

Half-asleep, I swatted at a tickle on my shoulder. It happened again, and I instinctively rolled away. The tickle

returned, traveling across my back. *Oh*. It wasn't a random breeze or another feather that had escaped from my

pillow.

Those were kisses.

Eyes still closed, I smiled to myself as Maxon brushed away a lock of hair to find a new place to kiss.

Waking up to the feeling of Maxon's breath on my skin reminded me of how we ended up knotted in these

sheets in the first place.

I giggled as his mouth hit a ticklish spot on my neck.

"Good morning, darling," he whispered.

"Good morning."

"I was wondering," he began, murmuring the words into my cheek as I rolled over.

"Seeing as it's my

birthday, do you think we could get away with spending the entire day in bed?"

I smiled and forced my sleepy eyes open. "And who will run the country?"

"No one. Let it fall to pieces. So long as I have my America in my arms."

His hair was a perfect mess, and he was so warm that every last particle in my body wanted nothing more than

to stay here with him. It was completely fascinating to me the way that love grew. I kept thinking I'd found a

way to give him all that I had, but then I'd learn a new quirk, hear a new story, go through a new experience,

and my heart swelled.

"But what about the party? We spent weeks planning," I complained.

He propped up his head on his hand. "Hmm. Okay, we'll take a ten-minute break to check out the party and

come right back." Maxon wrapped his arms around me, and I laughed as he covered me with kisses.

We were so distracted, we didn't even hear the butler open the door. "Your Majesty, there's a call from—"

Before he could finish, Maxon chucked a pillow at him, and the butler retreated into the hall, pulling the door

shut behind him. There was a pause before a muffled voice filtered in. "Sorry, sir."

I'd gotten used to a lack of privacy since living in the palace, and as far as those awkward moments went, this

was one of the better ones. I covered my mouth, trying to contain my laughter, and when Maxon saw my

smirk, he smiled, too. "Well, I guess that answers my question."

I sat up to kiss his cheek and immediately felt a rush of dizziness. "Oh!"

"Are you all right?"

"Mmhm," I mumbled, covering my mouth. "Sat up too quickly."

He ran his hand over my back, and I leaned into him.

"What time's the party again?"

"Six. Everyone's coming, even my mom."

"Oh, then it'll really be a party!"

I swatted him. "Are you ever going to let it go? It was one time."

"She danced in the fountain on New Year's Eve, America," he said, a childish amusement in his eyes. "It was

amazing, and I will never let it go."

I sighed. "Anyway, don't be late. I'm going to get dressed. I'll see you at breakfast."

"Okay."

I pulled the sheet off the bed as I stood, wrapping it around me.

He lay back and watched me go. "Of all your dresses, that's my favorite."

I bit my lip as I took one last look at him before opening the door that led to my suite. There was no way I was

ever going to have enough of him.

Mary was waiting for me, of course. She was used to seeing me walk back from Maxon's room or watching

him bolt out of mine, but it was that knowing smirk that got me every time.

"Good morning, Your Majesty," she greeted me with a curtsy. "Have a good night, then?"

"Wipe that smile off your face!" I teased, tossing the sheet at her and running to the bathroom.

I had been worried about the cut of my dress, but it fit spectacularly. Heads turned when I walked in to the

party, and I tried to accept the attention graciously. Even after two years of marriage, being in the spotlight still

took some getting used to.

May rushed to my side. "You look radiant, Ames!"

“Thank you. You clean up pretty well yourself.” I touched one of her perfectly placed curls and marveled at

how well my sister had adjusted to life as a royal. Not that I was surprised. She had always been charming and

bubbly, and almost as soon as she and my family moved to Angeles, May had become a media darling. While

plenty of pictures of me would be printed tomorrow, there would be twice as many of May.

“Are you feeling okay?” she asked.

“Just a little distracted. You go have fun. I need to make sure everything’s running smoothly.”

