

~ Queen of My Country, Queen of My Heart II: New Era of Queens ~

by Alex Tryst

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Dedication: To Carla, as always, you have been a tremendous help to me on this project and throughout our many years together as writer and editor. To Amy, for always fixing my historical inaccuracies.

Author's Note: Even though this is technically the second book in a series, I have been told by my betas that it can be enjoyed as a stand-alone piece. You will find characters from book one here and find resolutions to some loose ends from the last book. However, it is not a necessity that you read it to fully enjoy this one. In fact, since it's been six years between the books, I recommend just jumping into this one.

Chapter I: The Heirs Apparent

Alexa Washington looked skyward in her boredom that afternoon and sighed. She had come to the Kentucky Derby as part of a family tradition presumably started generations previously with her great-grandparents King George IV and Queen Victoria. Historians recounted that the king had a great love of horses, which began his annual pilgrimage to the state of Kentucky with his wife and in later years his wife and their daughter Alexa who had become the country's first female ruler since its inception and for whom the current princess was named. However, her reign lasted only days when she laid down her life to save her greatest love, her wife Queen Lara, and their child Faith, mother of the current Alexa.

The second queen, Alexa Georgianna Faith Washington, had officially ruled America since that fateful occasion even though she was merely an infant, allowing her reign to be the longest in American history. Sixty years Alexa's mother had been the queen, and apparently she had inherited the love of the derby from her mother and grandfather, so every year the entire royal family was required to attend the event. Princess Alexa herself did enjoy riding as well, but at her age of twenty-five, she was more interested in activities other than sitting in the royal box pretending to be enthralled in a horse race.

Her eyes shifted around the box at her other family members. There were her parents, Queen Faith and Prince Thomas. Her brother Prince George and his wife Princess Kelly were there engaged in conversation with each other and hardly paying attention to anything going on around them as Kelly rocked their infant daughter Princess Morgan. Her extended royal family of aunts Princess Victoria and Princess Katherine, as well as Katherine's wife Princess Nicole, was chatting amiably about what she couldn't quite discern. Her one uncle, Victoria's husband Prince Edward, was talking with her father, and her twin cousins Princess Lara and Princess Kate were obviously interested in watching people in the crowd and commenting on everyone's formal attire.

Princess Alexa just sighed to herself as she thought how odd it seemed to be there at the Kentucky Derby without her grandmother, The Queen Mother Lara Washington. Lara had passed away only months before, and the idea of being there without her weighed heavily on Alexa's heart. She always had a special relationship with her grandmother. Lara would often tell the heir to the throne stories of her grandmother, Queen Alexa. Her grandmother was a beloved icon in not only the country's history but also the royal family. Although the shortest reign of the Washington dynasty, Queen Alexa had moved the country with her eternal devotion to her wife and child, her benevolent sacrifice the cornerstone of her legacy. The Queen Mother had spent the rest of her life fulfilling what should have been Alexa's destiny in her memory and filling Princess Alexa's head with the grandeur of the woman for whom she was named. Furthermore, her grandmother impressed upon her the duties of following such great leaders as her grandmother and mother.

There were many times over the course of Alexa's life that she would sit with her beloved grandmother and listen to how much alike she was in look and personality to the former queen. The mere gaze Lara would get in her eyes when speaking of her late wife was of such fondness that Alexa cherished being thought of as the closest relative to being like her. However, it was not only her family that conceded the likeness. The media and country constantly compared her to the late ruler. In fact, it was widely thought that Alexa would fulfill her grandmother's legacy as the greatest sovereign the country had ever had. Although at that moment she was just the heir to the throne, with her own mother a powerful yet genteel ruler who brought true aristocracy to the position, while Alexa was seen as the wild child who would one day be queen.

Deciding she needed a change of scenery from her own family, the princess stood from her seat and turned toward her mother. "Mother, I am going to go call on the Adams," she said.

The queen nodded her head. "Very well. Mind your manners and stay out of trouble, will you?" she said with a smile.

"I will try. Meredith said she would be attending, and I have not seen her in a few weeks," she mentioned.

"I know. She has been far too busy with her position at the Musical Arts Foundation. She has not been to any functions at the palace in the last several months. The press is beginning to wonder about your lack of time together."

"Well, seeing us here today then should only make things better," she stated.

"Yes, it should." As Alexa turned to go, her mother took her by the hand. "Button your shirt properly, Lex."

The princess sighed but did as she was told, buttoning the white starched shirt all the way to the top sans the button on the collar. Brushing over the lapels of her formal morning suit jacket, she inquired, "Better?"

"Much. You now look more like the princess you are. Go have fun and give Lord and Lady Adams my regards."

With that Alexa headed out of the booth under escort to where the Adams family box was. The Adams, one of the noble houses, had always been close to the royal family. In fact, her aunt Victoria had married an Adams herself, but thankfully Meredith Adams was far enough removed in relation to Alexa's uncle Edward that the public did not frown upon the relationship they had begun two summers previous. Strolling down to their box, she was greeted by all the passers-by with the utmost respect as they all bowed before her. She just gave a charming smile to all her constituents, as she knew was proper, but her mind was really on seeing her girlfriend.

When she arrived to the place where the Adams always sat, she was greeted with fanfare typical of a royal arrival. Her girlfriend curtsied in her presence before giving her a chaste kiss on the cheek. Alexa returned the affection as she complimented, "You look radiant today, Meredith. Your dress and hat are stunning."

"Thank you, Lex. I must say you look dashing. Suits definitely become you."

Alexa simply smiled at the comment. She hated dressing up, but she knew it was unavoidable. The only consolation was that she was allowed to wear whatever she wanted, so often she and her brother would use the same tailor. That day she was wearing a morning suit, the gray trousers with a white shirt, gray vest, and black coat with tails. Instead of the traditional white tie like her brother was wearing, she opted for pearl buttons to complete her outfit. Of course typical of the young heir's personality, her dark aviator sunglasses hid her dark eyes, and her brown chin-length hair was carefully disheveled, giving her the edge of magnetism and danger people had come to expect.

"My mother sends her regards, Lord and Lady Adams," she said once everyone had been seated once again.

"How is your mother?" Meredith asked. "I have not seen her in awhile."

"I know. We were talking of just that very thing earlier. Your absence at the palace has been noticed. My mother feels you are being over-worked at the foundation."

"Well, then I shall make more of an effort to spend more time at the palace lest my presence be forgotten all together," she replied with a smile, placing her hand on Alexa's forearm.

"That could never happen, Meredith. You have the admiration of the queen. Nothing can change that, not even months apart."

"Yes but months apart from you could cause her disapproval. After all, it is my duty to attend to the land's greatest ruler-to-be."

Casting a charming one-sided grin at her girlfriend, she leaned toward her ear. Softly so no one could hear her, she whispered, "Speaking of attending to me, I was wondering if I might

convince you to take a stroll."

Meredith returned the smile and nodded. "Whatever you wish, your highness," she said placing her hand in Alexa's. The princess stood and then helped her tall elegant girlfriend to her feet. Turning to her parents, Meredith said, "Lex and I are going for a walk. We will be back later."

Her father gave a grin in Alexa's direction. "Take care of each other, you two. The press is about."

Alexa guided Meredith out of the box. Immediately her security escort that had been waiting stepped to them and then fell several footsteps behind, seeming to instinctively know the couple wanted some privacy. Hand in hand they walked through the grounds, greeting patrons pleasantly and even posing for a few photographs, but they managed to make their way to a small grove of trees in solitude. Coming to one tree in particular, they stopped. Meredith leaned against the trunk slightly and gave her girlfriend a pretty smile. "I have missed you, Lex," she admitted, putting her hands on the lapels of Alexa's jacket.

The princess gave her typical dashing bright smile. "I have missed you as well," she confessed, leaning in and propping her forearm up against the trunk over her dark-haired girlfriend's head. Instantly their lips met in a soft exchange.

Meredith moaned but then gently pushed her suitor away when Alexa tried to make things more intimate between them. "Lex, we are not alone."

"So? It is no secret that we are seeing each other. It does not bother me if they see us."

"But your mother. She would not look highly upon people seeing us this way."

"My mother. You know what my mother truly wants? She wants the media to see us happy. She is concerned about the speculation in the news that our relationship is on the rocks with all our time apart. She would not mind the public seeing us enjoying each other's company a little," she pressed, trying once again to kiss the brunette.

Meredith allowed her to do so. However, after a few minutes, she suggested, "Take off this coat. It must be hot to be in all this wool."

Alexa nodded in agreement and shed her jacket. She tossed it over a low hanging branch. Looking back at her girlfriend, she asked, "Would you mind if we dispensed with this beautiful hat?"

"I do not mind as long as you do not mess up my hair. It took a long time to get it up this morning," she warned.

Alexa nodded her head in understanding. Taking the hat from Meredith's head, she placed it on another branch. "Your hair looks good like that," she said, gazing at the long dark hair that had been swept up into an exquisite twist. "Of course I love being able to run my hands through it."

"I know, but for once you must resist your urges."

Giving a low laugh, the princess nipped her girlfriend's ear lightly. "Oh the urges I have when I am with you, Mere," she growled, pulling the brunette's body closer to her own by sliding an arm around her waist. "Tell me. What is the most convenient access into your dress?"

Meredith laughed and slapped at the hands running over the bodice of her formal gown. "You are incorrigible, Lex. Absolutely scandalous," she giggled, raking fingers through the heir's dark hair as Alexa kissed along her jaw. When their eyes met again, Meredith gently removed Alexa's sunglasses and hung them from the buttonhole on her girlfriend's collar. "I much prefer seeing your eyes when we kiss," she said, sliding her arms around Alexa's neck.

"And I like kissing," Alexa whispered seductively before finding soft lips again. "I just wish you would cease torturing me so. You know I need more than your sweet lips murmuring soft nothings. You know my needs extend beyond holding your hand and tasting your enticing mouth."

"I know, your highness, but you know the law."

"Probably not as well as you do, Meredith. Surely there is some loophole. I am sure the law says nothing about making me suffer cold lonely nights, not when there is such warmth in your embrace."

"Oh no. The law is specific, and even if it was not, the queen has made it quite clear. It is only the chaste that wins her favor for your hand. Pure in heart and body is a requirement to be your bride. Queen Faith would accept nothing else."

"But it is not my mother's choice. It is mine. No one has to know, Meredith. I will not tell a soul. Just let me sample the treasures you possess."

Meredith gave a pretty smile but rebuffed her sovereign. "You may taste my pleasures only after we have been wed. After that I am yours any and every time you desire me."

Moaning in frustration, the princess pulled back. She knew she would not sway her girlfriend of two years. Meredith would do whatever the queen wanted in order to ensure Alexa's hand. The princess knew Meredith was her mother's preference for Alexa's bride, and even as tempting as the graceful woman was, the heir had her doubts about taking her girlfriend as a wife. Nevertheless, she didn't voice that. Instead she simply wrapped her in her arms once again and placed a wholesome kiss on her forehead. "You drive me delirious, my darling Mere."

"Do you honestly think that I do not think on what it might be like between us, Lex? Trust me. Under other circumstances I would have already succumbed to your magnificent enticement." Meredith cast her eyes around them to make sure they were in privacy before bringing their bodies together tightly. Taking the crowned princess by the hand, she pressed it against her left breast and held it there. "My body aches for your caress," she breathlessly confessed.

Alexa's eyes flashed wantonly at the feeling of the soft flesh in her hand. Meredith had never allowed her to touch her that way. Knowing they could be caught in the compromised position, she reluctantly let go but not before giving a tender squeeze, just enough to elicit a mewling sound from her girlfriend. "I wish we had time to explore this conversation more, but I fear I cannot without doing something inappropriate, my sweet. Perhaps when we return back to D.C. we can take the opportunity to discuss this further."

Meredith nodded her head. "We should return. My parents may begin to wonder about us."

Alexa nodded as well as she picked up her girlfriend's hat and extended it to her. She then retrieved her own coat and slipped it on. "Do I look suitable?" she asked.

"You look fine except for this lipstick." Meredith wiped it from Alexa's mouth with her fingertips. "What about me?"

"You are beautiful. Come along now. Let me escort you back."

Later that day the royal family returned to D.C. in one of their jets. Alexa had made arrangements to spend time with Meredith the following day at their estate in Virginia to go horseback riding and be alone together, so she retired to her quarters when they got home, because she knew she had an early morning ahead of her.

The next day when Alexa arrived for her breakfast after an early run along the grounds, the sight of her parents discussing something that appeared to be in the paper greeted her. Both of them smiled at her as she came into the room. "Lex, good morning. We were just talking of you."

"Good morning, Mother, Father. What have I done now to be the object of a hushed conversation?"

Faith smiled as she extended the morning newspapers in her direction. "You made quite an impression with Meredith yesterday. The presses have published all kinds of photographs of the two of you sharing time together. They are speculating that wedding bells might not be too far away for the happy couple," she teased lightly.

Alexa looked at the front pages of several publications. "Well, you did suggest we make ourselves seem close."

"I would say you accomplished that and then some. I especially like this one. You two look so happy here," Faith mentioned, pointing to the picture of Alexa kissing Meredith on the forehead. "It is so sweet. Of course some of these leave no doubt as to your desires to be alone with each other. I do not know if you have seen the news this morning on TV. They have footage of the two of you together."

"I can only imagine of what."

"Fortunately it was not too intimate. You two are only kissing passionately, but I am happy to know you were on good behavior."

"Yes, Mother. Meredith is a lady. I would never take advantage of a lady."

"I know that. However, after seeing these photographs, it does beg the question of whether you are prepared to make a proposal to Lady Meredith Adams. The time certainly is appropriate," her mother hinted, taking a sip of her hot tea.

Alexa sighed her displeasure with the direction the conversation was suddenly taking. "Mother, I am not ready to marry anyone. I care for Meredith, and I enjoy spending time with her, but I do not wish to make any kind of marriage proposal at this time."

"But, Lex, the country wants to see you wed. You are twenty-five, and people want to see you happy."

"They want to see me having children is what you are trying to say, are you not, Mother?" she pointedly questioned.

"That as well. You are the heir to the throne. Your grandmothers were already well into having my sisters and me by your age. My mother had already taken on the duties of Regent, running the country due to my grandfather's ailing health by the time she was twenty-five. She had the responsibility of the entire country. I have had it officially since I was twenty-one. You have not taken on any royal duties as of yet, and I feel it is time for you to do so. You should start by growing up and taking a wife. George is already married with a child. The people are ready to see the same for you. Meredith is your perfect match. I do not understand why you postpone the inevitable. The two of you would make beautiful intelligent children. She loves you, Lex. She has told me as much, and I know that you feel deeply for her."

Alexa nodded. "I will concede that I have feelings, but I am not ready, Mother."

"My mother was not ready when the princess proposed to her nor was I ready when your father proposed to me, but once we made that commitment to each other, I realized I had just been afraid of the unknown. It is your obligation to your country not to delay this any longer. You must marry Meredith. She is the appropriate woman for you."

Alexa rolled her eyes and sighed. "And if I say that I will not?" she questioned defiantly.

"You would not do that. You know I would never wish to force my hand with you, Alexa, but as your queen I could do so. I am doing this for your own good. Once you are married, you will thank me."

"Father, have you anything to say about this?"

"Best to listen to your mother, Alexa, and if you cannot do that, you can at the very least comply with the wishes of your sovereign," he said firmly. "Your mother is correct. You have led a life

of leisure up until now, but that will end with your marriage to Meredith. You will become the responsible princess and heir you are supposed to be. The people will rest easier knowing you are wed and planning a family. That is your primary responsibility to your family and your country."

Knowing she was not going to win the argument with her parents, Alexa was quiet a moment. The queen had made up her mind, and Alexa knew once that had happened, she would not be swayed from her course. She had seen it since she was a child. That was the kind of leader her mother was, methodical but decisive. The princess knew the choice had been made for her, and she was obligated to adhere to her parents' wishes. At least hoping to stall for more time, she said, "All right. I know when a battle is futile. I will propose to Meredith but not before I leave for flight school. I will do so on my return."

Queen Faith nodded her head in agreement. "Very well. Three months will not matter much in the long run. In the meantime I will see to the rings, especially since you will not be available. That will give the jeweler ample time to create something for the two of you. The standard royal rings are most appropriate I think."

"Of course."

"Good. I am glad that has finally been decided. When are you and George heading for Florida?"

"The day after tomorrow. Today Meredith and I are going to the country estate to go riding and have some time together. I will not be back until tomorrow evening."

Her mother raised a fair brow at her. "I do hope you plan on behaving while you and Meredith are alone. That is highly against protocol, Alexa."

The princess shrugged her shoulders. "If she is to be my wife, you will have to start trusting me with her, Mother. She holds her virtue closely. You should not fear that an overzealous princess could divest the lady of her chastity."

"See that you do not. You know the law is quite explicit on that subject."

"Yes, I do. Although I have yet to figure out why."

"It should be obvious. No one but the sovereign should know their spouse. Anything else would be inappropriate."

"Even though that is true, I still do not see why an heir cannot enjoy their lover before the marriage. This notion of virginity on a wedding night is so antiquated. The laws are clear that an heir can enjoy anyone they choose before and after their marriage save their intended. I do not understand why they cannot savor the one person they wish to be with most. The idea is counter-intuitive and ridiculous in my opinion."

"Well, as interesting an opinion as that is, that is not what the law states. It says you must choose

someone among us, and Meredith's family has been in the ruling class since this country was founded. The other stipulation is that they are a virgin. It is not just for the brides of royals, Alexa, but the husbands too. This is not some discriminatory law against women you know."

Alexa glanced at her father who was nodding in her direction. When understanding dawned on her on what her mother was trying to say, she grumbled, "That was more than I ever wanted to know about the two of you."

"That is the law, Alexa, and you will observe it, or you will have to answer for your actions. Meredith knows the laws and has been willing to comply so must you. If you so much as coerce her into anything other than dignified behavior, just know that I will be seriously displeased. When you become queen, you can feel free to change any laws that you like, but for now you will live under my rules. Do you understand?" the queen questioned with an edge to her voice.

Alexa nodded, knowing her mother was growing tired of her insubordinate nature at the moment. However, she too was becoming irritated with the entire conversation and wisecracked, "Yes, your majesty. I understand." With that she stood from the table. "Now if you will excuse me I must be going. I have to pick up Meredith in a little while."

Later that day Alexa and Meredith arrived at the country palace in the Shenandoah Valley. While the servants took their luggage into their separate quarters, the two of them headed down to the stables holding hands. Alexa looked over at her girlfriend as she thought of the conversation she had with her mother that morning. The woman walking next to her would become her wife and queen when the time arrived. Even though Alexa was nervous about that prospect, she figured Meredith was probably the best choice for her given the limitations she faced. She had always gotten along with her girlfriend. They had never fought, so she didn't think quarreling would be a part of their marriage either. In fact, the only resistance Meredith ever showed her was whenever Alexa became too amorously inclined for what was proper in their stations in life.

The queen was right, she figured. It was her duty to marry and have children to carry on the Washington line, and Meredith was a perfect woman with which to do that. She had fine qualities and seemed to be capable of being a kind mother to any children they might have. Alexa's only concern was the passion of their relationship. The longing to be with Meredith barely went beyond wishing to conquer her, and she just didn't know if she could come to feel more. Furthermore, when she looked into Meredith's eyes, she wasn't sure of the woman's feelings. Meredith spoke all the right words and acted the right way, but the princess just wasn't necessarily convinced that her girlfriend was in love. Alexa had a suspicion that Meredith was more interested in the crown than her, but she would never be able to prove that notion. Alexa wanted to feel deliriously in love the way she thought her grandmothers had been. The Queen Mother had spun the most romantic notions about her relationship with Queen Alexa, and those tales became the basis the princess used to judge a prospective partner. By those standards she and Meredith would never be more than good friends who shared their bed for the sake of their country. There was no doubt that she wanted to bed Lady Meredith Adams, but once she had she wondered if that desire would fade or if their relationship might grow into more.

"You seem preoccupied today," Meredith mentioned, squeezing Alexa's hand. "Are you all

right?"

"I am fine. I was just thinking about a talk I had with my mother this morning. Sometimes it is difficult to have the queen for a mother. I cannot just throw a child-like tantrum, because I wish to do something other than what my mother wishes. I still am obliged to obey her, because she is the queen. That has always been difficult."

"I am sure it has, especially for you. You are not known for following orders well," she teased. "But I love you for being a progressive thinker, even if it goes directly against the laws. You have passion for life, Lex."

Raising her girlfriend's hand to her lips, she kissed the back of it sweetly. "I love you, too, Mere," she said, hoping that it sounded convincing to her company. The flush that appeared on the shorter woman's face made her confident that she had been successful. For the rest of the afternoon the two women rode through the countryside horseback enjoying each other's company. Alexa talked little as she contemplated the way her life was going to change when she and George returned from their military flight school.

The siblings had been looking forward to those three months together learning the lost art of military aircraft. The country had moved into unmanned crafts for the most common exercises, because the technology was reliable at much less expense. However, there were a select few pilots left throughout the Navy and Air Force, and all of them were gathering at the airbase in Florida for advanced training and a flight competition. The Washington children were among the Navy's finest aviators and had been invited to participate, much to their joy. Both of them adored the rush of exhilaration at the speed and altitude of the jets, and given their natural rivalry were eager at the chance to outdo the other in the contest, even though it was widely thought that George was the best pilot in the military.

However, Alexa now had mixed feelings about the excursion. She was glad to be able to retreat from her real life. She would not have to be subjected to her parents or spend time with Meredith pretending to be content with her life. She could do as she chose at any time for a short while, but she also knew after that morning that it would be the last time such an opportunity would ever exist for her. Her life would change, and she would be forced to mature into a respected leader. It was something she knew she could do, but she enjoyed her freedoms quite a bit as well.

After a late dinner that evening, the two women were in the study sitting together on the sofa sipping wine and enjoying a fire in the fireplace. Neither spoke for a while but finally Meredith mentioned, "That argument with your mother must have been serious. I have never seen you so withdrawn in your entire life."

Alexa gave a slow nod. It was true. She was acting highly out of character, and she wasn't surprised Meredith noticed. After all, they had known each other for their entire lives. The Adams and Washingtons were close families. Alexa could remember when Meredith was born, and she never thought when she was eighteen that she would end up proposing to the twelve-year-old who followed George and her around incessantly whenever their families would congregate. How much Meredith had changed over her teenage years, transforming from an

awkward and annoying kid into a beautiful intelligent young woman. "It was," Alexa replied softly. "To make it worse my father sided with her."

"Whatever it was, it will pass."

"I know."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

The princess shook her head. "I do not want to burden you with my troubles."

"Lex, I am always here for you. You know that."

"I know."

"I wish there was something I could do to make you feel better." The women looked at each other, but then Meredith gave a shy little grin. "I have an idea," she whispered, putting both their wine glasses on the coffee table in front of them. Turning toward her girlfriend, she leaned in and kissed her gently. Alexa responded in kind, bringing her arms around the younger woman. "I have been thinking about this since we were at the Derby," Meredith whispered as both women became more involved with their mouths.

"Me too," Alexa confessed. For several minutes they kissed before Alexa brought her girlfriend to sit straddled across her legs. Moving from Meredith's lips, her mouth trailed down along her neck as her hands began to roam over the brunette's back. "You feel incredibly good right now," the princess growled softly.

"So do you, Lex," Meredith breathlessly replied pressing their bodies closer. Taking Alexa's right hand, she placed it over her left breast and whispered, "Touch me here."

The older woman obliged moving her hands along Meredith's breasts. Their kissing continued as Alexa's hands fondled her girlfriend lightly at first but then with increasing pressure, enjoying the way Meredith's body responded, her back arching pushing herself deeper into the caress. "Do you enjoy that?" needlessly Alexa asked as her lips moved to her girlfriend's ear.

Meredith gave a moan and nod. "I like having you touch me."

"I can touch more of you if you want," Alexa offered as her fingers moved to the buttons on Meredith's blouse. She didn't wait for an answer before opening several. Not hearing a dissent, she kept going until it was opened completely. There was a brief pause as their eyes met. Alexa saw questions in her girlfriend's eyes, but Meredith said nothing. Alex ran her right hand slowly over Meredith's shoulder along her collarbone and down over the exposed skin of her upper chest eliciting a shiver from the woman astride her. Her hand methodically moved along the edge of the satin bra before her fingers slipped beneath the material to touch Meredith's bare breast. The smaller woman trembled but still said nothing. Although her body spoke for her as a gasp escaped her mouth. Knowing that Meredith could pull away at any moment, Alexa moved

slowly. Her lips went back to her girlfriend's as her hand simply rested where it was. The heat that suffused Meredith's skin made it obvious that she was enjoying the attention, but her actions were still timid.

The princess could feel her own body beginning to simmer. She had never been this intimate with Meredith before, and it was thrilling to be able to feel some of the body over which she had fantasized. Meredith's skin was incredibly soft. Unable to control herself, her hands began to grope with more insistence as their mouths conveyed their rising ardor. Going with the moment, Alexa let her mouth wander over Meredith's neck down her chest and over the clothed right breast.

Meredith gave a loud cry, but her hands were suddenly on the heir's shoulders applying resistance. "Alexa, we cannot."

"Yes, we can."

"No, I cannot. The laws says..."

"I know what the law says, Mere. It says nothing about two lovers enjoying each other's bodies before they are married. It simply states we cannot consummate the relationship."

"But..."

"But nothing. We are not doing anything wrong," she pressed continuing with her pace.

Meredith moaned but tried again. "Lex, please stop. I must protest. As good as this feels, I cannot allow us to continue. If I grant you this, I am afraid I will not be able to resist granting you all," she confessed.

"That is what I want."

"I know, and it is what I want as well, Lex, but we must abide by the law."

"But I want to make love to you, Meredith. It will be a long time before we see each other again."

"I know, and I want that as well, but we both must speak for our actions. I, for one, am not prepared to explain to the queen what has taken place between us. Are you?"

"My mother knows how I feel on this subject. We are not of the same mind."

Taking the taller woman's hands in her own, Meredith took several deep breaths. "Alexa, you know that once we are married, I will always be available to you, but until then I must remain faithful to the law regardless of my own feelings."

"She will never have to know, Meredith."

"She will know, Alexa. You may be able to lie to your mother, but I cannot lie to my queen. She will ask, and I must be truthful. Now perhaps it might be best if we were to retire for the night. Time apart will settle our desires."

Alexa sighed. She knew she would not be able to sway her girlfriend, so she simply nodded her head. "Very well. I will walk you to your room."

The women slowly made their way down several long corridors until they got to Meredith's quarters. Alexa paused at the door, knowing she shouldn't go inside even as much as she wanted to at that moment. Meredith smiled up at her and took a moment to brush some dark hair behind her girlfriend's ear. "I love you, Lex. I hope you know that."

"I know, and I love you too, Mere. This is just getting more difficult, though. I do not like being put off this way, even though I know you are trying to do the right thing. I guess I just do not like how much my mother seems to be in this relationship."

"She is not really. It is just the two of us. If you were not the heir to the throne, our relationship would be much different. This is just the path we both must walk. You know it is true."

Alexa conceded with a nod. "I know that, but I still get frustrated."

"The sooner we are married the sooner the torture comes to an end. That is all it will take."

"I realize that, but what you and my mother do not seem to understand is that I am not ready to give up my life as it is currently to be married. Once I am married, I have to be this responsible princess and live my life for others. Right now I am still more interested in living life for myself. I have very little time left to do so, and I want to use it to its fullest."

"I cannot argue with that. I will wait as long as you need me to, but that only means you must also wait."

"Yes, it does. However, at this point in time, it is a sacrifice I am willing to make. I hope you understand that."

"I do. I know once we marry the pressure will be on us to produce heirs directly. I am not exactly looking forward to such time, but I know it will be my position to do so. I am only nineteen after all, and sometimes I feel as if I am sacrificing my entire life for this fate, but I am willing to, because I have a chance to serve you and the country well. Not all women can make such a claim."

"No, they cannot. Well, I should let you retire. You know where I will be if you need me," she said, leaning to kiss her girlfriend lightly on the lips.

"Good night, Lex. Sleep well."

"You too, darling Mere."

With that the princess took her leave, heading down the hall to where her quarters were. She spent the next several hours reading, but she was restless. Consulting her watch she realized it was past 1:00 and decided she should attempt sleep. Dressing in her pajamas, she got into bed, but her mind wandered to the woman not too far away. She really wished she was sharing her bed with Meredith at the moment, even if they were not having sex. Thinking on that for a little while, she decided to see if her girlfriend was still awake.

Getting out of bed and heading out into the corridor, she made her way down the long hall to Meredith's room. She didn't see a light on under the door, so she thought the younger woman was probably asleep. However, she knocked lightly anyway. There was no answer at first. Putting her hand on the doorknob, she found the door to be unlocked, so she quietly opened it. The light from the hallway flooded the darkened room to show Meredith asleep in bed.

Alexa just stood there for a moment regarding her. The nineteen-year-old's long dark hair splayed across the pillowcase, and her lips were parted slightly. The princess thought she looked beautiful and innocent that way. Knowing she should announce her presence, she knocked on the door again. This time Meredith's eyes fluttered and then sleepily opened.

"Lex, is that you?"

"Yes," she whispered in reply coming into the room and shutting the door behind her. She locked it and then moved toward the bed.

"What are you doing in here? Was there something you wanted?" Meredith queried.

Alexa didn't answer at first as she moved to the unoccupied side of the bed and slipped under the covers. She could see her girlfriend's eyes on her, even in the dark, wide in surprise at this sudden move. "Do not be afraid, Mere. You know I would never hurt you."

"Lex, you should not be in here."

"I want to be with you, Meredith, even if it is just to hold you."

"Alexa, we should not."

"I promise I will not act inappropriately with you. I merely wish to hold you through the night. Have I ever broken a promise to you?" she inquired as her left arm slipped around her girlfriend's waist.

"No, your highness. You have never betrayed my trust."

"Do you trust me now then? Will you allow me to stay here with you?"

There was a pause of silence as they looked at each other in the dark. Finally Meredith answered,

"If it pleases you, your highness, you may stay as long as you wish."

"Thank you," Alexa murmured, leaning and kissing Meredith on the temple. She knew to do more would be breaking her word, so she simply snuggled closely, and the two were silent. Quickly sleep found Meredith again, leaving Alexa awake to ponder her life. She gazed at the sleeping woman next to her. She had never spent an entire night with another woman, even with all her tawdry affairs the public so avidly expected from the young heir, so she was eager to experience it to its fullest even if she could not consummate the relationship she had with Meredith. Long into the night she laid awake delighting in the pleasure of holding a beautiful woman in her arms.

The next morning the princess became cognizant when she felt something softly brushing over her face. Parting her eyelids slightly she came face to face with a vision. There was Meredith propped up next to her in bed, an angelic glow cast about her from the morning sun coming in the window. The teenager's eyes were bright, and she wore a content grin. "Good morning, Lex," she whispered as her hand continued rubbing Alexa's brow and forehead.

"Morning. You are in a pleasant mood."

"Because I woke next to you. You look so amazingly sexy asleep. I thought I was dreaming at first when I saw you."

"It is no dream," Alexa whispered reaching up to Meredith's face. She cupped her head and brought their mouths together slowly. Feeling their bodies pressed together with only their thin sleeping attire separating them made Alexa's desires from the previous night bubble up to the surface of her skin. However, Meredith was not as resistant as normal. Instead she began to move against the princess in earnest as Alexa maneuvered her on top of her own body. Their legs found their way between each other's, and their hips began to rock as their kissing became deeper.

"We are getting dangerously close to doing something we should not," Meredith mentioned with a giggle.

"I know, but it feels so good."

"So good," mumbled Meredith in agreement as she rolled her hips instinctively against the strong thigh she straddled. "However, we really should stop."

"We should," Alexa said, doing nothing of the sort. In fact, her hands wandered more freely, moving to her girlfriend's backside and squeezing gently.

"Lex," she moaned.

"I am right here, Mere."

"We need to stop," she said again.

"But I do not want to."

"Neither do I. You know that, but we must." Regretfully Meredith pulled back and put distance between them. "Come on. Let us get up and dress. Could we have breakfast outside on the veranda?"

"Certainly. We can do anything you want."

"Except what we want," she teased ironically, rising from bed.

"Exactly." Alexa got out of bed and moved to encircle her girlfriend's waist from behind. She kissed the top of her head. "It would be best if I went back to my room now I suppose. I will meet you out on the veranda in a bit."

For the rest of the day Alexa acted much more like herself. She enjoyed her day with Meredith and then returned home around dinner to pack for her trip. Her mother appeared while she was doing so. "Are you still upset with me?" she inquired, taking a seat in the bedside chair while her daughter contemplated what she was taking with her.

"Not really, Mother. The time away with Meredith did some good. I had a chance to think about things."

"And?"

"Perhaps you are right about Meredith. She is the appropriate woman to take as a bride. I am not quite ready to make that commitment, but I know it is my obligation to do it, and I know Meredith is ready. I suppose it will be a short engagement, possibly a winter wedding."

"Good. I am glad you have decided to take the mature approach to this. I knew you would come around given some time."

"Well, that means I am going to treat the next three months away as the largest bachelor party known to man," she joked.

"Do not do anything to tarnish the family, Alexa. Play all you want otherwise."

"Oh, I will, Mother. George and I are going to have a blast."

Chapter II: First Time Feelings

Early the following morning Alexa and George left to go on their military excursion. It was a tearful farewell between the prince, his wife, and their baby girl with promises to write and call. The queen also shed tears at the sight of both her children dressed in their military clothes leaving for service. She hugged each of them tightly but reminded Alexa to behave herself.

Finally though the two Washington children got in their limousine and were taken to the airport.

Boarding one of the royal jets, they were quickly whisked away into the air for their several hour flight. Alexa looked over at her brother who was quiet. "Are you all right, George?"

"I am fine. I just do not like the idea of being away from Kelly and Morgan so long. My little girl is not even a year old."

"I know, but we have so much to look forward to. There is the flight competition and all the partying on the weekends. I hope there are lots of girls hanging around."

George cracked a grin. "Girls follow you wherever you go. You should not have a problem with that."

"They follow you too, you know. You just do not pay attention anymore. Perhaps that can change this trip," she suggested.

He shook his head. "I will look, but I have no interest in touching, not since Kelly had Morgan. I do not know what happened to me, but it changed me somehow. I do not even think about other girls now."

"You cannot say that. You were one of the biggest womanizers that I know."

"As are you, but my time has passed. I am happy with Kelly. I will go out and hunt women with you, but do not expect me to be taking any back to our quarters. You feel free, though, to invite as many as you want."

"I will."

"I am sure of it. After all, I get the notion that you will not be single much longer. Something tells me that Mother has decided that you should marry Lady Meredith Adams."

"You would be right about that. I have agreed to proposing to her upon our return from training."

"Are you sure you want to do that?"

"No, but what choice do I have? You know Mother. When she decides on something, it is done. She has decided I am to be with Meredith. You are fortunate to be in the position you are in, my brother. You have all of the opportunities to do as you please without much of the pressures I face. You are free to live your life as you see fit for the most part, and you fell in love with the woman you desired to marry. I envy that sometimes."

"Well, I do not envy you, Lex. I would not want to be the first born in this family. I never wanted to rule a country. I am glad that responsibility falls to you. You are a natural leader, and I know you will make a fine queen when the time comes. Is there any hope that you might come to love Meredith?"

"I already love Meredith. Do not get me wrong on that point. I just do not love her in the way I feel I should love the woman I want to marry. I want to feel passion and excitement. I want to be enthralled by her very presence. Meredith is a beautiful, sweet, intelligent girl, but I just do not feel those things. We are close but not close enough to be married in my mind."

"That is a start at least. Maybe in time you can come to be more."

"We shall see I suppose. I do have consolation in the fact I may seek love somewhere else at any time. I may be married, but I still desire to seek love. If it does not come with Meredith, I hope to find it elsewhere."

George shook his head. "Well, I am not jealous of the situation in which you find yourself, Lex. I just want you to be happy."

"Well, right now I am happy, because I am away from Mother, doing what I want."

"I cannot wait to get in the planes. It has been too long since we have been in the skies," he agreed. "Of course I cannot wait to beat you in this competition either. I will be named Top Gun this year. Mark my words," he gloated.

"Not if I have anything to say about it," she said with a laugh. "I will be taking you down at every chance, Stryker," she promised, using his call name.

"We will see about that, Flash," he commented, returning the favor.

Several hours later when their plane landed on the base, they were immediately taken to the quarters they would be sharing. Most of the pilots were staying in the barracks together but being the royals that they were, they were segregated into the best accommodations on the base, a freestanding house that sat amongst a long line of homes for the top ranking officials. Still it was no palace, but Alexa was simply glad to be away from her life. Leaving their luggage, they were then escorted to where they would be spending a great deal of their time, a hangar next to the airfield that was equipped with a classroom and several planes.

Everyone was already there when they arrived. When they walked into the room, everyone stood, but no one bowed, because it was not protocol in the military, especially since the two of them were lowly officers at the present time, even though Alexa would automatically rise to the Commander-in-Chief when she became queen.

"At last our final pilots are here, Lieutenant Commander Washington and Lieutenant Washington. I am Colonel Pickrell of the United States Air Force, and I was just explaining the agenda to your fellow pilots. Please take your seats."

George and Alexa sat in the back of the classroom. Several curious eyes peered over sunglasses at them, but no one said anything as they listened to their instructor. After a couple of hours they were ordered to change into their flight gear for their first test run. Being the only woman in the

program, Alexa got a changing area to herself. Once in her flight suit, she grabbed her helmet out of her bag and smiled. It had been awhile since she had worn it, and it brought her such a good feeling to see the bold red and white stripes and stars against the blue field. The American flag helmet shone brightly in the light, and she turned to admire her call name, Flash, imprinted across the back. Pulling a photograph of Meredith and her out of her bag as well, she tucked it in her front pocket to take to her plane. Heading out to the airstrip, she was met by her fellow aviators. George had his helmet, a matching one to hers in his hand. Everyone was just standing around talking when several instructors appeared.

"All right. Let's get up there. Lieutenant Commander Washington, we'll have you do the honors being the most senior officer. You will be matched against Major Williams of the Air Force today. I should warn you, Lieutenant Commander, that he is the top flight instructor at this school. This isn't going to be a cakewalk."

"Thank you for the warning, Colonel Pickrell."

"Beginning now, Officers, everything you do in the air will be counted toward your score in the Top Gun competition. Good luck. Lieutenant Commander Washington, to your plane. The rest of you to the observation deck."

"Good luck, Flash," George said with a smile, reaching out and patting her on the shoulder.

"I will not need luck. You know that," she jested, putting on her helmet.

Climbing up into her plane, Alexa took a moment to get settled. She took the picture of she and Meredith from her front pocket and secured it against the instrument panel. Pulling shut the cockpit, she locked herself in and turned on the engines. The plane came roaring to life. Even though she would have normally checked her plane before flight herself, she knew it had already been done for her while she had changed. When she felt ready for her flight, she slowly eased her plane out from the others before pausing. With a thumbs up and a salute to her ground crew, she taxied toward the runway for her first flight.

Meanwhile up on the observation deck, the other officers stood around watching as Alexa's plane took to the air. George stood amongst them hoping that his sister won her first competition. However, his thoughts were interrupted by one of the men asking, "Say, Washington, can she really fly, or did they just let her in because of who she was?"

The prince turned to the voice. A tall fit platinum blonde smirked in his direction. Even without seeing his eyes, he could tell they were full of arrogance just by the way the guy was standing. Reading the name of Barnes on his flight suit, George knew who he was. He had heard the stories of the Air Force's greatest pilot. His skills were only surpassed by his cocky behavior. "Hollywood, is it not?" George questioned.

"That's right. Heard of me?"

"As a matter of fact, I have. Your reputation travels far."

"That's what happens when you're the best."

George laughed lightly. "The best? That has yet to be seen. As for my sister, she can fly. In fact, she is almost as good as me," he joked.

"That's pretty good then," the blonde conceded. "You have a rep too. Of course, so does the Lieutenant Commander. Although hers has nothing to do with flying."

Hearing snickering from some of the other men, George crossed his arms across his chest in defensive manner. "I can only imagine what you might mean. She might be a military pilot, but she is still the princess, and one day she will be the Commander-in-Chief."

"But for now she's just Lieutenant Commander Washington of the U.S. Navy, which means she doesn't get the same consideration she would in the civilian world. She's just one of us as are you. You know as well as I do that even though they let fags in the military, it isn't widely accepted by us career officers. We just put up with it, because we have to. That doesn't mean we like it."

"Well, that is just what you are going to do now. You do not want to cross Alexa, Hollywood. She will take you down."

"Yeah, right. A woman, a dyke will never take me down, Stryker. Get real."

"Mark my words, Hollywood. She will take you down before this competition is over, and if she does not, I will for the remark you just made."

"Is that a threat?"

"It is a promise. Now does anyone else have a remark they would like to make regarding the Lieutenant Commander's sexuality?" George questioned shortly. Everyone shook their heads. "That is what I thought. Now why do we not watch her teach Major Williams a lesson? Who knows? You might learn a thing or two."

Over the course of the next several days Alexa and George spent their time in classes and flying. In the evenings when they were alone, though, the princess would sit watching TV and drinking while trying to ignore her brother's verbal canoodling with his wife over the phone. The first Friday night they got though, the group of pilots decided to go hit the bars and enjoy their freedom of the next two days. Alexa was all for leaving the base, and since George didn't want to be left alone, both of them agreed to go with their peers.

Dressing in their formal military dress as was required of their entire group when they left the premises, they all headed out to find fun. Even though no one noticed, Alexa and George knew that their security would be tagging along closely behind just in case even though the two large men blended in with the rest of the crowd at the bar. The ten rowdy pilots found a bar close to the base that seemed to be popular amongst all the other military personnel. Finding a table they

crowded around it. Alexa saw her security take a spot at the bar, but she ignored them.

The place was packed with military people but few civilians with the exception of the staff. It wasn't surprising considering the fact that the base was not close to any major cities. As a waitress came to their table, she immediately recognized Alexa and George. Taking everyone's orders, she quickly ran to get their beverages. Alexa just drank her beer quietly and looked around the establishment. When her eyes got to the bar, though, her gaze locked on the woman behind it.

A petite redhead was standing there pouring drinks to her security team. The princess watched the shoulder-length hair sway lightly as the bartender turned to grab a liquor bottle from behind her, giving Alexa a chance to see what the backside of the stranger looked like. Her jeans were tight as was her t-shirt, allowing the heir to take in the fit little body. When the bartender turned again, Alexa got a better look at her face, blue eyes and a pretty smile. The princess was mesmerized. The simplicity of the stranger's wardrobe and makeup only made her more attractive. Alexa had never seen a woman so naturally beautiful in her opinion. Unable to tear her eyes away from the sight, she just sat there until a hard swat to her shoulder broke her concentration.

"Hey, Flash, you're being too quiet," Hollywood stated. "What's the deal?"

"Nothing," she stated, allowing her eyes stray once again.

"Oh, I see. The Lieutenant Commander's got her eyes on someone. She's not your type."

"And how do you know my type, Hollywood?"

"Well, she's not a dyke," he sneered into his beer. "There isn't any way that woman is gay."

"How do you know?"

"Because I know. I'll even bet on it."

"Flash, do not get involved in this," George warned.

"George, it is just a little wager. What are the stakes, Hollywood?"

"Bragging rights. The first one to fuck her wins."

Alexa's eyes went to the bar again. The small woman was standing in the corner of the bar with her head in a book, something Alexa found incongruent with the rest of the place. Nevertheless, she was intrigued. Casting a look at her brother, she saw him shake his head in disapproval. "I do not know," she mentioned.

"Come on. You scared? You afraid that I'm right?" Hollywood taunted. "You mean to tell me that your reputation as a womanizer isn't true? You think you're God's gift to women, but I'm

here to tell you that you don't stand a chance against me, Flash. No dyke will ever beat me in anything," he snarled.

Feeling her temper rise at the name he had just spat at her, Alexa rose from her chair. She wasn't used to being insulted. In fact, she couldn't recall ever having been called a name like that in her life. The circle in which she had always surrounded herself was respectful of her rightful place. Wanting to exert her power over this man who was quickly becoming an adversary, she nodded her head slowly. Extending her hand toward him, she said, "All right. We have a bet, Hollywood. First one to sleep with her wins."

He cracked a grin as they shook hands. "I look forward to this," he stated, draining his beer. "Excuse me, losers. I have work to do."

Taking her seat once again, she watched Hollywood saunter over toward the bar. Shaking her head, she turned back to her company. However, her brother scolded, "You should not have done that."

"Trust me. Hollywood will never win this bet. She is not straight."

"How do you know?"

"I just know."

"The same way he just knows that she is? If Mother found out about this, you would be in trouble."

"Then we need to make sure she does not find out. Promise me you will not tell her?"

"Never. This secret stays between us. Now how do you propose to keep Hollywood away from that woman? He seems pretty determined to undermine you by whatever means necessary. This is not about winning her but about insulting you, you know."

"I know that, Stryker, but that is not going to happen. She is a woman's woman. I just know it, and I look forward to the opportunity of being with her, especially after she puts Hollywood in his place. She is incredibly beautiful."

"That she is," George conceded.

For the next hour Alexa watched as her opponent tried to put moves on the bartender, but it was obvious she remained unmoved. Seeing that he was beginning to get a little more aggressive though, she figured it was probably time to step in. Putting her empty beer glass on the table, she walked over to the bar. She saw the way Hollywood kept touching the bartender, placing his hands in inappropriate places for someone he didn't know and the way his advances were brutally rebuffed. Leaning into the bar two stools down from where he was, Alexa called, "Hey, gorgeous, may I get another beer?"

"If that is a line, I am not biting," the redhead replied before she even turned around. However as she did, she came face to face with the heir to the throne. However, it didn't look like the woman recognized her.

"Another beer perhaps Miss..."

"None of your business," the redhead supplied shortly.

"Well, may I have another beer, Miss 'none of your business?'" she inquired.

"Fine. What do you want?"

"Whatever you are inclined to serve."

The redhead rolled her eyes. "Order please," she stated irritably.

Seeing that things were not off to a good start, Alexa just ordered her beer. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Hollywood chuckling into his glass. "What a bitch," he joked as the bartender went to the other end of the bar to get Alexa's beer. "She didn't take to you too well."

"It did not look like she was taking to you either, and it is not nice to call people names, Hollywood."

He waved her off. "You know the harder they fight they better in bed they are," he quipped. As the bartender returned, she put Alexa's glass down in front of her. "Hey, cutie. Another one over here too." She nodded but said nothing. As she turned to go, Hollywood put out his hand and gave her a pat on the back of the jeans, earning him an incredulous glare from her.

"I already asked you to keep your hands to yourself," she growled. "Do that again and you will be out of this bar."

"Dyke," he mumbled under her breath as she started to turn again.

Before Alexa could even register what happened, the bartender took a swing at Hollywood, but he had caught her by the wrist in midair before the slap had landed against his face. Gripping her tightly, he said, "Don't you dare." She struggled to free herself but to no avail.

Knowing she should step in, Alexa came to them and gave her adversary a shove in the chest. "Let her go, Hollywood."

"Get out of my face, Flash!" he yelled, releasing his grip on the bartender and stepping to Alexa.

"Then stop manhandling the lady."

"What's it to you? You want to fuck her too!"

Pushing him back a few feet, Alexa boomed, "Get away from me!"

"Make me!" he challenged.

Unable to control her anger, the princess took a swing at him but missed. He connected though with a shot to her stomach. Retaliating she clocked him in the jaw. Before it could escalate further though, her security pulled them apart. Both of them were snarling at each other and throwing daggers with their eyes. "Are you all right, Lex?" the man holding her inquired.

"I am fine. Get him out of my sight." Turning back to the bar, she was surprised to find the bartender glaring at her.

"You intolerable brute! How dare you interfere?" the redhead questioned.

"I was just trying to help," Alexa defended.

"Some help. I could get fired for what just happened. You are as bad as he is. Different act but the same goal," she grumbled.

"No, not at all," the princess stated, but she could tell she was not believed. She knew it wasn't the truth either, but it was worth a shot. "Allow me to make amends," she proposed.

"Fine. You can make amends by leaving. My boss will not tolerate that behavior in here. Get out and do not come back until your brain is out of your pants," she chastised. "You may be able to sweet talk other women but not me. I am not fooled by that nonsense."

Feeling reproached but also somewhat impressed by the woman in front of her, Alexa just nodded. "For what it is worth, I am sorry," she apologized before heading out the front door. One of her guards escorted her back to the base.

Later that night when George arrived back at the house, Alexa was lounging on the couch watching TV. "That was quite an eventful night," he mentioned. "You certainly made an impression. I just hope the media does not catch wind that the princess was in a bar brawl."

"It was not a brawl, only a few punches."

"I cannot believe Hollywood actually struck you. Is he insane? Does he think that is going to go unpunished?"

"Oh, he does not think. That is his problem. He will not go unpunished. In fact, I have already thought of an appropriate punishment for him."

"And what is that?"

"Hollywood wants to be a career military pilot, but after today, he will never see another promotion. He will remain a 1st Lieutenant as long as he serves. He struck a superior officer, and

that is unacceptable."

"He struck the crowned princess, Lex. Perhaps something a little harsher would be appropriate."

"That is enough. He will be ostracized slowly and painfully for what he has done when all his friends begin to outrank him. His only option will be to resign his position with a dishonorable discharge, and that is not looked well upon in the civilian world. He has ruined his life, but he does not even realize it yet."

"If you are sure, but I would like to see him kicked out of the flight competition as well."

"You are the prince, George. Have him kicked out if you would like. I will not stop you from that pursuit."

"Then it is settled. I will inform the Colonel tomorrow."

For the rest of the night even after she had retired to bed, Alexa couldn't get that bartender out of her head. The woman was so beautiful, so feisty and seemingly independent. She had given the princess a reproach like she had never received, not even from her mother, the queen. Even though she should have been upset over it, she wasn't. In fact, she took more pleasure in seeing the woman's fire in retrospect. However, she did feel somewhat bad that she was lumped with Hollywood as a miserable philanderer, even though there was some truth to the statement.

Saturday afternoon the princess decided she would go back to the bar in case the woman was there again, however, this time she went alone. When she stepped into the place, she was pleased to find the redhead behind the bar reading. It was fairly quiet. Going to the bar, Alexa took a seat. "Excuse me, bartender. Are you busy?" she asked politely.

Those blue eyes looked in her direction. She could see irritation already starting to grow as the woman headed her way. "Lieutenant Commander Washington," she stated.

Quizzically Alexa asked, "How did you know that?"

"Your name tag. I am a military brat, so I know all the medals and bars."

"Call me Lex or Flash. That is my call name."

"A Navy pilot?" she questioned.

"Yes."

"I should have known. All you aviators wear the same sunglasses. Why is that?" she questioned, picking up Alexa's sunglasses that were resting on the bar next to her military cover.

"It is a secret in the order of pilots. If I tell you, I would have to kill you," she teased with a bright smile. The bartender cracked a small smile but said nothing. "Do you have a name?"

"Of course I have a name. I told you last night."

"I know. 'None of your business.' I thought you might have legally changed it between then and now by chance."

This time there was a tiny chuckle. "Why do you want to know my name?"

"Because it is better to apologize using your name than just calling you bartender."

There was a moment of silence before she replied, "Lauren. Lauren Fulton."

"Well, Ms. Fulton, I just wanted to apologize for what happened last night. I thought I was helping when I stepped in with Hollywood. I should have known you would have been able to take care of yourself. I am sorry for any offense I may have caused you."

"You stepped in to save me in hopes that you might get that invitation into my bed. Am I right, Flash?"

"What gave you that idea?"

"You pilots are all the same. You are all arrogant and conceited. You think you own the world and that it should bow at your feet. You think women should fall into your bed whenever you want."

"Arrogance is what makes us who we are. It is what makes us great pilots. Insolence keeps us on the edge, one step ahead of the enemy."

Lauren shook her head. "You only think that, but truly it is not what saves you. It is what kills your breed. How many military pilots do you know that live into their old age? Very few because you all think you are invincible. Arrogance does not amount to bravery. It falls more in line with idiocy."

"Sounds as if you speak from experience."

"My father was a military pilot. He died pretending to be brave. Sometimes fear can be healthy. He might still be alive. My entire life changed the moment his plane fell from the sky."

"But he died chasing a dream I assume. We all are dreamers. We like the idea of being able to touch the clouds, if not with our hands our wings."

Lauren shrugged. "Sometimes you have to postpone your own dreams for those of your family. It is the right thing to do."

"Sometimes it is," Alexa conceded. "So am I forgiven for last night?"

"Sure, Flash. Now do you want a drink?"

"Iced tea if you have it."

"Of course we have that. Be right back."

A few minutes later Lauren set a glass down in front of her. "Thanks. May I ask you something personal?" She waited until the redhead nodded before inquiring, "Why do you read while you are here? I have never seen a bartender read before."

"I like to read. I actually work at the library just a few blocks down the street. That is my full-time job. I just do this for extra money. It can be slow, so I like to amuse myself with a book. It makes the time go by faster."

"Full-time job? What do you do there?"

"I am a librarian. I work there Monday through Friday during the days, and I work here Friday nights and Saturday days."

"That does not leave much time for yourself."

"I do not need time for myself as much as I need the money."

"What are you saving for?"

"My ticket out of this place. I have lived here my whole life, and I am ready to start a new one. I am almost there too."

"Where do you want to move?"

"I have not decided for sure. Somewhere along the East Coast. I imagine a place with bustling people and culture like New York or D.C. I want to live in a place that has lots of history."

"Well, D.C. certainly has that. That is where I call home."

"How long have you been stationed here?"

"Oh, I am only in the reserves. This is not my career. I am just here for a flight competition."

"I did not realize they had reservist pilots or officers. I thought only career personnel could do that."

"I am an exception."

"You must be special then. Who did you have to convince to get that?"

"My mother."

"Your mother?" Lauren questioned with a confused quirk of her brow. "Is she a senior military officer or something?"

"As a matter of fact, she is."

"So, what is your real job in life then when you are not serving your time?"

"I help her in the family business," Alexa answered, sensing this woman really didn't know who she was.

"And what business is that?"

Alexa shrugged. "Nothing exciting. Politics mostly. Mostly I just enjoy my freedom, at least for the moment. She keeps threatening to make me take on more responsibilities. After all, I am the chosen one to take over the business when the time is right."

Seeing some recognition overcome the bartender's face, Alexa just held the gaze. "Would I have heard of your mother, Flash?" she asked.

"Most likely."

"What is her name?"

"Alexa Georgianna Faith Washington."

"Queen Faith?" needlessly she inquired.

"That is the one."

With her eyes widened with shock, Lauren said, "Which makes you..."

However, the princess cut her off quickly, saying, "Lex or Flash. That is all I am here. I am nothing but a Lieutenant Commander in the U.S. Navy."

"Your highness, you were punched last night. A man dared strike you."

"I know. He will serve time for that in his own way. I did not mind too much. What bothered me more was feeling as if I created an injustice with you. I did not enjoy being placed in a category with Hollywood in vying for your attention. I was merely trying to assist. Clearly I was out of line, though. I am sorry."

The redhead shook off the comment with a shake of her head. "I never should have inferred that you had ulterior motives for trying to help."

"Well, shall we just start again then by pretending it never happened?"

"I would like that."

"Very well." Finishing off her glass of tea, she stood. "I must go now. It was nice to see you, Lauren. I hope this is the beginning of a pleasant friendship."

"It was nice to see you too, Flash," she said with a smile.

