

My Husband \$Chose Her Over Me Novel

Chapter 21

– Chapter 21

I felt something pressing down on me as I entered the grand ballroom for the royal banquet, my first public appearance since my true identity had been revealed.

Every eye in the room turned toward me, conversations halting mid-sentence as nobles scrambled to bow deeper than they ever had before. The irony wasn't lost on me; these were the same people who had whispered behind their hands just days ago.

I lifted my chin and stepped forward, the emerald gown Marielle had selected flowing around me like liquid forest. Father had insisted I wear the royal circlet of Verdana tonight—a delicate silver band set with emeralds that had once belonged to my mother. It sat unfamiliar but right on my brow, a physical reminder of who I had always been beneath the disguise.

“Breathe,” I reminded myself. “Just breathe.”

The Verloren palace ballroom glittered with a thousand candles reflected in gilt mirrors, casting everyone in a golden haze that seemed to blur the edges between reality and dream. This same room where I had once stood unnoticed in corners now parted before me like water.

“Princess Elara,” a familiar voice called out. “You outshine every jewel in the room.”

I turned to find Sebastian approaching, his ceremonial military uniform crisp and imposing, though his smile remained as warm as ever.

“Prince Sebastian,” I greeted him, genuinely pleased to see a friendly face. “I didn't expect you to be in attendance tonight.”

He executed a perfect bow, taking my hand briefly. “Though I must admit, I'm rather hurt you disappeared without saying goodbye.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks. “I owe you an apology for that. My departure from Verdana was... abrupt.”

“And mysterious,” he added, eyes twinkling. “The entire court has been buzzing with speculation. One day you were the overlooked bride, the next—the hidden heir to Verdana's throne.”

“It wasn’t my intention to cause such drama,” I said, falling into step beside him as we moved deeper into the ballroom.

Sebastian laughed. “Whether intentional or not, you’ve certainly made every social gathering far more interesting.” His voice dropped lower.

The announcement for dinner interrupted us, saving me from having to respond. The crowd flowed toward the banquet tables arranged in a horseshoe pattern around the room.

“Shall we?” Sebastian offered his arm.

I hesitated only briefly before accepting. “Lead on.”

As Sebastian escorted me to my designated seat, I couldn’t help but marvel at the twist of fate. Weeks ago, I would have been among those serving at this banquet, not seated at the high table with the royal family. The place card beside mine read “Prince Caden,” but he was nowhere to be seen.

“Your husband appears to be fashionably late,” Sebastian observed, pulling out my chair.

“As is his privilege,” I replied, keeping my voice neutral.

Sebastian took the empty seat to my left, leaning closer than strictly necessary. “You know, I always thought Caden was the luckiest man in Verloren, even before anyone knew who you really were.”

I felt a smile tugging at my lips despite myself. “Careful, Prince Sebastian. Such talk might be misconstrued.”

“Let it be,” he said boldly, his eyes never leaving mine. “I’ve never made secret my admiration for you.”

The first course arrived, an elaborate soup of wild mushrooms garnished with gold leaf, momentarily distracting us from dangerous conversational waters. Sebastian kept me entertained with court gossip and witty observations, and I found myself laughing genuinely for the first time in days.

“It’s good to see you smile again,” he said softly. “You’ve carried such weight recently.”

Before I could respond, a hush fell over our section of the table. I looked up to see Caden entering the ballroom, resplendent in formal attire that perfectly matched Verloren’s royal colors. His eyes scanned the crowd until they found me sitting next to Sebastian, laughing intimately.

His expression darkened visibly. Even from across the room, I could feel the tension radiating from him as he made his way to the high table.

“Your husband doesn’t look pleased,” Sebastian murmured, though he made no move to distance himself from me.

“My husband rarely expresses any emotion where I’m concerned,” I replied, taking a deliberate sip of wine.

Caden had nearly reached us when Lady Isolde intercepted him, her ruby gown cut scandalously low. She placed a familiar hand on his arm, leaning close to whisper something that made him pause.

“Ah, the viper approaches,” Sebastian said under his breath.