“Have fun? I’m on it!” She dashed off, waving to people I was positive she didn’t even know, sparkling all

over. The party was in full swing by now, and it looked as though the guests was enjoying themselves. The

decor was simple, the lighting was lovely, and the musicians were doing an excellent job. I hoped Maxon was

pleased.

I made my way across the floor, sampling some hors d’oeuvres on my way. None of the food seemed terribly

appealing, though. Maxon’s favorites weren’t necessarily mine, I just had to trust that everyone else would

enjoy the selection.

I stretched up to my tiptoes, scanning the room. If Maxon had listened to me, he ought to be around here

somewhere by now. I didn’t find him, but I did see Marlee. She rushed over as soon as she saw me, leaving

Carter talking with some of the guards.

“The party is amazing, America,” she gushed, kissing my cheek.

“Thanks. I’m trying to find Maxon. Have you seen him?”

She turned to look with me. “I did see him come in, but I have no idea where he is now.”

“Hmm. I’ll have to do a lap. How’s Kile?”

She smiled anxiously. “Good. I’m trying to get used to letting a nanny put him down.”

Kile was just over a year old, and Marlee absolutely adored him—as did I. He was the only male who regularly

spent time in the Women’s Room without expressly asking for permission.

“I’m sure he’s doing fine, Marlee. And it’ll do you good to spend some time with Carter alone.”

She nodded. “You’re right. We’re both having so much fun. But just you wait and see. It’s hard to let them go, even for a little while.”

I smiled. “I can only imagine. Go, enjoy some of the food. I’ll see you later.”

“All right.” She gave me another kiss and made her way back to Carter.

I looped around the room, searching for my husband. When I finally saw him, my heart lit up. Not simply

because I was happy to find him, but because he was talking to Aspen.

Aspen’s cane was gone now, but there were times when he still limped, especially if he was tired. We all

considered it a miracle that he had healed so well, but if anyone could have recovered through sheer

determination, it was Aspen.

They looked deep in conversation, and I moved closer, coming up behind them.

“Was your first year hard? Lots of people say it is, but you two seemed to do so well,” Aspen said.

He and Lucy had planned to get married not too long after Maxon and I did, but when her dad got sick,

everything was put on hold. He eventually recovered, but even after that Aspen dragged his feet more than he

needed to. I suspected he was afraid Lucy would change her mind, and I blamed that fear on me. They were so

right for each other, he never needed to doubt. And when they finally did tie the knot, I was as happy as I’d

been on my own wedding day.

Maxon sighed. “Hard to say. I don’t think it was the marriage part that was so hard as much as the duties. It

was a lot to ask her to step into the role of a queen when she’d barely gotten used to the idea of being a

princess.”

“Did you fight?”

“Are you kidding? That’s what we’re best at!” He and Aspen shared a laugh. I wanted to be offended, but it

was true—we were good at arguing. Still, that had died down a lot.

“I don’t know why it feels like such a big deal,” Aspen said, his laughter fading. “We wanted to get married

for so long. Why does it feel so overwhelming now that we are?”

“It’s the title.” Maxon took a sip of champagne. “It’s scary to be a husband. It feels like there’s more to lose. I

worry about that title more than being called king, easily.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Aspen was quiet, considering this.

“Listen,” Maxon started. “This isn’t me kicking you out. You’re always welcome here. But maybe what you

and Lucy need is your own place.”

“What, like a house?”

“Look around. Take Lucy with you and see if you find a place you like, that feels like something you can work

on together. Making a life together might be easier if you have a home that’s really yours.”

“Marlee and Carter do fine here.”

“They’re a different couple.”

Aspen looked down, and I could see that something about this made him feel like he’d failed.

Maxon clapped him on the back. “I don’t trust many people the way I trust you. You’ve done a lot for me and

for America. Just go look. See if there’s something out there that you two really love, and if there is, consider

it a gift from us.”

