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ON A ROSY STAR

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Published by Blushing Books  
An Imprint of  
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.  
A Virginia Corporation  
977 Seminole Trail #233  
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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Amethyst Isley  
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ebook ISBN: 978-1-64563-730-1

Print ISBN: 978-1-64563-731-8

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Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.  
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## Chapter 1

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Flashes of orange caught my eye through the night, bright under the Christmas lights. The tree in Dam Square was tall, with branches billowing out from the trunk like the dresses on girls around me. It was adorned with white lights, a minimal reflection of the blotted stars in the dark sky, and warm streams of glittery material that looked akin to a river passed over the green needles.

Most of the *Oranje* Family was still at the palace in the Hague, but the girls were here clamouring over the possibility of meeting Prince Jasper Vey, a taut man of twenty-three with light brown hair and striking blue eyes. My ambivalence toward him had turned to hatred in more recent years; if I had to pinpoint it, it was likely around the time he turned sixteen and began parading women through the *Villa Eikenhorst* corridors, the residential palace in which our families lived. Without the responsibility of the throne upon him yet, Jasper was drowning in superiority, using his lineage and looks to lure women into his opulent bedroom. Not that he had much trouble convincing them to come back with him.

The Royal Palace in Dam Square, under the winking

Amsterdam moon, was mostly ceremonial. But it was beautiful nonetheless, and I was aching for some champagne and quiet. It was normally open to the public; however, it was closed off while Jasper and some of us were in the city. I found my mother and father nearer to the entrance of the palace, although not past the men guarding the arching entrances.

“Mam, Pap,” I said. Dutch and English were somewhat interchangeable amongst most of us, but especially within the palace, we generally used English; it was easier to be diplomatic with a currently dominant language, and it was taught to fluency during our schooling years. “I’m going to go in for the night. It’s almost midnight, anyway.”

They nodded at me in acknowledgment as I passed by them, going to the guards.

“Lady Madelief,” one of them greeted me.

Lady was more of an honorary title than anything else for me, in a somewhat unprecedented circumstance concerning my mother, who had been granted the same title. My father had the equivalent Lord label, but like me, it was only because of his correlation to my mother.

Nevertheless, they knew me well and let me through. I walked into the palace, which wasn’t completely abandoned, but there were much less people around than there were outside; not many had clearance to access a palace wherein Jasper, the heir to the throne, was going to be sleeping in a handful of hours. Aside from whatever girl he would allow in here beside him after deliberating through the swarms of women.

I moved across the pristine floor leisurely, scarce in terms of furnishing, although still impeccable—crisp, formal, marbled. I went up to the bedroom that was assigned to me for visits long ago, on a much higher floor that was off-limits for most. It was too close to Jasper’s room for my comfort, considering all the nights I had spent in the past listening to the moans of women while I was trying to sleep. It sometimes surprised me that they

permitted me to have a room close to the prince, but I thought it might just be because we were around the same age and his parents cared deeply for me. I wasn't sure they had even deliberated upon the idea that, after hitting the age of consent—sixteen—we would be forced to endure each other's sex noises. Not that he has had to deal with mine.

We were slightly farther apart at home, but we were never truly distanced from one another. When we were young, we were close, two children united by our parents. But as we got older, and he turned sixteen while I was still fourteen, our friendship parted. We didn't know how to coexist with one another in a matured way, and we had become entirely different people since. He was a prince. I was nothing but an honorary Lady in the eyes of the monarchy.

I went into my room and began stripping as soon as I shut the door; my dress was too bright in the dim light, a customary orange, as the lineage dictated. I was content in my underwear, since the room was warm in comparison to the stark, wintry cold outside. I walked over to the ice bucket on the nightstand and pulled out a bottle of champagne. I poured myself a generous glass and sprawled out over the bed. The hues of the room were dark and formal, but beautiful in a classy way. It was expansive, and the small table placed long ago over the patterned carpet still had old papers from my school days collecting dust. I mostly learned from a private tutor in the palace in the Hague, but they willingly complied with my request to do the formal testing at a school in Amsterdam.

I didn't have much else here, but there were some dresses that had been tailored to me, ones for ceremonial occasions I would likely take part in or witness during our stays here. There were a few more casual outfits, like the one I wore tonight. Most were orange; I was just fortunate not to look any more terrible in that color than I did in the rest of the rainbow.

I sipped my champagne, dissolving into the taste of the

babbling constellations, and set it aside momentarily so I could pull my laptop out from where I stowed it beneath the bed. All of these riches and they wouldn't allow me a TV so I could drunkenly enjoy trashy shows. I supposed it made sense; we weren't at this palace that often, and they had an image to uphold, even if no one from the public was ever given access to my room.

My fingers combing over the keyboard, I opened my private email and found a few emails wherein I was being alerted to press releases. Honorary Lady or not, I was high profile for the Dutch, although nowhere near as high profile as the *Oranje* Family. Many of the public envied me for the sweet spot of fame and leisure I had found just in being born. And I couldn't deny it was enthralling—the wealth without responsibility, a room in every castle without having to take a formal title. But from what I had seen online and the minimal conversations I'd had with people among the population, most women were jealous I was twenty-one and living so close to the prince they all wanted to wed.

