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The Landers Affair

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Michelle Danielle Williams

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University of California, Riverside

The Landers Affair

by: Michelle Danielle Williams

Prologue

Off the coast of Greenland is an island. It is one of those Viking-discovered and settled societies that succeeded where the coast of what is now Canada had failed. The weather is typical of a northern country-- snow in the winter, beautiful springs and thaws rushing off of the cliffs. They are not called Fjords here. They are not deep or tall enough. Measuring across this island is roughly the size of what Americans indicated as Vermont's borders. This island, named Mercae, meaning 'center', is the last of the absolute monarchies in the modern world. Our story Begins in April 2002.

#

Her hair was carefully wrapped around the curling iron. The hairdresser began teasing the girl.

"Long hair makes for an interesting time in bed with a man," the hairdresser said. The girl looked into the mirror as the curls formed. The hairdresser winked.

The girl reached forward and grabbed a parcel off of the vanity. "To Rosie, from Us. Happy Birthday." She tore at the paper, but a stern and well-manicured hand took the gift away. Rosabeth had grown to hate that hand.

"Mother!" Rosabeth said, "Micah and Adam gave that to me. It is my birthday!"

The mother, a paler, older version of her daughter, pursed her lips and threw the present out the window. "By tonight, you will be the queen. You are on the precipice of womanhood, girl, so you must stop this dalliance with Bakers."

"If I'm queen, I can do what I want." Rosabeth kicked her legs.

"My lady," the hairdresser said, "I must have a still head if I am to tame this." She gestured at the mass of hair about her. "Heaven knows what is going on down in the nether regions."

Rosabeth blushed. "But, isn't it normal?"

The hairdresser leveled her gaze. "American girls remove all unwanted hair."

"This isn't the States," the mother said coolly. "The hair on her head is all you need to tend to."

The remainder of the hair appointment was spent in silence. Sixteen-year-old Rosabeth bit her tongue at every remark her mother had made. In a few hours, she would be the queen and her mother would have to listen to her commands.

#

With strict orders not to get dirty, Rosabeth left the chamber dressed in a white dressing gown. Her hair had been covered with a turban. She slipped into a pair of trousers and rain boots, tucked in her gown and belted up. She had a gift to rescue.

She waited for some maids to move around the corner of the corridor and then she slipped in through the kitchen. She checked the reflections on some pots. Nobody was

there, at the moment. She ran across the kitchen and out the door. She spun around in a triumphant circle.

Tomorrow, she wouldn't have to sneak out of the palace. The queen-to-be moved around the side of the palace and found her mother's dressing room window. In the rose bushes was the parcel. She did a little dance of victory. Not caring about the dressing gown, or about the turban, she maneuvered inside of the bush to get her present. Once obtained, she knew it was not safe to open it right there. She tucked it inside one of the dressing gown pockets and stole away.

The palace gardens were beautiful. The roses and the Acacia trees were in bloom. Nature was smiling down on her fortune. She was going to marry the king of Mercae that evening, something she had been born to do, not just because her parents arranged the marriage before she was actually born, but she knew in her heart that her love, Lars, was destined to be joined with her.

The birds chirped. She followed the cobblestone path, went down some steps and hopped along some stepping-stones. The rain the night before had left some of the lawn soupy, and though Rosabeth was glad the rain had stopped-- no bride wanted a rainy wedding-- she still wished she could take her virgin walk in a downpour. She wanted to get dirty. She reached the woods and sighed.

A man came out the woods, dressed in burlap and nearly collided with her. He got up quickly, and helped her to her feet. Her backside had landed in mud, but her turban was still in tact.

The man had dark hair, grey eyes and a serious handlebar mustache going on.

Rosabeth smiled. "Duke Roland, you scared me."

"Ah, my little lady, I did not recognize you." He winked. "Your mother won't be pleased you are out here."

"My mother can sew her mouth shut," Rosabeth said, "I'm on my virgin walk."

"Of course." The smile faded from his eyes.

"How is his majesty preparing for tonight?" Rosabeth wanted to know if her beloved was as excited as she was.

"With poise and dignity, little lady."

Rosabeth grimaced. Roland didn't seem happy. "Are you well, your grace?"

Roland waved her away and walked off.

"Your grace?"

He gave no response. Rosabeth shrugged and walked into the woods. She meandered through the trees, mostly fir and a few elms. A few kings ago had tried to introduce Ash into the forest, but the species didn't take and they withered and died. She was looking for the rare Eucalyptus tree. It was not native to the island, but it had made an appearance a century ago. One of Lars' uncles had brought it from Australia. Nobody thought it would survive the nearly arctic winter.

Underneath the Eucalyptus tree was a clearing. Two boys were waiting for her.

#

Micah and Adam were brothers. Micah was older by three years, and Adam was about the same age as Rosabeth. They were the sons of the royal bakers, but had recently graduated from the elite military academy. They were to receive their protectors' orders within the week.

Everyone was growing up. She was going to be queen. They were going into service. In two years, she would do the same. All Mercaens spent time in the reserve. Queen or not. Pregnant (hopefully) or not, she had a duty to her nation.

"You look silly," Adam said. "I hope they don't make you wear this tonight." He poked at her dressing gown.

"I'm on my virgin walk. It's supposed to represent purity."

"Yeah," Micah smirked. "Your ass is real pure."

Rosabeth glowered. "It's a good thing you are my best friend, Micah, because I'm not likely to take crap like that from the commoners come tomorrow." She crossed her arms.

"It looks like you crapped yourself." Adam said. Both boys smirked and high fived each other.

"Anyway," Micah said, "Did you get it?"

Rosabeth reached into her pocket and pulled out the parcel. It had been crunched. "Damn him," she said. She opened the paper and saw a squished Paper Mache carriage, complete with six dwarfed horses. "You guys must have spent a lot of time on this. Duke Roland ran into me on the way here. He's the reason my backside is dirty and I guess he ruined this."

Micah and Adam looked at each other.

"Look inside."

She opened up the Mache. Inside were two tortoise shell combs, polished so well that she could see herself in them.

"The carriage was a decoy." Adam shrugged. His blue eyes twinkled. She rushed forward and hugged both of them, at once, and kissed each on the cheek.

"You guys are the best."

#

"Ladies and gentleman, I'd like to take a moment to welcome you to San Diego," The pilot said. Rosabeth looked out the window. The sun was beginning to rise, shining off of the water. The buildings stood tall, affirming that this city was not leaving.

How long would she be there?

Until the king decided otherwise.

Rosabeth had been exiled, minutes before her wedding. She had been in the historical blue gown, had her hair arranged to accept the queen's coronet. Lars had met her before the grand palace stairs. He wasn't dressed in full arraignment. They had talked about this.

"Go. You don't know love." He said.

"But I love you!" she pleaded. "Why are you doing this?"

"One day you and I will fulfill our obligation, Ros,"

"Don't call me that." She had crossed her arms.

"Find love," Lars said. "And then you will be ready for me."

Her shoulder was shaken. "We've got to get off the plane," Adam said. Micah grabbed their bags. Micah and Adam had been given their protectors' orders. Her.

She numbly unbuckled the seatbelt, walked down the aisle of the plane and into the terminal. She would have been interested by the noises of people coming and going, but she followed behind her bodyguards, not caring about what was around her.

Micah stopped, suddenly. Rosabeth ran into him from behind. She peeked around his arm to see what had halted him. A chauffeur held up a sign that said "Lady Sumners."

The trio moved towards him. She was introduced. Five minutes later she was rushed into the back of a limousine with Micah and Adam on either side.

"Welcome to San Diego," the chauffeur said.

"I want to go home." Rosabeth whispered.

Part One

Seven Years Later

Chapter 1

A typical morning in San Diego saw sunshine streaming through the curtains. A grey tabby cat would be lounging on the pillow next to a mass of auburn hair. A white hand would come out from under the covers and would tickle the white spot of fur the tabby had on his belly. The cat often moved down the length of the pillow and nuzzled the mane of tresses, more like tangled messes, until one, and then two blue eyes met the gaze of the feline. The cat would meow and the woman would blow tiny kisses at the beast.

That morning, the sunshine filtered through the curtains. The curtains were wavering; the window had been left open. The auburn maned woman got out of bed, scratched the cat under his chin, and closed the window. She looked out and smiled. It was going to rain.

Rosabeth loved the rain. Living in San Diego created a need for it in her. Though, whatever storms passed through left her dissatisfied, she missed the long torrents and occasional flooding of a Mercaen rainstorm. She shut the curtains and walked to the bathroom, shedding her pajamas as she went. Her bedroom door was open, but no one in

her household had not seen her naked, modesty was one virtue she had shed when she climbed into that limousine.

The shower was already running. She stepped in and rubbed the back of the man. His hair was cropped, military style, he was quite tall. Though Adam could never be as tall as Lars. Rosabeth shook her head, shaking out the thoughts of her proper fiancé from her mind. Adam turned around, smiled, and kissed her on the mouth. He drew her close, placing his hand behind her head, cradling her neck. She kissed back, his hands twisted in her hair.

She broke away from him to breathe. She laughed. He grinned.

"Good morning," she said. Adam stood aside so she could get into the water. She turned the nozzle, raising the temperature. "Wimp," she relished the heat.

"Good morning," Adam said. "The shower is so hot, the water is evaporating. I'm getting out." He kissed her again and stepped out of the shower.

He wrapped a towel around himself and padded out into the bedroom. "Damn cat, get off my shirt!"

Rosabeth laughed. "That's what you get for leaving the window open," she said to the shower walls.

#

At breakfast, after she had dressed and pulled her hair back into a messy ponytail, all her ladies-in-waiting were present. Except for one. Everyone knew that his was an

‘off’ day, there weren’t any events to attend or appearances to be made. Rosabeth expected promptness and a cohesive household nevertheless.

"Miss Crackanthorpe is tardy again," Micah said. He laid out a plate of pumpkin scones. Pumpkin was out of season, but Micah had always managed to wrangle up something when he wanted it. "She didn’t check in last night."

Not surprising, Rosabeth thought. The mayor's daughter always had to ruin the plans for the entire group.

"Give the girl some slack," Adam said, pouring coffee for the girls. Rosabeth glowered. Lucy Crackanthorpe had to be the worst lady-in-waiting she had ever encountered.

"As informal as our operations here are," Rosabeth said, using her Sumners voice, "We must attend to the smallest of details." I so want her sacked, Rosabeth thought.

Rosabeth sat down. "Well, go ahead," she gestured. "Either be on time or starve." The noise in the dining room consisted of slurps, knives dinging against the plate and spoons clanging against the mugs. Rosabeth surveyed. The three ladies in waiting, Cynthia, Rosa, and Elena, were well poised. They dabbed their mouths daintily with their napkins. Rosabeth was pleased.

Rosabeth put her head into her hands and groaned.

"My lady," Cynthia started, "Are you well?"

"No." She looked up at Micah. "I've become my mother."

Adam and Micah smirked and then they both started laughing.

#

Lucy arrived closer to noon. Rosabeth was in her writing room, answering some charity organization letters, when Cynthia brought her in. She made the girl stand there in silence while she completed her correspondence.

Lucy huffed and turned to leave.

"Sit."

Lucy sat in one of the wing back chairs near the exit of the writing room.

Rosabeth laid her pen on her blotter and turned in her chair to face her wayward lady-in-waiting.

"Where were you?"

"I went home. It was my dad's birthday."

"I know it was the mayor's birthday," Rosabeth said. "You were to return last night before ten."

Lucy rolled her eyes and popped her gum. "Your rules kinda stink, like, alot."

Rosabeth stood up and placed both hands on the arm rests of the chair around Lucy. "Give me one reason why I shouldn't sack you."

"Americans don't say 'sack', they use the word 'fire'," Lucy said. "Geez, seven years living in God's Finest city, and you still sound like a fob."

"That's not a reason. And I'm not gay." My king might be, she thought, bitterly, but I'm not.

"Fob. Like, Fresh off the boat, immigrant? Not fop. Seriously, did you like, go to school here?"

Rosabeth waved her comments away. "Why should I keep you in my employ?"

"Because I am wonderful." Lucy batted her eyelashes. "And my dad could have you out of this house in ten seconds."

Rosabeth backed off. "I own this house." It was true, she did.

"Eminent Domain, this neighborhood needs a new park."

"I don't have to accept the offer." That was the law, she didn't have to sell.

"But we can try." Lucy smiled. She tapped her hands on the armrests. "Your move."

Rosabeth fumed. She wanted to smack the sweet grin off the girl's face. But ladies didn't resort to violence. Oh what did her mother know?

"Don't be late again." She knew Lucy had won, again. Rosabeth didn't feel that she was cut out for the political game.

She went back to writing and touched a framed picture of Lars, her king. She had known love; she had wanted to go home. Was she still so desperate?

"You were too easy on her," Adam said. He came in behind her and kissed her ear. He reached over and placed Lars' photo facedown on the desk.

Rosabeth pushed Adam away. "I have work to do."

#

Adam drove that night. Micah and Lucy were in the back of the Escalade. They had gone out for frozen yogurt. The other three ladies had declined the invitation. Rosabeth sat in the front passenger seat, looking up at the sky. The rain had never come. Such false promises as these often caused her to feel homesick.

"You're quiet." Adam said.

"Yes, I was just wishing the rain would come."

"If I never see a raindrop again in my life," Adam started, "I'd die happy."

Rosabeth shut her mouth. She was having reservations about the plans they were making. Could she really run away with this man, marry him, set sail on a cruise, live out of a suitcase and in fear of Lars and her mother's wrath over the scandal?

"You shouldn't say things like that," Lucy said. "That's bad luck."

"It's bad luck to say bad luck," Adam said. He laughed.

Rosabeth wanted silence so she could think. "Can we go home?"

"Your house or your country?" Lucy said.

Rosabeth was slightly uncertain which one she was really meaning. "Can we just go home?"

Bright headlights were suddenly head on with them. They didn't fade, or swerve, and Adam had no time before Rosabeth suddenly saw the sky below her. She gripped her seat.

She didn't see her life flash before her eyes. Nothing that resembled a tunnel and a light made itself known to her. I'm going to die. She focused on the cracking windshield. The crack formed from the bottom left corner and spread, like time-lapsed frost to the top

right corner. The sky, the ground, the sky, the ground, rotated behind the beautifully cracked windshield. I'm going to die. She may have screamed it.

She was okay with it. I'm going to die.

And then, there was silence.

Chapter 2

Rosabeth knew something was terribly wrong. She wasn't sure exactly what it was, but she had a feeling that--that was the problem. She couldn't feel. Nothing. Not even her nose itched. Opening her eyes, she was blinded from the glare of the fluorescent lights upon the sterile, white ceiling. She tried to speak, but a gurgling sound was all she could manage.

"She's coming too," a voice said. Rosabeth thought that the speaker had to be a woman because the lilt was in a higher octave than a man's voice would be. Octave? How did she know that? A face appeared above her and it began to speak. Rosabeth barely registered the syllables, but noticed the fake smile. Whatever the mouth was saying, it was a lie, the eyes gave away everything. She remembered something about eyes and mouths not matching, something to do with her father, but she pushed the thought away. She didn't want to think of the Lord Treasurer anyway.

She caught herself on her thoughts. Her father was the Lord Treasurer. That was something she definitely remembered. How could she not? As a child, he would remind her of his status when she was reprimanded for misbehaving or running off with the Baker(')s on some sort of unladylike adventure.

Baker. Lord Treasurer. Liar.

The voice began to speak more coherently. "Miss?"

"Liar." Rosabeth said. "Liar, Liar, Liar."

The face vanished. Something was whispered. A button was pressed.

Rosabeth began to feel warm and much better. Much, much better.

#

The worst part of her position was that the white ceiling refused to move out of her line of vision. She tried to turn over, but found that she couldn't. She tried calling out for one of the faces, but her voice was coarse and faint. The stoniness of her view dismayed her, color would be nice. Color. What color? What was the color she loved the most? Blue? Not blue. She gritted her teeth. Blue was an awful color. So was white. She didn't love white.

What was love, anyway?

Adam.

Adam had to be love. But something murmured beneath that, something that started with an L.

