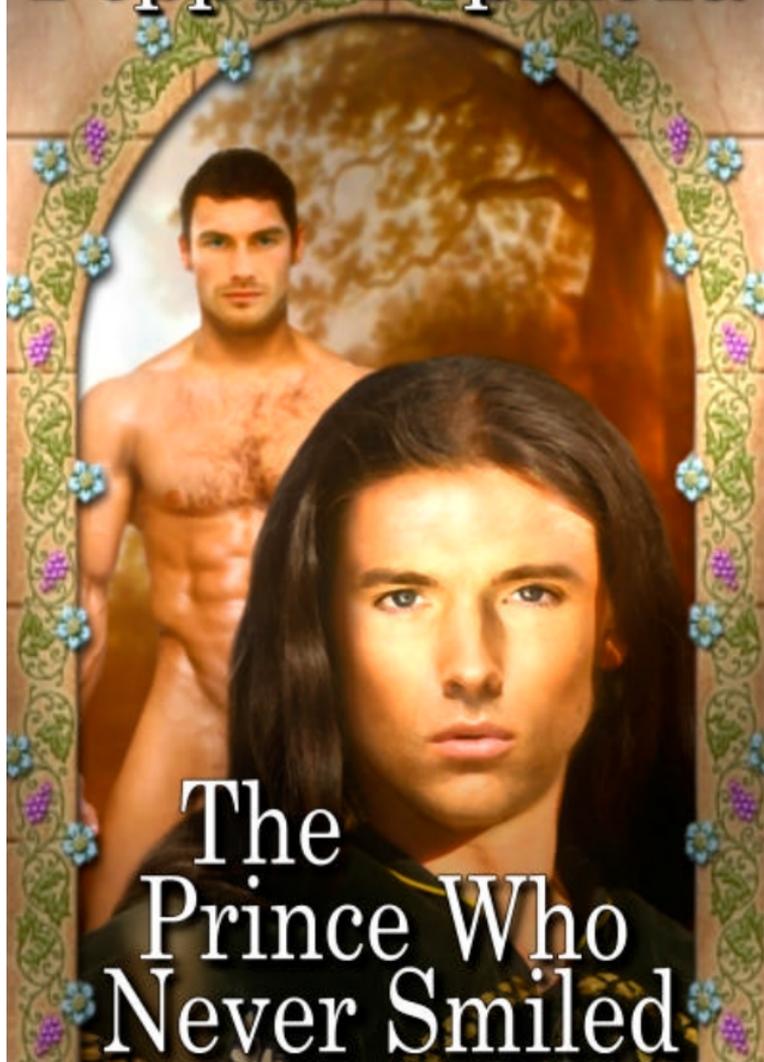


Pepper Espinoza



The  
Prince Who  
Never Smiled

## THE PRINCE WHO NEVER SMILED

...Leo hovered outside the closed bedroom door, torn between curiosity and basic decency. He had the right to open the door and stroll into the room, but he wasn't sure if the stranger knew that. It didn't seem so, since he hadn't once addressed Leo properly, and he didn't bow when they parted company. And the man did deserve some privacy after everything he had gone through. Leo didn't know what, exactly, he *had* gone through, but it was enough to know that he had looked like a frightened, angry, confused, drowned cat.

He closed his eyes, reliving the moment when the man had come out of nowhere. There hadn't been a warning, or even the hint of his arrival. He was just all of a sudden airborne, his arms waving, his face pulled into comical surprise. And then he was covered in mud. The whole event hadn't taken more than three or four seconds. But it had been enough to startle a laugh out of Leo.

A real, genuine laugh. Accompanied by a real, genuine smile.

Leo had been instantly ashamed of himself. What would his mother think if she saw him laughing at the poor man? And the stranger had certainly looked pathetic. It was shame that prompted Leo to pull the stranger onto the back of his horse—an action that would give both of his parents a small heart attack. And it was the memory of that shame that prompted Leo to instruct Jax to take the man to his private

quarters for his bath and supper.

His guilt was almost assuaged by the concessions. But his curiosity was piqued. Feeling the man pressed against his back had made something stir to life deep within him. He couldn't believe that he had any real desire for the stranger—the boy had been shivering and shaking, cold, and covered in mud. But somehow, none of that mattered when he pressed his chest to Leo's back...

ALSO BY PEPPER ESPINOZA

*...And To Hold*  
*Elected*  
*A Farewell To Angels*  
*Fumble Recovery*  
*(Just Like) Starting Over*  
*Maybe I'm Amazed*  
*My Only Home*  
*Peanut Butter Kisses*  
*Quarterback Sneak*  
*The Streets Of Florence*  
*Surrender's Edge*

# THE PRINCE WHO NEVER SMILED

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BY

PEPPER ESPINOZA

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THE PRINCE WHO NEVER SMILED  
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# CHAPTER 1

*Many years ago, in a kingdom far away, there lived a young prince. This prince was very handsome, and everybody in the kingdom loved him. His father, the king, doted on the young man, and did everything he could to make the boy happy. His mother, the queen, adored her prince, and devised new and special gifts for him every day. The subjects of the kingdom brought offerings to the prince, and served at his pleasure, without a single complaint. The prince, being a good man, responded in kind and treated everybody fairly and with respect. But, much to his father's confusion and his mother's disappointment, there was one thing the prince never did.*

*He never smiled.*

## THE PRINCE WHO NEVER SMILED

*Finally, unable to tolerate his son's dour expression any longer, the king sent out a decree. He dispatched messengers to every corner of his country, and runners to all the neighboring kingdoms. The first person to make his hard-faced child smile would earn the right to marry him.*

*Unfortunately for the king, things did not go as planned...*

\* \* \*

“This is stupid.”

“Hush. She's not stupid.”

Prince Leopold leaned closer to his mother. “I never said *she* was stupid. I said *this* is stupid. Bribing women to come to court to make fools of themselves is pointless.”

The queen brought the fan up to her mouth, shielding it from view. “You know that your father is not going to change his mind about this. He just wants to see you happy.”

Leo believed his mother, but that didn't make the situation any less ridiculous. The kind thing to do—the merciful thing—would be to send the girl back to her home with a couple of pieces of gold. Some sort of token payment for her effort and the time she spent traveling to the castle. He had to give her credit for originality—he had never seen such a risqué puppet show before, but he certainly did not want to watch something so explicit in front of his mother and everybody else in the long hall. It was all he could do to keep the grimace from his face.

As far as he knew, this was not the last young woman waiting for her turn to perform. Leo liked to make a game of

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predicting the new extremes the girls would go to. If the morning brought naughty puppets, what could the afternoon bring? He hoped it wasn't anything that would embarrass his mother or cause the girl injury.

"I'm not feeling well, Mother."

"Leo..."

"I think something from this morning disagreed with me."

"You can't leave in the middle of her...performance."

"Is this only the middle?"

Celeste sighed. "You'll wait until she's finished. It's only polite."

"I'm not interested in being rude, Mother. But she's not going to make me smile. We're wasting everybody's time."

"How do you know that?" Celeste shook her head. "Okay, well *she* probably won't, but that doesn't mean the entire day is a waste."

"I'm to go hunting tomorrow. If I can't prepare, then the whole day *is* wasted."

"Fine. You may leave when she's done."

Winning the small victory didn't actually make Leo feel better. His mother tried to hide it, but it was clear that she did consider the day wasted, and she was disappointed. As a child, sensing there was something amiss, he had tried to smile for her. Repeatedly. The result had never been what he would call a stunning success. Once, he had reduced her to tears over it.

He heard the servants whisper of a deformity. Something wrong with him. Something that twisted his face in a permanent frown. The more superstitious servants used a

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different word. *Curse*. Somebody had put a curse on King William's only son. A witch wanted to destroy the throne. The rumors didn't bother him now, but as a child, they had been devastating. More than once he had been sure his mother would send him away and never let him return home.

The girl refused to make eye contact with him. This was not uncommon. Most people were too shy, too respectful, too intimidated, to meet the eye of royalty. But the puppeteer's tendency went beyond that. She would acknowledge the Queen with a shy smile and a bob of her head. Her eyes would roam the wide hall, searching for response and laughter. But as soon as those eyes fell on him, she would glance away quickly. As though she could not even stand the sight of him.

Nerves? Or something else?

His father going to the extremes to find somebody who could make Leopold smile only made the rumors worse. *That's how they break the curse. Mark my words, if he doesn't smile before he turns twenty-five, this kingdom is doomed.* It was difficult to know which came first, the rumor or the King's stubborn demands for a smile, for a laugh, for anything besides a dour expression.

Leo didn't think such a little thing was cause for so much fuss. But the fuss would continue as long as he stayed in the castle. Which was why he had made arrangements to spend three months at the hunting lodge. He needed a break, and he suspected his mother felt the same.

"She is a pretty girl, though."

Leo cast a side-long look at Celeste. "So?"

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“Well, she’s got the look of a princess, don’t you think?”

“She’s rather plain, don’t you think?”

“Plain. Her? I’m beginning to think your real problem might be your vision, son.”

There was nothing wrong with his vision. He saw the girl quite clearly. Hair like straw—the color and the consistency. Blue eyes that looked more than a little vacant. He didn’t know from firsthand experience, but he suspected that a sense of humor required genuine intelligence, and she seemed far too reliant on the shock of the physical body.

“Could you imagine trying to hold a conversation with her? I suspect it would be quite difficult.”

“So?”

“What do you mean, so?”

“You don’t marry for conversation, son.”

“I’m going to need more than just a pretty face when I look for a suitable bride.”

“If one makes you smile, you’re not going to have a choice on attributes.”

“None shall.”

“I’m beginning to think you’re just being contrary.”

“What? Do you think I enjoy this?” When Celeste didn’t answer his question, Leo turned to face her fully, unmindful of how rude that was to the puppet girl. “I don’t enjoy this. I don’t want anything to do with this.”

“It seems to me that you could have ended all of this a long time ago.”

“I’ve tried.”

## *THE PRINCE WHO NEVER SMILED*

“Yes, I know you have.”

The hint of sarcasm was barely perceptible, but it was still enough to sting. Especially since his mother had always possessed an endless patience with him. Did she really think he was just trying to attract more attention? He was already the prince; he didn’t need an excuse to garner more attention.

“I just don’t know why you can’t be happy,” Celeste added.

“I never said that I wasn’t happy. Not once.”

“You’re right. I’m not...I’m not feeling myself today, son. I think...I think I might retire to my chambers.”

Leo immediately jumped to his feet and offered his hand. “I’ll walk with you.”

“No, no, you don’t have to do that. You should stay here and...”

“I should help take care of my mother and queen,” Leo said, softly but firmly. Behind him, the puppet show continued, but he didn’t care if the girl had an epic show planned that would last well into the night. His only concern was Celeste.

“It must be this heat,” she murmured, accepting Leo’s hand. As soon as she stood, the entire hall fell into silence, except for the sound of clothes rustling as everybody rushed to take their feet.

Leo folded his arm around his mother’s and turned to address the court. “Ladies and gentlemen, please excuse us. The Queen feels ill, and she wishes me to escort her to her chambers.”

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Disappointment flashed across the puppeteer's face, and for the first time, she met his eyes. He nodded, and a smile broke across her face, like the sun bursting through the clouds. It was pure and betrayed the sort of contentment that Leo was sure he had never felt. Did she smile like that just because he acknowledged her? Could smiles be bought so cheaply?

"Do you want me to go get Father?"

"No, no, the King does not need to attend to me. I just need to rest."

"Perhaps I should call Kipling?"

"He'll just bleed me."

"If you have bad blood..."

"I don't like the sight of it. It makes me feel worse. I just need to rest and have something cool to drink."

"I haven't upset you, have I?"

Celeste squeezed his hand. "No, of course not. I'm sorry I was short-tempered with you."

"I've given you reason to be."

"No." They stopped outside her chambers, and she cupped his cheek. "I know that you're happy...and you're a good son. You'll make a good king some day, too. But I still worry about you. That's my right as a mother."

Sunlight slanted through the window high above her head. It had a sort of washed-out look, but it was bright enough to illuminate her face. There were wrinkles that Leo swore were never there before. Her blue eyes, once so stunning songs were written in their honor, were faded now and clouded. She never complained about her sight, but he suspected things

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weren't as sharp as they once were. Most of her long gold hair had turned white.

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'd like to see you off tomorrow."

"I plan to leave early."

"Then I'll be up early."

"I won't leave until you bid me farewell," Leo promised, bending to kiss her cheek.

Celeste turned to her lady-in-waiting. "Make sure it's known that I'm not to be disturbed." With that final declaration, she took her leave of Leo and ducked into her chambers.

"Excuse me, your highness?"

Leo turned on his heel. "Yes?"

The servant bent low at the waist. "There are still several young ladies waiting for an audience, sir."

"Are they all waiting to make me smile, Jax?"

"Yes, your highness."

"Give them each a piece of gold for their troubles, and send them home. Go on."

Jax turned to hurry back to the main hall, leaving Leo in blessed, albeit temporary, silence. He wished he could leave for the hunting lodge at that moment, without all the pomp and circumstance. He needed his man, his horse, his dogs, and his bow. He didn't need to leave the castle with a parade of carriages and servants stretching behind him. Especially since the lodge was only a two-day ride by carriage, and even faster if he was just on his horse.

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“Excuse me, your highness?”

Leo didn’t slow at the familiar voice. “Yes, Jax?”

“His majesty has requested your presence in his chambers.”

“Right now, Jax?”

“His majesty indicated he would like to see you as soon as possible.”

Leo changed direction mid-stride. It was doubtful that his father had already received word of the Queen’s early retirement, but it was possible that he had noticed the empty hall. The hall that should have been full of singing, dancing, puppeteering, joking, beautiful maidens, there for Leo’s enjoyment—and hopefully his amusement.

“Jax, I want you to come to my office in about an hour.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I want to talk about tomorrow’s trip.”

“Everything is already prepared, sir.”

“That’s what I want to talk about.” Leo paused outside his father’s chamber door. “Be prepared to make some changes.”

Jax’s brow furrowed, but he nodded obediently. “Yes, sir.”

Leo tapped on the door with his knuckles, and he knew his father was waiting just for that because the order to enter followed immediately. He stood by the window—favored above all other spots in the castle for its view. William claimed it always brought him a certain measure of peace. But now, he didn’t look peaceful. His face was set in a heavy frown, and his arms were folded tightly across his chest.

“I will not have you disobeying me, boy.”

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“I did not, sir.”

“You did not disobey me?” William turned to face his son fully. “Then why are you not in the hall?”

“Mother felt ill. I accompanied her to her chambers.”

William’s face instantly transformed. “What do you mean? Is she well?”

“Yes, she’s fine. She just wanted to rest.”

“Are you sure? I’ll go check on her. But first...” William beckoned him forward. “I want to discuss something with you, son.”

Leo inclined his head and approached the desk, waiting until William took his seat before he sat down himself. “What would you like to discuss?”

“Your hunting trip.”

Leo stiffened. “What about it?”

“Don’t sound so worried. You can still go, but...”

“But what?”