I followed the links from the publicist who worked with me during these types of outings to ensure I didn't tarnish the royal name by such close association. There were a flood of images of me, venetian blonde hair tied up neatly, deeply strawberry in the dim lighting. Comments were critical, as always, remarking upon everything from my name to how pale my winter skin was. Most of the pictures weren't much to look twice upon, and I didn't want to get swept away by the internet so as to find myself drowning in the outpouring of images of Jasper, so I went on to reading about tabloid nonsense, mostly about the Americas.

I continued drinking, finishing off my first and second glass rather quickly. I didn't normally drink heavily, so my tolerance was low, but getting drunk in the room where I had my first sip of champagne on my thirteenth birthday with fifteen-year-old Jasper was appealing in a nostalgic way to me.

My hair was still tied up, but I washed all of my makeup off

in the bathroom—as best as I could with how intoxicated I was becoming. At around two-thirty in the early morning, I heard a giggling girl walking down the hallway, past my room. Jasper’s rugged voice followed her high-pitched laughter, and I heard his door shut seconds later. I drank a tad more champagne before turning off all the lights, aside from the ones upon my vanity dresser, and lying in the near darkness under my covers. My mind was swirling in serene, colorful bliss.

Not long after, the sounds of female moaning penetrated my relative consciousness. Sometimes I wondered if the girls were over-exaggerating with the desperate, pleased noises they made—after all, who would want to make a prince feel inadequate? Although, it seemed *every* one of them couldn’t possibly be that good at faking it. In my drunken state, my body wasn’t exactly responding to the girl’s noises with annoyance, per se. I was aching, feeling stirring low in me.

The sounds of Jasper’s old but extravagant bed creaking as he dominated the desperate stranger were threatening my fragile, dizzy thoughts. I wanted it. I wanted to feel what that girl was feeling. It had been quite some time since I had undergone desire this deep; normally, I was able to move on from any lust I had by distracting myself. But tonight, the alcohol disrupting my inhibition allowed me to be almost suffocated by my blossoming need.

My itching fingers slid slowly, hesitantly, under the hem of my panties. I felt myself, my intimate skin dripping with arousal, as I glided my hand over sensitive parts of my body I hardly ever explored. Listening to the sounds of the girl moaning, my mind drifted as I rubbed my clit languorously. The thought of Jasper’s hands on me, drifting lower and lower, guided me with what I was doing to myself. Intrusive images of his lips hovering so temptingly close over mine flooded me, and the creaking of his bed gave way to desperate fantasies. With my eyes closed, I imagined him on top of me, with his fingers inside me, concentrating on my pleasure instead of his own. My entire body felt as though

it was on fire; it had been far too long since I last came, far too long since I had even built myself up at all.

I didn't realize the moaning had stopped until I heard my door open. I quickly pulled my hand out of my underwear and got out of my bed, almost collapsing with my severely lacking motor skills and judgement. I definitely should have stayed in the bed. That would have been much less conspicuous—not to mention I was just in my underwear. Jasper caught me as I stumbled a few steps, helping me to balance myself.

In the low light, he looked me over with a smirk and said, "I see you've been drinking quite a bit, Elie. Among other things."

My mind was too foggy to think of a defense or some sort of logical denial.

"What happened to the girl you were fucking?" I asked.

Jasper guided me until I was back on the bed, sitting on the edge with my bare feet touching the carpet. He sat beside me lithely, every movement executed with the grace of a royal.

"I politely asked her to leave."

I scoffed. "You kicked her out? Why?"

"Plenty of reasons. I'm not interested in sharing a bed with a girl I don't know the name of, she wasn't very good, and she came three or four times, while I didn't even come once."

I looked at him with confusion. "Why wouldn't you fuck her until you finished?"

"I was bored," Jasper said, shrugging indifferently. "Obviously, you were not though. Maybe I should have brought her in here to fuck you. I bet she would have. You should see some of the things people say about you online. Being able to brag about making you come would have been great for her repertoire."

"Things people say about me? What, like I'm a privileged girl who lives in a castle and doesn't get enough sun?"

"You've been looking at the innocuous parts of the internet. Delve deeper. I've even found some fictional stories people have written about us having very rough sex. They think that's what



we're doing already." I rolled my eyes, but that just made me dizzier. "You should sleep. You're practically swaying. I'll bring you coffee and some painkillers to nurse your hangover with in the morning."

This interaction wasn't making a lot of sense to me.

I couldn't keep myself from voicing it. "Why are you even in here?"

He was quiet for a moment before he said, "If you want to know the truth, I couldn't stop looking at you tonight. Seeing you dressed in orange, under the lights of Amsterdam, reminded me of when we were teenagers, here for another Christmas celebration. I miss you sometimes, Elie. It just got too difficult to be around you. I didn't see you come in earlier. I wanted to make sure you got back safe enough." Jasper shook his head, laughing. "I should have left you alone, though. One of us deserved to have finished tonight."

