

THE FERAL BOOKSTER

Monroe + Aiden

A Bedford Kingdom Series

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First edition

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Chapter 1

Warm, golden beams of sunlight spilled through the small carriage window as it slowly rocked over the worn path to Castle Bedford—my new home. With each turn of the wheels over the gravel, the noose, disguised as duty, tightened around my neck. Soon, I would no longer be Princess Monroe of Celermare, but Queen Monroe of Bedford.

Before I could stew on my thoughts of my upcoming betrothal to the Bedford prince, a loud snap pierced through the air and the carriage thudded violently to a stop, nearly throwing me across the seat and into my lady-in-waiting Alice's lap.

"What was that?" Alice asked, steadying me.

"I don't know," I said. "I'll find out."

I threw open the door and stepped outside. "What seems to be the matter?"

"You should remain inside, your Highness," said one of the guards who had been riding on horseback behind the carriage.

Ignoring the guard's advice, I turned away to inspect the carriage. It sat askew, the right front end just barely touching the ground, the wheel lying beneath it. The outer rim of the wheel and its inner spokes were intact. The wheel had simply come loose from the joint connecting it to the frame. It was an

easy fix.

“Not to worry, Your Highness. We shall handle the matter,” the driver said, coming to stand beside me.

I turned to look at him. “With the right leverage, you should be able—”

“Why don’t you and Miss McKay wait inside the first carriage until then,” another of my guardsmen suggested, cutting me off.

I bit the inside of my cheek, holding back the retort I longed to hurl at him, and nodded.

Good princess should be seen, not heard. The voice, my father’s, rattled around in my brain.

“The lady is right,” came a voice from behind. It was deep and rich, and the sound of it sent goosebumps skittering across my skin. I turned toward the voice, and my breath stuttered.

A great white steed approached, and on its back, a Bedford knight. His polished silver armor glinted brightly in the sunlight as he leapt deftly from his horses back. He dropped into a bow. “Your Highness,” he said.

My tongue, stuck to the roof of my mouth, would not cooperate, so I bowed my head in return.

The knight walked around the carriage, inspecting it. “The wheel is unbroken, which is good. It seems to only have come dislodged from the frame. If we can prop her up, we can have the wheel back on in no time.”

A hint of satisfaction warmed my chest. *As I had tried to say*, I thought.

Orders were dispatched quickly from the knight, and my guardsmen and driver obeyed without hesitation. The carriage was repaired with practiced efficiency. Before allowing me back inside, the knight instructed the driver to test the wheel’s

integrity. When it held up after five successful rotations, he gave a single nod, and the carriage was deemed safe to travel.

“Safe travels, Your Highness,” he said, stepping back and bowing once more.

I hesitated, then extended my hand in thanks.

For the briefest moment, he did nothing. His gaze flicked to my hand, then to my face, as though weighing a decision he did not wish to make.

When he finally took it, his touch was careful. His fingers brushed mine, warm and steady, and the contact sent a sharp, unwelcome awareness skittering up my arm.

He released me at once, as though the space between us had grown suddenly dangerous.

My breath caught, though I could not have said why. Before I found my voice, he had already stepped away.

We continued onward to Castle Bedford, yet my thoughts lingered behind on the road we’d left. The knight’s face returned to me unbidden—the steady green of his eyes, the calm certainty in his voice, the warmth of his touch lingering like an echo in my palm.

I did not know his name, but I knew I would not soon forget him.

Chapter 2

Castle Bedford rose before me, massive and imposing, its light-gray stone gleaming in the sun. Bedford's red, yellow and white banners, hung from the ramparts on either side of the tall wooden gates, fluttering slightly in the breeze. The carriage rocked over the gravel road as we passed through the gates, where Bedford knights in polished armor stood like sentinels. Unease slithered through me at their watchful eye.

"Is it too late to throw myself from the carriage, Alice?" I whispered.

"Quite, my lady," she said apologetically.

We stopped along the winding curve of the drive in front of the castle's main entrance where additional guards and attendants waited for me.

"You look every bit the princess, Monroe. Breathe. You'll do fine," Alice said.

I had only a moment to compose myself into the princess they expected before my carriage door was opened and a gloved hand was extended to me.

I took the attendant's hand and let him help me from the carriage. As I emerged, my eyes swept over the line of attendants and Bedford Knights. They stood rigid, their years of mastered

discipline and authority evident. A flicker of disappointment tightened in my chest—none of them were *him*.

A tall man in navy velvet robes and polished boots stepped forward, bowing low. “Princess Monroe, welcome to Bedford,” he greeted, extending his hand to me. I let him guide me away from the carriage and along the courtyard. Courtiers watched silently, their eyes measuring every step.

He led me into the castle, past banners. long narrow hallways, my heels clicking loudly on the polished stone floors, until we reached a quiet corridor. There, he gestured toward a small private chamber. “Your chambers, Your Highness. A moment to compose yourself before the formal audience,” he said, bowing again before stepping back.

The quiet of my private chambers pressed against me, the silence ringing loud in my ears. I exhaled, long and slow, letting the tension in my shoulders dissolve with every breath.

A moment. That is all I need. A moment to remember myself as Monroe before stepping fully into my role.

I thought of what this arrangement meant, not just for me but for my kingdom. They relied on me to see this through—not that the choice was ever truly mine.

A soft knock rapped at the door. “Come in,” I said, straightening my shoulders.

“It’s just me, Your Highness,” Alice said, poking her head through the door. “It’s time. Are you ready?”

I smoothed a hand over my dress, the silken fabric soft against my fingertips. “Yes,” I said, jutting my chin up. I took one final, steadying breath and left the calm quiet of the chamber, feeling like I had left a piece of myself behind that closed door.

Moments later, I was escorted through the towering doors into the Great Hall where the quiet hum of guests stopped abruptly

and dozens of watchful eyes turned toward me at once.

Castle Bedford's Great Hall was exquisite. Candlelight, warm and bright, filled the hall, and elaborately made tapestries and eloquent paintings hung on the high walls. Nobles and ladies of the court filled the grand expanse, their fine clothing and jewelry denoting their status and wealth. Senior Knights and guards were stationed around the edges. Musicians, with untouched instruments sat quietly in their corner.

As I was led to the raised dais where Prince Alexander and his court were seated, I let the years of practice and training engrained in me take over. I moved automatically. My steps were slow, measured. My chin was lifted *just enough* to convey confidence without arrogance. My back was straight, my shoulders squared, my body composed, but not rigid. My gaze remained fixed just below the dais, respectful and subdued.

How a woman should always be—my father's voice again.

The walk felt eternal. I could feel the weight of the stares from each guest on me, observing, judging with each deliberate step I took. Their evaluating stares were a reminder that I had no real power here. Suddenly, I felt as if I were being *delivered* to the prince, presented to him as if were nothing more than cattle, to be inspected and deemed worthy.

The thought was almost enough to make me stumble.

My escort stopped in front of the raised dais. "Your Majesty, may I present to you, Her Royal Highness Princess Monroe of Celermare," he said, his voice booming through the Great Hall.

When the escort stepped to the left, I got my first full look at Prince Alexander. He appeared only a few years older than I was. He was quite handsome with wheat-colored hair, striking blue eyes and a soft, welcoming smile. Dressed in a dark navy, tailored suit, he carried himself with easy authority.

“Your Majesty,” I said, curtsying.

Prince Alexander bowed. “Your highness, it is an honor to meet you. Welcome to Bedford.”

After my introduction was made, Prince Alexander descended the three steps and came to stand beside me, offering his arm. I smiled politely, as I had been trained to, and took his arm.

The evening unfolded exactly as duty demanded. Polite conversation flowed easily, but it was without substance—questions about my journey, my home, my health,—each delivered with practiced smiles. Compliments were offered, pleasantries exchanged, and expectations silently measured. It was all perfectly proper. Perfectly dull. And yet, I responded as I had been taught. Every word was chosen with care, every expression carefully crafted.

As Prince Alexander spoke, his tone warm and attentive, my gaze cautiously drifted across the great hall. I scanned the gathered knights and guards along the edges of the room, searching for a familiar figure in keenly polished silver armor. But he was nowhere to be found. Each time my eyes returned to Alexander, a faint and unwelcome disappointment settled deeper in my gut. He smiled down at me, and guilt swiftly replaced disappointment. Prince Alexander was to be my future husband. Whatever curiosity had taken root within me had no place here.

We took a final turn about the room. I nodded appropriately, smiled when necessary and only spoke when spoken to. My attention firmly remained with Alexander, where it belonged.

Until I saw him.

A Bedford Knight, broad-shouldered and unmistakable. He stood at the far edge of the room, half-shadowed near the stone wall as if he had been conjured there from nothing. His attention

was fixed on the hall itself, his posture alert and controlled.

He did not look at me. My breath caught anyway.

“Ah,” Prince Alexander said, following my line of sight. “Sir Aiden.” He turned back to me, his expression pleasant and composed. “He is one of my most trusted knights and closest friends. I’ve assigned him to serve as your personal escort while you remain at Bedford.”

As if Alexander’s words had carried across the hall, Aiden’s gaze finally found us. *Me*. My chest tightened. The world tilted.

Oh. Crap.

Chapter 3

For a single, immutable instant, time stilled around us. Aiden's green eyes met mine, something unreadable flickering there before his expression smoothed back into discipline.

"Let me introduce you," Alexander said, his voice pulling me back to the present.

I couldn't argue, so I let him guide me towards Aiden.

He looked even more striking than before. His chestnut-colored hair fell just above his shoulders, half of it tied back, the rest loose and unruly. His green eyes seemed brighter now, reminding me of the rain-soaked hills in spring. He no longer wore his travel-worn armor but a formal uniform, the polished silver breastplate bearing Bedford's insignia, edged in gold.

The sight of him stirred something inside me too dangerous to name.

As we approached, he bowed, the warm candlelight glinting off his armor. "Your Majesty," he addressed Alexander.

"I'd like you to meet Your Highness Princess Monroe," Alexander said.

It was a miracle I remembered my manners, let alone how to speak. I smiled politely and curtsied. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Sir Aiden."

He bowed again. "Your Highness."

Alexander turned and smiled. "Sir Aiden has served the crown with distinction. You are in capable hands, princess."

His hand fell to the small of my back as he said to Aiden, "I'm placing something of great value in your hands."

"I understand, Your Majesty," Aiden replied with a curt nod.

Alexander's attention shifted toward oncoming courtiers, "It seems we're being summoned." Then quietly to Aiden, "Stay close," and Aiden fell into silent step behind us.

Conversation continued around us, but I found it hard to focus, too aware of the knight at my back. He said nothing, did nothing to draw attention, yet the space around me felt altered as if the air had shifted.

Without meaning to, I glanced over my shoulder. Aiden's gaze was already on me. Not openly, not boldly, but it was there all the same.

Heat rushed to my face, and I turned forward at once, my pulse stuttering.

Foolish, Monroe.

As the event drew to a close, I was out of pleasantries, compliments, and small talk. My cheeks hurt from forced smiles, my feet throbbed, and my mind could no longer distinguish one noble from the next. Blessedly, our farewells were swift.

"It has been an utmost honor, Princess Monroe," Alexander said. "I have matters to attend to this evening, so I must turn you over to Sir Aiden's care. I do look forward to our next meeting."

With that, he brought our joined hands to his lips and pressed a polite, modest kiss to my knuckles.

"The honor was mine, Your Majesty," I replied.

Alexander smiled brightly, his blue eyes shining. "Sir Aiden will show you to your chamber. Good evening, Princess."

I curtsied for a final time, and when I straightened, Aiden stood before me.

His features remained impassive, neutral, betraying nothing more beyond strict discipline and obedience to his duty. “This way, Your Highness,” he said, his tone measured and reserved.

All the way through the great hall, through the castle, and into the winding corridors beyond, Aiden maintained a respectful distance—never more than two feet away. Yet I could feel his presence as something separate from him entirely.

The walk to my chambers felt both too long and entirely too short. When Aiden came to a stop in front of the ornately carved door relief washed over me, followed by something I had no right to feel—disappointment.