Unrecognizable faces floated periodically above her, but she couldn't remember who or what had happened. She hardly was able to determine the gender of who was above her. Someone waved a piece of paper too and a flash of gold, but she had passed out again from pain.

The pain was the second worst part. Once she came 'out of it' whatever it was, her arms and shoulders were sore. Her neck was stiff. She could feel sutures and stitches in her abdomen. Her fingertips tingled. But her legs felt fine, or, if she could feel them, they had to be unharmed.

She tried to remember what her life was like before this mysterious event, but all she could string together was a few words, pearls of information that she hardly understood. Baker. Treasurer. Liar. No blue. No white. Adam. Pain.

Remembering her name was difficult. And what was she wearing? Were her nails painted? What color were her eyes? These seemed like silly questions, but to Rosabeth they were important. The effort it took to remember that her name started with Rose was enough to force her back to sleep, restless as it was.

Sometime later, when noises and images began making sense again, she pieced together what happened, where she was, and what was going on. Her name was Rosabeth. She was not wearing nail polish. She was wearing a hospital gown. Her eyes were blue. But two things were new to her.

She had been in a terrible car accident, and she was now married to the King of Mercae. Not Adam. Adam was dead.

Chapter 3

After the doctors had decided that it was safe to move her head and that the paralysis extended from the chest down, a nurse helped moved her into a sitting position. She was finally able to see where she was. The room was devoid of the second patient, and covered in blue flowers. Blue! She hated that color.

There was not a television anywhere in the room, nor a radio. A steady hum of the machines next to her was the only source of electronic noise to subtly undercut the silence that the white room enshrouded. The most decorative piece was a man seated by the door in full military dress and a ceremonial rifle. She didn't fail to notice the group of armed soldiers in fatigues outside the door, either.

She was thrilled, of course, to be able to move her arms. But she was not terribly thrilled to find the gold band on her left ring finger. Startled, she let out a squeak. The man inside the room jumped up quickly in response. He saluted.

"I um--I--I guess--oh, well never mind," she said, she waved him back to his seat. The exertion of the movement was too much and she fell asleep.

Drunk Driver Paralyzes Foreign Dignitary

On May 18, 2009, Michael Harrison, 58, collided with a blue Cadillac Escalade carrying Lady Rosabeth Sumners, 23, two bodyguards and one lady-in-waiting. Lady-in-waiting Lucy Crackanthorpe, 21, also the daughter of San Diego Mayor Blaine Crackanthorpe, was only slightly injured. The worst injuries were inflicted upon her

Ladyship, Rosabeth Sumners, who sustained serious injuries to her spine and neck. She is listed as in critical condition. One fatality was reported, Adam Baker, 24, one of the body guards to her Ladyship. He, died instantly. He was driving the Escalade. Michael Harrison was unhurt and had a blood alcohol content of .19. He will be arraigned for driving under the influence and vehicular manslaughter on May 21, 2009.

It was there, in the newspaper, yet, she remembered none of it. All she remembered was running around for last minute travel items and she woke up staring at the white ceiling for what felt like days. It was probably days.

That was devastating in itself.

The next piece of paper she was handed was more tragic.

A Proclamation from His Royal Majesty, the King

I, Landers XV, hereby decree that Rosabeth Sumners be my wife and queen from this day May 19, 2009 until my last day on earth. She shall be called Her Royal Majesty, Rosabeth Landers, and Queen of Mercae and shall be awarded all rights and respects therein.

Landers XV

Landers XV

May 19, 2009

That was the most devastating injury she could have endured. She had been jilted at the alter seven years before by that king, and once she was damaged and after she had lost Adam, he had bound her to the conventions of a Mercaen marriage: no divorce or lovers allowed. Not that she had a lover, anymore. She put her hands to her face and grimaced at the sight of the shackle on her finger.

#

"I would have been devastated if you had perished, my Queen," a blonde girl said. This girl was Lucy. Three other women sat near her. They all wore the white sashes of their stations. Only two of them were from Mercae and would return with Rosabeth if they chose too.

"I am pleased that your injuries were minor, Lucy," Rosabeth said. She smiled sweetly. Rosabeth moved her hand to touch the blonde tresses and caressed the girl's face. "We've had a tragic turn of events, but we shall carry through."

Rosabeth was trying to be brave with her attendants. She was also trying to be nice. Lucy had been there with her in the car, the trauma was palpable. Lucy's face was bruised and her arm was broken. Occasionally, tears fell down her cheek. Rosabeth had shed her own share of tears, in the midnight hours, silently. Alone. She was envious that Lucy had the comfort of the other ladies.

"What will happen now?" one of the Mercaen ladies, Cynthia, asked. Cynthia was a very tall girl and had earned a scholarship to San Diego State University to play volleyball. She was very talented.

"Your tenure with me has not expired," Rosabeth said. "But I'm sure if you would like to stay and finish out your degree, my husband would be willing to suspend your term."

"That, I would definitely agree too." Lars walked into the hospital room carrying a large bouquet of red and pink roses already settled into a vase. He handed the arrangement to Cynthia, who in turn set them on the bedside table. Lars leaned down and kissed Rosabeth's forehead. "I figured you were tired of blue."

A piece of her heart thawed for him in that instant. He was ever thoughtful, she surmised. "They are most beautiful, my sunrise." She inclined her head. "May I introduce you to my ladies-in-waiting?"

Lars bowed to the four of them. He took Lucy's hand first and kissed it softly. Lucy's face reddened.

"Lucy Crackanthorpe, my love," Rosabeth said, if not entirely eagerly. "She is the mayor's daughter."

Lars whispered something to Lucy, and Lucy blushed again. The king moved to Cynthia. Rosabeth narrowed her eyebrows. She was suspicious of his motives. She had no contact with him for quite a number of years.

"Cynthia Gardner," he said. "I thought I recognized you. You have blossomed here in the states and I do hope you continue to pursue your education."

Cynthia curtsied. "If it does not cause her majesty any distress."

"Absolutely not," Rosabeth said. "You are blessed with the choice to outline your own life. Pursue your own path."

Lars turned and leveled Rosabeth a cool look. Rosabeth took that as a warning. She introduced the other two girls and Lars spoke highly of their dutiful doting on his wife. He reached into his jacket and pulled out four white roses and handed them to each of the four women. Rosabeth allowed more thawing of her heart. He was extremely charming. Even if he had sent her into exile because she happened to be the wrong gender.

"Your service has been most appreciated. The crown shall see to covering the rest of your salary for the remaining year of your tenure and your tuition shall also be covered. You will no longer be bound to the conditions of your contract and shall, of course, be given the best of references. I, myself, shall be writing them."

What he didn't say was that he was buying their silence.

#

After the ladies had left, Lars swept into a swivel chair and spun around in a circle. He grabbed the edge of Rosabeth's bed. He flung his hair back with a quick shake.

"Miss me?" he smiled.

"You have some nerve," she said. She kept her hands still. It was probably a good thing she was paralyzed, or else she would have strangled him. "Seven years!"

"And?" Lars leaned back and crossed his arms. His face was more sun-worn and ragged. It made him more handsome and Rosabeth hated that she noticed. He had aged well. "You knew I could have sent for you at anytime."

"And you send for me now?"

Lars looked away. "Wow, you've got a lot of get well cards!" He picked up a bunch of blue flowers. "I'm glad you made such an impact with the American community."

"San Diego." She turned her gaze to the wall.

"Same difference."

Rosabeth wanted to scream. Had all Mercaens been so ignorant of the world?

#

"Your injury occurred at the Thoracic 6 vertebrae. You will retain the use of your shoulders, arms, hands, neck and upper chest, but everything below your lungs is lost to you. Fortunately, it was a complete severance of the spinal cord, had it been incomplete, more complications will arise. You'll have to rely on your arms to move, extensive physical therapy will be needed." The doctor laid it all out. "But, your Majesty, with your resources, I'm sure that when something comes up in the experimental and breakthrough market, you and your husband will be able to afford the procedures."

The man next to her placed his large hand on hers. "This is a tremendous blow to our monarchy, but we shall endure. I assume her chances of pregnancy are, well, haha, inconceivable," he turned to Rosabeth, "When we return, we will begin interviewing for surrogates." He patted her hand. "Lay out the treatment plan and what she will need to

live a long, healthy, comfortable life. When a cure becomes available, we will proceed with that, of course."

Rosabeth let Landers continue the discussion with the doctor. She let him continue patting her hand. She let him decide the course of her life. He was, after all, her king and husband now. He decided when she was there and when she wasn't. She had been his fiancée since her parent's ultrasound results. She should have known that she could never be free of him.

"I'm tired, Lars." She said. Everyone of power called him by his shortened name.

Lars patted her hand. "Of course, my sunset."

Chapter 4

Micah took away the never-ending bouquets of blue flowers from her hospital room. Rosabeth was in a wheel chair by the window overlooking the San Diego Harbor. Clouds were forming on the horizon and the cruise ships were slowly leaving port.

The cruise liner Barco Grande, was setting sail, the western sunset welcoming the ship and the passengers into its adventurous embrace. It was setting sail for Mexico, Cabo San Lucas, actually. The guests would be drinking second-rate tequila, would be ripped off by ruthless street vendors, and it would be a glorious time.

"We'd be on that ship," she said. She wrung her fingers. She traced her left index finger with her right thumb. It felt extremely odd to only be able to feel her fingers. Her legs must have been sore from just sitting and lying out all day. She needed to be running, or swimming, or walking hand-in-hand with Adam along the pier, boarding the departing cruise ship. Not stuck in the hospital with a mother hen for a husband and her boyfriend's brother wiping away her tears.

"I miss him too." Micah set the Glad bag by the door. The ceremonial security guard lifted his head up in recognition.

"Adam was a great man." The guard said. He saluted casually. Rosabeth scoffed. The guard turned to her. "My Queen?"

"Oh, nothing, McLaren, as you were." She said with her back to him. Micah returned to sit next to her. He placed his hand on hers. She wanted to put her head on his shoulder, but the logistics of moving towards him without maneuvering the chair was too

complicated for her. She pushed his hand away instead. She pulled a lock of her hair back behind her ear. "How are the preparations coming?"

"The king has decided to replace everything in the house. He wants a clean break. I've been organizing Adam's things and already sent back his sentimental items. All we need is our passports and visas. The embassy will close out all the accounts and sell our possessions. Lars is looking to fly out the moment you're cleared."

"Why does he think he can just swoop in like this?"

"He's the king."

"I've been in the states for seven years. I'm practically a citizen. He's not my king."

"He's your husband."

"Logistics," she shrugged her shoulders. Micah smirked. He and Adam always lifted the right side of their lips when they smirked. So much of Adam was in Micah.

"You forget. He decreed it and your father was more than ready to agree." Micah shrugged. He placed the trash bag outside the room. He came back, and sat back beside her.

"I don't want to go back to Mercae."

Micah patted her hand. "I'll call the nurse to help you back into bed."

"My sunset, your reservations are understood." Lars said, behind her.

Rosabeth wasn't going to censor herself now that he was around again. She turned her neck to look up at him. Her neck was still sore. "How long are you here, my sunrise?"

The king smiled and set his hand on her shoulder. "I wronged you." He lifted his hand and swept his long white blonde hair back from his face. "I shouldn't have panicked and sent you away from me."

Rosabeth clenched her jaw. This was as close to an apology she was going to get. "Who knows where our choices in life leave us?" His left him time to continue his relationship with his lover, while she, virginal and confused, all too easy prey for Adam. Adam was dead, the lover married off and now she was stuck with the man who jilted her. She felt bitter, but pushed the bitterness down. She imagined pushing the negativity towards the unfeeling parts of her body. Only positive feelings were allowed. Why had she loved Adam so much? Why did it hurt that he was gone?

Lars took Micah's seat and brought it closer to her. "I know that Adam Baker was dear to you. I am glad that you found a man's embrace since I--Well, you know, so many years ago. Now, I am glad of this more than ever. It would have been a shame if you had saved yourself for me."

"I hope his memory is honored back in Mercae." Micah said, inclining his head. He nodded to Rosabeth and pulled her chair back to the bed. She let him lift her and settle her neatly into the cot. He pushed the chair away. Lars brought the chair with him and set himself up next to her.

"I'll be flying to Washington D.C. to meet with the president and then I'll return to Mercae with Adam's remains. I'll offer a state funeral for him to his parents, and allow the Bakers to establish whatever memorial service they feel right."

"I'll miss the funeral," Rosabeth said. She traced the edge of the blanket. Lars smiled softly. This was what he wanted.

"I'll be sure to have a live feed for you. If you want to say anything, email it to me and I'll have it read. It will be glorious to honor this man that gave his life for you."

Rosabeth's eyelids fluttered. "Thank you, Lars. I appreciate everything you are doing."

"My duty and my devotion to you are my motivations, my sunset." He leaned over to kiss her forehead. "I'll be by in the morning before I head out to D.C. Sleep well." He caressed her face with his fingertips and left the room. The ceremonial guard saluted formally.

"He feels guilty," Micah said. "That's why he's doing all of this."

"Shh. Micah," Rosabeth extended her hand. "Read nothing more than what the king has said. It'll be more tragic otherwise." She was trying her best not to do just that.

#

Mercaen King Demands Extradition of Drunk Driver

King Landers XV met with President Obama this morning demanding that the drunk driver, Michael Harrison, be sent to Mercae to be held accountable for his actions. Michael Harrison is currently being held in a San Diego County jail facing charges of driving under the influence and vehicular manslaughter which involved and injured the

now Queen Rosabeth on May 18, 2009. One of the queen's bodyguards was slain in the collision.

President Obama has denied the request to extradite Harrison, "The crime was committed on American soil" and should be brought to American justice. Queen Rosabeth and the other two survivors, Lucy Crackanthorpe and Micah Baker, will be required to participate in the trial, which has yet to be scheduled.

King Landers accepted the President's response and is more than willing to cooperate with the trial. Queen Rosabeth is still recovering from a major spinal injury in the S----- Hospital in San Diego, Ca. She's expected to be released in six weeks, whenre she will return to Mercae and begin physical therapy.

Rosabeth rolled her eyes as soon as she put down the paper. "I know it's just a formality, but sometimes Lars astounds me." She resumed eating her breakfast. Micah chuckled.

"So there won't be any honeymoon period, huh?"

"Oh, as soon as I get home, I'm jumping his royal bones," Rosabeth drawled, "I'm just so embarrassed that I didn't keep anything from my bridal shower." She winked. Micah blushed. "What's on today's agenda?"

"Feel like wheeling over to the children's ward?"

"Do I have to wear the sash and tiara?"

"It would brighten up their little lives to be blessed with the radiant Queen Rosabeth."

"I do love children." She took a sip of her orange juice. "After I read them some books and give them stuffed animals?"

"The neurologist will be meeting with you."

"Sounds like a busy, exhausting day."

#

Rosabeth went through the wardrobe choices, there really wasn't much she could do with hospital gowns, and allowed the nurse to change her. She chose to wear pajama bottoms and a t-shirt under the gown so she wouldn't be so bare. The tiara was a bit much, but it was one of her first public appearances as a queen. The blue sash was unnecessary, but she made little complaint. Micah pushed her throughout the hallways, her IV pole securely attached to the wheel chair.

The children's ward was unfortunately filled to capacity with children who were suffering terminal illnesses and severe injuries. She read a few books to those who were able to leave their beds. After, she handed out some toys and visited every child and held some hands during the medicine portion of the children's routine. She grimaced when some whimpered from their injections. She also hated needles. She held a brave face. Some kids asked if she was sick, and all she told them was that she had been hurt. Many wished she would get better.

When she got back to her room, the blue flowers were back. "Why?" she said. Micah smiled softly and helped her into her bed. Deep Blue was the Crown's official color. She knew she'd never escape it. She had spent seven years in a blue-free

environment, detailed to the wardrobe of her ladies-in-waiting. Adam had once said it was an ironic prejudice since she looked her best in that color.

"Do you want to be under the covers or--?"

"Don't tuck me in," she said and opened up a magazine that Micah handed her. "I don't want to look like I'm sick."

