She was young, he’d been right, and so small. She couldn’t have been much above five feet tall, and it certainly had been an odd sensation looking down at his new monarch. But there was a strength in her voice – a strength with a tremor, for sure, and a lot of fake confidence that anyone with any observational skills would see right through – but a strength that had surprised him, given her history. She hadn’t been completely cowed by Conroy, he thought a little triumphantly. There was a fire in her eyes, an eagerness to succeed, but a wariness. She couldn’t hide her fear, no matter how imperiously she looked at him, how high she held her chin.

Or, the one where Lord Melbourne becomes Private Secretary to a twenty-two-year-old Queen Victoria sometime in 2017.
Chapter 1

It was still dark when the news alert came through.

She hadn’t been surprised. The news has been full of it for weeks, of course, ever since his doctor had made that first unscheduled visit. She’d watched with an emotion she couldn’t identify, knowing what was coming – her Uncle had been sick for a while, and she’d never seen Sir John Conroy happier.

He’d always been kind to her.

She stands as Lehzen enters her room, her face a mix of nervous excitement and apprehension, and watches as she curseys slowly - reverently.

‘Your majesty.’

***

She watches as they drive down the busy London streets in the pre-dawn haze. People would only just be finding out now, she knows; there’s a protocol to these things. They went to sleep with a King, and woke with a Queen.

She wonders what that felt like. Her uncle had been a good king, and the people had liked him. The mourning period would be long enough; it had begun days ago, really.

Would they like her? Would they want a Queen?

Would they want her?

She pets Dash who is sleeping soundly on her lap. ‘Things are going to change, Dash,’ she whispers. She can almost smell the freedom. She just hopes she will have the courage to take it when the time comes.

***

He straightens his tie in the mirror, his eyes switching between the television and his suit. He’d been woken in the early hours with the news, just one in a long line of people to be told that King George had passed away after a short battle with pneumonia, and a longer battle with liver cancer.

He sighs. A new Queen meant the Accession Council meeting, a recall to the House, and countless other duties that all must be rendered in the next twenty-four hours.

He glances at the television to see a photo of his new Queen; the woman he’ll pledge allegiance to
for what would most likely be the rest of his life, he realises. He’d seen images of her before; the media had been quite careful not to discuss life after the King, but had managed to carefully slip in some photos of his ‘family’ – in particular, his niece. Brown hair, blue eyes, and practically a child.

He’d not really paid much attention; that part of his life was over now, and the sooner the better.

***

She’s escorted into a small room where Sir John and her mother are waiting.

‘Your majesty,’ Sir John says as he kneels and kisses her hand. She almost grimaces; it’s just so strange to have him bow to her after everything. After Kensington.

‘Sir John,’ she replies, watching him carefully.

‘Your majesty,’ he begins, ‘whilst your education has been thorough and detailed, you are still young and there is still so much you have yet to learn. If you wish, I would be more than happy to step in as your Private Secretary to help you govern as well as we all know you can.’

She stares at him, eyes wide and panic rising in her chest. Private Secretary.

‘Oh, yes, Drina. Sir John will be able to help you,’ he mother beseeches. Victoria’s eyes flick between the two of them as she realises that this is her chance. Freedom was only a few short words away. She’d been waiting for this moment for so long. Her breath comes in short gasps, and she realises she needs to speak before they do. Before they realise what she’s about to say. She can do this. She can. She just has to say it.

She glances at the floor, mustering every inch of courage and strength and independence he’d spent twenty years trying to squash.

‘Thank you for your offer, Sir John, but I will not be requiring your services.’

She can’t help but feel a distinct sense of satisfaction – the relief – at the strength in her voice and the way his mouth drops open just a little.

‘Drina!’ her mother cries.

She turns to her mother. ‘I will choose my own advisors, Mama. You will not interfere.’

***

He is surprised by just how young she looks. He knows her age – she’s twenty-two – and is well-educated, and, by all reports, an intelligent young woman. Not that there have been many reports; she’s been kept on an incredibly tight leash.

She’s about four feet tall in heels, he thinks, and he feels the pull of pity. Being a woman in this role is going to be challenging enough; being so young and looking even younger is not going to help.
She’s just a child, he thinks, not for the first time. Too young and inexperienced to fully understand just what her name has determined for her fate, yet old enough for the weight of expectation to be dropped quite solidly on her shoulders. He knows of what awaits her; he’s been in his own job long enough to know what people expect of her.

Looking at her now, he knows one thing for sure: she is absolutely going to need help from someone, somewhere.

She just looks so young, and her eyes tell him she is absolutely terrified.

***

She’s terrified.

She knows what she has to say, but she’s never been good at public speaking and she really, really doesn’t want to stuff this up.

She suddenly understands all those metaphors about being out your depth and drowning. She feels them in her soul; that feeling of knowing you know nothing, but not having any real idea of what you don’t know. The feeling of inadequacy she was so used to, only magnified a hundred times.

Just when she thought she could escape...

She takes a deep, determined, wobbly breath. She wants to prove them wrong. She can do this, and she can do it alone.

I think.

The voices are still screaming in her head, drowning out all else, as she walks through the door.

***

The Accession Council meeting is where she first sees him. Among a sea of serious, solemn, much-older-than-her faces that she knows she won’t remember despite the importance of the meeting, he’s the only one that smiles at her.

She’s drowning, panicking, and there’s no one there to save her. She can hear their voices over the buzzing in her head, telling her it’s not good enough, that she’s not good enough, that she’s a stupid girl. That she’ll never be a good Queen.

But then he smiles, and she stops and stares at him for a moment. It’s only a tiny smile, but a smile nonetheless. A sliver of hope.

When she stumble over her speech, she unconsciously looks to him. He gives her a tiny encouraging nod and smiles again.

She has no idea how she would have made it through that meeting without him, her unknown saviour, and that thought both terrifies and humbles her.
Perhaps she does need some help.

***

‘The Queen wishes to see you,’ Emma tells him down the phone as he leaves his office, heading home for the official twelve days of mourning.

‘Me?’

‘Yes, you. You made quite the impression at the Council.’ He can hear the laughter in her voice.

He closes his eyes briefly before letting out a small sigh.

***

She’s patting her dog when he is shown into her study, and she could be like any teenage girl in her bedroom. A teenager dressed in a black dress with frills, in an ornately but beautifully decorated 300-year-old bedroom. She looks up as he enters and he’s struck by just how blue her eyes are. And how wide.

‘Your majesty,’ he says, bowing slightly, ‘please accept my condolences on the passing of your Uncle.’

‘Thank you,’ she says, and he can tell he’s being studied. She’s not shy about it either; her eyes are piercing. He nods, before taking a breath and deliberately reverting to a mild confusion and interest in his voice. ‘You requested to see me, ma’am.’

His face is the picture of contrived innocence, and she almost laughs in surprise. He is clearly not intimidated by her, or if he is, he’s hiding it well. The Prime Minister certainly hadn’t been quite so… interesting.

She thinks he’s mocking her. Of course he is. Why would he be kind to her?

But maybe he’s not mocking her.

‘I wanted to thank you for your… assistance… earlier today,’ she says, watching him closely. Her voice is so different to the one he’d first heard at the Council, all strength and authority, as opposed to wavering and clipped sentences. His lips twist slightly before he nods.

‘It is a pleasure to be of service, ma’am,’ is all he offers, and she smiles before carefully placing the spaniel on the floor.

‘It occurs to me that perhaps I need… a mentor,’ she says slowly, looking back up at him. ‘My education, whilst… detailed, appears to have left me with some… gaps that need to be filled.’ She struggles to avoid using Sir John’s words. She wouldn’t let him control her. Not here. Not anymore.

Melbourne frowns thoughtfully for a moment before nodding.
‘That may be wise, given the circumstances, ma’am. You have yet to appoint your Private Secretary, I assume – may I suggest you ask Lady Portman for a list of recommendations?’

She nods. After a short pause, she asks, ‘Who would you recommend, Lord Melbourne?’

He raises his eyebrows in surprise, and then tilts his head in slight annoyance. He should have seen that coming. Why else was he here, other than to be viewed and assessed almost under a microscope? ‘I would be happy to make some suggestions to Lady Portman for your consideration, ma’am,’ he replies slowly.

She smiles slightly, clearly satisfied by something – he’s just not entirely sure what, and it’s disconcerting. He’s always been quite good at reading people, and his experience has long taught him to think on his feet, but there’s something about her that unsettles him slightly. He hasn’t been anything vaguely close to flustered in quite a while, and he doesn’t enjoy the sensation.

She is the Queen, after all, he reasons with himself. He shouldn’t be entirely relaxed. And she’s young – much younger than anyone he’s really had to deal with on this level before.

He changes tack slightly. ‘I believe Sir John Conroy would expect to be on that list, your majesty,’ he says slowly, watching her carefully for a reaction.

She turns to him, her eyes flashing. ‘John Conroy is out of the question.’

Well, that answers that question, he thinks. But he can’t help his surprise at the strength of her reply, and she quietens somewhat. ‘He wants to control me, the way he’s tried for the last twenty years. The way he controls my mother,’ she adds, and he’s not entirely sure she’s still talking to him.

She does need help, he thinks, and he can’t help himself.

‘Then he doesn’t make the list,’ he says simply.

She turns to him in surprise. She knows that John Conroy’s transition to Private Secretary is a logical and expected one…but perhaps not quite so set in stone as she had dreaded. Despite her refusal, she knew he was still a possibility.

Who was she fooling? Her list of allies was purposefully thin – he had seen to that.

She didn’t have friends. Queens didn’t have friends, she knew.

It was time to start making her own allies, but she also was painfully aware that her choices were slim, and that the list of those she trusted was virtually non-existent. She was alone.

Until now, perhaps.

***

Well, she was everything and nothing like he expected.

She was young, he’d been right, and so small. She couldn’t have been much above five feet tall, and it certainly had been an odd sensation looking down at his new monarch. But there was a strength in her voice – a strength with a tremor, for sure, and a lot of fake confidence that anyone with any observational skills would see right through – but a strength that had surprised him, given her history.
She hadn’t been *completely* cowed by Conroy, he thought a little triumphantly. There was a fire in her eyes, an eagerness to succeed, but a wariness. She couldn’t hide her fear, no matter how imperiously she looked at him, how high she held her chin.

She was going to struggle, the little Queen, but he shrugs off the familiar pang of pity. There was nothing he could do for her; he was no one, now – just the way he wanted it.

***

She’s walking down the hall towards the dining room when she sees him standing in the hallway. He’s waiting for her, she knows it, and she feels herself shrink.

It’s just like Kensington all over again. She’ll never be free of him.

*Then he doesn’t make the list,* a small voice whispers in the back of her mind.

‘Your majesty, a moment of your time?’ he asks.

She stops and slowly turns to face him. ‘Sir John.’

‘I saw Lord Melbourne leaving the palace earlier today,’ he starts, and something in her stomach clenches. He’s been watching her – of course he has. Nothing has changed, really, she thinks.

