

~ Queen of My Country, Queen of My Heart III: The People's Princesses ~

by Alex Tryst

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Dedication: To Alexa, "For it is confronting one's own beliefs that we truly know ourselves." My hope for you is that you continue to challenge the beliefs you and others around you have in coming to know who you are. Knowing yourself is the first step to loving yourself, and I know you are well on your way in this lifelong journey. As a side note, the phrase I asked to borrow from you is buried in this book. Enjoy your search for it, if you can even remember what it was. It was the least I could do since you've adopted one of mine as a motto of life.

Chapter I: The Washington Princesses

The sun was shining brightly that afternoon at the Kentucky Derby. Long family tradition dictated that the Washingtons attend the event, and Queen Alexa did her best never to miss it. It was one of the highlights of early summer, and she enjoyed the excursion with her wife and daughters. On this particular day the six of them were able to travel as a family via the royal plane, which was unusual given everyone's schedules.

At age fifty-three the graying dark-haired queen remained active, providing counsel to the legislature and guiding the country's policy. She had allowed the country's Congress more latitude in introducing legislation, which might be to the benefit of the citizens, but she still retained the final word with respect to the law.

Her wonderful wife Lauren, meanwhile, directed her own free time toward improving domestic problems. Her interests in books had remained with her throughout the years, which she had wrapped into larger artistic and educational projects for children. She was intensely interested in the younger generations of the country, but especially their four daughters, the two oldest of whom seemed to be missing from the box at that moment.

"Where are those girls?" she questioned, looking down a row in the box to her youngest. The twins shrugged, obviously not really paying attention. "Let me borrow your binoculars for a moment, would you, Caroline?" she asked.

"Sure, Mom. Here you go."

Lauren looked around the crowd, and when she thought she saw her eldest daughter, she looked through the binoculars to confirm her suspicions. Sure enough Anastasia, their twenty-one-year-old college senior, was standing at the railing of the track talking to a female jockey who apparently has just finished a race. She watched for a few moments as her redheaded daughter gave a charming smile and said something that made her company blush. She chuckled a little at the sight.

"What is so amusing, love?" Alexa asked.

"Anastasia. She is flirting with a jockey."

"Let me see," she said.

Lauren handed over the binoculars and pointed in the general direction of her daughter. Alexa observed for a moment before smiling. "That girl truly does take after me," she joked. "Beautiful jockey."

"Yes but her heart is so fickle. Last week it was a volleyball player from school. Today it is the jockey. Who will it be next week?" Both of them laughed a little. "That just leaves one more to go. Where could Victoria be?" Both queens looked around the grounds the best they could without visual aids, but their second eldest could not be found at first. "Are you sure you do not know where Victoria is?" she asked her youngest again.

"Try looking over by the stables," Camille replied.

Lauren and Alexa looked across the track to where their daughter suggested. Due to where the royal box was located, they were able to see beyond the gates which led to the track to where the stables were. Thinking that she saw something, Lauren raised the binoculars to her eyes again. "Oh my," she whispered.

"What? Do you see her?" inquired Alexa.

Without answering Lauren just handed over the binoculars, so her wife could look. Alexa could feel the back of her neck tighten and rise in temperature at what she saw. "Who is that?" she asked. Neither of her twins answered. "Matthew," she called, gaining the attention of her Secretary of Affairs who was sitting several rows down.

He stood from his seat and came to kneel by hers. "Yes, Lex? What is it?"

"Do you happen to know the name of the young man who seems to have taken up residence on my daughter's neck?" she asked through gritted teeth. Handing the binoculars to him, she pointed toward the stables.

He looked for a moment. "Goodness," he mumbled looking away. "I believe the young man's name is Jefferson Keats. They are in college together, and I believe they are seeing each other."

"Call her security to break it up. How unbecoming of her to act in such a manner in public," she grumbled. "Then get both of them back to the box now."

"Certainly, Alexa."

"Do not be so hard on her, love," Lauren said.

"That behavior in a public place is totally unacceptable."

"Have you forgotten what it is like to be nineteen?" she teased. "Was Meredith not nineteen when you married her?"

Alexa groaned. "Do not remind me of that. She was much more mature than Victoria."

"Was she?"

"And it was an entirely different time in life. We had been seriously involved for quite some time before we even made public overtures. We have not even been introduced to the young man who is groping our daughter."

Alexa continued to watch as her orders were carried out. Victoria's security team interrupted the two young adults from their canoodling. She could tell that Victoria was not pleased but began to follow her security back toward the box while holding her boyfriend's hand. It took several minutes before they appeared.

Both Alexa and Lauren stood as they entered. The sandy-haired lanky young man immediately bowed when he saw them. "Your majesty, your highness," he greeted. "It is an honor."

"Mr. Keats, welcome. Please come have a seat," Alexa said, gesturing to the one next to her.

"There is a seat down here next to mine," Victoria said, taking him by the hand.

"I insist. Sit next to me," the queen said a little more firmly.

He nodded. "Thank you, your majesty," he replied, taking the seat as she had instructed.

"Victoria, you can sit with your sisters." Her daughter did not look like she was happy but did as directed. When everyone was seated, Alexa turned to their guest. "Mr. Keats, what is your first name?"

"Jefferson, your majesty."

"Jefferson, how did you and Victoria meet?"

"In political science class. We go to college together."

"And how old are you?"

"Twenty."

"That makes you a junior or a sophomore?"

"I'm a sophomore, your majesty, like Victoria."

"And how long have you and my daughter been dating?"

"About a month."

"About a month?" she questioned, looking down at her daughter for a moment. She couldn't believe they were involved in such activities after only dating a month. It was highly against family protocol. "Tell me, Jefferson. Do you make it a habit of mauling women you have just started dating?"

The young man blushed as Victoria screamed, "Mother! How dare you! You have no right to ask him that!"

"I have all the right in the world," she quickly replied, turning to him.

He was still blushing and shifting nervously in his seat. "We thought we were alone," he mumbled feebly, not meeting her dark gaze.

"You are never alone with Victoria. She is a princess, and the press follows her wherever she goes. As it was, I was able to see your cavorting from my seat without much assistance. Only these," she said, lifting the binoculars. "If I could see you with these, the rest of this gathering could as well. I would not be surprised if a picture of what the two of you were doing appeared in the papers tomorrow."

"I'm deeply sorry, your majesty," he apologized, still not looking at her.

"Traditionally the princesses do not meet with their boyfriends or girlfriends in public without them first being introduced to us. How did you even get in here?"

"Victoria got me a ticket."

"That was kind of her," Alexa mentioned. "Listen, Jefferson. I need you to understand something. Victoria is not your average girl. You may be able to carry on that way with other women, but I will not tolerate it with Victoria. You cannot share any serious intimacies in public lest you risk hurting her image. I will not allow that. She must maintain proper decorum at all times. Is that understood?"

"Yes, your majesty," he quietly responded.

"Good. I am glad we have an understanding. Now if you would like to remain here in the box with us you are welcome. The seat next to Victoria is available."

"Thank you, your majesty," he said finally looking into her eyes again before standing. He gave a little bow before taking his new seat.

"That went well," Lauren said. "I thought you were going to be much harder on him."

Alexa shrugged. "You are right. I have forgotten what it is like to be nineteen. I believe my own mother tried to dissuade me from such deplorable behavior at that age, but I never listened. Now I finally understand where she was coming from all those years."

The redheaded queen laughed lightly. "With age does come wisdom. Hopefully we can just keep them safe. I will feel like we have accomplished something."

A little while later Anastasia returned to the box wearing a smile. "Where have you been, young lady?" Lauren asked with a chuckle.

"I just met the most incredible woman," she said with a little sigh as she moved down a few rows to where her seat was. She paused when she saw Victoria's boyfriend. "Jefferson, hello. I am surprised to find you here."

"Hey. How goes it, Princess Charming?" he teased.

She and the rest of her sisters laughed. "It is going fantastically. Thanks for asking. I just met the hottest woman. She was one of the jockeys in the last race."

"A jockey, huh? Well, at least you know she can spread her legs wide enough for you," Victoria remarked sharply, earning laughs from her boyfriend and younger sisters.

However, her parents were not amused. "Victoria!" Lauren reprimanded. "Have you no sense of decency?"

"Come on, Mom. Stasia knows I am only joking."

"It is fine, Mom, really," Anastasia defended her sister as she took her seat. Under her breath where her parents couldn't hear, she added, "It is not like it is not true." The siblings and Jefferson all snickered.

Alexa and Lauren both shook their heads at the display. Their two older girls had become wild teenagers as they grew, but both of them were hoping maturity would blossom throughout college. However, it did not appear to be the case with either girl. Anastasia clearly was more interested entertaining women than her schoolwork at the Naval Academy from which she was graduating in a few weeks. She never seemed to apply herself to her studies and instead relied solely on her natural above average intelligence, leaving her with a grade point average below what she was capable. Victoria, on the other hand, seemed to at least be able to keep up with her studies at George Washington University well while juggling her social calendar, which by accounts from her security detail was inundated with college parties. It was their two youngest who seemed the most disciplined in their schoolwork and family responsibilities, but Alexa assumed it was because they were still living within the palace under watchful eyes.

For the rest of the afternoon, the group remained in the box enjoying the horse races. When it was time to go, Victoria turned to her mother. "Mom, could we give Jefferson a ride home?" she asked.

Lauren looked at Alexa, who shrugged. "Sure, honey. He can come with us."

"I want to stay behind," Anastasia said.

"Absolutely not," Alexa replied. "You have finals."

"But, Mother, I want to see this girl."

"No. Finals come first. You can come back and see her after graduation. If she means that much to you, she can wait," she said with a smile.

"Well, I at least have to go tell her good bye."

Standing, Alexa shook her head. "Call her on the way to the airport. I am sure she will understand when you tell her your overbearing mother would not allow you a chance to be together. Let us go now."

With that the troupe left for the airport. Alexa and Lauren stayed to themselves as their daughters and Jefferson chatted in the royal limousine. Upon getting to the plane, the fivesome sat in the back while the queens took to the front with various staff members filling the gap. Neither of them spoke to their daughters, as they seemed to be too engaged with each other to be bothered as the entire family headed home.

A few weeks later Anastasia graduated from the Naval Academy. It had been a long-standing family tradition that everyone devote time to the military to gain knowledge about military strategy as well as gain an appreciation for the citizens who made it their full-time career choice, but Anastasia had been the first to combine her military service with her academic schooling. Lauren and Alexa were both proud that she had chosen such a path for herself, for they hoped it meant she had found some focus outside of her family responsibilities. Alexa was personally pleased that her daughter had chosen the same branch she had and had arranged for her daughter to have a part-time job in the office of the Secretary of the Navy to further her education. Furthermore, since she had finally graduated, Alexa and Lauren offered their eldest daughter the opportunity to live anywhere in town that she wanted, so she would not have to remain at the palace.

Anastasia was particularly thrilled by the chance to live away from her parents and chose to live in the home Alexa had bought for Lauren close to the palace when Anastasia was just a little child. The gated two-story, five bedroom home seemed an idyllic place for a new graduate to begin her life as the crowned princess. In fact, she was so ready to exert her independence that on her first night in the place, she held a huge party for all her fellow comrades at the Naval Academy. Victoria had managed to convince her though to invite all her friends as well, leading to a drunken ruckus to which the police had to be dispatched. Unfortunately, Alexa and Lauren didn't learn about it until the next morning when they were reading the paper over breakfast.

"Those girls are going to put me into an early grave," Alexa grumbled, seeing the photograph of her two oldest, looking glassy-eyed and disheveled from the party, splashed across the front page of several publications. "I swear I was never like this."

Lauren laughed. "I think your mother would have disagreed."

"No. I was a handful. I can admit that, but I played by my mother's rules."

"Not always," she countered.

"Almost always. I even married a woman I did not love if you recall. It took you to break me away from her clutches," she joked for a moment. Growing serious she said, "These two do not seem to want to listen. Stasia's reputation as a capable leader is at risk. I have to get through to her, and Victoria is even worse. She is nineteen-years-old, and she is out drinking and partying. I do not even choose to think of what else she might be doing with that boyfriend of hers after what we saw at the Derby. They are going to get hurt if we do not check them. I always thought my mother was too strict on me, but I think we may have gone too far the other way. They have two younger sisters that will follow in their footsteps in a few years if we do not bring them in line now."

"Lex, Stasia is an adult, but she does fall prey to Victoria's charms too much. If you want to get to the root of the problem, it is Victoria. We need to bring Victoria back to the palace for the summer instead of allowing her to stay with Stasia. It is obvious those two cannot be trusted to live responsibly together."

Alexa nodded. "I think you are right. Next week when classes are over she comes home. I cannot put up with a summer of such behavior."

"She is going to hate this."

"I will deal with her. I will go to see her directly after breakfast and then pay Stasia a visit."

"All right. Are you sure you do not want me to talk to them?"

"No. I need to handle this myself."

When breakfast was complete, the queen took a car over to Victoria's campus to see her. While everyone observed her walk through campus with her security team, no one dared approach her. She knew from her daughter's security team that Victoria had not yet risen for the day, so she went immediately to her dorm room and gave a strong knock. Her knock was ignored at first, so she pounded harder. Hearing movement inside the room, she waited for a response. Slowly the door opened.

"Oh God, your majesty," Jefferson mumbled.

Alexa said nothing at first as she took in his lack of attire, except for a pair of boxer shorts. "Mr. Keats, I suggest you put on some clothing," she said, pushing open the door to reveal her daughter in her bed.

"Who is it, babe?" Victoria mumbled rolling over and propping up. "Mother!" she exclaimed, clutching her covers over her naked form.

Alexa turned toward to Jefferson, who was scrambling into a pair of pants. When he was dressed, she said, "I would greatly appreciate it if you left my daughter and me alone."

"Yes, your majesty," he said.

When he was gone, Alexa grabbed the robe that was hung up on the closet door and handed it to her daughter. Victoria took the silent instruction and slipped it on before the two women looked at each other. "You must know why I am here," Alexa began. Victoria shrugged. "I have come to talk to you about last night. I believe you were at a party at your sister's house."

"Oh that," she mumbled.

"There was a most interesting photograph of you and Stasia on the front page this morning, one in which you were utterly intoxicated!" she yelled. "How could you be so irresponsible? You are not even of drinking age, Victoria! The police should have arrested you!"

"The police would never arrest me," she mumbled. "They know who I am."

"But you seem to forget who I am!" Alexa continued. "I have had enough of this! You may be a princess, but I am the queen, and now I have to enforce discipline on you which you refuse to impose on yourself!" She paused to take a breath and calm herself. "Your mother and I have discussed this, and we have decided that until you can show some maturity and behave in a manner consist with being a princess, your freedom to do as you please has been revoked. This summer you will be returning to the palace to live instead of staying with your sister."

"Mother, that is not fair!"

"It has become clear to us that you cannot be trusted to behave appropriately, so we are putting you in a place in which we can maintain some oversight. If this trend continues, you will live at the palace with us until you graduate college. This behavior cannot continue, Victoria. Being a princess is not equivalent to being a brat. You are not some spoiled rich kid who can just take whatever they want without regard to others. Our family name is at stake, and your reputation as an heir to the throne is at risk. The position of being a princess has a tremendous amount of responsibility associated with it, but I am not even asking you to fulfill all those responsibilities right now, because your mother and I believe you should be allowed to live your life. You are only nineteen and have plenty of time to embrace your duties once you graduate, but you must act in a manner consist with the laws of this land, including directives from your parents as they happen to be the sovereigns of this country. Is that clearly understood?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Good. I do not ever want to see another photograph of you drunk. If we must, your mother and I are prepared to take all your freedoms to keep you in line. We have allowed you too much latitude, but you are a young adult now and need to start acting like a Washington." Coming to her daughter, Alexa pulled her into a hug. "I love you, Victoria, but you girls are single-handedly giving me gray hair."

Victoria laughed. "I thought that was Mom."

Alexa gave a pause before saying, "There is something else I wanted to talk to you about since I am here. This relationship with Jefferson seems to be quite serious."

Victoria shrugged. "It is not that serious."

"He just answered your door without clothes on. I consider that serious. You need to be careful, Victoria. I do not want to see you hurt. If something were to happen, this would not reflect just upon you, but the entire family."

"You would never say this to Stasia," she countered.

"Stasia is different, and you and I both know that. She, like many before her, is inclined toward her own gender, which makes life easier in terms of having an intimate relationship. There are no accidents. I would be a fool to think that my daughters are not involved in such an activity, but you must be more careful just by virtue of your desires to be with someone who can get you pregnant. As already established, you are not an average woman, which means average provisions are inadequate. While I cannot force you to remain celibate, I must ask that you think about the serious repercussions of your actions should anything go wrong. I, as your queen, could be forced to take drastic measures against you to save our family, and that is not something I am prepared to contemplate. Do not put me in such a position, Victoria. Promise me that you will always take the utmost precaution." She nodded. "Thank you. Now I will leave you to your studies. You have finals next week, so I am sure you are busy preparing."

"I will see you and Mom soon."

Alexa kissed her daughter on the forehead. "Good luck with finals. See you next weekend."

With that Alexa left to head to Anastasia's house. Her oldest daughter was awake and dressed when she arrived. "Mother, what a surprise. Come in," she greeted. They made their way into the dining area.

Alexa saw the newspaper on the table along with her daughter's breakfast. "I see you have seen the front page." She nodded. "Stasia, I know that party got out of hand because Victoria and her friends were here. Nevertheless, you chose to involve yourself, which reflects poorly on you."

"I know. I did not realize it was going to get out of control. Originally it was only supposed to be my friends from the Academy."

Alexa took a seat. Anastasia's household staff was there to offer her coffee and breakfast, but she declined. "Stasia, I know you have a penchant for adventure and fun. You are quite like me in that way. I used to like to find it wherever I could, and there is nothing wrong with that, but you have to always remain in control. You are first in line for the throne, and people expect a certain amount of decorum out of you. This incident jeopardizes your reputation as a potential leader."

"I understand. I apologize for what happened."

"Thank you. I know you can do better. You cannot allow yourself to fall under Victoria's influence. She has the unique ability to charm people into doing exactly as she wants without any thought to the consequences. You are her older sister, and I would appreciate it if you would take a more active role in helping us give her proper guidance since the two of you are incredibly close. Your mother and I know how much potential you have to be a powerful leader, and Victoria could learn from you. She does not seem to want to listen to us these days."

Anastasia nodded. "I will try to be more cognizant of that."

"Wonderful. We would appreciate the assistance. Just so you know, because of what happened last night, we have revoked some of her privileges. She will be residing at the palace for the summer instead of here with you. She is not to stay here overnight at all over the summer."

"I understand."

"Good. Now I hope we will still see you often at the palace. You are always welcome home anytime, whether it be for a meal or to visit or even stay. Do not feel you must stay away. Your mother and I have missed seeing you while you were in school, and we hope now that you are close to us again you will grace us with your presence."

"It seems strange to be alone here. I am so used to being around people."

"That is why I never left the palace even though I could have. You are not short on company there. If you ever change your mind, you are always welcome home."

"I know, but I want to try this for awhile. I am excited about having a job, even if it is only part time, and I like the idea of being able to travel more. I have decided to undertake a countrywide tour and visit every state."

"I think that is a wonderful idea. Let the people meet you and spend time with you. You will endear yourself to them. It is the perfect way to set the stage for your future reign."

Anastasia shrugged off the comment. "My reign. You have decades left to go. I do not even think about such things."

"Then you should. Everything you do now influences what you have to work with then. It is best to start with the best possible scenario you can. I made plenty of mistakes when I was younger just like you will. It was not uncommon to see my picture in the paper for excess partying. I was even involved in a fistfight once and lacked some discipline until I was in my late twenties. The only things I really took seriously were flying and your mother. I do not want you to make those same mistakes."

"You were in a fight?" her daughter asked with a grin. "Over what?"

"Your mother's honor. It was the night we met. One of my fellow pilots was hitting on her at the bar, and she was not open to his advances, but he persisted. I came to her rescue."

Anastasia laughed. "I never knew that. Let me guess. It was love at first sight and all that mushy stuff."

"Actually, no. She got upset with me and had me thrown out of the bar. I had to go back the next day and apologize." Her daughter laughed again. "It was a foolhardy thing to do, Stasia, and I paid a steep price for that incident and was thrown out of a flight competition. Flying was my life, and I lost my chance to prove that I was the best pilot in the military because of that fight. I was just lucky that the queen never found out about that."

"That is really funny."

"My point is that everything you do has potential consequences, and you need to think about those before you act. If you do that, you will quickly succeed in securing your place as a well-respected leader, and at the end of it all, that is exactly what you want. The people want reassurance that they are in capable hands. All right?"

She nodded. "I understand, and I will try to remember that."

"Thank you."

Anastasia paused for a moment to sip her coffee before looking back at her mother. "Mother, there is something I have always wanted to ask you. It has to do with Mom."

"I have nothing to hide from you children. What is it?"

She hesitated again. "Why did you have an affair with her while you were married to your first wife?"

Alexa looked down at the table for a moment. She was always afraid one of her children would ask her about that, and it had finally happened. She had thought over how best to explain the complications that had plagued her and Lauren when they were younger, so she looked back at Anastasia. "The history books would say that my first wife Meredith was unable to have children, and therefore I sought out a woman to carry on the Washington line, but that is not the entire story. From the moment I met your mother, I thought she was the most amazing woman in

the world. I loved her from almost the very beginning. Everything about her called to me, stirring something deep inside me that I never knew existed. I knew I could never love anyone else the way I loved her. However, I had made my mother Queen Faith a promise to marry Meredith Adams, who was my girlfriend at the time. Your mother was not an acceptable option for a wife, because the laws were written in such a way that I had to marry someone that was born into nobility. Meredith was pretty much my only choice. She had been raised as my future bride, and I had committed myself to taking her as such. I was so in love with your mother, though, that I offered to abdicate in order to be with her, but she would not allow it. Instead she asked to never see me again, and I respected her decision."

"How did you end up together then?"

"Well, Meredith and I got married as promised. We were not unhappy, but we were certainly not blissfully in love or anything. It just so happened that your mother came into my life unexpectedly again, and that time I vowed never to let her go. I would have given up everything to be with her, even the crown itself. Because of our age difference and our mutual desires for children, we opted to have the four of you before the divorce with Meredith was finalized. One of the first things I did when I became queen was to change the law, allowing us to marry and ensure that you and your sisters would never be placed in the same position. We just want you to follow your heart, wherever it leads you. We do not care from what class the woman of your deepest dreams comes as long as you love each other. Your queen needs to be totally devoted to you, Stasia, and if she is that is enough. The people will accept her if she shows them how much she respects and adores you as the queen."

"So it was not because of Meredith's infertility?"

"No. I have loved your mother deeply and profoundly for almost thirty years, even though we have only been married for fifteen of them. Never doubt that, Stasia. We want the same thing for you and the rest of your sisters." The two of them chatted for a little longer about other things before Alexa asked, "So when will you be starting your tour of the country?"

"Next month. I am hoping to spend at least a week in each state, so it may take me awhile to get through the whole country. My staff is working on setting up venues for me to visit."

"Sounds great. Where are you starting?"

"In the South. Florida and then Texas. I figured we could hit the most populated areas first. I am hoping to get to California as well before the summer is over."

"What about work?"

Anastasia smiled. "I will be doing that novel thing called telecommuting. The Secretary of the Navy understands my priorities, and he and I have come to an agreement. We will see how long this job lasts. It is already inhibiting me from my other duties."

"Well, your mother and I are proud you have chosen to try to work, at least for awhile. You are the first in our family to try to have a normal job. I know it will not be easy, and over time you will have to fade out of it, but embrace the normalcy of it while you can. I must be going but before I do tell me. How are things between you and the jockey?" she teased.

"That was over before it even started. I have already met half a dozen ladies since then. You really must try to keep up." Both of them laughed as they stood. Anastasia walked her mother to the door. "Thank you for coming by."

"I am always happy to see you. Remember our talk now," she instructed. The two women embraced. Alexa combed her daughter's red hair back from her face for a moment before kissing her on top of the head. "I love you."

"I love you too, Mother."

"Stop by and see your mother sometime soon."

"I will."

Chapter II: A Heart Opens

A month later Anastasia found herself in Dallas, Texas. She had flown there from her tour of Florida, and the first stop on the day's agenda was to head to the children's hospital to spend time with the kids and their parents. Another group was also going to be there, but the hospital didn't want to miss the opportunity to have Anastasia come, and the redhead had no qualms about sharing the spotlight with another organization.

She had opted to dress more casually that day and donned a pair of chinos instead of her usual dress slacks and a white short-sleeved polo instead of a long-sleeved dress shirt and rounded out the look with a ball cap from her alma mater and sunglasses in hopes of keeping a low profile.

Upon her arrival with her security detail, she learned the other organization that was supposed to be there was a local church that had brought their youth group to visit the kids. It became quickly obvious that it was the adults who were more interested in Anastasia's presence than the children who temporarily resided there at the hospital, as the teenagers had them engrossed in projects. She took it in stride though and was engaging as possible.

It seemed many of the parents wanted to talk to her about the state of healthcare, which was a subject relatively unknown to her, but she listened attentively, taking mental notes of the common concerns and wondered what her mother was doing to address these problems. However, as she engaged parents in discussion, her eyes kept straying across the room to one of the church members. There was a petite blue-eyed blonde in the corner of the room sitting on the floor, reading to a group of children, whose gaze had met with hers several times. Anastasia

thought she looked much older and more mature than the others, figuring her to be closer to her own age, but it was hard to tell. Nevertheless, she wanted to meet her.

When the opportunity arose to do so, she made her way across the room and sat down next to the blonde on the floor. "Mind if I join you?" she asked, flashing a smile.

"Not at all, your highness," she replied with a smile of her own.

Anastasia felt her heart jump in double time for a moment in response. "Everyone calls me Stasia."

"I'm Layla. Would you like to read the next one?" she suggested, extending the book to her.

Anastasia took it, letting her hand brush Layla's in the exchange, which didn't go unnoticed by the blonde judging by the little flush that graced her cheeks. "Thank you. It would be a great pleasure."

The two women sat side by side as they took turns reading books. However, as they did so, Anastasia noticed that the man and woman in charge of the church group kept looking over at her. She wondered why she was receiving so much attention from them, so after about five minutes, she leaned over to Layla as they were between books.

"Why do your chaperones keep looking at me?"

The fair blonde flushed a little and shook her head. "Those aren't my chaperones. They're my parents. My father is the head of the youth group at the church."

"So you are a preacher's daughter?" She nodded. "All the same, why are they looking at me that way? Do they have some issue to take up with me?"

"No," she replied, but Anastasia could tell just by looking into her eyes that it wasn't the truth. The redhead gazed intensely at her until Layla conceded, "Yes."

"Well, what is it?"

"I don't think it should be discussed here in front of the children."

"All right. What if we were to discuss it over dinner tonight then?" she suggested.

"Excuse me?" Layla was caught off guard by the question as her pulse began to race. She felt she could barely contain her composure when she first saw Anastasia enter the room. For as long as she could remember, she had had a crush on the redheaded princess but had kept it a secret. She knew her parents didn't approve of her interest in women given their religious beliefs and in fact when they had recently found out, they were seriously displeased. Layla knew why they kept staring at Anastasia. The princess's sexual orientation was publicly known, and most citizens considered it a non-issue, but Layla's parents' church was among a select group of religious

circles that made it clear they did not agree with that kind of behavior, which was why Layla had hidden herself for so long. Her parents were not happy with the ongoing exchange between her and the princess.

Anastasia saw the rapid cadence of the pulse in Layla's neck and knew she had not misread her, so she posed the question again. "I would like to have dinner with you tonight if you are available, so we can discuss the issue which seems to make your parents uncomfortable."

"I have this thing to do at my parents' church tonight."

"Will that take all evening?"

"No. It's finished around eight."

"Then we can make it a late dinner."

Layla smiled down at the kids and told them they were going to take a break from reading for a bit but would be back in a few minutes. With that they dispersed and she and Anastasia stood. "Look, Stasia, I really would like to have dinner with you, but my parents..."

"What does this have to do with them?"

"They would disapprove."

"So? Do you always cater to your parents' desires?"

She shook her head. "They don't approve of my dating interests," she quietly remarked.

Anastasia paused in thought for a moment. The thought had never crossed her mind that someone would disapprove of someone else's innate sexual orientation. "Oh, I am beginning to understand. That is why I am the source of their looks. They do not approve of me." It was the first time in her life that she had felt such negativity directed at her from any of her country's citizens.

Layla shook her head. "They just found out about me and are upset. It goes against what they believe."

"What do you believe?" she asked.

"That I couldn't be any other way than what I am."

Anastasia nodded. "Do you always do what they tell you to?"

"They are my parents, and up until recently I have taken their guidance."

"Are you not old enough to make your own decisions?"

"I'm twenty, so yes, technically I am old enough, but there are other issues to consider."

"Such as?"

"They're paying for my education, and I don't want them to stop."

"Is that all?" she scoffed.

Layla felt a little offended by the flippant remark. "The rest of the world doesn't live in a palace, Princess Anastasia. We have real problems."

Feeling rebuked Anastasia nodded. "I apologize. That was impolite to marginalize your problems. You have your reasons." She paused. "Does this mean that I will not have the pleasure of your company at dinner tonight?"

"I'm sorry. I want to, but I don't see how I can get away from my parents. I'm living with them over the summer until I go back to school."

"What about tomorrow morning for breakfast?"

"I volunteer here at the children's hospital. I'll be here tomorrow morning."

"Will your parents be here then?" She shook her head. "Then may I call upon you tomorrow morning here?"

She gave a little smile. Her heart started to pound a little harder as she realized the princess truly did want to see her again. Nodding she replied, "I'd like that. I get here at 8:00."

"Then I will come between 8:30 and 9:00 and maybe we can sit and have a cup of coffee."

"That sounds good. For now though I think we should get back to these kids."

When Anastasia left the hospital that afternoon, she couldn't stop thinking about the experience there. It was a first for her to see that the country still continued to have problems that the government had not addressed in the healthcare system. She wanted to make sure she brought it to her mother's attention at her next opportunity. Then her thoughts turned to the beautiful blonde. She was saddened by the fact that the woman seemed scared to live her life because of the beliefs of her parents. It had occurred to her that parents would not support their children, given who her own parents were. While they were always there to serve up discipline when it lacked, she always had their support for whatever she wanted in her life. She never imagined it could be different for others.

That night over dinner with her parents Layla sat quietly thinking about Anastasia. She could hardly believe that the woman on whom she had a crush for many years actually was there in her life for several hours. Moreover, the princess had taken an interest in her and even asked her to dinner. She was amazed by the gesture and smiled to herself as she looked at her plate.

"What are you thinking about?" her mother asked.

"Just the day. It was great to have Princess Anastasia there. I hope it will bring attention to the hospital."

"We noticed her speaking to you," her father said. "We didn't like it."

"We were just talking."

He shook his head. "You're a pretty girl, Layla, and you turn heads wherever you go. The princess seemed to be paying extra attention to you. She didn't spend as much time with anyone else. We do not condone her attentions toward you, and we would expect you to rebuff any suggestions she may have to continue those attentions."

"I seriously doubt the princess thinks of me that way," she said. However, the thought had lingered in her head as she continued to ponder the princess's insistence on seeing her again. She hoped that meant her crush had a real interest.

"We do not agree with her lifestyle or her choices, nor do we yours. It is unacceptable to be receiving attention from another woman. That is not what God intended, and we will never concede that he did. If you are insistent on your sexuality, you must at least remain celibate. We will never accept anything else for you," he firmly stated.

Layla didn't even bother to look at her parents. Instead she just stared at her plate. She knew it was useless to even try to engage them in a religious debate on this particular issue. She came at it from such a decisively different point. She knew her heart desired to know love and accept it from another person, and according to her own religious beliefs, God did allow her to seek that love in the arms of another woman. However, it wasn't worth debating the subject with her parents. She knew they would just severely discipline her if she went against their directives.

The next day Anastasia was at the hospital again as she had promised, dressed in her typical style. She was scheduled to speak later in the day at an event in Houston, so she wore her slacks and dress shirt and had her dress jacket close by for when she needed to slip it on. Going up to the floor where Layla volunteered, she immediately noticed that the joyful noise from yesterday was absent. A sullen quietness hung over the floor. Going up to the nurses' station, Anastasia saw the same nurses from the previous day who had been full of energy in somewhat of a daze, but they all managed to greet Anastasia with a respectful bow. When she asked for Layla, she was told that she was in the nurses' lounge and given directions on how to get there.

The corridor was so quiet that Anastasia could hear the shoes she was wearing as they contacted the floor with each step. Getting to the lounge, she opened the door. "Layla," she called into the darkened room. "Layla, it is Stasia. Are you in here?"

"Yes," came a muffled reply.

Anastasia searched for the light switch on the wall with her hand. When they flickered to life, they revealed the tiny blonde sitting on the tile floor in the corner of the room. Her head was down between her knees, and it sounded like she was crying. "Layla, what is the matter?" she asked, coming to where she was and kneeling down. Layla didn't answer at first as sobs heaved from her chest. She felt as if she could barely breathe. Not getting a response, Anastasia took a seat next to her on the cold floor. Unsure of what to do, she slowly reached for the back of the blonde head. "Layla," she softly called. Still there was no response, so she decided to make another move and wrap the smaller woman up in her arms.

No words were spoken for several minutes, but slowly Layla's body began to unfurl. "I'm sorry," she managed to say after awhile.

"No. Do not be. I just want to make sure you are all right."

She shook her head. "One of the children on the floor died early this morning. She was only four."

Anastasia could feel the absolute sorrow exuding from the woman next to her. It was true utter anguish. It completely overwhelmed Anastasia that someone could feel something so deeply for someone else, because she had never experienced emotions so deeply of either happiness or sadness, but it was clear Layla was besieged by her grief. It profoundly moved the princess that such a person could feel that way for another.

"Come here," she whispered offering her a tighter embrace.

Layla turned into her and clutched to the front of Anastasia's shirt as she continued her weeping into the side of her neck. The redhead rubbed her back consolingly as she kissed on top of her blonde head. Neither spoke for a long time. When Layla began to finally calm herself, she became aware of the fact that her head was burrowed into the neck of the heir to the throne, and Anastasia's arms were securely around her. She could feel lips dropping soothing kisses into her hair. She had never been in the arms of another woman before, but Anastasia's were incredibly comforting. Slowly she raised her head and saw that her mascara had stained the princess's shirt.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, rubbing at it to no avail.

Anastasia reached under her chin to raise her face and then gently wiped at the wetness. "Do not concern yourself with that," she softly said, gazing into wet, red-rimmed blue eyes. Anastasia hardly noticed Layla's blotchy red face. "I just want to make sure you are all right. That is all that matters."

"It's just so sad."

The princess nodded slowly. "It is, but surely a woman of your beliefs believes she is in a better place free from her suffering."

Layla nodded. "Yes but it doesn't make it any easier for those left behind. I cannot stand to see children die. It just creates an ache in my soul. This is the second one we've lost since I started volunteering here."

"You are a profoundly sensitive woman," she said.

Layla nodded. "I always have been. People think it's a flaw or that I'm being fake, because I just tend to feel things so deeply."

"I do not think that. In fact, I think it is an incredible gift to be able to feel so intensely. I have never felt something so acutely as you have displayed, for better or worse. My life up until this very moment has been one adrift in an emotionless void, but I can actually feel your pain, and it hurts me deeply. I wish there was something I could do to lessen it."

"You're here. For now that's enough," she whispered as she reached for the hand that slipped up to her cheek. It was larger than her own as she enfolded it between hers.

"Come. Let me move you to the couch," she suggested. Helping Layla to her feet, Anastasia walked her over to the sofa and sat her on it. "Could I get you something? Coffee? Water? Handkerchief?" she questioned, pulling one out of her pocket.

"Thank you," Layla replied as she took the white cotton square and wiped her eyes. She tried to give it back when she was finished.

"Keep it in case you need it again."

She nodded and looked down at it. The Washington family crest was stitched in gold in one corner and Anastasia's initials in the opposite. "Thank you, Stasia." There was silence for a moment as the thought overcame her that her fantasy woman was sitting so closely to her and had showed her such tenderness. She still couldn't believe she had even met Anastasia much less received any attention from her, but she was there with one arm around her.

Anastasia remained quiet for a few minutes but then decided she would try to take Layla's mind off of what had happened. "Did your parents have anything to say about me when you left yesterday?"

She nodded. "They mentioned that they thought you were flirting with me."

"So they are perceptive then?" she teased lightly.

Layla didn't say anything for a moment but had been wondering something since they met the previous day to which she wanted an answer. Looking into blue eyes, she asked, "Why me, Stasia? You could have anyone you wanted."

The redhead looked away for a moment before looking back into blue eyes. "If you had asked me that yesterday, my answer would have been different than it is right now. Yesterday's answer

would have been because I thought you were pretty, and you are the type of girl that usually captures my interest."

"What's today's answer?"

"Today it is because I think you are the most amazing woman I have ever met," she softly said. "The effect you have had on me in these moments just now have touched me in a way I have never felt before. I think you are extraordinary, Layla, and I do not even know anything about you other than your first name, age, and the fact that you weep genuine tears over the sadness of humanity."

Layla's face blushed deeply at the words Anastasia had bestowed on her. "I'll tell you anything you wish to know about me."

"Let us start with something simple like your full name."

"Layla Elise Stone."

"Elise? That is my middle name."

"I know," she mentioned.

"Do you?" she asked curiously.

"Doesn't everyone know that?"

"Where do you go to school?"

"I'll be a junior at The University of the South in the fall."

"Where is that?"

"It's in Sewanee, Tennessee. Are you a Christian?"

"I believe in God, but the Washingtons have always been careful not to assert one religious belief over another. We believe the government should not influence the manner in which people choose to worship, even if that includes not doing so at all. We attend official services at the Washington Cathedral, which is Episcopalian, but I have never considered myself Episcopalian. I have never considered myself anything."

"I'm an Episcopalian, but my parents are Anglicans. Do you believe in Jesus Christ?"

She shrugged. "No one has ever asked me that. I have never given it any thought actually."

"What about heaven or even hell?"

Anastasia gave an obliging smile. "Could we talk about something a little less complicated than religion?"

"Sorry. I just have always wondered that about you," she admitted.

"You have? You have thought about me before we met yesterday?"

She blushed but nodded. "I've seen you on TV and in magazines and papers, and I've been curious what it was like to meet you and talk to you."

"And now that you have? Do I live up to expectations?" she joked.

"Yes and no."

"How is that?"

"You're less pretentious than I expected," she said with a smile. "And cuter, too," she added with a little flush.

It was Anastasia's turn to blush the color of her hair. "I do not think a woman has ever made me blush before," she admitted. "You are incredible, Layla." There was a moment of silence between them as they just gazed at each other. Anastasia knew the perfect opportunity to kiss this woman was at hand. Layla was giving her all the signals that the advance would be accepted, but she hesitated. For once she really didn't want to be wrong. She leaned in a little closer to the blonde to see what the reaction might be and immediately saw the blonde take a sharp breath. "Layla," she whispered.

"Yes?" she asked in equally hushed tone.

"I am not usually like this, but for the last several minutes I have been preoccupied with the thought of kissing you," she confessed.

"Oh my."

"Would you mind too terribly much if I indulged myself?" she asked, cupping the blonde's face in her hands. "I have to know what it is like to kiss such an angel."

Even though there was no verbal reply, the deepening flush of Layla's face was enough for Anastasia. She leaned in and gently brushed her lips across pink ones. She felt Layla's right hand drift up onto her chest, which set her heart thudding rapidly. It was a brief touch but left them both affected.

"Am I dreaming?" Layla whispered. She had never kissed another woman before, but the faint touch of the heir's lips against her own made her feel dizzy.

"Perhaps we both are," Anastasia answered before leaning in a second time for another gentle kiss.

When the second innocent kiss came to its mutual conclusion, it took Layla a moment to compose herself. "Wow. This suddenly feels very fast."

"I am sorry. I did not mean to make you uncomfortable," the redhead apologized.

Layla shook her head. "You're pretty wonderful, and any woman would be a fool to refuse you," she said. "But you have a reputation."

"Do you think I am insincere?"

"I hope not," she confessed. "But I don't know you at all, just what I've seen and read."

Anastasia pulled back a little and nodded. "You are right, of course. You do not know what my motivations might be."

"That's not to say I think you have any. I just don't know you. That doesn't mean I wouldn't like to get to know you."

"I would like that, too, very much, Layla."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. I meant what I said. I think you are incredible."

"How do we go about getting to know one another when we don't even live remotely close to each other?"

"Leave that to me. I will think of something. For now, though, we just enjoy the little bit of time we do have," she said consulting her watch. "Could I take you somewhere? Perhaps the cafeteria? We can get something to eat."

"I really have to get back to work," she said.

"Okay. Are you feeling a little better now?"

She nodded. "Thank you for everything."

"If I cannot take you somewhere, could I get your phone number, so I can call you?"

"Of course. Let me write it down for you. Do you have some paper?"

"Here. Write it on the back of this," Anastasia offered pulling out her contact card from her pants pocket.

Layla looked at it before taking a pen from the front pocket of her own shirt and putting her number on the back. "Do you write email?"

"Sometimes."

"I'll put my email down for you as well." When she was finished, she handed it back but asked, "Do you have another one of those that I could have?"

"Sure." She pulled another out of her pocket. "This number is to my office at the palace. Someone is always there to answer it, and they can find me anywhere in the world. Just be sure to let them know who you are, and I will put you on the list of access people."

"Great. Thank you."

They walked slowly back to the nurses' station with Anastasia's security and staff trailing closely behind. "I suppose this is where I must leave you," the princess said.

Layla nodded. "Thank you for coming to see me."

They loitered closely together for a moment before Anastasia made a move to embrace her. Their hug lingered for long minutes. "Please call me if you need anything at all. Your name will be on the access list within five minutes of me leaving," she promised.

"I will."

Leaning down Anastasia kissed her softly on the cheek. "Take care of yourself. I hope to see you soon."

"You too."

With that, Anastasia walked down the corridor toward the elevator. Turning to her Secretary of Affairs, Madeline Sumner, she handed her the card on which Layla's information was written. "Maddy, see that this woman gets added to the access list immediately and file the number for future use."

"Certainly, Stasia. A new love interest?" she joked.

Anastasia smiled. "I think I am in love," she said.

"Of course you are. When are you not?" she continued to tease, pulling out her phone.

Anastasia overheard her taking care of the request as they got into the elevator. The group then headed to the airport to make their way to Houston. As they arrived onto the tarmac, Madeline's phone rang. She answered it and then leaned closer to Anastasia as they were climbing the stairs to the plane.

"Layla Stone is on the line. Do you want to take it?"

"Of course. Put her through onto the plane's phone," she said rushing up the rest of the stairs. By the time she got into the cabin, the phone was already ringing. "Hello," she greeted picking up the receiver.

"That actually worked," Layla giggled. "This is Layla."

"I told you it would. I am glad you called."

"I just wanted to thank you again for earlier."

"I just hope I was able to provide you with some small comfort."

"You did. Thank you."

"Well, as much as I would like to continue this conversation, I really need to go now. I am on a plane to Houston. Could we talk tonight?"

"Of course."

"Wonderful. I will call you tonight. How is 9:00 for you?"

"I look forward to it."

"Great. I will talk to you then. Have a good rest of the day."

"You, too, Stasia."

When 9:00 came Anastasia was sitting in a hotel room in downtown Houston looking out the window. Her staff had dispersed for the evening, but Madeline had left Layla's phone number for Anastasia on the bar. Taking a sip of her drink, she picked up the phone and placed the call she had been anticipating all day. The phone rang a few times before the blonde answered.

"Hi, Layla. It is Anastasia," she announced.

"Hi, Stasia. How was the rest of your day?"

"Busy but fine. How was yours? What did you do with it?"

"Okay. I worked at the hospital and then went over to the church for choir practice."

"You sing?"

"Yes. I'm in the choir. I actually have a solo at church this coming Sunday. Would you like to come to hear it?"

"I would love to do that, but it is a bit complicated for me to go anywhere on short notice. It would be a hassle for everyone else that went there on Sunday. I would not want to ruin it for them. Perhaps you could record it?"

"I think that could be arranged."

"I really would love to hear you, Layla."

"What else did you do today?"

"Had dinner with my parents and am now just hanging out in my room."

"Have our parents said anything else about me today?"

"No. They don't know that I even saw you."

"Tell me. What is going on there? Why do your parents disagree with someone's innate sexual orientation?"

"It's what they believe religiously. Anglicans, which is what they are now, believe that it's wrong."

"I see, but you are not Anglican. You are Episcopalian."

"Yes. They were too, but the Episcopal Church is undergoing a lot of change right now, and people are splitting off because of some gay and women bishops in the church. My parents were really involved in our old church but headed up the split and now help run their new church."

"I see. I guess I never really thought about this issue in a religious context."

"It's not just the Anglicans. There are many religious groups that believe that."

"But I have never heard of such a thing."

"Why would you? Even if they disagree with you, they won't speak out against you. You're the royal family."

"You are right of course. I would hope no one would ever speak out against my family out of respect."

"Exactly but they don't like it, Stasia. I can assure you of that."

"How would someone change their mind on the matter?"

"Many religious experts debate this topic all the time. It's quite complicated, and there are no easy answers, but if you wanted to learn more about why they think the way they do, you should start with the basics."

"Which would be?"

"The Bible, of course. Have you ever read it?"

"No."

"Well, if you want to become more knowledgeable, you'll have to read it."

"And then what?"

"Just start with that. It could take you quite some time just to get through that book. It's not light reading, and you'll probably be confused in several areas."

"Would it help if I had a teacher?"

"Probably. Maybe you can take some classes."

"Or maybe I can have a personal tutor. Would you be available?" she asked.

"Me? I'm not an expert."

"Oh, I am not so sure about that. You already know more than I do. Please think about it."

"I'm sure there are scholars at your disposal who would be better suited to help you."

"But you sound so knowledgeable. I am sure I can find all that I am looking for in you alone," she whispered. There was a pause in conversation.

Layla thought about those words for a moment and their possible meanings. In just the two days she had known Anastasia, she could feel her emotions running more deeply for the princess than when she was just a fantasy in her mind. She didn't really know how to respond to such a statement.

Sensing as much, Anastasia decided to move the conversation in another direction. "So, what is on your agenda for tomorrow?"

"Same thing as today. Volunteer at the hospital, choir practice. I may go out with some high school friends in the evening. What about you?"

"Nothing that exciting. I have a couple of speeches to make. Apparently I am to have dinner with the mayor of Houston as well. Then it is off to Austin."

"Are you going to be coming back to Dallas anytime soon?"

"I had not planned on it originally in this trip. However, now that I have met you, I would like to come back to Dallas at the earliest available opportunity. It just so happens I am heading back to D.C. on Sunday. I would like to see you if you are available."

"I have church in the morning and the early evening."

"Sounds like you are free for the afternoon and later evening then. I think my plane could be in Dallas that evening. Perhaps we could have dinner after your church service. Would that be convenient for you?"

"I think I can do that."

"Would that cause a problem with your parents?"

"They won't have to necessarily know. I can just say that I'm meeting with a friend."

"Do you have to say anything at all?"

"I suppose I don't. They may ask, however."

"Then you could always tell them that you had dinner with me and were teaching me about the Bible. After all I intend to ask you more about this topic, so please do come prepared."

Layla laughed a little. "All right. Dinner and a Bible lesson it is."

"That only leaves where and when. What time do you get out of church?"

"I should be able to leave by about 7:15, so anytime after that is fine. Where would you like to have dinner?"

"As I mentioned before, it can be difficult for me to go anywhere without advanced planning, so maybe it is best if we just have dinner at the hotel where I will be staying. I am not exactly sure where that is given the fact that this is a last minute stop, but I will let you know as soon as arrangements have been made. You can come after church, and I will make sure I am available when you get there."

"All right."

The two continued to talk for a while longer about nothing of great significance before Anastasia excused herself for the night with a promise to call later in the week. When they had hung up, Layla just continued to lie on top of her bed looking up at the ceiling and thinking. Never in her wildest fantasies did she ever consider that she would in fact meet the princess, much less begin to have a relationship with her. She wondered about the possibilities of it as she thought of the kisses they had shared earlier that morning. Even as much as she had always longed for it, she

had never kissed another woman before and was completely blown away by the fact that the heir had made a move to kiss her, not once but twice, in the softest of touches. They were faint gentle caresses, which had a dizzying effect. Layla reveled in the memory of them for several minutes before reality made her sober a bit.

The princess was widely known to take after her mother, the queen, in all things adventurous, including exploits with women. She was the epitome of a woman of means, and women clamored after her wherever she went, even though the affairs were often short-lived. It made Layla wonder why the redhead had singled her out in such a way. She did not want to be just another diversion for the princess.

Instead she imagined what it might be like to be the one woman who had an effect on the heir. She thought it would be a spectacular feat to succeed where no one else had, but she knew she could not offer the same inducements as other women just on her principles alone. She was conservative in matters of her heart and body, which she figured would be something to which Anastasia was unaccustomed. Nonetheless she fantasized what it might be like to see those blue eyes gazing at her with such affection. It was a true dream, one never likely to ever be a reality, she figured.

Nevertheless, the twenty-year-old daydreamed of them in close intimacy as she reached over to her nightstand. From the drawer she pulled out a magazine, which had a picture of Anastasia on the cover. It was an issue commemorating the princess's graduation from college and contained photographs of her throughout the years, including several recent ones. Layla thought she looked incredibly sexy in her naval officer's uniform and cover. She sighed as she thought of that mouth, which smiled for the camera, kissing her over and over. Her breathing began to turn uneven as she thought of the heir's chest under her hand, as it had been earlier that day and the loud thumping of Anastasia's heart. Layla knew she was enamored but did not want to show too many of her emotions until she knew more of the redhead's intentions.

Chapter III: Desire Versus Principles

The following Sunday evening Anastasia anxiously awaited Layla's arrival. They had spoken a few times over the week, which gave the princess enough over which to fantasize in their time apart. The blonde with pretty blue eyes monopolized her idle thoughts and some of her more intimate fantasies. Anastasia hoped that they would be able to draw even closer and that she would be able to see the body that dominated her dreams for the past several days.

Finally Layla's arrival was announced, and Anastasia stood to greet her. The tiny blonde was wearing a white cotton blouse and a khaki knee-length skirt with sandals. Her limbs were tanner since they had last seen each other, and she wore a bright smile for the princess.

Anastasia crossed the room and embraced her immediately, dropping a kiss on her cheek. "Layla, it is so good to see you." Her hands gently ran along bare arms.

Layla's heart began to speed up at the touch, but she tried to remain calm. "It's good to see you too, Stasia."

"I missed you," she offered. "I have thought about you quite a lot in our time apart."

A blush graced the blonde's cheeks. "I have thought about you, too. Here. This is for you," she said, extending a wrapped box.

"A gift? Thank you. I was not expecting that. Please come sit. Would you like something to drink before dinner?"

"No, thank you."

The women took a seat on the couch as Anastasia unwrapped the present she had been presented. Popping open the lid, she found two items. "What is this?" she inquired, raising the first.

"It's music. You said you wanted to hear me sing, so I downloaded a bunch of songs from church where I had solos from over the years. I don't claim to be great, but you said you wanted it."

"I am sure you are wonderful. Thank you. I cannot wait to listen to it." The next gift in the box was a leather-bound soft cover book with the princess's name printed in gold letters on the bottom right corner. She picked it up and turned it to look at the spine for a title. She smiled when she saw what it was.

"A student needs a proper textbook," Layla mentioned. "I figured you probably didn't have a Bible, and if we're going to discuss it, you might want to actually own one."

"You even put my name on it. It is beautiful. Thank you," she said softly, leaning over and slipping another kiss on the blonde's cheek. "Now I have something for you in return. Come with me," she said rising from the sofa and extending her hand.