Chapter 5

Rosabeth had worn that gown once before. This time, it had been altered to allow for the chair, and to allow for her more developed form. The last time her hair had been arranged around the tiara, it had been her sixteenth birthday and her hair was more brunette than auburn. Today, as the women fussed around her and cautiously avoided her chair, she was corseted into the inherited wedding gown and the queen's tiara, she was already queen, was secured with curls and bobby pin twists. Her short hair had been transformed with extensions that miraculously matched her sun-bleached auburn and brunette mixed hair. One woman chided her for dying it. It had been such a lovely color before she left.

Everything had been lovely before she left.

Her mother, Lady Sarah chided her on the perpetually tan cleavage she had. "California girls are notorious sluts," she said. Rosabeth wanted to wash her mother's mouth out with Sand. "Your skin!" Sarah said. "You look twelve years older!"

Rosabeth had to bite her tongue and not remind her mother that it had been seven years since they had seen each other last. Not so much as a call on her birthday, or a visit, or a Christmas gift, or even a bloody get-well-card while she was laid up.

To say that Rosabeth was bitter was an understatement.

While the other women cooed at how she was transformed from a crippled wannabe Cali girl to a queen, her mother had to make a point about her condition.

"Your wedding night is going to be--" her mother paused, "how will this work?" she pointed to the chair.

"I won't be having sex, Mother," she said. "Sorry to disappoint you." She tapped her fingers on the armrest. All the women gathered around her and looked like they were trying to admire her. She saw her auburn curls, the sapphires in the tiara, the silver that had been plaited into her hair, her made up face. The woman who did her make up failed to hide the scar on her cheek. How had she gotten that?

Glass had cut into her when she had been pulled from the wreckage of the car. The scars were everywhere. Adam, poor, dear, Adam. Was not. The bastard. Why did he leave her behind for this? For this? She raised her hands up in silent reasoning. The women looked around her as if she was about to say something.

Rosabeth wheeled herself backwards and turned around to go out the door.

Someone was supposed to push her, but she had decided to take care of herself whenever Lars wasn't around. In San Diego, she made it a point to learn, as best as she could, to dress herself, to change her colostomy bag and to push herself around in her chair. It was difficult without the use of her abdominal muscles.

She made it down the hallway from the bridal suite and met Micah by the foyer. She looked up the staircase and sighed. The ballroom and state viewing area were up on the third floor. "We need an elevator in this place."

"We need a lot of things," Micah bent over to pick her up. She held out her ungloved hands. Once the ceremony was over, and once the state crown was upon her, she would also don gloves. The wedding and coronation were just for show. She was

already Lars' wife and queen. She was slightly amused by the pomp and circumstance behind the ordeal; she had only been in Mercae for twelve hours.

Lars wasn't going to waste any time. He needed a queen to disavow any confirmed bachelor rumors.

Micah began to lift her.

"It is my turn. She is after all, my wife." Lars descended the staircase resplendent in full military dress, the blue sash securely tied from left shoulder to right hip. His tall frame slid gracefully down the banister the last few steps. Rosabeth's breathe caught. He always did that, even with state visitors. That confidence he radiated was once a reason why she had loved him. Perhaps she could rekindle that fire she once had for him. But there was Adam's memory. Rosabeth pushed his ghost away.

Lars came to her and held out his gloved hand. She reached up for it; he leaned down and lifted her up. Her gown fanned out gloriously. Everything was how she imagined it would be.

For one moment, she let her grief and despair be forgotten and she allowed herself to imagine what her new life held in store for her.

#

"I know about the intended elopement," Lars said. He settled her into his giant bed. The walls were rosy, a nice change from the white room she had lived in for three months. She pulled the blanket up to her chin.

"Can you blame me?"

Lars settled in next to her. He felt wrong. He was taller than Adam, thinner and his presence was too close to her. Too comforting. He put his head on her shoulder. He kissed it softly.

"Rosie," he said. He placed his arm across her chest. "I cannot blame you for wanting to live your life."

"Pretty speech." She closed her eyes. Lars removed his arm and rolled over to face the French doors. Lars breathed heavily. Soon, he was out. And she was alone in consciousness.

She lay there awake.

As the night waned, she laughed to herself suddenly. Then, sobs racked her and her shoulders shook her. She pressed her hands to her face, trying to quiet herself, but she suddenly saw a flash of something behind her closed eyes, a windshield cracking diagonally from the bottom left corner to the top right corner and something about the sky and ground rotating around it. She screamed.

Lars bolted upright and pulled her to him. He stroked her still-curled hair. He murmured to her.

"I miss him too," he rubbed circles with an open palm on her back. He didn't realize that she was remembering parts of the accident. She didn't explain. When she finally fell asleep, she had managed to wiggle into the crook of his arm. Lars tucked an unraveling coif behind her ear and smiled. He kissed her forehead, "Goodnight, my sunset." He laid his cheek on the top of her head and pulled her in close.

#

The next morning, Rosabeth awoke to four maids surrounding her. They said that they had been assigned to her by the king and were to assist her in everything she needed to do. Rosabeth rolled her eyes.

"Coffee. Today's newspaper, and half an hour of silence," she said. She waved her hand regally. The maids looked at each other and shrugged, and did her bidding. Rosabeth smirked.

"Maybe being queen isn't so bad," she said softly. She folded the blanket down to her waist and wished that she could be raised higher. One of the maids returned with her coffee.

"Could you fetch Sir Micah for me?" Rosabeth said. She took the coffee delicately in her hands. She sipped. She preferred her coffee straight black, the bitterness always reminded her of the sternness of the palace, the tradition of hundreds of years had etched itself into the stone work.

She preferred things to be unaltered.

She knew that things had to change, though.

The maid curtsied and left again. Before Micah arrived, her husband made an appearance.

"Good, you're awake," Lars said. "I've already instructed your attendants to pack some things, we're leaving on the 9pm train to the Sumners estate for our honeymoon. Your parents have been ordered to stay behind. Not that they will obey, of course." He chuckled.

Rosabeth couldn't remember the last time she had visited her family's home. Her father had been assigned Lord Treasurer before she was born, and only on rare occasions did she and her mother leave the palace for vacations.

"Why the Sumner home?"

"I want to take a good look at what I've just inherited." Lars said, he sat down on the bed. "You're the only child of your parents. The estate is part of your dowry. I'm hoping that it proves to be suitable as a summer retreat home for us and our children."

She traced the rim of her mug. "I doubt you will be disappointed." She finished the rest of her coffee in one gulp. "I'll confer with Sir Micah and the maids you've assigned me on what to take."

Lars reached down to kiss her forehead. "Bring what you want, you are the queen now and set the standard for the rest of the ladies of the court." He smiled. "We'll have the most fashionable nobles yet."

Rosabeth blushed. "You are kind, your grace," she set her mug down on the nightstand. Lars smirked and sneaked through the bathroom door as Micah entered.

"Was that the king?" Micah said.

"My husband likes to escape protocol and procedure. He's a ghost sometimes."

Micah sat down where the king had been sitting. "I have been briefed on the itinerary for the week away. I've instructed your maids to pack accordingly."

"Saves me the trouble." Rosabeth opened the newspaper. "I'm surprised my clothing survived the move from the States."

"Actually, Lady Sumners had new garments made while you were laid up. They've been altered to account for the chair."

Rosabeth laid the newspaper down on her stomach. "That was awfully kind of her."

Rosabeth's relationship with her mother had always centered on the betrothal to the king. How great it was that she was born to be queen. How great it was that her mother was going to be the mother of a queen. So on.

Throughout her exile, she had not one ounce of contact with either of her parents, nor did neither of them visit her after the accident. Adam's parents had, and that made her grieving even more difficult.

#

The last time Rosabeth had been on a train was shortly before her sixteenth birthday. Unlike that time, she was staring at the countryside shrouded in darkness as the locomotive barreled eastwards towards her father's rather endowed estate. She was alone in the cabin, her husband had gone off somewhere, and her maids were snug in the next compartment over, ready for her to ring the bell should she need anything.

This was not how she pictured her honeymoon. When she was younger she had hoped of going somewhere warm and exotic, her parent's home was not exactly the most exciting destination in her book. Despite the fact that the first two months of her marriage were spent in a private hospital room back in San Diego. Sunny San Diego. She really missed the beaches, the rough water at Ocean Beach, all the cute touristy curio shops she and Adam visited and made fun of, but she was headed towards her inheritance, married

to the King of Mercae, to spend her honeymoon, sexless, in a house that had constantly oppressed her and reminded her of her duty.

If it were daytime, she'd see the hills and glacier-capped mountains sweep by. She'd see the cottages and farmhouses of her people, her timeless people who cared not for the world outside the island nation. Her people who resisted the modernizing ways of her lord and king.

She closed her eyes and tried to sleep.

#

"You really ought to do something about your hair," her mother said. Lady Sarah started brushing Rosabeth's hair. "You need a more regal look, maybe one of those American bobs."

"If I was in the sixties," Rosabeth said under her breath. "I like my hair the way it is. It is finally growing back since the accident."

Sarah paused her brushing. "Please don't mention that horrific man."

"I didn't say anything about men."

They were in her mother's suite at the summer estate. She had fallen asleep on the train and had awoken in her childhood bed, Micah asleep on the floor. She thought Lars had forbidden her parents from accompanying her on her honeymoon. She was pretty sure she didn't need chaperoning when she wasn't having sex with her own husband.

"His Majesty is the best thing that ever happened to us." Sarah said.

"You sure do have the rote, don't you? Mother?" Rosabeth pushed herself back from the table so hard she knocked a vase off the vanity. Her chair rolled further than she meant. She hit the sofa, her shoulders felt the impact.

"Little ladies shouldn't--"

"Mother," Rosabeth said coolly, "I'm your queen. I will be treated with respect."

"I gave my life for you," Sarah said.

"And for that, I thank you," the queen turned her chair around. "I'll see you at supper, I must attend to my marital needs."

She followed the floral patterned carpets to the guest suite, sighing as she came to the staircase. She tapped her fingers slightly in annoyance against the armrest. A maid walked by and paused slightly. "Do you need assistance Lady--I mean, my Queen?"

Everyone was getting used to her elevated status, including herself.

"Could you perhaps send for my husband, or for sir Micah? I would like to lie down."

"At once, your Majesty," the maid bowed.

At least someone was treating her as a queen and not as an invalid.

Micah arrived five minutes later, and laughed when he saw her dilemma.

"Uppies?"

"Screw you." Rosabeth said, "Just get me upstairs. I need a nap."

Micah smirked. "Mother issues?"

"Life issues." Rosabeth muttered. Micah picked her up and carried her up the stairs, gently. More gently than Lars had done on their 'wedding' night. He set her on one

of the many divans by the windows on the second floor. Her parents were ostentatious with their wealth. But she welcomed the cushioning. She stared out the window and admired the view of the ocean on the horizon and the trees of the woods nearby. She knew that east of her position were glaciers and mountains, and the white capped peaks often made her feel smaller than herself. She loved being reminded of her minuscule existence, and the ocean and mountains reminded her that she meant nothing on the grand scheme of the universe.

Micah brought her the wheel chair. She looked over her shoulder at him.

"Actually, I think I'm fine right here."

Chapter 6

"Are you sure?" Lars said. He passed his fingers through her hair. She loved the feeling of her hair being slightly tugged from her scalp. Any sensation was welcome.

"We are married. And as high ranking members, our marriage must be consummated." She peered up into his eyes, green with small flecks of gold. He had married her against her will. Now she was going to get him to do something unpleasant.

"Rosie," he pulled his hand away from her hair. "You won't get anything out of it."

It was sweet that he was thinking of her needs. She paused. She was never going to have another orgasm? Shoot. She remembered something about some technique called 'thinking off' that she should pursue.

"My sole purpose for existing, my darling, is to please you." Rosabeth said, from rote. That was what had been drilled into her since she was born. Sometimes she had wished she was born in a common family.

"You sound like your mother." Lars left the bed. "How are we going to do this, then?" he looked uneasy, shifting his weight back and forth on the balls of his feet. Her kept pushing his hair away from his face. He blushed. Rosabeth had made the great Landers XV blush. She grinned in spite of herself.

"Do whatever it is you have to do to get, you know, prepared. I have some lubrication to aid you. I won't feel it, but it needs to be done."

Lars sat back down on the bed. He wrung his hands. "My Sunset, I have a confession to make."

Rosabeth leveled her gaze. "I know."

"You do?"

"I pieced it together. You sent me away before because it meant that you'd have to give up your pleasures for fidelity. But since I'm paralyzed, you don't have to worry about that aspect."

"But, you are pressuring me."

"Only this once, to secure our contract. Then you are free to do as you please."

"I can't act out on my urges as a married man. It is forbidden."

"I don't care what hole you use, as long as it's done." She said blatantly. Lars looked away from her.

"These words that fall from your mouth should be criminal."

"Isn't it also a crime to marry yourself to a woman when you have no attraction to her?"

"Rosabeth," Lars leaned over her. "Our situation is perfect. Sex complicates relationships, I love you, you are my wife, but do not ask me to do this. We will pursue surrogacy and meet our royal duties that way."

"Being gay is not anything to be ashamed of, I accept it. Just as you accepted my affair." She put her hand on his arm. "But we have a duty. If neither meets that one requirement in our contract, it can be argued and petitioned. And when it comes down to the succession..."

Lars sighed. His broad shoulders heaved and sunk into himself, making his back look like a question mark. "Just once?"

"Yes."

"Then let's do this tomorrow night. Make it special."

"You mean so you can get drunk?"

"That would help, yes, haha." Lars leaned over and kissed her forehead. "My Sunset, I promise you the world, and I shall do this with you." He straightened and stood up. "I don't suppose we need witnesses?"

"Neither of us will have any dignity with it regardless," she said. "Let's not make a spectacle."

"Very well. Tomorrow night. This is promise you." Lars kissed her lips.

He went to the bathroom and shut the door. Rosabeth pulled the blankets up to her chin and smiled. Even though she knew her husband 'played for the other team' as the Americans would say, she felt in her heart, a small fire burning of the love she had once had for him. Could she really be happy with him? Was he her true love?

She had thought of Adam and began sensing that it wasn't supposed to work out with him. He had been all too eager to take advantage of the jilted virginal fiancé of the king. She had ignored the other women he pursued. He had even fucked Lucy from time to time. Had she really loved Adam? Or the idea of him?

She felt warm; the idea that Lars finally wanted her had made her feel giddy. She figured that nobody really gets over their first crush and though the platoon of conditions

that surrounded her marriage were enough to make any sane person swoon at the thought of a cripple and a gay man fucking, she knew it had to be done.

It wouldn't be fair to him to remain celibate their entire lives. She had known for some time that he was a homosexual, and it came as no surprise to her. She had been visited a few years back by his lover, Roland, a young duke of the kingdom, who urged her to break the contract so that they could remain together. Rosabeth had tried, but the duke ended up married off to one of her cousins, a contract that had not been foreseen and could not be changed. Lars had mourned silently, but she knew he felt the loss and failed to invite the duke and duchess to court, out of shame.

She was going to make the best of the situation, but consummating her marriage was the first priority. She was probably not going to enjoy it, she wouldn't feel it, and the last time she had sex had been the day that Adam died and she had lost her freedom.

She closed her eyes and tried to will away the memories that came with even thinking of Adam's name. And silently cried herself to sleep. She felt the bed shift as Lars came to bed and his snore accompanied the nighttime sounds.

#

"What?" Micah said, pacing. "You want me to take you where?"

"A lingerie shop is not the most embarrassing place you have accompanied me into." This was true. He had once followed her into a drug dealer's house to buy some pot. Her nineteenth year had been-- well, interesting.

"But, what's the point?"

"There are legal ramifications, Micah, and besides, my wedding night had been stolen from me, so I am going to make the best of it."

"But, Lars?"

"He's not happy about it either, but promised."

"So why do you need lingerie?"

Rosabeth rolled her eyes. "Only a woman would understand." She let the maid finish plaiting her hair. She admired herself in the mirror. She was transforming into something new, and Rosabeth wasn't sure that she disliked it. She was a queen, albeit, wheelchair bound, but the most powerful woman in her kingdom.

