, I appreciate that."

"You are up, Your Highness," Timothy called. "Are you able to kick?"

Benedict got to his feet. "A king is always ready!"

Sally snorted, and the others paused, not knowing how the king would take it.

"Do you doubt me?" he said dangerously, moving into Sally's space.

Sally grinned up at him, the endorphins from the game causing her to throw caution to the wind. "If you manage to kick a home run, I will owe you a favor. But if you don't, you will owe me a favor. What do you say?"

His smile deepened, and he took her hand in his. But instead of shaking it he brought it to his lips and gently kissed the back. The students hooted and whistled as Sally's face grew hot. Benedict's eyes remained on hers.

"I accept your challenge, fair lady. Now, prepare to be blown away."

Benedict walked up to the plate with a confident swagger. The Dean was pitching for the other team and he nodded respectfully before throwing a fastball.

It was wild, and Benedict moved out of the way, so he didn't get hit.

"Some people would consider that treason, Dean," he joked, and the kids roared with laughter.

The Dean shook his head. "Your Majesty, forgive me when I say that you are going down."

His team erupted in outrage, just as the Dean had anticipated.

The second pitch was straighter than the first and the umpire called it a strike.

Benedict rubbed his palms together, preparing for the third pitch. The Dean threw it, and the round red ball came barreling toward him just at the perfect height near the ground. Benedict kicked with all of his might and the red bouncy ball went flying into the air.

With a whoop, he took off for first base. The team was standing on the benches screaming his name. When he rounded second, Benedict didn't look back; it was a do or die situation. Plowing through he raced on to third and heard the other team scrambling to get the ball thrown into home. In kickball if you were struck by the ball while running you were out.

Benedict rounded third and raced toward home plate. The catcher was standing at attention, he could see that she was anxiously awaiting the pass. He glanced to his right and saw a flash of red. Panicking Benedict jerked back, and the ball flew by him, missing his shirt by inches.

"Go!" his team screamed, and Benedict reacted, automatically taking the last five steps and touching home base.

Sally raced out from the bench and threw herself into his arms. "You did it!"

It was the first time that Benedict truly felt like a king.

Chapter 41

IT WASN'T UNTIL THEY HAD LEFT THE SCHOOL AND ENTERED the parking lot that a loud crack shattered their revelry about the games. Benedict immediately responded by yanking Sally down to the ground. His bodyguards went into action surrounding them while another charged towards the woods hoping to catch the shooter.

Sally swore underneath Benedict. "I didn't think to bring my gun, we are at school for fuck's sake."

Benedict shifted so that he could see her face. "You have a gun?"

The guards came back and ushered the two of them into the long black car. It wasn't until they were safely inside that Sally responded to him.

"Yes, I usually carry a gun. I just haven't in Hazenbak because I wasn't sure what your rules and customs are when it comes to a foreigner packing heat."

"Where is this gun?" Benedict was fascinated by this new turn of events. "At the palace?"

Sally rolled her eyes. "No, Ben, it's home in Tennessee, safely residing in my safe until I return."

"Why do you have it?" he asked curiously.

Sally thought for a minute, "Well, I am a single woman living in the woods of Tennessee. I grew up hunting and have a hunting rifle that was passed down to me. But I haven't used it in years. It stays in the gun safe. I have a policy with hunting that you don't shoot what you don't intend to eat. As for my concealed and carry weapon, well

you can't be too sure these days."

"Do you know how to shoot it?"

The moment he said it, Benedict knew that it had come out condescending, "I didn't mean it like that. Who taught you how to shoot?"

"My Nana," Sally said proudly. "I am an excellent shot. Many of our maids carry guns with them. As long as they take the training necessary, Nana allows it. There are too many creeps and scary people out there that prey on women. They think they are safe with someone who cleans the house. Who is she going to tell? Well, that's not how we operate."

For the rest of the drive back Sally and Benedict discussed the merits and drawbacks of gun control. It wasn't any surprise that Benedict was for a strict gun control policy and Sally was for the opposite.

What had been nice is that they both allowed the other to freely express their opinion without getting ugly. It was good for them both to get to know a little about what the other stood for, and what values they held dear.

Once they had arrived at the palace, Lia and Nick met them in Benedict's office to discuss the attack. It was amazing to Benedict how fast news travelled. In the brief time it had taken for the incident to occur it was already being talked about on the television stations.

Lia clicked off the TV. "And there are a few news media

out there but by the end of the day we will have news crews from around the world. Everyone will be weighing in on who tried to assassinate the king of Hazenbak."

"We might as well make ourselves comfortable," Benedict said with a sigh. "It looks like we will be here a while."

Sally walked over and took baby Anthony from Lia's arms and settled onto the floor to play with him on the soft rug. His chubby little hands grabbed at her face and wrapped themselves in her silky black curls.

"Tony!" Lia admonished, "I am sorry, Sally. He loves hair."

Sally didn't mind. "He is no trouble at all. Who is a handsome boy?"

Anthony laughed and batted at her face.

Benedict didn't hear what Nick was saying. His gaze was arrested on the sight in front of him. Only he was seeing what it might be like if Sally were playing with their child. A surge of possession so sharp that it nearly took his breath away rushed through him.

He almost lost her today. What was worse, is that the shooter was still on the loose. Suddenly it became imperative that she was safe.

"We need to increase the security for Sally." Benedict cut Nick off mid-sentence.

He blinked, "Okay? Do you really believe that she was the target?"

Obviously, by his tone, Nick didn't. But Benedict didn't care.

"It doesn't matter, she was almost shot today, and I won't have that. Starting immediately, we will have double the security staff inside the palace."

Sally looked up from where she was playing with Anthony. "I think you need to worry about who is shooting at you, Ben. They wouldn't want me; what use am I to anyone dead? If you were to die who would take the throne?"

Benedict frowned. "I am the last of my line. I suppose that a case could be brought about that Lia could rule."

Lia looked horrified. “I should hope not! We can’t rule Meron and Hazenbak, they aren’t even close together. No, it would pass on to Melinda’s family, wouldn’t it?”

Sally sat straighter. “Melinda, your old girlfriend who stares daggers at me, Melinda?”

Benedict rubbed his jaw. “She can be—interesting. But I seriously doubt she is a murderer.”

Lia was warming up to the subject. “She wouldn’t need to get her hands dirty. And her father and Habersham are the best of friends. I think there is something to this.”

“Why now?” Benedict shook his head. “No if they wanted to kill me off, they have had two years to do so.”

“Maybe they figured that you were more malleable than you are.” Nick added, “I would imagine that Habersham is not happy with the way you have skirted the bevy of beauties. And it was he that insisted that Melinda attend, was it not?”

Benedict sighed. “Her family is one of the oldest in Hazenbak. I can see the slight that it would have been had she not been invited. And besides the first night, she hasn’t said two words to me.”

Sally gave Anthony a toy and placed him in front of her. “She’s been different ever since Luke arrived.”

Benedict gasped. “Surely you can’t think that Luke had anything to do with today?”

Sally shook her head. “No, you misunderstand me. She seemed confident that she would regain your affections the first night. And then Luke showed up and she backed off. It

makes me wonder if she is afraid of Luke revealing something about her. Has he said anything?”

“I haven’t spent much time with him,” Benedict’s cheeks flushed. “The past two days were spent solely with you, first here going over numbers and then today at the academy. I asked Luke to come to the palace to help ward off the women. He is charming, eligible, and will take one for the team.”

“I think you should talk to him.” Lia picked up Anthony, who had started to fuss. Bouncing him on one hip she added, “Sally is right, Luke did date her for that fleeting time, and we all knew what a massive crush he had on her. What made him break off their relationship? It makes one wonder if there is something there.”

“Alright,” Benedict nodded. “I am sure it can’t hurt. I will ask him to meet me after supper tonight. What of the other girls?”

Sally shook her head. “I don’t know much about

Maxine, but I trust Stacy and Auralia. I don’t see them being involved in anything like this.”

Lia wrinkled her brow. “But if it were someone that wanted Benny dead, wouldn’t they act like they were innocent? I don’t know if we can mark anyone as completely trustworthy. Well, besides those of us in this room. I didn’t try to kill my brother and Sally was shot at just like Ben was, so it obviously wasn’t her.”

Nick’s lips twitched. “Was it me, my love?” Lia’s smile widened. “It could have been.” “What was my motive?” he asked, playing along.

Benedict barked out a laugh. “Retaliation for tricking you into working at the Royal Academy and watching over Stinky.”

Lia stuck her tongue out at Ben, “We all know that it was the best decision Nick ever made. Wasn’t it, Nick?”

He smiled lovingly at her. “That is what you tell me.”

“Because it’s the truth,” Lia opened her mouth to argue further but Nick stopped her with a quick hard kiss.

