

## Chapter 1

\*Calvin\*

"Deep breaths, Calvin. Deep breaths," I tell myself softly in the mirror as I try my best not to tug at my tie. Mrs. Celeste and Mrs. Audrey were so kind, but I find that I just really f\*\*\*\*g hate ties, especially this damn bowtie. They insisted that I looked handsome, but I don't even see the point of something like this.

I slide my finger between my collar and neck, trying not to mess it up. I need to go into the ballroom, but I just don't want to. Rob is throwing a huge party before Seth, Molly, and the kids return to the palace. I've never been to a party. I've never been to a real dinner. The dinners at the house here were crowded, and there wasn't much concern for manners, but here... I sigh.

I step to the side and place my hand on the doorknob, taking a breath before I pull the door open and step inside. There are so many people here. So many. There's music and chatter all around the dimly lit room. It's overwhelming.

"There you are!" Mrs. Audrey exclaims, grabbing my arm and tugging me to a large table at the front of the room.

Molly smiles at me brightly as we approach, releasing Seth's arm to come and hug me. "You came!"

"I didn't realize it was optional," I say uncomfortably, glancing down at the former queen who insisted I attend this evening despite my protests.

"You have to get used to it," she tells me, gently squeezing my arm. "You're the queen's brother and will travel with the former king. When you two visit other packs, they will make a big deal of it."

She's right, I realize, but it doesn't make this any easier.

Just tell me if it's too much, and we'll run off and hide. Promise, Molly links me.

I offer her a small, unsure smile. I need to get used to this. Mrs. Audrey is right.

Seth approaches us and hands me a glass with amber liquid and a large ice cube. "It's the kind you like."

I nod in thanks and take it, trying not to gulp it down. This is just so overwhelming.

"Do you remember what you learned about dancing this week?" Mrs. Audrey asks, and I nod slowly, wishing I didn't. "Good. You're mine after dinner."

I tip the glass back and drain the liquid from it, realizing I will need quite a few of these to get through this evening.

We're seated, and dinner is served on fine china with more forks than I've ever seen on a table. I blink down at the dinnerware and glance at Mrs. Audrey, trying to mimic her motions. It's exhausting, and I barely eat from trying to work it all out. I hate all of this.

"Come on," she tells me, tugging at my arm as soon as we are all done with dinner and drags me to the dance floor.

"There's no one dancing yet," I tell her as my eyes meet the empty space.

She smiles. "They'll join us once we start."

I feel my heart rate increase. "They'll see me. They'll watch me," I say softly, but she doesn't let up and drags me right to the center of the dance floor.

She looks up at me with kind eyes as I hold her and place my other hand on her hip as I learned. I exhale slowly, trying to remember what to do.

Look confident, she links me as I begin to move. It doesn't matter if you aren't. Don't let anyone know. I know this is hard for you, but if you want to find your mate, you must be prepared.

"Thank you," I tell her softly as others quickly join us on the dance floor.

"One dance, Calvin," she says. "That's all I'm asking for."

I nod once as we turn. "I think I can do that."

"I'm guessing you haven't smelled her here?" she asks.

"No, ma'am," I tell her with a frown. "I had hoped, but that would have been too easy, I suppose."

"It will be worth it in the end. You're such a wonderful young man. She won't know what hit her when she realizes what she has with you."

I smile sadly. "I'm hardly a young man anymore."

"Your age doesn't matter one bit. You'll find her, and it will be remarkable."

I'm about to protest, but Peter approaches us. "Mind if I cut in?"

I nod quickly and place her hand in his before stepping back. I want to look at someone how he looks at her, and maybe if I'm lucky, she'll look at me that way, too. I walk to the side of the room, making my way toward Molly as a girl steps in my path.

"Hi," she says shyly. "Are you really Queen Molly's brother?"

"Yeah," I say, unsure what else to say. I know I should say SOMETHING, but I don't know how to do this.

She twists her fingers together like she's nervous. Her blonde hair rests on her bare shoulders, swaying slightly with each move. I can't help but stare a little lower at her breasts, which are on display.

"I'm Amy," she tells me. "My Dad's a warrior here."

"What do you do?" I ask, proud that I was able to think of something normal to say.

She shrugs. "I haven't been assigned a job yet. I just finished school and training."

She just finished school and training? She's got to be, like, just eighteen. I pale at her words and blink at her before turning and walking off. Why on earth is she even talking to me?

"You good?" Molly asks.

I shake my head. "She's, like, maybe eighteen. Why is she talking to me?"

"Because you're the queen's handsome older brother who protected her when a madman was trying to kill her family," Molly says with a small laugh. "You're the most eligible bachelor in the kingdom right now. Word will spread, and girls will fall all over you."

I wrinkle my forehead. "I just want my mate."

"I know," she smiles. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

She lifts a couple of bottles off the table and leads me toward a door. Seth joins us, but she stops and turns to him. "Give us a little bit. I'm going to show him my favorite hiding place in the garden."

"Fine," he tells her, pulling her in to kiss her before she leads me through the door.

As soon as the door closes behind us, Queen Molly is gone, and it's just Molly, my little sister who has faced so much but still loves so deeply. She pulls her shoes off, carrying them by the heels before handing me one of the bottles and giggling as she runs down the stairs. This is the way that Seth and Rob took me before, and as they did, she leads me straight into the kitchen.

"Sorry, guys," she calls out. "I'm just here for snacks."

She returns from another room with a pack of cookies in her hand and jogs outside into the garden. We stop in front of an old trellis that once had plants on it. It probably formed a thick canopy at one time.

"It was beautiful before," she says with a sad smile. "I hid here when Seth found me. I hadn't met him, but I was scared and ran here."

"I heard," I tell her, climbing inside and under the sparse, dead leaves. "Seth showed me this before."

She climbs in with me and takes a swig out of her bottle of wine. "You'll get used to all of this," she tells me, motioning at my clothes.

"It's not who I am," I tell her, nally yanking the bowtie open and undoing the top two buttons of my shirt. "Honestly, I f\*\*\*\*g hate it."

"I know, but if you don't find your mate at the first pack, you'll have to get used to this," she says, handing me a cookie. "The packs that have money will do all of this when you arrive. They'll want to impress you so you'll tell me all about how wonderful they are."

"I won't," I say dryly, taking a sip from my own bottle.

"I know, and I'm glad."

I sigh, taking another drink. "With any luck, she'll be poor and won't expect much from me."

I lay on my back, looking at the night sky through the old vines. "I'm nervous. I didn't think it would be like this. I thought I could walk in, sniff around, and leave."

I'm surprised as she lays beside me, popping another cookie in her mouth. "You're a good guy, Calvin."

"People are uncomfortable around me," I say softly.

"You're just a little awkward sometimes," she says gently, as if it may hurt me, but it's not anything that I don't already know. "You were alone for so long. It will get better with time."

I sigh. "I hope so."