

Royalty NOT Ready



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MEGHAN
QUINN

Royally
NOT
Ready

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Prologue

KELLER

“Come in.”

I adjust my tie and then push through the ornate, wood-carved door to the king’s bedroom. The curtains are drawn despite the time. Just the smallest of cracks in the velvet fabric let the morning rays filter through, lighting up the room so I can see King Theodore resting in his four-poster bed, covered in heavy burgundy fabric.

His attending doctor, Armann, buckles up his bag, adjusts the spectacles on his nose, and then heads toward the door.

“See you tomorrow,” King Theodore calls out.

“Yes, tomorrow.” Armann glances in my direction, offering an annoyed glare, before he heads out of the bedroom, leaving me alone with the last-remaining royal.

“Keller, my boy—” He turns his mouth into his crooked elbow and heaves a horrendous cough that has plagued him for the last few weeks. After two bouts of pneumonia, Dr. Armann has now placed him on bed rest in order to get him back to his fully functioning self. “Excuse me.” He takes a deep breath, but it falls short from the lack of lung capacity. “Thank you for meeting with me.”

As the private secretary to the king, I’m his right-hand man, his most trusted advisor. Unfortunately for me, it’s been an uphill battle with this job. My predecessor had forty-five years on me before he passed away, and when I was hired, few believed a thirty-two-year-old belonged in this position. The only person who’d trusted me was King Theodore, or Theo, as I call him only when we’re alone.

By the side of his bed, there’s a burgundy wingback chair that I take a seat in. Pen and notebook in hand, I cross one leg over the other and say, “It sounded urgent when you called me.”

“Yes, well, this is an urgent matter,” he says right before coughing again. His light blue eyes squeeze shut, and the sparse pieces of hair on the top of his head hitch with every violent hack. He rests his head on his pillow and presses his large, meaty hand to his chest. “I need you to find her.”

Confused, I shift in my seat and ask, “Find who?”

He’s silent, catching his breath before he opens his eyes and says, “The only heir left.”

This is where things get tricky.

Let me give you a quick rundown.

Theo is an only child and the sovereign of our country. He married Katla and had four children.

They more than covered the old verbiage, “we need an heir and a spare.” They doubled down.

Pala was born first. The picture-perfect princess who always wore lavender, delighted the people with her flower crowns, and was well-known to try to sneak her cat, Norbit, into every state dinner. When she was at university, she met Prince Clinton of Marsedale, fell madly in love, and married him. But, because Clinton would one day become king of Marsedale, that trumped Pala’s throne, and she abdicated to live with him. It’s a sore subject.

Second born is Rolant, the troublemaker. Always pressing his luck, never following the rules, and single-handedly created the Fire Task Force—also known as *Rolant fucked up, and now we need to put out the fire*. His demise was inevitable. One drunk night led to him rolling around on one-thousand-year-old sacred moss, and the next day, he was exiled from the country.

Third born, the most promising of the four, despite being the third in line for the throne, is Sveinn. The listener, the do-gooder, the humanitarian. Known as the earth lover, Sveinn was good at everything. He married Kristin. After five years of marriage and no offspring, they were brought into the king’s quarters where Kristin admitted to having an affair with her lady’s maid. A brilliant lesbian love affair. They ran off together. Sveinn, on the other hand, found the nearest boat, set sail, and is still yet to be found—despite the king’s men’s best seafaring efforts—six months later.

So that brings us to Margret, the youngest. Fascinated with travel, she was bound and determined to flee from the chilling temperatures of her homeland and explore the humid climate of Miami, where she met the love of her life, Cameron Campbell, a larger-than-life food tour guide. And together, they had one child.

“You want me to find your American granddaughter?” I ask.

Theo slowly nods his head. “You must. Without her, we jeopardize losing our country.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, now leaning forward.

“As you are aware, we are a constituent of Arkham, and according to our bylaws, if there is no heir to the throne, then the monarchy dies with me.”

Which would be detrimental to the country.

