

#Chapter 8 A gift from the king

I closed my eyes, bracing for pain or more yelling. I heard a loud crack and a shriek of pain as I tried to get my heart to calm down. Candido's scent filled my nose as I buried my face in the fabric of the back of his suit and breathed.

Candido was here.

I was safe.

I would always be safe if he was here.

When I opened my eyes, a security officer of Team Gamma was standing between Candido and Bella. She was crumpled on the ground, holding her wrist and wailing in agony. Tears rolled down her face as she gasped and shuddered on the ground.

The officer turned his head just slightly, never turning his gaze from Bella. "Will that be sufficient, Your Majesty?"

Bella shuddered and lifted her head. She glared at me through the curtain of her hair that was still a bit wet from the wine she'd spilled on herself. My mother's necklace glinted in the low light as it swung, and she heaved. 1

"I'm going to make your life a living hell, Hedy!" She shrieked.

"For now," Candido said. Candido turned towards me and wrapped an arm around my shoulder. "Make sure to get her

and her parent's contact information and where to send the bill."

"Of course, Your Majesty."

I let Candido get us into the car. He opened the car door and ushered me into it without saying a word. Bella's words echoed in the back of my mind, but they vanished as Candido got in beside me. The heat of his body warmed me, and I sighed with relief as the car began to move.

The further away we got, the better I felt until my mind started to analyze the entire evening. Why had Candido brought me there? The video? Breaking Bella's wrist? What had he been trying to achieve?

"Why did you do that?" I asked.

"You'll have to be specific."

"You could have rejected the invitation. You usually do! You know you're acting way out of character, Candido. You're doing this for me, aren't you? You care about my feelings and want to punish my family for hurting me, don't you? Candido-"

Candido glanced at me and leaned forward. "Call the other car. I'll be changing cars."

I huffed as he turned back to me and met my gaze.

"You're being too noisy" he said.

The car stopped, and he opened the door.

"Don't cause trouble for Team Gamma, Hedy."

He got out of the car and closed it behind him, leaving me alone. I sat back with a huff. Team Gamma was the best security team of all of Candido's forces. They were usually only assigned to escort him.

It was so like him to evade answering my questions but ensure that I was taken care of. I smiled a little and shook my head. When would he just be honest? Candido was always evading conversations by saying I was annoying him or that he had something important to attend to, but he was such a liar. He acted like he didn't care what I wore and bought me expensive, flattering clothing. He said I was annoying and that my problems were my own, then defended and protected me as if I was everything to him.

He cared about me, but he was so dedicated to his cold reputation. Maybe he was just trying to keep me at arm's length. I snickered. If anyone spent as much time with Candido as Allen and I did, they would know that it was just a façade. Yes, Candido could be ruthless, but he could also be incredibly kind.

I still wasn't sure how I'd managed to sneak into his heart, but I was determined to stay there and expand my place in his life. When the car began to move again, I leaned towards the front where the leader of Team Gamma and his second-in-command were seated.

"So," I said. "Are you going to tell me what he won't?"

"What do you mean, Miss Hedy?" The second-in-command asked, feigning ignorance. The leader snorted as I eyed them both.

"So we're going to do this the hard way?" I asked. "Fine. Since Candido isn't around for me to annoy...."

They both knew that I could be outright annoying when I wanted to be. I could talk their ears off with ease, and I had done it before to get information about Candido's whereabouts before. My usual escort, Team Gamma-2, was well aware that I had no problem employing whatever tactic I had to in order to get information.

The leader sighed. "Miss Hedy, please. It was a gift."

I frowned. "A gift?"

"From His Majesty for the start of your school year."

"The dress? How could that party have been a gift?.... Unless ..."

Was he talking about the video?

"You mean the video?"

"It was happenstance that the information came to him. He had us investigate and gather evidence about the scandal."

My heart warmed. He really had done it for my benefit. It

almost made the whole evening worth it.

"He didn't need to do that," I said. "But... I can't lie and say that it didn't make me feel better."

Candido would have known that. It was probably why he did it. One day, I'd get him to just tell me that he did it to make me feel better, but for now, I just smiled, charmed and happy that he cared so much about me.

I couldn't say exactly when I had started to feel that Candido could be more than just my protector over these four years. He always treats her like a naive little girl, but I couldn't help but like it. I was turning twenty in a few months, but he had never seemed like he would ever stop watching over me.

After sixteen years of not being watched over, it was nice, but I knew it had to end soon.

He would never see me as a woman if I didn't start acting like one.

"You're turning twenty in a few months, Miss Hedy," the leader said. "Have you thought about the party you'll throw?"

I wrinkled my nose. I didn't have enough friends to warrant a party.

"I'll leave grand shows to Candido," I said, leaning against the window. I frowned down at the blood on my dress. "Do you... really think he's going to send Bella a bill for my dress?"



"For the cleaning or the replacement?" The leader asked.

"Either?"

"Well, if they can clean it, then great, but if they try and the dress has to be replaced anyway, he's going to be pissed."

I shook my head. What else could I expect?

We arrived back at the house, and Allen greeted me as I walked in.

"How was your evening?"

I winced. "It... was certainly eventful."

Allen nodded. "I've been instructed to collect your dress from you as soon as possible.

I sighed. "Right. I'll get changed."

I hurried towards the stairs.

"Miss Hedy?"

I turned back to look down at Allen. "Yes?"

"I hope I'm not overstepping when I say this," Allen said. "But I hope you can enter your twentieth year with your head held high."

I frowned.

"Despite what His Majesty may say, I know he hopes the same."



I nodded and grinned. "Thanks, Allen. I'll be back with the dress soon!"


I hurried off to my room, turning Allen's words over. Had he and Candido spoken about me? Typically, becoming twenty meant it was about time to start looking for a marriage partner.

Was Candido looking for someone for me? My heart constricted at the thought.

I didn't want anyone else. I pulled the dress off and took a deep breath. It seemed I'd have to work harder at getting Candido to see me as an adult now than I thought.

When I went back downstairs, Allen looked a bit troubled. "Is Candido back?"

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