I watched as Isolde guided Caden toward the table, her triumphant smile fixed firmly in place. They stopped directly across from where Sebastian and I sat.

“Princess Elara,” Isolde curtsied, the gesture perfectly executed and perfectly insincere. “How... regal you look tonight. The emeralds are a bold choice, though perhaps a bit ostentatious for someone still learning court etiquette?”

A few nearby diners quieted, ears perked for brewing drama.

“Lady Isolde,” I acknowledged her with a slight nod. “I’m pleased you approve. These emeralds have adorned Verdanan royalty for seven generations. My mother wore them the night she became queen.”

Isolde’s smile faltered slightly. “How charming to have family heirlooms. Though I suppose technically, they’re new to you, aren’t they? Having only recently discovered your... heritage.”

Sebastian set down his wine glass with enough force to draw attention. “Lady Isolde, surely you aren’t suggesting that Princess Elara’s royal blood is somehow diminished by the circumstances of her upbringing? Such thinking would be not only incorrect but embarrassingly provincial.”

Isolde’s cheeks flushed crimson. “I merely observe that royal bearing typically comes from years of training. Something our dear princess has been denied.”

“Yet she demonstrates more natural grace than those who’ve had every advantage,” Sebastian countered, his voice sharp enough to cut glass.

I glanced at Caden, curious to see his reaction. To my surprise, his expression had hardened, not with embarrassment at the scene unfolding, but with something that looked remarkably like anger directed at Isolde.

“That’s quite enough,” Caden said, his voice carrying enough authority that several nearby conversations faltered. “Lady Isolde, you forget yourself. Princess Elara is not only the daughter of our strongest ally but my wife.”

Isolde paled. “I meant no disrespect, Your Highness. Merely conversation.”

“Then perhaps you should converse elsewhere,” Caden suggested coolly. “I believe Lord Harrington was looking for you earlier.”

Dismissed, Isolde had no choice but to retreat, though her eyes promised retribution. Caden took his seat beside me without acknowledging Sebastian, whose eyebrow had risen nearly to his hairline.

The orchestra struck up a lively tune, signaling the beginning of the dancing portion of the evening.

“Princess,” Sebastian stood suddenly, extending his hand to me. “Would you do me the honor of the first dance?”

I could feel Caden tense beside me. He half-rose from his seat, clearly intending to intercept this request, but Sebastian had timed his invitation perfectly. The eyes of the court were upon us, and to cause a scene now would reflect poorly on everyone involved.

I looked between them, Caden’s stormy expression and Sebastian’s confident smile, and made my decision. Perhaps it was petty, perhaps it was prideful, but after months of being ignored and overlooked, the power to choose felt intoxicating.

I placed my hand in Sebastian’s. “I would be delighted, Prince Sebastian.”

Chapter 22

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I couldn’t sit still. The royal orchestra played a perfect waltz, yet all I could hear was the blood rushing in my ears as I watched my wife twirl across the ballroom floor in another man’s arms.

“Your Highness, about the trade negotiations with the eastern provinces...” Lord Keller droned on beside me, completely oblivious to my distraction.

“Indeed,” I muttered, my eyes never leaving Elara.

She was radiant tonight. The emerald gown caught every flicker of candlelight, transforming her into something otherworldly—a forest spirit who had wandered into our midst. The silver circlet nestled in her dark hair marked her as royalty, but it was the way she carried herself, shoulders back, chin lifted, that truly announced her status to the world.

And Sebastian, damn him, couldn’t have looked more pleased with himself if he’d tried.

“Is something troubling you, Prince Caden?” Lady Isolde appeared at my elbow again, her voice syrupy sweet. “You seem... distracted.”

I tore my gaze away from the dance floor long enough to give her a withering look. “Nothing that concerns you, Lady Isolde.”

Her perfect smile faltered. “I merely thought to offer some company. You look rather alone at your own celebration.”

“I wasn’t aware I required company.”

Lord Keller, sensing the tension, excused himself with a hasty bow.

Isolde moved closer, lowering her voice. “They make quite the pair, don’t they? Prince Sebastian has always had excellent taste in women.”

I clenched my jaw. “I suggest you find someone else to share your observations with. She is still my wife!”