“It’s your birthday. You’re supposed to be the one getting gifts,” Aspen protested, but there was a smile on his

face all the same.

“I have everything I want. A country on the upswing, a happy marriage, and good friends. Cheers, sir.”

Aspen lifted his glass with a smile, and they drank. I blinked away my happy tears and came up, tapping

Maxon on the shoulder.

He turned and broke into a sunrise of a smile. “There you are, my dear.”

“Happy birthday!”

“Thank you. This is really the best party I’ve ever had.”

“You did good, Mer,” Aspen added.

“Thank you both very much.” I turned to Maxon. “I need to steal you away for a bit.”

“Of course. We’ll talk more later,” Maxon promised Aspen, and followed me from the room.

“This way,” I instructed, pulling his arm.

“Perfect!” he said as we walked into the garden. “A break from the madness.”

I giggled, putting my head on his shoulder. Without instruction, he led us to our bench, and we sat, him facing

the forest and me facing the palace.

“Champagne?” he offered, bringing over his glass.

“No thanks.”

He took a sip himself and sighed contentedly. “This was a wonderful choice. Truly, America, this was the best

birthday I could have hoped for. Well, second best. I still would have liked the option I came up with this

morning.”

I smiled. “Maybe next year.”

“I’ll hold you to it.”

I took a steadying breath. “Listen, I know we have a full night ahead of us, but I wanted to give you your

birthday present.”

“Oh, darling, you didn’t need to get me anything. Every day with you is a gift.” He leaned in and kissed me.

“Well, I hadn’t planned on getting you a gift, but then something presented itself, so here we are.”

“All right then,” he said, placing his glass on the ground. “I’m ready. Where is it?”

“That’s the only problem,” I started. I felt my hands begin to shake. “It won’t actually arrive for another seven

or eight months.”

He smiled but squinted. “Eight months? What in the world could take ...”

As his words drifted away, so did his eyes, leaving my face and making their way to my stomach. He seemed

to expect me to look different, for me to be as big as a house already. But I’d done my best to hide everything:

the tiredness, the nausea, the sudden distaste for foods.

He stared on and on, and I waited for him to smile or laugh or jump up and down. But he sat there, frozen to

the point that it started to frighten me.

“Maxon?” I reached out and touched his leg. “Maxon, are you all right?”

He nodded, still watching my stomach. His eyes filled with tears as he spoke. “Isn’t that remarkable? I

suddenly love you a hundred times more,” he said, quietly and in awe. “And I didn’t think it was possible to

find love for a person I don’t know at all.” He finally looked up at me. “Are we really going to have a baby?”

“Yes,” I breathed, welling up, too.

His eyes lit up. “Is it a boy or a girl?”

“It’s too soon to tell,” I said through happy tears. “There’s not much the doctor can tell yet except that

someone is definitely there.”

Maxon placed a gentle hand on my tummy. “We’ll shorten your workdays, of course, or we can cut them

completely if we must. And we can have more maids put on call.”

“Don’t be silly. Mary and Paige are plenty. Besides, you know my mother will want to be here, and Marlee

and May will be around. I’ll have too many people taking care of me.”

“As you should!”

I threw back my head and laughed, but when I looked at him again, I saw that his expression had turned dark.

“What if I’m like him, America? What if I’m a terrible father?”

“Maxon Schreave, that isn’t possible. If anything you will be too generous. We’re going to have to hire the

strictest nanny in the world just to even it out!”

He smirked. “No strict nannies. Happy nannies only.”

“If you say so, Your Royal Husbandness.”

Maxon cleared his throat and wiped away his tears. “I’m assuming this is our secret?”

“For now.”

He smiled brightly. “All the same, now I definitely feel like celebrating.”

He scooped me up, rushing me back inside, and I couldn’t stop laughing. I peeked up at

his expression, so

hopeful and excited, and I knew we were only just getting to the best part of our lives.