"You will take me to Farah's Feminine Fashions," she said. "And you will aid me in choosing something suitable."

"Buttless chaps and aftershave?"

Rosabeth wheeled herself around and slapped Micah across the face, he was sitting on a chaise behind her, with such force that he fell back sprawling. The maid let out a little squeak.

"Chere," Rosabeth said, "I do apologize, and you can leave now."

The maid curtsied and left quickly.

Micah stayed where he fell.

"Get up."

He stood up and brushed himself off, straightening his shirt and readjusting his gunless holster. He rubbed his cheek. He glared at her with his gray eyes.

"We will not speak of this." She leveled her voice. "We will not speak the unspoken around staff. This is how rumors are spread and how kings are dethroned."

"Rosie--"

"Take the rest of the day off, Sir Micah," she turned herself around to look back into the mirror. "Send me an attractive female protector who doesn't ask obnoxious questions or comments so garishly."

"My queen--"

"Micah, go. Now."

#

After supper, and after a few cocktails, Lars entered the bedroom. Rosabeth had a maid arrange flowers everywhere and the floral aroma had an intoxicating effect on her. She had chosen to wear a white negligee that covered her entirely, but the lace was coquettishly see-through. She had her hair arranged, displayed in sprawling curls that fanned out on the pillow she was resting on.

She was on top of the bedclothes and was grateful that she had the foresight to have any unwanted hair removed at a salon earlier in the day. She later discovered a myriad of zig-zagged x's up and down her legs, and was appalled that she hadn't realized the full extent of her injuries.

Lars looked at her, his green eyes intent. He began undressing, slowly uncovering his tan body article of clothing by article of clothing. When he was down to nothing, he sheepishly smiled.

Hours later, she awoke in his arms.

She looked up into her husband's face and saw the self-satisfied smirk that she was familiar with. It mustn't have been all that terrible for him, either. She nuzzled in closer to him as she could and went back to sleep. Now she was married, in mind body and soul to him, and now she could allow herself to love him again.

Chapter 7

Rosabeth had known she was in love with Lars since she was very little. He was twelve years older than her, and by the time she was toddling around, he would pick her up and place her on his shoulders as he went about his kingly business. The Lord Advisor, George, often protested to the little lady being present at council members, but Lars always shrugged, lifted the child from his shoulders and set her on his lap, where she nuzzled in close and often fell asleep.

"She's going to be my wife," Lars would remind the council, "I don't think political exposure is going to harm her. I doubt she will reveal any of Mercae's secrets, she barely speaks."

Rosabeth always looked up at him when he spoke. She would reach her hands up and he would lower his face so she could touch his cheek. "Lars," she would say, "Mine."

Twenty years later, after having been sent away from him for seven years, she was back in his embrace, but still ever so much dependent on him. The morning after she forced him to consummate their marriage, she woke up alone, in their bed, with a note on the pillow beside her.

"Sunset, I had to return to the palace, there was a surprise visit from the President of the United States. Enjoy the rest of today at that beautiful estate and return to me tomorrow. I've given Sir Micah an update and he is aware of your needs, with love, Lars."
"

She smiled deviously. The corners of her lips tipping into a grin. She brushed back her hair from her face and rang a bell at the bedside.

Micah entered, sporting a black eye and held his nose up as if he was smelling something awful. "Your Majesty rang?"

"You aren't a butler." Rosabeth threw the bedcovers off of her. Micah pushed over the chair, without needing prompting like he normally did when he was in a sour mood.

"I'm not a fool either." He lifted her up, carefully and set her in her chair. He folded the train of the night gown. "Your maids are in the bathroom preparing your toilet. Will there be any special requests?"

Rosabeth put her hand out to stop him from pushing her further. "Could you look into hiring a physical therapist? Somebody from the States? I'd like to be able to get myself in and out of my chair and to dress myself. I've allowed people to treat me like an invalid, but I'm the queen. I am Mercae and Mercae is not weak."

"Is that part of your pillow talk with his royal fag--I mean majesty?"

"I know you miss Adam, so do I, more than you know, but," she allowed him to continue pushing her chair through the hallway to the bathroom, "There is no way to change my circumstances, I need to have a better attitude about it. So do you. That's why I'm putting you in charge in finding me a physical therapist."

"As you wish."

The maids were waiting for her in the bathroom, brightly blushing. Micah's footsteps faded behind her.

#

Lady Sarah sat at the breakfast table pretending to read the newspaper as Rosabeth rolled in. "Father returned with his majesty?" Rosabeth said.

"Of course. All of the council is there now. The President of the United States is a big deal."

Rosabeth inclined her head in agreement. A footman placed a napkin on her lap and presented her a plate of French toast, with powdered sugar and strawberries on the side.

"My favorite." She smiled to the footman. "Your chef remembers well."

"I shall give him your compliments, your grace," the footman bowed.

"I shall give him my compliments directly after I complete this fabulous meal. I grew up with him, surely I can still see him in his proud kitchen?"

"But of course, Ma'am." The footman bowed again. "I'll take you there after breakfast."

"I remember the way, don't unsettle your schedule on my accounts," she patted his arm. "May I have some of that delectable mint tea my mother is enjoying?"

"With sugar?"

"Not today, but thank you." Rosabeth waited for her cup to be filled before taking her knife and fork up to eat. The footman quickly disappeared. All that remained were the portraits of her ancestors and her solemn mother, who might as well have been statuary.

"Has father granted you a day of leisure, Mother?" Rosabeth cut an appropriate sized triangle of French toast and brought her fork up to her mouth. She chewed slowly and dabbed the corners of her mouth with her napkin.

"Your father does not permit me to do anything. I make my own schedule."

"Very well," Rosabeth took a sip of her tea. She made a small grimace. "Perhaps I should have asked for sugar, after all," she said.

"I can ring for the boy," her mother raised her hand to the bell.

"Don't," Rosabeth took another sip. "I'm fine. I don't need the sugar anyway."

She continued to eat her meal in silence. Her mother, eyes never tracking the lines of print of the newspaper, but never glancing away from it. Sarah had always used this medium to shield herself from those who threatened her.

Rosabeth had always threatened her.

The footman returned and smiled at Rosabeth's empty plate. She smiled back at him. "Just a slice more?" she held up her plate as if she was twelve and begging the chef for a sweet.

"Right away, my queen."

"You shouldn't flirt with the staff." Her mother said, abruptly. "As a married woman, your eyes are for your husband only."

"I was being charming." Rosabeth shook her head, listening to the soft rustling her hair made on her shoulders.

"You always have the same response." Sarah folded the newspaper and set it down on the table. She propped up her head with elbow, leaning forward to stare her daughter down. "I take your adventure with the king was successful?"

"I would say so."

"And will there be a natural born heir?"

"Mother," Rosabeth started, "I doubt I'll be able to conceive, not in this condition. And even if I were, it would be very dangerous for both the child and myself."

"I've read that many paralyzed women have carried children to term."

"Anomalies." Rosabeth huffed. "I must not hope to carry Lars' child. The best, safest route would be through surrogacy."

"But is it wise to trust your heir to a stranger to carry?"

"She wouldn't be a stranger, Mother. The king suggested interviewing some of the single noblewomen as possible candidates, some on the lower tier of court. Carrying the heir to the throne would boost their bridal price and of course the crown would contribute to her dowry."

"Is the king thinking of Duke Roland's maiden sister?"

"I do not know who the king is considering. We haven't had much discussion on the topic other than the initial conversation. If surrogacy is pursued, the candidate will be selected by both my husband and myself."

"Of course," her mother smiled, "Because the women of Mercae have a voice." Her mother wiped her mouth with her napkin, set it down and left the table. Rosabeth continued her meal in silence.

Chapter 8

Rosabeth was not really amused. The thing sat in the bedroom, while the delivery men worked to unwrap it. It had a blue seat and was trimmed with ermine. Ermine? Rosabeth flared her nostrils. There was even a 'skirt' that hid the mechanical features, such as wheels and the bulky battery. The armrests were at least normal, with a joystick on the right. Rosabeth sighed.

She didn't want a power chair.

Lars came into the room, his hands behind his back. All the men stopped what they were doing and genuflected towards him. "No need, no need," he said, half amused. Rosabeth knew he relished in the attention.

"Well, my sunrise?"

"It certainly stands out," she said. She circled some beadwork on her skirt.

"You hate it."

Rosabeth looked up at him. She was seated in her manual wheel chair. "That's not what I said."

"Rosie," Lars bent down to meet her gaze. She always hated and loved when he did that.

She wheeled herself backwards. "Ermine?"

Lars laughed, his cheeks reddening. "It's a throne on wheels."

Could it be that bad? She thought. Could she see herself zooming around the palace in that monstrosity? Her impetuous husband seemed to think so.

"Only for state functions when I'm not supposed to get my hands dirty." Which meant evenings.

Lars looked at her for a while. He furrowed his brow.

"Tell you what." He stood up. "We'll do this the fun way."

Rosabeth sighed.

"Two laps around the first floor of the palace, just the perimeter, you in the power chair, I in the manual. You win, state functions only. I win, we trash the old one."

"I'll need some time to practice steering." She began to worry at a loose thread.

Lars calmed her hands. "That's why we will do it Wednesday. Noon. Be there." He smirked. "or be square!"

"That idiom is outdated, even for you, my sunrise," she said. She giggled. "Fine. I'll race for my life."

They each spat on their hand and sealed the deal.

Rosabeth had two days to get used to that ugly chair.

#

And it wasn't easy. Rosabeth kicked everyone out of the ballroom and practiced in the abomination her husband thought would help her get around easier. The tile in the ballroom was at least set in parallel lines and she chose to attempt to follow them with the joystick.

If this had been a sobriety checkpoint back in the states, she would have failed so miserably that a million hours of community service would not do the humiliation justice.

"I don't think you are supposed to hold onto the controls so hard." Micah said. He had laid out the instructions on the tiled floor. Rosabeth's eyes narrowed. The piece of paper took up two of her 'lanes' in one direction and three in another.

"How is this technology helping me?" She raised her arms to the ceiling. "I was just getting the hang of the 'low-tech' chair," she sighed. She tried to slump, but the harness kept her at the appropriate posture for a queen.

"Blue looks good on you." Micah said. "Or around you, I guess." He lay on his stomach and looked closely at the plans.

She hated blue.

"I think I figured something out." Micah jumped up.

"What?"

Micah smiled devilishly. He stood up, brushed himself off and walked over to her. Standing to her right side, he grabbed the control. He pushed it slightly forward, and walking along side her, they managed to keep a straight line.

"Easy does it."

He grabbed her hand and held it with his. He pushed again, softly, so she could feel the amount of pressure needed to navigate. They tilted the controls slightly and she managed to turn.

Micah released her hand, like a father releasing the back of the bicycle seat, and let her coast in the direction she chose without wavering.

"My goodness!" she said.

"Come on, Queenie," Micah said, "Tell me how you really feel."

"Micah you are a fucking genius," she said. "How'd you figure it out?" she stopped the chair.

"Instead of reading the English translation, which was done horribly, I read the Swedish original. So much clearer." He smirked.

"You can read Swedish?"

"I attended an elite military academy, thank you very much."

"It was all thanks to you pulling me out of that well."

"Eh, if I got rewarded for saving clumsy little Ladies all the time, I don't think you'd be able to afford my service." He winked. He nestled back over the instructions.

"Try it again, but give it more juice."

#

Rosabeth was in the bed while the doctor examined her. She knew she had a few bruises, especially where the harness had dug into her, but she figured she was okay.

Lars burst through the door, surprising both Rosabeth and the doctor. The latter jumped and dropped his flashlight. Rosabeth would have jumped had she been able to.

"What happened?"

"I crashed the chair."

Lars sighed and sat down beside her. "Well, doctor?"

"Nothing serious, your majesty." The doctor retrieved his flashlight.

"I was practicing in the ballroom. I was getting the hang of it when I kind of lost control and crashed into a column. I meant to circle it." She lowered her head. It had been a rush. But she knew the power chair was to be handled slowly and carefully, especially for state functions.

The doctor began examining her lower limbs and abdomen. He lifted up her nightgown. He poked and prodded her legs, which she did not feel.

Chapter 9

She sat, looking out the window. It was raining. She watched the trees in the woodland across the palace grounds sway slightly with the wind. The drops of rain fell upon her window, slowly smudging the view. She thought of the view as a watercolor painting, blobs of colors gave way to her, a scene of tranquility, happiness, a memory fell forth from her mind as the skies continued their downpour.

When she was a child, she often would run outside when the rain started and dance in it. Her frocks would always become ruined, wet grass, mud and so on, and despite the verbal reprimands from the staff, the governess, her mother, she would take glee in defiance.

Rosabeth longed to jump in the puddles. She half hoped she could spring from her chair and rush outside to fling the water up into the air as high as she could. She wanted to return the water to the sky so it could fall again another day.

Rosabeth sighed.

"Ma'am?"

Rosabeth held up her hand. "I'm fine."

"Do you want some ginger ale?"

"No. I'm fine."

Rosabeth assumed the maid returned to her mending.

The lights in the room flickered and went out.

"Ma'am?"

"Light some candles."

Rosabeth glowered out the window. She was cooped up in her suite. She had wanted some time alone to watch the rain, but now she was in the dark. She wouldn't have minded, but the stupid maid behind her kept asking questions about where to find the candles.

"The telephone isn't working." The maid said.

"It needs electricity."

"How do I--"

"Go out in the hallway and ask someone to bring up candles, or ask where to retrieve them." Rosabeth was glad that her back was turned.

"I'm not to leave you alone."

"I doubt very highly that I will be going anywhere."

"What if you fall?"

"I assure you that I am not delicate. Go."

"But Ma'am--"

"If you do not retrieve candles within the next ten minutes and provide some illumination for this room within fifteen minutes, you can pack up your belongings and go back to live with your parents."

The door shut behind her.

Rosabeth smiled softly. She liked winning. She began humming a lullaby and let the drops pit patter against the glass. The rhythm was soothing.

#

She awoke in Lars' arms. He was swiftly walking down the stairs of the front of the palace. Several people milled about in the courtyard, covered in blankets.

She could hear sirens off in the distance and she was jolted by the image of the glass on the SUV cracking from one corner to the other. Adam!

"What's going on?"

Lars deposited her on a chair and wrapped her gently in a blanket.

Rosabeth looked at the palace. The left wing was engulfed in flames. People were coming in and out, helping others escape. A fire truck pulled up into the courtyard and quickly unrolled their hose. They connected to a hydrant nearby.

The water rushed forth from the hose, drenching the walls of the palace. Rosabeth grabbed Lars' hand.

"We think it was a lightning strike." He said, calmly. He leaned down to kiss her forehead. "I'm glad you are safe."

"Thanks to you, my sunrise."

Lars smiled meekly.

"Landers!"

Lars turned around and faced the Lord Protector, a staunch man. He was wiping soot from his forehead.

"There is report of some children stuck in the lower kitchens. We're assembling a team to reach them."

Lars placed a hand on the other man's shoulder. "My wife is my heir."

"I don't understand," Rosabeth said, "What--?"

Lars looked back at her. "I'm going to help those children. I'm naming you my heir just in case anything happens."

"Protocol." The Lord Protector said.

Lars kissed her cheek and placed a sooty hand on hers "I love you."

#

"The king is the first line of defense." The lord protector said. "He has to go to the front lines whenever something happens. This fire, tragic, requires his sacrifice."

"He will be alright, won't he?"

"My queen, it would be my deepest desire to tell you that there is nothing to fear, that everything will turn out perfectly." He shrugged, "but I can't. This is dangerous. Lars' father perished when their yacht capsized. Lars was but a wee boy; his father laced the lifejacket onto his son and threw him overboard. He then turned and helped the sailors try to right the ship, but it was a lost cause. Lars' father knew they were doomed."

"Aren't you supposed to reassure me?"

"No. I'm supposed to shield you from delusions."

Rosabeth stayed silent for a while. She tried not to over think the situation. Lars was battling a fire to rescue children, it was his duty. Rosabeth knew that even if he weren't the king, he would be right there on the front lines. That was the person he was.

"Ma'am," someone said.

"Come to me, I'm more or less immobile." She hoped the monstrous power chair melted in the fire.