“Thank you, Sir Aiden,” I said.

“Rest well, Your Highness,” he replied.

I lingered a moment longer, looking up at the man who had stirred something dangerous to life within me with nothing more than a few restrained words.

My mouth opened, then closed.

Footsteps echoed down the corridor, drawing closer.

Aiden’s jaw clenched. Then, without a word, he bowed and turned away.

I slipped into my chambers, closed the door, and pressed my forehead to the cool wood.

Foolish, Monroe.

Chapter 4

The room felt smaller than before.

I stood with my forehead pressed against the wood as if the chill might leach the heat from my thoughts. It did not. My pulse refused to settle, thrumming too loud in my ears.

I straightened at last and crossed the chamber, shedding the careful composure I had worn all evening like a second skin. The candles flickered as I passed, their warm and steady light mockingly calm.

This was foolishness, I told myself. A passing curiosity. Nothing more.

As I unpinned my hair, I repeated the words, as if their mere repetition would make them true.

Loosening the stiff bodice of my gown, I took my first full breath, inhaling more freely since my arrival at Bedford.

I closed my eyes, yet all I saw was him. Not his face, not fully, but the *sense* of him. The weight of his presence lingering behind me, measured and controlled, as if restraint were something he carried in his bones.

I sank onto the edge of the bed and pressed my palms to my knees. It meant nothing. I was tired. Overstimulated. Far from home. Anyone would feel unsettled after such a day. Anyone

might mistake vigilance for significance, discipline for depth.

And yet, my fingers curled into the fabric of my skirt as my mind betrayed me, replaying the sound of his voice—low, even, utterly composed. The way he had kept his distance, as though stepping closer would have been a transgression neither of us could afford.

I exhaled sharply and stood again.

This was dangerous ground. I knew it instinctively. These feelings, unnamed and unexamined, were indulgences I had never been allowed. I had been raised for alliances, for duty, for sacrifice dressed as honor.

Tomorrow, I would wake and remember who I was meant to be. Princess Monroe of Bedford. Future queen. A woman with no room for foolishness.

I moved to the window and stared out into the darkened grounds, where torches burned low and the castle settled into an easy quiet. Somewhere beyond these walls, Aiden would be standing watch.

And he certainly would not be thinking of *me*. At least, that is what I told myself.

I turned away at last and extinguished the candles one by one, leaving the room cloaked in shadow.

Still, long after I lay down, sleep would not come. No matter how firmly I closed my eyes, the space beside me felt anything but empty.

* * *

I opened my eyes to buttery light filtering through my bedroom window, its rays dancing along the floor.

In those few, precious seconds between sleep and waking, it

felt as though nothing had changed. I let myself savor them, relishing the stillness, the peace, the quiet of my own mind.

As I bathed and dressed for breakfast, I moved with renewed confidence. The unease of my arrival had faded, and I was ready to settle into the rhythm of my new routine.

Alice escorted me to the dining hall, all the while issuing me a constant flurry of guidance and encouragement. “Remember, my lady...” she began once more.

I stifled a chuckle and cast her a glance. “I’m quite surprised you have any advice left to give, dear Alice.”

“You joke, but one day you will thank me for it,” she smiled.

Alice’s voice flowed beside me, soft and steady, punctuated by the occasional huff of breath as she straightened my sleeve or smoothed a wrinkle only she could see.

“Did you see the tapestries in the hall yesterday? The embroidery on the Bedford crest was exquisite—careful, don’t catch your hem.”

I smiled faintly at her words, the cadence and hum of her voice a comforting anchor as we moved through the castle.

Polished stone walls rose into high, vaulted ceilings, and the morning light streaming through long narrow windows painted streaks of gold across the floor. Knights passed at regular intervals, their boots echoing softly against the stone.

I nodded absently as Alice continued, remarking about silverware and servants, horse stables and farms, manners and posture. She remained oblivious to my wandering gaze as she chattered on, her words blending into the steady rhythm of our steps.

Alice’s steps slowed as we neared the tall dining hall doors. She paused outside them and adjusted my dress one last time. She smiled at me, leaning in to issue me a final piece of advice.

“Mind your manners, and don’t forget to breathe.”

I nodded, managing a small smile.

She curtsied and stepped back.

Prince Alexander stood at the head of the long, narrow table, a pleasant smile already on his face. “Good morning, Princess Monroe,” he greeted. “I’m glad you could join me.”

“As am I, Your Majesty,” I replied. “Thank you for inviting me.”

He gestured to a seat. “Please,” he said, waiting until I had settled before taking his.

“I hope you slept well, Princess,” he said. “The first night in a new place can be unsettling.”

“I did, thank you.”

He nodded courteously.

A brief silence followed—not awkward or uncomfortable, just still. “I hear the weather is beautiful this time of year,” I said.

“It is. You’ve come at just the right time, Princess. Spring suits Bedford. The mornings are mild, the evenings cool, and the gardens are soon to be full of bloom.”

“I’m looking forward to touring the gardens this afternoon,” I said. “I’m sure they’re lovely.”

“I’m certain you will,” Alexander replied, his smile faltered just slightly. “But I must apologize,” he continued. “An urgent matter has come up unexpectedly and I’m afraid I can no longer accompany you today.”

A small seed of disappointment took root, but I nodded, words of assurance and understanding already forming on my lips. “Of course, Your Majesty, I—”

The dining hall doors opened, and Sir Aiden stepped inside. The words caught in my throat. Just for a second.

I swallowed and forced my eyes forward, focusing on Alexan-

der's face. "I understand," I finished, fighting to keep my voice even.

Alexander gave no indication that he had noticed my momentary falter. His gaze shifted to Aiden and his expression brightened, his blue eyes glinting as his smile widened.

"Perfect timing, Aiden," Alexander said, rising from his seat. He stepped toward him then turned back to me, as if the solution had only just presented itself. "Since I cannot accompany Princess Monroe to the gardens today, you shall do so in my stead. I would not have her miss the opportunity."

My stomach plummeted. It took every ounce of restraint to keep my face neutral.

I spared a quick glance at Aiden. Beyond the barest tick of his jaw, he remained a picture of control—unwavering, infuriatingly composed.

"As you wish, Your Majesty," Aiden answered, his tone as calm as his expression.

A bead of sweat slid down my spine as the realization sank in.

I was going to be alone.

With Aiden.

Chapter 5

I stood beneath an arbor wrapped in flowering vines at the start of the winding cobblestone footpath, mesmerized by the beauty around me. Colorful petals stirred in the breeze, tree branches swished overhead, and stone fountain statues burbled nearby.

A soft wind wafted through the air, carrying the scents of lilac, honeysuckle, and jasmine. I closed my eyes, lifted my face to the sun, and breathed them in.

When I opened them, Aiden was beside me, his attention fixed on my face.

“We don’t get many days like this in Celermare,” I explained. “It’s perpetually rainy.”

“Bedford has its share of rain,” he replied. “But days like this are worth waiting for.”

I smiled and stepped onto the winding cobblestone path. Aiden fell into step beside me, his stride perfectly in time with mine.

Neatly tended beds lined the path, their symmetry only broken up by soft bursts of color—clusters of blooms arranged with deliberate care. I slowed near a patch of forget-me-nots, their delicate powder-blue faces nodding in the breeze.

“These have always been my favorite,” I said, almost to myself.

His gaze lingered on the blooms, and for just a moment, the corner of his mouth curved—so faint that I might have imagined it.

“A wise choice,” he said.

I followed the path deeper into the garden, the first section giving way to a secluded area where flowers spilled over their borders in chaotic abundance.

I slowed my pace, letting my gaze wander over the riot of shapes and colors.

For the first time in days, I realized I hadn’t thought of politics, duties, or obligations. I hadn’t even been aware of Aiden—until now, when I caught myself glancing at him, sunlight catching in the chestnut strands of his hair. And yet... there was no fluttering of nerves, no tightening of my chest. None of the earlier fear or awkwardness I had expected.

Instead, I felt... free. As if the garden had eased all the tension I’d been carrying. I no longer felt like I was merely *existing* as a dutiful daughter or princess. Here, I felt like myself.

We passed into the next section of the garden, where the path curved between low hedges and around bubbling fountains. With each step deeper into the immersive garden, I felt my body relax—my shoulders loosening, my steps growing less deliberate, even my breathing coming easier.

I trailed my fingertips over the smooth stone of a fountain, no longer so mindful about posture or poise.

“You seem more at ease here,” Aiden remarked.

I glanced at him, surprised. Not just by the observation, but by how true it was.

“The gardens suit you,” he added.

“I—” I cleared my throat, suddenly dry. “I hadn’t realized I was that obvious.”

"I'm quite perceptive, Princess," he said. "I would not be much of a knight if I weren't."

"I suppose that's true," I said after a moment.

I sighed softly and then continued, "I suppose too, that it's been some time since I've felt like the girl I used to be. This place, it—"

Something brushed against my wrist.

I froze.

My breath caught as I looked down. A bee rested there, wings still, oblivious to the havoc it had just wrecked.

"Sir Aiden," I said, my voice barely more than air. Then again, sharper this time, panic lacing my words. "Aiden. I—there's a bee. I can't—"

My chest tightened, breath coming in short and choppy bursts. He was there instantly.

"You're okay," he said quietly. "Don't move."

"Allergic," I huffed out. "Aiden, please."

"Look at me, Monroe." My eyes snapped to his, filled with reassurance and unshakable calm. His hand closed gently around my wrist. "You're going to be fine. Steady now."

I could only nod.

His gaze never wavered as he lifted his hand, guiding the insect away with careful precision.

Only once it was gone did he exhale.

"You're okay," he said.

His hand lingered on my skin, and when I looked up, I found his gaze had not strayed from me.

There was unmistakable concern there, and I couldn't help but wonder if he had been frightened too. Not of the bee, but of what might have happened to *me*.

Aiden cleared his throat. "We should get you back inside,

Princess.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “I think you might be right.”

We retraced our steps through the garden, and I noticed Aiden had shifted closer, his eyes scanning the garden for any new danger—bees, or anything else.

My chest tightened, but in an entirely different way. He had learned of a new threat and would be ready to step in at moment’s notice.

It struck me then that he wasn’t just knight sworn to duty. He was watching me, *truly* watching me. And that both unsettled and reassured me.

Chapter 6

I didn't have long to sit with the thought of what I noticed of Aiden in the garden, nor the way it lingered long after I thought it should have faded. The following days were busy with appointments—dress fittings, royal wardrobe consultations, etiquette trainings. I barely had time to catch my breath, let alone examine my own feelings—or the way Aiden's presence had unsettled something I hadn't known was so fragile.

Today would be no exception. Prince Alexander was hosting a formal luncheon.

It would be the first time since my introduction to the court that Prince Alexander and I would be seen together in public. There would be no room for missteps.

After Alice checked—and checked twice more—that every silken strand of my hair was in place, my gown was wrinkle free and flowing just right, she finally gave me her nod of approval.

“Ready, Your Highness?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. I raised my chin and straightened my shoulders, a faint smile touching my lips when I caught Alice's proud look from the corner of my eye.

The great hall had completely transformed for the luncheon. It radiated elegance and finery—every gilded piece of furniture and décor gleaming brilliantly.

Alexander was speaking with a small group of men, and I couldn't help but be in awe of him for how he commanded the attention of those around him. Even as he left them to come to my side, the men's gazes followed him, reluctant to let him go.

"Good afternoon, Your Highness," Alexander said, taking my hand and bringing it to his lips.

His gesture was polite, proper, expected, yet it stirred nothing like the restless spark that Aiden's touch had set loose beneath my skin—sharp, electric, and impossible to ignore.

"Your Majesty," I replied, curtsying regally.

Leaning slightly, his voice low and steady, he said, "You look magnificent, Princess."

"And you," I replied.

"Shall we?"

I nodded and let him lead the way to the long dining table in the center of the room.

The luncheon unfolded with practiced precision. Plates were exchanged, wine glasses filled, voices rose and fell in easy rhythm. I answered when spoken to, smiled when expected, laughed softly at the right moments.