“Of course, Your Highness.” The false sweetness in her tone curdled. “Though I can’t help but wonder what the court thinks, seeing the Princess of Verdana so comfortable in another man’s arms.”

Something in me snapped. “What the court thinks is not your concern. Nor is my marriage.”

Without waiting for her response, I strode away, moving through the crowd with singular purpose. The dancers parted before me like a wave breaking against stone. Several people tried to engage me, advisors, nobles, visiting dignitaries, but I brushed past them all, my eyes fixed on Elara’s laughing face as Sebastian whispered something in her ear.

I reached them just as the music shifted to a slower melody. Without preamble, I stretched out my hand.

“May I dance with my wife?”

Sebastian’s eyebrows rose slightly, but his smile remained infuriatingly pleasant. For a moment, I thought he might refuse.

“Of course, Your Highness.” He stepped back, executing a perfect bow. “Princess, thank you for the honor.”

Elara’s eyes met mine, cool and assessing. She placed her hand in mine without a word, her fingers barely touching my palm.

Sebastian melted back into the crowd, though I could feel his gaze following us. I drew Elara closer than was strictly necessary, one hand settling at the small of her back.

“You look...” I started, then faltered. Beautiful seemed inadequate. Breathtaking, too common. “...like a queen.”

Elara’s expression remained neutral as we began to move with the music. “Thank you,” she replied, her voice carefully formal.

“The circlet suits you,” I continued, desperate to break through her icy composure. “Has it been in your family long?”

“It was my mother’s.” Her response was clipped. “And her mother’s before her.”

We moved in silence for several measures, our steps perfectly synchronized despite the tension between us. Around us, the ballroom whirled—a kaleidoscope of color and light and meaningless chatter.

“You’re angry with me,” I said finally.

Elara’s gaze flicked up to mine, a flash of genuine emotion crossing her face before the mask returned. “I wasn’t aware you’d noticed.”

The barb hit its mark. “I’ve noticed many things lately.”

“Like what?” she challenged, her voice low enough that only I could hear. “That I’m suddenly worth your attention now that you know who I really am?”

“That’s not fair.”

Her laugh was sharp enough to cut glass. “Isn’t it? For months you couldn’t be bothered to look at me. Now you can’t seem to look away.”

The truth in her words stung. “I was wrong,” I admitted. “I should have seen you sooner.”

“Seen me?” She shook her head slightly, the emeralds in her circlet catching the light. “You never even tried, Caden.”

We turned beneath a massive crystal chandelier, our shadows dancing across the polished marble floor. I was acutely aware of every point where our bodies connected, my hand at her back, her palm against mine, the occasional brush of her skirts against my legs.

“You seem quite comfortable with Sebastian,” I said, unable to keep the edge from my voice.

“He’s been kind to me,” she replied simply.

I pulled her fractionally closer, ignoring the small intake of breath that resulted.”

“You look beautiful tonight,” I said softly, changing tack. “Not because of your title or your crown or what alliance you represent. Just you, Elara.”

Something flickered in her eyes, surprise, confusion, perhaps even the faintest trace of hope. “You don’t need to flatter me, Caden. The damage is already done.”

“I’m not flattering you. I’m telling you what I should have told you months ago.”

The music swelled around us, the violins reaching a crescendo that seemed to mirror the tension between us. Elara’s grip on my hand tightened almost imperceptibly.

“And what good does that do now?” she asked, her voice barely audible above the music.

I drew a slow breath. “I don’t know. But I’d like to find out.”

Her eyes widened slightly. Before she could respond, the music ended, leaving us standing still amid a sea of movement as other couples broke apart and applauded the orchestra.

I didn’t release her hand. “Elara—”

“Your Highness,” a voice interrupted. One of my father’s advisors bowed deeply. “Forgive me, but the Ardanian ambassador has requested an introduction to the princess.”

I reluctantly let my hand fall away from Elara’s waist, though I kept hold of her fingers for a moment longer than necessary.

“We’re not finished,” I said quietly, for her ears alone.

The corner of her mouth lifted in what might have been the ghost of a smile, and without a word, she turned on her heels and I watched her walk away.