But then she remembers she’s Queen now. Everything had changed.

She says nothing, clenching her jaw and waiting for him to continue.

‘Are you sure it’s entirely wise to be summoning ex-Prime Ministers at random to the Palace, ma’am?’ he asks, but it’s no question, she knows.

‘I’m not entirely sure it’s your business who I speak to anymore, Sir John,’ she replies, and she hates herself for the slight tremor in her voice. She hates that he can do this to her, even now.

‘It’s just that Lord Melbourne…well, let’s just say that his reputation is well known,’ Sir John says slowly. ‘It’s not the kind of reputation you want attached to your reign, especially not one quite so young.’ He says the last bit slowly and she feels the anger burn in her chest.

‘Thank you for your concern, Sir John,’ she says through her teeth, biting down on the rest of the sentence. She won’t argue with him. He always wins when they argue, and she hates it. She hates him.

But she’s Queen, now. She doesn’t have to argue with him anymore.

‘As you wish, your majesty. I’d just hate to see you make such a public mistake so soon.’

She feels all the coolness of the threat behind his words, and it sets a small shiver down her spine. He steps aside and she strides past him, furious.

She’s furious at him, but also at herself. She’s the Queen now; he should not intimidate her like that anymore.

She wondered when she’d begin to *feel* like a Queen.
She looks up as Emma walks into the room with her usual folders of paperwork. ‘Lord Melbourne suggested that you might be able to compile a list people who would be suitable candidates for my Private Secretary.’ Emma nods. ‘I’ve asked him to contribute some names to that list.’

‘His experience would be helpful, ma’am. Thank you.’

Victoria nods, reaching out to take the folders from Emma. ‘How long have you known Lord Melbourne?’ she asks as nonchalantly as she can.

‘Since childhood, ma’am,’ Emma replies, smilingly a little too knowingly for Victoria’s taste. ‘He’s a good man.’

She takes a breath before she says the next part. She has to know. ‘With a chequered past, I’m told.’

Emma frowns resignedly. ‘Some would say that.’

‘What would you say?’ she asks too quickly, and she bites down on her tongue. A Queen is not eager for anything.

But she watches as Emma pauses, pursing her lips in thought. ‘I’d say he’s a good man who has suffered at the hands of life,’ she replies.

Victoria frowns at her response. Emma had said nothing at all, she realised. She would have to be more direct – only she had no idea what to ask, only what Sir John had said. She doubts he would actually lie directly to her face. ‘I have heard that his reputation is less than savoury,’ she says, watching Emma’s response carefully.

Emma sits in the chair opposite Victoria. ‘His wife,’ she says carefully. ‘She wasn’t…well, ma’am. She managed to hide it for so long, but perhaps…perhaps they weren’t as suited to each other as they initially thought,’ she says. Victoria nods, understanding at least some of that idea. ‘She had affairs. One particularly public one.’ The distaste was clear in Emma’s voice. ‘William – Lord Melbourne was devastated. And humiliated in the papers. It was horrible.’

‘I can imagine,’ Victoria replies, her eyes wide and her stomach a little sick at the thought. The papers were evil, she knew. Mama and Sir John had made sure she understood that. She had to guard herself carefully, she knew.

‘His wife died a few years ago now,’ Emma says, and she’s surprised. It hadn’t occurred to her that he would be a widower. That didn’t fit at all, she thought. Old men were widowers, and Lord Melbourne certainly wasn’t old. ‘But he is a good man, your majesty,’ Emma says firmly, and Victoria can see how eager she is for the Queen to understand. ‘He’s had quite a full career, and is well-liked amongst his peers.’

She can still hear Sir John’s voice in the back of her mind. Perhaps he was trying to trick her, trying to make sure she had no one and had to ask him for help.

Emma certainly thought Lord Melbourne was good. She was fairly sure she could trust Emma, but…

But then he had been kind to her, helped her at the council meeting without knowing her at all.
Emma stands to leave, and she calls after her. ‘I don’t think the list requires a great deal of your time, Emma.’
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

This AU presents a whole variety of challenges, mostly practical and around how the situation in the 1840s would work in the early 2000s. If something doesn't make sense, or you're just curious as to why I've made a certain decision around a character or idea, feel free to ask in the comments! (Or to point out glaring errors or inconsistencies. Please.)

Thanks for the feedback so far. I'm always willing to hear feedback - good and bad - or even just random observations. Whatever. :)

She’s just finished putting the last of her dresser drawer in a box when Lehzen appears. She knows she doesn’t really need to pack because she’s the Queen now – there were men all over the palace shifting furniture and packing up her life – but these were little things she didn’t really want anyone else touching.

‘We’re ready to go, majesty,’ she says, and Victoria nods, excited. There was a buzz in her veins, a heady feeling she couldn’t control, and didn’t want to control.

‘I am coming,’ she says, folding the lid down and turning to face Lehzen, who is still standing at the door, a concerned frown on her face. ‘What is it?’ Lehzen takes a step forward.

‘Majesty, Lady Portman has confirmed that Lord Melbourne will meet you at the Palace,’ she says, and Victoria nods.

‘Excellent,’ she replies, pleased. She’d hoped he would come. But Lehzen’s frown deepens, and she feels the pull of irritation. What could she possibly be upset about now?

‘Drina-Majesty,’ Lehzen corrects, her head lowering a little, before she steps forward, and goodness, she’s unhappy. ‘I must tell you that Lord Melbourne is…disreputable.’

‘Disreputable?’ Victoria replies. ‘I have already asked Lady Portman to look into Lord Melbourne’s background, and she assures me all is well.’

‘But Majesty, the stories,’ Lehzen starts, and she can’t hear this.

‘Lehzen,’ she snaps, the warning clear in her voice, and Lehzen bows and leaves quickly.

Victoria watches her go, and she’s angry. Lehzen’s always been on her side against Mama and John Conroy, but now, in this most important decision, she chooses to betray rather than support.

Besides, she’s sure that Lord Melbourne can’t be half as bad as they all make him out to be. He’d been kind to her when he hadn’t needed to be, and Emma had seemed so sincere in her praise of him. And he’d been Prime Minister, and a pretty popular one too, apparently. Surely her people wouldn’t vote in someone that terrible, would they?
She surprises him.

He’s at home reading when Emma calls. ‘Busy?’ she asks, and he grunts. ‘The Queen has requested your presence at Buckingham Palace,’ she says.

‘Me?’ he asks after a moment.

‘She’d like your assistance with some matters,’ is all Emma says, and he frowns.

‘When?’

‘Her majesty will be at the Palace in two hours.’

One hour and forty-five minutes later, he finds himself standing at the back entrance to the palace; the same one he’d used for the years he would meet with the King. He turns to see a convoy of cars and flashing lights arrive just a few minutes after him.

She steps out of the car and her reaction is priceless; she’s staring up at the columns of the balcony, awe written all over her face. He supresses a grin and walks over towards her.

‘Your majesty,’ he calls, bowing slightly.

She spins around and smiles at him. ‘Lord Melbourne! I am so glad you were able to make it,’ she says, as if he’d had a choice.

‘Of course, ma’am,’ he replies.

He turns to see another woman get out on the other side of the car, and she’s frowning a little at him. He can’t help but be amused; he has no idea who this woman is, but she clearly knows him. And she doesn’t like him. He’s impressed.

‘Thank you, Lehzen,’ Victoria says and the frowning lady rather reluctantly gets back into the car. ‘Lehzen was my governess,’ she explains, and he can see her cheeks pink a little.

‘A young lady’s closest ally,’ he says knowingly, and she stares at him for a second before nodding in agreement.

‘I was hoping you would show me around the palace,’ she says, and he’s a little surprised, and more than a little curious at her choice of guide.

‘I’m not sure I’m that familiar with all of it, ma’am,’ he says, ‘but I’ll do my best.’

She walks inside and he follows, pointing to direct her, and explaining what he knows about the building. The wonder in her face is child-like and Augustus’s face flashes in front of his eyes for second. He glances down, the stabbing pain in his chest subsiding slowly.

At least he can help her.

The palace is full of long hallways and so many rooms and she practically skips from one to the next. He follows behind her at a more sedate pace, answering her questions, pointing out views from windows, ancestors in paintings on walls. The wonder never leaves her face and he can’t help but smile; her excitement is infectious.
She stops when she reaches the Throne Room, approaching the throne carefully before sitting on it.

She peers down at her feet.

‘Yes, before your first reception, we’ll have to find you a throne that fits,’ he says, frowning. ‘Your uncle was taller than you.’

‘Everyone is taller than me,’ she retorts and there’s only the faintest hint of bitterness in her voice. He understands. ‘It is hard to be dignified when your feet are six inches from the floor,’ she agrees in a lighter tone, and he nods once.

They continue, and before he can stop her, she’s raced into what will be her bedroom. He pauses awkwardly at the door. She turns to see him standing there, her face confused, and he figures it’s not technically her bedroom yet, so he steps inside.

As she’s done in most of the rooms she’s actually stopped in, she goes straight to the window and peers out. ‘I think this will do nicely,’ she says after looking around for a moment, and he doesn’t comment. He’s not going to say anything about the Queen’s bedroom.

She turns to look at him, her chin slightly higher than before and he thinks this is her tell; she’s about to say something she’s not completely sure of, make an announcement of some kind. ‘Thank you for your recommendations for my Private Secretary,’ she says, and he nods.

‘You are most welcome, ma’am. I hope you found them helpful.’

‘Oh yes, very helpful,’ she says, and he nods. ‘Although, I must admit that my selection did not come from your list,’ she adds, and he’s not quite sure what to say to that.

‘I understand, ma’am.’

‘I also noticed that your name wasn’t there,’ she says and his eyebrows rise a little at that. He lets out a little laugh.

‘No, ma’am. I was hardly going to recommend myself,’ he says wryly, and she nods. He thinks that perhaps she’s misunderstood him; his name was never meant to be on any list, no matter who was compiling it.

‘Well, then, I suppose it’s good that Lady Portman speaks so highly of you,’ she says, levelling her gaze and him and he blinks. ‘Lord Melbourne, I believe with your experience as both a Lord and as Prime Minister, you would make an excellent Private Secretary.’

And she’s surprised him.

‘Me, ma’am?’

‘Do you disagree that you are more than qualified?’

‘Well, no, ma’am. Well, a little. I have not had the military experience that the most recent private secretaries have had,’ he adds, but a glance at her face stops him in his tracks.

Her chin is still held high, but her eyes are slightly wider than before, and there’s a tiny furrow in her brow now that tells him that she’s worried. She wants him to accept, he realises. His mind quickly fills in the gaps that today should have already filled: John Conroy.

He cannot – will not – do that to her.
But he has to raise the obvious issues. He is not the best choice for so many reasons.

‘Ma’am, you know I’m a Whig politician. Or I was, until recently.’

‘Yes.’

‘And that I still have a seat in the House of Lords, simply by virtue of my title.’