The conversation rarely lingered on me. It moved around me—trade, border disputes, the coming winter—matters I had been trained to understand but not invited to weigh in on.

More than once, my gaze drifted toward the edges of the hall before I caught myself—an instinctive, foolish search for a familiar presence that had no reason to be there.

Alexander would occasionally glance my way, but his gaze never stayed, already pulled into new conversations.

It was easy to understand why he was so admired. He spoke with confidence, each word laced with conviction, but there was a lightness to him too, a warmth beneath the authority. He was

charming in a way that felt effortless—the embodiment of a true leader. A prince. A king.

I should have been grateful that I was to marry him—he was everything he should be, everything a princess should *want*. But as one course blurred into the next, I found it harder to convince myself of it.

It wasn't long until I faded into the background completely. Alexander's quick glances ceased, and whatever small exchanges I had been a part of dissolved as conversation moved on without me.

It's all part of the role, I chastised myself, knowing that my place here was to be more decorative than essential. I had known this. Expected it. Still, I hadn't anticipated the loneliness that settled over me in a room full of people. It was a loneliness I hadn't felt in the garden, standing beside a knight whose solid unspoken steadiness had made me feel less alone without ever trying to.

Relief washed over me when Alexander rose from his seat, signaling the end of the luncheon. "Guests, if you would please," he said smoothly.

One by one, the nobles and courtiers gathered their belongings and filed out of the hall.

I exhaled, feeling the tension in my shoulders ease as the room emptied.

"Monroe," Alexander said. "May I escort you to your chambers?"

"Of course," I answered, and Alexander fell into step beside me as we walked through the hall.

"I know these last few days have been... busy," he began. "It hasn't left much room for anything else." Soft blue eyes met mine, warm and attentive. "I hoped we might take a walk through the castle grounds once things settle."

A faint flicker of hope stirred in me, imagining something beyond protocol and expectation.

“I would like that,” I said, feeling my lips curve into a genuine smile.

Perhaps, finally, there would be a moment that felt like it belonged only to us—one that might quiet the thoughts of a man I had no right to carry.

Chapter 7

I woke with a cautious sense of resolve. The flicker of hope I'd felt the night before lingered—not brighter, but steadier, as though I'd chosen to hold onto it rather than let it slip away.

I moved through my morning routine with practiced ease, a quiet anticipation setting in. It wasn't excitement, exactly, but intention.

Even as I sat in the small sitting room, a book propped on my lap, I found it difficult to focus on the words on the page. My thoughts kept returning to Alexander's words, to the possibility that *this*—whatever this might become—could be enough.

When the knock at my door came, I still smiled, but it was the sort of smile I had learned to wear well.

I closed the book, set it on the table beside me, and folded my hands in my lap as Alice went to the door.

When she returned, she said, "Sir Aiden, Princess," and he entered the sitting room.

My smile faltered—caught between what I had been expecting and what stood in front of me—before I gathered myself.

"Sir Aiden," I said, standing and dipping into a practiced curtsy. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Princess," he greeted, inclining his head. "The prince

sends his regards..." He paused. The subtle tug at his lips and quick tick of jaw betrayed his unease. "As well as his most sincere apologies. He has been called away from the court this morning."

I forced my smile back into place and schooled my tone into aloofness. "That is most unfortunate. Thank you, Sir Aiden, for letting me know."

I thought that would be the end of it, that he might turn to leave after delivering Alexander's correspondence.

He did not.

"The prince asked that I remain at your disposal today," he said. "Until his return."

It was faint, but a tightness formed in my chest.

"I see," I said. "And what does one do when one is... at a knight's disposal?"

His gaze drifted past me to the book resting on the settee behind me, then back. "If it pleases you, the library is quiet at this hour."

"Yes," I said. "I would enjoy that."

Aiden nodded and stepped to the side, letting me pass first before sliding into place beside me.

As we walked the halls, I let myself imagine the rows of books and what kinds of stories lay behind their leather covers—anything to keep my thoughts from drifting to the man at my side.

The library was exquisite. The calm quiet settled deep into my bones, giving me almost the same sense of peace I felt in the garden. I wandered through towering shelves, running my fingertips over well-worn spines and smooth covers. My fingers itched to pull the books from their slots, peel back their covers, and lose myself in them.

Aiden followed close behind, his broad frame crowding the narrow aisle, making his presence impossible to ignore.

I stopped in the poetry section, my eyes catching on intricate gold lettering on a spine, just out of reach. I stretched upwards on the balls of my feet, my fingertips just barely brushing the books edge—only for it to be plucked free a heartbeat later.

Aiden had stepped in behind me, leaving the barest breadth of space between us.

His arm brushed against mine as he reached overhead, the contact setting sparks dancing across my skin. I sucked in a sharp breath, warmth rushing to my cheeks at our sudden closeness—at the heat of his body, the pine and leather scent that enveloped me—and there was nowhere for my awareness to go but him.

He handed me the book without a word.

“Thank you,” I said, my voice coming out a shade too breathless.

I swallowed and tucked the book under my arm. I turned too quickly and continued down the aisle, my steps a fraction faster than before.

Aiden matched my pace, closing the distance between us in a few effortless strides, leaving me little time to gather myself.

As we browsed the next few aisles, I fought to keep my attention stubbornly fixed on the shelves. Still, despite myself, my gaze strayed toward Aiden more than once before I caught it and forced my focus back to the rows of books.

After we’d moved into a new section, I cast another subtle glance at him. His brow was faintly furrowed, his attention drifting over the shelves with polite detachment.

It dawned on me then that he was enduring this solely for my sake, and I found myself unexpectedly touched by his patience.

I paused mid-aisle and turned to him. “You don’t actually like it here, do you?”

He smiled sheepishly. “I do not. But I would not stand in the way of your enjoyment nor let you remain alone in it.”

I knew his words were meant to comfort, not wound, but they landed with a quiet sting all the same.

It was not Aiden’s place to guard my feelings.

He did it anyway.

Because the prince had chosen duty over me.

I did not allow myself to linger in that ache. Instead, I turned my attention back to shelves, choosing to be grateful for Aiden’s presence. For the simple fact that he was here at all.

I cleared my throat and pulled a book from the shelf. “For an esteemed knight such as yourself, Sir Aiden, I wouldn’t have expected libraries to be your downfall.”

“Nor I, Princess,” he said. “But it seems I have met my match—shelves and silence. I fear that my behavior would shame any of the knights you might find in these books.”

I smiled. “I don’t believe that. I think they would commend you for your bravery and sacrifice for daring to step foot inside.”

Aiden smiled then—truly smiled—and it softened the strong planes of his face. The sight of it struck me deeper than I was prepared for.

“Go on, Princess,” he urged softly. “Choose as many as you like.”

I wasted no time moving to shelf after shelf, piling my arms full of leather-bound books. When they began to tremble under their weight, Aiden scooped them easily into his.

We made another turn through the library, I gathered a few more books, and then we headed back to the sitting room.

“You’ve outdone yourself, Princess,” Aiden remarked as

we stood back from the low table, surveying the trove we'd delivered. "The library didn't stand a chance."

"Thank you," I said. "For this. For today. It was... perfect."

And truly, it had been *everything*.

I couldn't stop myself—I beamed up at him.

Our eyes held, and in the span of single fragile heartbeat, time stilled.

The air between us crackled, charged with longing, restraint—everything we both felt but could not say.

He took a single step.

And then, as if he had only just realized it, his breath caught.

Chapter 8

My lips parted on a soft exhale, my body responding of its own accord, years of meticulous training to command myself proving insufficient.

We were standing too close to one another, yet it was not close enough. One step, and I could be in his arms. One step, and I would surrender to the pull that had been drawing me toward him since the day I arrived.

His hand lifted slightly, as though drawn by instinct rather than intention. He raised it toward my hand, his control slipping just enough to betray that whatever war raged inside me raged inside him as well.

I did not move away.

His fingers brushed against my knuckles—light, tentative.

My fingers shifted without thought, just enough to allow the contact.

A shiver traced down my spine, goosebumps rising in its wake.

His fingers lingered at my knuckles, sending sparks skittering across my skin, sharp enough to steal my breath.

His gaze held mine—questioning, searching, and I did not look away.

He swallowed. Hard.

“Oh! There you two are!” Alice said brightly, her voice cutting

clean through the spell.

In the span of a blink, Aiden slipped seamlessly back into the disciplined knight. We looked away from one another and took a subtle step back. My fingers flexed slightly at my sides, as if my body had not yet accepted that he was no longer touching me.

Despite my quickening pulse, I managed to keep my voice even. "Sorry, Alice. I got a little carried away," I said, gesturing to the pile of books on the table.

"I'm glad to see you enjoyed yourself," she said, moving to inspect their titles. Her eyes flicked briefly toward me, as if she were gauging my mood, though she offered no comment.

"I'll let you ladies be," Aiden said, inclining his head as he moved toward the door. His hand paused on the latch before turning it fully. As he stepped through the doorway, I caught his glance back. Our eyes met for a brief, charged moment, and I drew in a quick sharp breath before the door shut.

"Are you alright, Monroe?" Alice asked, her brows knitting together.

"Yes," I said, but my answer came too quick, too breathless. I cleared my throat before continuing. "Quite fine. I feel a little worn is all."

I moved to the plush settee behind the table and picked up one of the books, my fingers drifting absently over the pages. Alice came to sit beside me, lightly closing the book in my lap.

I met her gaze, and something in her eyes told me that she saw more than I was willing to admit.

"Oh, dearest Monroe," she said, her tone soft and sincere. "I know these past few days have been hard on you but remember that even the smallest act born of a fleeting emotion can carry consequences you do not intend. Let your mind be your guide,

not your heart.”

I stared at her, words failing me. What could I say? To speak at all would be to admit something I knew I could not—not even to Alice.

She offered me a gentle smile, one that said she already knew. She squeezed my hand once and then left me alone with my thoughts.

Foolish Monroe.

I leaned my head against the back of the settee and closed my eyes.

We could have stepped back. He could have withdrawn his hand. I could have pulled mine away.

We did neither.

I waited for guilt to come. For my stomach to clench and my chest to tighten. But it didn't. And that, somehow, felt worse.

What frightened me the most was not that it had happened. It was that I was no longer certain I would stop it next time.

Alice's warning had come too late.

Whatever had sparked on the road to Bedford had begun to grow into something steadier. Stronger. And I could no longer pretend I did not feel it.

Chapter 9

“**T**he Prince has been called away.”
“The Prince sends his apologies.”
“The Prince regrets to inform you...”

The lines were always the same—always spoken by Aiden.

I had hoped I might convince myself that what had happened between us in the sitting room had been nothing more than a moment of weakness. A misstep. A trick of proximity and silence.

But with each of the prince’s absences, and each appearance of Sir Aiden in his stead, that illusion grew harder to maintain.

I sat in the solarium, one of my books opened before me, when I heard the soft click of the door.

“Pardon, Princess.”

My fingers tensed slightly around the book. I kept my gaze fixed on the words before me, forcing my attention to the neat rows of ink instead of the way my pulse misbehaved at the sound of his voice. I did not look up.

“Good afternoon, Sir Aiden,” I said, careful to keep my tone even. “What awaits us today?”

He stopped just inside the door, “Whatever the Princess wishes,” he said.

I slid my page marker into place, closed the book softly and

set it aside before finally looking up. I regretted it at once.

"We have seen the garden, the library, and walked the courtyard—twice. Tell me, Sir Aiden, what do you suggest?"

He considered for a moment. "There's an old path beyond the eastern grounds," he said. "It's cool beneath the trees, quiet. I walk there when I need space."

He hesitated for just a fraction, then quietly added, "If you would care to see it?"

I should have declined. It would have been the sensible thing to do. Yet the words that left me were not the ones I ought to have spoken. "I would like that."

His throat bobbed once before he inclined his head. "Very well, Princess."

I stood and smoothed out my skirts. Then he offered me his arm.

The path was shaded beneath broad canopies. A gentle breeze occasionally swept through, carrying scents of damp earth and moss. Birds perched high in the treetops, twittered and warbled. Sharp pinpricks of light filtered through the leaves, making them shimmer.