I couldn't quite manage to hold onto everything he was saying.

"You could always go and find another girl to finish you off," I said, barely coherently.

"I'm not interested. It's too much of the same," he told me. "Besides, if you'd let me, I'd like to sleep in here with you tonight, like we used to before I was sixteen."

"We used to sleep in your room," I reminded him.

"I figured you wouldn't want to sleep in the bed a stranger just orgasmed in. The sheets are a mess. I'm sure the staff is already expecting to have to clean in the morning, but I didn't think I'd make her come quite as hard as I did." He was bragging. With my slight bit of cognitive functioning left, I restrained myself from pointing it out. I wasn't sure he was even aware of it. "I can sleep on the floor, if you'd prefer."

"A prince sleeping on my floor?" I said with a sarcastically dreamy tone. "I'm not so cruel as to subject you to that. Go ahead, get in bed with me."

Unsteadily, I got back under the blankets. Jasper wasn't moving from where he was, and he noticed me looking at him questioningly.

"I don't know how much you have been taught about the male anatomy, but stopping sex before finishing is more than a little bit uncomfortable," he said. "I just need to come quickly. Is it going to bother you if I go into the other room and finish myself off?"

I laughed a little bit. "Do whatever you need to."

Jasper smiled and got up, going into the bathroom. He shut the door behind himself, and after a few failed attempts, I managed to get back out of bed. I didn't think I could put on a proper, covering outfit, but I did make myself take my uncomfortable bra off and switch it with one made more for sleeping, soft fabric that covered things up but wasn't as confining. I must have been fumbling with it for a few minutes before getting it on correctly, but a moment after I did, Jasper came back out of the bathroom.

"Better?" I asked.

"Slightly," he said with a smile. He appraised me curiously. "Decided to be kind to your tits for the night?"

"I thought I should. They do a lot for me."

Jasper laughed. "Classy."

"Always," I said.

The banter between us had been restored with the simple initiation of contact. I wondered if it was partly because I was intoxicated, and that made it easier for both of us. Whatever it was, my normal irritation with him had disappeared for now. Somewhere deep within me, I knew my annoyance and hatred came from a suppressed place, as I missed him. I missed our friendship and communication, and a part of me felt betrayed by the fact he had all but completely abandoned me for the handfuls of strangers he was lusting after.

“Do you mind if I turn off these lights? They won’t bother me too much if you want to leave them on,” said Jasper.

“Turn them off if you want. I only sleep with lights on because it makes me feel less alone. I hate sleeping by myself in the dark.” I supposed I owed him some honesty, considering how blatant he’d been with me so far tonight.

I couldn’t really discern between what was oversharing right now anyway. I wasn’t entirely sure my speech was even coming out as coherently as I was perceiving it as. Regardless, he was able to understand me well enough.

“I’m here with you tonight,” he said as he turned off the lights.

We both got into the bed, me stumbling slightly. The pressed images of orange from the night swallowed my mind like blooming roses. It had stuck—having the royal family be the *Oranje* Family. *Oranje* referred not to a surname, but to the color itself. It was customary, as orange had become a staple of the monarchy. It was unifying, a symbol of national pride. Most people thought of Jasper and his parents when they saw the color. But orange reminded me more of the image they had to uphold than anything else. When I thought of Jasper, at the time during which I knew him well enough to access such things, he made me think of calmer shades. Hues of blue and gray, maybe the dark green of trees occasionally.

I pulled the sheets up over my shoulders, burrowing into the bed for warmth escaped through drunkenness and the cold of December. There were still about two weeks before Christmas, but we liked to celebrate that alone in the Hague palace. It was one of the very few holidays during which Jasper didn’t leave just to come back late at night with a girl.

My thoughts wandered, and I asked aloud, “You have been using condoms with these strangers, right?”

Jasper laughed, a respectable distance away from me but still in my bed. “Of course I have been. It would feel much better to

fuck a girl without a condom, but I can't. Those girls don't keep their mouths shut, and if they were to get pregnant, should I be unable to pull out in time, or if one of them were to give me an STD—they would sell every bit of information to the tabloids. I can't tarnish the monarchy's reputation like that. They can talk about having sex with me all they want; that doesn't change much. But if they were to convey me in a more negative light, with the evidence to back it up, it would be a problem."

"It's probably for the best."

"It doesn't feel like it at the moment, but yes, it is." My breathing calmed slightly, becoming an easier pattern, and Jasper murmured, "Rest well, Elie. We leave midday tomorrow."

I fell asleep beside him, like we used to when we were younger, two children crafted into adults overnight with the moon's touch turning us no longer quite as innocuous.

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I woke up with a start, my dreams fading into nothingness before I could grasp onto them. My head ached as I sat up too hastily, but I persisted, forcing myself to get up. Slightly disoriented, I looked around, finding my ruffled sheets empty. I ran my fingers through my hair, pulling the skewed styling from last night further apart, and found a note, a glass of water, and some pills on my nightstand.