“I don’t think you should be gone for the full three months.” William sat completely straight and still in his chair. When Leo had been a child, he thought his father’s spine must have been made of iron.

“Are you asking me to cut it short, or telling me to?”

“I’m asking you to consider it. If you want to stay there for the entire season, I can’t stop you. But...I’m concerned. About your mother.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“Kipling doesn’t know for sure. Nobody does. But she hasn’t been herself lately.”

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“Maybe I shouldn’t go at all.”

“No, no.” William shook his head. “I don’t think you should stay here. Your mother knows how much you love to hunt. It would disappoint her if you elected to stay. But maybe...”

“I’ll come home in four weeks time.”

The quiet declaration brought unmistakable relief to William’s eyes. “Good. Good. Now, there’s only one other thing your mother would like.”

Leo sighed. “I know what you’re going to say. She wants to see me smile.”

“She wants to see you married,” the King corrected. “She wants to know that her only son is happy and secure before she passes on.”

Leo gaped. “Don’t talk like that. She’s feeling a little under the weather. She’s not...she’s not going to pass on.”

“She fears she is. Which is why she’s so...enthusiastic about all the young ladies coming to court.”

“If she wants me to marry, she should give me the choice of somebody I might actually like. Instead of this ridiculous decree that I’ll marry anybody who makes me smile.”

“Oh, I don’t know. You won’t smile for your parents, your friends, or your animals. You don’t even smile when you hunt, which I know you love more than anything else. Whoever makes you smile would have to be a very special young lady.”

Leo frowned. He had never considered it like that. “Perhaps. It would have to be somebody who is more than just a court jester.”

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“Undoubtedly. Your mother just wants you to find somebody who makes you happy, son.”

“I know, and I shall not forget that. But I’ve still got some time.”

William leaned over his desk, the sudden change in his posture adding years to his body. Leo blinked, surprised. “I think you should take the time you’re away from the court to think about these things, son. I mean, really think about them. I trust, once you’ve considered everything, you’ll make the right decision.”

“Yes, sir.”

The king straightened and nodded. “You may go.”

Leo stood, following his father’s command, though he had questions. Like what sort of right decision? Was William asking him to fake his amusement with a girl he could see himself bound to for the rest of his life? Or did he believe that Leo was simply being contrary, to the detriment of his own mother’s happiness? Or was it something else entirely? Was he giving Leo permission to be more pro-active about finding his potential spouse?

He was so distracted by the questions that he forgot he’d told Jax to meet him. The valet was waiting patiently outside the door, his hands resting behind his back. The man had been Leo’s shadow for as long as he could remember, and if there was anybody in the castle he trusted without reservations, it was Jax. Quiet, efficient, and effective, he never gave Leo a single reason to doubt him or distrust him.

“Is his majesty well?” Jax inquired.

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“Quite well. But he’s worried about my mother.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Leo unlocked his door and pulled it open. “Are you? Worried about my mother, that is.”

“I believe everybody in the kingdom is concerned for her to have a long, healthy reign.”

“Yes, I’m sure everybody is. But…” Leo shut the door, locking the two of them in the small chambers. “You can speak freely now.”

Jax’s brow furrowed and he sank into the nearest chair, like the burden of his knowledge was too heavy to maintain. “Amelia told me that she’s found blood in Her Highness’s kerchiefs.”

“Blood? Does my father know this?”

Jax inclined his head. “He requires an update from all the queen’s servants. She has tried to keep things secret, but…”

Leo dropped to the nearest couch and rested his head on the back. “What do you think I should do?”

“Go on your trip tomorrow. You enjoy hunting, and she doesn’t want you to know what the situation is.”

“I don’t see how I can.”

“You could leave as planned and then return earlier than expected. That way she won’t get suspicious.”

“That’s what Father has suggested, as well. But that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I’d like to leave early tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Without the parade of attendants.”

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“Leopold...”

Leo held up his hand. “I know what you’re going to say. Don’t. It would be disrespectful to make such a big deal out of my leaving the castle.”

“How so, sir?”

“With my mother feeling ill.”

“With all due respect, sir, I think it might be more disrespectful to use her as an excuse just because you want to sneak away.”

Leo sighed. “Okay, I’ll give you that. But...can you help me with this?”

Jax looked at him with knowing eyes. “How early would you like to leave in the morning?”

“Before dawn.”

The valet inclined his head. “Everything will be prepared to go when you are.”

“No more servants than absolutely necessary.”

“Of course.”

“You. Somebody for the horses. A cook. The dog trainer, of course.”

“It’ll all be taken care of,” Jax promised.

“Thank you.”

“My pleasure, sir.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to mention the content of his meeting with his father. Jax would always do his best to give him advice if Leo needed it, but he wasn’t sure what Jax could say to ease the questions on his mind.

“You look troubled, Leopold. Is it your mother?”

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“Yes. No. She wants me to marry.”

“Then marry.”

“It’s not that easy.”

Jax left his chair to settle on the couch beside him. He smelled like the spices in the kitchen, and it was easy to imagine him cutting through the great room and stealing bits and pieces of food as he walked. “Why isn’t it easy? None of the young ladies catching your eye?”

“No. They’re all just...”

“They’re not what you want,” Jax provided.

“Exactly.”

“I know.” He leaned closer. “Would his highness like me to come to his personal chambers tonight?”

Leo shifted as his cock began to harden. Jax was a good and faithful servant, and he had been more than happy to help Leo relieve certain pressures. Other noblemen who visited the castle always demanded the prettiest, most buxom girls, but Leo had always been more than happy with Jax’s services.

“If you have time.”

“I always have time for you, my lord.”

Leo turned into Jax’s body and pressed his mouth to the other man’s. The kiss was short and hard, but left no doubt as to what the prince wanted.

“You know that I’ll always be your faithful servant...even when you are forced to marry. For what that is worth.”

“It’s worth a lot, Jax. Thank you.” Leo nodded toward the door. “Go on and finish the preparations for tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir.”

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As soon as Jax left, Leo was sorry he'd sent him away. His arousal wasn't going to fade any time soon, but Jax was only one man. It wasn't fair to expect him to see to all Leo's needs, even if he didn't have anybody else who knew him like that. Who would understand. It was difficult enough to keep his true desires secret from the people constantly surrounding him. How would he deal with a wife?

The thought didn't make him more inclined to smile.

## CHAPTER 2

*At the edge of Prince Leopold's kingdom lived a young man. His family had once been quite wealthy, but now he was desperately holding onto one last plot of land. The family money had been slowly drained away before he was even born, by bad decisions and old debts. Dexter, as the young man was called, knew he couldn't lose his home. If he did, his old mother would die in the cold, away from the only home she had ever known.*

*Dexter was a clever young man. Everybody in the nearby village knew he was far too clever for his own good. Whenever anybody told him he was clever, it angered and saddened him. He wasn't clever enough to save his home or his land. Finally,*

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*he decided if he was so clever, he would be able to do something about it.*

*So early one morning, Dexter put on his best clothes and kissed his mother goodbye. He didn't know exactly how far away the castle was, but he resolved not to stop until he had an audience with the King himself.*

*His journey was much shorter than he anticipated.*

\* \* \*

Dexter smoothed his hands down his chest for the thousandth time, brushing away the dust on the shiny material and trying to push out the wrinkles. Sweat was already gathering at the back of his neck and below his ears, and he feared that by the time he reached the King's court, his entire shirt would be soaked through and covered in dirt. There wasn't anything to do about that, except stop regularly and dab the sweat from his skin while straightening his clothes.

His dog, Thor, followed at his heels, prancing along and kicking up even more dirt. The late summer sun was more powerful than he'd expected, and the heat only intensified as he stuck to the path that wound up the mountain. He wished he could have borrowed a horse. Or even a stubborn, smelly mule. But everybody had their own problems, and nobody had an animal to spare. Every horse, every mule, every ox, and every goat was put to work.

Dexter trudged on with his head down, keeping his eyes on the narrow, winding road, his thoughts locked on what would happen once he reached the castle. He did not expect any sort

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of charity from King William. He barely expected pity for his plight. After all, it wasn't the King's fault that Dexter's father had the tendency to lend money he didn't have and borrow money against crops that hadn't even been planted yet. But he was good with numbers, and quick with a joke, and his mother had done everything she could to give him the best education possible. He had even read three real books—read them until the pages were tattered and the ink started to rub off the paper. If nothing else, he might be able to find a job.

He kept a good pace throughout the morning, but by the time the sun hovered directly over head, his steps had slowed. His shirt was damp against his back and beneath his arms, and hair stuck to his brow and his nape. Thor had slowed down, lagging several feet behind him, his tail brushing against the ground. Dexter understood. If he had a tail, it would have been dragging, too. It wasn't that he was unaccustomed to physical exertion, but the slow, steep climb up the mountain took more from him than he had expected. He had a small bit of food, but he had already promised himself that he would save the bread and cheese for dinner. There was nothing worse than going to bed with an empty stomach, and Dexter avoided that any time he could. His canteen was light, too.

Dexter pushed on, walking until the sun was at his back and he reached the summit. He would have shouted for joy—it was all downhill from there—except the simple, narrow path he had followed split into three different directions. One continued east, one went north, and the other went south.

He gaped, almost powerless to do anything else. Nobody

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had told him that the road would diverge. They had told him to walk east, over the mountain. Did that mean to continue east? What if he picked the wrong direction? How far away could any of these roads take him from the castle? How many days could he lose if he chose the wrong path?

Behind him, Thor collapsed with a heavy sigh, tongue lolling. Dexter wanted to join him. And why not? He deserved a break. This wasn't a race. There weren't any prizes for nearly killing himself on the journey. Unmindful of his clean pants, he sat down heavily beneath a tree and contemplated his choices.

His choices became much more complicated with a crack of thunder. Frowning, Dexter studied the sky. Gray clouds whipped overhead, dancing with blue electricity. The hair on his arms and neck stood on end, though Dexter couldn't tell if that was fear or the result of an electrical charge. Either way, it seemed pretty obvious that he was about to get drenched. And possibly killed.

“Thor, come on. We’ve got to get off this mountain.”

Thor beat his tail against the ground.

Dexter jumped to his feet and whistled.

Thor continued to stare at him with his doggie smile.

“Get up or I’m going to carry you.”

Thor seemed unperturbed by the promise, but Dexter wasn't joking. Crouching beside the dog, he gathered up him beneath the hips and shoulders and put the beast over his shoulders. Thor sighed and dropped his head, at ease with the new position. Dexter grimaced.

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“Oh, I see how it is. You wanted me to carry you.”

He should have dropped the dog, but he thought his pet deserved a bit of a break. And he probably didn't weigh more than twenty pounds. But the problem still remained that Dexter didn't know where to *go*. He might have stood at the crossroads and continued to mull, but another snap of thunder sent him hurrying down the road. Staying east was probably the best idea.

The road went up a final steep incline, and his heart jumped to his throat as he reached the very top. Everything from then on was down. Straight down. “You'd have to be a fucking goat to get down this road.”

Thunder boomed and a tree not ten feet away exploded with enough force to shake the ground. Thor tensed against Dexter's neck, letting out a horrified bark. Dexter tried to hold him, but the terrified dog squirmed and yelped again. His fingers strained with the effort, but his strength was no match for the frightened animal. Long nails went into his shoulder and neck, raising painful welts as Thor sprung from his hold and hit the ground running.

“Thor! Come back! Thor!”

Dexter immediately gave chase, crashing through the woods after his dog and losing track of the road. Limb after limb struck him in the face, whipping back and stinging hard enough to bring tears to his eyes. Ahead of him, Thor ducked and dodged, diverting from his path without rhyme or reason, seeking a relief from the horrible sounds and explosions destroying his little world. Dexter knew he should find his

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own shelter, but the thought of losing his dog, his only friend, broke his heart. He couldn't leave his best friend alone in the frightening, electrified, burning world.

At first, the ground was solid and easy to run on. But only five minutes after he began running, the clouds opened again, and rain sheeted down. The dirt almost immediately turned to muddy gloop, bogging him down, making each step a new obstacle. His legs burned. His lungs burned. And his vision began to blur, Thor's white fur streaking out of reach. Dexter realized in a distant way that his shirt and pants were already ruined, his shoes destroyed, and his bag drenched. Which meant all of his belongings were likely harmed or ruined as well.

"Thor!"

Dexter ran blindly. When he thought about how far away he must have been from the road, it just made him pump his legs harder. If he was going to get lost—if he was going to be stranded in the wilderness with no hope of being found—then he would at least have his dog with him.

But that seemed more and more unlikely with each step, and the tears of pain burning his eyes turned to tears of frustration. How had this happened? How had he gone from dry if a little tired, to wet and exhausted and completely lost? How had everything changed in what seemed like no time at all? Nobody had warned him a storm of that magnitude was possible at the higher elevations.

Ahead, the trees began to clear, giving him a more extended view. Unfortunately, that view didn't include the

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ragged, white fur of his dog. He felt his heart breaking, but he didn't let that slow him. Thor loved him. Thor would return to him, despite his fear. But he couldn't just stop looking. Focused, determined to find his the dog, he picked up the speed, pushing his body beyond boundaries he didn't even know existed.

“Thor! Come here!”

Dexter hit a slick patch of mud and barely had the chance to register the change in consistency before his foot slipped from beneath him. He flew high into the air, and for a split second, he felt himself suspended in the rain and electricity. He even had the chance to look around and realize he had found a new road. The road he had already traveled on? Had he circled back? He realized the rain felt cold on his head and the back of his hands. Most of all, Dexter understood he was going to be very, very hurt when he hit the ground.

He crashed with a loud groan, landing directly on his tailbone. A shockwave of pain went up his spine, and he bit his tongue to keep from crying out. The mud was thick and soft beneath him, and must have absorbed some of the impact—though not enough. He wasn't going to move again. He probably could move, but Dexter decided in that moment that he simply would not. He'd sit there in the downpour, letting the water and mud sluice over him while his dog ran deeper into the dark woods, running farther from safety in his fear. Maybe he would be smart enough to return to the village?

The decision was barely made before Dexter heard the

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unmistakable sound of laughter. Even under the driving rain, he recognized it. Somebody was laughing. Somebody was laughing at *him*. The sound was low and rusty, like the amused man had something caught in his throat. But it was also plain. Undeniable. It sent a flash of rage through Dexter, warming him. Overwhelming the pain and the frustration. Dexter clung to that rage, thankful for it.

Jumping to his feet, he spun around to come face to face with a man on a horse. A large hood shielded his face from the rain and from view. Behind him, another man cradled a shivering white dog in his arms.

“Thor!”

“Does this animal belong to you?” The question was laced with the same rusty laughter.

“Yes.”

The man nudged his horse closer. His features were still obscured, but Dexter saw eyes of the darkest blue, and a long, thin, hawk like nose. “Why were you running? Is something chasing you?”

Dexter shook his head. He wasn’t sure why, but he felt compelled to answer the man. “No. My dog, Thor, was frightened by the storm. He ran away before I could stop him.”

The man glanced over his shoulder, but only for a moment before his attention returned to Dexter. “You both look pretty bad.”