Heading back to the base, Alexa was met in the foyer by her brother and Colonel Pickrell.
"Colonel, what are you doing here?"

"Your brother and I were just discussing what happened between you and 1st Lieutenant Barnes last night. Perhaps we can have a talk?"

"Certainly. Let us go into the kitchen."

When the two of them were alone, the Colonel turned to her and asked, "Is what he said true? Did Hollywood hit you?"

"Yes, that is true."

"Your brother wants him disqualified for fighting. I agree with him. He can't just go around hitting people."

"I know that, and I agree with you. However, in all fairness I have to admit that he was not the only one that threw a punch. I hit him too."

"I was told as much, but you are the crowned princess. There must be exceptions."

"I disagree with you on that point. Colonel Pickrell, it would be discriminative to disqualify Hollywood unless you disqualified me as well. After all, I am the one that initiated the fight. I threw the first punch. He landed the first one, but I started it."

"Why?"

"Because he was getting potentially abusive with the female bartender. I tried to step in to help. I lost my temper first and swung."

"Still, being who you are, you are allowed some leeway in your behavior."

Alexa shook her head. "Colonel Pickrell, I have designed a unique punishment for Hollywood for striking me. If you want to throw him out for fighting, then you must do the same to me. That behavior is unacceptable even for someone in my position."

"You want me to throw you both out?"

"I want you to discipline two pilots that broke the rules. However, in doing so, there is a request I would like to make. Even though this is a flight competition, it is also flight training. Hollywood and I are both good pilots. We could benefit from this training. My request of you would be to allow us to stay and complete our training. Disqualify us from the Top Gun competition if you must, but do not deny us the opportunity to hone our skills."

The Colonel nodded his head. "You know, before you arrived here, I had heard that you were quite wise for someone of your years. You have just proven that to be true. You understand consequences for your actions. That is very mature, but you also understand putting the military's needs above your own. You're right about Hollywood's talent. He is one of the best I have ever seen."

"I know, so we must keep him in the force."

"Very well, Lieutenant Commander Washington. I will take your request under advisement and let the two of you know on Monday. Right now I must visit him and get his side of the story."

"Thank you for your time, Colonel Pickrell. Sorry to have bothered you on your day off."

"I'm glad we got this out of the way. See you Monday at 0700."

Monday morning when the pilots arrived for class, the Colonel was already there. After everyone was seated, he said, "This morning before we start class I would like to discuss the events that took place Friday evening. I got wind of the fact that two of my pilots were involved in a bar fight. Now I want to make it absolutely clear to you all that fighting is unacceptable behavior! These two ignored the rules, so I'm left with no choice but to impose the discipline that they could not impose on themselves! Lieutenant Commander Washington and 1st Lieutenant Barnes, both of you come up here to the front!" Alexa and Hollywood both stood and made their way to the front of the room to where the Colonel pointed. They didn't even look at each other, only stood at attention with eyes on their superior officer. Pacing in front of them, Colonel Pickrell demanded, "Both of you drop and give me a hundred pushups now!" Both aviators did as they were told. Alexa focused on the Colonel's words as she did as she was told. "Both of you have disgraced this program! Because of your actions, you are immediately removed from the Top Gun competition! Neither of you will be allowed to be named Top Gun this year! You will remain here to learn from your other fellow officers and trainers how to advance your skills, but you will not participate any longer in the contest! Do you hear me?"

"Yes, Colonel Pickrell!" they shouted simultaneously as they continued their pushups.

"And let this be a lesson to the rest of you! Any more fighting and you're out!" The rest of the class just watched and waited until Alexa and Hollywood finished their punishment before returning to their seats.

When Alexa slumped into her chair, George leaned over and whispered, "They were not this hard on you in boot camp. I cannot believe he kicked you out of the competition. That was not

supposed to happen."

"I know, but I broke the rules. On the bright side, you will surely win now."

That afternoon when classes and flights were finished, Alexa decided to leave the base instead of have dinner with her brother. She headed to where she knew Lauren would be, arriving at the library shortly before five. When she walked in, she did not see her behind the desk. However, there was another woman, so she questioned her on the redhead's whereabouts and was directed back toward the children's section. Alexa heard Lauren's voice before she saw her, but as she came into the clearing, she noticed the librarian sitting on a small chair with several young children sitting around her on the floor. Lauren was reading them a story, so Alexa merely watched the scene until story time was finished. When the redhead's eyes found her, Alexa gave her most charming smile.

"Flash, hi. What are you doing here?" she inquired pleasantly.

"I wanted to see you. I hope that is all right."

"Well, I am flattered. Do you want a tour of the library?"

"Sure. Show me." Alexa followed the librarian around the facility listening to her tour guide describe the different sections. However, her mind was really on trying to figure out how to truly be alone with the woman. Seeing an opportunity arise when they were upstairs, Alexa pointed toward the back corner of the library and asked, "What is back there?"

"It is a conference room."

"I want to see it. Show me," she insisted. Lauren obliged, unlocking the door and opening it for the princess. Alexa walked into the room. Seeing Lauren hovering in the doorway, she demanded, "Come in here and shut the door."

The redhead hesitated for a moment before complying with the request. She moved to a table toward the front of the room and rested against it. "It is just a conference room," she mentioned.

The princess shook her head as she came to where Lauren was. "It is more than that." She stepped in closely, so they were only a few feet apart. "You seem like a wise woman, Lauren, interesting and well-read."

"I am wise enough not to indulge in things that are not mine," she mumbled, putting more space between them.

"What does that mean?"

"Flash, this is not a game. I know who you are. I know who has your heart. You should not be contemplating the arms of another."

The princess shook her head. "My heart is my own, Lauren. No one owns it except for me. As for contemplating the arms of another, it is my right to seek the company of anyone I choose. That is all I want. I want company from someone who is intriguing. I spend my days with military men who share nothing in common with me except airplanes."

"What makes you believe you and I share things in common, Flash?"

"I do not know. What I do know is that I find you interesting, and I would like the chance to get to know whether or not we share commonalities."

"And if we do?"

"Then we can be friends."

"And if we do not?"

"We can still be friends," Alexa replied, coming toward her again. "Lauren, I like you. I have since that night you berated me. Your strength and intelligence are awe-inspiring. I just want to get to know you. I have no other intentions."

Even though Lauren knew deep inside herself that it was probably a bad idea, she found herself nodding in agreement. She knew it could be dangerous to do so, especially with the way she felt whenever the heir was around, but she couldn't help it. Alexa was one of the most disarmingly attractive women she had ever seen, but she figured she could be a friend to the future queen. She knew nothing more could become of it, but she thought she should not deny herself the fun of getting to know someone new even if it was only for a short while. "Very well, Flash."

"Great. Would you like to have dinner with me tonight?"

"Certainly. Where would you like to go?"

"Wherever you want."

"Should you be mindful of taking me out in public? After all, you are known to be involved with someone else. Will the media make this less innocent than it is?"

"You are probably right, but I would like to spend time with you. What shall we do instead?"

"Come to my place. I will make dinner for you."

"Are you sure? I would not want to go out of your way for me."

"I am sure. I get off work in just a few minutes. We can go together."

"Where do you live?"

"Not too far from here, about a mile towards the beach. I have my car, so we can drive."

"Wonderful. I will wait for you then."

Minutes later both women were headed outside. Lauren directed them toward her car. Alexa had never seen anything quite like it. The car was well-worn, lacking paint on several sections and displaying rust in others. Nevertheless, she got into the passenger's side without comment. Listening to the engine struggle to come to life, she inquired, "How long have you had this car?"

"Fourteen years, ever since I was sixteen. I bought it myself."

"You are thirty years old? I cannot believe that. You do not look more than your early twenties."

"A few weeks shy of it actually. I have a young face. How old are you?"

"Twenty-five." There was a pause before the princess asked, "Have you thought about getting some other transportation? This car sounds like it is not going to make it much longer."

"I know, but she is all I have and buying a car would only set me back from my goal of moving. I would rather just keep her until I am settled somewhere new."

"If you could buy a new car now though, what kind would you get?"

Lauren shrugged. "I do not know. I am partial to the Volkswagen. After all this one has done well for me. She might be sore on the eyes, but she has never caused me major problems."

"What kind of Volkswagen? The convertible Bug or maybe the Jetta?"

"No, I think I want a Passat wagon."

"What color?"

"That funky dark blue that they have with leather seats, not black leather though. That would be too hot in the summers."

Alexa nodded her head in agreement. A few minutes later they arrived at Lauren's house. Pulling into the driveway, the redhead shut off the engine and flung open her door. "This is where you live?" the princess questioned, her eyes scanning around her. The librarian had a quaint little home facing the water. "This is a great house."

"Thanks. It was the only thing my mother owned when she died."

"When did you mother pass away?"

"About two years ago."

"I am sorry to hear that. And you lost your father at a young age. That must be difficult."

Lauren shrugged. "I had a step-father, but he went to jail when I was a teenager. He was a miserable alcoholic not worth anything. He was a mean man. He terrified me when I was a kid."

"Any siblings? Other relatives?"

"None. It is just me. It was hard to move back in here when she died because of the memories, but then I realized I had to be practical. I was living in this little rundown house with some friends, and I could save more money by living in my childhood home. I will be glad when I can get rid of it, though."

"I am sure it will sell for a handsome price. You have some prime ocean real estate."

"The land is worth more than the house. The house needs work, but I just do not have the motivation to make improvements to something I will soon abandon."

"Understandable."

"Come inside. The bugs are starting to bite." Alexa followed her hostess inside the home. The librarian had it sparsely but functionally decorated. "Would you like the grand tour?"

"Of course. Show me around your place."

Slowly they wandered through the first floor before heading upstairs. Pausing in front of a door, Lauren looked at Alexa. "You will have to forgive the mess. I was not expecting visitors."

"It is fine."

Opening the door, the redhead said, "This is my room."

Without waiting for permission, Alexa walked into it, stopping in the middle and slowly turning to take all of it into her mind. There was an antique full brass bed with the linens in a ball at the end of it. Clothes were draped over the one chair. There was a window that faced the water. The door of the closet was ajar slightly with a striped cotton robe hanging from the corner of it. "It is cozy."

"I do not spend a lot of time in here. Most of the time I sit downstairs in my study. There is a view of the water."

Alexa nodded her head. "The solitude must be nice. I do not have much time to myself, but there are times when I just want space."

"I understand that. When I was living with friends, I felt the same way. Well, come on. Let us go back downstairs, and I can start on dinner. What would you like?"

"Whatever you want. Would you like some help?" Alexa inquired as they went to the kitchen.

Lauren smiled. "Thank you for the offer, but I hardly see you as the type to roll up her sleeves and cook. No, you just sit here at the table and keep me company. Would you like something to drink?"

"Sure. Would you mind if I made myself a little more comfortable? Sometimes this dress uniform can drive me delirious."

"By all means, make yourself at home, Flash," Lauren answered with a smile as she turned to the refrigerator.

Alexa hung her cover from the spindle of one of the kitchen chairs and then proceeded to untuck her dress shirt. Unbuttoning it she hung it from the other spindle, so she was only in her white pants and a white t-shirt. "Are you sure I cannot assist you in some way?" she inquired, moving across the room to where the redhead was.

The librarian turned to answer but found herself staring at the heir's chest, which was suddenly much closer than moments before. Struggling to look upward, she met dark eyes and a charming grin. Her heart started pounding at the sight. Taking a calming breath, she answered, "If you keep offering, I may take you up on that. However, I really would prefer it if you would just sit down and drink some wine," she replied, putting a hand on Alexa's midsection and nudging her back to the table. However, the princess didn't budge, compelling the older woman to use more force. Feeling Alexa's stomach muscles flex under her touch, Lauren thought she would get lightheaded.

Alexa's body quivered as Lauren touched her. It was a strange sensation, one that had never happened to her in her life. Hearing the uneven exhale from her company, she knew Lauren felt something as well. She went with her instincts and wrapped her arms around her hostess. Blue eyes met hers again. "It is okay, Lauren," she whispered softly.

The librarian shook her head slowly. "Flash, I hardly know you."

"I know, but I feel a connection to you, Lauren. I do not know why."

"Neither do I. We are from different worlds."

"Sometimes that can be a good thing."

Breaking the spell between them, Lauren broke out of the embrace and requested, "Please sit down. I will bring you some wine."

The pilot did as she was told, going back to the table. The rest of the time was spent in relative silence as Alexa drank and watched her hostess preparing their meal. When it was ready, they ate in the small kitchen. "This is delicious, Lauren. Thank you for cooking for me."

"You are very welcome, Flash. Even you crazy pilots deserve to eat," she teased. "The military men that come into the bar complain about that terrible food over there. Cooking for the masses is never easy."

"No, I imagine it is not. I have never been to the mess hall, though, so I cannot not speak to the food."

"Then how do you eat?"

"My brother George and I have a cook at our house."

"You have a house on the base? You do not stay in the barracks?"

"No. That is the one accommodation we have been afforded. It was deemed unsafe for George and me to stay there. Security is easier to control by staying at the house on Officer's Row."

"Speaking of security, were those men at the bar with you that night on your detail?"

"Yes. They watch out for George and me. I feel sorry for them at times. The two of us are not the easiest to guard. Both of us crave adventure. We have interesting hobbies that make my mother cringe."

"Such as?"

"Horse racing, stock car driving, sky diving, mountain climbing, swimming with sharks and alligators. Crazy things. If we can get an adrenaline rush off of it, we will try it at least once."

"She must be beside herself with worry every time either of you leaves the house," she said with a laugh. "Why can you not have normal hobbies such as golf?"

Alexa laughed as well. "You sound like her. She asks that question all the time."

"Because she wants to instill some sanity in the two of you."

"What about you? What are your hobbies?"

"Safe things like reading. I have been known to be a bit of a card and pool shark too."

"Really? That seems unlike you. My little Miss Innocent hustles the tables?"

"Only in fun. I am not a gambler by any means. I just enjoy poker and pool. If I can win extra money at the same time, why should I deny myself the pleasure?"

"You have a point there. Perhaps we can play sometime?"

"That would be interesting. I would have everything to win and nothing to lose. You on the other

hand would have everything to lose."

"Sounds like you should take me up on that offer then."

"I have a sneaking suspicion that you might be a decent player."

"You will never know unless we play. We can play after dinner. Do you have any cards?"

"Of course I have cards. I will think about it. In the meantime though, you need to eat."

Half an hour later both were finished eating. Alexa ignored Lauren's protest and helped clean the kitchen by washing dishes while the redhead put away the food. As Lauren watched the princess at her sink, hands immersed in a sink full of sudsy water, she found herself bewildered and fascinated by the woman in her home. Alexa was nothing like she would have imagined her to be. In fact, the princess was incredibly real and seemed genuinely interested in cultivating their friendship. Eyes straying down the aviator's strong back, they came to the white fitted pants. Lauren ogled for a minute but then realized it didn't appear as if the Lieutenant Commander had bothered to wear any undergarments under her pants. Struck with that thought, her pulse began to race as she chugged the rest of the wine in her glass. Coming to the sink, she slipped a hand on Alexa's hip as the other hand eased her empty glass into the hot water.

Alexa felt the petite body against her back. It felt incredibly good, but she didn't say so in case it was not Lauren's attention to be alluring. Slowly as if unconsciously though, she pressed her body back toward the one against her. She felt the hand that was resting against her hip tense at the action, even though neither said anything. For the rest of the time Alexa was doing dishes, Lauren lingered near her. Neither spoke, both too afraid to voice what could possibly be in their minds. Instead both pretended it was perfectly natural to be acting the way they were.

Finally the princess turned around as she wiped her wet hands on a dishtowel. "Well, thank you again for dinner. It was a pleasant surprise."

"You are very welcome, Flash. I am glad you enjoyed it."

"Perhaps we can play cards now or maybe go for a walk on the beach?" she suggested.

"A walk sounds nice."

"Good. Let us go then."

Heading outside to the back porch, both of them discarded their shoes and socks before walking out onto the sand. Lauren took the lead in the direction they were going. Strolling closely along the water's edge, they would have looked like any other couple out there, but Lauren knew the truth. The woman next to her was one of the most powerful women in the world even though right then she looked just like anyone else. Taking in the scenery, Lauren glanced back over her shoulder. She was surprised to see Alexa's security detail trailing behind at a distance.

"It must be difficult for you to have any privacy," she mentioned, sparing a glace at her friend. "Security is right behind us."

Alexa nodded. "They have been with me the whole time. They followed us back to your house and have been sitting out on the street."

"Why did you not tell me? I would have invited them inside. They probably have not eaten. I should at least offer them dinner."

"That is sweet of you. When we return if you are so inclined to extend that invitation, feel free to do so."

There was a pause in conversation and then the redhead inquired, "Will you tell me how you got the name Flash?"

"You mean it is not obvious?" she asked with a sparkling smile.

"Do not tell me you got it for your beaming grin alone."

"Of course not. That was just an added bonus. The real reason is because I am fast."

"Fast in what? Your plane?"

"In everything, planes, cars, horses, women," she whispered. "I like speed."

"So does that mean you like easy girls?"

The brunette shook her head. "I would not call them easy as much as I would determined. They know what they want, and they cut to the chase. No pretending to be something they are not. You strike me as that kind of woman."

"Do I? Why do you say that?"

"Because you are a thoughtful mature woman. I think you understand the potential consequences of any action you might take. You impress me as someone who knows what she wants in life and exactly how to go about getting it in all aspects, including sex. To me that is not being easy. It is practical, and I have a great respect for that."

"Are you saying you think I sleep around? Because that is what you seem to be implying," she countered with an edge to her voice.

"Not at all. To the contrary, I do not think you sleep around. However, I think you are the type that when you find someone you are interested in that way, you do not dally in child's play. You do not allow yourself to fall foolishly in love. Instead you glean what you need from that person and allow them to do the same to you, and then you make an amiable parting without the complication of emotions."

"You have derived all of this from me over one dinner?" Lauren asked with a chuckle. "How interesting."

"We are kindred spirits in that way, Lauren. I know this much of you only because I am the same. I never complicate sex with feelings either. Although I do know when a woman wants me, I also know when a woman wants me to fall in love with her, and that has just never happened."

"You have never been in love?"

"Never. Have you?"

"No," the redhead confessed.

An hour later the women returned to the house. Lauren did in fact take the initiative to offer Alexa's security dinner, to which both men gratefully accepted. The librarian left Alexa in the study and then took her other guests to the kitchen. She returned ten minutes later to find the princess looking out the window.

"Thank you for feeding my men. You are quite gracious," the taller woman said.

"It is a pleasure to cook for people. I enjoy it."

Turning to her hostess, Alexa smiled. "I believe you owe me a card game now."

Lauren shook her head. "I do not think that is the best thing we could do at the moment."

"Why not? Are you afraid I will beat you?"

Lauren didn't answer for a moment. She was afraid of playing cards, for she didn't know what the stakes might be in such a game. The princess could bet anything and everything at her disposal, and Lauren feared what she might lose. However, she didn't say that. Instead she answered, "We must set the ground rules if we are to play."

"Fine. Whatever you want."

"First of all, what game do you want to play?"

"Poker," the princess suggested.

"What about Texas Hold'em? Have you ever played that?"

"Yes, I have played that. If that is the game you want, Lauren, that is what we will play."

"All right. That is what we will play then. I have some chips we can use."

"Good. Where would you like to play?"

"Let us go into the den. We can use the coffee table." Grabbing the chips and the cards, the librarian led the way into the other room. She took a seat on the floor, so Alexa copied her.

The brunette began to divide their chips as Lauren shuffled the deck. "We have to decide what the stakes are. What do you want to play for, Ms. Fulton?"

The older woman shrugged. "What are you prepared to lose, Flash?" she inquired with bravado.

Thinking on that for a moment, Alexa replied, "If I lose, I will buy you that new car you want. How is that for a wager? What are you prepared to lose, Lauren?"

Lauren sat there mute for a second as she thought about what had just been put on offer. Alexa had just staked a new car in their friendly game of poker. That was hardly what she had expected, and she didn't know how to respond. There was nothing she had that could even equal it. "That is a high stake, Flash. I am not sure I have something to rival that."

"Sure you do. You just have to think on it."

"I have my entire savings, but I do not wish to gamble my hard earned money away now that I am so close to reaching my goals."

"Money has no meaning to me. I would not take it anyway."

"This house will fetch a good price, but I will need it until I move."

"I do not want your home either."

"Then what do you want, Flash?"

Giving a sly grin, the princess inquired, "Can you think of nothing enticing to me?"

Seeing the heir make a dramatic sweep with her eyes over Lauren's body, Lauren realized what Alexa had in mind. The unspoken request made heat suffuse her skin as a knot formed in her stomach at the very thought of what the princess was proposing. It made her wonder if she would rather win or lose, because both rewards were equally tempting. Nodding her head, Lauren answered, "Very well, Flash. If I lose, I will give you one night."

"No deal. I am wagering a car, Lauren. You have to put up more than a night."

"Fine. A week."

"The rest of the summer," Alexa bargained.

"This game could take the rest of the summer, Flash, if you are as good as I am."

"That is true. A month then. Surely one of us will win within two months."

"A month. We have a deal," Lauren answered, extending her hand.

Alexa shook it. For the rest of the evening the two fiercely played cards. Neither spoke except to deter the other, but it was clear the game was still in fun. When it was close to midnight, Alexa mentioned that she had to get back to the base. Lauren consulted her watch and agreed. Both of them stood and stretched from being on the floor so long.

"Should I trust that you will not steal any of my chips?" the princess asked in jest. "Or should I count them before I leave?" Neither had made great progress of winning over the other's chips in their game so far, Lauren only having a slight advantage.

The redhead laughed. Moving to her guest, she put her hands on Alexa's waist. "Please, Flash. You have made me unsure of whether I want to win or lose our wager. I will not touch the chips. They will stay exactly like that until we can pick it up again."

"Tomorrow?" the pilot proposed, bringing her arms around her hostess.

"I look forward to it. Come around for dinner. I will fix you anything you like."

With a smile Alexa cupped the redhead's cheek in her hand. "You are a sweet woman, Lauren Fulton. I am in grave danger around you."

"Surely not, Flash. A woman of your power and strength could resist even the most alluring of wiles if you wanted to."

"I am not sure I want to," the princess whispered, leaning in a planting a kiss on Lauren's cheek. "Thank you again for dinner." With that she wandered into the kitchen where her men were sitting involved in conversation. The princess put on her dress shirt again and picked her cover up off the table. Her security stood and headed for the door ahead of her, stopping to thank Lauren for their meal again. When Alexa got to the front door, she waved her men off saying she would meet them in the car. She placed her cover on her head and then smiled at the redhead. "This has been a wonderful evening."

Lauren nodded in agreement. "Tell me, Flash. Has anyone ever mentioned how sexy you look in your uniform?" she teased, her hand lazily drawing a circular pattern over the pilot's stomach. She felt those muscles twitch again under her fingers.

"You are the first," Alexa answered, leaning into the touch. She lowered her head and kissed the redhead's cheek, lingering for a moment to take in the scent of her hair.

Lauren felt a shuddered breath leave her at the feeling of a nose nuzzling against her ear. She was acutely aware of her own state of growing arousal and furthermore knew the princess was cognizant of it as well. However, she felt empowered by the fact that Alexa was not shy about

displaying her own mounting desires. Emboldened by the need she felt coming from the brunette, the smaller woman let her hands wander up around Alexa's neck, her fingers running along the edge of dark hair. Her lips pressed against the aviator's jaw. "Flash," she murmured.

"Yes?" Alexa whispered, bound by the suddenly sensuality of the moment.

"You better go."

Alexa chuckled and pulled back, knowing Lauren had intentionally broken the spell. She nodded her head and took a deep breath. "Good night, Lauren."

"Night, Flash. See you tomorrow."

"I am looking forward to it. Shall I bring anything?"

"Just yourself."

"I will see you then. Sweet dreams."

"You too."

The following day seemed incredibly slow to Alexa. Class was dull compared to where her reflections were leading her. A certain redhead with blue eyes dominated every spare moment of her thoughts. As she got into the cockpit of her plane for her flight that day, she knew she had to focus on her job. She took a deep breath in order to regain her senses, but her eyes were drawn to the photograph pinned to the instrument panel. The picture of she and Meredith made her heart sink for a moment.

She had forgotten about her girlfriend completely after only a matter of a week. Meredith had not entered her thoughts once, but as she stared at the photograph, she remembered that the woman staring back at her was to become her bride. She sighed as her world came crashing back into reality. Being with Lauren had a way of making her forget whom she was, and she loved that about the librarian, but she knew she couldn't truly deny her destiny. Putting the picture in her pocket, she knew she had to forget about the women and concentrate on her flying.

When her flight was finished and she had returned to the observation deck with her fellow pilots, George looked at her in concern. "Are you all right, Lex? That was some of the worse flying I have ever seen from you. You barely won your match against a mediocre pilot."

"I am fine. I was just distracted."

He grinned. "By a certain person you spent time with yesterday?" he questioned lightly.

"No, by Meredith if you must know."

"What about Lady Adams?"

"I was just thinking that I should bring her down some weekend. I miss her," she lied, but she knew to say her thoughts were with Lauren would not be appropriate, even with her brother.

"Well, you can always invite her. I am going to have Kelly and Morgan come see me in a few weeks. Perhaps she can join us then? We can have some family time."

"Mere is not family," Alexa mentioned.

"It is only a matter of time," he responded. Changing the subject, he asked, "Do you have plans again this evening?"

"As a matter of fact I do. I am having dinner at Lauren's again. We have a bet to settle."

"What kind of bet?"

"That is between us. I will be home late again hopefully."

"When do I get to meet this woman?"

"What is the point in that?"

George shrugged. "You seem interested in her. I thought you might want me to meet her."

"You can see her at the bar all you like. There is no need for more of a relationship between you unless you are looking for company outside your marriage, George."

"Do not be ridiculous. I am looking for no such thing. I merely was asking to meet the woman who seems to have charmed you. What is the harm in that?"

"There is no harm. I suppose I just feel strangely about it."

"Why is that?"

"Because I feel things with her, George, that I have not felt before. I do not know what is going on with me."

"What do you mean?"

Alexa looked around, but the rest of the pilots were looking skyward discussing other things. Looking at her brother, she leaned to his ear and whispered, "She touches me, and I..."

"You what?" he asked softly, leading them further away from the group.

"I cannot say."

"I am your brother, Alexa. You can tell me anything."

"This has never happened to me, George. A woman has never affected me so."

"What happens when she touches you? Why is she even touching you?"

"It is innocent touching, but my reaction is not. She makes me...tremble," she breathed as if she was afraid to voice it.

"What?" George asked in apparent shock.

Alexa nodded. "I know it sounds crazy, George. I do not even know if she knows what she does. No woman has ever made that happen."

"Listen to me, Lex. You are the most powerful woman in the world outside of Mother. You are strong and confident. A little woman like that is no match for your strength. You can resist her if you want."

"That is just it. I like the feeling. I want to indulge in it. Meredith does not make me feel this way. No woman has ever made me feel this way."

"Lex, you have one of the most beautiful women in the world as a girlfriend."

"I know."

"Look, you can have anyone you want. I am not trying to talk you out of having a relationship with someone else. My concern is that you might fall in love with someone else. You are talking nonsense about this woman. Sleep with her if you want but do not under any circumstances fall in love."

"I will not fall in love with Lauren. I am just anxious to sleep with her. Having her touch me innocently just reminds me of that fact. I am sure that is all."

"Are you?"

"Yes. I am sure." However, she was not truly, but she decided she did not want to discuss it further with her brother. She knew she probably shouldn't have brought it up in the first place. Going back to where the other pilots were, she closed the discussion.

That evening her security team drove her to Lauren's house. They had done her the favor of getting her flowers for the redhead that afternoon while she was in class, so she took them and the bag of clothes she wanted to change into up to the door and knocked. The smaller woman answered with a smile after just a moment.

"Good evening, Lauren. How are you?" she inquired extending the flowers to her.

Lauren smiled and flushed slightly. "Thank you. These are beautiful. Come on in. Bring your men in as well. They need to eat too."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. I fixed enough for all of us."

"All right. Thank you. You are too good to them." Retrieving her two bodyguards, they all went inside. "If it is all right with you, I would like to change clothes. I am tired of wearing this uniform every time I see you."

"Whatever you would like. Suit yourself. We will be in the kitchen when you are ready."

While Alexa was gone, Lauren took her other guests into the kitchen. "What can I get the two of you to drink?" she inquired. Both of them answered politely but then just stood there somewhat awkwardly. Gesturing to the table, she said, "Please sit down. Make yourselves at home." They did as they were told. The librarian poured their drinks and then moved to the table to set them down. However, seeing the look on her guests' faces, she inquired, "Is something wrong?"

The older man, Roger, shook his head. "Ms. Fulton, on the contrary, you are a gracious hostess. We just aren't used to being treated this way by her highness's company of friends."

"Oh, I see. Well, you are always welcome in my home. I enjoy the company."

"Well, we enjoy coming here, Ms. Fulton. You are a pleasure to be with, and you make Lex happy. She likes coming to see you."

"That is good to know," Lauren answered. "I like spending time with her as well."

When the princess came to the kitchen, she was dressed in casual khaki pants and a button down shirt. She smiled as she saw the table set for four. Even though she wanted some time with Lauren alone, she was pleased that the older woman treated her men as well as she was treated. Taking her seat, the four of them had their meal together before security made their excuses to take to their stations around the house on guard while the two women had time together.

Looking across the table at her hostess, Alexa smiled. "Thank you for dinner. It was wonderful."

"I am glad you enjoyed it."

"And thank you for being so good to my men. They do not get that often."

"I know. As I told them, they will always be welcome in my house, Flash. All three of you will."

"We appreciate that, Lauren. Now let me do these dishes for you," she said, rising from the table with her plate and heading to the sink.

"You do not have to do that, you know."

"I know, but I want to in order to show my gratitude," the princess said with a smile. She started the water and poured in soap like she had done the previous night before going to the table for more dishes.

Lauren just sat there for a moment and watched the heir being so domestic. Finally, though, she made a move to put away the leftover food. She finished before Alexa, though, so she had time to watch her uninterrupted. Lauren gazed over her guest's frame. Alexa looked fabulous to her in her chosen outfit. Moving closer to her, Lauren put her hand on the pilot's hip and questioned, "How is that coming?"

Feeling the hand on her body, Alexa forced herself to take a normal breath. She wasn't used to the way she felt yet when Lauren touched her, but she didn't want to let on that it made her feel anything other than neutral quite yet. "All is fine." She felt the librarian's hand slowly move from her hip along the belt of her pants until it reached her lower back before it started to stroke lightly. She couldn't help a quiver at the touch, but she still said nothing. The light petting continued through the rest of the dishes.

When Alexa was finished, she slowly turned around to face the woman behind her. Lauren remained where she was, so the two women were standing closely together. Smiling into dark eyes, the shorter woman could see that her touching had affected the heir, but she wasn't sure how to act on the information. Not knowing quite what to say just then, she said softly, "Rumor has it that you like visiting me."

"Rumor, huh? I could only imagine who might start such a rumor," Alexa replied with a chuckle, knowing her men probably said something to that effect to Lauren.

"Is it true?"

"How could that be anything but true, Lauren? You feed me. You play poker with me. You help me forget myself for a while, and I like that. I like you," she added quietly, slipping her arms around the woman's waist.

"I like you too, Flash."

After a moment of just gazing into each other's eyes, Alexa whispered, "If I were to kiss you right now, would you be upset?"

"Why would I be upset? After all, you kissed me last night for my dinner efforts," she teased lightly, her arms tightening their hold around Alexa's waist.

With that permission the princess cupped Lauren's face. Her thumb grazed across her cheek lightly. A moment passed in silence before Alexa leaned down and kissed the redhead's soft cheek sweetly. Her lips lingered longer than necessary, but when she pulled away it was only a few inches. Their noses grazed for a moment before Alexa murmured, "I want to kiss you again."

Lauren could only nod before she felt it. The mouth of the sexiest woman she had ever known pressed against her own. Her lips instantly began to tingle at the sensation, and she instinctually opened her mouth to gasp in surprise but found the sound transform into a muffled moan as their tongues met. She felt her knees begin to weaken and wrapped her arms tighter around Alexa for support as the methodical onslaught continued for several moments.

Alexa felt the connection all the way through her body. The energy and attraction that had passed between them unvoiced for the past several days was becoming apparent in that moment as their embrace became tighter. Neither woman wanted to break the contact. Finally, though, Alexa could feel herself getting lightheaded and pulled back, bracing herself against the counter with her hand.

The older woman just smiled demurely. She had no idea what the aviator was thinking just then, because her face showed a plethora of emotion. Not knowing what to say, she teased gently, "That was some thank you kiss."

"Wow," the tall woman mumbled. However, after a second she said, "I can honestly say that is the first time that has ever happened to me."

"What?"

"I feel."

Lauren stepped in closer, sensing the vulnerability Alexa was feeling. She slipped her arms around the princess's waist. "You feel what, Flash?"

"Just that. I feel. No woman has ever made me feel before. Well, made me feel anything other than ardent," she joked.

"Are you saying you do not feel ardent with me?" Lauren joked.

"I did not say that. I just mean that I feel much more. I like being with you so much, Lauren."

"I like being with you too, Flash. And I certainly do not mind being kissed that way," she jested.

Nodding her head, the princess gazed into blue eyes. The emotion held within their depths told her that Lauren was being truthful. "Perhaps we could do that again then?" she proposed.

"Perhaps," Lauren replied with a shy smile. With that both women pulled each other closer and continued an unhurried exploration of each other's mouths. Lauren felt like she was in ecstasy in the arms of such a charming woman. Alexa was much more than she had even imagined. The pilot enraptured her with her very presence, and the feeling of the taller woman's kiss made her forget everything for a moment, even the magnitude of the woman who held her. Right then Alexa was not the crowned heir of her country but a simple Navy pilot whom she found herself adoring more each time she was with her.

Emotions swirled within Alexa as she clung to the redhead tightly, their lips communicating what she couldn't express just then. No woman had ever stirred her so much as Lauren did, which surprised her given their short acquaintance. The princess found the librarian beautiful but also intelligent and interesting. When she had bet Hollywood in the bar that she could bed the redhead, she had no idea how much treasure rested beneath the pretty exterior. Alexa was completely captivated by the smaller woman. She could sense strange feelings wrapping themselves around her heart but had no idea what they were, only that she didn't want them to leave.

Finally pulling back, the brunette smiled at Lauren. "Shall we go for our sunset walk or do you want to skip right to the poker game?" she inquired teasingly.

"How about our walk?" Lauren answered, taking Alexa's hand. Together they made their way to the beach. Removing their shoes, they took each other's hand and strolled along the water's edge. Both of them knew Alexa's security was behind them, but they ignored them in favor of each other's attention. Through their entire stroll, neither woman would let go of the other's hand.

Back at the house once the sun had gone to bed, the two women sat on the floor in the living room playing cards. Alexa spent most of her time that night gazing across the coffee table at her company rather than concentrating on her cards. Likewise Lauren appeared equally distracted and not many hands were played. Instead the two women just looked deeply into each other's eyes under the pretense of trying to read each other's tells, but both of them knew the real reason. At that moment both of them would have rather been in each other's arms continuing what had started in the kitchen.

Finally when it was late, Alexa mentioned that she should probably be going. Lauren nodded her head in agreement. Both women stood from their spots on the floor and headed toward the door. However, Alexa lingered for a moment as her arms came around Lauren's waist. "Do you have plans for tomorrow?" she whispered, nuzzling the red hair.

"Actually, I do. I am having dinner with some friends," she answered quietly.

Not expecting that response, Alexa pulled back to look into the librarian's eyes. Trying to play off her disappointment, she inquired, "Oh, well what about the next night?"

Lauren shook her head. "I have plans every day until Sunday, Flash. Perhaps we can get together Sunday afternoon?"

Alexa nodded her head in agreement even though the thought of being without the redhead's company that long was disheartening. "Sure. Sunday afternoon then. What would you like to do?"

"Whatever you want."

"Well, I will think on that then. I will call you Saturday if that is all right." Alexa proposed,

releasing the older woman and stuffing her hands into her pockets.

Looking at the pilot, Lauren sensed that something was wrong. However, she wasn't sure bringing it up was the best thing to do at that moment, so she merely nodded her head. "Great. I look forward to it, Flash."

"Well, good night, Lauren," Alexa said, leaning and kissing her on the cheek.

The librarian's heart sunk at the contact, for she was hoping for something else, but she didn't say so. Instead she just smiled pleasantly. "Good night, Flash. See you Sunday."

When Alexa arrived back at her quarters on the base, she saw that George was still awake. He was lounging on the sofa watching TV when she plopped down next to him. "You look like you had a bad night," he mentioned.

Alexa shrugged. "No, on the contrary, it was fine. I just am not used to being brushed off I suppose."

"She brushed you off?"

"I asked if I could see her tomorrow, but she said no. She has other plans. She has plans for the rest of the week," the princess grumbled.

"Sounds like you are jealous. Lex, just let it go."

"I know I should, but I like being with her, George. She is like no other woman I know."

Her brother shook his head. "You should be careful with this one. Sounds as if you might be falling for her."

"No," Alexa denied. "I merely have carnal interests."

"If you say so. How is that going by the way?"

"We kissed tonight, but that is all."

"Are you going to give me any more than that? Come on. I have to live vicariously through you these days."

Shrugging her shoulders, the heir was silent for a moment. She wasn't sure if she should tell her brother how it felt. "It was nice. She is a good kisser. I cannot wait to see what else she can do," she jested with a sly smile.

He laughed. "That is more like it. That is the sister I know. I was beginning to worry this woman had put the squeeze on your heart."

"No, she is just another girl, George. I will sleep with her and move on."

George gave her a friendly knock on the shoulder and mentioned, "Let me know how good she is, will you?"

"Of course I will. Right now though I am going to go up to bed. Good night."

"Good night."

Heading up the stairs, the princess went into her bedroom and flopped down on the bed. Looking up at the ceiling, her mind drifted to a certain redhead. Being with Lauren made her feel things, new things, exciting things, but Alexa also had started to feel something else, a gnawing in the pit of her stomach at the thought of being apart for several days. She had never felt it before with any other woman, and she knew she didn't like the feeling.

Back at the librarian's house, Lauren had settled down in her bed for the night. As she sat there reading her book, her thoughts kept straying to Alexa. She could tell that the pilot was upset as she left that night. Even though she didn't say it, Lauren felt it in the distance of their good bye. Part of her felt bad for evoking such emotion in the taller woman, but at the same time there was a sense of power that came with being able to dictate someone else's feelings. It made her feel as if she and the aviator were becoming closer emotionally, something that pleased her, although her heart was just as intrigued with Alexa's sexual interest. The few kisses they had shared had started a smolder deep within her, and she knew it might overtake her if the princess continued to be so sensually alluring. It had been a long time since she had allowed a woman to be sexually close, but there was something about Alexa that completely put her at ease and captivated her. She couldn't help herself. She was drawn to the dark-haired woman in a way she never had been to anyone. Settling herself down to sleep, Lauren sighed. She wondered what might happen between them.

Over the next few days Alexa didn't leave the house after flight school. Instead she just hung around watching TV and doing what George considered moping. However, by Saturday he had convinced her to join him and the fellow pilots on the beach for some beer and volleyball. Alexa spent the first part of the day sitting watching the water, but George dragged her into a game against two fellow aviators. Given that they were so good at it though, they continued to play on the same team. After awhile Hollywood decided to get in on the game with another pilot, and the fierce competition began. The two royals played their hardest, not wanting to be bested by their nemesis, but the game was close though.

A little ways down the beach Lauren was walking hand in hand with her best friend of many years, Mary Johnston. She had just recalled the details of her first kisses with the sexy pilot as the redhead noticed a volleyball game in progress. Three gorgeous shirtless men in swim trunks and one woman in a tank top and tiny shorts greeted her eyes. Her breath caught a little when she realized that it was Alexa. However, her thoughts were distracted by Mary's voice.

"Good Lord, do you see what I do? I've never seen men with such fine bodies!" Mary exclaimed with a giggle. "Look at that one playing with the woman. Does he have a washboard stomach or

what? Oh, I could just faint."

Lauren smiled but didn't respond at first. She just watched as they continued to walk a little closer. However, she suddenly sensed that the princess saw her, because Alexa seemed to look right at her and freeze. It made Lauren's own feet stop. The moment was brief though as Hollywood suddenly went for a spike and sent the ball flying right into Alexa's face, so hard it knocked her sunglasses off into the sand.

Grunting in discomfort Alexa immediately touched her nose with the back of her hand. When it came away stained red, she realized she was bleeding profusely. George rushed over to her. However, she brushed him off as she continued to stare down the sand toward Lauren.

Knowing she had been spotted, the librarian dragged Mary along with her up to where the pilots were standing. "Flash, are you all right?" she inquired in concern.

Alexa frowned at Mary but replied, "I am just fine." She sent a scowl in Hollywood's direction but said nothing to him.

"I think you might have a broken nose, Lex," George mentioned. "We should take you to the hospital. I will have security bring the car down to the beach."

However, Lauren offered, "I can take you. My house is just down the beach a little ways. My car is right there."

"No thanks. I would not want to interrupt your date," Alexa grumbled, leaning down to pick up her broken sunglasses.

Mary giggled at the statement as her eyes roamed over George's body. "We aren't on a date. Lauren is the only one between us that likes the women. In fact, she just can't shut up about you," she teased.

"That is not true," defended the redhead as a blush rose to her face.

"Come on, Lauren. Don't deny it now. Weren't you just telling me how lightheaded you got when this sexy aviator kissed you?"

Unable to form a response to the question, Lauren just shook her head at her best friend and mumbled, "You do not know when to shut up, do you?"

"I'm just trying to get you two lovebirds together. After all, who can resist such a fine specimen?" Mary joked putting her hand on Alexa's arm. "You need to come with us now, Flash. Lauren will take good care of you." Alexa didn't say anything but looked at her brother. Mary also looked in George's direction. "As for you, handsome, you should come with us as well."

Smiling at Mary, George answered, "Yes, I should probably come but to protect Lex's interests." Going to where their belongings were, he put on his shirt and gathered their things. Coming back

to Alexa, he mentioned, "Lex, I have not gotten a proper introduction to these ladies."

The princess who had not taken her eyes off Lauren since that adorable blush had appeared gave a shake of her head. "Right. I am sorry. George, this is Lauren Fulton. Lauren, my brother, the prince, George Washington."

Lauren bowed her head at him as she said, "Your highness, it is a pleasure to meet you. May I present my best friend Mary Johnston. Mary, this is Princess Alexa and Prince George."

"Lauren, you never said she was the princess! You're in love with the princess?"

"I tend to forget that Flash is a royal," she said to her best friend before turning to the Washingtons. "You will have to forgive her. She gets these romantic notions sometimes," Lauren stated, obviously trying to downplay the comment.

"It is all right. George does that too," Alexa joked. "Shall we go? My nose really hurts."

"Lex, I really think security should take us. After all, you know what will happen if the media catches hold of this."

The princess nodded her head. "You are right. If you would not mind getting them to fetch the car then, George."

"Certainly. Ladies, it was a pleasure meeting you," he said with a smile before taking his leave.

"Would you like us to go with you, Flash, or will you be all right?" Lauren inquired.

"If you would like to come, I would certainly enjoy the company, but do not feel as if you need to. George will see to me."

Mary didn't even look at Lauren as she answered for them, "We would still like to go with you. Lauren will be worried otherwise. You wouldn't want her to worry, would you?"

"Of course not. It is my life's goal to put Lauren's mind at ease," Alexa replied with a flash of a grin at the object of discussion.

Lauren blushed again but said nothing. As the three women started up the beach toward the awaiting car, the redhead fell a few steps behind Alexa with her friend. "Mary, please whatever you do, do not make such a big deal out of things between Flash and me. She is the princess, and she has a girlfriend. Do you not read the papers?"

"Who needs papers when I can see for myself what is between the two of you? Talk about a woman with feelings. Lauren, please tell me you see it. Can't you see the way she looks at you?"

Lauren didn't respond as they reached the car. All four of them rode quietly to the hospital. Alexa tried to maintain a passive face, even though her nose was in pain. In her mind she couldn't let go

of the comments that Mary had said on the beach. She wondered if it was true, if Lauren did have feelings for her. She felt fairly sure they were by the flush on the librarian's cheeks as her friend made the remark. It gave Alexa hope, because as soon as Mary had mentioned it, she realized her own feelings. She understood, only just then, what her emotions were. She was falling in love for the first time in her life.

At the hospital, she was rushed right in to see a doctor while her brother and the two women were given a secluded place to sit out of the sight of the rest of the public. Lauren was silent as she just flipped through a magazine. Even though she knew Mary was probably dying to discuss Alexa more, she didn't feel comfortable doing so in front of the prince. She was interrupted though by his deep voice saying, "Lauren, tell me about yourself. Flash likes to keep her time with you to herself for the most part."

"What would you like to know?"

He shrugged. "Whatever you would like to share. I know you work at a bar. How did you start working there?"

"Oh, that is just a part-time job. A friend of mine owns the bar. I am a librarian really. I have lived here almost my entire life. There is not much to tell other than that."

"May I inquire as to your age?"

"I will be thirty in two weeks. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious."

There was a pause in talk but then Mary asked, "Your highness, could I ask you something personal?"

"Only if you call me George," he replied with a smile.

She nodded. "What do you know about Alexa's girlfriend?"

"Meredith? You are interested in knowing about her? What about her?"

"How serious is the relationship?"

"Mary, that is awfully personal," Lauren admonished, even though she knew her friend was daring enough to ask the questions she wanted to know.

George looked between them for a moment before responding, "Lady Adams will most likely be queen some day. Of course that decision would be more of my mother's doing than Alexa's. If it were left up to my sister, she would probably remain unmarried for quite some time. She is in love with her freedom more than anything else in this world."

"What does that mean? Doesn't she love her?"

"Lex love Meredith?" he questioned. Seeing the look on Lauren's face, he shrugged. "She does not discuss her feelings with me, but if I had to venture a guess, I would say she has them elsewhere."

"Really? Isn't that a bit of a conflict for her then?" Mary asked.

He shrugged again. "I suppose that is something that most people do not understand about her. She was born to be queen, and with that comes a great deal of responsibility. Her life is not her own. From birth she has been sacrificed to the people, and it is her duty to care for them. Her own will does not matter. She is to serve others, not herself."

"That does not sound much like an existence," Lauren mentioned.

George nodded in agreement. "I do not envy her. I would never want to be king. The pressure is too great. Lex, though, will be a great ruler. She understands her place, and she is a natural leader. My only wish for my sister is that she love someone as greatly as I love my own wife." His eyes stayed on the librarian's long enough that she understood his point.

For the next hour the two women chatted amongst themselves as George read a magazine. However, even as Lauren talked with her friend, she knew something had changed. It seemed as if the prince was encouraging the relationship that seemed to be so obviously blossoming between her and the heir. It didn't quite make sense to her though, because at the same time he made it clear Alexa would marry a woman she didn't necessarily love.

A little while later George and Alexa's security team came into the room. "George, a situation has developed. Somehow the press got wind of Alexa's accident. They are outside. Do we know what is going on with her yet? Maybe I can get them to leave if we have a status report."

"No word yet. We will send a doctor out when we find out something. That will save you the headache. You just concentrate on the best route out of here."

"Not a problem. Even if they hang around, we'll just take you straight out the emergency room. Hospital security has been helpful in keeping them at a safe distance. What about the ladies?" he questioned.

"What about them?" George inquired.

"Do you think it is wise for you and Alexa to be seen with these women?"

He contemplated the point for a moment in silence before replying, "We are all friends here. I do not see the harm in it. Besides, I think Lex would like to spend some time with Lauren. I am sure there will not be rumors circulating about these ladies and myself."

"I was only thinking of Alexa's relationship with Lady Adams."

George dismissed the notion with the wave of his hand. "Meredith is used to the press making something out of nothing. She knows fact from fiction when it comes to Lex. The arrangements will be fine."

"Very well, your highness. Just let us know when you are ready to leave."

Almost as soon as they had gone, Alexa appeared with a doctor. She gave a small smile at Lauren. "Nothing is broken," she announced.

"She was fortunate. It is just a lot of blood, but we've stopped that by now. She just needs some ice and aspirin for the pain. She'll have black eyes for a few days, but then all will go back to normal. If you don't have any questions, she's free to go."

"Wonderful. Thank you. Now if you would not mind, could you go make that announcement to the press and then alert our security team of our pending departure?" George asked the doctor.

"Of course, your highness."

When the four of them were alone, Alexa asked, "I do not suppose anyone has an extra pair of sunglasses? I hate the idea of walking out there like this."

"You can borrow mine, Lex," George replied, handing them over to her. She slipped them gingerly on her face.

"Thanks, Stryker," she replied. Looking around for Lauren, Alexa held a hand out toward her. "I might need a little help getting into the car. It hurts to even try to focus on anything," she explained.

Lauren just nodded her head as she slipped an arm around the heir's waist. "I will take care of you, Flash. Do not worry."

Curving an arm around the librarian's shoulders, she whispered so only Lauren could hear, "I would like it if you would take care of me."

The decidedly sexy tone of Alexa's voice made her shudder slightly, but she didn't comment. Instead she just looked up into Alexa's face, trying to see the eyes behind the dark sunglasses. When security came to retrieve them, they had to move quickly through a growing crowd. As soon as they stepped outside, Lauren felt blinded by camera flashes as she, Mary, and the royals were ushered into an awaiting limousine. Alone once again, Alexa took off the sunglasses and sighed.

"We are going straight to the base, Alexa. I figured it would be safer for the ladies not to return home directly. I thought you would not want the media outside their houses. We will take them home later."

"Great idea. Thank you." Turning to Lauren she apologized, "I am sorry you were dragged into this mess. This is for the best, though. Trust me. You do not want cameras in front of your house."

"It is fine. Whatever you feel is best is what we will do," she assured, patting Alexa's knee.

Chapter III: Love Versus Duty

For the next week Alexa asked Lauren to visit her on base as a precaution, because pictures had been placed in the paper of the two of them together, and she didn't want the woman to be overburdened with press at her home. The librarian was amiable to the situation and made dinner for both royals and their security on the nights she went up to the house, for which everyone was most appreciative.

One night after dinner had come to a close and Lauren and Alexa were by themselves, the heir invited her guest onto the rooftop deck to watch the planes. The women sat close together in the darkness in relative silence looking out over the airfield of planes for a long time before Alexa turned to Lauren. She smiled at her. "Have I mentioned how beautiful you look tonight?" she inquired, wrapping an arm around the woman's bare shoulders.

Lauren had arrived in a pretty black linen summer dress with intricate white embroidery along the edge. She hadn't bothered to wear stockings, opting instead for simple black sandals to complete the outfit. The older woman flushed lightly under the compliment. "Thank you, Flash." She looked into the brunette's eyes. The dark circles were almost completely gone. Only traces of greenish-gray remained under her bottom eyelids, and her nose was once again its normal size. "Your nose looks better."

"It feels much better. In fact, there is something I have missed doing since my little injury," she whispered into Lauren's ear as the object of their discussion nuzzled red hair. The librarian gasped lightly as Alexa's lips pressed against her neck. "I have missed kissing you as a way of thanking you for all your efforts on my behalf."

Lauren could only moan in response at first as the gentle assault on her neck continued, but then she felt lips pressed against her own. Unable to control her own desires, she kissed back increasing the intensity between them. She had thought of this moment for days, and it had been driving her crazy not to be able to touch the woman she cared about so intimately. Feeling Lauren's response, Alexa groaned and pulled the redhead closer with both arms until she was practically in her lap. Carrying on for several minutes, they only broke apart as they felt an airplane soar over them and come in for a landing. Blue eyes met brown in silence.

"Flash, we are in jeopardy of doing something dangerous," Lauren whispered, caressing the heir's face sweetly.

"And what might that be, darling Lauren?"

The endearment caught the librarian off guard for a moment. She hadn't been expecting it, and for the moment it made her forget her reason for stopping their activities. Smiling at Alexa, she said, "I am in jeopardy of losing our bet."

"It would not be the worst thing that has ever happened, would it?"

"Certainly not," she answered softly as she curled herself into Alexa's lap. Her hand trailed down Alexa's face to her neck and then over her shoulder. Changing the subject she mentioned, "You are so beautiful, Flash. Has anyone ever told you that?"

Alexa felt herself blush. "Not in so many words. It means a lot coming from you. I have wanted to impress you since the moment I saw you."

Lauren chuckled. "Oh really? Well, you did leave an impression on me at first. I am so glad it was wrong though and that we have gotten this second chance to know one another."

"Me too. You are so interesting and intelligent, Lauren, on top of being beautiful. Not many women I know are both smart and pretty. Usually they have one of the other, but you... I could spend an eternity with you and never tire. I could spend hours just looking into your eyes and listening to you talk," she confessed, her hand moving up to Lauren's lips. Her fingers traced over her mouth. "I have never found anyone so intriguing as you, Lauren Fulton."

"Nor I you, Flash," the older woman answered. Lauren took Alexa's right hand that was still lingering against her face and moved it to her left breast. Eyes met again, and she could see Alexa's dilate at the sensation she had just been presented as the heir's breath caught a little. Lauren knew by the look in Alexa's eyes that the younger woman was eager for more intimate touching just like she was, so she decided to take the lead between them. "Flash, if I asked you to do something for me, would you?" The princess nodded, not even able to form words at the moment in eagerness to see what would follow. There was a slight pause as Lauren took a deep breath to bolster her fortitude. Meeting dark eyes again, she murmured, "Will you help me with the zipper of this dress?"

Completely caught off guard by the request, Alexa questioned, "Now?"

Lauren nodded. "Right now, Flash. Unzip me."

Doing as she was asked, the princess slowly pulled down the zipper on the back of the redhead's dress. Then she watched in fascination as Lauren leisurely pulled the material off both her shoulders, allowing it to fall to her waist. Alexa felt her breath leave her at the sight. She was used to women presenting themselves to her in such a fashion, but it was the first time the vision of a woman overwhelmed her. She couldn't move, and she just sat there eyes glued to the half-bare body before her. Struggling to meet blue eyes, she murmured, "Lauren, you are stunningly beautiful."

The librarian giggled a little. "You make me feel more beautiful than I have ever felt in my life, Flash."

"May I touch you?"

"Not yet. There is still something yet to do," she answered quietly, reaching for Alexa's shirt. Methodically she worked open the buttons and pulled the material from the heir's pants.

Alexa had never had a woman undress her before, and the feeling of Lauren's hands made her tremble slightly. She had to take a deep breath to regain some of her control. "Now may I?"

Lauren didn't answer. Instead she leaned back to Alexa's lips and kissed her deeply. That was a clear sign to the princess, who quickly found herself touching Lauren in ways she had only fantasized about in their short relationship. Not only that Alexa felt a new sensation as hands began to grope her just as ardently. For several moments neither could break their contact with their lips, but Alexa had to taste more of the skin on display and pulled back enough to let her mouth wander. Lauren didn't protest; instead she clutched tightly to the dark head and allowed the princess to explore her body. Focusing solely on the feeling of the heir's mouth and hands, Lauren cried out softly. No one had ever touched her so reverently and yet so passionately. No other lover she had ever had compared to Alexa's instinctive touch. She could actually feel the emotions passing between them that extended beyond just the physical. Shuddering at the feeling of her breasts being exposed to the humid night air, Lauren groaned. "Lex," she called.