Chapter 23

– Chapter 23 – “Lady Elara,” the ambassador from Eastwind said, bowing deeply.

I offered a modest smile, as the ambassador nodded eagerly before another dignitary whisked him away. I exhaled slowly, scanning the crowded ballroom. Ornate chandeliers cast a golden glow over the gathering, highlighting jeweled gowns and polished medals on formal attire. The din of conversation nearly drowned out the string quartet in the corner.

And there, at the edge of my vision, stood Caden again. His eyes weren’t on me but fixed on Sebastian across the room, who was engaged in conversation with two elderly councilmen. Caden’s posture was rigid, his jaw tight, a guard dog watching a potential threat.

“He hasn’t stopped following you all evening,” a familiar voice said at my shoulder.

I turned, relief washing over me. “Dani!”

We embraced warmly, and I breathed in the comforting scent of cedar and parchment that always clung to him. The man I had known as father all my life, until recently looked dashing in formal attire, though I could tell by the slight loosening of his collar that he was as uncomfortable at these functions as I was.

“How long has he been hovering?” Dani asked, nodding subtly toward Caden.

“Since the moment I entered,” I sighed, accepting a glass of sparkling wine from a passing server. “It’s becoming rather tiresome.”

“Is he worried about Sebastian’s intentions, or staking his own claim?”

I rolled my eyes. “Both, I imagine. Though he has no right to the latter.”

Dani’s expression sobered.

“I’ve been meaning to ask—have the council issues been resolved? Can I return to Verdana soon?”

My heart lightened instantly. “Yes! The final communications arrived this morning. You might be in Verdana for another week, though.”

“What?” I exclaimed. “Two weeks now?”

“Sadly. But I’m glad you will have more time with your husband.”

I rolled my eyes as we moved toward a quieter alcove, away from the press of bodies and political maneuvering.

“And what of your situation?” Dani asked, his voice lowered. “Things with Caden—have they improved?”

I traced the rim of my glass, gathering my thoughts. “I’ve told him I forgive him. And I do, in principle.”

“But?”

“But forgetting is another matter entirely,” I said, unable to keep the edge from my voice. “For years, Dani. For years he watched while I was humiliated, sidelined, and undermined. He knew what was happening and did nothing.”

“He was in an impossible position,” Dani said carefully.

“We’re all in impossible positions sometimes,” I countered. “It’s what we do in those moments that defines us.”

Dani didn’t argue, just nodded thoughtfully. We stood in companionable silence for a moment, watching the dance of politics and power playing out before us.

“Sebastian seems quite taken with you,” he observed eventually.

I couldn’t help the slight flush that rose to my cheeks. “He’s been... attentive.”

“I noticed. Very publicly attentive.”

“He’s nothing like I expected,” I admitted. “There’s more depth to him than court gossip would suggest.”

“And Caden has noticed this attention,” Dani said, his tone neutral but his eyes questioning.

I sighed. “Caden believes he’s protecting me. He doesn’t trust Sebastian’s motives.”

“And you?”

“I’m... uncertain,” I said honestly. “Sebastian is charming, intelligent, and seems genuinely interested in my work. But there’s always the question of political advantage.”

“And if you had to choose?” Dani asked quietly. “Between them?”

I shrugged, watching the two men across the room—Caden intense and vigilant, Sebastian smooth and engaging.

“After another week of staying here will determine,” I said. “I need time to see beyond their public faces.”

A shadow fell across us, and I didn’t need to turn to know who it was. The subtle scent of sandalwood and leather announced Caden’s presence before his voice did.

“Lady Elara,” he said with formal politeness that did nothing to hide the tension underneath. “The Minister of Trade is asking after you.”

“We’ll continue later,” I promised, squeezing Dani’s arm before turning to Caden. “Lead the way.”

But instead of heading toward the cluster of trade officials, Caden steered me toward a side door, his hand firm but gentle at the small of my back.

“What are you doing?” I hissed once we’d exited the ballroom into a quiet corridor. “The Minister isn’t even looking this way.”

“We need to talk,” Caden said, his voice low and urgent. “Without an audience.”