The note read:

*Intimate breakfast with us, your parents, and the publicists this morning at 11. I'll come up and wake you at 10:30 if you're not up before. Take some of these painkillers, drink all of the water, and make yourself decent.*

I didn't have the energy to roll my eyes, nor did I have enough clearness in my thoughts to do anything other than follow Jasper's instructions. I took the water and drank about half of it before grabbing the two pills and swallowing them. I checked the clock, which read 10:02, before getting up and

getting in the shower. I cleaned myself as thoroughly as I could, scrubbing through my messy hair and removing the slight bit of makeup I didn't manage to get off last night. It was easier to suppress the embarrassment I should have been feeling when I was so distanced from myself that I had to put every ounce of concentration I could garner into not falling over.

When I got out, I tied my hair up. The natural pinkish hues were accentuated by the dampness, and I tried my best to get it to be presentable. I managed well enough. I didn't bother with makeup—we weren't trying to impress anyone this morning. I went into my closet and got some of the more casual clothing; I pulled on black leggings, an off-white knit sweater dress, and ankle boots. I caught a quick glimpse of myself in one of the mirrors. *Good enough*, I thought.

I left my room and went down to the dining room. It was all calm red-orange hues. I walked in as inconspicuously as I could. Only my father and our publicists were sitting at the polished, oval table. I sat beside the publicist I had been working with more directly, and she greeted me warmly. I returned the sentiment as best I could. A kitchen staff member came in and served me some coffee, as the others already had mugs in front of them, and I poured some sugar and milk in as they retreated.

“Good morning, Madelief,” my father said.

“Good morning,” I returned. “Where's Mam?”

“She's just getting dressed. She'll be down shortly.”

He dissolved into conversation with the publicists, whom he had been working with as well. They talked about the casual event last night, praising how well everyone presented themselves, but I could only manage to hold onto the basics of what they were saying. The coffee was helping—however, my head was still pounding.

Jasper showed up before my mother did, looking as crisp and pristine as ever, true royalty. I didn't allow myself to catch his eye as he came in and sat at the head of the table. Wait staff

appeared immediately to pour him coffee just as he liked it, and he thanked them as they retreated to the kitchen. It wasn't quite eleven yet, so everyone at the table was just talking, changing between Dutch and English every few seconds, although they primarily stayed with English. It was difficult to follow along in my hazy state. As my mother walked in, I made the mistake of looking up at Jasper. He had a secretive smirk on his lips the moment our eyes met, and I quickly averted my gaze.

My mother came in pleasantly, choosing to sit beside me. "Good morning, Mady."

I didn't think she truly understood how much I hated that derivative of my name. Normally it didn't bother me too much, but everything was aggravated by my hangover. Still, I tried my best to be pleasant.

"Morning, Mam," I said.

I glanced at the clock hanging on the wall, which was blurry for a second as my eyes were further exposed to the light of the chandelier. It was only 10.40. Great.

My mother looked across me to my primary publicist and asked, in reference to me, "How did we do last night, Naomi?"

Naomi smiled politely. "Quite well. All the pictures of Lady Madelif are quite pleasant."

"Brilliant," my mother replied. "I'm always worried she's going to stealthily pass us by with a man and be careless enough to be photographed with him. That would reflect badly upon how women are raised in the palace."

Naomi nodded respectfully, obviously not quite sure what to say in response. It wasn't as if I had ever let that happen before. During the entirety of my life, I had done nothing explicitly incriminating which would tarnish my mother's image. The closest I'd ever gotten to slipping up publicly was on my eighteenth birthday, when I went to a club and got blackout drunk. Even then, I didn't do anything atrocious; I just fell off a table and had a minor flooding of pictures of me knocked out on the

ground released to the Dutch people. It wasn't a huge deal, although my mother seemed to think the apocalypse was upon us. She had been given too many harsh, detailed rules about how to behave during her younger years, and she wanted me to follow them just as well as she had. My father, on the other hand, was more lenient.

"Helena," he addressed my mother, trying to stop the conversation in its tracks.

However, that just escalated it. "What? I just don't think she should be bringing strangers back to her room."

"Has she ever?" he responded.

I was thankful Jasper and the publicists knew my mother well enough it wasn't overly embarrassing.

"Well, she's never been caught, but who knows what we and the cameras don't see? It might at any time be captured and immortalized," my mother said.

Definite hyperbole. I didn't think she cared. She was taught to uphold unrealistic standards of purity, to deem herself worthy in the eyes of the public, which were intensive and always watching. But I wasn't her. They didn't care as much about me as they once cared about her. I didn't have enough control over myself to deal with it this morning.

"Lady Helena, with all due respect, she's never even been pictured with a boyfriend—" Naomi began in an attempt to politely defend me.

"Which would only make it worse if she were to be caught bringing a man into one of the palaces," my mother persisted. She looked over at me. "I'm not accusing you of doing something wrong, my sweet daisy. I'm just ensuring you know the realities of what could happen if you were to get caught misbehaving."

Twenty-one years old and having sex would be misbehaving in her eyes.

I knew she wasn't going to stop anytime soon, and I didn't

have the patience today to deal with a long-winded lecture over something I hadn't even done, so without thinking, I said, "You don't have to worry about it. I'm a virgin."