Dexter drew himself to his full height. “Not all of us can afford a horse with servants. I’m sorry of my appearance doesn’t please you.”

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“Whoa, wait. I just meant you both looked soaked through to the bone. My hunting lodge isn’t far from here.”

Dexter’s first impulse was to reject the offer, but common sense prevailed as another crack of thunder made all the animals shudder. Why turn down a perfectly good invitation when he had never been so cold and miserable in his life? His toes were numb, his teeth chattering, and his lower back still ached where he’d landed.

“Thank you. Just point the direction.”

The man shook his head. “No. You’re not walking.”

“You don’t have a spare horse.”

“I don’t need one.”

He held out his arm expectantly. He didn’t expect Dexter to dismiss that offer, either. Dexter didn’t know if his ass could handle sitting on the back of a horse, but the beast could travel faster than Dexter could, especially since his legs were cold and lax, and his entire back throbbed.

Dexter gripped his arm and allowed the stranger to pull him upward and onto the horse. After a moment of uncertainty, he wrapped his arms around the man, sighing as warmth immediately transferred from his body and into Dexter’s. Too exhausted to be ashamed, he rested his forehead on the stranger’s back, struggling for each breath of air. He glanced over his shoulder regularly, watching the thin, older man who held Thor like he had been born to the task.

“That’s my dog trainer, Luke.”

Dexter jumped as he realized the man was speaking to him.

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“Animals love him,” the stranger continued. “He’ll take good care of...”

“Thor.”

“Thor. Right.” The stranger kicked his horse into a faster trot, and the animal easily picked its way along the muddy road. “How far have you travelled?”

“I...I don’t know.”

“Where are you heading?”

“I...think I might be lost, honestly. I’ve completely lost track of everything. Even before Thor started running. I don’t even know what direction we’re going.” Each word was accompanied with rising panic. A fear that was broadcast directly to the already nervous horse.

“Shh. It’s okay. Calm down.”

Dexter bristled at the tone—except it was the horse who calmed.

“Don’t worry about being lost.” Now the man sounded more reassuring than condescending. “I’ll make sure you get on the right track for where you need to be. Tomorrow, when the weather is clear.”

“Thank you. That’s...very kind.”

“Well, I couldn’t very well leave you to suffer, could I?”

Dexter couldn’t respond. The rain and the wind and the speed of the horse made it too difficult to talk. So he ducked his head again, a part of him wishing he could be even closer to the body in front of him. That was the only way to truly be warm. But he doubted the kind stranger would be thrilled to have some wet guy clinging to his back like a child. Even if it

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sounded like the stranger would understand Dexter's impulse.

He wasn't sure how long it took to reach the hunting lodge. On the one hand, it felt like mere seconds passed before he was staring at the lodge that was bigger than any house he had ever seen. On the other hand, his joints ached and his teeth clattered so hard that it was giving him a headache. They could not stop soon enough, as far as Dexter was concerned.

A man rushed out of the building as soon as they arrived, reaching their side before the horse even had time to stop. He didn't seem to mind the rain.

"Jax, help this man."

"Very well. Who is he, sir?"

"I don't know yet. We found him and his dog in the middle of the road. They've both had quite a fright."

Jax put his hand out and Dexter had no choice but to accept his help. His thighs were stiff as he climbed off the horse, and he would have collapsed to the ground if his rescuer hadn't reached down to grab his arm.

"I think a hot bath and a good dinner will do the trick."

"Yes, sir."

"What about Thor?" Dexter asked, looking over to where Luke still held the shivering dog.

"Thor is in good hands. He needs to be dried and fed, too."

Dexter nodded, though he preferred the dog stay with him. Without another word, Jax took his arm and led him through the high, double doors that marked the entrance of the lodge. Dexter still felt winded from his race through the woods, but

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stepping through those doors stole what little breath he had left.

The entry way opened into a one large, central, square room. It had high ceilings—maybe even close to twenty feet high—and the upper ten feet were nothing but windows. Now they were being pelted with rain and illuminated by lightning, but Dexter imagined that the room must have been bright and gorgeous when the sun was shining. Especially during the winter. Directly in front of the door sat a massive fireplace made of gray stone, and the walls were lined with trophies—the heads of deer, elk, boars, and bears.

The effect could have been utterly intimidating, but for the personal touches that indicated somebody really lived there. Moreover, somebody really loved the place as well as cared about comfort. The furniture was inviting and plush, covered in a warm, brown leather. The end tables and coffee tables throughout the room held books, a million different ideas waiting for acknowledgement. The room was lit with the warm glow of oil lamps, and sweet smells of pine, the fire, the leather, and food from an unseen room combined to make Dexter think of one word: *home*.

“If you would follow me, please.”

Dexter didn't want to leave the austere yet cozy room, but he couldn't stand in the doorway shivering all day, either. Wrapping his arms around himself, he trailed after Jax, down a long corridor into a room that was smaller in scale than the front hall, but no less impressive.

“I will bring you a change of clothes and a tray of food.

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The bath is just in the next room.”

Dexter frowned. How on Earth had he already filled the tub? But Jax was already leaving the room, walking with firm yet light steps.

The mystery was cleared up quickly. A series of steps led into a small pool in the middle of the room. The slight smell of minerals told him it was a natural spring. He peeled the clothes from his body and wished the servant had stayed to help with the task.

As he undressed, Dexter became more aware of the injuries he now sported. The cuts to his face. The welts on his chest. The slices on his neck and shoulders. By the time he stripped his clothes, his body was covered in goose bumps, and the open wounds stung with the cold.

Very carefully, he descended the wide steps, lowering himself into the pool. He whimpered as the water closed around his ankle, the whimper turning into a moan as the hot steam surrounded him. By the time he was up to his neck, he didn't know if he wanted to cry from the fresh sting of heat against his wounds, or cry from the relief of the cold. He sat on the bottom step, his chin just above the water, and gasped for breath until his pulse began to slow from its hammering rhythm.

After several minutes of simply sitting, he began to feel warm again. Several minutes after that, he emerged from the pool, wrapping himself in the big, thick towels that were left for his convenience. He emerged from the room to find fresh clothes and a large tray of hot food, just as he had been

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promised. Smiling, thanking the heavens for his luck, he discarded the towels in favor of the loose-fitting shirt and the pants that were made of some thick, unknown material.

Dexter had never been in such a rich, decadent room. He didn't need to touch the bed to know that it would be the most comfortable mattress, covered by the warmest, softest down blankets. The fire burned merrily, and he realized they were burning some sort of scented wood.

He sat on a couch with the food, and exhaustion immediately overtook him. Forget the bed, he could happily sleep on that narrow piece of furniture. But he roused himself, unsure if it was acceptable for him to give in to his exhaustion.

He removed the covering from the tray, and his mouth began to water. Of all the delectable treats offered to him, the soup was the most enticing. One bite told him it was full of the best meat, and the freshest vegetables. The soup alone would count for the finest meal he ever had in his life.

Sighing with pleasure, Dexter dug into the food, his earlier pain, fatigue, and fear dimming into nothing more than a dream as he ate.

## CHAPTER 3

*Once Prince Leopold brought Dexter to safety, he could not stop thinking about the young peasant. It didn't take long before he became obsessed with the man who'd made him smile. The prince didn't know if it was some sort of fluke, or if he could order Dexter to make him smile again. But he felt a strong, protective urge over the stranger, and he wanted to be sure that he was warm and comfortable, well-fed and well-rested.*

*But before he could see to Dexter's well-being, he needed to introduce himself. Which is never easy for a prince.*

\* \* \*

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Leo hovered outside the closed bedroom door, torn between curiosity and basic decency. He had the right to open the door and stroll into the room, but he wasn't sure if the stranger knew that. It didn't seem so, since he hadn't once addressed Leo properly, and he didn't bow when they parted company. And the man did deserve some privacy after everything he had gone through. Leo didn't know what, exactly, he *had* gone through, but it was enough to know that he had looked like a frightened, angry, confused, drowned cat.

He closed his eyes, reliving the moment when the man had come out of nowhere. There hadn't been a warning, or even the hint of his arrival. He was just all of a sudden airborne, his arms waving, his face pulled into comical surprise. And then he was covered in mud. The whole event hadn't taken more than three or four seconds. But it had been enough to startle a laugh out of Leo.

A real, genuine laugh. Accompanied by a real, genuine smile.

Leo had been instantly ashamed of himself. What would his mother think if she saw him laughing at the poor man? And the stranger had certainly looked pathetic. It was shame that prompted Leo to pull the stranger onto the back of his horse—an action that would give both of his parents a small heart attack. And it was the memory of that shame that prompted Leo to instruct Jax to take the man to his private quarters for his bath and supper.

His guilt was almost assuaged by the concessions. But his curiosity was piqued. Feeling the man pressed against his back

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had made something stir to life deep within him. He responded physically to Jax, but that had always been more about necessity than any real desire. He couldn't believe that he had any real desire for the stranger—the boy had been shivering and shaking, cold, and covered in mud. But somehow, none of that mattered when he pressed his chest to Leo's back.

Almost an hour passed before Leo gave in to his need to see the young man, and he knocked on the door.

"Come in."

Leo opened the door and paused at the threshold, an invisible fist squeezing his chest. It wasn't just the beauty of the young man—though he was quite stunning with his dark eyes and darker hair—it was the feeling that the stranger was sitting right where he belonged. That this was *his* bedroom, and Leo was some sort of interloper.

"How...how are you feeling?"

The man smiled shyly. "Better. Thank you."

"We haven't been properly introduced," Leo said, closing the door behind him. "I'm Leopold..."

"Prince Leopold?" The man jumped to his feet, almost toppling his dinner to the floor. "Oh, I should have realized...oh, excuse me, your majesty. I'm terribly sorry. Excuse me, please, sir..."

Leo held up his hand. "No, no. Please. Sit down and finish eating. That's not necessary."

"But I'm in your private chambers. Aren't I?"

"Yes, you are. But that's only because none of the other rooms were prepared for guests. Now, what's your name?"

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“Dexter.”

Leo approached the couch and offered his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Dexter studied Leo’s palm for a moment before shyly reaching to take his fingers. His grip was nicely firm, and Leo had the feeling that when Dexter didn’t feel completely out of his depths, he would be quite formidable.

“The pleasure’s mine, your majesty.”

“Don’t call me that, please. Nobody calls me that. Not while I’m here.”

“What do they call you?”

“Leo, mostly.”

“Leo. That’s weird.”

“Would it be weird if you didn’t know I was the prince?”

“No.”

“Then just pretend you don’t know.”

Dexter eyed him warily. “That could get me arrested, you know?”

“True. But not here.”

“Very well. Leo.” The name rolled off his tongue, and something about the timber of his voice sent a shiver down Leo’s spine. “Would you like to join me for dinner? I think your man gave me too much food.”

“I would like that. Thank you.” Leo lowered himself to his sofa, careful not to disrupt the tray. Dexter hadn’t been kidding. Jax had served a huge amount of food. “So where were you heading?”

“The palace, believe it or not.”

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“Oh? What for?”

Dexter lifted his shoulder. “A job, mostly. I mean, I didn’t think I would make my wealth in the Court, or anything like that. But there isn’t much opportunity in my village.”

Leo could have conducted an interview then, but he didn’t want to get caught up in that. There would be plenty of time later to find out what Dexter’s strengths were. He really wanted to know if Dexter could be somebody who would make him smile again.

“Really?”

“Not unless you’re interested in taking Snee the Goatherder’s job, and he doesn’t intend to retire anytime soon. And I don’t like goats.”

“I don’t like them much, either.”

Dexter’s lips twitched. “Have you ever spent time with a goat?”

“I’ll have you know that I’ve spent lots of time with goats.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard there are some old goats in your Court,” Dexter said lightly.

“A few,” Leo conceded. “Are you sure you still want to go visit?”

“A few old goats don’t scare me.” Dexter sipped at his bowl of soup. “So...all those trophies in the front hall. Did you shoot them all yourself?”

“No. My father was responsible for most of them, and my grandfather was the one who killed all the bears.”

“He had something against bears?”

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“He enjoyed a challenge, apparently. And it is quite the challenge to kill a big bull bear with a quiver of arrows.”

Dexter arched his brow. “Some would see it as a challenge. Others would see it as stupid.” His eyes widened. “Oh my God, I just called a king stupid.”

Leo barked laughter, then slapped a hand over his mouth with surprise. Dexter didn’t seem surprised by the laughter—no more surprised than if Jax or Luke had laughed. He did, however, look worried that he had gravely offended Leo.

“No, no. You’re right. It *was* stupid. He almost got mauled once. Fortunately, he had his entire fleet of servants with him. They managed to stop the situation from getting worse.”

Dexter looked at him thoughtfully. “A whole fleet? Where’s your fleet of servants?”

Leo shrugged. “I told you, when I’m here, I want people to call me Leo. I just need a break sometimes.”

“Do you not like being a prince?”

“Oh, I love being a prince. Who wouldn’t? But it’s just different up here.”

“I’m glad you said that.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m starting to like you.”

“Starting to? As your prince, I thought you were honor bound to love me?”

“You’re just Leo up here, though. I’m not honor bound to do anything except thank you for your hospitality.”

Leo’s mouth twisted. It wasn’t quite a smile, but it was a peculiar sensation. “You’ve got me there.”

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“So, how would I get to the castle from here?”

Leo shifted his weight on the couch. “Do you plan to leave soon?”

“I thought I would continue on my journey tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to leave so soon.” Leo realized he could have just demanded that Dexter stay, but he didn’t want to make demands on the other man. “The Court is a bit...out of sorts right now. My mother is ill. I’m going to cut my vacation short to return before the end of the month. Maybe you could...travel with me.”

“You want me to stay here for a whole month?”

“I could use the company,” Leo admitted.

“Are you lonely without your fleet of servants?”

“Honestly, sometimes I’m lonely with the fleet.”

“Because they’d rather call you ‘your majesty’?”

“They’re not really peers.”

Dexter tore a chunk off the end of a bread loaf. “Who are your peers? Landowners? The mayors who run the villages?”

“No. They’re all my father’s age. Or older. They still think I’m basically a child.”

“It’s because you look so young.”

“Or because they’re jerks.”

Dexter snorted. “Well, that’s a given. Look who we’re talking about.” He bit into the bread and nodded. After chasing the mouthful with a swallow from his goblet, he added, “I can stay. I need a break, too. I think.”

“You think?”

“I’ve never had one before. So I don’t know if I need one.”

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“What do you mean?”

“What didn’t you understand?”

“How could you never have a break?”

“If we don’t work, we don’t eat. You don’t get to take a break from that.”

“How could you afford to leave now?”

“My older brother is looking after my mother. I knew that if we ever wanted to get out of the situation we were in, I’d need to find better work.”

“But you’re not married? You haven’t started your own family?”

“No.” Dexter abandoned the bread for the sweet cake placed on a small dish. “No wife. No children. You need to be able to provide for a family before you’re allowed to start one, after all.”

“That’s the thing about a break. You don’t have to worry about any of that stuff while you’re here.”

“What is this?” Dexter held up the small dish.

“It’s cake.”