“And with the battles we’ve fought over the years with Arkham, there is no doubt they will not only destroy our culture, but they’ll take over our people.” A cough bubbles up and he sputters a few moments before regaining himself. “I can’t have that.” With his tired eyes fixated on me, he says, “If it were my choice, you, my son, would take my place, but it must be blood.”

“I know,” I say, my throat choking up.

I failed to mention the fifth child because the fifth doesn’t matter. The fifth grew up in the palace just like the other four, but lost his servant parents at twelve, was orphaned, and then one fateful Christmas Eve was taken in by the king and queen.

He has no right to the crown.

Instead, he . . . or I . . . have dedicated myself to protecting what is mine. This palace, and this man resting on the bed in front of me, practically lifeless with a gray complexion, are mine to protect.

“I need you to find her, Keller, and I need you—” He coughs again. I wait patiently for him to finish before picking up a glass of water from his night table and offering it to him. He nods as a *thank you* and takes a sip. “I need you to train her.”

My concerned brow pinches together. “Train her?”

He nods slowly before resting his head on the pillow. “Yes, she will not know of our country, our traditions, or our culture. If she is to take the crown, she must be prepared. The country will not take

kindly to an outsider.” His tired eyes flash to mine. “And if anyone can prepare the next sovereign, it’s you.”

Chapter One

LILLY

“Three . . . two . . . one!”

My truck siren goes off.

The crowd erupts in cheers.

I unleash my hose, spraying the men and women wearing white T-shirts in front of me.

“Shimmy for me. That’s right,” I shout into my headpiece, my voice projected by the speakers attached to my bikini truck. “Let me see your best moves.”

Two girls to the right rub their thong-clad butts together.

The man directly in front of me pelvic thrusts at the crowd while sporting a cowboy hat.

And the couple to the left, well . . . they’ve stopped dancing and are now just making out, drinks clasped in their hands.

“Dry me up,” I say to Timmy Tuna, my best friend and co-founder of the Splash Wagon, South Beach Miami’s one and only bikini-and-swimsuit store on wheels.

He turns off my hose and then sounds the siren one more time. Timmy Tuna moonlights as a DJ down at the Neon Bar. He’s well-known for playing his remixes of popular Afro-Cuban music. He can get a crowd jumping with one beat drop.

“Do we have a winner, folks?” I ask into my microphone. The crowd cheers, boisterously calling out who they think looks best in a wet T-shirt. I walk up to the couple on the left and hold my hand next to them. “Who wants the couple who can’t keep their hands off each other to win?” The crowd cheers. I motion to the two girls on the right. “What about these two ladies?” The crowd grows louder. And when I approach the single guy in the front who is still pelvic thrusting the crowd, I ask, “And what about our single gentleman?” The crowd erupts.

It’s clear who the champion is.

I knew he was going to win.

It’s always the man with the beer belly that wins. Every single time.

I lift his arm and say, “We have a winner!” I hand him a gift card to the Wagon while everyone cheers some more. “Clap it up for the rest of our contestants, who are all receiving a twenty-five-percent off coupon to the Wagon.” Timmy Tuna sounds off a blowhorn and then hands out the coupons.

“Before we close up for the afternoon, I’ll walk around as always for some simple Q and A.”

After every wet T-shirt contest, I always work with the crowd to see if I can drive business to any of my local friends. In my lime-green triangular bikini top and yellow sarong, I walk up to a couple who have so much sunscreen on, that their faces have been washed out with white goop.

“Do you have any questions about the area?”

“Yes.” The gentleman clears his throat. “Where is the best place to get a Cuban sandwich?”

Smiling, I cup my ear and ask, “Best Cuban, folks?”

Together, the crowd shouts, “Peter Palms!”

I smile at them and say, “Down the road to the right. Tell them Lilly from the Wagon sent you. They’ll give you ten percent off.”

I move to a group of single ladies.

“Anything I can help you with?”

“We need men,” they whine, but in a cute, pouty-face way. “Where can we find the perfect man for a one-night stand?”

I turn toward Timmy and say, “Timmy Tuna, we need some single men.”