‘Yes,’ she says, and the look on her face shifts slightly, and he thinks she’s beginning to see what he’s saying, and she doesn’t like it.

‘The Monarchy must be seen as impartial in political matters. It could look partisan on your behalf to have an ex-Whig Prime Minister as your Private Secretary.’

She purses her lips a little, and he can see that the new Queen is determined, but determination can be a two-sided coin, he knows.

‘But, as you say, you’re no longer a minister,’ she says.

‘No, ma’am,’ he replies, and he’s not entirely sure he knows where she’s going with this.

‘And you would be willing to resign your membership of your party?’ she asks, and he can suddenly hear it in her voice – the fear. The worry. This is what she’s unsure about – she knows what she’s asking, and she’s not sure if he’s willing to give it.

She’s counting on him to accept, but she’s well aware just how easily he could have said no straight up. Could still say no.

He should say no.

‘Of course, ma’am,’ he replies, and she blinks at him.

‘Would you try to shape my political opinions and sway me to a particular political belief system?’

He’s taken aback. ‘Not deliberately, ma’am.’

‘Then surely there is no problem.’

He sighs, studying her. She will have her way, he thinks. He should not accept her; it would not be a good look, especially when the news became public – if it did. The public would not particularly care he thinks, but it wasn’t the point – the Queen still needed to be seen to be beyond politics, beyond everything. The Tories would scream the House down.

Unless…

He feels the warning in his gut, that this would come back to bite him – to bite her, one day – but he also feels the pull of duty. To protect the new Queen. She won’t pick a stranger, he thinks. In her mind, he suspects, it’s either him or Conroy. Better the devil you know. He can appreciate the sentiment.

Perhaps they would survive the bite, he thinks. If he was careful – if she was careful. She was the unknown quantity, really. He could manage himself, and perhaps the Tories if he tried hard – Wellington wouldn’t start a fight if he didn’t believe in it, and he would happily make whatever concessions Wellington asked for if it came to that – but he couldn’t control her.

And she’s still staring at him, waiting for his response, and her breathing has become shallow.
It would be a fight from the start, and he’s surprised that he’s willing to do it. Even now, his mind is whirring, thinking of everything he’s going to need to do to get this through, the people he’s going to need to sway, the promises he’s going to have to make.

It would be anything but easy; anything but the quiet life he’d been aching for since Caro. Since his little boy.

‘I would be honoured, ma’am,’ he says quietly, bowing his head slightly, ignoring the warning that’s shifted and is now screaming quietly in the back of his mind, and hoping that he sounds as sincere as he feels. He knows that as he says it that he actually is honoured; that he wants this. When faced with the task of guiding her, leading her, protecting her, he finds that he wants it. He hasn’t really wanted much in a long time, and the feeling isn’t entirely unwelcome.

Her smile is both relieved and satisfied, and he’s strangely pleased the little furrow in her brow is gone.

He looks around, realising where they are, and gives her a small smile. ‘Can I show you something, ma’am?’ he asks, and her eyes widen in surprise and anticipation. She almost jumps up from her seat, and he turns and leads her down a hall to a painting.

He knows she recognises it the minute they get there; her eyes go soft and wistful, and the sadness in her voice almost makes him regret bringing her here. But better he show her now than her stumble across it in a weak moment, where the pain of loss could do so much more damage.

‘I did not know him personally, ma’am, but I’m told he was an excellent Duke and a fine man.’

He watches her as she stares at the painting of her father, and he is fascinated emotions that play across her face. Sadness, regret, fear. Anger.

He realises quickly that she wears her heart on her sleeve; every emotion she feels passes across her face and can be found in her voice, and he is absolutely going to have to do something about it if this had any chance of working for longer than about five minutes.

She looks down. ‘They think because I am young and small, I am incapable of being Queen,’ she bites out, and his eyebrows rise a little at that. Clearly, this is a conversation she’s had before. And recently.

But she’s at least a little self-aware – she was small, and she did look young, and whoever dressed her needed to be fired. She was dressed like a girl, he thought - no wonder everyone treated her like it. Something else for him to fix – with Emma’s help. Emma got him into this, he thinks – she can play her part.

‘I think they’re wrong ma’am,’ he says, confidently. ‘Your education may perhaps seem to be a little lacking in areas, and appearances can be deceiving, ma’am,’ he says with a small smile. ‘To me, ma’am, you’re every inch a Queen.’

He sees her lips quirk in amusement and satisfaction and he’s pleased. The little Queen needs reason to smile more, he thinks.

‘Thank you,’ she says, before narrowing her eyes slightly. If he was going to be her Private Secretary, he needed a name shorter than Lord Melbourne. Besides, he didn’t seem like the kind of person to dislike a nickname. ‘Lord M,’ she adds carefully, ensuring the inflection in her voice makes it clear that she’s testing the waters; that he’s free to disapprove, but she hopes he doesn’t – she’s already begun to think of him as Lord M in the privacy of her mind.
But he just raises his eyebrows slightly in surprise, she thinks – she’s a little pleased that she’s surprised him – and gives her a small, amused smile and it’s settled.

*Lord M*, he thinks.

Well, then.

He’s not surprised, in hindsight. She’s young, and he has a feeling the little Queen will need these little quirks, these things that make her feel safe. If this little nickname is the price he has to pay, he’ll more than gladly pay it. He’ll wear it with honour.

***

‘She wants you,’ Russell says, and he can hear and see the incredulity and almost disdain in Cabinet Secretary’s voice and all over his face, no matter how much he’s clearly trying to hide it.

‘Yes,’ he replies, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

‘And you said yes?’ Melbourne winces internally – Russell was no longer trying to hide anything.

‘Yes.’

‘What were you thinking?’

Melbourne sighs. ‘Do you have any idea what it’s been like for her?’ he asks, levelling his gaze at the younger man.

‘No one is going to care!’

‘She is the Queen, and she’s likely going to be the Queen for a very, very long time. We should care.’

‘But she’s supposed to be impartial,’ Russell argues, and he knows this.

‘It’s me or John Conroy,’ Melbourne says bluntly, and Russell sits back in his seat, still eyeing him, and he’s glad for the relationship that he’d slowly developed with the fellow politician over time – the trust that had naturally built over time and experience.

‘Wellington is not going to like this,’ Russell says after a moment. This, he knows. ‘No.’

‘You’re asking a lot.’

‘Yes.’

Russell eyes him for a few moments. ‘I’ll talk to him. But I can’t guarantee anything.’

Melbourne nods. ‘I appreciate any assistance you can give.’

He watches as Russell throws his hands in the air. ‘I don’t even know what I’m going to say,’ he says, and Melbourne purses his lips.
‘Ask him about his meeting with the Queen.’

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He gets the phone call later that afternoon.

‘Who the hell do you think you are?’

He doesn’t wince at the Prime Minister’s bellow; he knows this man too well. There’s far too much water under the bridge for them to be anything other than entirely candid with each other.

‘Wellington,’ he says by way of greeting. ‘Thanks for calling.’

‘Tell me why I shouldn’t let this blow up in your face.’

‘You know why,’ Melbourne replies steadily, and he can hear Wellington’s angry sigh. He’d been counting on this; Wellington’s sense of duty, his old-fashioned love for the monarchy. He was a father, and a grandfather. And he’d already met his sweet, wide-eyed, slightly terrified new Queen.

‘And there is no one else?’

‘She made it fairly clear that it was a two-horse race.’

‘I don’t like it, Melbourne.’ And he says nothing to that. There is nothing he can say to that. He knows he’s the best of two very bad choices. ‘If there is any hint of bias – anything at all, I’ll be the one leading the charge for your head.’

‘I would expect nothing less.’

‘Russell and I will be watching.’

‘I would do the same.’

And Wellington’s sighing again. ‘She’s very young.’

‘Yes,’ Melbourne says heavily, feeling all the weight of his decision and of what he was asking. But he knows that whilst he’s far from the best choice she could have made, at least Wellington knows they can work together. And if all he has going for him at the moment in Wellington’s eyes is that he’s not John Conroy, well, he’ll have to settle for that for now. ‘Yes, she is.’

‘Good luck,’ Wellington says before hanging up, and Melbourne smiles triumphantly down at his phone.
Chapter Notes

Thanks for the feedback so far! Keep it coming - I appreciate it all.

This is going somewhere plot-wise, I promise. Well, kinda promise. I'm more of a character-study kind of writer (as you may have noticed), but stuff will happen. We're getting there!

When he officially starts as her Private Secretary only a few days later, she thinks she may have made the right choice. She doesn’t really have much of an idea what a Private Secretary does, other than organise her life for her – but then she doesn’t really have a complete idea of what that’s supposed to look like either.

‘Good morning, ma’am,’ he says as he walks in, tilting his head in a funny kind of small bow, and she smiles.

‘Good morning, Lord M,’ she replies, and she’s pleased he’s finally here. She’s floundered a bit, and Sir John has taken every opportunity to remind her of what she’s missing. But Emma has been a godsend and a blessing wrapped in one neat, efficient, lovely package, and the rest of the staff have been nice too. She hasn’t really had that much to do, other than settle into the Palace, unpack some of her personal stuff. Explore.

She could count on her hands the number of times she’d been to Buckingham Palace. She’d always felt small there; like the house was too big for her, or she was too small for it. She imagined it as a stern old Grandmother; she was a very little girl who wasn’t yet allowed to play in the world her uncle hadn’t finished with. She had to wait until she was older – until she was more grown up.

As she’d walked along the walls that cradled the paintings of her ancestors, she’d realised she didn’t feel grown up at all. She’d wondered if she would ever grow into it, if she’d ever feel big enough.

She’s lost count of the number of times she’s gotten lost over the past three days. She’s never going to admit it to anyone, either.

‘Enjoying your new home?’ he asks with a smile.

‘I keep getting lost,’ she says before she can stop herself. Idiot. He’s going to think her silly; a child. Who gets lost in their own palace?

‘Oh, yes, ma’am. I got lost the first time I came here – a few times, in fact,’ he says, and her eyes flick up to his face. ‘It’s a maze, and a large one.’ And she thinks that maybe he’s not teasing her; his voice is serious, and almost…sympathetic. ‘I’m not sure Google Maps does inside Buckingham Palace, though,’ he adds, and she can’t help but smile. He’s definitely teasing her now, but she doesn’t mind - it’s not unkind. ‘I doubt your security would approve of that.’

It’s then that he spots Dash who is curled up in a ball on a cushion on the floor and she swallows. He’s going to think her juvenile for keeping her dog so close all the time. She’s going to have to give
him up now, her faithful companion, now that’s she’s Queen. Queens don’t keep their pet dog with them all the time. Queens don’t need pet dogs as their constant companions.

‘Oh, hello,’ he says walking over to where Dash is now awake and wagging his tail. ‘I haven’t officially met you,’ he says as he squats down and holds his hand out for Dash to sniff and then promptly lick.