“Cake?”

“You’ve never had cake?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never had anything this sweet before.”

“Would you like more?”

Dexter looked around the room like Leo would have a secret cache of cakes. “Right now?”

“Of course.” Leo stood and smiled. “I’ll go fetch more.”

“You’re going to wait on me? Doesn’t that flip the natural order of things?”

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There were other things Leo would like to do to him. It would be easy enough to order Dexter to the bed. Despite his reassurances to Dexter, they both understood who was completely in charge. But he didn't want Dexter to simply withstand Leo's desires, to simply tolerate his touch. And since he had no reason to believe Dexter wouldn't be appalled at the thought of touching a man, he was going to have to keep his lust to himself.

"It might. But I won't tell anybody if you won't."

"Perhaps you should tell me where I'm going to be sleeping."

"Is there something wrong with this room?"

"No, it's a beautiful room."

"Then stay here."

Dexter looked appropriately appalled at the suggestion. "Oh, no. No, no. I can't sleep in your private quarters. That's just...it's just...not right."

Leo inclined his head. "Very well. I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable. Do you like the bath?"

"It's brilliant."

"Then I'll put you in the adjoining suite. That way, you can use the bath whenever you like."

"That's very kind. You're not always this nice, are you?"

"Honestly? I feel a little bad."

"Why?"

"Because I...well, when you fell, I laughed." He watched Dexter closely, gauging his reaction.

"All of this because you laughed at me?"

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“Yes.”

Dexter tilted his head and considered the answer. “Then I want two more pieces of cake.”

Leo lifted the corner of his mouth. “That can be arranged.”

“Thank you.”

With a bow, Leo left the room. Dexter was more than welcome. He just wished he understood why Dexter could do the impossible—make him smile.

## CHAPTER 4

*Dexter and Prince Leopold became fast friends.*

*Prince Leopold wasn't as handsome as Dexter expected. Not that the man wasn't attractive. Dexter was certainly attracted to him, though he didn't know if that was a response to his lanky body, his small, fleeting smile, his hospitality, or his unexpected kindness. Dexter suspected it was a combination of all of the above, with a good, healthy dose of curiosity.*

*For example, he was curious about how it would feel to sleep in Prince Leopold's—Leo's—bed. He was curious about how soft his skin must be, and how gentle his touch could be. Which was a ridiculous thing to think about—ridiculous and*

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*dangerous. Pleasant, though. Despite the fact that he was surrounded by wealth he could barely comprehend, thinking about Leo was by far the most pleasant part of being in the hunting lodge.*

*He had expected to share the house with dozens of servants, but there were only two. Jax and Luke. Dexter could go an entire day without seeing either one of them, unless he wanted to. Despite that, Dexter was left in complete comfort. Jax must have been a wizard, working behind the scenes to make sure that nobody ever wanted for anything. Dexter had never been so pampered, so worry free, so utterly relaxed, in his entire life.*

*Except instead of focusing on everything he had, he obsessed over the one thing he didn't have.*

\* \* \*

Two days after they arrived at the lodge, Leo invited Dexter to join him on the hunt. Dexter agreed, excited to spend more time with Leo. He was also curious about how the prince conducted a hunt. It seemed to Dexter that the man was only killing animals for sport. He would not starve this winter if he did not kill a cure a deer. Would he take it less seriously? Would he kill anything that crossed his path, regardless of the age of the animal? On the one hand, Leo seemed reasonable, and he doubted he would turn into some thoughtless monster once he got a bow in his hands.

Leo had them awake and on their way before the sun rose. He looked good on a horse, even in the gray pre-dawn light.

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He was completely at ease, a result of learning to ride before he could walk, no doubt. Dexter, on the other hand, was far from comfortable. The horses in his village were almost exclusively used for farm work. Nobody had the luxury of riding a horse anywhere. Dexter could count on one hand the number of times he had been in the saddle. He just hoped Leo didn't think him ridiculous.

"Do you hunt?" Leo asked once the lodge was out of sight.

"Do I hunt? Well, I eat, don't I?"

"I just meant..." His brow furrowed. "I guess it doesn't matter what I meant. That was a pretty stupid question."

"Just a mildly stupid question. My older brother used to be responsible for hunting, but once he married, that job fell to me. I try to get as much good, fresh meat for my mother as I can. I think it makes her stronger."

"You hunt with a bow?"

"When I have arrows. Sometimes, I just have a knife and a few snares, for rabbits and other small game. What do you do with the game you kill here?"

"Jax will put it in the smokehouse. By the time we leave here, it'll be properly cured."

"So you actually use the meat?"

"Of course. What else would I hunt for?"

"Trophies."

"We're not wasteful. Besides, we have to eat, too, right?"

"So I guess it was my turn to ask a stupid question."

"Not that stupid. I won't deny that the royal family can be known for its...excesses. I guess mindlessly killing animals

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for trophies would fit in well with that reputation.”

“I don’t know much about the reputation,” Dexter admitted. “News and gossip tend to not make it that far west.”

“Really? So what do you know about me?”

“Just what you’ve shown me. You’re kind. You’ve got a good heart.” *You have an amazing body and great hands.* “Where are we going? A specific place?”

“There’s a salt lick not far from here. It attracts deer. The pond attracts a number of other animals. If we get there before the sun rises, we should have a few clear shots. We’re almost there, too, so now we’ve got to be quiet.”

Dexter nodded. He didn’t mind finishing the ride in silence. That gave him more time with his own thoughts. His own rather heated thoughts. Just because he had never known another person physically didn’t mean he didn’t know what he wanted. He wanted to feel Leo’s long legs wrapped around his body. He wanted to smell Leo’s skin at the crook of his neck. He wanted to feel Leo’s weight holding him down to the thick, plush mattress.

“Whoa, there.”

Dexter automatically reined his horse in, snapping out of his fantasies. A large pond with the clearest water he had ever seen rippled in front of him, and his horse pawed at the shoreline. If Leo hadn’t said something, he would have just walked right into the water.

“Oh, sorry.” Dexter smiled sheepishly. “I guess I was off in my own little world.”

“It’s okay. Fortunately, there aren’t any animals around

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here yet. Come on.” He nodded toward the brush, and Dexter realized it was a blind. A very well done one.

Dexter followed Leo behind the blind, and mimicked the prince, hobbling his horse in place. Leo moved with fluid grace, dismounting from the horse and collecting his bow and quiver. A sharp blade of lust slashed through him, making his lower stomach and groin tight. It was going to be a sweet sort of agony until they finally left the hunting lodge, and Dexter honestly couldn't say if that was a bad thing or not. Being stuck with the reminder of everything he wanted and daren't have was not pleasant. But there was a certain joy to being near somebody who made your heart pound and your palms sweat.

They settled behind the blind, hunkering down to watch the salt lick on the other side of the pond. In the silence, he could hear his own heart beating, as well as Leo's soft, rhythmic breaths. His arm brushed Dexter's, and the fleeting contact was enough to put a strange lump in his throat.

“Are you cold?” Leo murmured.

Dexter was far from cold, though the temperature was dropping, heralding the approaching sun. How could he be cold when each incidental moment of contact sent a wave of heat through him?

“No, I'm good,” he answered, barely moving his lips, his eyes locked on the pond in front of him.

“Are you hungry?”

“No.”

Though he didn't shift his eyes, he knew Leo was

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watching him. He could feel the weight of the prince's gaze on him. What was he looking for? What was he looking at? He withstood that for several seconds before glancing over.

"What?"

"I'm just...watching you."

"Shouldn't you be watching the salt lick?"

"I think you're more interesting."

Dexter swallowed. "You do?"

"Yeah. I do."

"Why?"

Leo brushed the back of his finger over Dexter's cheek. His skin was cool, but it felt good against Dexter's flushed face. "You've been fascinating me since the moment I saw you."

"I have?" Another question falling from his lips made Dexter feel a little silly. "Even though you were laughing at me?"

"Especially because I was laughing at you."

Dexter didn't know what that meant, but he didn't care. That wasn't the first strange thing Leo had ever said to him, and it seemed utterly inconsequential when compared to the fact that the prince was still staring at him.

"I've been...a bit fascinated by you, too."

"Because I'm a prince?"

"No. Because you're...you're you." Dexter couldn't believe he was admitting so much, but he felt safe. Leo had started this conversation, and there wasn't enough light for Leo to see his face. Besides that, he would never lie to royalty.

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Even if he wasn't most impressed by that royalty.

"Have you ever...kissed anybody before?" Leo asked.

The question made his entire body throb. "No."

"You never had a girl?"

"No." Dexter licked his lips, feeling suddenly bold. "Have you?"

"I've kissed somebody. But...it wasn't a girl."

The admission destroyed whatever interest Dexter might have had in hunting. "Did you ask because you want to kiss me?"

"I've been thinking about it."

"Just thinking? You're the crown prince. You should be able to take what you want, right?"

"Yes, I think you're right."

He cupped the side of Dexter's face, and his skin was smooth like the silk sheets on Dexter's bed. Judging by the light in Leo's hooded eyes, he wasn't interested in hunting either. Had all of this been part of Leo's plan? Had he invited Dexter with him in an effort to lay an entirely different trap? Away from the servants, away from the last reminders and trappings of royalty?

Ultimately, Dexter didn't care if this was all part of some master plan, or if this was a spur of a moment decision. He responded the same either way when their mouths finally touched.

Despite his desire for that very thing, Dexter froze. He had seen his brother kiss his wife a few times, and so he understood what was happening on one level. But he had no

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idea how to respond properly. If he should part his lips, if he should use his tongue, if he was drooling too much. Dexter was stiff with his indecision and uncertainty, and that only added to his fear that Leo would never want to kiss him again.

“You weren’t lying, were you?” Leo asked when he lifted his head.

Dexter’s face flamed. “I think I’ve spit all over you.”

Leo chuckled. The sound didn’t embarrass Dexter—he sounded more amused than scornful. “You didn’t spit *all* over me.”

“Just mostly?” Dexter shook his head. “I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“You can learn, though. Can’t you?”

“I suppose so.”

“Good. You can start by relaxing.” Leo ran his thumb over Dexter’s bottom lip. “Just take a few deep breaths.”

Dexter’s chest expanded and constricted.

“Slower. Like me.”

Dexter’s gaze fixed on Leo’s chest, and he did his best to follow Leo’s example. After three deep breaths, his heart seemed to slow, and his pulse didn’t pound in his ears. His earlier shame also began to drain away, prompting the tension to leave his shoulders and neck.

“That’s better. Now, let’s try this again.”

“Okay,” Dexter breathed.

Leo tilted his head, and his lips skimmed over Dexter’s. The contact was light, and anything by incidental. It was absolutely deliberate. It sent a direct bolt of lust between his

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legs, and his mouth watered for more. His entire body ached for more.

“How was that?”

Dexter nodded. “Good.”

“Just do what I do,” Leo instructed, before lowering his head again.

Dexter held still as Leo kissed him, waiting for any sign that he should do something else. Leo held the back of his neck, his tongue tracing Dexter’s bottom lip. After the second swipe, Dexter parted his mouth, automatically letting Leo deepen the caress. When their tongues slid together, Dexter shivered with delight. This time, he didn’t feel so awkward. He didn’t feel anything except the amazing pressure of Leo’s mouth, and the teasing dancing of his tongue.

“Better?” Leo asked against his mouth.

“Yes. Much.”

“Do you want to stop?”

“No. What about the hunt?”

Leo shook his head. “There’s plenty of time for that later. I’d rather focus on you.”

Dexter couldn’t help his pleased smile. And that smile only widened as Leo shifted his attention from Dexter’s mouth to his neck. His lips were warm and not the least bit rough, and he alternately kissed and licked the skin beneath his ear. Dexter began to shiver, but it wasn’t long before his whole body was wracked with shudders. He vibrated every time Leo found a new spot on his neck to suckle and bite.

“God, you’re so sensitive.”

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“I know.”

“Nobody’s ever done this before either?”

“No.”

Leo bit down, applying enough pressure to ignite a flash of pain. But as soon as Dexter tensed, Leo soothed the area with his tongue, calming him, relaxing him with fresh pleasure. He gently pushed Dexter down to the ground, forcing him to stretch across the dewy grass and fallen leaves. Above him, the stars had blinked out, replaced by a light gray tinged with pink. It wouldn’t be long before the golden light stretched across the sky and landed on Leo’s fine features and rich hair.

Dexter was happy he’d get the chance to see that.

“Can I undress you?” Leo asked.

“Why do you keep making requests?”

“What should I do?” The question was light and curious, like the answer wasn’t self-evident.

“You could tell me what you want to do. What you want me to do.”

“I could,” Leo agreed, pulling at the ties that kept Dexter’s shirt closed. “But that’s not what I want. I don’t want you here just because you think...your prince is demanding it.”

Dexter licked his lips, pleased to discover that they still tasted like Leo. He wanted to taste Leo again. “Why do you want me here?”

“I want to give you what you want. I’ve never done that before.”

“What? Give somebody what they’ve requested?”

Leo nodded. “I take. I make demands. When I’m in a good

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mood, I make requests. But I've never done anything for anybody else."

"I guess you don't have to when you're a prince."

"Not usually, no."

Dexter pushed his fingers through Leo's hair, thrilled that he allowed the simple contact. "Then why do you want to do something for me? You barely know me."

"Because you've already done something for me."

"What?"

Leo pushed Dexter's shirt open, revealing his chest and stomach. He ran his fingers from Dexter's throat to his hip, caressing the tight skin with a light touch. It tickled, and Dexter tried to bite back his smile, but he couldn't subdue his reaction when Leo followed the same path with his tongue. He laughed, trying to twist away even as he yearned for more.

"What's so funny?" Leo asked, strangely solemn.

"You tickled me."

"I did. How? Like this?" The tip of his tongue danced over Dexter's skin again, eliciting the same response. Laughter rang off the trees and water, echoing around them.

"Yes, yes, like that."

Leo glanced up, meeting Dexter's eyes through his lashes. His mouth was pulled into a small, almost shy smile. "I like the way you sound."

"Well, don't do it again."

"Why not?"

"Because it tickles! I don't like to be tickled."

"Very well. I won't tickle you at all."

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“You can tickle me a little bit,” Dexter allowed. “But only a little.”

The smile widened, and Leo lowered his head to focus on the area around Dexter’s belly button. That tickled, too, but Dexter only squirmed a little, and managed to keep himself from falling apart into a gale of laughter.

“What...what have I done for you?” Dexter tried again. “It seems like if anybody owes anybody else around here, it’s me.”

“I’ll explain everything later,” Leo promised. “And answer all your questions.”

“I’m going to hold you to that.”

“I expect you to.” His tongue circled Dexter’s navel again and again.

“Is this why you invited me to join you?”

Leo shook his head. “Believe it or not, I fully intended to hunt today. But then I got it in my head to kiss you, and once I did that...” He hooked his fingers over Dexter’s trousers and looked up. “Would you rather hunt?”

“No,” Dexter answered quickly, worried that Leo was being serious. The royal prince of the land had just expressed a desire to treat Dexter’s body like a temple—he definitely did not want to do anything to discourage that. And even if he enjoyed hunting, there was nothing he enjoyed quite so much as Leo’s mouth. “No, I would not.”