Walking side by side, my arm linked through Aiden's, we meandered down the path at a leisurely pace. There was no pressure to fill the silence, no need to weigh each word before speaking. After days of careful composure, I no longer felt so restrained.

"This place is beautiful," I said, sweeping my gaze over the trail. "I can see why you like it."

"Just wait, Princess. There is more yet to see."

The trail curved around moss-covered boulders and slipped past clusters of wild mushrooms and berry bushes. It rounded one final bend before opening into a wide, circular clearing

rimmed with slender birch trees. At the far edge, a crystal-clear stream threaded its way through the landscape, its gentle movement catching the light.

"Oh, wow," I breathed.

I unlinked my arm from Aiden's and took a few steps into the clearing. It felt as though I'd stepped into another world. I turned in a slow circle, taking in the space. When I faced Aiden again, he was watching me, something unguarded in his expression. Not duty. Not vigilance. It felt almost as though he were looking past the crown, past the expectation, straight to the marrow of me.

My breath faltered. I felt suddenly, dangerously known, yet I did not retreat.

I swallowed, steadying myself.

I turned away, letting my gaze drift back over the clearing. "This is... I'm not sure I even have the words."

"I understand," Aiden said, joining me. "It's my favorite place in Bedford. It's the one place I can just... be."

That gave me pause. Not because I didn't understand exactly what he meant, but because I had never once considered that Aiden might desire anything beyond what he was.

"I know what you mean," I said. "The gardens are that for me. There I can exist simply as Monroe. I have only ever known you as Sir Aiden. I had not realized there was more."

His brows rose ever so slightly, as if he were unaccustomed to being seen and unsure what to do with it.

Our gazes held.

Slowly, some of the tension left his shoulders. Mine followed.

Something in the air seemed to loosen, as if we'd both finally let out a breath we hadn't realized we were holding. Even the clearing seemed to breathe with us.

After a quiet beat of shared understanding, Aiden extended his hand. "Join me?" he asked.

Without hesitation, I slipped my hand into his. His fingers curled around my palm, his grip sure and steady. Warmth spread through my arm and settled deep in my chest.

He guided me to the stream's bank where two overturned stumps rested at the edge. Aiden helped me down and then settled beside me. We sat in silence, listening to the quiet rush of the stream, the rustling of leaves overhead, and the chittering of birds.

"I've never brought anyone here before," he said, his voice so low and soft I almost missed it.

Something tugged low in my chest as though some invisible thread between us had been drawn taut. "I'm glad you did," I said. "Thank you for sharing it with me."

"As am I," he said, offering a small smile before turning to the stream.

I let my gaze linger on him a moment longer.

It struck me then how different he was here. His shoulders were loose, his posture relaxed, and his gaze no longer sharp with vigilance but thoughtful, at ease. There was a quiet confidence in him I hadn't noticed before. One not forged by duty, but by belonging.

This was not the disciplined knight who stood at my side in court. This was simply Aiden.

And I was unprepared for how deeply I felt the difference.

Chapter 10

The curtains in my chambers were drawn back, and morning light flooded the room.

I sat up and stretched my arms over my head, unhurried. "Morning, Alice," I said through a yawn.

"Good morning, Monroe," Alice answered, already sorting through gowns, muttering something about the prince and the picnic planned for the day.

I slipped off the bed and came to stand behind Alice. I rested my hands on her shoulders and gave a light squeeze. "You worry too much, dear Alice.

"It is my job to worry," she replied primly.

"Well, if one of us must, I am grateful you do it so diligently," I said, pressing a quick kiss to her cheek before moving toward the bathing chamber.

"You are in quite an agreeable mood, this morning," she observed. "Excited for the picnic with the Prince?"

I lifted a shoulder, but I could not suppress the faint curve of my lips. "Something like that," I said.

After I bathed and dressed, I settled in the parlor.

Boot steps echoed in the corridor.

My pulse thrummed beneath my skin, my lips faintly curving into a smile.

I turned as the parlor doors opened.

Alexander stepped into view.

Disappointment flickered through my chest. My smile faltered, just barely, before I composed myself. The mask felt suddenly foreign.

I rose from the settee and smoothed my hand down the front of my bodice.

"Good morning, Prince."

"Princess Monroe," Alexander said, "I'm glad you could join me."

"As am I," I said, but the words felt flat.

He held out his arm and led us to the waiting carriage.

"I know this outing comes later than intended," Alexander said. "The past days have demanded more of me than I had anticipated."

"I understand," I said. "You have obligations to the crown that must be fulfilled. Duty comes first."

Alexander smiled at that.

As he spoke of duty and obligations, I was struck with a sobering clarity. I, too, belonged first to duty. In recent weeks, I had allowed myself to forget that, had almost convinced myself otherwise.

The carriage stopped in front of a vast green expanse that stretched as far as I could see. Stone benches nestled under pink and white flowering trees, floral vines climbed up trellises and arbors, and at its center a sprawling hedge maze.

Alexander helped me from the carriage and then offered his arm. He guided us toward a towering magnolia tree. A white wrought iron picnic table and two chairs were tucked beneath its canopy of pale blossoms.

The table had already been set. Crisp linens laid neatly, cov-

ered dishes arranged with care, polished silver cutlery glinting in the sunlight—clear evidence of thoughtful preparation. Yet it felt less like a picnic and more like a carefully curated scene.

And I knew, without thinking, exactly how I should behave within it.

Alexander pulled out the chair for me. I smiled and inclined my head before taking my seat. A servant uncovered the dishes, revealing fresh bread and soft cheeses, cold meats, small tarts and pastries. I remarked how lovely everything looked. Another servant filled our glasses with wine. I thanked them.

I wore the mask as if it had never slipped at all.

“I’m glad the weather held for us,” Alexander said, lifting his glass. “The park rarely looks this inviting after the spring rains.”

“Yes, it’s beautiful,” I agreed. “I didn’t realize Bedford had anything like this.”

“My grandfather created it,” he said. “He loved the outdoors nearly as much as he loved ruling. He believed a kingdom should offer people, and its rulers, space to breathe.”

I smiled faintly. “That sounds like a wise way to live.”

Alexander inclined his head. “Perhaps. I never quite inherited his fondness for lingering in places like this. But I understand the value of maintaining what he built.”

I understood what he meant, even respected it. Though I admired his sense of responsibility, a quiet part of me longed for the kind of life his grandfather had embraced—one that allowed room for stillness and wonder and finding joy alongside responsibility.

It was a quiet distinction, but one that felt larger than it should have.

Even as Alexander spoke, my eyes strayed beyond the flow-

ering trees, catching a familiar glimpse of silver. Aiden stood watch, still and composed.

His eyes met mine.

My traitorous heart stuttered.

For a fraction, the practiced rhythm of the afternoon wavered.

I tore my gaze away and returned my attention to Alexander, schooling my expression into a relaxed smile.

We spoke easily after that—about the estate, the changing seasons, the pace of court life. The conversation was pleasant, thoughtful, and polite. Exactly what it ought to have been. And yet, beneath the civility, something remained just out of reach. A warmth I could not quite summon, no matter how I tried.

“Allow me to show you the maze,” Alexander said after the servants had cleared the table. “It was another of my grandfather’s creations.”

“Of course,” I said, rising from my seat.

The maze was formed of low, neatly trimmed hedges that curved and looped across the lawn, no higher than my waist, revealing the full shape of the winding paths. Sunlight danced across their glossy leaves and spilled across the open corridors.

We had just maneuvered through the first section when a faint buzzing brushed past my ear.

I halted abruptly on the gravel path. I sucked in a sharp breath, rooting myself to the spot.

My eyes tracked the bee as it cut jagged lines through the air, unable to look away. The bee zipped past my face and I flinched, biting down on my lip to hold back a shaky whimper.

Only then did Alexander turn. “Princess Monroe?”

His voice barely reached me over the blood rushing in my ears and the relentless, panicked beating of my heart.

A chill raced through my body as the bee zig-zagged closer,

the buzz of its wings as loud as the chaos inside my head.

A small, breathless plea tumbled from my lips before I could stop it.

Alexander's brows furrowed in confusion, his mouth parting as if to speak. Aiden stepped in his path before he could.

"Monroe." His voice was barely a whisper, yet it was impossibly steady. Unshakable. It cut clean through the panic.

"It cannot hurt you," he said, calm and steady. He stepped closer, gently wrapping both his hands around my forearms.

"Look at me, Monroe." He lowered his face to meet my gaze. My eyes locked on to Aiden's bright green irises.

The maze dissolved. The noise, the buzzing, the world beyond him—gone.

There was only Aiden.

"Breathe," he said.

His voice, his grip, were my anchors. I could do nothing but obey.

I drew in a shaky breath.

"That's good," he murmured as I released it. "Again."

Another breath. The panic loosened its grip.

Aiden nodded. "You're doing well, Monroe. Take one more big breath for me."

Aiden's hands slid to my elbows as he gently guided me a step to the left. Over his shoulder, I caught the bee's quick movement as it darted away.

A long breath left from me as the world slid back into place.

"Are you alright?" Aiden asked, voice low.

"Yes, I—" I swallowed thickly, acutely aware of how close Aiden still was.

The warmth of his hands seeped through my skin. Pine and leather filled my lungs. I caught the faintest hitch in his breath

before he spoke. "Princess?"

Boots crunched over the gravel, the sound dragging me fully back to the present.

"Sir Aiden?" Alexander's voice came more clearly.

Aiden did not move. His fingers tightened slightly against my arms, his gaze searching mine.

"I'm alright," I breathed, dipping my head once.

Only then did he release me and step back.

Before Alexander reached me, I caught Aiden's eyes for a fleeting second. I shaped the words silently. *Thank you.*

His expression softened before duty reclaimed him.

Alexander glanced between us, his brows drawing together faintly. "Are you quite alright, Princess?"

"I am," I said. "I'm afraid I have never fared well with bees. I'm allergic."

"Allergic?" His brows rose. "I'm sorry. I wasn't aware."

Aiden's reaction was quick, nearly imperceptible, but I caught it all the same. His gaze flicked to Alexander, his jaw tightening.

"No need to apologize, Your Majesty. I don't often like to make my vulnerabilities known."

Alexander's expression shifted, as though filing the information away. He nodded once.

"Well then, I believe we have had sufficient excitement for one afternoon," Alexander said. "We should return."

His arm settled lightly at my back as he guided us toward the carriage.

Aiden's gaze rested between my shoulder blades.

And somehow, it comforted me more than the prince's hand at my back.

Chapter 11

I retired to my sitting room for the evening and settled into the chair before the fireplace.

Alice returned a few moments later with a steaming cup of tea, handed it to me, and then tended the fire.

“Did you enjoy yourself today?” she asked. “I have yet to see Bedford Park, but I hear it’s wonderful.”

“Yes,” I said. “It’s lovely. You would like it very much.”

Alice smiled. “Well, I shall leave you to your evening. Good night, Monroe.”

“Goodnight, Alice.”

She gathered the tray and slipped quietly from the room.

The soft crackle of the fire filled the silence, and I was left alone with my thoughts.

I thought of the lawn trimmed to perfection. The gravel walkways raked smooth. Not a bloom out of place.

Alexander suited it. He was immaculate, composed. Every thread in order. He maintained himself as carefully as he maintained the park and his kingdom.

And yet my thoughts drifted. To moss-covered rocks. To wildflowers shifting in the breeze. To a quiet stream cutting through untouched earth. To Aiden standing there, unguarded.

A familiar warmth bloomed behind my ribs.

I caught myself imagining a life beyond duty and structure and composure. A life unmapped by others. And I was struck by how fiercely some hidden part of me wanted it.

I shook my head and set my teacup aside.

I was not meant to want such things. That was not the life I had been shaped for.

Duty first, I reminded myself.

I tried to rebuild the walls of expectation around me, but no matter how hard I tried, they felt too thin.

The room closed in. The air grew heavy in my lungs.

I needed air.

I pulled my robe from the back of the chair and shrugged it on.

I quietly turned the latch and stepped into the darkened hallway, the door whispering shut behind me.