Layla took the offered assistance and clasped the princess's larger hand. They walked into the dining room where a candlelit table was prepared. Off on the side table, there was a large vase of yellow roses with a card and a small blue box with a white bow. "This is beautiful."

"I believe yellow roses are most appropriate for a Texan," Anastasia said with a smile.

Layla nodded as she went to the pale yellow roses to smell them. "They're lovely."

"I am glad you like them, but this is your real present," she said extending the small box to her. "Apparently this came from a famous craftsman right here in Dallas. At least that is what I was told when I began looking for something like this."

Curiously Layla unwrapped the small box and opened the lid. Inside there was a silver necklace with a small rectangular pendent upon which her initials had been engraved. "It's beautiful. I

have several pieces from this jeweler. He does great work with silver. I absolutely love it," she said with a bright smile as she pulled it from the box.

"Allow me to put it on you?" When Layla nodded in consent, Anastasia took the necklace. Stepping behind her, she put the necklace around the blonde's neck as Layla held her blonde hair up out of the way. Once Anastasia had clasped the necklace into place, her fingers gently traced the woman's neckline for a moment. She saw Layla shiver a little in response which spurred her into her next action, a little kiss right in the hairline on the back of Layla's neck. She heard a gasp as hair fell across her face. Knowing she was pushing a little bit too much too quickly, she stepped away and slowly turned Layla toward her. Giving a smile she said, "It looks beautiful on you."

"Thank you," she replied quietly.

"Are you hungry yet? Dinner has been prepared for us."

"Yes. I actually am quite hungry."

"Then let us eat. Here," she said pulling out her chair for her.

"Thank you, Stasia."

The redhead then went into the other room for a moment and returned to take her own seat at the other end of the table. The wait staff came to attend to them and presented Anastasia the wine choices for the evening. "What kind of wine do you like? We are having white this evening."

"I don't actually drink."

"Oh. My apologies. What would you like to drink then?"

"Whatever is available is fine."

"Everything is available to you."

"Iced tea?" she questioned.

"The lady wants iced tea. How quickly can you make that?"

"We can have it available shortly. We just need to return to the kitchen."

"Fine. Then please do so and bring us both some water while we wait. I will have wine with dinner. Thank you."

"Yes, your highness," the server said before leaving them.

When they were alone, Anastasia turned to her guest. "Why do you not drink?"

"Well, to begin with, I'm underage. The drinking age is twenty-one in this country."

"You are precluded from regular laws in my company."

"I also believe alcohol lowers a person's inhibitions, which can lead to irresponsible behavior."

"I see, and you do not trust me to be on best behavior, I suppose," she joked.

"With all due respect, Stasia, I don't know you yet. I don't know what to expect of you."

"Fair enough. I respect your wishes not to consume alcohol if that is what you choose."

"Thank you."

"Shall we start our Bible lesson now while we wait on dinner?"

"We could, but before we get into reading the book, I think it's best to talk about the book itself."

"Okay. Whatever you think is best. You are my teacher after all," she said with a smile.

For the next hour the two sat at the table eating and discussing the Bible. Anastasia immediately noticed that Layla seemed knowledgeable and animated by the subject. She could tell religion played a large role in the blonde's life, and Anastasia was enjoying learning from her just by the way those blue eyes sparkled as she spoke. Of course her mind wondered to if those eyes would shimmer just as brightly when the tiny woman was involved in intimacies.

When their meal was over and the conversation had lulled a bit, Anastasia suggested they adjourn to the living room again. The princess brought her wine with her and encouraged Layla to bring her beverage along as well. Both women took a seat on the sofa. Anastasia slipped her arm up along the top of the back and leaned closer to her company. With a smile she asked, "Could we put her studies on hiatus for the night? I need some time to process all we have discussed thus far. Maybe we could talk about something else."

"Like what?"

"Like you. Tell me more about you. What do you like to do for fun?"

"I like being outside. I love horses."

"So do I. Do you ride a lot?"

She shook her head. "I don't own a horse, so I have to rely on my friends letting me ride theirs at school."

"Maybe we could ride sometime then. My family has an estate in the country in Virginia. We could take a couple of days and ride the countryside."

"That sounds like fun."

"Then we should plan it. Maybe my sisters could come with us. We all love riding. Do you have any siblings?"

She shook her head. "It's just me at home. I think that's one of the reasons my parents are taking things so hard outside of their religious beliefs. They are worried about me not being able to have a normal life."

"How so? You can marry anyone you want in our country without prejudice. You can have children. What else could you want that you could not have?"

"I know I can have everything, but they don't see it that way," she mumbled looking down at her lap.

Sensing the sadness overcoming her guest, the princess leaned a little closer. She tenderly tucked an errant piece of blonde hair behind Layla's ear. Her hand lingered on it, tracing the curvature gently. "It is all right," she whispered.

Blue eyes looked at her. They were slightly watery. "I feel like I cry whenever I'm around you."

"I am sorry if I am the source of your tears. It is unintentional. I cannot stand to see such a beautiful woman in tears," she quietly said, cupping her face. "Dry those pretty eyes." Anastasia brushed away a tear from the corner of Layla's eye.

Layla gazed into the dark blue eyes of the princess, which seemed to show genuine concern. They were so close together on the sofa, and she could sense the redhead leaning ever closer as arms came around her. She knew she was about to be kissed. Her eyes began to flutter as Anastasia leaned closer, but instead of kissing her, the redhead hesitated a mere few millimeters from her target. Layla exhaled in anticipation as Anastasia continued to hover for a moment before a soft kiss ensued. Moaning a little Layla cupped the back of red hair as the kiss continued.

Anastasia felt Layla's moan deeply in her heart, which was speeding up exponentially at the exchange. Unable to resist those soft lips, she delved deeper on the second kiss, slipping passed them into Layla's moist mouth. The blonde's head started to spin at the feeling as she moaned a second time. However, when she pulled away for air, blue eyes were gazing at her intensely as the princess leaned in for a third kiss, which led her to place a hand up to stop her. Anastasia wasn't dissuaded as fingers came to her lips. Instead she kissed them lightly before sucking the tip of Layla's index finger into her own mouth.

"Oh God," the blonde whispered, feeling completely overwhelmed by the sexual hunger exuding from the princess. "Stasia."

"Yes," she whispered.

"I, uh, I need you to stop," she softly pleaded. Her voice was starting to fail her even though her conscience was not.

"Why?" she asked quietly, pulling back ever so slightly. "I can tell you find this enjoyable."

"I do, but I'm just not like that."

"Like what?"

Gently pushing Anastasia back far enough to regain some of her senses, she took a deep breath. She looked at her lap as she let out a sigh and then risked a look at the princess. Anastasia was still looking at her in a sexually voracious manner. "Please don't look at me like that. You make it hard for me to think when you do that."

Anastasia cracked a little grin but respectfully reigned in her own desires in seeing that Layla was not as receptive as she had hoped. "I am sorry if that makes you uncomfortable. I think you know by now that I have developed a keen interest in you, Layla, but I would never force a woman to do anything she did not wish to do."

The blonde gave a nod. "Stasia, I like you. I really do, but I'm finding it difficult to reconcile you suddenly being here in my life with what your public persona is. You have a reputation."

"You seemed so concerned with my reputation, and I am not even sure what you perceive it to be. What kind of reputation do you think I have?"

"You are interested in a lot of women, but that interest often fades very quickly."

"Where did you learn that?"

"Your picture is everywhere and often with beautiful women who, even in photos, show how much they adore you. You could have anyone you wanted, and I sense that you indulge in that fact."

"Are you inferring that I am promiscuous?" she asked seriously.

"Well, tell me the truth. Do you see a lot of women?"

"Yes."

"And you enjoy their physical company?"

"Are you asking me if I am having sexual relations with these women?" She slowly nodded. "The answer is yes. I like sex, Layla. I like making women feel good and feeling good in return," she replied, softly running her fingers over the blonde's bare forearm.

"How many would you say you've been with?"

"How many women? Let me think about that." She paused. "I would say about 20 or so in the past 4 years."

"How many of those were your girlfriend at the time?"

"None. I do not keep girlfriends. I much prefer to be open to seeing many women at once."

Layla nodded. "That's what I thought. I'm not like that, Stasia. I believe in relationships and monogamy. I don't believe in casual sex. I think sex should be reserved for your spouse alone."

"So you have not had sex before?"

"No, nor do I plan to. I want the person I give myself to for the first time to be my wife, and I want her to be the only one to know me. I think it's a gift."

Anastasia sat back fully into the corner of the sofa and just looked at Layla contemplatively for a moment. Initially she couldn't believe what she had just been told. She had never met a woman who felt bound to such principle. Disappointment began to fill her at the thought of her fantasizing not coming to fruition. She had never been denied her desires before, and she wasn't sure how to respond at first.

Seeing the look on the heir's face, Layla felt her heart sinking. She was afraid of this reaction, but her morals would not be swayed. "Does this change the way you think of me?" she inquired.

Anastasia nodded. "It does but not negatively. How have your previous girlfriends handled such a declaration?"

"I've never had a girlfriend."

"You must be joking. A beautiful woman like you has never been in a relationship?"

She shook her head. "No one other than my parents knows about me, and they harshly disapprove. I haven't had the opportunity to date anyone. Even when they thought I was straight, I wasn't allowed to date until college, but by then I realized I wasn't interested in finding a husband."

"Have you ever even kissed a woman?"

"You're the first," she admitted.

The redhead smiled. "How did I do then? Was it all you imagined?"

She nodded and blushed. "It was better than I imagined."

"I am glad for that. I had not realized any of this. Thank you for telling me. I was wondering why I was getting mixed signals from you."

"I'm sorry, Stasia. My beliefs don't allow me to behave any differently."

"I understand, and rest assured I still am interested in you. I just am not sure what to do from here. I have never been in this situation before. I have never been denied what I want, but I respect your position and promise not to pressure you to reconsider."

"Thank you. I appreciate your restraint, but where does that leave us?"

"I think we will just have to be friends for now and see how things go. Will that suffice?"

Layla knew she didn't want to be just friends, but she also knew she had no right to make demands of the princess. "I suppose that is what we must be if that is what you want."

Hearing her tone, the princess sensed that was not exactly what she had in mind. "What would you prefer?"

"I have no right to ask for anything from you. You've made it clear you aren't interested in dating or a girlfriend. Friends is all that is left."

"Yes, it is, so let us embrace that for now and let time dictate where we go from there. As much as I like you, we do not want the same things at the moment. I would rather keep you as a friend than not have you in my life at all," she confessed.

"Me, too," she answered. Layla knew remaining friends meant she might not be feeling the heir's mouth on hers again anytime in the near future and that Anastasia may go after someone else. She didn't like those thoughts, but she wasn't prepared to compromise her beliefs, even for the princess. She just hoped she could hold Anastasia's interest with her limited resources.

For the rest of the evening, the two watched a movie together on the sofa. Even though there wasn't any further kissing, they did cuddle a bit in each other's arms while they watched TV, which made Layla feel like there was a chance for them. When she finally had to go, Anastasia walked her to the door while holding her hand.

"Thank you for my gifts and for spending the evening with me, Layla. I had a wonderful time."

"Me too. Thank you for my necklace. I will cherish it."

"So we will have our next lesson late next week and cover the book of Genesis?" she clarified.

"If you think you can read that much in a week."

"I will do my best. In the meantime, will it be all right if I call you?"

"Of course. I'd love to hear from you."

"Well, feel free to call me anytime. I look forward to getting to know you a lot better, Layla."

"Me too, Stasia."

"Also let me know what time is best for you to come see me for our horseback riding excursion. I will see to all your travel and lodging arrangements if you just let me know when you would like to come."

"Thank you. You're very kind. I'll let you know."

There was a pause between them as blue eyes met. Finally though Anastasia leaned in and planted a soft kiss on the blonde's cheek. "I hope to see you soon."

Chapter IV: A Decision to Make

For the next two months Anastasia continued touring the country to meet its citizens and take an inventory of their concerns. Everywhere she went she met all kinds of people, but as usual it was the women who kept most of her interest. She often found herself having dinner with the most attractive of company. There was one particular brunette she had met in California named Clarissa, who she found especially interesting when they met at an art gallery exhibit. She was a twenty-five-year-old student in the process of getting her Masters in literature. She was a lively talker, and Anastasia was thoroughly intrigued when Clarissa made the suggestion they leave the party together before it was over.

Getting the brunette's wrap, Anastasia extended her arm to her to escort her outside. Of course as usual the media was there as soon as the doors were opened to capture the two of them together as they got into Anastasia's car. The flashes continued as the driver began to pull away with the vehicular security escort. He turned to ask the princess where she wanted to go, and she in turned looked at her company.

"Well, this was your idea. Where did you have in mind?"

"How about my apartment? We won't be disturbed there," she suggested, running her hand up the lapel of Anastasia's jacket.

The princess nodded. "Actually I think it would be easier if we returned to my hotel suite for security reasons if that is all right with you."

Clarissa nodded in agreement, so the two relaxed in the backseat for the ride. "This is a nice change. I didn't think I would get you alone," she said.

"You wanted me alone?"

She nodded. "Something told me that us being alone was a good idea. There were too many people around for the conversation I want to have with you."

"Is that so? What kind of conversation would that be?" she questioned, playing along having seen the hungry look in the brunette's eyes. She had felt the chemistry the moment they had been introduced.

"One without words," she replied, leaning in to kiss the heir's lips. Both women moaned, but in the back corner of Anastasia's mind images of a certain blonde lurked. Anastasia had spent an extraordinary amount of time thinking about Layla over the summer. The two spoke several times a week and had seen each other two other times in Dallas. Even though it had been established that they were just friends, Anastasia had often thought about the possibilities if that was not the case, but it was, and the woman in her arms was stirring interest within her on a more primitive level.

The two continued to kiss in the back of the car until they arrived at the hotel where they were ushered through a remote back door and then service elevator, so the public wouldn't see them. Up in the suite, they found Anastasia's Secretary of Affairs in the living room on the phone. She smiled and waved at Anastasia.

The redhead waved back and turned to her company. "Clarissa, could I ask you to wait in the den for me? There is a bar, and my staff will be happy to oblige you in any request you may have. I need to attend to some business."

"Certainly."

"Thank you." When she was alone with Madeline, she asked, "Is there something you needed?"

"You have a couple of messages, but all of them can wait until tomorrow."

"Then why are you still here? You should have taken the evening off and let the palace take care of my calls."

"There was one call that you might want to return. You did not answer your cell when I tried to call you earlier. Layla called for you about an hour ago."

Anastasia nodded. "Oh. All right."

Gesturing toward the den, Madeline inquired, "Will you need me to update your access list? Should I no longer try to connect Layla to you when she calls?"

The princess shook her head. "I still would like to speak to Layla whenever possible, but tonight is not a good night. Do you think you could return her call and let her know that I am unavailable this evening but will call her tomorrow?"

"Of course, Stasia. If that is what you truly want, I am at your service."

"As to your other question, I do not know about any other updates to the access list at this time, but I will let you know if that changes. Now please take some time to relax. I believe we have a busy day tomorrow."

Madeline nodded. "Good night, Stasia. I will return early in the morning."

"Good night, Maddy."

Layla was lying in bed in the dark thinking of Anastasia when her phone began to ring. She had hoped that the princess was calling her back, but looking at the number, she saw that it was Madeline Sumner instead. Nevertheless, she answered. "Hello."

"Hi, Layla, this Madeline Sumner. I hope I am not disturbing you."

"Not at all."

"I spoke with her highness, and as much as she would like to speak with you, she is unable to return your call this evening due to some other pressing matters. She requested that I call you and extend her regrets of not being able to do so," she said using the line she had perfected over the years. Madeline was used to making such calls for Anastasia. She was often the one that delivered the message that Princess Anastasia was no longer interested in someone in the most professional yet caring tone, but Layla was the woman who had lasted the longest when it came to Anastasia's fleeting attention. Madeline liked the blonde but knew all too well when Anastasia appeared to be finished with a woman, and the end usually began with unreturned phone calls.

"Oh. Okay," she replied in disappointment. Layla was not expecting that from Madeline. Every time she had called the princess, her calls had been taken except during times when Anastasia was conducting business, but even then her calls were promptly returned. Not a day went by before she heard from Anastasia if she had to leave a message. She wasn't sure what to think.

"Is there any other message you would like for me to pass on to her highness?"

"No. I'll just talk to her tomorrow I guess. Thanks for at least calling me back, Madeline. Good bye."

When the call ended, Layla's thoughts ran over that last two months since they had met. While they had only seen each other three times over the course of the summer, they had talked almost every day. Meanwhile the media had kept close track of Anastasia's travels across the country, including the company she was keeping along the way. Layla had privately endured seeing Anastasia with many attractive women, who stirred a jealousy she had never known in herself before, but one call from the princess was always able to squelch it. After all, the princess never seemed disinterested in their conversations nor did she ever bring up other women in their discourse. Instead Anastasia always seemed intently focused on her, but the manner in which Anastasia's Secretary of Affairs had just delivered her message had seemed calculated and distant. There was a part of her that did not believe business was what was keeping the princess from returning her call but rather someone else. It was what she feared, the princess losing

interest in her. The very thought of it depressed her, but she knew she had made her choice based on the only things that mattered to her, her moral values, and in order for she and the princess to become more than friends, she'd have to reassess her principles. She wasn't sure that was something she could do, even though in her heart and mind, she had privately thought about what it would be like to be more intimate with Princess Anastasia.

Meanwhile in California Anastasia had returned to her company in the den. Clarissa had managed to make herself a little more comfortable as she had shed the heels she had been wearing and had struck a casual pose on the sofa while drinking a glass of wine. The redheaded princess smiled at her.

"Thank you for waiting. I just needed to catch up on a few things for a moment."

"Certainly. You are well worth the wait," she teased.

Anastasia smiled as she joined her on the sofa, leaning in closer to her. Tapping at the wine glass with her finger, she quietly asked, "May I have a taste of that?"

"Of course," Clarissa replied with a grin before taking a small sip of the wine before leaning to Anastasia's lips. The princess moaned that the exchange as her company deposited the liquid into her mouth.

When they broke apart Anastasia swallowed and smiled again. "This is suddenly turning into an interesting evening," she said.

"I think so, but I think you should get a little more comfortable," Clarissa suggested. Discarding her wineglass on the table behind the sofa, she leaned in to kiss the princess again, but her hands began to work off Anastasia's suit jacket. Soon the redhead joined in as her hands began to take in the landscape of Clarissa's body on the way to the zipper of the dress. Her guest seemed to be completely open to her advances as they continued to undress each other.

The couple remained on the couch for a long while kissing and caressing each other as new skin became revealed, but Anastasia's mind wouldn't let her totally forget the blonde of her fantasies. Every time she thought about suggesting she and Clarissa move into the bedroom, she was hindered by the thought of how Layla might feel at the turn of events, so much so that when Clarissa herself made the suggestion, she pulled away a bit.

With a gentle smile, she said, "As much as I am enjoying this, I do not think we should venture further this evening. You are a beautiful woman, Clarissa, but I do not believe that to be the best course of action at this particular moment."

The brunette looked surprised and confused but nodded. "All right. Whatever you want is fine. I am your humble constituent."

"And I am honored you would offer yourself in such a manner, but I think it might be best if we just kept the night to this."

Nodding her head, Clarissa gave a smile. "Certainly. I have no objections to that."

"Good," she answered, leaning to kiss her once again and ending their discussion.

Later that evening when it was time for her guest to leave, Anastasia alerted her driver that his presence was needed. The princess decided to walk her company to the car. Due to the hour, there were not many patrons milling around the lobby. When they reached the car, the two women lingered closely at the back door for a moment.

"It was a great pleasure to spend this evening with you, your highness," Clarissa softly said.

"You as well, Clarissa." Anastasia then leaned down and slipped a soft kiss on her lips. "Good night."

Heading back into the hotel, the princess was escorted back to her suite. She immediately headed to the bedroom to get ready for bed. As she slipped under the covers, her thoughts once again turned to Layla. The student kept invading her free time, but it was the first time it had happened while in the company of another woman, and she started to feel a little guilty for her behavior. She pondered what that meant until she drifted off to sleep.

The following morning Layla was up early after not sleeping well. Her heart was hurting over the fact that Anastasia had not returned her call. Heading into her kitchen, she saw her parents both there eating breakfast. She mumbled a greeting to them as she went to the coffee pot to pour herself a cup of the caffeinated substance. Her parents in the meantime hurried around her getting ready for work and within a few minutes, she was alone in the house. Getting herself a bagel, she toasted it and then layered it with cream cheese before taking a seat at the table where the newspaper had been discarded earlier by her parents. She ate her bagel and drank her coffee slowly as she read over the news of the day in the front section.

When she felt adequately caught up on the important items, she moved on to her favorite section, the variety section, which always contained articles about the royal family's goings-on. It was how she had found out about what Anastasia and her sisters were doing over the course of the summer and where Anastasia was visiting in the country. Often there were photographs of the four princesses at various events, and many times over their acquaintance she had seen Anastasia photographed with beautiful women, but when she opened the section that day, she was not prepared for the photograph inside.

There was Princess Anastasia standing by a car kissing an unidentified brunette. Layla felt her stomach turn as she stared at it a moment longer, wishing that the picture did not depict the princess in such a fashion, but there was a corroborating blurb about her activities of the night at the art gallery and early exit with the brunette in the photograph. Layla realized her instincts had been correct the previous evening. The princess hadn't returned her call, because she was busy entertaining another woman. Unable to read more, she put the paper aside. She felt sick that she had allowed herself to be swayed into feeling something for a woman who was so obviously unable to return her feelings.

Suddenly her cell phone ringing broke her musings. She dug it out of the pocket of her robe to check the number. It registered as one of the palace numbers she had come to recognize, which made her hesitate. She wasn't sure she wanted to hear from Anastasia or one of her staff members at the moment, but she also knew if she didn't answer it, it could be awhile before the two women had a chance to connect again. Going against her better judgment, she hit the talk button.

"Hello," she softly greeted.

"Good morning, Layla. It is Stasia."

"I know. Good morning, your highness," she said formally.

The tone and address took Anastasia back for a moment. Layla had not called her that since the first day they had met. "Is everything all right? You do not seem like yourself."

"I'm fine," she quickly stated. "How's California? Meeting anyone interesting?"

"California is full of many interesting people but none as interesting as you. I miss your company, Layla."

"I'm sure there are plenty of substitutes for female companionship out there."

"Perhaps but none as fascinating as you. I am looking forward to our time together next week. Not only do we once again get to have stirring religious discussions but also I have the opportunity to indulge you in one of your pleasures. I have already had Maddy call the estate to ensure everything is perfect for your arrival. Three days of relaxing in the country, lounging by the pool, horseback riding, and devoted religious study. Sounds idyllic, does it not?"

"It does sound wonderful, but I have concerns about going," Layla said.

"Why? All you have to do is show up at the airport. I have arranged the rest."

"I know. It's my parents, though. I feel bad for lying to them about where I'm going. They think I'm going to see my college roommate. They would get incredibly upset if they knew the truth. I don't feel good about this."

"I cannot tell you what to do, Layla. I would like you to come, but I understand your dilemma. What is the worst thing that could happen if they found out?"

"They would disown me, and I'd lose my money for college. They already threatened to withdraw funding for school if I engaged in any activities with another woman. I know we're only friends, but they already demanded that I stay away from you."

"Well, if that is what scares you the most, I would be willing to pay for your schooling expenses. That should not inhibit you from doing what you want."

"That's too much to ask of you. I couldn't let you do that."

"I would want to. You should not be denied an education for embracing your true nature, and they should not threaten you with that. That is discrimination, and I will not stand for it. You have a right to go to college, as does every American. Just tell me where to send the funds, and I will. I am serious. No strings, commitments, promises or compromises. A woman like you deserves every opportunity, and I will assure that for you if it makes you more comfortable about our spending time together. I give you my word as the crowned princess of this country," she said seriously.

There was a pause for a moment before Layla softly replied, "Thank you. That means more than you could ever know. I've just been so afraid of not being able to finish school. I really would like to come, but are you sure you can spare the time, though?" As thankful as the blonde was at the princess's declarations regarding her education, she was still feeling awkward about their plans in light of what she had seen in the paper that morning, but she knew she didn't have any right to express that with the princess.

"We discussed this. It is a pleasure to spend this time with you. We are always so rushed. I do not think we have spent more than a few hours in each other's company, but I am looking forward to remedying that situation. I confirmed with my sisters that they would be joining us at least for one or two days. You do not mind, do you?"

"Of course not. It is your house."

"Has Maddy contacted you about your travel arrangements yet?"

"Only tentatively. She said it's all subject to change depending on where you are going to be that day."

"I hope to have my entire schedule clear while you are visiting. I insist on giving you my undivided attention." There was a pause. Still feeling the tension from the other end of the line, Anastasia asked again, "Are you sure you do not want to talk about what is bothering you? We are friends, Layla, and I can keep any confidences you bestow on me."

"I know we're friends, Stasia. I'm just having a hard time right now is all."

"With what? Your parents? Work?"

"I don't really want to talk about it. I'm sure it'll pass."

"All right. If you change your mind, I am here. I should begin my day. I have lots on the schedule, and Maddy will be arriving any moment. I am in desperate need of some coffee after the night I had. I was up quite late, and then I did not sleep well. I kept thinking about you and calling you first thing this morning."

"I'm sure whatever was keeping you up was important," the blonde offered without trying to give herself away, even though she found it difficult to refrain from the temptation.

"I am sorry that I was unable to call you back last night. I appreciate that I am able to talk to you now. You make the days brighter, Layla. Maybe I should speak with you every morning."

Unable to help herself, the blonde felt a blush rise in her face. Even as hurt as she was, she was still interested in Anastasia. There was no denying that much, but she hated the fact that the princess was with another woman, even if she was well within her rights to do so. "Will I talk to you later today?"

"I would like that every much. I have all kinds of appointments today but will be staying in this evening. Perhaps we could talk then. Maybe I will get the pleasure of hearing your voice as the last one of the day before I go to sleep."

"That could be arranged."

"Good. I am glad you are willing to oblige me. Until then, my beautiful blonde angel. Have a good day."

"You too, Stasia."

Chapter V: Love's Patience

Anastasia was up early that morning with nervous excitement. She had hardly slept the night before as she thought of the few days ahead in which Layla would be visiting. Ever since that incident in California, the princess had realized her feelings for the blonde went beyond the carnal interests that dominated most of her relationships with women. Layla was different in so many ways, and while Anastasia was keenly interested in her on a physical level, there was something else that she had never felt with another woman.

Getting out of bed she showered for the day. She was supposed to be heading to the palace to see her parents, and the queen had invited her to sit in on some meetings that morning before she and her sisters left for the country estate with Layla. Dressing in record time, she grabbed her Bible in case she had any down time that morning to try to finish her assigned reading for her next religious discussion with Layla and then headed to the palace.

When she arrived her parents were eating breakfast, so she joined them. After kissing both her mothers, she took a seat, placing her book on the table and then asking the kitchen server for some food.

"You look well-rested," Lauren mentioned with a smile.

"To the contrary, I did not sleep well, but I am full of energy today."

"Good. You are going to need it for our meetings today. I am thrilled you decided to join me. I like seeing your interest," Alexa said, taking a sip of her coffee.

"I am extremely interested. My recent journeys cross-country have only made me more so. There are so many interesting people I have met and issues I have learned about."

"I look forward to hearing about them all," the queen replied. "What are you reading?"

"The Bible."

"The Bible?" Alexa repeated.

Anastasia nodded. "Have you ever read it?"

"I have not had the pleasure. I did not know you had become interested in religious study. How did this come about?"

Anastasia flushed a little as she smiled. "I met someone in Texas, and she is extremely religious. I wanted to try to impress her at first and spend more time together, so I asked if she would teach it to me."

Both the queens chuckled a little. "That is my daughter, always trying to play to women's passions."

Anastasia shrugged. "At first that is exactly what I was trying to do, but now that I have begun reading it, I find it fascinating, and she is passionate about the subject of how religion plays a role in the greater society. Just watching her and listening to her talking about it intrigues me greatly. She is like no other woman I have ever known."

The queens exchanged a look. It was not the first time they had seen their daughter enamored with a woman. Anastasia's feelings were easily swayed in matters of the heart, but it wasn't often she was so willing to go through extra effort for one, which was an intriguing difference.

Lauren pushed her silvering red hair back off her shoulder and then leaned back in her seat for a moment to regard her oldest child. "What is this young lady's name?"

"Layla Stone. She is coming to visit me today. That is why I was going to the country estate with Victoria, Camille, and Caroline. She loves horses. She should be here around lunchtime."

"That sounds like fun. You want her to meet your sisters?"

She nodded. "I think they would like her a great deal. I think the two of you would as well. Perhaps you could meet her? We could all have lunch here at the palace before we leave."

"You want us to meet her?" Alexa asked in surprise, looking at her wife.

"If you are available."

"Of course we are available, sweetheart," Lauren said.

"You have just never brought anyone to the palace before. This is not some ordinary woman, is she?" Alexa questioned.

"No," she answered shaking her head. "I think I am in love with her," she pronounced with a wide smile.

Alexa wanted to laugh but managed not to do so. It wasn't the first time her oldest had declared love for someone, but it was always nothing more than lustful desires. Nevertheless, she did her best to try to be supportive. "All right. Then lunch it is. We look forward to it."

When breakfast was complete, Alexa and Lauren headed off toward their offices while Anastasia went to hers. "Our daughter claims to be in love for about the sixth time this year," Alexa teased.

Lauren chuckled. "Yes but you have to admit that we have never been asked to meet anyone. This time really could be different, Lex. After all, have you ever seen her try to cater another woman's desires? She is even reading the Bible to try to impress this girl."

"She is too young to know true love."

"Is she? Have you forgotten that we met when you were twenty-five? She is just a handful of years from that."

"Well, I am sure Ms. Stone is lovely, but a twenty year old does not know what love is," she claimed.

"I am sure your first wife, Meredith, would disagree with you on that. After all you two were married when she was nineteen."

"Yes and we were divorced as well, because we realized we did not love each other. I just want to make sure Anastasia does not fall into the same situation. If this girl is different, that is fine, but they are too young to know if they are compatible in marriage. I do not want the heir to the throne to be involved in a disaster of a marriage and divorce, because she is too young to realize the potential repercussions of choosing poorly. We both know our daughter is fickle where love is concerned."

"Let us just meet her as we promised. We need to be supportive of Anastasia."

Alexa nodded. "I agree. We just need to watch out for any signs that things are growing serious between them too soon if this is for real. I do not object to her being in love and enjoying herself, but she must be sure before she tries to make someone her wife. There are so many levels of concern there, and I do not want her to face the problems I did. That is all I am saying."

Lauren nodded. "Fine. If this looks serious, we will encourage her to take things slowly."

A little later that morning Anastasia joined her mother for her first meeting with key senior members of Congress. While some of them seemed a little surprised to see the young heir come into the room, no one said anything as they rose from their seats out of respect for her position. Alexa gave her a warm smile and gestured to the empty chair next to her.

"Stasia, I have saved this seat right here for you," she said.

"Thank you, your majesty," she said formally as she knew was required in such situations before taking her seat. "Thank you all for letting me join you today."

When everyone was seated Alexa began the meeting saying, "Anastasia has expressed an interest in attending meetings with members of our legislative branch, and as the heir to the throne, I believe she should be as involved as possible in the event she needs to fill in for me. That said please include invitations to her for meetings as you would me." She paused to look around the table. "She has been on a journey across our great country these past few months and returned to us having a sense of where the constituency's concerns reside, probably far better than any other person in this room. I anxiously anticipate the report of her travels as a possible way to alleviate burdens of our people about which we may not yet know. Being significantly younger than the rest of us in this room, I think she will certainly bring fresh ideas to our old group," she joked. "With that said let us begin our meeting. Anastasia, please take a few minutes to tell us about your trip to one of the states you have seen thus far."

"All right. I was recently in Texas and had the honor of visiting a children's hospital there. While speaking to several of the parents, it became obvious that they all have concerns about our healthcare system. While all of them commented on the high quality of care their children were receiving at the hospital from the facility and the staff, there seemed to be an overwhelming sense of concern regarding how to juggle caring for their child and their jobs during such a trying time."

"We have a family medical leave act in place to assure they can take time off for such situations," one of the congressmen stated.

"I am aware of that as are they. However, something seems to be missing from it. While they are able to take the time off without fear of losing their jobs, they are not getting paid during this time. They have bills and other children to take care of. They worry about having enough money to take time off from work to be there for their sick child while life is going on around them. Many mentioned to me that while they have no bills under our healthcare system they are concerned about paying their mortgage and keeping a roof over their head. I think we should entertain changing the family medical leave act in some way that frees them of such an emotional burden. Their priorities should be on their sick children."

"That is quite a new insight that we have never considered," Alexa said. "Do you have any ideas of how we could make something like that happen?"

Anastasia shrugged. "I have no idea, but seeing the way this burdens them makes me realize we need to do something. Furthermore, I think we should add some kind of component to our healthcare system for a family's physiological needs as well. These people had nowhere to go to discuss their problems. Having someone they cared about in the hospital was taking an emotional toll. Unfortunately while I was there on the second day, a child died at the hospital, and that family had nowhere to turn to help them with their grief. It is not something we provide for currently. These people need help."

Alexa nodded. "Interesting. I think you should look into all of this, Stasia. You need to meet with the congressional committee on healthcare. I want you to take this and run with it. Meet with Congress and see how far you can get on finding ways to improve these two areas. I will give you one month before you need to report back on your progress. At the very least this will be an educational experience on all the intricate interlocking parts of our government," Alexa said.

Anastasia nodded. "Certainly, your majesty."

"Wonderful. Now let us begin with our official agenda."

For the next couple of hours, the two royals listened to the congressional report and discussed various aspects of laws that were under debate in the legislature. When the meeting was over, Anastasia looked at her watch anxiously. Layla would have been getting on the plane right about then and heading her direction.

"We have about an hour before the Joint Chiefs of Staff meeting. It is extremely important that you be there, Stasia. We have a military situation brewing in the Middle East, which may require our attention. Being a military officer now, I think this will be a good learning experience for you if you are available."

"Of course. Our last meeting was intriguing. I am sure this next one will be as well."

"Good. In the meantime tell me how your job at the Secretary of the Navy's office is going."

The young redhead shrugged. "It is interesting. However, it interferes with my travel schedule, and if I start attending more of these meetings, I am not sure I will be making a meaningful contribution to it."

Alexa nodded. "I figured that would happen. It is your choice as to what you want to do. If you want to stay on there, you most certainly can. However, I am thrilled at the idea that you wish to be more involved with what I do on a daily basis. It is the best way to cultivate your leadership skills for the future. I want you to know that all my meetings are open to you. There is nothing that I do that you cannot observe. More than that, all your thoughts and ideas are valid, even if you are just my replacement," she teased. "You may not always have the right answer, but you are thinking about the people's best interest, and that must always be your primary focus."

"I know."

"You know when I was in my twenties, I had a chair at the Joint Chiefs of Staff table, even as a junior military officer, and I eventually took over the responsibility of that committee as heir. I am thinking about giving you a seat on the committee, but I do not think you should have one while you are working for the Secretary of the Navy. Having a seat on that committee requires you to be less vested in one branch than another. I want you to attend this meeting today and then think about your options."

"All right. I promise you I will."

"Good. Now what time does Ms. Stone get here?" she inquired with a grin.

"Just a couple of hours from now," she answered with her own smile.

"Time passes too slowly sometimes when you are waiting for the one you love." Anastasia nodded. "You know, Stasia, your mother and I support you in your quest to find a special woman, but you are only twenty-one. I know you understand that while you are your own person, you are my daughter, and that carries certain weight in how you choose your mate. Someone picked my first wife for me, and I did not want you to have to go through that, which is why I changed the law, so you could choose whoever you felt worthy. That was a gift I gave you, but you still need to choose wisely. I do not wish to see you unhappy, because the love you believed to have was not real. You should not rush into choosing someone."

"I have no such thoughts about any woman."

"Not even Ms. Stone?"

Anastasia shrugged. "I love her, Mother, but I do not know if she feels the same for me. I have not said anything to her."

Alexa nodded. "I see. Do you think you are going to tell her while she is here?"

"I do not know. I have never felt this way before. I am nervous about saying anything. What if she does not feel the same?"

Touching her daughter on the shoulder, she answered, "If it is meant to be, it will be, Stasia. Love is not an exact science. You just follow your heart where it leads you, and if you are lucky, you find someone who loves you just as you are, flaws and all."

At their next meeting, Anastasia spent more time listening than anything to the top ranking military officers in the country. Each relayed a concern with a situation developing in the Middle East, which had not yet involved the country directly yet, but they were concerned the country should be on high alert in case it escalated by sending forces into the surrounding area. Alexa agreed to consider the matter and asked each member of the group to determine what would be adequate troop levels from the appropriate branches for such action.

Meanwhile when Layla landed at the airport in the private jet that had been arranged for her and the door opened, she saw a familiar face greet her. "Madeline, hi," she said with a smile.

"Hello, Layla. Stasia regrets that she was unable to get you herself today, but she had meetings today at the palace with the queen."

"It's all right. I didn't expect her to be here."

"Nevertheless I am to take you to the palace where you will join her for lunch before you head out on your trip."

"The palace? Stasia didn't say anything about that. I'm not dressed to go to the palace," she said.

"I could take you to Stasia's house in order for you to change. Do you have something you would feel comfortable wearing to the palace amongst your belongings?"

She shook her head. "No, just one summer dress. I wish she had said something to me about this."

"In her defense I believe this was a last minute decision. She is dressed casually today, so I do not think you need to change necessarily."

"I must. I can't go to the palace like this," she insisted.

"Very well. Let me just make a phone call ahead to Stasia's house. Let us go," she said leading the way to the car.

The blonde followed Madeline to the dark limousine waiting a little bit away from the plane. Both women climbed into the backseat. They didn't talk to each other as Madeline remained on the phone the whole time after giving the driver instructions. Layla had never been to Washington, D.C. and gazed out the dark tinted windows at the passing scenery until they pulled through gates of a large house.

An armed guard came to the door and opened it. "Madeline," he greeted formally.

She nodded at him as a woman came out the front door. "Madeline, I received word you would be coming," she said before looking to the blonde. "Ms. Stone, I am Lydia Gardner, the estate manager. Please come in. I have a room prepared for you already."

The three women went into the house while another man brought in Layla's bags. She was showed a nicely furnished bedroom and then left alone to change. She felt her stomach begin to churn a little as she slipped out of her travel attire and into her dress. Going to the palace had never been discussed between she and Anastasia, and she was surprised and confused by the development. Nevertheless, she knew she could not decline to go, so she only hoped that she would be appropriately dressed for the occasion. When she had put on her dress, she went to the

mirror to brush her hair and reapply some of her makeup to make sure it looked fresh. She had no idea what to expect, but whatever was in store, she wanted to look her best.

When she had finished dressing, she stepped out of the bedroom. No one seemed to be around as she looked up and down the hallway, but at the end of the corridor there was another room that she assumed was probably the princess's private bedroom. Curiosity got the better of her as she quietly snuck to the end of the hall and looked through the crack of the mostly closed door. She noted that the bed was immaculately made with dark fabrics and a multitude of pillows. There were various family photos decorating the walls but also a few of the princess with women she didn't recognize, which made her jealousy rise.

She had not completely gotten over what she had seen in the papers when Anastasia had been in California, even though the two had never discussed it. She knew she had no right to stake a claim on the princess, especially when Anastasia had made it clear friendship was best for them given Layla's limitations based on her principles. Still she wanted the princess for her own, and knowing that she couldn't have her gnawed at her. Knowing that people were waiting on her, she went back downstairs to meet Madeline again. It took a few minutes before they were headed over to the palace.

The sheer size of it was overwhelming for Layla. She had seen pictures of it, but it was by far the most impressive building she had ever seen in size and grandeur. As the car pulled around to the side of the building, the blonde received a pleasant surprise. The princess was standing under the portico with a large smile as they pulled to a stop. The redhead didn't even wait for someone else to open the door. Instead she pulled it open and smiled brightly as both women emerged.

"Layla, what a pleasure it is to see you," she greeted embracing the blonde and slipping a kiss on her cheek. "I have missed you."

"Stasia, it is good to see you, too," she answered, allowing herself to feel the frame of the princess against her own for a brief moment. She had often wondered what Anastasia looked like under her clothes in the privacy of her room and hoped this trip would afford her an opportunity to see the heir wearing less when she heard there was a pool at the country castle. Although she had to admit she liked the casual look the princess was sporting that day, khaki trousers and a blue and white striped button down.

"You look beautiful. I love this dress," Anastasia complimented, taking her guest's hand and leading her inside.

"Thank you. You didn't say anything about coming to the palace. I had to change at your house before we came here."

"You have been to my house? I hope you approved of it."

"I only saw one bedroom."

"Which one?"

"The one upstairs on the right side of the hall."

"That was my room growing up as a child until we moved onto the palace grounds."

Layla quietly looked around the grand corridor, trying to take everything in as they passed it. However, one thing of which she was acutely aware was the fact that they were still holding hands. She decided not to mention it, even though she found it a little odd.

"I thought we could have some lunch here before we went out to the country. My sisters headed out earlier this morning, so you will meet them once we get there."

"All right. I look forward to that."

The twosome headed to one of the smaller dining rooms. Layla saw the table had been set with four place settings. "Is someone joining us?" she asked.

Anastasia nodded as she guided the blonde to her seat. Pulling out her chair, she answered, "My parents."

"Your parents? Stasia, I wish you had told me about this. I'm not dressed to meet your parents."

"Of course you are. You look beautiful. Besides they do not form opinions on the way a person is dressed."

"They are the queens of this country!" she exclaimed.

Anastasia dismissed it with a wave of her hand. "They are just my mothers. It will be fine. I promise."

Just then the door opened, revealing the two queens. Immediately Layla bowed. "Your majesty, your highness," she quietly said.

"You must be Ms. Stone. It is a pleasure to meet you," Lauren said, coming to her and clutching her hand.

Blue eyes met and held for a moment in a gaze. The silvering redheaded queen's eyes appeared so genuine that Layla felt herself relaxing a bit. "It's an honor to meet you both. I apologize for not being more appropriately dressed. Stasia didn't exactly tell me I would be meeting you today."

"Glad to know we were not the only ones in the dark," Alexa teased a little as she approached the blonde. "Nevertheless, it is a great pleasure." She extended her hand to the young woman. When Layla put her hand in the queen's, Alexa squeezed it gently. "Please make yourself comfortable."

"Please do not be uneasy with us, Layla, and we will try our best to not be imperious parents who put our daughter's friends through inquisition," Lauren said with another smile.

"We admit we were not informed about your arrival at the palace until this morning, and Stasia has not had much opportunity to tell us much about you. However, from what she has said, we have been quite impressed. She says you are a bit of a religious scholar," Alexa stated as they all moved to sit at the table.

Layla shook her head. "She exaggerates. I go to a religious college and practice Christianity, but I'd hardly call myself a scholar."

"But you are teaching her the Bible, are you not?"

"We're reading it together and discussing it. She said she was interested in learning more about it when we were discussing various religious views on same-sex marriage. I was telling her that my parents believed it to be against God's teachings."

"Really? And in your religious studies do you find that to be true? Are same-sex marriage and Christianity irreconcilable?" Alexa asked curiously.

She shook her head. "I don't believe so, as do many other people. However, there are some who believe differently. Stasia seemed interested in learning how to have dialogue with those people."

Alexa looked at her daughter and then back at their guest. "She failed to mention that part, but that does not surprise me. Stasia has always strived to be the type who likes to try to reach out to people. It is one of her greatest assets as a future leader. Just this morning she was sitting in a room with several key members of Congress and relaying her concerns over certain aspects of our healthcare system that seemed to have been overlooked through the years. She emphasized that people's emotional and psychological well-being is as vitally important as the physical care they receive."

"I would agree. I volunteer at a children's hospital in Dallas. That's where we met actually and seeing those families go through the stress of having a sick child makes you wonder how you could bring them more comfort. As a Christian, I can offer them Christ's love, but I know sometimes practical matters can overwhelm."

Alexa smiled at the blonde. "Do you believe in Christ absolutely?"

She nodded. "I don't think there is any other way to believe."

"What about the Bible? You have Stasia reading it. Do you believe everything it says?"

Layla looked at her plate for a moment. She didn't know where the queen was going with the line of questioning, but it was beginning to make her nervous. Nevertheless, she never imagined the opportunity to share her views with her sovereign so openly. "I believe the Bible is open to interpretation. I don't take it literally if that is what you are asking."

"I am just curious as to your thoughts, because you seem to have sparked an interest in Stasia. I am not trying to pass any judgments upon you, Ms. Stone," she said with a gentle smile.

There was a pause before the blonde decided to ask something she had always wondered. "Do you believe in God, your majesty?"

Alexa gave another smile. "Yes, I do believe in God. However, our family has not been a part of any religious affiliation to try to preserve the freedom of religion that is the cornerstone of this country, so it is rare to find someone so willing to profess one's faith in our company or even ask us of our own. It is an admirable quality for such a young person. Knowing one's beliefs at twenty is uncommon."

"Thank you, your majesty," she quietly said.

Lauren looked over the table for a moment before deciding the conversation needed to move in a different direction. "Stasia mentioned that you were in college. What are your career aspirations after you graduate?"

"I'd like to help children. I was originally thinking about med school, but I'm not that good with needles," she confessed with a smile. "Then I thought I could be a counselor or psychologist for kids. That way I could still feel like I was helping them but without having to deal with the needle factor. My other thought was being a youth minister. My faith plays a large part of my life, and I like sharing it with others. My father is a youth minister."

"And he is opposed to same-sex marriage?" Alexa asked.

"He does not believe the Bible supports it."

"This is what has me so confused about Christianity. There seems to be no consensus on what their truth is," Anastasia commented.

Alexa nodded and turned back to their guest. "Sounds like there might not be an answer to what the truth is if the Bible is open to interpretation," she said.

"I think there is one simple truth," Layla said.

"What is that?" Alexa asked.

"I think in order to be a Christian, you must believe in Christ as your personal savior. I don't think anything else matters if you believe that, because if you believe that, you will emulate his life, which, if you read the Bible, was about inclusively and love of all people regardless of who they were."

Alexa looked at her wife and daughter for a moment before gazing at the blonde again. "Well spoken. Are you sure you are twenty? Victoria does not speak so profoundly, and she is only a year younger."

The smile that accompanied the question made Layla realize the queen was not mocking her, just gently teasing her about her age. "Last time I checked, I was still twenty," she replied.

Through the rest of the meal, the four of them talked about other subjects. Both Alexa and Lauren watched the exchanges between Anastasia and Layla carefully, looking for signs that their daughter's feelings were deeper as she had claimed. When the meal was complete, both queens extended their hands to Layla.

"It truly was an incredibly interesting lunch. That was a most unexpected pleasure," Alexa said.

"Thank you, your majesty, for having me to the palace."

"We hope you visit us again," Lauren said with a smile.

Going to their daughter, both of them hugged her. "Be careful on your trip and have fun."

With that the two queens took each other's hands as they left the room. When the door was closed and they were in the privacy of the hallway, Lauren looked at her wife. "I think this time is for real, Lex. I have never seen Stasia look at a woman the way she was looking at Layla."

Alexa nodded. "Our daughter truly is in love. Now we have to be careful of how she handles this. The longer it is kept from the media the better. I do not want either of them to feel any pressure, and I do not want Stasia to make a hasty decision about whether Layla is right for her long-term."

"She is quite a passionate young lady."

The queen nodded. "A bit singularly-minded with Christianity. I hope she finds other things she loves as much as she does religion. Nevertheless, she was quite charming and intelligent."

Lauren nodded. "I am so happy you changed that law all those years ago, so our daughters could be as happy as we are."

"Me too. Seeing Stasia's face as Layla spoke was worth it. She is in love," she said with a smile.

Behind in the dining room, Anastasia smiled at Layla. The princess could tell by watching her parents that they liked the blonde, which pleased her greatly. The college student smiled back at her hostess but said, "You could've warned me that I was meeting them. It's not everyday that I get to meet the queens of the country."

"It was just decided this morning. I am sorry for not giving you advanced notice, though. Did you enjoy lunch nevertheless?"

She nodded. "It was a once in a lifetime opportunity, and I know that. Do you think they liked me?" she asked shyly.

The redhead nodded as she rounded the table. Reaching for Layla's hand, she answered, "Yes. I think they were impressed that you owned your opinions so decidedly. My sister Victoria hardly

does the same. Speaking of her, I think we should go unless you would like a tour of the palace first."

"You would take me on a tour of the palace?"

"Of course I would. I can show you all kinds of interesting things. We could spend days in here looking around."

"I'd love that, but if that's the case, could we do it when we come back into town?"

"Absolutely. I will clear an extra day in my schedule if you want. Are you able to stay an extra day?"

"I think I can do that."

"Good. Then it is a plan. We can leave for our trip now then. I just need to go to my office for a minute. Come on."

The two of them walked holding hands to Anastasia's office. Madeline was there sitting at a desk on the phone. She smiled and waved to wait for just a moment. Quickly finishing the call, she asked, "Are you off to the country?" Anastasia nodded. "Are you sure you do not want me to accompany you?"

"No. I need this time away from things. You know how to find me if you need me. Feel free to call if something pressing arises. Otherwise we will be back in a few days. When we return, I have promised Layla a tour of the palace, so maybe you could plan the best route that lets us avoid the public tours."

"I am sure that can be arranged. Have a pleasant trip," she said, smiling at them.

Anastasia had arranged for a driver to take them into the country that day even though there were faster ways to get there, such as by helicopter. She wanted to give Layla the opportunity to see some of the scenery on the way. The two sat in quiet contentedness in the back of a limousine looking out the window. Upon their arrival they were informed that the other princesses and Victoria's boyfriend had gone out riding, leaving the two of them alone.

"Well, what would you like to do first? We could ride, but with it being so late in the afternoon perhaps we should table that until tomorrow, so we can spend all day enjoying it. Instead we can go to the pool or I can give you a tour of this estate or you can just relax on your own. Anything you desire on this trip is yours," she said with a charming grin.

"The pool would be nice. It is quite warm today."

"Very well. Let me show you to your room, so you can change."

Together they walked upstairs. Coming to a heavy dark wooden door, Anastasia pushed it open. "I hope this room is suitable for you. My room is just next door. You have a view of the back grounds and hills, and there is a balcony just out the door."

"This is a beautiful room," she answered, looking around the plush surroundings. The king-sized bed was layered in bedding and off in the corner there was another door, which she assumed was the bathroom. Her bags were sitting on a bench at the end of the bed. It was an incredible room, which only reminded her once again with whom she was sharing time.

"I will see you momentarily. I will be just next door changing. See you in a moment."

When Layla was alone, she went to her bags and opened them but was surprised to find them empty. She was confused as she stared into the bag for a moment but then looked around the room. Seeing the dresser she wondered if her belongings had been unpacked for her. Pulling open the dresser drawers, she found her clothes neatly stacked. The thought never occurred to her that someone would have touched her belongings, but she figured that was what typically happened when people stayed at the country castle. Deciding not to inquire, she went about changing. She had brought a blue bikini that brought out the color of her eyes, hoping that it might capture the princess's attention. On top of that she added khaki shorts and a white cotton top and sandals.

When she was finished changing, she went next door and knocked. She heard Anastasia's voice beckon her into the room, so she pushed open the door to find the princess on the phone, looking out over the balcony. She glanced over her shoulder and smiled at her guest before turning her gaze back outside while she continued to talk, giving Layla a chance to just look at the mostly bare body of her fantasies.