Leo pulled down the trousers, exposing Dexter completely to the morning air. It was cool against his heated skin, and the tiny pricks of damp grass irritated his flesh a little. Not enough

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to make him wish he were somewhere else. He wouldn't even move in favor of Leo's bed. His cock was hard, and once free of his pants, it fell back, lying against his stomach. Leo sat back on his heels, his gaze moving slowly down Dexter's body, absorbing each detail.

"You work hard." Leo ran his palms down Dexter's arms, then his chest, his hips, his thighs. He moved slowly, allowing his hands to mold over the defined muscles, like he was savoring every inch.

"Yes."

"I don't mean to sound soft in the head."

Dexter smiled. "You don't."

Leo held Dexter's hips and bent at the waist. Dexter tried to brace himself, but it was impossible to predict just what Leo would do, and so it was impossible to prepare himself. In his wildest fantasies, he never would have foreseen what Leo did next. He delicately dragged his tongue from Dexter's sac to the tip of his cock, licking the entire length of his shaft.

"Oh, God," Dexter moaned.

"Is it worth swearing?"

"Yes. Yes, yes."

"You're so soft here. I've never felt anything quite like this."

Dexter moaned again.

"I don't think I can get used to how soft you are."

As if to prove his point, Leo drew the flat of his tongue along Dexter's length again. Each time he did, Dexter responded with a soft whimper. He wasn't sure if he wanted

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Leo to continue like that—it was almost akin to torture—but when Leo stopped, he squirmed and groaned in protest.

“Oh, I see what you like. I see quite well.”

“I see that you like to drive me out of my head,” Dexter panted.

“Perhaps. Is this too much? I feel like I’ve only just begun.”

“It’s not too much. It’s just...a little...God, I didn’t even know anything could feel this good.” Good seemed too weak of a word, but it was the best Dexter’s mind could produce. He was sure that it wouldn’t take long for all coherent thought to flee his mind. Leo’s tongue was like magic. Some sort of wonderful, unbelievable, warm magic that nobody had ever heard of before.

It didn’t take Dexter long to realize Leo wasn’t just using his tongue. His lips were soft. The side of his cheek was rough, bristled with hair. He held Dexter’s length in place with light fingers, gently applying pressure as he licked, kissed, nuzzled, and caressed every bit of skin from the base to the tip. The thorough exploration gave Dexter a chance to realize more things about himself than he had ever suspected. The sensitivity levels varied. There was a spot just below his slit that made him jerk his hips and squirm. There was a spot near his balls that literally made him hum under his breath.

Dexter whimpered as Leo refocused his attention lower, closing his lips around Dexter’s balls. The heat was enough to melt everything under his skin. His muscles, his stomach, his lungs, his heart. He thought he would melt right into the

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ground. But everything seized, tightened, as soon as Leo hollowed his cheeks and sucked hard on his balls.

“Oh...Leo...Leopold.”

Dexter’s eyes fluttered open and he watched the sun crest above the prince’s head. The first rays touched his trembling body, and the temperature finally began to climb again. High above him, the trees rattled and whispered with a soft breeze. Somehow, staring at the skeletal fingers of the trees made him even more intensely aware of what was happening, of how it felt. Leo was stoking fire under his skin, building up the pressure with small motions of his mouth. His fingers weren’t even moving. They just held Dexter’s length flat against his stomach.

“You feel so perfect.” Dexter sighed. “I can’t believe...”

Leo nudged past Dexter’s sac, seeking out the smooth strip of skin between his legs. Dexter automatically spread his legs wider, planting his heels against the soft soil. He felt exposed, almost uncomfortable, but that wasn’t enough to make him put his legs down and push Leo away. He tilted his head back, the trees behind him suddenly in his line of sight as Leo licked the strip of skin, his inner thighs, and then finally the crease of his ass.

Leo was thorough and unhurried. A part of Dexter wanted Leo to return his focus to his cock, but he wouldn’t dream of asking for that. He didn’t think he could speak, for one thing. He squirmed to get away from Leo’s mouth, he squirmed to increase the contact. He squirmed because the friction was too much to bear, and he needed more pressure because the light

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dance of Leo's mouth made him want to crawl out of his own skin.

"How is this?"

"Good. Good. Good."

"Do you want me to stop?" Leo asked, his words hot, almost as heavy as his touch.

"Yes. No. Leo...I don't know...I don't..."

"Tell me if you want me to stop."

"I can't...I can't tell you..."

"I want to show you something."

Leo lifted his head, and Dexter felt so cold without the contact that goose bumps broke out across his thighs and down his arms.

"What?" He croaked.

Leo wrapped his hand around Dexter's cock and pulled it away from his stomach, pointing the head toward his mouth. Dexter watched, unblinking, as Leo guided the tip to his lips. They closed around the crown, drawing a whimper from Dexter. He would have been perfectly happy with that amount of contact, that level of pressure, but Leo wasn't stopping there. He circled the crown with the tip of his tongue, lapping up the salty liquid on his skin.

At first, Dexter thought Leo just wanted to show him how he could make the sky spin above his head. How he could make the earth break apart and shift beneath Dexter's writhing body. But it only took moments for Dexter to understand that he intended to show him something far beyond that. He didn't stop with the crown between his lips. He sank down, pulling

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Dexter's length deep into his mouth and down his throat.

The heat, and the grip, was enough to make Dexter cry out. He pushed his hips up, forcing his cock deeper into Leo's throat. He swallowed, his muscles constricting tightly around Dexter's cock, and he knew he couldn't take any more. Not another single second. The base of his spine tingled, and then a flash of pleasure erupted through him, spreading in his flesh, overtaking every inch of his body. His cock jerked hard, erupting in Leo's throat before Dexter even had the chance to warn him. His flesh throbbed, each pulse sending more come down Leo's throat.

"Oh my God...oh my God...Leo..."

Leo kept swallowing, and each time he did, new shivers raced through Dexter.

"Please stop. I'm too sensitive..."

Leo let Dexter's cock slip from his mouth and climbed up his body. "How was that?"

"I..."

The shy smile returned. "Was it good?"

"It was good. It was very good." Dexter palmed the back of Leo's head. "Can I have one more thing?"

"Name it."

"I want you to kiss me again. Many times."

"I can do that."

"We don't have to go back to the hunting lodge any time soon, do we?"

Leo shook his head. "Though the lodge is more comfortable."

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“I like it here. Here it’s easier to just...be with Leo.”

“I like it here, too.”

Leo touched their mouths together, and Dexter closed his eyes, winding his arms around the prince’s back. He inhaled, and filled his lungs with Leo’s air, tasting and smelling him. He could taste his own spending on Leo’s tongue, and his cock was still semi-erect, still wet and sticky from Leo’s attention.

“Are you going to tell me why you owe me?” Dexter asked against his mouth.

“I told you I would. Later. It’s a bit of a long story. Tell me again if you thought it was good.”

Dexter pulled back, so Leo could see his eyes. “I thought it was better than good.” He smiled widely. “I’ve never felt anything like that.”

Leo returned the smile. “I’m glad. Now let me get back to kissing you.”

Dexter nodded and their mouths came together again.

\* \* \*

Dexter stretched in the naturally hot water and thought about closing his eyes. But if he closed his eyes, he would fall asleep. He had absolutely no doubt of that. He didn’t want to sleep. The hot water lapped against the sides of the stone tub in a lulling rhythm, and his muscles were rubbery and soft. He had spent the entire day stretched on the cool, damp ground, beneath Leo’s hot, hard body. Which had been fantastic, but he was paying for that now. He was paying for it in his

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muscles and his bones.

He was also lonely. Leo had instructed him to strip and get in the tub, and Dexter had been more than happy to comply. But he thought Leo would be joining him, and as the minutes stretched on to a sleepy hour, he began to worry. It was a vague sort of worry. Had he done something to displease Leo? Had he somehow disappointed the prince? Or had something come up? Would he be given one perfect day with the prince before everything was shattered? Did he even deserve more than that? Probably not. He was feeling greedy already.

Dexter didn't just want more attention. He wanted to do the things that Leo wouldn't let him while they were outside. He wanted to kiss Leo. He wanted to make Leo's eyes roll back and make him cry out with pleasure. He wanted to show Leo what a quick study he was.

"Are you still awake?"

Dexter jerked upright. "Where have you been?"

Leo shook his head. "Oh, I've been talking over things with Jax. Sometimes he forgets his place."

"What's his place?"

"To do what I tell him to do. Are you thirsty? I could have Jax fetch a tray."

"No. No, that's not necessary."

"We should be eating dinner soon."

"Soon? But I'm not really hungry." Dexter tilted his head. "Are you?"

"No. In fact, I was too distracted to be worried about food."

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“Why were you distracted?”

“Because I knew you were waiting for me. And I missed you.”

Dexter smiled to himself. He didn't want to show Leo how pleased he was to hear his own thoughts echoed. “You missed me? You've spent the whole day with me.”

“Maybe that's not enough.”

Leo began to undress, and Dexter kept his gaze locked on the prince's smooth body. Despite everything they'd shared, Leo had never lost his clothes. That had been the only downside to their day, but Leo had been firm about who would be receiving attention, and who would be giving attention. A question hovered on the tip of his tongue, but Dexter decided not to give voice to it. He wanted to ask what would happen after three weeks passed—would that be enough to sate Leo? He hoped not.

Leo sighed as he slipped into the water. Dexter remained seated as he watched Leo swim from one side to the other and back again. His body sliced through the water, hinting at real power. Dexter was sure that he would look like some otherworldly being if he took a swim in the pond. Had Leo ever done that? Dexter would have to remember to ask.

“This water has healing properties,” Leo said, once he surfaced.

“Does it?”

“That's what they tell me. And I don't think they would lie to me.”

“What sort of healing?”

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“Revitalization, for one.”

Dexter arched his brow. “Well, I’m beginning to feel more revitalized already.”

“I hope so.” He glided to Dexter’s side and sat beside him on the smooth stone. Dexter was drawn to him automatically, seeking out more contact with Leo’s body. “Though a part of me still wishes we could have stayed at the pond all night.”

“That would have been very cold. And uncomfortable.”

“I would have kept you warm.”

“Oh, I know. But I don’t know if you would have been able to protect me from a blanket of dew. I prefer the hot water.”

“It is nice,” Leo conceded. “Come here.”

He pulled Dexter onto his lap, but Dexter didn’t resist. He happily straddled Leo’s hips, his cock trapped between their bodies, while Leo’s arousal slid against his ass. The time for talking was over, and they both moved at the same time, their mouths coming together in a hard kiss. Dexter knew that by the next morning, despite the hot bath, his body would be a testament to the hours they spent together. Bruises and scrapes, love marks, teeth marks, swollen lips. Leo could be unbelievably gentle, but he wasn’t afraid to get a bit rough, either.

“There’s still one more thing I want to do,” Leo said against his mouth.

Dexter didn’t care what it was, as long as the hard kisses didn’t stop. “Yes?”

He smoothed his hand down Dexter’s spine, sliding under

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the water to cup his ass. Leo pulled at the flesh, his fingertip seeking out Dexter's entrance. "I want to be inside of you."

Dexter lifted his head. "I don't know if...I don't know if I can."

"Why not?"

Leo sounded more concerned than demanding, but Dexter still felt uncomfortably shy. "Because it...it could hurt."

"I won't hurt you."

"I know you wouldn't...not on purpose. But still...that's..." Dexter floundered, afraid that he could offer no explanation that would satisfy Leo. If Leo wanted to do it, Dexter couldn't stop him. And there was always the reminder in the back of his head that he couldn't legally, or morally, deny Leo anything. Not to mention physically and emotionally.

"Then I won't do it."

"But you want to."

"I want you to feel good. That's what I want. Can I try something?"

Dexter nodded. He trusted Leo, implicitly. Even so, he caught his breath as Leo teased at his pucker, pushing his fingertip past the tight opening.

"Just relax. I know a way that'll make you feel good. Somebody showed me once."

Dexter laughed nervously. "I'm glad somebody's shown you all this stuff. I would have never figured out half of it."

Leo shook his head. "That's not true. People have been figuring it out since the beginning of time. Now...relax...or

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this won't work."

Leo pushed deeper, and a sudden, sharp pain jumped up his back. Dexter resisted yelping and squirming to get away from the touch. "That hurt."

"I'm sorry. It won't hurt for long, I promise."

"But that was..."

"I promise," Leo repeated, his voice low, his eyes solemn.

Dexter swallowed hard. Already the pain was fading, and soon it would be nothing more than a memory. He nodded. "Okay. Just...just go slow."

"I will. Remember to relax."

It was difficult to relax. Dexter wished Leo would understand that. It was difficult to relax when everything Leo did wound him tighter and tighter. It was difficult to relax when his body ached for some nameless, boundless, undefined *more*. And the only person who could give him *more* was Leo. But he forced himself to take deep breaths, willing the tension from his muscles as a new sort of pain erupted through him. It made the back of his eyes tingle, but he didn't try to pull away, even as Leo worked his finger deeper and deeper into his passage. Eventually, the sharp discomfort dulled to a warm throb, which wasn't so unpleasant at all.

Leo must have sensed the moment Dexter relaxed. His arm tightened around his waist, and the hot water helped keep Dexter's thighs relaxed. "There's a spot...it's unlike anything you've ever felt."

Dexter had a hard time believing that. Especially after Leo had spent an entire day working Dexter over with his mouth.

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“Do you believe me?” Leo asked.

“I don’t know.”

Leo crooked his finger, his finger pushing against...something. Dexter didn’t know. As soon as Leo applied pressure, the world completely melted away. Everything ceased to exist except Leo’s solid body and his finger and the warm embrace of water.

“Leo...Leo...Leo...”

The pressure suddenly disappeared. “How was that?”

“More...please...”

Leo smiled broadly. “That’s what I thought you’d say.”

The pressure returned, and Dexter cried out. Once he shouted, he couldn’t stop. Water splashed around them as he jerked and kicked in response to Leo’s relentless finger. He kept one arm around Dexter, holding him in place, and he occasionally whispered reassurances, reminding him to stay relaxed, to keep still.

A steady ache began in his balls. A wild sort of throbbing that spread through him, finding focal points behind his eyes, and at the bottoms of his feet. He wanted to beg Leo not to stop, but he knew the words were entirely unnecessary. If there was one thing he’d learned about Leo, it was that he knew how to see something through to the end.

“Please, no,” Dexter gasped, when Leo took his finger from the spot.

“Shh. I’m not going to stop.”

“Please, just...”

“I’m not going to stop,” Leo repeated, crooking his finger

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again.

Dexter dropped his head back, shouting from pleasure. Shouting for release. His eyes still throbbed, and his mouth prickled and tingled for attention. His sac pulled tight, like his balls were trying to tuck back into his body. He began moving his hips without thought, unconsciously slamming backward, fucking himself on Leo's finger. When he finally dropped his chin forward again, he noticed in a distant, weak way that Leo was still smiling.