The stone was cool against my bare feet as I moved silently down the corridors. Silver moonlight spilled through the narrow windows, lighting my way.

My footsteps barely echoed as I turned the first corner heading toward the balcony I knew lay ahead.

The double doors appeared just as a sound echoed behind me. My steps quickened instinctively.

I risked a glance behind me, catching the orange flicker of candlelight dancing along the wall just beyond the corner I'd come from.

Just as I turned back around, I collided with a solid wall of muscle.

I gasped and staggered backwards, but two strong hands caught my waist, steadying me.

"Princess?"

My eyes snapped upward, meeting bright green irises.

"Aiden?" I breathed.

Before I could fully register that Aiden's hands were on my waist—and that my own fingers were clutching the strong lines of his arms—a sharp voice rang through the corridor.

Aiden's head turned instantly toward the voice, his posture going rigid, his gaze sharpening.

Keeping one hand secured around my waist, he used the other to swing open the balcony door and drew me inside with him.

He quickly shut the door behind us and braced his back against the wall, holding me securely against his chest.

"Aiden..."

"Not yet, Princess," he whispered. "Wait till they pass."

I nodded and bit down on my bottom lip. Aiden's gaze dipped there for just a second before snapping back to the door.

The orange candlelight grew brighter.

The footsteps grew louder.

They halted just outside the door.

Aiden's grip tightened on my waist, his fingers bunching the fabric of my robe. My fingers dug into his skin in return.

For endless seconds we clung to one another, breaths held, eyes fixed on the door and the shadow behind them.

The latch jiggled the slightest fraction. I squeezed my eyes shut and hid my face in Aiden's chest.

A muffled voice rose outside the door.

The footsteps retreated.

Aiden's body relaxed against mine, his breath warm against the side of my cheek as he slowly exhaled.

I lifted my head and found Aiden's gaze already on me.

My breath caught in my throat.

Moonlight brushed across his skin, tracing the strong line of his jaw and the curve of his lips.

A cool breeze stirred the night air, but I barely felt it. Our

bodies were pressed flush together, the heat of him seeping through the thin barrier of fabric and settling low in my core.

Each nerve in my body felt like a live wire, sparking at each point we touched.

He tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear. My skin tingled where his palm brushed my cheek.

His hand did not fall away. His palm remained at my cheek, cradling my face as though he could not bear to let me go.

And I did not want him to.

His gaze dipped to my lips once more, lingering there, before slowly returning to my eyes.

Our gazes held.

His head dropped a fraction lower. His nose brushed mine, his breath ghosting across my mouth.

His mouth hovered just above mine, so close I could feel the warmth of his lips.

My eyes fluttered shut, fingers curling into the fabric of his tunic.

I rose onto my toes, my chin tipping upward.

Aiden's fingers pressed deeper into my waist.

Then, his forehead dropped to mine.

"We can't." His voice was rough, as if the words themselves pained him.

"I know," I whispered, my own voice cracking.

Aiden's jaw tightened. His grip loosened—reluctantly, almost painfully so—before his hands slid away from me.

I took a single step back, creating space that felt far too wide, far too cold. The loss of his warmth was jarring.

My arms fell back to my sides, fingers clutching my robe to keep them from trembling.

His gaze lingered on me—conflicted, aching with everything

left unsaid—before he finally forced his eyes away.

He pushed off the wall, hands balled into fists, knuckles white.

“I should...” he started, then cut himself off. His voice was more strained than before. He cleared his throat. “We shouldn’t be here.”

I forced myself to nod, even though every part of me wanted to close the distance again. Wanted to pretend the world outside that door didn’t exist.

But it did.

I searched for the familiar steadiness, the polished calm I had been taught to wear like armor, but it was gone. I looked away and started for the door.

My fingers had just grazed the latch when movement flickered at the edges of my vision.

Aiden caught my wrist.

“Monroe...” his voice low and strained caught on my name.

I turned just enough to see the conflict on his face—the tight line of his jaw and the flare of his nostrils.

He drew in a sharp breath.

His fingers flexed instinctively against my skin, but he did not let go.

My pulse hammered beneath his fingertips.

“Don’t.”

His fingers tightened.

Then I was moving—pulled toward him.

His hands rose and cupped my face.

His mouth claimed mine.

For a single, breathless moment my mind went blank.

My lips softened beneath his. But before my body could fully follow, he broke the kiss.

My body swayed, dizzy.

My eyes fluttered open.

His breath came ragged in the narrow space between us.

“Aiden,” I breathed.

Realization flickered across his face.

His hands pulled away.

By the time the haze lifted, Aiden was at the door.

His hand closed around the latch. He paused and looked back at me.

Then the door opened, and he was gone.

Chapter 12

I stood rooted to my spot on the balcony, staring at the door Aiden had left through, my pulse still hammering a relentless rhythm.

I softly traced the curve of my bottom lip, my mouth curving into a small smile.

He kissed me.

An incredulous laugh bubbled out of me and echoed across the stone. The sound startled even me. I quickly pressed a hand over my mouth, quieting myself.

I wavered on my feet, suddenly unsteady. My knees felt weak as I stumbled to the curved stone bench beside the balcony railing and sank onto it.

Aiden's face flashed through my mind—the hint of desire in his eyes—and then his voice followed, low and husky, sending a shiver racing down my spine.

I could still feel him, as though his touches had branded themselves into my skin—the imprint of his fingers on my wrist, the warmth of his palms on my cheeks, the firm press of his lips against mine.

Aiden had kissed me.

I closed my eyes, clinging to the feeling while it still lingered. Cool midnight air brushed against my skin. Slowly, the

warmth of the moment began to fade, and the quiet of the balcony settled around me.

I rose from the bench, drawing my robe tighter around me before slipping quietly from the balcony and back toward my chambers.

The corridors felt darker now, the air thicker around me.

The walk felt endless, each step heavier than the one before.

Candlelight glimmered along the golden threads of a great tapestry.

My steps faltered.

The Bedford crest loomed before me. It sat at the heart of a golden crown, framed by glittering jewels.

A symbol of duty.

A symbol of honor.

Alexander.

A cold unease seeped into my bones.

I turned away and hurried back to my chambers.

My trembling fingers fumbled with the latch. When it finally gave way, I stumbled inside.

I slammed the door harder than necessary. The wood reverberated like my pounding heart.

I turned the lock and backed away from the door, as if it could keep the inevitable at bay.

Only it didn't.

Guilt settled heavy in my stomach, sinking like a stone.

Foolish, Monroe.

But the familiar words rang hollow, offering no comfort. No matter how many times I repeated them, the guilt refused to ease.

I was betrothed to another man, our wedding barely a month away. It was not simply a union between two people, but a

promise between two nations—one meant to secure the future of my kingdom.

These feelings I harbored were not only a betrayal of my own kingdom, but of Alexander as well.

I had not stopped Aiden.

Worse still, I had wanted it.

I dropped onto the edge of my bed and drew in deep, steady breaths willing my mind and body to calm.

When my body finally began to loosen, I slipped under the covers and waited for sleep to come.

But every time I closed my eyes, Aiden appeared unbidden in my mind, followed by phantom impressions of him—his breath, his hands, the heat of him.

“Oh, God, Monroe.” I shook my head, forcing the thoughts away.

I rolled onto my back and stared at the high-vaulted ceiling, trying again to focus on my breathing.

That did not work either.

All I could think about was how irrevocably things had changed.

Aiden had kissed me. Not by accident. Not by impulse alone. He *chose* it.

And I had chosen him in return, surrendering myself to the moment.

This was not a passing spark—it was something deeper.

I squeezed my eyes shut, refusing to follow that thought any further.

But when sleep finally came, it carried the memory of Aiden with it.

Chapter 13

The following afternoon, Alice stood behind me at the vanity, pulling my waves into a neat braided crown atop my head.

I studied my reflection in the mirror.

On the surface, I appeared calm and composed—ready for an afternoon of tea with the ladies. Beneath the surface, my nerves were anything but.

“There,” she said as she set the last pin in my hair. “Sir Aiden should be arriving shortly.”

My chest tightened at the sound of his name.

I gave myself one last glance in the mirror before rising and moving into the adjoining sitting room.

The knock at the door came then, and heat rushed to my cheeks before I could stop it.

Each of Aiden’s footsteps matched the drumming of my heart-beat, and when he stopped before me, the rhythm stuttered.

His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed.

“Your Highness,” he said, inclining his head in a careful bow.

“Sir Aiden.”

I curtsied, but when I looked up, Aiden was already moving toward the door.

“If you are ready, Princess.” He held open the door.

My mouth opened, then closed. My brows creased faintly.

"I am," I finally managed.

As I moved past him, he did not meet my eyes.

We walked in silence through the long corridors, the space between us wider than it had been before, the echo of our footsteps the only sound.

"Thank you for escorting me," I said, glancing at him, waiting for *something*.

The silence stretched between us.

His jaw tightened before he finally said, "As is my duty, Your Highness."

My steps nearly faltered.

Your Highness?

"Aiden."

He did not stop. He continued walking ahead, his hand resting atop the round pommel of his sword, his fingers tightening around it.

I quickened my pace, just slightly. "Sir Aiden," I tried again.

"Your High—"

"Stop that," I said. "Since when have you begun addressing me so formally?"

He straightened, his posture tightening.

"I..." his voice was strained.

His shoulders loosened just slightly, something in him giving way.

"Princess, I—"

Laughter filled the corridor.

His shoulders snapped back, his posture going rigid once more.

"Come, Your Highness," he said. "The ladies are expecting you."

I stared at his back a moment too long before my feet finally moved.

Aiden stopped just outside the parlor and opened the door for me.

I cast him one last glance before stepping inside, but he did not meet my gaze.

Something in my chest tightened painfully.

I tried to give the ladies before me my full attention, but despite my best efforts, my focus kept slipping to Aiden standing guard just inside the doors.

My responses came a beat too late. I had to work too hard to say the right thing, to smile and laugh at the right moments.

If any of the ladies noticed, they did not remark on it.

When the tea concluded, I was the last to leave.

The walk back to the sitting room was painfully long. Quiet.

With every step, my nerves grated.

When we neared the door, I stopped abruptly in front of Aiden, lifting my chin up to meet his eyes.

"Aiden."

His gaze slid to mine. "Your Highness."

"What is this?"

He held my gaze, but neither his eyes nor his expression offered me anything.

I curled my fingers into my palms, my nails leaving half-moons in my skin.

"Good day, *Sir Aiden*."

Without another word, I turned on my heel and entered the sitting room.

The next few days were the same.

Titles. Formalities.

Distance.

By the day of the jousting tournament, I had come to expect it. So when the knock came at my door, I braced myself for more of the same.

But when I opened the door and found Sir William in Aiden's place, something in me faltered.

"Good morning, Your Highness," Sir William greeted.

It took me a moment too long to find my tongue.

"Sir William." I curtsied before stepping into the corridor. "Where is Sir Aiden?"

"He has already departed for the arena, Your Highness," he said.

My chest tightened.

"I see." I turned forward. "Very well."

We met Alexander in the courtyard, where he waited beside the carriage that would take us to the jousting tournament just outside of Bedford.

Alexander helped me up and then settled across from me.

After a few polite exchanges, silence fell over the carriage. Yet it felt nothing like the silence that had stretched between Aiden and me.

Alexander's gaze moved over me, slow and deliberate. "You seem distracted."

"Merely thoughtful, Your Majesty," I said.

"Mm." He turned to the window.

By the time we arrived, the grounds were already alive. The hum of the crowd was thick with anticipation. The scent of roasted meats and fresh ale wafted from the stalls. Music drifted through the air.

Alexander stepped from the carriage and offered me his hand. I took it, and he guided me down.

We were escorted through the gathering crowd and into the

raised stands. Our seats were positioned high above the arena, providing a commanding view of the field below.

Shortly after we settled, a herald stepped forward to address the crowd, his voice carrying across the arena as he spoke of honor, sportsmanship, and chivalry.

As he continued, a procession of armored knights on horseback was led onto the field, each bearing their kingdom's banner.