From his perched spot on the hood of the Wagon, he shouts, “Word on the street is, some of the single players from the Vancouver Agitators are in town and they’re staying at Moxy Miami. The bar serves the best rum runners in town. Tell them Timmy Tuna sent you, and get your first drink for free.”

The girls squeal and take off. Bet some hockey players get lucky tonight.

I turn to the right and spot a beautiful man—tall, broad-shouldered with blond hair and a menacing scowl. He’s dressed in stark black dress pants and a black button-up dress shirt. The sleeves are rolled up to his elbows, displaying ink wrapped around his thick forearms. His presence feels threatening, like someone is about to get into a world of trouble. Thankfully, it’s not me.

“Looks like someone didn’t get the swimsuit memo,” I say as I walk up to him. “Dear sir, do you realize it’s summer in Miami?”

His chin juts out as his jaw grows tight, displeasure written all over his face. Maybe someone needs to grab a rum runner with the ladies.

“I need to speak with you,” he says in a low tone. The type of tone a father would use when he catches his teenager partying past curfew.

But, hey, I’m here to help, despite the puzzling expression on this man’s face.

“Sure,” I say into the microphone. “What can I assist you with? Looking for some cigars? Maybe a decent lap dance to help you loosen up? Not saying I’m willing, but I have been known to offer a lap dance with the right drink in me.”

His eyes narrow. Nostrils flare.

Man, he might need more than a drink and a lap dance.

“Privately,” he says through clenched teeth. “I need to speak with you privately.”

Oh, okay, psycho. Yeah, let me just go somewhere private with the angry man. Sounds like a really good idea.

Keeping a smile on my face, I say, “Flattered, but I fly solo.”

I turn to talk to someone else when I hear him say, “It’s pertaining to your mom. Margret.”

My body freezes, my muscles stilling from the mention of my mom’s name.

Slowly, I turn back around and remove my headset so my conversation isn’t blasted for all of Ocean Drive to hear. “What did you say?”

“I need to speak to you about your mother. I doubt you want to do this with a crowd.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a black card. Printed in gold is a singular address. When I look back up

at him, he says, "Eight tonight, meet me there." His eyes scan my body before saying, "Wear something decent."

"Excuse me?" I say. "How fucking dare you?"

But he's turned around and walking away before I can expand on my tirade.

"What the actual fuck," I say as Timmy walks up to me, the crowd now dispersing.

"Who was that?"

"Some sicko," I say, still clutching the card. "Says he wants to speak to me privately, something to do with my mom."

"Your mom who passed away when you were seventeen? Seems sketch. Need me to call the cops on him? You know Luis would be more than happy to do his blonde goddess a favor." He isn't wrong about it sounding sketch. Mom died when I was seventeen. *It's been a long time since I've heard someone speak her name.*

I watch as the man gets into an unmarked black sedan, my mind reeling. "He knew my mom's name. He said, *Margret.*"

"Wait, really?"

"Yeah." My hand shakes as I look down at the card again. "915 Washington Ave. Is that—is that the Moxy?"

"It is," Timmy says. "Does he work there? Maybe he wants to hire you. Or maybe hire the Wagon for a private event."

"But what would that have to do with my mom?" I ask.

"Not sure, but there's only one way to find out." He flicks the card in my hand.

"Are you saying I meet up with this man?"

"If he knows something about your mom, maybe about your dad? I would if I were you."

I roll my teeth over my bottom lip as I continue to stare at the card.

Who is this man, walking in on my turf, looking like some sort of uptight security detail with his burly, tatted forearms and thick neck? And what could he possibly know about my mom?

Timmy is right, there's only one way to find out.

But if he thinks I'm coming "decent," then he has no clue who the hell he's dealing with.



I FLIP my long blonde ponytail over my shoulder, adjust the deep V of my dress to make sure things are covered, and then, in my four-inch heels, I click-clack across the tiled floor of the Moxy, unsure of where to go from here.

All that was written on the card was the address. A name could have been useful. Possibly more of a meeting destination other than a vague address. But you know how it is with elusive men, they try to gain the upper hand with confusion. Little does he know, I'm not falling for his outdated tricks.