He didn't know how much pressure he could possibly tolerate. Dexter only knew that he wanted more. He became quite certain that he would never get enough. He could take and take and take, and it would never be enough. It was Leo's fault for unleashing this wanton greed. Leo's fault for making him shout his pleasure, shout his demands for more, shout until his throat hurt and even that wasn't enough.

Dexter thought Leo would use his free hand to stroke his cock. That was the only logical way to end this torture. He needed Leo to stroke his cock, to apply just the right amount of heat and pressure around his shaft. Otherwise, he feared, he would be left writhing and begging on Leo's hand until he simply broke. Or until Leo forced him to stop. And if Leo forced him to stop, Dexter didn't know if he could bear it.

"I want feel you come around me," Leo said, the words low and throaty.

"I can't..."

"Just come...Dex...I need to feel it."

Dexter wanted to protest again. But the pleasure was

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enough to make his brain shut down. He had nothing to focus on, except Leo's demand—his plea. "Just...touch me."

"No. You don't need that."

Dexter disagreed. He braced himself on Leo's shoulders, and his head dropped back again. He wished there was more than just a single finger in his passage. He wished there was more pressure, something larger pounding into that secret spot he had never, ever suspected. Did other people know about this? They must, and yet, Dexter thought if anybody did know about how wonderful this felt, nobody would ever accomplish anything. They would spend all their time aiming for higher and higher peaks of pleasure.

"Do it, Dexter. I want to hear you scream."

Something about those words finally unlocked Dexter's body. He did scream—a loud, almost primal sound that echoed off the stone and the water. His cock jerked violently, shooting impossibly hot come into the water. He didn't stop rocking against Leo's hand, though. He was so sensitive that the slightest contact made him whimper and shudder, but he still craved it. Still enjoyed it.

"Dexter..."

"Hmm?"

"It'll be better when it's my cock."

Dexter's eyes slowly focused and he met Leo's gaze. "So...this was a trick?"

"A good one, wasn't it?"

"A great one, actually." Dexter took a deep breath. "Okay, I think I can handle it. But not here."

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“No, not here. In my bed.”

“I’m still waiting for you to explain all of this to me.”

Leo slid his finger from Dexter’s body and locked his hands in the small of Dexter’s back. “I promised you I will. But is it so hard to believe that I could want to do something for you?”

“Not...not anymore. I’m just curious, I guess. I mean...this is all a little much. You’re doing things that I never even conceived of.”

“I can give you the short version. If you want.”

“I’ll take that for now.”

Leo touched his brow to Dexter’s. “I’m doing this because you make me happy.”

“I do? Me, personally?”

“You personally.”

“But I haven’t done anything.”

Leo shrugged. “Maybe that’s just it. Maybe you don’t have to *do* anything. Maybe you just have to *be*.”

“I think everything you’ve done has fried my brain, because I’m not sure that makes sense.”

“It’ll make more sense later.” Leo caught Dexter’s bottom lip and sucked on it. “Come on. I want to get you to bed.”

Dexter nodded. He wanted that, too.

\* \* \*

Dexter was definitely a farm boy. Leo was familiar with the body-type. Thick and strong. As sturdy and constant as the land that they worked, and loved. Dexter’s body seemed to

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hold a multitude of surprises and delights, but Leo found he got the most pleasure out of simply looking at Dexter's striking form.

He stroked himself slowly, spreading thick oil from the base to the tip of his cock. Dexter was already stretched and slicked, and he watched Leo with heavy, curious eyes. He was willing to do whatever Leo told him to do, ready to give whatever Leo asked of him. Nothing that Leo wasn't already used to—except it was nothing like what Leo was used to. Because for once, he wanted to do all the giving. He wanted to serve. He wanted Dexter to know all the pleasure that his body had to offer.

“This is probably going to hurt a little,” Leo warned, kneeling on the bed between Dexter's thighs.

“I know.”

“But it's like before...it'll stop hurting.”

“I know.”

“Here...” He pushed Dexter's legs up until his feet were pointed toward the ceiling. “Hold yourself up.”

Dexter frowned, but he gripped his thighs and brought his feet back, until they were almost over his shoulders. His hole was stretched, glistening in the light. Leo could already feel the warmth swallowing him, gripping him, holding him in place. Dexter's eyes were wide, his lips parted, his attention still focused on Leo.

“Is that comfortable?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“It'll make things easier,” Leo promised. “That's how it

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was for me.”

“You let somebody do this to you?”

“I was curious, and I trust him.”

“Did you like it?”

“I did. I think you will, too. But if you don’t...tell me, okay?”

Dexter took a deep breath. “I will.”

Leo knew he would stop immediately if Dexter was uncomfortable, or didn’t like what he was doing, but as he guided himself to Dexter’s stretched hole, he hoped that he wouldn’t have to stop. A day spent exploring Dexter’s body had just convinced him that the young man was not only perfect, but perfect for him. But he wanted to know all of the other man. Leo wanted to feel his body flex and tighten around him, wanted to be drawn into his heat until he forgot that anything else in the world existed.

Nothing he had ever done with Jax—or the nameless young man Jax brought to his prince—could compare to Dexter. That was already true, even before Leo gripped the base of his cock and guided it to Dexter’s pucker.

“I’ll go slow,” Leo promised one more time before he pushed forward, feeling the ring of muscle expand and then contract around his crown.

“Oh...oh...wait.”

Leo froze. “What?”

“Just...give me a chance...I need to breathe.”

“That’s fine.” Leo didn’t move, allowing Dexter to grow accustomed to his width. Already the pressure around the head

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of his cock was almost unbearably exquisite. He felt Dexter's heartbeat throbbing through his body, flesh fluttering in a rapid rhythm around Leo's head. "You okay?"

"I...I...yeah. Yeah. I am."

"Good."

He slid forward, but stopped after just a half an inch. Dexter's face was pulled tight, but he wasn't resisting Leo. For a moment, Leo wondered if he should just stop. There was no reason to push this far, so fast. It was just enough that Dexter was willing to try. There would be other chances later—Leo would see to that.

"We can stop," Leo suggested softly.

"No. No. I don't want to stop." Dexter released his breath slowly. "Just keeping going slow."

Leo moved another half an inch. Now his entire crown was buried in the impossible heat. Dexter's nostrils flared and his hands were closed in tight fists, and another wave of doubt moved through Leo. He had never felt anything as amazing as Dexter's body, and as a prince he had the right to that body, but the thought of hurting Dexter—even a little—cut through him, dulling his pleasure.

"Dexter..."

"Please...I want to feel you."

Leo nodded, his thighs and ass tensing as he continued to push forward. The lubricant around his entrance and deep into his passage helped ease the way, and the stretched muscles stretched further as Leo rocked forward. His cock and balls throbbed, but he didn't know if that was because Dexter's

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pulse was racing, or if that was because of his own galloping heart. Dexter reached for Leo's forearms, and he gripped him, his fingers tightening in silent encouragement.

Finally, he was fully seated, his length completely buried. Dexter's eyes were bulging, and Leo wondered if his own face reflected the same sort of pleasure and amazement, with traces of pain.

"Are you okay?" Leo rasped.

"Yes."

"God. You feel so good. Does this hurt?"

"No...not really." His throat bobbed. "Not so much."

"Can I move?"

"Yes. Yes. Please."

Despite Dexter's plea, Leo couldn't quite bring himself to slide back out. Instead, he tilted his head and kissed Dexter softly. He intended the caress to be reassuring—for both of them—but Dexter parted his lips, his tongue slipping into Leo's mouth. The brush of tongue against tongue electrified Leo, and he rocked his hips, his balls pressing against the curve of Dexter's ass.

"Oh. God. Oh..." Dexter's mouth ripped away from Leo's and he tilted his head back, his throat working frantically, but soundlessly.

"Does it hurt?"

"Don't stop." This time, Dexter's words were harsh and demanding. "God, don't stop."

"I won't." Pleasure surged through him, spurred by the encouragement. Everything from his scalp to his knees tingled

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and tightened. He felt strong and weak at the same time. He felt like he was flying, even as Dexter's strong body kept him grounded, kept him focused.

The rocking was gentle, like water lapping at the banks of a deep pond. Dexter seemed more than happy with the pressure, and Leo didn't need any additional friction. The firm heat around his shaft was more than enough. Was better than anything else could be. The strokes were so shallow, they barely existed. They shared kisses. They shared breath. Leo wanted to share everything. He wanted Dexter to know everything about him and inside of him. And he had the feeling that maybe Dexter wanted the same thing.

Leo didn't want it to end. He wanted to capture the moments between them and simply remain where he was—inside and above Dexter, chest against chest, mouth against mouth. But it didn't really matter what he wanted, because he simply could not physically tolerate the firm heat around him.

The pleasure reached higher and higher, morphing into something akin to bliss. Dexter panted, his harsh breathing only making Leo's body tighter. He thrummed and vibrated, like a taut string. He kissed Dexter, seeking a sort of relief, but that didn't help. Only one thing would help him.

"I can't...I'm almost..."

"I know," Dexter said through gritted teeth. His color was high. He clawed at Leo, his fingers fighting for purpose as he rose off the mattress to meet Leo's body.

"Dexter..."

"I know." Finally, he wrapped his arms and legs around

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Leo. “God, Leo, I know.”

Dexter’s words wrapped around him, as hot and enticing as his body. They were both slick with sweat, and they were both getting clumsy. Leo slid his fingers through Dexter’s hair, gripping his head as he plunged his tongue into Dexter’s mouth, kissing him with more than a little desperation. Bliss turned to pure joy like Leo had never experienced before, much less imagined. It crashed through him until he was finally forced to stop, the explosion seizing his muscles, including his throat. He couldn’t even whisper Dexter’s name.

Leo’s soft cock slipped from Dexter’s passage just before he collapsed on Dexter’s perspiring body. “Was that okay?” he asked, as soon as he could speak.

“It was great.”

He felt his face shifting and realized he was smiling. Again. “Really? I didn’t hurt you?”

“Nothing a bath won’t help.”

Leo skimmed his palm over Dexter’s erection. “I can help with this.”

“No, no. Don’t worry about it.”

“Are you sure?”

“I think you’ve made me come like a hundred times today.”

Leo’s smile broadened. “I don’t think it’s been a hundred times. It was four.”

“You still have to answer me. And tell me what this is all about.”

The reminder made Leo chuckle. “Don’t worry, I don’t

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break my promises. I think we should have that bath first.”

“You keep putting it off.”

“I just want to make sure you’re comfortable. Then I will tell you everything.” And Leo meant that. Everything including his father’s decree.

## CHAPTER 5

Time didn't matter inside Leo's world. Or maybe it just felt that way because Dexter lost the ability to keep track of the seconds. He spent minutes or hours floating on his back in the tub, staring at the high ceiling and reliving the moment Leo sank into his body. There was a dull ache in his flesh, a not exactly unpleasant reminder of Leo's length stretching his muscles. The longer he stayed in the tub, the more that ache faded into a light throbbing.

After the bath, Leo dried him with soft, heated towels and gave him the finest pajamas to dress in. By the time he made it back to Leo's bed, he was content and warm. His head was fuzzy, his body sore yet satisfied. He couldn't think of

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anything else he wanted—anything he lacked. And when Leo curled against his body, pulling Dexter as close as possible, he knew that he would never desire anything more.

“I guess I should start at the beginning,” Leo said, his voice rumbling through Dexter’s skin.

“Yes, that’s probably the best place to start.”

“At home, in the castle, they call me the prince who never smiles.”

Dexter burrowed closer, burying his face in Leo’s chest. “That’s silly. You smile all the time.”

“For you. But...until the moment I saw you in the woods, I never smiled in my life.

Dexter looked up. “What do you mean?”

“Some people thought there was just something wrong with me physically. Some sort of birth defect. Other people believe that I’m cursed...that I’ve brought a curse down on the entire royal family.”

Dexter touched his fingers to Leo’s cheek, then skimmed the pad of his thumb over Leo’s lips. “I don’t even understand how that’s possible.”

“Welcome to the club. I don’t understand it, either.” Leo caught Dexter’s wrist and kissed the tip of his thumb before drawing his mouth in a path to his pulse point. “My parents were confused and frightened. I spent my whole life trying to do as they ask, trying to make them happy. They just wanted to know that their son was normal. But no matter what I did, I couldn’t give them what they wanted more than anything.”

“A smile?”

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Leo nodded.

“So they’ve never seen how wonderful it is?”

“No. Is it wonderful?”

Dexter nodded solemnly. “Yeah. It’s like...it changes the shape of the world.”

The comment brought a small, shy grin to Leo’s face that was gone almost as soon as it arrived, like a brightly colored hummingbird. “That’s what I meant when I said you’ve already done something for me. Dexter...you’ve given me a gift that I can’t repay. And the really unbelievable thing is, you keep doing it. You keep giving me that gift, like it’s as natural as breathing. I see you and I...” He took a deep breath. “My parents were so worried about the problem that the King made a decree for the entire land. Did you hear about it?”

Dexter shook his head. “Sometimes news doesn’t make it out to our village. It’s easy to forget that we’re there.”

“He said that the first person to make me smile shall be given to me in marriage. Girls of all ages came from everywhere in the kingdom, and they did everything they could. But it was never enough. I didn’t know it at the time but...well, there was one thing they couldn’t overcome.”

“They didn’t fall down enough?”

“No. They weren’t you.”

“Leo...that’s...” Dexter fumbled, at a loss for words. If Prince Leopold had made that declaration, he might have been able to rebut it. But it hadn’t been *Prince Leopold*. It had been Leo. A man Dexter wanted desperately. A man he would be happy with even if they lived in a tiny little shack with dirt

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floors.

“There was just an endless stream of them. They danced and joked and sang and told stories. They tried to lure me by wearing clothes that were absolutely indecent for the Royal Court. They were charming. A few were even funny, but...they weren't for me.”

“But you're going to have to get married one way or the other, aren't you? That's what a prince does. He gets married and makes more little princes.”

“My father's decree didn't say that the person who made me smile had to be a woman.” Leo traced a light pattern on Dexter's chest. “It seems to me that you're entitled to your reward.”

Dexter sat up. “My reward? Marriage? Leo, I can't...we can't get *married*. The King would never allow it. Nobody would allow it. It just...it can't happen.”

“I can marry anybody I want. I'm the prince.”

“It's against the rules,” Dexter reminded him.

“I *make* the rules.”

Dexter shivered, more from the power in Leo's voice than the assertion itself. “Leo...I...”

“Do you want to be with me?”

The question was blunt, but so was the answer. The only answer that Dexter could give. “Yes. I've never had anything before, Leo. Nothing's ever been mine...or because of me. But I guess that's not true anymore.”

“Why?”

“Your smile is mine.”

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Leo inclined his head. "It is. Always."

"I'm still not convinced that the King will give me my prize," Dexter warned. "I know you are the prince, but he is still king."

"What if I had to marry to produce an heir?" Leo asked softly. "Would you still want me?"

Dexter arched his brow. "Would I realistically be able to deny you? Sometimes I don't think you remember that you are my prince. I'm bound to obey you."

"Are you here right now because you are bound to obey me?"