Jasper choked on his coffee, reminding me of the fact he was in the room. That, of course, was when my mind cleared enough to allow me slight mortification. My cheeks warmed significantly, and I was sure they were lighting up with pink.

"That solves that," my father said calmly. "Are you content now, Helena?"

"As long as she remains that way," my mother said resolutely.

I got up and excused myself, to which no one objected. I was so grateful it had only been the six of us there, and our objective of the morning hadn't been to put on airs for anyone. Although, it made sense. I was completely certain my mother wouldn't have said those things in less appropriate company. I left the dining room and went through the hallways until I reached one of the exits. The Amsterdam morning was quiet and steely, light snow falling from the dark clouds without enough velocity to stick to the ground. A cold breeze went straight through my clothes and wrapped frozen temperatures around my skin. I walked along the pathway, allowing the bitter weather to sharpen my senses dulled by my excessive drinking last night. It wasn't pleasant, but it helped. I walked past a few well-kempt trees and bushes, all rather dried out by winter, and found myself standing in front of the fountain, which was collecting melting snowflakes.

I stayed there for quite a while, able to manage the cold well enough to withstand it. I wrapped my arms around myself in an attempt to preserve body heat as I watched the water shift. The area was pretty much abandoned, which was nice. I was used to less populated places, where most of the people around me were working directly under the monarchy or helping to upkeep the palace and its grounds in the Hague.

I wasn't aware of how long I was standing before the fountain before I heard footsteps behind me. I turned around and



forced myself to keep from audibly sighing as I saw Jasper there. Well, at least it wasn't my mother or father.

"You are not dressed for snow, no matter how light," he said as he approached me.

"I wasn't exactly expecting to come outside this morning," I responded quietly. "God, that was not the way I wanted to start my day."

"It wasn't too bad. There was no one there who would tell anyone what you said, and it was a good way to quiet your mother. Naomi and Sterre signed non-disclosure agreements long ago, so it's not as though that's something you need to concern yourself with."

"Right," I said blandly. "All I did was tell the prince, who has fucked every girl in the Netherlands, that I'm a virgin."

Jasper smiled. "If you're a virgin, I couldn't have fucked every girl in the Netherlands."

I laughed despite myself and said, "You know what I mean. You seemed surprised."

"I was," he admitted. "I had just assumed you weren't, but had slept with fewer people than I have and were far more subtle about it."

"I think pretty much everyone would be more subtle than you are."

"I suppose that's true. Why, may I ask, have you not had sex with anyone? Based on the things I know people say about you, I'm sure it's not from a lack of offers. Saving yourself for marriage?" asked Jasper.

I might not have answered, but he wasn't being teasing about it. It was genuine curiosity. It was like he couldn't wrap his head around the fact I was twenty-one and still a virgin, five years older than he was when he first had sex.

"I'm going to tell you the truth, but I need you to not make fun of me for it," I responded.

"I won't," he agreed.

I took a deep breath. “So, when I was seventeen, I went on a date with a guy I had met here in Amsterdam. I think it was during King’s Day, so people were focused on your father and didn’t pay much attention to me. I was able to get by without having any pictures of me taken. I made sure we went somewhere more secure, definitely not high profile. He asked me back to his place, so I went. His parents were out celebrating your father. We were alone. We were kissing, and it got really hot and heavy. We took my clothes off, and he said something along the lines of, ‘I can’t believe this is happening.’ I didn’t quite understand what he meant. He was definitely attractive, and it seemed as though he had done this before, so I didn’t really get why it was so bewildering to him. So, I asked him.” I glanced down at my shoes on the cobblestone. I had already embarrassed myself plenty this morning, might as well make it worse. “And I remember very clearly what he said: ‘I can’t believe I get to have what belongs to Prince Jasper, for a night.’ Of course, I got dressed and left after that.”

I managed to make myself look up at Jasper. It seemed as though he definitely hadn’t been expecting that answer.

“You’ve never belonged to me,” he simply said.

“But I was afraid anyone I slept with would be thinking the same thing, whether or not they had the audacity to say it. I didn’t think I could enjoy sex with someone if they were garnering bragging rights because they felt as almighty as you.”

“I’m sorry, Elie,” he told me, which wasn’t the response I thought I was going to get. “I didn’t know that’s how people viewed you. I understood it from the female population, but more in the sense they wanted to be you because you had some sort of control over me, not because you belonged to me in any way. I’ve never thought about it from the male perspective. Perhaps I should have.”

I shrugged. “There’s nothing you could have done to prevent

it. We've distanced ourselves from one another for seven years. Anything they think is a complete fabrication."

"Has it really been seven years since we were truly friends?" he asked quietly.

"You were sixteen, and now you're twenty-three. So, yes."

"I didn't realize."