The corridor was dimly lit with wall sconces casting long shadows. Portraits of stern-faced ancestors gazed down disapprovingly as Caden guided me into a small antechamber used for private discussions during political gatherings.

“This is highly inappropriate,” I said, maintaining distance between us as he closed the door.

“More inappropriate than spending the evening flirting with that Sebastian?” he asked, a bitter tone to his voice. I laughed.

“What else am I supposed to do then?” I threw my hands up in exasperation. “You ignored me for years, and now suddenly you’re my self-appointed protector?”

“I’m trying to make things right,” he said, stepping closer. “Tell me how. Tell me what I can do to earn your forgiveness.”

I sighed heavily, the fight draining out of me. “I’ve already told you, Caden. I forgive you. But trust has to be rebuilt. It doesn’t happen by following me around or warning me away from others.”

“But you don’t look at me the way you used to,” he said quietly.

The raw vulnerability in his voice caught me off guard. This wasn’t the confidence of the Prince of a royal family—this was the boy I’d grown up with, the young man who once knew me better than anyone.

“I’m not the same person I was,” I replied softly. “Neither are you.”

I turned to leave, suddenly needing air, space to think. But his hand caught mine, tugging me gently back.

“Elara.”

Just my name, nothing more, but the way he said it like a prayer, like a plea, made me pause. I looked up at him, at the face I’d once memorized in secret moments, and something shifted in my chest.

Before I could process what was happening, he closed the distance between us. His hand came up to cup my cheek, thumb brushing against my skin with unexpected tenderness. And then his lips were on mine, hesitant at first, then with growing certainty as I didn’t pull away.

For one breathless moment, I let myself remember the comfort of familiarity, the history between us, the dreams I’d once harbored. My hands moved to his chest, feeling his heartbeat racing beneath my fingertips.

The sudden burst of cold air was our only warning as the door flew open, crashing against the wall with enough force to shake the nearby bookshelf.

We broke apart instantly, but too late. There in the doorway, expression shifting from shock to cold fury, stood Sebastian.

Chapter 24

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Sebastian’s eyes locked with mine for one searing moment before moving to Caden, a silent exchange passing between them that made my skin prickle with apprehension.

Then he turned to leave.

“Sebastian, wait!” I called as he turned sharply, stalking away from the doorway where he’d discovered Caden and me. I pushed away from Caden’s embrace, not sparing him a backward glance as I hurried after Sebastian’s retreating form.

The corridor stretched before us, my heels clicking rapidly against the marble as I tried to catch up. “Sebastian, please! Let me explain!”

He didn’t slow down, shoulders rigid beneath his formal jacket, hands clenched into fists at his sides. I finally managed to outpace him, planting myself directly in his path.

“Move, Elara,” he said, voice tight and controlled despite the storm in his eyes.

“Not until you listen—”

“LEAVE!” The word exploded from him, echoing through the empty corridor. “Just... leave me be.”

I flinched, taking an instinctive step back. In all our interactions, I’d never seen him lose control like this.

The moment the word left his mouth, I watched realization dawn on his face. The fury drained, replaced by immediate regret.

“Elara, I...” he ran a hand over his face. “I apologize. That was inexcusable.”

I nodded stiffly, stepping aside to clear his path. “You’re free to go.”

But he didn’t move. Instead, he stood there, conflict visible in every line of his body. “What I saw—”

“What you saw,” I interrupted, newfound anger bubbling up, “was none of your concern.”

“None of my—” he began, incredulous.

“Yes,” I cut him off again, words tumbling out faster than I could consider them. “I am not yours, Sebastian. I never claimed to be. I’m still legally married to Caden, whether you like that fact or not.”

His eyes widened slightly. “I’m well aware of your marital status.”

“Are you?” I challenged, stepping closer. “Because you’re acting like a jealous lover when you’re nothing but someone who has shown interest in me. Someone I’ve been cordial with. That’s all.”

“I thought we had a connection,” he said quietly.

“Perhaps we did,” I acknowledged. “But as long as I haven’t gotten my marriage annulled, Caden is still my husband. And frankly, I can do whatever I want with him.”