Benedict groaned and turned away.

Sally turned also to respect for their privacy, but she couldn’t help but envy the sweet comradery that Lia and Nick had with one another.

When Nick raised his head, Lia was dazed, and Anthony let out a loud wail.

“Goodness, Tony is hungry, I need to nurse him. I will see you both at dinner?”

She and Nick were out the door before Sally or Benedict could answer.

“She’s a bit like a whirlwind,” Sally said fondly.

But Benedict wasn’t looking at his sister; he was moving to take Sally into his arms.

Chapter 42

WHEN HIS LIPS MET HERS, THEY WEREN'T HESITANT. BENEDICT was a man who knew what he wanted and for far too long that someone was at his fingertips but out of reach. Time and tide wait for no man; he finally understood that now.

His hands slipped around her waist and he pulled her against his hard body.

Sally shivered as her soft breasts came up against his hard chest. His hands were on her hips and curving down to cup her ass. She could feel his length between them, and it only served to make her hotter.

His kiss was possessive and determined; she loved the way that he took what he wanted. It left her feeling desired and wanted. She leaned in and he tugged her closer until there wasn't even a hint of space between them. She could feel his hard thighs against her legs. Her hands roamed up and felt his impressive biceps.

The desire to want to see Benedict without his clothing came flashing into her mind. She moaned, and he deepened the kiss. His hands slid up from her hips to her waist and then underneath her sweater to the soft silky skin beneath.

Benedict couldn't catch his breath; her skin felt like silk beneath his fingertips. Her hands sank into his hair and she tugged lightly, grinding her hips against his cock. The kiss that had been passionate before was downright carnal.

Her hands moved down and suddenly she was tugging at the buckle of his jeans. Her sweater was being yanked over her head. And then not wanting to wait another moment Benedict slipped the cups of her bra down to reveal two dusky pink nipples that were tight and begging to be kissed.

His hands traced the swells right before his lips took one glorious peak inside his mouth and all thoughts and reasoning flew out the window.

Sally's hands were in his hair again and then she was tugging him closer. Moaning as he gently bit the tender lip and then kissed away any of the sting. Benedict moved to the other breast and began it all again.

Her panties were soaked, and her pussy was begging for attention. Sally hadn't been with anyone since she met Benedict in their Smokey Mountain Cabin over two years ago. Her vibrator tried to curb the need, but this, there was nothing like this. His blatant desire written all over his face. The whiskers leaving faint pink lines on her breasts.

The way he growled as if he wanted to do every naughty thing imaginable to her. And damn if Sally wouldn't be in it all the way.

“Tell me to stop, Sally,” he rasped against her skin moving lower so that he was on his knees before her and moving to undo the fly of her jeans.

Sally shook her head, “Not on your life.”

Benedict wrenched her jeans down her legs and then slipped his fingers underneath the hem of her panties and pulled them down as well. It got a little confusing because

she still had her shoes on. But they managed to get those yanked off and the pants went flying behind him and then he was on her. His hands sinking into the soft globes of her ass and his mouth licking along the seam of her bare pussy.

She gasped and opened her legs wider for him to be able to lick her from end to end.

“You taste amazing, Sally. Fuck, you can’t know how many times I thought about this, imagined what you would taste like.”

Her cheeks heated but she didn’t stop him. No, Sally liked when he talked to her and Benedict saw the gleam in her eyes.

“You want me to fuck this?” He leaned forward and sucked her clit, causing her knees nearly to buckle.

She whimpered and tried to press her hips forward. He grinned against her flesh and then got down to business. He licked and sucked every fold, bringing her higher and higher and then backing away when she got too close. The last thing he wanted was for her to come too soon. No, if Benedict had his way, she would come several times, and this was only the first.

Sally was so responsive to his touch. His tongue delved into her core and she moaned, humping his face. He hadn’t even hoped to dare that Sally would be this way. But he had hopes, shit, he had dreamed about it over and over again. Benedict had gone from being a playboy with Nick and Luke to a complete monk after he met Sally.

Sure, there was always his own hand in the shower, but that wasn’t anything compared to the ecstasy of her juices on his tongue and her hands raking her nails into his skin.

It was a good thing he still had his jeans on because his dick wanted out. It wanted inside of her, the nearest hole, hell he wasn’t fussy.

Benedict slipped two fingers inside of her tight channel and moved up to suck on her clit again.

“Come for me, Sally,” he sucked again and this time she shuddered and broke, her body overtaken by the spasms of her release. He let her honey coat his tongue as his fingers continued to fuck her through the release.

When she showed signs of stopping, he stood and wrenched his own sweater off. The shoes were kicked off and then his pants and underwear stripped until it was just Benedict and Sally, and Benedict's socks.

She laughed when she saw them, “Are you leaving them on?”

Benedict gave her a wry look. “The first time you see my dick and you want to talk about my socks?”

Her eyes went back to the massive length that was straining to be inside of her. The head was glistening with precum and Sally unconsciously licked her bottom lip. Benedict moaned and then went to his desk wrenching it open.

“I know I have a condom around here somewhere. I saw one last year!”

Sally’s grin widened, “Last year?”

His cheeks colored, “I haven’t had need of them.”

She gasped, “Really?”

He nodded, “After I met a certain raven-haired beauty and shared a platonic night sleeping next to, that gave me a case of blue balls. I couldn’t really be bothered to find someone else.”

She moved toward him, “I am on the pill.”

His eyes flared. “I am clean, practically virginal.”

Her lips twitched. “I don’t know when I have laughed more during sex.”

He growled, “I prefer to think that you have never had

sex before in your life. This is the first time for both of us.”

She felt her heart melt, “That is ridiculous and terribly sweet.”

“I’m not sweet,” he yanked her to him and then cupped her ass and kissed her to show Sally just how demanding he could be.

When they were both panting, he spun her around and shoved the things on his desk to the floor. Sally let out a cry of dismay, “We spent hours yesterday on that.”

But Benedict didn’t care. He moved her so that she lay across his cool wooden desk, a distinct pleasure for her fevered flesh. And then she felt the gentle caress of his hand over her ass. She relaxed and let him caress her right before he smacked her playfully.

Sally squealed but then clenched her legs, the smack had sent liquid heat to her already soaked core.

“Did you like that?” he asked incredulously.

She didn’t say anything, so he smacked the other cheek a little harder. This time he felt between her thighs and knew that she had liked it.

“Do you like to be spanked, Sally?”

She hesitated, and he touched the red handprint lightly.

“Tell me, Sally, do you like when I spank you?”

She held her breath and then told him the truth, “Yes.”

He growled and rubbed the length of his cock along the seam of her ass.

“You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. I will make you feel good, Sally. Just stay still for me.”

And another crack sounded as he hit the first cheek again. There were two more of the same and she was fighting rubbing her legs together when Benedict slammed his massive length into her greedy pussy, filling her all the way to the hilt.

Chapter 43

SALLY MOANED AS HER BODY SCRAMBLED TO ACCOMMODATE his huge cock. Her ass stung from the slaps and her pussy throbbed with need. She was so wet she could feel her own desire on her thighs. Sally had never been spanked before; in truth most of her sexual encounters consisted of missionary sex followed by pleasant if not awkward after sex conversation.

There was nothing missionary about the way her breasts were smashed against the wooden desk. Benedict was thrusting into her hard and hot, moving her every time he buried himself to the hilt. This was nothing like she had experienced before. If she hadn't already been propped up by the desk, Sally felt like she would likely slither to the floor.

Benedict growled, "You are so fucking tight, Sally. My dick feels like it's being strangled."

She gasped, "I hope that is a good thing."

"Baby," he moaned as she clamped down with her vaginal muscles. "You have no fucking idea."

He rammed into her again and again, until she was on the brink of release and then he pulled out.

"No!" Sally cried out, but Benedict wasn't done.

He picked her up and laid her back on his desk. Spreading her thighs wide he blew on her hot folds causing goosebumps to erupt of her skin. Sally moaned as his fingers traced the folds of her pussy. He brought them to her lips, "Suck."

Sally had never tasted herself, in fact, if someone would have suggested it, she would have been mortified. But she willingly took his fingers into her mouth, loving the way his eyes darkened and his jaw tightened.

His long cock looked impossibly large and she wondered how on earth he had managed to fit it inside of her. But then by the gloriously full feeling that she had been experiencing, Sally knew that he was her perfect fit.

Benedict's mouth went to her breasts, licking and sucking like a man possessed. He wasn't gentle, but he didn't hurt her. His dominance was spiking her arousal higher and higher. His fingers went down to play in her pussy once more and Sally couldn't help the low moan that escaped her lips.

"I have waited so fucking long for this day, I refuse to let it be over too fast."