Anastasia's skin was fair, but her toned musculature was exquisite. Her suit top was red and navy and cut in a razor back sports bra, leaving defined shoulders and shoulder blades on display. The bottoms were tiny shorts that just covered her. She had a trim waistline and athletic legs. Layla had to remind herself to breathe for a moment as she just took it all in. However, as Anastasia turned she had to put a hand on the door to brace herself for what appeared. The princess's breasts were slightly larger than she imagined, but the real surprise was what was resting just beneath them. Anastasia's abdomen was a piece of art with exquisitely defined muscles. While not overly muscular, each one could be seen in its glory.

Anastasia tried not to respond at the sight of Layla leaning against her door. It was obvious her reaction was the one she wanted. She had hoped the blonde would find her enticing, which was why she hadn't bothered to put anything over her suit before allowing her to come into the room. However, she was disappointed to see her company fully clothed. When she was finished with her call, she put the phone down on the nightstand and picked up a t-shirt. Slipping into over her head, she followed it with a pair of mesh shorts for her legs. She did her best not to smile when disappointment flickered in blue eyes.

"Come on. I ordered us some snacks and beverages. We have towels down at the pool. My sisters are due back within an hour according to the staff."

Anastasia led the way downstairs and outside to the pool. Two chairs had been prepared for them. Unceremoniously the princess took off her outer layer to expose herself again. She proceeded to lather herself with sunscreen as she watched the blonde reveal herself. She was glad to be wearing sunglasses as she felt Layla would have been able to see her eyes go wide as the blonde slipped off her top. Instantly her pulse began to race at the sight of perfectly smooth suntanned skin.

Layla was a perfect example of a woman the princess found attractive. The blue bikini top was held together by just a couple of strings around her neck and back that would have been no challenge for the princess's quick working fingers, but she knew she had to refrain, even though she desperately wanted to see those flawlessly round globes of femininity bare. Layla's stomach, while mostly flat, had muscles that poked out in definition just a bit when she moved a certain way. Her legs were trim and muscular enough, making it obvious that the blonde went to lengths to stay toned.

Neither said anything for a moment as they applied their sunscreen, but finally Anastasia found her voice and asked, "Would you like some help getting your back?"

"Thank you. That would be great," Layla answered as calmly as possible. Holding her hair up, she waited for the princess to touch her. Strong hands softly rubbed along the center of her back before moving lower. She did her best not to moan at the caress against her skin, but it was getting harder to not react when the princess was near.

For Anastasia's part, she did her best not to let on that her thoughts were running in a wildly prurient direction. She had been the one who had classified them as friends, but just then that was the last thing she wanted. Nevertheless, she knew winning Layla's favor was a daunting task given her principles. However, she could enjoy the innocent touches and fantasize about more in the privacy of her room later.

When the task was finished, Layla offered to return the favor for the princess. Anastasia allowed her to coat her back with sunscreen all the while imaging those hands caressing her back in a more intimate way. She wanted Layla desperately just then, but she knew it would not happen. Seeing one of the staff bringing the food poolside, she knew she would need a drink when the moment was over.

Heading over to the table where the food was laid out in an assortment, she poured herself some lemonade from one of the pitchers to check for which one included vodka. Turning to her guest, she did her best to sound normal as she asked, "Would you like something to drink?"

"Sure. That would be nice."

Picking up the regular lemonade, she poured Layla a glass and brought it to her. Pointing back to the table, she said, "The pitcher to the left has vodka in it, and the one on the right does not. I had them make you a special pitcher."

"Thanks."

The two laid in silence in the sun with their sunglasses on. The afternoon was hot but not humid for their time poolside. As predicted by the staff, Anastasia's sisters returned about after an hour with Jefferson in tow. All of them had on their suits. Anastasia dutifully introduced the four of them to Layla before Victoria and Jefferson took chairs as well. The eldest princess felt the heat was unbearable in light of Layla being so close and the thoughts that had been running through her mind, so she decided to join her two youngest sisters in the pool.

Swimming over to them, she hung on to the edge of Caroline's raft as she asked the twins softly, so she couldn't be heard, "What do you think of Layla?"

"She is adorable," Caroline replied.

"Totally hot, Stasia. Does she have a sister?" Camille said with a grin.

Anastasia laughed at her sister. "Since when were you interested in anything other than books?"

"Trust me. She has gone girl crazy this summer," Caroline commented. "It is like she realized teenage girls had breasts. I think she takes after her older sister," she teased the first in line to the throne.

"Awesome. I would love to have you on my team," she said, raising her hand toward Camille who gave her five. "Have you gone out with any girls yet?"

She shook her head. With a shy blush she said, "I do not know how to approach them."

"Then stick with me, kid. I will show you the ropes." Turning to her other sister she asked, "What about you? What side of the fence are you on?"

"Victoria's."

"Our side's loss," she joked. "And a serious win for the boys. Have you branched out at all and met any guys?"

"Not really. They all only have one thing on their minds, and I am not that much like Victoria and you."

"Sex is fun, girls, but both of you are right to wait until you are a little older. Victoria and I are not exactly the best examples of prudence. Do not feel like you have to follow us down that path so quickly. Our mothers would thank me for telling you this, I think."

"So how is Layla? Is she as hot in bed as she is in that suit?"

Anastasia laughed. "Actually, I do not know. Layla has decided to remain chaste until she is married, so I will not get such an opportunity unfortunately."

"They why are you dating her?" Camille inquired in confusion.

"We are not dating. We are just friends."

The twins laughed lightly. "Right," Caroline commented. "That is impossible."

"In this case it happens to be true."

"But you want her. Are you going to take no for an answer?" Camille pressed.

"I am going to take whatever she wants to give me and be happy with it. She is different, girls."

There was a pause between the three of them for a moment before Caroline softly asked, "Do you love her?"

Anastasia nodded. "Yes. I am in love with her."

"Does she know?"

"No. She does not, but I hope she will soon. Please do not say anything to her. She needs to hear it from me."

"Of course we would not say anything. That is amazing. I never thought I would see you in love," Caroline said with a giggle.

"It happens, and I am happier than I have ever been, even though I know being with her means being denied my sexual desires. I believe she is worth it."

"You are in love. Seems to me no woman would be worth that," Camille said with a smile.

Anastasia returned it. "Just you wait. Someday you will feel differently, Camille. Someday you will meet a woman who you think is worth all the waiting she will put you through before finally getting what you want so badly. It will only make it better, at least that is what I have to tell myself in this case," she joked.

Layla did her best to ignore Victoria and Jefferson's canoodling in the chaise next to hers as she focused on the three women in the pool. Her nerves were on edge from being around Anastasia just then. She could feel her desires acutely as they settled between her thighs. She had never felt so much conflict with her own principles, but it seemed every time she was around the princess, her longings came roaring to life, making her hypersensitive to everything Anastasia did. Needing to calm herself a little, she went over to the table. She picked up the pitcher of nonalcoholic lemonade to pour herself some but then stopped. Putting it back down, she picked up the other one and wondered for a moment if the alcohol would help soothe her some. She knew it had the power to lower inhibitions, but with everyone around, she felt safe that Anastasia wouldn't try anything inappropriate, so she poured herself some. The liquid burned a little as she swallowed it, but after several sips, she started to get used to it. Finishing off one glass, she refilled it with a second round of the spiked lemonade.

The group hung out at the pool until they all adjourned inside to prepare for dinner. When Layla was alone in her room, she showered and dressed for their meal. Her head seemed a little fuzzy, but her nerves were settled, for which she was thankful. When she dried her hair, she reapplied her makeup and then slipped on casual clothes and her sandals again. She took the time to look herself over in the full-length mirror. The sun of the day had already added a deeper tone to the bronzed skin of her arms and legs as she looked at them from under the hem of her knee-length sundress.

Feeling like she looked good, she headed next door and knocked on Anastasia's door. The princess answered it wearing a smile and khaki pants and a blue dress shirt. "You look lovely," she complimented.

Layla blushed. "Thank you. You look nice too."

"Let us go to dinner," she proposed, extending her arm, which the blonde took. Together they walked downstairs to one of the dining areas. The rest of the troupe was already there, chatting loudly. Anastasia pulled out her guest's chair before taking her own. As soon as she sat, dinner commenced with the first course.

As they ate salad, the server offered wine to Anastasia, who accepted on behalf of the group. "Everyone can have some except Camille and Caroline," she said before looking at Layla. "Would you like some wine?"

"I'll try a little," she answered, obviously surprising the princess, but it wasn't stated.

Anastasia nodded and gestured to the blonde, so the server began to pour Layla's glass first before filling Anastasia's. He quickly did the same for Victoria and Jefferson before leaving the bottle on the side table and stepping back toward the wall to wait in case they needed anything.

During the meal that evening, Layla was mostly an observer of the four princesses. It was obvious that the siblings were close to each other. As Layla didn't have any siblings herself, she felt a little envious that the women had each other to share, but she was enjoying these stolen moments with Anastasia, even if it was in the company of her sisters.

Once the meal was complete, Victoria and Jefferson excused themselves first. Camille and Caroline were content to hang around for a while continuing to talk. Anastasia really wanted to be alone with Layla, but she obliged her sisters for a bit as they seemed to be interested in knowing more about the pretty blonde. It was some consolation to her that her youngest sisters were making an effort to get to know the woman she had come to love. Finally, though, the young princesses decided it was time to find something else to do and leave the two women alone.

The redhead smiled at her company. "Well, what shall we do with ourselves now? Perhaps a walk through the gardens to watch the sunset?"

"That sounds nice."

"Great. Let us go then," she suggested, rising from her seat and extending her hand.

Together they walked out one of the large glass back doors toward the terrace before descending the steps to the grounds. Quietness enveloped them for a bit as they strolled, but Layla's mind was active. Once again she and the princess were holding hands. Her head was still swimming from the alcohol from earlier in the afternoon plus the wine she had at dinner. She knew Anastasia was surprised by that development but had the graciousness not to say anything. However, now as they walked, the blonde realized being alone with Anastasia while her inhibitions had been compromised by alcohol was probably not the smartest decision she had ever made, and yet being that close felt too good to withdraw. To the contrary, she wanted to feel closer to her. Breaking their hands, she curled both her arms around the redhead's bicep as she stepped closer.

The princess said nothing, even though she was pleased with the feeling of Layla's body along her arm. Instead she indulged in the feeling while they walked. When they reached the far end of the gardens, they took a seat on one of the benches to watch the sunset together.

"This part of the country is so incredibly beautiful," Layla mentioned.

Anastasia nodded. "This place has always been a favorite getaway for my family for generations. It is a wonderful escape from daily life that is not too far away. If you take the helicopter, it is only about an hour from the palace. I just wanted to take the car, so you could see the scenery."

"Thanks. I appreciate that. I'm not sure how I would feel about flying in a helicopter," she said, leaning and putting her head on Anastasia's shoulder.

The way her companion was acting was making Anastasia's desire to be even closer. Deciding to make a move, she slowly withdrew her arm from Layla's grasp and slipped it around her back. The blonde snuggled in even closer and curled her arms around the heir's waist in response. Together they watched the sun dip below the mountainous horizon before Anastasia turned to look down at her company. She gazed deeply into blue eyes as she tucked blonde hair back behind Layla's ear.

"You look so beautiful right now," she whispered, caressing the younger woman's cheek before her hand cupped her chin. Layla felt her face warm as she blushed. "No one else has ever made such an impression on me, Layla. You are an incredible woman."

"Stasia," she whispered, looking into the redhead's blue eyes. The moment felt like one of her dreams with the way the princess was looking at her just then.

Unable to resist Anastasia leaned down and softly brushed the blonde's lips with her own. Instantly hands were in red hair, pulling her closer as the kiss deepened. "Layla," she whispered as their mouths met a second time.

Layla's head was spinning just like it had the first time the princess had kissed her. It was what she had been thinking about for so long, but it was actually happening. For several minutes they kissed softly before air forced them apart. "Stasia?" she questioned.

"I am sorry, Layla. I cannot go on like this. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I feel for you. I cannot keep it to myself any longer."

"You can tell me anything," she said anxiously. She had no idea what Anastasia was about to say, but she hoped the fact that the princess had kissed her first was a good sign.

"I have never felt this way about anyone before, and I cannot stop thinking about you. I live for our moments together, whether they are on the phone or in person, and every time I am with you I feel alive. I..." She paused. She had never professed feelings for someone before, but she hoped her sentiments would be well-received. Caring blue eyes portrayed their openness, making her relax as she took a deep breath. "I find myself in love with you, Layla."

Layla felt as if she couldn't breathe. She could hardly comprehend what had just been said. Her mind refused to process it at first, but her heart was well ahead as it began to beat in rapid cadence. The princess had just confessed her love for her. It was her favorite fantasy come true. Finally she found her voice as she managed to reply, "Oh, Anastasia. I love you."

The princess gave a soft smile as her heart thumped loudly. "I like hearing you say my name," she softly confessed.

"Anastasia," she murmured as they kissed again. Layla couldn't believe what was happening to her. She had won the heir's affections without any compromises. Anastasia claimed to love her just as she was. It was beyond her hopes to have her feelings mutually returned. After several more minutes of kissing, she pulled back slightly and asked, "So what happens from here?"

"I do not know. I have never been in this position. However, I think it is best if this stay between us for now. I have had to deal with the media everyday, and my assumption is that once they know of this, they will wrap you up in the whirlwind that has been my life in the press. It is in your own best interest to remain unknown for now. I do not want you to be hassled just trying to live your daily life."

Layla nodded in agreement. She had never considered such a thing, instead concentrating more of the feeling of what it would be like to be loved by such a woman. It was a complication she didn't like, even though she immediately understood Anastasia's concern. "I won't tell anyone."

"Good. I have taken the liberty of telling my family but will not disclose this to anyone else."

"You told your family?" she asked in surprise.

The princess nodded. "That is why I wanted my mothers to meet you. I told them at breakfast how I felt, and I told my sisters this afternoon, even though I was unsure of what your reaction would be. I just hoped that you felt the same."

She nodded and smiled. "I do, Stasia. I really do."

"That pleases me greatly."

Together they sat cuddled in the waning light of dusk. After the star began to appear, the blonde turned and smiled. With a little laugh she asked, "Does this mean we're dating?"

"I certainly hope so," the princess answered. "I have never had a girlfriend before, but I would be honored if you would be mine," she said. "In fact, I acquired something for you in the hopes you would be open to my declaration."

"What's that?"

"It is a surprise. I left it back in my room. Perhaps we could go back?" When Layla nodded, the two rose from the bench. Holding hands they strolled back through the gardens toward the castle. "So what would you like to do this evening?" the princess asked.

"What are our options?"

"I would not recommend anything public, so that means we need to stay here. However, we still have plenty of choices. There is always a night swim, or we can take a tour of the castle, but friends have told me that it is kind of creepy at night. Those are probably the most interesting. Otherwise we could watch a movie or something or raid the kitchen for some dessert," she joked.

"I don't like creepy, so maybe we should postpone that until the daylight. I want a tour though. Let's take another swim. I never even got in the water earlier."

"All right. A swim it is."

The couple made their way back inside to their respective rooms to change before heading out of doors again. Layla noticed that Anastasia didn't have the gift she had mentioned with her but decided not to say anything about it even though she was immensely curious.

The two women found the temperature of the water just right for a night swim and hung around in the water talking and laughing for a while. The heir felt the need show off on the diving board for her girlfriend by attempting all kinds of dives. Layla was amused by the effort as she hung off the side of the deep end of the pool watching the display. However, there was one dive Anastasia could do well and executed it nearly flawlessly to end of her performance, which sent her to the bottom of the pool. When she surfaced again, she glanced over at her audience. Her girlfriend was just gazing at her intently with a slight smile playing at the corner of her lips. Submerging under the water again, she swam over to resurface within a few inches of her. Layla smiled at her girlfriend as she watched water trickling down her face.

"Who knew you were such a talented diver?" she teased lightly, encircling her around the neck.

Anastasia smiled as her own arms came around her girlfriend's naked waist. It was the first time she had been able to touch any part of Layla's bare torso. The movement didn't go unnoticed by Layla either as she gasped a little at the large hands against the skin of her back. Anastasia leaned in for a kiss at the same time bringing their frames together. Both women moaned at the feeling of so much flesh meshing together.

Layla's senses were on overload. She had never experienced such a thing as another woman's exposed legs or stomach rubbing against her own or breasts pressed against hers. The feeling of it caused a flurry of sexual desire to pulse through her, and she thought she might actually faint. She could feel the heat passing between them, even in the water as their mouths continued their exploration.

Anastasia's body intuitively began to tune into Layla's. The blonde's frame was rocking into hers as hands gripped at her back. Going with her instincts, the princess slid her right thigh between Layla's to which there was an immediate gasp as the blonde's lips broke from Anastasia's.

"Stasia," she cried lightly.

Taking advantage of the moment, the redhead kissed down the side of Layla's neck. "Layla, God, you are so beautiful," she whispered.

"Stasia," she murmured again, threading hands through red hair. Layla's head was swimming at the feelings. Somewhere in the recesses of her mind though, the thought occurred to her that things had the ability to get out of control quickly, as she had never been that intimate with anyone before, but right then she was enjoying the attention.

The two of them continued to make out in the pool for a while before Anastasia slowly pulled back and softly suggested, "I think we should go inside."

"Okay," Layla agreed, allowing herself to be led out of the pool. The couple picked up their towels and wrapped themselves up as they headed indoors.

When they got upstairs to their rooms, the princess said, "Change into your pajamas and then come back to my room for your gift."

Layla nodded. She was greatly interested in it, so she went into her own room to change clothes. Since it was summer, she had opted for a tank top and cotton sleeping shorts for her bedtime attire. When she had changed and brushed out her hair, she went back next door. Anastasia was in a robe lounging on her bed with the TV remote in her hand flipping through channels when she came into the room.

The redhead gave her a smile. "Come sit," she said, patting the bed next to her.

Layla closed the door behind her and then came to the bed. Slipping onto it, she mirrored Anastasia's position, partially reclining against the headboard. The redhead picked up a box sitting on the bedside table and then rolled onto her side. "Here."

Taking the present, Layla slipped off the ribbon and then popped open the box. "Oh my," she whispered slowly taking out the bracelet. "This is beautiful."

Anastasia took it from her and slipped it around her left wrist. "I have never bought such a piece of jewelry for a woman, but it was recommended that I insure it just in case something happened to it. I want you to be able to enjoy it without worrying about it, so on the off chance there is a problem, just know that it is insured."

"What are these blue stones?" she inquired. She wasn't sure what she was wearing except for the fact that it was the most exquisite thing she had ever seen.

"They are blue diamonds. It is all diamonds in a platinum setting. I thought the blue would match your eyes."

Layla's heart began to pound hard as she looked at the bracelet of traditional colorless and blue diamonds adorning her wrist. "I don't know what to say. It's the most incredible thing I've ever seen."

Leaning toward her and cupping her cheek, Anastasia whispered, "Just kiss me and tell me you love me again. That is all I need."

Gazing deeply into her girlfriend's eyes, Layla whispered, "I love you, Anastasia. Thank you for the bracelet." With that she leaned in to kiss her on the mouth as she threaded her left hand through red hair.

The two kissed slowly for several minutes before Anastasia rolled over partially atop of her girlfriend. Layla moaned at the weight against her. The feeling of being underneath the princess's frame set her body ablaze in a way she had never even imagined. Rocking up into the body above hers, she slid her arms down around the princess's back to bring them even closer. Anastasia's right thigh pressed between hers as they began to move more deliberately against each other.

"Stasia," she called as her hands gripped the heir's hips through her robe. The feeling was exquisite, but Layla knew things were progressing much farther than she was comfortable so quickly and that she had to stop them from doing something they would regret. "Stasia," she called softly.

The princess's blue eyes met her own. "What is it, beautiful?" she quietly asked.

It took her a moment to catch her breath, but as she was doing so, she noticed Anastasia's robe partially open revealing bare skin that had gone unnoticed until then. "Are you wearing anything under your robe?" she asked.

The princess gave a charming one-sided grin. "Why do you not find out?" she playfully asked, taking the blonde's right hand and placing it between the folds of the cotton.

Layla only felt soft skin over the top of muscles. As exciting as the discovery should have been, reality finally surfaced in the sea of new emotions. She was in the bed of the heir to the throne lying underneath a naked princess while being scantily adorned herself. She had no idea of how easily she had allowed herself to get into the position, realizing that the alcohol of the day had to have played a factor, and admonishing herself for her own consumption. However, the more pressing matter was that it was clear what was going to happen if she continued to allow the princess to touch her so intimately. Her own new sexual desires were suddenly raging and could only assume Anastasia's were as well by what was happening between them. Withdrawing her hands from Anastasia's naked body, she looked up at the woman hovered above her.

"Stasia, I'm sorry. This is going way too far way too fast for me," she said trying to take some much-needed deep breaths.

"What are you talking about? We are just enjoying each other's company."

"You're naked on top of me," she said.

"I always sleep naked."

Seeing that Anastasia was not moving off of her, she knew she was going to have to try a different approach. "You know I really do love, Stasia, and I like being close to you, but I'm not ready for this."

"For what? I have not even asked for anything from you yet."

"And just what were you going to ask of me?" she asked. She was beginning to feel uncomfortable with the fact that Anastasia was still on top of her with what seemed no intention of moving.

The redhead broke their gaze for a moment. "Well, I was going to ask if you would stay with me tonight," she confessed meeting blue eyes again. "I want to be closer to you than we have ever been."

Layla couldn't believe it for a moment as she just thought about what had been asked of her. "I can't, Stasia," she softly replied, trying her best to let her girlfriend down easily.

"Why not? I love you, Layla, and I want to be with every moment you are here."

There was another pause between them. "I'm just not ready for something like that."

"I do not understand. You said you loved me. Why do you not want us to be closer?"

Looking at the bracelet on her wrist, there was a moment that she wondered if by accepting Anastasia's gift that she had somehow sent the message that they were going to be intimate. "Did you tell me you loved me and give me this bracelet thinking that I would agree to sleep with you?" she seriously asked.

Red brows furrowed as the princess's face drew together, and Anastasia withdrew from the bed. "Is that what you think of me? How dare you insinuate such a thing! I resent that! I do not have to pay a woman for her affections! I can have any woman I want in my bed!"

Layla took the opportunity to rise from the bed as well as hurt and anger began to fill her. She couldn't believe she had come so close to being persuaded into something she was morally against or the fact that the princess would even try to cross such a boundary. "Not this woman!" she yelled. Taking the bracelet off, she dropped it on the bed. "I cannot be bought! How could you think my virtue was worth so little?" she continued.

Anastasia's face flushed darkly as rage began to overtake her. "I gave that to you because I love you! I cannot believe you would think I would do such a thing! Do you not know me at all?"

"I know you well enough to know you'd sleep with someone else even though you have feelings for me!" she countered.

"What are you talking about? I have done no such thing!"

"Oh really? How long have you felt this way about me?"

"Since almost the beginning. Why does that matter?" she asked confused at the turn in the argument.

"And yet you slept with someone while you were in California!"

"First of all, that is not true! Secondly, what does that have to do with anything? We were just friends then!"

"Did you love me when you were in California?"

Still baffled by the line of questioning but willing to answer the question, Anastasia nodded. "Yes! So what?"

"And yet you took another woman back to your hotel!"

"How did you know that?" Anastasia questioned, her fury waning in light of rising bewilderment.

"I saw the pictures in the paper."

Shaking her head, the heir asked, "Even so what does that have to do with anything?"

"I loved you even then, Stasia, and it hurt to see you with someone else, but I tried to accept it, because we were only friends. Then I realized I was more hurt by the fact that you just wanted to be friends, because I wouldn't have sex with you. You wouldn't give me a chance. Now you've taken me on a romantic walk, told me you love me, and given me this bracelet all just before we

started making out in the pool. It has started to feel like an incentive to give in to what you wanted. I mean you're naked. Granted you look incredibly... sexy like that," she admitted with a flush rising on her cheeks. "But I feel like you're pressuring me."

The princess dropped her head forward and took a deep breath as she realized the deep misunderstanding that was ensuing between them. She shook her head. "Stay right here a minute, will you?" she softly requested. Layla nodded in agreement and then watched Anastasia head into her bathroom and close the door. A few minutes later she was back, dressed in a t-shirt and mesh gym shorts. "Sit with me?" she asked, gesturing to the sofa. Layla headed to the sofa to take a seat while Anastasia detoured to the bed to pick up the bracelet before joining her. "Layla, I am deeply sorry if I made you feel like I was trying to force you into having sex with me. As much as I would like to be intimate with you, I know that you are waiting for deeper commitment, maybe even marriage, before you give yourself to someone else. Hearing what you just said, I can see how this evening made you think I had other thoughts, and I apologize for that. It was never my intention."

"Then what did you mean when you asked me stay the night with you?"

"I wanted us to sleep in the same bed. I know you are not prepared to give me what I want, and I respect you enough not to pressure you. It hurts my feelings to think you believe me capable of that. I really do love you, Layla, and I want you to have this bracelet as a sign of that love, nothing more," she said, slipping it back on the blonde's wrist.

"What about California? Did you have sex with that woman?"

Anastasia shook her head. "No. She was willing to, so I took her back to the hotel to do just that, but I could not. You had a hold on my heart, Layla, even then, and I could not shake it. It was then I realized I did not want to. It is as I said earlier tonight. You are the most incredible woman I have ever met, and I love you."

Nodding her head, Layla whispered, "I'm sorry. You know I've never even had a girlfriend, and now I find myself being the girlfriend to first in line for the throne. It's surreal, Stasia. We can't even really have a normal relationship. We can't go out in public very much. We can't go to the movies or on a date or anything that normal people do. I'm struggling to figure out how to do this, especially since you expect certain things from women. It became obvious to me when you were in California that you had needs I wasn't able to fulfill, which is why you wouldn't give me a chance in the first place. I guess I'm just feeling anxious that you'll give up on me because you're tired of waiting. It would crush me if you left me or were unfaithful simply because I wouldn't have sex with you."

"Layla, I think we need to step back a little. I love you, and it is the first time I have ever been in love before. I have no idea what I am doing here. I just know that I want to be with you every possible moment that I can, and I have accepted the fact that it means I will not be having sex with anyone else nor will I be having it with you until you are ready. I really like sex, but I love you more. Please give me a chance to prove myself to you. I do not believe myself to be the kind

of woman that would be unfaithful simply because you would not satisfy my physical desires. I knew this upfront about you, but my heart cannot let you go." She smiled tenderly at the blonde.

"I don't think you're that kind of woman either. I'm just scared of this feeling. I've never loved someone either, but I do love you, Stasia."

There was a pause before the princess hesitantly asked, "Is there anyway I can convince you to stay here tonight now that you know everything?"

"You know, I really want to be with you every minute as well. The idea of sleeping in your arms is like a dream. I'll stay under one condition."

"Anything you want you can have."

"You need to wear something to bed. I'm not sure I can trust either of our resolves if you're naked, and I really don't want to wake up tomorrow regretting anything that happened tonight. It would do permanent damage to our relationship."

Anastasia nodded in agreement. "I can live with that. Let me change into proper sleeping attire, and then we can get settled in bed."

The redhead went into the bathroom, returning a few minutes later dressed in her t-shirt and a pair of lounging pants. Both women moved to the bed again, slipping in on opposite sides but cuddling together in the middle. They watched TV for a little while before finally deciding to go to sleep. After turning off the lights, Anastasia kissed her girlfriend softly on the lips and curved her arms tighter around her.

In a night full of firsts for Layla, the moment of them holding each other in bed made her feel incredibly loved and safe. She had imagined what it would be like between them, including lying in the heir's arms, but it was better than her fantasies. The strength of the embrace was only outweighed by the comfort. Layla found it exceedingly easy to fall asleep in the arms of the most powerful princess in the world.

Long into the night after her girlfriend had fallen asleep, Anastasia remained awake. With her eyes adjusted to the darkness of the room, she took the liberty of gazing on her as she slept peacefully. They had managed to weather their first fight and cleanse themselves of some of their insecurities in the process, for which she was thankful. She hadn't wanted to lose her temper, but in the end it had been a productive dispute. She knew with certainty she truly loved the woman in her arms and wondered for just a moment if Layla was the one, even though they had just admitted their feelings to one another. With the joyous thought in her heart, the princess decided to do something special for her and slipped out of bed quietly.

Heading out into the dimly lit corridor, she made her way downstairs to the kitchen area where the night staff was sitting. All of them stood when she entered. "Your highness, what can we do for you?"

"I am looking for a vase, a pair of scissors, and flashlight," she said.

"What size vase?" the butler inquired as the staff went for the requested items.

"Something large enough to hold a dozen roses."

"Here are your scissors and flashlight," one of them responded. "Is there something else we could do for you?"

"Actually, yes. If one of you would accompany me to the garden with the vase to help me get some flowers, I would appreciate it."

"Why do you not stay here, and we can go?"

She shook her head and smiled. "I want to pick them."

"Would you like anything to go with them?"

"Such as?"

"A card? Chocolate? Champagne? Anything?"

Anastasia grinned as she realized her staff knew exactly why she was taking a midnight excursion into the garden.

"No, but thank you. I will let you know if anything else is required."

When the vase was brought to her, she and one attendant went into the garden. Neither of them spoke as the princess perused the grand landscape of flora. She took her time choosing each rose and then arranging them in the vase with other greenery for accents, trying to make an arrangement worthy of giving to Layla. When she was finally satisfied with it, they returned to the castle. Together they walked upstairs with the attendant carrying the arrangement just a few steps behind Anastasia. However, as they turned down the corridor where all the princesses were staying that night, they heard noise coming from Victoria's room.

"Do you know if Victoria has a guest here?" she inquired as she realized what she was hearing was her sister crying out in what she could only assume was sexual gratification.

The attendant gave no outward response to the sound but responded, "I believe Mr. Keats is staying the night."

Anastasia shook her head. Her parents would be upset if they knew about that. They did not approve of Victoria's sexual relationship with Jefferson, but she didn't know whether or not to mention it to them. Nevertheless, she had her own concerns about her sister's behavior. Without another word, they continued on to the princess's room. She turned to take the vase.

He smiled politely. "Have a pleasant rest of your evening, your highness."

"Thank you. Good night."

Heading back into the dark room, she placed the roses on Layla's side table and then returned to bed. She smiled at the sight of the flowers just sitting there waiting for her girlfriend when she awoke in the morning. Reaching for the blonde, she curved an arm around her and felt her snuggle in closer in response.

The next morning Layla awoke first. As she sleepily opened her eyes, she noticed an arrangement of red roses on the night table that hadn't been there the night before. She smiled at the surprise and then turned toward her girlfriend who was still sleeping. Thinking about the night, she reveled in the enjoyment she felt in being close to the woman she loved for a few minutes while gazing at the sleeping princess. Anastasia looked so peaceful that she almost didn't want to wake her, but she wanted to thank her for the flowers.

Leaning in to the redhead's ear, she kissed it softly. Anastasia stirred and moaned a little as Layla whispered, "Good morning, love."

A smile graced the heir's face before she even opened her eyes. "Good morning, sweetheart," she murmured fighting to open her eyes. Finally her blue eyes remained opened after a few false starts. "How did you sleep?"

"Amazingly well. It must have been the strong arms that were holding me. Then I woke up to find roses where there weren't any the night before."

"I wanted you to have a little surprise to wake up to this morning."

"They're beautiful, but when did you get them?"

"I snuck out to the garden while you were asleep," she answered with a proud smile.

"Oh, you are such a romantic."

"I hope you do not mind that. Just seeing the way you look at me when I surprise you is worth it."

"I don't mind. It just reminds me that there are so many reasons to love you." Cuddling down into Anastasia's shoulder, she wrapped an arm around her waist. "I could stay like this forever."

"That would be nice, but I think we have a full day of horseback riding planned. I happen to know of a perfect place where we could sneak away for a little cuddling while we are out."

"That sounds nice too."

"Then let us get up. I need to check in with my sisters to see what their plans are for the day, and then we should eat some breakfast before we head out. I have already taken the liberty of asking the kitchen to prepare lunch for us to take. I just need to know how many of us are going. Personally I would not mind if it was the two of us, but I have a feeling Caroline and Camille will go with us. They love the horses. Victoria, on the other hand, might be a little too busy with Jefferson to bother," she grumbled.

"Why do you say it like that? Don't you like him?"

She shrugged. "He is all right. My parents have some problems with their relationship. She has chosen to be sexually active with him, and they worry something could go wrong. They never had such a problem both being women and all. Being a princess leaves no room for mistakes sometimes. Fortunately for me I date people who are incapable of rendering such a mistake upon me or vice versa. If I were interested in men, my mothers would have impressed the importance of precautionary measures upon me above all else. We all worry about Victoria's choices to be so casually and intimately involved with him at such an age without serious commitment between them. She would never recover from it if she accidentally became pregnant. The country would not let her."

"I guess I could understand that. My faith taught me that it was special between two people who were married, but there were practical reasons as well. The idea of being a pregnant teen is not something I can even comprehend."

"Lucky for you I do not possess such talent to get you pregnant on accident," she joked.

Layla laughed a little. "Thankfully no but the idea of being married and pregnant someday is one I kind of look forward to. I always have wanted kids, even from a young age knew I wanted to be a mother."

"I think that role would suit you well. I can already see it, a bunch of blue-eyed towheaded angelic princesses running around the palace with you scurrying after them."

Layla's heart thumped hard at the statement. She had never imagined that but as Anastasia said it, she could picture it. The thought had never occurred to her that if she and Anastasia ever were to be married and have children that they would become part of the royal family. It was almost too much to comprehend in that moment, so she resolved to think about it at a later date and just enjoy the time they were sharing. Rubbing Anastasia's chest through her t-shirt, she curiously asked, "Do you ever think about how many kids you'd want to have?"

"Two would be the minimum requisite. You know the old saying of 'the heir and the spare,'" she joked. "After that, I would be open to as many as my wife wants. After all, she bears the burden of being pregnant, so I would cater to her desires on that one. I am determined to give my wife everything her heart desires. My mother does the same for my mom and rightfully so I think. My wife would deserve it for putting up with my life as it is."

"You do have an unusual life," she conceded. "I've been a part of it for just a few months and see how complicated it can be."

"It is what kept my mothers apart for so long before they finally got married. I do not want the same thing to happen to me. I want a woman who loves me as I am, the crowned princess and future queen of this country. There is nothing I can change about my role in life, and quite frankly I would not even consider doing so. I am proud to serve my country and hope I can do it even half as well as my mother."

"I think you will. You have a good heart, Stasia, and I think you genuinely want to help people."

Later that morning once they had finally gotten out of bed, dressed, and eaten breakfast, the group headed out to the stables for their riding excursion. The rest of the day was dedicated to seeing the countryside by horseback and enjoying each other's company. Layla immensely liked the other princesses after getting to know them even better that day, and it appeared as if the feeling was mutual by the way she and Anastasia weren't able to sneak off by themselves like they had originally intended. However, neither seemed to mind. She could see what her girlfriend was talking about earlier that morning with Victoria. The nineteen-year-old princess was far too involved with her boyfriend to really be bothered with her siblings that day. It seemed every time she looked their way, they were involved in an intimate moment together.

That evening after returning to the palace and having dinner with the other princesses, the couple retired to the library to discuss their latest Biblical readings, but they found it more difficult than usual to focus, instead finding themselves kissing and cuddling on one of the couches. Lying together in each other's arms and reclining on the sofa together, they were contentedly quiet. Anastasia felt it was the perfect way to end their day, just as they began, in each other's arms.

Most of day three at the country castle passed in a similar fashion as the previous one before the group headed back to the city. The first stop was to drop Jefferson off at his place and then take the three younger princesses back to the palace before heading back to Anastasia's home not too far away. The couple walked wrapped in each other's arm into the house where the estate manager, Lydia, was waiting on them along with the butler. Both of them smiled pleasantly at the princess and her guest.

"Good evening, Stasia, Ms. Stone. I hope you both had a pleasant trip into the country," Lydia greeted.

"We did. Thank you for asking. How were things here?"

"Uneventful." Turning to the blonde, she said, "Ms. Stone, should you need anything during your stay, please do not hesitate to ask for me. Stasia does not usually have company, so this is an exciting change."

"Thank you."

Looking back at the princess she asked, "Where would you like Ms. Stone's belongs be put when they are brought into the house?"

"Put them in the guest room next to mine for now."

She nodded as the butler went out to the car to carry out the heir's bidding. "As a last item of business, dinner will be ready shortly. If you would like to freshen up first, I would be happy to keep them from serving until you are ready to eat."

"Thank you, Lydia." Turning to Layla, Anastasia inquired, "Are you hungry yet?"

She nodded. "I'm ready to eat when you are."

Looking back at Lydia, Anastasia replied, "We shall be ready in about half an hour."

"Would you prefer dinner inside or out on the terrace?"

"Let us sit on the terrace," Anastasia said.

"Wonderful. I will let the kitchen staff know."

Holding each other's hand, the two women then headed upstairs behind the butler who was carrying their bags, but Anastasia waited until they were alone in the guestroom, to kiss her girlfriend. "I will be just next door taking a quick shower. I smell too much like the horses to be a proper dinner host. Please make yourself at home. You have a bathroom right through this door if you would like to use it. I will be with you again shortly."

"I will miss you while you are gone," the blonde teased with a smile.

Raising a red brow in her girlfriend's direction, the princess cracked a grin and audaciously replied, "Trust me. I will be thinking of you while I am gone."

At dinner that evening the two leisurely enjoyed eating and watching the waning sun while picking up their conversation from the previous night about the Biblical book they had been studying. They remained thoroughly involved in it well past dark when they finally moved into the den where they stayed until bedtime. Heading upstairs they changed in their respective rooms before settling down in Anastasia's bed. Cuddling closely together, they watched the news of the day on TV until a knock on the bedroom door interrupted their solace.

"Come in," Anastasia called.

The door opened, and Lydia began to step into the room when she paused at the sight of the two women in bed together. "Oh, I apologize, Stasia. I thought you were alone," she said quietly, quickly hiding her surprise and adopting a professional expression.

"It is fine. What is it?"

"Matthew Franks called earlier. The queens would like to have breakfast with you and Ms. Stone. Since Madeline said you did not have any conflicting appointments, he scheduled it for you all. I just wanted you to know I would be awaking you earlier than normal in the morning for that."

"Great. Thank you for letting us know. We were planning on spending most of the day over at the palace anyway. At what time do we need to be there?"

"Breakfast was scheduled for 8:00 due to an appointment the queen has at 9:00. Will waking you at 6:30 be a sufficient amount of time for you?"

"That would be just fine."

Lydia nodded before saying, "If that is all you need, I will be leaving for the night. The night staff is here and knows you have a guest."

"I think we are fine. Thank you. We will see you in the morning."

"Good night then, Stasia, Ms. Stone."

When she had closed the door, Layla mentioned, "Well, that was awkward."

Anastasia shook her head and shrugged. "She just has never seen me in bed with someone else. She will get used to it."

"But what she must think of me finding me like this," she mumbled.

"She thinks nothing of it. If she does, she knows anything other than keeping it to herself is unacceptable."

"Still, I don't want her to think poorly of me."

"It is her job not to judge but to just accept. She is a grandmotherly type who looks out for me, but she never passes judgments. She knows her own limitations. However, if it will make you feel more comfortable, I will talk to her in the morning."

"Would you? I can't stand the thought of someone close to you looking down on me."

"I promise she does not, but I will talk to her." Changing the subject she mentioned, "Since she is waking us up so early tomorrow, we should probably get some sleep."

The next morning both women were awakened by Lydia's gentle voice calling the heir's name. Sleepily Anastasia opened her eyes to find that her and Layla's limbs were thoroughly entangled as she spooned into the smaller woman's back. Extricating herself from the embrace, the princess sat up and stretched a bit.

"Thank you for the wake up call," she mumbled with a smile as she put her feet on the floor.

Lydia just nodded. "Your coffee will be right here for when you want it," she said, placing a silver tray on the dresser.

"Thank you, Lydia," she said rising.

Layla also managed to get out of bed. "I'm just going to go get dressed now," she said, not quite meeting eyes with either of them.

When they were alone, Anastasia looked at her estate manager. "Lydia, I would like to talk to you about something important."

"Of course. What is it?"

"Layla was a bit embarrassed with the way you saw us last night."

"I will admit I was surprised, but it is not my concern. Your escapades are well known, but you have never brought anyone into your home. I assure you the staff is prepared to deal with this change, though. Everyone knows what goes on here must remain within the grounds."

"I know that, and I have full confidence in all of you. It is just that Layla does not want you to have the wrong impression." She paused for a moment before admitting, "This is a bit difficult for me to explain in light of my history, but it is important for you to know that Layla and I are dating exclusively. However, as close as we have become, we are not involved in a sexual relationship."

"I hold no judgments, Stasia, regardless of what your relationship is."

"I know that, but she wanted you to know the truth. It is important to her that she is seen in the appropriate light."

"Very well. I understand. Am I to tell the staff the same?"

"Let us just play that by ear for now. While she is here, I would appreciate it if you were the only one to have interaction with us in our bedroom."

"Understood." She smiled at Anastasia commenting, "She seems like a lovely girl."

"She is," the princess replied with a smile of her own.

Once the couple was dressed, they headed over to the palace to have breakfast with the queens, who seemed happy to see them. "I hope you had a pleasant trip," Lauren said as they all sat.

"It was wonderful. I really enjoyed it," Layla replied.

"We are glad to hear it. What was your favorite part?" Alexa inquired as their meal began to be served.

"The landscape by far. It's so beautiful there. We rode in the hills for hours. It was just magnificent."

"And were our daughters well behaved?" Lauren inquired.

"We were," Anastasia assured.

"Save one," Alexa countered. "But we have already dealt with Victoria's unapproved visitor. Camille and Caroline seemed to have a wonderful time as well."

Changing the subject, Lauren inquired, "When does school begin for you again?"

"In just a couple of weeks."

"Are you looking forward to it?"

She nodded. "I am. The situation with my parents has become intolerable in many ways, so it'll be nice to be back on campus."

"How so?"

"They strongly disapprove of me having a relationship with a woman due to their religious beliefs, but moreover they said they would stop funding my schooling if I started dating one."

Lauren nodded. "That could definitely be problematic."

Layla nodded as well. "Now that Stasia and I are together, my future education is in danger. I dread what will happen if they find out about the two of us."

"Do not fear being without education. I believe no one should be denied a college education who wants one, and I would support you personally if I had to do so," Alexa offered.

"I greatly appreciate that, your majesty. Stasia has already promised me the same thing, and I am truly grateful to know that if it should come to that, I have support."

Looking at her daughter, Alexa asked, "Were you able to do any Biblical study while you were there?"

"We did some. We're in the process of discussing some of the minor prophets of the Old Testament right now."

"Stasia really is a quick learner, and she asks the most fascinating questions. I admit I'm not the best teacher she could possibly have on this subject," Layla added.

"Still, I have been enjoying our discussions anyway," the princess said, smiling at the woman sitting next to her.

When breakfast was complete, the two of them spent the rest of the day on the palace grounds touring the place and spending time with the rest of the royal family. Arriving back at Anastasia's residence that evening, Lydia was there to greet them as always. She asked about their day convivially and listened attentively as Layla discussed all that had happened.

However, as the two of them headed upstairs, Layla inquired, "Did you talk to her this morning like you promised?"

"Absolutely. I told her exactly what was going on between us, so she knew the truth."

"Did she have anything to say in response?"

"Just that she thought you were a lovely girl, and I had to agree with her whole-heartedly," she replied, slipping her arm around the blonde's waist as they walked.

Nodding her head, Layla said, "That makes me feel better. I guess having someone wake us up in the morning is just going to take some getting used to."

"You will. I have never had much privacy of which to speak, so I am used to it."

"That has to be so difficult."

"My entire life has been a matter of public record which makes me all that more thankful for the moments we do have."

"Me too."

The following morning Anastasia accompanied her girlfriend to the airport to see her off. As they stood next to an unmarked royal jet, they cuddled closely and kissed as the plan crew prepared for the flight. "I am going to miss you so much."

"I'm going to miss you, too, Stasia. When will we be able to see each other again?"

"I do not know. You said you start back to school in just a couple of weeks?" Layla nodded in response. "Do you need any help moving your belongings? I would be happy to assist you."

"We can't justify having your security detail helping me move my stuff. I couldn't explain that."

"Then what about just me? No security, just me."

"I'd love to have you come to campus, but are you sure that is wise?"

"I cannot go without seeing you. It is easier for me to come to you, and I am prepared to do whatever is necessary to see you as much as I can."

Layla nodded. "Very well. I'd love for you to help me."

"Wonderful. I will work on a plan then. Just let me know exactly when you want to go. I can pick you and your belongings up in Dallas and fly you to school."

"Or you can ride with me as I drive back. That's what I normally do. It takes about twelve hours."

"That might be more of a logistical challenge but a lot of fun. Let me see what I can do."

A few minutes later the plane was ready for the flight, so they said their final goodbyes. "I love you, Stasia. Thank you for this incredible few days."

"I love you, too. We will talk tonight, and I will see you very soon." Once they had shared their final kiss, Anastasia waited by her car until the airplane had taken off before returning to the palace.

Chapter VI: Duty Assumed and a Love Deferred

The following day Anastasia was sitting in a meeting with her mother and the Joint Chiefs of Staff discussing the escalating situation in the Middle East. America had been an ally to the fledging democracies of the Middle Eastern region of the world while trying their best to withhold judgments on more authoritarian societies. The nation was respected as a neutral mediator in most corners of the world, but as of late the disruption in the region was stressing its ability to remain nonpartisan. The U.S. had heavy interests in the natural resources in that area of the world, which were suddenly in jeopardy by the new military regime that had taken over Iran.

"Alexa, after continuing to weigh this carefully and examining our options, we still feel it is best to deploy a larger presence into the area as we discussed at the last meeting," the Chairman reported. "We have run the numbers you requested and consulted our counterparts in the Middle East, and we are prepared to deploy the Navy and Air Force but withhold ground troops at present unless an imminent danger to our interests presents itself. We have a list of the personnel we would like to deploy as soon as possible. It would take weeks for our carrier ships to move all these people and equipment. While continued escalation is certain between Iraq and Iran, we do not think war is imminent quite yet, but we would like to be prepared with appropriate military response if Iran does invade. We will be able to maintain our presence in the region by sending troops."

"You believe ground troops are unwarranted. What would be the strategy then if military response was required?"

"A series of air strikes originating from our ships. It is the safest way to respond while limiting potential casualties of our personnel. A ground response would only cause higher number of casualties given Iran's superior training in that region of the world. Bluntly put it is their home turf and we would be outmatched on foot if we tried to match their forces one to one."

"And the likelihood of them being able to sink one of our ships?"

"Highly improbable but not impossible. They have enough power to sink one of our ships, but the question would remain what they would do then. It would take significant resources to do that."

"Then what would we do? I think we would need some ground forces in one of our bases in the region in case it reached such a point."

"We already have some, Alexa, but we could increase that number. However, I must reiterate, if we engage on the ground we will need a three to one ratio in personnel, because our casualties will be high. They want to engage us on the ground, because they will have the upper hand. Our air personnel are highly superior."

"Understood. I agree with the approach, but I would want to shift ground resources as well. If something goes wrong, we will need people in position to respond quickly. Now let us review the personnel list," she said.

When the list was disseminated to the group, they began with the Air Force units and equipment to carry out their proposed operation. No one seemed to have too many concerns about it, so they moved onto the Navy personnel, which was a larger list, which was unsurprising given the amount of ships would be needed to transport the military personnel and equipment. They made it most of the way through the list before Anastasia noticed something that would cause her mother a problem.

When the Chairman came to the unit name in question, she preempted him by asking, "Why is my unit on this list?"

"Your unit is uniquely positioned to assist in this operation due to the kind of ship it maintains. You and your fellow commanding officers would bring good experience to the operation with marginal risk."

"Absolutely not," Alexa firmly said. "Stasia will not be going to the Persian Gulf. She is my daughter. That takes precedence over her military rank."

"Mother, why can I not go? The ship is enormous and will have hundreds of people on it. There is relatively little danger."

"I cannot allow you in harm's way even if that risk is nominal. You are the heir to the throne."

"I am a junior officer in the United State Navy. How can you expect my unit to go without me?"

"You could become a target and put your unit and those around you in more danger."

"My unit's morale will suffer if I am forced to stay behind. I am one of them, Mother."

The queen shook her head. "We must table this disagreement for now to get back to our discussion at hand, but we will continue this conversation."

"Yes, we most certainly will," the princess strongly stated.

For the rest of the meeting, neither the queen nor the princess discussed their feelings on the matter. Instead they attentively listened to the Joint Chiefs of Staff's recommendations. Alexa gave her approval to move ahead with the plan within the next thirty days and then dismissed everyone except her daughter.

When they were alone, Alexa said, "We have some other meetings today, and I must ask that you not overshadow those with your adamant feelings on this matter. I need you in the moment listening and participating, not arguing with me later tonight in your mind. I will hear you out on this matter. I give you my word, but for now I need you to stay with me. We very well may go to war, and our country has not been engaged in a war in generations. I do not take consideration of this lightly, and we both need to think of what is best for our military personnel, not our egos. We will discuss this in detail after dinner. Agreed?"

Anastasia nodded. She knew it was her mother's right to keep her from joining her unit as the Commander-in-Chief and the queen. She only hoped she could sway her to change her mind on the matter, but she knew her mother was right. She had to stay in the moment as the weight of such consideration went beyond either of their feelings.

That evening after dinner Alexa and Lauren adjourned into their favorite library with Anastasia to discuss her potentially impending departure to the Middle East. "Stasia, you must understand that allowing you to accompany your unit brings higher risk to the entire operation as a whole. Iran's new regime has made condescending remarks about our country, which I choose to let pass in an effort to secure the continued cooperation with our allies, but these remarks are deeply personal for our family. They call into question my capacity not only as a leader but also a wife and mother. They call into question your place as heir to the throne. It is the first time that I can recall in our nation's history that America has come under verbal attack for the life the monarchy leads."

"Meaning what exactly?"

Alexa looked at her wife and sighed. "This is difficult for me, Anastasia. I have never had to endure such public disdain, but I do so forbearingly, because we are the most powerful nation in the world, and reaction to such provocation could only be seen in a negative light. The new power of Iran would like to see America's monarchy crumble, because its leaders are women. However, the contempt goes even further than that. Not only have women ruled this country for generations, most of the women in power have been lesbians, except for my own mother. The world for the most part is an equitable place, but occasionally a more traditionalist regime rises,

giving way to hatred of anything outside of what they consider conventional. America stands for freedom, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom in choice and action. Our laws are aimed to cater to the equality of all people, but some parts of the world do not necessarily believe that is what is best."

"All the more reason I should fight."

Alexa shook her head. "I cannot allow my daughter, the crowned princess and a lesbian, go to the Middle East. They will make their mission to find you and destroy you, and I cannot even tempt them with such a notion."

Anastasia was quiet for a moment as she took in her mother's words. She knew her mother faced a difficult choice with respect to her, but she didn't agree with the decision she reached. For once her mother was acting out of character by placing her personal feelings above those of the country, and she knew beseeching her to reconsider the bounds of duty to the country would be the only way to change her opinion.

"Mother, I appreciate your desire to keep me safe from harm's way. A child could not ask for more from her parents. However, this is my country. I have a claim on her that only you and I can make. She belongs to me, and I love her beyond any measure of words. I am willing to sacrifice myself for her good even if it means being without me to guide her. That is our role as members of this family. Country has to always come first. I know in your heart you feel the same way. If the roles were reversed, you would stand and fight for her. Our forefather George Washington was a soldier for this country before he was ever king and fought for her bravely with no regard to his own safety. No one in our family's history would let her suffer, and you personally would not let her fail. If I do not fight for her when she needs me the most, how can I expect anyone else to?"

The queens looked at each other for a moment. "As much as it grieves me to say this, you know she is correct, Lex," Lauren softly said.

The queen sat there silently for another few minutes before quietly admitting, "I am terrified of letting you go. I cannot even comprehend how I would go on if I lost you."

"Think of all those military personnel you are sending. All of them are someone's children, and their parents must feel exactly like you. We must stand with them to show we believe in our cause, that we are willing to fight for our continued freedom."