Instead, I stand in the middle of the lobby, people bustling around me, take a compact mirror out of my clutch, as well as my bright pink lipstick, which matches the boisterous flowers on my dress, and I reapply. I'm capping my lipstick when a man in a dark suit and sunglasses approaches me. "Miss Campbell, please follow me."

I don't move, and when he realizes that, he turns back around, a confused look on his face. Well, I assume he's confused. Can't really tell from the sunglasses and inanimate facial expression.

"Do you expect me to just follow you, a man I've never met before?" I shake my head. "Think

again. I'm going to need to see your boss, or whoever sent you out here to get me. And I will need his name, as well. And his cell phone number."

Looking far too confused, the man presses his finger to his ear and asks, "Did you hear that?" It's all very secret service-type behavior, and it's all quite comical. This is movie-quality theatrics, not everyday. "He will be right down."

I know what you must be thinking—*Lilly, what the hell are you doing? You don't go off with strangers.* And you're right, I shouldn't, but there's something you have to understand—I lost my parents when I was seventeen to a horrible boating accident. I have no family. No grandparents, no brothers and sisters, no aunts and uncles. My dad was an only child, and his parents passed away when I was five. My mom, well, she never spoke of her side of the family. So, being the strong, confident, and smart twenty-seven-year-old that I am, I'd normally tell this man to fuck off and go on with my day following Miami's trendsetters so I can make sure I have everything in stock in the Wagon. But, the little girl inside of me, the girl who misses her parents, the girl who will cling to any piece of them, she's the one leading the show tonight.

Cut her some slack.

Folding my arms over my chest, I nod toward Mr. Suit and ask, "So, been doing this for long? You know, fetching young women for your boss?"

Stiff, avoiding me at all costs, he doesn't say anything, but I catch his mouth twitch in humor.

"How much do they pay you? Do you have a gun? Or do you consider your hands lethal weapons? From the looks of it, they seem like Grade-A chokers. Have you ever choked anyone? Wait, don't answer that, I don't want to be an accomplice in your murders."

He continues to look around, not saying a word.

"Ah, I see what's going on. They must dock your pay every time you say something, right? You know, I get it. You have mouths to feed, probably. How many kids do you have? Wait, wait, let me guess, that will be more fun. Hmm." I tap my chin. "I'm going to say ten. You look like the kind of man with strong lovemaking genes. Like a workhorse in bed, pounding that semen, one right after the other, having that wife pop them out—"

"Miss Campbell," comes the silky, English voice from earlier.

I turn to see Mr. Mysterious standing behind me, still wearing the black pants and button-up shirt from earlier, but now he has a suit coat draped over his broad shoulders, and he's clouded in a masculine scent that reads more like fresh mountain logger than shadowy assassin. Man, this guy. He's got to be at least six three with a jacket size no smaller than forty-six long. They build them big where he's from.

"Well, hello, there. How lovely of you to show up." I thumb toward Suit. "Not much of a talker, this one. Do you dock his pay for talking?"

Completely ignoring my question, he says, "I believe you have requested my phone." He reaches into his suit jacket and pulls out his phone. He offers it to me, holding it out in his large hand.

Take a look at those fingers. Hello, *lover*.

"Is that really a phone, or perhaps a bomb acting like a phone? I need you to prove to me that it's a phone."

That anger I saw rear up earlier reappears as he taps the screen, entering a passcode so fast that I only catch two numbers: three and eight. He then turns the screen to me, showing off his black wallpaper with all his apps lined up in folders.

"Who doesn't have a wallpaper on their phone? Seems a bit psychotic, don't you think?"

"Miss Campbell, what I have to talk to you about is of high importance. Please take the phone and

follow me.”

I take the phone and then say, “First, I need to make a phone call.”

I might be following a strange man to God knows where, but I have gained some form of self-preservation over the last few years.

I punch in Timmy’s number and then put it on speaker.

“Hello?”

“Timmy, baby, it’s me.”