My gaze caught on Bedford's banner, its vibrant red and yellow snapping boldly in the wind.

"I wasn't aware Bedford had entered a knight," I said, my attention sharpening.

"We enter one each year," Alexander answered proudly. "Bedford has long held a distinguished reputation in the tournaments."

My gaze drifted to the field below, settling on the Bedford knight. He turned, lifting his head to the stands.

The knight raised his visor.

Vivid green eyes met mine.

My breath caught.

"Aiden."

"You recognized him rather quickly," Alexander said beside me.

"He is difficult to miss."

The words came too easily. I smoothed my expression, willing my composure back into place before turning to him.

Alexander studied me for a moment. "Indeed," was all he said before he returned his attention to the field below.

The remaining knights cleared the field, leaving only Aiden and his opponent in the arena.

As the herald announced their names, they rode to opposite ends of the field, turning them neatly into position.

The crowd swelled with cheers.

My gaze remained on Aiden.

His squire retrieved the banner and placed a lance in his hand.

A marshal stepped into the center of the field and raised his trumpet. The call rang out and both knights spurred their horses into a full gallop toward one another.

My pulse quickened as Aiden made his first pass.

Both lances missed their mark.

They returned to their starting positions.

Aiden adjusted his grip on his lance, his movements unhurried. He sat tall in the saddle, composed, as if the first pass had been nothing at all.

Down the field, his opponent's hand tightened around the reins. Through the narrow slits of his visor, his gaze pinned on Aiden—sharp, intent, and edged with something less controlled.

At the marshal's signal, they urged their horses onward. As they closed the distance, they tucked their lances beneath their arms, angling them across the tilt.

I held my breath, my eyes fixed on the opponent's coronel—the metal five-point crown at the tip of the lance.

Metal screeched against steel.

I sucked in a sharp breath, my hand finding Alexander's wrist and tightening.

A lance struck the ground, its coronel mangled—Aiden's opponent's.

I dragged in a breath.

I glanced up at Alexander. His eyes dipped briefly to his wrist, then returned to my face. "You seem invested," he said.

I withdrew my hand, clearing my throat. "I did not attend many jousts in Celermare. I am not used to this level of... intensity."

"I see," he said, his gaze settling on Aiden.

I resettled in my seat, fixing my attention below, where Aiden and his opponent prepared for the final pass.

Aiden remained composed atop his horse, his grip firm on the lance. A faint score marked his armor where he'd taken the earlier blow, the metal there slightly bent.

At the other end, his opponent's squire readied a fresh lance. The knight shouted something at him before yanking it from his grip and tucking it beneath his arm.

Once more, the marshal stepped into the center of the field.

The trumpet had barely finished sounding when his opponent dug his heels into his horse and surged forward.

Gasps rippled through the crowd.

"He can't—" The words died in my throat.

Aiden charged forward.

Steel rang. Wood splintered.

A helmet tore free.

I was on my feet before I had realized I moved.

A body hit the ground.

The world went quiet. For a moment, I forgot how to breathe.

It felt like ages before the dust began to settle.

A knight lay motionless on the ground, his head turned away.

Please... it can't be.

My eyes lifted to the knight still astride his horse.

He lifted his visor.

Aiden's eyes locked on mine.

Air rushed back into my lungs.

My mind went fuzzy, my knees threatening to give out beneath me. I gripped the railing, steadying myself.

His eyes softened, just for a moment, before he dropped his visor and steered his horse off the field.

“Princess.” Alexander’s voice came quietly, but no less commanding for it.

His hand was a firm weight at my back, and I straightened, smoothing my skirts.

“I do not think I shall ever grow accustomed to such a spectacle,” I said, forcing my breath to steady.

“No,” he said after a moment. “I imagine not.”

His watched me as I settled back into my seat.

Another moment passed before he took his own seat. “Sir Aiden will be joining us shortly,” he said.

“Of course,” I replied lightly, keeping my gaze trained on the next competitors entering the field.

It wasn’t until after the first pass that I felt the shift in the air beside me.

I dared not tear my gaze away from the field, but from the corner of my vision, I caught sight of two steel boots beside my chair.

“Sir Aiden,” Alexander said, rising.

“Your Majesty.” Aiden bowed.

“That was a decisive pass. You’ve done Bedford proud.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

I might have been able to ignore Aiden’s presence if not for the scent of pine and leather that curled around me. It was a scent I had become far too familiar with—one I had not been able to wash from my skin since the balcony.

I looked up.

His dark hair was slick with sweat, his armor dusted with dirt—the mark from the earlier hit standing stark against the metal. He cradled his helmet in one arm.

“Your Highness,” Aiden said.

“Sir Aiden,” I said, inclining my head.

“Have a seat, Sir Aiden,” Alexander said, gesturing to the chair behind me. “The matches have been... eventful.”

My fingers tensed against the arm of the chair.

For a fraction of a second, Aiden’s gaze held mine. Then he looked away.

“Your Majesty,” he said, inclining his head before taking his seat.

I kept my attention anchored on the field below, though I scarcely registered the movement of the horses or the ring of steel.

I was acutely aware of Aiden behind me—of his nearness, of the faint shift of steel as he moved, of the quiet, steady sound of his breath.

Beside me, Alexander’s presence pressed just as close, the air around me tightening and leaving little room to breathe. Every subtle movement he made felt rather than seen.

The world below blurred, but I missed nothing of *them*.

Midway through the next round, I felt Alexander’s gaze on me.

I straightened, forcing myself to follow the next pass—the charge, the strike, the outcome—and adjusted my reactions. As I should have from the beginning.

Every breath I drew was controlled, every movement deliberate. I folded my hands in my lap, more mindful of the movement than ever before.

I could not afford another misstep.

Relief was not a strong enough word to describe what I felt when the final match was called and the crowd began to thin.

The carriage ride back to Bedford had passed in relative quiet, the sound of hooves and the grind of gravel beneath the wheels forming a steady, grounding rhythm.

I was grateful Aiden had not ridden with us, yet his absence did little to ease the tension that coiled tight in my chest.

Riding alone with Alexander felt... worse.

Every breath, every glance, every word felt measured in a way it had never been before.

It had never been this difficult to keep myself in check, and by the time the palace gates came into view, a bone-deep exhaustion had settled into me.

Chapter 14

Sunlight filtered through the gallery's tall stained-glass windows, casting soft bands of color across the stone floor. The long walls stretched upward to soaring ceilings and were lined with rows of artwork—lush landscapes, vibrant seascapes, and regal portraits. Throughout the gallery, glass displays held a diverse array of historical artifacts and precious jewels.

After the noise and spectacle of the tournament, the quiet here was a reprieve.

I moved slowly down a wide aisle. On one side, glass cases held exquisite jewels worn during coronations and royal ceremonies, their gemstones catching the colored light from the windows. On the other side stood a neat row of armor and weapons—gilded suits of armor worn by past kings and longswords with adorned hilts.

I drifted further along the gallery toward a row of formal oil paintings—rulers and their families. I slowed as I neared a portrait of a woman. She stood tall in a gown of deep sapphire, a jeweled crown resting lightly against dark hair, the masterful brushstrokes capturing her grace and beauty.

It wasn't just her beauty that had captured my attention. It was the sadness in her eyes. It was barely a passing shadow, yet

I saw it nonetheless. It stirred something deep within me.

My chest tightened as my gaze dropped to the nameplate beneath the portrait.

Alexander's late mother.

"Queen Giselle."

Aiden's voice carried softly through the gallery behind me.

I felt him draw closer, the warmth of his presence settling close at my back.

"Did you know her well?" I asked.

"I did," he replied. "She was kind. Gentle. Strong. Resilient."

Tears burned behind my eyes. "She looks... lonely."

Aiden stepped beside me, his gaze shifting from the portrait to me.

Quietly, he said, "Power often is."

My heart ached for her.

For myself.

We began moving together without quite realizing it, drifting from one piece to the next, pausing only briefly to examine each.

With every step, the space between us narrowed until his scent overtook the faint traces of oil and polish lingering in the gallery.

Aiden's knuckles grazed mine. His arm brushed my shoulder. Each unintended touch sparked along my nerves, sharp and electric.

This was the closest we had been in days. The sudden nearness of him was dizzying.

It became harder to focus on the artwork around me.

I forced my attention back to the walls, willing them to steady me.

My gaze landed on a landscape unlike the others. It wasn't grandeur or craftsmanship that caught me, but the simplicity of it. Rolling hills beneath a summer sky, wildflowers bending in

the wind, a small stone cottage nestled at the edge of a distant tree line.

It was the kind of life I would never have—one untouched by titles and expectations.

My vision blurred before I realized tears had gathered. One slipped free, trailing down my cheek.

“Monroe?” Aiden murmured.

I turned to him, something in my chest fracturing at the sound of my name on his lips.

His hand lifted instinctively. Not with thought. Not with caution. Only care.

My eyes fluttered closed beneath his touch, the pad of his thumb sweeping delicately across my cheek. I leaned into his palm, his warmth seeping into my skin.

My breath stuttered, but it was the hitch in Aiden’s that made me open my eyes.

Aiden’s green eyes reflected my own emotion back to me—raw and unguarded.

Footsteps rebounded against stone.

Close. Too close.

Aiden’s hand fell away from my cheek and dropped to his side. His expression shuttered in the span of a single breath and the disciplined knight returned like armor snapping into place.

I turned.

Prince Alexander stood in the open doorway

His gaze moved slowly between us, a flicker of caution crossing his face.

“Am I interrupting?” he asked mildly.

Alexander stepped fully into the room, the door closing softly behind him. His movements were controlled, purposeful, each step exuding the ease of a future king within his own halls.

My pulse skidded. I lifted my hand without thinking, brushing my fingertips lightly across my cheek, as if I could erase the lingering warmth of Aiden's touch.

"No, Your Majesty," I said quickly, forcing steadiness into my voice. "Not at all."

I took a small step away, just enough to break the closeness between Aiden and me.

Aiden inclined his head in a crisp bow. "Of course not, Your Majesty."

Alexander's gaze lingered on us a fraction longer, and for a dreadful heartbeat, I feared the worst. Then Alexander's lips curved into an easy smile.

"Good," he said lightly. "I would hate to interrupt something so terribly fascinating."

He stepped closer, his gaze settling on the painting behind us. His eyes traced the quiet landscape before turning to me. "You seem taken with this one."

"I am," I replied. "There is something... comforting about it's simplicity. It's peaceful."

Alexander considered the cottage a moment longer.

"Peaceful, perhaps," he said thoughtfully. "But also rather lonely."

He turned away from the painting, already moving further down the gallery.

I remained where I was.

For a moment, I imagined myself standing among the wildflowers, a soft breeze stirring their petals as warm sunlight spilled over the hills.

The realization settled deeply over me.

Where I saw peace in its solitude—a freedom from expectation—Alexander saw only loneliness.

Chapter 15

Rain pattered against the glass windows of the solarium, its steady rhythm a soothing backdrop to the quiet I had been craving all morning.

I had tucked myself into one of the cushioned window seats, an unopened book resting in my lap. My fingers traced idly over the lettering on its cover as I gazed out at the rain.

I drew in a deep breath and then peeled back the book's cover, ready to lose myself in the story unfolding inside its pages.

My fingers had just brushed the edge of the first page when I heard the quiet swish of the solarium door opening.

I looked up, already knowing who it was by the familiar cadence of his footsteps.

"Good morning, Sir Aiden," I said.

"Your Highness," Aiden replied, inclining his head.

My brows drew together faintly at the formality.

I was beginning to despise that title.

Aiden's expression tightened for the briefest moment before he gestured to the book in my lap. "What are you reading today?"

"Something you'd find dreadfully boring, most likely," I said lightly, a smile tugging at my lips.

I turned the book toward him, revealing the cover.

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised." The corner of his mouth

lifted slightly, before he seemed to remember himself, and it faded entirely.

I studied him a moment longer. The tension in him was unmistakable—shoulders too tight, spine too straight, jaw set too hard. He looked almost statuesque. More like carved stone than the man I knew.

I sat a little straighter.

“Aiden,” I said quietly. “What is it?”