With a resigned sigh, the queen nodded. "I am immensely proud of you, Anastasia. In this moment you have once again proved that you are incredibly wise and persuasive for someone of your age. You are the hope of this nation, and your willingness to be a benevolent sacrifice, if need be, for your country only illustrates the leader you already are. I absolutely loathe the thought of you being a target, but you have the superior presence of mind to understand duty in this moment."

"That means I can go?"

Alexa nodded. "As your Commander-in-Chief, I order you to go, even though as your mother I wish it did not have to be so. You will deploy with your unit and stay your entire twelve-month tour."

"Thank you for the opportunity to serve, Mother."

Alexa brought her daughter into a tight hug. "Stay safe and return to me."

With the decision to deploy made, Anastasia began to prepare to leave for her tour. She was scheduled to leave with her unit the week after she visited with Layla. She wasn't sure how her girlfriend was going to take the news of her deployment, so she put off telling her for a few days in order to try to find the best way. However, one night over the phone, Anastasia knew it could not be put off any longer.

When there was a pause in conversation between them, the princess sighed and said, "There is something important I need to talk to you about, but I have been putting it off."

"What is it?" Layla inquired, relaxing further into the pillows of her bed. She had turned out the light to talk to her girlfriend, because it always made her feel closer to her, almost as if they were in bed together.

"My unit has received deployment orders. I have to ship out for a year-long tour."

"Where are you going?" she asked in concern.

"I cannot discuss that."

"Well, when do you have to leave?"

"I am scheduled to deploy the week after you return to school."

"That's so soon. How long have you known about this, and why haven't you told me until now?"

"I did not want to upset you. Things are going so well between us, and I hate the idea of being away from you for even a day much less an entire year. My mother tried to order me to stay behind, but I know I have to go."

"Why? Why can't you just stay here? You're the princess," she reasoned.

"I know, and that is why I feel I should go. I am the future leader of this country, and I have to be willing to defend her. I believe it is my duty to do so."

Layla took a deep breath as she thought of the statement. She knew that her girlfriend felt strongly about her country and would be willing to make such a sacrifice. It was one of the reasons Layla loved her, her willingness to forgo the pleasures her position afforded her for the

greater good of her people. "I understand," she quietly said. "I hate it, but I know you well enough to know this is how you think it should be."

"Layla, I love you, and I do not like to think about the fact that people can grow apart in each other's absence. Twelve months is a long time to wait for someone. My heart is yours, but I will understand if time creates a distance between us that cannot be undone. You are a beautiful young woman with so much to give, and I know that in leaving to serve my country, I am leaving behind the best thing that happened to me. I know that there will be others who are interested in you the way I am, and as much as would hate to lose you..."

"Stop. Don't even finish that thought," the blonde whispered. "You won't lose me. I love you, too, Stasia, and I'm not going to go anywhere. I promise you that. Will we at least be able to talk on the phone and write each other?"

"Sometimes but not everyday like we do now. I just detest the fact that I will not be able to see your angelic face or feel your soft skin. I will long for your sweet kiss, but I am convinced this is the right thing for me to do."

"And I support you even though it's hard. We'll just have to make the most of our last days together for a while. I can't wait to see you on Sunday," she offered, trying to change the subject. She didn't really want to think about her girlfriend being away for so long just then.

"I know. I have missed you terribly already, and you have not even been gone that long. I long to see you. I cannot wait to run my fingers through your hair and kiss your soft lips."

Layla moaned a little at the thought. "That sounds nice. What else would you like to do when you see me?"

"There are so many thing I could say in response to that, none of which are entirely appropriate," the princess confessed.

"But you're thinking them anyway, so why not tell me?" she prompted. "After all, if you're going to be gone so long, I'd like to know what you'll be thinking about me while you're away," she teased lightly.

Anastasia sighed as she turned off the lights in her room and settled down in her bed. In the cover of darkness, it made it easier to contemplate confessing her more primal desires, but she still withheld at first. "I do not want to sound presumptuous by speaking of things that I know will not come to pass. You have told me your boundaries, and I respect them, even if my mind wanders passed them on occasion. Out of respect for you, I do not wish to impart my baser sexual desires upon you."

Her initial confession made Layla's heart speed up. The thought of her girlfriend thinking about them intimately excited her in a way she had not ever known before. She often found herself having fantasies of them together, even though the particulars of such had yet to be defined. She hoped the redhead could fill in some of the details for her. "Tell me anyway," she whispered.

"Are you sure? I do not wish to make you uncomfortable."

"I want to know what you dream about when you fantasize about me. I'll be able to think of you out there in the ocean somewhere, and I'll be able to know what you're thinking of me. Please tell me, Anastasia."

The tempting appeal disintegrated Anastasia's resolve. "Very well. If I were able to have my way, I would find the most convenient place to lay you out horizontally and cover your body with my own. I love the feeling of your body underneath mine with you holding onto me. Our short-clad legs would rub together, skin on skin, and my hands would wander over your clothed frame while we kissed deeply." She paused. The exhale on the other end of the phone made her realize Layla was interested in what she had said. "I would sneak my lips into the crook of your neck to kiss you and listen as you gave a little moan and shudder at the feeling. I like the feeling of you trembling in pleasure in my arms."

Layla did her best to imagine it as Anastasia said it. Quickly the image appeared before her with her eyes closed. "Then what?"

The princess wasn't sure how much further she should take them given the fact that they hadn't ventured past that in real life, but her girlfriend seemed curious to know. "My hands would slowly unbutton your blouse, so I could see your torso better. They would caress your bare sides and stomach lightly as my mouth ventured lower onto the slope of your left breast. Your hands would cup the back of my head and hold onto me as I kissed and tasted the skin."

Layla's heart began to thud rapidly at the thought. "Stasia," she whispered.

The sound of her name being called drove the princess to continue. "My hands would unclasp your bra and fill themselves with your warm flesh. I just know you would feel so incredibly soft."

A soft gasp ensued as Layla thought of those words. "I want you to touch me like that, Stasia," she whispered in confession.

The princess groaned at the admission. She wanted her girlfriend so much that she could hardly articulate it, but she tried her best to continue. "Slowly I would undress us both until our naked bodies touched all over. The heat of our skin as we rubbed against each other would only continue to rise as our legs tangled in each other's. Your arms would be clutching to my back as my mouth slowly devoured one of your breasts and then the other. Your hips would be rocking into mine as you cried out in pleasure." She paused, thinking she should stop there with the details, but then added, "I want you more than you could ever know, Layla."

"Then tell me," she pleaded breathlessly as the fantasy continued to unfold vividly in her mind.

"I want you to give yourself to me, so I can make you mine and mine alone. I want to be inside of you, feeling the warmth of your core clutching to me. I want to hear your delight and feel your body quiver as I slowly make love to you, and I want to be the only one who ever hears you

reach that pinnacle of pleasure. I would not stop until you were satisfied, and the whole time we made love I would tell you how much I loved you, how much I needed you, and how incredibly special you are to me," she professed, not knowing exactly how her girlfriend would respond but wanting her to know how she truly felt.

The blonde could see it in her mind better than she ever had. Anastasia was truly a gentle and accommodating lover. She moaned again. "You make it sound so perfect," she whispered.

"It would be with you," she softly said.

"Thank you for telling me. Now while we're apart we can have the same fantasy."

"It is my pleasure, Layla. I will always be here to give you everything you want and need. I promise. I would never leave you unfulfilled."

"It's getting late, so we should probably go to sleep. I wish you were here holding me right now."

"I would hold you all night after we made love just so you knew how much I loved you."

"I love you, Stasia. Good night," she softly said.

"Good night, sweetheart. I love you. See you soon."

On Sunday evening the princess arrived in Dallas with a small contingent of security. Layla had agreed to come see her after church that evening but had mentioned she had to spend her last night at home with her parents, to which Anastasia was amiable. She didn't want her girlfriend to have problems with her parents, so she made the decision to stay as far away from their house as possible. Their evening passed much too quickly, but they had plans to meet early in the morning for the twelve-hour drive to Layla's college.

Monday morning came very early for both women. They had agreed that in order for them to go largely unnoticed Anastasia would have to disguise herself a bit, so that day she wore a much more casual look than she normally would have in public. She dressed in a pair of long khaki shorts and a pressed Navy t-shirt with a Navy baseball cap covering most of her red hair. A pair of dark sunglasses hid her blue eyes, giving the impression that she was just another college-aged student, not the crowned princess. Layla had already packed her belongings in her own car and drove to their secret rendezvous spot, a rest stop along the highway just outside of town.

When the nondescript sedan pulled into the rest stop, Layla was already there, leaning against her car waiting. They pulled up next to her, and the princess got out of the backseat of her car. She smiled brightly at the blonde as she walked over to her. "Hello, beautiful," she greeted, slipping arms around her.

"Hi. Don't you look sexy. I like your outfit."

The princess leaned down to kiss her deeply. "Thank you. I hope my disguise meets your specifications. I am not used to being so casual, but I have tried to look the part of a college student."

She nodded. "No one would know it was you in passing. Having the three of them with us might tip someone off, though," she mentioned gesturing to her security team.

"They are staying in their own car and following us from a distance. I had to bring a few people for safety's sake. You know that. This was the minimum I could get away with, and they will be as unintrusive as possible. I want this visit to be as secretive as you."

Layla nodded, knowing they really had no other choice. "Okay. Do you want to drive the first shift, or do you want me to?"

"I can drive. Let us go," she suggested, dropping another kiss on her girlfriend's mouth before Layla rounded the car to the passenger's seat.

The rest of the day passed with the two of them in the car driving, talking, and listening to music. Anastasia did her best to maintain a low profile whenever they had to get out of the car and was successful in the endeavor as they drove through rural Arkansas and Tennessee. The princess was completely unaccustomed to the types of places they stopped for bathroom breaks and meals, but she gamely went along with her girlfriend's lead. Nevertheless, it was an education in the ways of life of areas of her country, which were drastically more rural to those she normally visited.

When they arrived to their destination, it was too late begin unpacking at the dorms, so they opted to just head to the hotel. The princess was used to only the finest accommodations, but she said nothing as she headed into the hotel near school, which appeared to be a frequent destination of business travelers. She kept her head low and carried her own bags as well as her girlfriend's to keep suspicions at bay as their group headed to the elevator.

Fortunately there was a suite available for the princess as well as three rooms for her security detail. The three men quickly settled on a rotation schedule for guarding the princess while the two women decided to settle into their room for the night. With the first guard decided, he knocked on the bedroom door and waited for an answer before relating the schedule to Anastasia before taking his place in the sitting area.

"Are they just going to stay out there all night?" Layla inquired when they were alone again.

She nodded. "Each one of them will take a turn staying up. They will probably just watch TV while the other two get some sleep. Then they'll change shifts, so each of them has a chance to get some rest. We intend to be up fairly early, so there are only about eight hours for which to account. That is nothing for them."

"What about tomorrow? How are they going to stay out of the way?"

"One of them will stay in your room, one at the car, and one will help us unload. It is the best they can do to secure the area without getting intrusive. I promise it will be fine."

The blonde nodded. "I suppose that is all they can do. My roommate will be moving in tomorrow as well. I do not wish her to be inhibited. That will not go over well."

"Of course she will not. I promise the men will not get in her way."

"Good because I told her I had a friend coming to help me move in, but I didn't tell her it was you. She's going to be a little surprised, I think."

"Tell me about this roommate."

"Her name's Hannah Winston, and she's my best friend."

"Have you told her about you yet?"

Layla shook her head. "No but I want to. I want to tell her about me, and if that goes well, I'd like to tell her about us," she hesitantly said.

"Look, Layla, it is vital to your peace of mind that no one know about us, because if the press finds out, your life as you know it will be over."

"I understand that, but she's my best friend, and I'd like to have someone to talk to about you," she said with a smile. "You can't expect me to not have someone I can talk to about you, especially with you leaving."

The princess nodded. "You have to be absolutely certain you can trust her. If you have any doubts at all, do not tell her. However, I understand you want to be able to talk to someone about this. I have my sisters, and you do not have anyone."

"I trust her, Stasia. If I didn't, I wouldn't live with her."

"All right. I am just trying to look out for your best interest here."

"And I appreciate that, but I think I know what I'm doing. I'm just going to tell her about me first and make sure it goes like I think it will."

The princess consulted her watch. "Fine. We should be getting to bed. We have an early start in the morning."

The women changed separately before getting into bed. As they lay in the dark curled up into each other, Layla said, "Thank you for coming with me. This is so much better than having my parents here."

"I am glad to hear that I out-rate your parents," she joked. "You did not tell them about seeing me, did you?"

"Most definitely not," she said turning in her girlfriend's arms. "I couldn't tell them that without risking everything. I wish they could understand how happy I am, but they don't care." Leaning in she kissed her gently. "I love you being here with me."

"And I love being with you. I am sorry about your parents, though."

In the morning the women were up early as expected. Each respected each other's privacy as they dressed for the day. Their first stop was a quick breakfast at a fast food restaurant. Anastasia took it in stride like she had the previous day, thinking of it as just an addition to her education. The five of them sat around the table drinking coffee and eating egg sandwiches until they were satisfied before heading off to the school.

Anastasia pulled her baseball cap tightly down on her head and adjusted her sunglasses as they got out of the car to help shield her identity before following Layla to the check-in area where the blonde could get her keys. No one seemed to notice the princess, or if they did, they ignored her being too busy with their own agendas. With keys in hand, Layla led her girlfriend and two security guards to her dorm room.

When Layla unlocked the door and stepped inside, the first thing Anastasia noticed was how hot it was. Her girlfriend immediately went to the air conditioner to turn it on and then opened a window. The princess took a minute to look at the small room. Her own closet at the palace was considerably larger.

"Two of you live in here?" she asked curiously, as she opened the closet door to find a small walk-in.

Layla nodded. "Granted it isn't a castle or palace. Come on. Let's get the stuff out of my car. I have other stuff in storage we need to get as well. Just leave the door open."

"Is that safe?" the princess asked.

"Of course. No one would steal anything. Besides don't I have my own guard," she joked.

Quickly the two women began to unload the blonde's car with the aid of one of the security team. Half way through they came back to find a spunky little blonde in the room who screamed in delight when she saw Layla. The two quickly hugged each other.

"It is so good to see you. Man, has it been a long summer," she greeted. "You never told me about your cute friend," she said gesturing at the security guard that had been stationed in the room.

Layla laughed as the two blondes continued to hug each other. "Must have slipped my mind. These are my other friends," she said pointing behind her. She introduced security first before saying, "And this is Anastasia Washington. Stasia, this is Hannah Winston."

The princess took off her sunglasses and hat before smiling at Layla's best friend. "Hello, Hannah."

Hannah opened her mouth to reply but nothing would come out for a moment as realization overcame her face. "You're the princess," she said as if no one else in the room knew as much.

Anastasia chuckled a little as she nodded. "Yes, I am."

"Layla, you forgot to mention that you made friends with the princess over the summer," Hannah chastised.

"Surprise," she said meekly.

"To say the least."

"Layla and I met early in the summer, and she was kind enough to let me tag along with her. I am being deployed with my unit on a twelve-month tour, and she obliged me in a request to escape the palace for a few days before I had to leave," the princess explained.

"Well, it is an honor to meet you, your highness," she said with a small bow.

Anastasia waved the formality off. "It is a pleasure to meet a friend of Layla's. She speaks highly of this school, so I was pleased to have an opportunity to visit."

Turning to her friend again, she said, "You will have to tell me all about how you two met a little later. We have to get this unpacking finished. Are you going to the storage unit later?"

Layla nodded. "We were going to go after we finished with my car."

"We would be glad to help you unload," Anastasia offered.

"Thank you. My parents are here, but I'd love the extra help. It'll give me more time to spend with them before they have to leave tomorrow."

"Perhaps we could all have dinner," the princess suggested.

"That would be a great honor, your highness. I'm sure my parents would love to meet you."

"Something casual of course since we'll hardly be suitable to be seen when we're finished unloading today," Layla amended.

Anastasia smiled obligingly. "Whatever is most convenient for the group. There is no need to be formal on my account. Besides this visit is supposed to be under the radar. I would prefer the press not know about this."

"Great. It's settled then," Layla said.

For the rest of the day, Anastasia helped Layla and Hannah with unpacking their belongings. Even though she was unaccustomed to physical labor, she enjoyed the change of being somewhat anonymous in her task. The exercise felt good, and she was glad to be spending time with her girlfriend. It was also a pleasure to meet Layla's roommate and see where Layla would be while she was at sea. It would make picturing her in her surroundings much easier.

That night as Layla had dictated the entire group when out to dinner. They took the opportunity to visit one of Layla's favorite restaurants near school, which had a deck on which they could sit. Hannah and her parents seemed excited at the princess's presence but managed to reign in it enough that she went largely unnoticed by the other patrons of the place. After dinner Hannah went back to the hotel with her parents while Layla and Anastasia retired to their own hotel suite. Once again the security team quickly settled on a schedule for the rest of the night while the women closed themselves in the privacy of their room.

"I feel disgusting after all that moving," Layla said. "I definitely need a shower."

"I do as well. You can go first if you would like."

"Thanks. I will just be a little bit."

Each of them showered to wash the dirt of the day away before settling down in bed with the TV. Quietness surrounded them for a while as they cuddled together, but finally Anastasia said, "I really loathe the idea of leaving here in the morning."

The blonde nodded. "I know. I wish you didn't have to go either. It's going to be so hard not seeing you for a year. It seems unbearable."

"I know, but I will try to call and email as much as I can."

"It's not the same."

"No, it certainly is not but it is the best we can do."

Looking at each other, Layla caressed her girlfriend's face. "I don't want you to go. I couldn't bear it if something happened to you, and you didn't return to me."

"Everything will be fine. I promise."

The smaller woman nodded before leaning to gently kiss her girlfriend's lips gently. Curving her arms more tightly around her, Anastasia pulled Layla closer as the kiss deepened. Both of them

moaned as their bodies pressed more firmly together, their shorts-clad legs entangling. The princess had to feel more, as she had described on the phone a few days previous, especially since Layla had seemed so amiable to the idea then, so slowly she rolled her girlfriend onto her back. Layla moaned again at the feeling of her girlfriend's body on top of her own. She hadn't stopped thinking about what had transpired on the phone, and she immediately knew this was the last chance she had to feel some of what her girlfriend had described. Deciding to take the initiative, she slipped her hands beneath Anastasia's t-shirt onto the heir's bare back.

Anastasia groaned as she felt short blunt nails lightly clinging to her. It was something she had thought about many times but never experienced with Layla, and it felt incredibly good just then. Feeling safe to reciprocate, her hands slid under the hem of her girlfriend's top to her naked sides as her lips traveled down into her neck.

"Oh, Stasia," she whispered as electric pulses shot through her beginning where Anastasia's hands caressed her and fanning outward along her extremities.

"You taste so good," she replied, licking and nipping the pulse that started to grow rapidly faster under her mouth. Meanwhile, her hands began to caress her girlfriend all over. The left curved around her back while the right took in a hip before heading up toward the edge of her girlfriend's left breast.

When the princess's hand gently cupped it, Layla softly cried out as her body arched upward further into the touch. She had never been touched there, but the large tender hand continued to spread warmth through her body. "Anastasia," she called as her breathing began to turn uneven.

"I have you. You are safe, Layla. Just hold onto me and let me make you feel good."

Their mouths met again with rising fervor as Layla gripped tighter to her girlfriend's frame. Her head was spinning at the combined stimulus of lips and hands in new places. Wanting to be even closer, she began to push Anastasia's t-shirt up. She moaned when the skin of their stomachs brushed, but she wanted even more.

Sensing it, Anastasia rose up enough to remove her own shirt. She could see blue eyes taking in the visual offering before Layla's hands pulled her close once again. Several moments later Anastasia had worked the blonde's top up over her breasts and once again had to rise up enough to assist her with it. However, she could tell that Layla was a little apprehensive being exposed.

Smiling gently and kissing her softly on the lips, Anastasia confessed, "You are so beautiful. I love you so much, Layla."

"I love you, too, Anastasia," she replied as their mouths met once again in a deeper kiss.

Both women groaned as their half-naked bodies meshed together. It was better than either had imagined in their fantasies. Taking her time, Anastasia kissed along the blonde's torso starting along the slopes of her chest before moving between her breasts. Layla moaned with pleasure but also some disappointment when they were bypassed in favor of her stomach. Anastasia grinned

into the skin, as she tasted it, indulging in the softness of it under her hands and mouth. She could feel the blonde's hips rocking against her, and the heat and wetness that emanated from between Layla's thighs assured her that her girlfriend was enjoying her touch. Anastasia lingered on her left hip, taking in the curve of it under her lips before slowly traversing up her side to underneath of her left breast.

Layla cried out as her girlfriend's mouth explored the underside for a moment before withdrawing, pulling another tortured groan from her. Anastasia chuckled a little as her mouth moved to the other side and explored down to her right hip before settling on her stomach again. "Anastasia, please," she called, cradling the redhead to her body more tightly.

The princess risked looking up at Layla. Her girlfriend's eyes were closed and her mouth open as she panted irregularly. Her chest had taken on a reddish hue that she hadn't seen before but took for arousal, and the pale tips of Layla's breasts stood rigid in rigid response to Anastasia's caresses. Knowing exactly what Layla wanted, Anastasia obliged with great joy. She hovered over the crest of her left breast for a moment before kissing it sweetly, which caused a cry. Feeling a hand in her hair pulling her downward, the princess did as directed, taking it into her mouth.

"Oh God!" Layla screamed. Her hips responded with a faster rhythm. The princess could feel a flood of desire coating her stomach, even through her girlfriend's sleeping shorts. Anastasia alternated her touches, kissing and stroking her skin as Layla began to ascend to the peak of pleasure. She could feel the blonde's legs shifting against the sheets as they rubbed against her own. "Anastasia! God!"

"I have you, Layla. My God, you are beautiful like this."

Several minutes passed as they moved against each other. Anastasia could feel the tension build in Layla's thighs as they clung to her. She knew the signs well enough to know her girlfriend was on the verge of release, but suddenly she could feel Layla's body tense in another way. "Stasia, please stop," she pleaded through her panting.

Immediately the redhead did as asked and pulled away, but she was confused. Looking into blue eyes, she asked in concern, "What is the matter? Did I hurt you? Are you all right?"

Layla took gasping breaths as she shook her head. "It's just too much too fast," she panted. "Oh God," she moaned, putting her hand on her forehead. Blue eyes connected with Anastasia's. "I don't know if I can take this."

"I want you more than you could ever know, but I will not force you, Layla. I would never want you to feel conflicted," the princess gasped, gulping for air to try to reign in her own feelings a little.

"I just can't," she said again, with a groan of frustration. "And if we don't stop now, I'm afraid I'm going to end up regretting this. I'm so sorry I started this."

"No. There is no need to apologize. I would never want you to regret anything that happened between us. I am so sorry if it felt like I was pressuring you."

Layla shook her head. Reaching up to her girlfriend's face, she stroked her cheek for a moment before tucking some red hair behind her ear. "It didn't feel like you were. I wanted this as much as you did, and it felt so good up until my morals decided to surface," she said with a soft smile.

Kissing Layla on the inner wrist, Anastasia did her best to settle her own raging hormones to reassure the woman she loved. "I am glad to know that up until then you were enjoying yourself."

She nodded and blushed a little. "I was. I suppose we'll just have to leave the rest. It'll give us something to think about while you're gone," she said, hoping that her girlfriend could live with that small consolation.

Rolling off of Layla and onto her side, the princess curved her arms tightly around the blonde. "Believe me when I tell you that I will," she teased with a smile.

Curling further into the embrace, Layla said, "I don't want this night to ever end."

"Me neither but we really should get some sleep. You have a busy day tomorrow."

"Could we sleep like this tonight? That way I get to at least feel your skin against mine all night long."

"Of course. I would love that."

They exchanged a gentle kiss. "I love you, Anastasia, and nothing will ever change that."

"I love you, too, Layla. Sweet dreams."

When Hannah returned to the dorms late that next morning from the hotel where she had stayed with her parents the night before, Layla was on her bed crying. With instant concern, her friend came to her and plopped down beside her on the bed. "Layla, what's the matter?"

"She's gone," she cried.

"Anastasia left?"

Layla nodded. "I'm not going to see her for a year. I don't know if I can go on that long without her."

"What do you mean?" Hannah asked in confusion. Even though she knew Layla was a person of profound emotion, she had never seen her friend that distraught over friends leaving before. She didn't know why the princess would suddenly be an exception.

Knowing it would be difficult to explain to her best friend without telling her the entire story, she tried to regain her composure a little bit. "There's something important I've been wanting to tell you all summer, but I didn't want to do it over the phone. I'm afraid you might be upset. I couldn't take it if you were as upset with me as my parents were."

"That wouldn't be possible. Your parents are totally strict. They get upset at the slightest stuff sometimes."

"That's true," she conceded with a roll of her eyes. "I think I know how you're going to react, but I don't know for sure."

"Just tell me. I'm your best friend. There is nothing you could say that would upset me. I can tell something's bothering you, and you won't feel better until you tell me."

Layla nodded. Wiping at her eyes, she sat up on her bed, causing Hannah to do the same. Sitting side by side, they were silent for a moment. "I've been struggling with something for a long time, but I've finally come to peace with it. However, when I told my parents, they flipped out on me. Please promise me you won't do the same."

"I promise. I'm sure it's not that big of a deal."

"Actually they think it is. You see, I, uh, I'm..." She faltered for a moment. She couldn't take another negative reaction from someone she loved.

Hannah took hold of her friend's hand. "Layla, I love you. You're like a sister to me. You can tell me anything," she assured seeing her hesitation.

"I told them I was gay," she quietly admitted.

"That's it?" Hannah inquired.

"What do you mean 'That's it?'"

"I thought you were going to tell me something I didn't already know," she said with a smile.

"You know?"

"Of course I know. I'm your best friend. It became obvious last year. You may never have said anything, but we all know."

"Who knows?"

"All of us, Layla. We discussed it on several occasions when you didn't take interest in any of the cutest guys on campus, even though they were interested in you. We're all fine with it. We just didn't want to confront you in case you hadn't figured it out yet. Your parents lost it, didn't they?"

She nodded. "Yeah. They were extremely upset. They think I'm going to hell, and they threatened to pull my funding for school if I acted on it."

"I don't believe that, and neither do any of your friends. We love you as you are. We'll just have to start looking for good Christian lesbians for you, but that might be harder to come by in these parts," she teased, pulling her friend into a hug. "Seriously, we accept you just as you are."

"Thank you. I was pretty sure you would, but I was just scared after what happened with my parents."

"Forget them. What do they know? Our faith accepts you, even if theirs doesn't." A moment passed between them as they just hugged. "Why you were crying about Anastasia? Do you have a crush on the princess?" she teased. With a flush Layla nodded. "At least you have good taste. She's a catch."

"But it's a little more serious than that," she confessed. "I'm in love with her, and now she's gone for the next year on deployment. I don't think I'll be able to live without her for that long."

"Does she know how you feel?" Layla nodded. "Does she feel the same?" Hannah inquired curiously.

"She says she does."

"You mean to tell me that the princess told you that she was in love with you?"

"Yeah."

"Oh my God! This is huge!"

"Yes it is, but you can't tell anyone. You have to promise me. Anastasia said if I told anyone the media would hound me, and I wouldn't be able to have a life. They would follow me everywhere I went, and I couldn't take that, especially since she's not even here."

Hannah nodded. "She's right. They wouldn't leave you alone. I've seen what they do to her in the papers. Every little move is documented. I wouldn't want that for you."

"Then you cannot tell a soul. Not your parents, not our friends, nobody."

Hannah nodded. "Absolutely. You have my word. I won't tell anyone."

"Thank you. It's a relief to have someone to talk to about it. I've had to keep this to myself all summer."

With a smile Hannah chuckled. "I can't believe it. You and the princess. Have you two... you know?"

Layla blushed at the question. "No. What kind of girl do you think I've become over the summer? I still have my values."

"She just has a bit of a reputation as a womanizer. She doesn't strike me as the type to wait is all."

"Well, I've made it clear that I'm not available for that, and she said she respected that decision. So far she hasn't pressed for it."

Hannah smiled again. "I still can't believe it. How far have things progressed then between you?"

"We sleep in the same bed and have made out. Last night we went further than we ever have."

"Give me the dirt. Tell me she's good at least," her best friend teased with a chuckle.

Layla laughed and blushed. "She's a fantastic kisser, and her hands touch me so perfectly. I'll admit last night it could have been so easy to give in. She's just so-I'm not even sure I can describe it. She just makes me feel so alive in a way I've never felt before. She is better than any fantasy I've ever had," she admitted with a smile and sigh. "For the first time I know what it feels like to want to be with someone that way, but I will not give way on this issue. She knows I think sex should be reserved for marriage. I think I might just go insane in the meantime, though."

"I'm so happy for you, Layla. Too bad she doesn't have any brothers," Hannah joked after a moment.

Both girls laughed. "Thanks for being so understanding. You don't know how much that means to me."

"I'm just glad you've found someone. You deserve that, Layla. You're such a good person, and you deserve happiness. I just hope she knows how lucky she is."

Chapter VII: Personal Savior

Six months passed with Anastasia being on tour. Not a day went by without the royal family missing one of their own, but the queen received daily updates about the troops assuring her that her eldest daughter was doing as well as expected under the circumstances. However, the tensions in the area were escalating, and the queen did worry about Anastasia being involved in an altercation. She just hoped it would not happen, not only for her daughter's sake but also for the sake of all the men and women she had sent overseas to assure America's interests.

One night though Alexa was roused from sleep by the insistently ringing phone. Sitting up in bed, she was disoriented by the sound. "Make it stop, Lex," Lauren grumbled.

Picking up the phone, the queen whispered sleepily, "Hello."

"Your majesty, I am terribly sorry to wake you at this hour. We have an emergency," the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff formally said.

"What is it?" she inquired, knowing whatever it was had to be serious if she was being awakened in the middle of the night.

"Some of our ships in the Persian Gulf have been attacked by Iran, and they were able to sink one. The Joint Chiefs of Staff are headed to the palace at this very moment for an emergency meeting."

"Very well. I will meet you in the Blue Room," she said, already rising from bed. Her first thought immediately turned to Anastasia, but she didn't ask about her just then. Instead she hung up the phone and rushed to the bathroom to dress. She didn't even bother trying to find the most appropriate thing to wear. Instead she just pulled on whatever was closest, which were a pair of sweatpants she wore to workout and a Navy sweatshirt.

By the time she had returned to the bedroom, Lauren was awake. "What is going on?"

"Iran attacked us in the Persian Gulf," she said quickly.

"Oh no. Was Stasia hurt?" she asked frantically.

"I have no idea. I am headed to the Blue Room for a briefing. You are welcome to join me."

Lauren had never joined her wife in any military meetings, and as much as she wanted to then, she knew she would not be helpful and in fact could be a hindrance. "I do not wish to be in the way."

"Well, I will let you know as soon as I find anything out about Stasia," she promised.

"Please do. I will not sleep until then."

Coming to the redhead, Alexa kissed her on the forehead. "I am sure she is safe," she tried to assure. Not even waiting for a response, she rushed from the room.

She was the first to arrive in the Blue Room and paced anxiously as the senior members of the military filtered into the room in various states of dress minutes later. No one had managed to put on their uniform given the hour, all of them opting for outfits similar to the queen's.

"What is going on?" she inquired nervously, forgoing all ceremony. "Are our personnel safe? What kind of damage did Iran inflict upon us?"

"I just received word that it was one of our destroyers that sunk," the Chairman said.

Anastasia calmed a little, knowing her daughter was on an aircraft carrier. "What are our casualties?"

"Apparently most of the personnel abandoned ship before it went down. They had to be rescued from the water by other ships in close proximity, namely the USS Hancock." That was Anastasia's ship. "The Hancock came under enemy fire as well and sustained losses to some of our aircraft but was able to fend off the attack."

"I do not care about weapons or equipment right now. I want to know what our injuries and casualties are, and I want to know now," she growled.

"We do not know yet. The ships are assessing personnel now and will be calling me as soon as they coordinate their numbers. The estimate thus far is about 100 injuries and casualties combined, but it is just an estimate, your majesty. As I said, most of the crew managed to escape into the water. There was gunfire into the water by Iran, so there could have been casualties there as well." He paused for a moment before adding, "I have specifically inquired about the status of Princess Anastasia."

The queen ignored the comment, even though she felt anxiety for her daughter's safety. "How did the strike happen?"

"It was an air attack. They used long-range missiles from the ground and had unmanned aircrafts drop bombs and gunfire on the targets. We severely underestimated their air strength."

"I would say so, and now I have dead sailors!" she yelled.

"With all due respect, your majesty, this is war," he stated.

She glared at him. "My daughter is out there!" she screamed. "Everyone of those people is someone's child! This is not a justifiable cost of war! Their deaths are on me as the Commander-in-Chief! And they are on all of you!" she ranted pointing her finger around the room. "We must protect our soldiers above all else! A miscalculation such as this is unacceptable!"

The room fell silent for several moments as she continued pace in anger, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff just watched her. Suddenly the phone on the side table began to ring. Immediately the Chairman answered it. No one spoke as he listened to the caller on the other end. "Are you absolutely certain?" he inquired toward the end of the brief conversation. "Very well. Thank you."

"Well?" Alexa asked.

"Fifty confirmed dead from what they pulled out of the water so far. Another forty or so injured that were in the water or on the Hancock." He paused and took a deep breath. "Princess Anastasia..."

"Yes?" the queen inquired, sensing his hesitation.

"She has been gravely injured. She is on an immediate transport to the Air Force base hospital in Iraq with several other sailors."

"How was she hurt?"

"It is not exactly certain yet. The officer of the watch on the Hancock said she had gone onto the deck to help with the rescue effort of those in the water. According to the ship's doctor, she was bleeding profusely and was unconscious upon transport. He reported her injuries as machinegun fire to her legs and shrapnel to her torso."

"Someone call Lauren and get her in here," she whispered, dropping into a chair and covering her face with one hand. "And someone call Madeline Sumner. I need a phone number for a Layla Stone," she added.

It was mere moments before the redheaded queen arrived. She was still dressed in her pajamas with a robe when she rushed into the room. Coming to where Alexa was slouched in the chair, she dropped to her knees in front of her. "What is it, Lex? Is it Anastasia?"

The queen nodded. "Our daughter has been hurt badly. She is on her way to the base hospital in Iraq."

"We must go to her, Lex. There is not a moment to lose."

The queen nodded. Looking at the Joint Chiefs of Staff, she inquired, "Can we safely get to Iraq right now?"

The Chairman nodded. "You would be perfectly safe to fly through Europe and over the Mediterranean. You should be able to be at the base in Iraq within twenty-four hours."

"We must go. Our daughter needs us," Lauren said.

Alexa nodded. "We will. Wake up the girls and let them know what is going on. I have a call into Madeline Sumner to contact Layla. She would want to know about Anastasia."

Lauren nodded. Kissing her wife on the cheek, she rushed from the room quickly. The queen looked at her senior military officers. "Must I declare war on Iran?" she asked seriously. "Putting the issue of my daughter aside, how do we respond?"

"We can defeat them, but the question is at what cost. What do we do once we defeat the regime?"

"We worked well enough with the old one. Would it be possible to reinstall them?"

"Many of the old regime's senior officers were killed in the coup, but there are probably enough left to sustain a temporary government."

"We have to have a plan. We cannot just annihilate them and leave them to their own devices. Think quickly," she said as the phone once again began to ring. This time it was Madeline Sumner.

"Your majesty, you wished to speak with me," she said with a yawn.

"Yes, Madeline. I need to contact Layla Stone. Anastasia has been hurt in an air raid on her ship."

"Oh no. Is Anastasia going to be all right?"

"We have no idea, but I know she would want Layla to know what was going on. Could you call her please and then put me through?"

"With all due respect, your majesty, perhaps it would be better if I called her. She is used to hearing from me. She may overact if you call. It is not everyday the queen calls you on the phone."

"You are correct. I do not wish to inflame the situation. All right. Please call her now and then call me back here to let me know how it went. Lauren and I are going to Iraq to be with Anastasia."

"Yes, your majesty. I will call you back shortly."

Down in Tennessee the phone awakened Layla and her roommate. "Who in the world would be calling at this hour?" the blonde grumbled, picking up her cell phone from her nightstand. She was completely confused when she saw a number to the palace, because she had not received one from there since Anastasia had gone on her tour. "Hello," she whispered cautiously.

"Hello, Layla. This is Madeline Sumner. I am sorry to be disturbing you at such an hour. Her Majesty Queen Alexa asked me to call you on her behalf."

"Why? Is something the matter?" immediately she asked, sitting up in her bed and clicking on the light. She had no idea what the queen would want from her.

"I am sorry, Layla. I regret to inform you that Anastasia's ship came under attack a few hours ago. This princess has been critically injured. Her majesty wanted me to relay this news to you on her behalf, as she knows that you and Anastasia are in a relationship."

"Oh, God!" she exclaimed in panic. "Will she be all right? What happened? Where was she injured?" She saw her roommate sit up at the rise of her voice and look at her with concern.

"I do not know anything. The queen did not give me any details except that Anastasia was being transported to one of our military hospitals on one of our bases and that she and Queen Lauren will be leaving immediately to see her."

"I have to see her! Please, Maddy, get me to her," she begged.

"If you would like, I can make a request of the queen."

"Please! I must see her! She means everything to me! She has to let me see her! I can't lose her, Maddy," she hysterically said.

"I am so sorry, Layla. I do understand, but I will have to ask her majesty. Will you be available to speak again in a little bit?"

"Of course. I won't be able to sleep now until I know for myself that she is all right," she whispered as she started to cry. Without a word Hannah came to her bed and slid onto it. She put her arms around her best friend in silent support.

"Very well. Let me see if I can find out more. I will call you back as soon as I am able."

"What's happened?" Hannah softly asked when Layla ended the call.

"Stasia was critically injured. She doesn't know anymore than that, but Queen Alexa asked her to call me. God, this must be serious if they called me," she cried.

Hannah nodded and pulled her friend closer. "I'm sorry, Layla. I wish there was something I could do. She's in God's hands now. You have to believe that even though it's hard. We just have to pray for her."

The blonde cried as she curled into her best friend for further support. She was terrified for her girlfriend, and the not knowing was excruciating. "Pray with me," she whispered.

"Of course," Hannah softly replied, taking her friend's hand.

When Madeline rang the queen back on the number she had requested, the queen and her staff were in a heated debate over what to do. "Madeline, talk to Lauren. I cannot speak now," Alexa said, handing the phone off to her wife, who had come back into the room just a moment prior.

"Madeline, it is Lauren."

"Your highness, I spoke to Layla. She is terribly concerned about Anastasia. She would like to see her as soon as possible. She is practically beside herself with worry."

"Of course she would and understandably so, but I am unable to authorize that. Alexa would have to allow her to come onto the base, and I am sure there are many security measures. Alexa is really not in the position to be weighing that request. We will have to get back to Layla. Call her back and let her know that we will let her know as soon as possible."

"Yes, your highness. Is there any other information I can pass on to her? She wants to know how she was injured."

"They do not know exactly yet. All we know is that she was came under fire on the ship with other personnel and sustained injuries to her legs and torso. The doctor believes it to be

machinegun fire and shrapnel, but that has not been confirmed. Assure her that as soon as we know things we will pass them on to her."

"Yes, your highness."

"And please stay on call. It is only a matter of time before this reaches the media, and we will need all staff to respond to inquiries."

"Yes, of course, your highness."

Across the room, the queen was still pacing and rubbing her temples as she spoke to her officers. "All right. I guess I am left with no other choice but to declare war on Iran. I will do so immediately. Are our Air Force and Navy in a position to continue bombing?"

"Absolutely. They fought off the attack and can continue to send missiles and bombs deeper into Iran if that is what you wish."

"Specific regime targets only, though. Limit civilian casualties at every possible turn. The people are not our enemy, just the government. Get our ground troops ready but do not deploy them yet. Let us see if we can take care of this with our Navy and Air Force first."

"Yes, your majesty."

Looking at her wife, she inquired, "What did Madeline say?"

"Layla wants to see Anastasia immediately."

"I thought that might be the case. I cannot allow her into Iraq or onto the base right now. It is too dangerous, as we are at war, and she is only a civilian. Once we know Anastasia is stable and our forces are secure, then I will consider it. Are our daughters going to Iraq with us?"

Lauren shook her head. "They are safer here. They have their own obligations. Besides you are right. It is best to know that Anastasia is stable and our troops are secure before allowing more heirs to the throne anywhere near the combat zone."

"Agreed. Get someone to pack some belongings for us. We will be leaving within the hour. I have an press conference to give." Turning to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, she said, "Everyone come with me."

Lauren watched the military staff leave before rushing off to find palace staff to fulfill the queen's request. Then she called Madeline again to relay that Layla's request had been denied for the time being, as she knew it would only be fair to the blonde to let her know as soon as possible. Alexa in the meantime marched down to the pressroom with her staff closely behind. There were only a handful of reporters given the time of night, as there always were in case pressing news broke during off-hours. All of them looked surprised and stood up for her when Alexa marched into the room and up to the podium without so much as an introduction.

"Is the feed running?" she inquired seriously.

"Yes, your majesty."

Without any pretense she began to speak without any notes. "My fellow Americans, it is approximately 3:30 in the morning Eastern Standard Time. The Joint Chiefs of Staff has just informed me that Iran has attacked our peacekeeping ships in the Persian Gulf. This attack of terror was unprovoked by our people. One of our ships was sunk and a rescue effort to save the lives of its crew was undertaken immediately. While there were casualties and injuries, the exact numbers are unknown at this time. As the sovereign of America, I am faced with the difficult decision of whether or not to respond to such a provocation. After consultation with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, it has become apparent that a military response is a necessary course of action. Therefore, I am officially declaring war with Iran and striking back with a military response to end the regime that caused harm and destruction to our people. Our country has not been engaged in a war in generations, and this is not a matter I take lightly. I can assure you that all alternatives have been weighed but ultimately discarded in lieu of this course. It is my goal to ensure the safety of all our citizens regardless of where they are in the world, and I will make certain that once again our people are safe. May God bless our country and keep watch over our troops. Good night."

When the announcement had been made and they had left the pressroom, she turned to her staff. "I will be going to Iraq immediately and will be on the base within twenty-four hours. Let us try to finish this by the time I arrive."

"Yes, your majesty."

Layla and Hannah were still sitting on the bed when Layla's cell phone began to ring again. She knew it was Madeline just by the number. "Maddy, what did she say?"

"Hello, Layla. I spoke to her highness on your behalf, because her majesty was otherwise engaged at present. Her majesty has denied your request for now. She has officially declared war with Iran, and as a civilian she will not allow you to go to a military base located in the middle of a war zone. Her highness wanted me to assure you that she and her majesty will be going, so Anastasia will not be alone."

"We're at war with Iran? When did this happen?"

"Her majesty just declared it a few minutes ago via the media."

"So that means Stasia is in the Middle East somewhere?"

"I cannot disclose the location of any military personnel, even the princess. I am sorry, Layla. Queen Alexa does not wish for you to be endangered in anyway. Her other daughters are staying behind as well. I promise you I will keep you informed of any developments at every available opportunity. I must implore you not to speak to anyone on this subject yet. The queen did not say anything about Anastasia's condition in her declaration a few minutes ago. Eventually the details

will come to light, but for now she does not want the public to get even more concerned. With Anastasia being first in line to the throne, there are potential ramifications for this country when this news breaks, and her majesty will deem when it is appropriate to tell the people."

"Of course. I understand."

"You have my number, so please call me anytime you need. I will update you as soon as I know anything further. I am truly sorry for what you must be feeling at the moment, but you must have patience while her majesty takes steps to defend our country. With the Washingtons country must always come first even before family. You must understand this."

"I do. It doesn't make it any easier, but I do," she conceded.

"Very well. I will be heading to the palace shortly to get an earlier start than usual on my day, so please feel free to call me if you need to."

"Thank you, Maddy. I appreciate that."

When the call ended, Hannah asked, "What did she have to say?"

"The queen just declared war on Iran. Turn on the TV, will you?"

Together the two of them watched the news. Seeing the queen's announcement, Hannah inquired, "I take it she was in the Persian Gulf?"

"They wouldn't tell me exactly where she was, but it makes sense. They told me I couldn't say anything to anyone about Anastasia. No one knows yet, and they don't want that to be leaked to the media. We just have to keep it to ourselves for now."

Hannah nodded and curved her arms around her friend again. "Everything is going to be okay," she softly assured.

"I hope so."

The hours it took to get to the base in Iraq were filled with quiet tension between Alexa and Lauren. Neither spoke about their daughter even though it was all either was truly thinking about as they rode on one of the royal jets to the base. Alexa's heart was heavy with the knowledge that she had allowed one of her beloved children to go into a potential war zone. In hindsight it seemed foolhardy to acquiesce to her daughter's fierce will. Had she even truly thought this would have happened, she never would have let her leave the country. She knew if anything happened to Anastasia, she would bear the burden of guilt for as long as she lived.

For Lauren her thoughts ran to the conversation she and her wife had with Anastasia on the subject of her deployment. When the queen had needed her support in restricting their daughter from going, she had sided with her child, which had swayed the queen in her final decision. She wondered if she had not done so if Anastasia would be in the position in which she found herself.

She knew Alexa well enough to know she felt total responsibility for what had happened, and it pained her to think her wife suffered the weight of that alone in silence.

When the plane finally arrived to the base, both women were exhausted from not sleeping, but they forwent the offer to rest in order to see their daughter immediately. As they walked through the base toward the hospital no one spoke to them, but every officer stood at attention and saluted Alexa as she passed. Lauren saw her wife returning every acknowledgement with a salute of her own over and over but without the conviction she normally had for such ceremony. Nevertheless, the queen remained stoic and an outward pillar of exceptional strength, which she knew was required in such a perilous time for the country. As terrified as Alexa was for her daughter, she knew to show such emotion would only cause panic, so she kept it all inside until they got to the hospital.

While Alexa knew she would have to eventually stop in every room to see every soldier that was there, she bypassed the opportunity for the moment as they went to Anastasia's. When they arrived there was a doctor outside in the hallway waiting for them. He saluted the queen and waited until she did the same before speaking. "Your majesty, your highness, before you go in, I must warn you. She does not look good right now but has vastly improved since she arrived."

"What happened to her?" Lauren quietly asked.

"She was hit by machine gunfire pretty badly in the legs and shrapnel was lodged in her torso, most likely by some explosion somewhere else on the deck. She was unconscious upon arrival here, and we rushed her into surgery. We have done everything we can in order to save her legs. Under normal circumstances someone could end up losing them with those kinds of injuries, but if she can fight off infection, we will not have to operate further. However, that is unknown at this point. There was so much damage that I don't know whether or not she will ever be able to walk again. Only time will tell. I am deeply sorry," he whispered as Lauren began to cry and clutch to Alexa.

Alexa took a deep breath to try to maintain her own composure. "Anything else we should know before we go in?"

"We were able to remove to all the fragmentation from her torso. Several of her organs sustained damage, but she will survive this. I have no reason to believe she won't make it. She is strong, a real fighter, and she is a hero to the other personnel who were transported with her. Many of them can tell you stories of her bravery and fearlessness in the heat of battle, and some even credit her with saving their lives."

"Thank you," the queen whispered. "We would like to be left alone with her now."

"Certainly, your majesty. Just let me know if you require anything. She is heavily sedated right now. It's better that she sleep through as much of the pain as possible."

When the two queens entered the room, they closed the door softly behind them and then slowly made their way over to the bed together. Anastasia lay perfectly still on her back with her eyes

closed. Her chest took measured breaths underneath the bed linens that covered her as if she were simply sleeping. There were no obvious signs that she had been injured, but both women knew better.

Lauren took the edge of the bed linens and folded them back to the foot of the bed to see her daughter better. Underneath the covers they found the princess dressed in a hospital gown that came down to her knees. They could see bandages wrapping both of their daughter's legs that extended up well beyond the hem of the gown, so Lauren pulled it up to Anastasia's chest in order for them to survey everything. Even though the princess was completely bare underneath, one would scarcely be able to tell with all the bandages that covered her pale skin.

"Oh dear God," Lauren whispered, dropping down onto her knees and putting her head down on her daughter's chest. Tears began to run in streams down her face and onto Anastasia.

Alexa didn't quite know what was worse, seeing her daughter in such dire shape or seeing her wife losing her poise. Kneeling next to Lauren, she placed a hand on top of her wife's reddish-silver hair while her other took hold of Anastasia's hand. She also finally allowed herself to cry now that they were in privacy.

"This is my fault," the queen said softly after several minutes. "I never should have let her come."

"No, this is mine. I never should have sided with her about this. I helped her talk you into this. I should not have done that."

Alexa shook her head. "No, my love. The choice was mine and so must be the responsibility."

"She wanted to come, but did she ever really think of the possibility of ending up here?" Lauren rhetorically asked. "What if she never walks again?"

"She will walk, darling."

"What if she does not? What if she loses her legs? You heard the doctor. There is a very real possibility that she will."

"Regardless of what happens, when all of this fades away, she is still the crowned princess, the heir to the throne. She is still our daughter, and she will get the best care the world can provide her. Her life will not end without legs upon which to stand. She gave all of herself for our country, and the people will respect that."

"What about Layla? What if she cannot accept this fate for Anastasia?"

Alexa shook her head. "I have no idea. Stasia loves her, but this will be a real test for their relationship. Even if she is able to keep her legs, the scars on her body will change her, and she will have scars on her soul for witnessing such brutality. She will be a different woman having

been in war no matter what happens now. We all may have difficulties adjusting to the new her that awakens. We just do not know."

The couple stayed by the bed, each touching their daughter and each other for a long time before a knock on the door interrupted them. The lead doctor poked his head into the room. "Excuse me for the interruption, your majesty, your highness. I just wanted to check on Lieutenant Washington. Also, there is a seaman wishing to see the Lieutenant." Both women took a moment to collect themselves while the doctor checked on Anastasia. "May I send the sailor in?" he asked.

Alexa nodded. "Of course. Allow him in."

A moment later a dark-haired young man greeted the two queens. He gave a salute to them and waited for one in return from Alexa before he said, "Forgive me if I am intruding upon your time your majesty and your highness. I'm Seaman David Mitchell, and I'm most anxious to know how Princess Anastasia is doing."

"Come in, Mr. Mitchell," Alexa beckoned.

He did as instructed and moved toward the foot of the bed. No one spoke for several minutes. With a sigh he finally turned toward them again. "Tomorrow I'm to go home to Kansas. I was part of the crew on the USS Texas that sank. I was able to abandon the ship into the water but came under gunfire while waiting to be rescued and was shot in the shoulder."

"I deeply appreciate your sacrifice," Alexa said.

"While I was in the water I saw members of the Hancock on their deck desperately trying to rescue us. There was a great flurry of commotion, bombs, and gunfire the entire time, but the crew didn't stop. One of them pulled me from the water. Meanwhile the gunfire hit various parts of the deck, and the next thing I knew that same sailor threw their body on top of mine, shielding me from further injury. You couldn't imagine my shock when I finally looked up and saw it was the princess covering me. As soon the gunfire subsided enough, I began to help her pull others from the water. I saw her when she first got hit with machine gun fire, but she refused help getting off the deck. She wanted to keep going with the rescue mission, so I stayed with her. Even though she couldn't move her legs, I was amazed at her strength as she was still able to get people out of the water and to safety. She was out there until she fell unconscious, even though people were trying to get her inside. I'm sorry I wasn't able to carry her myself, because she deserved that much for her heroic efforts, but I finally at least managed to drag her by uniform into the hull. She was determined to stay out there until every last person was rescued from the water, and I've never seen someone so fiercely focused in such chaos." He paused for a moment. "She saved so many lives, your majesty, including mine. I'm honored to have served next to her. She has my utmost respect, and I'm sure that goes for the entire Navy."