He moved back down her body kissing her hip bones and then the insides of her thighs.

"And this pussy, it tastes so fucking good. I want to go to sleep with you on my tongue and wake up to eat you again. Never have I wanted a woman as intensely as I have wanted you."

Sally felt her breath catch. She wanted to believe that he could be her happily ever after. But there were so many things standing in their way. One thing that she did know

was that the time she remained in Hazenbak he was hers and she was his. There would be no more pretending that she didn't care.

"Benedict," she moaned, "Please!"

His mouth covered her tender flesh, sucking her clit into his mouth as his fingers continued to stroke in and out of her body. She had been on the precipice before, but it seemed like this time when her orgasm rose within in her a tidal wave was behind it.

"I'm, I'm, ahhh!"

"Come for me, Sally, let me see you, Baby!" Benedict thrust his fingers faster and flicked the tiny nub with the tip of his tongue before sucking it back inside and sucking hard.

She came so hard that black dots lined the edge of her vision. Before she came back to earth, he had her legs up on his shoulders and had slid her ass down until he could hold it in his hands.

And then he was thrusting inside her again, the strokes strong and sure. Her hands reached out, desperate to hold him. She sank her nails into his chest, and he groaned, thrusting harder. Benedict angled her up so that her back was arched and by the scream, she let out he knew he had hit the right spot.

His cock wanted to come so bad that he knew he was moments away from blowing his load. She needed to cum, damn it, he needed her to cum right then. Sally sprawled out on his desk, breasts bouncing, pussy flushed and drenched from his mouth and fingers. Her eyes wild and her mouth pleading, it was all too much.

He thrust into her again and began to erupt inside of her. Suddenly her body responded by clamping down hard and drawing his orgasm out while she contracted around him. It was not only the best sex of his life, but Benedict wondered if it was the best sex in the world—ever.

He couldn't fathom anything coming close to the lifealtering connection they had together.

Sally wriggled, and he realized he still had her legs on his shoulders. He was rammed balls deep inside of her and his dick hadn't even softened all the way.

What was it about this girl? He knew that she meant something to him. But now, fuck, after that? He could never let her go no matter what.

She blushed, her hands coming up to cover her breasts, "Is this when we have the awkward talk and try to find our clothes?"

Benedict shook his head, “No, this is when I take my time licking these perfect breasts. Because you might think that I am finished, but Baby, I am just getting started.”

His mouth came down to latch on her nipple and Sally’s fingers sank into his hair.

“Benedict, oh, oh!”

He flicked his tongue back and forth on the tight tip and then blew warm air on the wet surface, making her nipple tighten even harder.

Her pussy clenched around him and he felt his cock start to swell again within her.

“How can you go again so soon?” she rasped.

“When you have had nothing but your own hand for over two years you tend to build up a lot of stamina.”

He began to move within her, slow steady strokes that had her eyes rolling back.

“Wait,” she panted, “you really haven’t been with anyone else?”

Benedict stopped and looked right into her eyes. “Not a soul since we met.”

The smile that broke across Sally’s face would be forever imprinted on Benedict’s mind. If he had to tell someone what the true definition of happiness was, he would think of this smile.

Benedict began to move again. Sally wrapped her legs around his waist and clutched his forearms as he impaled her over and over again.

“Touch yourself for me?”

Benedict wanted to see what she liked, he needed to see her fingers making that tiny nubbin harden.

Sally blushed but ran her hand between her thighs and began to rub and he thrust his cock inside of her.

“Oh, shit, Baby just like that!” he growled, “You pussy is clenching so hard when you do that.”

She picked up the pace, moving her other hand to her nipple and pinching it hard before pulling on the tip.

“Fuck! That is hot.” He could hardly believe how uninhibited she was being. This is was far better than anything he could have ever imagined. And he imagined a lot, a whole lot.

She began to whimper, “Benedict, I am going to come if I keep this up.”

His eyes flashed. “Do it, make that pussy so wet, come on baby, I want you to come all over my cock. Your sweet passion coating my dick, making me cum too.”

She cried out as her fingers moved faster. The hand on her nipple twisting and pulling her nipple impossibly hard.

“Benedict, aw fuck, Benedict!”

She screamed as the orgasm overtook her. Her legs shaking and her core clenching until Benedict was powerless not to cum as well. Ribbons of cum flew out of him, and he knew that it wasn’t just a fluke the first time.

This girl, she was his match, his future.

He saw that her eyes were closed.

“Are you ready for that awkward conversation?” he teased.

Sally only grunted.

“We will have to save that for next time then.”

This had her popping an eye open, “What makes you think there will be a next time?”

Benedict leaned down and took her lips with his own. The kiss demanded submission, participation and soon Sally found herself winding her hands into his hair and kissing him back for all she was worth.

When he pulled back, they were both panting. “There will be a next time and many others.”

Sally’s eyes danced. “Of course, Your Highness.”

Chapter 44

"WHEN ARE THE BUZZARDS GOING TO LEAVE?"

Sally turned from her spot at the window and smiled at Lia, who was carrying Anthony on her hip. The news media from around the globe were swarming the castle, eager to get a glimpse of the royals and report anything that they might on the possible assassination attempt.

"One would think, after finding out that it was a misfire, that they would get bored seeing that it was an accident." Sally smiled at Anthony who gave her an adorable grin.

"Are you buying that? What kind of hunter accidently fires a shot so close to a school?" Lia raised a brow.

Sally blew out a breath, "You are right. But that is what the authorities have decided. Obviously, the press shares your opinion. If they didn't think a story was here, they would leave. Benedict spoke with the old gentleman that 'confessed' and he isn't any more convinced than you are."

"Miss Baker?" A tall footman interrupted the two women talking, "There is an important call for you, line three."

"I am sorry, Lia, can you hold on for just a moment?" Sally turned and walked over to the phone and picked up the line.

"Sally?" the familiar voice sounded much frailer than it had when they spoke a few days ago.

"Nana, what's wrong?" Sally couldn't keep the fear out of her voice.

"Now, it's the damnedest thing. I had a little trouble with the light over the garage."

Sally paled, "That light is more than ten feet off the ground."

A faint laugh trickled over the line, "Well, by the time I got through with it, the light was on the ground. As was the ladder and my sorry ass to boot."

"You fell off a ladder?" Sally could hardly believe it. "I am on my way. I will get a flight out as soon as possible. What hospital are you in?"

"Now just you wait half a darn minute, Missy. I didn't call you so that you would hightail your buns back home. I wouldn't have called at all, but I can't recall where the insurance card is that you got me."

Guilt flooded Sally. She should be home taking care of her elderly grandmother. Not pretending to be royalty halfway around the world.

"Nana, what did the Dr say?"

“Oh, something about a strained something or other. I am fine, child. Quit your fretting, I can tell you are getting all worked up over nothing.”

Sally’s hands were trembling, “I will be there as soon as I can. I love you, Nana.”

When she hung up the phone Lia was there, “I am so sorry.”

Sally nodded, “Please, I need to call the airlines and…”

“No, I texted Benedict while you were on the phone. I hope you aren’t angry. He is getting the royal jet ready.”

Sally blindly followed Lia down the hallway, “No I am not mad. Just worried.”

Benedict came racing up to them and immediately wrapped Sally into a tight hug.

From there it seemed to be a blur, Sally really didn’t remember packing a bag. She knew she threw some things together but for all she knew it could be a bunch of socks. She had been surprised when Benedict came down carrying his own overnight bag.

“Did you think I would send you alone?”

She shook her head but that had been precisely what she had been thinking. Another surge of love for Benedict swelled in her chest. How could they make this work? Her Nana needed her, but she was starting to realize that she needed him.

On the long flight to the states Benedict held Sally and they whispered funny stories about when they were children. It was cozy and comfortable in a way that she had never felt with anyone else. A car was waiting for them at the airport to take them to the local hospital.

The moment they walked into the emergency room a nurse approached them and took them up to the second floor. Sally knocked briefly on the door and then opened it quietly just in case her Nana was resting.

The sound of professional wrestling hit her ears and Benedict’s brows rose into the air. Nana turned, and her face broke into a brilliant smile. “There’s my Sally, girl! And you brought his royalness along with you?”

Sally felt her cheeks fill with color, “Nana, this is King Benedict.”

Benedict reached out his hand, “Just Benedict or Ben if you’d rather.”

Nana grinned, “Well, you are a handsome devil, aren’t you? The name is Geraldine, but you might as well call me

Nana, they all do.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Nana.”

The older woman waved them over to the chairs, “I told Sally that it wasn’t that bad, I feel bad dragging your both all the way to Tennessee.”

“If they are keeping you in the hospital, it’s bad, Nana.”