‘That’s Dash,’ she says quickly. ‘He’s mine.’

‘Hello, Dash,’ Melbourne says, scratching the dog’s head, and Victoria can see that Dash is loving every second of it.

‘I’ve had Dash since I was thirteen,’ she explains quickly, as Melbourne stands. ‘Sir John doesn’t think I should keep him now that I’m Queen.’ She’s babbling, she knows, and bites down on her tongue.

He frowns a little. ‘And what do you think?’

She’s taken aback, speechless for a moment. ‘I want to keep him. He’s mine,’ she blurts out. ‘He’s been a source of great comfort,’ she adds, a little more quietly.

‘Then I don’t see why you should give him up, ma’am,’ and he genuinely looks confused, she thinks.

They say Queens don’t need lapdogs. They say I’m a child.

‘Your uncle had a number of dogs,’ he adds thoughtfully. ‘Though they really were a little too big to be roaming around the palace, I’d still run into them from time to time.’ He looks down at Dash. ‘I doubt Dash is going to be a problem for anyone. Except perhaps the kitchens,’ he adds with a small smile, and she breathes again.

It’s a few hours later and he brings up the Coronation, and her heart’s in her throat again.

‘When will it be?’ she asks, and he frowns thoughtfully.

‘There’s no great rush, ma’am. It will take a great deal of planning. Early next year, perhaps,’ he says, and she sighs with relief. ‘We’ll schedule a practice run or two closer to the time, of course,’ he says slowly, and she realises he’d noticed her panic.

‘I am pleased to be Queen,’ she explains. ‘I’m just not all that good at public speaking,’ she admits.

‘Well, you won’t have to do too much speaking in this case, at least not when too many people will be able to hear,’ he says. ‘Mostly walking. And sitting. And wearing the crown,’ he adds.

‘I remember thinking that it wouldn’t fit me,’ she says, and the corners of his mouth turn up slightly.

‘I’ve heard it’s quite heavy,’ he says, and she blinks.

She remembers seeing her Uncle wearing the crown once, and the size of it had overwhelmed her, but she’d never really considered that it would be heavy. What if it’s too heavy? What if she can’t hold it up? She had no idea how strong her neck was. Surely it wouldn’t be that heavy… but then most of the monarchs before her had been men. Men with bigger heads and thicker necks than her. Stronger.

She swallows at the thought.
‘It will be televised,’ she half-asks, already knowing the answer.

‘Oh yes, ma’am. We can’t really get away from that,’ he replies, and oh goodness, if she fails the entire world is going to watch her humiliation live. He must sense her fear because he puts down the book he’s holding. ‘We can practice as many times as you like,’ he says gently, and she nods. She’s already thinking of ways she can strengthen her neck. She remembers pictures of African women carrying baskets on their heads from one of her books; some of them were small, but they’d managed. Maybe she could too.

When he arrives one day a couple of weeks later with a bucket with a swatch of fur wrapped around the bottom and some weights taped at even intervals around the sides, she thanks God for her Lord M.

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‘Melbourne,’ Wellington says, and he nods to the older man before glancing at his feet. Wellington must look confused, he thinks, because she speaks after a few moments.

‘I’ve asked Lord Melbourne to sit in on our meeting,’ she explains to the Duke.

‘Perfectly fine, ma’am,’ the Duke replies, and Melbourne can tell it’s anything but. He winces internally; he doesn’t particularly care about Wellington’s feelings in general – he was deliberately and carefully neutral there – but he didn’t like how it made her look. Needy. Dependent.

He also doesn’t want Wellington to think he’s controlling her that much. He’s only been here a week.

But he would sit in the chair and take notes as surreptitiously as he could, and hope that this is the last time he’d have to do this.

He suspects it won’t be.

It takes all of two minutes before she’s turning to ask him a question about the role of the Minister of State in Veteran’s affairs, and he can feel Wellington’s gaze on him, waiting to see what he does. But there is no way he can tell her to ask Wellington – the actual Prime Minister – in front of him, so it’s just awkward all around.

‘Yes, ma’am, that would be the purview of the Under-Secretary specifically,’ he replies, and he glances from her to Wellington, and he thinks she gets the idea when she turns back to Wellington to continue her line of questioning.

Six questions in less than twenty minutes later, he can see Wellington’s patience with his new Queen – and her Private Secretary – is just about to hit the reserves. There’s a brief pause as the conversation comes to a natural stop, and he takes advantage of it.

‘Ma’am, some tea?’ he asks, and she looks surprised, but nods anyway.

‘Yes, thank you, Lord M,’ she replies, and he can hear the poorly-disguised confusion in her voice. And Wellington’s looking at him with an eyebrow raised and he thinks that no one outside of Emma and perhaps one of the staff has heard her refer to him as Lord M before, and he could do without that look from Wellington right at this moment. He thinks that perhaps he wouldn’t have minded at
any other time, but it just adds to the whole skewed picture so neatly he can’t help but wince at the timing.

‘Can I offer you some tea, Prime Minister?’ she asks Wellington who blinks at her before quickly thanking her. Melbourne makes a mental note to remind her that she’s the Queen, and that particular job is almost never hers.

‘Ah, you asked me to remind you that you wished to discuss the latest troop commitments in Afghanistan with the Prime Minister, ma’am,’ he says, as he stands.

‘Yes,’ she says reluctantly, watching him stand, and he gives her the briefest of nods as he turns and heads out the door.

‘Tea for her majesty and the Prime Minister, please,’ he says in a sigh to Emma, who nods and picks up the phone.

He would not be able to continue this, he thinks. Wellington would lose it eventually, and he wouldn’t blame him – he wouldn’t have been pleased about the whole situation either. She was young, yes, and inexperienced, but there was only so much give in this awkward three-way relationship.

‘It’ll be up in a minute,’ Emma says, and he nods, leaning on her desk. ‘I’ll bring it in,’ she adds deliberately when he doesn’t leave.

‘I’ll wait,’ he says, before frowning.

‘You’ll wait,’ Emma replies doubtfully, and he glances down at her. ‘Not going well?’ she asks, and he sighs again.

‘Not from Wellington’s perspective,’ he replies, pursing his lips, and he can see Emma’s tongue curl into her cheek, but he says nothing.

When Wellington leaves not long after, he gives him a tight smile that Wellington almost returns, and he gets the message.

He was going to have to extricate himself from these meetings.

‘Ma’am, I don’t really think you need me present when you speak with the Prime Minister,’ he says a little while later, and she turns to him, her eyes wide.

‘Why not? Of course I need you there, Lord M,’ she replies. ‘There’s so much I don’t yet understand.’

‘I think the Prime Minister should be able to answer your questions,’ he says, and she frowns, and he knows he’s going to have to explain this. Delicately, too.

‘Do you remember when you first asked me to be your Private Secretary, and I said that it could potentially be seen as partisan on your behalf?’ She nods, still frowning. ‘I think having me, an ex-Whig Prime Minister, answering your questions about government business in front of the current Tory Prime Minister could be considered less than impartial,’ he says carefully.

He watches while she considers his words. ‘But I don’t know the Duke,’ she says, but he can hear the truth behind her words. She doesn’t trust the Duke yet.

He wonders again what he did to earn such implicit trust from her so quickly, and what it is about
almost everyone else that means they have to work so hard to earn it.

‘You will get to know him, ma’am,’ he says gently. ‘You should get to know him.’

She lets out a sigh, and he thinks that maybe, just maybe, he’s won this round. ‘You can always come and ask me anything you wish to know after your meetings,’ he promises.

‘The Duke seems nice enough,’ she says uncertainly, and he has to be careful here. He could so, so easily sound bitter, and she doesn’t deserve that. His history with Wellington is his own, and he will not let her be swayed by his past.

‘The Duke is a very capable Prime Minister,’ he says carefully. ‘And he is most definitely loyal to his monarch.’ And he can see that has done approximately nothing to assuage her fears. ‘He’s a good man, ma’am,’ he adds, as much as his belief in that statement is tinged with pain.

‘Very well,’ she replies, and he counts this one in the win box.

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Her loose business pants and blouse the next day remind him that he really needs to talk to Emma. He’s a man, sure, but even he knows she could look so much better than she does, and that if she wants to be treated like a Queen, she needs to actually look like one. The power of clothing choices was not lost on him, even if he hadn’t much of a clue what that actually meant practically for women. But there were people they could employ who did, and he suspected Emma would know just the right person.

There were so many things they needed to work on that he occasionally finds himself momentarily overwhelmed. He knows he has to be patient; so much is just going to take time and experience, and if they rush things, if he pushes too hard, she’ll break and they’ll have to start again. But he’s pleased this is one problem that can be essentially solved for her, and quite quickly, he thinks. It’ll do wonders for her self-esteem; despite all the bold statements and seeming surety, he knows that underneath it all she’s still that terrified, wide-eyed girl he first saw at the Council. She’s just relaxed a little, out of the spotlight for now.

He’s just not entirely sure how to broach the situation with her. He doesn’t really know the Queen well at all yet – he’s known her for barely more than a few weeks. But he does know she’s young, and a little tempestuous by nature, with so little emotional intelligence it’s almost staggering; but also kind and compassionate. And scared. Her past at Kensington is a relatively unknown quantity, and he’s just not entirely sure how that will factor into her reactions and responses - yet.

In this case, he decides he’s going to have be direct. If she’s angry, then she’s angry, and he’ll have to wear it until he can talk her around.

‘Ma’am,’ he says, ‘I’d like to suggest that you employ a stylist,’ and he’s watching her carefully.

Her head flicks up and her eyes are wide. ‘Really?’ And he thinks perhaps she’s not upset at all. She sounds almost…excited at the prospect.

‘Yes. As Queen, it’s important that your wardrobe choices reflect how you wish to be viewed by not
only those around you, but the public as well.’ He watches as a small smile spreads across her face, before she frowns a little.

‘Lehzen has always chosen my clothes, with Mama’s approval,’ she says thoughtfully, and Melbourne nods, waiting for the inevitable. ‘But I am Queen now,’ she says, her voice stronger, and he resists the urge to smile.

When he arrives the next morning, Emma’s surprised to see him. ‘Harriet Sutherland is due any minute,’ she says, eyeing her watch and him. ‘Why are you here?’

He lets out a small sigh. ‘Her majesty requested that I be present.’

Emma’s eyebrows rise so high he has to actively resist the urge to comment.

‘I’m only staying to officially meet Ms Sutherland – as I should – and then I’m leaving,’ he says firmly.

Emma’s lips twitch and he shoots her a look. ‘Does the Queen know that?’

‘Oh yes,’ he says firmly, and he ignores Emma’s pointed look.

When Harriet arrives minutes later, both he and Emma usher her into the Queen’s study, and Melbourne is pleased to see that the Queen takes a liking to Harriet almost instantly. She’s tall, stylish and confident; everything he suspects the Queen wishes she was. Harriet, unsurprisingly, is not fazed by the young Queen’s status for long, quickly assessing her most exciting project to date, before sitting her down and opening a folder with photos.