Lauren began crying as she came to hug him. Alexa followed suit with a hug of her own but managed to withhold the tears. "Thank you, Mr. Mitchell."

"In the event that she doesn't wake by the time I leave tomorrow evening, will you extend my sincerest admiration and gratitude to her for me?"

"Of course we will," Lauren answered. "But we hope that she is awake soon. We know she would like to see you."

"And I'd really like to see her to thank her personally, but I'm also anxious to get home to my family."

"That certainly is understandable."

"I'm not the only one with this story, your majesty. She saved the lives of several of us here at the hospital and countless others who never had to come because of her courage."

"Thank you for telling us. We are greatly appreciative of what you and the others have done in defending our country."

He looked at Anastasia again. "May I take her hand for a moment and say a prayer over her?" Alexa acquiesced with a nod, so he went to Anastasia's bedside and knelt down on one knee next to her. Taking her hand, he bowed his head and closed his eyes. The queens said nothing but watched him closely as he began to speak. "Father, thank you for sending a guardian angel to protect me when I needed one the most. I am forever grateful for Princess Anastasia's presence, but now is the time when she needs you. I humbly ask you to watch out over her. Bring her and her family peace and strength and patience as she begins the long journey of recuperation, and if it is your will, please allow her to fully recover. She has done so much for so many people, saved the lives of so many sailors unselfishly. I ask that such kindness be returned to her tenfold. I pray for those of my comrades who did not survive and the ones with worse injuries than mine. Please watch over them and their families during this trying time. I pray this in Christ's name. Amen." Reaching to his neck, he unclasped a cross necklace that had been hidden under his t-shirt and placed it in her hand before standing.

The queen just did her best to barely maintain her composure even though Lauren was freely weeping. "Thank you," Alexa whispered. She didn't trust her voice well at the moment. He gave a nod at them and then looked at the princess once more before leaving the room. When they were by themselves again, Alexa cleared her throat. "Now that we have seen Stasia I need to get back to work. We have a war going on, and I need to find out what is happening. Are you going to stay here?"

Lauren nodded. "I am not going anywhere until Stasia opens her eyes, but I know you must. You run the free world and have to ensure that it remains that way. Do not worry. I will watch over her until you return."

"Have someone fetch me if something happens. I will try to return as soon as I am able."

By the following day the war with Iran was over, America having removed the rogue regime from power and reinstalling the former one which was friendlier to their politics. It was a great

relief to Alexa for the ordeal to be over, even though it meant their troops would have to remain in the area much longer than anticipated to ensure the peace. She was just pleased that it would be under the diplomatic peacekeeping to which the country was accustomed. It also meant she could concentrate more on her daughter.

True to her word, Lauren had not left Anastasia's side since they had gotten there. Her meals were brought to her, and she occasionally napped in the chair next to the bed, but for the most part, she was intent with just watching the sleeping princess. Anastasia continued to be stable and even had managed to open her eyes at one point just long enough to see her parents by her bedside. Her first thought, however, was to ask when she could see her girlfriend. Alexa, for her part, decided to fulfill her promise to Layla, especially since Anastasia seemed so intent on seeing her as well and allow the blonde to come to the base with Anastasia's siblings.

By the time Layla and the other princesses had arrived via the military plane and escort the day after, Anastasia's strength was beginning to return, and her eyes remained open more than not. The princess was thrilled to see her sisters and received their hugs with gladness. However, her eyes were on the blonde who stood silently out of the way letting the royal family have their moment. Alexa sensed Layla's nervousness at the sight of her girlfriend but knew there wasn't much anyone could do except let the two women have some time together, so once all the princesses had a few minutes, she made the suggestion.

"I think you girls should get settled in your quarters, and your mother and I are in desperate need of some sleep. Let us leave Layla and Anastasia to themselves for a while. Layla, we will have an escort posted outside the door in case you need to come back to the quarters."

"Thank you," she softly said, looking at the queen. She watched as the royal family left the room and closed the door. Silence prevailed for a few moments.

"Hello, sweetheart," Anastasia finally greeted gently.

The blonde looked back at her girlfriend laying on her back in the bed. She had been briefed about Anastasia's injuries, but as she couldn't see them just then because of the blanket that covered her, she still felt anxious. "Hi," she answered.

"Come here. Come sit next to me." Layla did as requested and rounded the bed, but as she was about to sit in the chair, Anastasia said, "No. Up here on the bed."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"Please. I need to touch you right now. Come lay next to me."

After another moment of hesitation, the blonde put the side railing down on the bed and then gently eased herself onto it, trying her best not to jar it too much. She lay down on her side, and Anastasia slowly curved an arm around her back to hold her. "What doesn't hurt?" she asked.

"Nothing hurts from my chest up."

Tenderly Layla placed her head on her girlfriend's shoulder and hand on her chest. She could feel the heartbeat underneath her palm and the way it skipped a little at first touch. Suddenly it became clearer just how horribly Anastasia had been injured, and she began to cry.

"Oh no. Do not cry, sweetheart. It will all be fine. I promise."

Layla couldn't stop though. It was suddenly too much to bear. The woman she loved had been on the verge of death, and while she had survived, the extent of the injuries she had endured was still unknown. The physicality of the woman she loved might not ever be the same, and while it was not what drew her to the princess in full, she did wonder how she might feel about the possibility of drastically changed girlfriend. "I'm sorry, Stasia. I love you so much, and I almost lost you."

"You did not lose me. I am here now, and I will continue to be here for the rest of your life. My place is by your side," she whispered.

The endearing comment only made the younger woman weep harder. "I don't think I would be able to go on without you."

"You will not have to. I am yours now and forever."

"And I'm yours," she whispered.

Anastasia paused for a moment as her heart began to accelerate under the blonde's soft touch. "I want to marry you, Layla," she whispered after a moment.

"What?" she questioned, propping up, so she could look into the princess's eyes.

The redhead smiled. "I want to marry you," she repeated. "Everyday that I was gone I thought of you and longed to be with you. Everyday I looked at your picture and thought of the life you and I could have together. I could see it all, our marriage, our children, our love life," she whispered with a wicked grin, which made her girlfriend blush and chuckle. "I would listen to your voice as you sang those melodious songs that you gave me, and I would dream of you. I want you to be my wife and my queen when the time comes."

Layla couldn't even comprehend what had just been said for a moment. "You're serious?" she finally asked.

Anastasia nodded. "Unfortunately this is not a very romantic spot in which to make a proposal, and I believe you deserve to be asked in such a way, so I am going to withhold my official proposal until such time as I can get down on bended knee with a ring and ask you properly. Nevertheless, I wanted to tell you now that I am going to ask you. You should not take it lightly either. It would be a life of service, but I already know your heart is inclined to be of service to others." There was silence for a moment before she continued, "You know, you were the first one I thought of when I awoke here, and you are the only one I believe loves me for who I am. I could not imagine my life without you now."

"I do love you for who you are," she replied, leaning in to give her girlfriend a gentle kiss on the lips.

The princess pulled away quickly as she mentioned jokingly, "I do not think my breath could be the most pleasant of things at the moment."

"I have much larger concerns than your breath," the blonde said, looking down the body that lay under blankets.

"There is something else important I wanted to tell you."

"It could not be as important as what you just said," she said, settling herself once again.

"Actually, I think you might think it is."

"Then what is it?"

There was silence for a moment before Anastasia quietly said, "While I was away, I read the Bible you gave me everyday, and I read the part about Jesus sacrificing himself for the world by allowing himself to be crucified, so we could all have everlasting life. It moved me greatly. The day when the USS Texas sank, and we were under fire, that story inspired me. I know I could have died, but I was willing to be a sacrifice if it meant I could save other people's lives."

"There could be no greater sacrifice," Layla said quietly.

"Layla, when I was out there on the deck, I called out to him for help, and he answered me. I saw the face of God in the middle of a war, and he protected me and saved my life. He told me everything would be fine. I believe in him, Layla. I believe that Christ was my savior that day, that he is everyday," she admitted.

"Oh, Stasia, that's so wonderful. I'm so happy that you found him. I always hoped you would."

"You led me to him, so I have you to thank."

"Have you told anyone else about this?"

"I wanted you to know first. You are truly the most amazing woman I have ever known, Layla, and I thank you for leading me on this journey. I could not imagine a life without him or without you."

"You're pretty amazing yourself," she replied. "We will get through this together. I promise."

A few minutes passed in silence before the princess said, "I am getting sleepy. Will you sing to me as I fall asleep?"

"Of course."

About an hour later Layla was just watching her girlfriend sleep and stroking her red hair when there was a knock on the door before the three princesses entered the room. Immediately Layla tried to move from the bed, but Victoria waved her back. "Do not move on our account. Stay. I am sure she would want you to." The three of them came to the bedside and took seats next to their sister's bed. "Mother thought it would be a good idea for us to make the rounds and visit with the injured to help boost morale, so we had to make our first stop that of our favorite sailor."

"You really love her, do you not?" Camille asked.

Layla nodded. "Yeah. I do."

"She loves you, too. She said she was abstaining from sex for you, so that has to mean something," Camille added with a smile, causing all of them to laugh lightly.

"Is that all you Washington girls ever think about?" Layla teased, causing more laughter. "What would your mothers say?"

"What our mothers do not know will not hurt them," Victoria replied with a smile of her own.

The blonde looked down at the sleeping Anastasia and sighed. "I just hope I'm worth it," she softly answered.

"She thinks you are worth it, and that is all that matters," Victoria commented.

That evening when it was time for everyone to retire for the night Layla asked if she could continue to stay in Anastasia's room. Alexa was amiable to the request and had a second bed and her bags brought in, so they could spend more time together. Layla was exhausted by the emotional toll of the day and the trip and fell to sleep immediately after changing and brushing her teeth.

Through the night medical staff came to check on the princess, which awoke her every time they opened the door, but she was just glad for the chance to be with Anastasia as much as she could before she had to return to school. The queen had only allowed her to come long enough to see Anastasia but in return the trip had to be for only twenty-four hours due to logistical and security measures. She was to return with the princesses while the queens stayed behind to tend to their daughter.

In the morning she got up early and waited until the doctors had come to check on Anastasia to get out of bed. She knew she had a good half an hour before the next check-in, so she decided to use her time wisely and take a shower. Going into the bathroom, she decided to leave the door open in case Anastasia awoke and needed anything. Unceremoniously she stripped off her clothes and got into the shower.

The princess came to at the sound of water. At first she thought it was rain but then realized it probably wasn't the case given where she was. Confused she opened her eyes sleepily to find the source of the sound. Her eyes focused on the light coming from the bathroom. Given the hour of

the morning and the lack of natural light in the room, the fluorescent light shone brightly. As her eyes began to adjust, she realized Layla was in the shower, and she could see her through the clear curtain. Her heart began to race wildly as she saw her girlfriend naked for the first time.

Layla's body was completely wet as she stood there with her eyes closed shampooing her long blonde hair. She gave a yawn and a stretch of her back as she continued to wash it, causing the breasts Anastasia fantasized about to become even more pronounced. Their fair tips were rigid from the stimulus of the water. Anastasia felt her breathing start to labor as thoughts ran wild through her mind, but she did her best to remain quiet as to not tip Layla off to her voyeurism. Her eyes traveled further south to what she wanted to see the most. Water clung to matted blonde curls. The princess moaned despite her best efforts, which caused Layla to look briefly into the room, so Anastasia quickly closed her eyes for a moment like she was sleeping until she felt it was safe to open them again. When the blonde was finished scrubbing her hair, she turned around to duck her head under the water. The redhead's eyes gazed over the bare wet back and then all the way down and back up again. She thought she was going to faint from the lack of oxygen to her brain as everything in her started to race in a decidedly southern direction. She could feel the blood pulsing in her veins as her heart went into overdrive. Suddenly a sharp pain began to rise in her torso from her erratic breathing. As much as she didn't want to, she closed her eyes to try to calm herself, and it was how Layla found her several minutes later.

When the blonde walked out of the bathroom as she dried herself, she saw the princess in bed with eyes closed but breathing heavily. At first she thought she might be having a nightmare with the painful facial expressions she was making and contemplated waking her, but decided it was probably best if she dressed first. Putting the towel down on the end of her bed, she leaned over to pick clothes out of her bag.

"Oh God," Anastasia groaned when she opened her eyes and saw the blonde bent over her bag naked.

Immediately Layla's whipped up. "I thought you were asleep," she said, grabbing her towel and covering herself.

"I am dreaming, am I not?" the princess tried to tease even though the pain still radiated through her and was evident in her voice.

Hearing the joke even through the pain, the blonde smiled. "Afraid not."

"I suppose you are right. If I were dreaming, you would be naked... and on top of me," she joked, choking back the pain.

"Are you all right? Do you need the doctor?"

She shook her head. "Just get dressed in the bathroom with the door closed," she requested.

Feeling shunned, Layla said nothing further and turned to go back to the bathroom with her bag. She was confused by the reaction she had just received. Anastasia's joking made it seem as if she

approved of Layla's body, but her directive made it sound like she didn't like what she had just seen, which made Layla self-conscious. She had never given any serious thought to the fact that maybe Anastasia didn't think she was attractive enough. After all the princess often told her she was beautiful, but that was before she had been completely naked in front of her. She was confused by the mixed signals. Tears began to fall from her eyes as she pulled on some clothes. She didn't know how she was going to go back out there to find out the truth, but she knew she had to, so she did her best to swallow the insecurity and head back into the room. However, she noticed that Anastasia still looked uncomfortable.

Crossing to her she put her hand down on her chest. "My God. Your heart is racing. I've never felt it go that fast. You need a doctor."

"No," she said, but she was ignored as Layla pressed the call button.

Doctors rushed into the room within seconds. "What's the matter?" they asked.

"Her heartbeat is out of control. She's having a hard time breathing. She's sweating, and she's in obvious pain," Layla reported stoically.

The doctors rushed toward the bed, but Anastasia, said, "Stop. I am fine."

"Your highness, we need to check you."

"You do not need to check me. I know exactly what is wrong with me."

"Then tell us or else we will have to examine you."

Anastasia closed her eyes as she tried to swallow the pain along her side. "I think I may have ripped a suture or two on my side."

"How did you manage that?" the lead doctor asked as he immediately pulled back the covers to Anastasia's waist and pushing up the hospital gown just enough to investigate.

Layla stood to the side and watched as the princess's torso came into view. She had not seen any injuries until that moment, even though she knew they were there, and she felt herself starting to get sick at the sight of all the bandages, some with blood seeping through them on her side, covering Anastasia's midsection. She was totally unprepared for the sight of her girlfriend's condition.

The doctors took off the bandages where there was blood to see that the princess had in fact ripped open a few stitches. "How did you do this?" they asked again.

The princess paused in answering at first. "I do not wish to make the lady uncomfortable," she replied finally.

"Just tell them what's wrong," Layla ordered. She didn't like the idea that she was part of the reason, even though she had no idea how that was even possible.

"Very well. I awoke to see this woman showering and my breathing began to accelerate quickly and erratically, which caused me to rip my stitches," she said, not daring to look at the doctors, but meeting blue eyes, she added, "I am deeply sorry for causing you any embarrassment. I know it was wrong for me to be a voyeur without your knowledge or consent, and I know you may never forgive me for the indiscretion, but you have to believe me when I say how sorry I am for putting you in that position."

Layla could feel her face flushing badly as she heard the princess's confession. Suddenly her thoughts of Anastasia not approving of her body were wiped away to be replaced with the knowledge of just how much she really did want her. The thought of it overwhelmed her. "I think I might need some air," she said, not even waiting for a response before leaving the room.

Immediately a man who was standing next to the door asked, "Her majesty said you were not to leave without an escort. Where would you like for me to take you?"

"I need to go outside," she replied.

Without further words the pair left the hospital. When they were outside, Layla leaned up against the wall of the building and tried to breathe. There were so many emotions rushing through her in that moment that she could barely process them. The obvious sexual desires of the princess caused her own heart to flutter wildly, but it was overshadowed by the nausea of seeing Anastasia's injuries. Previously she could pretend they were less serious, but now that she had seen the horrific bleeding scars that covered the heir's side, and now that she truly understood the weight of the situation, the tears came once again, heavily flowed over her cheeks as she squatted down with her hands covering her face.

She was out there for several minutes by herself before a soft voice called, "Layla, are you all right?"

She looked up to see the queens. Shaking her head she whispered, "Stasia."

"Did something happen?" Lauren quickly asked.

"She ripped some stitches."

Lauren didn't say anything else as she rushed into the hospital, leaving Layla and Alexa alone together. "This is difficult," the queen whispered.

The blonde woman nodded as she tried to wipe the wetness from her face, but more just replaced it. "I'm not sure I can do this. It hurts so much to see her like this," she bawled.

In sympathy Alexa came and slipped her arms around the girl. Bringing her into a tight embrace, she stroked blonde hair. "It will be all right. I know how much this hurts, because you love her so much, but she will recover."

"What if... what if she's not the same person?" she cried.

"She will never be the same person, Layla. You cannot go through what she has gone through and remain unchanged. She has seen and experienced absolute horror. She has seen people be killed in front of her, and she was almost killed herself. That has to change you. You would be inhuman if it did not."

"I know she's changed on the inside. I've already seen some of that. What if it's the outside that remains drastically changed?" she questioned. "What if she does lose one or both of her legs? What if she can't accept her new body? What if I can't? I love her so much, but I can't even think about how that might affect us."

"I think you are getting ahead of yourself. So far she is recovering well, and there has been no reason to think she will not make a full recovery eventually."

"She may never walk again, or if she does it may not be normally. I don't see how she will ever be able to accept that."

The queen shook her head. "Layla, Anastasia is an extremely strong person. Whether or not she has legs, she will be walking. She would not stop trying until she does. Now I think it is best if you just try to take this one step at a time. Do not over think this. It serves no purpose except to upset you. This is an extraordinarily stressful time for you both, and neither of you should be making decisions about anything right now, least of all your relationship. I know you love her, and I know she loves you. You need that to carry you through right now. Time will make it obvious what is in store for the two of you. She will have a long road ahead, and she will not be walking out of here when she does finally come home. That much has become clear. She will be confined to a wheelchair, but we will be getting her the best care in the world. She will walk again. I know my daughter well enough to assure you of that. I just do not know how long it will take." Leaning down the queen planted a soft kiss on top of her head and squeezed her tighter.

Layla held to the queen tightly. She wanted so much to believe like Anastasia's mother. She started to cry again, but Alexa simply held her and consoled her in such a matriarchal fashion that Layla felt completely safe to lower her guard and let her emotions pour out. They remained that way for a long time with Alexa just quietly soothing her with gentle caresses to her hair and back. Finally when the tears were under control, Layla looked up at the woman who held her and suddenly realized that the arms around her were more than just the mother of the woman she loved but the sovereign of her country.

"I'm sorry, your majesty. I didn't mean to get your shirt wet."

Alexa just gave a tender smile as she reached to the blonde's face and softly wiped the tears away with her hand. "I think we ought to dispense with formalities. After all when I let a woman cry

on my shoulder, it is because I care about her. You are already like a daughter to me, so perhaps we should be addressing each other in a more friendly way. I think you should call me Alexa."

"I don't dare," she responded.

Putting a hand under the blonde's chin, Alexa smiled at her. "I consider you a friend, Layla, and something tells me you might even be more some time in the future. My friends call me Alexa or Lex, and that is what I want you to call me. Now come on. Let me hear you say it, so I know you will."

"Alexa," the blonde slowly said.

"There. That was not so hard, was it?" She shook her head. "Come on. Are you ready to go back in?" She curved a strong arm around Layla's back in support.

"Yes. Before we go though I was wondering if perhaps I could stay here a little longer with Anastasia?"

The queen shook her head. "I cannot let you do that. First of all, this is a military base in the middle of Iraq, and it is not safe for civilians. Secondly, you are a very pretty girl, and I would not feel comfortable with leaving you here alone without some protection. The military is full of honorable people, but these men and women have gone a long time without seeing someone like you, and I would not wish to exacerbate the issue with having you here. I would not want any of them to compromise their integrity because their baser instincts overtook them. Thirdly, you can help Anastasia the most by going home and keeping up the charade between you. You do not want to be hounded by media right now while you are trying to deal with this emotionally. Focusing on school should be your priority. I promise that when Anastasia comes back to the palace, you can come see her as much as you would like. I will send the plane for you every weekend if that is what you need, but you simply cannot remain here."

"Do you know when she can come home?"

"It will be awhile. We think it is best that she remain here until her sutures heal at the very least. I assure you that as soon as she is home you can come see her at the palace. We think it is best that she stay with us, because her house is not appropriately set up for someone in a wheelchair, and the palace is. King George IV was in a wheelchair towards the end of his life, so the palace can accommodate her needs much easier until she no longer needs the chair."

Knowing she was not going to change the queen's mind, Layla let the subject drop as the two walked back inside with their arms around each other. When they returned to Anastasia's room, the princess was asleep, having been medicated to help reduce her pain. For the rest of the day until it was time to leave, Layla remained with her girlfriend while the queens paid visits to other hospital inhabitants.

Chapter VIII: Coming Home

A month later Anastasia was cleared to return home to the palace from Iraq. Her mothers joined her in her journey on the plane, having been there the entire time their daughter was in the hospital. While the princess was confined to a wheelchair, she had already started working on rehabilitating her legs with a much physical therapy as she could handle, which pleased everyone greatly.

When they arrived on the tarmac of the air base that day, it was common for the press to be there to capture the queen's excursions. However, what was a complete surprise to the princess were the thousands of people that came to watch her homecoming. As soon as the door to the jet opened and princess and queens appeared at it, there was a roar of the crowd as they all chanted Anastasia's name. While being sequestered away in Iraq, none of them had realized that the story of what had happened in the Persian Gulf would have spread rapidly courtesy of one man, Seaman David Mitchell, who was standing at attention at the bottom of the ramp with half a dozen other sailors.

"Welcome home," Alexa said, smiling at her daughter as she helped her stand from her chair to wave at the crowd.

"It is good to be home."

She took a seat again in her chair and allowed her mothers to push it down the ramp. All the sailors saluted the queen and princess, which they returned. However, one of them called out, "Welcome home, Lieutenant,"

Abruptly Anastasia halted her chair as she turned toward the voice. "I know you," she said, trying to stand. He reached out to help her.

He nodded. "I'm Seaman David Mitchell. You saved my life. You saved all our lives," he said gesturing to the other sailors in the formation. "And lots more. We're just the ones that were injured that you pulled from the water."

She shook her head. "No. That is not it. Your voice," she said, thinking that she had dreamed how she had gotten off the deck of the USS Hancock and that it had been God's voice telling her she would be fine. "It was you. You pulled me off the deck." He gave a modest nod. "You saved my life, and you are the one that gave me this," she said, pulling the cross necklace out from under her uniform.

"Yes. I gave you that."

She smiled as she reached toward him. Pulling him close, she gave him a tight hug. "There never could be anyway to repay you. Thank so much for everything."

He returned the hug. "It was my honor, your highness. You are incredibly brave, and I greatly admire your selflessness. I would follow you anywhere."

"You will see Mr. Mitchell and all these sailors and others back at the palace," Lauren told Anastasia. "We have a special lunch planned for all the injured personnel and their families this afternoon."

Anastasia smiled at David and the other sailors around her. "Then I look forward to speaking with all of you at length at the lunch," she said, taking a seat in her chair again.

With that her mothers continued to wheel her toward the crowd of onlookers. She smiled and waved at the people who had gathered there. Little did she know she had a special surprise waiting for her when she reached the car. Layla sat in the back of the limousine in the motorcade watching the festivities from the safety and anonymity of the car. She really wished she could have been by her girlfriend's side just then, but she knew the royal family had their reasons for continuing to hide her that were for her benefit. Nevertheless, it had been a long month to endure without so much as a call from the princess.

Finally she saw the three women come toward the car and the door open. The queens got in first and smiled at her as they took seats across from her, so their daughter could have the seat closest to the door. However, when Anastasia was assisted into the car and saw her girlfriend, the smile she managed to present for the public grew larger as she threw her arms around Layla.

"Oh, Layla. You are a sight to behold. I have missed you so much," she said as she leaned in for a kiss. The blonde obliged her in a soft peck on the lips, but when the princess went back for something deeper, Layla staved off the advance. "What is it? What is wrong?" she softly inquired, caressing her cheek. Layla gestured to where the queens were sitting, looking amused. "Oh, right," the princess mumbled. "What are the chances of you two finding another car in the motorcade to ride in?" she joked.

"Control yourself. It is not a long ride back to the palace," Alexa admonished lightly. "Once we get there you have a full hour before the luncheon begins, and you can do anything you want with it."

Anastasia laughed while Layla blushed. "You both are incorrigible," the blonde said, shaking her head.

That afternoon the palace grounds were full of military personnel and their families and close friends for a special luncheon to honor the service of those injured in the war. As a reward for their time, Alexa would not allow any of them to return to their current tour, instead giving them pay for time served on duty and allowing them to stay at home with their families until the rest of their units came home.

The queen also had another tribute for the group after lunch. When the meal was finished, she got up to the podium to address the crowd. "Thank you all for coming today. It is a great honor to have you all in my home to meet with each of you to convey my personal gratitude for your service to this magnificent country of ours. Each of you has made your own personal sacrifice with the belief that this beautiful country is worth defending, and it is a privilege to lead you as your Commander-in-Chief. I would like to acknowledge each of you personally today by

bestowing a great recognition of the Purple Heart to each one of you. There were forty of you in total that were injured in this war, and I am humbled by your willingness to defend this land of ours." She paused for a moment as the Joint Chiefs of Staff came to stand next to her. "I would like each of you to come up here to receive your medal when I call your name and wear it in remembrance of my unyielding gratitude to you."

The queen took her time in calling out the name of each serviceperson and patiently waiting for them to come to the podium. Instead of following military protocol of having the more junior person salute their senior officers, Alexa and the Joint Chiefs of Staff saluted each person first out of respect for them. Then she took great care to pin the medal on each person's uniform and take photographs with every single soldier.

However, when she came to the name of David Mitchell, she paused after she announced it and gave a smile. "While I owe Seaman David Mitchell my respect for his service, as a mother I am personally overwhelmed by his sense of duty. It was Seaman David Mitchell who saved the life of my eldest child and in doing so saved the crowned princess, so in addition to being awarded a Purple Heart, I would like to award him the Navy Cross for his exceptional service to the royal family."

Anastasia smiled at him as he came to the podium to receive his two medals from the queen. He gave the princess an additional salute as he passed her, which she returned. When they came toward the end of the alphabet, Queen Alexa skipped her daughter's name and did everyone else first. Finally though she gave a large smile to the crowd.

"Before I give out this last medal, there are few special words I would like to say to our soldiers and to their families. Eight months ago when the Joint Chiefs of Staff and I were discussing sending all of you to the Persian Gulf, I felt a new kind of conflict as my maternal and governmental duties clashed. As I seriously weighed the potential for a war in the Middle East, I felt an extra layer of anxiety, as I knew all of you did, since my child was going on a mission to defend our country. Princess Anastasia, knowing my dilemma, said one simple thing. She looked me right in the eyes and rhetorically asked one question: If I would not let her fight for her country, how could I expect any of you to do so? As difficult as it was to accept, I knew she was right. I could not expect you all to be willing to sacrifice your time, your health, your well-being, and possibly your life to defend this great land if I would not send one of my own. As a mother I have felt what each of you has in learning that your child, your sibling, your spouse, your parent, or your friend was hurt in this war. My daughter sustained terrible injuries while leading a group of sailors in a rescue effort. Many of you have told me stories of her heroism and her bravery. The heroic tales you all have relayed to me regarding her makes me proud to be more than your sovereign. It makes me proud to simply be the mother of such a fine sailor. It is because of you that I would like to bestow not only the Purple Heart but also the country's highest award, the Medal of Honor, upon Lieutenant Anastasia Elise Washington for her fearless service to this country and selfless bravery in saving so many lives."

Anastasia smiled at the crowd as she wheeled her own chair toward the podium. Her mother helped her stand from her chair and then gave her daughter a salute, which the princess returned

with a smile. Alexa took her time pinning the two medals to her daughter's uniform before giving her a hug and kiss on the cheek while the crowd roared.

When the princess was once again at her seat at her table, the queen continued, "To close this ceremony, there is one other thing I would like to say. I know some of you have had your lives immensely altered by your injuries. As your Commander-in-Chief, I feel personally responsible for your health and safety. You have given everything for me, and in return I assure you now that I will assist you through the rest of your lives. The military will always be your family, and family takes care of each other. With that in mind, I have established a foundation to assist you all with your ongoing needs. Each of you will be receiving a call in the coming weeks to assess your personal situation to establish how we can best help you in the years to come. I will always be forever grateful to each one of you and please do not hesitate to call upon your military family now as we have called upon you. Thank you again for coming today. May God bless you all."

Once the formalities of the ceremony were complete, Anastasia mingled through the crowd, talking to the other military personnel, most of whom she had already met during her stay at the hospital. The one exception to that was David Mitchell. When she finally found him, he gave her a large smile and greeted, "Hello, Lieutenant."

"David," she said trying to get out of her chair. He leaned down to help her. "I think I would prefer it if you called me Stasia."

"It would be an honor."

"I just wanted to thank you again for saving my life. I know I could never repay you."

He gave a charming smile. "Just serving next to you was a great honor within itself."

"Thank you for those kind words, but I would like to try to honor you in some way as a token of my great appreciation."

He shrugged. "I'm just a Kansas boy who lives on a farm with his parents. I've never dreamed big."

"Now is the time to start," she said with a smile.

"I've always wanted to travel. That's why I originally joined the military, but because of my injury I've been discharged. I'm not sure how to do that now. Perhaps you could get me reinstated?" he questioned.

"I do not think I can help you with that particular request. What if you came to work for me instead? You have already proven yourself, and I believe you told me you would follow me anywhere. What if you did just that? You could see the world."

"You'd give me a job?"

"Absolutely. I would give you whatever job you want under my jurisdiction, but to travel with me, it would have to be something close to me like a part of my Affairs Office or my security detail."

"I don't know what I'd be suited for."

"You would fit right in on my security detail. It is paramilitary, so you could still enjoy some of the military culture."

"That sounds like fun."

"You would have to move here from Kansas, though," she explained.

He laughed. "I'd love to get out of Kansas. Life on the farm is hardly exciting."

"I guess it is settled then. I am thrilled that we will get to know one another better."

"Me, too," he replied with another smile.

The following day after Layla returned to school Anastasia dressed for the morning slowly by herself. She missed her girlfriend already and wished she was there, but she knew it would only be a few days until they saw each other again. When she was finished getting ready for the day, she sat in her wheelchair and then grabbed her forearm crutches, which were leaning against the nightstand to put them across her lap. Then she turned to leave her room and head down to breakfast. Upon her arrival she found her parents, who gave her pleasant smiles and warm greetings, sitting at the table. She returned it while backing her chair into the corner. Applying the breaks, she put her forearms into the cuffs of the crutches and stood. Immediately Alexa stood to help her daughter, but Anastasia shook her head to wave her off. The queens watched as their eldest child struggled across the room to her chair. It was painful for both of them to see how excruciating the small act seemed for their daughter with her frail legs. They just didn't appear to want to cooperate with the movement of her upper body well, making her shake fiercely as she took each step. When she was settled, Alexa retook her seat.

"How did you sleep?" Lauren inquired.

"Actually I slept well," she said with a smile. "Pleasant dreams about a certain someone."

Alexa chuckled. "Ah, that will do it. How is Layla? Did she arrive back at school safely?"

"She is fine. She misses being here with me, and I certainly miss being with her."

"It can be difficult to be apart," Lauren said with sympathy.

Anastasia looked at her parents quietly for a moment before saying, "I actually wanted to talk to you about Layla this morning."

"What about her?"

The princess smiled tentatively. "I... I want to ask her to marry me."

The queens looked at each other a moment. "We were wondering when you were going to bring this up," Alexa commented.

"I love her, and I could not imagine my life without her now. She is all I want."

The queen nodded. "We know that, and we actually approve of her. She has brought out the best in you in your acquaintance, but it has been a short relationship. You have not been dating a long time, not even a year."

"I know, but I know it is right in my heart, Mother. She has given me so much of herself and helped me become a better woman, a better leader."

Alexa nodded. "I think that is definitely true, but both of you are so young. She has not even graduated from college. Do you think you should give it more time?"

Anastasia shook her head. "I do not care how old we are. She is the light of my life. She is a force of goodness that has come into our family. She has even affected you, Mother. I have seen it."

Alexa smiled. "She has," she admitted. "I have never met a young woman quite like her. She is the kind of girl we would want for you. I just think it is too soon. I think you should take more time with this and not rush into it. I would hate to think your urgency was connected to some sort of... sexual conquest."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Layla has made it quiet clear that her religious principles guide her life's decisions. While I have never heard her explicitly state it, I am led to believe that being the case, she is more guarded in her virtue than women to whom you are accustom. Virginity is no longer a requirement for your bride, but you have chosen a woman who seems to revere it, and it would be reprehensible to offer her the crown just to entice her into a sexual relationship. She is worth more than that... as is the crown."

"You think this is about sex?" the princess asked.

"We know you, Stasia. My goodness. You are my daughter," she teased. "We know of your interest in the activity. You are a virile young woman with lots to offer. Most women would be enticed."

The princess scoffed. "Not anymore. No woman but Layla gives me the time of day. She loves me as I am."

"I am sure that is true, but Layla is clearly looking for more. Are you prepared to give her the more she needs?"

"Yes. I am prepared to give her anything she needs. And yes, it is true Layla wishes to remain chaste until she is wed, but that is her choice, and I have respected it. I may wish to be with her on a physical level, but it is so much more than that. I want to be with her every possible moment of the day. Just listening to her talk or sing or watching her read is amazing. I am utterly enthralled by everything she does, even just walking into a room. I want her to be the one I see first when I wake in the morning and the last one I see at night. I want to be the one she turns to when she is upset and hurting, and I want her to be that for me. I have never felt this way about anyone." She smiled as she thought of her girlfriend. "I am not sure I can even explain it."

"You are in love," Lauren said with a smile.

"I am," she replied. "And I do not want to lose her."

"What makes you even think that you would lose her?" Lauren asked. "She has shown great faithfulness to you this whole time." Their daughter was quiet a moment causing Lauren to ask, "Has something happened between you?"

She shook her head. "I just do not want to lose her."

"Something is troubling you. What makes you think that you might lose her?" Alexa asked.

Anastasia remained silent for a few moments. "She is the most incredible woman in the world, and she deserves the best. She deserves a woman who can be all Layla needs her to be. I used to be that woman, but now I am not so sure."

Placing a hand on her daughter's arm, Lauren caressed it gently. "What do you mean?"

"Look at me," she said, making a sweeping gesture with her hand. "I am not the woman I was six months ago."

"No, you are not. You have been through a war, Stasia," Alexa said. "There was no way you would come home unchanged by that."

"Some changes are larger than others, though. I cannot even walk, and even though I go to therapy, we all know there may be a time when there will be no more improvements. And my body has been marred by war. Everything I worked to become physically is all gone," she said softly.

"Layla's love for you is not based on your ability to walk nor is it based on how you look. She loves you for your heart and your goodness," Lauren said.

"And that is why I love her and want her to be my wife."

Alexa nodded. "Let us be clear with you. We approve of your choice, but we would like you to think about waiting longer."

The princess shook her head. "I already had Madeline order the ring, and it is sitting in my safe. I plan to give it to her this weekend. My mind cannot be changed."

Alexa sighed. With a nod she said, "When you went to war and almost died trying to save your fellow sailors, I had great admiration for your valor, your selflessness, and your sacrifice. While you are our daughter, you were also a common soldier, willing to die for this country you love so much, willing to die for your sovereign who also happens to be your mother. I allowed you the opportunity to almost die for your country because of your love for her, and I suppose that creates a precedent for all the loves in your life, including Layla. I suppose now I must allow you the same opportunity here to live for your country. You know your heart better than anyone else, and while we make think you are rushing things, you are heart strong as well as headstrong." She smiled. "If you really feel this is what you must do, we will stand behind you."

"Thank you. That means a great deal to me."

"I will ask you to consider one other thing, though. Do you think Layla is ready for this? Is this what she wants? I mean she is a junior in college. Is she willing to forgo that? If you truly love her as we believe you do, you must be willing to give her happiness, whatever that might be, whether or not it includes you just now. Do you understand?"

Anastasia nodded. "I think I do."

"She may have another path for herself, and you have to be willing to wait until she is ready. Forcing her to forgo her own dreams is not love. That is why your mom and I waited so long to get married. You must be willing to give her the freedom of choice, knowing full well that being without you at present is one of those choices."

"I understand."

"Good. I suppose we are to wish you luck then," she said with a smile. Both of them came to her and gave her hugs and kisses.

"Thank you. I will let you know how it goes."

Chapter IX: Hearts United

That weekend Layla was flown up to D.C. to visit her girlfriend. Spring was starting to descend upon the city with nature decorating it in pastel colors. The princess wanted to go to the country estate that weekend, so they could have some privacy. Even though the palace was large enough, she felt her mothers were intruding on their private time with their concern for her well-being.

When Layla landed at the airport, the princess was there waiting for her in a limousine that would take them to the country. They cuddled in the car and enjoyed the passing scenery until they arrived upon which the staff greeted them pleasantly.

"Your highness, in light of your temporary condition, would you prefer to be in a room on the first floor?" the butler inquired.

"Yes, I think that is a wise idea. I cannot manage stairs quite yet," she replied with a smile.

"Very well. Ms. Stone, shall I prepare your room close to the princess's?"

"Thank you but only one room is necessary," she answered.

He nodded at them and then went to retrieve the bags as they went into the house. "It is amazing how many obstacles I realize I face in getting around my own homes now that am in this chair," she mentioned.

"You won't be in it forever. You've already made improvements just since being home."

"I feel like I have, but I would like to be more stable. My upper body lost a lot of strength in the hospital, so it is harder for me to hold myself up on my arms."

"I'm confident you will be back to your old self soon. Now what shall we do with our Friday evening? Perhaps dinner and a movie," Layla suggested, changing the subject. She wasn't comfortable lingering on the subject of her girlfriend's condition too long, as she was still trying to get accustomed to it.

"That sounds nice. Let us see what they have made for dinner."

Layla walked next to Anastasia as the princess rolled her chair toward the dining areas. The redhead's spirits were good for the most part, but Layla could sense some of the frustration of not being able to be herself under the joking façade. She knew she had to be the stronger of the two of them during this process, even though she had her own concerns about Anastasia's progress. She longed in her private intimate thoughts for that woman she had met the previous summer, who had the flawless body to match the perfect smile. Now neither was quite the same. While it did not sway her feelings toward her girlfriend, she was not used to the differences yet and still fantasized about the woman Anastasia's used to be, even though she knew there was a possibility she would never see that particular woman again.

After dinner the two of them adjourned to their room to watch a movie in bed. Layla always felt safe and content in the heir's arms whenever they were around her, and that night was no exception. Reclining with her head on Anastasia's chest, she took in the feel of her girlfriend. Her left hand gently roamed under the hem of her t-shirt to her stomach. The definition she had back in the summer was gone, having been replaced with some extra weight due to her inactivity. The blonde's fingers traced over the scars on Anastasia's side from her war injuries. The doctors had

taken great care to stitch her wounds closed carefully, but the lines were still slightly raised from the rest of her skin.

"What are you thinking about?" Anastasia asked after a moment, feeling the inquisitive touch to her skin. She had never felt insecure about her body before, but the newness of her injuries made her feel less confident than usual. When Layla touched her, she couldn't help but wonder what she was thinking.

"Your scars feel like they have improved some more," she answered, propping up on her elbow. She pushed down the covers around them to her girlfriend's waist and then pushed up the t-shirt to look at them closer. Some redness still remained, but overall they looked to be healing well.

They looked at each other for a moment. The redhead cracked a small grin. "You know what happens when you touch me like that," she said. "My heart starts to pound and I feel like I can barely breathe."

"Let me see," she said with a little smile of her own, pushing the shirt higher over her chest. Anastasia's heart was visibly pounding under her breast. She slipped her hand up onto it to feel the heartbeat.

Anastasia gasped at the gesture. Women hardly ever touched her intimately in the past, and it certainly came as a surprise to her given her current condition. All her conquests were so passive, allowing the princess full access, but they never reciprocated, and at the time Anastasia never cared. Even Layla had not ever touched her that way except in the hospital when she was checking her heartbeat, but the touch just then made her respond in a way she never had as the tip hardened in response. Just then she needed to be touched to be assured. She looked up at Layla as her breathing became uneven.

The blonde felt the change in the princess as the tension-laden moment lingered. She hadn't intended for her touch to be so sexual, but seeing and feeling the reaction made her own body respond in a new way. She wanted to touch her even more. Without words between them, her hand closed around the curvature and squeezed ever so slightly. Anastasia's back arched as she moaned at the move, which just encouraged Layla further.

"Does that feel good?" she whispered doing it a second time.

"Yes," she replied breathlessly.

Layla looked down at her girlfriend's bare chest and thought back to the only time Anastasia ever touched her that intimately. It was the last night they were together before Anastasia left for her tour. They had never been so close, nor had Layla ever felt such physical pleasure as the way the princess caressed and kissed her. Just then she wondered if she could make her girlfriend feel that way. She had never even tried to initiate something between them, but looking into blue eyes just then, she knew her advance would be welcomed. Slowly leaned down Layla hovered over Anastasia's stomach for a moment before finally dropping a light kiss onto her skin.

"Oh, God," the princess moaned, instantly threading a hand through long blonde hair to cup the back of it.

Encouraged by the response, Layla repeated the gesture as her hand softly began to caress over her torso. Within mere moments the sounds coming from above her head began to increase, and she realized Anastasia really was enjoying the attention. "Does that feel good?" she asked again as her mouth inched its way along her side kissing her scars to the underside of her breast.

"Yes. Please, Layla," she called.

Feeling confidence surge through her at the plea, she moved her mouth over the heir's breast and hovered for a moment until Anastasia pressed herself upward for the touch. Both of them moaned as Layla kissed the crest softly at first before taking her first taste. Anastasia had never felt something that incredible against her own body. No woman had ever kissed her there, and even though she had never even thought about Layla doing so, as she felt it, she knew she never wanted the touch to cease. Even more she wanted it to increase, so she managed to pull her girlfriend's small body on top of hers, so they would be touching all over.

Layla gasped when she felt her thigh brush against the apex of her girlfriend's. It was rapidly warming and growing damp as Anastasia's breathing came in harder pants. Propping herself up on both arms above the princess's body, Layla gazed down into blue eyes. She truly wanted more, and it appeared her girlfriend did as well, so she took action to slip the t-shirt from Anastasia's body. The princess allowed her to do so and returned the favor, leaving them both bare from the waist up. Immediately the blonde lowered herself to kiss her girlfriend on the mouth, allowing their forms to brush together.

Each of them groaned at the feeling as Anastasia's hands splayed across the blonde's back. "God, you are so beautiful," the redhead whispered.

"So are you," she replied softly as their hands began to caress each other as they kissed deeply.

The comment made Anastasia's heart palpitate even harder. As much as she wanted to take control of the situation between them, she knew she lacked the grace to flip them over and reverse positions due to her legs. Besides she did wonder what might happen if she allowed her girlfriend free reign over their intimacy. Quickly her body realized Layla was intent on giving her pleasure as the blonde's toned thigh rubbed against the seam of her sleeping shorts.

"God, yes," she called as Layla kissed her along the neck and hands continued to caress her breasts.

Layla didn't think about what was happening between them as she focused on how wonderful it felt to touch her girlfriend after their long abstinence. Things had been so tentative between them in certain respects, mainly out of concern for the heir's injuries, but the need to connect with each other outweighed everything else in that moment. They carried on in their make out session for quiet awhile until Layla felt shudders start to fill the frame beneath hers that corresponded with

the princess calling her name at increasing volume. With concern she tried to withdraw, but the princess kept her trapped in place.

"Please do not... stop," she panted before shrill escaped her, and her body fell limply into the mattress. It continued to jerk a little as Anastasia took sporadic breaths.

The flood that she suddenly felt against her thigh made her realize what had just happened. She had never intended that, and for a moment she felt guilty, but the look on her girlfriend's face of pure delight made her feel conflicted. She had never really considered how far was appropriate for them to really go once the moment had overtaken them, and even though they had not had sex, the intimacy of what had taken place was not lost on her.

A few moments passed in silence as Anastasia calmed. She gave a gentle smile up at her girlfriend. "Well, I guess it is good to know that something down there works," she teased.

"Are you all right?" the blonde softly asked.

"I am wonderful. Are you all right?" she inquired seeing the conflicting emotions clearly on Layla's face.

"I'm so sorry for what just happened," she profusely apologized.

"Why? I am not."

"We shouldn't have done that."

"Why not? We did not have sex."

"Yeah but you still..." She couldn't even finish her sentence, dropping eye contact.

"Layla, look at me." Cupping her face in her hands, she brought their gazes back together. "I want you to know something important. You are the first to touch me like that. No other woman has ever dared try, and I wanted you to. It felt amazing."

"I'm the only one?" she asked in confusion.

Anastasia nodded. "The women in my life have always been so submissive. None of them have ever gone after what they want and have let me set the pace. You are different. You have had control of the intimacy between us from the beginning. No one has ever touched me like that, and I want you to be the only one that ever does."

Blonde brows furrowed in thought. "I know you have been with other women. How is that even possible?"

"I have had sex with many women, Layla. I have also had quite a bit of sex with myself," she joked with a smile. "The point is no one has ever returned the favor. You are the first woman to ever touch me."

"I don't understand. Why wouldn't a woman want to touch you?"

"Why have you waited this long to touch me?"

She shrugged. "You're the princess, and I just want you to be pleased."

"That is probably what most women would say. They do not even contemplate that I could be pleased by them touching me. They are so focused on allowing me to touch them however I want, and quite frankly the thought never occurred to me either until just now." She paused. "I liked it when you touched me, Layla. I needed you to touch me to feel closer to you right now, and I want you to touch me a whole lot more when the time is right."

"I just don't know what happened just now. I got carried away."

"It is fine. I assure you. You have made me incredibly happy, but I do not want you to regret this moment between us. We will not have sex until we get married. I promised you that a long time ago, and I am telling you again now. Please do not be upset. You have given me a great gift, and I do not regret it."

She nodded. Putting her head down on her girlfriend's naked chest, she sighed. "I love you, Stasia. I want to be with you forever."

The princess smiled at the comment, for it made her surer of her own desires to propose the following day. "And I want to be with you forever."

The next day the couple stayed around the castle since Anastasia's abilities were limited. Nevertheless, both of them were content just to be in each other's company. That night after dinner they went into the library. As they cuddled on the sofa and listened to music, Anastasia could tell her girlfriend still had some lingering issues over the previous night, but she hoped she could put all that to rest with what she was about to ask her.

"I wanted to talk to you about something important," the princess quietly said.

"Okay."

Gently she nudged the blonde off her shoulder. Even though it was difficult for her, Anastasia struggled to get down on her knees in front of her girlfriend. "I wanted to talk to you about us. My life is so much better for having you in it, and I could not imagine my life without you, Layla. You have brought out the best in me, and you have made me a true believer in Christ. When I was at war, my priorities in life became apparent. I am the crowned princess, and one day I will be the queen of this country if God sees fit to allow me to live that long, and that is extremely important to me, but I cannot do it alone. I need a special kind of woman to sit beside

me and to help me be the best woman I can be. In the time we have known each other, I have come to realize you are that woman. God has given me a precious gift in you, and I am thankful for that. I would like to further honor that gift, Layla. I want to return to you all you have given me and so much more. I want to spend my life trying to be worthy of the greatest thing that has ever happened to me if you will let me. Would you do me the honor of becoming my wife? Will you marry me, Layla?" she quietly asked, pulling the ring box from her pocket. Popping it open, she turned it toward her girlfriend, so she could see it.

Layla felt her heart racing as she looked down at Anastasia on the floor in front of her. Her gaze flitted over to the ring for a moment, and her eyes grew wide at the size of the center diamond and the others surrounding it. It was the largest set of stones she had ever seen in her life. She knew this moment was coming between them at some point, but she felt totally unprepared for how it would actually make her feel to receive such a proposal. "I'm speechless," she whispered after a lengthy pause.

"I hope in a good way," Anastasia tried to joke, but she was growing nervous when she didn't get an immediate response.

"That is the most incredible ring I've ever seen."

"I am glad you like it. Now will you accept it?" she questioned, sensing some hesitation on Layla's part, which made her even more nervous.

"Anastasia, I love you, and I have thought about this a great deal since the hospital. I do want to marry you. I really do, but I have some concerns about accepting right now," she softly said.

"Like what?" she asked, closing the box and putting it on the cushion next to them.

"Here. Come sit next to me. I know that's not comfortable for you," Layla said, helping her girlfriend back onto the couch.

"What can I give you that would allow you to say yes?" Anastasia inquired. "Just tell me what you need, and you can have it."

"When I think about my future life, I do see you in it, Stasia. Furthermore, I see us married. I do. Don't doubt that. I just have another dream as well that I want to fulfill first. I need to finish school. I have two semesters left of college after this one, and it would mean the world to me to be able to finish."

"Whatever you need. I would never stand in the way of your dreams of an education. I am a patient woman, and you are worth that wait. We will get married after you graduate."

"There are other things."

"Tell me."

"As much as I want the world to know that we belong to each other, I understand why you have kept me away from the public spotlight. It would be impossible to have a life if I'm known as your fiancée. Could we continue to keep this a secret until I graduate, so I can have some normalcy?"

The princess nodded. "Absolutely, sweetheart. I want you to enjoy your anonymity as long as you can."

Layla smiled at the woman who held her heart. "The last thing might be the hardest part."

"Nothing is too hard if it pleases you."

The blonde cupped her girlfriend's cheek in her hand. "My faith is the cornerstone of my life, and because it's my foundation, I have to practice it daily by studying and worshipping. I have to have that. I can't forgo any of that simply because I'm your wife. I can't be that symbol of separation of church and state that your family seems to think is necessary."

"Of course. I understand. You just tell me where you want to go to services, and I will see to it that you have the proper access and security to do so at all times. I do not want you to give up your faith. It has made you uniquely different from every other woman I have ever known. I would never wish to squelch that."

"But I need my spouse to believe it and practice it as much as I do. I want you to go to church services with me every week as your schedule allows. It is important to me to have a spouse who lives their faith. I know you feel an obligation to keep church and state separated from your role as the princess. I respect that and know that's what's right for the country, but I feel like you can do that while still attending services. Why does that have to preclude you from worshiping the God you have found, the one you claim saved you?"

Anastasia nodded. "If that is what it takes to win you, I am willing to go to church for you. I do believe in God, but I need the people to understand that this is a personal part of my life and will not have undue influence on my decisions as a leader. Are those your only concerns?" She nodded. Anastasia smiled at her and opened the ring box a second time. "So will you marry me then?" she inquired again.

Layla smiled brightly as she pulled her girlfriend into a hug and kiss. "Yes, a thousand times yes."

"I love you, sweetheart. Allow me to put this ring on you," she said, taking it from the box and slipping it on her fiancée's left ring finger.

"It's absolutely beautiful, Stasia. Thank you. I love you so much."

"Thank you for making me the happiest and luckiest woman in the world."

"I'm the lucky one," she said. Together they looked at the ring for a moment through their interlaced fingers before she continued, "You know I can't take this ring back to school."

"I know, but you can wear it while we are together."

As they curled up on the sofa once again, they kissed for several minutes before the blonde softly gazed at her fiancée. "I think we should retire to bed," she whispered.

"You have no objections from me if that is what you desire."

"You know, I've thought about last night quite a bit today but now it has new context in light of what we just decided," she softly said. A smile played at the corners of her lips. "I haven't been able to stop thinking about how much I liked it and want to do it again."