The use of her real name caught Alexa by surprise, because Lauren had never called her anything other than Flash. Looking into the librarian's eyes, she saw an emotion she had never seen on the face of any other woman. The woman in her arms clearly showed her hunger through her eyes, but there was something else, something even Alexa didn't quite comprehend. All she knew was that she loved the look she was being given and never wanted it to leave. Matching the hushed tone, the princess questioned, "What is it, darling?" There was so much Lauren wanted to say just then, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. She knew she was falling in love with the woman who held her, and yet that same woman was promised to someone else. The thought left her with a sinking feeling in her stomach, and it forced her to pull away enough to reclaim her sense of propriety. Seeing the emotions fade from fair eyes, Alexa asked, "What is it, Lauren?"

The redhead shook her head, declining to answer. "I am suddenly feeling a bit modest about being out here in the open," she lied.

"Oh, well, I am deeply sorry. I would never want you to be uncomfortable. Would you like to go inside?"

Slipping back into her dress, the librarian shook her head. "Could we just sit here?"

"Of course. Whatever you desire is yours," Alexa replied, disappointed in the sudden change in their activities but determined to give Lauren anything she wanted. A few minutes passed in silence. Trying to rid them of the serious mood that had seemed to overtake them, the princess inquired, "Are we still on with your party next Friday? The royal jet will be down that day to take you and your friends to Miami for your birthday. I hope you do not mind, but Princess Kelly decided to come down, so she will be joining George and me at the party."

"You are being too sweet to me, Flash. Of course I do not mind. You really did not need to go to such lengths."

"Nonsense. You only turn thirty once, and I wanted to do something special for you. After all, you are a special woman in my life, and if I can give you half the pleasure you have given me, I want to do so."

"Well, I still think you are being too extravagant."

Alexa shook her head. "I did not do much. I booked the restaurant and club you wanted, and I booked some hotel rooms for you and your friends. It was not that much."

"But you are footing the bill for all of us. That is a bit more than necessary."

"Money is no object, not when it comes to you, Lauren," she said with a smile.

"Well, I thank you in advance. I know this will be the best birthday I have ever had."

"I hope so. Thank you for allowing me to be a part of it."

The following Friday Lauren awoke up early to the sound of ringing her doorbell. She checked her clock and frowned when she saw it was showing 5:00AM. Wondering who in the world could be at her door at such an hour, she slipped on her robe and headed downstairs. Pulling the door open, she was about to lay into her visitor, but a huge arrangement of roses greeted her along with a smiling princess in her dress whites. "Good morning, Lauren. Happy birthday," she greeted cheerfully. "These are for you."

Forgetting her own ire for being awakened at an hour early for work, she smiled at Alexa. "Thank you. They are beautiful."

Gesturing into the house, the princess said, "Let us go in. I wanted to make you breakfast. You get dressed for work while I start."

"Flash, you do not have to do that."

"I know, but I want to. Please. Just let me do this for you."

Shrugging in answer, Lauren did as what was requested of her. She headed back upstairs and proceeded to dress for work. By the time she was finished, she could smell breakfast from downstairs. Going into her kitchen, she saw that the table had already been set and the princess was serving the plates. "This looks wonderful, Flash. Thank you."

"You are most welcome. I hope you enjoy it."

Both women sat down to their meal. "I am sorry I had to wake you so early, but I wanted a

chance to spend some time alone with you today. I know once we go to your party, you will be spending more time with your friends."

"You know I will spend just as much time with you. You are the host after all, and I owe this wonderful day to you."

"The day has just begun too," Alexa mentioned.

When the meal was done and the pilot had done the dishes, she looked at her watch. "I have to get back to the base. Would you mind giving me a ride?"

"Not at all. Just let me get my things. I will be right there," Lauren replied as they stood. Leaning to Alexa she kissed her gently on the mouth. "Thank you again for breakfast. I will never forget it."

"It was just breakfast."

Lauren nodded her head, but she knew she truly never would forget that the woman who was to be queen was so humble as to cook for her. It was something so simple but so full of emotion. "I will be right back."

"Okay. I will just wait out front for you."

Running up the stairs, the librarian gathered her things for work. Slinging her purse over her shoulder, she went to the front door. Locking it behind her, she went down the steep stairs to her driveway. However, as she reached the bottom stair, her eyes immediately were drawn to Alexa leaning against a Passat with a large red bow on the top of it. For a moment Lauren thought her eyes were deceiving her, but after a second when the mirage didn't disappear before her eyes, she realized the princess had gotten the new car she had always wanted. Slowly making her way over to where Alexa was standing, she asked, "What is this?"

"I do not know. It was sitting here when I arrived. I think there is a card for you under the windshield wiper," she mentioned with a grin.

Going to the card, Lauren opened it. Car keys slipped from the envelope as she removed the card. The front was a simple black and white photograph of a birthday cake, and the inside was blank except for some strong script. Lauren read it to herself. "My darling, Lauren, Happy thirtieth birthday. May all your wishes come true. Much love, Flash." Unable to form any sort of reply, she just looked at the princess in awe.

"If you would prefer a different color or model, or if this does not suit you for whatever reason, we can take it back and get you whatever you want, but this is what you said you wanted."

Moving to where Alexa was standing, Lauren took her by the hands. "Thank you so much. You are a wonderful person, Flash. This is the car I have always wanted, but I cannot accept this from you. It is too much."

"Why not? You were prepared to take it in a card game. Why can you not just accept this gift?"

"Because I was supposed to win it."

"You have won it, Lauren. I was going to lose the bet anyway."

"You do not know that. We have not even finished our game."

Ignoring the comment, Alexa wrapped her arms around Lauren's waist and said, "It would please me greatly if you were to accept this small token of my affection for you, Lauren. I want to give this to you. I will not take no from you, not about this."

Seeing that she could not be dissuaded, the redhead nodded her head. Bringing her arms around the aviator's neck, she leaned up and kissed her soundly. "Thank you for my present, Flash. You are too wonderful for words."

"Anything for you. I am just glad you like it. Come on now. I have to get to class."

That afternoon as soon as class was over for George and Alexa, they met up with Kelly before going to get Lauren and all her friends at the librarian's house. Upon their arrival, the redhead and ten of her closest female friends came out of the house. Alexa felt her heart speed up at the sight of Lauren in a pair of linen trousers and a cream-colored silk blouse. She was the picture of casual elegance.

"Looks like someone has a crush," Kelly said, breaking Alexa's thoughts as the women came up toward the car.

"I think it is a bit more serious than that," George commented, but his sister just frowned in his direction as the driver opened the back door.

As Lauren and her friends climbed into the limousine, they were shocked to see who had come to get them, save the birthday girl, who just grinned at Alexa. The heir smiled at her. "You look great, Lauren," she complimented.

"Thank you. You look nice too. I thought your dress uniform was my favorite outfit on you, but I may have changed my mind. You look terrific in this," she said, putting her hand on Alexa's knee to caress the charcoal gray slacks. Without thought the brunette slipped her hand over the one on her leg.

The quick ride back to the base was filled with excited chatter, but the heir simply sat in silence taking in the scene. Lauren seemed happy, which is what mattered most to her. Once on the plane, it was much of the same. However, Kelly got a chance to speak to her sister-in-law privately. Giving a supportive smile, she said, "So you have made a new friend, I see."

Alexa nodded. "Lauren is a great woman," Alexa replied.

"I do not doubt that, but that does not exactly explain your behavior toward her. I have never seen you like this with anyone, not even Meredith. Your eyes are a slave to her every move."

"I like her, Kelly. It is that simple."

"It is more than that, Lex. Truthfully now. Are you in love with this woman?"

Alexa looked at the object of discussion for a moment before answering. "She is magical, Kelly. Being with her is such a paradox. It is like time stands still whenever she is near and yet time also seems to pass much faster than it should. Every minute with her is like a lifetime of happiness."

Kelly smiled at her sister-in-law. "So you are in love then?"

Alexa shrugged, not wanting to admit it fully. "I enjoy her company tremendously."

The younger woman would not be dissuaded from getting a straight answer. "Well, if it means anything to you, she looks at you like she adores you, Lex. She is a woman in love. Tell me. Have you two consummated this relationship?"

Alexa glared at Kelly. "That is awfully personal, Kelly," she stated.

"That must mean no. You have never been shy about your adventures before this. When do you plan on making your move? Tonight? It would be a great chance to do so."

"I have no plans to do such a thing. Lauren is a lady, and I would never try to entice a lady when she is less than herself. Tonight Lauren will be thoroughly intoxicated, so I have no intention of trying to take advantage."

Kelly shook her head. "You really are in love then. Since when does a drunken rendezvous not appeal to you?"

"Since I met Lauren," she responded. "Now just leave it be. Do not try to put any ideas in her head."

"Do not worry, Lex. Whatever ideas she may have, which I can see that she does when she looks at you, she got them on her own. You may not wish to have sex with her tonight, but I bet she is looking to grace you with a little favor. Mark my words, and you would be a fool to pass that up with the way you feel. How many chances do you think this happens to people?"

"Kelly, I really do not wish to discuss this further. I just want to enjoy this evening with her."

Over dinner that night, the entire restaurant staff fawned over the royal family, and by the time they were ready to leave the paparazzi were posted outside waiting to get pictures of the three of them. Being used to the attention, they didn't think much of it. However, Lauren and her friends

were caught off guard by all the cameras and had problems getting through the growing crowd. In the limo though, they still didn't get any relief as the press followed them in a pack, getting as close to their car as they could and trying to snap photographs through the dark glass. The security at the club had to help keep the media away when they pulled up to the curb, but they all managed to get inside unscathed and were promptly escorted up to their private room that overlooked the dance floor.

Falling onto one of the sofas, Alexa pulled Lauren down next to her. "My apologies for the press. Ever since they got a picture of you a few weeks ago, it has been chaos. There is so much speculation about you and why you are in my company so much. Anything for a story," she said loudly over the music.

Lauren smiled. "It is fine. It is at times like this that I remember exactly with whom I am spending my time. It is so easy to forget when it is just the two of us."

"I know. I like that."

"So do I," she confessed. Looking over to where her friends were quickly getting absorbed into the atmosphere, talking with others and dancing, Lauren offered, "Do you want to dance?"

Alexa shook her head. "I am afraid that I am not very good at dancing if it is not formal. My whole life I had to take dance lessons, but this freestyle is just something I have not been able to do well. You go ahead with your friends. Watching you enjoy yourself is fun enough for me."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. This is your birthday, and you should enjoy it. Go on now. I will be right here."

With that the older woman left Alexa there and headed off to where her friends were. Alexa was quickly abandoned as her brother and sister-in-law started to dance with each other, but it gave the princess time alone to observe and enjoy Lauren unobstructed. As she watched the shorter woman with her friends, she found herself beginning to feel amorous. The redhead had a natural sensuality with the way she danced, making Alexa want her like never before. However, she knew to make such an overture might be misconstrued as wanting favor in return for her gift, which was not the case. She simply wanted to be able to touch Lauren, to feel her intimately, and to know what it was like to be with someone she truly cared about deeply. Nevertheless, she knew that was not going to be possible, at least that night, because the librarian was more focused on her friends and having fun.

As Lauren danced among her friends for the next hour, her eyes drifted to where Alexa sat once in awhile. Even though somewhere in her mind she knew the heir would be watching, she was still surprised each time she looked up and met dark eyes. Alexa's face was showing such strong emotions, and it was obvious to her that the Navy officer was feeling wanton with needs they had never truly discussed. The evident desire raging in brown eyes and her sinewy form made Lauren's own body respond. She found herself trying to move in a more alluring fashion for her audience, pleased when she got such a quick outwardly response from the princess. She could

see the brazen ogling get even more intense. Unable to stand it, she made her way over to the sofa and took a seat.

Alexa immediately turned toward her and propped an arm up along the back of the couch. "Having fun?" she questioned.

Lauren nodded. "I would be having even more fun if you danced with me, Flash."

"I told you that I am not very good at that. You are much better at it."

"I think you should let me judge for myself. It is my birthday after all. I should surely get what I want."

"Yes, you should. You deserve it."

"Well, then what I want is you out on the dance floor," she said leaning toward Alexa's ear. Pressing her lips to her ear so she could be understood clearly, she continued, "I want to feel your arms around me and your body grinding against me. I feel quite sure that would be agreeable to you as well."

The princess could only nod affirmatively. Knowing that it was a losing battle, she took hold of Lauren's hand and rose from the sofa. They went over to the spot where George and Kelly were dancing under close guard by security and joined them. Bringing her arms around the librarian, Alexa went with her feelings as they began to move against one another. Neither said anything, but words were unnecessary. They communicated clearly with their touches.

Lauren was completely lost in Alexa's arms. She felt so safe and loved by the woman who held her. Indulging in the feeling, she pressed herself closer. Immediately the princess took the cue and cuddled her even more intimately. This was as close to heaven as Alexa had ever felt. Her heart felt as if it might burst from the pleasure. Leaning down to the redhead's ear, the princess kissed it. "You look so beautiful right now, Lauren," she said.

The older woman nuzzled into Alexa's neck. "Flash, you are too sweet for words."

"Only when it comes to you. I would give you anything and everything you ever desired. All you have to do is name it, darling. I hope you know that."

"I do now," she replied. At that moment Lauren knew it was true. Right then there was something she wanted more than anything else in the world, so she decided that she had to take her chance to request her heart's greatest desire. "Lex," she said.

"Yes?" It was unusual that the librarian used her real name, so she knew it was serious.

"Could we leave early and go to the hotel?"

"Certainly but the club still has hours until close. If you really want to go though, I will round up

your friends, and we can go."

Shaking her head, Lauren smiled. "I did not mean leave with my friends. Let them stay here and have fun. I was thinking more along the lines of you and me leaving early. I would really like to be alone with you right now."

"All right. Let me just make a few arrangements here to take care of them, and then we can go. I will be right back."

Nodding in agreement, Lauren went over to where her friends were dancing and obviously trying to ignore the fact that their friend was keeping the company of the future queen. When she got to them, they were all eager to listen to what she had to say. "Listen, I want all of you to stay here and have fun, but I need to leave with Alexa right now."

Mary smirked. "Don't give us that. You need to leave, so you can get laid," she joked.

Waving her off, Lauren continued, "You all have hotel rooms ready for whenever you want to leave. Flash is making the arrangements to get you all back when you are ready."

"You go have fun with the princess, birthday girl, and when she's screwing you, don't forget that you're experiencing something most only fantasize about in their lives. Some women spend their entire lives dreaming about the bed you're about to be in, so enjoy it," Mary commented.

Before Lauren could offer any sort of retort, Alexa returned to her side. "All right. George and Kelly are staying for a while, and security will see to it that all of you, ladies, get to the hotel safely. They are ready to escort us to the car, Lauren, whenever you are ready."

Looping an arm through Alexa's, she said, "I am ready if you are."

"Very well. Let us go."

Heading outside together with security, the media went crazy as they snapped photographs of the two of them together. However, neither woman cared as they rushed into their limousine. As they sped off, the press followed them. "Does this ever stop?" Lauren inquired as their driver attempted to lose their following.

"No. Everywhere I go it is always the same. They want pictures of the person I am with regardless of who it is and me. You will be all over the paper tomorrow again. We really need to start being careful. I do not want them to know where you live."

By the time they arrived at the hotel, they seemed to have lost their entourage, so they discreetly were taken inside and up to the royal suite. Neither said anything on the elevator as security guided them to their suite and took post outside the door after politely bidding them good night.

It was quiet in the hotel room as Alexa checked the lock on the door, and Lauren took in their suite. Finally turning to her hostess, Lauren mentioned, "This is some room. I have never seen

anything like it."

"Well, it is all for you. George and Kelly will be joining us later, and if you do not mind, I will allow them to take the master bedroom. They have not seen each other in some time, and they need their privacy."

"That is fine. I would not expect anything else."

"There are four other bedrooms to choose from, though, so I want you to pick the one that pleases you the most."

"And where will you sleep, Flash?" she questioned, moving into Alexa's space.

The princess knew an invitation when she heard one, even when it was veiled in casual interest. Not knowing how to proceed yet, though, the pilot gave a safe answer. "That remains to be seen," she whispered, gently taking Lauren's hands in her own.

Blue eyes looked up at the princess as the librarian stepped closer, so their frames were pressed together lightly. "I have an idea. Maybe we should sleep in the same room."

"If that is what you wish, I will more than happy to accommodate your desires, darling. I promised you everything, and I meant it."

"Then let us go pick out a room."

Alexa's heart was pounding loudly in her ears as Lauren took her by the hand to investigate their choices. The redhead made a point to try the comfort of each bed by lying on it under Alexa's fervent eyes. The heir didn't know if her company was naive in her actions or if she was intentionally trying to provoke a response from her, but knowing how smart Lauren was, she figured on the latter. Deciding she should take matters into her own hands, Alexa finally spoke up after they had gone through every bedroom. Coming to the bedside where Lauren was comfortably resting on the king-sized bed, she took a seat and asked, "Well, after trying all the accommodations, have you made a decision?"

Silence greeted her question for a moment as they just looked at each other. Lauren knew this was the moment, right then, to make her move. Sitting up and scooting over to where Alexa was sitting, she embraced the princess around the shoulders. "This is perfect," she whispered, seeking out the aviator's mouth.

The princess immediately responded, bringing her arms around the smaller woman as she eagerly participated in their exchange. However after a moment, she retreated enough to meet blue eyes. "Lauren, I utterly adore you. I hope you know that." The older woman nodded absently before trying to kiss Alexa again, but she was held back as the princess continued. "I would be lying if I said I did not desire to know you more intimately. In fact, I must confess I think about it quite often."

"Me too, Flash," Lauren admitted.

"I just do not want to do anything you might regret later. You are a lovely, beautiful, charming woman, and nothing can change that in my eyes. I do not want you to feel some sort of obligation, because everything I do for you, I do out of the happiness I know it will bring you, not what it might bring me."

"I know, but this is what I want, Flash. This would be the best part of my birthday if you would grant me this desire."

"I would grant you anything, Lauren, but I must know that this is not born out of a misplaced need or inebriated state. I would hate to have that on my heart with the way I feel for you."

Blue eyes met brown ones for a long minute. Lauren just gazed into the eyes of the woman she loved as she thought of an appropriate response. Her hand went to the heir's face and cupped her cheek sweetly. "Alexa," she began using her soon-to-be lover's real name. "I assure you with all that I am that I have never been more sure of my desires for anyone as I am right now. It would be the fruition of my birthday wish if I knew most intimately what your hands felt like against my body. I need to feel you against me, inside of me, taking me to places I know only exist in your arms. I am asking you to make love to me."

Feeling her heart lift at the words she had just heard, the princess gave a small nod. "I am bound to cater to your every want, my darling Lauren," she replied in a whisper before leaning to kiss the librarian's lips once again.

The following morning Alexa awoke to find Lauren still blissfully asleep wrapped in her arms. Blue eyes were closed, and red hair was in disarray, but she still looked more beautiful than ever to the princess. Looking down on the woman in her arms, Alexa knew she was deeply in love. Furthermore, she couldn't wait to express it to the woman who had won her heart. Leaning over she lightly began to dust Lauren's face with kisses until sleepy eyes opened.

"Good morning, my darling. You look like an angel in this light," the heir whispered.

"I am looking at an angel," replied Lauren stretching her back a little, causing her bare form to brush against Alexa's. "You were so good to me last night," she giggled, nuzzling further into Alexa's shoulder.

Gathering her courage, the princess sweetly kissed the librarian's forehead and said, "I fully intend to be good to you for as long as I live. You are the most amazing woman I have ever known, Lauren, and I love you."

Lauren gasped a little when she heard the declaration. However, in looking into dark eyes, she could see the truth staring back at her. The heir to the throne truly did love her. "I love you too, Alexa," she confessed.

Alexa smiled as her heart swelled in happiness. She had never believed someone truly loved her

even though women had said it to her before until now. She knew it in her soul that Lauren did feel the same for her. Meeting the redhead's mouth with her own, the two of them quickly found themselves resuming their activities from the previous night.

Hours later they finally decided to get up and dress for the day. When they headed out into the living room area, they found George and Kelly reading the newspaper and enjoying breakfast, so they joined them. After greeting each other, both Alexa and Lauren started in on the food that was sitting there in content silence.

However, George picked up a newspaper and flung it in his sister's direction. "You have made the paper again, Lex, but this time the press seems to be on to you. Mother is not going to be pleased about this."

The princess looked down at the front section of the paper. There in bold letter across the top read the headline, "Love is in the Heir" with a secondary headline that stated, "The princess and mystery mistress canoodle in chic Miami nightclub." The pictures on display, although dark and grainy, were obviously of Alexa and Lauren, sharing intimate moments on the dance floor. Without even bothering to read the story, Alexa shoved the paper aside. "This is not good. Lauren's privacy was paramount to me, and now it has vanished. I should have been more careful," she griped.

Lauren pulled the paper over to herself and started reading. Outlined in great detail was their evening together as well as their quick departure to the hotel. Moreover, facts about the librarian's life were written in print for the whole world to read. It made her wonder where they had gotten their information. The story made her out to be a harlot who was trying to steal the heir away from the well-to-do Lady Adams. Feeling nauseated for the way she was portrayed, she pushed her food away and excused herself from the table.

When the three royals were alone, Alexa questioned, "Did she look upset to you?"

"Yes, of course. How could she not be after this article," Kelly answered. "They are scathing about her, Lex. They make her out to be some sort of home-wrecker, which we all know is not true."

"But it is just a newspaper. This is par for the course."

"Not for her. She has never experienced this in her life. We are used to it, but she is not. She probably has never even been in papers before you came along, and now people are writing horrific things about her."

Nodding her head, Alex realized her sister-in-law was correct. "If you will excuse me, it looks like I have something to do." Heading back toward the room where Lauren went, the princess found her standing at the window looking out over the city. She could hear muffled crying coming from the woman she loved. Moving to her, she wrapped her in her arms. "I am sorry seeing that upset you."

"It was completely unfair of them. How can they do that? How can they just print things they know nothing about as if they did? It is not right."

"No it is not, but they have a right to speak what they choose, and I cannot stop them."

"You know, whenever you and I are alone together, I always forget who you are. You are not the princess or the first in line for the throne. You are simply the woman I love."

"I know, and I love you for that. I forget who I am supposed to be with you and act like myself. It is a rare gift you have for making me feel at ease enough to be the real me. No one but George and Kelly know the real me."

"They said I was trying to steal you from Lady Adams," she muttered.

"Do not even speak her name. I want do not want you to ever think about that woman. Know what we have is real, Lauren. What we feel is real, and nothing can change that."

"But she is your girlfriend and I have caused you to go astray. I seduced you when I knew you were not mine to have. I never should have done such a thing."

"Lauren, my darling, I was falling quite well on my own without any of your assistance. I do not believe for a moment this was ever your intention, nor was it mine, but it has happened, and I feel happy, alive, and loved for the first time in my life. You bring me such joy, and nothing can ever change that."

Lauren turned in that arms that held her. "I love you, Flash. I really do, so it hurts to see that love discounted by people who do not even know us."

The brunette nodded her head as she kissed Lauren on top of her hair. "I know, dearest, but you simply have to believe what you know to be real. You have to believe in our love and not allow them to get to you. This will continue indefinitely now that you have been exposed. I will do my best to protect you, but you must come to accept this if you are ever to move beyond it."

"What people must think of me after reading such a thing. What if Lady Adams were to read that? What about the queen?"

"Both of them know most reports of my escapades are exaggerated. They will not even think twice before dismissing such an article."

"But this time it is true, Flash."

"They do not know that yet. Only I will be able to confirm the validity."

"Are you going to tell them the truth? Will they even ask?"

"They will not ask, but if they do, I will not deny you. I would never deny my love for you to my

mother."

"And to Lady Adams?"

"Meredith has no right to inquire about my business. She would never dare question me, and if she does, I will just have to remind her with whom she is dealing." The commanding tone her lover was using just then made Lauren pull away and stare contemplatively at her. Seeing the look, Alexa questioned, "What is the look for?"

"I have just never heard you sound that way. We are speaking of your girlfriend here."

"She is my official girlfriend according to the papers and my mother, but she is truly just a woman in zealous search of a ring and a crown. My heart never has and never will be moved by her the way it is with you, Lauren. That is all that matters to me."

Nodding in acceptance, the redhead decided not to think about the complications of their relationship just then and stepped into the loving arms of the pilot. She took a deep breath. "I love you, Flash."

"I love you too, darling."

Later that day they arrived back at Lauren's house. The two lovers quickly found themselves lost in each other for the rest of the weekend, making love at every available opportunity. However, as Monday came so did the responsibilities, and the two went their separate ways for their careers. Back on base Alexa called her secretary at the palace with whom she had not communicated in several days.

"Alexa, the queen is upset about this reported relationship with this woman Lauren," Matthew stated.

"I do not wish to discuss that yet. On the contrary, I need you to do something for me, Matthew. I need you to do a little job searching for me in that area. I want to find positions open at any of the libraries in the DC metropolitan area. I do not care if you have to impress upon one of them my interest in a position at their establishment."

"Very well, Alexa, but may I inquire as to this request? It is highly unusual."

"Lauren would like to move, and I want to see what the market is up there in her field of work. If there are any openings at all, I want to be informed immediately, because I would like to speak with the library about a possible position for her."

"Are you sure this is a good idea? Does she even know you are doing this?"

"No. I want it to remain secret. It stays between the two of us. Do you understand?"

"Yes, of course, your highness. I understand. Should I research accommodations for her as

well?"

"Not yet. Let us just job search at the moment. Please report any findings to me as soon as they are made."

"It will be done, Lex."

"Thank you. Now tell me how my mother is with this new development."

"She is not doing well. She has made it clear to me that she is upset with your behavior. She says that you are acting disgracefully for someone of the family, and you should not be mistreating Lady Adams, who has been loyal to you all this time. I believe she will want to have words with you upon your return."

Shaking her head to herself, Alexa muttered, "Typical."

"She is so upset over this that I believe she will not even bide her time until after your birthday party next month. She has requested your presence in her office upon your immediate return. Lex, I think you have overstepped your boundaries this time."

"I do not see how. I am not doing anything that I have not done in the past."

"But she had made it clear to me that I was to begin planning a wedding, your wedding to Lady Adams."

"What?" growled the princess in irritation. "I have not even proposed to Meredith nor has she accepted."

"Well, the queen has requested me to do so anyway. She gave me an engagement ring for safekeeping in your office safe."

The princess gave a disgruntled sigh. "Matthew, I cannot discuss this further without consulting my mother. I suppose you must carry on in her bidding, but you are bound to follow through on my request as well. Do you understand?"

"Yes, your highness. I understand perfectly. I will report any findings to you when I have them."

"Thank you, and do not inform the queen of my request."

"No, Lex. It stays between us."

"All right. I must go. I will be talking with you soon."

Chapter IV: Fates are Sealed

Over the course of the next several weeks Lauren and Alexa were inseparable. Every spare moment they had, they spent it together. Most of the time was spent exploring the new aspects of their relationship, but on many occasions they also discussed Lauren's future career plans. At the pilot's urging she had started searching for possible positions in the DC area, not knowing that the princess had already been doing research of her own on the topic.

A week before Alexa's birthday the two were having dinner at the librarian's house. "I really cannot believe I have had such good response to my resume," the redhead mentioned. "I thought for sure it was going to be more difficult than this to job hunt from so far away, but so far things are going well. I have several interviews lined up for while we are in DC next week."

"I am glad to hear that. I am so pleased you agreed to come to my birthday party as well. It would not be the same without you, darling."

"Well, I admit that I am still concerned about it. I mean after all, it will be mostly royals from all over the world."

"True but I have invited my entire flight school classmates, except for Hollywood that is, and all of them are coming. It would be boring without them and you. You will know enough people to have fun. I promise."

"I believe you. I still wish you had not bought me that dress, though, without consulting me first," she mentioned, wagging her finger at her lover.

"Why not? Do you not like it?"

"You know I love it. That is not the point."

"I know. I just did not want you to be able to use that as an excuse."

"Still I do not like other people making my decisions for me."

"I had to just this once. I could not make it through that evening without you."

"And what of your mother?"

"Do not think on her. You are a charming beautiful woman, and everyone will adore you as much as I do."

Lauren shook her head. "I highly doubt that with all the trash people write about me these days. Popular press believes I am pure evil."

"Well, I do not, and I believe my opinion is the only one that matters," Alexa stated. Reaching to her lover's hand, she caressed it gently. "I love you, Lauren, and that is all that should matter."

The older woman nodded her head, but in the back of her mind, she knew there was the

possibility of not being greeted warmly at the party. Even though she had grown accustomed to seeing her face in the papers whenever she was around the princess, it still hurt to see that the world thought negatively about her simply for following her heart. Furthermore, she knew she was the other woman in the heir's life. She couldn't bring herself to accept the fact that in public Alexa belonged to someone else, even though you would hardly know that by the aviator's lack of interest in her girlfriend Meredith.

Deciding to change the subject, Lauren asked, "Are we still leaving on Thursday?"

"Yes. You, George, and I are flying back on Thursday evening, and the others are joining us Friday. All of you are staying at the same hotel near the palace and are free to do whatever you choose for the evening. The party is on Saturday night, and then everyone flies back Sunday except the three of us who return to Florida Monday afternoon. That leaves you two whole days to interview. Do you think that is enough time?"

"If it is not, I can always fly back by myself later in the week. I really am hoping that one of these positions will work out, though. From the phone interviews I have had, they would be perfect."

"Well, I know any place would be lucky to have you. You would add something to any organization."

Smiling at the princess, Lauren replied, "Thanks. That means a lot coming from you."

The following Thursday the two royals and Lauren boarded the royal jet to head to DC. However, instead of returning to the palace like she was supposed to, Alexa decided to stay the night at the hotel with Lauren. She knew she was in for a fight with her mother as soon as she saw her and wanted to delay it in favor of intimate time with the woman she loved. As Friday morning dawned, though, and the librarian prepared for her interviews, Alexa knew the time was at hand. Standing at the door of the hotel, she looked down into blue eyes that she adored and sighed.

"You are going to be fabulous today. Just remember you have the skills and the experience. They would be lucky to have you. Do not accept anything less than of what you are worthy."

"I will remember. Thank you, Lex. Will I see you tonight?"

The princess nodded. "I could not stay away. I will call you this evening."

Heading home Alexa knew a fight awaited her, so she mentally tried to prepare herself for what might happen with her mother. As soon as she arrived, Matthew greeted her at the entrance and stated, "The queen has requested your presence immediately upon your arrival. I am to escort you to her office."

"No need. I know the way."

"I know that, your highness. She asked me to bring you, so you do not stray on your way there."

The princess sighed but walked with her secretary to her mother's office. She knocked and then opened the door at her mother's request. Entering the room, she closed the door and then stood at attention in front of the queen.

"Well, you finally decided to show your face at home," she grumbled. "I expected you last night."

"I had business to attend, Mother. It could not be avoided."

Queen Faith threw the first section of the newspaper at her, and it landed at her feet. "I can see that for myself! Yet again you find yourself in the company of this woman, Lauren Fulton! She is here? She has traveled with you on the royal jet to DC?"

"Yes. She will be attending my birthday party tomorrow evening with the rest of my friends from the base."

"And just how do you intend to explain that to Meredith? How will you explain that to the press?"

"Lauren is my friend. Is it so wrong to have friends, Mother?"

"She is no friend! Do not think me naive, Alexa! According to the papers, you spend every available moment of your leave with this woman! On more than one occasion, you have been seen kissing this woman intimately! Do not deny your behavior to your own mother! I know you better than the media even does! I strongly advise you to rethink your actions of inviting her to the palace!"

"Mother, I cannot retract my invitation. That would be rude and inappropriate behavior for a person of my status."

"I would think you of all people would want to spare your friend any pain that might be associated with such an evening!"

"Why? It is just a birthday party."

The queen shook her head as she stood from the chair behind her desk. She moved to her daughter and paused a few feet from her. She gave Alexa a serious gaze. "It is no longer just a birthday party, Alexa. It is now an engagement party. I have planned it myself. I will be announcing your engagement to Lady Adams tomorrow night at the ball."

"You will not!" the princess yelled. "You promised me I would have the rest of the summer!"

"Yes but that was before you decided to pursue this other woman! This will put an end to the rumors for good! I will salvage what is left of our family name before you run us into the ground

with your debauchery! Now there is a ring in your safe! You will take it to Meredith and propose to her before tomorrow evening, or I will do it for you in front of the whole world tomorrow night! Are we clear on that, Alexa?"

"Mother, I do not wish to do such a thing!"

"I do not care what you wish! You have no say any longer because of your actions these last several weeks! As your queen I demand your conformance since I cannot get it from you as your mother!"

There was a pause as the princess contemplated her options. Knowing there were none, she nodded in concession of her defeat. "Very well, your majesty. It shall be done."

"Good. I promise you, Alexa, once you are married, you will be glad I made you do this. This is the right thing. You will come to see that in time."

Alexa didn't comment on the statement. She simply nodded her head and mumbled, "Good day, Mother." Going to her own office, she found Matthew sitting there waiting for her. She ignored him for the moment, though and went to her safe to pull out the ring. She sat at her desk and regarded it for long minutes, imagining for just a moment that the ring in her hand found its way onto the finger of another woman instead of the one for which it was intended. The thought gave Alexa great happiness, but she knew it was not to be and frowned.

Turning to her secretary, who was obviously waiting for instructions from her, she said, "Matthew, I need you to do something for me. I want you to find me a set of diamond earrings and necklace. I want something classic and glamorous, and I need it here by tomorrow night."

"Certainly, Lex. I will get right on that."

"Also, I need to meet with Lady Adams. Set up a time for us to meet at her apartment this morning or early afternoon. Impress upon her the importance of an immediate meeting if you must."

"It will be done."

"Thank you. I will be in my quarters if you need me."

Once in her room, Alexa picked up the phone and called the hotel where Lauren was staying. She knew she was not in, which made it a bit easier for her to leave the message that she would be unavailable to see her that evening but would stop by in the morning. Then she waited for her fate to unfold.

Afternoon found her at Meredith's apartment. The butler had let her in even though the brunette had not arrived yet. It gave Alexa a moment to try to figure out what she was to say to the woman she was about to ask for her hand. However, nothing came to mind as she paced the study. Figuring it would come to her when she saw Lady Adams, she simply decided to wing it.

A few minutes later the door opened and in floated the younger woman. During her absence, Alexa had forgotten how enchanting Meredith could be, and that attractive smile and adoring eyes brought her back to the Kentucky Derby for a moment when they were standing alone in the grove of trees. Her thoughts were interrupted as arms came around her neck.

"It is so good to see you, Lex," she greeted, pulling Alexa's head down for a scorching kiss. "I have missed you so much."

"And I have missed you," the princess replied.

Once their initial greeting was over, they both sat on the sofa. Meredith cuddled into her girlfriend's frame as she mentioned, "Matthew said you wanted to see me. May I inquire why?"

Alexa gave a tentative smile as she extracted herself. Meeting eyes with her girlfriend, she answered, "Certainly. This is why I asked to see you." She pulled the ring box from her pant's pocket. Unceremoniously she pulled the ring from its resting place and looked into her girlfriend's dark eyes. "As you know, Mere, tomorrow the country celebrates my twenty-sixth birthday. Tomorrow night there will be a ball at the palace, and at that time an announcement will be made that I have chosen a bride as a way to honor the country that has given me so much. You know as well as I do there could only be one choice for such a lady. So today I come before you to ask for your hand. Please honor the country and me by saying yes. Lady Meredith Adams, will you marry me?" she slowly inquired. She saw her answer in dark eyes before Meredith said anything. Tears streamed down the teenager's face as she pulled Alexa into a tight hug.

"Oh, yes, I will marry you, Lex. I thought this moment might never come. It has been my greatest desire to be your wife."

"Then let us make it official," the princess said, slipping the ring onto Meredith's left hand. She then kissed it as she said, "To our happiness, my future princess."

That evening when Lauren arrived back at the hotel after a long day of interviews, she was surprised and disappointed to receive Alexa's message. Furthermore, she could tell just by her lover's voice that something was the matter. Knowing she would not be able to find out what until the next day, though, she decided to treat herself to a lavish dinner and a soak in her hot tub as she thought over all her meetings that day.

Her interviews had gone better than expected, and she felt sure she would get an offer from at least one library. She contemplated what that might mean for her. Her dream of leaving her childhood behind was closer to coming to fruition, and she was happy for the first time in her life that she could remember. She knew a large part of it was because of the woman with whom she had fallen in love. The love she felt from Alexa was by far the best thing that had ever happened to her. However, it was at a moment like this, sitting in a hotel otherwise out of reach to anyone other than the wealthiest in the country, that Lauren realized with whom she was dealing. The woman who had her heart was the hope of the nation. She was the future queen, and being that was her position in life, she had responsibilities that might one day conflict with their blossoming love. In fact, even though she would never dare admit it to anyone, she knew there would be a

time not in the distance future when the love of her life would be taken from her by duty. Lauren desperately tried not to dwell on such thoughts, but she knew they were always there lurking in the back of her mind. For the moment, though, she tried to keep the pain at bay by focusing on the love she knew existed between them.

On Saturday morning Alexa arrived at the hotel early. She had hardly slept the night before with what was weighing on her mind. She knew what she had to tell her lover was going to hurt her, and it pained her to know she had to inflict such torment on the one she loved so much. Nevertheless, it was her responsibility to her country to sacrifice herself, much in the same manner her grandmother had sacrificed. Except instead of dying a physical death for her love, Alexa only had to suffer the infliction of pain on herself and her beloved Lauren.

Entering the suite with her key, she noted that the redhead was not yet awake. She went to the bedroom to find her beautiful blue eyes still closed and the rhythm of her slumber peaceful. Alexa gently lay down next to her lover on the bed and placed an arm around her waist. Her name fell from Lauren's lips in her sleep as the librarian turned toward the source of heat next to her. Several minutes passed before blue eyes sleepily opened, and Alexa received a pretty smile.

"You are back. I missed you."

"I missed you too, Lauren. I am sorry I could not come sooner."

"Happy birthday, Lex."

"Thank you," she whispered, stroking red hair gently. She kissed Lauren's forehead sweetly.

Sensing something was still amiss, Lauren inquired, "What seems to be troubling you?"

"I need to talk to you about something serious, and I am not sure how."

"Just tell me. That is the best way."

"I will, but I think we should have breakfast first. Allow me to order us something. You freshen up and meet me in the dining room."

Lauren did as requested. She could tell whatever it was truly was weighing heavily on her lover, though. By the time she came into the dining room from taking a quick shower, breakfast was already there. The two women sat quietly eating, but both of them really just pushed the food around their plates instead of consuming it.

Finally when she could take no more, the librarian asked, "Will you please just tell me what is wrong? It will make you feel better."

The princess nodded her head as she put down her fork. "The queen asked me yesterday if you would be attending the ball this evening. I told her you were. She asked me to get you to reconsider."

"You mean she does not wish me to come?"

"She is indifferent to your attendance, Lauren. However, something is going to happen tonight, something I have dreaded for months. It will be difficult for me, and I fear it will be worse for you, and I do not wish to ever cause you pain."

"What is supposed to happen tonight?"

Alexa paused and took a deep breath. She did not want to do this, but she knew she had no choice. "My mother is supposed to announce my engagement... to Lady Meredith Adams."

In that moment Lauren felt her heart shatter. She never knew such pain existed or that it could be delivered in such a decisive manner. She sat there for several moments saying nothing. Just then she had no words. Finally she whispered, "I do not know how to respond."

"I am not sure what protocol would demand either. Lauren, I want you to know that this in no way reflects what I feel for you. You own my heart. I love you more than I have ever loved anyone else in this entire world. If I could marry you, I would, but the queen would not allow it. It does not change the way I feel, though. I must marry Meredith for the sake of my country, not my happiness. I am a servant of the people, and I must serve the people's best interest. This is how my queen has asked me to serve."

The librarian nodded her head. It made perfect sense in her mind, even though her heart ached. Quietly she said, "I understand what you must do, your highness. The dreams of a common woman must not stand in the way of your destiny."

A few minutes passed before Alexa said, "If you do not wish to come this evening, I will understand. Although I would love to have you there."

"I do not know if I will attend or not. I have to think about it."

"I understand. You will still have a driver at your disposal should you choose to attend. I must take leave of you now. I am needed back at the palace. If I do not see you this evening, I would like to see you tomorrow morning. Please remember, Lauren, that I love you. Nothing can change that."

Lauren nodded her head but didn't respond further. Once the princess was gone, tears began to fall like a waterfall down her face. She didn't even know how she could cry so much over someone she had only for a few weeks, but then again she had never given her heart to anyone before, and the pain of love was greater than she ever had imagined.

When the evening hour of the ball arrived, Alexa was standing in her bedroom looking at herself in the mirror. The day had been the second most miserable of her life just behind the day her beloved grandmother had passed away. She always thought birthdays were meant for happiness, but this day found her painfully sorrowful. She had hurt the woman she loved more deeply than

she could have imagined, and she was being forced to marry someone who could never own her heart. A knock on the door broke her from the mirror where she was regarding her outfit. Answering it she found Meredith standing there in an elegant evening gown.

"You look lovely this evening, Mere," she complimented.

"And you, my sexy princess, look simply ravishing," she commented. "I so love suits on you, but this tuxedo might be my new favorite. You look so charming." Leaning up to her fiancée's lips, she gave her a peck on the mouth.

"Shall we go?" Alexa asked, extending her arm to her lady.

All the guests had already arrived for the evening when the royal family was set to process into the ballroom. As was custom, the guests lined up on either side of the doorway to pay their respects to the family as they came in. Alexa usually processed alone, but that night found her bride-to-be on her arm as she waited for her turn.

Matthew opened the doors for the family and began his duty of calling out their names. The long lists of aunts, uncles, and cousins came first, followed by her brother. "His Royal Highness Prince George and Her Royal Highness Princess Kelly." Alexa watched as her brother and his wife took the slow entrance walk down to the head table. Taking a deep breath, she cast a look at Meredith, who looked more excited than nervous at her first formal event as a family member. "Her Royal Highness Princess Alexa and Lady Meredith Adams," Matthew called, signaling their turn. Alexa put on the smile she knew was mandatory and began their walk. She took little note of the heads as they bowed to her until she noticed the top of a familiar red head. For a moment her heart stopped, for she couldn't believe it to be true. Nonetheless, as soon as the woman raised her head, blue eyes met brown ones, and Alexa felt as if she might faint. There was Lauren looking more beautiful than the princess had ever seen her. For a brief moment the air around them seemed nonexistent, and Alexa found it difficult to breathe. Knowing what she was supposed to do, the princess forced herself to look forward once again in an effort not to let on who Lauren was in the crowd. She knew she had not been successful, though, when she felt a glare come from Meredith once they were at the table. Neither had time to discuss it, though, as Matthew announced, "Her Majesty Queen Faith and His Royal Highness Prince Thomas." Watching her mother process, Alexa hoped she would not see Lauren amongst the crowd, but she knew the redhead had been spotted with a barely discernable flutter of her mother's eyes in Lauren's direction.

Throughout the meal Alexa could hardly concentrate on the royal families from other countries. Her mind and gaze continually sought Lauren out in the crowd. She was at a table with the other pilots from the Top Gun competition, seeming to enjoy herself. Once dinner was finished, the dance floor opened with her parents taking the first spin around the floor. Knowing her duty, she took Meredith to the floor for several songs as well until the gathering was all dancing. After filling that obligation, she made her rounds to socialize, leaving Meredith to do the same. Finally reaching the table where Lauren was supposed to be, she was disappointed when one of her friends informed her she was off dancing. Looking to the floor, it took her by surprise to find the redhead in the arms of her brother, the prince.

"So, Lauren, I must say, I am surprised at your presence this evening," George commented.

"That makes two of us. I was not sure I was going to come after what has happened."

"Lex told you what our mother had made her do."

"She told me."

"I would hope you know that it does not mean she loves you any less. She loves you like I have never seen her love anyone. You make her happy, Lauren. She just is obligated to live her life for her country."

"I know all that. I do not doubt her love for me, but that does not make it any less painful."

He nodded. "I am sure you are correct. I would never wish to be in your place." Pausing for a moment, he continued, "I know I cannot tell you what to do in regards to this situation, but I do hope that you will continue your relationship with my sister. She needs you, Lauren. You make her happy. I know you two may never have a conventional love affair, but she deserves happiness, and you provide her that."

"And I should just forfeit my own dreams of marriage and children, George? I do not believe I have it in me to sacrifice my life, my dreams, my world just to be the mistress of the most powerful princess in the world. I am not sure I could live with that."

"I do suppose that is a bit much to ask. However, you could still have your dreams and Lex. It is possible."

"Maybe in the world in which you live, George. I just am not sure I can have that in mine. Only time will tell I suppose."

"I guess that is the best response one could hope for at this point. May I request you give consideration to Lex during this time? She has a difficult task ahead of her, one she would rather not undertake. I implore you to remain her friend and comfort her during her time of need. Please?"

Lauren nodded her head. "I could never abandon a friend in their time of need," she conceded.

Just then there was a tap on George's shoulder. Alexa gave them both a smile. "Pardon me, George. May I cut in? I cannot have you monopolizing the most beautiful woman at the ball."

George looked at Lauren who gave a nod of her acceptance, so he relinquished her into his sister's arms. As the two women began to dance, silence ensued for a few awkward moments. To break it, though, Alexa complimented, "You look beautiful, Lauren, more so than I have ever seen you."

"Thank you."

Another pause before the princess said, "I am glad you are here. This night is more bearable with you in it. I know this must be difficult for you. It is for me, Lauren. When I saw you standing there as I walked in, I wanted to throw myself at your feet and beg you for forgiveness for the pain I may have caused you. It was never my intention."

"I know, Lex. I know in my heart that you have never wanted to hurt me. But the fact remains that I am hurt."

"Yes," the princess sighed. "For that I am and always will be sorry." Before the conversation could go any further, the music gently faded into nothing, signaling a shift in the evening. Looking toward the head table, Alexa saw her mother stand up with a glass of champagne in her hand. Knowing where she had to be just then, she whispered, "Excuse me."

"If you would all take your seats, dessert will be served. At this time, I have something to say to my daughter on this special occasion, so, Alexa, please come stand next to me," the queen requested. Alexa did as she was told, recognizing this was the moment she had feared for the last two days. "Alexa, being that today is your twenty-sixth birthday, I want to take a moment to tell you how proud I am of you as your mother and your queen. You have shown all of us here in one form or another why it is you will be the next great leader of this country, and I just want to formally announce to all of our family and friends the illustrious decision you just recently made." She paused for a moment, shifting her gaze from her daughter to her audience. "I would like to take the opportunity to announce to you all that the princess is engaged to be married. She has chosen a wonderful woman who is a distinguished complement to her. This is a special night as we welcome a new member into our family. Please join me in embracing Lady Meredith Adams. It is these two women who hold the future of our great country in their hands."

A roar of clapping commenced as Alexa and Meredith accepted their standing ovation. Even though no one considered the announcement a surprise, the amount of support through the noise assured Alexa that her people approved of the choice that had been made for her by the queen. She did her best to smile for the crowd and appear happy as her eyes scanned the onlookers. However, she noticed the woman she loved in the crowd trying to make her way through the sea of people to the exit. Alexa knew there was nothing she could do at that moment to retrieve her, but she cast a look at her brother who nodded in her direction. She took that as a sign that he saw it as well. She watched him move slowly over to where Matthew was standing off to the side and whisper something to him. Immediately her secretary exited the side door.

Lauren wasn't sure where she was going, only that she needed to get as far away as she could from the commotion in the ballroom. Even though she knew what was to happen, to see it for herself was harder than she ever thought possible. The tears seemed impossible to stop as she scurried down a long hallway away from the noise. When she had turned the corner out of sight, she leaned against a wall and tried to compose herself. However, she jumped when she heard a deep clearing of a voice next to her.

"Forgive me, Ms. Fulton. I did not mean to frighten you. My name is Matthew Franks. I am

Princess Alexa's Secretary of Affairs. I was wondering if I might be of assistance to you."

"I was just looking for a place to myself for a moment. There was too much going on, and I needed some air."

"Of course. I understand. Perhaps I may escort you to the library. There is a veranda there if you would like some fresh air. It is just this way," he said pointing down the corridor.

"Thank you, Mr. Franks."

"Matthew," he corrected with a smile. Walking her to the room, he opened the door for her and turned on the lights. "Take all the time you need, Ms. Fulton. When you are ready to return to the party, I will be right here to escort you back."

"Thank you but that is not necessary."

"I insist," he said, closing the door behind her.

Lauren tried to calm herself but the tears still came. Although they began to slow as her eyes surveyed the room. The library in which she stood was filled with books floor to ceiling. Her eyes roamed the expanse, and she found herself naturally intrigued as she began to study the shelves. Coming to the first shelf, she picked up an old unlabeled book and opened it to the first page. The name Lara Washington was on the inside cover written in legible script. Curious the librarian flipped through the first few pages. It took Lauren a moment to realize she was holding not a book from the recently deceased queen mother but her private diary. For a moment she contemplated whether or not it was appropriate to read such personal thoughts of the queen mother, but she figured if it was not meant to be read, it would not have been on the shelf. Beginning with the first page, she immediately found herself immersed in the writing. The first page was of her wedding day to who was then Princess Alexa, soon to become the country's first queen. Lauren was so lost in the pages that she didn't know how much time had passed or hear the library door open, but she jumped at the sound of her name.

Looking up she saw her lover, the grandchild of the woman about whom she had been reading standing there with concern clearly written on her face. Quickly shutting the book, the librarian tried not to act guilty at what she had just been reading a surprising and deeply unsettling account of Queen Alexa on their honeymoon.

Intrigued by the look on Lauren's face, Alexa forgot the reason she had come to her at first and asked, "What are you reading?"

"I am terribly sorry, Lex. Matthew allowed me to come in here, and this was just sitting on the shelf."

The princess took it from the redhead's hands. "My grandmother's diary. I had wondered where these had gone. I knew she wrote in her diary everyday. I never thought to look for them here. Although it does make sense that they be amongst her favorite books. This was her personal

library. She was a teacher before she married my grandmother, and she never lost her love for books. She read all the time." Putting the diary back on the shelf, Alexa put her arms around Lauren. "I just wanted to check on you. I know that was hard."

At the thought of what had transpired, the redhead felt her eyes start tearing once again, but this time she wept in the arms of her beloved. Alexa could feel her lover's pain so acutely, and it tore at her soul, causing her tears as well. Together they clung to each other shedding their tears over the event that shook both their lives. It was only when there was a knock on the open door that either broke from the embrace.

"Father," Alexa greeted in surprise, wiping at her face.

"Alexa, your absence is being noticed. I advise you to return to the ballroom or suffer your mother's disapproval in the morning."

"Yes, sir." The princess gave the woman she loved one last gaze before withdrawing from her arms and leaving the room.

The prince stood there for another moment. "I do not think we have been properly introduced. I am Thomas Jefferson."

"Lauren Fulton, your highness," she said with a small bow.

Thomas nodded his head in her direction before saying to Matthew, who was still keeping watch at the door, "Matthew, please close the door, so I may speak to Ms. Fulton in private."

"Certainly, your highness."

Lauren looked nervously at the prince when they were alone. She had no idea what he wanted to say to her. "Please have a seat if you would like." He gestured to the sofa as he took a seat in a leather chair. Tentatively the librarian took the offered seat and just waited. After a moment he began. "Ms. Fulton, I find myself in a bit of a quandary. You see, my wife, my queen has demanded that our daughter Alexa marry Meredith Adams. At first I was for this idea, thinking that it would bring maturity and discipline to my daughter's life, which she was sorely lacking. However, I have come to realize that my only daughter is actually in love with someone else. I am as surprised by this observation as in awe of it. My Alexa in love. I thought it would never be so, but I look at you, and not only do I know it to be so, I know her love is returned. The quandary is that this love is forbidden to be more than an affair of the heart. I can assume that you are a sensible woman. Alexa would not care for you otherwise. Tell me, Ms. Fulton, what is a father to do in this situation?"

She shook her head. "There is nothing to do, your highness. The course has been set and cannot be altered."

He nodded. "You are as judicious as I suspected. Please understand me, Ms. Fulton. I do not wish you misery nor do I wish my daughter unhappiness. It is just that the queen has had this

course set for years, and I must request you not interfere. I ask for your word."

Lauren paused for a moment as she contemplated what the prince was saying. She knew she had no choice in the matter, so she replied, "You have my word, your highness. I will not interfere."

"Thank you for that." He regarded her for a moment before continuing, "I must tell you, Ms. Fulton, that I have never seen my daughter display such emotion as she does in your presence. I saw you dancing with each other tonight. I know she was trying her best not to show how she felt about you, but fathers know these things. My daughter is in love with you. I have no objections to this love. In fact, I would like to encourage it to grow. Alexa needs someone to love, and if that person is you, it would be wonderful. I know my daughter's heart. She will provide for you in ways no one else in the world could. She will love you with her entire heart if you let her. I know this must be an arduous situation in which you find yourself, and I cannot tell you what to do. However, I would like to ask that you consider allowing this relationship to continue. This marriage is a political move, nothing more. You have her heart, and in the end that is all that should truly matter." Not knowing what else to say, the librarian simply nodded her head. "May I escort you back to the ball now?"

"No thank you. I think I should retire for the evening. This party only serves as a reminder to my heart the difficulty in which I find myself."

"I understand. I will escort you to your car then." Getting up from his chair, he went to the door. "Matthew, please have Ms. Fulton's car pulled around front. She is retiring for the evening."

"Yes, your highness."

Turning to the redhead, he extended his arm. "Allow me?"

Taking the prince's arm, Lauren allowed herself to be taken to the front of the palace where a car was waiting on her. "Thank you for walking me."

"It was my pleasure. Please consider what I have said."

"I will, your highness."

"Good. Have a pleasant evening, Ms. Fulton."

"You too, your highness. Thank you again."

The next day Alexa headed to breakfast not knowing what to expect from her mother. She had done as she was told, but she sensed some displeasure at her behavior at the ball. Going into the dining room, she found the queen was the only person present. She looked up when the princess entered.

"Well, Alexa, you are up early today."

"Yes, I had an early appointment."

"To see that lovely fiancée of yours I hope."

"No, Mother. I was not planning on seeing Meredith this morning."

"Then I can only assume it is to see your mistress. You would not rise so early on your own accord." Alexa said nothing. "I saw her at the ball last night, Alexa. I saw you dancing with her at one point."

"Yes, Lauren and I were dancing. There is nothing prohibiting me from dancing with my friends."

"Except I know better than to believe your relationship is platonic."

The princess shook her head. "I will not deny it, Mother. My feelings for Lauren run deeply. In fact, this may surprise you, but I am in love with her. Seeing as you have engaged me to another woman, friendship is the only appropriate course with my beloved at this point. It pains me to think of the anguish I have inflicted on such a caring woman, but as a servant to my sovereign I was left with no choice other than to heed your direction. However, I will never forget this has happened. I will never forget that my own mother denied me my happiness."

The queen sighed. "You are young, Alexa, and you know not of what you speak. You are not in love, merely blinded by sexual interest. Time will prove that she means nothing to you. I know once you and Meredith are wed, you will have all you need in your life. You will have the perfect wife who is amiable to catering to your desires. You will be happy with Meredith, and Lauren Fulton will just be a faint memory of the wild royal oats you once had sown. Now I wish to bring closure to this subject. We shall talk of something else. Tell me. How is flight school?"

Enduring her breakfast, the princess made her escape as soon as she was able to go to the hotel where Lauren was staying. Once again she let herself into the room, but that morning found the redhead already awake and partaking in her own breakfast. "Alexa, I did not expect to see you," she mentioned quietly.

"I had to come. I could not stay away."