‘Ma’am,’ he interrupts before they can get too ensconced in discussions about colours and fabrics and shapes, ‘I’ll return this afternoon with your paperwork.’

And when she frowns a little, he can almost hear Emma’s unvoiced laugh. ‘You’re not staying?’ she asks, and he shakes his head.

‘This is very much not my area, ma’am,’ he says firmly. ‘But Lady Portman and Mrs Sutherland are more than capable.’

Her nod is very clearly reluctant, and he gives her a small smile before leaving.

The realisation that he would have stayed if she’d asked him to sits rather uncomfortably in his stomach.

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He knows that he has absolutely made the right decision when she appears at the end of the hallway in a pale blue dress that’s covered in a long, simple pale blue jacket and heels, and he can’t look away.

He’s struck by how different she looks as she walks towards him, all legs and blue and beautiful long, long brown hair that’s been pulled back from her face and hanging curled down her back, hidden slightly under a fascinator. But more than that, she’s elegant. Dignified. A young Queen.

He feels the pride well in his chest. If outward appearances were anything to go by, she would
‘What do you think, Lord M?’ she asks when she stops a few feet away from him, and he’s dully aware he’s been staring. He manages to process the vulnerability in her voice and in her eyes – her eyes were so blue today – and he gives her a soft smile.

‘Lovely, ma’am,’ he says, before nodding once. ‘An excellent choice.’ She smiles tentatively before looking down at her feet. He thinks perhaps she doesn’t wear heels often.

‘New shoes, ma’am?’ he asks, and she looks up at him guiltily.

‘I’ve been practicing,’ she admits. ‘Mama would never let me wear heels.’ Mama wouldn’t let me walk down stairs alone.

‘Ah,’ he says.

‘I feel like I can barely walk,’ she mutters, and his eyebrows rise a little at that.

‘It didn’t look that way to me, ma’am,’ he says. She gives him a disbelieving smile, and he is dully aware that his brain is quietly screaming at him, an incoherent mess of appropriateness and duty and staring and beauty. But he squashes it; she needs to hear reassurance now, and reassurance is what he will give.

‘I just hope I won’t fall over,’ she says worriedly.

‘I’m sure you won’t,’ he says, as he sees Harriet walk up behind them. ‘I don’t think Ms Sutherland would select shoes that she thought would present a problem.’

‘Certainly not,’ Harriet says, and Victoria turns. ‘The heels are quite wide, ma’am. The grass won’t be a problem. Just walk slowly and deliberately, as we’ve practiced.’

Victoria nods, and he can see she’s trying to feel convinced by their assurances. He can understand. She has so much yet to experience, his young Queen, and she has to do it herself, to learn what she’s capable of. To learn how to do the work that is her birthright, heels and all.

‘If you’re ready, ma’am,’ he says, and she nods.

‘Would you mind if I held your arm?’ she asks quietly as they begin to walk down the long hallway. He looks down at her, concerned, but holds his arm out straight away. She takes it gratefully, and he marvels at how small her hand is on his forearm. For all her elegance, she really is just tiny. She grips his arm tightly for a moment before relaxing. ‘Just until we reach the doors,’ she says, and he nods.

‘As long as you like, ma’am,’ he replies.

She’s still holding on to his arm when they reach the foyer, and he can see the question in Emma’s eyes.

‘Your first Royal Garden Party, ma’am,’ Emma says after a moment, her voice light and a smile on her face.

‘Yes,’ Victoria says, letting go of his arm to peer through the window to the people outside. She turns back to Melbourne, and he can see the nerves have returned in droves. ‘There are so many people.’

Not really, he wants to say, but that’s not helpful. For her, for this first real event, it might as well be
‘There are a few,’ he agrees. ‘But you won’t have to meet them all at once.’

‘I won’t have to meet them all,’ she almost asks, her voice a little panicked. ‘I thought it was just a selection.’

‘It is, ma’am,’ he assures her, but he can see it’s not working. The nerves are getting the better of her. He makes a mental note to teach her some breathing techniques. Tomorrow, preferably. She’d been so calm of late, so focused on learning her role – on being Queen mostly alone in the palace – he hadn’t thought she’d succumb to nerves quite this badly. He had misjudged, clearly.

‘Monarchs have been meeting their people for centuries, ma’am, and everyone out there is very excited and pleased to meet the new Queen. You have nothing to worry about,’ he says quietly. She looks up at him, her eyes wide, and eventually nods.

‘This will be a very tame crowd, ma’am. Emma and I have made sure of it,’ he adds, and she nods again. He watches as she takes another breath.

‘I am ready,’ she says, and he gives her a small smile before nodding to the guard at the door. He can’t help but smile as her chin tilts up slightly before she walks towards the door.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

As a teacher I’ve been learning
And forgive me if I boast
That I’ve now become an expert
On the subject I like most

Getting to know you
Getting to know you, getting to know all about you
Getting to like you, getting to hope you like me
Getting to know you, putting it my way but nicely
You are precisely my cup of tea

- 'Getting To Know You' - The King And I

Chapter Notes

I'm posting this a little early because I've had some time to write over the past few days, and because I'm going overseas for three weeks on Wednesday and don't know when I'll get to post again. I'll be writing, though, don't you worry about that...

Thanks for all the feedback so far - I really appreciate those who've had time to write something even really small (and everyone who's given kudos). Ask any writer - it means a lot.

When he arrives, Emma’s face is pensive, and she tells him Conroy has been in there for at least the last fifteen minutes. He sighs and nods in resignation; the Queen will need cheering up.

It varies, depending on who has visited, he’s learned. If it’s the Duchess, she will be upset, but relatively easy to cheer up if he’s patient. If it’s Conroy, she’ll be angry, but more at herself than anything, he’s realised. If it’s both, then it can take a lot longer.

He hates to see her upset. Seeing her bullied makes his blood boil.

‘This is not a game!’ he hears a voice shout and his feet propel him through the adjoining door to where he can see Sir John standing only a few feet from the Queen. Her eyes fly to his, and the anger – the rage – at the look on her face almost, almost overwhelms him; she’s defiant, but so, so small. Cowed. This must have been her childhood, his mind helpfully supplies, and he draws in a deep breath, desperately quashing the desire to tear Sir John limb from limb.

He thinks he’ll never forget the look in her eyes at that moment; it will haunt him forever.

‘Sir John,’ he says after a moment – a moment where he ascertains that the Queen is now standing at a safe enough distance from Sir John, and where he finally pushes down the rage that threatens to
blind him – ‘might I remind you that despite any connection you may have, you are speaking to the Queen of England.’ He can hear the barely disguised fury in his own voice, how his voice becomes louder at the end, and he’s thankful at that moment that he’s also standing at a safe distance himself from Sir John; neither of them need his start as Private Secretary to the Queen to be his end. He watches as Sir John’s expression turns from anger to shock, and, he’s mildly satisfied to note, to some form of mild fear, before he bows slightly to Victoria and stalks out the other door.

Melbourne takes the few quick steps to where Victoria is standing, her shoulders slumped and her eyes closed. ‘Are you alright, ma’am?’ he asks, his voice as quiet and as soft as he can make it.

‘Yes,’ she says after a moment. ‘I am fine.’ She looks up at him, all wide eyes and unshed tears and all he wants to do in that moment is pull her into his arms and hold her, and the strength of the sensation shocks him a little. When did he begin to care that much?

This is the Queen. He cannot hug her, he tells himself, so he settles for giving her a small smile.

‘Of course you are,’ he says softly. ‘I apologise for intervening in your discussion with Sir John.’ She lets out a huff of a laugh at that point, and turns away to look out at the window. And, he notices, to rest against the wall.

‘Sir John is displeased with some of my choices,’ she informs him after a moment, her voice stronger.

Melbourne pulls a face behind her. ‘I don’t see why your choices concern him, ma’am,’ he says, careful to add a hint of confusion in his voice. She glances up at him, her smile almost rueful. ‘You are the Queen, ma’am, and he is wholly unrelated to you in any way.’

‘He is my mother’s Private Secretary,’ she explains, as if it meant anything. ‘And her closest friend.’

‘But not yours,’ he replies. ‘Your Majesty,’ he adds deliberately after a moment, and she turns to look at him, her smile a little more genuine this time.

‘No,’ she says, and he can see the strength return to her as she considers the implications of his words. ‘No, he’s not.’ The edges of her mouth curl up a little, and she glances down at her feet. ‘And that I think was what he was so angry about.’

Melbourne nods; he’s not surprised at all. But she’s smiling tentatively at him now, and he can’t help but give her a small smile back. ‘Shall we start on your letters for the morning, ma’am?’ he asks, and her smile widens as she nods.

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His phone rings in his pocket one day when they’re talking – he’d obviously forgotten to put it on silent. He apologises before pulling it out to see who’s calling. It’s Peel – he flicks it to silent and makes a mental note to call him back. He’d just be leaving a message anyway.

‘What kind of phone do you have?’ she asks.

‘Emma said I needed an iPhone,’ he says resignedly, and she nods. ‘I’m still figuring out how to use it,’ he admits.
'Could I get a phone?' she asks, and he blinks. He realises he’d always assumed that she had one – it never occurred to him that she wouldn’t have a phone. She was, despite her title, a twenty-two-year-old woman in the twenty-first century. But he’s never seen her with one, and in hindsight, he reflects, he’s not surprised. He can’t imagine why the Duchess or Conroy would have seen the need for her to have one – she’d barely left Kensington from what he can tell, and never alone.

She most definitely should have a phone, he thinks. If for nothing else than the fact that she was a twenty-two-year-old woman in the twenty-first century. His mind whips through the pros and cons: the security issues and the ease of access to social media balanced against the need for her to be contactable and to know what she was talking about with the most basic of technology. The monarchy may be in some ways a relic of a bygone era, but he thinks perhaps it should be dragged into the twenty-first century, and she was just the monarch to do it. He’d talk to her Director of Security Liaison, Alexander Cockburn, but he couldn’t see why not.

‘I suppose so,’ he says, eventually. ‘If you wanted one.’

‘Really?’ she says, and her face brightens.

It takes him only two days to speak to Alex and organise her a shiny new iPhone, complete with secure email and access details. He’s amused by her excitement when she pulls it out of the box, but she stops after a moment. ‘I don’t really know how to use it,’ she admits quietly, looking up at him.

‘And I am not the person to be asking,’ he points out. ‘But I can probably work out at least how to turn it on.’

They spend a good fifteen minutes going through all the set-up prompts and typing in all the details he’d been given by the Director before they’re successful in setting it up, and then she’s staring at the home screen in wonder.

‘And this is about the time I bow out,’ he says. ‘Harriet will be here at three to go through some clothing options for your next event, and to help you play with your new toy,’ and she grins. ‘But first – you have a meeting with your Director of Security Liaison at one. He has some concerns about social media, given that this is a new field for you, ma’am,’ he says, and she nods, eyes wide.