"I would like that very much, but I know you had some lingering doubts about the appropriateness of it all. I am glad to see that has been resolved."

"It wasn't like we had sex. We were just getting closer to each other, and I want to be close to you right now."

"I want that too. Come on," she said, sliding over to her wheelchair and getting into it. "I will give you a ride if you want."

Layla laughed as the redhead pulled her down into her lap. Together they made their way out into the hallway and down the hall to their room. Once there Layla went into the bathroom first to change for bed while the princess maneuvered her chair into the corner of the room and stood up on her crutches. Even though she struggled across the room, she knew it was more important than ever to regain the use of her legs. She was determined to give her fiancée a completely healthy spouse. Layla deserved the woman she used to be in physical strength, and she was resolute to walk unassisted down the aisle and dance with her bride at their wedding. Even though it was still a long way off, it gave her a new goal to keep her motivated.

When the blonde was finished, Anastasia took her own turn in the bathroom before returning to the bedroom. Layla was already in bed giving her a supportive smile as she slowly walked with her crutches across the room. When she was finally in bed and they both were laying on their sides looking at each other, Layla didn't hesitate to lean over and kiss Anastasia.

Hours later the couple held each other in silence. "I wish I didn't have to go back to school tomorrow."

"I know. I feel the same way, but the semester is almost over, and you will have your whole summer free."

"That's true."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"I thought I would just go back to volunteering at the hospital at home and singing in the choir."

"What if you did not go home over the summer? What if you came here and stayed with me instead?"

"I couldn't possibly. What would I tell my parents? They don't even know I've been sneaking away over the weekends to come see you. I haven't even told them we were seeing each other. They made it quite clear that they wouldn't accept that."

"Why do you need your parents' permission? You are the woman that flew half way around the world to see me for twenty-four hours in a hospital without their permission."

"I'd do it again even if it was for only ten minutes."

"They obviously do not wish to accept you as you are, but this is your life, Layla. You just accepted my proposal to become my wife. How do you think they will react to that?"

"They are going to be extremely unhappy about that. I'm afraid of what they might do, but I won't live without you."

"Then you should stay with me over the summer."

"And how would you propose to pass that off? The media would notice me staying at your house for the entire summer, and what would I even do? We couldn't go to a lot of places together, and you have your own responsibilities."

"What would you want to do? I am sure we could get you something worthwhile. Name your interest, and I will get you a summer job doing whatever you want. Just think about it. If your parents are going to be upset with this news, it might be better for you if you have some distance from them. I could easily get you a place to stay other than my house or the palace, so it would be less obvious, and if you are just hanging out with my sisters and me, we could pass that off easily. Even more, you could bring Hannah with you, and I would put the two of you up somewhere, so you would not be alone. With you and Hannah both spending time with my sisters and me, the media may be a little interested, but they would not suspect anything too unusual. After all, we all have friends outside of the palace walls and get photographed with them all the time. Having both of you together would definitely help temper any suspicions. Just think about it. You and Hannah could do whatever you want, go wherever you want, and all of your expenses would be paid. It would be the ultimate summer vacation," she enticed with a smile.

"Let me think about it and then talk to Hannah. Having her here would be great. I'm going to have to tell my parents, though. It's one thing to sneak up here on the weekends but quite another to lie to them about where I'm spending an entire summer or the fact that we're in a relationship. I have to tell them, and it's not going to be easy."

"Do you want me to be with you when you do? I would be happy to be there."

"It's probably better if you aren't, but thank you for offering. It's going to get ugly, and they're probably going to throw me out of the house," she said softly.

"Your home is with me now. As soon as you put on my ring, you became a member of the royal family, and you will always have my protection. Do not worry about paying for school or where you are going to live. I will provide all that. I promised it to you awhile back, but I owe it to you now as my future wife."

The blonde nodded. "Thank you. I know that you will take care of me. I just hate the idea of possibly losing my parents. They're all I've had for so long."

"Now you have me, and I promise you will never want for anything."

"Except their acceptance," she whispered. "I'm not sure that'll ever come."

"You never know. They may come to accept this part of you in time. If nothing else they owe you respect as the future queen of this country, and I will ensure you get that respect."

Layla shook her head. "Respect isn't enough. Their acceptance would mean the world to me, and it hurts to know that I'll never get it."

"I know, sweetheart. I know," Anastasia whispered consolingly.

When the princess returned to the palace the next afternoon, her parents were there to greet her. "Well? How did it go? Do we have a new family member?" Alexa asked curiously.

Anastasia nodded her head. "I did ask her, and she said yes, but you were right, Mother. She needs more time. She wants to finish school first and keep our relationship quiet until then. I agreed with her wishes, so the ring goes back in the safe for the time being. In the meantime I have a new goal, which is to walk unaided down that aisle and to dance with my beautiful bride at our wedding."

"Nothing like a little motivation. We are happy for you, Stasia, even if your desire is delayed a bit."

"She will be so appreciative of your respect for her dreams, sweetie," Lauren added. "It will pass before you know it."

Anastasia nodded. "It is a long time to wait, but I am determined to do it. I will not be dissuaded."

"Nor should you. We think you made the right choice," Lauren said.

Chapter X: No Turning Back

The spring went by quickly at the palace. Layla spent most of her weekends with her fiancée while Hannah covered up their secret affair with their friends. The two blondes were giddy with the excitement of Anastasia's offer to spend the summer with her, and Hannah had already told her parents of the arrangement. Layla, however, was dreading informing her own, knowing there would be a major altercation. Nevertheless, she knew she had to do it. When mid-May came and with it just a few weeks left of school, she knew she couldn't delay the conversation any longer.

One evening after she and Hannah had returned from their room after dinner at the dining hall, Layla plopped down on the bed. The two of them had discussed how to best go about telling them, but both knew no matter what Layla said, they would be incredibly angry. Layla just cradled the phone in her hands a moment and stared at it as she sighed.

"Do you want me to stay?" Hannah asked as she gathered her books for the library. Finals were not far off, and both girls knew they had a lot to do before school was over for the semester. However, Layla's emotional needs came first for her.

Layla shook her head. "This isn't going to be pretty. We know that."

"I know. I wish there was something I could do. Are you sure you have to tell them about your relationship with Anastasia?"

"Yes, I have to tell them. They deserve to know. Okay. I'm going to do it," she said giving herself a pep talk. "I can do this. I'm not afraid."

Hannah slung her book bag over her shoulder and then came to her friend. Leaning down, she kissed her on top of the head. "You have the most amazing woman in the world who loves you. They can't hurt you anymore unless you allow it. Come over to the library if you feel like it when you're finished."

When Layla was alone, she dialed the number for her house. Her mother answered after a couple of rings. "Well, hello. How are you, dear?" she greeted.

"I'm fine, Mom."

"Exams are coming up in a couple of weeks. Do you feel ready yet?"

"No, not yet but not to worry. Hannah and I have already set up a study schedule."

"Good. Well, your father and I are looking forward to having you home for the summer. We met someone terrific that we want you to meet. He's quite an attractive, nice, young man who is the son of one of our members at church. His name is Chad, and he's a junior in college. He's anxious to meet you."

"Actually, Mom, I wanted to talk to you and Dad about my summer plans. Is he home?"

"Of course. Let me get him on the phone."

A moment later he joined the call. "Hello, Layla. How's my girl?"

"I'm all right. I actually called, because I have something important to tell you two."

"What's that?" he asked.

"Hannah and I have decided to live together over the summer. We got a place in D.C. and are going to spend the time touring the city and doing volunteer work."

"Exactly how did you plan on affording that? We don't have the resources to get you your own place for the summer, and not only that, we're not inclined to just let you go to a completely different city without supervision. I'm sorry, Layla, but that's not going to happen," he said seriously.

"Actually it's already been arranged, Dad, and is at no cost to you."

"I'm still not going to let you go without an adult to supervise."

"I'm almost a senior in college. I don't need a babysitter."

"Who is paying for all this?" her mother asked.

Layla paused in answer. She knew she had to tell the truth. It was time to stop hiding, because she was scared. "Hannah and I are going at the invitation of the royal family."

"What?" her father exclaimed. "Have you been talking to the princess when we explicitly told you not to?"

"I've become friends with the queens and all the princesses over the last several months, but it was Princess Anastasia that invited Hannah and me to spend the summer with them."

"Absolutely not! We forbid it! Surely Hannah's parents have a problem with this!"

"Actually they think it's a great idea. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity, and I'm not turning it down," she said with quiet but firm resolve.

"Oh yes you are! You will not go anywhere near the royal family! They are a bunch of degenerates that deserve their lives in hell! I will not allow you to become one of them! God struck Princess Anastasia with her injuries, because she's immoral! She deserved what she got! You will not be anywhere around her!"

"Don't you ever speak about her like that again!" Layla screamed. "She almost died defending our country and saving other people's lives! She's a hero, and she's the woman I love! I will not have you speaking about her like that in my presence ever again! Your hate doesn't scare me anymore!"

"You're coming home when the semester is over or else we're not paying for your schooling anymore!" he threatened.

"I'm going to D.C. to spend the summer with my girlfriend, and I don't care if you threaten to disown me or pull my funding from school. The princess has made it very clear that she will give me whatever I need."

"Oh dear God. Say it's not true, Layla. Tell us you're not involved with that woman," her mother pleaded.

She could hear her mother's tears even through the phone. "I am, Mom. I've been dating Princess Anastasia since last summer," she said calmly. "I love her, and I want to spend the rest of my life with her. She has said the same thing about me. I'm going to marry her. I wish you could be happy for me in that I found real love and someone who accepts me exactly as I am. She's the most amazing person I've ever known."

"This is your last chance, Layla! You will come home! If you don't, you risk losing us! It's your choice! You can either choose to live this life full of immorality by being with her, or you can choose God and stay with us!"

Layla could feel the tears in her own eyes. She knew the threat of losing them was always there, but it hurt to have her father say it. As she began to cry, she said, "I'm not coming home. I lost you a long time ago, because I've never lived up to this vision you had for me. This is my life, Dad, and I'm making my choice to live it with the royal family. They have welcomed me wholeheartedly from the moment I met them, and they've given me more emotional support in the last year than you ever have. If you choose to live without me, that is your choice, but this is mine. I wish you could be happy for me."

There was no response for a moment, but Layla heard one of her parents slam down the phone in her ear. "Layla," her mother softly said.

"Yes?" Both women were crying.

"Layla, you're my child, and I want you to be happy, but this is wrong. It's against God's will. You can't do this."

"It's not against His will. He made me like this in his image, and to honor him I'm living the life he designed for me, Mom."

"We can't support you if this is the life you choose. Are you really prepared to walk away from your family?"

"Anastasia is my family. I wish you would be, too."

There was silence for another moment before her mother softly said, "I'll always pray for you, Layla, and I'll miss you so much, but this is the end. You heard your father."

"I heard him."

"And you're absolutely sure?"

"There is no other choice," she replied. "I can't have Anastasia and you, and I'm not living without her. She asked me to marry her, Mom, and I said yes. I'm not ever going to change my mind about this."

"Then I'll pray for her as well. I have to hang up now."

"Good bye, Mom," she whispered in tears.

There was no response, only the dial tone. Putting her phone aside, Layla curled up on her bed and wept. An hour passed before she felt calm enough to call Anastasia to relay the news of how things went with her parents, but as soon as she heard her fiancée's voice on the other end of the line, the tears started afresh.

"Layla, sweetheart, what is the matter?" Anastasia softly inquired.

"I finally told my parents about us," she cried. "It was awful. They hate me."

"I am sure they do not hate you, darling."

"They never want to see me again. They've disowned me, Stasia. My own parents," she wept.

"I am so sorry, Layla. I wish there was something I could do. I wish I was there to hold you."

"Me too. I need your arms around me right now. This is too much to bear. How could they do this to me?"

"You always said this was a possibility."

"I know, but they actually did it, Stasia. My father actually told me it was either you or them, and then he slammed the phone down in my ear when I chose you. They'll never talk to me again. I knew this could happen. I just didn't know it would hurt this much to actually be abandoned," she whispered as the tears continued to flood over her face.

"You are not abandoned. You have a family, my family. We all love you so much, Layla, and we will always be here for you."

"I know. I love you more than you could ever know."

The couple just sat on the phone for a while. Anastasia felt helpless to assist her girlfriend with her pain. She couldn't fathom what it might be like to be renounced by her parents for such a disagreement. Her mothers had always supported her, even if they did not always agree with her decisions. She couldn't comprehend how Layla could be discarded so flippantly over such a

divergence of her beliefs from theirs. She felt inadequate to provide solace to her fiancée, but she tried her best to be there for her through the distance.

"I love you," the princess whispered. "And I am going to spend the rest of my life making you happy, Layla. You deserve that. You deserve the best, and I am sorry they cannot see that as well."

"You already make me so happy, and I'm so glad I have you. That's the only reason I can bear this."

"Is Hannah there? Can she at least sit with you awhile? I hate being away from you at a moment like this."

"She's at the library studying for finals."

"Do you want me to get on a plane and come down there?"

"I know you can't do that right now. You're busy, and besides I have finals to study for."

"I love you and am here for you, sweetie, now and always. You mean absolutely everything to me, Layla. I would do anything to spare you this heartbreak if I could."

"I know, but there is nothing anyone can do. I just have to try to carry on the best I can. I've made my choice, and I chose you. I chose life and freedom from fear. I know it was the right thing. I just have to cling to that now. It's all I have," she softly said.

The couple stayed on the phone for the next hour just talking about other things and trying not to dwell too much on what had taken place. However, when Hannah returned to the room, her best friend's red-rimmed eyes told her Layla had been crying. "How'd it go?" she whispered.

"Hold on. I'll tell you all about it after I get off with Stasia," she replied. Turning her voice into the phone she said, "Hannah's back now. I need to go."

"All right. Always remember that I love you, Layla. I will stop at nothing to ensure your happiness."

"I know, and I love you. I'll talk to you later tonight." When she hung up the phone, she sighed and looked at her friend.

"How bad was it?" Hannah inquired.

Layla started to cry once again as she thought about how to describe it. "It hurt more than I could ever explain. They disowned me."

"Oh, Layla," she said, dropping onto the bed next to her friend. "I'm so sorry."

"They refuse to acknowledge that I'm happier than I have ever been, and they refuse to concede their belief that God thinks it's immoral. They think I'm going to hell, and they think God inflicted Stasia with her injuries, because she's gay."

"Did they actually say that?"

She nodded slowly. "It's hopeless. They're gone. In my whole life I didn't think this would really happen. I thought the threat was there, and I thought my father might try to do this, but there was a part of me that thought my mother wouldn't let me go. I thought if faced with the idea of never seeing me again, she might try, but she didn't. She didn't even fight him for me," she whispered as she curled up into a ball on top of the bed and clutched her pillow. Hannah lay next to her and curved an arm around her waist. The two friends cried in silence, one over her loss and the other for her friend's pain.

"I'm always here for you, Layla. I love you like you were my own sister."

"I love you, too, Hannah. You and Stasia are all I have."

"We can be enough to sustain you through this. I know we can. She is going to make you so happy as a wife. She can give you everything."

"Except my parents' love and acceptance. That will never come now."

"Even if it doesn't, you're strong. You can get through this. All of us have disappointments in life, but they shouldn't impede our dreams. This is your dream. God has given you this gift of love in Anastasia. Cherish it for what it is, and let know no one come between you."

Turning over her shoulder, she smiled at her friend through her tears. "Thank you for truly understanding."

"Now if only I could be so lucky as to fall in love with a royal. Not much chance for that, though, is there?" she joked lightly.

Chapter XI: Stepping into the Light

When the semester was over, Layla headed straight to D.C. for her summer vacation since her parents didn't want anything to do with her. The loss of them was acute, even if expected, and she often cried over the fact she would never see them again. However, there was also a certain freedom she felt in being true to herself finally and not living in the fear of their disapproval. She just hated that they refused to remain a part of her life. However, Princess Anastasia was even more attentive to her girlfriend, knowing she was taking the development especially hard.

The two of them stayed at the royal family's country castle for the week before Hannah arrived. While Anastasia was still confined to her wheelchair part of the day, she took great effort to walk

whenever she could with her crutches and even managed to take the stairs slowly one at a time for practice. Layla was immensely proud of her fiancée's progress. Her upper body no longer shook when she walked with the crutches, which made watching her much easier. However, she did notice that her left leg still trembled with each step while her right seemed somewhat more stable. Layla knew there was still a long road ahead for Anastasia, but the princess was truly focused on making a full recovery, so she did not feel overly concerned with it.

Upon Hannah's arrival the princess took the blondes to their furnished apartment that they would inhabit for the summer. It was located at one of the most sophisticated hotels in the city that was in close proximity to the palace and the princess's home. When the car pulled up in semi-circular drive, a doorman stepped to the car. The security detail however opened the door for the princess and her guests and then retrieved the blondes' bags. Slowly the three of them headed into the building with Anastasia setting the slow pace. As soon as they were inside, all the staff was there to greet them with respectful bows for the princess before the manager approached.

"Your highness, it is an honor to have you with us today. I am Duncan Freedman, the hotel manager."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Freedman. This is Layla Stone and Hannah Winston, the two women that will be staying with you for the summer."

"It is a pleasure to meet you both and welcome. My staff is at your complete service. The suite you asked for, your highness, is ready."

"Then please show us."

He snapped his fingers at his staff that immediately began to move. Some came to take the luggage from security while the rest returned to their duties. "Would you be more comfortable in a chair, your highness?" he questioned carefully.

She shook her head. "I am fine. Thank you for offering."

The entire entourage moved to the elevator and took it to the top floor of the hotel. When the manager stepped out, he led the way to the door and opened it. "Here we are. The royal suite, specifically designed for heads of state, foreign dignitaries, and friends of the royal family. This suite comes fully staffed with maid service, a personal chef, and a concierge at your disposal twenty-four hours a day. Our goal is to ensure you do not ever want for anything, Ms. Stone and Ms. Winston. We want this to be your home for the summer."

"Stasia, this is incredible," Layla exclaimed as she went to the window.

"There is a view of the palace and one of the gardens here on this side," Duncan said. "And on the other side of the suite there is a view of the princess's residence. Over here we have a view of some of the museums and memorials on our public green. This is by far one of the best views in the city."

"I'd say. Stasia, this is too much," Hannah said. "You didn't have to go through all this effort for us."

"Of course I did. You two are some of my closest friends, and I would not have it any other way." Turning to the manager she said, "These two women are to have everything they want. I will not spare any expense."

"Yes, your highness. I will make sure they are always completely comfortable here."

"Thank you. I think now they would just like to settle into their new space."

He nodded at her and smiled. "Very well. Here are the keys to the suite. Once again, Ms. Winston and Ms. Stone, please do not hesitate to call on my staff or me. We are at your service. Enjoy your stay."

Once he left and security had stepped outside of the suite to guard the door, Layla came to her girlfriend. Slipping her arms around her, she said, "This place is magnificent. Thank you for doing this for us."

"It is my pleasure. You know I would give you anything," she replied leaning down to kiss her. Digging into her pocket, she pulled out Layla's engagement ring. "Perhaps you would do me the honor of wearing your ring this summer?" she asked, slipping it onto her fiancée's hand.

Hannah came to look at it on her best friend's ring finger. "My God! That ring is huge!" she exclaimed, grabbing her friend's hand. "How many karats is that?"

"I did not want it to be ostentatious," the princess said. "Do you think it is too large?"

Hannah shook her head and smiled. "Diamonds could never be too large," she joked.

"Well, Layla has small hands, so I did not think going over three karats for the main stone was appropriate. It has to be something that matches the royal wedding bands as well. This is the best complement I could get for someone with petite fingers."

"It's stunning," Hannah mentioned.

"And one more thing for you to welcome you home," she said, pulling another box from her other pocket.

"Stasia, you spoil me."

"You deserve all of this and more. You are going to be a princess, so you might as well get used to me giving you things."

Opening the box, she smiled at what was inside. "They're beautiful."

"To match you bracelet," Anastasia noted as her girlfriend pulled out the blue and clear diamond earrings.

Layla kissed Anastasia again. "Thank you. Now would you like to help me unpack?" Layla asked with a mischievous grin.

The princess grinned. "Most definitely. Come on. Let us see what your options are for sleeping accommodations."

The three women toured the suite before deciding that Hannah would take the room that overlooked the palace. It was spacious with a king-sized bed and separate sitting area and bathroom. On the other side of the suite, Layla picked a similar room that overlooked Anastasia's house in the distance. With that the princess and Layla went into their room and shut the door while Hannah began unpacking her belongings on the other side of the suite.

The princess reclined on the bed while her girlfriend began to unpack her bags. Anastasia gazed at every little move she made in silence as she thought about how much time they were going to get to spend together over the summer. It would be by far the most amount of time they'd ever been together with the opportunity to see each other almost every single day for three months. To her it seemed like bliss. Twenty minutes later the blonde was finished with her things and came to the bed. However instead of taking a seat on it, she crawled upwards from the bottom covering Anastasia's body as she went until she hovered over her. They smiled at each other.

"What are you thinking about?" Layla softly asked as Anastasia cupped her face.

"How incredibly happy I am right now. Thank you for agreeing to spend the summer with me."

"Thank you for inviting me," she whispered before leaning down to kiss the redhead's mouth.

The two of them brought each other closer as their lips melded into a tighter lock. Anastasia moaned at the feeling of Layla's small frame against her own. Even though she had felt it just earlier that morning when she awoke, it made her heart start pounding. Her fingers snuck under the hem of her girlfriend's top to her lower back to feel some of the skin.

"Hannah's here," Layla lightly admonished.

"Hannah is going to have to get used to us being in bed," the princess growled playfully, rolling them over, so the blonde was underneath her larger form, causing Layla to giggle.

The two of them made out for about twenty minutes before Layla managed to push Anastasia away. "Come on. It's her first day here. She's probably waiting on me to come out of my room."

With a playful sigh, the princess rose from the bed. Both of them went back out into the living area of the suite where Hannah was sitting on the sofa reading a book. She smiled at the two of them. "I didn't realize you had so many clothes to put away," she teased.

Layla blushed but didn't comment. Instead Anastasia said, "I think we should have lunch at the palace, so Hannah can meet my family. Your volunteer schedules are at my office. I took the liberty of having Madeline coordinate your schedules, so you two could work the same shifts and be off together. You work Tuesday through Thursday and are open the rest of the time. My schedule is always most open on the weekends, so I made sure your weekends were available as well. Also I have another surprise for you."

"What's that?"

"I made sure your entire month of July was clear, because my sisters and I would like to take you two on a cruise on the royal yacht. We will be traveling the eastern and southern coastlines, starting in Maine and going all the way to Texas. It would give us all time to relax in privacy. We will stop in different ports and spend time in some of our marvelous cities. How does that sound?"

"It sounds totally amazing!" Hannah exclaimed.

"If you two would like to pick the cities for the itinerary, I would be happy to oblige you in any stops you would like to make. I already have several places in mind, so it would be equal to about two or three stops a week."

"Wow! I can't wait." Coming to the princess, Hannah curved an arm around her waist. "Are you sure you don't want a second wife to go with the first? I'd be happy to volunteer," she joked.

Anastasia laughed before dropping a kiss on her cheek. "The Washington women already have two loves in their lives, and their wives comes second," she replied.

"What comes first then?" Hannah asked curiously.

"Her country," Layla replied for her girlfriend.

Anastasia smiled at her. "Spoken like a true Washington. This is why I made the perfect choice, Hannah. Layla understands me and loves me just as I am."

"Without a doubt," Hannah said.

The rest of the afternoon was spent at the palace spending time with the royal family. As Anastasia expected, her sisters took an immediately liking to Hannah's easygoing nature, and by the end of the day the six young women were chatting like they had known each other all their lives.

During the month of June the best friends spent part of their time volunteering at a children's hospital in the city. Anastasia respected the fact that the two of them might want to spend time together and not be with her every possible moment, so she often gave them space to do what they wanted. The two of them took the time to see the museums and tourist attractions together since it was easier to get around town without the princesses, but they almost always had dinner

with Anastasia and her sisters at the very least and many times the queens as well. Then in the evenings the princess would often go back to their suite with them. She didn't always intend to spend the night there, but more often than not, Layla would convince her of the merits of falling asleep in each other's arms which outweighed anything she had going on at home.

However, it was finally decided that the princesses wanted to take the two blondes out, so she gave them options on where they could go on such short notice. "We could have dinner and see a play or hear the symphony. Would that be of interest to you?" she asked Layla and Hannah as they lounged around her house one day.

"Either one sounds like a lot of fun, but we don't have anything to wear. We didn't pack anything formal," Layla mentioned. "You didn't say anything about bringing formal clothes, Stasia."

"I can take care of that problem for you. Just tell me your dress and shoe sizes, and you will have choices here before you in an hour."

Sliding her arms around Anastasia's waist, Layla smiled. "You are so incredibly good to me."

"You certainly deserve it," she replied softly, leaning down to kiss the woman in her arms while Hannah did her best to pretend to be reading her magazine and ignored them. For a moment they were lost in their exchange until the butler opened the door to the study to bring them an afternoon snack.

He had the decency to blush a little and smile. "I am terribly sorry, Stasia," he apologized.

The heir chuckled a little. "It is fine. Do not worry. This may take some getting used to," she said, squeezing Layla for emphasis.

"But what a lovely addition regardless," he complimented. "The country longs to see you with someone," he added. "Now that you are out of school, everyone wonders when you are going to settle down and have your own princesses."

The redhead flushed at the comments. "Do not wed me just yet," she teased. "That time will come soon enough. Do me a favor. Let Lydia know that I need to see her."

"Certainly."

They waited for Lydia to appear, which happened several minutes later. "Stasia, what do you need assistance with?" she inquired.

"I need you to make some phone calls for me. We would like to go out this evening with my sisters for dinner and to either the symphony or theater. I need you to call Maddy to make those arrangements. While you are on the phone with her, I need you to get the names of the designers my sisters use for their formal gowns. Layla and Hannah need some clothes for the evening. Call them and have them come to the house with dresses for them to try. Make sure they bring shoes and accessories as well."

"Certainly. Layla, Hannah, may I inquire as to your sizes?" she asked, going to the desk in the den and pulling out a piece of paper and a pen. Layla looked at her girlfriend shyly before looking back at Lydia. Sensing her timidity in revealing such intimate information in front of the princess, she suggested, "Perhaps you would like to write them down?" When both women had done so, Lydia left them alone.

"It should not take too long until you have choices before you," Anastasia said.

That evening Anastasia dressed in her room for their night out while Layla and Hannah did the same in the guestrooms. Madeline had taken the liberty of sending over the younger princesses' stylist to help the blondes dress and prepare her hair and makeup for which Anastasia was thankful. Her Secretary of Affairs had also sent over some jewelry at the princess's request for her fiancée to wear.

When Anastasia was finished dressing, she went back to the den to wait. She was just looking at herself in the mirror and straightening the collar of her tuxedo shirt when she heard the door open, and Layla slowly walked into the room. The blonde was dressed in a black evening gown, which bared her shoulders and the slopes of her breasts. Her shoulder-length blonde hair was pinned up elegantly off her neck, leaving the brilliant diamond necklace that had belonged to the royal family for generations on display around her attractive neckline. She just stood there fidgeting with the black clutch in her hands.

"You look amazing, so beautiful," the princess softly complimented.

Layla blushed. "You really think so?"

"Absolutely. I can hardly speak. Will you turn around, so I can get the full effect?" Layla did as requested, slightly picking up the hem of her flowing dress and slowly turning. As she did Anastasia was greeted with the sight of a gorgeous mostly bare back. When they met eyes again, the blonde could see the effect she was having on the redhead, which pleased her greatly. "You are stunning. You look like a princess," she joked with a smile.

"I feel like a princess," she admitted, putting her hand over the necklace. "Are you sure I can wear this? I don't want your mother to be upset."

"I want you to wear it. My mom lets my sisters wear it all the time. It belonged to my great-grandmother, Queen Lara. Apparently it was a gift to her from Queen Alexa when she was pregnant with my grandmother, Queen Faith."

"It's beautiful."

"Just like you," Anastasia whispered, crossing the room on her crutches to reach her lover's side. She sighed. "It will be extremely difficult to keep my hands to myself with the way you look tonight. I want everyone to know how lucky I am."

"I'm lucky too," she said, caressing Anastasia through her tuxedo jacket. "You look good in a tuxedo."

"The remaining question is tie or no tie, though. What do you think?"

"I like the bowtie," she said, pulling at the ends of the white satin material a little to straighten it a bit. "You look sexy," she whispered with a little grin.

Anastasia flashed a smile. "I like the way you say that. It makes me feel incredible."

Stepping closer so their bodies were brushing together, Layla quietly said, "You're so sexy, Stasia."

The princess moaned a little at the feeling of her girlfriend's body against hers, as well as her words. Instinctively one of her hands touched Layla on the back, which shot jolts of electricity up her arm at the feeling of the smooth bare skin. "Have I mentioned how much I really want you?" she asked.

Layla chuckled a little. "Yes but you know the rules."

"I am not sure I do actually," she replied in jest. "Jewelry did not seem to do it," she teased.

"Oh, on the contrary, jewelry will do it. It just has to be a certain type," Layla said playing along with the game.

Taking her girlfriend's left hand, she kissed the tip of her ring finger. "Something tells me it has to do with a second ring that would reside on this finger."

"You would be right," she whispered. Her pulse began to race as the princess tenderly kissed the tips of her other fingers before clasping the hand in her own.

"We should go. It is going to be a long evening. Where is Hannah?"

"She's coming. She just wants to make sure she looks perfect."

Dinner was the first stop on their agenda. They made it to the restaurant without much fanfare, but there was a lull in conversation in the place as the six women were shown to their private table. Everyone's eyes were on them, but being used to it, Anastasia and her sisters ignored it. However Layla and Hannah were unable to do so. They were uncomfortable with everyone staring at them.

"Just try to relax," came the quiet directive from across the small table. "They just have never seen you before in our presence and are curious about you. Ignore them the best you can, and they will eventually do the same. Security will keep people from coming up to the table, so you will not have to speak to anyone."

Layla tried to take the advice and was marginally successful. It was proving to be a difficult outing for her ,between being seen in public with the princess and having to pretend their relationship was only platonic. However, the food and company were terrific, and she was happy to be out of their confinement of the hotel.

As their meal came to a close, security came to their table. "Stasia, the press is out front. We're going to try to sneak you all out the backdoor. There are only a few reporters loitering out there in the alley, so I think it'll be safer."

Anastasia nodded. "Thank you. Just let us know when you are ready for us to go."

"The maitre d' will be coming to escort you into the kitchen where you will wait for our signal."

"Fine. As soon as the bill is settled, we will be ready."

"It's already settled. Let us know when you're finished here."

When they were ready to leave, the maitre d' escorted the group to the restaurant's kitchen where they lingered by the back door. "Welcome to the least glamorous part of my world. I often have to sneak out through the backdoors or freight elevators of places."

"That must be difficult."

"Just to prepare you. There were will many cameras taking pictures and people asking you questions when we walk outside. Say nothing. Just get in the car. I will be directly behind you."

Layla nodded. A few minutes later members of the royal security team came in, strategically positioned themselves around the group, and moved them outside. Just as Anastasia had said, flashes of cameras went wild as soon as they stepped into the alley and people started shouting to get their attention. Layla and Hannah ignored them all as instructed and ducked into the back of the limousine. Even after they were securely in the car with the doors closed, the commotion continued until they were underway.

"So that happens everywhere you go?" Hannah asked.

"It always happens when we are out in public for recreational reasons. Sometimes they leave me alone if I am going to the Capitol or something. That is just business, and they do not have much interest in that. They are more interested in who is keeping us company in our beds," she answered for her and her sisters.

"They would probably be shocked to know that you have turned toward celibacy since meeting me."

"Not entirely out of choice mind you," she joked. "If I thought for a moment that I could have you, I would do my best to do so. However, I respect your moral fortitude, even if it means I do

not get a chance to feel all this gloriously soft skin against mine," she whispered, caressing her girlfriend's forearm as her lips snuck into her girlfriend's neck.

"I think you're determined to ruin me," she said with a little giggle as she gently pushed her off in front of their company.

"I am determined to love you," she amended as their mouths met.

"Get a room, you two," teased Victoria. "Much more of that and you will not be fit to be seen."

Breaking apart from each other, they focused on their company and spent their short drive to the theater just chatting as a group. When the car pulled up in front of the theater, some of them took a moment to freshen up before the back door was opened for them. Fortunately when they stepped from the car, the press had not caught up with their motorcade yet, leaving them with just a sea of curious onlookers as they made their way inside. The royal family had their own box at the theater, which is where they were taken by security. Once in privacy they took their seats and continued to talk until the program began.

During the intermission Anastasia asked, "How are you enjoying the evening?"

"I'm having a great time. This is fun."

"It's so incredible," Hannah added.

"Well, we could venture outside our box here to the VIP lounge for some champagne if you want, but we will probably get flooded with attention. However, it is a select group of patrons of the theater, so we might be able to negotiate it well enough. It is up to you, though."

"We could try it. I would like to walk around a bit."

"All right. Just remember, constant denial of anything but friendship," she reminded.

"Got it."

"All right. Let us go."

Walking to the door, the princesses led the way out of their box. Security escorted them to the lounge area. People immediately began to stare as they entered, but Anastasia ignored it as she went to the bar for beverages. They stood by themselves for a few moments with champagne before an older gentleman and lady approached.

"Your highnesses," he greeted with a bow. "What an honor it is to have you here this evening. I'm Derrick Malone, the theater manager. We've met previously."

"Of course, Mr. Malone. I remember," Anastasia said with a smile.

"This is my wife, Ashley."

"Your highnesses," she said with a bow of her own.

"A pleasure, Mrs. Malone. May I present my friends, Layla Stone and Hannah Winston. I believe you know my sisters."

"It is a pleasure, Ms. Stone and Ms. Winston," he said.

"What a beautiful necklace, Ms. Stone," she added.

"Thank you," she replied, looking at the princess.

The fivesome began chatting amiably as the younger princesses wandered across the room, but after a few minutes a photographer approached them asking for a picture. "He is doing this for me. We are trying to get some additional funding for the arts," Derrick said. "Do you mind having your picture taken, your highness?"

She shook her head. "No. That is fine."

Gesturing to the younger women, he suggested, "Perhaps one of the three of you together."

With a smile Anastasia countered, "I have a better idea. How about one of the three of us?" She quickly passed her champagne to Layla and then moved toward the other couple. When the photograph had been taken, they chatted a few more moments before they were left alone again.

"I would have taken the picture with you," the blonde mentioned.

"The fewer the photos of us right now the better. The press already got enough of us tonight. You two will be making tomorrow's front page. I do not wish to exacerbate the issue."

The second half of the play passed without much ordeal, but once again they had to sneak out the back way as to avoid as much press as possible. The media followed their car back to the hotel where the two blondes were staying but were kept at bay by security as the three went into the hotel.

Duncan Freedman was there to greet them when they made it inside. "How was your evening, your highness and ladies?" he asked.

"Wonderful," Layla answered.

"It was great fun," Hannah added. "But I think we are going to retire for the evening."

"Very well. Have a pleasant rest of the evening. Good night."

As they got into the elevator, Anastasia's phone began to ring. She was surprised to hear Matthew Franks, her mother's Secretary of Affairs on the other end of her phone. He explained that he was calling on her mother's behalf, wanting to know if the princess and Layla would be at the palace tomorrow and had requested to see the two of them together.

"Then of course we will be there. We were planning on coming in the morning. Let her know, will you?"

"Certainly. Good night, Stasia."

"Good night, Matthew. See you tomorrow."

"What was that about?" Layla asked, seeing her girlfriend's face.

"My mother asked to see the two of us tomorrow. I wonder what she wants."

The following morning when they had eaten breakfast and dressed for the day they headed over to the palace. Queen Alexa was sitting in her office with Matthew and Madeline when they entered. Both stood as the princess came in.

"Good morning. You asked to see us, Mother."

"Yes, I did. I hope you two had a pleasant evening out last night."

"We did. It was nice to be out of the privacy of the palace for a while. Why did you want to see us?"

The queen gestured for the three of them to be left alone and then waited until they were. "Sit down," she said, gesturing to the sofa across the room. As they walked over to take a seat, she also moved to a chair near it.

Anastasia could see a paper tucked under her mother's arm and assumed she knew what her mother was about to say. "Are we in trouble for going out?" she asked lightly, seeing that her mother seemed somewhat more serious than normal.

"Of course not but I am concerned about something," she said, dropping the paper down on the coffee table face up where there was a photograph of the two young women and next to it the two queens. "I know you were aware of the risks of taking Layla and Hannah with your sisters out last night, but there is one small yet significant detail you did not contemplate."

"Which was?"

"The necklace," she replied. Her voice took on a stern tone as she said, "Layla is wearing my grandmother's necklace. You did not even think about what the press would make of that, did you?"

Anastasia dropped her head a little. "No, Mother. I did not."

Seeing her girlfriend feeling bad, Layla tried to offer up her own apology. "I'm so sorry, Alexa. I never would have worn it if I knew it would upset you."

Alexa shook her head and turned a softer gaze on the blonde. "Do not misunderstand me, Layla. I am pleased someone was able to wear it, and it looks beautiful on you. I do not take issue with that. I want that to be clear. My concern is the fact that by allowing you to wear the necklace Anastasia has sent a message to the media. Look at the photographs, ladies. Queen Lauren and Layla are wearing the same necklace in these photographs. The press picked up on that immediately. You two need to do some PR control right now. I was already going to tell you this last night when I saw the two of you on the news last night, but now it is worse. You now have two choices here. You two need to put out an adamant denial of your relationship now and invent a plausible reason for Layla to have been wearing this necklace, or you need to introduce your fiancée to the world now. You know denial is the only way for Layla to have any peace, Stasia."

The princess nodded. "I understand, and we will issue a denial. I am sorry, Mother."

She shook her head and gave a gentle smile. "You will have to make some adjustments to make this secret relationship work, but I have to say that I am happy you two have each other. Layla, you are a lovely young lady, and Stasia, I just want your happiness. You just need to make a strategy of how you are going to deal with the new attention Layla may be getting in response to this development. For the most peace, denial, regardless of how hard it can be, is the best solution."

"We will handle it, Mother. Thank you for your advice."

"If you need me to do anything, please let me know. I would be happy to help further." All three of them stood. Giving the blonde a genuine smile once again, the queen took Layla's hand and said, "I am happy my daughter has found you. I can tell you are like the sun in her life. You bring her warmth and happiness while giving her the ability to grow into something greater than she already is. It takes a special woman to encourage a princess into growth. I should know. I am fortunate to have such a woman myself. A princess needs a partner who respects her as she is, challenges her on what she believes, and helps her flourish into the best leader she can be. I can clearly see that is what you are for Anastasia."

Layla flushed badly at the extraordinary compliment that had just been extended to her by her sovereign. "Thank you, Alexa," she softly replied, continuing to blush as the queen dropped a maternally tender kiss on her cheek.

When the two young women left the queen's office, Layla put a hand up to her cheek. "I guess I really am in if your mother just kissed me," she joked.

"She is smitten," Anastasia teased with a laugh. "I just hope I am a better kisser than she is."

Smiling at her girlfriend, Layla looped an arm through Anastasia's. "You are the best kisser ever."

"How would you know? You only have my mother and me to compare against each other," she joked.

"She kisses like a mother, but your kiss turns me on from my head to my toes."

"Good to know," she replied with a smile.

Toward the end of June Hannah and Layla had decided to go visit Hannah's parents in New Hampshire for a long weekend before the anticipated cruise the princess had promised. On the night before they were scheduled to leave, Layla and Anastasia had retired early for the evening. The two quickly found themselves wrapped up in each other's arms exploring their deepening relationship for hours before the princess drifted to sleep. Layla, however, still had a few things to do before bed that night, like packing for her trip to Hannah's parents' house, so she began to do so for their four-day excursion. Every once in awhile she looked over to the woman sleeping in her bed. It never ceased to amaze her how incredibly fortunate she was to have the princess, but there was still part of her that missed her parents. A little while later there was a soft knock on her door. She glanced over at Anastasia who merely groaned in her sleep and turned onto her side away from the door, leaving her bare back on display. Quietly going to answer it, Layla opened it to find her best friend dressed in her pajamas.

Hannah looked at the sleeping princess before smiling at her friend. "Wearing out the heir, are we?" she teased.

Layla blushed. "It's not what it looks like," she softly answered.

"Oh really? You mean you're not having sex with her?" she joked.

"No. I haven't even seen her naked."

"That's not naked?" she questioned with a grin.

"She has a pair of shorts on under there," she defended. "Now did you come here for someone other reason than to harass me?"

With a nod Hannah said, "I just wanted to know if you needed to put anything in my bag before I went to bed. We have such an early start tomorrow. We're supposed to leave at 5:00."

"I managed to get it all in two bags, but thanks anyway," she said softly.

"Are you all right?" she questioned, seeing the contemplative look on her friend's face.

"I'm fine. I was just thinking about my parents before you knocked."

"I know it's hard, but I'm really happy you have Stasia and her family."

"Me too. I'm not sure I could do this without her."

"All right. Well, I'm going to bed," she said. The two women hugged for a moment. "Good night. Kiss the princess for me," she teased.

Layla smiled and chuckled a little. "Good night, Hannah."

Early the next morning all three women got up at the same time for breakfast. Hannah was still in her playful mood from the night before, even on just a few hours of sleep. "So how did you two sleep?"

"Fine," Layla mumbled into her coffee.

"Quite well. Thank you for asking. You?"

She cracked a grin as she took a sip of her coffee. "I slept well and had dreams of a hot naked redhead," she teased.

Layla choked a little on her toast at the comment. "Are you all right?" Anastasia asked, not knowing it was the comment that had caused her fiancée to choke.

"I'm fine," she replied, glaring at her friend, a look that didn't go unnoticed by the princess.

"Is something going on between you two?"

Layla shook her head, but Hannah gave another smile. "Oh, Layla just let me see you naked while you were asleep," she teased. "It gave me pleasant dreams."

Anastasia laughed while Layla blushed. "Is that all?" she asked. "My, my, it does not take much to make my girl blush, does it?" Hannah continued to laugh along with the princess. Playing along for a bit, she asked, "So, I take it from your dream that you liked what you saw. I hope it was my good side at least."

"It was just your back," Layla defended.

"I'm sure you don't have a bad side. Seeing all that did make me wish I had one of those, though," she joked.

The princess chuckled. "Sorry. You would have to be all right with being with a woman and someone your junior to snag another Washington. I am sure Camille would be interested."

"Seventeen is a bit young. Granted she does have a hot body," she said with a smile.

"Hannah!" Layla exclaimed.

"What? Why can't I appreciate it?"

"You absolutely can," Anastasia said. "I just did not think you were inclined that way."

Hannah shrugged. "I suppose being around the two of you is rubbing off on me," she joked.

"Are you serious?" Layla inquired. "Are you having feelings for women?"

Hannah shrugged again. "Would it be bad if that were the case?"

"Not at all. I would like to have you in the fold," Anastasia said with a smile. "We just want you to be happy."

"Well, I am beginning to wonder. The men in my life certainly have never done it for me. Why not try women on for size?"

"This is not something you just try on though, is it?" Layla asked. "Surely you have an inclination whether or not you are truly interested in women."

Hannah nodded. "All right. My curiosity has been aroused. Your girlfriend saw to that," she said with a teasing smile.

Layla sat there quietly for a moment. "If that is really the case, you could not do better than Camille."

"She is good looking. I'll give you that, but she seems kind of quiet, though."

"Not once you get to know her. Think about it," Layla encouraged.

"She is almost eighteen," Anastasia added.

Hannah shook her head. "She's too young, but she is cute." Then she added, "Of course so is David Mitchell. Talk about tall, dark, and handsome. Although he's another mysteriously quiet one."

"David is the truest friend a person could have. He is loyal and kind. He saved my life. That tells me all I need to know about what kind of person he is," Anastasia said.

"He would be a good match for you," Layla said with a smile. "He's a sweet guy."

Anastasia nodded in agreement. "Both of them will be on the cruise with us, so that will give you ample opportunity to get to know each of them better. Maybe I could put your room in between theirs, and you can just wander back and forth across that fence all you want," she joked, making both of the blondes laugh.

At exactly 5:00 the girls told Anastasia good bye and headed to the airport on their way to New Hampshire to see Hannah's parents. "This might be one of the last times you're ever on a commercial plane, so enjoy coach class while you can," Hannah teased her friend.

Layla chuckled a bit but then conceded, "You're probably right. Big changes are coming soon. I just don't know if I'm ready for them."

"Are you kidding me? This has been the most incredible month already. I can't wait for the cruise next week."

"Yeah, it has been incredible. I just see how the family deals with the press all the time. That'll be a tough change."

"But she's totally worth it, Layla. I've never seen you as happy as you are when you're with her."

"I am happy with her. I just wish my parents could see that."

Hannah nodded and looped her arm through her friend's. "Maybe they'll come around."

"You have more hope than I do," she mumbled. "They were adamant in their decision."

"Give it time. You never know. They may come around, but even if they don't, you have a family in Stasia's and mine."

For the first two days the two women hung out with Hannah's family enjoying themselves. However, early in the morning on the third day the family was all sitting around having breakfast when a loud commotion diverted their attention outside. Hannah's father went into the front room and opened the blinds to see what was happening.

"Oh my goodness," he said, quickly closing them again. "We have a problem."

"What is it? What's the matter?" Hannah's mother inquired as he came back into the kitchen.

"There's a hoard of people standing outside our house, and most of them have cameras." He looked at Layla. "Is there something you girls need to tell us?"

Hannah got up from the table and went to look out the window herself. "Layla, he's right. The press is outside. This is bad."

"What could they possibly want, girls?" he asked.

Hannah's mother looked at the two blondes before asking, "Does this have to do with Princess Anastasia and that gigantic ring you're wearing, Layla?"

"It might," she conceded, looking at her best friend. "Did you tell anyone? You're the only one that knows."

"I swear I didn't tell anyone. I would never do that," Hannah frantically asserted. "Who else knows? The royal family would never say anything. You and I haven't said anything. Are you sure no one else knows?"

"I told my parents, but they're ashamed of me. They wouldn't tell the media. They think I'm a degenerate going to hell, because Anastasia and I are engaged. That's not something they want people to know."

"You're marrying the princess?" Hannah's mother inquired with a smile. "Congratulations!"

"Thank you but no one was supposed to know."

"I'm going to get to the bottom of this. Honey, call the police. Layla, call the princess. I'm going to go find out what they want."

Layla did as she was told. It took her a moment before she was connected. "Stasia, we have a problem. There's a mob of reporters here."

"I had hoped they had not found you yet. I literally just saw your parents on the news, and your father was furious. He has called me several insulting names and demanded you return to him immediately. I am so sorry, but the world knows about us now. The local police have already been contacted and should be on their way, and I am sending a plane and security for you immediately. Until they get there you should not go anywhere. Stay in the house and away from the windows. I cannot tell you how sorry I am about this. This was the last thing I wanted."

Layla gave a long sigh. "So they really are here for me? I can't believe he would do this. He's lost his mind, Stasia."

"I am sorry. I do not know what to say about him. We will have to deal with this someday, but right now my concern is with you. I just want you to be safe."

Seeing Hannah's father come back into the kitchen, Layla said, "Hannah's father went outside before I called you to see what they wanted."

"No one goes outside," Anastasia directed.

"It's you. They're looking for you, Princess Layla," he said.

"Anastasia wants everyone to stay inside. She is sending the police and her security team," Layla relayed.

"Layla, you need to listen to me. This is important," Anastasia said. "I know you have one more day there in New Hampshire, but under the circumstances, I am not sure that is a good idea. However, if you really want to stay, security can make it happen. Talk it over with Hannah, so you can have a decision by the time they arrive. They will have to juggle their schedule for that, but it can be done should you want it to."

"I don't want to cause a problem."

"Sweetheart, your life as you know it has just changed forever. Security is at your disposal to accommodate your schedule, not the other way around. Whether you are ready or not, your father has just thrust you into the international spotlight. The media knows that you are my fiancée now, which means they see you as a member of the royal family. You have to be extremely careful what you say and what you do. I think it might be advisable that you return here to the palace, so we can face the media for the first time together."

"That's probably a good idea."

"All right. If that is the way you feel, you need to pack up your belongings and leave with security when they get there. Do not say a word to the press when you go outside. Just get into the car with security and leave. If you want to bring Hannah back with you, make sure she is ready to go as well. I would recommend that she come, because it may be difficult for her to leave tomorrow. The press will linger outside her house for the next few days. I will have police stay there, but it might be better if she came back."

"I'll ask her what she wants to do."

"All right. Now I actually have to go. I need to meet with Maddy and my mothers on how best to handle this development. Are you going to be all right until security gets there?"

"We'll be fine."

"All right. Call me back if things get too tense for you. The police should be there any minute."

When they got off the phone, Anastasia and Madeline headed down to the queen's office. Both queens were already there with Matthew Franks. Alexa stood as her daughter entered the room and watched her limp on her crutches over to the sofa. Dropping her head Anastasia ran her hands through her red hair. "Someone please give me some ideas on how to deal with this," she said.

"Has Layla seen the news?"

"No. There are reporters outside of the Winston's house right now, though. She is preoccupied with that. I hope she does not turn on the TV. She does not need to see her father going on like that on national television. I do not care so much what he has said about me, but I do care about it hurting her."

Alexa came and took a seat next to her daughter. "The media will take care of him. They will air his anger and show him for what he is. The majority of America is behind you. They know you now as not only the heir to the throne but also as a national military hero. You are trusted and respected by the country. His demise in the public eye will be swift and acute," she assured.

"But Layla... she will be devastated when she sees what her father has done, what her father has said."

"That cannot be avoided, and for that we are all sorry. All of us will be here for her, but the secrecy on which you two relied is no longer intact. She must be protected, and that will mean major changes for her. We need to think of a plan."

"We will. My biggest concern after getting her here back safely is what to say to the press. We are supposed to go on this cruise for the month of July. I do not want to delay that, but the media will not rest until they have at least had an opportunity to lay eyes upon us together. I do not want the trip ruined, because they are overzealous for her. Do I let them have their first chance with her before we leave or wait the extra month?"

"I think under the circumstance it might be better just to get it over with, Stasia," Madeline said.

"I agree," Matthew chimed in. "Now that your veil of secrecy is no longer in place, things will escalate until they get their chance. Better to do it on your terms."

Anastasia looked at her mothers. "What do you think?"

Lauren came to take a seat on the other side of her daughter and placed a hand on her knee. "When the public found out about your mother and me, it was extremely difficult for me as the outsider to deal with the press. I tried to distance myself from them and even tried to escape the obligation of marrying your mother to avoid them to try to preserve my privacy, but it really only made things worse in the long run. This will be hard for Layla. It is a real adjustment, but it is better to go ahead and face this now."

Anastasia looked at her mother. Alexa nodded. "Your mother is correct. It is going to be much harder for Layla than you, but it is best to do it now when it is on your terms. Madeline can control the environment, so this event unfolds in the best possible way."

"All right. Everyone seems to think it is best to just tell them now before the trip. The question becomes how."

"We can have a press conference as early as tomorrow if you want. How comfortable do you think Layla will be talking in public?" Madeline inquired.

"I have no idea."

"We can ask her, but there are two choices. You can introduce her, and she can speak, or she can stand next to you and say nothing."

"That does not seem right. I would think it would be better to have her speak. She is quite charming, and people will see that immediately."

"She is that," Alexa agreed. "I think the public would like to hear her say a few words. It does not have to be anything formal."

Madeline paced the room as she thought. "We would just have to set up some rules with the press. We would not want the conference to be interrupted with questions about her father. That would not be pleasant for her."

"Absolutely no questions about her parents. Any person that even speaks their names should be removed," Anastasia said.

Madeline nodded. "Certainly. Let me get to work on some speeches and call the press conference. Of course this means the departure time for the trip will have to be delayed for a day. We will need to get Layla and Hannah out of that apartment and into the palace or your house for the rest of the summer for optimum security of course."