"Why are you in a tuxedo?" the redhead questioned as she gestured to a chair next to her at the table.

"Because I want to relive last night, except instead of it turning out so poorly I wanted to give you the night you deserved, even if it is early in the morning. Please oblige me in my pursuit. Will you do me the honor and put on your ball gown from last night?"

Lauren shook her head tiredly. "I really do not feel like it, Lex."

"Please. There was something I wanted to give you, but the gift only makes sense with the

dress."

She sighed. "Oh very well. I will return shortly."

While her lover was gone, Alexa moved into the living room area and turned on the stereo. She found the station she was looking for and then waited, standing by the window with her hands in her pants pockets. Her heart was already fluttering at the thought of seeing Lauren in that beautiful dress once again. Minutes later she got her wish. The librarian came from the bedroom wearing her dress sans shoes. Her red hair had been freshly brushed and hung loose around her shoulders. The princess crossed the room to her, her eyes never leaving the blue ones.

"You are too beautiful for words, darling. My heart feels as if it will pound out of my chest at the sight of you. You are the most incredible thing I have ever seen."

Even though Lauren's mind knew she shouldn't respond to the comment, her heart refused not to. She could clearly see it in Alexa's eyes the truth of the words. The princess belonged to her through her emotions. The prince's words ran through her head. She had Alexa's heart, and that was all that should matter. With a blush at the compliment, she replied, "Thank you. You look so alluring dressed this way. You are the sexiest woman I have ever had the pleasure of loving," she confessed.

"That is a great honor. You have my heart, Lauren. Nothing will ever change that. Now let me bestow you on what I desperately wished to last night. Close your eyes and hold up your hair." Lauren did as requested even though she was curious. She could hear a click like something was being opened, and then she felt a mouth against her left ear. "This is because you are the most stunning woman in the world," the princess whispered. She could feel an earring being slipped into her ear. The heir's lips moved to the right ear and kissed it. "This is because you have been so generous with granting me the favor of your time." Another earring was eased into her other ear. Lauren was immensely curious but continued to stay in the position Alexa had requested. Her exhaled unevenly and gave a tiny whimper when she felt hot breath along her neck followed by an open mouth sucking her pulse and hands trailing up her clothed breasts. As soon as they touched her bare collarbones, she realized they were holding something as it ran across her skin. "And this, my darling, is because I love you, and I want to spend the rest of my life loving you," Alexa avowed in a hush. Lauren felt hands go around her neck and clasp something.

Unable to resist the mouth so close to her own, the redhead dropped her hair and embraced the princess around the neck. With eyes still tightly shut, she found the mouth she craved and ravenously partook in the sweet lips. "Alexa, take me to bed," she solicited.

"Do you not wish to see your gifts first?"

Blue eyes opening and meeting brown ones, the librarian answered, "You are truly the only gift I need."

"Then I would be honored to please you, my lady, in whatever way you desired."

Hours later the couple remained in bed. Clothes were in a pile on the floor, but the jewelry remained on Lauren. The two women cuddled together, allowing skin to meet skin as they simply rested. Nuzzling red hair and kissing the woman she loved on top of the head, Alexa mentioned, "With all that has happened, I forgot to ask how your interviews went. Did you think any libraries were worthy of your abilities?"

"They all had potential. I am going back on Monday with all of them for another round of interviews."

"I am certainly glad to hear that. It means your dreams are that much closer to being a reality. Of course I am also pleased this means you and I will be living in the same city once my tour at the base is complete. I was not sure how I was going to survive without seeing you, but now it seems as if I will not have to suffer that way. I do hope you will take one of these positions."

"I most likely will. My dreams of the future include you now, so I want to be close to you."

"I am glad to know we feel the same way. I was not sure you would ever want to see me again."

Lauren nodded her head as she sighed. "Honestly, Lex, I was not sure I ever did want to see you again after last night, but your father said something to me that made me think otherwise."

"What did he say?"

"He said I had your heart and that was all that should matter. Your brother told me the same thing. I do not know what our future may hold, Lex, but I trust my heart will know what to do when the time comes. Right now my heart wants to be with you no matter what. I cannot have it any other way."

"Neither can I. Thank you for giving me your love, Lauren. It is the greatest gift I have ever received, and I cherish it. I know rough times lie ahead for us, but I just want you to know that my love for you will never fade. My heart is yours now and always."

The librarian leaned up and kissed her beloved's mouth sweetly before asking, "What are you doing the rest of the weekend?"

"Hopefully I will be spending as much of it as possible right here with you. I know I have some obligations at the palace that I must tend to over the weekend, but they will not take up all my time. I cannot go out in public with you after last night's announcement. If you'd like to see the city, I am sure I can get a driver to take you, but the press would surely speculate if we were seen in each other's company right now."

"I understand. I think I would like to see some of the city in which I am contemplating living. However, it is not necessary for me to have an escort. After all, I am just a common woman who nobody knows. No one will even notice me. I will do that while you tend to your duties. What do you have on your agenda today?"

"A press conference this afternoon and interviews. It should take up all afternoon and into the evening. I will be able to come back tonight, though. Tomorrow I must attend church and have a luncheon but then am free after that."

"Well, I will be happy to send any time you can afford me then." Looking at the clock next to the bed, she said, "It is almost 11:00. When is your conference?"

"At 1:00. I should probably be getting back to the palace," she mentioned, tossing back the covers. However, she didn't move further as her eyes roamed over the woman she had in her arms. The nakedness of her lover mesmerized her. Lauren's fair skin and the delicate contours of her body were inviting to the touch. Alexa sighed as her hand trailed lightly over Lauren's hip. "You are such a beautiful temptress, darling. There is nowhere else I would rather be than right here. I cannot wait to return to your arms."

"Neither can I. For now you must go. The world awaits your greatness."

Chapter V: Destiny Challenged

Over the course of the next few months Alexa and Lauren carried on as if nothing had changed between them. Not once did they discuss the heir's upcoming wedding to Lady Adams, instead preferring to live in the fantasy they had created with each other. However, once Alexa had finished flight school and helped Lauren settle into her new job and new home, it became more real that the princess would have to inevitably marry. Even though the lovers still didn't speak on it, their relationship began to have a strain that had not previously been there.

One night Alexa had come to Lauren's house for dinner and time alone together, but when the redhead answered the door, the princess knew she had been crying. "Darling, what is the matter?" she questioned trying to embrace her lover.

Her affection was rebuffed though as Lauren pointed to something on her coffee table. "How could you hurt me like this?" she asked in tears.

"What have I done?"

"Pick it up," the librarian stated, thrusting her finger toward the coffee table once again.

Alexa moved into the room and picked up the cream colored envelope that was sitting open on the table. She removed what was inside and read its contents. Her heart sank seeing her wedding invitation. "Oh, God. Lauren, you have to believe me. I did not send this to you. I would never hurt you in such a deliberate manner. You must believe me. My mother made the guest list. I was never consulted."

"Oh? So it is your mother that believes I should attend your wedding to another woman? Do you expect me to believe that?"

"I have no other explanation, Lauren. Do you actually think I want you there to witness it? It is one thing for me to inflict torture upon myself in the name of my country. I would never want to do that to you. I love you."

The redhead sighed but said nothing at first. Finally she whispered, "This is really happening."

Alexa stepped to her and embraced her closely. "I am terribly sorry, darling."

"I am not sure I have the strength to do this, Alexa."

"What would you have me do? Abdicate the throne? That is my only recourse. If I do not marry Meredith, I will have to abdicate. My mother will see no alternative. Is that what you wish me to do?"

Lauren looked into the eyes she loved so much. Her heart screamed yes to the posed question, but she merely answered, "That is a decision you can only make for yourself."

Not letting the issue go, Alexa pressed, "If I abdicated, we could be together. We could be married."

"But what would you do with yourself? What would you do with your life? You are the crowned princess. That is the only life you know."

"I could stay in the military. I can continue to be a Navy pilot. That could be my career. I could still take care of you that way. It would just be the two of us, you, my sexy little librarian and me, Flash, just Flash. No media, no attention, just the two of us living our life happily ever after."

A moment passed in silence. Unable to resist Lauren quietly inquired, "Would you really abdicate your throne for me?"

Alexa gave a tender smile. "If I was able to propose marriage to you right now, would you say yes?"

"Yes," the older woman confessed in a whisper. It was in fact her greatest wish, one she knew would never come true. However, it never stopped her from dreaming.

"You would do me the greatest honor in the world. You would make the ultimate sacrifice for our love. Why would I not do the same?"

"Getting married and abdication are considerably different things, Lex. If you were to ask me to marry you, I would say yes. Of course I would. Who would not? However, you are meant to be the ruler of this country."

"Our child could rule in my stead. They would become the next in line for the throne."

"Would you want that for our child? Would you want to sacrifice them the way you are being sacrificed? Would your mother ever look upon our child as the rightful heir to the throne?"

"Then George can rule, and the line be passed on through Morgan. We would not have to sacrifice our child. It can be done."

Lauren shook her head. "This is a ridiculous notion. I do not know why we are even discussing it. You cannot abdicate. It would not be fulfilling your destiny."

"My destiny is my choice. Please allow me to do this for you."

"I cannot. You cannot do this for me. It would not be right. Now I do not wish to discuss it any further. The fact that you would be so self-sacrificing as to even suggest such a thing will have to be enough for me. I know you love me, Lex. I do not doubt that."

"Good. See that you never do." The rest of the evening the two women did not speak of anything. They simply sat cuddled together on the sofa watching TV and trying to forget the looming calamity that would take place in two month's time.

The next morning after Lauren went to work, Alexa returned to the palace. She immediately inquired as to her mother's whereabouts and heard she could be found in her office with Lady Adams. Heading that direction she found her mother and fiancée having tea.

"Lex, where have you been?" Meredith inquired, coming to kiss her fiancée on the cheek.

"My whereabouts are none of your concern, Mere. I must speak to my mother alone at once."

Queen Faith smiled at Meredith before saying, "Leave us. We will continue this conversation later." When they were alone, she asked, "What seems to be the trouble, Alexa?"

"You so callously had a wedding invitation delivered to Lauren! How could you do that to her?"

"My dear child, she is your friend. I thought you wanted all your friends invited to your wedding. I did not know she was an exception."

"You know she is not my friend! She is the woman I love, Mother, and you have hurt you! I will not stand for it!"

"Then what do you propose to do about it? I am sorry I caused her pain, but she must know you are to be wed. She cannot possibly live in the fantasy of your love affair forever. The reality is that you are intended to someone else."

"I refuse to marry Meredith, Mother. She is a nice girl, but I do not love her. I will not marry her. She does not even love me. She just wants the crown."

"You will marry her, Alexa, because I told you to marry her. What other resort do you have?"

Alexa took a deep breath to fortify her courage. She was terrified of the next words she was to say, but she knew she would do anything to be with her beloved. "I am prepared to abdicate my rightful place as heir to the throne, Mother. Lauren is the woman I choose to be with the rest of my life, and I will be with her with or without your blessing. If I must abdicate to do that, then I will do so," she stated in seriousness.

There was silence between them for several moments. Finally the queen spoke. "Do you understand the gravity of what you have just said, Alexa?"

"Yes, Mother. I do."

"Well, before you do anything rash, I will ask you to contemplate all possible consequences of this suggested action. Give yourself a few weeks to consider your options. Consult with your father and brother on this idea. Consult with Lady Adams. After all, she is your fiancée and will be affected by this decision. If after you have done all those things, you still wish to abdicate to be with your lover, then I shall be obliged to allow you to do so, and we will hold a press conference in which you can publicly renounce your throne. Until such time as we discuss this again, I simply ask that you do not speak to any of the public about this. Are we in agreement?"

Alexa nodded her head. "Yes."

"Good. We will speak on this again in three week's time. Do yourself a favor, Alexa, and truly consider your actions. Once you renounce your rights, they cannot ever be reinstated. You will still be a member of the royal family of course, but your claim to the throne will permanently cease to be. George would become first in line unless you had children. Then it would automatically be passed down to them unless I decree otherwise. You having a child with that commoner would probably persuade me to decree that Morgan take the throne after George. Do you want that for your children? Please think seriously on the matter. It is not just your life at stake but that of your offspring as well."

"I will think on this as we agreed, Mother, but I doubt I will change my mind."

"Very well. You may go now."

Turning on her heels, Alexa opened the door to her mother's office and stepped into the hallway. Not surprisingly she found Meredith lingering near the door. "I need to speak to you, Mere." The younger woman nodded her head and followed the princess down the hall to her own office. Gesturing to a seat for her bride-to-be, Alexa took a seat on the sofa. Meredith joined her there. "How much of that conversation did you hear?"

"Enough to know that librarian holds you heart, not me."

"Well, then let us be honest about why we are choosing to be married then, shall we? I will go first. You are a pleasant woman, Mere. I like you as a friend. I know you would make the acceptable spouse in my mother's eyes. You are the obvious choice to carry on the Washington

line. These are all valid reasons to be married, but I am in love with another woman."

"I know that. I have known that for quite some time."

"Then why agree to marry me?"

"For all the reasons you have already stated. My parents raised me with the intention of one day being your wife. It is my destiny to become wife of the princess and bear your children for the house of Washington. I love you much more than you do me. I know this, but I go into this marriage hoping that I might one day have your love completely. I see the way you look at me. You are not without interest. I know this for a fact. You cannot deny me that. I hold this close to me as a beginning, and maybe in time there will be more. I always have been and always will be your humble servant, Lex. I am prepared to take my place beside you and do whatever it is you ask of me," she answered, leaning over and touching Alexa's cheek softly. Her lips brushed against the heir's gently. "Only I will fulfill all your desires. It is my duty to serve you and attend to your wants. I know my place, Lex. Can you say the same for your librarian? Does she know what you deserve? Will she give you everything you want and desire? Does she accept that your word is the only opinion that matters?"

Alexa closed her eyes as she allowed Meredith's kissing to persist. The teenager posed some interesting questions. Furthermore, she knew she didn't have those answers. "If I were to abdicate, then my opinion would not be the only one that mattered."

"Abdicate? What are you talking about? What do you mean abdicate?" Meredith asked pulling back.

"I told my mother today that I was contemplating renouncing my throne."

"Why would you do such a thing? You are the rightful heir, and the people want to see you rule. They want to see us together."

"You mean we would not be together if I were to abdicate? That should not change things between us. I would still need heirs for the line. Our children would succeed my mother, not me. They would still have a rightful place, but I could not achieve that without you."

"But then you would never be queen. Do you not wish to be queen?"

"At this moment I do not care whether or not I am queen. However, I think you do. You wish to be queen. Am I right? If I were to abdicate, you would be denied your chance to be queen. Could you marry me knowing that might never be?" Meredith sat perfectly still for several moments not answering. Seeing her hesitation, the princess said, "You can answer me honestly, Mere. As of this moment, we are still engaged. If I were to abdicate, I would release you from your obligation if you asked me to. I just want to know where we stand. Would you still marry me if I decided to abdicate?"

"I love you, Lex. Do not misunderstand that. However, if I were not to be queen, I would request

that you would release me, so I could pursue other ambitions in life. I am prepared to sacrifice myself for the country if needed, but it would not be needed if you were not to become queen."

"As I suspected. Well, at least we both know where the other stands. I appreciate your honesty, Mere. I hope you can respect mine in return."

The younger woman nodded her head. "I should go. The queen is expecting me back in her office. Allow me to ask one favor of you? If you do decide to abdicate, please tell me before you tell the people. I would like to be the first to know outside your family of course."

"Of course. I can grant you that request."

"Thank you."

By the time the evening meal came around, both Thomas and George had heard the news from the queen what Alexa was contemplating. Her brother came to her after dinner in a huff as she prepared to return to her lover's house. "Tell me you are not serious?" George asked.

"I am perfectly serious, George. I love Lauren enough to give up my kingdom. It means nothing to me when compared to her."

"But think about what this means for the rest of us? Think about me, Lex! I do not wish to be king! I am not meant to be king! You are the one meant for the role! You are the strong one! You are the one people adore! They want you to be their queen, Lex! They do not wish to see me sitting on the throne!"

She shook her head. "You are fortunate to have been able to marry the woman you love. Can you not understand that I simply want the same thing?"

"Yes, I married the woman I loved, Lex, but she was still noble blood! Do you honestly think Mother would have allowed me to marry her had she not been? I would not have expected her to! If she were not, I would have still loved her, even though I would have married someone else!"

"Would she have loved you, though? Tell me. How would you feel if you could not be with her? I just want to be with Lauren. Either I abdicate or Mother decrees that I may marry whom I chose. You know she will not change her mind once it has been set. It is my only option."

"I am begging you not to do this! Please, for the love of the people, do not do this! Think of the hundreds of millions of people that you will let down! No one in the history of our family has ever abdicated! It just is not done! Lauren will still love you even if you have to marry another!"

"I do not want to marry another. I want to marry her, George. Why can you not understand that?"

"You are being selfish! The world is counting on you! You are the world's next great leader! You were born to play the role! When you become queen you can decree whatever you choose! You can renounce this law that prevents you from marrying Lauren, so our children and our children's

children can marry whomever they choose! You are to make history! That is your destiny! Do not pawn it off on me! I will never be the ruler you could! You know this! Please do not do this!"

"George, I will not argue with you. It is true what you say. However, I hope you could one day understand why I had to do this. When you are king, you can save our children's children. As for me I just wish to be a wife to Lauren Fulton and a Navy pilot. They are simple dreams, but they are mine, and I wish to pursue them. I am tired of living my life for others. I want to live it for myself."

"You are making a grave mistake, Lex. You are letting yourself be carried away by your hormones. What if you and Lauren do not make it? What if you were to divorce? You would be left with nothing. You would be nothing."

"I do not wish to discuss this anymore at the moment. I am due back at Lauren's right away."

The next day Alexa had lunch privately with her father. He took a different tone with his daughter, though. "Alexa, your mother tells me you wish to give up the throne to marry Lauren. Is this true?"

"Yes. I was thinking of doing that."

"Are you sure that is what you want to do?"

"I love her, Father. She means the world to me."

"I understand that. That does not answer my question. Are you sure you want to abdicate?"

"I cannot marry her otherwise."

"Again that does not answer my question. Alexa, do you wish to abdicate the throne for you, not Lauren? Do you wish to do this for yourself? Would you do this if Lauren were not in the picture?"

"Lauren is the reason I wish to give up the throne. If she were not in my life, I would marry Meredith and stay heir."

"You would keep all your responsibilities as heir and then as queen when the time came if Lauren were not in the picture?"

"Yes."

"Then, my daughter, I fear you are doing this for the wrong reasons. To give up your life for yourself is one thing, but to give it up on the chance at happiness with someone is a perilous proposition. Do you not think that to be the case?"

"I suppose I had not thought of it that way."

"Well, perhaps you should. Let us assume that Lauren was not in your life. You would marry Meredith and go on as the rightful heir. Do you think that would have made you happy?"

"I guess. I would not have known differently."

"Would you have embraced your role as princess and then queen when the time came?"

"Yes."

"Would you have shown compassion to your people?"

"Of course."

"Would you have done what was in their best interest?"

"Yes. I would not deny them that."

"Then you cannot abdicate. Alexa, it is time you did embrace your role as princess and heir. The people need you. You sitting on the throne, not George, is what is in their best interest."

"But I would give up all of that for Lauren. She means that much to me."

"I know. You are in love, but love can be capricious. It can come and go so quickly we hardly knew what it was when we were looking at it. Let me tell you something that illustrates that point. Your dear grandmother, Lara, did not love Alexa when they married. In fact, she did not fall in love with the queen until she was on her deathbed when it was too late."

"But that cannot be true. She always spoke of her deep love for my grandmother."

"Do not get me wrong. Lara loved Alexa, but she did not see the love before her eyes until it was gone. She spent the rest of her life loving a ghost. If you do not believe me, you can read it for yourself. Her diary tells the story of what happened. Lara made her sacrifice for her country. She married a woman she did not love, because it was in the country's best interest. She was more a queen than even Queen Alexa could have ever predicted. If she was here today, what do you think she would say to you? What do you think she would advise you to do? What is right or what is easy?"

"Abdicating is not easy, Father."

"I think it is. I think it is easier than facing the fate you know you are meant to live. You know as well as I do that what is right is to stay the course. What is easy is to run away. Lauren will never stop loving you. I have seen it in her eyes. Her heart will always be yours. This marriage to Meredith is of convenience to have heirs. It is political, and she knows that. We have discussed it, and she understands why things have to be a certain way."

"You have discussed it? When?"

"At your birthday party. She is a good woman. I will not deny that, but she has already accepted the fact that you must follow in the footsteps of your forefathers. Now you must accept that. It is what is right."

Alexa nodded her head as she thought about her father's words. She wondered if he was right about her grandmothers and decided to investigate that matter for herself after their meal.

Heading to her late grandmother's library, she pulled the first diary off the shelf and made herself comfortable on the couch to read. Hours passed as she read the details of her grandmothers' life together. Her father was right. Lara did not love Alexa at first. In fact, the words used to describe the consummation of their marriage led her to believe the act was coerced. The princess could even still see the stains of dried tears on the page running the ink of those memories. Her heart ached at the thought of her beloved grandmother being put through such a thing. However, as the diary continued, the tone shifted. As she read the recollection of that fateful day, the day of Alexa's ultimate sacrifice, and the days that followed, her heart once again began to pang but this time for both her grandmothers. They had come to love each other, but it was too late. The queen had died saving Faith and Lara. Unable to continue her reading, Alexa closed the book and placed it back on the shelf. Her mind was jumbled with thoughts and feelings. Her heart was conflicted with what she should do. On the one hand, she thought her grandmother would tell her to do what made her happiest, but on the other, she knew if her grandmother could sacrifice for her country, she should be able to as well.

Over the next few weeks, Alexa thought about her course in history. She knew she would have to give her mother an answer soon, and furthermore, she knew she did love Lauren enough to give up the rest of her life. However, whether or not that would be right haunted her.

Lauren in the meantime was thinking about her relationship with Alexa. The time was fast approaching that the princess was to be married, and the librarian didn't know what would happen after that. She had always believed that it would be wrong to be involved with someone married, but this was an extraordinary case. Her heart had been so completely captured by the princess that she didn't know what was the right thing to do.

One morning after Alexa had left, she was getting dressed for the day when she received a phone call from the palace. The queen was requesting her presence for tea that afternoon. Lauren had never met Queen Faith before, and furthermore, she could only assume why the queen wanted to see her, leaving her with trepidation about the meeting. However, knowing she was bound to go, she called in sick to work and spent the rest of the morning contemplating what the queen might wish to say to her. Going to the palace, she decided she would meet whatever fate had in store for her with the confidence that Alexa loved her no matter what happened.

When she arrived Matthew was there and gave her a friendly greeting before escorting her to the queen. He announced her arrival and then stated he would be outside waiting to escort Lauren out again when their talk was finished. "Your majesty," Lauren greeted tentatively, bowing in respect.

"Ms. Fulton, thank you for coming today on such short notice. Please sit and join me for a cup of tea." The redhead did as she was told, taking the chair the queen had indicated. A server poured them both tea and then left them to their privacy. Lauren just sat there not knowing what to say. "I assume you know why I have asked you to come," Faith mentioned.

"Actually, your majesty, I do not know. Please enlighten me."

"You cannot be serious? You have no idea? Alexa has not told you her plans?"

"I am not aware of any plans, your majesty."

"She wants to abdicate the throne. She has not told you this?"

"She may have mentioned it, but that was weeks ago. We have not talked of it since. I did not think she could be serious."

"Oh, she is serious, child. She claims she wants to give it all up for your love. She claims she cannot go on without marrying you, Ms. Fulton. She is prepared to leave her entire family, her entire country to run away with you. I asked her to weigh her decision carefully, because it cannot be reversed. She is to give me an answer in a few days time. You knew nothing of this?"

"No, my queen. I did not know." Both women fell silent for a moment. In absence of something to do, Lauren sipped her tea and waited for whatever the queen might say next. She was shocked at the first disclosure and wondered if others were to follow.

"Tell me, Ms. Fulton. How do you like your job at the library?"

"It is wonderful. The people are nice, and I enjoy being there. Thank you for asking."

"Did you know that job in which you reside was a donation of the palace? Alexa wanted to see to it that you moved here, so she convinced the library to hire you and made a generous donation to keep you employed. She gave them so much money that they renamed it after my late mother, Lara, at her request. Did you know that she had bought you your position?"

"No. I had no idea," she answered truthfully. Her heart sunk at the thought that she hadn't won it on her own merit, but she didn't say so.

"And what of your home? Are you finding it quite comfortable?"

"Yes."

"I can only assume based on your salary that it was another gift from my daughter much like the jewelry you are wearing. No librarian could afford to live there or afford diamonds such as those." Lauren just nodded her head, not knowing where the conversation was going. "So, Ms. Fulton, it seems to me that you have profited quite well from the royal family. Alexa has given you more than just her devotion. She has bestowed expensive tokens of her affection."

"She has been generous with her gifts, your majesty." She still wasn't sure where the conversation was headed but got the inclination she was not going to like it if it continued in the manner it was.

"Tell me something, Ms. Fulton. As a woman does she fulfill all your needs? Do you find her lacking in any way?"

"I am not sure what you mean." In fact she knew exactly what the queen meant, was just mortified that she had been asked such a question.

"Yes, you do. Do not play coy with me, child."

"Your majesty, I must decline to answer. That is personal, and I do not wish to share such intimate details of my life."

"Then tell me this. If Alexa were not who she is, would you find as much fulfillment with her?"

"Your majesty, when I met her I did not know who she was. To me she was just a pilot in the Navy. It took several days for me to figure it out. I fell in love with the pilot first."

"Well, she is not a pilot. She is the princess. She merely plays at being a pilot as a childish game of make believe. Surely you can understand the difference."

"Yes."

"Ms. Fulton, before my daughter met you, she made me a promise that she would marry Lady Adams. She gave me her word. However, upon meeting you, she seems to have decided she cannot live without you. Do you feel the same way?"

"I have never thought I had any option other than to be her mistress," she confessed. "I know my place in the eyes of the law. If there were another option, I would take it. If Alexa asked me to marry her, I would want to say yes. However, I know that is not possible."

"Well, at least you understand the position in which you find yourself. You do know that if she abdicates, you two will be allowed to marry. However, you would not be marrying the woman she is now. She would not have any resources. She could not bestow gifts upon you the way she does now. She would hardly be the powerful woman she is today. By abdicating she would be as common as the rest of the citizens in this country. Do you realize that?"

"Yes, I do realize that."

"Would that make you happy?"

"I would be happy to have Alexa's love. That would be enough for me."

"Do you think that would make her happy?"

"I do not know. I am not sure she could suffice without what she is accustomed to having."

Another pause occurred as both women sipped their tea. Lauren was nearly to the bottom of her cup before the queen spoke again. "How much do you love her?"

"I would do anything for her."

"Even deny your own happiness?"

"If it was in her best interest."

Queen Faith nodded her head and put down her cup. Gazing directly into Lauren's eyes she said, "Then I must ask you to do what is right by her. If you love her, let her go. As long as she thinks she has the faintest chance of being with you, she will give up everything, and she will be miserable for the rest of her life. It is in her best interest for you to let her go. She needs to be queen. It is her rightful place. Tell her you can no longer see each other. Tell her that the relationship between you is over. You can keep your job, your house, your jewelry, and any other tokens she has accorded you as fond memories of a love you once shared, but Lauren, tell her good bye. I must ask this of you. She is not in the right mind to see the harm she is about to do to herself or her country. You obviously are an intelligent woman, and you have the foresight to see where this action will lead. The fact that when she first mentioned the idea you did not encourage her gives me hope that you know what is right. You say you would deny your own happiness if it was in her best interest. I know you know this is what is best for her."

Lauren could not respond at first. The queen had just asked her to turn her back on her greatest love, but she knew the queen had her reasons. In some respects she was right. Lauren feared Alexa would regret her decision if she abdicated, and she did not want to become the root of resentment for such a rash decision. Lauren finally nodded her head as she put her teacup on the coffee table. "Your majesty, thank you for the tea. I appreciate your candidness about Alexa, and I will take your words under advisement. May I please be excused now? I do not think there is anything left to be said."

The queen nodded in agreement. "Yes, I have said all I needed to on the subject. You are free to go."

By the time Lauren arrived back at her house, she noticed her lover's familiar car in the garage. It was still relatively early in the evening, much earlier than when Alexa normally came by, but she was glad to know she was there. Going into the house, she was greeted by the princess in the living room. One look from Alexa and she started sobbing and threw herself into her lover's arms.

"Darling, what on earth is the matter?"

Lauren just shook her head, unable to answer. She could only cling to the princess for support as

she wept. Her heart was in such agony. Finally words came to her. "Flash," she whispered.

"Yes, Lauren?"

"Take me upstairs to bed and make love to me all night long. I need you to touch me, hold me. It is only in your arms that the world is right."

The younger woman nodded her head before scooping the redhead up in her arms. She obliged her lover in her request. Neither strayed from bed the rest of the night and into the dawn. Alexa gently made love to the woman who had her heart and kissed away the trails of tears as they flooded over Lauren's face. She had never seen anyone so sorrowful in her entire life, and she wondered what had caused her beloved so much pain. She didn't ask, though, because it was obvious Lauren was not ready to speak about it. Instead she gave her support in the best way she could, acquiescing to all her lover's needs that night. In the early light of the dawn the two women finally exhausted themselves. Alexa just held Lauren in her arms as the redhead drifted off to sleep and hoped that once Lauren awoke she could speak to her of the great plan she had devised for them.

It wasn't until late that morning they awoke. Alexa's eyes were open when Lauren finally turned over. "Good morning, beautiful. How is my darling today? Feeling better I hope." The older woman said nothing in response just broke their gaze. "Lauren, I have no idea what is wrong. I wish there was something I could do to ease the pain you are feeling whatever might be the cause."

"There is nothing you can do, Lex."

"To the contrary, I think there might be. I wanted to give you something last night that I think will cheer you immensely." The princess rose from bed and retrieved her pants from the floor. Pulling something out of the pocket, she made her way over to Lauren's side of the bed and dropped down on one knee. "I wanted to give you this," she said, sliding a small box onto the bed. The librarian just looked at what was obviously a ring box sitting there in front of her, but she didn't make a move to touch it. "Open it," Alexa pressed. Lauren did as she was asked. She flipped open the lid to find the most beautiful diamond ring she had ever seen. She looked into dark eyes, knowing her ultimate fantasy was about to unfold. Alexa took the ring from the box with her right hand and took Lauren's left hand in her own. "Lauren, I love you. Nothing else in this world matters to me but that. You are the best thing that could have ever happened to me, and I count you among the best blessings I have ever received. I want desperately to spend the rest of my life with you, and I will honor and cherish you for as long as we both shall live. Please do me the honor of becoming my wife. Will you marry me?" she humbly requested, slipping the ring onto Lauren's finger.

Lauren didn't know she had more tears to shed after the evening she had been through, but they sprang forth in waves covering her cheeks and dripping onto the sheet. She took Alexa by the back of the neck and pushed her head against her shoulder, clutching it to her as her hands caressed dark hair. It was the moment she had long dreamed of since meeting the powerful woman. However, now as it was upon her, she knew there was only one choice to make.

"Alexa, I love you. I do. I really do, but..." She paused as her pain overwhelmed her for a moment. Alexa pulled back to try to look into blue eyes but was denied their gaze.

"Lauren?" she questioned.

Knowing what was right, the librarian forced herself to look the princess in the eyes, the eyes that held so much love for her. The redhead shook her head slowly. "I cannot marry you, Alexa."

"What? Why not?"

"I told you when you first got engaged to Lady Adams that my heart would tell me what was right in time when it came to us. This is not what is right. I cannot marry you. I cannot allow you to sacrifice your life in this manner. I know what must be done if you were to marry me, and I cannot let you do that, not for me, not for anyone. We must all make our sacrifices to the crown, and this is mine. You must do what is best for the country, and that fate does not include me."

Unable to believe this was happening, Alexa pressed, "You do not wish to do this. This is your pain, your agony. This is why you are so upset. You love me, and you do not wish to let me go. Tell me so."

"I must, Alexa. It is the right thing to do. I must let you go to be the great ruler you can be. That life does not have me in it. I would only be a distraction to your true calling. I wish not to see you any more. It is for the best."

It was Alexa's turn to start sobbing. She didn't know her heart could feel so broken. Nevertheless, she knew she had to at least try to remain strong. "This is your final word?" Lauren could only nod her head. "Very well. I will do as you ask of me. I love you enough to give you the freedom you seek. However, if you ever change your mind, you know how to find me. If you ever need or want anything, I am here for you. I love you, Lauren. That will never change. I will continue to support you in whatever way you need. I will continue to pay the mortgage on the house and all your bills. I will continue to support the library, so you have a place to work, and I will continue to love you just as you are. If you need anything else, all you need to do is call Matthew to arrange for anything day or night. I do not care what it is. If you need money or clothes, a new house, whatever, you come to me. Even though we cannot be together, I will still think of you as my wife in spirit. You are in my heart, and you will continue to be for the rest of my life." Slowly getting to her feet, Alexa pulled on her clothes from the previous night. No other words were spoken, but both women were crying. Looking back over her shoulder to where Lauren lay, Alexa drank in the sight of the woman she dearly loved, the woman who had just shattered her heart. It would be the last moment she ever gazed upon her. Then without another word, she left.

Chapter VI: A New Path is Laid

A month later the greatly anticipated wedding between the princess and Lady Adams was scheduled to take place. No one ever spoke again of Alexa's desires for abdication, and the two

women silently agreed to put it behind them. The street was filled that day with public support for the future queen and her bride, but as Alexa took the steps of the Washington Cathedral as so many of her relatives had before her, her heart felt nothing. She had not looked forward to this day, but she kept those emotions to herself. Turning to the crowd before entering the church, she gave a friendly wave and smile, knowing it was her duty. Her eyes scanned the group and for just a briefest of moments she thought she saw her redhead beauty in the crowd. She was so sure that she momentarily forgot herself and retreated down the stairs toward the congregation of supporters. Of course all the onlookers were thrilled at the idea of their future sovereign coming to greet them on such a special day, and Alexa graced them with handshakes and received well wishes even though her eyes were desperately searching for Lauren. She had been there or so she thought. After several minutes though of not finding her, she retreated back to where the rest of her family was still standing on the stone staircase. It had only been her imagination, and her heart steeled itself once again for what was to come.

The wedding was an extravagant affair. Meredith was radiant in her dress, and the princess equally stunning in her military uniform. Once the nuptials had been said and they had been pronounced married, the entire family adjourned to once again meet the people. This time though Alexa did so with her new wife, Princess Meredith, on her arm.

Back at the palace the opulent celebration continued until it was time for the newlyweds to depart on their honeymoon, a trip around the world in the royal yacht. The two women dutifully said farewell to their families and boarded the boat on which they would begin their new life together. They stood there cuddled together posing for pictures as the yacht began to leave the harbor, and then finally once land could no longer be seen, they moved inside to the living room area.

"Well, here we are," Alexa said with a sigh as she flopped down into a lush sofa.

Meredith took a seat next to her. "Yes, here we are. I cannot believe this day actually happened."

"Me neither," confessed the crowned princess. "But alas, it did, and we are now married."

Meredith nodded her dark head. She leaned into her wife's shoulder and rested her head there as her arm came around Alexa's body. "Thank you for making this day special for us."

"It was my pleasure, Mere."

A few moments passed in silence before the nineteen-year-old spoke again. "Lex, I know these last few months have been difficult for you, but I hope that we can put all that behind us. Now that we are married, I hope we can focus on the future, not dwell on the past. We have a long life together, and I wish it to be as gratifying as possible for us both. Can we just focus on building our marriage and never speak of the past several months ever again?" tentatively she requested.

Alexa could hear the doubt in her wife's voice. It seemed that Meredith needed an assurance that the past was in fact just that, and it was never to be discussed. Knowing it was for the best, the princess put her hand under her wife's chin and raised it, so their eyes could meet. "I could not

agree with you more, Mere. The past is gone, and we are each other's future. I want us both to be happy, and I will start by loving you the way you deserve," she vowed, leaning in to give her new bride a sweet kiss on the lips.

That night Alexa's consolation for doing what was right was finally knowing Meredith. What she had thought she had desired for so long, to love the young beauty, actually came to pass. Even though Alexa had not touched another woman since she had met Lauren, she knew it was her duty to become one with the woman she married, and she could tell Meredith was desperately trying to please her in whatever way she desired that night. Given that, the consummation of their marriage was more ardently adventurous than the older woman had expected, and in fact, she found some solace in Meredith's arms. Her heart relinquished itself to the idea that a content marriage to the younger woman was possible, and from that moment onward she promised herself to try and make things work between them.

Chapter VII: Love's Second Chance

Five years passed, and in that time Alexa only thought of Lauren in the most private of times when she was truly alone with her thoughts. She was too busy with her royal duties to have much free time to think or even enjoy life. The only pleasure she did have was in spending time with Meredith. Over the course of the past five years the now twenty-four year old princess had been pressing Alexa for a baby, and Alexa knew it was her duty to have such offspring for the family line, but their reproductive efforts had not been successful. Meredith had not been able to conceive except for one occasion, but unfortunately she had miscarried their child after only a few weeks. This caused the younger woman despondency for she felt she was not living up to her part of their marriage, even though Alexa tried to assure her that they would have children when the time was right.

Alex had her own doubts, though, as she watched her wife suffer through being implanted with embryos every other month only to discover that they had not taken. She knew the process was painful for Meredith, but she did admire her wife's dedication to the cause. It drew them closer together to have such tribulation in their life. However, what was not helping their situation was the speculation from the media as to why they had not conceived a child. Unsubstantiated rumors circulated in the press, so much so that Alexa wanted to put an end to it all by telling the people the truth, but the queen would not allow her to do so. By allowing the people to know about the disease that inflicted the young princess, the queen feared other speculation would follow concerning the future of the marriage between the heir and her bride. The law did allow for divorce under such circumstances as infertility where the royals were concerned, but the queen did not want the people to even think such a thing regarding Alexa and Meredith, so the two princesses suffered in silence together.

One day when they were at the clinic, their doctor sat them down for a discussion. "Your highnesses, I just wanted to discuss the course of Princess Meredith's treatment with you. We have done all that we can to treat her endometriosis and minimize her pain. However, in doing so, the drugs she is taking may have inhibited her from being able to carry an embryo to term. I must make a suggestion to you. It is not something I do lightly, because it would be potentially

very painful to the princess, but it might be the only way to have a child short of finding a surrogate to carry for you."

"What is your suggestion?" Meredith asked, taking her wife's hand.

"Take you off your medications. The medications you are on are potentially suppressing your body's natural cycle. If we take you off them, you will fall back into your natural menstrual cycle, whatever that might be, and we can try to adapt our procedures to it. My hope is that your body will decide to accept the embryo that way. Right now the medications you are taking are causing your body to reject it I think."

"If that is what you think I should do, then I suppose I should do it."

"I must warn you, though. Going off these medications could prove to be painful for you. You could suffer cramps far worse than anything you have ever experienced. You could have internal bleeding. There are things that could prove to be difficult for you. The symptoms are quite varied by woman."

"But from what I understand, if I were able to carry a child full term, my endometriosis will most likely go into remission."

"That is true in some cases."

Alexa sighed as she looked at her wife. She knew Meredith would do whatever it took to have a baby, so she commented, "I will leave the decision to you, Mere. This is your body. I would not want you to suffer any more than you already do."

"I am willing to try anything. I will stop taking my medication. How long do we have to wait after I go off until we can try again?"

"I would give it a few months. These IVF procedures are painful enough. You and Princess Alexa both are putting your bodies through enough trauma. To remove your eggs is incredibly invasive, but we are going to have to retrieve more, and I know that will take some time. Then we are going to have to do the same for Princess Alexa. We did not take that many to begin with, because I did not realize the process would be so arduous, but we will have to harvest more from both of you and then combine the DNA before we try any more embryo implants. This will take months. However, we need that time for the medication to leave your system and see what your body's natural cycle might look like, if you have one at all."

"Fine. If that is what must be done. We have to have a baby. There is no alternative," Meredith definitively answered.

"Very well. We should set up appointments to do the egg harvesting for you both, so we can start immediately on merging the DNA."

Leaving the clinic that day, Meredith cried all the way back to the palace. Alexa knew there was

nothing she could do, so she simply held her wife trying to comfort her to the best of her ability. She didn't like seeing her wife in pain, but she lacked the ability to do anything other than assure her things would work out in the end.

That afternoon as Alexa was in her office Matthew announced his presence. She gave him a small smile trying to force her and her wife's difficulties from her mind. "Matthew, what can I do for you?"

"I need to speak with you, Lex, about something quite important."

"Very well. I am listening."

"I have sat on this information for six months, knowing the timing of it could not be worse, but I cannot keep it to myself any longer."

"Then speak, Matthew. What is it?"

Her secretary took a seat in the chair in front of her desk. "Alexa, several years ago you once asked me to make special accommodations for Ms. Lauren Fulton. Anything she wanted you said I was to give her."

At the hearing Lauren's name, Alexa's heart started to pound. Her mind went wild, wondering what on earth Matthew was going to say. "Go on."

"She has requested so little since that time. She only asked that you stop paying her expenses, which I did on your behalf. But now she has requested an audience with you. She would like to see you. I was not sure that was a request you would be willing to accommodate, especially with everything that has been going on in your life with Meredith, so I waited for things to settle. However, she made the request a second time three months ago. I feel obligated to give her a response at some point."

"She wants to see me? Did she say why?"

"No."

"Well, I suppose I should see her then. After all, I did agree to give her everything she ever wanted and needed. We will go to her place of work tomorrow and see what she wants. Please call the library and make sure she is scheduled to be there."

"Yes, Lex. Right away." For the rest of the day, the princess wondered why after all this time Lauren wanted to see her. The redhead had made it clear that she no longer wanted to be in her life.

The next afternoon Matthew and Alexa went to Lauren's place of employment. When the princess walked in a hush fell over the idle chatter that was taking place behind the Information Desk. Both she and her secretary approached the women standing there. Matthew inquired of

Lauren's whereabouts and was directed to the third floor where he was told she was setting up a conference room. Armed with the information the two of them took the stairs to the third floor. They searched every corner of that floor until Alexa's eyes fell upon what she was after. There she was, her back to the door. Lauren was arranging chairs and tables mindless to who was observing her. Whispering to Matthew to guard the door once she went inside, Alexa gave a knock on the open door and waited.

When Lauren turned she jumped at the sight that greeted her. There was the princess dressed in a suit, but she looked very much the same as the last time she had seen her. Immediately the redhead remembered her manners and bowed in Alexa's presence. "Your highness, what are you doing here?"

"You requested my presence, Lauren, so here I am. May I come in?"

Lauren nodded her head and watched as Alexa shut the door behind her, so they were alone. The princess crossed the room, closing the gap between them until they were just a few feet apart. "I asked for you six months ago and then again three months ago."

"Yes, well, I am sorry for the delay. It could not be helped. What can I do for you?"

Lauren shook her head. She thought she had gotten over her. After all, she had dated someone since and had agreed to marry someone else, but looking at the princess just then, it felt as if no time had passed. Her heart still belonged to Alexa. "It does not matter anymore. Six months ago I had news I wished to share with you, but it is hardly relevant now. I wanted to tell you for myself that I was to be married, but as it turns out, that engagement has since been broken. I am sorry you traveled here just to hear me say that. I should have told Matthew I had rescinded my request, but I did not actually think you would come. My apologies for wasting your time. It was not my intention."

Alexa nodded her head. "Seeing you is not a waste of time, Lauren. In fact, it is welcomed. I have thought of you many times. You look good. Time has definitely been kind to you. You are as beautiful as I remember."

"Thank you, your highness," she answered, trying desperately not to let the comment affect her heart. She knew it was a losing battle, though. "You look just the same."

The princess nodded again. Not knowing what else to say just then, she mentioned, "I see you are still wearing the jewelry I gave you. I am glad to know it is being put to use." Seeing where Alexa's eyes were, her right hand instinctively covered the diamond necklace hanging from her neck. It was a piece that she always wore under her clothes, but she didn't realize it had slipped out from under her blouse. At the gesture Alexa's eyes caught the ring that Lauren had on her right hand. Her heart constricted at the sight. The ring was the one she used to propose to the redhead those years ago. Unable to stop herself, she reached for Lauren's hand, bringing it between her own. "You still have this?"

"I did not know what else to do with it. I could not give it back nor could I sell it."

"So you have just worn it all this time?"

Lauren didn't answer the question. She was not prepared to reveal the fact that she had worn it everyday since the day the princess had bestowed it upon her. The only time she had taken it off was to move it from her left to right hand, where it had remained, which was why her engagement ultimately disintegrated. She refused to take off the ring she had been given by the woman she once loved, the woman she obviously still loved as she gazed upon her. The librarian couldn't speak as she looked into dark eyes. She was paralyzed by her emotions.

Alexa could feel her heart pounding wildly at the thought of Lauren wearing her ring all that time. It made her breathing turn erratic as her mind took her back to that night, the way they made love and the way Lauren felt in her arms. She could feel it all as if the memory were just a few days old. That moment right then that was all that mattered. "Lauren," she whispered, putting one arm around the redhead's body and pulling her closer. She leaned in, allowing herself to smell the scent that was uniquely Lauren's. It still had the same effect on her emotions and her libido.

Lauren could feel herself beginning to get lightheaded. In the months that had followed their breakup, she had fantasized about this moment, and even after she had gotten engaged to another woman, she secretly harbored this dream of having a chance to be close to the princess again. Closing her eyes, she took in the feeling of their bodies pressed together. "Flash," she murmured, helpless to the power of her emotions. Then before she realized it, their lips were sealed in a strong lock. Everything she had dreamed of for the last five years came crashing upon her in that one kiss, and she held on to the princess by the back of the neck with all her strength, allowing the moment to consume her.

Alexa groaned deeply as their tongues met. Lauren tasted exactly the same, her sweet mouth and lips so eager to be caressed. The princess felt as if she was home once again. She couldn't break away from this woman if her very life depended on it. Finally though when air ceased to be in her lungs, she pulled back just long enough to breathe before meeting Lauren's mouth once again. They seemed so thirsty for each other, the years having kept them apart so long.

It took long minutes before reality slipped back into the librarian's mind. This was not some fantasy she had created in her head. Alexa was really there doing what she had always dreamed she would. However, there were complications that made Lauren finally pull away and take a shaky breath. Dark eyes were blazing in fervor as she gazed at them. It seemed to her that the love Alexa claimed she would always have for her still existed after her five-year absence. Nevertheless, they were different people now.

"Your highness, we must not do that."

"We both want to. You cannot deny me that, Lauren."

The redhead shook her head. "I do not deny it. The fact remains you are married, and I cannot allow myself to become emotionally involved with you."

"You already are. This ring proves it. You still love me. Say it is true."

Lauren shook her head and broke away from the arms that held her. Her body protested as much then as it did five years ago, but she knew it was for the best. "I cannot. I will not."

"Then you deny yourself your happiness still."

"I thought I had moved beyond this. For heaven's sake, I accepted another woman's hand, thinking that I had gotten over you."

"Then why are you not together?"

"Because as it turns out, my heart was not with her. I cannot marry someone I do not love."

Alexa nodded her head. "That is understandable. Take it from someone who has done that, it is more difficult than you expect. Sometimes it can work, but most of the time it does not."

"I know, which is why I remain unmarried to this day. You, on the other hand, had no choice. You are married, and from what I hear, it is to a dedicated wife."

"Meredith has proven to be more devoted to the crown and to me than I ever imagined possible. She has matured into quite a woman and holds the post with dignity and grace. She is not the fledgling teenager that I married. She is truly a princess."

"And you love her," Lauren supplied.

"I must confess that I do, but it is in a special way. I feel more in friendship than in matrimony. I care for her deeply, but as far as loving her, it is not the kind of love I dreamed of having in a spouse. The only time I have felt love of that nature has been with you, Lauren. I have never known it to exist elsewhere," she admitted.

Nodding her head in concession, the librarian mumbled, "Nor have I."

The looked at each other silently for several moments. "So, what shall we do then?"

"Nothing. There is nothing to do. You must return to your wife."

"Have dinner with me tonight," Alexa suggested, ignoring Lauren's comment.

"Excuse me?"

"Have dinner with me tonight at the palace."

"Have you lost your senses, Lex? What would your wife think of such an idea?"

"She will not be there. She leaves this evening to see her family."

"What about your mother?"

"She is in Europe. No one is residing at the palace but me. Please have dinner with me tonight. I cannot just let you walk out of my life again now that you have invited yourself back into it. At the very least can we not try to be the friends we once were?"

"Friends? Surely you jest. I do not think that is wise."

"Can we just try? Accept my invitation to dinner. After tonight if you feel friendship is out of the question, then you will be free to say so, and I will respect your wishes. Just give me one night."

Going against her better judgment, Lauren replied, "Very well."

"Wonderful. I will have a car come for you at your home around 7:00. I would ask that you dress in formal attire."

"All right."

Alexa smiled at her. "Thank you for giving me this chance." With that she left the librarian standing there, and she and Matthew returned to the palace.

That evening the princess saw her wife to the airport for her trip to the Adams's retreat in New England with a promise to join her in a few days. Then she returned for her evening with Lauren. Standing in her room contemplating her wardrobe options, she decided on her favorite black tuxedo, the jacket with tails and a stark white shirt with white tie. She was anxious about Lauren coming to the palace. She had not been there since her twenty-sixth birthday party, and so much had happened in those five years. Part of her wanted desperately to give in to the desires both of them so evidently had, but she knew Lauren was a woman of conviction, and friendship was the best route if she ever wanted to see the other woman again.

Just as she finished dressing, Matthew announced Lauren's arrival. Alexa quickly rushed down the corridor and into the library where her secretary had placed her guest. Opening the door, though, she had to steady herself momentarily at the sight before her. Lauren was dressed in a royal blue gown that brushed the floor and bared her shoulders. The diamonds that Alexa had given her adorned her ears, neck, and hand, but the diamond necklace was especially prominent, sitting perfectly centered against the gentle slopes of the thirty-five-year-old's breasts, drawing Alexa's eyes to the treasures she knew hid just beneath the dress. The princess thought she might actually faint for a moment, but she smiled at her company and willed her sexual cognizance into the back of her mind.

"Lauren, thank you for coming. You look beautiful this evening. Blue sets off your eyes. I have always thought so."

"Thank you, Lex. You look nice too."

"Dinner will be in the small dining room this evening and shall be served momentarily. Perhaps we should adjourn and take our seats," she suggested. "May I offer you my arm?"

With a smile at the chivalry, the redhead took the extended arm with her right hand and allowed herself to be escorted to their meal. Alexa made a point to pull out her chair instead of having an attendant do so before she took her own. Dinner started as a quiet affair, neither woman truly knowing what topics were safe for discussion, but the awkwardness began to fade after the first course as they found common ground in books and aviation. Lauren found herself charmed and at ease with the more mature princess. Time had turned her from a zealous hellion into a charismatic adult. She could see why her country was so fascinated by the crowned princess, more so now than they ever had been. The heir had grown up in their time apart.

As dessert was set before them, Alexa refilled Lauren's wine glass as well as her own. "Well, now that we have had our meal, what could I interest you in doing? Perhaps I could give you a tour of the palace? There are some fascinating features that people do not get on the general tour. The libraries alone should interest you."

"That sounds lovely. I would love to see the libraries."

"Wonderful." When the meal was finished, Lauren thanked Alexa once again before they set out down the corridor. They went to the main entrance of the palace before the princess gestured around them.

"This is the main entrance hall of course. As you can see paintings hang here of every monarch this country has had starting with King George and ending with my mother, Queen Faith. Someday my picture will hang amongst the land's greatest rulers, God willing of course. And on the other side are various family photographs of interest."

They perused the hall slowly together, but Lauren paused in front of Queen Alexa's portrait. "I guess I never realized how much alike you two really looked. This could be you."

The princess nodded her head. "The only way to really tell that it is not is by the military uniform. My grandmother chose U.S. Marine Corps as her branch of service when she was younger, so the dress uniform is different, but being the military child you were, I am sure you already knew that."

The redhead nodded. She turned to look at the other side of the hallway but came face to face with a large photograph of Princess Alexa and Princess Meredith on their wedding day. Her heart dropped, but she forced her feelings away as she quickly turned her eyes to the picture next to it. "Queen Lara was a stunning woman," she mentioned, gazing at a casual photograph of Queen Lara and Queen Alexa together.

"She was that," Alexa conceded. "Sometimes I wonder what might have happened had they not married. I was told that Queen Alexa originally intended to marry my other grandmother, Lady Gwyneth Jefferson. Had that happened, I probably would not be standing here today. The royal

family would look completely different. That is a little known fact."

"That is quite interesting. I had never realized that."

"Come. Let me start by showing you the library on the tour. It is the largest one we have." Both women quietly went about the tour. Alexa explained each room in detail as she presented it. When the many libraries were seen, she took Lauren through the royal offices before suggesting they see the most sacred of places, the private chambers of the royal family members.

"Are you sure that is okay? I would not want to intrude on anyone's privacy," Lauren questioned hesitantly.

The brunette paused before answering, "Well, perhaps just mine then. I would certainly not want to be caught snooping around my mother's room. She would be upset. My quarters are this way."

Together they went off the younger woman's wing of the palace. Lauren found her mind racing as Alexa took her into her bedchamber. Her eyes gazed upon the bed that was flanked by nightstands on either side and on them there were photographs. On one side there was a single photo of Meredith in her wedding gown and on the other was one of Alexa standing at the top of the steps of the Cathedral on her wedding day smiling at the crowd. The librarian was drawn to the picture. Without even asking permission, she went to it and picked it up to view closer.

Seeing what she had done, Alexa went and stood next to her. "Meredith says she loves this picture of me. I do not know why. If she only knew what I was thinking when that photograph was taken, I do not think it would reside where it does."

"What were you thinking?"

"That I had seen you in the crowd. I was sure of it, so much so that I went down to the people to find you. Looking back, I know it was an absurd notion."

Lauren nodded her head. "I knew it."

"You knew what?"

The older woman paused in her answer. Figuring she should just be honest, she said, "I knew you had seen me. It was not your imagination."

"You were there? Why?"

"Because I thought it would help bring me closure, but when I felt your eyes connect with mine, I knew I had been discovered and fled before you had a chance to do anything irrational. To this day I wish I had not done that. It did not bring any closure, simply sadness. In fact, closure did not come until much later."

Alexa nodded her head. "I understand what you mean." The women looked at each other intently

for a moment. The princess knew it would be so easy to just reach out and touch Lauren. She saw the desires there, and the opportunity had presented itself on several occasions but none so obvious as standing next to her bed. She sensed that all it would take was the first kiss, but she knew she had made a promise to the librarian not to do such a thing. Forcing herself away from the temptation, she crossed the room toward the door. "There are several verandas on which to sit, or perhaps you would like to see my favorite garden."

"It is getting late. I should be going. I have to work tomorrow morning."

Alexa nodded her head. "Very well. I will escort you back to your car," she said, deciding it was best to allow the evening to come to a close before she gave in to any temptations. Extending her arm to her guest, she led the way back out to the front of the palace. Standing at the open door of the car, Alexa smiled. "Thank you for coming this evening. I had a lovely time."

"So did I. Thank you for having me, Lex."

"If it would be all right with you, I would like to see you again."

"I would like that."

"Would tomorrow night be too soon? I will be leaving the day after tomorrow on family business, but I am free tomorrow. If you are available, I would like to spend the evening with you."

"All right. It just so happens that I am free. What would you like to do?"