“Do they have you captive? Remember our safe word.”

“We’re in the lobby. The Viking look-alike is about to take me wherever we’re going. Is Luis there?”

“Yes, he’s tracking the conversation.”

I smile to myself. “Good.” I glance up at the monstrous man in front of me and say, “You may proceed with wherever you’re taking me.”

The man adjusts the cuffs of his jacket and starts making his way through the lobby, me following behind him and the suit behind me. Like ducklings in a row, we cross the tiled floor.

We dodge a few of the single ladies looking for a good time from earlier. They already have drinks in hand and are eyeing the hotel bar for any incoming hockey players. We move past a restaurant full of the glitz and glam of vibrant Miami fashion and to a back door that leads to a private rooftop overlooking the pool.

“What’s going on?” Timmy asks over the phone. “Have they bound and gagged you?”

“No, they’re just taking me to a private rooftop area. It’s all very dreamy out here. We really need to hang out at the Moxy more.”

Flowers cascade down perfectly placed pergolas draped in string lights, and red couches line the back wall, with round, stone coffee tables placed in front of them. Candles are lit up on every surface, while the aroma of fresh flowers, sunscreen, and this evening’s dishes float through the air.

“You know, if I didn’t know any better, I’d think you brought me up here to propose.” I glance around. “Is this some sort of hidden camera thing? One of those blind marry-me shows?” Calling out to empty space, I say, “Okay, camera crew, I’m onto you, come on out.”

The Viking gestures to a red couch and says, “Take a seat.”

Okay, he’s unamused.

I set my clutch on the coffee table in front of me and then maneuver my body down to the soft surface of the couch, sinking in further than I expected. I adjust my V-neck once again and when I glance up, I catch his eyes on me, studying.

“What?” I ask. “Did I have a nip slip?”

Without a word, he takes a seat next to me on the couch, not so close that I feel like he’s going to make a move, but not so far that I have to shout to have a conversation. A respectable distance.

“I thought I told you to wear something decent?”

“Ooo, I missed the memo on when you became the boss of my body.”

“Good one,” Timmy says on the phone.

“Thank you.” I chuckle.

“I’m going to need you to end that phone call,” the Viking says. “What I’m about to tell you is highly classified.”

“But they’re making sure I’m not murdered.”

“Trust me when I say it’s in my best interest not to murder you. Now hang up,” he says in such a forceful tone that I lean in to the speaker of the phone.

“Uh, I think I need to go. You have the phone pinned?”

“Yes,” Timmy answers. “Call me after. I want to know what’s highly classified.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll tell you later.” I hang up the phone and hand it over to its faithful owner.

He sticks it in his coat pocket as he says, “You will not be discussing this conversation outside of the two people involved: you and me.”

“Okay, sure.” I wink at him.

“Miss Campbell, this is not a joking matter.”

I cross one leg over the other and wave dismissively at him. “I’ll be the judge of that.” I rub my hands together and ask, “Okay, so what’s all the secrecy about?”

Chapter Two

KELLER

Go find her.

Bring her home.

Train her.

Seemed simple at the time. A task I didn't want, but something I was more than willing to do because my country means more to me than anything.

After seeing Lilly Campbell, King Theodore's one and only heir, spray water on scantily clad women and a man who found humor in humping the air in public, I realized this is going to be a huge undertaking. *And possibly, an erroneous mistake.*

"Soo . . . I'm waiting," Lilly says, blinking those dangerously light blue eyes at me. Ones I've looked into many times. *Theo's eyes.*

But what I wasn't expecting was how absolutely stunningly beautiful Lilly would be. *Is.* Long, white-blond hair that falls just over her small yet perky breasts, eyes the color of ice crystals, full lips stained in light pink, and a slender frame still curvy enough in all the right places for a man to grip on to. And those lashes of hers—long and dark—which reveal a depth to her eyes I'm sure she's unaware of.

But it's her attitude, her vibrant sass, that I know will make this task of not only training her to be the next heir—*plus convincing her to drop her life and come with me*—very difficult.

