

Chapter 191 Sugar-coat

Alexander

I rested back against the headboard and continued to rub the baby’s tiny back in soft circles, trying to calm her down. I wished I could hold Fiona, too; she clearly also needed comfort. But the wailing child had to take priority, and anyway Fiona was insisting that she was fine, despite the obvious pallor of her skin and the heavy sweat that had her black nightgown clinging, sodden, to her trembling body.

Even over the baby’s cries, I could hear my wife’s heart pounding in an adrenaline-fueled riot rhythm.

BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM.

She got up and closed herself into the bathroom.

Lexi’s wails began to subside.

I took her back into the nursery and checked her diaper. She was dry. It was only Fiona’s mid-sleep outcries that had woken the baby. After a few more minutes, she quieted down.

I heard the shower turning on when I returned to our room. I pulled the bedcovers back; the sheets were just a little sweat-damp on Fiona’s side. I separated the layers to air them out before heading into her closet to find a clean, dry nightgown for her to change into.

I never went into Fiona’s dressing room. Didn’t have a reason to. I had to smile as I looked around it now, just seeing her touch, her personality everywhere.

All the beautiful clothing, shoes, and jewelry were organized so neatly, the tidy space resembled a boutique. The wooden clothing hangers were even hung parallel on a slight, particular angle, with what looked like an exact inch between each. I found her sleep clothes and selected a soft blue nightgown, turned the light off behind me and left on tip-toe, feeling like a trespasser in my Luna’s pristinely kept private space.

She had not locked the bathroom door. I knocked on it very lightly before turning the knob and entering.

“Hey. How are you doing?”

Fiona was just stepping out of the shower with a towel wrapped around her body. “I’m okay. Sorry to disturb the whole household,” she said with a self-deprecating smile.

I shook my head. “Lexi’s back asleep already. I’m just a little worried about you. I’ve never seen you have a nightmare like that before.”

“Yeah, that was strange.” She frowned, looking to the side. Seemed like she might’ve been recalling the dream.

“I brought you something to change into.”

“Thank you.”

I helped her into the nightgown. Tired, she leaned forward and pressed her cheek to my chest, wrapped listless arms around my middle and sighed.

I hugged her and planted a kiss on the top of her head. Then I swept her body up into my arms and carried her back to bed.

Fiona was my rock. But moments like this reminded me that even though she always maintained a strong exterior, the stress of our circumstances was indeed taking a toll on my perfect Luna.

“Are you nervous about seeing him?”

Fiona pursed her lips and nodded. I noted with curiosity that she pulled the long sleeves of her knit sweater down over her hands before adjusting the baby on her lap.

“It’s just the nature of his illness,” she said quietly, meeting my eyes. “He will only get worse and worse from this point on.”

My wife had never been one to sugar-coat anything, but this statement, especially delivered so calmly, felt downright morbid. It was true, though. There was no recovery from dementia.

It was necessary. Fiona’s brutal stoicism. It was how she got through moments like this.

Her grandfather had been in the middle of an anxious quarrel with a nurse when we arrived at his door. We waited in the hall since we had Lexi with us, and spoke with the nurse on her way out. The polite woman told us the old man was not having a great day so far and warned he may not be the best of company, but assured Fiona we were welcome to go in and give him a try.

There was no surprise when the old man looked into my eyes and showed no glimmer of recognition. He had been hit-or-miss with knowing who I was for as long as we’d been acquainted. But when he gave the same look of non-recognition to Fiona, and even asked her who she was, my heart broke for my Luna.

Her face betrayed no emotion as she calmly identified herself to her confused grandfather and then introduced me and Alexis as well. But I saw her breathing change and knew she was summoning deep strength in order to keep so cool in such a painful context.

We remained standing near the door for a while longer. I followed Fiona’s lead on this. It dawned on me that she was trying to avoid frightening the old man by approaching his bedside before he remembered that he knew us.

Things lightened a bit when, after a few more minutes of Fiona’s calm reassurances, finally the tired old man called her by name and waved us over to him with a smile. But when my wife attempted once more to tell her grandfather that the infant in her arms was his great-granddaughter, he only squinted at her for a few long moments and then asked, “Whose daughter is she? My niece, Fiona’s?”

Fiona held the baby and I held Fiona as we exited the building. I kept an arm around her shoulders, attempting to push a comforting energy into her body from mine by sheer force of will, if such a thing may perhaps be possible.

We’d earned some moderate attention on our way up to her grandfather’s room. But apparently while we were in there, word had spread about our presence, and by the time we reached the ground floor the halls and lobby were packed with onlookers who stood and watched us shamelessly, some even holding up their cell phones to take photos or videos of us as we passed by.

It took a great deal of restraint to not tell them off. But I was trained well enough to know that a King must be cautious of his public appearance. We hurried out of the building and into our waiting car, and both sighed with relief once the doors closed behind us and we could enjoy the relative privacy of heavily tinted windows.

Fiona clipped and pulled the straps of Lexi’s car seat into place with expert ease. I watched her fingers while she worked, trying to study the small movements. Now was no time to practice the task for myself, though; I let my wife secure the baby and confirm with the driver when she was sure we were ready to go.

“That was intense,” Fiona said, shaking her head.

I wasn’t sure if she meant the visit with her grandfather or the pressing crowd of photo-taking bystanders that had followed us out of the building. Probably both.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

“You know, I was planning on treating you to a surprise this morning.”

Fiona looked over at me, a small smile curling her lips for the first time all day. “Oh? What kind of surprise?”

“One that I am now thinking you may not actually like.”

She laughed, snorting, then covered her mouth with her hand to force herself to stop. “Okay. Well, what was it going to be?”

“Brunch out at a beautiful, fancy restaurant. I made us reservations. I’d been thinking it could be refreshing to get out of the palace and do something different, have a first outing together as a family. But I don’t know, after seeing the way people were following us around back there, I’m getting the feeling that an afternoon out in public may not be the relaxing treat I was imagining.”

“Ah. Hm.” Fiona agreed with an eyebrow thoughtfully. “That was a nice idea, Alex. Thank you. But I believe you’re right. With us having been on TV lately, I suppose I should have expected we’d be recognized more. And since we have the baby with us, yes, I think I would prefer just to get home now. I don’t like the idea of people taking photos of her.”

I agreed with her about that. I communicated our change of plans to the driver.

And returned to the drawing board in my mind, trying to think of something else I could do for my loving, giving Luna today, to show her how much I appreciated her.