"What about dinner and a movie here at the palace?"

Lauren shook her head. "I have a better idea. Come to my place, and I will make you dinner. I am a little uncomfortable being at the palace."

"I understand. Fine. That sounds wonderful. I have a meeting at the Pentagon that should adjourn around 5:00, and then I can be there."

"All right. I will be expecting you around 6:00 then. Is there something in particular you would like to eat?"

Alexa shook her head. "If I remember correctly, everything you make is delicious. I look forward to the surprise."

The following evening Alexa was still in her meeting when her watch read 6:00. She was tired and irritated that the fellow officers were still debating over the last item on their agenda when she had plans with the most beautiful woman in the world. Finally having had enough, she called for an adjournment with the conversation to be taken up at the next meeting. Going out to her car, she knew she didn't have time to stop to change, so she just raced off to the librarian's place with the directions Matthew had provided for her. Pulling up to the front of the building, she

frowned. Her ex-lover had given up the nice house Alexa had bought her for a much smaller condo. She knew she didn't like it, but she also knew she had no say either, so she simply exited her car, and called her security detail to let them know she had arrived safely. Heading inside the princess found Lauren's door and gave a strong knock.

Lauren was in her kitchen cursing at herself for allowing her heart to feel hurt by the fact that Alexa had not shown up for dinner as she had promised when she heard the knock. Figuring it was the princess, she went to answer the door, but as soon as she opened it, she felt her breath leave her at the woman who stood before her. Alexa was standing in her military uniform looking as sexy as she had ever seen her. Her military decorations took up most of the left side of her shirt and she held her cover in her hand. She was wearing an apologetic gaze.

"I am so sorry, Lauren. My Joint Chiefs of Staff meeting ran much later than I expected. As the Chairman, I could hardly just leave. Finally I had to adjourn even though we were not finished, because I did not want to keep you waiting any longer. Please accept my apology."

She nodded her head. "Certainly, Admiral Washington. Please come in. Dinner is ready."

"Thank you," the princess replied, stepping into the condo. Her eyes scanned the place. Although modest in size, it was tastefully decorated.

"Here. Let me take your cover," she said, taking it from Alexa's hand and hanging it on the coat rack near the door. "Would you like a tour?"

"That would be wonderful."

Dutifully the librarian showed off her humble dwelling, ending with her bedroom. As they stood in the doorway, the brunette gazed at the bed as her mind wandered. For a brief moment she wondered if that was the same bed they had made love in for the last time, but she didn't dare ask. "You have a lovely place, Lauren. It suits you."

"Thanks. I have worked hard to get it just as I want it. I guess the only still missing is someone with whom to share it." Alexa felt her heart accelerate at the comment for a moment until the redhead continued, "But I hope it is just a matter of time before I have a baby."

"A baby? You are having a baby?" the princess questioned in trepidation.

"No. Not yet. I think someday soon I will. I am not getting any younger, and I have always wanted children."

"You would do that without a spouse?"

Lauren nodded. "If I wait for a spouse to come along before having a child, I am afraid that door will be closed before I even have a chance. No, I have decided it is time to take control of my life and do what I want."

They walked back toward the kitchen. "So, when are you planning on getting pregnant?"

"I figured I would start trying in a few months. I would like to be pregnant by my next birthday. Thirty-six is a bit late to begin this process, especially with how many kids I would like to have."

"How many?"

"I was thinking four was a nice number."

"Four children? That is a lot of work, is it not, especially for one person?"

Lauren shrugged. She couldn't believe she was having this discussion with Alexa, but since she was already in the middle of it, she just answered, "It is what I want, and I deserve to get what I want."

"That certainly is true. If I may ask, how are you going to have a child? Are you going to use a donor?"

"I will have to. I have not decided on any, though. I am still in the process."

"Do you think that donor is going to be a man or a woman?" Alexa asked as she took a seat at the table. Her eyes surveyed the table settings and intimate candles, and her heart started to make itself known once again.

"What do you mean a man or a woman?"

"Exactly that. Are you going to use a sperm or egg donation? What about a clone?"

"Alexa, most of the world uses sperm donors."

"Well, the royal family has been doing egg donation for years."

"Well, I have news for you, Lex. The rest of the world does not necessarily have the resources to do that. It is incredibly expensive to combine two eggs into an embryo. DNA extraction is quite expensive. I did the research, and I cannot afford it."

"You could do that if you wanted. All you have to do is ask me, and I would help you. I thought I made that clear to you years ago."

Lauren lowered her head and sighed. "Yes, you did. I remember, but that was a lifetime ago. Friends do not typically step over certain boundaries. That is a boundary I do not wish to cross with you again," she stated with sharpness to her voice.

The princess sat there stunned for a moment at the tone she had received. She hadn't ever heard that particular sound in Lauren's voice. It seemed a cross between being upset at her and saddened by something. Not sure what to say, the princess just said, "I am sorry if I bothered you

with these questions. They are none of my business. Please forgive me for being so rude." The older woman shook her head but didn't raise it to meet Alexa's gaze. Instead she just stood there a moment, and before Alexa realized it, she heard the other woman start crying. Immediately she stood from her chair and went to her, placing consoling arms around Lauren's waist. "Lauren, I am so sorry. Please do not cry."

Lauren's head found its way onto Alexa's right shoulder as arms circled her neck. They were quiet for several minutes. Finally though the librarian began to settle herself with several large cleansing breaths. "I am sorry, Lex. It is hard for me to talk about this. I still have some unresolved emotions on this subject."

Thinking she was the reason for the unresolved feelings she asked, "Would it help if you talked about it? I am willing to listen."

Lauren shrugged. "It is just that if I had married Janice I would probably already be pregnant by now. We were going to start a family this year. Sometimes I think I threw away my last chance for a wife and child."

Alexa could feel that familiar breaking of her heart whenever she was close to her ex. Nevertheless, she tried to remain strong. "Oh, I see. I take it Janice is your ex-fiancée?"

The redhead nodded. "We should have been married by now. I should have been pregnant by now. We were going to do the DNA combination with our eggs. Being a fertility doctor, it was going to be easy for her to get it covered for us."

"I see. So that really is the method you wanted to use, and now you cannot, because she is no longer in your life." Lauren gave another nod. Wanting to find out more about the woman who Lauren had fallen for, she asked, "Well, if you still love her, why are you not together?"

Lauren didn't answer for a moment as she just took in the feeling of Alexa's body close to her own. She wanted to be honest and tell the woman she loved that she was the reason, but it would serve no purpose. There was nothing either of them could do to change the past. "Do not get me wrong. I loved Janice, still do, but in a way similar to how you have described your relationship to Meredith. Janice is a kind woman, gentle, giving. She treated me so well. I was lucky to have her, but in the end I just did not love her as I wanted to love my spouse. We are still friends today, but that is all we could ever be. If I could not make a relationship work with her, then I am not meant to have a relationship. She is the perfect woman. It is simply too bad that I could not fall in love with the perfect woman."

"The perfect woman? Well, I am sorry things did not go the way you had wanted."

"Me too."

"If you do not mind me asking, you said she was a fertility doctor? Does she practice here in the city?"

"Yes, she has a practice with several other doctors. They are renowned as the best clinic in the country. Why do you ask?"

"Wait a minute. Is her name Janice McQuade?"

"Yes. Do you know her?" Lauren inquired carefully.

Alexa sighed and pulled away from the redhead. "She is one of our doctors. Meredith and I are using that clinic."

"You are having fertility problems?"

The princess nodded. "Meredith was diagnosed with endometriosis. She has not been able to get pregnant. The doctors are starting to wonder if she ever will," she admitted slowly. "Dr. McQuade has operated on the both of us to extract eggs. I am going back in next week for another procedure. Everyone believes Meredith is the perfect wife for me, but in reality she cannot do what is required in the law. She cannot give me children. My mother does not want the public to know." She paused before adding, "No one knows that, Lauren. No one can ever know that. I should not have even told you. My mother made us swear ourselves to secrecy."

"I would never tell anyone. You know I have always kept you secrets, Alexa. I will not tell this one."

"Thank you. It is actually kind of nice to have someone to talk to about it. Mere and I have been going crazy. It has taken over our entire lives." Looking at her feet, the princess paused. She had more to say, but she didn't think it was wise.

Seeing the look on Alexa's face, Lauren came toward her. "You can tell me anything, Lex. You know that," she encouraged.

The princess picked up a wine glass off of the table and took a big sip of the white wine. She needed some liquid courage just then. "Mere and I are far from the happy couple perceived by the media. Do not get me wrong. We are good friends, but we are not in love. Even though we share the same bed, we do not know each other anymore. We have not had sex in three years, and I do not think we ever will again."

Lauren didn't know how to respond for a moment. In one way she was thrilled at the idea that the princess was not sustaining any sexual relations with her wife, for it gave her hope, false hope, but hope all the same, because she knew she had what the heir craved. On the other hand, though, she was saddened by the fact that the woman she loved was so miserable with her life. "That must be difficult for you. You used to thrive on the physical closeness. I remember that."

"Yes, well, now holding hands is as close as we get. An occasional cuddle on a cold night and a chaste kiss at the end of the day is all that greets me. I should have run away from my life when I had the chance," she grumbled, finishing off the glass in her hand.

Knowing exactly what she was implying, Lauren's heart palpitated a little. Putting her arms around the taller woman, she pulled her toward her, so their bodies were pressed together. She felt Alexa respond with a sigh as strong arms embraced her. Neither said anything for minutes as Lauren rested with her eyes closed, head under the heir's chin. She could feel Alexa's heartbeat, and for a moment it took her back to the summer they met.

She recalled one Saturday morning shortly after her birthday. Alexa has spent the night at her place, and they had gone straight to bed after a short dinner and walk on the beach. The night had been filled with tender fervency. To that very day she could still remember what Alexa felt like, her mouth, her hands adoring her body, but it was the morning after that held such intimate feelings for her. Lying in bed with her head on the brunette's chest, listening to her breathe and to her heart beating in a slow calming cadence made her feel safe. Large strong hands had caressed her red hair in a gentle display of fondness, much in the same way they were in the present. It was a memory Lauren had locked away in her heart and only thought about in rare moments, but it epitomized the love she and Alexa had once shared, a love she still had for the woman who held her. Her reflections were broken suddenly, though, when she felt the brunette's heart speed up as heat suffused her hands where she was touching the heir's back. Immediately she looked up into dark eyes. She recognized what she saw there. Transparent longing stared right at her, paralyzing her for a brief moment. She couldn't look away nor could she move, but Alexa did nothing, only peered into her blue eyes. Lauren knew it would only take one kiss, and things would revert back to old times, but she knew she shouldn't. It would only complicate their lives, so instead she did the hard thing and stepped away from the temptation.

"I think it might be best if we ate," she suggested.

The rest of the night was quiet. Even though Alexa was supposed to stay for a movie afterwards, she made an excuse to leave after she had done the dishes. Lauren agreed even though she didn't want to, but she knew it was for the best.

Chapter VIII: Love Vanquishes Duty

A week later Alexa found herself at the doctor's office for her egg extraction. As she sat there waiting for the doctor, she thought about what she had learned from Lauren at their last dinner. The door opened interrupting her thoughts, though.

"Your highness, it is good to see you again," Lauren's ex-fiancée, Janice McQuade stated with a friendly smile.

"Dr. McQuade, how are you?"

"I'm well. How are you?"

"Just fine. Listen. Before we begin the procedure, I was wondering if I could speak to you about something."

"Certainly. What is on your mind?"

"When you do the egg extraction today, I was wondering if I could ask you to remove more than you need."

"Why would you want me to do that?"

"I would like to have some extra. This procedure is always so arduous, and to me they are just eggs. I would prefer that I not have to do this again, so please take more than you need and keep them frozen just in case. You do not even have to combine them with Meredith's right away. Just save them. We can always discard them later if they are not used."

"If that is what you truly want, I can do that."

"Good. Thank you, Dr. McQuade. I appreciate this." There was a pause between them, but Alexa wanted to know more about the relationship the doctor once had with her former lover. Unable to stop herself, she said, "You know, I just recently realized we have a mutual acquaintance."

"Oh? Who might that be?"

"Lauren Fulton."

Janice looked at her in confusion. "I didn't realize you knew Lauren. She's my ex-fiancée."

"So I heard but I also heard you were still friends."

"Yes. She is a lovely woman. It's too bad it didn't work out for us. I loved her. She deserved the best."

"May I ask what happened?"

"We broke up over something that looking back seems kind of ridiculous. We broke up over a ring she always wore. I suppose it was just a symptom of other problems, though. We just weren't meant to be."

"A diamond ring?"

"You know the one. It looked like an engagement ring, but she wore it on her right hand," the doctor mentioned. "She never would take that thing off. She said it was a special gift, and when I pressed her about it, she said someone special gave it to her, some military friend. It didn't take a genius to figure out it was a lover, who I think she still had feelings for. Nevertheless, it just wasn't meant to be for the two of us. I hope someday she finds the love of her life."

"That makes two of us."

"How long have you known Lauren?"

"About five years. We met when she still lived in Florida, and I was a pilot at the base nearby."

There was an awkward pause between them. Alexa could see Janice visibly stiffen and then look at her thoughtfully. "Were you a Navy pilot by chance?"

"Yes. Why?"

"It was you, wasn't it? The one who broke her heart."

"What do you mean?"

"When we first started dating, she said she had gotten her heart broken by a Navy pilot who was from this area. She said she had met her in Florida, and she had moved here to be closer to her when her duty was over there. She's never told me who it was, even though I asked several times."

Alexa shook her head. "I think Lauren's secrets are best told by her. If she wanted you to know about her former lover, she would have told you."

Janice nodded her head. "That's probably true. I'd really like to know who that was to tell them what an idiot they were, though. She still loves them, whoever they are. I think she always will."

Over the course of the next few weeks Alexa and Lauren spent time together having dinner or talking on the phone. It seemed quite obvious to both of them the attraction they once shared was still there, even though neither was brave enough to confront it. However, then Alexa found out some news that changed the way she felt about her relationship with Lauren. She had suspected it for some time, but the evidence had finally made it into her hands. Meredith was having an affair.

That night over dinner Alexa was quiet as she and Lauren ate at the librarian's house. The older woman could sense something wrong with the princess, but she wasn't sure she should ask. The gaze she was getting across the table was sending the message that even though something was bothering her, Alexa didn't know how to talk about it. She wanted to, but she didn't have the words right then, so Lauren was patient. She waited until the meal was finished and Alexa had washed the dishes as she always did.

They went into the den and sat on the sofa. Alexa refilled her own wine glass from the bottle before gesturing to Lauren's glass. The redhead nodded in acceptance and held out her glass for the princess to fill. Neither spoke for a moment, but finally Lauren put her wine on the coffee table and curled her hand around Alexa's arm. "I can see something is bothering you. We are friends, Lex. If you want to talk about it, we can."

The brunette nodded her head as she finished off her wine in one large sip. She desperately wanted to tell her, so she finally admitted, "I found something out today that was shocking. No one knows this except Matthew and me." Lauren nodded her head for her to continue. Taking a

breath she said, "I found out that Mere is having an affair."

"Do you know with whom?"

"Yes," she confessed. "Someone I never would have expected."

Lauren waited for further disclosure but none came. She figured Alexa didn't want to tell her that. "Well, I am sure this is hard on you. I know you and Meredith have been having problems."

"Well, that is just it. We have not really been having problems. After all we are just friends. I am a little hurt that she went behind my back, but I guess I am sadder that neither of us is happy. I care about her, and I want her to be happy. If it is with this other woman, then fine, but we both have these obligations that keep us from being who we are. We have to have this front for the world, and I really am tired of it. I just want to be able to be myself, and I do not feel like myself anywhere but here."

"At least you have here. You will always have here," Lauren stated, tightening her grip around the taller woman's shoulders. Pausing for a moment, Alexa knew she had something else to say, but she was working up the nerve. She was feeling more vulnerable than she had ever felt in the redhead's presence. Turning into the embrace, she pulled Lauren to her, and the women held each other closely. "Come here," Lauren whispered, pulling the heir down against the couch next to her. They laid in each other's embrace for a long time in silence, but their bodies spoke louder than any words ever could, and within only a few minutes they found the position in which they felt most natural to each other, the same position they had always cuddled in at bedtime when they had been dating. Lauren's smaller frame draped across Alexa's with her head on the heir's chest listening to her heart.

It felt incredibly good to Alexa to have Lauren in her arms. She knew she had been fighting her sensibilities for the months they had reunited. Every night she had been with the librarian, she had walked away aching with desire, but right then she felt more loved than she had in the last five years. For a moment she forgot all her problems and just focused on Lauren. "It feels so good to hold you," she confessed in a whisper.

The comment took Lauren by surprise. She knew she had been feeling things for the princess again, but just then she knew those feelings were returned. Raising her head slowly off of Alexa's chest, she gazed down into dark eyes. She had done that so many times before, and just like then those eyes showed so much. Immediately she realized where she was and how close she was to what she wanted. However, the princess seemed to have taken the initiative as she cupped Lauren's cheek with her right hand. "Alexa," she murmured.

The heir saw it all in Lauren's face and heard it in the way Lauren said her name. It was still there. The love had never left, and just then Alexa was desperate for a feel of it. "This is ridiculous, Lauren. I cannot go on this way," she declared, before leaning up to find the librarian's lips with her own. The world started to spin at the familiar feeling. Lauren's mouth eagerly cohered to her own as her hands became active along the redhead's body. She took in the landscape of her back as her fingers slipped under the casual cotton shirt Lauren had been

wearing. The skin felt just the same. Both of them indulged in the feeling for several minutes, but Lauren finally pulled away.

"Lex, we cannot do this."

"I cannot deny my feelings for you any more, Lauren. For the past five years I have had to force them deep inside myself, and I do not want to live that way any longer. I love you. I have never stopped loving you. I want to be with you so badly that nothing else seems to matter. The day you refused my hand in marriage, something inside me died, and it has only been these last few months being with you that I have started to feel alive again. You make me feel more alive than anyone else. I want to touch you."

Lauren shook her head as she quickly rose from the sofa. Her body screamed at her mind to stop, but her head forced her to move away. "Alexa, please do not say such things," she implored.

The princess followed her across the room, pinning her against the wall leading back toward the kitchen. "Why not? I know you feel the same way, Lauren. Do not deny your heart." Alexa fell to her knees as tears came to her eyes. She gripped Lauren by the thighs, forcing her to stay in place. "Please. I am begging you. I crave you, Lauren. I dream about making love to you every night that I visit here. I have not forgotten how you feel against my body, your weight underneath me, your breasts heaving against mine. I cannot forget how you feel from the inside, how you would hold me inside yourself, refusing to relinquish my touch. You make me feel like I am home. You are the only woman who has ever made me feel. You are the only woman I have ever wanted, and you are the only woman I ever want to make love to for the rest of my life. Please. Do not deny my desperate heart the healing power of your love. I know you love me. I can feel that you do. Please just say it is true."

Looking down at the princess on her knees in front of her with tears streaming down her face, Lauren felt the lock on her heart shatter. She couldn't deny it any longer. She didn't care who Alexa was. The only thing that meant something to her was that this woman kneeling before her loved her. Sinking to her knees, so they were on the same level, Lauren took Alexa's face in her hands. Tears began to run her cheeks as well as she whispered, "It is true. I love you, Lex. I have never stopped. So many nights I have wanted you. Your touch is the only one that has ever set me ablaze in a fashion I never knew possible. It has been so hard having you around, but I thought it was better to at least be able to see you, even if we could never be lovers again. I should have never let you go. It was the biggest mistake I have ever made. You have no idea how badly I wanted to say yes when you proposed to me. I should have. We would both be happy. Now we are both miserable in our lives."

"But we can find that happiness again. As long as we are together, that is all I need."

"Your life is so complicated. I do not know if I could handle it."

"Could you try for us? All I want is another chance to love you."

Lauren shook her head. "I do not know if I can." Alexa felt her heart drop into her stomach, but

the redhead continued. "However, there is one thing I do know, Alexa."

"What is that?"

The older woman leaned in the heir's ear and kissed it gently as she confessed, "I do not think I could make it one more second without feeling your hands on my body. Tomorrow is going to bring its own challenges, but tonight I want you to make love to me."

Alexa moaned at the request and the feeling of Lauren's lips against her neck. "It would give me great pleasure to do just that. I have waited for five years to hear you make that request. Take me to your bed, and I will give you heaven." It wasn't until late that night that the princess tried to leave her lover's bed. She could see the tears on the librarian's face as she stood at the foot of the bed dressing in her clothes to go home. The redhead said nothing at first, but the tears spoke for her. Alexa felt them in her soul. "This feels like *deja vu*," she mentioned. "The last time you cried this way after making love was the morning you broke my heart. Is that what I am about to receive from you now?" she questioned hesitantly.

Lauren shook her head and sat up. She held out her arms to the princess, who came and stood in them. "I do not know what to do. I love you more than I have ever loved anyone else, Alexa. This will never work, though. We both know it."

"What about this has to work? You have my love, Lauren. What else could I give you? What do you want from me? Name it and it is yours."

She shook her head as it dropped against the heir's stomach. Alexa gently ran her fingers through the soft hair, not knowing what else to say. "You could not possibly give me what I want, Alexa."

"That is not true. Are you not satisfied? Do I not please you?"

"It is not just about sex. Just because you are the best lover I have ever had, does not mean I am satisfied. There are other things I want that you cannot give me."

"Like what?" Lauren wouldn't answer, so the heir ventured a guess. "A baby?"

"What?" she asked in obvious shock.

"You said you wanted to have a baby. Is that what you want from me?" the princess asked, kneeling by the bedside.

"That is impossible. We both know that."

"Lauren, do not think for me. I want you to answer my question from your heart. Do not think about any potential consequences. Just tell me the truth. Do you want to have a baby with me?"

"How can I not think about consequences? That would be irresponsible of me."

"Because those are my consequences to bear, not yours. Is that what this is all about with you? Are you afraid of the consequences of our love?"

"You cannot tell me that you are not. Your mother would never forgive you."

Alexa snarled as she answered, "My mother has taken away everything that means anything to me, and I am tired of it. I am ready to take it back. I am ready to be the woman I know I can be. I will stand up to my queen and stand down from my position if that is what you desire. I can take care of you. I am an Admiral in the United States Navy. That position pays well. You will never have to be without. Five years is enough pain for both of us. Just tell me your longing, and I will appease you."

Lauren sighed as she broke their gaze. Changing the subject slightly, she asked, "Do you remember the night we met?"

"Of course. You rebuked me like no other."

"Yes, well that was before I knew who you were. That night when I got home and went to sleep I had a dream about you, about us really. I dreamed that you and I were married with four children, four adorable girls. I dreamed about us living in my tiny house on the beach and making love every night under the stars. It was a good dream. Even though I was angry with you that first night, something in me was still attracted to you. I remember that dream like I had it yesterday, and sometimes when I am all alone, I fantasize about it. It is a dream I wish to live, Flash. I deserve my dream or at least as close to it as I can get."

"You are absolutely right, Lauren. You deserve to live your dream, and if that is what you really want, I will make it happen for you. Right now I am married, but I do not have to stay married. Mere is for all purposes infertile, and I can legally divorce her under the law for that reason. That will take time, though. It could take another two years, and I know you want to have a baby now. If you are okay with having a baby without us being married first, I will give you a child now."

"But then that child will be heir to the throne. I do not want that for her. This will never work, Lex. You cannot change who you are."

The princess paused for a moment to think. Nodding her head with a solution, she said, "We will not tell her. We will not tell anyone. I will be your donor, and I will take care of you financially. If you do not want me to be a parent to her in the traditional sense, then fine. I am far from having a traditional life, and I am not sure how much I would be able to see her anyway. You would be her mother, and I will be whoever you want me to be to this little girl. Think about it, Lauren. You want to have a baby with me, and I want to have one with you. We can do this without hurting anyone if we are just secret about it."

The redhead shook her head in concern. "I do not know. It is so tempting. I never imagined you would ever offer yourself this way. It is almost surreal. I need time to think about it. This is complicated, and people could get hurt."

"All right. Fine. Think about it but for once in your life, Lauren, think about yourself. This is what you want, and I am willing to give it to you. Please take this gift, the gift of life and love. I could bear to go on living my life the way it is now if I had to, knowing that you are carrying my child that was conceived out of our love for each other and nothing else. To know we are bonded together through a baby would be the best thing to ever happen to my life."

"Mine too," she whispered.

"Then I think we should do what will make us both happy. Just think about that."

A couple of weeks passed before the subject came up again. However, one night as the two lay in bed, Lauren kissed her lover on the shoulder as she asked, "Can we talk about this baby idea?"

"Of course. Have you come to a decision?"

The librarian nodded her head as she propped herself up on her elbow and looked down at the princess. "You asked me what I wanted, Lex, so I think I should be honest with you about my desires."

"Certainly. I want you to, Lauren. It is the only way we are going to get anywhere."

The redhead nodded. She took a deep breath before saying, "I want to get married to you, and I want to have children with you. Those are the two things I want in life more than anything. I should have been honest with you about that five years ago, but I was afraid that I was taking you away from your destiny. Now I know that I was just delaying my own. I love you, and I want to be with you. I am ready to be the woman I know I can be, and if that means I have to go before the queen myself and tell her that I refuse to allow her to ruin my life, I will."

"Oh, Lauren. It makes me so happy to hear you finally say that. I want those things just like you. The only problem is that I am already married, and getting a divorce will take time. That is time we really do not have to waste when it comes to children."

"I know. If we have to do this out of order, then that is what we will do. I know it will take time to divorce Meredith, and furthermore, it will be complicated, especially since you do not have children together, and your mother will have something to say about that." She paused for a moment. "I have actually thought about this part the most. Your mother will be much more forgiving for leaving Meredith if you had a baby together to carry on the line. As much as I hate the thought of you having a child with another woman, I think it would be easier if you and Meredith had a child before you got a divorce."

"You are probably correct. However, I do not care about that. My mother's wrath means nothing to me if I can have you. Besides the doctors are not even sure she can have children."

"Just hear me out on this, Lex. If you have a baby with Meredith, it would ensure that our girls would never have to take the throne. I know we do not plan on telling anyone, but the fact will

remain that by being your children, they will be princesses whether your mother likes that or not. Your mother would automatically want your and Meredith's child to be heir, not ours. They would be safe from those responsibilities."

"All right. I see what you are saying. I do not like it, but I understand it. That still leaves the problem of Meredith and I being married."

"You are going to have to remain married until you have a baby, Lex. There is no way around that. As much as I hate to admit it, it is the truth."

"But..."

Lauren placed her fingers to Alexa's lips to silence her. "Listen to me, Lex. I spent the last five years miserable, thinking that I gave up my true love. Now I know you and I still feel the same. That is enough for me right now. We can have children now, and I can wait for you as long as I have to as long as I know when it is all over, we will be together. Promise me now that you will come for me when the time is right. That is all I need."

Leaning up the brunette kissed Lauren sweetly as she turned her onto her back against the bed. Immediately arms pulled her closer, so she was lying between her lover's thighs. Alexa smiled down at Lauren as she tenderly caressed the redhead's face. "I will always come for you, Lauren," she avowed. "You are the woman I want to be with for the rest of my life, and words cannot express how happy you have made me tonight. Nothing gives me greater happiness than to know you love me enough to carry my child."

Lauren smiled at the woman hovered above her. She and her tall, dark, sexy princess were finally going to be together. It was what she had always wanted. "I love you."

"I love you too."

"Stay with me tonight, Lex. I really could not bear it if you went home tonight. I need to be close to you right now."

The princess gave her a charming one-sided grin. "I am not going anywhere. The whole night is yours to do whatever you desire."

In the morning after they had gotten out of bed and taken a shower together, Alexa made them breakfast. Sitting together at the kitchen table, Lauren asked, "Do you have any ideas on how we are going to have this baby? I have not come up with anything yet. I had not even thought that far ahead."

"Never fear, darling. I had eggs extracted weeks ago. I had asked Janice to extract extra, because that process it so grueling that I did not want to have to do it any more if possible. I told her just to keep them frozen and not combine them with Meredith's DNA. I was going to discard them if they were never needed, but that is not necessary now. All we need is your eggs to combine the DNA."

"Well, that is easy enough. Janice has them at the clinic. I had already done that when we were engaged."

"Then there is not time to waste. We can call her today and have her start the process."

"But I thought she was Meredith's doctor. Do you not find that to be a bit of a conflict of interest for her? She is my friend, and I would love to use her as my doctor, but do you think that is wise?"

"It will be fine. I figured you would want to use Janice. She is the best in the country, and you deserve the best of everything. Besides she owes me."

"What does she owe you?"

"That is between us. Do not worry about a thing. We can make an appointment with her together. There are several forms we have to complete, so we might as well go at the same time."

"How about I call her office and make the appointment for me, and you can come along? We probably do not want to arise any suspicions beforehand."

"We could probably get in sooner if you say the appointment is for me."

"That is probably true. Let me try now. The office is open on Saturdays."

Because it was Alexa, she got an appointment for the following week instead of several weeks in advance like the rest of the people who used the clinic. When that day arrived, Alexa and Lauren arrived separately but sat together in a private waiting room like the princess always did when she was there instead of the public one, because the heir demanded privacy. Neither spoke as they just pretended to read magazines.

When the door opened, Janice McQuade didn't even look up from her file at first as she said, "Your highness, you requested my presence. I have a full schedule today, so what can I do for you?" Alexa didn't answer at first, waiting until the doctor raised her eyes. When Janice did she was obviously surprised. "Lauren, hi. I didn't realize you were in here. What's going on?" she questioned.

Alexa stood up from the sofa. "Dr. McQuade, we need to speak with you about a private matter. It is of some urgency."

"Of course. Let's all take a seat. What can I do for you, your highness?" she asked, directing her words to Alexa.

Alexa took Lauren's hand and looked at her for a moment. As soon as she said these next words, there was no turning back, and she wanted to make sure her lover was all right with the events that were about to unfold. Seeing nervousness but conviction in those blue eyes, she turned back

to the doctor. "Lauren and I would like to have a baby. It is my understanding that you have both her eggs and mine. We would like for you to combine the DNA and implant the embryos in Lauren," she stated without any waiver to her voice, even though she too was nervous.

Janice just looked at them for a moment in what could only be described as genuine shock. Finally she turned to her friend. "Lauren, is this what you want? Is this what you really want?"

The redhead looked at her lover for a moment and then back at her friend. "Yes, Janice. It is."

"And, your highness, you are absolutely sure you want to do this?"

"I know what I am doing, Dr. McQuade. Do not question me." Alexa's voice took on an edge to it that made Lauren stiffen. She didn't hear that tone often, but at that moment she was sitting with the heir to the throne, not her lover.

Unable to help herself, she inquired, "Does Princess Meredith know about this?"

Alexa stood up once again. "Lauren, if you would not mind, I need to have a word with Dr. McQuade in private."

Janice looked at the librarian for a moment before saying, "You can go wait in my office. Do you remember the way?"

"Sure."

"This will only take a few minutes," Alexa assured, cupping Lauren's face in her hand for a moment before letting her go. When they were alone, the princess turned cold dark eyes on the doctor. "How dare you question me?"

"I'm sorry, your highness. It is just a conflict of interest for me to try and impregnate Lauren with your eggs when I'm also trying to do the same with the princess."

Stepping into the doctor's space, Alexa growled, "Let me tell you a little something about conflicts of interest, Janice. Do you not find it a conflict to be sleeping with one of your patients?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," she weakly said.

"Do not take me for a fool. I know about you and Meredith. You have been sleeping with my wife. Have you forgotten with whom you are dealing?"

"No, your highness."

"Good. See that you do not. Now let me tell you a little something. I do not care that you are sleeping with Meredith. I care about her, and I want her to be happy. Is she happy with you? Do you give her what she needs?"

"I try my best. She says she is tired of the spotlight, tired of living a lie. This infertility is weighing on her, but she says she can forget when she's with me."

"Good. I am glad to hear it. Listen, Janice. If Meredith has confided in you, then you know by now that our marriage is a farce. She cares about me just the way I care about her, but that is all. We are trying to do what is right by the country, but all we really want to do is what is right by ourselves. I have no objections to you and Meredith if you make her happy. She deserves happiness but so do I, and I have it with Lauren. Lauren wants to have a baby. You know this, and I want to be the one to give her that. You will do as we ask, or you will suffer the consequences of having your affair publicly announced. You do not want that. Think about Meredith."

"Very well. I understand your position."

"Good. And one last thing do not even think about telling Meredith about this. If you do, I will see to it that you never practice medicine again anywhere in the world."

"I won't say a thing. Patient confidentiality is extremely important to me. It's the cornerstone of my practice."

Alexa nodded her head, feeling that they understood each other. "Before we go retrieve Lauren, let me ask you something. Do you love Meredith?"

"Yes."

"Does she love you?"

"She says she does, and I have no reason not to believe her."

"Do you see yourselves having a future together?"

Janice hesitated but finally said, "I would try to give her the world if I could. You know, she cares about you, your highness, but she regrets marrying you. She said the first year it was great, because she thought she was in love with you. However, she says she grew up and realized she never loved you. She was just in lust, and she wishes she had not been so hasty to give in to her parents' and the queen's desires to see you two married." The doctor cracked a small smile. "You know, she actually told me that she wished she had slept with you before the wedding. It was her whole reason for marrying you. She wanted to have sex with you. I guess at nineteen that is a good enough reason to get married."

"Well, that feeling certainly was mutual. It is just too bad we had to walk this path for the last five years."

The doctor shrugged. "Although had you not come to the clinic I may never have met her, so for that I feel blessed."

"That is how I feel with Lauren. Just do me a favor and take care of her. Meredith is a wonderful woman."

"I know; so is Lauren."

"Could we continue our consultation now? I have to get back to my pretend life at some point," she teased.

Janice chuckled for a moment but then grew serious. "You know, Lauren really loves you. I don't want to see her hurt."

"I have no intention of hurting her. I just want to love her freely the way you seem to love Meredith. Maybe some day we can all have that. Maybe some day we can all actually even be friends. Until then, though, I ask you to keep all this between us."

"I understand. Come on. Let's get Lauren."

Walking down the hall to the doctor's personal office, they found the redhead looking out the window. She looked at them nervously, but both women smiled at her. "All right, Lauren. I'm assuming you've been tracking your cycle, so we know when you're ovulating." She nodded her head. "Then this shouldn't be too difficult. We'll combine your DNA with Princess Alexa's, and that will be that. I'll get started on it right away. You two just need to sign some forms."

Coming to her friend, Lauren hugged Janice tightly. "Thank you for understanding," she said.

Chapter IX: The Lost Princess

A year later Alexa was in Scotland at an international conference with other world leaders. Over the last year her mother had been relinquishing some control of the country to her, making it more difficult for her to carry on her affair with Lauren. However, the librarian seemed to understand and was patient with her. It helped both of their morale greatly when the redhead got pregnant. Now the princess was in Europe when she was wishing she were at Lauren's. Her lover's due date was while she was away, but Janice promised to take care of her in her absence. Nevertheless, Alexa was anxiously awaiting the arrival of their first child. She was so excited about it, but she had no one to tell.

That evening as she was attending a gala with other world leaders, her secretary interrupted her during her dinner. He leaned down as he touched her on the arm. "Excuse me, your highness, I have an urgent message for you."

"What is it?" she questioned, not paying him much attention as she smiled at her dinner companion next to her, the princess of Wales.

"It is a private matter, your highness."

Nodding her head in understanding, she excused herself from the table and followed Matthew until she got to her hotel room. When they were alone, she asked, "What is it? I really need to get back downstairs."

Matthew shook his head as she handed her something off the printer. "I think you have a change of plans, Lex." Taking the paper he handed to her, she looked down at it. Her heart stopped beating a moment and then started again in double time. There staring back at her was a photograph of the woman she loved holding a newborn. Lauren's hair was matted and damp, and her blue eyes looked tired, but the bright smile she gave made Alexa's heart melt. Underneath the picture were the words "Anastasia Elise Washington Fulton, born August 1 at 8:37 AM, 7 pounds, 6 ounces, 17 inches long, red hair and blue eyes." The princess felt tears escape as she stared down at the photograph. Arms came around her shoulders as Matthew gave her a hug. "Congratulations, Lex."

She looked at him with questioning eyes. "How did you know?"

"You pay me to know everything about your life, even what you choose not to share. I knew something was going on, and when Ms. Fulton called me this evening requesting to speak with you, I figured you had rekindled your relationship. Now I know it is much more than that."

She nodded her head as she wiped at her face with the back of her hand. "I just wish I could have been there."

He nodded his head. "I have already scheduled to have the royal jet take you home. It will be ready for take off by the time we arrive at the airport. The conference was over tomorrow anyway, so I arranged to get you out of here without the media knowing about it. We are ready to leave as soon as you are. I had someone lay out some traveling clothes for you on the bed, and your bags are packed. Change quickly, so we can go. Your daughter awaits you."

Hugging her secretary once again, she whispered, "Thank you, Matthew, for everything."

He nodded. "I just want you to be happy, Alexa. She makes you happy, and that is all that matters. Go on now."

By early the following morning, the princess arrived at the hospital. Matthew had arranged for her to be snuck in through a private entrance and taken to Lauren's room without the public seeing her. When she got there, she found the redhead and their little girl asleep. Quietly she crept into the room, shutting the door behind her softly. She did her best not to wake either of them, knowing Lauren needed whatever sleep she could get. She gently lowered herself into the rocking chair near the bed and just gazed in awe at the little baby sleeping in the crib next to her. She couldn't believe it. All she ever wanted was there in front of her. Unable to resist, she reached for her daughter. The little girl squirmed as she was picked up and wearily opened her eyes for a moment. Alexa smiled at the sleepy face that greeted her. Bringing her to her chest, she rocked her gently back to sleep.

For the next twenty minutes there was silence in the room. Alexa couldn't tear her eyes away from the precious girl she embraced. Before she had met Lauren, the princess didn't know what love was. She had found it in the librarian, but just then as she held her daughter for the first time, the idea took on a completely different meaning. One look into those drowsy blue eyes, and Alexa was in love. She could hardly believe it could happen so quickly, but she was smitten with the little girl in her arms. If there was ever a doubt that she had made the right decision, it was erased just then as princess and princess sat together.

Finally though, Anastasia began to make noise that started as a whimper until out-right crying overtook her. Alexa did her best to calm her, but it woke Lauren anyway. When the librarian opened her eyes and saw the sight before her, she at first thought she was dreaming. There was Alexa by her side cradling their daughter and trying to soothe her. Her heart overflowed with the feeling of love the princess had for her. "The doctors say different cries mean different things, but I have no idea what that cry is," she mentioned softly.

Alexa jerked her head up at the sound of her lover's voice. She smiled at Lauren. "Sorry I am late."

"It is all right. We understand. You have a world to run. Here. Give her to me. That might be a hungry cry."

Alexa handed over the tiny bundle to Lauren. The redhead buzzed the nurses' station and within minutes a nurse came into the room. She was shocked though to see Alexa there. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize you had company. Did you need something?"

"She is crying, and I thought maybe she might be hungry. She has not eaten anything since I gave birth."

"Well, perhaps we should try to feed her then. Are you going to be breast or bottle feeding her?"

Lauren looked at Alexa for a moment before answering, "I was going to try breast feeding, because it is better for the baby."

"All right. Let me show you the correct technique then."

Unsure of whether or not she should be watching, Alexa offered, "I can leave if you want."

"No. Stay. I want you to stay," Lauren replied as she sat up straighter in bed. She unsnapped the front of her hospital gown and exposed her left breast.

Alexa quickly averted her eyes, even though part of her desperately wanted to watch. She did her best to focus on the floor as the nurse instructed Lauren how to properly feed the baby. It seemed to take several minutes and tries before there was success. When they were left alone again, the brunette risked a look at mother and daughter together. "You look so beautiful right now."

The older woman blushed. "Thank you even though I do not feel beautiful at the moment." She

paused. "Does this make you nervous?" she asked, gesturing to their daughter feeding from her breast.

Alexa shrugged. "It is fascinating. I cannot believe she is here. I have dreamed of this moment with you."

"So have I. She looks like you."

"Do you think? I think she looks like you."

Lauren shook her head. "She has my hair and eye coloring, but she has your face. If you study her, you can see it. She has your nose and your ears. I even think she has some of your smile." She paused once again before looking at her lover. "Thank you for giving me this gift."

"It is my pleasure. I hope this is just one of many more to come."

Lauren nodded. "They are lying when they say you cannot remember the pain. It really hurt, but it was a small price to pay to have heaven on earth. She is perfect."

"Yes, she is."

"It makes me already crave another just like her."

Alexa laughed. "Well, you know if that is what you want, I will certainly make it happen for you. However, I think we should just enjoy our little princess first for a few months."

"She is a princess," Lauren mumbled, looking down at their daughter. Neither spoke as the comment lingered in the air. Both of them knew that the remark was much more true than either wanted to admit. The little life they had created together was indeed a princess. Moreover, she was the heir to the throne behind Alexa, but believing it was in her best interest, they decided the country would never know this little girl. Lauren smiled at Alexa and patted her bed. "Come sit next to me."

Dutifully the princess did as she was told. Moving to the bed, she stretched out next to Lauren, wrapping one arm around her as she watched her daughter suckle. It was the most beautiful thing she thought she had ever seen. Kissing Lauren on the temple, she whispered, "Thank you for loving me enough to have our baby."

The librarian snuggled into her shoulder. "Thank you for never giving up on us."

The following day Lauren was released to go home. Being that her mother still thought she was in Europe, Alexa went back to the condo with her lover and their new baby for some quiet time together. However, the rest of the day and night were anything but quiet as Anastasia woke them from their sleep every few hours.

After a relatively sleepless night, Alexa left Lauren and Anastasia to head home herself, knowing

she was expected back at the palace. Upon her arrival at home, she headed to breakfast. Her parents were sitting there together with Meredith. Her wife gave her a brilliant smile as she walked into the room. "You are back early. Welcome home," she said, hugging Alexa as she sat.

"Thanks. It is good to be home," she stated, giving Meredith a perfunctory kiss on the cheek.
"You look beautiful today, Mere."

"Thank you."

"Meredith was just telling us the wonderful news, Lex. Why did you not tell us before you left for Europe?" the queen questioned.

"News? What news?" the princess inquired as her breakfast was set before her.

Her mother laughed. "What news? Goodness, Lex. You act like the fact that you are going to be a mother is no big deal."

Panic struck Alexa as her eyes darted to Meredith. For a moment she thought Janice had told her wife about Lauren, but her mother wouldn't be happy knowing a woman less than she thought worthy had given birth to the princess's child, so she was confused. Her wife smiled at her and took her gently by the hand. "Alexa, I am pregnant."

"How far along are you?"

"Four months."

"And you waited this long to tell me? You told my mother before you told me?" she asked in surprise.

"I just wanted to be sure. Dr. McQuade thinks I have a good chance at carrying to term."

Inside Alexa's heart hammered wildly. She hadn't expected this, and furthermore, it left her with a nauseating feeling in her stomach. The woman she loved had just had her baby, and now the woman to whom she was married just had declared she was pregnant with her child. Although there was one bright side to the moment, because she promised Lauren she would leave Meredith as soon as the princess had her baby, and it seemed that moment might be closer than she had expected. Knowing she had to look happy, she curved her arm around Meredith's shoulders and squeezed her gently.

"I think we should have a press conference to announce this," Queen Faith stated.

"Maybe we should wait, Mother. You know it has been difficult for Meredith and me, and I do not want to announce anything prematurely."

"But the country is desperate for this good news. We must share it. The rumors about the two of you are flying. We have to do something to put them to rest. This pregnancy will do just that."

"I think we should do something more subtle, Mother. Perhaps a well-timed photo opportunity dressing Meredith in something that shows off her growing physique. Then the rumors will start to be about her being pregnant, but we do not have to say anything. With all the difficulty Meredith has gone through to get here, I would hate to have any added pressures."

"I agree with Lex. I think I would have it rather leaked to the press through rumors than having a press conference. I am nervous enough as it is," Meredith added.

The queen sighed. "Oh very well. Make it soon though. Right now the media is making it sound like you two are on the edge of divorce. They have nothing better to do than write silly nonsense about the two of you."

"Well, we have a charity ball tonight. Perhaps we should play it up then," Alexa suggested. On the inside she cringed. She hated the thought of having to pretend to still be in love and happy with Meredith. Even though she loved her wife dearly as a friend, it was getting tiring lying to everyone.

"I think that is a good idea. The sooner the better," the queen said with finality.

When the meal was over, Alexa took her wife by the hand and escorted her back to their bedroom. However, when she opened the door, she found the space vacant on her wife's side of the room. "What happened in here?" she questioned.

"I moved my things."

"You moved them where?"

"Down the hall. I wanted my own room."

"But what about the fact that we are married, Mere? We are supposed to be sleeping together. Does my mother know about this?"

"No. Do you think I am a fool? Listen, Lex. I am tired of pretending. We might be married, but what we have is a sham. It is bad enough that we have to parade ourselves in public as this doting couple. Right now all I really want at home is to be alone. We hardly see each other these days. Your mother has you so busy running all over the world. You were not even at the session when Dr. McQuade implanted these embryos."

"I have no doubt that Janice took care of you in my absence," she remarked snidely.

"What does that mean?"

"It means I know about your affair with the good doctor, Meredith."

The younger woman just stood there with horror written all over her face. For a moment she

didn't say anything. Finally, though she asked, "How long have you known?"

"A long time, over a year."

"And you did not say anything?"

"What was I supposed to say to you?" Alexa inquired, going to the bed. She took a seat and then patted a spot next to her for her wife. Meredith took the place indicated and just waited. "Look, Mere. You are not the only one tired of this. I understand your frustration with the queen, because I have lived my whole life with that frustration. She is my mother after all. My whole life she has told me what to do and when to do it. You have had her for five years. She wanted us to get married. It was her idea, and she picked you out from all the other available women I could have had as my bride. She was the one that pushed for me to court you and propose to you, because she felt it was right for the country. You bought into that as a teenager. She was the one that pushed both of us into this. You may have not realized it at the time, but she was the one holding all the power in our relationship. She still is."

Meredith nodded her head. "Looking back I can see how that was true. She used to talk to me about you. She was so adamant that I become your wife when really all I ever wanted was to sleep with you. I think she knew that. I guess at nineteen you do not hide that kind of thing well. I was obsessed with the idea of your bedding me. I thought it would make you love me. I went to our marital bed honestly believing that, Lex. In the end I guess it just made you resentful of both her and me."

"I did not resent you. I understood then that you were just a pawn the way I was. We both had a role to play, and we have been playing it to the best of our abilities. I know you are not happy in this marriage, and I do not fault you for seeking happiness elsewhere. I love and adore you, Mere, and I want you to be happy. If it is with Janice McQuade, then fine. She is a good woman and can provide for you. However, we both still have roles to play being a part of this family. You and I have to pretend everything is fine. We have to act cheerful and in love wherever we go. Most importantly, though, we have to have a baby. My mother will not rest until we have a baby for the sake of the country. Our lives mean nothing to her without this child to carry on the family name."

Meredith nodded her head as she started to cry. Alexa slipped her arms around her and held her. "I am so sorry, Lex, that I have let you down. I do not even know how my feelings all started for Janice. I was just spending so much time at the clinic without you there, because she would have to give me fertility shots everyday. We started talking a lot about personal things, and she seemed really interested in me. One day I had gone to the clinic for my shots, and I had been crying about the whole process. She held me and listened to me. I never felt like you listened to me seriously about anything, and then the next thing I realized there we were kissing. To this day I feel ashamed for going behind your back."

"And yet you have done it for over a year?"

Meredith shrugged. "I am sorry, Lex. I love her. I do not know how it happened, but I do."

The princess nodded her head. "I understand. I fell in love once myself. The sensation makes you do things you normally would not."

"That woman Lauren, right? The one the queen hated?"

"They never met, so I do not know how my mother could have formed an opinion of her, but to answer your question, yes, it was Lauren."

Meredith shook her head. "No. The queen did meet her a few times. She told me she had met her."

"When?"

"Was it your birthday party? I remember seeing the two of you dancing together. You looked at her like she was the most amazing thing on earth."

"My mother did not meet her at my birthday party. She met my father that night, not my mother."

"Well, Queen Faith told me she had spoken to her. I remember because I asked your mother about her specifically. She said she had spoken to her, and there was no reason for concern. If I remember correctly, it was around the same time you were contemplating abdicating the throne. That was it, was it not? She was the reason you wanted to abdicate?"

Alexa saw no reason to lie to her wife, considering they had already revealed so many intimate secrets, so she answered, "Yes. She was the reason."

"I always suspected that."

Both of them were quiet for a few minutes, taking in all that had been disclosed. Finally though, Alexa spoke again. "Meredith, since we are being honest here, I think I should confess something to you. I also have been having an affair."

"With who?"

"Lauren."

"The same Lauren?"

"Yes."

Meredith nodded her head. "That explains a lot. Lately you have seemed content, and I had wondered why. If your mother ever found out, you would be in so much trouble. I do not know why, but your mother really does not like her."

"Probably because she does not fit into my mother's plan for my life."

"Do you honestly think your mother would be so cold?" Alexa looked at her like she was crazy for even asking such a thing. Meredith gave a smile. "You are right. That was not a smart question. I think we have already established that she is stringent enough. I wonder why though. I mean I only saw this Lauren once dancing with you, and even I could see how happy you two seemed together, so much so that I was terrified of losing you. She saw it too. She had to have seen it, which is why she met with Lauren in the first place."

"You know, neither my mother nor Lauren has ever mentioned the two of them meeting. How do you know so much about this supposed meeting between them? What did they even talk about?"

"Lex, the night of your birthday party when your mother announced our engagement, I saw Lauren run out, and then I noticed you followed along behind her fairly quickly. I was mad. I will admit it. I was extremely upset that it was so obvious you had feelings for someone else. I went to your mother the following day and begged her to do something about it. She said she would. Then before our wedding you started to get that crazy idea of abdicating, and I suspected it was over Lauren. I spoke to her again, and she said she would handle the situation before you did anything you regretted. A few days later she said it was done. She said she had spoken to Lauren and made her see reason. I thought Lauren was out of your life for good then. How long have you been seeing her?"

"About as long as you have been with Janice."

"And you love her?"

"Yes, Mere, I do."

"Then what should we do? We both love other people."

"You know as well as I do that a divorce is out of the question until we have children together."

"Well, we have one on the way. I say we have this baby and then talk again. I just want you to be happy, Lex, and I am sorry that I have contributed to your heartache. It was never my intention. I think I was just too young to fully appreciate the consequences of my actions. Nineteen is too young to get married. Promise me that we will not allow our daughter to do that."

Alexa smiled at her wife. She felt as some of the burden she had been carrying was lifted. For the first time in their marriage, they really had spoken to each other, and it felt wonderful. Bringing Meredith into a tight hug, the heir sighed. "No, we will not allow our daughter to marry at nineteen. In fact, I will do more than that. I promise that when I am queen, our daughter will be allowed to marry whomever she wants. No more restrictions. She will be able to choose her prince or princess charming as she sees fit."

"Good. I am happy to hear that."

Leaning up to Meredith's forehead, Alexa placed a delicate kiss there. "I love you, Mere. You have always had a special place in my heart, and that will never change. I just think we are meant to be friends instead of lovers."

"I think you are right. I love you too, and I want your happiness. Just know that I will support you."

"And I you."

That evening at the charity function both women played their parts better than ever. With

their new-found understanding, the tension that had been building between them had dissipated, leaving two friends that genuinely enjoyed each other's company. They danced together most of the night, and knowing the press was about, they made several gestures that if captured on film would indicate that there might possibly be an heir on the way, and in fact by the following morning that was what all the major publications were suggesting.

Chapter X: Another Lost Princess

Two months later the seemingly blissful marriage between Princess Alexa and Princess Meredith once again made the papers. However, the stories running were not speculation on the heir-to-be but mourning the loss of the heir the world would never know. Because of the queen's zeal to inform the public of their pregnancy before either of them was ready, the miscarriage that Meredith suffered during her sixth month was even more painful than the one they had already experienced together privately. Neither wanted to talk to the press about it, but official statements had been released on their behalf by Matthew. After the initial physical pain was gone weeks later, though, Meredith told Alexa she wanted to spend some time alone and made arrangements to stay with Janice. The princess agreed that being with the woman she loved during the emotional trauma was in her best interest. In return she spent most of her time with Lauren.

For several weeks Alexa stayed with her lover at the tiny condo, not going anywhere, just being with the librarian and their daughter. One night after Anastasia had been put down, the two women lay together on the couch. "Do you want to talk about how you are feeling?" Lauren questioned. Alexa had spent days in silence just staring contemplatively at her daughter, not wanting to do anything else.

"It is difficult, Lauren. I love Meredith, and I hate seeing her in pain like this. This is her second miscarriage in six years. She tries so hard, but her body just refuses to carry a child to term. I do not know what to do. I can see her becoming more depressed as time passes, and that is not what I want. She is my friend, and I care about her deeply. Both of us want this baby desperately, because we know we can be released from our obligations of this marriage by having a child. Until then, we are both captive to my mother's demands. Neither of us knows what to do. I cannot even give her the support she needs."

"Well, does she have anyone that can give her that?"

The princess nodded. "She has Janice. At least that is someone."

Lauren looked at her quizzically. "Janice? You mean my Janice? My ex-fiancée? Her doctor Janice?"

"The same one."

"When did that happen?"

"It has been over a year and a half now. Meredith is in love with her."

"How come no one told me about this?"

"Does it matter?" Alexa inquired.

"Well, no. It is just that Janice is one of my best friends. She did not tell me, and you did not tell me. Why not?"

"Because Meredith deserves her privacy just like I deserve mine. I was not even sure it was going to last, but apparently they are really happy together. It seems kind of strange though. I never imagined Mere going for a woman even older than me."

"Janice is even older than me. How many years are they apart?"

"Mere is only twenty-five."

"Janice is forty-two. That is seventeen years difference."

Alexa shrugged. "But they are happy. I know it seems odd, but I truly believe they are content together."

"Has Janice told you that?"

"Yes. We have had occasion to talk about it."

"Does Meredith know about us?" she asked quietly.

"I finally told her."

"Does she know about Anastasia?"

The princess shook her head. "No. I could not tell her that. We promised we would not tell anyone. It would only hurt her, especially with all the problems she is having."

"But Janice knows. You do not think she told her, do you?"

"Janice knows as our doctor. She has no right to relay that information to anyone. She understands her obligations. She will not tell Mere."

Lauren sighed. "I feel so torn over this, Lex. On the one hand, I know you cannot get a divorce until you and Meredith have a baby, but there is a part of me that does not relish the idea of another woman having your child," she confessed. "I do feel badly for Meredith, but selfishly I want to be the only one. Do you think that makes me a bad person?"

The brunette shook her head. "It is only human, I think. I feel the same way. I want you to have my children, because I love you. Under other circumstances I would not want Mere to have my baby. However, we have no other choice."

"And what is to become of that child?" the librarian questioned. "She will be the product of a union that was not even based on love. She will be a sacrifice to the country. She will not have a life of her own. That seems so unfair. I know how much you love Anastasia. I can see it whenever you are with her, but what about this child? Will you love her just the same?"

"Of course. She would be my daughter."

"But say you had her and the abdicated to be with me, you would not even live with her, would you? The queen would probably demand to keep her at the palace. Is that a life a child should have? To have two mothers who do not really want her?"