One of the head housekeepers presented herself in front of the queen.

"We should consider moving people to a secure location. We need sleep, dry clothes, and hot food."

Rosabeth drummed her fingers on her thigh. She thought of who was nearby.

"Get me a mobile."

A cell phone was produced by one of the staffers. She dialed the number she thought of instantly. She pressed the phone to her ear. Three rings later, a man picked up.

"May I assist you?"

"Am I speaking with the butler of Duke Roland's household?"

"You are. May I ask whom I am speaking with?"

"I am Her Royal Majesty, Rosabeth Landers, Queen of Mercae."

"Your Grace. How May I be of service?"

"Put the duke on the phone."

"At once."

She waited for two minutes while the call was patched through to the duke's bedroom. Her husband's former lover answered, sleepily.

"Your grace." He yawned.

"I'm terribly sorry to disturb you at this hour."

"Is Lars okay?"

"The palace is on fire."

"Did I hear you correctly?"

"Yes. The king and some protectors are rescuing children who were trapped in one of the lower kitchens. But that is not why I called."

"I see. How can I help?"

"I've got about a hundred and fifty stranded residents of the palace, out in the courtyard in the rain. Your residence is the closest of size to accommodate us while this emergency is being handled."

"Of course. I'll transfer you back to the butler and give him the specifics. I'll get the ball going on my end. See you soon."

"Thank you, Roland."

"You are most welcome, my Queen."

Chapter 10

Roland had gained weight since he married Rosabeth's cousin a few years back. His stomach protruded slightly over his belt. She had known him when his eyes smiled and his svelte figure dived seamlessly from the cliffs at a beach location the king had often haunted. Roland's tawny hair was now lifeless and muddy, his eyes carried rings, his face drooped.

Would Lars age this much because of their marriage? Bile rose in the back of Rosabeth's throat.

"Where is the queen?" Roland said to a maid.

"I am here, sir." Rosabeth said. She wiped her mouth. Someone handed her a bottle of water.

"I got here as quickly as possible." Roland knelt in front of her. "My queen."

"Rise, Roland." Rosabeth said, waving her hand. And waving away another bout of nausea. "Is everything ready?"

"We have a few buses for the staffers and my butler is organizing the rooms as we speak."

"Very well, begin loading the children, women and elderly. We need to get the meak ones out of this weather."

Thunder crackled. Lightning flashed.

The hairs on Rosabeth's arm rose. There was electricity in the air.

"And yourself?"

"I will stay until all my people have been seen to."

Roland stared at her for a while. "I find your enthusiasm to be refreshing. Perhaps you can talk to my wife about marital duties." He bowed stiffly and walked off.

Rosabeth's father sauntered over and leaned over her. "Are you warm enough?"

She was slightly taken aback by his concern. "I'm fine."

"You are soaked through!" he took off his coat and wrapped it around her. "You should have gone with the others."

Her father kissed her forehead and walked away. Rosabeth touched where his lips had been. She couldn't remember the last time her father had shown her affection.

"Find me a wheelchair," she said. "I'm tired of sitting still."

#

The men emerged from the lower kitchens in the east wing, each carrying a child. Emergency responders rushed to meet them, gurneys swinging wildly on the wet cobblestone of the courtyard. The children were hauled off, faces and mouths being wiped, soot coming off, mixing with the rain.

Rosabeth wheeled over to the men, eagerly searching for two faces. All the staffers had been transported to Roland's. she, the duke, and the lord protector were all the remained.

The men were covered in soot. She looked for two familiar faces. Hands grabbed her chair from behind her and she was wheeled from the scene.

"You ought to get to the Duke's." Micah said.

"Not without the king."

"Rosabeth."

"Micah."

Shouts erupted behind them. Emergency responders were called. Rosabeth tried to wheel around.

"Don't."

"I'm the queen!"

"You don't want to see."

The lord protector came forward, nearly out of nowhere. "My queen, you must come with me."

"My husband!"

She stopped hearing the voices quarreling with her. She stopped feeling the rain fall on her face. She didn't see the car being pulled up beside her. She wanted to fight her captors placing her in the car, but she couldn't. She was placed on her side, in the backseat of a town car. So she couldn't rise. So she couldn't see what was going on.

She clutched the leather seat. She felt a wave of nausea overtake her, and she retched all over the carpet of the vehicle.

"I'm sorry I ruined your shoes," she said to the Lord Protector. She wasn't sorry. Not in the least.

The Lord Protector was silent.

#

The Duchess herself brought in Rosabeth's breakfast a few hours later. She had tea, toast, eggs and a grapefruit cut into cute little slices.

"Rosie?"

"Amelia." Rosabeth tried to smile. "I'd sit up, but my legs stopped listening to me."

"Yes, I know. Luckily I have one of those adjustable beds."

Amelia grabbed a remote from the edge of the nightstand. "Tell me when."

Rosabeth was reminded of tea time parties they had as children at her summer home. She often imagined Amelia to be her sister.

The bed rose, and for the first time Rosabeth was amused. No sweaty maid had to sit her up or stuff pillows and bolsters behind her to keep her upright.

"That's perfect. I need one of these. I'll suggest it to Lars when we rebuild."

Amelia's face whitened.

"Where is my husband?" Rosabeth set the tray to the side. She moved it back above her lap. Sometimes she forgot she couldn't jump out of bed of experience a jolt of surprise.

"He's been terribly injured."

Rosabeth wanted to bolt out of the bed. She buttered a piece of toast. Play it cool.

"Where is he?" she tried to be as calm as possible.

"In the hospital. They say a beam fell, blocking the rescuers from the children. It is said that your husband reached for it, moved it, but caught fire in the process."

"I must see him." She heard the panic in her voice.

"Roland is with him."

"How quaint." Rosabeth pushed the tray of food away from her. She had no pretense of appetite.

"Look, Rosabeth, What can you do? At least the person he loves is with him. He's not expected to live."

"I am his wife, his queen, his sunset!"

What was she, then? All her life she had been groomed to be this man's wife, and his candle was being snuffed out. Would hers burn as brightly? She didn't want to think of the kingdom, she wanted to be selfish and wail and scream, and kick, well, why not? It was her fantasy. She could dream as she wanted.

I already lost one love, why is the universe being so cruel?

"I'm only going to say this once, Amelia. Find me some clothes and get me a car. I must go see my husband."

"I can't--"

"I said once."

Amelia sighed, sucked in her retort and complied.

#

Rosabeth wheeled into the private room Lars was in with an air of authority. Amelia followed behind, shamefully looking away from Roland as he stood up.

"Rosabeth," he said. "You should be resting."

"I should be by my husband's side. As he was beside mine."

She looked at the man in the bed. He was so tall, that his legs hanged off it for a good eight inches. "Could they not find a bed long enough for him?"

"No, he's a big man."

Rosabeth regarded Roland coolly. She returned her gaze to her husband. His face was covered in bandages. His entire right side, actually, was gauzy, bloody, and oozing. She could smell the burnt skin. She also noticed that he was naked and that the hospital staff had made a sort of makeshift tent so that the sheet wouldn't aggravate his sensitive-- whatever-- was left.

His breathing was shallow, but his heart monitor was going strong. That was promising. She had spent such a long time in a hospital and entertained many sick children to notice the good signs and the bad.

"Where is his doctor?"

"He doesn't have one." Roland said, "They don't expect him to live, so they took all the available doctors to treat the children."

"Then bring in the royal physician."

"You'll be wasting your time," Roland said. "He's going to die."

"We're all going to die at some point. I refuse it to happen today." What was the point of having authority if she couldn't demand the impossible?

Roland stood there doing nothing. "I'm sorry."

"Out." She said. "Both of you."

Amelia grabbed her husband's arm. Roland stood still.

"I'm not leaving."

"Amelia, please summon an available caregiver."

Roland stared her down. So it was going to be cousin-versus-husband tug of war. So be it. Rosabeth wanted to lick her chops.

"She's in charge," Amelia said. "While he is incapacitated, she assumes all power and authority. She is the King." Amelia turned and left. Rosabeth applauded herself on the inside. She had won. She had trumped Roland.

Rosabeth wheeled to the phone. She picked it up and dialed the number.

"Doctor, this is the queen."

"I'll do what I can." She sensed the hesitation in his voice.

"Who called you?"

"The Lord Protector. He told me of the direness."

"I'm telling you there's hope. Come."

"I can't make any promises."

"I just want somebody to do something!"

The other end clicked off.

She returned the phone to its stand. She returned to her husband's side and grabbed his left hand in hers. His wedding band had been removed, but it was next to him on the table. She moved his hand to her abdomen.

"We should seek a surrogate as soon as possible," she said. "I want our child to meet the bravest man in the world."

Lars was brave for rescuing the children. Brave for taking the fire upon himself. Brave for marrying her, despite his preferences. Brave for bearing a responsibility he

probably never wanted. Would she be able to do that in his place? Rosabeth looked down at her useless legs and doubted she would be there on the front lines, rescuing children.

"I love you," Rosabeth whispered.

Roland scoffed. "Out of one bed and into another," he said. "Didn't take you long to get over the death of your boyfriend."

"I think of him everyday. I know now that marrying him would have been a mistake."

"How can Lars possibly love you? He's like me."

"Your bitterness over your marriage to Amelia is one of the reasons that keep me going. I want to get rid of arranged marriages. I think being forced to marry someone your parent's choose for you is medieval."

"Who would you have chosen?"

Rosabeth smiled. "I would choose Lars over and over again. I know about his preferences, but I love him with all my heart. I always have. I always will." She kissed his hand. "And even if he does pass on from this, I still have something of his to carry on." There had to be a promise of a child.

"What makes you certain that he would have chosen you? He sent you away."

Roland was dense sometimes.

Love wasn't about the sexual release of endorphins between two people, love was beyond sex. Love, in all sense, transcended relationships. Lars and she were companions, secret keepers, they may not have performed physical love, again, but they still loved.

"If 'what ifs' made the world go round, we'd have children messing with the laws of physics."

"I would have chosen you, Rosabeth," someone whispered. One of Lars' eyes opened. His lips were cracked. He licked them. "Over and over again." Love was beyond gender.

"Please don't be saying that because you are about to leave this earth," Roland said. "You are a gay man."

"It would be easy to say what everybody wants to hear," the king said meekly, "but in the end I must say the truth."

Rosabeth cradled his hand. "My sunrise?"

"Shhh." Lars put his finger on her lips. "I won't die today." He placed his hand back in her lap. "You forbade it." His left eye twinkled. Rosabeth pressed his hand to her stomach. Soon. She would see to it.

Part Two

Chapter 11

A baby cried. The nurse shushed the child. Rosabeth opened her eyes. She pressed some buttons on the remote beside her so she could adjust her bed. Now that she was in a sitting position, she called out to the nurse.

"Bring him to me, he is hungry."

The nurse came in to the bedroom, the six month old baby in her arms. "Ma'am, it's the colic."

"My son, please?" Rosabeth held out her arms. The babe was placed, red faced and squalling, into her arms. She kissed his forehead. The nurse handed her a bottle. "Now, now my gentle giant, let's have none of that."

After the baby had found the nipple of the bottle, she smoothed his blonde hair back. He was still squirming, but at least he was silent. She murmured the fragmented chords of a lullaby, allowing her son's hand to grasp her thumb. He smelled like sour milk and baby powder; she drank it in. These three am moments, without attendants and protectors constantly surrounding her and the boy, without her father throwing out names of barely born princesses at her for betrothal to her son, these moments, in the whispers of the approaching dawn, were hers to be alone with her son and the memory of his father.

Lars' picture was on the nightstand next to the empty side of the bed. His death had been a blow to the nation and enough people challenged her right to rule, as his wife and heir. And that she was differently abled. She never liked that term, differently abled, but it was apparently the politically correct term these days. It did sound nicer than 'imprisoned in her own body'. She proceeded with a surrogate and she promised to turn over the throne when the child was of age, and the dissenters quieted down.

They always quiet down.

Like babies to warm formula, they eventually cease their squabbling.

"Llewellyn Sebastian Landers," she said. "I love you."

She had hoped her child would have been a girl, but once she held her son, she knew that it was right. His hair was blonde and straight, though she expected it to redden and curl. His face was chubby, but somehow his cheekbones would chisel out as he grew older, growing into his father's likeness and girth.

#

When morning came, Rosabeth pulled herself into her chair. Since starting physical therapy, well before the embryos took inside the womb of Amelia's youngest sister, she was much stronger. She rolled herself into the baby's room and paused. The boy was sitting up, both his hands were on the spindles of the crib and he was looking intently at her.

"Your highness," she greeted. The baby smiled. "How is my smelly Welly this morning?"

Welly giggled. Rosabeth motioned to the nurse and the babe was taken from the crib and placed in her lap. She held him close. Learning how to move herself in the chair while holding her son had been interesting. But she was able to. Another accomplishment in her favor. Perhaps she could be a queen in all rights, after all.

She moved down the hallway of her suite to the breakfast room. Her mother and father stood up briskly.

"You aren't dressed!" Sarah said.

"You weren't invited." The queen said. She took the head of the table. One of the footmen carefully took the baby and placed him in a high chair next to her.

"I don't know why you won't hire a nanny." Her father said, " we have the funds, and this would free up much of your time."

"I am the mother of Mercae, I most attend to my son if I am to keep that title," she batted her eyelashes. "That's why I have such a fitting council, yes?"

Her father blushed. "Of course."

"What do I owe the honor of your presence, beloved parents?"

"There's a princess," the Lord Treasurer started.

"There's a door." She pointed. A footman opened it.

"Just here me out Ros,"

"Your majesty." Rosabeth tried to sit tall. "I'll have no more of the Sumners sinking their claws into the aristocracy of the world. Your daughter is the queen, your grandson, the future king, isn't that enough? You married me to a Landers before I was even born. Excuse me while I insist on my son finding his own love and happiness."

"He will have a duty, and we don't want to encourage him to be like--"

"Whom? His Father?"

"My darling," Sarah started, "a homosexual king is not what Mercae needs. We've had enough trouble keeping it under wraps, even paying off Roland to keep his mouth shut. Your husband was a fop and you need to curb any of those characteristics your son might have inherited."

"A gay father does not make a gay son, and regardless, it is time to put those old-fashioned notions aside." Rosabeth nodded to the waiter who placed her bowl of porridge before her. A small bowl of Gerber's rice was placed next to her, in addition to her coffee.

The nurse entered the breakfast room with a baby bottle. "I thought his highness would like something fresh," she curtsied.

"Naturally" Rosabeth took the bottle. "He can have it after his rice."

She placed the tiny spoon into Welly's bowl and scooped up some of the cereal. The baby met her halfway.

"Someone is hungry!"

#

"This is not a good idea," George, the Lord Advisor said. "Mercae is a very conservative nation." George was an old man, who, as rumor had it, lived in his office. Some said he never actually slept anyway. He was older than Rosabeth's father and the Lord Protector by an average of twenty years. He always gave Rosabeth the impressions of a stick stuck in a creek eddy.

"I know, but I've got to make a stand on before the world does it first, It's a battlefield in the states, England has already signed the paperwork and it won't be long before news of tolerance trickles it's way to our men and women hiding themselves from the world. If we make a jump start on it, then perhaps marriage contracts would be more willingly entered into."

"This is not the way to honor your husband." The Lord Protector said.

"I'm not doing it for Lars, or for Roland, or for anybody else I know who is suffering from 'moral' oppression, I'm doing it for the future children of Mercae so they can have more freedom to choose who they marry."

She eyed her three advisors. "This is something I feel strongly about."

"We won't approve it." Her father said.

"I don't need you too." She smiled. Being queen was badass sometimes. She brushed her skirt. Welly was with the wet nurse, but she missed his tiny head tucked under her chin. She stared down the advisors. She wanted to distract them. "I also want to build an airport."

"Rosabeth, that's preposterous!"

"And why, Lord Treasurer? We can afford it. It will boost tourism, provide jobs for those content on not being farmers and possibly bring Mercae onto a level playing field with the world stage."

"Our nation is small."

"Then build a slightly larger airport and we can extend the pier to accept more cruise ships."