"No. Of course not."

"You're never bound to obey me, Dexter. Others are, it's true."

"Everybody," Dexter corrected.

"Fine, everybody. But I don't want you mindlessly doing whatever I tell you to do. I don't want to think that you're only with me because you're afraid to say no. That's not how...that's not how I view you."

As Leo spoke, Dexter began to understand. In Leo's mind, Dexter was above his own station. After years of worrying about curses and physical deformities, he had created something mythical in his mind—a person so powerful, so special, that he could overcome all problems to give Leo the one thing nobody else could. To give him something he couldn't order or demand. Dexter agreed there was much to be said about Leo's smile, but ultimately, he wasn't the deity Leo seemed to believe him to be.

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“All I did was fall in some mud.”

“No, that’s not...that’s not it at all. That’s not all you did.”

“Okay. I went soaring through the air and landed most ungraciously on my ass.”

“No. No, that’s not it at all.” Leo separated himself from Dexter and stood. He walked the length of the bed before turning and coming back. His agitation made Dexter uncomfortable, but he remained where he was, cushioned by silk pillows. “Because you haven’t just made me smile the one time. When I’m with you...I’m happy. Really, really happy.”

Dexter’s lips twitched. “You don’t look very happy right now.”

“I thought this might be easier.”

“I’m not trying to make it difficult. I just want you to be sure that if we do this...it’s what you really want.”

“I’ll prove it to you. Anyway I can.”

“You don’t have to...”

Leo returned to the bed, his arm going around Dexter’s shoulder. Dexter automatically leaned into Leo’s body—it fit him perfectly. And it felt good to have something to lean against. He tried to imagine having Leo at his side for the rest of his life, but that seemed too big, too impossible. So he settled on having Leo at his side for the rest of the night. That seemed much more reasonable.

“When I return home, I’ll send out a kingdom-wide decree, if that’s what it takes to prove what I feel,” Leo vowed.

“I’m serious, you don’t have to do that.”

“I just want to make sure you know. Because I’ve never

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been more certain of anything.”

Dexter took a deep breath. He didn't doubt that Leo's feelings were genuine, and he was pleased that he had been the one to make the prince smile. But he wasn't going to hold Leo to all of his promises. Time wasn't the only thing that couldn't take hold in Leo's hunting lodge. Sometimes, Dexter thought, reality was a distant and nebulous concept, as well. But when they left it behind, they would have no choice but to face thousands of years of tradition, obligation, beliefs, and a responsibility that was greater than anything the two of them could share.

Dexter understood that. Even if it seemed like Leo didn't want to.

## CHAPTER 6

*Prince Leopold and his humble servant spent the following weeks together, sequestered in a world that only existed for the two of them. Prince Leopold neglected to hunt—a fact which pleased the animals of the forest a great deal—and they barely acknowledged the servants of the house. This did not endear Dexter to Jax, but the man served at the pleasure of his prince, and so even his grumblings were subdued.*

*But they couldn't remain hidden forever. As promised, Prince Leopold returned to the court exactly four weeks after he left, this time with Dexter and his loyal dog, Thor, in tow. They were all greeted with much rejoicing, as befitted the return of the crown prince. But when they reached the castle,*

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*Dexter did his best to linger out of sight. Uncomfortable and awkward in his peasant's clothes, he was too shy to approach the throne.*

*Even when Prince Leopold announced him.*

\* \* \*

Relief radiated from the Queen. As soon as Leo saw her smile and her shining eyes, he let go of whatever resentment lingered for leaving his perfect, even heavenly, getaway. He'd thought after a day or two that being with Dexter would become boring. But Dexter was never boring. He delighted Leo. He delighted Leo so much that it was difficult for the prince to keep a novel smile from his face as he approached the throne and bowed.

"Oh, straighten up and come here," the Queen said, holding out her arms. She enveloped him, surrounding him with the familiar smell of her powders and soaps. She smelled like home to him. The thought that he could lose that sense of place, the steady sense of belonging, made his stomach clench.

"You look well, son," the King greeted, extending his hand when his wife finally released Leo.

"Thank you, sir."

"Did you have a successful hunt?"

"I...it depends on your definition, sir."

"My definition? How many different definitions of success are there, son?"

Leo was suddenly aware of all the people behind him, staring at his back, straining to hear each word in the

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exchange. He knew that it would only be appropriate to present Dexter now—his mother would be offended if he introduced Dexter any other way. But he wished he could save Dexter from the awkwardness.

“I didn’t bag any animals...but I did meet somebody who you might be interested in, sir.”

Both of their faces registered surprise and skepticism. “You met somebody? Who?” his mother asked.

“He was traveling here to ask for an audience with the King,” Leo explained, traces of excitement in his voice. “He had some difficulties...and I agreed to escort him to the court.”

“Why would I be interested in that?” King William asked gruffly.

“Because he’s...he’s special.” Leo almost smiled at the thought of how special Dexter was, but he held it back. He was waiting for the perfect opportunity to reveal exactly what Dexter had done to him. He wanted to relish the shock.

“Special?” Celeste still looked skeptical, but also mildly interested. Perhaps she sensed the happiness lurking just beneath the surface. Or maybe she couldn’t sense it because she had never seen it from Leo before. “Where is he?”

Leo stepped back and swept his arm in a grandiose gesture, drawing everybody’s attention to the doorway.

The empty doorway.

Leo frowned. He didn’t look over his shoulder, but he could sense the disapproval radiating from his parents. “Dexter?”

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No answer.

“Dexter, are you in here?” Leo stepped from the throne. “Has anybody seen a young man?”

“Your highness?”

The voice came from his left, and he turned, zeroing in on the speaker. “What? Did you see him?”

“Sir, is he a young peasant?”

Leo grimaced at the mention of his station, but he nodded.

“Forgive me, sir, but I believe he snuck out the door while you were addressing the throne.”

“Why would he do that?”

The man shrunk back, clearly unable, and unwilling, to guess at an answer. But Leo wasn't expecting one, anyway. He hurried to the door, desperate to catch up with Dexter. He couldn't get far, Leo was sure of it. But he couldn't linger and give Dexter the chance to run away. And why would he run away? Had somebody insulted him or hurt him? If anybody had dared to say so much as a cross word to him, Leo would find the speaker and rip him apart.

“Leopold! Where do you think you're going?”

The tone of his father's voice told him to turn around. But he couldn't. He would deal with the King's wrath—and the appropriate punishment—later. At that moment, he only wanted to find Dexter. The thought of him disappearing made Leo feel sick.

The courtyard was full of the regular hustle and bustle, with people and animals coming and going, blocking Leo's path and vision.

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“Dexter! Dexter?” He grabbed the guard stationed at the door. “Where did Dexter go?”

“Your highness?”

“A young man, about my height, in peasant closing.”

The guard pointed silently to the east, where all of the animals were housed. “I told him that there was nothing over there but animals, sir, but I don’t think he heard me.”

“Thank you.”

The ground was soft from a storm the night before—soft enough to leave indentations in the mud, but there was too much traffic for that to be any help. Even so, he took off at a quick jog, his eyes peeled for any hint of the young man. His heart began to fall as he ventured closer to the animal pens—they were a maze of barns, stalls, and fences. And he was not familiar with the area. Certainly not familiar enough to find anybody who didn’t want to be found.

But he wasn’t going to let Dexter get away from him.

Leo didn’t slow his jog. He didn’t care if he had to run through the maze for the rest of the day, he wasn’t going to stop. “Dexter?”

After what seemed like hours of running and listening to nothing but pigs, fowl, and sheep, he heard soft murmurings in a deep, familiar voice. Slowing down so he wouldn’t drown the sound with his own rapid breathing and even faster heart, he listened to the soft drone and followed it. The one-sided conversation guided him around a squat, wooden building. Dexter sat with his back against the wall, Thor at his side.

“What’s going on?” Leo blurted.

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Dexter looked up sharply, and his cheeks colored. “You found me.”

“Did you think I wouldn’t?”

“I didn’t think you’d look,” Dexter admitted.

“Why did you run? I thought...this is what you wanted.”

“I saw you talking to the King and Queen and I realized...I mean, it really struck me...that they’re your parents. You are a prince. *The* prince.” Dexter shook his head. “I always knew it, but I didn’t really understand it until just now. And...it...it was just too much.”

Leo shook his head. “I don’t...why does that matter now?”

“It’s so normal for you. I don’t really know how to explain why it matters now. But...maybe it’s best if I don’t meet them. Maybe it’s best if I just stay...your secret. I could live at the hunting lodge. You could come visit me. That’ll work.”

“That won’t work. I don’t want to just...lock you away. I can’t do that. If I do...” Leo shook his head. “I need you with me, Dexter. These past three weeks have been the best weeks of my life. Nobody in that court could possibly give me what you do. Nobody.”

“That’s not going to matter to them.”

“It is.” Leo dropped down his knees, unmindful of the way the dirt clung to his pants. “You think they don’t care about what you do for me? And to me?”

“No.” Dexter pulled his knees up to his chest. “I don’t belong there. And if you would just think about it, then you would realize it, too.”

“Then we’ll leave together.”

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“What are you talking about?”

“We’ll go someplace where nobody knows who we are. Then nobody will care if we’re together.”

“You’re talking about giving up the throne.”

Leo tilted his head. “Yes, I am. The throne never made me happy. The crown never made me happy. But you do.” He took Dexter’s hand, cupping it between his palms. “Please believe me, Dexter. Please.”

“I do believe you.” Dexter swallowed hard.

“Then trust me.”

“I don’t want to go back there,” he admitted.

Leo leaned closer, worried that if he gave Dexter just an inch, Dexter would try to flee again. “Just stay by my side, then. Hold my hand.”

“Can’t we just go back to the hunting lodge? Just for a little bit longer?”

“Yes. If you want to.”

Dexter smiled, though it was with a touch of sadness. “No, we can’t do that. I know you’re worried about the Queen. You should be here with her.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course.” He cupped the side of Leo’s face, gently drawing him closer. “I’m sorry. Did I worry you?”

“A little.”

“Did I embarrass you?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Leo murmured just before his mouth touched

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Dexter's. He half-expected to feel Dexter's anxiety, but he was open and receptive to the caress. After a few moments, it became clear he was more than receptive. The kiss had a desperate edge, like Dexter was a little afraid this would be their final kiss.

"Let's go back to the castle," Leo said against his mouth. "It reeks here."

"I like that you came and knelt in the dirt for me."

"It was the least I can do."

"You're going to smell like a barn animal. That's not very princely."

Leo smiled. "I guess that means it's bath time."

"Leopold!"

Despite his earlier comforting words, Leo jumped back as though he had been scalded. Dexter immediately pushed himself to his feet, and tried to bow, but the attempt was clumsy. And unseen. King William's attention was entirely focused on his son.

"What do you think you are doing?" William demanded.

"I..."

"You ran out of the royal court in order to roll in the mud with some peasant?"

"Your majesty..."

"You have embarrassed the entire court." The King's face was red, almost purple, and hot shame trickled down Leo's back. Not at anything he had done—he was not ashamed of Dexter—but he didn't like to anger his father. The King rarely lost his temper with Leo.

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“Father...”

“Who is this?”

Dexter bowed again. “Your majesty, I’m...”

“Was I addressing you?” The King snapped.

Dexter visibly shrank, stepping back and slumping his shoulders.

“This is Dexter,” Leo said softly. “The young man I wanted to introduce you to.”

“The young man who left without asking permission?”

Dexter opened his mouth, but Leo caught his eye and slightly shook his head. Dexter shrank back again. Leo acted without thought, reaching out for Dexter’s arm.

“He left without asking because he was a little overwhelmed. He meant no offense.”

“Well, he caused offense,” the King said gruffly. “Leave him here. Where he belongs.”

Dexter tried to pull free, but Leo tightened his grip. His fingers were slick around Dexter’s hand, but his hold was firm. “He belongs with me. I won’t be returning to the Court without him.”

“The Queen demands an audience.”

Leo swallowed. His mother didn’t demand an audience from him. She requested his company. She sought him out. But she didn’t treat him like a servant or a commoner. It was possible she hadn’t used those words at all—or requested to see him—but Leo didn’t want to take that chance and issue a refusal.

“Then my mother will have the opportunity to meet

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Dexter, as well. I'm not going to leave him behind."

The firm set of the King's jaw told Leo he should just give in. William wasn't just stubborn—he could not be disobeyed. Leo had no real chance of winning this one, but even as that certainty set in, Dexter squeezed his fingers.

"Leo, let me..."

"Your majesty!" Jax raised toward them, his long legs flying over the ground, the hat long since knocked from his head, allowing his hair to blow free in the wind. "Sir! It's the Queen."

At those three words, both William and Leo forgot that Dexter was even standing there.

"Speak quick, man. What is wrong with her?" William demanded.

"She collapsed, sir." Jax stood still and respectfully, but his eyes were frantic and a slash of red colored his cheeks. "After you left, sir."

"Collapsed?"

The King's gaze jumped to Leo's. They shared a frantic glance, and then both of them were running.

## CHAPTER 7

Leo was young, but William was terrified. He had never seen his father move so quickly—and a part of him understood that this was what his father had looked like as a young man. A young man in love with his beautiful Queen. A lump lodged in his throat, making it more difficult to breathe. He had never doubted the love between his parents. He just hoped that he wasn't the reason his mother's illness had taken a horrible turn.

Behind him, he heard Dexter racing after them, and Thor's heavy pants. He knew for a fact that Dexter could run faster than both of them—especially since his clothes were far less restrictive. But he hung back at a respectful distance. Leo only

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hoped that once they reached the castle's heavy doors, Dexter wouldn't keep running right by the building. Because this time, Leo couldn't give chase. And they both knew it.

Jax held the doors open for them when they reached the castle, allowing both the King and his son to race to the foot of the throne, where Celeste was still on the floor. Kipling, Celeste's personal physician, crouched over her, his small, squirrely face creased with a deep frown, his shrewd eyes thoughtful and, Leo thought, more than a little fearful.

"What happened?" The King demanded, his voice bellowing over the crowd.

"She stood to follow after you left, but she didn't even take a step."

"Is she still..."

"She's alive," Kipling said softly. *But not for much longer.*

Leo dropped to his knees and took her hand. "Mama?" It was disrespectful to address her that way, especially since he was a grown man and not a child, but Leo didn't care. "Mama? Please, wake up."

"She needs air," William said. "We need to get her to her chambers. Maybe she needs to be bled." He didn't sound like royalty. He sounded like a scared, and confused, old man.

"No," Leo said, bringing her hand up to his mouth. Her skin was thin and cool, and her pulse thready against his fingers. "No, don't do that."

"Who do you think you are?" William asked, more than a little coldly.

"She hated it," Leo snapped, tears stinging the corners of

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his eyes. “She hated it. It scared her.”

“I think I’ve got to,” Kipling said.

“You touch her with a knife, and I’ll drive it through your throat,” Leo warned. The edge in his voice forced Kipling back, but Leo still pulled Celeste’s prone body closer, hugging her to his chest. “Mama? Mama, please, wake up.”