She’s taking photos of a rather unamused Dash when a message appears later that evening.

_Having fun?

_She grins. His was the first number she’d put in – he’d left it on a scrap of paper inside the box. She just wasn’t sure if she was allowed to message him or not. Would he mind her messaging him at strange hours? And when he wasn’t technically at work? He might find it – find her – annoying. She’d decided not to risk it. She really didn’t know him all that well yet, despite having spent part of almost every day with him over the past month. She didn’t want to make him angry. Sir John would get so angry so quickly.

But now? Well, it would be impolite not to reply, she thinks.

Yes. _Thank you for organising my phone_, she replies. She stares at the screen for a few moments before the little bubble with the dots appears, and she feels the grin spread across her face – the thought that he’s looking at her message now, replying to her as she watches, thrills her.

_My pleasure_, comes the reply. _Use your power for good_ appears moments later, and she grins before pressing a few buttons and biting her lip, waiting for his reply.

He laughs out loud when a picture of Dash appears on his screen a few moments later.
This is by far one of her favourite parts of the day, he knows – the letters. They’re carefully vetted, obviously – first by his Deputy and his assistant, then again by him, because she doesn’t need to see any of that, ever. There are far too many for her to read them all, anyway – her novelty has not yet worn off. There are so many sweet letters from little old ladies in small villages and hamlets all over the country telling her how lovely she looks on the television and wishing her the best, young children telling her they liked her dress or her tiara, foreign dignitaries wishing her all the best for her coronation.

He finds her sitting quietly one morning – he’d dropped the letters off before excusing himself for a meeting with his Peel, before returning an hour later. The look on her face is contemplative, he thinks, but there’s a hint of worry in her brow.

‘Penny for your thoughts, ma’am,’ he says, when she doesn’t stir at his entering. She blinks and looks up at him, her forehead still crinkled. She’s holding a letter in her hand. ‘Still drafting your responses?’ he asks, and she purses her lips.

‘They’re so kind,’ she says, and he looks at her, waiting. ‘They all tell me how wonderful it is that I’m Queen, and how I’m a role model for them and, for some of them, their daughters, and…’ she trails off. He waits.

Outside of public speaking, she rarely struggles to speak, to articulate her thoughts clearly and determinedly. But when she’s flustered or is struggling with an emotion she can’t deal with or even identify – and there are many of those, he thinks – she stumbles over her words. And the way she stops abruptly and looks away, very clearly collecting her thoughts, tells him she hasn’t been allowed to be anything less than perfect.

‘They expect so much from me, and they are right to do so. I don’t want to let them down,’ she finally says.

He’d wondered if she’d get to this, and when. She was a series of walking contradictions, his little Queen: vulnerable but blunt, petulant but intelligent, fragile yet so strong. He could see it in her face, occasionally – the fear – but he hadn’t been sure if it was fear of her own failure, or the impact of her failure on others. She’s compassionate, but occasionally her immaturity still surprises him.

But he’s proud of her; of her concern for her subjects. She needs to hold this – not let it weigh upon her like a millstone, but consider the impact of her actions. It’s a lot to ask, he knows, especially now. Too much, sometimes.

So he sits next to her on the couch. ‘You won’t, ma’am,’ he says.

‘You don’t know that,’ she interjects before he can finish.

‘You won’t,’ he repeats, ‘and when you do, they’ll only learn that no one is infallible. And then, when you rise above it all, they’ll learn that Queens learn from their mistakes. And then when you go out there again, they’ll learn that to be a Queen is to do your very best, despite all those who would tear you down.’

She stares at him, and he can see the worry still etched into her face, but it’s joined by something a little softer now. Hope, he thinks.
But she is right to be concerned, he knows. People are wary - she is young, and has yet to prove that she has the dignity and weight of authority and the wisdom to rule. But he can see that they want to like her, most of them - youth is accessible, understandable. It's this dissonance in her subjects that she lives every day, and it's a tightrope. One false move and she'll fall, and fall far.

He prays she never has to work too hard for forgiveness and redemption.

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It’s one of the biggest events of the year behind her fast-approaching coronation, and she’s struggling. The annual dinner for the Diplomatic Corps is a white-tie event, an assembly of foreign diplomats and representatives, and it’s when he really begins to realise just how unprepared for her role she really is.

When he’d said that her education had been a little lacking in certain areas, he hadn’t realised just how much of an understatement that was.

He’s going through her schedule with her when it comes up, and he can see by her face that she’s worried about this one. He understands why – there will be over a thousand men and women there, all part of the diplomatic centre of Britain, all very highly qualified and highly educated people, and all much, much older and far more experienced than her. Whilst she’s slowly mastering the Garden Party – he’s so pleased at how much she’s learned and changed and grown – this is something else entirely. He reminds her that it’s months away, that she’ll be prepared for it all, that he’ll teach her who she should know, and that both he and Emma, and Wellington, will be there.

She seems to settle a little at that, and he thinks no more of it.

He brings her a list of the representatives a week later, with the most important names highlighted for her to memorise. He’d suggested they spend an hour or so with Emma making flashcards – her being part of the process would help her remember the ones she created – and she’d laughed at him before pulling out her new iPad (her latest toy in Harriet’s new quest to ensure she can at least keep up with fashion, Lord Melbourne.). Within a few minutes, she’d downloaded a flashcards app and was busy googling faces that corresponded with the highlighted names on his list – the people she really needed to know by sight.

But when she asks him why it’s obvious that the Israeli ambassador and the Iranian ambassador should not be stationed next to one another in the reception line, he stares at her for a few moments, his mouth open just a little, before blinking. He makes a mental note to request from the Baroness a list of exactly what she’d been taught by her private tutors for twenty-two years.

Then he makes a mental list of everything he needs to teach her in the next eight weeks just for this event alone based on a worst-case scenario, and his mind starts making lists upon lists and he lets out a breath.

She’s still staring at him, and he can see she’s starting to colour at his lack of response.

He says something quickly about a recent disagreement and that would be impolite to put the ambassadors in a situation that could potentially reignite those tensions, and she nods, but he knows she can still see his mind spinning and he forces his face to calm, and to look right at her.

‘Your majesty, how much in the way of recent political history did you study with the Baroness?’
He can see her falter a little, and he thinks he knows the answer already.

‘Not much,’ she says. ‘Our history lessons focussed mainly on European history.’ She pauses. ‘Although, my second-last tutor did start teaching me about some more recent matters – we talked a lot about the Cold War, and US-Russia-British relations, but then she left after only a few weeks.’ She looks up at him. ‘Sir John said she’d been offered another position at a university.’

‘Hmm,’ he replies, knowing exactly what had happened to that tutor, and he’s working to control his expression.

He wonders how anyone could be so irresponsible, so desperate for power, to leave her so underprepared for a job the world had known she would have almost from her infancy. And now that Sir John’s plans had fallen through – he’d failed – she was left floundering in that very unforgiving world.

‘It would appear we have some work to do,’ he says, making his voice as light as possible. How he was going to teach her all of this in such a short space of time, he had no idea.

He knew one thing for sure – he was going to need some help.

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He enlists the help of everyone he thinks will be of some use – Wellington, Emma, Harriet.

When he speaks to Wellington, he can hear the reluctance in the man’s voice. Wellington’s biggest fear was that Melbourne would turn her against him, against his party, and make her a partisan Queen, but here he is, offering Wellington more influence than ever. He hoped Wellington would see it for what it was – both an olive branch and a request for help.

‘What are you asking, Melbourne?’ he says, and Melbourne sighs.

‘She knows virtually nothing about modern politics outside of what she’s learnt in the last few months,’ he explains. ‘Conroy…’ and he trails off, knowing anything he says is unlikely to be positive, and is probably best left unsaid. ‘She’s going to look a fool at the Reception if something isn’t done.’

‘I agree on all fronts, but I’m not sure what you want from me outside of what I’m already doing.’

He sighs. ‘She respects you, Arthur. She needs you to teach her what I cannot.’

He hears Wellington chuckle humourlessly down the phone. ‘You were PM, Melbourne. What could I possibly teach her about the modern world that you can’t?’

‘The most recent events that I don’t have access to in the detail you do. She doesn’t need a history lesson; just enough that she doesn’t step on any toes and embarrass herself. Or you,’ he adds, reminding Wellington that her failure makes them all look stupid.

He can hear Wellington thinking. ‘Okay,’ he concedes, and he can hear the reluctance in the older man’s voice. ‘I’m not convinced she’ll listen to me as well as she listens to you, Melbourne.’

‘She can’t just hear it from me,’ he says. ‘She needs to learn to listen to more voices.’ And when it
comes out of his mouth, so final like that, he’s reminded of the truth in the statement. And of how important it is that he says it.

Wellington chuckles. ‘I think we’re a way off from that yet,’ and Melbourne cringes. This is not the conversation he wants to be having.

‘I appreciate your assistance, Arthur,’ he says, and he means it.

‘You’re welcome, Melbourne, but I’m not really doing this for you.’

And Melbourne smiles. ‘Of that, I am fully aware.’

When he arrives the following week, he sees Wellington on the way out.

‘I was aware of the gaps in her understanding, but I didn’t realise just how bad it was,’ Wellington says to him quietly. Melbourne purses his lips and nods. ‘You’ve got your work cut out for you. But she’s smart, and eager to learn. How long have you got?’ he asks, and Melbourne looks at the date on his watch.

‘Twenty-one weeks and two days.’

‘And the Coronation?’

‘Three weeks after that.’

Wellington lets out a chuckle and pats him on the shoulder. ‘See you next week.’
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Girl you got me high, just with your eyes  
Every word you say, well it's a lullaby  
Pull me inside out  
Put me upside down  
Silence all of the noise that I can do without  

You're the sweetest thing that I ever did see  
Like a bird taking wing  
Or tears that set you free  
You're the sweetest thing that I ever did see

- Sweetest Thing, Allman Brown

Chapter Notes

I'm so very sorry for the delay in posting - I was away for three weeks, and then work just slammed me for a month after that (this is quite literally the first day I've had off in a month). Being in Britain and seeing so many of the places Victoria lived in and visited and learning so much more about her - and about Lord M - gave me so much inspiration and challenged so much that I had already written and constructed in my mind about the whole plot (and made for so many notes and ideas) that I've had to go back and re-edit a lot of it. That, and I'd lost the trail of the plot, so I've had to find that again and get back into the swing of writing, and sigh. Hopefully I should be able to post much more regularly now. Thank you for your patience!

It's late and he’s tired when he sees John Conroy appear from the shadows and stand in his way. He’s been waiting for this; he knows Conroy is still lurking around the palace, and he knows why. He just has to be patient. He figures it probably hasn’t really occurred to her yet that Conroy doesn’t actually need to be here at all. And despite it all, he suspects she loves her mother, and probably struggles to think of them as separate entities. He wonders briefly what the Duchess would do if Conroy was given his marching orders; he’s not convinced the Duchess would choose her daughter, and he hates the idea of Victoria being all alone in the palace.