His chin lifted as he clasped his hands behind his back.

“The Prince has requested our presence.”

“Our?” Dread coiled tight in my stomach. “May I ask why?”

“I do not know. The Prince has not shared his reasons with me.”

My throat tightened as I swallowed. “Alright, then.”

I set my book aside without another thought and rose to my feet.

We walked side by side through the silent corridors. We did not spare each other a glance. We did not speak. The only sound was the rain lashing the castle walls, muted by the thick stone, and the hollow resonance of our footsteps.

A heaviness hung in the air, thick as the rain clouds outside.

And none but Aiden and I would know it.

My posture mirrored his—the image of perfect discipline. Our steps were precise, controlled. Our expressions neutral, unremarkable. The distance between us was painfully appropriate. We were everything a princess and a knight *should* be.

And yet the act, once second nature, felt profoundly wrong—like wearing a skin that no longer belonged to me.

Suddenly, the air turned colder. The corridors narrowed, dimmed. More Bedford guards stood along the way. Though we were only in a different part of the castle, there was nothing

warm or familiar about it.

And when the tall, dark wood doors to Alexander's study came into view, I felt the full weight of how easily everything could unravel.

Lightning struck, illuminating the stone walls for an instant. Aiden reached for the latch.

I could no longer bear it.

So quietly I wasn't even sure I had spoken at all, I said, "Wait."

His hand froze, suspended an inch above the brass latch. With the subtlest turn of his head, his gaze shifted down the corridor behind us, then back to me. For just a blink, his mask cracked.

"We must," he said.

And then he opened the door.

The scent of parchment and leather, struck me immediately, followed by old ink and something faintly metallic beneath it.

Alexander was seated at his desk, quill in hand, scrawling something across a document.

"Sir Aiden," he said without looking up.

He completed the line he was writing as though unwilling to leave a thought unfinished, then set the quill aside and lifted his gaze.

"Thank you both for coming. I won't take up much of your time."

"Of course, Your Majesty," Aiden said, bowing.

"Please," Alexander said, gesturing to the two chairs positioned before his desk.

I smiled politely and nodded, moving to the chair closest to him.

Aiden remained where he stood.

Alexander's gaze flicked briefly to Aiden, then back to me.

"How are you settling into Bedford, Princess?"

“Well, Your Majesty.”

“The transition has been... smooth for you, I hope.” His gaze lingered. “You appear more comfortable lately.”

“Though it has taken some time,” I said carefully, “I am beginning to understand Bedford’s rhythms.”

“That’s wonderful,” he said. “It matters to me that Bedford feels like home to you, especially as you step fully into your role.”

He leaned back slightly in his chair, fingers steepled. “You and I will soon be shaping this kingdom together, Princess Monroe.”

He paused then, his gaze holding mine—steady, assessing.

“It is important that you are prepared for what that asks of you in the coming weeks.”

Another beat of silence.

“Your presence. Your attention. Your focus.”

The knot in my stomach tightened.

“Of course, Your Majesty. I understand what is expected of me.”

“Good.” Alexander smiled, though it did not quite reach his eyes.

“In light of the upcoming engagement celebration,” he continued, “certain adjustments must be made.”

“Adjustments, Your Majesty?”

“Yes. Which is why I’ve asked you both here. With your position soon changing, Princess, and with the increased visibility that comes with it, your safety is of the utmost importance.”

Alexander turned to Aiden.

“Sir Aiden,” he said. “You will be relieved from your escort duties effective immediately.”

Blood rushed to my ears, the rest of Alexander’s words coming through muffled as though I were hearing him from underwater.

“Your skill set will be of greater use at my side. Sir William will assume your post henceforth.”

Every instinct in me urged to look toward Aiden, to see if he felt the blow of Alexander’s decision as sharply as I did.

I did not. *Could not.*

Alexander’s gaze lingered on me, his eyes watching. Assessing.

Training took over. I forced my fingers to uncurl from my skirts and folded my hands neatly in my lap.

Aiden inclined his head. “Of course, Your Majesty. Sir William is a wise choice. He will serve you and Her Highness well.”

My chest cracked open, his acceptance striking harder than Alexander’s decree.

My mind screamed at him. *Refuse him. Fight this. Fight for me.* Yet I knew he could not.

For the same reasons I sat silent and obedient.

Duty. Honor. Loyalty.

They demanded these thoughts be silenced.

Just then, a knock sounded on the door.

“Ah. That will be Sir William now,” Alexander said. “Enter.”

The door opened and Sir William stepped inside.

It felt as though I was watching everything unfold in slow motion.

Aiden nodded once to Sir William, then stepped aside and moved to Alexander’s side, his hands clasped behind his back.

He did not spare me a glance. His gaze remained fixed somewhere beyond me.

“The next matter,” Alexander said, reaching for a stack of documents on his desk, “is the matter of our engagement preparations.”

He laid the papers before me. Among them were invitations,

seating charts, and schedules.

I smiled, and despite the tightening of my throat, kept my voice even. "Of course. I'm happy to go over anything you like."

Alexander slid a piece of parchment toward me—the schedule for the coming days, already outlined precisely. "I'd like us to be seen together more often," he said, "especially now that we're so close to the day. It's important that people see we are aligned."

My eyes skimmed the paper, noting how full it was—public appearances, luncheons, dinners, outings. It left little room to breathe.

"Everything looks satisfactory," I said.

"I'm glad you think so."

Alexander continued speaking, reviewing seating arrangements and plans, offering details I should have been absorbing, but his words dulled, blending into a low, indistinct murmur.

I followed along as though my world hadn't just tilted, even as my mind fled the room.

I barely remembered Alexander concluding the meeting. Barely remembered Sir William leading me from the study.

All I could focus on were the stark gray walls of the corridor.

Behind me, footsteps followed—heavier, their rhythm out of step with mine. They were... wrong.

I do not remember the walk back to my chambers. Only that somehow I arrived and found myself standing in the center of the room, unsure what to do with myself.

I was empty in a way I had never felt before.

Hollow.

Chapter 16

Hollow.
That was all I was capable of feeling.
And yet, to look at me, none would have been the wiser.

Not even Sir William, who had stood beside me for the last several days and noticed nothing at all.

He was not unkind. He was attentive, efficient, ever-present at my side. But he did not notice when my steps slowed or when my smile wavered before I caught it. He never asked me about my books or if I cared to walk the gardens.

Being escorted by him felt like moving through the world unseen. Observed, perhaps, but never truly *noticed*. With him, I felt myself recede, little by little, until only the role remained.

And so I did what was required of me.

I fulfilled my duties with flawless precision—attending fittings and meetings, reviewing guest lists and ceremonial details, standing still as jewels were held against my skin and gowns were pinned in place. I accepted courtesies, listened when spoken to. I smiled when expected, nodded at the appropriate moment. My posture was perfect. My composure unassailable.

I wore the role as though it fit. As though the hollowness wasn't spreading, widening into a chasm vast and vacant.

Each day that passed brought me closer to the engagement celebration—and farther from myself.

I hadn't realized just how much Aiden had shaped my time here at Bedford—and just how much his presence had anchored me.

I had come to long for the glimpses of him in the corridor as Sir William escorted me to appointments, for the brief glances I'd sneak of him when he was stationed near Alexander in meetings, for catching sight of his familiar posture at the edge of the room.

But even those fleeting moments didn't last.

As the celebration grew nearer, the glimpses I once caught of Aiden grew fewer.

It had taken me two days to stop searching for him—in the corridors, the grounds, even the training yard. It had taken another two days for the realization to hold. And one more still, for me to accept it.

He was gone.

He was not coming back.

And he had taken a part of me with him.

Every smile, every polite remark, further chipped away at what little remained.

Still, the world required me to keep moving.

"Her Highness Princess Monroe," Sir William announced as I stepped into the great hall.

Alexander was waiting near the tall windows overlooking the forecourt where carriages were already beginning to arrive through Bedford's gates.

He turned away from the window.

"Appearances matter now more than ever, Princess," Alexander said, adjusting his cuffs. "The kingdom will be watching closely."

I inclined my head. "I will fulfill my responsibilities, Your Majesty."

"I'm quite certain you will," he said, offering me his arm.

I linked my arm through his and we strode through the double doors and out onto the palace steps.

Nobles approached one by one, offering bows and warm congratulations.

Alexander moved through the greetings with effortless confidence, his voice warm, his smile steady.

I stood beside him, my body remembering its role, even as my heart refused to.

A familiar figure stepped from his carriage and made his way toward Alexander and me with a self-important air.

I recognized Lord Dupont at once. He had visited Celermare when I was a child, often bringing my father rare volumes for my father's library.

He flicked his coattails back and bowed. "Your Majesty."

Alexander inclined his head and smiled. "Lord Dupont. It is an honor to have you at Bedford. It's been too long."

"I would never dream to miss such an auspicious event," he replied.

I curtsied. "Lord Dupont," I began politely. "It is—"

Alexander's hand settled at the small of my back, and my words died on my tongue. To anyone else, the gesture was affectionate. I knew it for what it was—a quiet instruction.

"Lord Dupont oversees trade negotiations along the eastern coast," Alexander supplied smoothly, as though I had never spoken.

Lord Dupont smiled and continued speaking with Alexander, his attention never once shifting toward me.

I stood beside them, still and silent.

A familiar voice surfaced in my mind.

Good princesses are seen, not heard.

Only this time, the voice was Alexander's.

The next carriage rolled into the forecourt. I lifted my chin and fixed my smile into place, ready once more to play my part.

Carriage after carriage arrived through the gates, and noble after noble offered their well wishes and polite courtesies.

When the forecourt had emptied at last and the evening air had grown cool against my skin, Alexander extended his arm to me.

"Shall we?"

I nodded, taking his arm as we turned back toward the palace.

We settled in a private sitting room for the evening. A fire flickered quietly in the hearth, its glow soft against the otherwise austere lines of the room.

A servant brought us tea and other light refreshments and then swiftly departed.

Alexander lifted his teacup, taking an unhurried sip before setting it aside.

"You've handled this well. You'll make an excellent queen, Monroe."

My fingers closed more firmly around my cup, the porcelain warm against my skin.

The sound of my name, spoken so easily, so confidently, sat foreign and strange in the air.

It did not sound like reassurance.

It felt like a claim.

Without thinking, my fingers lifted to my throat, rubbing absently at the pressure there, as though something invisible had drawn tight.

I swallowed, then brought it to my lips, and took a sip, if only

to give myself a moment to compose.

"You are most kind, Your Majesty," I answered. "Thank you."

"Kindness has nothing to do with it," he said simply. "You are well suited for the life you are stepping into." His gaze held mine.

"I will serve you and all of Bedford faithfully."

Alexanders lips curved faintly, the expression controlled. "Good."

"It is getting late. I should retire," I said, rising from the settee. "Goodnight, Your Majesty."

He rose from his seat, smoothing his hands down the front of his coat. "Goodnight Princess."

I left the parlor, the door closing behind me with a quiet finality that echoed far too loudly in my chest.

As Sir William escorted me back to my chambers, I searched for *him*.

As I rounded every corner and passed every hall, I expected to see the familiar knight with emerald green eyes. Yet every corridor and hall remained painfully empty.

The hollowness crested inside me. Tears burned behind my eyes, but I refused to let them fall.

When I stepped through my chamber doors, the realization struck sharp and unforgiving—the noose had never been removed.

It had only learned to disguise itself better.

Chapter 17

A few days later, Alexander and I met in the courtyard to review the decorations for the final time.

It was alive with activity. Servants strategically wrapped vibrant floral garland around banisters and balconies, their bright colors standing out starkly against the gray stone. Others had arranged additional blooms along the walkways and adjusted their petals and ribbons with meticulous care. The lush green lawn was perfectly trimmed, statues were meticulously polished, and the fountains were cleaned and sparkled in the sunlight.

Every detail was arranged to Alexander's exacting standards.

"Marvelous, isn't it?" he asked, his gaze sweeping over the courtyard. "It promises to be the event of the season."

"Indeed," I replied, smiling faintly.