“Get all of these people out of here. Jax? Get them all out. Everybody,” the King demanded.

Jax didn’t need to do anything at all. Leo could hear them shuffling out, their murmurings subdued as cloth whispered against cloth. Leo’s mouth tasted bitter—his tongue felt swollen and his throat dry.

“Mama...*please*.”

“Your highness, please allow me to take her majesty to her chambers,” Kipling implored. “She’ll be far more comfortable there.”

Leo glared daggers at the man. This was his fault. He had only one job in the entire world. And he’d failed at it. He hoped the King would make sure this charlatan was punished appropriately, and if he didn’t, then Leo definitely would.

“Son, he’s right.”

“I’ll take her.” Leo gathered her in his arms and straightened, horrified to realize just how light she was. Even with the heavy garments, she felt no heavier than a cat. Had she always been this slight? Had she lost weight while he was away? He shouldn’t have left her. He never should have left her. She needed him.

Her lady-in-waiting, Amelia, led the way to her chambers.

## THE PRINCE WHO NEVER SMILED

Had she come clean about the blood to Kipling or the King? If not, he would see to it that she was charged with treason, and her head could join Kipling's on the pikes outside the castle walls.

Leo set her on the bed gently, and her eyes didn't even flutter as he transferred her from his arms to the mattress. He sat on the edge, keeping her hand folded in his. It almost felt icy.

"She's cold. Somebody get her more blankets."

"Leopold, son, you've got to move so Kipling can help her."

"No. He did this to her. Don't you think I know that? Don't you understand that? It was him. And he's going to pay for that." Kipling's eyes widened at Leo's outburst, and that just made him feel more violent toward the man. "You'll have the death of the Queen on your head and your soul."

Kipling and the King both gaped at him, and Leo felt the vaguely like he had gone too far. Kipling hadn't made his mother sick, after all. But that logic held no sway over him. He didn't have room in his mind, or his heart, for it.

"Your highness?"

Dexter's voice from the corridor. It should have been soothing, but the tentative question scraped across his nerves. "I don't have time for this right now, Dexter."

"I know, sir, but I might have something that can help."

Hearing such formal address from Dexter hurt in some indefinable way. But it was the rest of the words that really caught Leo's attention.

*THE PRINCE WHO NEVER SMILED*

“How?”

“It might wake her, your Highness.”

“Stop that! Come here.”

“I don’t need to enter her chambers...”

“Come *here*.”

Dexter shuffled forward, his large body as small as he could make it as he approached. He dug around in the bag that he carried around his shoulder before offering a small, leather pouch. “It’s a mixture of herbs. All quite pungent and stimulating. If it’s possible to waken her at all, this will do it.”

“How do you know it’ll work?”

His tone might have been appropriately deferential, but Dexter met Leo’s eyes with all the boldness he would have expected from his lover. “I have a sick mother, too.”

Leo nodded and pulled the pouch open. His eyes immediately began to water. The scent was something unnamable and raw. It was wild and somehow reminded Leo of the thunderstorm that had brought Dexter into his life. Leo waved it under her nose, his bottom lip caught between his teeth, his heart hammering.

There was no response at first, but Leo kept trying, even though the sour-strong scent was filling the room and hanging over their heads in a cloud. After the fourth pass under her nose, her eyes began to flutter. By the sixth, they were open. At the seventh, she coughed and turned her head, trying to escape the stench.

Leo tossed the bag aside thoughtlessly and scooped his arm under her shoulders, helping her sit up. “Mama?”

*THE PRINCE WHO NEVER SMILED*

“Leopold?”

“I’m here. How are you feeling?”

She gave him a look of such sadness that he thought his heart would break. Tears threatened, and this time, he knew he wouldn’t be able to hold them back.

“Not good, son. I’m not good.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s true. I haven’t been...” She paused to cough again, red specks of blood flying from her mouth to splatter across her hand. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“You should have sent for me. I would have come home. In an instant.”

Celeste shook her head. “You were where...you needed to be.”

“Mama...”

“I just...want one...one thing.”

“Name it.” He pressed his lips to her brow. It was hot to the touch, unlike her hand. “Name it. Anything.”

“Let me see you smile. Just once...”

Leo sniffed, trying to drag back the tears that were pooling from the corners of his eyes. “Mama...how can I smile at a time like this?”

“Just once.”

He leaned forward and spoke softly, wishing that he had walked into the court beaming from ear to ear. “I have smiled. Many times.”

She pulled back, looking at him with wide, if slightly cloudy, eyes. “When?”

## *THE PRINCE WHO NEVER SMILED*

“While I was away. I smiled every day. Because I met the person I want to marry.”

“Who is she?”

Leo had been preparing himself to speak these words every night for two weeks. But now he found them difficult to say. He wished Dexter would step forward and relieve him of the burden, but Dexter couldn't do that. In that room, in that moment, Dexter was no more than a servant.

“It's not a woman. The person who made me smile is a man. This one.” He dragged his gaze from his mother and gestured to Dexter to come forward. He did so, haltingly. “His name is Dexter. And he's...everything.”

Celeste narrowed her eyes, trying to focus on the young man. “Dexter?”

Dexter bowed low, but remained silent.

“He makes you smile?”

“Every day.”

“I want to see. Please, son.”

Leo didn't know how he could possibly grant the Queen her wish. Tears were flowing down his face freely, and how could he smile when so much pain suffocated him?

Dexter bent to put his mouth next to Leo's ear. “I love you, and I'll never run from you again. I promise you that.”

Leo didn't know if those were the words he needed to hear. He didn't know if there were any words that would help him. But the fact that Dexter was there—the fact that Dexter was there to offer whatever support and strength he could—touched Leo more deeply than he had anticipated.

*THE PRINCE WHO NEVER SMILED*

Leo smiled.

“Oh,” Celeste sighed. “Leo...you’re so handsome. This is what you wanted to tell us earlier?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She cupped the side of his face, wiping away a bead of moisture with her thumb. “Don’t let him go. Don’t ever let him go.”

“I won’t.”

“So handsome.” She brushed her damp thumb across his mouth, tracing what remained of his smile.

“Leopold, please excuse us. I’d like to speak to the Queen in private.”

The sound of his father’s voice jolted him. He didn’t want to leave her, but he had no choice. He might be at odds with the King, but he did not want to be the reason that William did not say goodbye to his wife. With a final kiss and a whispered devotion of love, Leo stood and dragged his feet from the chambers.

As soon as the bedroom door closed behind Dexter, Leo turned into his arms, unable to hold back the riot of emotion. Dexter held him tightly, his physical and emotional strength more than enough to hold Leo up.

“I’m sorry I snapped at you.”

Dexter squeezed him tightly. “Don’t be.”

“I don’t want her to be gone.”

“I know. But...the love she has for you, that’s not going anywhere.”

“I almost didn’t get a chance to say goodbye.”

*THE PRINCE WHO NEVER SMILED*

“But you did. And you gave her everything she ever wanted.”

But he couldn't give her the one thing she needed. And that was why he clung to Dexter for the rest of the day, and all night as well.

## CHAPTER 8

*Prince Leopold sat vigil at his mother's bed for three days and three nights, waiting for her to wake again. She never did. She expired as the sun rose on the fourth day, and Prince Leopold had to be dragged from her side so she could be prepared for interment. Dexter could do nothing but wait and watch silently. He offered the best comfort he could, and remained by his prince's side.*

*The Queen's family was inconsolable, weak with grief. Dexter tried to take over Prince Leopold's duties, quietly directing the servants and easing the pressure from the mourning King and Prince. Every day, he expected to be sent home. Every night, he curled against Leopold's back and tried*

## THE PRINCE WHO NEVER SMILED

*to soothe him to sleep.*

*But he couldn't shake the feeling that his days were numbered.*

\* \* \*

“Excuse me, Dexter, but the King has requested your presence.”

Everything inside of him went numb at Jax's mild words. The twinkle in his eye that he couldn't quite disguise didn't help Dexter's anxiety. The servant would, no doubt, be quite pleased if Dexter was kicked out of the castle—or worse. He hoped that if the King did send him on his way, he would at least be allowed to say goodbye to Leo.

He followed Jax to the King's study, though he didn't need the servant to lead him. Over the past weeks he had become intimately acquainted with the castle, and he knew it well. Sometimes, he caught himself striding through the corridors like he owned the place, and that sort of general ease seemed arrogant at best, presumptive at worst. He didn't even feel like himself.

But the one place that Dexter had not ventured during his stay in the royal castle was the King's private office. He hesitated outside the door, even after Jax announced him. His limbs were heavy. His heart was worse. But it wouldn't do to keep the King waiting, so he entered the room on trembling legs.

“Good afternoon, your majesty,” Dexter said with a deep bow.

## THE PRINCE WHO NEVER SMILED

“Good afternoon. You may have a seat.”

Dexter didn't want to sit down. He would rather be standing when he received his walking papers, but an invitation was as good as an order. He sat across from the King's massive oak desk, feeling even more insignificant.

“I haven't had a chance to talk to you since the Queen...passed.”

“No, sir.”

“I understand you've been overstepping your bounds.”

Dexter colored. If he couldn't exchange farewells with Leo, maybe he could sneak the prince a note. “I...I have been trying to help, sir.”

“By behaving as though you run the castle?”

“I'm sorry, sir.”

“Jax, to name just one person, is quite upset with you.”

“I'm sorry, sir.”

“You don't belong here.”

*Don't cry. Don't cry. You're a grown man. Don't cry.* “No, sir.”

“Where do you belong? What's the name of your village?”

“Smithton, sir.”

“And that's where your mother lives?”

“Yes, sir.”

King William looked at him thoughtfully. Dexter tried not to fidget. The King had aged ten years since the Queen passed. His hair had been peppered with gray before, but now it was almost a solid white. His skin was dotted with brown spots, and his eyebrows were heavy with wire-like hair. There were

## *THE PRINCE WHO NEVER SMILED*

wrinkles around his eyes and mouth, and they pulled his entire face into a drooping frown.

“What’s her name?”

“Judith, sir.”

“I see. I’m familiar with Smithton. I visited there once. It’s only a three day journey from here.”

Dexter swallowed. He swallowed again. He would be returning to the village without money or success. He’d have nothing to show for his venture except a broken heart. Would Leo allow him to walk away? Or would he defy his father and come looking for him? It was impossible to say, because Leo had changed, too. Had grown more distant as he mourned his mother. Maybe he would only be relieved if Dexter left.

“Yes, sir. And I’m sure that my mother misses me.” He didn’t need to add that, but he wanted to signal his understanding. He didn’t want to prolong this.

“Yes, I’m sure she does. Especially since you are such a hard worker. More than a few people in this court could learn a thing or two from you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Do you have any other relatives in Smithton?”

“Um...yes, sir. My brother and his family live there. They are seeing to my mother right now.”

“That’s good. It’s good she’s not alone.” King William waved his hand. “You may go.”

Dexter inclined his head and stood. He walked backward to the door. “Thank you, sir. It’s been...a real privilege and honor to be here.”

## *THE PRINCE WHO NEVER SMILED*

Once out of the office, he took a deep breath, trying to clear his head. He didn't think he would return to Smithton. Not straight away. There was still a whole kingdom to explore—and more, beyond the borders. Of course, he understood that he could walk the length and breadth of the entire globe and never be beyond the reach of his memories, but he had to try.

Walking took too much energy, so he shuffled. What would Leo do? Who would he marry? Would he accept a new bride without argument? Had the loss of his mother sapped his stubbornness from him?

It would be easier to go without waiting for farewells. If he had to see Leo again, he would cry. And he really didn't want to do that. That's not how he wanted Leo to remember him—without pride, weeping like a woman.

Dexter only had a few belongings. He didn't want to take any of the clothes or items he had acquired during his tenure in the castle. Would that be considered thievery? The last thing he wanted was to be arrested. It would be a blow he didn't think he could withstand.

Once packed, he couldn't leave the room. He stared at the door, trying to imagine the world he was going back to. A world without Leo, or the occasional shy smile that could truly light a room. He was still thinking about that smile when Leo pushed the door open.

He frowned as soon as he saw Dexter's peasant clothes. The clothes he hadn't worn since the day he arrived in the castle.

## THE PRINCE WHO NEVER SMILED

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing. I’m just...I’m going.”

“You’re going? You’re going where?”

“Home, maybe. Or somewhere else. I think that I’ve outstayed my welcome.”

Leo shut the door, blocking his path. “You told me you would never run from me.”

“I’m not running. But your father called me into his office and he...he told me I don’t belong here. And you’ve been...you’ve had a lot on your plate. I thought it would be best if I just quietly followed the King’s orders.”

If anything, the explanation seemed to deepen Leo’s confusion. “He didn’t tell you to leave.”

“He did. I heard him.”

“I don’t know what you heard, but it wasn’t an order to leave.”

“Why else would he want to speak to me?”

“He was *supposed* to speak to you about our marriage.” Leo frowned. “Though now that I think about it, he’s been a bit distracted today. You may have only got half of what he intended to tell you.”

“Our *what*?”

Leo took Dexter’s hand and led him to the bed. Dexter followed, numbly. He thought he should be happy, but his system hadn’t processed the shock. There was no room for emotions. They sat on the bed together, Leo still gripping his fingers.

“Dexter...that was the last thing she said to my father. She

*THE PRINCE WHO NEVER SMILED*

asked him to please keep his promise. Anybody who makes me smile would be given to me in marriage.”

“She did?”

Leo nodded. “And how could he deny his Queen her dying wish?”

“So why did he ask me where I was from? And where to find my mother?”

“He probably intends to send servants to fetch her.”

“So we’re...you and I...we’re to be married?”

Leo gripped the back of Dexter’s neck. “You want to marry me, right?”

“Of course.”

“I know I haven’t thanked you...but you were the only thing that kept me sane. I need you more than I’ve ever needed anything.”

“What about...your heir?”

“We’ve been discussing the line of succession. We’ll take care of it.”

“I can’t believe...I mean, I really thought he was sending me away.”

“Even if he were, you must have realized that I wouldn’t let you get far.”

Dexter leaned forward, his mouth almost touching Leo’s. “I was hoping you wouldn’t let me get far.”

“Thank you, by the way.”

“For what?”

Leo smiled. “Everything.”

Dexter couldn’t resist kissing him then. He was convinced

## *THE PRINCE WHO NEVER SMILED*

that Leo's mouth tasted sweeter when he was smiling. Leo parted his lips with a low moan, and a thrill chased down Dexter's spine. Together they sank into the soft, welcoming mattress, and Dexter didn't hold anything of himself back. From that moment on, there wouldn't be anything that didn't belong to Prince Leopold.

\* \* \*

*Prince Leopold and Dexter were married in the lodge that had meant so much to them. Dexter became the Royal Consort. He never left Leopold's side. And Leopold never left him.*

*Dexter made Leo smile every day of their lives.*

## PEPPER ESPINOZA

Pepper Espinoza lives in southern California with her husband and her cats. She has spent the last year working as a full time author, and intends to start graduate school in the fall.

You can learn more about Pepper by visiting her website:

<http://www.pepperverse.net>

\* \* \*

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