The older woman rolled her eyes, “Well, I am glad you are here just the same. I have been meaning to have a chat with this young man. Benedict what are your intentions

with my granddaughter?” Benedict grinned.

“Nana!” Sally was astounded.

Nana shrugged, “What? A grandmother has a right to know. You have been there for over two years, child.”

Benedict nodded, “Every right, I should think. I will tell you honestly, I am in love with Sally and want her for my wife.”

Sally’s eyes popped, “Don’t say that! Don’t tell her things like that! She is likely to believe you. Please ignore him Nana, he is exhausted.”

“He looks pretty good to me,” Nana wriggled her brows at Benedict.

Sally shook her head. “You are right, there is nothing wrong with you. We shouldn’t have come.”

Nana laughed, “Don’t be a spoil sport. I will stop teasing you.”

There was another knock on the door and a young doctor walked in.

“Ms. Baker, I am here to get your stats again,” he said checking his clipboard.

“You just want to feel me up, I know how you young fellers are.”

Benedict couldn’t suppress his grin. “Your Nana is something else.”

The Dr was used to Nana and went about his checks. “Well, everything looks good. We will go in for surgery in the morning and get that hip replaced. I am glad to see your family made it in time.”

Sally clutched Benedict’s arm, “Surgery?”

The Dr nodded, “We need to put some pins in. Your grandmother will need to take it easy for a while. Is there someone that can help her run her business?”

Sally swallowed. “Of course, I can help. Anything that she needs I will be there.”

The Dr smiled. “Well then, have a good night and we will see you in the morning.”

After he left Sally rounded on her Nana who was looking rather sheepish. “Surgery?”

“Sally, I didn’t want you to get all upset. I am going to be fine.”

"Who is running the business?" Sally's tone was a little shrill.

Nana hedged, "Oh, I have it covered, nothing to worry about."

"Nana," Sally insisted, "What is going on?"

The older woman let out a loud sigh, "If you must know, the business isn't doing so well. I have had trouble filling some slots and I decided to send some of the work that I couldn't do to Rapid Clean."

"You have been sending our customers to our competitor?" Sally sat down. "This is all my fault. I knew I shouldn't have left you for so long. And now you are losing your company. How can you ever forgive me?"

"Well," Nana huffed, "Who died and made you God?" Sally scowled at her grandmother.

Benedict choked on a laugh. "I beg your pardon?"

"My granddaughter seems to think that she is in charge of everyone else's lives. I don't know where she got the idea, honestly, I raised her better than that."

Sally blinked and tried to take in what her grandmother was saying. "I should be here for you. You were always there for me."

Nana rolled her eyes, "When you were a child that was one thing. I needed to watch you. But I never wanted you to live for me, child. Live for you! This handsome man is a king —a king! And he wants to be with you. Why on earth would I want to come between you? Hell, I am thinking of moving there myself."

Sally had never considered that her grandmother might want to come to Hazenbak.

Benedict grinned. "We would be honored to have you, Nana. I know that my sister will be terribly jealous, when she comes to visit, she might want to adopt you as well. Are you ready to take all of us on?"

The wiry older woman had a twinkle in her eye. "I have a feeling that you all need a little shaking up and I am just the granny to do it. Just as soon as they work out this hip situation I will be on a flight to Hippopotamus or whatever it is called."

Sally blanched. "Benedict, she means no disrespect."

Nana waved her arms. "He knows that! That is the beauty of being old, you can get away with forgetting things and people just think you are adorable. Wasn't nearly as cute in my forties."

Benedict laughed. "You are charming, I can see where Sally gets her humor."

Nana leaned forward and whispered, "Give her some wine and she really will cut loose, a total lightweight."

"Nana!" Sally blushed. "This is not the time to pull out stories!"

Benedict pulled the chair right up to her bed. “This is precisely the time to tell stories. What else are we going to do?”

And so, for the next several hours Nana relived some of the more embarrassing times in Sally’s childhood and Benedict fell that much further in love.

When it was time to go, he gently kissed Nana on the cheek after Sally and promised they would be there first thing in the morning.

True to their word they were there before the surgery and kept her company until it was time for Nana to be taken back. An hour and a half later the doctor came out to say that the surgery went beautifully, and she was in recovery.

It was another half hour before they were able to go back and sit with her. Benedict was by Sally’s side the entire time.

It would be another five days until Nana would be stable enough to make the flight back to Hazenbak. During that time, the sale of the company was contracted.

Even here in the states the press was relentless. Everyone was grateful when at long last Nana was cleared to fly.

Chapter 45

WHEN THE PLANE TOOK OFF FOR HAZENBAK, NANA COULDN'T believe that they were flying in a private jet. She insisted on being shown every inch of the space and asked about a thousand questions of the pilot.

"How does one join the mile-high club?" She waggled her brows at the pilot and Benedict had to keep Sally from choking her grandmother.

Benedict humored her when Sally was ready to pull her hair out, but overall, they made the trip back to Hazenbak in one piece.

Once landed, Nana couldn't believe how green and beautiful the countryside was. Despite the nip in the air, she loved the quaint village and old time feel to the streets. The palace had been a complete shock to Nana.

"That's a castle!" she breathed, smashing her face against the car window.

"You don't say? I tell you, I never noticed." Benedict grinned, "Been in the family for years."

She rolled her eyes, "You are hilarious."

"Where are we going to have Nana stay, the family suite is upstairs," Sally wondered aloud.

"I took care of that," Benedict winked at Nana. "There has been an elevator installed in three different places so that you can travel to whatever floor you wish to be on. I also had a bedroom prepared on the first floor, but the room is rather small. It is up to you if you want to keep it or stay on the second floor."

Nana laughed. "I want the bigger room of course!"

Sally just smiled. She was through being mortified at her Nana's candid nature. It seemed that no matter what embarrassing thing Nana said, Benedict took it in stride.

Once they showed Nana both rooms, she actually took the smaller one downstairs. She said that it was closer to the kitchen should she get hungry. Benedict told her that a servant could bring her food anywhere, but Nana insisted that she'd just bought a new hip; she was going to get her money's worth out of it.

When they'd just come down for tea there was a rustle from the Royal offices and Olivia appeared, flustered, with files in her hands.

"Your Majesty, I must speak with you at once." Olivia's bright eyes held concern as she motioned to the papers that she had been going over.

Benedict politely excused himself and joined Olivia in the office. An hour later, after having a look at what Olivia had shown him, he shook his head. “That is nothing. Habersham oversees the agricultural funds.”

Olivia’s eyes narrowed. “I see; however, I find it odd that there are duplicate files here under a remarkably similar name. I would like you to look at this and tell me if it’s really necessary to be spending the same amount as say the state of Texas.” Benedicts eyes widened, and he swallowed hard. “I beg your pardon?”

They spent the rest of the morning in closed quarters going over every line, dollar amount and decimal.

“SPILL THE BEANS! WE haven’t seen you in what feels like forever. You are either locked up the in the King’s study,” Auralia wriggled her eyebrows suggestively, “Or away at the Academy. You can’t leave us like this, Olivia is beside herself.”

Olivia glanced up from her tablet. “It’s none of my business.”

“See!” Auralia flopped down next to Olivia, “She can hardly function.”

Olivia rolled her eyes but kissed Aurelia’s cheek before returning to her tablet. Stacy wasn’t as complacent.

“I agree, I need to know! Now that Auralia and Olivia have each other and you have King Benedict I have been left to the wolves.”

A smile broke across Olivia’s face. “Auralia and I have attended every group activity.”

“But you are all happy to be together, my word, you both are practically glowing. It’s depressing as hell. What does a single girl need to do around here in order to get laid?”

“Erm,” a highly amused chuckle came from behind the ladies, “I was asked to gather everyone up for croquet.”

Stacy turned on her heel and proceeded to blush as she saw Luke, the Duke of Hastings give her a saucy wink. “I might have a solution to that problem of yours.”

Then he walked away whistling as if he hadn’t a care in the world.

Sally and Auralia burst into laughter, but Olivia was kind enough to hide her smile behind the magazine she was holding.

“How long do you think he stood in the doorway?” Stacy asked miserably.

“Long enough to offer you a booty call,” Auralia teased and then ducked when Stacy threw a decorative pillow at her head.

The girls were gathered in the morning room. Each had already eaten breakfast and prepared for whatever inane activity that was scheduled for the day. They had awakened to find out that Maxine had left the palace. There was a note stating she had a family emergency.

But Stacy and Auralia filled Sally in on a little gossip that she had missed when she was spending time with King Benedict. Apparently, Maxine and Melinda got into a rather huge argument just outside of their bedrooms.

Stacy said that she heard yelling and went to the door.