"First of all, the country wants her. She will not be without love. Secondly, it will be her fate. She will walk the same path I have had to walk my entire life. Chances are that she will take the throne at a young enough age to change the laws as she sees fit to ensure her own happiness. My mother is sixty-six years old. No one is immortal. My daughter will take the throne if I abdicate before she is of marrying age, and if she does not, Mere and I will make sure she does not marry unless it is for love. We do not want that for our child. And if by chance I take the throne, I will change the laws to ensure my own happiness and the happiness of any other heirs to follow by mandating marriage in a different fashion. I do not see it as the merger my mother does, and I would never force my daughter to choose a mate that is not of her own desires."

"And what happens if you and Mere are never able to have children?"

The princess sighed. "I do not know. I suppose at some point Mere and I will have to talk about that. She is as ready to move on with her life as I am. I think she would not be opposed to a divorce, so she can be with Janice, but after that I have no idea. Either I take the throne or George takes it, but he is adamantly against doing that. He does not feel qualified."

"Well, he is not, especially with all the responsibilities that have fallen on you recently. You practically run the country now, do you not?"

"Yes, that is true. My mother has relinquished a lot of control to me."

"I hate thinking on this, Lex, but I cannot help it. If you and Mere do not have a child, Anastasia is your heir. She is the rightful heir, even though no one knows that. Do you honestly think we can hide that forever?"

"I gave you my word that we would, darling, and I am going to do my best to keep it. I think it would only truly be fair to her if we let her decide for herself when she is older what she wants to do about her place in line for the throne. Truthfully she is second in line behind me, and if I were to abdicate, she would be first. I still do not want to tell the people, but I think it is only fair to tell her when she is older. She deserves to know the truth about us at some point."

The librarian nodded. She wanted her daughter to know Alexa as her other mother, but the problems that posed made her wish to delay the inevitable conversation with their daughter. Fortunately, it was years away, and a lot could change before then. "Tell me the truth. Do you honestly think Meredith will ever have a child?"

"The chances are slim, Lauren. They grow slimmer as the years pass."

Silence passed for several minutes before Lauren spoke again. There was something she had wanted to discuss with her lover, but she wasn't sure the timing was the best. However, they had tentatively made their own plans for another child, and she wondered where they stood. "I know this may not be the best time to discuss this, but when Anastasia was born, I told you I wanted to have another baby soon. It has been three months. If I could have another child by my thirty-seventh birthday, that would be good. The older I get the harder it is going to be for us."

"I know. I would love to have another baby with you, darling, but I think we need to wait a little while longer. I mean Anastasia is only three months old. Do you really want to be pregnant again so soon?"

"I am just thinking about our time line. If we are going to have four kids, there is no time to waste."

"Women have healthy children well into their forties these days, Lauren. We can afford to wait a little longer."

"They may have healthy babies in their forties, but I do not want to be forty-three or forty-four with a newborn. I would be in my sixties when they were in their twenties. So would you. I do not want that for our children."

"That is true. That is a little old to have college-age children. I do not think I would be able to handle that if I were at my mother's age. Fine. We can start to work on another baby, but give me another three months first. As much as I want this, I need time. We will try again in three months. All right?"

Lauren nodded her head in acquiescence. Even though it threw her own timetable off a little bit, she felt it was worth it if it meant that much to Alexa. She figured her lover still had feelings to

sort through regarding Meredith's miscarriage, and she had pushed for another baby too soon. Nevertheless, she decided she would hold her lover to her three-month hiatus and broach the subject once it was over.

Chapter XI: A Family of Six

Another five years passed. Alexa's public relationship with her wife Meredith remained unchanged. They had been unsuccessful at conceiving a child, and the press had grown tired of speculating over if they were ever going to. Instead the focus began to shift to what would happen when Alexa took the throne at her age without an heir. Her mother was seventy-one, and her health was not what it once was. The country was clearly uneasy over the prospect of not having an heir to follow Alexa.

The thirty-seven-year old's private life, on the other hand, had changed drastically. She and Lauren had welcomed another child into the world, Victoria Rose, who was then three, and the couple was expecting a set of twins at any moment. Their oldest, Anastasia Elise, was a five-year old bundle of non-stop energy that absolutely adored the princess. Every time Alexa was at their house, she constantly vied with her mother and younger sister for the brunette's undivided attention. Lauren, then forty-one, had been compelled to take a leave of absence from her position at the library to try to care for her two daughters while pregnant with two more, but Alexa spent almost every free moment she had with her little family, whom she had moved into a larger house closer to the palace.

Life was good for the most part for the two women. They were happy with each other and their children, but underneath it all the old issues still lingered. With the queen's ailing health and Alexa's marriage to Meredith still intact, the two wondered to themselves if they ever were going to fulfill the rest of their dream of finally being wed to each other. Truthfully Lauren had concerns about what might happen if Alexa succeeded her mother to the throne before the two of them could find a way to marry. She knew the princess loved her, but Alexa becoming queen was never part of the plan. Furthermore, she wasn't sure she wanted to be subjected to the scrutiny her lover had if by chance they did get married, and Alexa didn't renounce her claim to the throne, therefore making her and her daughters royals by matrimony. Lauren had never considered such a prospect until recently, but now the matter seemed more imaginable than eleven years ago when they first met.

That evening when Alexa was finished at the Pentagon, she headed straight back to the house to see her girls. Pulling into the garage, she made sure the door was secured behind her before heading into the house. "Hello. Where are my favorite girls?" she called from the hallway.

She heard both her daughters squeal in delight from the other room. Both came running, but Anastasia beat Victoria to the princess. "Lexi," she exclaimed, throwing her arms around the woman's legs. Victoria did the same.

Alexa hugged them both tightly before picking one up in each arm and taking them back toward the living room. She smiled consolingly when she found her lover reclining on the sofa, clearly

in discomfort over the fact that she was seven and half months pregnant. Dropping a kiss on Lauren's forehead, she put the girls down on the floor and asked, "How are you today, darling?"

"Miserable," she mumbled. "Please. I am begging you. Take these two girls out of here. The nanny left an hour ago, and they have been going crazy ever since. I have a headache."

"All right. What is for dinner tonight?"

"The cook prepared something earlier that just needs to be heated. Would you mind taking care of that for me?"

"No problem. Anastasia, Victoria, the two of you get your crayons and paper. We are going to go draw in the kitchen, so Mommy can rest."

The girls did as they were told. When the women were alone for a brief moment, Lauren pulled her lover down for a real kiss. "I have missed you today. I have been thinking about you all day."

"What about me?"

"I was hoping that after dinner you might help me get the girls down for the night a bit early. Then you and I can have a little conversation."

"A conversation?" the princess teased. She knew just by the look in the redhead's eyes what she truly meant. The conversation Lauren wanted to have really was more about communicating sexually rather than verbally. The librarian had been especially amorous during the third trimester of this pregnancy, leaving Alexa tired from working all day, taking care of the girls in the evenings, and then taking care of her lover at night, but it was a burden she was happy to shoulder as long as Lauren was pleased. "We shall see. It depends on if you are a good girl."

"I am always good," Lauren whispered seductively.

Alexa whimpered. "I should get to the girls. It is not a good idea to leave them alone too long. They might start drawing on the wall again like last time. I will come get you when dinner is ready. You just stay here and try to relax."

Going into the kitchen, she was satisfied to see her daughters behaving themselves as they drew at the table. Alexa kissed Anastasia on top of her red head and then did the same to Victoria's dark one before taking a seat between them. "What are you drawing?" she asked her eldest.

"Our family. See there is Victoria and me and Mommy."

The princess smiled at the stick figures that were differentiated by hair color. However, seeing her draw another tall figure with dark hair standing next to Mommy that had some extra color along the body, she asked, "Who is that?"

"You, silly," the little girl giggled.

"Why do I have all that color?"

Anastasia placed her small hand on Alexa's chest over her heart where her medals were. "It's your uniform," she stated as if it should be obvious.

"Of course. That makes perfect sense." Alexa looked at her younger daughter's work. Victoria was trying to copy what her sister was drawing, but at three her skills were lacking. Nevertheless, she seemed proud of her own work as she showed it off to Alexa. "Good job, Victoria. That is beautiful."

"Gimme your hand," Anastasia asked. "I wanna draw it."

The brunette relinquished her left hand to her daughter, who put it flat against the plain white paper. She held still as the five-year-old did her best to make an outline of it, and then she watched as the redhead traced her own hand inside the drawing of the larger one. "Look how big my hand is compared to yours."

The girl nodded. "I wanna write our names on it. How do you spell Anastasia?"

"I will help you write it." Together they slowly wrote out the name as Alexa taught her how to spell it.

"Now how do you spell Lexi?"

The princess chuckled at her nickname but helped her spell it anyway. "Do you want to put our ages next to our names?" she asked.

"Okay."

"How old are you?"

"Five," she pronounced proudly.

"Do you know how to write a five?"

The little girl shook her head. Alexa showed her how to draw the number before Anastasia asked, "How old are you?"

"Thirty-seven. That is a big number." The girl nodded in agreement. "Well, let me show you how to write it."

When they were finished, Anastasia held it up to view it closer. "Can I show Mommy?"

"Sure."

The little girl raced off to find her mother while Alexa turned her attention to Victoria. The three-year-old never said much, but the princess could tell how observant she was of her surroundings. Even though she was quiet, Alexa knew that Victoria was taking in much more than she was communicating and couldn't wait to hear her daughter's first full sentence. Alexa put her arm around Victoria and kissed the top of her head. Her daughter curled into her affection.

"Lexi," she whined. "Hungry."

"All right. I hear you. I will start on dinner. You keep drawing."

The princess started heating dinner up for her girls and then set the table around her daughters. Half an hour later when it was ready, she served the plates and then retrieved Lauren to come sit at the table and eat with them. Anastasia dominated the meal by talking about all the things she had done that morning during pre-school. Alexa just listened to her daughter speak, but as the little girl went on and on, she started to get concerned about her speech. She had noticed it over the past several weeks, but that night it was more evident as her child conveyed her thoughts using slang and incorrect grammar. What started out as a mild nuisance was beginning to grow into a strong irritation. However, she said nothing to her daughter, deciding she would speak to Lauren about it first.

With dinner complete, Lauren said she would take care of the dishes if Alexa would give the girls their baths, so dutifully the princess took her daughters to the bathroom. Bathing them both, she allowed them to play in the tub for a while before finally getting them into their pajamas. Since it was still a bit early, they all went back to the living room when they were finished. Lauren was back on the sofa with her eyes closed, so Alexa curled up on the far end of the couch with her daughters in her lap with a book and read to the both of them until bedtime.

Both women tucked their girls in for bed, and then Lauren took Alexa by the arm toward their room. "Oh, the sound of silence," the redhead whispered, wrapping her arms around the heir's neck.

"Anastasia certainly can talk," Alexa said. "However, I am a bit concerned about her grammar. It is terrible. What are they teaching her over at her pre-school?"

"It is not that bad. She is five."

"No. It is awful. It is not money that divides the classes in our country but our speech. You can tell who was born into the upper class by the way they convey their thoughts. Made up words, slang language, and contractions are all associations with a class beneath her. She is a princess. She needs to speak properly."

"Lex, she is just five. She will outgrow it."

"When I was five, I spoke perfectly. My mother saw to that. I could read. I could write, and I was learning multiple languages. She does not even know how to spell her own name."

"In case you have forgotten, she is not you. She does not need to have all those things."

"Lauren, have you looked at our daughter lately? She is me. That is what I was when I was five. It is only going to get more chaotic the older she becomes. I have concerns about Victoria as well. Her language skills are not what they should be."

"Well, what do you want to do about it? Tell me, Lex. What do you suggest we do?" the redhead asked in exasperation. Her headache had not gone away, and she was more than a little irritated that Alexa was choosing to bring up their daughter's education just then when all she wanted to do was rest.

"Home schooling. We get the girls a private teacher."

"What about their social skills? Victoria needs help socially. What about a new school?"

"No. No school will be good enough for our girls."

"I think they need to be with other children, Lex. It is an important part of growing up, making friends."

"But those friends are causing her to pick up things that are incorrect." The princess paused for a moment as she thought. She knew it would be wrong of her to just dictate what should be done with the princesses, even though the urge was strong. Sighing, she said, "We can come to a compromise somehow. What about a private tutor in the afternoons? They can focus on the girls' reading and writing."

The librarian thought about it for a moment before nodding her head. "Fine but the nanny still stays on full-time. We have two more on the way to consider."

"Fine but I want Anastasia and Victoria to learn another language. When I was a child, I was required to learn Spanish, French, German, and Chinese, in addition to English. If I can do it, they can do one."

"You do not think that is a bit excessive?"

"No, I do not. How about Spanish? There are a lot of native Spanish speakers in this country. It might help them in the future. They can start with that. Eventually, I would like them to learn a few more, but they can wait."

"And why might you want them to learn multiple languages, Alexa? Do you have plans for them other than just allowing them to be children? I will not deny our girls the chance to be children. They need that. You needed it and never got it, which is why I think you were so uncontrollable in your teens and twenties. I will not endure our girls cavorting around and falling into bed with a convenient conquest for a parsimonious thrill or allow them to get involved with alcohol or drugs the way your mother tolerated your antics, because we were too hard on them as kids. They need a childhood. You wanted to relive a childhood you never had. Do not make that

mistake with our girls. You will regret it, and they will resent us for it."

"I want them to be children, too, Lauren, but I also want to prepare them for life. I have the opportunity to give them things other children their age do not have. I know they will never run the country, but I still want them to find success in their life, and I firmly believe accomplishment starts at home at an early age by giving them all the advantages we can. That is all I want for them. They deserve the best life we can give them. Learning can be fun. We just have to find them the right tutor to open their imaginations. I promise that if it seems like it is not working, we will try something else."

There was a pause but then the librarian nodded. "Fine. I understand. Could we finish this discussion later? I really just want to get off my feet. My back hurts so badly."

"Sure. Let me get you your pajamas, and then I will give you a back rub."

Alexa brought Lauren a nightshirt and then began to take off her uniform. Both women were quiet, but the princess could feel blue eyes studying her body as she undressed. She knew this was the part of the evening that her lover would be demanding of her intimate attention, but just to play with her a bit, the brunette made a show of peeling off her work clothes. When she was undressed, she didn't bother with sleeping attire and instead just turned to look at the bed. Sure enough Lauren was reclining against the headboard with rapt eyes on her. The older woman had not bothered to put on her pajamas either after shedding her clothes, leaving her naked with her legs slightly splayed.

Alexa's heart sped up radically at the sight before her. She gave a tender smile as she crossed the room and took a seat next to Lauren on the bed. "You are so beautiful, darling."

Lauren gave an unconvinced chortle. "I do not feel beautiful right now. I am huge. I have no idea how you can find me attractive."

The princess knew her lover was fishing for more compliments intentionally, but she decided to oblige, especially since she thought Lauren did look as stunning as ever. Moreover, she knew Lauren had enough positive regard for her own body image to sit naked in her state and not feel embarrassed. Over the course of her pregnancies, her body hardly ever changed with the exception of a rounded tummy where she carried their children. This pregnancy was no exception, save the fact that the protrusion of her stomach was larger given that there were two babies. Placing a hand against her beloved's stomach, Alexa caressed it tenderly. "You are an angel, darling. My heart beats so fast I feel faint at the very sight of you sitting in all your grandeur. No other woman makes me feel so loved, so wanted, so alive. Everything about you calls to me, stirring a place in my soul that is reserved only for you. I am the luckiest woman in the world to have you, and I want to prove my worth if you will allow me the honor," she whispered as her lips brushed against her stomach. She felt hands lace through her dark hair. Alexa knew her lover wanted this even though she wasn't saying so at the moment.

Lauren closed her eyes as she tried to relax into the younger woman's stroking. Alexa's hands and mouth always made a rush of feelings pour forth from her heart and her body, and that night

was no exception. However, the pain in her lower back was making it difficult to lie there under her love's ministration. Regretfully, she tapped Alexa's on the shoulder to gain her attention. Questioning eyes met her. "I am so sorry, Lex. This feels good. It really does, but my back hurts too much to lie in this position. I have to move."

The princess gave her a sympathetic smile. "Okay. Roll over onto your side. I believe I promised you a back rub," she said softly.

Doing as she was told, Lauren turned onto her side facing away from Alexa. She immediately felt strong capable hand rubbing her aching muscles. Her eyes closed as she focused on the feeling of relief that slowly began to spread through her back as the massage continued for over half an hour. Lauren was starting to doze when she felt lips against her bare shoulder that trailed a slow path to her neck and back again. She could feel the heat radiating off the body behind her, sensing that the princess, even though she was being genteel, really wanted something more intimate at that moment. Deciding to give encouragement to her lover, the redhead whispered, "Massage a little lower." Alexa responded to the directive, her hands drifting south of the small of her lover's back. Fingers dug into the firm flesh, kneading it. "Lower," Lauren instructed.

The librarian heard a low chuckle in her ear as the princess started kissing along her hairline. "I thought you were going to fall asleep on me."

"Never. Why would I miss out on a chance to have you cater to my desires? Having you make love to me is the highlight of my night. Fortunately the doctors say it is actually good for me in the third trimester, and I think I should try to stay as healthy as possible."

"Then who am I to go against doctor's orders?" she teased.

Later that night screaming awakened Alexa. Sitting up disoriented it took her a minute to realize the noise was coming from down the hall, so she immediately got out of bed to investigate. Jogging down to Victoria's room, she opened the door to find her daughter crying as loud as she could. "Victoria, what is it? What is wrong?" she inquired, flipping on the lights and coming to the bed.

The young girl clutched to her tightly. "Lexi," she whimpered, curling into her lap.

Suddenly a loud crack of thunder filled the air, and Victoria started to cry again. "Are you afraid of the storm?" There was no answer, only tears as the girl clasped her around the neck tighter. "Oh, it is all right, sweetie," she whispered, kissing the dark head on her shoulder. "Come on. Come get in bed with Mommy and me."

Moving back into the hallway, she noticed the light on in her other daughter's room, so she carefully cracked open the door. Anastasia was sitting up in bed shaking and clutching her blanket tighter. "Lexi, I keep hearing voices," she stated in a terrified voice.

"Voices? What kind of voices?"

The little girl pointed to the ceiling. "And walking," she added.

"All right. I will check on it. Come with me. We are all going to sleep in bed together tonight," she said holding out her hand. Anastasia jumped from her bed and grabbed Alexa's hand just as the voices started up again from above the ceiling. The princess knew what those sounds were, but she had never told her daughters about the surveillance that covered their house.

Taking the two girls back to the master bedroom, she helped the two of them in bed. Lauren yawned as the jolting of the bed awoke her. However, she immediately welcomed her children into bed with her when Alexa told her what had happened.

"I just need to check on these voices Anastasia told me about and then I will return," she said, grabbing her robe from the back of the door and slipping it on.

"Be careful, Lexi," Anastasia called out with concern as the princess left the room.

Going into the living room, she grabbed an umbrella and then headed out the back door to the staircase on the outside of the house she had installed that led to the attic and roof. Finding the door locked when she arrived, she dug out her key to open it. Flinging the door open, she found two of her guards not doing their jobs. Instead they had female company that didn't belong anywhere in the vicinity of the house.

The group was surprised by Alexa's sudden appearance and jumped to their feet. "Your highness, we didn't know you were here."

"Well, I am, and I am not pleased! The two of you have made enough noise to wake up two little girls who normally can sleep through anything! You have scared them both terribly, so much so that they refuse to go back to sleep! Not only that you have caused me to come out here in this storm! Moreover, I find you with company while on the job! I expect more from my security details!"

"Yes, your highness."

"You, ladies, are excused, and if I ever see either one of you here again you will regret the day I ever laid eyes on you." Both women scampered to leave, and then it was just Alexa with her two security guards. "Who is on the roof right now?" They told her. It was one of her most trusted security guards from days past, whom once had guarded her personally and she had requested to guard over Lauren and the girls. "I want to make a little change in the rotation this evening! I want both of you on the roof now! The two of you will remain up there the rest of the night!"

Without a word both men grabbed their rain gear and headed out the door. Moments later their replacement arrived, soaked but otherwise in good spirits. "This is unexpected. Is there a problem, your highness?"

"Yes! Those two imbeciles are not performing to standard! I want them to spend the rest of the night on the roof, and then I want you to fire them in the morning! I cannot have those two men

around the Fulton women! They have scared the girls with their ruckus, and I choose not to trust them with a pregnant woman! I trust you can handle things in here for the rest of the night."

"Yes, your highness. I will see to it that your wishes are carried out as specified."

"Thank you. I am going to try to forget this happened."

There was a brief pause before her guard said, "It is good to see you, Lex. It has been awhile."

"Yes, it has, Roger, but I could not trust this post to just anyone. You know that. You have known Lauren as long as I have, so you know what a treasure she is. I only will have the best here for her."

The guard nodded. "I will never forget the way she treated me all those years ago. She is a gem, and I do my best to treat her and her girls like the princesses they should have been," he quietly said.

Alexa nodded her head. She knew she was not the only one with affection for the librarian. The two security officers that had been with her in Florida when she met Lauren eleven years ago both had readily agreed to supervise the detail for the Fulton residence, even though it meant leaving the palace to do so simply out of their respect for the woman who once had shown them such kindness. The princess gave a small smile. "Thank you for that. Good night."

As she turned to go, Roger stopped her by hesitantly saying, "I hope I am not out of line by saying this, but these children hold a striking resemblance to your highness."

Alexa stood with her back to one of her best security guards as she contemplated a response. After a moment, she looked over her shoulder and gave a smile. "So they do," she replied. "Good night, Roger."

He gave a nod in her direction. "Your highness."

Going back into the house, the princess shed her wet robe and discarded the umbrella before going back to the bedroom. She found three blue-eyed women awaiting her arrival. "Is everything all right?" Lauren asked.

"Everything is just fine," she replied, slipping into the bed. Turning on her side, she wrapped an arm around Anastasia. "We all should try to sleep now. Mommy and I will keep you safe."

Both women just held their daughters until they drifted back to sleep. When it was clear that they were dreaming once again, Lauren inquired, "What was the problem?"

"Just some incompetent guards. I had Roger take care of it. I was just thinking though that we should consider introducing the girls to Roger and Doug. After all, they are the leads on this detail, and I would not want the girls to be scared should this happen again. I think they should know who is watching out over them and who they can go to if they have a problem."

"How would we tell them? What do you propose we say?"

"I do not know yet. However, do you think it would be all right?"

The redhead nodded. "That is probably wise. I would not want them to be afraid should they happen to come across them in their duties."

"Great. I will think on it and then introduce them tomorrow after work."

The next morning Alexa was out the door before the other girls were awake. Knowing her presence was required at the palace, she headed home. Sneaking in without being seen, she went to her room to change into more casual attire before joining the rest of her family for breakfast. Everyone happened to be there that day, but no one said anything about her being the last to arrive. Taking her seat next to Meredith, she gave her a kiss on the cheek and a smile before directly starting on her food.

"Alexa, we have a lot to do this morning after breakfast," her mother stated.

The princess nodded her head. "I am aware of that. We are hearing budget reviews from Congress this morning, are we not?"

"Yes. Some of the senior members will be coming. You are also giving a report for the Joint Chiefs of Staff regarding the military budget if you feel prepared."

"I am prepared to speak to that. I have been reviewing the numbers for the last several years, and I have some proposed changes that hopefully will coordinate with the overall operating budget. I know we are contemplating trying to give the people some tax relief, and I have some ideas on how to make that possible."

"Wonderful. I look forward to hearing them." The queen turned to her son. "George, I would like you to join us today if your schedule permits."

"Mother, I think Lex is capable of giving the Joint Chiefs of Staff report on her own."

"I know she is, but I would still like you to be there. You need to learn to take on some responsibilities to be prepared. As second in line to the throne, you need to be able to fill in for Alexa at any given time."

George and Alexa looked at each other silently. Each knew what the other was thinking. It was the first time their mother had ever even considered the fact that it would be George's child, not Alexa's, to take the throne after her. George nodded his head. "Very well. I should be able to fit in meetings this morning," he conceded. "I will have my secretary shuffle my schedule."

Once the breakfast came to a close, the queen stood. "I will see the two of you in the conference room in half an hour."

The siblings nodded in her direction. After bidding their respective wives good bye, the two strolled off down toward Alexa's office. "I do not like this one bit, Lex. Why must she insist on my presence?"

"Because she has given up on Meredith and me. She is looking to the future."

"Have you given up?"

Alexa shrugged. "Mere deserves not to have to go through this anguish any more."

"But she is only thirty. You still have time. You do not have to get concerned until she is in her forties. You are not the only royal couple that ever had fertility problems. If I remember correctly, Queen Victoria did not have our grandmother until almost twenty years into their marriage."

"We are in different places in life. Mere has done nothing but try to get pregnant for the past eleven years. It is a painful process. She has had two horrible miscarriages. I just want to let her have some happiness."

George stopped his sister in the hallway with a hand to her arm. "So wait a minute. That is it? You are just giving up?"

"The doctors say she most likely will never carry a baby to term. That is difficult enough for her. The least I can do is let her be happy with the rest of her life."

"Meaning what exactly? Where do I fit into that picture?"

Alexa shrugged. "I suppose that means you will take the throne after me unless you happen to die first. Then it would be Morgan to succeed me. She is a good kid and could do the job reasonably well."

"My daughter will not sit on the throne. That was not the life she was meant to live, Lex. It is your responsibility to have the heir."

"Well, I do not think Mere and I ever will have a child together. The doctors are not optimistic either."

The prince shook his head. "What about a surrogate? Surely that would be a way to accomplish your goals."

"It would be an insult to Mere to ask another woman to carry our child for us."

"Well, what about another woman? The child might not be of your marriage, but it would still be yours and the rightful heir."

"Are you suggesting that I have an affair, George?"

He looked up and down the corridor to ensure they were alone before whispering, "Do not misunderstand me. I can tell that you and Mere are happy together. I mean, I have not seen the two of you as happy as you have been in the last several years. Your marriage has finally taken, even though the beginning seemed rough. I would not want to undermine that, but you could have an heir."

Alexa just looked at her brother as she thought of his words. If he only knew that she had already conceived two girls with two more on the way with her beloved Lauren, he would feel differently. However, knowing she had made the librarian a promise never to disclose that fact to anyone for the sake of her girls, she knew she couldn't tell him. Not only that, she couldn't reveal that she and Meredith were both having affairs outside their marriage that procreated their happiness. The princess just gave a sigh and shake of her head. "Please do not fret over this, George. I will do what I can to release you from any obligations, but if that should ever come to pass, you can always abdicate and let Morgan take your place. However, I will bear the responsibility for us for as long as I live. I know that now. I have put away youthful inclinations of abdication myself. I now know this is my path, and I will walk it. Come on now. Let us prepare for our meeting."

For the rest of the morning Alexa and George sat with the queen and members of Congress to discuss pending tax changes. As usual the princess was full of ideas of how to redistribute funds amongst the civic programs to adequately cover the needs of her country. She could tell that her mother and their other guests were impressed with her opinions and vowed to see they be put into law at their earliest convenience.

Over lunch that day the queen ate with just her two children. They were having further discussions on the military budget when Matthew entered the dining area. "Your majesty, your highnesses," he greeted with a bow for all of them. "Lex, I have an urgent matter of business that needs your attention."

"What is it? I am in the middle of a meeting with the queen."

"Yes, I realize that. However, if you would step outside, I can assure you that this is worth the interruption."

Alexa looked at her mother who dismissed her with a wave of her hand. Leaving the table, she followed Matthew into a private room where her mother normally took her afternoon tea. "What is so imperative, Matthew? You saw that look on my mother's face."

"I am terribly sorry. I just knew I had to interrupt you, though. It is regarding Lauren."

"What about her? Is there a problem?"

Her secretary nodded his head. "She has been taken to the hospital this morning. Her water broke, and she is in premature labor."

Alexa's heart sank. She had lived through two miscarriages with her wife, and she did not want to lose a baby or possibly two with her lover. "Tell me the prognosis. She is six weeks early. This cannot be good for the babies."

"I do not know much else. Roger was just getting off his shift when he was alerted of the emergency. He followed her to the hospital. I am afraid I do not know more."

"Where are the girls?"

"Anastasia is at school, and the nanny has Victoria at home. Of course Anastasia gets out of school in less than an hour. The nanny will pick her up and take her home. She has instructions to stay there with the girls until I direct her to do otherwise."

The princess nodded. "Good. At least I know they will be in safe hands. I need to get to the hospital. I missed both my girls' births. I will not be missing these. Find out Lauren's status and get my car ready to go. I will leave after lunch unless she is in immediate danger."

"Certainly, Lex. I have cleared your afternoon schedule for you."

"I think my mother will be finished with me once lunch is complete. Have you spoken to Lauren directly?"

"No. Only Roger. He has refused to leave her there alone."

"He is a good man. Let them know I will be along shortly."

Heading back into the dining room, the princess did her best not to let on that anything was wrong. However, the queen asked, "So what was this important business?"

"It is personal, Mother. Matthew and I have some unexpected business to attend to after lunch. That is all."

She could tell the queen was not quite convinced, but the older woman didn't say anything else on the subject. "Back to business then."

Two hours later Alexa entered the hospital through a secret entrance and was taken to Lauren's room. Through all her pregnancies, Janice and Alexa had always ensured that the redhead got the best room available, and this day was no exception. By the time she arrived, Janice was also there. Roger was posted at the door, obviously looking concerned, even though he said nothing, only nodded as Alexa entered the room.

The librarian looked up from her position in bed. The older woman looked tired and distraught. "Lex, I am so glad you are here," she mumbled, extending a hand to her.

The princess took it, kissing the back of it delicately before turning to Janice. "Well, what is

going on?"

Janice shook her head. "We are trying to stop the labor, but Lauren isn't responding to drugs. They have only been able to postpone things by a few hours. These babies are coming any moment. I'm sorry I can't delay things further."

"Will they be all right being born this early?"

Janice looked between them both. "I have concerns about their lung development. I'm not sure they will be able to breath on their own, but I'll know more once I see them."

Alexa felt Lauren squeeze her hand nervously. She gave her a reassuring smile. "Was there anything specific that could have caused this? Strenuous activities or anything?"

The doctor shook her head. "Lauren told me about all your sexual activities over the last several days. Don't worry. You didn't do anything wrong. Sometimes these things just happen. Lauren is forty-one. There are inherent risks with women over forty being pregnant. We all discussed this before you decided to get pregnant again. I'm going to do everything I can here. I wouldn't worry too much. These girls have a great chance for survival even if they are a little early. Most twins are not full term. I am going to do everything I can to keep them healthy."

Turning to her lover, Alexa smiled at her again. She was worried, but she didn't want it to show. "Are you in pain?"

The librarian shook her head. "They gave me an epidural, so I am feeling better than I was. Where are the girls?"

"With the nanny at home."

Neither woman spoke further for a while as Alexa sat at her lover's bedside holding her hand. Janice was in and out of the room over the next hour. Finally though she came back and asked, "We have a decision to make here. Either Lauren can have a natural birth or a c-section. Under the circumstances I think a caesarean is the appropriate course of action. We can get the girls out faster, and there is less stress on them."

Lauren frowned, because she had wanted to do a natural birth, but she knew Janice was thinking of their daughters' best interest. "If you think it is best. I do not want them under any more duress than they already are."

"What risks does that pose to Lauren?" the princess inquired.

"It is less risk to all three women, Lex. I know you all were set on doing this the other way, but truly I believe this is the right thing. If I could get Lauren's contractions to stop, I would, but I can't, and one of the girls is already dropping fast. I could already feel the crown of her head in the birth canal when I did my last examination an hour ago. Lauren is fully dilated. This is going to happen one way or another. I just think it's safer to do the c-section. We can get them out

faster and on ventilation should they need it, which I'm sure they will."

The brunette nodded her understanding. "You are the doctor. We will do this in whatever way you recommend."

"Very well. We need to get Lauren prepped for surgery. I'll be back in a little bit to take her in. You will be allowed in the room with us if you want, Lex."

"Of course I want to be there."

"All right. I'll come back to get both of you in a bit."

The two lovers were then left alone once again. The older woman rubbed her stomach as she looked at the princess. "I am sorry about this, Flash."

"Do not be. There was nothing either of us could do. You heard Janice. Now we try to stay positive. Things will be fine. Janice will see to it."

True to Alexa's prediction, Janice did take care of Lauren and their two new daughters as well as she could, and several hours later the Fulton women were once again in their room. However, the new princesses, Camille Anne and Caroline Hope, were hooked up to ventilators to help them both breathe. The heir looked between her girls silently for a long time as Lauren rested in her bed. Camille looked healthier than Caroline, being larger in size. The eldest of the twins had a full head of soft brown hair. The younger, Caroline, had red hair like her mother but was more petite stature and of more concern to the doctor.

"They are so beautiful, Lauren," she whispered.

"Camille definitely looks like you," the redhead conceded.

"And our little Caroline looks so much like you, even more so than Victoria. In fact, I think I finally have the Lauren clone I always wanted," Alexa said with a chuckle. She slipped a hand into each one of the incubators that held her children and gently caressed their tiny hands. She sighed softly and then looked over to Lauren. "Thank you for giving me these gifts, darling. It is such an honor to have you as the mother of my children."

"I love you, Alexa. Thank you for giving me this."

"I love you too." Turning her gaze back to the girls, she contemplated, "How is it even possible to love someone so much when you do not even know them? I am continually amazed by the sensation."

A little later Janice reappeared. "How is everyone doing?"

"I am all right. In pain but that is to be expected I suppose," Lauren commented.

"Yes. Well, you did have a major surgery, an unexpected one at that. You need to relax as much as you can."

Alexa consulted her watch. "Darling, it is starting to get late. The nanny will be off soon. What shall we do with our eldest daughters tonight?"

"I had not even thought of that. I cannot go home. I have to stay here."

"Well, I suppose I could stay with them tonight."

"They have never spent a night without me, Lex."

"Not to worry. I can handle it. They will be fine with me. It is not like I do not already care for them regularly. I will just tell them that you had the babies and had to stay at the hospital. They will understand."

Lauren looked worried. "Maybe they could come stay here at the hospital with me."

"No. I don't think that is a good idea," Janice broke into the conversation. "You won't be able to move around, Lauren. You need rest, and you can't get rest with two little girls running around here."

"Janice is right. It is best that I stay at the house with the girls. Do not worry about a thing. We will be fine."

"All right. I suppose that it our best option. You win, Flash."

"Good. Roger will stay here until I can find a replacement for him for security."

"No. You cannot expect him to stay here. He has been on duty for almost twenty-four hours now. He needs to rest."

"He will not leave your side, Lauren. I will ask him, but he will refuse until a replacement arrives." Standing up Alexa spent a moment looking fondly at each of her daughters before moving to the bed. She smiled at her beloved. "Thank you for this special day. It has been one of the best of my life."

"Me too."

"I will see you tomorrow. Sleep well." They kissed sweetly. Going out into the hallway, Alexa pulled Roger aside. "Lauren is staying the night on doctor's orders. I will have a replacement sent for you."

"Not to worry. I will remain in her highness's service as long as needed."

"I know you will. You serve me well always, Roger."

He smirked as he leaned into her ear. "I meant Lauren, Lex," he joked.

The princess looked at her guard and laughed. "Of course you did. I know where your loyalty truly lies. Good night. I will have someone sent over as soon as I can."

Heading back to the Fulton residence, Alexa greeted the nanny and made her aware of the situation before going to find her girls that were in the kitchen.

"Lexi!" Anastasia cheered.

"Hi, ladies. How are you today?"

"Good. Where's Mommy?"

The princess took a seat at the table. "Well, Mommy had to go to the hospital today, because she needed to have her babies. She needs to stay there for a few days, so while she is gone, it is just going to be the three of us. We are going to have lots of fun. Now what do you two want for dinner?"

"Can we go out for pizza still?"

"What do you mean still?"

"Mommy promised we could go. I want you to take us."

Alexa thought about the request for a moment. She had never been out in public with her girls in their lifetime. It was something she always wanted but never got to do because of the challenges of going out just on her own. However, she truly wanted to make her daughters happy in whatever way she could. "It is getting late. Perhaps tomorrow we can have pizza."

"Yeah!" Victoria screamed, jumping into Alexa's lap.

"For now though let us find something to eat here at home," she said standing. Putting Victoria on her hip, she went to the refrigerator to find food for them.

The rest of the evening followed in controlled chaos. Alexa indulged the girls in whatever they wanted until it was bedtime. She read them extra stories and sung to them both before they finally settled down for the night. Once she had left their rooms, she called Matthew.

"Lex, I have been wondering all day about Lauren and you. What is happening?"

"Lauren gave birth today to two beautiful girls, Camille Anne and Caroline Hope. All three of them are still at the hospital. The girls are on ventilators, because their lungs do not function on their own properly yet. Lauren had to have a cesarean section, so she had to stay there. I am in charge of the girls for the next few days. I need to have a clear schedule."

"All right. I will do what I can."

"I actually need something else from you. I promised my girls I would take them out for pizza tomorrow night. I need somewhere to take them. I cannot let them down, Matthew. I need you to find a place for us to go."

"Um, Lex, you know I will do whatever you ask of me, but I must ask whether or not you have fully considered what you are doing. You cannot honestly think it is a good idea to take these girls out in public. The media surely will catch hold of the idea, and the moment a photograph is captured of you with them, the world will know. You cannot deny how much Anastasia looks like you. Both of them do. Are you prepared to deal with that? I thought you made Lauren a promise not to disclose to anyone your relationship to these girls. Would she think this is a good idea?"

Alexa growled in frustration. She knew her secretary was right. However, she replied, "Just do it for me. Find a place that I can take the girls and make sure the appropriate precautions are taken. I will deal with Lauren. I think it might help to have some staff there. We can take the nanny, Roger, Doug, and I also want you to come along."

"Me, Lex? Why?"

"Because we introduced them to you as their Uncle Matthew. That can be our ploy. It will be less obvious with more staff there. It will also help the girls have more fun."

"Very well. I will arrange it."

The following morning after the nanny arrived to take care of Victoria, Alexa took Anastasia to school herself in one of her unmarked royal sedans with one of her drivers. She watched from behind her tinted windows as her daughter skipped into school with her backpack. It was the first time she had ever even been on the school's campus, and the sight of her eldest child climbing the staircase to the building gave her a joyous pang in her chest. It was hard to believe that Anastasia was growing so fast. For a brief moment, she pondered what kind of a woman she would become, hoping that she would take after the librarian.

Heading to the hospital, she found her lover and her two infants just where she had left them. Lauren though was asleep when she arrived, so she just sat quietly trying to give her as much resting time as possible. In the meantime Alexa herself dozed off, having not gotten much sleep through the night.

For the rest of the morning, once both women were awake, they simply enjoyed each other's company until Matthew appeared. He gave Lauren a gentle smile and kiss on the cheek in affection. Alexa knew he had become fond of the woman she loved over the years and was pleased her secretary's relationship with her lover seemed mutually amiable. "Lauren, you are looking well for a mother of four," he teased lightly. "Motherhood suits you. I have always thought so."

"Thank you, Matthew. It is a pleasant surprise to see you here."

"I could not stay away from the newest members of the family. After all, what kind of uncle would I be if I did not at least welcome these little angels into the world?" he inquired rhetorically as he moved to the two incubators near the bed. "Perhaps an introduction would be in order, Lex."

"Of course. Matthew, this is Camille Anne," she said, gesturing to the larger of the two infants. "And this little one is Caroline Hope."

Matthew smiled at Camille for a few minutes before turning his attentions to Caroline. "She is so tiny, Lex."

"Yes. Caroline is significantly smaller than Camille. The doctors are concerned about her. In fact, they had their doubts about her survival at first."

"She would not be the first royal to be born prematurely. I see you gave her a name reminiscent of your religious beliefs and of the last heir to be in such detriment."

Lauren, curious to what Matthew meant, inquired, "Which heir might that have been?"

"My mother," Alexa answered. "My grandmother went into premature labor as a result of Queen Alexa's attempt to save her life. My mother was born too early. My grandmothers had never intended to name my mother Faith until that moment in time. She was supposed to be Queen Alexa II, but Queen Lara changed her mind. She said she named my mother that because faith was the only thing she had to cling to in those final days of Queen Alexa's life."

"Hope is a good trait to have, and I can see that you need it now with this little one," Matthew mentioned. "However, I dare predict that this one will turn out to be the most outspoken of all your children just by her tremulous start. She will spend the rest of her life proving how strong she truly is just like her grandmother."

Alexa nodded her head in agreement. After a few moments of silence, she changed the subject. "What brings you here today?"

"Oh, I know you asked that I clear your schedule as much as possible for the next several days in light of these births. However, there are still some items we need to discuss. Besides, I wanted a reason to come see Lauren."

"Well, please make yourself comfortable then, and we can discuss our business."

For the next hour the heir and her secretary did work in Lauren's room. The librarian had never seen her lover in the act of work before. She knew Alexa had lots of responsibilities, but to see her in action was a rare glimpse into Alexa's life as the crowned princess. Alexa and Matthew spoke freely to each other about the country's matters, hiding nothing from the redhead. It was

fascinating to see her lover's intellect at work in ways she had never considered. It was obvious that the princess was indeed good at her position.

When Matthew was preparing to leave just before noon, he commented, "Last on our agenda is this evening. I believe I have everything prepared as you asked of me. I have all the details arranged and just need some finality from our destination."

"Wonderful. I am pleased to hear it."

"I will see you this evening then." He stood and moved to the bed. "Lauren, as always it is a pleasure to see you. Please take care of these girls, especially this eldest one here. She is the biggest rule-breaker of them all," he joked, pointing in Alexa's direction.

Lauren laughed. "After all this time, I have not forgotten that. Thank you for coming, Matthew. It is always good to see you."

Once he had taken his leave, Alexa stood and stretched her frame. She looked out the window in thought for a minute before asking, "Do you know when you will be able to leave?"

"No. However, I intend to stay here until the girls come home even though I will be released before them. I do not want them out of my sight for even a moment's time."

"I understand. I feel the same way. They should not be alone. I was wondering if you were ready to have Anastasia and Victoria up here to meet their sisters."

"Oh, I would love for them to come. I miss them so much, Lex, but I think I need another day. I am still sore from surgery, and I have not been resting well. Perhaps by tomorrow I will be up for that venture. It has been difficult not seeing them, though."

"I know. They miss you, but I am doing my best to keep them happy and entertained. Last night they told me you promised to take them out for pizza."

"I had not forgotten, but it will be awhile before I can make good on that promise, I suppose."

"Not to fear, I have taken it upon myself to fulfill that promise for you."

"How do you intend to fulfill it?"

"I am taking them out this evening for pizza."

The older woman frowned in her direction. "Just how do you intend to do that? You have never taken these girls out in public. I thought we agreed that was in their best interest."

"They asked me to take them, and I will not deny them such a simple pleasure because of the complications of my own life. These are my children, and I want to give them everything they desire."

The librarian crossed her arms across her chest. "These are our children, Lex, and I do not think it is wise for you to be taking them anywhere. Suppose the press catches on to your location? If the public gets one look at you and Anastasia together, everyone will know she is yours. Victoria is slightly less obvious, but chances are they would come to the same conclusion. It just is not safe to take them anywhere."

"I disagree. It is perfectly safe. Security and other members of my staff will surround us. It is not as if it will be just the girls and me. Many people will be there."

"You promised me that you would never endanger them. All it takes is one photograph of you with them, and their lives would be ruined. There would be no denying to the public or to our daughters the true relationship you share."

"They should know that I am their other mother anyway, Lauren. They already think that of me. They should know the truth."

"They are too young to understand the complexity of the situation. We agreed we would not tell them until we felt sure they would be able to comprehend and accept all the details of our convoluted relationship. They will not understand that even though you are their other mother, you are married to another woman. They will not be able to handle knowing they are heirs to the throne. What do you think Anastasia will do with such information? We can ask her to keep it to herself, but you know her. She will talk to anyone about anything. That secret would not remain so for any length of time. No, it is best they not know yet."

"Fine. This is not about that anyway. We are simply talking about going out to dinner here. The girls asked me to take them, and I said yes. I will not disappoint them, Lauren."

The redhead shook her head in disagreement. "I think it is a bad idea, and I am asking you not to do it, Alexa."

The princess looked at the woman she loved sitting in her bed, glowering in her direction. Feeling her ire rise, she snipped, "And just who do you think you are speaking to, Lauren?"

Immediately Lauren's face became flush with emotion. "Forgive me, your highness. I have obviously forgotten my place as the mother of these children," she remarked sarcastically. "You may have assisted in the creation of these angels, but I am their mother! I know what is in their best interest, and I am instructing you not to take these girls out in public! There is too much risk involved! Do use your senses, Princess!"

"I suggest the same from you, Ms. Fulton!" Alexa growled crossing the room to the end of the bed. She stood at her full height and glared down at Lauren in displeasure. She would not be told by this woman what to do with her own children. With gritted teeth the heir stated, "I know it can be easy to forget who I am. After all, I have done nothing in your presence except cater to your desires. I have allowed you to mistake me for a different woman by my adoration for you, but do not forget, do not ever forget that the woman who shares your bed is your sovereign, and I

demand your respect."

There was a pause as blue eyes stared into brown. Finally the older woman quietly responded, "I respect you, Alexa, not because you are my sovereign but because you are the woman I love. I am only asking for the same consideration. That is all I have ever requested from you. It is not right to force your will upon me the way your mother forces hers upon you. I did think you a different woman in that regard. Perhaps I have been wrong in my presumption. Possibly you are more like the queen than you care to admit, and that is what bothers you so much." She hesitated before saying, "I really must ask you to leave now. I am not able to continue this discussion in my present condition. I have asked you not to take the children out in public. I can only hope you will abide by my request."

Hearing that she was being dismissed, Alexa didn't say anything at first. She merely stood in her spot at the end of the bed for another moment. Finally, though, without words for her lover, she went to tell her children good bye and then left the room. The heir was angry at what had transpired between them, but she knew Lauren was correct. As much as she hated being told what to do, she knew that in this instance, it was for the best not to take the girls out in public, even as much as she wanted to.

The next day Alexa did not go to the hospital in the morning due to duties at the palace. However, once Anastasia had gotten home from school, she took both girls to see their mother. Upon their arrival, they rushed to her bedside. "Be careful, girls. Mommy still has not recovered," warned Alexa as she checked on her newborns.

Lauren smiled down at her two eldest and gently assisted them onto the bed to cuddle. "I have missed both of you so much. What have you been doing since I have been away?"

"Fun stuff. We had a party. Lexi got pizza last night for us and a bunch of other people."

"Did she now?" the librarian questioned. Her eyes flittered over to the brunette, who was staring back. The older woman said nothing to her, instead focusing on her children. "Tell me about it." Anastasia did as requested, retelling the events of that evening for several minutes. When she had finished, Lauren said, "That sounds like it was great fun. Sorry I missed it."

"Girls, come over here and meet your new sisters," the princess interrupted.

Both girls came to her and received their formal introductions to the newest members of the family. Neither adult said anything for several minutes as the girls chatted to the twins. After some time though, Lauren asked Alexa, "Who is posted outside the door at present?"

"Doug is out there with a new person. Why?"

"Because I wish to speak with you but I want them out of the room when I do so," she answered.

Alexa retrieved Doug from the hallway. "Girls, I want you to go with Uncle Doug to the cafeteria. He is going to get you some ice cream. Your mommy and I need to have a talk."

The older gentleman extended his hands to the children. They cheered in delight as they took his hands, having gotten along with him well the previous night. "How long would you like me to detain them?" he questioned.

"This will not take long," Lauren answered. "By the time they eat their ice cream and walk back, we should be finished." He nodded his head in understanding before leaving with his charges. The librarian's eyes went back to Alexa. "Thank you for respecting my wishes yesterday."

"After taking all the information under advisement, I knew it was the only choice as much as I hated it. I would never want our children to be in any danger, and even though I still think it would have been safe, it was not worth our fighting. They had a wonderful time, Lauren. You should have seen them with my staff."

"I did not feel good about the way things ended yesterday. I could not sleep knowing that we were fighting."

The princess nodded her head. "Neither did I. I apologize for what I said in anger. It was inappropriate, and I do not want you to feel as if my opinion supersedes yours simply because of my status. That is not the person I am."

"I know that, Lex. I am sorry as well for yelling. That is not the kind of relationship I want with you."

"Then we shall put it behind us. I love you, Lauren."

"I love you too, Flash," she whispered with a smile as she received a gentle kiss on the lips.

Chapter XII: Deception Crumbles

About three months later the Fulton residence had returned to as much normalcy as possible, given there were two newborns at home. Alexa still spent as much time as she could with the five women she adored, but her international business kept her traveling abroad and doing the bidding of the queen. However, one night she arrived home late from Europe and had every intention of heading straight to Lauren's after a brief stop at the palace, but upon entering her bedroom she found her wife sitting there, obviously awaiting her arrival.

"Mere, good evening. Why are you awake at such a late hour?"

"I need to speak with you immediately, Alexa," she said.

It was obvious she was unhappy over something, so the heir took a seat next to her. "What is the matter?"

"This is the matter," her wife replied, dropping a stack of photographs into Alexa's lap that had

been sitting by the nightstand. "I demand an explanation."

Alexa looked at what had been thrust at her. The top picture was of her and the five Fulton women. She was holding Anastasia in one arm and Caroline in the other. "What explanation can I give? You already know that Lauren is in my life. It should be no surprise to you. Where did you get these pictures?"

"They were in your desk! I was simply looking for paper to leave you a note! Do these children belong to you? Do not even think of denying it! The resemblance leaves no doubt that you have conceived four children with this woman!"

Knowing there was no way out of the situation, the princess nodded her head. "They are mine," she admitted.

Meredith's tears began as she yelled, "How could you do this to me? For the past eleven years I have tried in vain to give you a child, but you go off and have four with this woman! Why put me through such agony? You have your heirs! Why demand I continue in my futile quest to conceive your child?"

"Because you know as well as I do that my mother demands it of us."

"But our child would not even be next in line to the throne! I wish you had been honest with me about your relationship!"

"I never intended to hurt you, Mere."

The younger princess continued to cry. "There is nothing left to do here. Another woman has fulfilled my one requirement as your wife. I believed we had an understanding that we would remain married for our future child, a child we now know will never be."

Alexa nodded her head. "I have come to accept that. You have put yourself through so much trying to please my family. I do not wish you to suffer any longer."

"Nor do I."

"So what do you propose we do?"

The younger princess sat for a moment in contemplation. "There is only one thing to do. We divorce. Neither of us wants to be in this marriage any longer. I wish to be with Janice, and you now have your obligations to Lauren. It is in everyone's best interest for us to move on with our lives. We cannot spend the rest of our lives married to each other, especially since you have children by another woman."

"Are you certain you wish to divorce?"

Meredith sighed as she looked at her wife. "Alexa, I am young enough to still have a life once I

leave here. I wish to enjoy my life, and I will have that opportunity with Janice. I know you love Lauren. How could you not after having four children together? It is best for both of us. Do you not agree?"

Alexa nodded. "If it is what you want, I will grant you that. Of course you know that my mother will try to persuade us otherwise."

"She will not be able to deny the necessity of it when she learns of your four children."

"Except I have no intention of telling her about them. I made Lauren a promise that these girls would not know of their situation in life until they were old enough to understand it and make a decision on how they wanted to live their own lives. Neither of us wants these girls to take the throne. It is a burden we do not wish to bestow on them."

"Nevertheless, it is not for you to say. It is their destiny, and you know that."

Alexa gave a nod of concession. "I beg you, Mere. Please do not tell my mother about these children. I do not want her to know until the time is right. We must present our decision to her independently of these children. I made my promise to Lauren. Please allow me to keep it."

Her wife reluctantly nodded her head. "Very well. I do not wish pain upon your family. I will not say anything about them to the queen. I suppose we can use the infertility clause in the law for our grounds."

"Are you comfortable with that?"

"I am infertile, Lex. We both know that, and it is not going to change. I am not embarrassed by that fact any longer. It is something I accepted years ago. The queen cannot deny that fact, or the reality that it allows the two of us to divorce. She will be unhappy, but we just must stand our ground and do what we both know is right."

"Very well. I will speak to her about it tomorrow."

"And I will make arrangements to move my things out of the palace."

"As would be customary, I will be more than amiable to give you a house of your choosing and support for you to carry on with your life. After all, you will retain your title of Princess unless you remarry. Then everything will stop."

"I already know that. I appreciate your offers, and I will be amiable with whatever you decide. We are fortunate enough not to have children involved in this. It does make it easier. Do you want me to be with you when you tell your mother?"

"No. It probably would be best coming from me alone. I have no doubt she will try to dissuade you at some point. No need to do so in front of me."

The two women hugged each other in silence for several minutes. "I am sorry for whatever pain I might have caused you, Lex. I have always loved you, and you will hold a special place in my heart."

"You too, Mere."

"I need to go now. Janice is expecting me."

Alexa nodded. "And I need to get home to my children." Once Meredith had taken her leave, the princess stowed her photographs in the table by her couch. Quickly she set off on the task that had drawn her into the room in the first place before heading to Lauren's.

She expected all to be quiet when she arrived. However, she was surprised to find her lover sitting on the sofa trying to nurse two infants at the same time. The redhead looked exhausted. "I thought you would never get here," the librarian commented. "It has been a long week without you."

"I am terribly sorry. You know I would have much rather been with you and the girls. Is there anything I can do?"

"Just sit with me."

Alexa did as she was told, coming to the couch and taking her place next to her beloved. She slid an arm around her shoulders. "I have just come from the palace. Mere and I came to a decision tonight that we are tired of living our lies. She asked me for a divorce, and I am going to grant it to her."

"And what of an heir for the throne?"

"She is infertile. The doctors have made the prognosis official, and there is nothing we can do to change that. There is no reason for us to remain married. She wants to go on with her life with Janice."

Lauren nodded her head. "I suppose that is understandable. It does open up a world of questions about our daughters, though, especially since you will have no other children. I was not prepared for that."

"I know. We should only think about one thing at a time, though. Mere knows about the girls, but she has promised me she would not tell the queen about them."

"How did she find out?"

"She found a picture of the six of us together in my bedroom. She assured me the secret would be safe with her, and I trust her."

"Still that does not change the fact that Anastasia would be your undisputed heir. I do not want

that for her."

"I know, but staying married to Meredith does not change that fact. Mere will never have a child regardless of whether or not we are married. That is a fact we have both come to accept. We will try to figure out what to do with our daughters in time. For now, I just wanted you to know that I will be divorced, and then we can work on our marriage that I promised you all those years ago."

Lauren gave a partial smile that did not quite reach her eyes in response. She did want to be married to Alexa, but things were beginning to get even more complicated between them. She had doubts that her lover would be as eager to abdicate as she once had been, and she had no idea how that might fit into their lives, if it even did. Sensing that Camille was finished eating, she handed her over to Alexa while she continued to hold Caroline.

The princess held her daughter against her shoulder and gently began to pat her on the back as the two women sat in silence. Neither spoke again as they tended to their daughters. Finally when the babies were once again asleep in their cribs in the master bedroom, the two adults settled down into bed to nap before the infants awoke again.

In the morning Alexa headed back to the palace to for the dreaded meeting with her mother. She knew it would not be pleasant, but it was necessary for her to move forward with her life. Going to her mother's office, she came across her parents talking quietly alone.

"Lex, good morning. You do not look well-rested. A difficult flight back last night?" her father asked.

She nodded. "I am glad you are here, Father. I need to speak with both of you on a matter of importance." Her mother gestured toward a chair for her, but Alexa remained on her feet.

"What is it, Alexa?" the queen questioned warily.

"After eleven years Mere and I have decided to end our marriage. We decided last night."

"No. That is not possible. I will not allow it," her mother immediately stated.