"I agree. They can stay at my house. When they arrive here this afternoon, take them immediately to the penthouse to gather their belongings and then go to mine."

"One more small detail," Madeline said. "She needs a makeover for the press conference tomorrow."

"She does not. She is perfectly lovely as she is," Anastasia replied with a frown.

"She is absolutely lovely, but you cannot send her out there to meet them in her regular clothes. That would not be fair to her. The game has changed, and they expect to see her wearing something befitting of a princess. She needs a new wardrobe and now. Victoria's stylist will take care of her hair and makeup tomorrow."

"All right. Her style seems kind of similar to Victoria's, so find out who makes her clothes and have them bring some things to the house for her. I will take her shopping in New York when we stop there on our cruise, so she can buy what makes her most comfortable."

"Do you know what size she is?"

"No idea. Go to the penthouse and rummage through her clothes to find her sizes if you must. Let us just get on with it. She is not going to like this," she mumbled. "It is so much so fast. She does not like fast."

The rest of the day continued at a frenzied pace for the royal family and Layla. When the security detail had arrived at the Winston house to take her away, she was bombarded with questions and photographs the moment she stepped outside the house. It was absolutely terrifying to be rushed by all those people, even with security forming a tight circle around her, each trying desperately to be the one that got the first photo of the princess's bride-to-be.

Then when they arrived back in D.C. the two women had to vacate their apartment immediately and move in with Anastasia. The press followed her everywhere and remained at the gates of the

redhead's house, even after they were closed, furiously taking pictures of her. However, once inside silence prevailed for a moment.

"Layla, is there anything we can do to make you more comfortable?" Lydia inquired.

The blonde shook her head. "Just tell me where Stasia is."

"She just arrived back here a little while ago. I believe you will find her in the study with Madeline."

Both Layla and Hannah went in search of the princess and found her as predicted sitting on the sofa in the study. The two were engrossed in conversation about something Anastasia was holding while the TV was on in the background. Looking up she gave a sympathetic smile as she rose. Opening up her arms, she received her fiancée into them.

"Are you all right?" she quietly asked.

Layla shook her head. "That was terrifying. They wouldn't leave me alone."

"I am deeply sorry that it has come to this, Layla."

"They were everywhere, even outside your house."

"They are always outside my house. They are broadcasting live from outside the gates at this very moment," she mentioned, pointing to the TV. "I saw you pull up this way. I know you just arrived home, but we have many things to do this afternoon. Tomorrow you and I are giving a press conference where we will be officially announcing our engagement. I wish it could be delayed, but in light of what has happened, this has been deemed the best choice of action. Madeline's staff has been working on a speech for you, and you need to go over it with her to make sure you are comfortable with what you are supposed to say."

"A speech? I can't give a speech," she protested. "I've never spoken to a large public audience before."

"It will be fine. It is not of any great length, but you cannot just stand next to me and say nothing. They expect a few words from you. You also have to decide what you are going to wear to the announcement. I took the liberty of summoning some of Victoria's favorite designers to bring potential outfits for you to try. Pick the one you like the best and in which you feel the most comfortable. We will be buying you a new wardrobe in New York when we get there."

"I don't need a new wardrobe. What's wrong with the clothes I own now?"

Giving her a gentle smile, the redhead said, "I do not care what clothes you wear, because you are beautiful just as you are, and I love you for who you are, but the public is expecting a certain kind of woman to be at my side. That woman is dressed in the most fashionable way possible. She is dressed like the princess she soon will be."

"What will you be wearing tomorrow?"

"A casual summer suit. I have my options lying on the bed upstairs. You can pick whichever one you like for me to wear if you wish. Once you have decided on your outfit, please return here, so we can finish these speeches."

With that the princess retook her seat on the sofa. Hannah and Layla went upstairs to where Layla's outfit choices had been prepared for her. The blondes looked them over together. "I can't give a speech, Hannah. She can't expect that from me."

"Apparently she does. You can do this, Layla. I've seen you speak in front of people at school. You're good at it."

"Yeah but I wasn't speaking to the whole world then. Now I will be."

"Just find out what she wants you to say first before you panic. You're going to have to get used to it some time. You're going to be a princess and eventually queen."

"Oh God, I am, aren't I?" she asked. She would one day be queen. While she had contemplated it before, suddenly the reality panicked her.

"Don't tell me you haven't given that any consideration?"

She shrugged. "I have thought about it."

Taking her friend by the shoulders, Hannah gazed deeply into her blue eyes. "My friend, you are about to go on a journey that ends with you being the queen of this country. You are going to assume such tremendous power beyond your wildest fantasies on the arm of that sexy redhead down there," she teased. "She's literally offered you the world, and you've accepted it. She wants you to go out there and officially accept in public what you've already done in private. Just look into her eyes and tell her once again why you want to be her wife. That's all you have to do. If people see how much you love her, they will accept you."

Layla nodded. "You're right. I can do that."

"Good. Now let's look at these clothes. I can't believe you get a whole new wardrobe. I'm so jealous," she joked.

"You can always borrow whatever you want. What is mine is always yours."

"If only that were true of your lover," she teased.

Layla blushed hotly but laughed at the joke. "Come on. Help me pick out something to wear."

An hour later the women returned downstairs. Hannah smiled at the princess as she plopped down next to her on the sofa. She placed her hand on her thigh and winked at her saucily. "You

must know that I am only human, Hannah. I love Layla and would never be unfaithful, but I might spontaneously combust if you touch me like that due to the fact that I cannot reciprocate," she said, knowing her friend was only playing with her.

"Still it's fun to watch you struggle," she teased.

Layla just shook her head and wedged her way between them on the couch. Looking at Madeline she said, "All right. Let's see this speech."

The Secretary of Affairs handed it over to her. "Have you ever used a teleprompter?" She shook her head. "All right. We will have one brought over here this evening, so you can practice with it."

The foursome sat in silence watching Layla read her script. It only took a few moments before she shook her head. "I would never say this. This doesn't sound like me at all."

"You can change anything you want," Anastasia said. "Just give Madeline some direction."

"Give me the pen," she said, reaching for the one in her girlfriend's hand. Turning the page over to the blank side, she began to write. The words followed out of her and onto the page easily as she thought about how she would describe her feelings for her fiancée. Everyone just quietly watched her for about half an hour until she handed the page back to Madeline. "How's this instead?"

Madeline began to read silently. The other three women watched her carefully trying to assess her opinion of it. The Secretary of Affairs smiled and chuckled as she read before growing silent as her eyes began to tear. It took her a moment to respond when she finished reading it. "Well, I guess you might be a princess that does not need a speech writer. This is beautiful. I was moved, and the people will be, too. You can tell how genuine these words are, and that is exactly what we were looking for here."

"May I see it?" Anastasia inquired.

Layla shook her head. "No. You will just have to wait and hear it at the same time everyone else does."

"Let me just clean it up a bit and put in a segue from Anastasia's speech into yours. I will have it typed up and then come back after dinner with the teleprompter to help you learn it."

For the rest of the evening the blonde was sequestered away with Hannah and Madeline. As much as Anastasia wanted to know what was going on in the study, she left the women to themselves to prepare for the big day tomorrow. In fact, it was late when the blonde came to bed, but the princess received her into her arms as if she had been away forever. Together they tenderly reconnected before drifting to sleep.

The next morning everyone headed over to the palace early to prepare for the big press conference. As was the day before, the press was anxiously awaiting their appearance outside the princess's residence. However they were not acknowledged as the group got into the limo. The media followed them to the palace but were left behind at the gate. The queens and other princesses greeted them warmly before they sat for breakfast, after which the preparation began for the announcement.

At 11:00 that morning the royal family and Hannah congregated in the front foyer of the palace. Anastasia pulled at the cuffs of her suit jacket as she waited on Layla to arrive with Madeline. She wore the khaki-colored linen suit and light blue shirt Layla had chosen for her, but she did wonder why it was the outfit of choice. A few moments later she had her answer as she saw her fiancée and Madeline walking down the corridor together. Anastasia felt as she if couldn't breathe for a moment. Layla was wearing a light blue summer dress that bared her arms and legs from the knee downward. On her feet were a pair of heels that added two inches to her height, and her hair and makeup had been done by Victoria's stylist, making her appear youthful and yet sophisticated. Gone was the adorable innocence, which had been replaced by elegant refinement.

"Wow," Anastasia mumbled. "You look amazing."

She still blushed at the compliment. "Thank you. You look good, too."

"Are you ready?" She nodded. "Hold onto my arm," the princess instructed. Turning to Madeline she said, "We are ready."

"Good luck," Alexa said with a supportive smile for her daughter and Layla. "They are going to love you, Layla, as much as we do."

"Thank you, Alexa." Smiling at the woman she loved, she gripped her by the arm just above her elbow. "Let's go."

Madeline headed outside ahead of them. Anastasia and Layla went at a considerably slower pace due to Anastasia's use of her crutches. However, as soon as they stepped out the door, they could hear the cameras begin. The blonde gingerly held to her girlfriend's arm as Anastasia eased herself down the stairs on her crutches before they continued to the platform where Madeline was standing. Standing at the back of it for a moment, they waited for Madeline to introduce the princess.

When her name was announced, Anastasia smiled at Layla before stepping to the podium. She smiled at the crowd for a moment as they clapped vigorously for her. "My fellow Americans, thank you for joining me here today on a particularly special day. More than a decade ago my mother, Queen Alexa II, decreed that each member of the royal family was free to choose a spouse based on nothing but their own criteria. This was a profound break from tradition, but such decree has brought us an amazing queen of the people in my mother, Queen Lauren." She paused as the crowd cheered for Lauren, who was an immensely popular figure in the family. "I owe gratitude to my mothers for making this possible for me by taking those daring steps together, because they have altered the course of history for what I believe to the better. It is their

courage that has led me on a path up to this moment. I come before you today reeling from the joyous fortune that has been bestowed upon me as I have met a woman who has captured my heart, my soul, and my imagination in ways I never even remotely thought possible. It is my great pleasure to announce to you that I have found my future queen, and her name is Layla Elise Stone." The crowd screamed excitedly at the pronouncement, making her pause and smile.

"About a year ago I was blessed to meet Layla in Dallas, Texas while touring the country. The moment I saw her something about her that took me by utter surprise. This woman was so filled with the spirit of life. She evoked such emotion in those around her and me, and I fell for her almost immediately upon that first meeting. In the last year she has taught me how to live by teaching me how to feel true, deep, powerful emotions. Layla is a profoundly religious woman and relies upon her faith to guide her on a path of righteousness, which I have never seen from another human. Her entire life has been devoted to giving to those around her, and she had given to me most of all. She has bestowed upon me the opportunity to grow into a person who truly understands the diversity of this nation and the need for acceptance of its people. She has taught me to not only see and hear people with my eyes and ears but also to view them through my heart. It is her passion for life and compassion for people, which has led me to this choice, and as you come to know her through the years, I believe you will see the genuine humanity she possesses." She paused and glanced over her shoulder at the women about whom she had been speaking. Layla was wearing an adorable modest blush and smile. Anastasia smiled at her before turning back toward the media. "As I know you all are anxious to meet her, let me now to present to you, my fellow Americans, Ms. Layla Stone."

The mob of media screamed as the princess stepped aside for the blonde. Layla smiled at the gathering as she continued to blush at the attention, but as the moments passed and they did not settle, she looked at Anastasia, who just smiled in return but didn't make a move to intervene. Instead she continued to clap the best she could through her crutches for her fiancée. Several minutes passed as she just stood there, but the crowd did not cease their applause.

Finally though she gave a little nod and another smile as she said, "Thank you. Thank you very much." Still the noise continued, so she tried again. "Thank you. Thank you all." It didn't get quiet, so as a last ditch effort, she said, "Thank you. I appreciate your acknowledgement, but if you keep clapping you're going to make me too nervous to get through my speech." The press chuckled at the joke but began to settle at her words. When it had grown quiet enough, she gave another smile. "Thank you. Thank you for that warm reception. You don't know what it means for a young woman like me from Texas to be standing here before you. As Stasia already said, I'm Layla Stone, and I am humbled to be here before you all having accepted Stasia's hand in marriage."

The group cheered at the pronouncement. She paused until they settled to continue. "A year ago I had the pleasure of meeting Princess Anastasia at the children's hospital where I had been volunteering in Dallas. When I first saw her, my first thought was, 'Wow, she's really cute.'" The group laughed as she smiled at her fiancée. "However, it quickly became obvious to me that Stasia's beauty went far beyond her physical presence. To see her with those children and with their parents truly listening to their concerns made me realize her great capacity for caring about her people. When we parted ways that day, I didn't know what might become of us, if anything, but I was excited by the thought of seeing how the crowned princess connected to people. The

following day we met under less than pleasant circumstances. In fact, I had just unexpectedly lost someone close to me, but Stasia was there without reservation. We hardly knew each other, but she opened her arms and embraced me like a best friend or a member of the family might. There was no pretense as she held me and consoled me over my loss, and it was in that moment I realized she was not extraordinary because she was the crowned princess but because of her simplistic way of being able to relate to people at a fundamental level. I looked up into those blue eyes and saw that she felt my pain. They conveyed the ultimate compassion, and being held in her arms made me feel safe in a way I had never experienced in my life," she added, looking at the redhead who stood just off to her side.

"We quickly became friends and then much more, as I began to feel more deeply for her than anyone else I had ever known. Then just three short months after we met, her country called her to duty. Stasia never doubted answering that call, rather she had an enormous sense of pride in being able to serve her country. I was greatly moved that she considered herself an example of a patriotic soldier, willing to defend the country we all hold so dear, even though I was terrified of what our time apart might hold. No one could have foreseen then what was to happen." She paused for a moment to collect herself for what she was to say next. "My heart went with her to sea, and it shattered into a million pieces the night I heard what had happened to her. To receive the call that she had been gravely wounded in battle and not being able to do anything was practically more than I could bear. She almost died out there on the water saving the lives of others," she whispered as tears came to her eyes.

She dabbed at the corners of her eyes with her ring fingers, trying to keep the tears from falling, and saw her audience felt the way she did about her fiancée's sacrifice. "Her Majesty Queen Alexa was kind enough to allow me to see her at the military hospital where she was recovering from her injuries, but I'll admit that I wasn't sure I would be able to handle the new woman she was. However, once again she proved that underneath all those bandages and her broken body, she had the same loving spirit that originally drew me to her. Through all that suffering she endured and still does, she never second-guessed her commitment to serve her people or her country. She has been a true hero at every step of the way, and she has taught me a great deal about sacrificing one's self for those around you. In that little unadorned hospital room on a military base in the Middle East, she held me in her strong safe arms and said the words that forever changed my life. Right there without fanfare she told me she wanted to marry me, and I knew I was hers forever. Regardless of what our future might hold together, I knew she was the only one that I could ever love," she quietly said, casting a look at her fiancée.

Taking another second to compose herself, she continued, "I know the acceptance of Stasia's hand gives me a great responsibility to the people of this country, and I will do my best to honor it. The Washington family has served the people for generations, and I am proud to be joining them in the quest for a continually improved America. Thank you for allowing me into your lives today and for giving me the opportunity to serve you. God bless you and God bless America."

When she was finished, she stepped toward Anastasia and curved her arms around her waist as the media cheered for the two of them. The redhead leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. "Well done. That was really moving."

"I meant every word," she said, smiling up at her before they kissed each other sweetly. It was only the roar of the crowd that broke them apart. Layla blushed, and the princess just smiled brightly while Madeline took the podium again to direct the question and answer session.

When she took the first question, the man asked, "Your highness, when can we expect the glorious event of your marriage?"

"Layla and I have talked about this seriously, and we both feel strongly that she finish her education first. Given that, the earliest opportunity would be next summer, but we both would like to have the ceremony at the earliest possible moment thereafter."

"Ms. Stone, how many children would you and Princess Anastasia like to have?"

The blonde smiled and flushed a little. "We haven't decided on an exact number. To quote Stasia, I would say at least the heir and the spare," she joked, which drew laughter from her girlfriend and the gathering. "God willing, he will bless us as much as possible with children. I love them, and I would like nothing more than fill the palace with sound of innocent laughter only children possess. I assure you not matter what you will not lack more princesses when the time arrives."

"Have you given any thought to what roles you would like to assume in the royal family once you graduate?"

She shook her head. "I think I will be taking the next few years to figure out where I might best be of help."

"What are your interests?" another reporter inquired.

"I love church, singing, and volunteering."

"Your highness, if I may ask a more serious question. With Ms. Stone's religious background, what assurances are you prepared to give the people who believe in the religious freedom on which this country was founded?"

"My family and I believe in religious freedom now as much as we ever have. Layla has brought her faith into this relationship, and by extension I have found faith in Christianity. That faith has helped sustain me through many things already, and I am thankful to her for showing me the power of it. However, I do assure you as I stand before you now, that my faith has no bearing on the queen's directives. Furthermore, if I someday do become queen, it will have no influence on my own. I believe faith is a deeply personal matter, and I wholly intend to continue to embrace the diversity of our nation. Those who believe in a higher power and those who do not will be equally welcome in this palace and in this country for as long as the Washingtons are the guiding presence of this nation."

"Ms. Stone, would you like to comment further on that declaration?"

"Stasia and I discussed this subject in depth and at length. She feels strongly that the foundation of this country is the secular values on which it is based, and I agree. I told her I must not be denied my right to practice my faith if I took her hand, and she understands that need. I fully intend to keep practicing my faith. Therefore, I could never deny someone else the same right, even if that person chose not to believe anything. I agree with her that faith is personal, and I intend to keep mine so."

Looking at Madeline, Anastasia gave her a look, which her Secretary understood well after all the time they had been working together. The princess was ready to be finished with the interview. Taking the unspoken instruction, she closed the session of questions and thanked everyone for their time. Then slowly the threesome made their way back into the palace.

"They were starting to get too serious," the redhead said. "I think everyone could sense what was unspoken today."

Madeline nodded. Turning to Layla she said, "Eventually we will have to address the problem of your parents, specifically your father."

"There's nothing I can do. They disowned me and want nothing to do with me. I would do anything to make them stop spitting accusations about Stasia."

"We will think of something. You did well for your first time out there," Madeline complimented. "You made them laugh and cry all in one speech. You moved them by being yourself."

"You were fantastic," Anastasia added.

"Thanks," she replied, assisting Anastasia up the stairs.

For the rest of the day they hung around the palace with the royal family spending time together before the big cruise began. That evening the couple lounged in bed catching up on the news before sleep. They watched the replay of their press conference, as every major network ran it, but Layla's father also had his own interview that day. Both women watched in silence as he spewed hateful rhetoric about the princess and his own daughter. Knowing it was upsetting to her fiancée, Anastasia turned it off and curved her arms tighter around her.

"It is going to be all right. I have you. You are safe and loved here with me."

The blonde cried in the arms of her beloved for several minutes. "Why does he hate me so much for just following my heart?"

The princess shook her head. "I do not know, but you are loved by the world. You are amazing, kind, compassionate, loving, giving, tender. The list is unending. He has no foundation for his arguments but his hate, and today you showed the world why there is no reason to hate you. You are angelic. It is me with whom he has a problem, and the people will not stand for that for long."

I promise you. The world will shortly come to love you as much as I do. No one stands a chance against your smile and your genuine compassion for others."

"Thank you for being here, Stasia. I'm not sure I could get through this without you."

"You can and will, and I will be by your side every step of the way."

Chapter XII: The First Family Outing

Once the princesses and their guests returned from their cruise, the palace hosted events before Layla and Hannah's school began again. A few days after their return the royal family held an international gala at the National Gallery of Art for the foreign dignitaries from all the Embassies in the area, so Layla and Hannah headed over to the palace with Anastasia that afternoon to prepare. As usual, the princess had several designers provide options to the two blondes for the evening and then had a stylist on hand to complete their looks, so they were dressed appropriately.

Upon arrival at the National Gallery of Art, Hannah went inside with some of the palace staff ahead of the royal family while they waited to be announced. Since Layla had been officially introduced to the public, she had to remain with Anastasia for her first official introduction at a palace function. When the time came, Matthew Franks took the duty of announcing the family. All the guests gathered in the main gallery, as was tradition to greet the royal family.

"Honored guests, may I present the royal family. Her Royal Highnesses Princess Caroline, Princess Camille, and Princess Victoria," he said first, allowing the three youngest to walk in together.

Meanwhile Layla and Anastasia waited off to the side. "Are you ready for this?" the princess asked.

Layla nodded. "Ready as I'll ever be."

"Just hold onto my arm and walk in with me. Then when my parents come in we all bow to them. That is all there is to it."

"I can do that."

"Good. Here we go then. Take my arm," she instructed. Layla took her fiancée's right arm since the princess needed her left for her crutch and waited for the announcement.

"Her Royal Highness Princess Anastasia and the Princess's Consort Layla Stone," Matthew announced loudly.

When they walked through the open doors of the gallery, the entire group began to bow as they slowly passed by them. Layla found it incredibly odd that everyone in the room bowed their head out of respect for her girlfriend. It was in that moment she once again was reminded exactly who she had agreed to marry. Her fiancée was the heir to the throne and a beloved member of the royal family to almost all who knew her. It made her proud to be on the arm of such a fine woman. At the end of the hall, they turned and waited with the rest of the princesses for the queens to be announced. While they did so, the blonde turned to her fiancée and asked, "Since when did I get the title Princess's Consort?"

"Since the world figured out who you were. People will call you that until we get married, so you may as well start to get used to it," she said with a smile. "Here come my parents. Remember to bow," she reminded.

"Her Royal Highness Queen Lauren and Her Majesty Queen Alexa II."

The whole room bowed deeply at the entrance of the queens, including their daughters. The public display made it obvious how much the four women respected their parents by the public display. Layla followed suit along with them, knowing it was expected, even though she had never seen any of them greet their mothers that way.

After the queens' entrance, the party officially began. There was lively music and equally lively conversation in the main hallway of the gallery for a while before dinner was announced. The princesses were interspersed throughout the guests for the meal. Layla sat next to her fiancée the whole time and did her best to converse with those around her even though she wasn't sure what the most interesting topics were for such an event. Everyone seemed excited to meet her, which made her feel good. She did notice, however, that there was no dancing going on even though there was a floor dedicated to such purpose. However, it became obvious what protocol was when Queen Alexa and Queen Lauren took to the floor first, and then shortly thereafter people joined them.

Layla looked on as couples filled the floor. She did love dancing, but she knew Anastasia wasn't able to participate. It was something they had never been able to experience together and wondered if they ever would. The redhead's right leg had healed well, but the other one still left her using assistance to get around. It somewhat saddened her to think they may not ever share that simple pleasure.

Anastasia could read the thought across her girlfriend's face as she gazed out onto the dance floor. It was something she longed to do as well but knew she couldn't at present. Looking around she hoped Camille would at least come through for her on her behalf, so the blonde could at least have some fun. However, it was not her sister she saw coming toward them with obvious intent.

Queen Alexa smiled at the pair of them as she came closer. "Layla, are you enjoying yourself?" she asked.

"Yes. Thank you, Alexa."

Extending her hand she said, "Stasia loves to dance, but until she is able, I would like to at least try to step into her shoes. I would be honored to fill my daughter's duty this evening if you will oblige me in a dance."

Layla smiled brightly at the both of them before standing. "Thank you, Alexa. I would love that."

Holding hands they slowly made their way to the floor. Alexa smiled down at her future daughter-in-law as she wrapped an arm around her waist and clasped her hand. As they began to move to the music, Alexa smiled down at her. "I would just like to tell you how beautiful I think you look this evening. You do Stasia great credit."

"Thank you," she replied with a blush.

"Stasia would like nothing more than to be the one who was escorting you around this floor this evening. She has a great fondness for dancing. This is especially difficult for her to have to be on the sidelines watching her fiancée in the arms of other people."

"Fortunately you are only her mother," she joked.

Alexa nodded. "It will be just a matter of time before someone other than I or one of her sisters asks you to dance. I would like to encourage you to dance with anyone who has the nerve to ask you. You will by my daughter-in-law very soon and will become another mouthpiece of this family by extension. We oblige people whenever possible. You will not have to fear anyone being inappropriate, but at the same time it is our job to be accessible to constituents. You are an attractive girl, and I think you are going to be extremely popular with people. You are so genteel and sweet that you have a profound effect on those around you. You might as well use that for the greater good to advance the family's agenda."

Layla nodded. "Of course."

Anastasia watched her mother and fiancée from afar as they moved around the floor together. She knew her mother was extremely fond of her prospective bride and was grateful they had support that was lacking in her Layla's family. She knew that eventually she would have to do something to temper the ire that had been ignited by the announcement of their engagement in the media. She didn't want Layla or someone close to her to get hurt, because of the rage that consumed Layla's father.

Several songs passed before Anastasia saw her sister, Camille, approach Layla and the queen on the floor and ask to cut in. Alexa obliged her own daughter with a large smile before returning to the table where Anastasia was sitting. "She is utterly charming," the queen noted as she took a seat next to her daughter. "You could not have picked better."

"I am glad you approve."

Alexa nodded. "Whole-heartedly."

For the rest of the evening, Layla was engaged in dancing with a plethora of people. Anastasia was sorry she was missing out on a lot of the fun by not dancing, but she felt fortunate that her fiancée seemed to be making an incredibly good impression in her first official outing with the royal family. When it was time to leave for the night, Anastasia and Layla tried to find Hannah, so they could all return to the house together, but Madeline told them that she had left early with Princess Camille. Both women were surprised and amused by the development but thought nothing more of it as they headed for home. All was quiet upon their arrival, so they went to bed. As they were lying together in the darkness in each other's arms, Layla asked, "Do you think I should call her? I just want to make sure she's okay."

"She is with Camille, so she is perfectly safe. I am sure they are just over at the palace. The staff will take care of her. Who knows? Maybe they are off canoodling," she joked.

"That would be amusing. She's changed a lot in the last year, mostly since meeting you. I do wonder if that is coincidence. I don't really know what she's thinking anymore. I thought I knew her when it came to this stuff."

Anastasia shrugged. "People sometimes do not even know themselves. We just have to accept her as she is, regardless of what that entails."

"I know and I do. She's the best friend I've ever had, and I love her completely. Nothing could ever change that."

The following morning the two were sitting at the breakfast table when Hannah strolled in wearing her outfit from the previous night and a bright smile. "Good morning," she greeted.

"Good morning. Are you just getting in?" Layla asked even though the answer was obvious.

She nodded as she plopped down into a chair. "What an exciting night. It was a blast, Stasia," she said.

"I am glad you enjoyed yourself. You left a little early, though," she mentioned with a grin. "Where did you go?"

"Don't act like you don't know," she playfully chastised.

"We really do not know. We were just told that you and Camille had left together."

"Camille," she sighed with a sparkle in her eyes. "I think she found her Washington charm."

"What happened?" Layla asked with a laugh of her own seeing her friend's response.

"Well, she came up to me at the gala, and we started talking. I could tell she was nervous but finally got up her nerve to ask me to dance."

"You danced for quite a while at the gala," Anastasia mentioned. "I actually did notice that."

She nodded. "I think she started picking up confidence while we danced. She was so sweet the whole time. Later in the evening she asked me if I wanted to go back to the palace for a walk in the gardens."

"That is my girl," Anastasia teased with a smile. "She has seen me do that through the years."

Hannah nodded. "I sensed that was a signature Washington move, and why not? It's the perfect ploy. Those gardens can be incredibly romantic. Well, it took her a while to get up her nerves again once we left, but she finally put her arm around me as we walked. I wasn't sure she was ever going to go for it, but I could see how much she wanted to kiss me, so I made it easy for her. She's has a natural ability in that department," she chuckled. "I actually couldn't believe that she had never kissed anyone when she told me later. She didn't seem like a novice."

"I can't believe you kissed her," Layla said.

She shrugged. "She wanted it. It was so obvious, and I have more experience in that area. Of course I thought it was just going to be something innocent, but you should have seen her. I gave her the opening, and she ran with it. My God did she run with it," she moaned. "I think she's spied on you through the years, Stasia, and picked up some of your moves. We started kissing, and the next thing I knew her hands were under the hem of my dress."

"Wow. Sounds like she really did go for it. I hope you were not too offended by her forwardness," Anastasia said. "She needs to learn how to respect women. I hope you taught her what the word no meant."

Hannah shook her head. "I wasn't offended, more amused by it. She must take after you, Stasia. She has some incredible little moves," she joked.

"Hannah!" Layla exclaimed.

"What? I've gone further with boyfriends than I did her, but a little tutorial went a long way. She's a fast learner and unafraid to take instructions. She's going to make some girl very happy."

Anastasia smiled at the assessment. "I knew she would be. She just needed the right motivation. Does this mean you are dating my sister now?"

Hannah shook her head. "One make-out session does not make me her girlfriend. She's too young, but still it was fun," she mused.

Anastasia laughed while Layla just shook her head. "I'm glad you at least enjoyed yourself," the blonde said.

Chapter XIII: Struggling for Normalcy

When the blondes returned to school to finish their last two semesters, they tried to carry on as usual, but it was a big adjustment for Layla to be followed everywhere she went. Nothing was sacred anymore, and she had no privacy except when locked alone in her dorm room. Being that she was a senior, she and Hannah had opted not to live together but live individually in adjacent rooms that shared a bathroom. Many times their doors remained open to be connected to each other but with a little more space than they had previously, so each could concentrate more on their studies. Campus was full of the royal security force, making sure the newest member of the family was protected. The media had to be restricted from accessing the school except for certain events, because it was deemed they were too much of a distraction to provide adequate protection in the academic surrounding, which only left the student and faculty population to contend with on a daily basis. Fortunately for Layla her school seemed to embrace her new public life and position within the Washington family, allowing her to have as much normalcy as they could provide.

For Anastasia's part life seemed as it always had with the exception of being asked about her bride wherever she went in public. Her days were filled with the usual responsibilities of meetings and physical therapy. On the weekends she would often see Layla, but they kept to themselves during the week to fulfill their own respective duties, filling the gaps in between with long talks on the phone and wedding discussions.

However, with the arrival of the holiday season, Anastasia began to become aware of something that had gone unspoken since the time she had returned from war. Everyday she struggled through therapy for her legs, and while her right had made a full recovery, her left had not. Moreover, she hadn't made any progress in her sessions in the months since she moved to using a cane. It appeared as if her injury was becoming permanent, which she had never truly considered would be a reality. It was a fleeting thought at the worst of times, but now it appeared as if her fears of not being able to walk as she once had might be coming true. It made her anxious that she might not be able to fulfill her own two wishes to walk down the aisle the day she married the woman she loved or dance with her on their wedding day.

Needing some reassurance that she would indeed be able to do so, she went into her therapy session that afternoon looking for hope that she was wrong in her assessment. After struggling through her routine, though, she knew she was correct. When it was over and she was simply sitting with her doctor and therapist, she shook her head a little. "This is never going to get any better from here, is it?" she questioned seriously. The two looked at each other for a moment, but she could see it in their exchange that neither wanted to be the bearer of such news. "I need to know. It has been long enough. Surely you both have an inclination of my prognosis at this point."

The doctor nodded. "Stasia, we just did not want to dissuade you from your pursuit of a full recovery, but your leg has made no meaningful progress in some time."

"We think you should continue to pursue therapy, but it may be time to think of it more as maintenance of the mobility that you do have versus trying to gain even further mobility with your left leg. The strength just isn't there like it is with your right," the therapist added.

"Surely there is something you can do to help me further. I cannot be bound to this cane for the rest of my life. I refuse to walk down the aisle at my wedding using a cane. There must be some sort of hands-free device that will give me support while allowing me more mobility."

"There are currently no such braces or equipment currently available."

"But could you build something?"

"It would have to be something strong enough to support your weight," the therapist commented, looking at her counterpart.

"But pliant enough to move with you. It's a possibility, but there are no guarantees it will make you walk normally."

"I just need to walk on my wedding day and dance to a nice slow song with my wife. That is all I truly want. Certainly I am not the only person in the world that wants something like this."

"We could try to develop something. There are of course no guarantees that it will work, but we can always try. We would need some resources to research, and we have a limited amount of time, only approximately six months."

"I have all the resources you would need. It could be an amazing advance for those of us who are in such a position. To be able to walk without having to hold onto something, to walk upright, instead of bent over a cane or crutches, would be amazing. I never realized how much that little act meant."

The doctor nodded. "We would be pleased to work on it together, but I must insist that you not raise the expectation too high. Let us see where we get first. We haven't a moment to lose if you want this finished by your wedding day."

"I am here to help you in anyway I can."

For Thanksgiving that year the entire royal family traveled to their country castle in Virginia for the long weekend. Layla arrived by helicopter that night just as the family sat down to their meal. All of the family greeted her with hugs and kisses, telling her how much she was missed, even though it hadn't been that long since she had seen them. She always felt so welcome by the Washingtons, which gave her some sense of peace. However, there was a part of her heart that ached for her own parents. She still hadn't spoken to them since their ugly parting, which pained her, but she kept those feelings between Anastasia and herself.

Once dinner was complete and everyone had dispersed, Anastasia and Layla made their way to one of the libraries to relax. They watched the fire in the fireplace in silence as they cuddled on the sofa. However, each could tell the other was lost in her own thoughts. Deciding to take the initiative, the princess quietly asked, "Is there anything I can do to help you with whatever is bothering you tonight?"

The blonde shrugged as she snuggled closer. "I'm just thinking about my parents, wondering how they're spending the holiday. This is the first time I haven't been home for Thanksgiving, and I'll be missing Christmas as well. It's hard."

The redhead nodded and kissed her fiancée on top of her head. "I am sure it is difficult. I wish I could take away your pain."

"There's nothing you can do. I knew I had a choice to make, and I made the only one I could live with, but that doesn't make it any easier."

"I know. I love you so much, Layla, and I know loving me comes with great personal sacrifice. I am always cognizant of that fact."

"You're totally worth it. I could never love anyone but you, Stasia," she whispered, looking up into her eyes. They kissed softly. "I can tell something's bothering you tonight, too."

Anastasia nodded. "I recently received some bad news from my doctors. I knew it was coming, but I have not told anyone yet. I know I have to tell you, though."

"What did they say? Is something wrong?" she asked in concern.

Meeting blue eyes Anastasia confessed, "They told me I would never walk again unassisted. My left leg will never be the same."

"Oh, baby. I'm so sorry. I know you were hoping for a full recovery."

She nodded. "I wanted to walk down the aisle on our wedding day without a cane," she mumbled.

"That would have been a nice surprise."

"But what it worse is that I cannot even dance with you at our reception."

"Well, I'm not sure about that. We've never even tried to dance together. Maybe we can."

The princess shook her head. "I cannot support my own weight without assistance."

"Even so, let's try it. Come on. No one is here," she suggested rising from the sofa. She went to the stereo and found something soft and slow for them. Holding out her hand, she said, "Do it for me."

Unable to resist, Anastasia allowed herself to be pulled from the sofa and into the arms of her beloved. "I cannot do anything other than stand here unless you hold my weight," she said.

"All right. I'm not sure that I can, but I'm willing to try," she replied, slipping arms around her girlfriend's waist securely, so they were pressed body to body. The princess in turn slid her arms around her girlfriend's back to hold her closely. "Here we go. Left foot first," Layla instructed.

They shifted together, but Anastasia's knee began to buckle a bit under her weight. Layla clutched her tightly to keep her upright. Together they tried a few steps, but it was obvious that it wasn't working the way either wanted. "This is impossible," Anastasia mumbled.

"You just need some support like a brace of some sort," she answered. "Something that will lock into place if your knee starts to buckle. I have an idea. Hold your cane against your leg this time as we move," she said, reaching for where it was leaning against the sofa. "Put your other arm around me."

Once again they tried to move slowly to the music, but the princess sighed with discontent. "This is hardly dancing if I cannot use both arms."

"Still you are doing better with some support. I think a brace would definitely do it."

"I have asked the doctors to try to make one for me. There is nothing of its kind out there, but it could be an amazing advancement if it works. And it is all because I want to dance with the most beautiful woman in the world," she whispered, pulling the blonde a little closer with the arm around her waist. She leaned to kiss her gently on the side of the neck.

Layla moaned a little as her hands gripped tighter to her lover's waist. Anastasia's attentions felt incredibly good just then. Trying to encourage her further, the blonde began to grind her frame against her sensually to the beat of the slow music. The princess whimpered at the feeling of the petite body brushing against her in erotic rhythm. Her hand right hand caressed Layla's left hip before moving onto the small of her back and pressing them even closer. "Oh," she moaned, feeling slim hips rocking against the pressure building between her thighs. "You certainly know how to take my mind off my problems," she teased lightly, letting her mouth drift along the rim of Layla's left ear.

The blonde chuckled softly. Looking up into blue eyes, she admitted, "Suddenly I don't feel like dancing so much anymore."

"What would you rather do?"

There was no verbal answer at first, but Anastasia received a response loudly and clearly as the blonde's right hand slipped between their bodies. "I want you to touch me," she seductively whispered. "Like this," she quietly added, slowly unzipping her girlfriend's trousers and slipping her hand between the folds.

"Oh, God," the princess groaned. She could feel her legs giving way as they weakened at the touch. Slowly they sunk to the floor in front of the fireplace. Each of them forgot their problems as they focused on giving and receiving each other's attention. Sweaters and shirts were shed as their intimacy began to grow more intense. Looking up at the woman hovered above her,

Anastasia pushed back blonde hair from Layla's face and smiled. "I love you so much, sweetheart. Thank you for loving me just as I am."

She smiled as she leaned down to the heir's mouth. Floating millimeters from her lips, she whispered, "I love you, too, Anastasia, and I love how your skin feels against mine. I cannot wait until we're married. Sometimes it seems so far away." Her hand drifted over the princess's bare stomach.

"I know what you mean," she replied, letting her fingers trace lightly over the blonde's back. Her fingers nimbly flicked upon the clasp of her bra and then drew the straps down off her shoulders. Layla returned the courtesy, so their naked upper torsos could touch completely. Anastasia unzipped her girlfriend's jeans and slipped into them, causing Layla to moan. They had never touched in that manner, but they still were reserved enough to feel each other over the top of the last thin article of clothing keeping them from their ultimate goal. Nevertheless, their bodies responded to the new stimulus with racing hearts and erratic breathing as their touches became even more passionate.

"Oh, Stasia," Layla called out feeling her lover's caress. She had never allowed anyone to touch her that way before, and her needs were racing out of control. She wanted the princess more than she ever had.

"God, you are beautiful," the taller woman whispered, gazing up at the body rocking down into hers.

However, just as they kissed again the door leading from the hallway opened. Both women jumped at the sound and then sight of Anastasia's mothers stepping into the room. The queens were obviously surprised as they quickly averted their gaze. "We are so sorry, kids. We did not realize you were in here. We will go to the other library," Alexa quickly apologized. "However, you might want to think about taking this up to your own room lest you have another intrusion," she added with a smirk before closing the door behind her. Alexa chuckled with her wife out in the hallway for a moment. "Think they will make it until the wedding?" she joked. Lauren shook her head.

Inside the library the two younger women just looked at each other. "That was embarrassing," Layla mumbled, having had her ardor impeded by the interruption.

Anastasia shook it off however. "It could have been worse," she said with a smile as her hands trailed up over the blonde's bare arms before finding their way onto her chest, which caused Layla to shiver, even in front of the warm fire.

"Oh? Your parents just caught us naked making out."

"We are only half naked, and they did not even see anything except your beautiful back, which they have seen in formal gowns anyway, but enough about them." Her mouth found the side of her neck again. "Maybe we should go upstairs to bed."

Layla sat back on her heels and looked longingly down at the princess. She knew that was what she wanted and that her resolve was waning. However, she knew she wouldn't be able to live with herself knowing she had gone against what she believed morally even if her body craved the attention. Taking a deep breath and then sighing, she quietly confessed, "I'm afraid that if I go upstairs with you right now I might not be able to resist you any longer."

Anastasia grinned at the statement, but the seriousness in her girlfriend's eyes told her that instead of feeling triumph at having won Layla's physical affections, she should be more sensitive to the moral conflict her beloved was feeling. "I think that is a good thing, because it means you are truly ready to be married."

"And yet the wedding seems so far away," she moaned as she dismounted from across her girlfriend's hips and took a position next to her on the floor.

They snuggled together as Anastasia nodded in agreement. "Waiting until the summer seems so torturous, but this is for you. There would be no way for you to finish college after we married. This is your dream, and so I embrace it as my own on your behalf. Even if it is incredibly painful to wait," she teased a little.

"You really are so good to me," Layla whispered.

"I want you to have everything in the world. While this time seems long, I know this is what is best for you, and that means more to me than anything."

Another moment passed before Layla suggested, "Let's try to put our long wait out of our minds and talk about something else."

"Certainly. You name the topic."

"Let's go back to our original discussion before we were distracted about this leg of yours. Do the doctors think they can create some sort of brace for you to wear?"

"They are going to try. You know, this could be a real medical advancement if they succeeded. I am sure others feel the way I do. It would be a great improvement for our citizens and for our military personnel to have something like this. Walking on this cane only makes me realize how much more I would like to help the disabled. My back always hurts from being slouched over it. The idea of being able to walk erect and without using my arms to support my weight is such a simple one. Everyone deserves that chance in my opinion."

"It would be nice to have you walking without assistance. Then we really could dance just like you want."

"Well, we do not have a lot of time, but they have a team in place, and I am going to be their test case. We will be working diligently on it."

"I'm glad you have a goal then. It'll help you along."

"I just do not want to raise anyone's expectations, so it will have to remain between us for now."

"Of course. If it works it will be a huge surprise for the people and your parents. Your whole family would love to see it."

"I am sure they would."

"I can't wait until our wedding. I can just see it now, you standing there looking so sexy as I come down the aisle. What are you going to wear? A tuxedo or your dress uniform?"

"Dress uniform is customary, but I can wear whatever you would like. It is up to you."

"Definitely your dressiest uniform then. Your medals make you look so distinguished."

"I cannot wait to see your dress. I am sure it is going to be beautiful."

"I hope so. The designer sends me updates every week on its progress. The sketches were absolutely stunning. I just hope it lives up to your expectations."

"You are wearing it. That is all I need to fulfill my expectations," she said with a kiss to Layla's forehead.

"I just wish my parents would come."

"We will still send them an invitation and anyone else you want to come as well. Whether they be friends or other family members, everyone is welcome if you want them. What is Hannah wearing?"

"Her dress is being designed as well. Is David going to wear his uniform, too?"

Anastasia nodded. "Absolutely. Have you given any more thought to who you want escorting you down the aisle since your father will not be there?"

"My first thought was David, but then that leaves Hannah walking alone, and I don't like that. Then I thought about Hannah's father. He's been like a father to me since my parents disowned me."

"That has possibilities."

"Of course I could walk alone."

"Do you not wish to be given away?"

She shrugged. "My parents gave me away a long time ago," she mumbled. "There was one other thought I had, but it's a bit unorthodox."

"What is it?"

"What if your mothers walked me?"

"My mothers? That is unorthodox, but if that is what you really want, I am sure they would be honored to do it. They adore you and would absolutely do anything you asked of them. Of this I am sure."

"Would you prefer one choice over another?"

"I want what makes you most comfortable. What are you thinking?"

"I was thinking I'd really like your mothers."

"Then we should ask them tomorrow. I am sure it will be fine."

"This wedding is going to be huge, isn't it?"

"No way around it, I am afraid. It is a state ceremony. World leaders will be there. Family and friends will be there. Senior government officials will be there. The cathedral will be packed with people and television crews who will be broadcasting it live around the world."

"Are all those people coming to the reception as well?"

Anastasia nodded. "The media is not invited, but all the guests are. We will be exhausted by the time it is all over. I am kind of glad we decided not to do anything too glamorous for the honeymoon. We will be so tired between your graduating and then getting married that a trip to our home in the Virgin Islands is the perfect secluded getaway. We will have the beach to ourselves and be completely alone to try and recover."

"It does sound wonderful. I haven't been to the beach in a long time."

"You will love this. The sand is so incredibly soft and white, and the water is so amazingly clear. The weather will be great for us if we decide to venture outside, but who says we will want to?" she teased, letting her hand traverse the blonde's bare side.

Layla chuckled. "You think the sex will be so good it will keep us indoors our whole trip?"

"Well, I know what sex is like with me," she joked. "I have a feeling whatever you lack in knowledge is going to be more than made up in your passion. You strike me as a woman who is going to enjoy it tremendously once you allow yourself the opportunity to experience it."

"I hope so," Layla replied with a grin. "I'm so ready for you," she whispered.

Anastasia moaned a little at the softly spoken words. "Not this again. I just started to calm down. I think a cold shower is going to be in order to make it through the night."

Layla chuckled. "I suppose we both need one."

"Shall we go douse ourselves with cold water?"

Layla nodded. "Probably a good idea."

"What if we made it a joint cold shower?" Anastasia suggested, rolling partially atop her fiancée and kissing her on the neck.

The blonde chuckled and shook her head as she gently pushed her away. "The most freezing of water wouldn't be able to stop you, wouldn't be able to stop us if we were naked in such a confined space. We can't both be naked at the same time or else we risk losing our moral fortitude." She paused and gave a smile and sigh. "I really never thought I'd feel like this about anyone, Stasia, but I am still determined, even as much as painful this waiting is."

"I know, and I respect you even if it is torture," she playfully complained. "Come on. Let us get presentable before someone else in the family interrupts us."

The following day Anastasia and Layla found the queens just after breakfast having some alone time reading the newspaper in the sitting room that overlooked one of the back gardens. Both older women smiled at them as they came into the room and gave them pleasant greetings. Anastasia and Layla took a seat together on one of the love seats and held hands. They exchanged a look between each other before the princess spoke.

"Mother, Mom, we were hoping we could discuss some wedding plans with you this morning."

"Of course. We would love to hear anything you wish to share, sweetie," Lauren replied, putting her paper aside. Both queens looked at them.

"Well, things are progressing as expected I suppose. As you know, it will be a state ceremony for the most part. However, we are having a dilemma with one particular item, and we were hoping you might be able to assist us with it."

"Absolutely. What is your dilemma?" Alexa asked.

It was Layla's turn to speak. "Well, we will be sending an invitation to my parents, but I know for a fact they won't come. There is no one to give me away."

Lauren gave a soft gaze as she reached over and took the blonde by the hand. "We know, dear. It pains us to think of you without your parents on such an important day in your life."

"I don't want to walk down that aisle alone. I know this is untraditional in this kind of ceremony, but I was hoping that you two might walk me down the aisle. You've quickly become the closest thing I have to parents in my life, and it would mean a lot to me."

Both of them smiled. "We would be happy to escort you," Lauren answered for them with a reassuring smile.

Looking at Alexa, Layla said, "Thank you. It means more to me than you could know to have the two of you there with me. Alexa, I was hoping that you would specifically be the one who gave me away."

The queen smiled. "It would be a great honor, Layla, if that is what you would like. I am humbled that you think so highly of me as to allow me to fill the shoes of your father."

"I think it's only appropriate that if my father won't stand beside me that my sovereign does to present me to the future ruler of this country."

"It really would mean a great deal to both of us," Anastasia added.

"You two can have anything you want. We are sparing no expense for this service, but sometimes the things that matter most are the sentimental ones that are without price. Both of us are here for you for anything you need," Alexa softly said. "We will beside you both for as long as you wish always."

Chapter XIV: The Veterans Remembered

As spring ascended upon the city, Layla and Anastasia continued to do their best to juggle their hectic schedules. Layla was trying to finish her last semester of college while helping plan her wedding and attending official functions with Anastasia whenever possible. It was a frantic existence, but both of them knew it would be short-lived and well worth it when they had their wedding in early June. However, at the present they survived the best they could.

Since Anastasia had been back from the war, she had campaigned for her fellow veterans wherever possible. Having to live with a debilitating injury herself gave her a unique perspective of the military personnel who committed their lives to service. As a war veteran, she physically struggled to regain the full use of her leg while always remembering those whose fates were even worse than her own.

Shortly after the luncheon to celebrate her return and honor those injured, she easily convinced her mother that more should be done for those who had made the ultimate sacrifice for their country during the war. She wanted the families of those fallen soldiers to be taken care of and their loved ones honored, so she worked with Congress to find a suitable place for a memorial to the war. Once the place was found, she and her Office of Affairs coordinated efforts with the military for a groundbreaking ceremony to which she wanted all family members and friends of the personnel who had been involved in the frontlines of the war to be invited.

On that spring morning, Anastasia and Layla were up early, heading to the palace to prepare for the ceremony. The princess felt the entire royal family should be in attendance for the day's event

given its significance, so Lauren, the princesses, and Layla dressed for the occasion in the latest spring fashion appropriate for such a state ceremony while Alexa and Anastasia went with their more traditional dress uniforms. When everyone was prepared, they were driven to the service, at a site close to the other war memorials in the heart of the city. A mass of people was already gathered when the group was formally introduced and escorted to their seats.

At the appointed time, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff stood and made his way to the podium to begin the ceremony. While his countenance was serious, his voice was welcoming as he said, "Your Majesty, Your Highnesses, ladies, and gentleman, thank you all for being here for this occasion as we honor our friends and loved ones who served this beloved country during the time of war, the ones who were injured, and the ones who gave the ultimate sacrifice for freedom. It is my humble privilege to stand before you as a representative of our armed forces and welcome each of you to this sacred place. The ground upon which we all gather will be dedicated today to honor your loved ones and their service to our great land, and while I know this memorial will never replace those who gave their lives and others who gave of themselves in the fight, I hope this site will be a place that we will all be able to remember and reflect on their sacrifices. Thank you for your attendance here today. Now it is a great honor to introduce to you the Princess's Consort, Layla Stone, and ask you to stand for our national anthem."

The crowd clapped loudly as Layla and Anastasia glanced at each other as they took to their feet. "You will be fine. You have the voice of an angel," Anastasia whispered, squeezing her by the hand.

Layla nodded. When Anastasia had first approached her about singing at the ceremony, she was flattered that her fiancée thought that much of her voice but had been hesitant to accept the offer. However Alexa had been adamant that singing would be the best way for the future princess to participate in the day's events, so she agreed to sing the national anthem. But as she started for the podium and looked out over the crowd, her stomach began to flutter even more than it had just sitting there. She still was not used to being the center of the nation's attention. Standing there alone on the stage, knowing that thousands of people stood before her and thousands more watched on TV, her hands trembled a bit as she took the microphone. Not a sound could be heard as she took a deep breath to calm herself. Knowing the only way she could successfully sing was to find her focus, she met the eyes of her fiancée standing in the front row raptly waiting and thought about the words to the country's most beloved song. The words were incredibly poignant in such a moment. Taking another deep breath and closing her eyes for a moment, she began to sing acapella.

"O! say can you see by the dawn's early light,?

What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming? ?

Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight, ?

O'er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming. ?

And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air, ?

Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there. ?

O! say does that star-spangled banner yet wave?

O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?"

As she held the last note a little longer than normal, she looked out over the sea of people in front of her. People stood with their right hands over their hearts, and the military personnel stood at attention saluting their flag, but it was the two women in the front row that made an iconic image of the war.

The queen and princess stood shoulder to shoulder, each holding perfect salutes. Their gaze upon the flag of fifty stars upon a blue field with thirteen red and white stripes conveyed their total devotion to the country they felt they served, while Anastasia leaned heavily on her crutch with her left hand to hold herself completely upright. Layla knew the sight of her future wife and mother-in-law in that moment would be forever etched in her memory.

When she finished the song, the multitude began to cheer loudly at her rendition. She smiled and waved modestly as she put the microphone back in its place before heading back to her seat. Anastasia greeted her with a huge smile. Taking her by the hand, she kissed the back of it as they sat.

"You were brilliant," the princess complemented. "You do the song great justice."

"Thank you, Stasia. That means a lot coming from you."