Just as she opened her chambers a loud crack sounded, and Melinda stood in the hallway holding her reddened check with a shocked look.

“You struck me?” Her tone was more shocked than anything else.

Maxine had rushed off and not been seen the rest of the night. And now this morning she was gone. Another development was that Melinda had not come down yet to breakfast. They were told that she was still in her rooms.

She never missed the chance to interact with Benedict,

so it seemed that they had a little mystery on their hands. But first, they wanted to get the gossip from Sally. And so, with heated cheeks, she gave them a very abbreviated version.

“You slept with him? I know you did. I can see it on your face!”

“Stacy, is nothing private?” Sally covered her hot cheeks.

Stacy wrinkled her brow, “I certainly hope not. I like to talk about everything. I don’t want there to be things that we can’t talk about. It’s not like I have had a dozen best friends you know. It can be lonely being a debutante. Honestly, I can’t believe that I was sad at first to come to this house party. It has by and large been one of the most fun things I have ever done.”

Sally leaned in and hugged the girl. “I agree.” Auralia and Olivia nodded.

“Sally, are you coming?” Benedict poked his head in around the doorframe. “Hello, ladies.”

Sally ignored their titters and pokes as she got to her feet, “I am coming, just a second.”

“That’s what she said last night,” Stacy said under her breath, but it was one of those comments that just carried anyway despite the effort to keep it within the girl’s hearing only.

Benedict flushed and barked out a laugh, “I haven’t heard that joke in a while.”

Stacy decided that she wouldn’t push things by saying that she wasn’t joking. Sally already looked murderous.

They all made their way out onto the lawn, past the formal garden where there was more room to play.

“I call the red mallet,” Olivia spoke up.

“Pink,” Sally called out.

“Yellow,” Luke picked his up.

“I guess I am blue,” Auralia grabbed the blue one.

“There is black and green remaining, your highness.”

Benedict looked around, “I heard that Lady Maxine had to leave, but where is Melinda?” Nobody knew.

Benedict sent a footman to find her uncle, Habersham, and go check on the girl. Then he picked up the black mallet.

“Ladies first?” he said with a smile.

Luke grinned, “Don’t mind if I do.”

They laughed as Luke got in position and smacked the yellow mallet. He was a talented player and it seemed that he and Benedict had played this course before. It was obvious about three wickets in that they were far more competitive than the girls felt like being.

Instead of doing better, they tried so hard to ruin the other person’s play that Auralia ended up winning the match.

“She used to be a professional athlete, that’s not fair; she should only play with one arm!” Luke teased.

“Are you suggesting I take one off? Because I will have you know I am rather attached to them.”

He pulled her into his side, “If we play again, I want to be on your team.”

Olevia pouted, “Hey, I thought I was on your team.”

Auralia moved to Oliva and threw an arm around her shoulders, “We are a package deal, I am sorry, Luke.”

He smiled, and everyone made their way down to the lake. There was a small lake house where one could change into their bathing suits and a large picnic would be served later in the afternoon. For now, there were cool drinks and fresh fruit.

“Isn’t it a bit cold to swim?” Sally rubbed her arms. The weather had been pleasant, but it was by no means the heights of summer.

“There is an indoor pool just around the bend,” Lia announced, coming forward with Nick and baby Anthony.

Sally laughed. “I thought I was just being a wimp!”

Benedict reached out, grabbing her by the waist and pulling her into his side. “There is nothing wimpy about you.”

Auralia and Stacy stared on with wide eyes, but Lia only smiled.

“Let’s get Anthony inside, he loves to swim. I hope that you all will get in.”

Sure enough, everyone went swimming,

Auralia in a black bikini that showed her dark skin and luscious curves to perfection. Olivia was in an orange one piece with large white flowers. Stacy’s string bikini had Luke nearly swallowing his tongue when she went off the high dive.

Sally grinned at her friend, who clearly had no idea that she was driving the man insane. Stacy had told them earlier that boys didn’t look at her that way because she was so slender. But the truth was that she had a model’s body. Sure, her breasts weren’t large, but they were perky, and bounced when she did.

Sally sat back and played with Anthony. She wore a retro red tankini and her hair pulled up on top of her head in a messy bun.

Benedict wasn’t sure if he had ever seen her lovelier. His heart thumped wildly in his chest. She was the one, he knew it to the bottom of his soul.

He went to speak to her when the door to the pool crashed open.

“She’s dead! My niece, she’s been stabbed!”

Chapter 46

"HOW COULD YOU POSSIBLY CONFUSE DEAD WITH ALIVE, Habersham? You almost incited a riot! You really are an idiot."

There were things that Nana could say that no one else could and once again she seemed to hit the nail on the head.

Benedict knew it was a good thing they didn't like in ancient times or he would have insisted this man lose his head. Not only had he upset everyone with his antics, but Melinda wasn't dead.

However, she had been attacked. According to her, it was early in the morning and she tried to fight them off. It didn't make any sense as to why Maxine would do such a thing. It also was questionable that her maid didn't notice anything and neither did Habersham when he checked on her earlier.

Benedict had had quite enough of the entire family. Regardless of the fact that they were an old Hazenbak family of royal blood, he wouldn't have them in the castle a moment longer.

"You will take your niece and depart as soon as possible!"

Habersham bristled, "How dare you? Your father knew the consequence and respect that is due to our family."

Benedict rose to his feet. Habersham's eyes bulged, and Benedict leaned over the desk.

"My father is dead. If you are saying something against the crown, I will have you court martialed for treason. So, choose your next words very wisely."

It was the first time Benedict had shut Habersham up.

The whirring of a motor was all that was heard before Nana's wheelchair approached with her knitting in her hands. She whacked the man with her knitting bag, which for some reason weighed at least six pounds and then moved to Benedict's side to show her allegiance.

Habersham's mouth opened and closed much like a flounder. Nana lifted her knitting needles, "It's time to take out the trash, wouldn't you say, Benny?"

Benedict fought the uncontrollable urge to laugh as the man stumbled out the door leaving his office.

Moments later there was a loud rap on the door followed by Melinda. He knew that she wouldn't leave without a fight. If the woman was anything, she was predictable.

"How dare you?" Her eyes flashed, and she looked remarkably well, for a woman who had been stabbed.

Nana picked up her long knitting needles and began to click them together. For a moment Melinda was distracted.

Benedict rolled his eyes at the dramatic way she was presenting herself. “It’s interesting that you and your uncle would use precisely the same words. How dare I? Well, Melinda, I am the king. I can do whatever I feel is best for

my family and my people. Perhaps we should get to the heart of the matter?”

“His is the king,” Nana added, clucking her tongue, and starting a new row.

Benedict wondered if he would ever get used to the strange older woman. She was odd in the best way possible and he hoped she would never change. But for now, he needed to deal with Melinda.

“The gunshot at the school is illegal and you could be arrested and imprisoned.” When she began to protest, he waved a hand. “I already tracked down your marksman and he has confessed, don’t waste your breath. As for my second point, we are never getting married. Not now and not ever.”

“Did you hear that, missy? Not now, not ever!” Nana reiterated punctuating each statement with her knitting needles.

Benedict swallowed his smile. Damn it, he had to be serious. “Melinda, your family is never going to rule Hazenbak. You and your uncle will return to your estate and gather your things. From there my private plane will take you to your next place of residence. It will not be in the country of Hazenbak. If for some reason you do not follow my wishes, I will be forced to assume that you want your charges to become public. Are we clear?”

Melinda stiffened. “Your father hand-picked me to be the next queen. You can’t do this to me.”

Benedict’s knuckled whitened, “And the offer of the plane will be expiring in the next twelve hours. So, I suggest you hurry; I know you dislike commercial flights.”

Melinda switched tracks. Her face crumpling as bright tears appeared in her eyes. “I was attacked this morning in your home and now you are throwing me out. How could you be so cruel? Is this because of Luke? I promise that was only because you left me high and dry.”

“I would like to see the injury,” he said, deadpan.

Melinda flew to her feet. “You wish to see the stab wound? Have you no concern for infection or worse reopening the wound?”

“Is no wound, girl, we all know it,” Nana chortled.

Benedict rose as well. “I have a strong inclination to believe that we wouldn’t find anything. I think you faked the incident to try and garner sympathy and you took advantage of the fact that

Maxine smacked your face the previous evening. I have someone out to meet with her, they should be catching up to her at any moment. I will be interested to hear what she has to say."

Melinda faltered a little. "I can't believe you are accusing me of lying! We were once as close as two people could ever be!"

Benedict suddenly felt weary.

"No, we never were. You had your life on the side, and I did as well. That was never closeness, it was nothing."

Her mouth hardened. "Grow up Benedict! Do you think that life is supposed to end with happily ever after because, newsflash; it doesn't! The hero doesn't get the girl and the life doesn't end with lollipops and rainbows!"