"What makes you think Americans would want to come here?"

"Why do Americans do anything?" she shrugged her shoulders.

"That's very narrow-minded." The lord protector said.

"Strike up a research committee. I'll give you six months to pull together reasons why we shouldn't. I'll put a committee together to come up with reasons why we should. Whoever can convince the other side wins."

"This isn't the States."

"I know. I also know that I have absolute power. I could make this happen without your support. I'm giving you a chance to prove me wrong. How many monarchs are so kind?"

The council looked sheepishly at her. The lord treasure straightened his neck tie.

"Six months?"

"The day before the Crown Prince's birthday shall a decision be made on the airport" She banged her hand on her wheelchair rest.

"And about the edict concerning marital law?" George said.

"In due time, my Lord Advisor, in due time."

Chapter 12

"Micah, we need to audit the taxes from before we were born. I think the council has been taking advantage."

"Of a child king?" Micah scoffed. "Of course they would."

"I'm not necessarily that naïve." She said. "I want a kingdom that is honest with its coffers for my son."

"I'm not sure you should pursue this, what if that's the reason Lars died?"

"To cover up fraud?" Rosabeth frowned.

"I think you should hire outside investigators, from the States."

"Americans are as dishonest as the rest of them." She crossed her arms. Then she scowled, hadn't she lived with them for a few years?

"The people of Mercae will accept an outsiders prognosis. If we can get the proper ruling, through the proper mediums, then we can oust the council and you can be free to do as you please. Also, securing the assets of the corrupted advisors would help pay for the new air and sea ports."

"You make very good arguments." Rosabeth drummed her fingers on her thigh.

"Micah," she said, "I think you would make an excellent prime minister."

"Mercae doesn't have one."

"If the implication on what I discovered are true, my dear, Mercae is going to need one."

#

She felt as helpless as Welly. The baby wasn't yet crawling, but he was able to wiggle over onto his stomach. Sometimes she liked to lay on the play mat next to him so he could climb over her and use her for support. She doubted she would ever play catch with her son or if there would be a father figure in their lives to take on those roles. But they had Micah and she hoped he would never leave them.

Llewellyn was on her stomach while she held a sitting position when, speak of the devil, Micah entered the room.

"Mother-son bonding?"

"Of course."

Welly always giggled at the sound of her voice.

"My baby prince loves me." She pursed her lips. A slobbery set of baby lips met hers. Welly peeled in laughter. He saw Micah and held up his arms. The bodyguard pickled him up and cuddled him close. The baby tugged on his beard.

"Llewellyn, I wish you wouldn't do that!" Micah tried to pull the boy's hand from the scruff.

Rosabeth smiled. Micah would do well indeed, Maybe she should reconsider--but no, marrying someone for convenience instead of love would be a disservice. And Lars hadn't been gone for a year yet, should she ask Micah anyway?

"You must never leave us," she said.

"I won't. You and Welly here are all I have left in the way of family."

She wanted to ask him, but she wasn't sure if she should. It was an impulsive thought. Her father kept telling her that remarriage was necessary, but could she spin the relationship in such a way to get her marriage equality edict passed?

"Micah," she said, lying back on the play mat. "I was wondering if..." alright, here goes. Fuck it, let's ask, she thought.

"If what?"

"If you would consider being the prince consort of Mercae."

Micah was silent. It obviously was a step above Prime Minister.

"What brings your majesty to this decision?"

She didn't want to tell him about the pressure she was encountering with her father and the council on account of her widow status. Nobody wanted a Widow queen. He would take it as a tryst against her council in efforts to shut him up. And she didn't want him to know that she was lonely.

"You are my best friend and I can think of no one more suited to be my companion."

Micah place Welly on the floor next to her. "You tried to marry my brother, you were married to Lars."

"And?"

"Do you not mourn them? Your lost loves?"

"I mourn them everyday, but life must go on, I won't ask you to fuck me, if that is what you are concerned about."

"Language," he said, "the prince."

"Llewellyn doesn't care." She rang for the nurse. It was nice to have a buzzer on the remote beside her than actually tugging the bell at the wall.

"I can't accept." Micah bowed overhead, in her line of vision and stormed off.

Llewellyn climbed back on her stomach.

"Promise me you won't have a man's temper." She said. She sat herself up to kiss Welly's forehead.

Chapter 13

"The best course of action is to hire an outside agency to investigate."

The attorney's words only reiterated what Rosabeth already knew.

"I understand that," she started. She twirled some of her hair around her finger.

"Do you think I have a case, however, to depose the council?"

"Ma'am, I'm not necessarily familiar with your constitution."

"Mr. Alexander, you are an international lawyer."

"I need to brush up on my Mercaen expertise."

The UN had recommended Samuel Alexander, an American lawyer, to help her with her investigation. It was not considered wise to involve solicitors from her nation--chances of word getting out to the advisors would be high.

"I'm stuck with my council unless they resign, die, or are found guilty of corruption. In this country, the judge is the monarch. I don't want to have a public trial."

"What did you want then?"

"I want to gather up as much evidence as possible and present it to them. I'd offer them retirement, so they can bow out gracefully. If they refuse, then I'll take it to the public."

"You didn't by any chance get your college degree in political science did you, Mrs. Landers?"

"No. I have a liberal arts degree. I was never supposed to be the monarch."

#

"I am your only heir," Rosabeth said.

Her father was pacing back and forth. "No, I have two heirs. I'm inclined to leave everything to Llewellyn."

Rosabeth's face grew hot. Her sex had always been an inconvenience to her father, and now that she had a son, he was eager to be involved with her life, even more so.

"Welly will be king, and will absorb the estate anyway."

"Listen to me," her father said, "I gave you everything. This." He held out his hand to the throne room. "And you never thanked me."

"Thank you for forcing me to marry a man who wasn't attracted to me, who sent me to the states because the thought of making love to me made him feel sick inside. Thank you for never calling, visiting, or even sending a godddamn birthday card while I was there. Thank you for kindly ignoring me after the accident, after I, the key pawn to your scheme to control the monarchy, nearly died, watched my boyfriend die, and before I could even fathom why I can't feel my toes, had me married to Lars, who was a good husband, before I could even figure out how to sit up." She glowered at him, "Thank you for this."

She gestured to the wheel chair.

"You are in hysterics, is it your monthly time?" her father casually glanced at his fingertips.

She said nothing. The truth was that she had her uterus removed after Lars died so she wouldn't have to deal with menstruation or losing another baby to her paralysis.

"Yes, that the only reason why any woman would dare raise her voice to man," she said, breaking the silence. "I will have it."

The lord treasurer looked at her coolly. "Your husband said the same thing."

He smirked. He buffed his nails on his coat and left the room.

"You haven't been dismissed!" she called after him.

He looked over his shoulder at her and laughed.

#

Sir Micah was six foot two, broad of shoulder and dark of hair. He would have been a few short inches taller than Rosabeth had she been able to stand. His younger brother, Adam was the tall one, the pretty one, the one all the girls flocked too, including fair and red-haired Rosie.

Adam nearly married Rosabeth. But a car accident had thwarted that dream for them, for both of them, and opened up channels for Micah.

Was Micah sorry his brother was dead? Yes, he was. Adam had been a good brother, a terrible boyfriend though, an unfaithful husband had he the chance. But he had Micah's back and Micah had his. What Rosabeth didn't know was meant to be secret.

Adam and Lucy. Adam and pretty much all the ladies-in-waiting. Adam and Amelia, Duke Roland's wife-before they were married. Mercae took a very narrow view down at adultery. .

Micah walked through the garden and plucked a luscious pink rose. He heard a door slam and footsteps walk on the wooden extension of the ballroom veranda. He kept low.

"I don't understand why you don't just give in," someone said. It was a man, Micah thought he recognized the voice, but drew a blank. Perhaps if he could see the faces--

"It is about principle."

Micah ducked lower. He was sure the second speak was Lord Alfred, Rosabeth's father.

"She can demand it, she is the sovereign."

"That queer husband of hers thought the same thing and look where that put him."

Micah covered his mouth with his hand. He breathed through his nose.

"Surely you don't intend your own daughter harm--"

"The only thing she has ever done right is procure me a grandson. Llewellyn will be a fine king."

"When he is of age." The second man said. It seemed to Micah that he was cautioning the lord treasurer.

"He will be king when I say he is, not before."

The second man started to say something, but Alfred interrupted.

"Women are such frail creatures. Rosabeth the most among them."

#

After the men had left, Micah looked down at the rose he had crushed in his hand. He absorbed what he overheard and was unsure of what to do. He knew he should tell his queen, but the row they had earlier would emphasize her request.

He could also go to the Lord Protector, who was, after all, his boss. Micah had never encountered a true reason to distrust the old man, but until he could identify the second speaker, he didn't think he could take the risk.

He dropped the flower and pulled out his mobile. "Ready two horses. Be mindful, the prince will be with her majesty."

He carefully looked around him and stepped out from behind the bushes and went to his bedroom.

Chapter 14

Rosabeth felt her shoulders sway as the horse walked forward. Each dip of the mare's shoulders coincided with Rosabeth's movements. She let herself get lost in the rhythm of it, not caring that her saddle was just a crude rendition of her wheel chair. She looked over to her left and saw Micah gently holding the reins of his horse in his right hand and the other kept Llewellyn secure on the horse with the other.

Micah had been her best friend since she was able to sneak from her nurse's care into the kitchens. She, Micah and Adam often ran loose through the palace, bare footed with pastry smeared faces. Whenever Lars encountered the three of them, he would pat each of the on the head, slip them some piece of paper that would 'pardon' them if they got in trouble and off again they went.

A lady should not have been involved with such lowly bakers' sons, but the alternative was to play with dolls that were too pretty to touch, that could only be viewed on the stark walls of her bedroom in the palace. She, Micah and Adam were the only children, at the time, living there, and that's what brought them together.

"Are we going to the fort?"

"Well, the clearing where the fort stood," Micah said. He laughed. "Once your mother found out about that, she had it torn down."

"Improper." They both said, together. The birds' chirps sounded like peals of laughter around them. The woods were greeting them once more, happy that somehow

they were making their way back. She felt at home for the first time since arriving in Mercae, broken.

She stopped her horse. "People must view me as a slut." She glanced over her shoulder. "As soon as my boyfriend died, I was in Lars' bed. I spend a lot of time with you. I have lost two loves in a short time, but I daren't--"

"What people think of you shouldn't matter." Micah brought his horse up to hers. The horses nuzzled each other.

"No one is taking me seriously." She yanked on the reigns to get going again.

Micah was silent. They made their way to the clearing and the forest sang around them. The trees brushed against the wind, flirting with its branches as squirrels and other wildlife flitted about in seamless everlasting.

The only thing that had changed was the destruction of the fort that they had spent a month making. She was slightly saddened by its absence, but saw, in the corner, another haphazard shelter made of fronds from the garden.

"These woods always welcome the children of the palace," she said. Micah dismounted, carefully, with Llewellyn in tow. He handed the baby up to her and the boy kissed her cheek.

"Mam." Welly said. Rosabeth kissed him back.

Micah spread out a blanket on the natural nettle carpeting and set out two lawn chairs that he had stashed in the frond fort. From out of the saddlebags he produced some of Welly's toys and a lunch bag.

Rosabeth handed Welly down to him. The baby was set on the blanket and immediately he went wild over the sight of the toys. He began shaking them with his fat fists and screaming in delight. Rosabeth smiled.

The ties that held her into the saddle were being loosened. Before she knew it, she was sliding off the horse and into Micah's strong arms. She was carried and set gently into a lawn chair. Welly climbed into her lap with one of his toys. Micah unsaddled the horses and set them by the tree line to graze.

"Mam!"

She kissed his forehead. His blonde almost-curls began tickling her nose. His double chin jiggled as he laughed. He pressed into her and nuzzled.

"I can't believe I have him," she said. Micah sat in the lawn chair next to him.

"He's phenomenal." Micah reached over and rubbed the baby's head. "I'm going to do everything to protect him. And you."

"Micah."

"Ros, listen to me." Micah then told her about the conversation he had overheard earlier. Rosabeth's eyes grew wide, but she wasn't terribly surprised.

"And you are sure it was my father?"

"Yes."

She sighed and held Welly closer. "He said as much to me when I told him I was going to absorb the estate."

Micah's lips were clenched, he was brooding. She hadn't known him for twenty years to not be able to spot a dark mood.

"Would anyone really miss him?"

"No." she had thought of this herself. "But assassinating the Lord Treasurer would be ill-done."

"I suppose, but everything would be so much easier."

Rosabeth laughed, then her mood turned sour. "I wouldn't want my father's death on my conscience."

"He threatened you." Micah gripped the armrests of the lawn chair tightly.

"Alfred would never dirty his hands himself. I know. When my nurse was sacked, he sent in someone else to do it."

"Why was your nurse sacked?"

"She encouraged me to play with you, haha."

Micah smiled. "I'm glad she did."

"He wasn't thrilled when the three of us were sent to the States."

"And I'm sure your marriage to Adam would have been egg in his face." Micah looked down at his lap.

"Which was why I was going to." Rosabeth sighed. Welly held up one of his toys for her to take. "Thanks, sweetie," she said. She looked at Micah. "I knew about the girls."

Micah looked over at her quickly.

"He boasted about them. About fucking my attendants and sticking me with it."

"Why were you going to marry him?"

"I was stupid, slighted, young, and my father would have disproved," she let her son climb out her lap back onto the blanket. The boy scooted over to another toy and shook it. He seemed disappointed that it didn't make any noise. "I miss Adam, and I did love him, but part of me was glad that we were thwarted. I would have been stuck. Mercaens never divorce."

"And you would be content with me?"

Rosabeth smiled. "I would."

Micah got out of the chair and knelt next to her. "I am sorry I stormed out earlier," he kissed her forehead. "I have given your proposal some thought. And I agree that it would be for the best. Welly needs a father. He needs someone to raise him and influence him differently than Alfred will."

"Yes," she said. Micah put a finger to her lips.

"I'm not finished. " he smiled. "I have a provision. I hope it doesn't sound presumptuous of me, but I don't want to be the prince consort."

Rosabeth knew. "You'd have to change your name to Landers. I'm sorry."

"I think King Micah Landers would be about right," he said.

"How about that for egg in the face?"

They both laughed. Then they spit on their hands and sealed the deal.

Chapter 15

Rebuilding the wing of the palace that burned down was still taking time. Most of the subjects of the kingdom wanted it restore to its historic look. It was, after all, nearly five hundred years old. Finding the stone and the teak were challenging, and as Alfred kept reminding her, expensive. Still, it needed to be rebuilt, as close to being historically accurate as possible, with a few changes.

"I want to use this opportunity to make the palace more handicap accessible," Rosabeth said, "in the long run, doing it now will be less expensive than doing it later. It's time to modernize and if we want tourists, we have to allow for them to come in all shapes and conditions." She was sitting up as straight as possible.

"You want an airport, my land, a historically accurate palace and accommodations for people like you?" Alfred laughed. "You may be the Queen, your majesty, but you can't have everything."

Rosabeth smiled. "I can have what I want."

"Spoiled bitches don't make good monarchs. Lars had the decency to listen to his councilors." Alfred bent down over her, placing his hands on the armrests of her chair. "What exactly do you think you are doing?"

She allowed her father to lean over her. He wanted a meek daughter, so she figured she would give it to him. "Perhaps I am touched with a bit of hysteria," she said. "I am a bit fatigued. Could you excuse me?"

Alfred smiled. "But of course."

Rosabeth drew a wan smile and exited the council room. The last thing she heard before the door shut behind her was:

"Now, that's more like it."

She had no illusions, like it or not, her father had raised her in a political setting and she had observed Lars for years. The constant reminder of the king he was, served as a nerve that all the advisors kept hitting. She wanted to bury that nerve below the belt, so to say, where she could no longer feel it.

She missed Lars, but she knew she had to keep his memory strong.

She made her way back to her office, where Micah was going through some paperwork.

"I still haven't found anything that would help our case, but, I did find something extremely interesting." He held a page.