"Miss Campbell—"

"Ugh, call me Lilly. That *Miss Campbell* shit is so stuffy. And you know, it might not hurt you to introduce yourself."

"I was getting to that."

"Takes you long enough."

I clench my teeth. "My name is Keller Fitzwilliam, and I'm the private secretary and advisor to King Theodore."

"Oooo, you sound fancy. Fitzwilliam, so posh." She looks over her shoulder. "Seriously, though, where are the cameras? Are they buried in the flowers?"

"There are no cameras. This is very serious. Please regard it as such."

She folds her arms and stares me up and down. “Where do you get off talking to people like that?” In a snooty tone, she says, “Please regard it as such.’ What acting school did you go to? Your accent could use some work.”

Christ.

I push my hand through my hair, irritation now ripping through my veins. “Your mother, Margret—what do you know of her family?”

Lilly straightens up, the straps of her revealing dress pulling on her delicate shoulders. “Why do you want to know?”

“Because what I’m about to tell you pertains to that.”

“Do I have family I don’t know about?” she asks with a dreamy look in her eyes.

That dreamy look, the intrigue, the hope . . . it’s all there, which means, I’ve found my way to capture her.

“What have you been told?” I ask.

“Uh, well, that my mom fled from somewhere in the Scandinavian area and came to America, where she met my father. She never spoke about her family too much. Why, what do you know?”

She’s in for a goddamn culture shock.

“Your mother, Margret, is one of four children.”

“Four! You mean I have aunts and uncles?”

Technically, but I don’t need to go into details about them just yet.

“Yes. And you have grandparents.”

“Grandparents?” she says, her eyes welling up. “Really? Like, actual grandparents? Like two old people who sit in rockers and throw shoes at the street youth for being a nuisance to the neighborhood? Two old people who smile when they fart? Who call you *honey* and wear small blankets over their shoulders because they’re always cold? Two old people who talk about sciatica and send you five-dollar bills in a birthday card? That kind of grandparents?”

Not so much.

If Theo or Katla ever smiled while they farted, I wouldn’t be sure what to fucking do.

“No,” I answer honestly. “They aren’t that kind of grandparents.”

“Oh.” Her shoulders sag. “I always wanted old, cranky grandparents. When I was young, we lived across from this old couple. We weren’t friends with them, but I would sit on my porch and watch them from across the street as they yapped and yelled at the kids riding their bikes. I found it endearing. Sometimes I wished that they had been my grandparents. I even asked—”

“They are King Theodore and Queen Katla,” I say, unable to deal with her jabbering.

“Excuse me?”

“From Torskethorpe.”

“Torske-what-now?”

“Torskethorpe, a small island in the Scandinavian waters, just north of the British Isles.”

“Torskethorpe?” she asks, her nose curling up. “That, uh . . . that doesn’t really roll off the tongue well, does it?” She pauses and then says, “Wait, you said *King Theodore* and *Queen Katla*.”

“Correct.”

“Hold on.” She blinks a few times. “Are you *really* trying to tell me that these long-lost grandparents I’ve never heard of in my entire life just happen to be royalty of some far-off country that frankly I don’t even believe is on a map? Torksy-to-da, was it? Dude, that was not in my geography books.”

“Yes, I am.”

The corner of her lip twitches.

Her eyes flit around the empty rooftop.

She smiles.

She chuckles nervously.

And then she stands from the couch. “Okay, Fitzzy—”

“My name is Keller.”

“Whatever it is, this is some fucked-up reality show.” She grabs her clutch from the coffee table and tucks it under her arm. “You must have done some serious research to prey on an innocent girl with a secret yearning to learn more about her family.” She scoffs. “Wow, you really are a little, little man. I hope karma comes back and deliberately places a painful zit on the tip of your dick.” She spins on her heel, the fabric of her dress floating against the wind, and as she takes her first step away, Brimar blocks her departure with his large body.

“Lilly, I suggest you sit down,” I say.

Her eyes widen as she turns toward me. “You can’t possibly believe you can detain me. I’ll have you know, that I have some serious friends in the Miami Police Department. They will take you out.”