My attention drifted across the courtyard, over the servants and the gardeners, and fluttering ribbons until it reached the guards stationed along the perimeter. Out of habit, I searched for the familiar build I could recognize without hesitation.

But he was not there.

Before I could dwell on the tightness in my chest, Alexander took my arm and steered us away.

As we continued across the grounds, we were stopped by

nobles, offering compliments and extending congratulations.

I smiled warmly, inclined my head at the proper moments, and accepted their well-wishes, my voice carrying calm assurance.

No one would have guessed the effort it required to hold myself together.

We rounded the garden and a quiet awareness pressed at the back of my thoughts. It was the unmistakable sensation of being watched.

I turned, my gaze sweeping past garlands and polished stone, over the rigid line of guards. At the far edge of the courtyard, a figure stood concealed in shadow beneath an archway. Though I could not make out his face, something in me wanted to believe it was him.

I wondered if he would notice the tightness in my shoulders. The way my smile held a second too long. The absence of light where it should have been.

A servant passed between us, carrying a cascade of ivory roses.

When I looked again, the shadow beneath the archway was empty.

I exhaled slowly.

Foolish Monroe.

"Princess." Alexander's voice cut gently through my thoughts. "Are you with me?"

My smile widened. "Of course," I replied. "Just admiring the decorations."

He inclined his head toward a waiting cluster of nobles, his hand settling at the small of my back. "We mustn't keep them."

By the time we left the nobles and Sir William had arrived to escort me back to my chambers, every part of me ached. My cheeks throbbed from holding my smile in place. My spine had been kept so straight for so many hours it felt as though it might

splinter if I allowed it to bend. Each breath pressed against the rigid boning of my corset, my ribs protesting beneath the silk and laces. Even my slippers felt heavier than they should, dragging against the stone as though I were wading through water.

“Thank you, Sir William,” I said once we’d reached my chambers.

“Good day, Your Highness.” He bowed and withdrew, retreating down the hall to his post.

The door eased shut behind him and I sagged against it, the strength draining from my limbs now that no one was there to witness it.

I had only taken a few steps into the sitting room when I stopped short.

A leather-bound book sat at the center of the low table.

I hadn’t seen that book in days. Not since I had left it behind in the solarium.

I took a few tentative steps forward, a quiet unease stirring in my chest as I tried to understand how it had found its way here after all this time.

A sliver of pale blue peeked out from between the pages.

My heart thundered against my ribs, my fingers trembling as I opened it.

A forget-me-not lay pressed inside.

All at once, my breath left me, and tears slipped free before I could stop them.

These have always been my favorite.

A wise choice.

The walls of the sitting room melted away.

I was standing in the garden again with sunlight on my skin, the scent of lilac and honeysuckle carried on a gentle breeze.

I was with him. With Aiden.

The forget-me-not trembled in my grasp, pressed against my chest as something new threaded through my limbs.

Not longing. Not ache.

Resolve.

I could not continue this way. I could not pretend any longer
I *would* not.

I was already moving before my mind caught up with what I was doing.

“Monroe?” Alice called after me, but her voice barely reached me.

The door shut behind me, and she became nothing more than a fading echo.

My feet urged me to run. To gather my skirts and fly down the corridor like a reckless girl in a storybook romance.

I did not.

Anyone who passed would see only a princess making her way through the castle halls. They would not see the way my pulse thundered. The way each step felt like stepping off the edge of something I could never return from.

I walked.

And I did not stop.

Behind me, Castle Bedford dissolved into shadow, its towering spires swallowed by the night as the forest path unfurled before me.

Only once the trees closed in around me did I let urgency carry me forward.

Near the end of the path, amber light flickered against the trees.

My pulse quickened, each breath drawing in shorter than the last.

I stepped into the clearing. It was empty.

A small fire burned at its center, the embers glowing low as though it had been left untended for some time.

My breath faltered.

He had been here. I had waited too long. I had lost him.

My fingers curled tightly around the forget-me-not, my heart splintering beneath the weight of his absence.

Then... a soft rustle of branches. The deliberate crunch of leaves underfoot.

I turned slowly, my pulse roaring in my ears. Every nerve in my body trembled with hope.

Aiden stood at the edge of the clearing, half-shadow, half-firelight, and utterly still.

“Monroe.”

Chapter 18

He did not move. Not toward me. Not away.
And so I crossed the distance. One step. Then another until there was no space left between us.

Slowly, he lifted his hand to my cheek, fingers barely grazing my skin. His breath left him in a shaky exhale, as though he only just allowed himself to believe I was real.

His thumb trembled as he traced the curve of my lips.

“Monroe...” my name stumbled from his lips. “You shouldn’t have come.”

His jaw tightened, and for a moment I saw it—the war inside him. Duty. Loyalty. Want.

“I couldn’t stay away,” I told him.

“Alexander is a great man,” he said hoarsely. “He can provide for you everything that I cannot.”

I covered his hand still resting gently on my cheek with my own. “All I want, Aiden... is you.”

His breath caught.

His eyes searched mine as if trying to find something he did not dare believe.

For weeks I had tried to fulfill my duty as Princess, as future queen, but I knew that life was no longer mine.

My heart had long since made its choice, and I could not deny

it what longed for.

Him. Aiden.

I let him see it.

Something in him finally gave way.

His hand slid from my cheek to the back of my neck, not pulling me closer, just holding me there. Like I was his anchor as much as he was mine.

He pressed his forehead to mine. "My heart is yours, Monroe. Always."

My fingers fisted in his tunic.

"And mine has only ever been yours."

I rose onto my toes.

Aiden stilled.

For one suspended heartbeat, the world held its breath with us.

Then I kissed him.

It was not tentative. It was not careful. It was every stolen glance, every restrained touch, every word left unsaid set free all at once.

Whatever restraint he had left shattered.

Aiden's mouth claimed mine. His hand tightened at the back of my neck as the other slid to my waist. He pulled me flush against him, and my hands threaded into his hair.

He nipped at my lower lip, drawing a soft sound from me, and a low approving grumble reverberated in his chest.

Aiden's hands moved over my back, my shoulders, my arms, as if he were mapping out my body to commit the feel, the shape of me, to memory.

I clung to him, my fingertips digging into his biceps, only breaking away long enough to steal a breath.

Beneath the starlit sky, it was only Aiden and me—hands

twisting in hair, fingers clutching fabric, breathless ravenous kisses.

Aiden broke our kiss with a groan, as if stopping was agony.

Our uneven breaths mingled in the space between us.

“Monroe,” he murmured, sending goosebumps across my skin.

He rested his head atop mine, his fingers still pressing into my skin.

“I can’t lose you,” he said, the words rough and uneven.

I looked up at him, my hand cupping his cheek. “You won’t. I choose *you*, Aiden.”

His lips curved before he leaned in and brushed a soft, delicate kiss to my mouth.

He took my hands and held them between us. “I have to tell Alexander,” he said, his voice steady.

“We will tell him,” I said. “Together.”

Aiden and I paused at the edge of the forest path, looking up at the dark silhouette of Castle Bedford rising in the distance.

He squeezed my hand once before releasing it, and together we stepped onto the stone path.

We walked side by side, close enough that the heat of him brushed my skin, yet careful not to touch.

The night air was cool, but I barely felt it. Every nerve in my body thrummed, alive with the knowledge that everything was about to change.

We passed guards, their gazes following Aiden and me, but none made a move to stop us. No one suspected the fracture we were about to carve into the foundations of Bedford.

Aiden halted just before a long corridor, his fingers closing gently around my wrist. “Are you certain?” he asked quietly. “If he strips me of everything—”

I held his gaze, letting him see the unwavering truth in mine. "Then we shall have nothing. Together."

He held my gaze a moment longer. Then he nodded once, slow and decisive, and he laced his fingers through mine.

At the end of the corridor, the parlor doors stood slightly ajar, a shaft of firelight spilling across the stone floor.

We shared one final look, a silent confirmation.

Aiden brought his hand up to the door, but before his knuckles even grazed the wood, Alexander's voice drifted from within.

"Enter."

Aiden pushed the door open.

A fire crackled softly in the hearth, casting warm light across the parlor. Prince Alexander sat in a high-backed chair, one ankle crossed over his knee, a glass untouched at his side.

Firelight traced the sharp line of his profile as his gaze lifted slowly from the flames, settling first on our joined hands.

"I wondered when this moment would come," he said.

His attention returned to the hearth, the quiet snap of burning logs stretching between us.

"I admit," he continued evenly, "I had hoped you would choose me."

He rose then, unhurried, setting the glass aside without looking at it.

When his gaze met mine fully, there was no accusation there, only clarity.

"But I see now, you would only have resented me."

Something in my chest tightened. Not with fear, but with understanding. For the first time, I saw him not as a prince, not as an obligation, but simply as a man who had misjudged love... and knew it.

"I tried," I said softly.

"The fault is mine, Your Majesty," Aiden said.

Alexander lifted a hand, not sharply, not in reprimand, but in quiet refusal. "No," he said. "No, the truth is no one's fault."

His gaze moved between us, not as a ruler assessing subjects, but as someone finally seeing what had always been there. "You love each other."

We did not deny it.

A faint curve touched his mouth. It was not quite a smile, but something like acceptance.

"You are released from this arrangement," he said, his attention returning to me. "I will dissolve the engagement. The rest, I will manage."

Silence settled in the parlor again, only broken up by the soft crackle of the fire.

Then, softer, Alexander said, "Go."

I released Aiden's hand and stepped forward. "Thank you," I said.

Behind me, Aiden bowed. "Your Majesty."

Alexander inclined his head once, then turned away, his hands clasping behind his back.

Aiden and I left the parlor, hand in hand, moving silently through the corridor.

Perhaps we did not trust the moment to hold. Or perhaps we could not yet believe we had walked away without consequence.

When the carriage waiting in the drive came into view, something inside me began to ease.

There were no gloved attendants, no line of guards standing at attention as there had been the day I arrived. No banners. No procession.

There was only Aiden and me in the hush of dawn, stepping into something entirely our own.

I did not allow myself to look back at first. But as the carriage wheels began their steady rhythm over stone, carrying us through the outer gates, I could not help myself.

I turned.

High above, framed by stone and morning light, Prince Alexander stood at the balcony.

He did not wave. He did not call out. He simply watched.

Our eyes met across the distance. He inclined his head. Not as a prince to a subject. Not as a man to a possession. But as an equal.

The gates closed, and Bedford receded behind us.

Aiden took my hand in his, and brought it to his lips, placing a gentle kiss to my knuckles.

I leaned my head against his shoulder and closed my eyes.

I did not know where the road ahead would take us, but as Aiden's thumb traced slow, lazy circles over my hand, I knew one thing with absolute certainty—wherever it led, we would meet it together.

* * *

Pinpricks of sunlight filtered through the broad canopy overhead, dappling the meadow below.

I wandered along the bank where wildflowers grew in abundance, their petals brushing my ankles.

Aiden was stretched out comfortably on the blanket, boots discarded, one arm propped behind his head. He watched me with an expression so open, so unguarded, it made my chest tighten. As though I were not merely his wife, but a miracle he still could not quite believe was his.

I returned to the blanket and settled beside him. He gathered

me close, his strong arms wrapping around me without hesitation, as though some part of him still feared I might vanish if he did not hold me there.

His fingers curled beneath my chin, tilting my head back until our gazes met. "Are you happy?" he asked.

"Better than happy," I said, smiling. "With you, I am whole."

"Always so poetic, Princess."

I smiled wider, brushing my fingers over his jaw. "I am no princess."

"You are whatever you chose to be, and you have always been *more* than a crown."

He kissed me slowly, reverently, like he had all the time in the world.

"I love you, Monroe."

"I love you, Aiden."

He kissed me again, then tucked me close against him and held me there.

I gazed across the meadow at our cottage tucked amongst the trees. The light struck it just so, and I thought of the painting in Bedford's gallery.

I had once believed it beautiful in theory. I had not known it could be lived.

Here, there were no nooses disguised as duty. No crowns masquerading as destiny. Only the steady rush of water, wildflowers at my feet, and the man who had chosen me as fiercely as I had chosen him.