Sebastian’s jaw tightened. “I understand you’re angry—”

“No, I’m not angry,” I said, though my tone betrayed me. “I’m simply stating facts. You have no claim on me. No right to burst in and act outraged.”

“I was concerned for you,” he tried again.

“Concerned?” I laughed, the sound brittle even to my own ears. “Is that what we’re calling it?”

He reached for my hand, but I pulled it away. “Elara, please.”

“I’m sorry if I led you on,” I said, my voice dropping. “But I can’t consider you, not now, not even if Caden and I end up divorcing.”

“You don’t mean that,” he said, reaching for me again. “You’re upset, and rightfully so, but—”

“No,” I cut him short, stepping back. “What I mean is that we might never even get divorced because unlike some, he has never raised his voice at me.” The barb hit its mark; I watched him flinch. “So goodbye, Sebastian.”

I turned on my heel, dignity intact despite the emotional storm raging inside me. I’d made it halfway down the corridor when I nearly collided with Caden, who must have followed at a distance.

We stared at each other, a thousand unspoken words hanging between us. His eyes searched mine, looking for something, permission, perhaps, or forgiveness. But I wasn’t ready to give either. I brushed past him, maintaining the same clipped pace until I reached the stairs that would take me to my chambers.

By the time I closed my bedroom door behind me, the tears I’d been holding back spilled over. I pressed my back against the heavy wood, sliding down until I hit the floor, knees hugged to my chest as sobs wracked my body.

I cried for the girl I’d been, and I cried for the woman I’d become hardened, cautious, wary of trusting anyone fully. I didn’t hear the door open, but suddenly arms were around me, pulling me into a familiar embrace. Caden’s voice was a gentle murmur against my hair as he rocked me slowly.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I’m so sorry, Elara. For everything. For tonight, for the past, for every moment I failed to stand by you.”

I didn’t push him away. I’d spent so long being strong, maintaining my composure in the face of political machinations and personal heartbreak. For just this moment, I allowed myself to be held.

“Why?” I asked when my tears finally subsided, my voice hoarse. “Why did you break things off with Isolde? You were engaged to her.”

He sighed deeply, his chest rising and falling against my cheek. “Because it was a mistake from the beginning. A political alliance that my father arranged, nothing more.”

“But she’s here,” I said, pulling back to look at him. “At the banquet. I saw her.”

“Her family’s still politically powerful,” he said with a shrug that didn’t quite achieve the nonchalance he was aiming for. “They received invitations as a matter of protocol.”

I studied his face, noting the tightness around his eyes. “You’ve been avoiding her.”

“Can you blame me?” he asked with a half-smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

“What happens if you don’t marry her?” I pressed. “There must be repercussions. Your father—”

“Will be furious,” he said. “The alliance will suffer. Trade negotiations may become more difficult.”

“And you’re willing to accept that?” I asked, disbelief coloring my tone. “After everything your family has worked for?”

He looked at me then, really looked at me, his eyes reflecting the soft candlelight that illuminated the room. “I don’t care.”

Two simple words, but they carried the weight of a thousand promises. Three simple syllables that undermined years of political maneuvering and careful alliance-building.

And just like that, I was crying again, tears spilling silently down my cheeks as everything I thought I knew about Caden, about us, about the choices we’d made and the futures we’d planned, shifted once more.

His arms tightened around me, and I didn’t resist.

Chapter 25

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I couldn’t pinpoint the exact moment when the tears stopped and healing began, but as I sat in Caden’s arms, I felt something shift inside me, like tectonic plates realigning after years of pressure.

“Do you think we missed anything important downstairs?” Caden asked, his arms still wrapped around me, our tears barely dry.

I laughed softly against his shoulder. “A dozen political maneuvers, at least three scandals, and probably two marriage proposals accepted purely for strategic advantage.”

“Worth it,” he whispered, brushing a strand of hair from my face with a gentleness that made my heart ache.

The banquet continued without us, the distant strains of music filtering through the closed door of my chambers. Here, in this quiet sanctuary, time seemed suspended—the politics, the schemes, the careful posturing all faded away until there was just us. Two people who had once known each other better than anyone, finding their way back to that understanding.