He is painfully aware of why can’t stand the idea that a mother would choose her lover over her child.

And it’s because of that – because he cannot trust himself here – he’s not going to get involved.

‘Sir John,’ he says by way of greeting. ‘Have you been waiting for me?’ he asks flippantly.

‘There is some concern about the Queen’s published engagement schedule,’ Sir John replies, and
Melbourne is reminded of a snake.

‘Yes, I suppose it is concerning that the Queen should finally be allowed to plan her own life,’ Melbourne replies, not trying to hide the contempt in his voice.

‘Some would suggest you’re turning her into a puppet for your party’s own political benefit.’

‘As someone who can’t see past their own self-interest, I imagine that it does look very much like that to you, Sir John. But I hold myself to a higher standard.’ He sees Sir John almost snarl, and he finds it unsurprisingly satisfying to know that he’s gotten under his skin. ‘There are those who would wish the Queen to fail. To what end, I cannot possibly fathom, but they do.’ He stops, knowing there is little point in going on; his point has been made.

Sir John’s chin rises infinitesimally, and Melbourne almost smirks. ‘Some consider the Queen to be too young to rule independently. Too inexperienced.’

He frowns slightly and nods once. ‘She is young, and quite inexperienced, yes. But I find the Queen no longer needs someone to tell her what to do. When given the chance, I think the Queen makes some of the wisest decisions I’ve seen in someone of her age.’ He ignores Sir John’s almost-huff of derision and continues. ‘I find the Queen refreshing. Her youth and enthusiasm is exactly what is needed to revitalise the monarchy. She is a remarkable young woman, and I consider it the greatest privilege of my career to serve her.’

‘Yes,’ Sir John sneers. ‘A very short, and yet very colourful career. Or is that your personal life?’

His face hardens slightly. There was nothing that Sir John could say to him that he hasn’t heard or read before, and Sir John was so very low on the list of people whose opinions mattered. But it wouldn’t help the Queen to continue this conversation, and he didn’t particularly want to either.

‘Good day, Sir John,’ he says, stepping past the taller man.

Sir John’s words followed him as he walked down the hall. His life had been colourful, yes, especially for someone of his position. But despite all that, despite all his failures – all the important things he’d ruined, all the responsibilities he’d failed to uphold – he somehow has been given a second chance in her. Another reason to live. Something to devote his life to.

And devote he would.

He just didn’t understand how Sir John couldn’t see the beautiful young woman underneath the title - her fire, her passion for life, her intense desire to do well, to please her people. Her spirit that had resisted all those years under Sir John’s heavy thumb.

She reminds him that perhaps there are things worth fighting for. Things he can believe in again. People he can believe in. And it’s been so, so long since he’s believed in anything at all.

***

She loves her coffee, his little Queen, and he’s mildly surprised by that.

When he arrives one morning, coffee from his now-favourite little hole-in-the-wall coffee shop at the back of Hyde Park in hand, he can see her eyeing it, but he doesn’t get an opportunity to say
anything before they’re interrupted by Emma, so he leaves it.

Later that day, when they’re halfway through a lesson on Singapore, he feels the need for coffee – there’s only so much British colonialism he can stand in one day, sans much caffeine. He stands and stretches a little. ‘Coffee, ma’am?’ he asks, and her eyes widen.

‘Yes, please,’ she practically begs, and his mouth twists in surprise. He thinks she’d love the little shop – it’s all wood and iron and potted plants and large, ornate gold mirrors, and at forty-two, he is an outlier in the average age of the customers. For the briefest of moments, he toys with shoving a hat and sunglasses on her and just ducking up the road, but he dismisses the idea quickly: Alex would kill him, and then Palace Security would start on him. So he wanders around to Emma’s desk – she’s all too happy dispatch a kitchenhand – and within twenty minutes, she’s tentatively sipping on a latte.

And her eyes go wide, and she gasps. ‘This is so good,’ she says in wonder, and he smirks at her.

‘Yes,’ he says. ‘One of the few benefits of British colonialism – Australian baristas,’ he announces. But he frowns after a moment. ‘There is a full coffee machine in the kitchens, ma’am.’

‘Yes, but it’s inefficient to run the machine for just one coffee,’ she says. ‘So I just usually have instant.’ And somehow instant coffee doesn’t really match with royalty in his head, but he doesn’t say anything.

The next morning when he arrives with two coffees in a tray and a smirk on his lips, she looks at him like he’s the sun and he thinks vaguely that there isn’t much he wouldn’t do to see that look on her face again.

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‘So, you’ve made her Mistress of the Robes?’

Despite years of training, Victoria still feels the urge to roll her eyes. It had been a rather pleasant morning, just her, Harriet and her mother discussing her Coronation robes. Her mother had managed to keep her disdain and opinions to a minimum, and Victoria was grateful. ‘Yes, Mama, Harriet is my stylist.’

Now that they’re alone, her mother makes no effort to hide her displeasure. ‘Sir John is worried that your Lord Melbourne is filling your household with his friends.’

‘Nonsense, Mama. Harriet is more than qualified for the role – she’s a Duchess, and she’s a designer in her own right. She had a show only a few months ago.’ She stands to put away the folder Harriet had left with the swatches of fabric; she would come back to that after a little while when Emma was back and show her. She grinned to herself: perhaps she would take the folder into Lord M and ask his opinion on her fabric choices. She could already see the look on his face in her mind.

‘Yes, your clothing certainly has changed,’ her mother says, and Victoria can hear the disapproval in her mother’s voice as she eyes the jeans and cardigan her daughter was currently wearing. Her mother’s opinion on denim had been made clear many times; it was the working man’s clothing, and thus far beneath her daughter who would be Queen. ‘But your dress for the Garden party last week was very nice, Drina. Very elegant.’
'Thank you. Harriet chose that one,’ she adds.

And the Duchess sighs dramatically. ‘All these beautiful new clothes for you and none for your Mama.’

‘Mama,’ she starts, but she’s interrupted. She doesn’t want to have this conversation again.

‘I sit here in these worn-out clothes, these rags, as your mother. It is embarrassing, Drina!’

‘Mama, I am not responsible for how you spend your money.’

‘I have no money to spend!’ her mother cries.

‘And whose fault is that?’ Victoria retorts. Sir John, she wants to cry, but the Duchess is already storming from the room.

***

There are the days she feels cowed; frustrated and angry under the weight of the state and her own head. Gentle encouragement - and a walk in the garden - is his method. (One day, on a whim, he picks her a flower – a daisy. He spots it in her hair ten minutes later.)

She has to move, his little Queen. She cannot stay still. She’s constantly fidgeting, moving around. He quickly learned to break up their meetings into no more than hour-long chunks without some kind of break – not only because a person can only focus for so long, and he’s only human too – but also because eventually her fidgeting begins to drive him crazy. She gets antsy if she’s cooped up for too long.

When there’s a particularly difficult or complex issue to think or talk through – and there have been so many of those recently – he takes her for a walk in the gardens. The fresh air and the change in scenery helps to clear her mind, and his. It doesn’t take long for their conversations to turn from matters of state to other, more personal topics, but he doesn’t mind. She’s sharp, and her edges need blunting, and he’s happy to be the rock she shaves those edges against. Rather him than someone who doesn’t understand; someone who would hurt her in return.

She runs in the morning or the evening most days, he knows – and hadn’t that been a small disaster at the beginning.

No one had cared at Kensington; no one had really known who she was, and security had been so, so tight that no one was getting close even if they had wanted to. She’d had more than enough manicured grass and well-tended paths to run on – thanks to Sir John’s emphasis on his young charge’s safety – and she’d taken advantage of the small moments of freedom where she could just get out. He understood why.

It wasn’t until she’d arrived at the palace and eight days and fifteen hours into her reign she’d almost – almost – thrown a tantrum when she was told that she couldn’t run outside at moment’s notice as security needed at least an hour’s notice and would she mind running tomorrow at all?

He’d found her later that evening staring out a window, pressed against the wall and a cabinet, still in her running gear. She had looked so small and so young and so, so tired.
‘I’ve just moved from one cage to another, haven’t I?’ she asks, her voice thin and quiet, when he comes to stand next to her.

He sighs. Yes, he wants to say, *but what a beautiful cage it is*. He knows that it not what she needs to hear, and it’s not entirely true anyway. A cage it may be, but at least now she is the Queen of her cage. He wants to talk about privileges and responsibilities, but he knows she knows – if not fully understands – all that.

She’s just overwhelmed.

‘What happened, ma’am?’ he asks instead.

‘I wanted to go for a run.’ She lets out a small, humourless laugh.

‘Ah,’ he says, nodding once before frowning. ‘Outside the Palace?’ he clarifies, and she nods. She’d obviously seen the paths and the trees – the parks around the palace were beautiful, and he can more than see the attraction for her. ‘I assume Palace security weren’t in love with that idea, ma’am,’ he says more than asks.

‘No.’ She purses her lips, her face resigned. ‘It’s my fault. I should have considered the idea more carefully,’ she says, her voice slightly stronger but still miserable, and he’s impressed she’s owning her responsibility already.

The Director of Security was never going to allow her to run through St James’s Park, or Green Park, even with a horde of security running with her – it was too open, her run would be eventually become too predictable, and she’d be an easy target for anyone with time and patience. They’d have to close down the whole park, and he wasn’t interested in creating more PR issues than he already had to deal with. Besides, he suspected she wouldn’t let them do it anyway when she eventually realised what she was asking. She’d already ordered that portion of the gardens at Kensington reopened to the public after they’d been closed twenty-two years ago when a young princess had moved in.

His brain solves the problem instantly – convert a room to a gym with a treadmill – but the less rational side of him tells him that the purpose of her running isn’t entirely to stay fit. People in cages crave freedom.

‘You do have the Palace gardens here, ma’am,’ he says slowly. ‘They’re quite extensive.’

She nods. ‘They’re dark at night. And I don’t know the paths.’

He nods. ‘Ah.’ But this is not the problem, really.

‘Without our cages we cannot appreciate freedom,’ he says, and she glances up at him. ‘The cage of a Queen is a gilded cage, but a very strict one. And those who create the cage don’t necessarily realise that they do, or only perhaps see the gold.’ He pauses. ‘I suppose it makes the moments of your freedom so much more precious, ma’am.’

The next morning Victoria smiles when she arrives at her study to find two men standing at the door, talking with Emma. ‘Your majesty, this is the Head Gardener of the Buckingham Palace Gardens, and the Deputy Head Gardener. They’re here to take us on a short tour of the gardens, and have plotted out some two and four-kilometre running routes for you.’

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It’s getting closer to the Diplomatic Corps Reception and he thinks that perhaps the task he’s undertaken is just too big. She’s really very bright – her intelligence is not in question – but he’s asking a lot of her. Perhaps too much. After one particularly disastrous session where he’d all but given up within the hour and moved on, he’d gone back to his desk and revised the list of what she needed to know down to its absolutely most basic form. He’d have to confer with Wellington closer to the time for more specific talking points, he knew, but after several hours, he’d cut everything down to the basics and collapsed into bed at some ridiculous hour in the morning – a practice he was becoming more and more familiar with.