She took the parchment and looked at it. It was one of the articles in the kingdom's charter:

Article XVII

- a. a. Mercae shall have no standing army or navy or flotilla of any kind.
- b. b. However; in the purpose of defense, the following will be allowed:
 1. 1. A reserve force.

2. 2. Every child born to Mercae, royal, noble and common alike, must serve two years upon the age of eighteen, in training and maintenance of the reserve force.
3. 3. Any family that fails to send their child to serve in the reserve force shall see the following disciplines:
 - A. A. Loss of all titles, honors, lands and estates
 - B. B. Loss of dignity
 - C. C. The land and estates and money's hence forfeited will be awarded to an outstanding member of the commons at the monarch's discretion.

"Seriously?" she said. She set the parchment down. Then she began to think. "Is this a way to get rid of my father?"

Micah smiled. "Lord Sumners has but one child. Did that child serve in the reserve force?"

"No, I did not." She tapped her mouth with one of her fingers. "I'm having a hard time believing that the answer to the Alfred problem is right here."

"Maybe we should take a closer look at the charter and see what other delicious discretions our government is making?" Micah laughed. He rubbed his hands together.

"Your father won't expect you to pull this out of the bag, now will he?"

"He thinks I'm stupid and easy to manipulate," she smirked. "I'm beginning to prove otherwise, I hope." She read the article over again. One down, two to go.

#

"It will have to be public," she said. "During one of my state sessions." She watched the maid wrap her hair around the curling iron. Micah looked at her through the mirror. His protector's suit, grey, with a starched white shirt and simple bolo tie. She knew about the gun he carried in his holster, right about his left hip.

Micah crossed his arms and scowled. He never looked more dangerous. "A public setting would ensure that your father, or the advisors, won't demean you physically or threaten you." He rubbed his clean-shaven chin.

"Are you positive that this will play out like you want it too?"

Rosabeth smiled at the maid, dismissing her. Through the mirror, she watched the girl leave. As soon as the door closed, Rosabeth let herself slump forward in her chair. "I can but try."

"When will the announcement of our engagement be made?" he kissed her forehead.

"As soon as I strip my father of his dignity."

Rosabeth had always wanted a good relationship with her father, but he always acted and behaved as if he had no time for a little girl. Her mother, even her mother, foisted her off to nannies and maids and babysitters so that she could take care of herself. Rosabeth once asked, when she was thirteen, her father to formally escort her to the coming-out ball, all he had done was wave his hand and shoo her away. She then asked Lars, who was 'over the moon' about it.

Rosabeth was determined to be a better parent for her son.

"Where is Llewellyn?" She turned herself around.

"He's napping," Micah said. He held up a walkie-talkie. "I've got the baby monitor covered."

Rosabeth rolled into the nursery and examined her sleeping son. How tiny his fingers were, she loved how soft his hair was. She was not going to let anyone take him away from her. Rosabeth gripped the side rail on the crib. No one was going to take him.

Chapter 16

That night, around two a.m. the telephone rang. Rosabeth reached over to the nightstand to answer it.

"Hi," she said. The only time people would call this late would be to deliver bad news. What could it possibly be?

"Rosabeth--" the voice on the other end said. "It's-Amelia-it's so terrible-I-can't-believe--"

"Amelia, slow down." Rosabeth leaned her head over to the side, resting the telephone on her head so she wouldn't have to hold it. She flattened her palms on the bed beside her. "What is wrong?"

"Roland." Amelia said. Rosabeth could hear gasps. "Roland hung himself."

Rosabeth wanted to bolt out of bed immediately, hop into her car and drive over to comfort her cousin. None of these things were possible. "Have your butler bring you here. You'll stay with me."

"No," Amelia said. More gasps. "Don't you get it?"

Rosabeth closed her eyes. "Why is this my fault?"

"Because, you stupid whore," Amelia started. "You were born."

Rosabeth would have taken offense to being called a whore over the phone in the middle of the night, well actually at two o'clock in the morning, but she understood the grief that Amelia was feeling.

"Amelia," Rosabeth cooed. "None of this is anyone's fault."

"You had to marry him."

"I married Lars."

"Yes, and I was forced to marry Roland so a 'problem' could be dealt with."

"Now both men are gone. I lost my husband too. I was forced to marry a man who loved men, just like you."

"This is the third man to die because of you."

Rosabeth carefully chose her words. "Dear Cousin, please, I extend my invitation to you to stay here at the palace until you feel better." What she meant was shut up you dumb bitch. She hoped she didn't say that out loud.

"Don't 'dear cousin' me." Amelia had stopped crying. "I'm not going to be a hundred feet anywhere near that place. I don't want to see your son, I don't want to see you, and I don't, oh, I especially don't want your father, dear old Uncle Alfred, to remarry me to sniveling bore."

"I'm dealing with my father," Rosabeth said. "We used to be such friends. Please, let me know if I can help with the services."

"You can go to Hell." The line went dead.

Rosabeth pressed the END button on the phone and set it back on the nightstand. She looked at the clock. The green numerals read back 2:20, the glow making the room seem ephemeral. Three men had died because of her. Three men. Adam. Lars. Roland.

She lay there for what seemed like hours, repeating: Adam. Lars. Roland. Really, though, only five minutes passed. At 2:25, the ghostly veil of green light was enough for her to take. She needed to get out of bed.

It would be another early day. Sleeping in was just too much to ask for most of the time. Not that she was sleeping anyway. She blew air out of her mouth and pulled herself up into a sitting position by placing her hands beside her hips and lifting her body up. She was getting stronger. She was almost able to do this without too much strain. When she was sitting up, she placed one hand on the bed next to her aching hip to support herself before she leaned back and hit the headboard. The paralysis extended to her waist, so that she had no real way to stay up. Her lower abdomen ignored her commands to move, to stay upright. If she wasn't supported, she fell backwards. She hated when that happened. Her other hand grabbed the lonely pillows on what used to be Lars's side of the bed and put them behind her so she could be supported more comfortably.

She smiled to herself. She wasn't able to sit up on her own a while ago. Hiring the physical therapist was one of the best things she had done for herself. She was regaining her independence and returning to a sense of normalcy, despite everything that was happening to her now. Adam. Lars. Roland.

She looked to the side of the bed to see if her chair was within reach. She had ordered the nurse, and Micah, to make sure her chair was nearby so that she could get herself out of bed without their help. It was there, right next to the edge. All she had to do was use the bar, and swing herself down into the chair. Easy.

Not easy. She threw the covers off of her and looked down at her legs. She sat there for about five minutes, secretly willing her legs to move on their own, half-hoping

that a ghost, not that she really believed in them, would come and make the whole move from bed to chair faster and easier.

When it was obvious that her mind tricks weren't working, she sighed again and leaned forward. She grabbed one leg and pushed it to the edge of the bed. She did the same with her other leg. Her knees dangled off the bed and the calves hung against the thick down mattress. And she stared, still hoping that at any moment she would be able to feel the material of the fabric.

She grabbed the bar and pulled herself to the edge of the bed. She crossed her legs. Using her left hand to hold the bar, she leaned forward to grab the right armrest with her other arm. She would use the leverage of the bar to lift up and swing down into her chair. She tried to take her time, but she was antsy and distracted. It had started to rain. And despite the unsettling news, there was rain outside, she wanted to watch it. She really wanted to be in it, but she would make do with what she could see through the window.

As she was getting into the chair, it suddenly rolled back and she fell to the floor, on her stomach. She tried to lift herself up with her arms so she could wiggle around, but couldn't. The chair rolled all the way to the wall, a good six feet away. Rosabeth lamented on not checking to see if the wheels had been locked in the first place.

As long as Welly doesn't wake up, she thought. She called out softly, "Anna."

No answer.

"Anna!" she cried a little louder. Where was the damnable nurse?

She began to cry, three men were dead because of her, she had fallen and couldn't get up, and to top it all off- her son had started crying. Someone shushed him.

Her father came into the room, holding Llewellyn, saw her lying there and laughed. "This is the great Queen Rosabeth." He gestured. "By the way, Duke Roland has passed away."

"I spoke to his wife just ten minutes ago." She said. She placed her palms on either side and attempted to trunk lift. She could smell urine and realized that her colostomy bag had burst.

"Well, have a pleasant night." Alfred placed the baby on the floor next to her.

"You aren't going to help me?"

Alfred called over his shoulder, "You seemed reasonable enough earlier today." He walked out of the suite.

What was he doing in Welly's room? She was able to see her son out of the corner of her eye. She was in a strange position. Welly looked at her with an amused smile, but when she didn't smile back, he began to wail.

"Micah!" she yelled. "Someone, Help!" she sobbed into the floor. "Please, someone help me." Adam. Lars. Roland. "Someone, please."

Chapter 17

Micah heard the cries. He had been in a deep sleep and remembered, vaguely, a phone ringing in his queen's bedroom. When the cries grew louder, and mixed in with the baby's, he sat straight up. His door was closed. This never happened.

He quickly threw off his own covers and swung his legs onto the side of the bed, and not bothering to pull on his shirt or pants, he was out the door. He slept in his boxers. He went into the queen's chamber and found her on the floor. Her legs were bent up behind her, against the bed. Her urine bag had torn and the contents of the night had spilled everywhere and all over her nightgown. Welly was sitting five feet from her and was angry and red-faced and wailing.

"Welly," Rosabeth said. "Get him back to sleep. I'm not going anywhere."

Micah picked up the child. Welly nuzzled into Micah's neck. He walked into the nursery, and strangely, all the photos of Lars had been taken down or turned over. Someone had been here. On the crib there were a pair of white gloves. A rose had been thrown into the crib. The thorns still there. Micah rang the bell for the nurse.

Not quite awake enough to make sense of it, he changed the baby's diaper, removed the articles, repositioned the photos, closed the open window. Rain was starting to seep into the carpet. After Welly had been dressed in a different pair of pajamas, Micah made him a bottle and placed him back in bed. As he turned to leave, Welly let out another high pitched scream. Something had scared him.

Where was the nurse?

Micah dragged the crib through the chamber door and placed it next to the prone queen. Welly quieted. He began to suckle on his bottle and leaned back and tumbled over onto his back. He kicked his feet up in the air and grabbed one with his free hand. Micah turned to Rosabeth.

Micah lifted her up with ease and the queen's arms wrapped around his neck. "The wheels weren't locked," she said. She leaned her head on his shoulder. Mother and son. He thought. They both like my neck.

Micah carried her to the bathroom and pulled the bell for the nurse with his teeth.

"Just set me in the shower."

Micah didn't speak as he placed her on the newly refurbished shower, which hosted a bench and a removable shower head and hose. She must feel stupid, Micah thought, she has too much pride, she tries not to ask for help, she's stubborn.

But she had asked for help. She had cried for it.

He turned his back and went to the door to wait for the nurse. Welly looked at him through the spindles of the crib and smiled. He pulled out his bottle and pointed at him. "Cah." Welly had said one of his first words. "Cah."

Micah heard plastic rustle, a soft thing land on the tile in front of the shower, and then the spray of the shower head bombarded the panes of the glass that encased the unit.

He rang the bell again. He wasn't going to leave Rosabeth in the bathroom by herself. He would wait at the door until the nurse dragged her lazy ass out of the bed and came to his call.

The rain outside the window began to fall harder. He would have to cancel the horseback-riding excursion.

"Micah," Rosabeth called, the shower ended. "Where is she?"

Who the hell knows? "I've rang thrice."

"Unacceptable. Can you hand me a towel?"

Micah turned from the door, gave the bell one more pull and went over to the shower stall. He grabbed a large, white plush towel from the rack and reached into the shower stall.

"Thanks-a-bunch."

He stepped away and turned around again, looking towards the door. "No horseback riding," he said. "It's raining too hard. The grounds are probably all soupy now." He heard a mutter that sounded like 'but I like when the grounds are all soupy', which he ignored. Her safety and comfort were the foremost of his duties. He walked back to the bathroom door and sneered at the nurse who just now walked into the bedroom.

"Sir Micah," the woman said, surprised. "I--"

"Have just resigned."

The maid opened her mouth and closed it, without sound.

"By lunchtime, you no longer serve the Queen. Now, take her robe and chair to her and finish your duties." Micah walked out of the bathroom, grabbed Welly from the crib and sat on the bed. He held the bottle at an angle and cradled the babe close. "Clean up the puddle by the bed."

When Welly was asleep again, Micah carefully laid him down without waking him. He caressed the boy's soft hair and smiled in spite of himself. His name had been Welly's second word.

He then sat down on the bed again, gripping his hair with his hands. He had been ordered to let Rosabeth do most of the things she needed to do by herself, unless she asked. The therapist had established this rule so that he, and others, would not undermine the feats Rosabeth was accomplishing with her therapy sessions. Micah had stepped back, actually amazed at how much progress she was making on her own. She could sit up and she was able to get in and out of her chair.

But when she fell, like she did that morning, it was hard to resist the urge to cradle her and spoil her with his attention. He'd chew her food for her if she let him. Well, maybe that was going too far, but he'd feed her if he could. Damn Adam and his recklessness. His brother had known that Micah loved her, which was one of the motivations Adam had developed when he pursued seduction. Adam had only treated Rosabeth as a tool, a means to perpetuate sibling rivalry. And Adam had died because of it, taking half of the lovely Rosabeth with him.

"Sir," the nurse said. She was standing half in the bathroom doorway.

He bolted up. "Yes?"

"She needs some medicine... says there's the pain in her hip—you've the key to the cabinet."

"I'll get it." He moved to the cabinet in his room that held her pain medicine: Vicadin, Perkiset, and some Morphine that he only gave to her in extreme cases, usually

when she had the pain in her hip and couldn't ignore it. He was her protector and he included protecting her from addiction amongst his duties.

"Tell me," he uncapped the vial of Vicadin, "Why didn't you answer the bell the first time?"

"It's early," she complained. "And I was..."

"Where were you?" he didn't wait for her to respond.

He set the pill on the table. The girl's face flushed and she took a step backwards into the queen's room. "Go get a glass of water."

Only then, did he put his clothes on.

Part Three

Chapter 18

Rosabeth locked herself in her office. She was furious with herself, and she didn't want to be around anyone, especially Micah. He would make everything worse. She busied herself by answering letters and reading through some construction bills that required her signature. Most of it was mundane, but she preferred it. She had a rough afternoon.

The problem was that her son had started walking.

Llewellyn's first steps.

Each foot struck forward, awkward and inexperienced. His arms flailed, a crude attempt at keeping his balance. Rosabeth watched him, worried he would fall. Micah held out his hands, just a few feet in front of the toddler and caught him just as the baby's confidence waned.

Tearfully, Rosabeth turned away and wheeled out of the nursery. Her son was growing fast, achieving feats she was no longer capable of. She never told anyone about her dreams— she had been dreaming of walking through the gardens. A dream was a cursory topic, sure, but she didn't want to tell anyone that could feel the grass between her toes in the dreams, the tingly sensation of numbness wearing away.

It wasn't that she wasn't proud of his wobbly accomplishment—on the contrary; she was very happy for him. Soon he would be chasing everything in sight. But, his ability to walk had shaken something in her and she did not like it.

What sort of mother was jealous of her own child?

She quelled the thoughts and sighed. She set the letter she was reading down. The solar, the round room at the top of one of the palace's three remaining towers, provided an excellent view of the grounds. It was nearly a three hundred and sixty degree view, if she could see through the other two towers, of course.

She rolled to one of the large arching windows. This had been Lars' office. She liked to be up here, it gave her some sense of what it was like being on the top, politically and metaphorically. It was here she would whisper to her late husband, tell him her secrets and dreams and wishes. She was being a stupid woman, she knew, but she needed some outlet.

“Welly walked today. He hobbled right towards Micah.” She fingered the curtains. “He looks like you. But his hair is curling; I knew my mother had to make some emergence somewhere.”

She watched the construction workers outside. Someone was installing a rather nice Jacuzzi. Wait, she turned her neck, she didn't remember seeing that on the bill. She rolled back to the desk and searched for the order, but she couldn't find anything that matched the description. She leaned back. She stroked her chin in thought. She traced her lip with her forefinger. After a secondary skim, she noticed the entry ‘tub—5,000 dollars’. She circled it.

She reached over for the phone and dialed the foreman's mobile.