He walked toward the study door and opened it; on the other side he addressed the servant with his wishes for them to leave the castle immediately.

"I won't come crawling back," she hissed at him, and then she was gone.

For a moment there was silence, and then Nana sighed. "She's a right bitch, isn't she?"

Benedict started laughing and wasn't surprised when the older lady joined in with cackles of her own.

Lia was standing in the hallway. "I had been about to enter to see what the screaming was all about when I heard you both start laughing."

Benedict sighed, and Lia did something totally uncharacteristic of herself and wrapped her arms around her older brother.

"Are you alright?" she asked softly.

"Olivia discovered something about Habersham," he said, kissing her forehead. "Come in and I will try and explain it. Or I am sure Nana will do the honors if I happen to blunder."

Nana's eyes sparkled, "He's not wrong."

Benedict went on to talk to Lia about the unauthorized expense account that he had uncovered with Olivia and Sally.

"You need to bring them to justice!" Lia was incensed.

"They will be exiled. We won't have them in this country."

"What of Maxine?"

Benedict shook his head. "I feel bad that she had to deal with Melinda. No doubt that the woman incensed her into a state. I know that many people have often wanted to strike the

woman. Everyone can snap if pushed hard enough and I know how devious she can be. Did you speak to the housekeeper?"

Lia nodded. "That was what I was coming to speak with you about. There were no bloody sheets removed from her room. I do believe that the injury was fake, another ploy to get your attention."

"How can people be so deceitful?" Benedict shuddered.

"I can't believe that father wanted me to marry that woman."

Lia made a face, "I agree she is terrible, but then I always felt so. Do you know where Sally is right now?"

He shook his head, "No, the last I saw her was when we were out on the lawn."

Lia took a deep breath. "She and Auralia are speaking with Aurelia's parents."

Benedict wasn't following, "Why?"

"Are you completely oblivious?" Lia rolled her eyes.

"Auralia is in love with Olivia; everyone knows that."

Benedict nodded. "Yes, I am aware."

"Her parents have forbidden the connection. But Sally is there as emotional support as Auralia tells them it's her life." "She is coming out publicly?"

Lia smiled and nodded. "Yes, they are going to petition the court to marry."

Light dawned on Benedict and he rose from his chair.

"Where are they?"

Lia's smile widened. "In the front parlor. I would hurry."

Benedict wasted no time, practically running toward the front parlor. Once he arrived, he heard raised voices. Obviously, it wasn't going well.

"Your Majesty," one of the footmen gasped, and scrambled to get the door.

Benedict turned to him. "I want you to announce me with all the pomp and circumstance that you can muster. Do you understand?"

The young footman hadn't been at the castle long and had never introduced the king before. But he stood proudly

and nodded. "Yes, Your Majesty."

Benedict grinned, "Well then, let's get to it!"

Chapter 47

THE FOOTMAN CLEARED HIS THROAT AND THE SOUND IN THE room stopped to an immediate silence, “His Majesty, Anthony Roberto James Benedict Vicenza, King of Hazenbak, has decided to address you.”

Auralia and Sally raised their brows at the formality but stood, as was proper, to give Benedict a curtsey. Sally didn’t miss the way his lips quirked when she caught his gaze.

She had no idea what Benedict was up to, but his timing couldn’t have been more perfect. They had been getting close to blows.

Aurelia’s Father bowed deeply. “Your Majesty, you honor us with your presence.”

“Indeed,” Aurelia’s mother tittered, “Such a delight! Our

Auralia here has been saying how lovely her stay has been.”

Auralia looked at her mother. “That isn’t at all what we have been discussing.”

“Auralia!” her father snapped, “Hold your tongue!” Benedict’s eyes narrowed. “If you would all be seated? Viscount Mornington, while it is a pleasure to have you and the Viscountess with us, I have been getting reports of a rather,” he paused for effect, “boisterous conversation; might I be of service?”

Viscountess Mornington blushed, her dark eyes grew large in her face and she sent a worried look to her husband before responding, “It is nothing, Your Highness, just a spot of girl trouble.”

Benedict turned to Auralia who was sitting next to Sally holding her hand tightly.

“Where is Olivia?” he asked kindly.

“She is in her rooms; my parents won’t receive her.”

Benedict’s brows drew together, “Viscount and Viscountess, is there a reason one of my most trusted advisors isn’t allowed in your presence? Perhaps she is guilty of some crime you wish to make me aware of.”

Sally had never loved him more than at that moment. It was true that Oliva had been crucial in finding the missing funds taken by Habersham. But for Benedict to call her his most trusted advisor shed new light on the girl.

Sally had quickly surmised that Aurelia’s parents were more concerned about how society would see them and less about the wants and needs of their daughter. In one fair swoop, Benedict had managed to boost Olivia tremendously in their eyes.

The Viscount spluttered, “No crime, fine girl, indeed.”

Auralia felt the reins of her anger springing free, “Fine girl? You were just accusing her of seducing and corrupting me. It can’t be both ways. If Olivia is a fine girl there should be no reason why we can’t be together!”

The Viscounts face looked thunderous. “My daughter is not a gay!”

“A gay? What does that even mean? It’s not like I am anything different than I have always been. I am attracted to women, is that a crime?”

“No,” Benedict said before the Viscount could answer. “And if you and Olivia are amenable, I am going about the process to change the laws against same-sex marriage. There should be no reason why you can’t be with the one you love.”

The Viscount looked like he wanted to argue. The pulse in his jaw ticked frantically. But Benedict knew that he wouldn’t go against his king.

“Olivia has been a godsend and I wish to have her appointed as one of my personal accountants. It would mean more time spent here at the palace, so I apologize for that.”

A tear slipped down Aurelia’s cheek, “I know she would be honored.”

“Why don’t you go fetch her,” Benedict suggested. “I am sure your parents won’t mind.”

The Viscount shook his head, “Of course not.”

When Auralia softly shut the door, Benedict turned to her parents.

“You have a beautiful daughter that loves you very much. She has put her happiness on hold in order to appease the both of you. I just wonder for what means? Is that your goal to make her miserable for the rest of her days?”

The Viscountess bit her lip, “We want our daughter to be happy. It is just that what she is suggesting is an abomination before God.”

Sally took a deep breath, “Perhaps you need to leave that for God to decide. I know that religion is a touchy subject, but it seems to me that in most cases we are taught that we are not the ones to judge another, but we are taught to love. What you are doing to Olivia and Auralia doesn’t resemble love.”

The Viscount pushed his shoulders back, “In my day this kind of thing was not to be tolerated.”

Sally shrugged, “Well, perhaps you should be grateful that your daughter doesn’t have to live in a time when she is forced to hide who she is. Perhaps you should be happy that your daughter has found the love of her life. And maybe you should work on building a relationship with Olivia so that when they do marry you aren’t the ones left without a daughter. She loves you, make no mistake, but she is

finished choosing your happiness over her own."

Benedict smiled, "Well said."

The door opened and Auralia walked in with a reluctant Olivia.

The Viscountess rose to her feet, "Olivia, it is nice to see you again."

Olivia stopped for just a second before Auralia was hauling her forward again.

"King Benedict said that they were changing the marriage laws," Auralia rambled, "And he wants to hire you full-time. I heard him say it!"

Benedict smiled, having risen to his feet when the Viscountess stood, he made his way forward to greet them.

"I meant to ask you earlier and things got away from me. But I would be most grateful if you would consider joining the royal staff. We can discuss particulars later of course, and I am not looking for an answer right at this moment."

Olivia nodded gratefully. "Did you really mean it?"

Benedict looked confused, "Of course, you would be a wonderful addition."

Olivia shook her head, "No, I am sorry Your Highness I wasn't being clear. Did you really mean that you are going to

change the laws about same-sex marriage?"

Benedict blinked, "Absolutely. I am a firm supporter of equality."

Olivia burst into tears, "I just never thought it would be possible."

Auralia wrapped the shorter woman in her arms, "I told you we would find a way. I won't do this without you, not anymore."

The Viscount cleared his throat, "Perhaps we should take some time getting to know Olivia."

Aurelia's face at that moment was happier than Sally had ever seen her.

"You will love her, Papa, I know you will!"

The Viscount and Viscountess moved forward to speak with their daughter and Benedict indicated with a head nod to Sally that they should leave.

She was way ahead of him already making her way toward the door. As soon as they were outside in the hall, she threw her arms around him.

Benedict wasn't expecting it but was able to keep them both from stumbling to the ground.

"What was that for?" he said with a laugh.

"You are wonderful, did you know that? Oh, Benedict, what you did for them. That was the sexiest thing I have ever seen you do."