“I still can’t believe you broke your engagement,” I said, shifting slightly to look at him. “Your mother must be livid.”

“Let her be,” Caden replied with a shrug that seemed far too casual for the political earthquake he’d caused. “I spent years trying to please him, trying to be the perfect heir. Where did it get me? Engaged to someone I didn’t love and estranged from the person I did.”

His candor surprised me. The Caden I remembered had always been careful with his words, measuring each syllable against potential political repercussions.

“Caden,” I began hesitantly, needing to address what had haunted me for years. “All those years when you watched me struggle, when your father’s allies undermined me at every turn”

“I was a coward,” he interrupted, his eyes pained as they met mine. “I convinced myself I was protecting you by keeping my distance, by playing the game my mother set before us. I told myself that challenging him openly would only make things worse for you.”

“And now?” I asked, searching his face.

“Now I see that silence is its own form of betrayal.” His voice grew stronger with each word. “I won’t be silent again, Elara. Not when it comes to you, not when it comes to what’s right for Verdana.”

Something shifted in my chest then—a wall crumbling perhaps, or a door unlocking. “I think I’m ready to forgive you. Truly forgive you.”

His eyes widened, hope and disbelief warring across his features. “Truly?”

“Truly,” I confirmed, surprised by how light the word felt on my tongue. “Not because I’ve forgotten, but because I understand better now. We were both pawns in a larger game.”

“I don’t deserve your forgiveness,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “But I’ll spend every day trying to be worthy of it.”

“That’s exactly why you deserve it,” I replied. “You see the wrong now. You’re willing to make amends.”

He took my hands in his, his thumb tracing circles on my skin. “I love you, Elara. I’ve never stopped loving you, even when I didn’t deserve to.”

I froze, the words hitting me like summer lightning—unexpected, powerful, illuminating everything around them. In all our recent interactions, through all the tensions and reconciliations, neither of us had spoken those words aloud.

He must have felt my hesitation because he pulled me closer without demanding a response, just holding me against his chest where I could feel the steady beat of his heart. I returned his embrace, allowing myself the comfort of his warmth.

“My feelings for you have always been complicated,” I admitted after a long moment. “Even before everything fell apart, we came together through arrangement, not choice.”

“I know,” he said softly.

“But we’re choosing now,” he said firmly. “I’m choosing you—not because of politics or alliance or advantage, but because you’re the only person I want by my side.”

I pulled back slightly to study his face, searching for any hint of the calculated diplomat I’d grown to distrust. Instead, I found only earnestness, vulnerability, and a determination that took my breath away.

“You stood against your family for me,” I said wonderingly. “You risked everything—your inheritance, your position, the alliances your father spent decades building.”

“I’d do it again,” he said without hesitation. “A thousand times over.”

His willingness to confront his family, to defend me openly—it was the turning point I’d needed. For years, I’d seen him as a political partner at best, an adversary at worst. Now I glimpsed the possibility of something I’d thought forever lost: trust.

Something resolute settled in my chest. “I’m going to secure a new law in court,” I said, the idea crystallizing as I spoke. “‘The Royal Sovereignty Act.’ No royal marriage can be forced without the consent of the first spouse and the approval of the people.”

Caden’s face broke into a wide smile. “Taking back control.”

“Of my life,” I nodded. “Of our future. No more being pawns in someone else’s game.”

“The council will fight it,” he warned.

“Let them try,” I said, surprised by the steel in my own voice. “I have the support of the eastern provinces, the merchant guilds, and several key noble houses. And now,” I squeezed his hand, “I have you.”

“Always,” he promised. “Whatever comes next, we face it together.”

The certainty in his voice, the unwavering support in his eyes—it healed something in me I hadn’t realized was still broken. For years, I’d stood alone, fought alone, planned alone. The prospect of a true partner, someone to share both the burdens and joys of rule, was almost overwhelming.

He laughed then, the sound pure joy, and kissed me with such tenderness I nearly wept again. This wasn’t the desperate kiss from earlier in the evening, shadowed by years of hurt and separation. This was a beginning.