"This is not your decision to make, Mother. Mere has asked me for a divorce, and I will grant it to her."

"But you have not even had a child together. You have no heir."

"Nor will there ever be. We made that clear to you already. The doctors have said it is no longer possible. We did our best, but the window of opportunity has forever closed for us. The main purpose of our marriage was to conceive a child, and that is no longer a possibility. Mere wants her freedom, and I want mine. This is what is best for the both of us."

"It is not what is best for the people, Alexa. I will not allow you to throw away your life."

"Again I have to say it is not for you to decide, Mother. Besides, we are not throwing away our lives. We are winning them back," she stated firmly.

"How dare you say that to me? I am your queen, and you will do as I say."

"And if I do not?" Alexa pressed.

"Then you will suffer the consequences."

"Exactly what are those consequences, Mother? Do you wish to see me abdicated from the throne? You are not in a position currently to automatically renounce me for not doing your bidding! Are you to throw me in prison? The people will not see justification in that! Just exactly what would you do to me if I did not follow your orders?" the princess yelled. "You seem to forget this is not about just me! This is about Meredith as well! She has a right to live another life if she so chooses!"

"She does not! She gave up her life to serve this country! She, too, will feel my wrath for disobedience to the crown!"

"I am sure she is prepared to accept any consequences for her actions as am I! You cannot intimidate us into remaining in a farce of a marriage! Neither of us wishes to be together any longer! Do what you will, but we will be divorced!"

The queen stood from her chair in rage. However, she said nothing at first and before she could her husband broke into the conversation for the first time. "Faith, do not think on this as a failure on their part. After all, it might be an opportunity for Alexa."

"How so?"

"Well, if Lex and Meredith were to remain married, there would never be an heir. However, if they were to divorce and Lex remarry, she would have another chance at becoming a mother. There would be another opportunity to produce that heir."

"You could still have an heir with Meredith if you used a surrogate to carry the baby! You have never tried that alternative!"

"And we never will! It is an insult to Mere to have a surrogate! It is degrading to her as a woman and as the princess! I will not put her through more! We have made up our minds! Our marriage is over! This meeting is just a courtesy to allow you to know first before the public hears of it!"

"If you tell the press about this, you are in trouble, Alexa! I will not stand for such behavior!"

"Then do your worst to me, Mother! You will also have to answer to the people for your actions! This is my life, and it is about time I start living it for myself! Now excuse me! I have to inform Matthew of an impending press conference this afternoon!"

That afternoon Lauren was at home with the four girls playing in the living room while she had the TV on the news to catch up on the day's events, because she and Alexa had been up most of the night with the girls when she suddenly heard that a press conference was about to begin at the palace. She had no doubt that it was the news that the princesses were ending their marriage, so she picked up the remote to change the channel before her daughters noticed Alexa on TV. However, Anastasia did observe her.

"Look, Mommy. It's Lexi."

"I see that."

"What is she doing on TV?"

"She is giving a speech, sweetie. You do not need to watch it, though."

"Oh, please, Mommy."

"No. It is not meant for you to hear. We need to work on your homework," she said, turning off the TV, even though she was curious as to what was being said. She knew she would find out eventually, as it was earth-shattering news the world would be carrying for several days.

By the time Alexa arrived back at their home, the princess looked exhausted. However, she wore a content smile for her lover as she took a seat at the dinner table with the five of them. "Lexi, I saw you on TV today," Anastasia announced as she took her chair.

"Oh really? You were watching the news?"

"Only for a moment," Lauren informed her.

"Mommy wouldn't let me watch you, though. She said I had to do homework."

"Well, your mother was right. Homework is much more important."

"How did it go this morning?" the librarian asked.

Alexa just shook her head. "We will talk about it later after the girls go to bed."

Lauren nodded her head in agreement and patiently waited for bedtime to come. When it did, the couple made themselves comfortable in bed, being that they were both tired as well. "So tell me. How were things with the queen?"

"She was not happy of course. She threw out vague threats for my insubordination, but for the first time in my life I stood my ground. It felt good. I told her that just as I had to answer to the people so did she, so she needed to choose her own actions carefully. I told her I was not afraid of her threats and that I knew the law well enough to know she cannot have me renounced or thrown into jail for my choice. I am well within the law to be making this decision, and there was

nothing she could do about it. Needless to say, my choice stood, and I made the announcement this afternoon. I have not seen her since, so I have no idea what is to come with her. However, this was the right thing to do for Mere and me, so I have no regrets. Besides, now I will be able to focus on you."

"How long do you think it will take until your divorce is settled?"

"I do not know, but each of us is looking for quick resolution. Neither of us is making unreasonable demands, and we have no children over which to argue, so it should be soon. It is a matter of it making its way through the court system. I am sure we will be able to take precedence over other cases. Once that is complete, I look forward to giving you the wedding you desire," she whispered, kissing Lauren on the neck.

Lauren indulged in the feeling of her lover's mouth and words for a moment before finally saying, "You forget one small detail. Your mother will still not allow you to marry me. I do not expect her to make any concessions of law for our happiness. She sees me as common and has never liked me."

"We shall cross that bridge when we get to it, darling. Besides, how do you know she dislikes you?"

"She made it clear on our one occasion of meeting."

"What occasion was that? You never told me you met with her."

"I could not bring myself to do it before. It was such a difficult conversation to have with her, and I did not want to relive it. However, it does not bother me as much as it did then."

"When was this conversation? What did she say to you?"

"It was just a short time before you were to marry Meredith. She requested my presence at the palace, so I of course felt obligated to go. She told me that you had spoken to her seriously about abdication, and she wanted to know if it was my influence. She insinuated that I was a courtesan, more interested in your monetary possessions than you, because I had accepted your gifts of my home and my position at the library. At that time I had no idea you were paying my salary until she told me so."

"Anything else?" The librarian shrugged. Of course there was more, but it was hard for her to talk about even to that day. "Lauren, you can tell me what she said," Alexa prodded gently.

"She cornered me about my feelings for you and made me admit that I would do anything for you, including letting you go, if it was for the best. She managed to convince me that it was in your best interest to leave you. I believed her. Looking back I never should have believed her."

"Is that why when I proposed to you that you said no?"

The redhead nodded slowly. "I thought I was doing the right thing, but the pain of it was unimaginable. I regretted my decision the moment you walked out of my life that day, and I still carry the weight of that guilt. Had I gone with my heart, neither of us would have been in this predicament. We would have been together years ago and living the life both of us had wanted. We would have been happy, Flash. I know we would have. I am so sorry I allowed myself to be deceived. I have always loved you, even when I thought I could not be with you."

Alexa sighed and kissed her beloved sweetly. "We are together now, and I will never leave you. That is all that matters."

"I am terrified of our future," the older woman whispered, pulling the princess closer. "The unknown scares me more than I am even willing to admit."

"Me too but we will be together. We will get through it with each other."

The next morning when Alexa returned to the palace, she found her Secretary of Affairs sitting in her office. Matthew wore a solemn countenance. "Your highness, good morning," he greeted seriously.

"Matthew, good morning. You do not look rested. Are you all right?"

"No, Alexa, I am not," he replied, extending an envelope to her.

She looked at it. Her name was hand-written across the front in his handwriting. "What is this?"

"I have come to submit my resignation, your highness."

"What? Why?" she asked in confusion. "What is the meaning of this? I thought you were happy here."

"I am, Lex. At least I used to be. The queen and I had a conversation yesterday about your impending divorce from Meredith. She suspects you have fallen in love with another woman and demanded to know who it was. I refused to tell her. She made reference to Lauren as a suspect, but I still refused to divulge your relationship. She made it clear to me last night that I was to either give her the answers she sought or quit my post. I have been up all night thinking about what I should do, and I come here now to resign my position."

Alexa sighed. "You are a loyal friend, Matthew, but I cannot accept your resignation. I need you now more than ever."

"She has left me no option, Lex. She will fire me. I care about you so deeply. You are like a little sister to me. I would never betray the trust you have put in me all these years. I cannot. I will not, not even for my queen."

"Matthew, I care about you, too. I will not let you do this. Your place is at my side. It always will be for as long as you choose to be here. You are my most trusted friend. This action you are

suggesting just proves that point further. I will not accept your resignation today. I will talk to my mother."

"And say what, Lex?"

"Do not worry about that. Just come with me. We are going to see her right now." The princess led the way to her mother's office and gave a strong knock. When the queen beckoned them into the room, Alexa dragged Matthew in with her.

"Alexa, Matthew, what can I do for the two of you this morning?"

"You can explain this!" Alexa yelled, waving Matthew's letter at her. "You are trying to force out Matthew for no reason!"

"He was given a choice. If he decides to resign, that is his right. Am I to assume that is your decision, Mr. Franks?"

He looked at Alexa. She spoke for him. "I will not allow Matthew to go anywhere! He is my Secretary of Affairs, and I need him! You cannot manipulate him into betraying me!"

"That is not for you to decide. He knows as well as you do I supersede any authority you have to keep him."

"He stays, Mother."

"No he does not, not unless he tells me what I wish to know."

"I will tell you what you want to know but only if he stays! You must agree that he can stay for as long as he chooses! You will never try to use him as a pawn against me again!"

"You will be truthful with me and tell me absolutely everything I want to know?"

"Yes, Mother. Do we have a deal?"

She sat silent for a moment before she finally nodded. "Very well. Matthew's position is safe for as long as he chooses to occupy it. Now, Matthew, you may be excused while I speak to my daughter."

He bowed in her direction before turning to the princess. She gave him a reassuring smile as he touched her on the arm in support. "I will be in the office when you are finished," he said.

"I will be there as soon as possible."

With that the two women were left alone. The queen picked a large envelope up off her desk and stood. She walked toward her daughter and thrust it at her. "You have brought disgrace onto this family with your abhorrent behavior. As your queen I cannot even begin to express my

disappointment in your explicit disregard for the law and your people." Alexa opened the envelope to find the same pictures Meredith had shoved at her the night before when they argued. It was of the five Fulton women and her. "I cannot believe you are still with this woman. I thought I made it clear to her that she was not to see you again. Not only that, you have had children with her. There is no sense trying to deny it. The resemblance is obvious enough. There are four illegitimate princesses because of what you have done. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Alexa looked at the picture of her family before looking at her mother. "The only thing I can say. I love her, Mother. I love Lauren Fulton. I always have, and I always will. She has honored that love we share with four beautiful daughters. I am proud of the five of them, and I could never be with anyone else."

"This is why you have chosen to divorce Meredith?"

"No, not exclusively. Meredith is still young enough to have a life, to find someone else. She is infertile. We would have never had an heir, and I promised Lauren children. I wanted to have children with Lauren. She is the woman I love, Mother. Nothing else matters more to me."

The older woman gave a sigh of disappointment. "You are unfit to rule this country, Alexa. You are too selfish. You need to stand down and allow George to take your place. I cannot allow you to remain heir to the throne. You have totally neglected every law meant for the protection of the royal family."

"I will not abdicate, Mother. I promised George I would not."

"You have no choice here!"

"I disagree! Only I can abdicate my position, and I will not!"

"Then I will change the law to see that you never take the throne!"

"And just how will you explain that to the people? George is not fit for the position! We both know it! Even he knows it! He does not want the throne, never has!"

"We cannot remain at this impasse forever, Alexa! You must do what is right for your people for once in your life! Stand down!"

"No! If you are so concerned about the people, why do we not let them decide if I should abdicate?"

"You cannot be serious!"

"Why not? Are you afraid they would want to keep me as rightful heir?"

The queen was quiet for a moment. Finally with a controlled voice she asked, "You would let

your fate rest with the people of this country? You will allow them to decide whether or not you remain heir?"

It was Alexa's turn to ponder her proposal. "I would, Mother. The Congressional elections are coming up this fall. Let them vote. If they want to remove me, I will go. If they do not, I will stay."

"I can only agree if they know the truth about what you have done. They must know about Lauren and the children."

"That only seems fair."

"And I want you to be the one to tell them. You will confess your sins on national television to our people and ask them to vote on you. Either you do that, or I will remove you from your place."

"Fine. I will have Matthew arrange it."

"I want it done within the week."

"Agreed. We will be bound by the results?"

The queen nodded in agreement before looking at the princess in a long stare. "You have disappointed me, Alexa. As your mother I am disheartened at your actions. I thought you knew better. As your queen I am sickened to know that the princess has blatantly disobeyed me. You have put me in jeopardy with our people. If I am seen as weak in their eyes for what you have done, the response could be disastrous. You could cost the entire royal family their power. We have ruled this country for over two hundred years, and I will not see it fall, because you have chosen to follow your heart instead of your duty."

Alexa nodded her head. "If you will excuse me, I need to start on my speech."

"You are excused."

Heading back to her office, Alexa saw Matthew anxiously awaiting her. "What happened after I left, Lex?"

The brunette sighed. "An unusual twist actually. My mother and I came to agreement about my future as queen. She wants me to abdicate, but I refused. We agreed to allow the people to decide my fate. They will vote on whether or not I should be queen during the Congressional election in the fall."

"What? How could you agree to that?"

"I am trying to protect George. He does not want to be king, but should I get voted out, then we can at least say the people spoke. My mother found that amiable. There is only one small

obstacle. I have to confess my affair and the girls to the people. My mother demands they know the truth about Lauren and the children."

"How is Lauren going to feel about that?"

"She is not going to like it. We had not wanted the girls to be exposed, but I have no choice. Now I need your assistance. I have to prepare a speech that I must give on television in one week's time. I have to figure out how to tell the country I have had an affair and four heirs in the process. It is not going to be easy."

"How you want to spin it? What are you hoping to accomplish? Do you wish to remain heir or abdicate?"

She shrugged. "Honestly, I just want it to be over. I want whatever the people want. I know I can do the job well. I have prepared my entire life for the task. I do not want it taken away simply because my mother disapproves of my choices in life. However, I will go if the people wish me to."

"Then I say we just tell them the truth and let it unfold as it will. Perhaps Meredith could come to your aid here."

"I can ask, but I think it is best I go it alone. I will attempt to write the speech, but I will need your help refining it."

"Of course. Anything I can do to help you, Lex."

That night when Alexa got back to the Fulton residence, it was time for dinner. She tried to put everything out of her mind as she focused on her children, but she knew she had to tell Lauren what happened. In fact, she could tell her lover knew something was wrong but was waiting until the girls were asleep to bring it up in conversation. The opportunity came several hours later when the two oldest were tucked into bed for the night.

"You have been upset since you came home. I can only assume you had an altercation with your mother."

"Yes. This morning I walked into Matthew trying to resign, because she demanded answers, which he would not divulge. She insisted on him sharing the details of our relationship with her, but he refused. She said either he tell her or resign. I could not allow that."

"So what happened?"

"I told her the truth and saved his job. She found the photograph I keep of you, the girls, and me. I could not deny the obvious. She knows we are involved again, and the girls are mine."

"I am sure she did not take that well," Lauren mentioned, with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. She knew now that the queen was involved things had a chance of becoming nasty.

"Not at all. We fought bitterly. She demanded I abdicate the throne because of my behavior, but I refused."

"Why did you do that?" Lauren asked in confusion. She figured if Alexa had agreed to abdication, they could be married finally.

"Because I had promised George I would not. I cannot force him to take my place when he does not want to. I am the heir. I am the one responsible for my people, and I must fulfill that obligation. She disagreed."

"Then where did the two of you leave things?"

"We agreed to allow the people to vote on my fate. I am to be put on the ballot for the Congressional election. The people will be given the chance to decide if they want me as their queen or not, and both my mother and I agreed to abide by the results, whatever they may be."

"What about us?"

"I have to tell the world about you and the girls. She insisted I be honest with the people about our relationship and the fact that I have produced heirs to the throne with you."

"Then the secret will be out. The girls' lives as they know it will not exist any longer. Lex, I thought we agreed we would not tell anyone about the girls for their protection."

"I have no choice, Lauren. They are princesses, and we have sheltered them as long as we could. Anastasia is my daughter and second in line for the throne. It is her rightful place whether we like it or not."

"They do not even know you are their other mother. How are they going to take it to find out you are their mother, you are a princess, and they are princesses? That is too much for a child to handle."

"They have to know sooner or later. We cannot hide it from them forever. You know I am right about this."

"And if you abdicate?"

"Anastasia becomes first in line to the throne. She cannot be spared, Lauren. We can only delay the inevitable for a little while. I think we have postponed it as long as we can."

"I do not like this."

"Neither do I but you have to understand."

The redhead nodded. "I knew we were just deceiving ourselves by believing we could protect

them longer. We just put ourselves in denial of the truth." She paused. The weight of the situation made her quiet. Her mind was bothered by thoughts of her relationship with the princess. She knew the results of the election would dictate their future. If the people reconfirmed Alexa as the rightful heir, they would never be married. If she were forced out, they would be able to have the life they always desired. It left her conflicted, because she sensed Alexa would rather remain heir than be forced from her post. Knowing there was nothing she could do about it, she focused on her children. In her heart she knew they would not be able to shelter them forever, but it just seemed to be too soon to reveal them to the world. She didn't want them to grow up in the fashion Alexa had. "I suppose we should talk to them in the morning. They need to know now that you are their other mother and they are royals. I guess it would only be right to introduce them to your family as well. I just wish they did not have to meet the queen."

"They do not have to meet the queen. My mother and father will be out of town beginning tomorrow. They are going to France for a few days. Perhaps we could take the girls to the palace to meet George, Kelly, and Morgan. I would like my brother to know his nieces. I have denied him the truth long enough."

"It would probably help them to know the rest of your family, so they know they are not alone."

"Fine. Tomorrow after Anastasia gets out of school, we will take them to the palace."

"Now for the hard part of telling them the truth. Perhaps we should keep Anastasia out of school tomorrow. We cannot have her telling anyone what we tell her."

"True. We can have her tutored for the rest of the week, so she does not get behind, but we cannot have her telling anyone before I make the announcement. I will arrange it in the morning with Matthew."

"We should try to go to bed. The twins will be up soon enough to eat, and I know rest will not come easily with tomorrow's discussion ahead of us."

Alexa agreed. "You are right. Let us at least try to get some rest."

The night was restless for both of them. The twins were fussy, and neither could figure out how to tell their daughters the truth. However, they knew they had to, so when Victoria crawled into bed with them, they knew it was time.

Smiling at her daughter, Alexa said, "Morning, Victoria. How did you sleep?"

"Fine."

"Is Anastasia awake?" She shrugged. "Well, we have a big day today. Come with me to wake her," the princess suggested.

Victoria took her hand and excitedly led her down the hall. Going into Anastasia's room, Alexa

gently woke the grumpy child. She fought against waking until Alexa told her she was not going to school that day. That struck her interest as she sat up in bed. Trying to delay the inevitable for just a little bit, Alexa decided to get the girls dressed for the day and feed them breakfast. Lauren joined them with the baby monitor after she had dressed for the day.

Alexa knew the time had come so when her two eldest girls were playing in the living room, she and Lauren took seats on the floor with them. "Girls, we want to talk to you about something important," the librarian began. She looked at her lover for support. They had decided she would be the one to tell them that Alexa was their other mother, and let the princess tell them about being royals. "Anastasia, do you know your friend Nikki at school?"

"Yeah."

"You know that Nikki lives at home with her two mommies, right?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I saw her mommies at school one day."

"Right. Well, sweetie, we never told you this, but it is important for you to know that Alexa is your other mother."

"I know."

"You did?" Alexa asked.

Anastasia nodded. "Miss Morris asked me what parent I looked like one day, and I said Lexi."

Lauren knew that was her daughter's teacher, who was known to be a little bit too nosy in her opinion. "Did she ask you who Lexi was?" The little girl nodded. "And what did you say?"

"My other mommy."

Alexa smiled at her girls. "So you have known for awhile?"

"Yeah. Miss Morris asked if you two were married. She said mommy doesn't wear a ring."

The princess looked at her lover. "Sounds like Miss Morris has taken interest in you, darling."

"I had gotten that indication before but just tried to ignore it. I did not realize she was gleaning information from our daughter."

"Are you married?" Anastasia asked.

"No, sweetie. We are not married," Lauren answered honestly.

"Why not? Nikki's mommies are married."

"Sweetie, we cannot answer that question at this moment in time. It is complicated. However, I hope when you get older you will understand why Mommy and I are not married," Alexa said.

"Do I still have to call you Lexi?" the child asked.

"Do you want to call me something else?"

She nodded. "I wanna call you Mom."

"Okay. You can do that."

"Me too," Victoria piped in for the first time.

"You can both call me Mom. I would like that."

"Yeah," Victoria cheered, cuddling up into Alexa's lap.

"There is something else Mommy and I need to tell you, girls. We should have told you this before now, but we did not. Do you girls know that the country is run by a queen?" They shook their heads. "Well, it is. Her name is Alexa Georgianna Faith Washington. She is my mother, just like Mommy and I are your mothers."

"Does that make you a princess?" Anastasia asked.

Alexa wasn't surprised her daughter would come to that conclusion on her own, knowing her love of fairy tales. "Yes, I am a princess."

"Do you have a wand?"

Alexa chuckled. "No. I do not have a wand."

"Do you have a crown?"

"Yes. I have a crown."

"Do you have castle?" excitedly Anastasia inquired.

"I have a palace. Would you like to see it?"

"Yeah."

"All right. I will take you there today. Do you two realize that because I am a princess and I am your mom, you are also princesses?"

"Really?"

"Really. You are both princesses as are Camille and Caroline."

"Can I have a wand?" Anastasia asked.

"Real princesses do not have wands, sweetie."

"But I want one."

Lauren smiled at her child sitting in her lover's lap before looking at her eldest. "Perhaps we can make an exception and get you one."

"Me too, me too," Victoria added.

"All right. I will see what I can do. Do you want to go to the palace now?"

Both girls answered yes. Alexa promised them they could go after she made a phone call. Going into the kitchen, she used her cell phone to call her brother. "George, good morning."

"Morning, Lex. Why are you calling me from half way across the palace?"

"I am not at the palace right now, but I am coming back. I was hoping you had some free time today. I need to see you and Kelly as soon as possible."

"Is this about your impending divorce?"

"In a small way. I actually need to tell you two something important."

"Well, I can squeeze you in this morning."

"Trust me. You are going to want to take the morning off."

"Why? Is something wrong?"

"Yes but I am trying to make it right with you. Allow me to do so by giving me the day."

"All right. I will have my secretary clear my schedule and have Kelly's do the same."

"Thank you. Now what time does Morgan get out of school?"

"She gets home around 4:00 after tutoring. Why?"

"This concerns her too, but I want to talk to the two of you first."

"Well, we will be here."

"I will be there shortly."

An hour later the five Fultons, the nanny, and Alexa arrived at the palace. The princess left her daughters in the nanny's care while she and Lauren went to find George. He and Kelly were waiting in his office when they arrived.

He was obviously shocked to see Lauren. "Lauren, this is certainly a surprise. Is this why you wanted to talk to us, Lex?"

"Only in part. You better sit back down, both of you." She waited until they had done so before gesturing toward the sofa for Lauren. Both of them took seats before Alexa said, "You both know that Meredith and I are getting a divorce. It is for the best. She does not wish to be here any longer, and I am still in love with Lauren after all this time."

"Does Mother know?"

"I told her yesterday."

"How did she take it?"

"We will get to that later. Right now there is something more important to discuss. I have not been honest with the two of you. In fact, I have been lying to you for years. Lauren and I have been having a relationship, and we have conceived children."

"What? You have children?" George inquired in shock. "Where are they?"

"They are here now. I brought them to meet you."

"How many?" Kelly asked.

"We have four girls," Lauren stated.

"You have four daughters? Does Meredith know?"

"Yes. It is a catalyst in our divorce."

"Lex, how could you do this to us? All this time you let us believe you had given up on children. Why did you keep it from us?"

"Because I did not want Mother to find out until she had to."

"She knows?"

"Yes and she is not happy with me. She asked me to abdicate yesterday."

"What did you say?"

"We came to an agreement. We decided to allow the people to decide whether or not I should be allowed to rule. Part of the agreement is that I have to tell them about my relationship with Lauren and the girls. I needed to tell you now before I told them. I am so sorry I have kept this from you for so long. I have wanted my children to know you. You two are some of the best parts of my life, but they did not even know they were princesses until today. I could not bring them here, nor have you there to see them. I know this must hurt you, and for that, I will always be sorry, but I hope you can understand why I did it."

Kelly nodded her head. "Of course. The queen would have never accepted them. We would have been expected to follow her course."

"But they are your children. I would never have turned my back on them," George stated.

"I know that, but I did not want you to have to choose between Mother and me."

Kelly stood from her chair. "Enough of this talk. Lauren, take me to my nieces."

"Yes, take us. We want to meet them now," George said, taking his wife's hand. Alexa and Lauren followed suit and led the way.

Going to where they had left them, Alexa smiled seeing they were behaving and watching a cartoon quietly. "Girls, I want you to meet some people. Come over here," Alexa requested, kneeling. George and Kelly did the same on either side of her. Both Victoria and Anastasia did as they were told while Lauren went to fetch their youngest ones. "Girls, I want you to meet my brother and sister-in-law. This is your Uncle George and your Aunt Kelly. George, Kelly, this is my oldest Anastasia and my next oldest Victoria."

George smiled at the little girls. "Hi, Anastasia and Victoria."

"Hi," they greeted simultaneously.

However, the little redhead asked, "If your Mom's brother, are you a prince?"

"Yes. I am a prince, and your Aunt Kelly is a princess."

"And here are the two others. This is Camille and Caroline," the librarian introduced.

"Oh, they are precious," Kelly said, looking at the infants. "Could I hold one?"

"Of course. Take Caroline. She is a little less temperamental than Camille."

Kelly took the baby and cooed at her. "You are so cute."

Alexa looked at her brother and laughed. "Uh oh. Sounds like Kelly's clock is still ticking," she joked.

"I never said it was not. You have beautiful girls, Lauren and Lex."

"Thanks, Kelly."

"You know, girls, Kelly and I have a little girl, too, at least she is little to us. She is your cousin. Her name is Morgan."

"How old is she?" Anastasia asked.

"She is twelve. You will get to meet her later today."

Chapter XIII: A Rift in House of Washington

Over the next week, the Fulton girls spent a great deal of time with George and his family getting to know each other. Alexa was still stressed over what she was going to say to her people and worked diligently with Matthew on something appropriate. However, she was still worried. Finally the evening came in which she and her mother had agreed she would admit what she had done on television. As she stood with Matthew waiting for the press conference to begin, her heart was pounding. This was the most important speech of her life.

"Everything is going to be fine, Lex. You have Lauren and the girls. That is all that matters, right?"

She nodded. "I am just scared of the unknown," she admitted. She knew she could tell Matthew anything.

"Everything will work out as it is supposed to. You just have to be honest with the people. They will respond accordingly. Now are you ready?"

"I do not think I will ever be ready for this. Let us just get this over with, so I can go home to Lauren."

"All right. I will go out and introduce you. Then you will make your speech. We will not be taking any questions. As soon as you are finished, you thank the people, and I will escort you off. I will be right behind you the entire time."

"Okay. Let us go."

Matthew nodded his head before heading out to the podium. He greeted the press that had been invited to come before introducing Alexa. The princess squared her shoulders and calmly walked to the podium. She looked over the sea of press before turning her eyes to the cameras. Taking the speech she had prepared from her pocket, she placed it on the podium and then gripped it tightly in nervousness.

"My fellow Americans, thank you for allowing me to encroach upon your evening. I have come

before you tonight a humble princess. In light of my recent announcement of an impending divorce from Princess Meredith, the queen has asked me to come before you and explain myself. I have not been faithful to you. In fact, I have deceived you all for quite some time. As you have all previously heard in the divorce announcement, Princess Meredith and I felt it best to end our marriage for several reasons. We decided to invoke the infertility clause in the law due to Princess Meredith's endometriosis, but there were other reasons that played a part in this decision. For a long time we have been friends, and we thought we were doing what was best for our country by marrying. It was a mistake on both our parts, and I apologize for my share." She paused and then continued. "However, the main reason we wish to be divorced is because we both are in love with other people. I share a profound love with a special woman. Her name is Lauren Fulton, and she has played a major part of my life for the past twelve years. During that time I have come to realize I could never love anyone else. She is the only woman who has ever touched my heart and my soul. Because of the deep love I have for her, I gave her my most cherished treasure. I have given her the children I have always wanted, the ones that have always been necessary to carry on the Washington line. I have come before you tonight to inform you all that I have four daughters that I have kept from the public eye, because I thought it was best for them. However, I know it is important that you know who they are. My eldest child, Princess Anastasia Elise, is five years old. Her next oldest sister, Princess Victoria Rose, is three. I also have a set of twins, Princess Camille Anne and Princess Caroline Hope, who are only a few months old."

She continued earnestly, "I come before you tonight to declare to all of you that Princess Anastasia is in fact my child and second in line to the throne. Although I cannot apologize for following my heart, I feel I must apologize to all of the people for lying to you for the past five years. I feel poorly for allowing you all to think I did not have an heir. My mother, Queen Faith, and I feel it is only appropriate for you, the people, to know the truth. Because I have broken the law and conceived children with a non-royal, I stand here now to ask for your forgiveness. I have been selfish in my quest for happiness. I did not stop to ponder how my actions would affect you all. I have been blinded by an all-consuming love I never knew was possible. It is a love that consumes me even today. I love Lauren Fulton, and if I could marry her, I would. However, as the law stands now, that is not possible. It is not permissible for me to marry someone who is not of the ruling status. Nevertheless, I will continue to love her for the rest of my days and desire to carry on our relationship until I cease to be. Not only that, I fully intend to raise my daughters in conjunction with Lauren's parental guidance. She is as much their mother as I am, and together we will raise the next generation of princesses. I have made up my mind on these matters, and I offer no excuses or apologies for still wanting to follow my heart, even though this goes directly against our laws.

Looking straight into the camera, she continued, "Because of this, I stand here tonight to do the queen's bidding. Queen Faith and I have resolved to allow you, the people, to decide my fate in the royal family. I am the true heir and the next in line to be your queen. However, in light of what I have disclosed here tonight, some of you may wish me to be removed from my position. Queen Faith and I have both agreed that we will allow you, my people, to decide. In the fall Congressional election, I will be on the ballot in every state in our union. The question will be simple. It will give you the option of either reconfirming my position as next in line or abdicating my rights to the throne. My mother and I have agreed that we will abide by whatever majority

decision you all make. If you determine to see me abdicate, my daughter, Princess Anastasia will replace me as the next queen of our country. If you wish to see me take my legitimate place as queen, I will serve you until the end of my days.

"My fellow Americans, this is a crucial decision we are placing upon you, and it should not be taken lightly. You hold my fate in your hands. I have spent my entire life preparing for my time as queen, but if you choose to pass over me, I will be faithful to your will. However, if you choose to see me take my place, I will keep America the strong nation it is in the world. Either way I will raise my daughters to be the next generation of our peace keepers and humanitarians, and I assure you that the house of Washington will be here to serve you for generations to come. For now, though, it is your choice if I am to be a part of that destiny. I only ask that you consider your options carefully, and I will be your humble servant, whether or not I wear the crown. I thank you all for your time this evening and look forward to a resolution once and for all on this issue in November. God Bless you all. Good night."

With that Alexa ignored all the press who were immediately trying to gain her attention and walked with Matthew from the podium. Once in privacy, she sunk into a chair.

"You did well, Alexa. You remained strong. That was what was most important."

"That was the worst speech I have ever given."

"You said what you needed to. That was all that could be done."

"At least it is over. Now I can go home to Lauren and my children."

"Shall I have a driver take you?"

"If you would not mind. I am too worn out to drive myself."

"Certainly. I will arrange to have your car pulled around. You stay here."

Alexa did as she was told, just resting in the chair. However, her cell phone rang as she waited on Matthew's return. "Alexa, I just watched your speech," her mother stated.

"And?"

"Now that you have introduced your daughters to the world I was wondering if you would extend me the same courtesy. I have a right to meet my own grandchildren."

"Mother, you did not treat Lauren with respect last time you saw her. I will not have you repeat your performance with her or my children."

"Alexa, you have had children with this woman. She is now an integral part of the Washingtons whether or not I like it. I have made it clear that I do not. However, her daughters are your daughters, and they are princesses. As the queen I am demanding an audience with them."

"Very well. I will ask Lauren if that is acceptable to her. Now you must excuse me. I would like to go home to my daughters, and my car is here."

It was dark when she got back to the Fulton residence. Nevertheless, she admitted herself and headed to the master bedroom. She saw her lover lying in bed having fallen asleep while watching TV. Alexa turned it off and then got undressed in the dark. Slipping into the bed, she heard Lauren whisper her name. The redhead curled her body against her.

"Thank you," she said softly.

"For what?" Alexa asked.

"For telling the world how much you loved me. I needed to hear that now more than ever."

"I do love you, Lauren, and I always will. Nothing can change that."

"Do you want to talk about your speech at all?"

"Not really. It was awful. Nothing could have prepared me for it. I do not even feel that I expressed myself well. I simply did not know what to say. I love you and the girls, and I was not about to apologize for that. However, I am not sure I conveyed the proper amount of remorse for my deception. I truly am not sorry for what I have done. Maybe that makes me the terrible person my mother thinks I am."

"You are not a terrible person, Alexa. You show such a great love for the children and me. You protect us the best you can, and you try to protect George. You never chose your life, but you are trying to live as you see fit. It is unfortunate that your mother disagrees with your choices so immensely. I know your mother's disapproval cannot be easy for you."

"It does hurt sometimes," she admitted. It was something she didn't confess easily. "However, I find myself angry at her. She is the queen, and she could erase this pain simply by changing the law to accommodate my desire to be with you."

"Maybe she thinks it unwise to cater to you. Maybe she thinks that shows weakness, and she does not want to be perceived as weak to the people."

"I know she does not. She is seventy-two, and her health is beginning to fail her. We Washingtons are not known for our long lives, so I know she is probably only concerned with preserving our strength as the ruling family, but this is different. She could change the lives of all the future heirs with just a few strokes of a pen, but she will not. She will not concede that I am happiest with you, and nothing she can do will change that."

"It hurts you, I know. It hurts me, too, but I have to believe she honestly thinks this is in your best interest."

"Well, she is wrong, and if I ever become queen, the first thing I will do is change the law to assure our daughters do not share in my same fate."

"You would be doing them a great service."

Alexa nodded as she leaned to kiss her lover's forehead. "Since we are on the subject of my mother, she told me tonight that she would like to meet the girls. I told her I would not agree to a meeting unless you consented. I know how you feel about her, and I told her that I would not stand for her treating you the way she did last time, nor would I allow her to treat our children that way. Nevertheless, the queen has demanded an audience with her granddaughters."

"As much as I dislike the idea of such a meeting, I know we cannot deny her," the librarian said.

"I will deny her if you ask me to, Lauren. She holds no power with me any longer. The people do. If you want me to refuse the request, I will."

"It is not worth it. We both know that. She will only continue until she is granted access to them. I suppose we should allow her to see them now, but I want you to be with them the entire time. I do not want our children alone with the queen."

"I would never allow that. I also want you in attendance."

"Fine. She can see them but only if we are both there. I have no desires to be in the same room with her without you."

"Then I will tell her as much. I will get her to agree to our demands."

Lauren sighed. "I simply hate that our lives have come to this."

"Me, too, but it will be over soon. The people will vote in November, and the decision is binding."

The redhead said nothing in response. She knew it was far from over. Depending on the outcome of the election, she might or might not ever see her dream of marrying the woman she loved fulfilled. It was only if the people chose Alexa's removal from power that she would be allowed to marry her lover. That alone distressed her. However, the fact that her children would never know the innocent life she and Alexa had tried to give them saddened her immensely. She did not want her girls to be subjected to the lifestyle the princess had as a child. Knowing there was nothing she could do about any of it, though, she was frustrated. She did not like having her world so out of her control, but it was a sacrifice she knew she would have to make now that the world knew the truth.

The following morning Alexa and Lauren followed their usual routine. However, Doug making his way into the kitchen interrupted them. "Forgive the intrusion, but there is a situation developing outside, Lex."

"What situation might that be?"

"Media is congregating outside the gates of the house. As of now we are keeping them back, but the crowd is getting thick. I think they are trying to get pictures of the girls. I know Anastasia has to go to school soon."

"And so it begins," Lauren mumbled into her orange juice.

Alexa turned to her lover. "I do not foresee the benefit of delaying this. Perhaps we should just let them take their pictures now instead. To have the guards push them back would be a futile effort at best. They will follow us to school."

"Can we not just submit a formal photograph to the media to quell their desires to see the girls?"

"They will not be satisfied until they have seen them for themselves."

"If I may interject, they would probably be satisfied if you gave them an opportunity to photograph Anastasia. That is who they really want," Doug said.

Lauren looked mortified at the suggestion at first, but the brunette nodded her head. "That is true. We could delay the other girls for a while if we gave them a shot at Anastasia. That is whom they came to see. They want to see Anastasia, probably with me. Perhaps I should be the one to take her to school alone today. The press will get the pictures they want, and the other three girls can be spared a little longer."

"It will not buy much time," Lauren mentioned.

"Still it gives us the chance to plan when and how the girls are introduced. If I take Anastasia to school today, I am willing to bet most of the press will follow us, giving you some space, at least for the morning. In the meantime, Matthew can come up with an appropriate solution."

"He has already anticipated this response and sent a royal escort to take Anastasia to school this morning," Doug reported. "It should be arriving shortly."

The redhead looked at Doug. "Is this the best thing to do?"

He nodded. "It is, Lauren. Let them have their pictures of Lex and Anastasia. It will suffice them long enough for Matthew to make a plan. You cannot hide them any longer. I am sorry for that."

"Fine. Lex, you take Anastasia to school, and I will stay here with the girls until the nanny arrives. I had planned to do errands today."

"You will now need an escort for your activities as well," Doug informed her.

"Excuse me?"

"Darling, he is only thinking about your safety. We do not know what the people's reaction will be to my declaration last night. Until we do, you cannot go about your life without protection. I will not have anything happen to you because of a disappointed citizen. It happened to my grandmothers. I will not let it happen to you."

"I do not need or wish to have an escort."

"I do not care about your desires, darling. You must have one. Do you not understand that someone could attack you in the street? You could get hurt simply by walking outside right now. Whether or not you are officially a royal, you are the mother of these heirs and are a potential target. You will be required to have the same protection all other royals have."

"You do not have protection around you whenever you are out in public," she argued.

"To the contrary, I always do. You just do not always see them. They are not always visible, but they are always there. We can arrange the same for you, but it takes time. For now you must have a guard escort you on all your outings. Promise me that you will comply with this necessity."

The librarian looked from her lover to Doug once again. He nodded at her. She knew they had valid reasons for wanting her protection. Furthermore, she knew she couldn't allow herself to get hurt, because the girls needed her. Sighing, she reluctantly accepted her fate. "Fine. I will not go out without protection."

"Good. Now I need to check on Anastasia and explain to her what is about to happen outside. Then I need to dress appropriately for this excursion. Doug, let us know when the royal car arrives," Alexa said, rising from the table and excusing herself.

Half an hour later, Anastasia and Alexa were ready for their outing. Alexa couldn't help but smile at her little girl as she pranced around the living room, excited about what was about to happen. The heir knew it was because of the novelty of the situation and that her daughter would learn to deal with the media for the rest of her life. However, just then, at the tender age of five, it was still a fantasy. When it was time to go, Doug opened the door and stepped out first. Alexa took her daughter's hand and then stepped into the daylight. Immediately the camera flashes began. She gave a friendly wave to the crowd and told Anastasia to do the same. After just a brief moment, the princess led her daughter to their waiting ride and helped her into the seat before getting in as well. Slowly the caravan left the gated house and took a slow route to Anastasia's school.

Matthew had arranged to bar the press from the school grounds, so once they were inside the gates, they had their privacy. Alexa escorted her daughter into the school and allowed Anastasia to lead her to her classroom. When they got to the door, other parents and children were already there. People fell silent though as Alexa stepped into the class. The adults automatically bowed in her direction. Alexa just gave a demure smile to the group and asked her daughter which one was her teacher. The little girl led the way over to her.

"Here she is, Mom," she said, taking her own leave to go find her friends.

Alexa smiled at the teacher. "Miss Morris, I am Alexa Washington, Anastasia's mother. I am sorry we were not able to meet until now," she said, extending her hand.

"Your highness," she answered, shaking hands and adding a bow. "I'm Diana Morris."

"My apologies for causing chaos in your classroom this morning. It is an unusual day for Anastasia. She may be a little unsettled today, but she is still trying to get used to the responsibilities we just placed on her. I hope you will treat her as you always have. She has a great fondness for you."

"Yes, your highness."

"I am also sorry for springing this on you. It is important to me that Anastasia be allowed to be a child and learn just like the rest of the class. I do not want her to be treated differently in any way if it is possible. However, out of necessity, security is here in the building and will remain in your classroom to ensure her safety. I assume you understand the importance of these precautions. I want children to be children, but it is the guards' sole responsibility to keep her safe at all times. I do hope you work with them to find an amiable solution that keeps your classroom under control while allowing them to watch over her."

"Of course. I understand."

"If you have any problems with the security team, Lauren and I will take corrective action. All you need to do is inform us."

"I will."

"Good. Now I just need to speak with Anastasia for a moment, and then I will allow you to do your job. Again, I am sorry for the unexpected intrusion."

"You are always welcome in this classroom, your highness. I have told Lauren the same thing."

"Thank you. Excuse me." Calling to her daughter, she led her into the hallway. Kneeling down so they were on the same height, she smiled at her. "Now, Anastasia, I have to go. Doug is going to stay here with you for the day. Do not cause a distraction because you have Uncle Doug here. You are to pay attention to Miss Morris. Now it is important to remember that you are no different than any of your classmates simply because you are a princess. You are expected to pay attention and to listen."

"Okay, Mom."

"Good. Mommy and I love you. Doug will bring you home this afternoon instead of Mommy or me. If he tells you to do something, you need to follow his instructions. Give me a hug." The two princesses hugged briefly. "Have a good day, sweetie."

"You too, Mom."

Heading back outside Alexa went back to the Fulton residence. The press was back in full force, having followed her there from the school. The nanny was there taking care of the three younger girls. Lauren was getting dressed. Alexa came and embraced her as she stood in the bathroom putting on her makeup. "You look beautiful, darling," she whispered, kissing her temple.

"Well, I figured I would have to dress up now that I am going to have pictures taken of me wherever I go. I never really wanted this."

"I know, but I appreciate the fact that you are doing this for me and for our girls."

"Are you going to be staying here today or going to the palace?"

"I have work to do at the palace. I am going to get Matthew to schedule a time for a family portrait for the six of us. Maybe we can do it this afternoon or tomorrow. The sooner we get it to the press, the sooner you can get a little peace."

"All right. Just let me know."

"It will be at the palace, but I will have Matthew call you. Security is on strict orders to only have the girls in the backyard for the time being, so they can still play outside. You will have Roger as your escort for the day. I figured it would help to have a friendly face while you are out running errands. A car will take you wherever you need to go."

"I guess this is destined to be our lives forever now."

"You will get used to it. I will have Roger and Doug set up security for you like mine, so you have maximum security with minimum intrusion. It will just take time and scheduling." Lauren just gave a nod of her head. Turning the redhead around so they were facing each other, Alexa kissed her sweetly on the lips. "I love you, darling, and I know you have sacrificed for our love. I am the luckiest woman in the world to have you, and I know it. I will spend the rest of my life making sure you know how grateful I am for the things you have done for our family and me."

"I love you, too, Lex."

That weekend Alexa and Lauren took the girls to the palace to meet their grandparents. Even as much as they dreaded it, they knew it couldn't be avoided. The one small positive thing was the fact that Alexa's father was going to be there. When Alexa and Lauren brought their daughters to the children's library in the palace as they had agreed, the queen and her husband were already there. There was silence for a moment as Queen Faith stared at Lauren. The librarian gave the required bow to her but said nothing.

"Mother, Father, I would like for you to meet my daughters. This is Anastasia, Victoria, Camille, and Caroline. Girls, these are your grandparents."

"Well, hello there," Prince Thomas greeted warmly, taking the first step toward them. He knelt in front of Anastasia and Victoria. "How are you? My, are you not just the prettiest little girls. Lauren, Lex, your daughters are beautiful."

"Thank you, your highness," Lauren responded quietly. She could feel the queen's eyes still silently perusing her.

Being the talkative girl that she was, Anastasia stepped toward him boldly and said, "Mom says you're her dad. Does that make you a king?"

He laughed lightly. "No, sweetie, I am not a king. However, your grandmother is a queen. That is her right there." He pointed to his wife.

The little redhead looked at the queen before walking toward her. The queen made no move to kneel; she just stood in perfect posture looking down at Alexa's eldest daughter, the heir to the throne. "Hello," the five-year-old finally said.

"Good morning, Anastasia," Queen Faith greeted. "How are you?"

"Good."

The queen looked at her daughter. "Alexa, Lauren, please take a seat."

The two women looked at each other before moving toward the couch. Lauren sat first, but Alexa took a seat on the floor and encouraged Victoria and Anastasia to sit with her. Her father gestured toward Caroline, whom she was holding and asked if he could hold her. Grateful for her father's apparent acceptance, Alexa released her daughter into her father's arms.

"Well now that you all are here, let us talk while the girls play," the queen suggested.

Alexa nodded her head. Taking her oldest daughters to the small table, she settled them with the coloring books they had brought with them. "What do you wish to say to us, Mother?"

"You do understand that I whole-heartedly disapprove of what the two of you have done," she stated. "And I especially object to you, Lauren, having snuck back into Alexa's life after I thought I made it clear to you it would not be accepted."

"Mother, I will not tolerate you saying things like that to Lauren and especially in front of our children. This is the woman I love, and she is the mother of the heirs of the throne. She deserves some respect," Alexa said with quiet firmness.

The queen ignored her daughter. "There is no doubt that these girls belong to you, Alexa. The resemblance is obvious enough. For that reason alone, I have no choice but to embrace them as rightful heirs, but let me be clear that I do not like what you two have done. Each of you deliberately disobeyed me in your own way. If it were not for these girls, you would have to

answer in a most unpleasant way for that, but these girls need you now. Now what has taken place cannot be reversed, but the people are deciding your fate, Alexa. No matter what happens, though, it is these girls who will carry on the Washington line. You must start training them to be the women they are expected to be. You have denied the people and the rest of the family, but that must stop now. These girls need to understand the life designed for them. You must adhere to the formal training passed down over generations."

Alexa shook her head. "Lauren and I have decided against that at this time, Mother. These girls will be children first. There is plenty of time to teach them what they must know about being a leader. Right now it is important that they be children. I was denied that, and I refuse to deny that to my children."

"Alexa, Anastasia is only a few years from being expected at functions."

"She will not be at any formal functions until she is of age."

"That is not protocol. I must insist," Queen Faith stressed.

The princess shook her head. "Our daughters might be royals, but they are also part non-royal. They deserve to know each life and decide for themselves, unlike what you have done to me," Alexa stated.

"You cannot be serious."

"I am. These are our children, and we will raise them as we see fit. You asked that we bring them here for you to meet them, not argue over their fate. That is a discussion for another time. If you do not wish to be with them, then we will take our leave of you," Alexa said.

There was silence for a moment as mother and daughter stared at each other. Finally the queen said, "I do hope you realize what you are doing. This is far beyond any tradition we have ever followed, and I do not like it. No heir has ever been raised outside these walls or without formal training. You are shaping the future of our nation with your decisions, and I fear it is not for the better, Alexa. Some day this country will be in the hands of these girls, and they need to be prepared. If you are removed from power this fall, that obligation might fall on Anastasia sooner than you expect. I am not going to live forever. There is the likelihood of her succeeding me before she is of age. I ask you to bear that thought in mind."

Chapter XIV: Conflicted Destiny

In the fall of that year, Alexa and Meredith's divorce was expedited and finalized, because of the circumstances of the election. The polls showed the people split on the issue of Alexa's future. Lauren and Alexa never discussed it, even though it weighed heavily on both their minds. The redhead just couldn't see the point in it. She was torn by her own desires and that of her lover's. She sensed Alexa would like to stay on and rule, but doing so would mean their own wish to be married would never be. It was a difficult thing for Lauren to accept, for it was what she had

wanted all the years they had known each other.

On the evening of the election, Lauren cast her own ballot for her fate. It was much more difficult than she had anticipated, especially with all the media covering her movements. In the end once she had voted, she cried all the way home, doubting whether or not she had made the right decision, wondering if it even mattered. No matter what the results were, the life as she knew it and the lives of her daughters were forever altered in a way she felt less than wonderful.

Alexa stayed at the palace that evening as the election results began to be announced. She knew it was going to be a rough night for her family no matter what happened. She just sat in her office with Matthew watching the news and waiting for her destiny to unfold. At one o'clock in the morning, the answer was revealed. Taking a deep breath, Alexa looked at her old friend. "Time to face the people," she mentioned.

He nodded. "The press has been here all night. They are ready when you are. Do you know what you are going to say?"

"There is not much to say. I accept the outcome and move on with my life. It should not take but a few moments to do that."

"Very well. I will let them know you are on your way." He stood from his chair. Patting her on the shoulder, he mentioned, "At least it is over."

Alexa nodded her head in agreement. She had hated to be in limbo the last several months. It had caused strain on her relationship with Lauren, even though they hadn't talked much about it. Getting out of her chair, Alexa went to the mirror and looked at herself. For the middle of the night, she decided she looked decent enough to meet the press. Heading out the door, she went to the press conference room to speak to the world. Upon her arrival, Matthew announced her presence to the people before she took the podium.

"My fellow Americans, thank you for being here at this late hour. As you know the election results have just been announced. I fully accept the results as being from the people. You have spoken, and as your sovereign I have heard your collective voice. Just as you have asked of me through this election process, I will retain my post as crowned princess and first in line to the throne, and I will guide us all into the next phase of our country's history. I thank you all for your vote of confidence in me, and I promise to hold fast to the values that make America strong. May God bless all of you. Good night."

With the quick announcement finished, Matthew and Alexa went to the queen's office. Queen Faith was sitting there with her husband. "Well, it is finished," Queen Faith stated with a sigh. It was one of obvious defeat.

"Yes, Mother, it is. The people have made their decision, and neither of us may undo what the people have done."

The older woman nodded her head. "Perhaps I have not kept abreast of the changes in our

country. Maybe I am out of touch with the people. Perhaps I am too old to know what the younger generations want. I did think they would vote you from your post, but they reaffirmed you by quite a margin. Maybe they feel your infidelity and deception is not as much of an issue as I do."

"Mother, I know you may never understand this, but it was never my intention to deceive the world intentionally. I just wanted to love Lauren. That is all I ever wanted in life, to love this woman. I have loved her from the moment I saw her, and through all these years she has given me so much. I know you have never agreed with me about her, but she makes me happy."

"She must if you were willing to sacrifice everything for her," she conceded. "Well, what is done is done. The country is yours now. The people have made that quite clear. They believe in you and so must I, even if I do not agree with your decisions. You are the rightful heir, and they want you to be the leader of this great country. I have no doubt you will be taking it in a direction it has never been before."

"You still have quite a few years ahead of you, Mother. Right now it is your time, not mine."

The queen shook her head. "Tonight proved that my time is over. I may still be queen, but you are the new face of leadership in this country. They want you to rule. I must abide by their wishes under our agreement. I must start relinquishing my duties to you."

"Mother, that was not our agreement. They simply reaffirmed my place. They have not asked that I take the throne from you. I must ask you to reconsider. I have four small children at home. I cannot possibly be Regent and raise a family. You are more than able to carry on your duties."

"Alexa, it is obvious they want to move in the direction you do. This is a good thing, but it is not a direction I want to go. They want you to take them there, and you will. You are going to be queen and have four children at home. You need to get used to it. Now we can talk about this more tomorrow. I must retire now. It is late, and I need my rest."

The queen and the prince both stood and approached their daughter. The queen cupped Alexa's face in her hand and gazed upon her intently. "Sometimes I wonder if your namesake was as much of a challenge to her parents as you are to me. My mother always said so. Queen Alexa apparently had her own mind about a lot of things, but she loved her parents, and her parents loved her. I know we have had our disagreements, Alexa, but I want you to remember that you are my child, and I will always love you. I may not always agree with you, and I may even be disappointed by some of your actions, but I will never stop loving you. I do not like what we have become to each other. We are not supposed to be adversaries. We are supposed to be mother and daughter, but even more, you are thirty-seven, and you are going to make decisions regardless of how I feel. I suppose it is time I accept this. I do not wish my last years with you to continue in the manner they have for some time now. I want us to be friends."

"I would like that," Alexa conceded.

The queen nodded her head. "Good. From this moment forward, I would like to never speak

about this election again."

"I agree, but what of Lauren?"

"You know how I feel about Lauren's place in your life. It is different than how you feel. I can at least appreciate your devotion to her at all cost. It is a fine quality to have toward your loved ones."

"I think if you tried to get to know her, you would see how special she is, the way I do."

"I think I have no choice but to do that very thing. Married or not, she is the woman you have chosen. She is the mother to the heirs to the throne."

"Would you change the law so that we may marry?" the princess asked.

"I would have to think about that request. Are you sure she wants to marry you?"

"Of course. We love each other. Why would she not?"

"Because a life with you is a life in the public eye. It is a life full of obligations. Alexa, she would be your queen. Do you think she wants that life? Do you believe she could wear the crown with grace and dignity? You must both think of your actions carefully. A marriage of this kind is a life of servitude. Now I really must rest. This day has been taxing enough as it is, and I must sleep before further discussing Lauren's place in your life." Alexa conceded with a nod. Her mother hugged her. "I love you, Alexa."

"I love you, too, Mother."

"Go home to the woman you love. We will discuss everything more tomorrow."

Going back to Lauren's, Alexa found the house quiet when she entered. She knew her girls would be asleep, but she ducked her head into each of their rooms just to gaze upon them. That night their fate had also been sealed. Just as Alexa was to remain the crowned princess and first in line to the throne, by default her daughters had their rightful places reaffirmed by the country as well. It would be her line that would continue to rule, and she had enough heirs to carry on the Washington dynasty for generations to come.

Going into the master bedroom, Alexa found the lights off except for a small one in the bathroom, giving her just enough light to navigate around the furniture. Going toward the two cribs, Alexa peeked at her youngest. Both were sleeping soundly, so she continued into the bathroom to change her clothes. Minutes later she returned to the bedroom, clicking off the light as she went. She slid under the covers on her side of the bed and rolled over to where her lover was lying with her eyes closed. The princess kissed the red head gently eliciting a deep sigh from Lauren. Feeling the tension coming from her lover, Alexa whispered, "Do not worry, darling. I love you. Everything will be fine."

"I love you too, Lex," she replied. However, she couldn't help her thoughts. Now that the people had reaffirmed Alexa as the heir apparent, she had no idea what was to become of them. Alexa was to be queen and her daughters the princesses of their heritage. The four girls would grow up exactly as Lauren didn't want. Furthermore, Alexa had been reconfirmed as the future leader of the nation, guaranteeing that the marriage of which she had dreamed would never come to pass. It made her feel alone like she had never felt before.

Over the course of the next several months, life was hectic. Alexa was always on business with the palace, traveling away from home a great deal, and Lauren felt more and more like a captive in her own home. The press was constantly outside the walls, just waiting to catch a glimpse of one of the princesses or her in their daily lives. She couldn't go anywhere without a security escort, and cameras were always around, even when she just ran errands. Photographs of her began to appear all over the news as the people's interest in her began to grow stronger. She was no longer Lauren Fulton, a woman of independent character. She had become the Princess's Consort in the media, and everything she and Alexa did was forever linked back to each other. Her disdain for her loss of freedom consumed her, and even though she knew it wasn't Alexa's fault, she couldn't help but hold her partially responsible for the circus her life had become.