He cupped his hands on her ass. "That was my sexiest move?"

Her cheeks heated, and she tucked her face against his neck. "Well, there might be one or two others."

Benedict wasted no time climbing the stairs with Sally in his arms. Harrison, the butler, opened the doors to the King's bedchambers and politely shut them after Benedict had carried Sally in. He allowed a faint smile to cross his weathered face.

He hadn't been a huge fan of the old king, not that anyone would have been able to tell; he was excellent at his job. However, Benedict was something special, and he knew their country was in good hands.

Wiping away the smile he straightened his tie and went to inquire about dinner.

Chapter 48

"HOW DID YOU KNOW IT WAS HABERSHAM?" SALLY ASKED AS Benedict bounded up the stairs.

He grinned at her, "I am whisking you away to my bedroom and you are worried about business? At a time like this?"

Sally nodded, "Absolutely, I want to know how you figured it out. I also want to know how the showdown with Melinda went. Was she really stabbed? And what about Maxine, have you heard from her?"

Benedict carried Sally into his chambers and set her gently on the four-poster bed. The linens felt luxurious under her fingertips and she took her time feeling the satin against her skin.

"As for Habersham, it was Olivia who uncovered the leak. All of my advisors have expense accounts, and I was too naive to think that there might be more than one attached to an individual. When she asked me why he had two I knew that something was wrong. One looked much like my other advisors and it was the one that I knew he had. The second account was filled under agricultural improvements. I hate to say that I know little about agriculture. When Olivia saw the amount that we were sending out as well as what my father had paid, she knew there was a discrepancy."

Sally slipped one shoe off and then the other. Benedict watched as she moved to take off her sweater, "Keep going, what about Melinda?"

He cleared his throat noisily, "Well, she was typical Melinda, dishonest, threatening and manipulative. I can't believe my father wanted me to marry that woman."

Sally's sweater hit the floor and she unbuttoned the side panel of her skirt, shimming it off, showing her lace garters.

Benedict's eyes grew wide. "Are you trying to kill me?"

A sexy smile was his answer before she added, "And the stabbing?"

This time Benedict did roll his eyes, "She was no more injured than you or I. I think she has been watching too much American reality television!"

Sally laughed and threw a pillow at him, "Hey! I like some of those shows!"

He shuddered. "I know. I don't think I can sit through another episode of the Bachelor with Lia. You are going to have to take my place."

"What about Nick?" Sally unhooked the garters and began to remove the stockings.

"Who?" Benedict rasped.

“Nick—your brother in law, best friend, does any of this ring a bell?”

It was difficult for Benedict to concentrate with her sitting on his bed in her bra and panties.

“Nick won’t watch it, says that his man card won’t allow it.” Benedict’s mouth went dry when she unclasped her bra and tossed it onto the floor with her other clothes.

“I see, what about your man card?” Sally teased.

“My sister burned it ages ago,” he said shortly.

She noted the massive bulge behind his trousers.

“When I heard that you and Auralia were speaking to her parents I came as quickly as I could.”

Sally paused and then slipped her thumbs under the elastic and slid her panties down. “I don’t know that I have ever been more attracted to you than when you charged in there to help Auralia and Olivia.”

Benedict’s focus what gone, he began tearing at his clothes desperate to get them off. “How was that attractive?”

Sally gasped when she saw the pearly essence of his precum on the mushroomed head. Sliding over she reached for him.

Benedict was no dummy and immediately moved toward his bed. Sally pumped his massive length a few times before leaning down and taking him into her mouth.

Benedict would have decreed anything she wanted just as long as she kept sucking his dick into her throat. The slurping sounds echoed in the room and his eyes were locked on the way her lips were stretched to capacity to take him in.

She was so beautiful, so perfect for him in every way. He was down to less than twenty-six days and suddenly it seemed as if there wasn’t enough time. He needed her. Not just for help with the Academy, although she was amazing with the students. And not just to help him at the palace, although she always seemed to have the right answers.

Benedict needed her in his life, in his bed. He wanted to see her grow round with his babies and he wanted to be the one she woke up with every morning.

As much as he didn’t want to Benedict pulled her from

his cock. She wiped away a string of spit with the back of her hand.

“Are you alright?” her voice was husky.

“No,” he said honestly. “I can’t handle having the days loom over us. And I didn’t want the first time I really bared my soul to you, being the same moment, my cock was in your mouth. I don’t want you to misinterpret things or to

assume that I am speaking out of passion."

Her face froze, "What do you need to tell me?"

"Sally, I am in love with you. I think I fell for you the night we first slept together in the Smoky Mountains and you teased the hell out of me. I love your heart and how you care about your friends. I have seen what kind of woman you are, and I know that there is nobody out there better for me. I am sorry that I am a king."

Her fingers shot to her trembling lips, "You don't have to be sorry."

"If being king means that I can't have you, I don't know what I will do. I have a responsibility to these people, and I want to rule them. But Sally I need you more. Please tell me our story has a happily ever after."

She bit her lip and large tear streaking down her cheeks,

"I love you too, so much."

"Will you marry me?" he gathered her into his arms and moved so that they lay side by side. "I want to be your husband. I want to give you babies and I want your grandmother to see her great grandbabies."

"Oh, Benedict, why do you make things so hard?" she was clearly torn, wanting to say yes, but worried that she would be ruining his life if she did.

"It's easy, my love."

He kissed her softly, "Do you love me?"

She nodded, and another tear slipped out, "You know that I do."

"Then marry me. We have the rest of our lives to figure it out."

Sally knew that this was the moment that would change everything. She could accept Benedict and be made a queen, or she could leave and just be miserable for the rest of her life.

"Yes," she breathed.

"Yes?" he was so surprised he barked at her, "You did say yes, right?"

She nodded happily and then suddenly his lips were on hers and he was kissing her with all of the pent-up passion and joy that existed between them. Their legs tangled as their tongues slid against each other.

They couldn't seem to get close enough. Sally pushed him on his back and straddled his legs. The heat of his cock resting just above her pussy. She continued to kiss him desperately, this was her Benedict, and she would never ever let him go.

He lifted her hips and pressed his swollen cock against her entrance. Sally didn't hesitate to slide down, impaling herself on him. The fit without anything between them was exquisite. She moaned and rocked, needed more friction.

His hands went to her ass and he helped to lift and drop her down again. Her inner muscles clenched, and she knew that if he just kept up that rhythm she would sail into ecstasy. His hips thrust forward harder moving deeper inside of her and then suddenly her body was thrashing, coming hard, his cock was being squeezed impossibly tight and he could no longer hold back.

Ribbons of hot cum coated her insides and sent her on another round of pleasure. He held her and kissed her softly until she was able to come back to herself.

"Wow," she breathed and then snuggled into his neck.

Benedict grinned, "Wow, indeed. I love you, Sally."

She grasped him sleepily, "Love you too, Ben."

Chapter 49

"IT'S OFFICIAL, OLIVIA AND I ARE ENGAGED!" AURALIA THRUST out her left hand to show the glittering diamond on her third finger.

Sally embraced her friend, "It is gorgeous! I am so excited for you both!"

Sally had been stepping in to help at the Academy and she was surprised when instead of one of the students calling out her name it had been Auralia. Things had settled down at the palace after Habersham had been dealt with. Even Stacy and Luke had begun dating—although Stacy said they were just friends.

Most of the guests left shortly after, including Lia and Nick, who had to return to Meron for his twin sisters' birthday. It had been nice for Sally and Benedict to spend the time alone with each other.

Consequentially it had been providence that they stayed on in Hazenbak, the person that had taken her job at the Academy was going through some personal things and Sally was needed there.

As she hugged her dear friend, she wondered for the millionth time if this was what happily ever after felt like. Olivia and Auralia were getting married. She and Benedict were in a good place. It was almost like it was too good to be true.

The problem with thinking that thought is the moment you do, something happens.

When they had her settled in Benedict turned to Sally. "I took the liberty of having your things moved while we were away."

Her eyes widened. "To where?"

He pulled her into his arms despite that they were standing in the downstairs hallway and gently kissed her lips.

"To where it belongs. My thirty-day trial is long expired,

I am going to need to make a new arrangement." Sally's lips twitched, "Oh? Well, what are the terms?"

"Nothing too out of the ordinary. You have to promise to love me, live with me for the rest of your life, and I would love it if you would marry me."

Her breath caught. "And if I say yes?"

"Then I will spend the rest of my life adoring you, loving you, and our kids. And your grandmother, especially your grandmother. I will do everything in my power to see that you are happy and that you know how much you mean to me."

Her eyes were glazed with tears. “You already make me happy. I love you so much!”

He kissed her again, as if he couldn’t hold it back another moment. “I know.”