Next the general in charge of combat operations took to the podium as people once again sat. He looked out over the crowd for a moment before beginning. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for coming today. As a senior member of our military, I extend my deepest gratitude to you and your families for your own personal sacrifices to our great country. Patriots who volunteer themselves to the greater cause of defending our citizens have always supported our military, and each and every one who gives so freely humbles me. We are always conscious of this fact, which makes every individual sacrifice different and deeply moving. We shall always remember your family and friends who fought together in the name of freedom." He paused while the gathering clapped. "Now it is my privilege to introduce to you one such soldier. May I present Her Royal Highness Princess Anastasia."

The multitude took to their feet as they clapped for the princess who stood from her seat and slowly limped to the podium using her cane. Upon reaching it, she grasped the edge with both hands to steady herself as she looked out over the attendees. It took a few moments for them to settle again, but once everyone had taken their seats, she looked at the teleprompter to start her speech.

Without any preface she solemnly began, "Lisa Alvarado was a mother to four young children all under the age of ten. Andrew Austin was a recent high school graduate who had also just graduated from boot camp. Courtney Boyd enjoyed nature photography. Charles Brown was a

sailing enthusiast. Katherine Caldwell was the youngest of ten children. Wang Chao was the first in his family to get an American education. Alistar Charleston wanted to study physics in college. Mark Clearwater was a passionate environmentalist. McKenzie Coleman had become a father for the first time just before he deployed. Maria Cruz was an aspiring journalist. Gordon Darling had recently become a naturalized citizen. Christine Diaz was a former Miss San Jose. Chad Fitzsimmons was an only child and a single parent. Ronald Foster played football for Nebraska. Jonathan Goldberg wanted to be a rabbi. Colin Hafner was a part-time flight instructor. Sean Hannington was a husband and father of five. Dennis Harvey loved reading mystery novels. Thomas Hodges wanted to be a professional golfer since he was a child. Alton Jacobs spent every Saturday mentoring children. Richard Jindal was a trumpet player from New Orleans. Su Kang was just a young man trying to find some direction in his life after graduating high school. Aisha Kaufman hailed from the projects in the Bronx and wanted a better life for her family. Darius Lee dreamed of playing professional basketball. Stephanie Mann loved to write poetry. Edwin Marks had been a lifeguard in high school and saved a child from drowning at the local pool. James Martinez had been a landman in the oil industry in West Texas prior to joining the Navy. Jason Matthews once won a pie eating contest at a county fair in Indiana. Stephen Murphy came from a family of strong Irish tradition. Mohammad Noor wanted to be a doctor someday. Seamus O'Hara always dreamed of visiting the land of his ancestors. Lauren Perris was a self-proclaimed shopaholic. Louis Petteau came from a line of French diplomats who helped our country in the Revolutionary War. Jessica Pinkerton loved old black and white films. Ralph Richardson collected model trains. Jakob Rosenblum liked to fish but always released what he caught. Gideon Saft loved astronomy. Paul Samson had ambitions of becoming a screenwriter. Iliana Schreiber loved spending time with her dog. Norman Schwartz wanted to be an economics professor. Sam Shao loved restoring old cars. Brendon Simmons once traveled to the Amazon Jungle and spent time with its indigenous people. Allison Smith used to hold fashion shows at her house when she was a child, because she wanted to be a fashion designer. Kristy Sorrentino always awoke early to catch the best surfing waves. Martin Thomas wanted to invent something that everyone needed. William Tully had decided at a young age that politics was in his future. Angela Turner wanted to be a kindergarten teacher. Clarissa Vaught had an existential view of life. Michael Webber was a career military man. Laura Winters thought veterinary medicine might be her calling. Peter Zarin loved music."

She stopped speaking. The silence continued across the crowd as she looked out over them. In the front row, her fiancée was actively wiping her eyes. "Ladies and gentlemen, these are just a few details you have shared with me about your loved ones. These were our citizens who deployed and never had a chance to see the shores of our blessed country again. They were mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, husbands and wives, friends, and everyone one of them was someone's child. They were all taken from us much too soon, but each of their stories deserves to be told and heard in full, and by continuing to share the essence of who they were, we keep their spirits alive."

The audience clapped for a moment, interrupting her temporarily. When she continued, she said, "While I have become a representation of our country's injured veterans, there were many others who came home but with physical scars from their mission. Jennifer Appler, Nathaniel Avallone, Robert Bersey, Amanda Carruthers, Chai Chen, Alesha Cleveland, Rachel Cooper, Erika Cortez, Jeffrey David, Anderson DeArman, Brenda Faranda, Melvin Firestone, Julie Fisher, Ashley

Flynn, Meghan Franzetti, Earl Fuller, Patrick Greene, Daniel Hannity, Henry Hatcher, Christian Juettnner, Alexander Keller, Sonja Ladis, Han Ling, Summer Mathis, Xavier Menchero, David Mitchell, Cynthia Moulding, Amy Nixon, Travis Oakley, Keith O'Reilly, Adam Peters, Nicholas Pierce, Jasper Reynolds, Kevin Roberts, Aemillo Ruiz, John Schultz, Sally Snyder, and Janet Vaughan."

The multitude applauded the names of the veterans before she continued, "These ninety people along with the countless other members of our military have been our guardians of peace. They believed so much in the promises of our land that they were willing to take that message half way across the world. However, no one could have ever predicted what would happen that fateful day. Every story from all our sailors is uniquely their own and a part of our country's collective history. My personal story involves seeing men and women at their most courageous. Their bravery and selflessness amidst chaos helped restore peace to a troubled region of our world, but it did not come without a price. My fellow Americans, today I stand before you with a sea of emotions whirling within me. I am pleased that we will break ground today on a memorial to all who served in the war, those who were injured, and those who fell in battle. And yet I grieve for my comrades who were never able to see our beautiful country again and sympathize with those who returned changed by their time away. The cost of war is always much higher than could ever truly be calculated, which is why America had always tried to lead the world down a different path. However, there are times when confrontation becomes inevitable. For those involved, it changes them in a profound way. I have suffered a permanent debilitating injury to my left leg, which has been a catalyst for understanding the true needs of our veterans. You and your loved ones committed your lives to the service of the country, and the country in turn needs to take care of you. I stand before you today more deeply devoted than ever to seeing that we follow through on that commitment."

There was more applause. Looking down at her family, she said, "With that thought in mind, I would like to present to you our Commander-in-Chief, Her Majesty Queen Alexa, who will speak further about our dedication to our military families."

The people clapped and stood as the queen made her way onto the stage. Anastasia saluted her mother, and Alexa returned it with one of her own before they embrace briefly. Alexa then watched as her daughter carefully limped off the stage before stepping fully behind the podium to address the audience.

"My fellow Americans, thank you all for coming today. As Anastasia briefly mentioned, I too am filled with mixed emotions regarding this day, and I come before you as more than the Commander-in-Chief and queen of this country we hold so dearly. I stand here as a mother of a child who was wounded in war. For generations the Washington family has been the steward of this great land, and the responsibilities of such a duty can be extensive. However, we have always fully embraced our obligation to serve and protect the people of this country. Every generation one of our own has volunteered for military service as to have a greater sense of appreciation for those of our citizens who make this voluntary life choice, and I have always been amazed at the dedication of those of you who enlist and your families who support you. Military life is not the easiest path you could have taken, but many of you still make the decision,

because you believe so deeply in what our country represents, and I as your Commander-in-Chief could never express with adequacy how much each of you means to our military family."

The gathering clapped as she paused for a moment. "That is what I truly consider our collection of armed services. We are more than just a several branches of service that collectively make the strongest military in the world. To me, I feel as if I am the matriarch of the largest family in the world, and as such I feel compelled to always protect and care for you in the good and bad times. For several generations we have been able to avoid war, but last year we were forced into a position where we had to defend ourselves and ultimately remove a rogue regime from power lest they continued to wreak havoc on our allies. The decision for that action was mine and so are the successes and failures that go along with it. I feel the injury to and loss of every life whether military or civilian acutely as the Commander-in-Chief, but I especially feel it as a mother of one of the injured. Seeing Anastasia is a constant reminder that as a head of our military family I must continue to strive to do more for each person, but I know everyone's needs are different. When the injured arrived home from the war, I announced an effort to assist them with returning to normalcy within their communities, and while I understand that nothing could ever replace your loved ones, we have started the same process for families of the fallen. We want to assist you in your time of need in the ways that are most meaningful to each of you, and I promise to you that we will continually assess your personal situations in the years to come."

The audience once again applauded. "On this special day we break ground on a memorial to all of those on the front lines of this war. The men and women who fought bravely for our country deserve this recognition for their dedication. Moreover, the names of those who were injured and those who made the ultimate sacrifice will be inscribed here for the world to know whom they are for generations to come. Anastasia has already given us a few personal details about each of these citizens, but there is so much more that could be told. The collective potential of these people we have lost was limitless, and that grieves us all. However, their spirit does live on, and I hope it continues to do so through this memorial."

She paused again to allow for the gathering's response of loud clapping. "To the families that have lost a loved one in this battle, I extend to you my sincerest condolences. Each of your family members gave themselves in their entirety, and I would like to honor that by posthumously bestowing the Purple Heart on each one of them later today at the reception at the palace for families of the fallen. Thank you all for coming today. Please enjoy the rest of our ceremony as we celebrate the lives of your family members and break ground on this memorial in their honor."

When the queen had finished speaking, the mass of attendees stood and applauded her, as she moved to the site of where the ceremonial ground breaking was to take place. After a brief pause for photographs, she symbolically used the shovel to break ground where construction would begin, to the cheering of the crowd, before returning to her seat for the rest of the service, which was filled with patriotic music.

Chapter XV: The People's Princesses

When Layla awoke that morning, she just lay in bed and looked up at the ceiling. The plush bed that she and Anastasia had shared at the princess's residence since she had graduated a month prior felt incredibly large without the redhead next to her. Her fiancée had spent the night at the palace with her family in anticipation of this special day for the nation. She was to officially marry her princess and join the royal family that day. There were times that she still couldn't fathom their chance meeting and subsequent relationship. Her dreams of winning the woman she loved had come true, and Anastasia would take her as a wife in front of the entire world, but it came at a heavy price without her family. She missed them more than she could express, but still she knew she was where she belonged, on the arm of one of the most powerful women on the globe. When they had first met, Layla thought Anastasia was flawless in body but lacked a religious compass. However, in going to war, she had transformed into a woman of flawed perfection who grounded herself in her newfound faith, which is what Layla truly always wanted in a spouse.

A soft knock brought her out of her reverie. When the door opened, Hannah gave a smile. "Good morning." Layla smiled in return as her best friend crawled into the bed with her. The two blondes curled up into each other's arms and were quiet for a moment. "I can't believe this is it," Hannah observed.

"I know. After all this waiting, the day has finally come. Sometimes I still can't believe it."

"You're leaving this house a single woman and coming home a married princess. People are going to call you your highness."

"It's hard to picture that. Nevertheless, I'll always just be Layla to you and your family."

Hannah nodded. "We aren't letting you get away just because you're marrying the crowned princess. You'll always be a member of our family. You're like the sister I always wanted."

"So are you," she softly said, squeezing Hannah tighter. "And I'm so thankful to have you in my life. You've been there through everything, and I couldn't ever forget that."

They were silent for a few moments just enjoying each other's company. "We should probably get up, shouldn't we?"

Layla looked over at the clock. "We have a few minutes before the madness begins. Let's just enjoy this last little bit of peace. When the stylists come for us, there is no turning back," she teased. Both women remained in bed just chatting until the alarm clock signaled the official beginning of their day. Smiling at her best friend, Layla said, "Well, here we go."

"The first day of the rest of your life. Come on. Your princess and the world await," Hannah lightly teased.

Getting out of bed the twosome headed downstairs for breakfast. The house was already abuzz with excitement of the day. The staff was scurrying around while the blondes ate and watched the news. On TV they saw the enormous sea of people in front of the church and along the route

all the way up to the front gates of the princess's residence and the palace. Layla's heartbeat began to accelerate at the idea of the crowd that anticipated her arrival. She had never seen so many people. When breakfast was complete, the two women began to prepare for the big event. Each was shuffled off to the master bedroom by their stylists since they wanted to be together to have their hair and makeup done. Even though they made small talk, Layla's thoughts were on the redhead she would be marrying in a few short hours, wondering what she was doing over at the palace.

Just a few miles away Anastasia was being given the same treatment as her bride but in the privacy of her room at the palace. Her stomach was in knots, not because she was nervous about marrying Layla, but because it would be the first time she would be going out in public without her cane as a surprise for her parents and her people. With the brace completed and in working order, she was able to slowly walk on her own accord. It was a gift she had wanted to bestow on her parents, for she knew even through all their strength they felt the responsibility of her injury just as deeply and personally as if they had inflicted it, and she knew this would be a way to help ease their own guilt, even if she felt no remorse about her sacrifice.

Even though Layla knew about the brace, they hadn't had the opportunity to practice their dancing with it, because it hadn't been ready until the last minute, so Anastasia was especially excited about the prospect of their first dance together. Even though the couple had practiced with the earlier models with nominal success, the night previous Anastasia had secretly solicited Victoria's help in practicing the moves to traditional dances for hours at the palace until she felt sure her brace would hold under the movement. It would be a gift to her bride and to herself on their special day, but moreover the people in her country would benefit from the new technology, which pleased her greatly as well.

When Anastasia's styling was complete, she was left alone to dress. Putting her brace on first, she secured it before slowly putting on her full dress blue military uniform complete with its ceremonial sword. She looked at herself in the mirror to ensure she looked the best she could, taking note of the way her brace partially covered the black shoe adorning her left foot. Fortunately, the color blended with her dark uniform, and she felt confident with the way it felt and moved with her as she walked. Feeling ready, she picked up her cover to put on when she stepped outside, and her cane to maintain the surprise until the church, and went in search of her family.

The royal family congregated in the main hall of the palace when they were ready. They had arranged to meet with the public briefly before the service that day. The queens smiled brightly at their eldest child as she came limping down the hall with her cane but otherwise looked dignified in her chosen outfit. In the time she had known Layla the redhead had grown so much into a mature, thoughtful, compassionate leader of people, and they knew this day was the beginning of a union of two people who would guide their great country on a path of acceptance of the most diverse of citizens for the next generation.

"You look wonderful, sweetie," Lauren complimented as Anastasia got to them. She ran her arm along her daughter's sleeve as she looked her over for a moment.

"You really do," Alexa added. "You do this uniform great justice."

"As do you," Anastasia said looking at her mother who was also in her full dress uniform. Turning to her other mother, she said, "You look stunning, Mom." Looking at her sisters, she mentioned, "All of you look amazing."

"Are you ready to meet the public?" Alexa asked.

Anastasia nodded and smiled. "I have been looking forward to this day for so long. Let us go see the people."

"There is just one thing you should know before we go outside since you are riding in a separate car. We have learned that Layla's parents have positioned themselves outside the church. We have no legitimate reason to move them yet, but if we allow them to stay there, they could cause a scene. Would you like them removed? I do not want Layla upset on her wedding day."

"Let me see them first to see how they are going to behave before I decide. I do not want Layla upset either. Am I still greeting people at the church before I go in?"

"Security thought about canceling that with them being there, but we can still do it if you feel strongly."

"I want to do it. The people should not be denied a chance to see us just because they are there."

"All right. Just know that security is prepared to remove them from the crowd, so Layla does not have to see them when she arrives if need be."

Back at the princess's residence, the two blondes continued to get ready as the news played the royal family exiting the palace to meet the people that had lined up along the gates. "Wow! What a beautiful family!" Hannah exclaimed. "Your wife looks totally hot!"

Layla laughed. "She does," she agreed. "I just hope I'm worthy of her in this dress." She looked at it lying across the bed.

"It's the most beautiful dress I've ever seen. This embroidery is impeccable."

Layla nodded and giggled. "It really is, isn't it?"

"Let's get you in it, so you can go get your Princess Charming."

When it was time for the royal family to head to the church, they all went together in one of their cars except for Anastasia who rode alone. The streets were filled with screaming, excited people as her car slowly went to the National Cathedral. Upon her arrival there, she saw her mothers and sisters waiting for her on the steps when her car door opened. She knew the moment to unveil her surprise was at hand as she slowly rose from the backseat without the use of her cane. Turning and looking at the crowd, she waved, but she saw Layla's parents prominently placed in

the crowd. With a quick look back at her own parents, she gradually rounded the back of the car and headed toward the gathering.

"What is she doing? We were supposed to all go together," Alexa questioned in confusion seeing the display.

However, Lauren just smiled at what was taking place before her. "She is walking, Lex. Our little girl is walking without her cane," Lauren said. "Come on. We should get down there with her."

The family came down the steps to join the princess as she began to greet people. However when she arrived at Layla's parents, she paused and smiled pleasantly. "Mr. and Mrs. Stone," she greeted. "You have seats inside should you wish to occupy them. I would be happy to show them to you."

"I'm not going anywhere with you! You're going to hell for this, and you're dragging our daughter with you! God will judge you, and you will rot for eternity for your life! All of you!" he screamed waving his index finger at the entire Washington family. "You're a bunch of degenerates who don't deserve to rule this country!"

Before Anastasia could react, the crowd started to yell at him, so quickly security pulled the Stones out of the crowd before harm could come to them. With the noise beginning to increase around them, Anastasia looked between them. His eyes were vehemently seething, showing a rage she had rarely seen anywhere else, but in looking at Layla's mother, she saw fragility absent from him. "Mrs. Stone, your daughter is getting married today. Surely you want to be there for her on such an important day."

"It's wrong, your highness," she replied softly. "I can't support it."

Anastasia nodded. "While I do not share your opinion, I will choose to respect that we have a difference in the way we see things. Civility should rule this day, even through that. It is my opinion that God has made your daughter exactly as she is in His image, and she is glorifying Him by committing herself to another in marriage the way the people of the church commit themselves wholly to God. She truly believes Christ is her Savior the same way you do, and she lives her faith daily through her words and actions. She is an instrument of peace. She gives love to all those around her and instills hope and joy in everyone with whom she comes into contact. She is a consoler and an empathizer. Mrs. Stone, you have raised a daughter whom I believe is truly the best example of Christ's love that I have ever seen, and I strive to emulate that. This is one of the most important days in her life, and she wishes for you to be there. She is your only child, and she needs you to feel complete. I would like to have a civil dialogue with you on our differences of opinion on this subject, but for now please be here for her."

Layla's mother looked at her husband. He turned his rage in her direction as he yelled, "Don't you dare even think about going in there! You'll be as bad as everyone else! They are Satan's workers trying break you away from our Lord!"

"Mrs. Stone, if you are afraid, I can protect you. You need not fear him. I give you my word. Do this for Layla. Come with me now," she softly said, extending her hand to her.

She looked between them again in obvious conflict. "It's wrong," she repeated, looking back at Anastasia.

Anastasia sighed, ready to give up but just then Lauren spoke. "Mrs. Stone, I have been in such a moment like this where I had an opportunity to change the course of a relationship with someone who meant something deeply to me, and I let it slip away causing emotional pain to many people. This is not a moment you can redo. You will never be able to come back to this place in time. If you ever want to try to have a relationship with Layla again, this is where you must start. Even if it is the hardest decision you have ever made, even if you disagree with your daughter's choice, the door is going to forever close on you if you let this moment pass. Coming inside right now does not have to mean you affirm Layla's choice. It only commits you to the possibility of reconciliation."

"It is a step she would like to take toward you, Mrs. Stone, if you will take this one toward her," Anastasia said.

"You have tarnished her forever! She's a lost cause if she goes through with this!" Layla's father yelled.

However, Layla's mother shook her head. "I can't give up on her," she said to her husband.

"She's gone! She's one of them now!"

"She's my baby. I can't walk away if there's a chance."

"Then come in," the princess invited.

Layla's mother took a step toward Anastasia only to be restrained by the arm by her husband. "You're not going anywhere!"

The redhead princess scowled at him. "Remove your hand now," she growled.

"This is my wife! You will not tell me what to do with my own wife!"

"She is a citizen of this country who is entitled to my protection. Remove your hand or be arrested," she said firmly, staring at him. A tense moment passed before he relinquished his grip. Curving a protective arm around her, Anastasia motioned security over to Layla's mother, so she could be shown into the cathedral. Then turning back to Layla's father, she said, "Wise decision. I fear if you continue on in this manner, you will be in danger. My security team will take you back to your hotel now for your own safety." With that she left him standing there and returned to the steps with the rest of her family. She gave a final wave to the crowd before heading inside to await the beginning of the ceremony.

When the family got into the cathedral, they were ushered off to a private room by the wedding coordinator to wait for Layla's arrival. The security team approached Anastasia with an update on the situation regarding the blonde's status and that of her parents. "Mr. Stone has been removed from the area, so Layla will not see him when she arrives. She's due in about five minutes. Mrs. Stone doesn't want to go in and take a seat. She wants a private audience with Layla before the service instead."

The princess shook her head. "She can see Layla but not privately. I will not risk having anything upset my bride today. As it is unlucky to see Layla before the service, I will not attend the meeting. My parents can go in my stead."

Alexa nodded. "We would be happy to. Not to worry, Stasia, we will not allow Layla to become upset just before her wedding."

Back outside Layla and Hannah weaved their way through the streets slowly in their car. The multitude of people cheered as she passed, making her heart begin to quicken again. The idea of marrying Anastasia was become so incredibly intense that her breathing began to come in irregular nervous inhalations, which made her feel dizzy. "Are you all right?" Hannah asked in concern, taking her friend's hand.

She nodded. "Just nervous all of a sudden. I'm about to get married."

"I think that's probably normally for a bride, but you're not just any bride. You have a lot of eyes on you. You'll be fine, though. I'll be with you the whole time, even the honeymoon, if you want, in bed right between you and that hunk of a wife of yours," she teased.

Both women laughed as Layla's unease faded a little at the joke. "I'm sure you would. Go get your own princess."

"Maybe I will," she replied with a smile. Looking out the window, she added, "We're almost there."

Upon arrival at the church, there was an honor guard there to meet the blondes. Layla could hear the roaring crowd as she stepped out of the car. She turned and smiled at them, adding a little wave before the two headed up the stairs together, escorted by two members of the guard. As soon as they were inside, they were ushered off to a private room to wait for the service to begin. Within just a few moments, the queens arrived.

"You look incredible," Alexa said with a smile. Layla blushed.

"You are so radiant," Lauren agreed with a smile of her own.

"Thank you."

There was a pause before Alexa said, "Before we go in, you have a visitor who wants to see you. It is your mother. If you would like to see her, we will have her sent in, but it is up to you. We do

not want you to be upset by her whatever she might say, but she has been entirely civil, which is why she is here. The choice is yours."

"I'd like to see her."

With the blonde's consent, the queen summoned the woman. A moment later she entered the room. Mother and daughter looked at each other silently for a minute. "You look so beautiful, Layla. I don't think I've ever seen you look as beautiful as you do right now."

"Thank you, Mom."

There was an awkward pause. "Princess Anastasia was kind enough allow me to come talk to you before you got married. I know you know how I feel about this, and I also know how you feel about it. It's the not the same, and it may never be the same, but I don't want this to be the defining moment of our relationship. I'm not in a position in which I can support this decision you have made, but that doesn't stop me from loving you. You're my daughter, my only child. I have always loved you, and I will always love you. I just wanted you to know that."

The blonde nodded as she tried to hold back the tears pooling in her eyes. She didn't want to ruin her makeup just then, but one escaped as she whispered, "I love you, too." The two women hugged for a moment until the wedding coordinator came to see if they were ready. Layla nodded. "I'm ready," she replied, looking back at the mother. "I have to go now."

Her mother nodded. "Godspeed, Layla," she whispered. "My prayers are with you."

Once she was gone, the queens looked at their daughter-in-law to be. "Are you all right?" Lauren inquired softly.

The blonde nodded. "I'm ready to do this," she answered, taking a deep breath and putting on a smile.

The wedding coordinator smiled at them. "All right. Hannah, I need you to come with me now. Your majesty and your highness, you will follow with Layla in just a few moments. Someone will come to get you when it's time."

Anastasia was standing with David Mitchell just outside the closed doors of the sanctuary when they saw Hannah approach. She smiled at both of them and received their compliments on how great she looked before taking her flowers from one of the wedding assistants. David extended his arm to her when she was ready, and then both of them smiled at the princess.

"See you inside," she said with a smile. "And please do not trip going up the aisle. Millions of people are watching."

"No pressure," Hannah laughed in return just before the doors opened.

Anastasia watched them begin their long trek down the center aisle of the cathedral as she anxiously waited her turn. Even though she wouldn't admit it to anyone, she was as nervous as she was excited. She and Layla were finally going to be married, which pleased her tremendously, and someday in the future the woman who was to become her wife would be the mother of her children as well. The thought made her heart palpitate even harder. However, first they had to make it through the pomp and circumstance of the occasion.

When the moment was upon her, the princess slowly made her way down the aisle toward the front of the cathedral. She had made the walk many times before for state ceremonies and what had become their regular church attendance using her cane, but this was the first time she had walked of her own accord across the stone floor since the war. She was nervous about her leg holding up for the long procession, especially since she didn't want any missteps in front of the millions of people who were watching her every move. Blocking everyone else out except David and Hannah, she focused on gradually walking the length of the aisle, paying keen attention to every slight movement of her brace and feeling how it locked into place with each step before releasing as she took her next one. When she finally made it to her mark, she smiled at her two friends and then turned to wait on the formal entrance of her parents and bride-to-be.

Layla kept her eyes fixed on the closed door in front of her as the wedding coordinator and her staff fluttered around the queens and her making last minute touches to all three of them. Alexa and Lauren each held her by an arm just above her elbow. Underneath the large bouquet of flowers she was holding, her hands were trembling. She had been in the sanctuary many times before as a parishioner, but the gravity of what she was about to do, what she was about to become, set her body shaking in nervous energy.

"Just breathe, sweetheart," Lauren whispered, feeling the quiver of the blonde. "All you have to do is focus on Stasia when you go in."

"You are going to be fine. Everyone in there has come to pay his or her respects you to and Anastasia. Nothing bad will happen while we are with you. There is nothing to fear," Alexa assured.

"I know," she softly said with a smile looking between them. "Thank you for walking me, both of you."

Alexa smiled. "It is a great honor."

Music began and the doors came open to reveal a sanctuary fuller than Layla had ever seen it. All eyes were focused on her, making her freeze for a moment. However, the queens were not frozen by the attention. Instead they gave her a little nudge to break her from her fog, which prompted her into action. Looking for the princess, she smiled at Anastasia as the threesome began to walk down the aisle. It seemed the longest few moments of her life.

When they reached where the redhead was standing, each queen took a moment to kiss Layla on the cheek before doing the same to their own daughter. Alexa then took Layla's hand and placed

it into Anastasia's, holding the two of them together for a moment before she and Lauren took their seats, so the two of them were alone on the world stage for all to see.

"Hi. Fancy meeting you here," Anastasia whispered with a huge smile, making the blonde giggle a little but only so the two of them could hear it. "You look amazing, so incredibly beautiful, Layla. I am the luckiest woman in the world."

"Thank you. You look wonderful, too."

Before any more conversation could take place, the reverend of the cathedral stepped up in front of them to begin the service. He smiled at the two of them as he opened his book. "Are you two ready?" he softly whispered so only they could hear him. Both of them nodded. With that he looked out over his audience and began. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God and in the face of this company to join together this couple in holy matrimony, which is an honorable estate instituted by God, signifying to us the mystical union that is between Christ and his Church, and therefore is not by any to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God. Into this holy estate these two people present come now to be joined." He took a requisite pause, during no sound could be heard before he continued.

"Princess Anastasia, will you take Layla to be your lawfully wedded wife? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her in sickness and in health, forsaking all others so long as you both shall live?"

"I will," the princess answered loudly, so her voice could be heard by the gathering.

"Layla, will you take Princess Anastasia to be your lawfully wedded wife? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her in sickness and in health, forsaking all others so long as you both shall live?"

The blonde looked at the princess and smiled as she replied, "I will."

Turning his attentions toward the gathering again, he asked, "Who here gives Layla to be married to Princess Anastasia?"

Both women looked toward the royal family sat. Queen Alexa stood and answered, "At the behest of Layla, I do." When she had taken her seat, the couple turned back toward the minister.

"Please take each other's hands and then repeat after me." Layla passed her bouquet to Hannah, and then they did as they were told. He turned toward Anastasia and said, "I, Anastasia Elise Washington, take you, Layla Elise Stone, to be my lawfully wedded wife."

"I, Anastasia Elise Washington, take you, Layla Elise Stone, to be my lawfully wedded wife," she began.

"To have and to hold from this day forward, for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health."

"To have and to hold from this day forward, for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health," she repeated.

"To love and to cherish, till death do us part."

"To love and to cherish, till death do us part," she finished with an exhale of nerves.

"Layla, it is now your turn. Please repeat after me. I, Layla Elise Stone, take you, Anastasia Elise Washington, to be my lawfully wedded wife."

"I, Layla Elise Stone, take you, Anastasia Elise Washington, to be my lawfully wedded wife."

"To have and to hold from this day forward, for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health."

"To have and to hold from this day forward, for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health," the blonde softly said, as tears began to fill her eyes.

"To love and to cherish, till death do us part."

"To love and to cherish, till death do us part," she whispered.

The reverend turned to David Mitchell and requested the rings. First he gave Layla's to Anastasia. "Princess Anastasia, please place this ring on Layla's hand as you repeat after me. 'With this ring I thee wed, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.'"

The redhead eased the signature royal wedding band onto Layla's left ring finger as she clearly enunciated, "With this ring I thee wed, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Giving Anastasia's ring to Layla, he said, "Layla, please place this ring on Princess Anastasia's hand as you repeat after me. 'With this ring I thee wed, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.'"

The blonde's hands were trembling, but she wore a tearful smile as she repeated, "With this ring I thee wed, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

The reverend then put their left hands together and said to the two of them, "Now that Princess Anastasia and Layla have given themselves to each other by solemn vows, with the joining of hands and with the giving and receiving of rings, I pronounce they are married, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Those whom God has joined together let no one put asunder. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, bless, preserve, and keep

you; the Lord mercifully with his favor look upon you, and fill you with all spiritual benediction and grace; that you may so live together in this life, that in the world to come you may have life everlasting. Amen." He smiled at them, having made it thus far and said, "Now by the power vested in me by the Episcopal Church and the city of Washington, D.C., I declare that you are married. You may kiss your bride."

Both women smiled as their arms came around each other. "I love you, Layla," Anastasia whispered softly.

"I love you, too, Anastasia," she replied as their lips met tenderly. When they broke, they still cuddled for a moment as Anastasia wiped the tears from her wife's cheeks.

Once the couple had sealed their vows with a kiss and broken from their embrace, the reverend smiled at the two of them. Hannah handed Layla's bouquet back to her before the minister looked at the crowd. "I now have the great honor of presenting to you Her Royal Highness Princess Anastasia and Her Royal Highness Princess Layla."

The entire congregation stood as the couple turned to face the crowd. Both with beaming smiles, they began to process down the aisle and out the front to the steps to the jubilant sound of an orchestra. The hoard of people began to scream wildly as they appeared, causing Layla to blush and laugh at the overjoyed reaction. Both of them waved at the mass of people who appeared extraordinarily excited. Moments later the rest of the royal family appeared at the top of the stairs with them.

Alexa curved an arm around her new daughter-in-law and kissed her on top of the head. "You did it."

The blonde turned and gave Alexa a hug. "Thank you for everything."

"You are as much my child as any of my others, and I love you. It was my great pleasure," she replied with a smile.

Once they returned to the palace, the couple changed into their reception attire while the reception commenced. Layla opted for a more functional white dress than the one in which she was married while Anastasia slipped into a tuxedo. The staff quickly ushered their formal wedding clothes off for inspection before they were to be put in their permanent home in the Washington family museum.

The formal reception had the typical grandeur of a palace party. Matthew Franks was there to announce their arrival after changing clothes. He hugged both women and congratulated them personally before opening the doors for them. Standing at the doorway, he waited for the crowd to settle before he said, "It is now my honor to present Her Royal Highness Princess Anastasia and Her Royal Highness Princess Layla."

All the guests bowed for the newlyweds as they made their formal entrance into the room with the exception of Anastasia's family. For Layla it was a surreal moment as she realized she truly

was now a member of the royal family, and the people were bowing for her as much as Anastasia. While she had contemplated it before, she was still moved by the reality of the moment.

Once they had made it to their table, the small orchestra, which had been playing, began again. The couple mingled for a little bit before the food courses were served to the gathering. However, when the food courses were completed, Alexa and Lauren came to them. "It seems the group is getting anxious to dance this afternoon. We were not sure whether or not you two intended to have your first dance given Anastasia's condition."

"Actually we are going to have our first dance," Anastasia said with a smile for her parents.

"We are?" Layla inquired in confusion. "I thought we were forgoing that, because you said you couldn't dance, even in your new brace."

"Victoria was kind of enough to practice with me. I may not be as good as I would like, but I could not miss the chance to dance with my bride for anything," she answered with a smile. "It is a gift to myself."

"And to me," Layla said, leaning over to kiss her sweetly.

"We were amazed when you stood up out of your car today without your cane," Lauren said. "Nothing could have made us happier then to see you walking after all that has happened, darling."

"I know, Mom. This was meant as a gift to all of us, my whole family and the people of this country. This brace will be going into mass production for those people who are in my position, so we can all regain parts of our lives we have had to postpone."

Alexa smiled at her daughter as she hugged her. "Nothing would make us happier than watching the two of you share your dance then."

A few minutes later the wedding coordinator announced that the newlyweds would have their dance, so they took to the floor by themselves. Even though Anastasia had to move slowly, the couple managed to give their guests an endearing performance full of gazing deeply into each other's blue eyes as they slowly shuffled their way around the floor. When it was complete though, they stayed out there and were joined by other couples, including the queens, for several more songs.

Anastasia would have liked to spend the rest of the evening with her bride dancing, but her leg was beginning to feel weary from all the day's activity. Reluctantly they moved back to their table to rest. Layla smiled at her wife. "That was a wonderful surprise."

"I am glad you enjoyed it. You can thank Victoria for working with me on it. I have been working especially hard to make that moment happen for us. It was meant to be something special."

"It was special. The whole day has been and so will the night," she whispered kissing her wife's ear lightly.

Anastasia moaned a little as their eyes met. While the thought had certainly occurred to her that she would finally be able to know her beloved's body, the commotion of the day had placed that thought way into the back of her mind. Just then though, it came rushing to the forefront. "I can hardly wait," she whispered in reply. Checking her watch, she mentioned, "We will not be getting there until late, though. It will be midnight most likely, and that is assuming we get out of this party within the next hour."

"I suppose we can't sneak out," she teased.

"They would probably notice if we were missing."

When the couple was able to leave about two hours later, they quickly changed into their travel clothes and rushed to the airport before anyone could detain them to board one of the royal plans for their honeymoon. Once aboard, both women were beginning to tire from all the activity of the day, so they retired to the bedroom suite on the plane. Putting in a movie to help pass the time, they curled up together on top of the bed to watch, but each of them drifted to sleep almost immediately, not waking until they had landed in the Virgin Islands. Sleepily the pair shuffled down the staircase to the awaiting car and were taken to their palace.

The night staff was there to greet them pleasantly and take their belongings to their room. The two of them followed slowly behind, holding hands as Layla leaned into Anastasia's shoulder as they walked. Even though the staff tried to unpack their belongings, Anastasia waved them off, saying they could take care of it themselves in the morning, so the couple was alone.

Standing together in their bedroom, they embraced each other. Anastasia smiled down at her wife. "Well, your highness, how are you doing?"

"This entire day has been an incredible dream. I can't believe it. We're actually married. I thought this day would never come, and I know you thought this night never would," she teased.

The redhead chuckled and nodded. "You look so beautiful right now. You look completely content and yet utterly exhausted," she whispered, caressing her cheek softly.

Layla nodded. "I am exhausted," she admitted. "I feel like I could sleep for twelve hours together given the chance."

"Me too," Anastasia confessed. Kissing her wife's mouth gently, she said, "Perhaps we should go to bed then. Would you like to use the bathroom first?"

"You go ahead. There is something I want to get out of my bag first."

Anastasia went into the bathroom to prepare for bed. She opted for casual pajamas, figuring she wouldn't be wearing them for more than a few minutes anyway and then headed back to the

bedroom. She sat on the bed to remove her brace as Layla disappeared into the bathroom. With that accomplished she slid under the plush covers to wait for her bride. Several minutes passed before Layla opened the bathroom door and stepped into the bedroom. Anastasia felt her breath leave her as her heart began to beat in a rapid cadence at the sight of her wife.

Layla lingered shyly by the doorway for a moment waiting for Anastasia's reaction to her outfit. It was intense and immediate as she saw the redhead's blue eyes darken in fervor and the pulse of her neck become more profound. She definitely had her wife's attention, so she slowly made her way over to the bed and slid onto it.

"Wow. You look stunning, so sexy," Anastasia whispered as she reached out to her wife's cheek.

"I hoped you would like my outfit."

"I do. I like it very much," she softly said, kissing her cheek before moving to her lips as her hand ran down along a satin-covered shoulder. The off-white satin robe and lace and satin chemise Layla was wearing was bringing her libido roaring to life. She felt as if she had never wanted her as much as she did in that moment. The couple kissed for several minutes enjoying their closeness, but Anastasia's ardor was competing with her fatigue, which caused her to hesitate in moving them further.

Sensing something wasn't quite right, Layla pulled back enough that they could look into each other's eyes. She clearly saw her wife was as tired as she was, but she wasn't sure what to do about it. This was their wedding night, and she had promised herself to Anastasia on this special occasion. As much as it was a promise she wanted to fulfill, there was a small part of her that wished for a few-hour reprieve before they consummated their marriage, so they could each be fully rested in order to concentrate on the other. "Is everything all right?" she finally asked.

Anastasia smiled and nodded. "Of course. Everything is wonderful. I am just more tired than I thought."

"If you're too tired for this, we can always wait."

"I promised you a wedding night to remember," she countered. "I want to keep that promise. I love you, and I want to show you how much you mean to me the way we have both longed for all these months."

"You already have kept your promises. This whole day has been amazing, and I have absolutely no doubts about your love for me. I want to be with you, too, but I'm not against waiting until after we get some sleep. I'm totally exhausted but would do this for you if it were what you really wanted right now. I know you would as well if it's what I wanted."

"I would do anything you asked of me tonight, but I just want to be at my best for you, and I am afraid I will not live up to your expectations in this condition," the redhead admitted.

"You would never fail my expectations, love, but we've waited this long. What's a few more hours, so we could rest up for the big event," she teased.

Anastasia chuckled lightly. "Wait another few hours? Well, you have put me off this long. What is a few more in the grand scheme of things?"

Leaning to kiss her wife, Layla whispered, "I've waited my entire life for you, and I want us both to have what we want. I'm going to need you at your best to satisfy my desires."

"You are going to make it impossible for us to go to sleep talking like that."

Layla laughed lightly. "I love playing with you, and I look forward to a lifetime of teasing you unmercifully and loving you completely, but let's start after we get some sleep."

"All right but promise me one thing."

"Anything."

"I want you to keep this on until then. I like the idea of unwrapping my present all dressed in white."

"Not to worry. Your virgin bride will remain dressed in white for you to take at your earliest convenience."

Anastasia moaned a little. "I cannot wait until we awake."

"Then sleep now for your chance will not come until you rest a little."

With their decision to withhold made, the couple curled up together under the covers in bed as they had done numerous times. Kissing each other once more for good measure, each whispered their undying love before sleep quickly claimed them both for the rest of the night.

The next morning when Anastasia awoke she noticed that she was alone in bed. Sitting up she sleepily looked around the room and noticed the wooden blinds on the doors leading to the beach were open and one of the doors cracked, emitting the soft sounds of waves. Peering outside to the private terrace, she saw the small table set with what looked like a light breakfast. Figuring her wife was outside enjoying the morning light, the princess eased herself from bed after securing her brace and made her way outside. She saw Layla just a short distance from the terrace standing in the sand overlooking the water.

Her spouse looked ravishing in her white lingerie with her long blonde hair fluttering down her back in the slight breeze. Anastasia simply gazed at her for long minutes as she leaned against a column of the palace to rest her leg. Her heart swelled with emotion at just the sight of her beloved who seemed unaware of her presence. A few minutes later though Layla turned to come back to the table. Seeing Anastasia she gave a bright smile of contentedness, which took hold of

the redhead's heart. Anastasia had never felt so loved as she did when her wife smiled in her direction.

"Good morning, your highness," Anastasia whispered softly as the blonde came to where she was standing.

Layla continued to smile as she ran her hand up along her wife's chest, then her neck and into her red hair. "A very good morning," she replied, leaning up to kiss her seductively.

Moaning into the kiss, Anastasia brought her arms around Layla. It was clear that her wife had not forgotten what was first on the day's agenda. "I missed you when I awoke, and you were not there."

"I wanted to give you a chance to rest, because I knew you were going to need it. I took the liberty of having breakfast brought out for us. Perhaps we should eat a little something first. You need fuel for what's to come," she teased as her hand retraced its path down her neck and over her chest. She lightly massaged the flesh a moment before she withdrew her touch completely and turned to the table.

Anastasia tried to take a normal breath, but her body wouldn't let her. This overtly sexual side of Layla was causing chaos within her. While Layla was always quite comfortable with their physical intimacy before they were married, there was always a certain amount of restraint she employed. However, that certainly was not the case that morning. Anastasia was as intrigued as she was secretly pleased.

Taking their seats at the table, they began to eat some breakfast. Layla poured them both coffee from the silver pot that had been sitting on a tray and then added the appropriate amounts of cream and sugar for their cups before handing Anastasia hers. The redhead felt electricity shoot up her arm as her wife caressed her hand in the exchange. Anastasia smiled gently and said, "You certainly are feeling playful this morning."

"I've waited my whole life for this moment with you. I've thought about it so many times, but I knew I couldn't act on it then. I couldn't even tease you fully the way I always wanted, because I knew I was too vulnerable to your charms and might have succumbed to them had you reacted to me then the way you are now. I also didn't think it was fair to tease you this way if we weren't married, as it would have been paramount to torturing you," she replied with a smile behind her cup.

"So does this mean you'll be torturing me for the rest of our lives?" she joked.

She nodded. "Absolutely," she whispered.

Anastasia gave a smile and a sigh. "That is perfectly fine by me. I like this side of you," she admitted leaning over and kissing the blonde on the cheek.

"Eat some breakfast," Layla directed. "Because after this I want to go back to bed."

Cracking a grin Anastasia replied, "Whatever you desire, your highness."

Breakfast was filled with subtle seduction as Layla took every opportunity to caress her wife's frame. She could see the effect it had on her, the way her breathing labored and eyes darkened. Anastasia started to look unreservedly fervent as the meal progressed. When it was clear neither was going to eat anymore, the blonde stood from her chair. Holding out her hand to her wife, she said, "Come. You have a promise to keep."

Without a word Anastasia took her hand and allowed herself to be led back to their bedroom. Together they stood at the bedside just gazing into each other's eyes as they allowed the gravity of the moment to enfold them. They had pledged in front of God and the world to forsake all others, and while they had both kept that promise while dating, the consummation of their marriage would be the first encounter on the journey of what each anticipated to be a satisfying relationship in that regard.

In keeping with the earnestness she felt in her heart, Anastasia tenderly caressed her wife's cheek. "I love you so much, and I consider myself the luckiest woman in the world to have you for my wife. I have no idea what I would ever do without you."

"Luckily you'll never have to find out," she whispered in reply as they kissed softly.

Each of them methodically ran their hands along the other's body on the outside of their pajamas. There was no need rush the moment, even after all their waiting. Instead they wanted the occasion to linger, so they slowly became acquainted with each other. Layla made the first move as she raised Anastasia's t-shirt over her head. She had seen the princess shirtless many times, but this time she was allowed to explore the strong torso at leisure. She heard her wife's breathing hitch as her hands drifted along the redhead's chest and abdomen before encircling her bare back.

"I love how strong you are. I've always wanted to be able to just caress your body like this," she confessed as their kissing started to become more intense.

Anastasia groaned. "It feels incredible." She whimpered as she felt hands slip into the back of her sleeping shorts. Her hands trailed over Layla's satin robe as she began to kiss her wife's neck.

Layla moaned lightly at the gentle caress. She could feel herself becoming more aroused by the moment. Tugging on Anastasia's shorts, they fell off the redhead, so she was only standing there in her leg brace, which made the redhead pause a moment and pull back slightly. The blonde's eyes trailed along her wife's body taking inventory of what greeted her. She had never truly seen her wife's nakedness before, the only two closest times being when it was slightly obscured during their first fight and then in the hospital while it was mostly covered in bandages, so she didn't fully know what to expect of her wife's post-war frame. Anastasia's body still had faint scars from her war injuries, but Layla didn't care. Anastasia might have been flawed, but she was also perfect.

"I hope you approve of what you see," the princess whispered, shifting her weight a little onto her better leg.

"Very much. I've imagined your body so many times pressed against me," she murmured. "I can't wait to feel your skin on mine." Making another move, Layla pulled away enough to kneel down in front of the princess. Anastasia's hand threaded itself in long blonde hair as she felt hands teasing her legs with light strokes as her wife unlatched the brace. A mouth joined the exploration, kissing her lover over her stomach and up between her breasts as Layla stood again. Anastasia was so weakened by the display and her desires that her legs gave out, and she sunk onto the bed. She never once dreamed Layla would be so aggressive, but she was enjoying this surprise tremendously.

Layla straddled her wife's legs as their mouths came together again. The short chemise rose as she did so, revealing that she wasn't wearing anything beneath it. Anastasia could feel that Layla was becoming excited as their hips rocked into each other. Slowly Anastasia removed her wife's robe, revealing bare arms and mostly bare shoulders. Taking her time she began her own exploration of Layla's skin. Her mouth skimmed lightly over the smoothness as her fingers provided light caresses down along her arms before moving to the thighs that were astride her. It was Layla's turn to moan as she felt her lover's hands along her legs and hips as Anastasia's mouth once again took residence in her neck. Feeling strong hands dip under the hem of her chemise and slide their way up her back, her breathing came even faster as the satin rose with the movement. Anastasia worked off the garment, leaving them both completely bare. She had only see her wife naked once before at the hospital, and she had desperately missed the sight.

"You are so incredibly beautiful, Layla," she said. "I love you so much."

"I love you, Stasia, and I could only ever belong to you."

Anastasia's heart pounded even harder at the loving sentiment. Rolling them so Layla rested against the bed, Anastasia pulled herself up to hover slightly above her for a moment before she said, "I want you to enjoy this completely, so if I do something you do not like, promise to tell me. It is my honor and duty to give you anything you desire and pleasure you in any way that gives you satisfaction. I will never take from you, only give to you as a way to bring us closer. I promise this to you as your wife now and for always."

"I know, Stasia, and I promise you the same. You have all of me," she answered, bringing the body above hers down onto her own.

Both women groaned at the feeling of their bodies pressed fully against each other. Anastasia took the lead between them as she kissed slowly down into her wife's chest as her hands filled themselves with the softness of Layla's breasts. The blonde was incredibly responsive to each little touch as her mouth worked its way over the crest and kissed it gently, causing the smaller woman to writhe and gasp. Lingering there with her mouth, Anastasia let her hands wander over the rocking frame beneath her. She could hear Layla's labored breathing and feel her lover's hands clutching at the back of her red locks while her thighs did the same to her hips.

"Stasia, oh, God, Stasia," she panted as pleasure radiated through her body. She already felt on the verge of losing control, but this time there was nothing holding them back from what they both wanted so much.

The princess continued to survey her wife's form with her mouth as she descended down to her stomach. Her hands stroked the blonde's thighs and hips. She could feel Layla's arousal beginning to coat her torso as she closed in toward her goal. Everything about her lover's desires was making her delirious with need to connect them physically, but she continued to withhold at first. She knew there would only be one first time, and she wanted to give her virgin bride ultimate pleasure.

Kissing lower still she began to open her lover's legs to accommodate her shoulders. The heat and wetness that Layla's body emitted reached deeply into her own heart as she truly realized she was the only one to have such knowledge of her beloved. She understood just then the gift her wife was giving her. "I love you so much, Layla."

"I love you," she gasped as she felt Anastasia's mouth against her for the first time. "Oh... my... God," she panted, clutching the back of the head between her thighs. The mouth and tongue that kissed her so well was suddenly bestowing a new kind of intimacy upon her, one she had never been fully able to visualize until she felt it for the first time.

Anastasia took her time. As much as she wanted to rush to the climax, she wanted to discover all she could about what her lover enjoyed. Using her tongue as her guide, she methodically surveyed the outer edges of the treasured space, making mental notes of her wife's responses before delving a little deeper to the entrance. She was tempted to slip inside but resisted, knowing neither of them was quite ready. Instead she teasingly circled it with the tip of her tongue.

Layla's hips practically shot off the bed as she gasped, "Stasia, oh, please."

"I am going to take care of you, love. I promise," she whispered. Continuing with her tongue she traced up from the opening up to where she knew the most pleasure awaited her wife. She drew small figure eights in a leisurely pattern from the top of her pleasure down to the entrance and back again, causing a set of tremors through the blonde. Thighs contracted against her shoulders and cries of delight emitted from her lover's throat. Anastasia carried on methodically, taking her time and using her mouth to bestow gentle caresses until it became obvious her wife was about to climax. Even though she desperately wanted to push her over that precipice, she knew she had other ideas of how she wanted it to happen the time and reluctantly withdrew her attentions.

"No, please don't stop," Layla begged.

The princess kissed up the blonde's body to her mouth and kissed her. "I would never stop," she promised, replacing her mouth with her right hand between her lover's thighs. Wetness quickly coated her fingers as she applied similar pressure as she had with her mouth.

Layla's hips rocked faster at the touch as she whimpered, "Please, Stasia."

Anastasia kissed her wife on the ear and affirmed, "I love you, Layla, and I will always love you."

Layla couldn't even respond for a moment as she felt her wife claim her for her own. She had imagined what it would be like to make love with Anastasia, but the feeling of her inside the first time made her fall for her all over again. She moaned and held her closer. "Oh, Anastasia, I love you, too," she finally managed to pant as her beloved began to thrust in time with her rocking hips, causing each delve to be just a little deeper. Being so close to the edge already, it was only a few minutes before her body started to tremble. "Oh God, oh God, Stasia," she called clutching her closer.

"I have you. You are safe, and you are so beautiful, Layla," she whispered as the contractions began inside of her lover.

Layla's whole body shuddered, and she moaned as her climax fully claimed her. The spasms continued sporadically for several minutes as Anastasia remained inside of her. When her breathing had returned to normal, she whispered, "Wow."

"Are you all right?" Anastasia asked meeting blue eyes with her own.

The blonde smiled brightly. "That was incredible."

"I am glad you are pleased."

"I'm more than pleased. I'm elated. Is that what I have to look forward to for the rest of my life?"

"If that is what you want, but there are so many ways to make love to you, and I look forward to trying every single one," Anastasia confessed, pulling out of her wife, which caused another set of shudders. They cuddled together for a few minutes in silence, enjoying their newfound closeness. "Thank you," Anastasia said after a bit.

"For what?"

"The gift of yourself. I am humbled by it."

"I knew I was only meant for you."

"There is no greater gift you could have given me, and I understand that now. I know I have nothing as valuable to give in return."

"You have already given so much to me," she assured. Cracking a grin though she added, "But you can give me what I've wanted for so long now." Her hand trailed over her lover's torso between her thighs.

"You can have anything you want. I am yours completely, and your wish is my command, your highness. I am yours forever." Smiling at each other, they kissed softly as Layla took her wife's offering and connected them physically.

For them it was the first day of the rest of their lives, and they were determined to enjoy it to its fullest. They knew time would bring them challenges. There would be children to raise and a country to rule, but in that moment, it was the beginning of their journey, and they knew whatever the future held, they would be there to face it together.

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