On one particular evening when Alexa was to return home after an extended trip, she requested that Lauren come to the palace for dinner and leave the girls with their nanny. As much as the older woman didn't like going to the palace, she acquiesced to her lover's wishes. At the appointed time, a car came for her and took her on the short drive. Matthew was there to greet her when she arrived.

"Lauren, how are you this evening?" he asked with a smile as he extended his arm to her.

She took it and allowed herself to be led inside. "I am all right. How are you, Matthew?"

"Tired but well. Alexa's schedule has been keeping me busy. Now that the queen has made her Regent, both of us are just swamped. She has missed you terribly, though. Not a day goes by that she does not speak on how she misses you and the children."

"I have missed her, too. I never expected life would be like this," she lamented.

Matthew nodded. "I understand. She says the same. I hope both of you find the right balance soon. I know she craves it as much as you do." Coming to a stop in front of a door to a room that Lauren had never visited, Matthew opened it for her. "Lex is just through there. She is expecting you."

Lauren smiled at the man who had become a friend to her through their acquaintance. "Thank you, Matthew." He smiled and nodded before waiting for her to enter through the passageway to close the door once again. As soon as Lauren took a few steps, she noticed soft lights lighting a pathway at her feet. She couldn't quite tell where she was yet, but it smelled like a garden. Walking the dimly lit path around a corner, her eyes adjusted as a candle-lit table came into view, and she realized she was standing in an indoor atrium. Alexa was standing at attention next to the table in her military uniform minus the cover, which was sitting on a nearby bench.

"Good evening, darling," the brunette greeted with a smile for her lover as she picked a rose from the vase in the center of the table. Stepping to the redhead, she presented it to her. "You are such a beautiful sight. I have missed you tremendously."

"I have missed you too, Lex," Lauren replied, taking the rose presented to her. The two embraced and then kissed deeply.

When they broke, Alexa gestured to the table. "I have taken the liberty of having dinner prepared already. Please. Let me escort you to your seat." The princess walked her over to her chair and then pulled it out for her. Then she moved to the chair across the small table and took her own place.

"To what do I owe this occasion?" Lauren inquired as she looked down at the elegant meal before her. Even though she could easily eat that way at home if she wanted, Lauren didn't like the extravagance spent on meals for her and the girls, and Alexa had never argued with her about it, leaving them with simple dinners for the six of them.

"Can I not just want to see and spend time with you?" Alexa asked with a smile as she took her champagne flute off the table. "A toast to you, my wonderful woman."

Over the meal the two of them spoke of what had taken place in the week that Alexa had been away from her family. Lauren droned on about how the press was scrutinizing her every move and was being an annoyance to her life. Alexa just merely listened and offered her sympathies for her lover's unhappiness at the situation. The topic then moved on to the royal business to which Alexa had been attending. Lauren listed to her lover talk and thought about the fact that someday their daughters would be called upon to the same duty.

Once the meal was complete, the couple moved to the nearby bench to continue their conversation. Long into the evening they talked. However, when it was starting to get late, the former librarian mentioned, "We should get home."

Alexa nodded in agreement. "In just a minute. There was actually something else I wanted to discuss with you."

"What is that?" the older woman asked curiously.

The brunette smiled at the woman she loved as she reached for her face. She caressed Lauren's cheek and tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. "You know that I love you with everything that I am, Lauren. You are by far the best thing that has ever happened to me. I know that life has not gone the way either of us might have predicted, but I still hold fast to our dream of one day being married. I promised you that, and I want to keep that vow. Even though my path has now been set, I still wish for you to be the one who walks with me through this journey. You are the mother of my children, and I love you. I will love you for the rest of my life." Alexa slipped down onto one knee in front of her lover. "Lauren, will you marry me?" she proposed, digging a ring box out of her pants. She took out the ring and slipped it on her lover's left hand.

Lauren looked at the ring a moment and then at the woman who had given it to her. She reached out and fondly stroked Alexa's face. "Alexa, I love you more than anything else in this world. You have given me great happiness through the years with your love and our children, and I know that I will love you for the rest of my life, but I cannot accept. I am not meant to walk this path with you. I am not meant to be your queen. I do not relish the idea that someday our daughters must follow in your footsteps, and I cannot be with you this way. You are meant to be queen. You were born to lead this country. I was not, and I cannot accept that duty to sit beside you and rule. I need my freedom, and so much of that has already been taken from me since the election. If I were to marry you, I would cease to have any independence left. I know I always said I wanted us to be married, and I did, but in another place in life. You have to understand, Lex. Even though I cannot marry you, it does not change the way I feel for you. I love you deeply, and I want to continue our relationship. I want to still raise our children together and be together as much as time will allow, but I just cannot marry you."

Alexa dropped their gaze as she took a deep breath, trying to control her emotions. She had feared this, especially when her mother had cast doubts upon the idea of them being married. It was something she desperately wanted, though. Her heart felt like it was breaking. She wouldn't know a marriage with Lauren after all, but this time it was of the redhead's own design. Nothing truly stood between them that couldn't be altered except Lauren's will. It hurt Alexa deeply, but she knew she had to respect her lover's wishes.

Nodding her head slowly, Alexa couldn't quite meet Lauren's blue eyes. "Very well. I understand. It was foolish of me to think of a marriage to me as anything but a way to divest you of your freedom. You have already suffered enough for my fate. I will not put you through more. I still love you, Lauren. That will not change. We will carry on as we always have, and now that I have your feelings on this matter, I will not renew this impractical notion again."

Lauren knew it was hurting her lover, but it was for the best. Reaching under Alexa's chin, she raised her head. "Thank you for understanding."

The princess nodded and then rose to her feet. "Come on. We need to get home to the girls," she said. Lauren stood as well. She slipped off the ring and held it out to Alexa. "Keep it. It matches your other one," she mentioned, handing over the box.

The following morning when Alexa returned to the palace, Matthew informed her that her mother wished to see her. Heading down to her mother's office, she greeted her quietly. The queen smiled at her daughter. "Lex, how was your trip?"

Alexa sighed as she took a seat. "It was exhausting but good."

The queen leaned forward in her chair and took off her reading glasses. Putting a hand on her daughter's knee as she asked, "And how are you?"

"Tired."

Queen Faith said nothing at first but then said, "Perhaps if you lived at home in the palace, you would be more rested. Traveling back and forth all the time to Lauren's place only makes you more tired."

Alex rolled her eyes. "That is not possible."

"Certainly it is. It would be better for you, and it would be easier for security, because they would not have to be at Lauren's all the time."

"Yes, they still would because of the girls."

"Not if they move with you."

"Are you suggesting that I move Lauren and the girls into the palace?"

"Having the princesses and you living away from the palace is completely unorthodox. They would be safer here."

"I am not sure Lauren would want to do that."

"Even if it was in your best interest?" she questioned.

"Would you really want them here? Four young children and a woman you do not even approve of living here?" she asked.

The queen sighed. "I am simply suggesting for your sake that you bring them here to live. She should consider making this compromise for you, because it is what you need."

"I am not sure she is going to like the idea, because she will probably feel more like a prisoner at the palace than she already does."

"Is that how she really feels? Has she expressed that sentiment?"

Alexa nodded. "Last night I asked her to marry me even though it is against the law, Mother. She said no again."

"And that was her reason?"

Alexa nodded. "That was the rationale. I have never thought of a marriage to me as such a thing."

"Perhaps there is another solution to the living situation then. She can occupy one of the other buildings on the grounds. Surely there is one that would be suitable to her. The more time you spend here the better, and you know that. It would be easier to walk across the grounds than to drive to her place in the evenings. The children would be inside the palace walls and would be safer."

"That is a point, but I should discuss this with Lauren. I do not think the conversation will go well, but it would be easier for me."

The queen squeezed her daughter's knee gently. "Alexa, relationships take compromise. Even though you two are not married, you will have to make this work. You must make it work now that you have put yourself in this position."

"I fully intend to make this work," she griped. "I just was not expecting to be rejected."

Queen Faith shook her head. "I do not see why you expected any other reaction, quite frankly."

"Why do you say that?"

"Lauren does not strike me as the type of woman that would want the life that you have. You should have considered that before you decided to go down this path."

"This path was not of my own choosing, if you remember."

Her mother shook her head. "No, Alexa, this path has always been of your own choosing. You have always wanted to do things the opposite of the traditions of this family for years. That is what has made your life so complicated. You must live the life of your destiny. You need to move yourself and your children onto the palace grounds for them to be raised as the princesses they are."

Alexa didn't say anything for a moment. Finally she rose from her chair and said, "I have to get to work. I have a Joint Chiefs of Staff meeting. George is giving a report on the military's state of affairs. Will we see you for lunch?"

"It would be wonderful to have lunch with my children."

"I will see you then."

For the rest of the day, Alexa thought about the conversation with her mother. Even though she did not want to admit it, she knew her mother was correct about the living situation. She, Lauren, and the children should be residing within the palace walls for safety and convenience. As much as she knew Lauren would not like the idea, she decided she would ask her lover to make the concession.

Upon her arrival back at Lauren's house, she found her daughters already sleep and her lover sitting on the sofa watching the news. Lauren yawned and patted a seat next to her on the couch. "You are late tonight."

Alexa nodded. "There was a lot of work upon my return at the palace. It is quite tiring to travel so much and then commute between here and the palace when I am in town."

"You are always tired."

"I know. I was actually thinking of ways to rectify that situation." She paused. "I want you and the children to move into the palace with me," she requested.

"Absolutely not, Lex. That is a horrible idea. They would be miserable, not to mention me."

"Lauren, I know what I am asking of you. I have my reasons but this is something I truly need you to do for me. You just said yourself that I was always tired. This would help me a great deal, because you would be closer to where I should be at all times."

"But then we will be at the palace even when you are not there. How could we possibly reside at the same residence as your mother? She does not even approve of me."

"Then we can reside in one of the other buildings. I already know exactly which one would be perfect. You will have everything you need there. We can have an entire staff to care for our needs."

"But I do not want that. I do not need a staff other than our nanny and the housekeeper."

Alexa responded, "Yes, but if we did this you would be able to go back to work at the library if you wanted. You have wanted to go back to work for some time. You will be able to do that. The girls will be well cared for in our absence. They will be safe. They can have freedom inside the grounds and play outside any time they want. You know that is not possible here. Media is around this house at all hours."

"I really do wish they had more freedom at home without the press around."

"They can. The grounds are extensive enough that media will never be able to spot them, and there is a no-fly zone over the palace. They can have some breathing room. They can be children."

"And we can live in another building from your mother?"

"Absolutely."

"Could we not have all the staff? I would prefer to keep things as they are here. I think it is important that the girls have as much normalcy as possible."

"Fine. We do not have to have any additional staff. It would make my life much easier to simply commute across the grounds than to here while I am in town, but when I am gone, you will be able to carry on as normally as possible."

"I hate this idea, Lex. I truly do."

"I know, but this is something I need to do, Lauren. It would be helpful to me to have you closer to the palace."

"Do I really have a choice in this matter?"

"I would not force you to do this, but I need you to do it just the same. Please, Lauren. It would be helpful if we all live at the palace."

The redhead shook her head. "I cannot believe we are having this discussion. I detest the palace. I loathe being there."

"I know."

With a sigh Lauren admitted, "But I know you are right. In fact, I knew this time would come. I just was not sure exactly when. I always knew there would be a time when you would need to live there, and I do not want to deny our children the chance to live under the same roof with both their mothers. I just hate this."

"I love you, Lauren. I know this is a sacrifice."

"And I love you, Lex. I hate this, but I do love you."

A month later, life at the palace was not easy for Lauren. Even though they were not in the main palace, she felt immersed into royal life. Everywhere she went on the grounds, the staff treated her as if she were a princess. Everyone was at her beck and call, but instead of enjoying the opportunity to have things only the royal family could have, she felt stifled. The only peace she felt was at work at the library, but even then she knew it was only a mirage. Security flanked her inconspicuously in public at all times, but she always knew of their presence. Alexa, on the other hand, was constantly working but had the consolation of walking to her home on the grounds after leaving the office in the evening to be with her children. Anastasia and Victoria, however, loved their new surroundings. Every day after school and tutoring, they played on the grounds together with their nanny, and occasionally Alexa and Matthew would sneak outside with them.

On one evening while Alexa was away on business, the queen requested Lauren's presence. Knowing she didn't have much of a choice, she asked Prince Thomas if he would like to spend time with his granddaughters, which he happily accepted. After she had given them dinner and their baths, Lauren put the twins down for the night. A knock on the door alerted her to Thomas's arrival. He smiled at her when she opened the door and moved to give her a kiss on the cheek.

"Good evening, Lauren. How are you?"

"Well, your highness. How are you?"

He shook his head and smiled. "I feel under the circumstances, Lauren, that it might be best if you ceased calling me anything other than Thomas. You may not be my daughter-in-law, but you are much too close for me to be called anything else."

She nodded. "Certainly, Thomas. I understand," she quietly said.

"I appreciate you allowing me to spend time with my granddaughters. I am pleased that you all are living here now and love having them around more. It is such a pleasure to look out my office window and seeing them playing in the fountain in the garden."

She smiled. "I did not realize you had a view of the garden. That is their favorite area of the grounds. Maybe sometime you could visit with them during the day."

"I would love the opportunity to do that. They seem happy here, Lauren."

She nodded. "That is true. They do seem happy here. I never thought that would happen." There was a pause in conversation. "Do you know why the queen wishes to see me this evening?"

He shook his head. "I do not know exactly. She has not enlightened me with such information. Rest assured, Lauren, Lex has made it clear that she will not tolerate any mistreatment of you by anyone at this palace, her majesty included. My wife wishes to continue to try to mend the wounds she and Alexa have inflicted upon each other before her life comes to a close. I do not believe she would attempt to invoke a disagreement between the two of you for that reason."

"All right. Well, I suppose I cannot delay the inevitable. I will return as soon as I can."

"Please take as much time as you need. The girls will be fine."

Walking through the garden up toward the palace, Lauren pondered what the queen possibly would want to say. They had not had much communication with each other since she and the girls took residence on the palace grounds. In fact, the only time in which they ever saw each other was when the queen requested to see her granddaughters, which was not often. Heading into the palace, she walked through the large corridor that led to the queen's quarters. She was instructed to meet Queen Faith in her private parlor, which was unusual, but given the time of day, Lauren simply assumed the queen had retired from work for the day.

When she arrived, she gave a knock and then awaited her summons. When Queen Faith beckoned her into the room, she slowly opened the door, but what greeted her gaze took her by surprise. Queen Faith sat on a settee in the most informal attire Lauren had ever seen on her. The queen was wearing what appeared to be sleeping attire and a robe. She had her reading glasses hanging from a chain around her neck and papers beside her on the sofa. For the first time Lauren looked upon her ruler and realized that Queen Faith really was an old woman who looked truly tired.

Coming into the room and closing the door, Lauren gave a bow as she said, "Your majesty, you requested to see me."

"Yes, Lauren. Thank you for coming this evening. Please have a seat," she said gesturing to the chair next to her. Lauren took the offered chair. "Would you like some tea?"

"Yes, thank you." When the queen reached for the silver pot to pour it, Lauren leaned forward. "I

did not mean that I wished you to pour, your majesty. I can do it."

Queen Faith brushed Lauren's hands away as she said, "I am more than capable of pouring tea, my child. It would not be the first time I have ever done so." After the queen had poured, she offered the cup and saucer to her guest.

"Thank you, your majesty."

Both women sat in silence for a moment as they partook of their tea. Finally, though, the queen said, "You are probably at a loss as to why I asked to speak with you."

"You are quite right. I am."

Queen Faith took a deep breath and then exhaled slowly. Lauren watched as she did so. The queen appeared to be struggling, but Lauren didn't say as much. Instead she simply waited. "I know you and I have had our differences, Lauren. I feel my daughter's life has not progressed in the manner it should have, largely due to your influence. I have tried desperately to keep Alexa on the path that was designed for her since her birth, but she has refused time and again to accept my guidance. Her life has been much more chaotic than it needed to be had she just followed her path. However, I am happy to see that she finally took one thing seriously and had you all moved into the palace. It is what is best for her and the children."

"She does seem more rested when she is here," Lauren conceded.

"I want to thank you for making that concession for her. She felt strongly that you would be against it."

"I must admit that I was. However, I knew it was best for her, even if it was not so for me."

The queen nodded. Shifting the conversation slightly, she said, "I know my time here has almost come to an end, and Lex will soon become queen. Every queen that has ruled this country has made notable history, and she will be no exception. My mother Queen Alexa was the first queen our country had and held the shortest reign because of the ultimate sacrifice she made for my mother Queen Lara and me. I, on the other hand, have had the longest reign, officially ruling this great land since I was a few days old, and soon it will be Alexa's turn. She has already made unorthodox history with her children by mixing the line of this house with those of the people. Even though I felt strongly against it, the people of this country have accepted those girls as the true heirs of the house of Washington, so in the twilight of my life I have made up my mind to put my disapproval behind us and not to speak of it again. I wanted you to know as much."

"Thank you, your majesty. I appreciate that we can put that subject to rest."

"There is another matter of importance, however, that needs discussion. When Lex becomes queen, she will be the first unmarried monarch in history. Granted, that would have been more of an issue had she not had heirs, but I still see it as a concern. A great weight of responsibility will be placed upon her, much more so than there is even now, and in the past the heir has always had

someone to sit beside them to assist them with these responsibilities. I do not wish to see Lex struggle through this alone. I would like to see her married." Lauren said nothing as the queen paused. She couldn't believe Queen Faith had broached the subject of marriage, and even more, she wasn't sure where it was headed. "As you are well aware, Lauren, under current law, the only suitable spouse would be from one of the noble houses. My mother Lara was a Hancock, my husband a Jefferson, and Alexa's former wife Meredith was from the house of Adams. There is only one other noble house from which Alexa could pick, Lee, but there are no good choices for her among any of them. Meredith was the only respectable choice, and she is no longer an option. Moreover, Alexa has made it quite clear she only has interest in marrying one person and that is you."

"I am aware of that, your majesty."

"Lauren, Alexa has followed her heart at every turn when it has come to you, even asking you twice for your hand in marriage. There was legitimate reason the first time you refused. However, the second time there was not, so I am left to wonder why you did so."

"The fact that it is illegal and that you would not approve gives my answer legitimacy, your majesty," she replied.

The queen shook her head. "You know as well as I do that you simply could have waited until she was queen and overturned the law to wed, but instead you outright answered that you would not do so. Alexa's heart beats for you and those girls, and she has been willing to turn her back on her true calling to be with you. She loves you completely, Lauren. I truly believe it would be a great gift for her to be married to you. Even though it goes against everything in our county's history and even my personal feelings on the matter, I would like to see her happiness come to fruition."

"I thought your mind was settled."

"I confess that it is only my inevitable mortality that has made me change my mind. Alexa needs someone to be with her when I am gone, and her love for you knows no boundaries. The Congress asked me if I would change the law, so the two of you could marry, because it seems the people would like to see Alexa gain her true love. They have created a bill for that exact purpose, and I have it sitting on my desk in my office, waiting to sign into law. If you tell me now that you will marry her, I will change the law permitting you to do so."

Lauren sat quietly for a moment before saying, "As much as I appreciate your acceptance regarding such a union, I feel I must decline it, your majesty."

Queen Faith nodded slowly. "I thought that might be your decision, but I would like to know why. Why is it that you love my daughter enough to have her children but will not marry her?"

"I love Lex, your majesty, and it is only because of that love we have four beautiful children."

"But why will you not marry her?"

Lauren shrugged. "When Alexa and I first met, I dreamed of us being together. I wished that I could marry my beautiful Navy fighter pilot, but you made me remember that she was much more than that. She was the crowned princess and with that came certain responsibilities."

"Are you saying you do not love her completely just as she is?"

"Your majesty, my love for Alexa is profound. When we are alone together at the end of the day, sitting on the sofa talking after our daughters have been put to bed, she is the woman I love."

"That is only a small fraction of who she is, Lauren."

"I know."

"Can you not love the woman who is to be queen?"

"I respect and admire the woman who is to be queen. She has grown into an influential leader, and I am proud to see her flourish. I can love Alexa as my queen, but I do not need to be married to my sovereign and taking on all the responsibilities of such a commitment."

"You do not love Lex fully if you cannot accept who she is. She is the princess and in a short time she will be queen. That is who she is. I thought the two of you were living in a fantasy when you first met. You fell in love with a fighter pilot, which is something Lex never truly was. You two deceived yourselves into believing this mirage. Even after the girls were born, the two of you persisted in this dream, which has finally been shattered. Now reality has set in, and both of you are unhappy. I wish I could help my daughter find true happiness. Are there any circumstances in which you would marry her?"

"I would marry my Navy pilot, and I would even marry the Navy Admiral, but I would not want to marry the queen and allow my life to become what Alexa's already is. I have forfeited my life enough as it is."

"So you are prepared to forfeit the rest simply because the woman you love has not grown into the woman you wished her to be? Married or not, you will be treated as a member of this family by the public. You are Alexa's beloved, and therefore you will be beloved by the people. Your life and whatever hopes you had for it are gone in light of what you have given to Alexa. You bore the future queen's children, and that makes you revered by society. The sooner you accept that, the happier you will be. Whether you wished for this or not, you will be by Alexa's side for the rest of your life, and you will always be known as her companion. You may as well finish what you two began all those years ago. Alexa desires a marriage to you. Furthermore, you will never have the life you seek by virtue of what you have done. Therefore, why do you not try to make the most of what you do have? You can have Lex in her entirety if you just accept your role within this family."

There was a lull in conversation. Lauren had not expected such a candid talk with the queen. Moreover, she was unhappy with the perception the queen had of the situation between Alexa

and her. The truth was that she did love Alexa; she just had difficulty accepting what she was. Changing the subject slightly, Lauren inquired, "Are you going to sign the bill allowing Alexa to marry anyone she chooses?"

"The bill is for the entire royal family. If I sign it, anyone who comes after me will be free to choose anyone from anywhere in the entire world for a spouse. There will be no restriction, only that they be of their own volition. I love my daughter, Lauren, and want her to be happy. I know that she and I have not always agreed on what that meant, but I have always tried to put her best interest first. I do not want to see her get hurt anymore than she already has. I would like to protect her from the pain that would surely follow from signing such a bill into law only to have you reject her offer of marriage for a third time. I would not want her to realize that the woman she loves with her entire being cannot love her in return in the same manner. I would rather not sign it and have her believe that I went to the end of my life holding to my belief. My conviction does not believe this is right, but I would do it as a last act for her happiness. However, I will not sign that bill only to have her know greater pain at its expense. I ask you, Lauren, not as your queen, but as the mother of the woman you love, to please consider what I have said here this evening."

Knowing she didn't have much of an option, Lauren nodded. "I will, your majesty," she said, leaning forward to place her cup on the table. However, a frail hand came to rest on hers.

"Faith," she corrected. "After all, whether or not I like it, you are the mother of my grandchildren and a member of this family."

"Thank you, Faith," she softly said, clearly uncomfortable addressing the queen by her first name.

Chapter XV: Her Majesty, Queen Alexa II

A few months after Lauren and the children moved onto the palace grounds, the country was mourning its beloved Queen Faith's passing. Alexa proved inconsolable in private at the loss of her mother, even though publicly she remained strong. On the day of the funeral, Alexa, Thomas, and George sat in the first row of the Washington Cathedral to pay their respects to the late queen. Lauren and the girls sat on the row behind with Kelly and Morgan. As Lauren sat there behind her lover, she could tell that Alexa was struggling to maintain her composure. Having lost her own parents at an early age, Lauren knew the pain she was experiencing, but Lauren mourned for the fact that Alexa had to grieve stoically in public. Lauren also mourned the loss. Ever since that night when she and Queen Faith had discussed a potential marriage between Alexa and her, there was a strong civility that encompassed all their meetings, so much so that even Alexa noticed and mentioned it. However, now Queen Faith was gone, and her lover, the crowned princess, was queen of the most powerful country in the world.

When the service was complete, the procession began to take Queen Faith's remains to their final resting place in the family cemetery. As was custom, the new sovereign followed on foot behind the procession. Thomas and George joined her on the journey through the crowded quiet street as

the late queen's coffin, draped in the American flag, slowly processed through the people on top of an open carriage. Lauren, Kelly, and all the children followed behind in a motorcade. The family had a private gathering at the cemetery, but Alexa was the last one ready to leave.

When she finally returned to the car, Matthew was waiting there for her. "Alexa, as you know, it is customary for the new sovereign to meet with the people today. Are you prepared to do so?"

She nodded. "Yes, I must."

"No one has ever gone out there alone. This is an unusual circumstance, because you have no spouse to go with you. Thomas needs to remain at the palace. Anastasia is probably the best choice to accompany you."

Lauren was about to protest the idea, but Alexa beat her to it. "She is too young to be exposed to this ritual. I can go alone."

"It is too much to do alone, Lex. Maybe George instead?"

Alexa shook her head. "It is expected that I go to the people with my spouse. George is not an option, and since I have no spouse, I will go alone." Matthew's gaze drifted to Lauren, but he said nothing. Seeing it Alexa shook her head. "Absolutely not, Matthew. Do not even suggest such a notion. Lauren has made her sentiments known regarding such occasions. We must respect her position."

"Lex, you really should not be alone," Lauren said in sympathy at the prospect of her lover going alone to greet the people.

"There is no one to stand beside me, Lauren. This is my duty, and I must face it alone," she snipped, turning to look out the window. Silence fell in the car as no one said anything else the rest of the ride. Arriving once again at the palace, Alexa did not say anything to the rest of her family but proceeded to walk toward the gate with her security, knowing what she had to do.

Lauren just looked on after her until Matthew's voice attracted her attention. "It is not too late to go with her, Lauren."

"She does not want me there with her."

Matthew shook his head. Turning to George and Kelly, he requested that they take the princesses into the palace. Thomas retreated inside with them, leaving Lauren and Matthew alone. "She needs you, Lauren, whether she admits it or not. You are her companion, and you belong out there by her side. Do not make her do this alone. Her mother has just died. She is a strong woman, but she needs support right now."

Lauren knew Matthew was right. She didn't want Alexa to be alone out there. Nodding her head, she said, "Very well. I will go."

Extending his arm to her, he said, "Allow me to escort you."

Together they followed Alexa down the long drive and out the gate. She was already conversing with people who had congregated when Lauren stepped up next to her. Alexa turned her gaze to catch Lauren's eyes. Even though no words were spoken, Lauren saw thankfulness reflected in Alexa's gaze. As the new queen curved her arm around Lauren's waist, Lauren felt the tenseness of Alexa's body fade somewhat.

Focusing on the people in front of her, Lauren noticed they were genuinely interested in extending their condolences to her as a member of the family, which took her by surprise. Married to the queen or not, they all treated her as if she were a queen herself. It was in that moment she realized Queen Faith had been correct. She pondered it while she received greetings from the people standing alongside her lover.

Finally, when it was time to return to the palace, Alexa and Lauren walked through the gate hand in hand. Silence surrounded them as they strolled up the drive, but then Alexa whispered, "Thank you for coming out there with me. I truly appreciate it."

"I am here for you, Alexa, always."

"You do realize that now we must move into the palace. The time has come."

"I understand."

"Matthew will have the girls' rooms prepared, and you will need to pick a room for us to have as our sleeping quarters."

"Of course."

"As much as I would appreciate your company at any functions I must attend as queen, since we are not married, you are under no obligation. However, Matthew will seek someone to be your Secretary of Affairs. Your schedule will be your own, but you will have help managing it should you need it."

"That is unnecessary, Lex."

"All the same you will have one, and next week my first official act as queen will be to repeal the royal marriage law, so our daughters will never have to follow the same path as me."

Lauren nodded. "I think you are doing the right thing."

"The law will affect me as well," Alexa softly said. "I know you have made your thoughts on the matter clear, but the law will no longer interfere should you ever change your mind." Lauren said nothing but nodded and held tighter to her lover as they proceeded inside the palace.

True to her word, Alexa's first act was to change the law to protect her daughters' hearts and

futures. Even though she never said it, she wished that Lauren would change her mind regarding their relationship. Having Lauren in the palace with her and by her side at public functions made Alexa realize how possible it truly was to have Lauren as her queen, but she had vowed never to broach the subject again, leaving her in silent longing.

For Lauren's part, she begrudgingly accompanied Alexa to events, at first out of sympathy for her lover having to carry on alone and then as a way to have more time with the woman she loved, who always seemed incredibly busy. However, one evening there was a ball at the palace for visiting dignitaries, the Princess of Wales and her wife, which made Lauren see her role in a different light. As the royals were introduced for the evening, the visiting family was announced first. Then George and Kelly went next as was custom. As Lauren and Alexa just waited on their turn, Lauren strained to watch the Princess of Wales and her wife process through the entrance hall. The blonde princess was a resplendent beauty in a green gown and her dark-haired wife equally as stunning in a dark suit.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Alexa's voice at her ear. "My darling, what has you so preoccupied?" she questioned with a smile.

"Oh, I was just thinking."

"About a certain dark-haired British princess?" she asked teasingly.

Lauren smiled but answered, "Now why would you think that? I have everything I need right here." She squeezed Alexa's arm tighter. "I was just noticing what a fine-looking pair they made."

"As do we, my darling. Come. It is our turn."

Matthew smiled at his friends before he turned to the hall and announced, "Her Majesty, Queen Alexa II and Her Majesty's Consort, Miss Lauren Fulton."

With the dignity and grace she had been trained to have, Alexa guided Lauren through the entrance hall and the sea of palace visitors. Everyone in attendance bowed as the women passed on their way to the head table where the Princesses of Wales were waiting. Lauren's gaze was affixed firmly on them and how similar they seemed to her and Alexa. The women before them were the heirs-in-waiting in Britain and of similar age. Furthermore, they had four children as well, all of whom were close in age to their girls.

Alexa had told Lauren the story of the princesses, of how the heir had married someone of the people, but their marriage was one of the strongest of the British royal family. There were many similarities between the four of them, but it was obvious the Princesses of Wales were adored by their public, and the one who had married into the family looked as if she had always been there.

Lauren wondered if people thought the same thing about her. Instinctively she knew they did just by the way she was treated. Married or not, she was one of the royal family to anyone who came in contact with her, just as Queen Faith said would come to pass. Now that Alexa was queen, it

was easier to see what life would be like as the queen's wife, instead of just trying to conceptualize it as the princess's lover. Granted, she felt overwhelmed at times, but she knew, as Queen Faith had predicted, this was her life now, and she would be better off embracing it. However, there was one thing making her hesitate from such a venture. If she were to become Alexa's wife, she would become a queen herself, the first in the country's history to come from the people. The thought terrified her.

That evening as Lauren conversed with guests, George asked her to dance. She was glad for the reprieve and allowed him to escort her to the dance floor. He smiled at her when they were alone. "You look beautiful this evening, Lauren."

"Thank you, George."

"Whether or not you are married to my sister, you are a queen in the hearts of many people, mine included. Seeing the Princesses of Wales just reminds me of the fact that there should be a marriage between the two of you. You would do the role justice. I do not understand why Alexa will not renew the overture now that the laws are different."

"Because she promised me she would not after I refused her a second time. Your sister has asked me enough. She will not again."

"But you do realize she still wants to?"

"Sometimes I think she does. Others, I do not."

"Trust me. She does, but if she gave you her word, she will not go back on it."

"She gave me her word."

"Then there is only one solution. You must ask her."

"Ask her? Are you suggesting that I ask the queen to marry me?"

"No. I am suggesting that you ask Lex. I can think of no one better than you."

She shook her head. "I cannot. I am not meant to be a queen."

He smiled at her. "You know, there was a time when I thought I would not make a very good king, but Lex thought otherwise. She thought I would do the job well, but she promised me to fulfill her true calling. Looking back on it, she was probably correct. Had it been me instead of her in the role, I think I would have done it well."

"I agree. I think you would have."

"As would you as her queen. The first time Lex proposed to you, she was trying to be something other than what she was. However, the second time, she was asking you to be something you

truly were, but you were not ready. You do realize, though, that by denying her your hand, you are only delaying your own destiny? From the moment I first met you, I knew you were different. Kelly and I often discussed what a profound impact you have had on my sister. She was so in love that she was willing to give up the entire country to be with you. I think if she had to make the choice today, she would not hesitate to do so. You mean that much to her, Lauren. She sees something special in you that makes her believe you have it in you to be her queen, and I see it as well. It is the same thing our grandmother had in her that made our grandmother choose her. You are incredibly beautiful. I have always thought so, and you are intelligent and charming. You have fine external qualities that a queen needs, but it is so much more than that. Within you are incredible strength and grace. I know it could not have been easy all those years, keeping your relationship and the girls a secret, but you did it. Then when it all came into the public light, you held your head up and remained the strong independent woman you have always been. That is why Alexa loves you, and that is why you would make an ideal spouse for her."

"You truly think so?" she questioned.

He nodded and smiled. "I would find great pleasure in having you for a sister-in-law. You make Lex complete. I just wish you two would finish what began years ago in that tiny bar in Florida."

Lauren smiled and leaned to kiss George on the cheek. "Thanks for your vote of confidence."

That evening when Alexa and Lauren retired, they cuddled in bed and spoke of the ball. "You seemed intrigued by the Princesses. I saw you dancing with them," Alexa mentioned.

"I just see so many similarities between them and us."

Alexa nodded. "So do I. They are the future of a truly modern Britain. For as progressive as that country can be, it took a long time until its royal family had to confront what we have accepted for generations. They did so with diplomacy, and now they have those two women about to take the mantle of power. Not only that, they have such a positive marriage and family. It is refreshing to see."

Lauren nodded as she curled closer to Alexa. "You also have diplomacy. Our country is in good hands with you at the helm. After all that has happened, I can see that now. You literally were born to do this job."

Alexa grinned. "True. Although there are times I still wish I could run away and be a fighter pilot," she joked, kissing Lauren on the neck.

The redhead giggled. "You can always take me on a flight," she teased. "And you will always be my fighter pilot, Flash. You just are my queen, too."

"And you will always be my queen," she whispered, meeting blue eyes in the dark. "No matter what, I will always love you."

Cupping Alexa's face, she answered, "And I you."

The following day after the British royal family departed, Kelly had invited Lauren to lunch. Since it was just the two of them, they had an informal meal in one of the smaller dining areas. The conversation between them was easy as it always had been, but while they were eating Kelly said, "Lauren, George told me about the talk you two had last night while you were dancing. He is not the only person in the palace who believes you and Alexa should be married. You two were meant for each other."

"I know that, but as I told him I have reservations about it, because I would become queen, and I am not sure I am the right person for that post."

"Of course you are. Lex has brought the monarchy into a new era with her decision to have children with you. It is only the appropriate next step that her wife is of the people. It is the natural extension of that decision and her reversal of the royal marriage laws. The country wants this, Lauren. Congress wants this. Lex's family wants it, and I am sure if your daughters had a say, they would want it, too. The question is, do you?"

"I do want to be married to Lex. I have always wanted that. I just do not believe I should be queen."

"Why? Are you afraid? Does the thought overwhelm you?"

Lauren nodded. "I do not want to disappoint Lex. I have not lived my life in expectation of ever ruling a country. I do not even know all the protocol. And I could certainly forgo the interference with my personal life from holding such a position."

"Your life has already been overtaken by your association with Lex. What you endure now will be the same if you were married. Your life will pretty much remain as it is. However, you will have what you have always wanted. You will finally have Lex in her entirety. I know in your heart that is what you have always wanted, Lauren. There is only one thing that stands in the way, and that is you."

"I told George that Lex vowed not to renew a proposal to me."

"Well, she will keep that vow if she made it. It is up to you then. It is the only way."

"You truly do not believe my life would be worse for it?"

"No. I think it actually will bring you peace to have your dream come to fruition. I do not see any more inconvenience to you, only added happiness."

With a nod, Lauren replied, "Maybe you are correct."

"I know I am, as is George, Thomas, Congress, and the country. It is time, Lauren. Ask her to marry you. She will say yes."

"How does one even ask a queen for her hand?"

Kelly shrugged and shook her head. "I am not sure, but Lex will be completely satisfied if you are just honest and sincere."

"That is true. Well, I will think on this some more. I must be sure."

"It is for the best. The sooner you accept that, the better off everyone will be."

After lunch Lauren was headed back toward her quarters to check on the children when she passed Matthew in the hall. Smiling at him, she greeted him warmly. "Matthew, how are you today?"

"Wonderful. How are you, Lauren?"

"I am fine. Thank you." She paused.

Sensing she had more to say, he inquired, "Is there something you needed?"

"Actually there was. Do you have a few minutes to speak to me?"

"Of course. I always have time for you. Let us go to your office." When they arrived, both of them sat on the same side of the desk. "What can I do for you?"

"I must confess I am at a loss. George and Kelly have managed to convince me that it might be in the best interest of everyone that Lex and I marry."

He smiled brightly. "That would be fantastic! I could not think of better news!"

She held up her hand. "Just a moment. There is a caveat. I have rejected Lex's proposals twice, and she promised she would not renew the notion again, which means I will have to go to her. That is where I need your help."

"It would be an honor to assist you with this. What can I do?"

"What do you think is the most appropriate way to approach this with her?"

"I think it should be special. Do not make it so spontaneous, or she might not believe in your sincerity. I think it would be helpful if you made your overture with a sign of your conviction."

"What would you recommend?"

"The royal family has standard wedding rings that date back to the early existence of the monarchy. I think you should give her an engagement ring in the same style. I think she would be pleasantly surprised to be presented with such a gift."

"Of course I am going to assume you know what the rings look like."

"Obviously. How about this? I have to return to Lex. Let us schedule some time to view the photographs of rings used in the past. That should give you an idea of what you would like. We can have a jeweler create anything you desire."

"All right. When do you have time?"

Matthew smiled at her. "For you, Lauren, I will make time. You have just allowed me to share in the best news this country has had in years. The key is to get me separated from Lex for enough time, but I can manage that. How about later this afternoon?"

"That sounds good."

"Then it is a plan. I will meet you here in your office." Both of them stood, and Matthew moved in to hug her. "You have no idea how happy you will make so many millions of people with this news, Lauren. However, there is one above all others who has waited so long, and that is Lex. This is what she has always wanted, and it is the right thing."

"Thank you, Matthew."

"I will return this afternoon."

True to his word, Matthew came back to Lauren with photographs of rings of the past. Together he and Lauren pored over them, discussing what would best suit Alexa, but Lauren did not see anything she liked. "What if we did not use the royal rings?" she asked Matthew. "Do you think Lex would have a problem with that?"

He shrugged. "I think Lex will be so thrilled at the idea of marrying you that she would not care what kind of ring you put on her hand to do so."

"In that case, I think I know what I want, but it is not in here."

"Do you think you can draw it or describe it?" She nodded. "Well, then let us go that route. If Lex insists on royal rings, we can probably manage the Washington crest on the inside of the ring where no one can see it, but as I already said, I doubt she is going to care."

Giving a nod, Lauren took paper from her desk and began to draw the ring she wanted for Alexa. It took several tries before she was satisfied with the look of it. Handing it to Matthew she asked, "Do you think I am going to need to explain that to the jeweler?"

"Possibly. Let me take it to him first and see what he thinks. It might take some time to get it just right for you, but we try to get it created as quickly as possible. I would not want you to get cold feet," he teased lightly.

She laughed a little. "Do not worry. I already have cold feet, but this is the only way. You, Kelly, and George managed to convince me of that. Now I need to figure out how to ask her. Do you have any ideas on where we should be?"

"I do not think you have ever been there, but Lex's favorite place is the country palace in Virginia. She has a great love for horseback riding in which she rarely indulges. That is a family hobby passed down from generations. Take a few days to be alone together. I can clear her schedule, so the two of you can have some time."

"The children have never been without us."

"Let them have a treat of staying with George and Kelly or Thomas while you are gone. I would even volunteer to watch them. They will be well cared for by anyone you choose to leave them with for a couple of days. You and Lex go away to the country palace for a weekend. It will give you a chance to relax and spend time alone together. You will both come back new women."

Lauren nodded. "All right. I think we could manage that. More time and it will infringe on her duties too much."

With a smile for her, Matthew said, "I must take my leave now. I will begin working on this right away to coordinate everything."

"Thank you. You are a good friend to Lex and me, and I appreciate it."

"Anything for you two."

Chapter XVI: Destiny Reclaimed

Two months later Alexa and Lauren took a trip to Virginia to spend the weekend at the palace. Even though Alexa was suspicious of her lover's motives, she did not mention it. The two of them had never been away together without the children nor had they ever come to the country estate. However, Lauren had requested that they do so, enticing Alexa with the promise of horseback riding and completely uninterrupted time together. It was an inducement she could not resist, even though she wondered what had been the catalyst for the idea.

Upon their arrival, they changed and headed out to the stables. Alexa then requested two horses be prepared for a ride, but Lauren overrode it by suggesting they ride on one horse. Raising a brow in her direction, Alexa said nothing to her but then turned and echoed Lauren's request.

When they were alone, Alex curved her arms around her lover. "You are not quite yourself today," she mentioned with a smile as she brought Lauren's body to hers. "I am not sure what is going on with you, but I like the change of pace," she whispered, kissing her cheek lightly.

The redhead smiled as she leaned up to kiss Alexa. "It kind of feels like old times when it was just the two of us," she said. "After all this time, I have forgotten what it felt like. I look forward

to our weekend tremendously."

"As do I, but I must admit I am feeling disinclined to go riding at the moment when I have you all to myself. I could think of better things to do," Alexa whispered as she softly began to kiss along Lauren's jaw. "You smell incredible."

"Flash," Lauren mumbled. She felt hands rise from her waist to the edge of her breasts. Her body quickly was forgetting the agenda she had set. Reluctantly she stilled wandering hands. "Trust me. I have slated time for that starting right after dinner and lasting well into tomorrow. This will be your only scheduled chance to ride. I promise you that."

"Then what divine torture you have devised in the interim by making us ride together."

The ride proved to be challenging for them both. Each playfully tortured the other to raise the expectations for the evening ahead. Lauren tried not to think too much about what she was going to do after dinner. She had no doubts that Alexa would be receptive, but she was still nervous that she was about to propose to the queen of her country.

Dinner passed much of the same way that the day had gone. They hardly consumed their food as they kissed and fondled each other at the table. When it was clear the moment had come for them to adjourn to their room, Lauren managed to extract herself from Alexa's embrace.

Alexa sensed a change in her lover as she watched Lauren take a sip of her wine and a deep breath. It was such an abrupt change from their canoodling that she wondered what had brought about such a significant pause. Reaching for Lauren's hand, she quietly asked, "Are you all right?"

Lauren nodded. "Of course. I just needed a moment to breathe. Things are getting a bit more intense than expected over a plate of food," she teased a little.

"Well, shall we retire for the evening?" she questioned.

"In just a moment. There is just one thing I wanted to talk to you about before we go."

"All right. What is it?" she asked, bewildered by the change of events.

Lauren turned toward the brunette and placed her hand on Alexa's. Gazing deeply into dark eyes, she said, "Lex, I love you so much."

"I love you too, Lauren."

"Lately I have been thinking. There is something I want from you, but I was not sure that you would be receptive, or that it was the right thing."

"What do you want? Another baby?" Alexa joked softly, caressing her lover's hand.

Lauren shook her head. "No. Good guess but no. Actually I want something much more than that."

"You want me to run away with you and renounce my throne?" she continued to tease, sensing that Lauren was nervous.

That brought a small smile to Lauren's face. "Quite the opposite, actually. I want you to remain the queen that you are."

"Then what is it? Tell your desire and I will appease you."

Lauren paused before rushing through her words. "I want us to get married."

"What? I am not sure I heard you correctly. Did you just say you wanted to get married?"

Lauren slowly nodded. Pulling the ring box she had been hiding in her clothes that day, she opened it and put it on the table. "This is for you. I want to marry you, Lex," she said.

Alexa looked at the diamond-encrusted ring sitting in the box. It was atypical for an engagement ring, but she immediately liked it. "Lauren, this a beautiful ring."

"I want you to have it. Will you marry me, Lex? I know I have not always been the ideal partner for you, but I hope that I can be going forward. I want us to be married. It is what I have always wanted, and I want our daughters to have two mothers who are married."

"I, of course, accept, but are you sure this is what you want?" she asked.

She nodded. "It has taken me a long time to get to this point, Lex, but I am sure. I have accepted that I am in love with my queen, and to be with you the way I always wanted, I must sit beside you. I am fully prepared to do that if it means I can have my greatest wish, which is to be your wife."

Alexa gave a large smile as she leaned over and wrapped her arms around her fiancée. "You have made me so incredibly happy, darling. This is what I have always wanted, and I am thrilled that you are willing to sit beside me. I am glad our girls will know their parents as married and happy."

Lifting the ring out of the box, Lauren gently slipped it onto her queen's hand. "I thought this would be most like what you might want."

"You chose beautifully, and I cannot wait to return the favor. For now though, I believe we have an after-dinner commitment to keep, and I cannot wait to make love to you, my most precious gift."

Smiling Lauren leaned to kiss her fiancée sweetly. "And I cannot wait to become yours once again."

Well into the next day the two did not stray from their room but finally they knew it was time to head back to the city. As they rode in the back of their car, Lauren and Alexa called Matthew to share the news. He was told to have the girls ready to see them when they arrived, so they could tell them the news before it was announced to the world. He said he would have everything prepared upon their arrival back to the palace, which he did.

As soon as Alexa and Lauren arrived, he ushered them off to see their children, but they were pleasantly surprised to also see Thomas, George, Kelly, and Morgan all there as well. Alexa smiled at the collective group as she and Lauren hugged their children. "Thank you for getting everyone together, Matthew," she said. Turning to her family she said, "Lauren and I have something we wish to tell you."

"You are having another baby?" George joked with a chuckle.

"No. Good guess, though," Alexa noted. Turning to her girls, she knelt down before them. Lauren joined her. "Mommy and I have something important we wish to tell you."

"Mom and I are going to get married," Lauren said with a smile at their two eldest. "What do you think of that?"

The girls began to cheer as they hugged the two of them. "Will there be a big wedding?" Anastasia asked.

"We do not know yet, but I am going to let Mommy do whatever she wants," the queen responded. Looking up at her brother and father from her spot of the floor, she saw them both smiling.

"Congratulations, both of you. This is the best news the country has had in a long time," Thomas said.

"Everyone always hoped this would happen," George added.

"Well, it is official. Lauren asked, and I said yes." Alexa held up her hand for her family to show off her ring. "Now it is my turn to get her something just as beautiful."

"When will you tell the people?" Thomas asked.

Alexa looked at Matthew. He answered for her. "There is a press announcement scheduled in less than an hour from now. Lex, would you like to make it yourself, or shall I?"

Alexa looked at Lauren. "Perhaps you would like to do so, darling?"

She shook her head. "Not without you."

"Then we shall do so together. However, we should try to give them some details. Do you have

any idea what kind of wedding you would like to have, or when you would like to do so?"

"I would like something private. I never imagined a large wedding, just family and friends."

"Small it is then. Of course I would like to do this as soon as possible, so you do not have a chance to change your mind," she teased.

"Not a chance but the sooner the better."

"Next week then," Alexa announced to Matthew. "We can have it right here at the palace chapel. As soon as the announcement is made, Lauren and I will make a guest list and figure out our clothes. Contact the priest at the Cathedral and make sure he is available."

"Certainly. Now let us get the two of you prepared."

Lauren smiled down at their girls. "We will be back soon," she promised. Taking Alexa by the hand, she said, "Let us go."

Heading to their room, they changed into more appropriate clothes to meet the press. When they were prepared, they walked hand in hand to the main entrance hall. Even though conferences were typically held inside, Matthew had the press congregate in front of the main palace steps on the clear evening. The two women could see him standing there talking when they moved outside. Coming down the stairs together, they stopped just behind Matthew and waited for him to stand aside. When he did, Alexa smiled at the gathering.

She looked into the cameras and began to speak, "My fellow Americans, thank you all for allowing us into your lives this evening. This is a special day in the history of our country, for we have some news we wish to share with you." Turning to Lauren, Alexa gestured for her fiancée to speak.

Lauren smiled nervously at the crowd. She had never spoken in public before, and she knew this was a tremendous moment in history. Taking a calming breath, she said, "Thank you for coming. Lex and I- I mean Her Majesty, Queen Alexa II and I- are here to announce that we will be joined in marriage next week."

The queen then added, "We wanted to share this wonderful news with you as soon as practical. We will be having an intimate ceremony here on the grounds of the palace. Official photographs will be released later to the public, but the media will not be allowed on the grounds for the next week to prepare. Afterwards, Queen Lauren, our children, and I will be taking some family time before we resume our duties here at the palace. We appreciate the respect of our privacy during this week, and look forward to meeting with you again soon, as we take the Washington family and the country on the first steps into our joint future," she said, curving her arm around the redhead. "Thank you once again for your time. God bless you all. Good evening."

As they headed inside, Lauren, asked, "Is it always that nerve-wracking?"

"You will get used to it. You did well."

"I must remember to try to refer to you properly in public."

Alexa smiled. "I did not mind."

"It seemed so odd to hear you say Queen Lauren. I cannot believe that will be me."

"It is just a title. Instead of being Mrs. Alexa Washington you get to be Her Royal Highness Queen Lauren."

"I think I like the sound of Mrs. Alexa Washington better," she admitted.

Alexa shrugged. "You will get used to it. I promise. Now we must discuss what to do about this wedding. I can think of all the people I want to invite already. What about you?"

Lauren nodded. "I have a very short list. Matthew can make those arrangements."

"And what will you have me wear?"

"What would you like to wear?"

"Anything you desire. Standard protocol would be my military uniform, but as has already been established many times, we are atypical. I can wear a tuxedo or a morning suit if you would like, or if you want something a little less formal, I can wear a suit. What are you going to wear is probably the better question. I will wear something to coordinate appropriately."

"Actually, I already have a dress."

"Really? I do not ever recall seeing a wedding dress amongst your possessions."

That is because it is not a typical wedding dress. I bought it a couple of years ago, but it has been in its storage bag ever since. Secretly I always hoped we would one day be able to do this."

"Well, what does it look like?"

"I refuse to tell you. I wish for it to be a surprise."

Alexa nodded. "Very well. What will go best with it?"

"I would like to see you wear your morning suit."

"Then I shall. What about the girls? I assume you wish them to be a part of the service?"

"Of course. We need to work on their outfits. I am sure we can find something suitable for them in such a short amount of time."

Chapter XVII: The House of Washington United

On the day of the wedding, Alexa and Lauren rose early. The palace was already buzzing with activity for the special occasion that was to happen later that day. They spent their morning with their children just playing in the garden and then having lunch together before it was time to begin getting ready for their service. Both women had thought the girls would be better off getting dressed at the chapel to ensure they stayed clean, so Alexa agreed to take them over and get dressed there while Lauren did so in the palace. However, when she was ready, Matthew escorted her to the chapel.

As they stood in the entrance hall waiting to begin, Matthew said, "You look incredibly beautiful, Lauren. I always imagined what you might look like on such an occasion, but even my thoughts do not compare. Lex will be overwhelmed by your presence."

She blushed lightly at the compliment. "Thank you, Matthew."

"I should probably head inside. Is there anything else you might need?"

"Actually, there was something I hoped you would do for me."

"Anything for you."

"I know I am supposed to process alone, but I am suddenly quite nervous. I was hoping that you would walk with me."

"I would be honored to oblige, your highness," he answered with a slight bow. "However, are you sure? I could bring Thomas or George out here to do so."

Lauren shook her head. "You are Lex's best friend in the entire world, and you have been there for the both of us since the very beginning. I would like it if you would escort me to her."

"Then I most certainly will," he responded. "Lex has been like a sister to me, and I am overjoyed by the occasion and am happy to add to your joy as well."

Kelly came out of the sanctuary with Anastasia and Victoria and smiled at Lauren. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you."

"Everyone is ready inside. The girls and I will walk in first, and then they will cue the music for you."

Lauren nodded and then took hold of the arm Matthew had extended toward her. "Thank you. Let us start."

Alexa stood shifting back and forth on her feet in nervousness. She had never thought this day would ever come. It was her ultimate dream coming to fruition to have the woman she truly loved joined with her in marriage. All her longing was finally going to be appeased. Alexa smiled as the music began, and she saw her eldest daughters holding hands and walking down the aisle toward her. Kelly followed them before the back doors were opened, revealing Lauren on the arm of her best friend. The queen felt her heart start racing as she saw Lauren begin to walk with Matthew down the aisle. Her off-white satin gown nearly brushed the floor and the spaghetti straps bared her shoulders. Alexa thought she had never seen the redhead looking so simply radiant as she did walking toward her.

Upon her arrival, Matthew took Lauren's hand and extended it to Alexa. The brunette smiled at him. "Thank you, Matthew," she whispered. He nodded and then moved to his seat. Taking a deep breath, Alexa whispered, "You are so lovely. You are an angelic beauty, Lauren. I love you so much, and I cannot express how happy I am right now."

"I love you, too, Flash," she answered. "Let us complete what we started so many years ago." She turned Alexa and herself toward the priest and smiled at him.

Alexa smiled as well. "You heard your highness. Let us complete this."

The service itself was simple as they exchanged their vows to each other and then extended them to their children. After sealing their vows with a kiss, Lauren smiled. "I love you, Lex."

"And I love you, my darling Lauren. We should take some photographs now with the family while our friends head to the reception."

Lauren nodded in agreement. After official photographs were taken, they returned to the palace where a small reception awaited them filled with their dearest friends. As Lauren conversed with guests, she kept gazing across the room at her wife. She couldn't believe she finally had the woman she wanted. There had been times throughout the years when she honestly didn't know if their wedding or marriage would ever come to fruition, and now that it had, the wedding was everything she had imagined early in their relationship. At last she had won her love for life, and nothing could ever come between them again.

As the afternoon turned to evening, dinner was served for the guests before they decided to retire for the night. Everyone had started out early that day, and the next day they were leaving for a trip throughout Europe. The girls were showing signs of being exhausted, so Alexa and Lauren took it upon themselves to prepare them for bed and tuck them in for the night, as was their normal routine. Then they went to their own room. All was quiet between them as they undressed from their day.

Alexa shyly spied on Lauren as she slipped out of her dress. Her naked form was one she was used to seeing everyday, but as she gazed upon it just then, she realized the woman before her was now her queen as she had always desired. Stepping into Lauren's personal space from behind, Alexa wrapped her arms around her waist. "Could I be of any assistance to you, your highness?" she softly inquired, kissing her on the side of the neck.

Lauren giggled as she allowed her further access. "I thought you were tired, Flash."

"Exhausted but how can I rest with such an enticing creature in front of me? I need to partake in what is finally mine if you would allow me to do so."

Turning in the embrace, Lauren curved her arms around Alexa's neck. "You are way overdressed, your majesty."

"A problem easily rectified," she answered. Alexa slowly began to work on her clothes once again but this time had an extra set of hands help in the process. When she was bare, her hands went back to Lauren's body. "Now it is your turn," she said as they continued to kiss.

"Oh, Lex," she murmured as her wife gently kissed along her bare shoulder. They moved onto the bed as Alexa continued her quest to rid Lauren of the rest of her clothes. When she had been successful, Lauren looked up into her wife's dark eyes as Alexa hovered above her. "I love you."

"I love you, queen of my country, queen of my heart," Alexa proclaimed as they finally became one in all the ways both had always dreamed.

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