I was trying hard to remain indifferent. My hangover was making my emotions unstable and untrustworthy. But instead of causing irritation as it did with my mother, Jasper was bringing out a more sensitive side of me. I wasn't enjoying it. I felt like he could read too easily into my psyche, and even I didn't want to know what was in there. But I had the urge to touch him, feel his skin on mine—to experience that closeness with him. It was foreign to me. I didn't normally have the urge to show physical affection to anyone. I had gotten used to not touching another person for quite some time, and it wasn't even something I missed. Now, however, I wanted to know even just what the fabric of his coat felt like. I refrained from allowing myself to do that.

I cleared my throat, trying to chase the thoughts away. "Did you finish breakfast?"

"They were still eating when I left. I had just enough to be polite and be able to engage in the right amount of conversation before excusing myself. After what you said and my, well, reaction to it, I didn't want to leave right after you and have your mother be concerned I was working on seducing you."

I laughed lightly. "She certainly feels close enough to you and your parents that she wouldn't hesitate to lecture you over an inkling she had."

"I believe that wholeheartedly." Jasper pulled his phone out of his pocket, glancing at the time. "It's eleven-thirty. Do you want to go back inside? We should be leaving in about an hour and a half."

“Is there anything you need to get done before we go back to the Hague?”

“I don’t believe so,” he said. “This was just a celebratory visit; we aren’t entertaining.”

“Did you bring anything you need to pack?” I asked.

Most of the time, we didn’t take anything with us, since there were more than enough supplies, including things specifically for each of us, in any palace we might stay at throughout the Netherlands.

“No,” said Jasper. “Did you?”

“No,” I said. “So, how do you feel about taking a cab to Vondelpark?”

He looked at me with a slight smile and curiosity. “You actually want to go somewhere with me?”

“It’s snowing. Not many people should be out. The press doesn’t know we’ll be there, and we won’t tell anyone else. We’ll take a taxi so we don’t even have to get one of the private drivers. People will think you’re taking care of some last-minute things here and that I’m off sulking. It’s a perfect time for it. Plus, how much do either of us actually get to experience Amsterdam? Our visits are always confined to Dam Square.”

He was quiet for a moment, deliberating, before he said, “All right, you’ve convinced me. I’ll call a cab and tell them to meet us a block or two away from here.”

We started walking as he made the call, and I looked at the old buildings around us as we wandered down the sidewalk. Everything was quite beautiful in the darker colors of winter; everything took on a surreal, storybook appearance, as though we were walking through the set of a fairytale. Jasper spoke to the driver in eloquent Dutch, ending the call by saying he would give a five-hundred-euro tip if he were to refrain from telling others who he was picking up until after he had dropped us back off by the palace, and to be discreet about my presence alongside him.

When Jasper hung up, I asked, “Why didn’t you ask him not to tell anyone he had driven you at all?”

“It’s unrealistic he wouldn’t. I’m just giving him rules with the likelihood he might actually follow. I don’t want to deprive a man of making some extra money by telling tabloids that I took a taxi to Vondelpark with an unnamed woman.”

“Kind of you,” I remarked.

Jasper laughed a little bit and then looked over at me. “We should have gone back in to get you a coat first.”

“I’m fine,” I said. “You don’t need to be polite with me.”

“I’m just concerned you’re going to separate yourself from me again if I fail to be anything less than gentlemanly to you.”

“Why would you be concerned about that?” I asked. “You’re the one who distanced yourself from me. And it’s not as though you couldn’t find a world full of women endlessly more interesting than I am. Women who would feel privileged to kneel before you.”

“I distanced myself out of necessity,” he said, more quietly. “I don’t want a world full of women. You’re more interesting than any of the ones I could find close by.”

I laughed and said, “You should do this whole compliment thing more often. Maybe you’d become good enough at it your praise would stop sounding like insults.”

“You know what I mean,” Jasper said. “You’re interesting. I think you’re interesting.”

We reached the corner where the driver was going to pick us up and stood there in silence for a few moments. The painkillers were definitely kicking in, and the cold had helped to sharpen my thoughts. I almost felt completely cognitively restored. I glanced over at Jasper, who was nothing short of the stark outline of an unbearably attractive man against a snowy backdrop. He appeared a prince, even away from his castle. It was almost intimidating; it would be if I hadn’t grown up beside him, if I wasn’t used to being so close to the monarchy. He looked at me

when he realized I was watching him, and I quickly averted my eyes.

“Sorry,” I said, slightly uncomfortable.

“No, don’t be,” he responded. “Look at me all you’d like to. I much prefer your eyes to the ones that are generally watching me.”

I didn’t know what to say in response to that, so I was glad the cab driver pulled up right then. Jasper opened the door for me, and I got in the car, which was pleasantly warm compared to the ever-plummeting temperatures brought down on us by the December sky. He got in after me and shut the door. The driver appraised us for a heartbeat too long, but he seemed intent on getting the extra five-hundred-euros, so he said nothing. He already knew where we wanted to go, so he simply started down the empty streets. Jasper was smiling slightly, in a warm but privately humorous way.

“What?” I asked quietly.

“It’s just a little strange,” he murmured back. “Driving down the streets of Amsterdam without a whole entourage.”