Fuck, she’s feisty. This is why I prepared.

Hoping it wasn’t going to come to this, I take out my phone, unlock the screen, and go to my pictures. I find one of her mom and point it to her. “Does she look familiar?”

Lilly leans in, taking a closer look, and when recognition crosses her face, she slowly lowers back down to the couch as she takes the phone from me.

“Where did you find this picture?”

“It’s one of many Theo and Katla have of Margret. Flip to the right. You’ll see more.”

Her hands shake as she moves her thumb across the screen, and picture after picture, I see tears well in her eyes until they cascade down her face.

Pictures of Margret in the courtyard with her siblings.

Pictures of Margret embroidering—one of her favorite Torskethorpien traditions.

Pictures of Margret outside the palace walls, talking with the people.

They’re all there, and as I watch her flip through, I notice the shake in her hand and the tears that fall to the fabric of her dress. From the side, Brimar tosses me a pack of tissues that I gently hand to her. With a curt nod, she takes one and dabs at her eyes, only to gasp when she gets to the last picture.

“How did you get this?” she asks as she shows me a picture of her mom in a hospital bed, an infant curled in her arms, with her dad’s arm wrapped around her mom.

“Your mom sent that to Theo, her father. She would send a pack of pictures every year at Christmas. That is one of many.”

“She . . . she did?” she asks, scrolling through the pictures again. “But—I don’t understand.” She meets my gaze. “Why would she send pictures, but never talk about her family?”

“From what Theo told me, it’s because she wanted to explore the world. She wanted a simple life. She wanted to live in a place where she could create a world of her own. To my understanding, she did just that.”

Another tear falls down her cheek before she wipes it away and hands me my phone. On a deep breath, she sets her shoulders and asks, “Do you have any ID?”

“What?” I ask, confused.

“I need to see your ID or passport, something that tells me who you are.”

I fish into my pocket, pull out my wallet, and hand it to her. She flips it open and stares at my identification. She doesn’t just glance, she studies it. She then asks for Brimar’s, and he obliges. She

brings them both together and compares them, giving them a thorough read-through. When she's done, she folds up our wallets and hands them back to us. "Okay, I might not be convinced, but I am listening. So why are you here?"

"King Theodore requests your presence."

"Requests it?" she asks. "He wants me to go up to Torkey-party?"

"Torskethorpe."

"You should really reconsider the name. It's quite jumbly in the mouth."

"The island is over one thousand years old. There's no changing it." *Why are you arguing with her? Get to the goddamn point. This has taken longer than I planned.* "Tomorrow morning, we leave."

"Uh, excuse me?" she asks.

"What do you not understand?"

"Well firstly, I don't understand where you get off telling me what to do. And secondly, who's to say I'm going with you?"

Fucking insolent woman.

At this point, she's either in or she's out. If the pictures don't convince her, I don't know what will. So, I stand from the couch and button my suit coat while staring down at her. "We leave at eight." I reach into my pocket and hand her another black business card. "Here's the address. If you're not there by eight, we leave without you."

She stares at the card and then waves it at me. "Did you get these printed for this one-time occasion? That's really freaking weird."

"Good night, Miss Campbell."

"It's Lilly."

Brimar follows me as we head toward the door that leads into the main hotel.

"And don't wait around for me, Fitzy. You don't tell me what to do. Do you hear me? You're not the boss of—"

The door shuts behind us, silencing her.

Brimar places his hand on my shoulder and says, no doubt with an eye roll, "*Americans.*" He shakes his head. "Good luck with that one."

Fuck, I'm going to need it.

Chapter Three

LILLY

“Holy shit. Look, right here it says ‘Margret Edwina Ingrid Strom, Princess of Torskethorpe’—woof, the country name is awful to say.” *Tell me about it.* “‘Is the daughter of King Theodore and Queen Katla.’” Timmy sets his phone down and looks me in the eye. “Girl, you’re royalty.”

“What? No, I’m not . . .”