"This is—"

"I did not authorize that hot tub." She didn't give him any time to speak.

"Your Majesty—" the foreman stumbled over the phone. "The Treasurer did."

She rolled her eyes, who else could have tried to slip it past her?

"And where is this Jacuzzi going?"

"In the Treasurer's bathroom, it's rather nice."

"Send it back." She rolled back over to the window. She held a tight smile.

"But, ma'am," the foreman started, "we've already installed the reinforcement tiles."

"Send it back, rip out the tile and give the Lord Treasurer a normal tub." If anyone was going to get something fancy, it was going to be her.

"But that will delay the Treasurer's rooms from re-opening."

"He'll live." She ended the call. She steepled her fingers together and came to a decision.

She dialed her father's office number.

He answered on the first ring, "What? I'm busy!"

"Don't you have caller I.D.?"

The lord treasurer paused. "Rosabeth."

"My office. Now."

"You don't get to order me around you sniveling—"

"You have ten minutes." She hung up.

She decided she was going to win this fight and she was going to do exactly what she had tried on Lucy back in the states, who had, incidentally written to her to ask for money. That was a letter she put aside. She was at her desk looking through the construction bill and circling things she was going to deny her father. She had a copy of the charter nearby to so she could leverage if she needed to.

The Lord Treasurer entered. He made no announcement. Rosabeth continued to peruse the documents in front of her. She had to make it clear that it was on his time he was there, not hers. He cleared his throat.

“Sit.” She said. He was about to say something, but didn’t. he sat down.

She let a full minute pass by before turning around to face him. On her lap was the construction paperwork. She sat as straight as her inhibited body would allow.

“Tell me, Alfred,” she started, “do you like playing games?”

“I don’t have time for this.” The old man crossed his arms,

“My airport idea was thwarted. I commend you on making a valid argument. The budget does seem to be teetering a bit these days, what with the rebuilding and all.”

Alfred smiled. “I did warn you.”

“I was so moved by the way you were able to convince me to hold off on that project,” she made sure he heard the words ‘hold off’ so that he would know she wasn’t done fighting for it, “That I wondered where else we could ease up spending.”

“Do you have any ideas?” Alfred said. “It’s remarkable how you’ve grown into this, my dear. I think you are proving yourself to be a wise ruler.”

She brushed one of the very few moments of genuine praise aside. She handed him the bill. "I'd start with sending back the circled items, they seem to be extraneous."

His eyes narrowed. "These are all in my rooms."

"Gold streaked wall paper?"

He leaned back in his seat. "To have that removed will set the readiness of my rooms back. Think of your mother."

"Why do you need a hot tub?"

He smiled. "I'm getting older. I need to soak in something to wash away all the unpleasantness of the day."

"I have revoked all of the circled items. They are being removed and sent back. You will pay to have these removed, the state can no longer support your lifestyle"

He stood up and leaned over her. "I don't think you can do that."

"Look at the last page in that group of documents."

He stepped back and looked at the particular article of the charter in question. She could do what she wanted. And she was going to. She tapped her fingers on the arm rest of her chair.

"What does this have to do with me?" Alfred said.

"How many children do you have?"

"Just you."

Rosabeth flashed him a smile. "And did that child serve in the reserve force?"

Alfred whitened. "You were exiled."

Rosabeth grinned. “You could have petitioned to allow me to serve. That was your responsibility and for that you will pay.”

“There’s got to be something I can do.” The man knelt down before her and kissed her feet. “My lovely child, please, just think of your mother.”

Rosabeth wished she could kick him away. “Did you know that Mother had her ovaries removed after I was born?”

Alfred looked up at her. His face was creased with wrinkles, she suddenly realized he was older than she thought.

“Mother had never wanted this life for me and she made sure you couldn’t take another child from her. “ She rolled away to the window. “I don’t think you fathomed that any of this would happen.”

“I wanted the best life for you!” Alfred pleaded.

“Retire, Father. I’m giving you an out without having to go public with the charter business. You and Mother can go to the estate and live a nice, comfortable political free life together. Maybe you can actually fall in love with her all over again. She’s given so much to you.”

“You’re not going to strip me of my lands?”

“You need to live somewhere and I’m not so ruthless and cold-hearted. Retire and promise that the estate is mine when it is time, and you can go, gracefully.”

Alfred sat on the chair by her desk. “Will I be allowed to see my grandson?”

“We will come visit for Christmas and over the summer. Lars had the idea of using the state as a vacation house and I don’t want you out of my life.” She turned to

face him. “Your parenting skills were horrendous, but you can make up for it by being a good grandfather to Llewellyn.”

Alfred looked defeated. He looked up at her, his eyes twinkling. His face drooped and his fatigue was palpable. “Who is going to replace me?”

“Candidates are being vetted as we speak.”

Alfred laughed. “I have never been more proud of you than I am now.” He walked over and kissed her forehead. “Your mother and I will be gone by the end of the week.”

“Welly started walking today,” she called out after him.

Chapter 19

“That sounds too easy.” Micah said. He poured her a cup of coffee. “I think he is up to something.”

Rosabeth had told him of her victory over her father. He was sure that Alfred had other plans. He had to think practically, nobody was going to take his queen’s protection seriously, and he was just the man to do it.

“Someone keeps removing all of Lars’ photos.” She said. She took the mug from him. “Ever since Roland died, I’ve been getting this weird vibe about the palace.”

Micah had noticed it too. And he was more aware than he let on. Lucy’s letters were beginning to take its toll. He had to deal with her, deal with the person vandalizing the place, and make sure that Welly and Rosabeth were safe. They hadn’t announced the engagement, and Micah was wondering if it was a good idea after all. He hated thinking it, but the men in Rosabeth’s life seemed to disappear.

He set his mug down. “We need to talk.”

Rosabeth looked up. His blue eyes looked at him. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“I cannot marry you.” He said. He pulled out a stack of letters from his coat pocket. “this is why.” He pushed them across the table.

She was silent. She read through them, quickly, not blinking. She patted them into a nice, neat stack and set it before her on the table. She slouched. “I know.”

It was Micah’s turn to be surprised. “She wants a lot.”

“I have ignored several of her letters. I know what she wants and why.” Rosabeth sipped her coffee. “Lucy is not getting a dime.”

“What about the scandal that will arise if we go forward with our engagement?” he loosened his tie. He was beginning to see how much Rosabeth had grown into the position she held. Had it really been two years since he and Lars went to rescue those children? She was more sure of herself, able to move around, and sometimes he forgot she was paralyzed. She simply was Rosabeth, the queen. Commands and protocol were coming naturally to her everyday.

“I have been giving it some thought,” she said, “I agree.” She paused slightly. “I nearly married your brother, one who had, as they say, shagged Lucy. I married Lars, only to lose him. If I marry you, the brother of a dead boyfriend, that’s scandal enough. If I marry a man who also shagged Lucy, then—“ She left the rest up to him.

“I’ll resign.” Micah hung his head. “I’m sorry.”

“Being sorry for getting some is pathetic. This was before everything happened.” She wheeled around to his side. “I’m beginning to wonder if I need a husband anyway. And besides, I can’t force you into a life of celibacy.”

Micah had always loved her and she was breaking his heart, again. Never mind that it had started off with him breaking up with her. “If you say so.”

She touched his hand. “Don’t quit. The Prime Minister position is still available if you want it.” She kissed his cheek and rolled out of the room. He heard her excited babble as she greeted her son.

Micah clenched his hands. He stood up, scattered the letters about the parlor and slammed the door on his way out. He made his way to the Lord Protector's office and busted in. the councilor was speaking with Alfred.

"I quit." Micah said. Alfred smiled sheepishly.

"I told you that she was never going to go for a Baker boy." Alfred said.

Micah grabbed the Lord Treasurer by the collar and shoved him into the wall behind them. The meaty hands of the Lord Protector tried to separate them. Micah pushed harder. "I don't know hat you are about, sir," he clenched his teeth, "but I don't trust you." He gave Rosabeth's father one last shove and walked away. "I expect my final pay by the end of the night."

#

He packed up his belongings quietly. He didn't have much. He telephoned his parents and told them he was coming to visit. He wanted to ask them to find him a wife, but thought he'd deal with that in person. He wanted to be done with redheads and blonde babies. He wanted a normal woman who didn't have money or power or beauty or intelligence or a charming smile. He could deal with an ugly woman, maybe a seamstress. He'd help his dad with the bakery and learn to take over.

Into his knapsack went four things: his diary; A small piece of metal left from the wreckage of the Escalade; his lapel from the royal wedding; and a small lock of Welly's hair. This was all he was going to take of this life. He was done.

he added some casual clothes and sighed as he touched the suits he had been wearing for so long. The next protector might get better use out of it.

He and Adam had been warned about falling for their assignments, and both of them had fallen hard. One was dead. One was leaving. That was that. He learned his lesson.

Someone knocked on the door. He opened it and stared down at the queen.

“You are leaving.”

He let her in and continued his packing. He set the key to the medicine on the table. He stripped the sheets and placed a new set of linen on the mattress. He folded the blanket neatly and set the pillows on top of it. He didn't look at her.

“Micah.”

He shouldered the bookcase out the way and retrieved all of the money he had saved from a small cubby hole he had made by removing one of the bricks. He moved the bookshelf back.

“What about Welly?”

He grabbed his knapsack, his money and his sunglasses and walked out the door. It was better not to say anything at all.

Chapter 20

And another man was gone. Micah's departure had shocked Rosabeth, she never anticipated he would abandon her. She moved to the floor and let Welly climb all over her. He kissed her cheek. She loved her son, but she was worried that she was going to lose him too.

Adam. Lars. Roland. Now Micah. Yes, Micah was still alive, but he was gone. She was sure he was going to his parent's house. All wayward boys usually ended up back home at some point.

Someone entered her room and sat down on her couch, behind her. She was able to tell who it was by the wing-tip shoes. "Yes, Father?"

"He assaulted me. I demand his arrest."

Rosabeth sighed. Welly looked up at her with interest. She blew air through her mouth and let the current catch his curls. He squealed.

"Let it go." Let him go.

"What was his problem anyway?"

"We decided not to get married."

Welly shimmied off her and began chasing the shadows the wind's blowing through the trees made. He was getting fast.

Alfred was silent.

Fatehr and daughter watched the baby entertain himself with the sunlight. He sat down and began inching towards them on his butt. He loved scooting like that. Once he got to the couch, he held up his hands to Alfred. “Up!”

Alfred leaned down and Welly was instantly tugging on the old man’s mustache. Not a complaint was made by the grandfather. The boy was brought to Alfred’s lap. “Nurse,” he said. The woman brought him a bottle of milk.

While her father was feeding her son, Rosabeth stayed rigid. Micah had left. He had left them. She depended on him—no other protector was going to understand the particulars of her needs.

To say she needed a man in her life was preposterous, she had never felt that way. Now the only men who were familiar to her were a toddler and a retired, or retiring, councilor.

“Left me take Welly to the estate for a week or two. Your mother and I want to try our hand at having a baby outside of the political sphere.” Alfred said.

Rosabeth craned her neck to look at them. Welly was almost asleep in her father’s arms.

She closed her eyes. She had a lot of work to do and sending him to the country would be good for him. It was summer, so it was warm and the meadows near the mansion would be brimming with wildflowers. She could use a vacation herself.

“Alright. I’ll join you for a brief holiday in two weeks, and I’ll return to the capital with my son.” She didn’t like the idea of allowing her son to go with her father, but she needed to believe her father would be true to his word.

Micah had broken his. He had promised he would never leave her. He did.

#

Her world was shattered. Her son was away, with her parents, and she was interviewing candidates to replace Micah and to replace her father. She still needed to find away to put the other two councilors out to pasture, but she had nothing on them. Her inquiries into their finances had turned up nothing heinous, and it all turned out to be legal, Lars had initiated their salary a few years before Rosabeth married him.

At least the restoration was coming along. She wheeled through the new hallway, wearing a hard hat, with the foreman and nodded approvingly at everything he had showed her. This had been taking enough time, nearly two years and she was glad the end was in sight.

“All we need is the elevator inspector to sign off, and this wing will be pretty much done. Yes, we will need to paint, but your people can start moving back in, I’m thinking, in like two weeks.”

“That is very good news!” Rosabeth said. “We’ve been really crammed.”

“That fire must have been really frightening.” The foreman said. “it did a lot of damage.” He paused. “They say it was lightning.”

“Yes, there was a storm that night.”

The foreman scratched his chin. “Doesn’t add up. The rain should have knocked it out.”

Rosabeth stopped moving. “What are you saying?”

“Ma’am, I may be a simple contractor, but I know my structures. In order for a fire to get that hot, that fast, and spread so quickly, it had to have been set, internally.”

Rosabeth had never ordered an investigation. She had simply accepted it as a freak occurrence and nothing more. If what the foreman suspected was true, then her husband was murdered.

“There isn’t any evidence.”

The foreman shook his head. “I don’t think you should be moving around without protection, my queen.”

#

Her new protector was a woman named Linda. The woman was of a good size and was also very strong. Rosabeth felt Linda was a bit rough when she carried her up the stairs to her office—she had looked into installing a lift, but the stairs were too narrow—but, she wasn’t a man.

Rosabeth was tired of men.

She didn’t want Linda to leave, so she included the woman in her daily tasks. “Read through these,” she said. “If you see anything that might require my attention, let me know.”

Linda nodded and took the stack of mail. The first letter was from Lucy Crackanthorpe. “Oh, Linda, give that to me. That goes in the burn pile.”

Rosabeth switched on her computer and opened her email account. One thing she had done since Micah’s departure was buy a laptop and have wi-fi installed throughout

the palace. No more dark ages. She answered some marital queries, mostly with a 'no'. She let the men, rich nobles, mostly, down gently.

If she convinced herself not to marry Micah then she could not marry anyone else.

"Ma'am," Linda said, "There's a request here." She held up the paper. "Mr. and Mrs. Baker are requesting your approval of a marriage contract between their son and a Miss—"

So Micah was going to get married. Fine. She snatched the request from Linda, a bit hastily, really, she was sorry about that, and signed away.

"It's his life," she said.

"Do you know him?"

Had Linda been living in the same nation as the rest of them?

"Yes, he was your predecessor. I almost married his brother." Rosabeth pursed her lips. She turned back to the computer screen and typed away.

The phone rang. Linda answered. "Her majesty's office, Linda speaking," she said.

Rosabeth smiled. This was good.

"One moment." Linda looked at her. "A Lucy Crackanthorpe?"

Was that girl ever going to leave her alone?

Rosabeth motioned for the phone. "What?"

"I wanted to make sure you were getting my letters." The voice from San Diego said.

"They make good food for the fire," Rosabeth said. "What do you want?"

"You know what I want."

“I don’t care who you slept with, it doesn’t matter to me.”

“The fact that I fucked both your boyfriend and his brother should matter to you.”

Lucy softened her voice. “And besides, my arm never really recovered.”

Rosabeth laughed. “My back never healed. So what?” This time, Lucy had nothing on her.

“I’ve been following you in the news, you know,” Lucy said. Rosabeth really could have cared less.

“I’m hanging up now,” Rosabeth said.

“You were supposed to die.” Lucy said. Rosabeth imagined the blonde girl with a sneer on her face. “Adam had been paid. You were supposed to die.”

Images, memories from the crash flashed before her. Headlights, sky and ground, crunching metal, screaming—she had been screaming.

“Adam?”

“yeah, the bastard hit the other car a second too late. It was all planned, even the drunk driver was in on it.”

Rosabeth wished she could stand so she could sit down. This was heavy news.

“Why are you telling me this? Who planned it?”

“I won’t say. I want a million dollars.”

Rosabeth hung up. “Linda,” she said. Linda looked up from reading through more letters. “I want you to block the number that just came through. I’m also placing that woman on a no entry list.”

“Yes ma’am,” Linda said.

Rosabeth turned back to the approval she had just signed. She tore it to pieces. “I also want Micah Baker in my office tomorrow morning. Make it happen.”

Rosabeth turned the volume up on her laptop and played some classical music. She rolled to one of the windows. Someone had murdered her husband and she had been targeted too.

Shit was going to go down.