I could see that. I was normally a part of the entourage. I realized I had unconsciously rested my hand on the seat between us—likely my body’s way of voicing its desperate desire to be touched by him. I tried to be subtle in moving it back so it rested on my lap. I wasn’t sure if he noticed, but if he did, he didn’t say anything about it. We spent the drive mostly in silence, glancing out the tinted windows at the buildings and streets slowly being glossed over with dampness from the snow.

When we got to Vondelpark, Jasper paid the cab driver the amount for the ride there, with the wordless reassurance of the five-hundred-euros if he were to wait for us without speaking a word of it to anyone. The driver seemed to be looking forward to the excessive payment for a short transport.

“It’s just you and me and Vondelpark, *engeltje*,” Jasper said once we began walking down one of the pathways.

He was right; it was almost completely abandoned. There were a few cyclists swaddled in clothing riding through the park, but they weren't paying enough attention to recognize us as we stood without the backdrop of a palace behind us. We went further into the trail of trees, which had scarcely any leaves upon them. They were dead and tall, beautiful silhouettes of worn bark to match a world made of steel.

"See? This is nice," I said. "No one's even looking for us. You're just the heir, not yet a king. Take advantage of it while you can. In ways beyond sleeping with strangers."

"You are smarter than I, Lady Madelif," Jasper said teasingly.

"Not smarter," I corrected. "I just think with my head and not other parts of my anatomy."

"So bold—speaking to a prince in such a manner."

"Ah, well, you see, I have known you all my life, which makes it far easier for me to ignore your extreme charisma you use to win over everyone else."

"It's a necessity. The Dutch want a figurehead who's respectable. It's just a plus I'm attractive to many women and men. If they're fantasizing about getting me into bed, I'm already familiar to those who have never met me. I know them in an intimate way, even if I'm unaware of it. It's beneficial. The fact that the Netherlands has gotten to see me grow has made me a child of the country, so they're prepared for me to take over when the time comes. As for the people who are around my age, they feel like they know me as well. But in a more intimate way. In a way which makes them want me to be their friend, their sibling, their cousin, their boyfriend, husband, or someone they want to make come and, therefore, exert some power over, since I have more control than most."

"So all of this—all of the relationships you make with people—are calculated so people will follow you when you're King?"

"Not so they will follow me," he corrected. "So I can work to

achieve change that won't be objected against from all sides. Having the public's favor is quite powerful in itself. When the time comes, I will have to marry smart. Every move I make will affect my image in the future, which is why I make sure to get all of my lust out now. I'm hoping whomever I wed will be someone I love, but I don't know if that will be possible. I might have to marry for political reasons. There are a lot of unknowns. So I'm doing what I want with women now, hoping it will make marrying easier in a few years. And as for every other relationship, what you see with my mother, my father, and your parents, what you have seen with me and you in the past—that's all genuine. I've never needed to be strategic with any of you."

"That makes sense," I said. "It just seems like a difficult way to live."

Jasper shrugged. "It's worth it."

The pathway we were on was interrupted by a bridge ahead of us, arching over a river which wasn't yet completely frozen over, although it was heading that way. Jasper and I walked onto the sturdy wood, outlined by simple metal railing. He stopped at the crest of it, and I stood beside him silently. The wind was using the branches of dead trees around us as instruments, playing with the ones that were more pliable.

A question blossomed in my mind. "When you're flirting with masses of girls, or when you find one you want to fuck, do you ever consider them? To be your wife, I mean?"

"No," he said. "If one called out to me in that way, if I felt some sort of attraction beyond the physical level, I might explore it. But it hasn't happened yet. I know I will have to marry eventually, but I don't want to think about it in a realistic light right now. The idea of being trapped in a loveless marriage is quite concerning." Jasper looked at the water, which was hardly moving now, for a moment before glancing over at me. "How about you? Would you be searching for a husband if your concerns were to vanish?"



“I don’t know,” I said. “I haven’t really had a chance to think about it in a realistic way. How could I know whether or not I want a husband when I haven’t so much as had sex or, for that matter, romance? There has to be some sort of logical consideration before I can know for sure what I want in a way beyond idealistic expectations.”

Jasper nodded. “I understand. I think I might view things with too much realism, because I’m not sure any of the fantasy and romance of marriage will ever be available to me. I’ll have to consummate the marriage certainly, but I want the type of blistering lust newlyweds are supposed to have. I don’t want what I felt last night—you know, boredom.” He regarded me carefully. “You’ve had an orgasm before, right?”

There wasn’t a lot he could ask me which might embarrass me in extremes now. “Twice, at my own hand. I might’ve achieved my third last night, but...”

“I apologize,” he said with a slight smile.

We stood there for a heartbeat longer, and I wanted so badly to touch him. I longed to know the texture of his skin, the softness of his hair. *What is wrong with me?* I asked myself, as though I might be able to produce some sort of answer. I leaned against the startling cold of the railing without a jolt, protected slightly by my sweater dress. It was enough that I could bear it. Jasper leaned beside me, close enough our arms were touching. I didn’t know whether or not he was aware of it, whether or not he was consciously making contact with me, but it set my body on fire. Was I lusting after him? Part of me hoped I wasn’t. I wasn’t entirely sure I could control it if that were the case, however. I shouldn’t have gotten drunk last night. He was able to slip past my defenses so innocently while I was inebriated, enveloping himself around my emotions so I was unable to get him out when I sobered up. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t be just another of the prince’s conquests.