She swatted at his arm, “You aren’t supposed to say that!”

He feigned surprise. “I meant. I love you more!”

Her lips trembled. “How long will this contract be good for?”

He growled, “Two hundred years and not a day less. Do you hear?”

She nodded, “Yes.”

He froze. “Yes, you will stay with me for two hundred years or yes you will marry me?”

“Yes, to all of it!”

He scooped her up and kissed her hard, twirling in a circle. There was a flashing out of the corner of Sally’s eye, but she didn’t want to stop kissing him to find out what it was.

“Got it, Ben!” Nana called out.

Sally wrenched her lips away, “What?”

“Your Nana was on filming duty.”

Nana waived her cell phone in the air, “I love these smartphones! I am going to get it uploaded to social media immediately!”

“No!” Sally cried out, “We can’t have anything go out that doesn’t go through the public relations representative!”

Nana’s face fell.

Benedict called out to Nana over Sally’s head, “You didn’t sign a non-disclosure when you moved in the palace, did you?”

The older woman shook her head in confusion but then realization started to dawn on her.

“Nope, looks like I can post what I want to.”

Sally turned to Benedict. “You can’t seriously be giving her free reign?”

Benedict kissed her nose. “I set up her accounts and have to approve all of her posts.”

Nana was too busy uploading to hear what he had said.

Sally smiled and leaned up and kissed the corner of his mouth. “I love you.”

He picked her up and turned to Nana. “Have a good night, I am off to plunder my lady.”

Nana grinned and waved. “Have a good time!”

Sally buried her face in his chest; life would never be boring with these two. And she was perfectly okay with that.

Chapter 50

SIX MONTHS LATER...

"Why can't Hank come to the wedding?"

Nick sighed for what seemed like the hundredth time. His twin sisters were literally driving him up a wall.

"Kate, this is your uncle's wedding. Hank is something of a monster. We don't take cats to weddings."

Kate frowned at her mother Queen Stephanie but knew better than to argue. The entire family was there decked out in their finest wear. The girls were to be the flower girls and Anthony an honorary ring bearer.

Anthony had already had a major blowout in his little tuxedo and was currently sporting a onesie while one of the servants tried to whip his outfit back into shape for the ceremony.

Lia, Auralia, and Stacy were all in with Sally as the makeup artist put on the finishing touches. Nana had brought the pearls that she herself wore at her own wedding. Auralia had provided a blue garter belt and Stacy gave her a lace negligee to wear under her gown.

Lia had brought the tiara that her mother had for her debut. It was nothing too extravagant and looked amazing in Sally's dark locks.

"I can't believe this day is here," Sally said to her reflection.

"You are a beautiful bride," Nana replied, "Obviously with the genetics I gave you, there was no other alternative."

The girls laughed.

Stacy fixed a curl that was falling, "It seems that we all are getting our happily ever after."

Auralia and Olivia had been married two months ago on the beach with everyone in attendance—even her parents. Stacy and Luke had decided to move in together. And the "L" word had been tossed around a few times.

Now they were standing at Sally's wedding surrounding her in their bridesmaid dresses.

"Where are you going on your honeymoon?" Auralia asked.

Sally wrinkled her nose, "Benedict won't tell me. I haven't even packed a bag; he had Nana and one of the maids do it. When I tried to see what clothes were missing, I couldn't tell. I am worried that for the next seven days he plans for me to be nude!"

Nana grinned. "Smart boy!"

“Maybe he bought new things, so you wouldn’t suspect anything,” Lia suggested, but Nana just shrugged and made a motion like she was zipping her lips.

“Miss Baker? We are ready for you.”

The wedding specialist indicated that it was time for the bridal party to get into position. Sally’s gown was an off the shoulder designer gown with a long train. She had an additional gown in light pink for the reception with a shorter hem for dancing.

It was the first time since meeting Benedict that she had ever felt royal.

The Academy was overjoyed to hear that she was going to be staying on in Hazenbak and Benedict turned full reins of the school over to Sally. It was something that she was passionate about and she could have as little or as much involvement as she wished to.

The orchestra began to play and then it was time.

Sally wasn’t sure that she would remember much about that day. But one thing that was imprinted on her mind was Benedict’s face as he turned to greet her. Eyes blazing intently, he didn’t wait for her to walk all the way to the front.

Benedict started toward her and then in front of half the world’s finest and all of the press he gathered Sally into his arms and kissed her. This wasn’t a peck either. Nana’s proposal video, which had gone viral, was sure to be supplanted by this romantic move.

It was said that King Benedict and his to be crowned queen were the greatest romance of the twentieth century. There were books written and documentaries made as well as copycat movies and even dolls, if one could believe it.

Nana of course had stock in all of it and made a very tidy fortune for herself. The ceremony was long and formal, but the way he looked at her when he repeated his vows stole Sally’s breath away.

When all was said and done, and they were officially man and wife he kissed her again. Tears ran down her cheeks, ruining the effect of the make-up, but she didn’t care.

Sally had never been happier.

Auralia and Olivia hugged her close and wished her well.

“I will never forget what you did for us,” Auralia whispered into Sally’s ear at the reception. “You are truly a wonderful person and I am proud to call you my queen.”

Olivia kissed her on both cheeks. “What you bring to Hazenbak is something that is impossible to value. You are good and kind, we are happy to have you.”

Stacy and Luke had disappeared for much of the dancing but showed up rather disheveled about an hour later.

“Please tell me you weren’t in the coat closet,” Sally teased as she hugged her tiny friend.

Stacy blushed. “Goodness no! We were in your room!”

Sally gasped as Stacy began laughing “You should see your face! Serves you right for teasing me!”

Benedict could hardly take his eyes off of Sally. It literally was the best day of his life. Not only was the woman of his dreams now his wife, but everyone who loved and cared for them had attended. It was a day of celebration and gladness. But he found that he was itching to get her alone. He wanted to unzip that gorgeous pink gown and get to her glorious pink skin underneath.

When it was time to depart, they bid their farewells and then he whisked her off, with their well-wishers waving them goodbye.

Benedict helped her into the limousine and caught the sight of Stacy holding the bouquet.

“Did you throw it to her?” he asked with a laugh.

Sally nodded. “Almost smacked her in the head!”

Benedict grinned and pulled her onto his lap. His lips were hard and demanding and she immediately responded by kissing him back with everything she had inside of her. His hands were at the nape of her neck, undoing the tiny clasps and unzipping her dress.

He nearly came in his pants when he saw the sheer negligee that she was wearing. Never had he seen anything more beautiful in his life.

Pulling out his cock, he had hardly pulled his tuxedo pants down when Sally was mounting him. His hands were full of her perfectly round ass and those breasts were shoved in his face.

He sucked on her nipples through the lace and she moaned and rode him harder, faster.

His hands replaced his mouth, tugging and pulling on her tips. The lace from the negligee rubbing against her delicate skin. Her nipples were hard, and her eyes glazed.

He reached between them and began to circle her clit as she rode him. Her head fell back as she rolled her hips, taking him impossibly deep.

And then she was coming, hard and fast. He groaned and followed her into extasy. His spasms prolonging her release.

She slumped on him when the last of her orgasm left and his hands wrapped around her small curvy body.

“I love you,” she said simply. Because there was so much that she wanted to say but somehow those three words summed it all up.

He kissed her shoulder and continued to caress her skin,

"I love you, more."

She grinned against his neck. "Not possible."

EPILOGUE

LIA AND NICK WERE CROWNED KING AND QUEEN OF MERON in his forty-ninth year. While the passing of his father was extremely hard for Nick and Lia were some of the best rulers their country had ever seen. They ended up having four little ones, Anthony, Claire, Rebecca, and Charles.

Auralia and Olivia were blessed with two children from the same surrogate father. Their sons were named Rubio and Renaldo, giving homage to their Latin patronage. Both boys were excellent tennis players, having been coached by their mother Auralia. But Rubio's true passion was soccer, and he went on to play for Hazenbak in the World Cup.

Stacy and Luke were married a year later. Children weren't something that came easily to them. But after ten years they were able to have a little girl, Sarah Diana.

Benedict and Sally had to say goodbye to Nana twelve years after she had come to live with them at the palace. She had not only adopted every member of the staff, but she was a constant at the Academy as well. Her funeral was attended by foreign dignitaries and local students alike. George was eight when his great Nana passed, and Elaine was only four.

Sally had hopes that they would remember the great lady for all the wonderful things she taught them.

Life wasn't perfect for our royals, especially when Anthony and George were at the Academy together. Despite the age difference, the two boys caused more riots than any other generation before them. Charles and Renaldo vowed to outdo them when they came of age. No, perfection was something for fairy tales. But what they did have was love, laughter, and family. And isn't that worth far more?