His smile stretches from ear to ear, like the Cheshire cat, as he nods. “Yes, you are. If your mom is a princess, that makes you a princess as well.” And then, before my eyes, he lowers himself into a curtsy and bows his head. “Your Majesty.”

I push at his forehead. “Men don’t curtsy, and I’m not royalty.” I pick at one of the fried plantains on our shared plate and plop it in my mouth.

“What does it feel like to just sit there in denial?”

“Comfortable,” I answer while chewing on my plantain.

Timmy leans on the apartment island, where we’re sharing a late-night snack. When I left the Moxy, I told him to meet me at my place ASAP. I know Keller said our conversation was confidential, but let’s be honest, it’s all such a fictional farse, so how could I possibly keep that confidential? I couldn’t. I told Timmy, who of course I swore to secrecy, you know, just in case there is some sort of legal action that could be taken against me.

“Lilly, you know I love you, right?”

“Oh boy, here comes the heart-to-heart,” I say.

“You can’t deny the facts, and the facts are—your mom hid you away from a world where you have grandparents, an aunt, uncles, and well, a family. And correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t that what you’ve always wanted? A family?”

“I have a family,” I say, reaching out and taking his hand in mine. “You’re my family.”

“As much as I like claiming you as my own, this is your chance to get answers. This is your opportunity to see where your mom is from, to see the place she grew up. Haven’t you always wanted that?”

Yes.

I have. It’s been one of my biggest life questions.

That, and why I wasn't blessed with any sort of rumba hip action. No matter how hard I try, my hips just don't sway like everyone else's.

"I have, but, seriously, Timmy, do you really expect me to fly off to some foreign island with a man who looks like Thor's brother?"

"Sounds like a dream to me."

I roll my eyes. "What about the Wagon? With your DJ schedule picking up, you can't cover all the shifts."

"You admitted even yesterday how Shari and Carrie need more shifts. The days they work, our sales are always double. You can't deny the power of a pair of Latina twins in bikinis."

He's right. My boobs have nothing on theirs.

"And they've been looking for more shifts as well. What other excuses do you have?"

"Uh, how about I just signed up for a monthly Pilates membership? That's just careless money management if I don't go at least once a week."

"I know Karen down at the shop. I can get her to put your membership on hold."

"Yeah, well, what about my apartment? You know there's an ant problem. If I'm not here, watching over the invasion, they very well might take over. And then what? I come back to an empty apartment? You know ants can carry up to fifty times their weight? Have you heard about furniture gone missing around here? It's the ants. They're selling people's possessions on the black market, and to hell if I will be subject to such behavior."

Timmy places his finger under my chin and forces me to look him in the eyes. "We just got this place sprayed. No ant will be penetrating these walls. And I promise to stop by to make sure none of your furniture is sold on the ant black market. Face it, Lilly, you have no real excuse to not go."

"How about getting on a plane with a stranger to a weird country I can barely pronounce, let alone heard of, to meet my so-called grandparents? That's not making smart decisions. And, seriously, you really believe this royal thing?"

"Only one way to find out."

"This seems really irresponsible. We don't know these people."

"They know you." He heaves out a heavy sigh and grips my hands. "Listen to me. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and if you don't end up going, you know you're going to regret it for the rest of your life. So, let's grab your suitcase, fill it up, and get some rest. You're catching a flight tomorrow morning."

"Will you stay with me tonight? Drive me to the airport tomorrow?"

"You know I will, baby girl." He kisses me on the head, then takes my hand and walks me to my bedroom. "Time to get packing."



"SO . . . HOW LONG IS THIS FLIGHT?" I ask, tapping my fingers on the lavish armrest. There are gold flecks in the wood. Could be real, could be fake, but I'm on a private plane with royal emblems everywhere, so my guess is it's real. Naturally, I took a picture of the gold flecks so I can send it to Timmy when we land.

Straight across from me sits Keller Fitzwilliam—the man with little personality and a whole lot of muscle. I'm not one to gawk, I grew up in Miami for crying out loud—shirtless, muscled men are everywhere—but the three inches of skin revealed above where his buttons stop is doing more for me