After a moment, he quietly recited from a long-ago memory,

“On a rosy star, in the humid sky, Deep into her heart I learned to look, And ‘neath her unveiled sleep, Of a soft wind’s blowing, the daisy dreamed.”

“I remember that,” I whispered, trying to place it in my mind.

“I asked my tutor at the time to find a poem about a daisy. I wrote down the lines I felt best encapsulated you and gave you it for your fourteenth birthday, because I couldn’t think of a single thing to buy you when you already lived in a palace,” Jasper said with a nostalgic smile. “M.E. Wilkins, *The Daisy’s Dream*.”

I smiled as well, remembering the hopeful look on his face when he gave it to me. “I was amazed you had put so much thought into a present for me. I mean, especially to find one in English—I couldn’t believe you had remembered me saying I enjoyed poetry more in English than in Dutch. And then to think of a poem about a daisy, basically the English translation of my name... I was just so surprised. That’s why...” I hadn’t been thinking I should have just stayed quiet.

“What?” asked Jasper.

“It’s nothing,” I said, but that wasn’t a good enough answer. I tried backtracking, “I, just, I don’t know. I—” *Should I tell him the truth?* I took a deep breath. “That’s why I didn’t understand when it was as though you had never cared about me once you turned sixteen.”

He looked at me, looking slightly confused. “I thought you knew why. It was obvious enough to my father.”

“Well, it wasn’t to me. I still have no idea what happened.”

“Think about it, Elie,” he said patiently, his voice slightly strained. “My father gave me clear instructions not to have sex until I hit the age of consent. And then once I did, I was not to have sex with anyone under sixteen, nor was I to have any relationships with them. It would have reflected badly upon the monarchy. He imprinted that on my mind over and over again as soon as I began puberty. Even though it’s legal to have sex with

someone under sixteen so long as they consent and their parents have no qualms, there was too much risk there. Someone might have complained; parents might have tried to take legal action against me for the sake of attention and money.”

“I don’t know what that has to do with me. I’m two years younger than you—so what? It’s not like we were having sex.”

“That’s the point, though. I wanted to have sex with you. Badly.” Jasper looked away from me, appearing somewhat uncomfortable. “Elie, I was in love with you. I couldn’t keep from telling you, so I had to cut my ties with you. My father knew how I felt about you, and he made sure I stayed away from you. He loves you dearly, he always has; he would never do something like that now. But then, it was about my image. Even me explaining things to you was forbidden. It would have been too difficult for me anyway.”

I was just staring at him, so incredibly confused. Maybe I was dreaming. Or so hungover my reality was skewed. Or still drunk, enough so my mind was making up the words I thought he was saying.

“You,” I said, struggling to comprehend it, “were in love with me?”

“Come on,” he said. “It was very conspicuous.”

“Obviously, not to me,” I retorted.

“Yes, I was. I had to move on from you. I had to. I couldn’t have told a fourteen-year-old I was in love with her. It was ridiculous. Why do you think I fucked so many girls in such a short period of time? I was trying to get you out of my head. I couldn’t stand it.” He laughed bitterly. “My father said it was a fantastic exercise in learning some things are off limits. That, even as a prince, I cannot have everything I want.”

I was quiet for a moment before daring to say, “And how do you feel about me now?”

Jasper pulled away from the railing, and I turned slightly as my eyes followed him. He didn’t say a word, just took me in his

arms and kissed me. His lips met mine very briefly, and he moved back just barely, looking for consent in my eyes. I nodded slightly but eagerly, my mind completely overwhelmed by him, and he pressed me back into the metal railing as he kissed me tenderly but with the full heat of fervency. I was being starved of logic. He set the frozen world ablaze with his lips, exploring my mouth quickly and desperately, finally allowing himself to feel the desire he had hidden within himself for years, unbeknownst to me.

Everything about him was fiery and passionate, but instead of satiating my desire for him, it just made my longing more pronounced.

When he parted from me, he moved back quickly and unsteadily, as though he had to put some physical distance between us so he could make himself stop. He was flushed, color on his cheekbones and in his lips, a dreamlike daze over his eyes. I was breathing hard, trying to coerce the cold air into complying with my lungs.

“What?” I managed to ask, fearing I had done something wrong.

“You have to make me stop,” he said, assessing me with desperate eyes. “Or I’m going to take your virginity right here and now, and I don’t want to do that.”

“You don’t want to take my virginity?” I asked.

Every part of him was tense. “That’s not what I said, cheeky girl. I don’t want your first time to be at a park in Amsterdam while the temperature is below freezing and I don’t so much as have a condom with me. You deserve better than that.”

I laughed, still breathless. “Considerate. Want to go back to the palace?”

He smiled just slightly, tousled and so devastatingly beautiful under the cool light of the clouds. “I’m going to have to pay that driver far more than I was planning on.”