He’s done up notes for her, of course, but despite her best efforts, he knows, there’s just so much to learn, and her attention span just isn’t that great, and there is such a thing as information overload. She can’t just read it though; she has to talk it all through, ask questions. She’s just naïve enough initially to think she can solve some of these great world problems herself in a simple sentence, and he has to be careful not to laugh at her too often – it’s really quite sweet, he thinks, her desire to fix it all, her compassion for those who have suffered – and there are also times when he agrees completely. Now he’s resorting to using her stationary as teaching tools, and drawing maps and diagrams on pieces of paper, and it’s hard, hard work.

But despite it all, the moments where she remembers something she’d forgotten so often, or when she finally joins all the dots on a particularly difficult issue, or when she finally just understands, are the moments that give him life. The way her eyes widen and she laughs and claps occasionally – there were even high-fives when she was really pleased – make it all worth it.

He’s aware he’s a walking, talking cliché, but he doesn’t care at all.

But she’s tired after weeks of this, and so is he, and it’s getting harder and harder to get through it all. So today he’s decided she’s going to have a break, and work only on her letters and other less heavy tasks. He’s included a few more than usual, so that her time is filled up a little more, but he thinks she won’t notice. There are some really lovely letters in this bunch; some very cute drawings from some of her younger fans that he knows she’ll love.

So he arrives at her study, tray with two coffees in hand, to find her lifting a painting off one of the far walls of her office, and he’s confused.

‘Tired of Wallerstein, ma’am?’ he asks, and she turns.

‘Oh, no,’ she says, and he raises his eyebrows. ‘Just making room,’ she says, grabbing her coffee from him with a quiet thanks before walking back to a desk in the middle of the room where he can see a projector. He watches as she turns it on, and walks back around to her laptop. After a few seconds, her background appears – a picture of Dash on what he recognises is probably her bed, no less – and she grins at him triumphantly.

‘What’s this all for?’ he asks.

‘Well, I was going to ask Emma to buy a large map of the world, so I could follow along and so you didn’t have to keep drawing them – which is ridiculous, really – why don’t I have a map of the world? But then I realised that maps keep changing, especially after World War Two. They barely stay the same for more than a few years. I was talking to Harriet, and she has one of these set up at her office, where she watches the runways and shows, and I realised, with a little help from the internet, that I could just do this.’ And with a flourish, she clicks something on her computer and a map of the world in 1946 appears on the wall. Her eyes are bright and she’s got this satisfied little smirk on her face. ‘What do you think, Lord M?’ she asks, and he can’t help but chuckle.
He thinks she’s brilliant, his little Queen.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

I've only known her for a while
She came as some surprise
I see the sunshine when she smiles
I feel the rainfall when she cries

She hits me in the heart
She drops me to my knees
And I don’t know where I’d be without you

- Sweet Louise, Passenger

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He should have seen it coming; it had been too quiet for too long. She’d managed to fly mostly under the radar, the press seemingly happy with the official photos and reports from the mostly private functions she was holding. The Instagram and Twitter accounts had never been so active, and he was happy for as much good publicity as they could get.

She wouldn’t do much too publically just yet; she hadn’t been officially crowned, and it wasn’t really appropriate for her to be out and about acting like a Queen when the formalities were yet to be held. She was officially Queen, and had been for months – ever since her Uncle’s death, technically – but the public likes its traditions and ceremonies and he’s not about to do anything different. She’s different enough for most already.

But it all comes crashing down one morning when the papers arrive.

He sees the headline and frowns, reading on.

She’s not going to be happy. He’d be furious if he thought it was worth it. He knows who is behind it; it didn’t take him more than about a second to work that one out. He wonders if she’ll figure it out too. He’s not sure what he’d prefer.

The picture is clearly pre-Harriet, easily six months old; she’s just stepped out of her car, wearing a dress that looks like a sack, her hair in a braid, and she looks about twelve. He didn’t expect anything less from The Sun, really. But the Daily Mail he thought was perhaps a little less deliberately obnoxious.

WHERE IS OUR QUEEN?

We have a new queen – we’re told. Apart from the select few who have met Queen Victoria, our new sovereign has been hiding in her palace, too afraid to meet her public except at the few private functions and traditional summer Garden Parties, held in the gardens at Buckingham Palace…

There has been some speculation that the Queen is perhaps not entirely fit for royal duties. Sources inside the palace speculate about her mental health…
At twenty-two, one would expect a monarch to have at least completed some university-level education, but speculation is rife that the Queen is unable to complete higher studies and that her private tutors found her deficient in several areas...

‘Lord M, have you seen the paper?’ she cries as he walks into her study.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ he says. ‘Full of nonsense, as usual,’ he says dismissively, but his nonchalance only seems to make her angrier.

‘What are they talking about? I’m right here, in the middle of London!’ she cries, slamming the paper down on her desk. ‘How can they say this – any of this – about me? They don’t even know me!’

‘Of course not, ma’am,’ he says patiently. ‘That’s why they print it. You are still a novelty, ma’am, and will be for quite some time yet.’

‘They’re saying I’m afraid to meet the public,’ she says, a little more quietly, her brow furrowed and she looks so confused and angry and sad. He wonders that there’s not more accusation in her voice; he’s the one who recommended – along with Wellington and the Cabinet Secretary – that she not participate in too many official functions until after her coronation. It was their decisions that have led, in part, to this.

‘Are you?’

‘No,’ she says. ‘Well, yes, a little…but I’m not hiding!’

‘No, ma’am, you’re not.’

‘And they say that there’s something wrong with me! That I’m too stupid to go to University,’ and her voice trails off at the end. He levels his gaze at her, determined that she should understand this.

‘Ma’am, the papers will print whatever they think will sell, with very little – if any – evidence to substantiate their wild speculations. I think we both know that you are anything but stupid.’ She gives a small sigh, her lips pursed, and he can tell she’s listening. ‘There’s not much we can do about this now, although, with your permission, ma’am, I’d like to lodge a formal protest with the editor.’

‘Yes, of course, if you think it would help,’ she replies, still troubled. He knows he can’t solve this now; she’ll have to work her way through all of this on her own for herself. He can advise, guide, instruct and suggest, but she has to learn to deal with the rubbish in her own way. And there’ll be a lot of it, he knows. She will never escape it.

‘Give it time, ma’am. As you said, they don’t know you yet. In time, they’ll see what I see: an elegant, dignified, intelligent, compassionate young Queen who loves and desires to serve her people.’

Her face relaxes a little at that into something closer a smile, and he’s satisfied for now.

It’s two days later and at the end of a conversation about the history of Jordan when she asks.

‘Could I go to university?’

He raises his eyebrows. He hadn’t realised she was still thinking about this.

‘Technically, yes,’ he replies honestly. ‘There’s nothing stopping you, ma’am.’

‘So if I wanted to study at Oxford or Cambridge, I could?’
He turns to look at her. ‘Yes, if you wanted.’ He thinks she’d likely be the first reigning monarch in History to study at University, but he figures she’s going to be the first at a lot of things, so perhaps this wouldn’t matter too much. She’d probably have to study part-time in order to manage her duties as Queen with her study, but he thinks it’s possible. Whether she’d get in to Oxford or Cambridge is another question entirely…

She lets out a thoughtful noise, and he feels a small headache threaten in the back of his head.

Well, at least the preparations for the Diplomatic Corps dinner hadn’t completely killed off her desire to learn, he thinks. But he’s not sure how much more he can take at the moment, let alone her.

‘Whilst I’m all for higher education and learning, ma’am, do you think perhaps we could just get through the next few months first?’ he asks, and she grins at him.

‘Of course, Lord M.’
key line or phrase, she’d lost the thread of the story. And in a play like *Hamlet*, that was suicide.

‘Reading?’ he repeats, and she frowns.

‘Yes,’ she answers, not quite sure what he means.

‘Did you never see the plays performed?’ he asks slowly, and her eyes widen slightly.

‘Oh no,’ she says. ‘I couldn’t go to the theatre,’ she explains, and his face softens slightly.

‘Well, that, ma’am, would explain it,’ he says. ‘Shakespeare was never meant to be read. His plays were meant to be performed – on a stage, with actors and sets and crowds of people milling about,’ he explains, waving his hands around a little.

‘Oh,’ she says, and she feels stupid. They’re plays. Of course they’re meant to be performed. But leaving Kensington had been difficult enough; going to a full theatre was out of the question. Mama would never have taken her to a theatre full of people where she could get sick or hurt. Besides, it had probably been too expensive.

She looks as his eyes narrow slightly, a shadow of something passing across his face before disappearing again behind a smirk.

‘But the theatre can come to you, ma’am,’ he says, a teasing note to his voice. ‘Or film, at least. Leave it with me,’ he says, and she nods eventually. She wasn’t sure how Shakespeare could be enjoyed quite as much as he made it sound like it could be, but she was curious, and she trusted him in everything else – she would also trust him in this.

Late the next afternoon she receives a message; would she mind if he called in quickly?

*Of course not,* she replies, frowning slightly at the question with lack of explanation that was rather unlike him.

When he appears half an hour later, he has a bag with him and that familiar smirk that she loves.

‘I have a present for you,’ he says, his voice low and teasing, and she laughs.

‘Ooh! What is it?’ she asks, and he chuckles at her.

‘That defeats the purpose of gift-giving, ma’am,’ he says, and she throws him a look. ‘Hold out your hands,’ he says playfully, and she’s a little confused, but she does as she’s told. She sees something flicker across his face at her hesitancy; did she do something wrong?

A moment later he’s pulled out a bag of chocolates from Melt, a box of macarons from La Duree, a bag of caramel popcorn, and some crisps, and he’s somehow piled them all up on her hands, and goodness, he knows her well.

‘Wow,’ she says. ‘What’s all this for?’

‘Well ma’am,’ he said, ‘you can’t watch a movie without snacks,’ he says, pulling out a DVD from the bag and holding it up for her to see. She lets out a laugh as she reads the front cover.

‘It is time to begin a real Shakespearean education, ma’am,’ he says, ‘and you have to start with Mr Branagh.’ He tilts his head to the side slightly. ‘Your Uncle did knight him for services to the arts, particularly Shakespeare.’

‘*Much Ado About Nothing,*’ she reads out loud as she puts his ‘snacks’ on her desk and picks up the
DVD. ‘I’ve not read that one.’ The cover looks decidedly happy – too happy for Shakespeare, she thinks.

‘It’s one of his comedies,’ he explains. ‘I thought it best perhaps to start with something light.’

Her heart is full as she stares down at the cover of the DVD. He’s so good to her, her Lord M.

‘Thank you,’ she says. ‘I think,’ she adds, narrowing her eyes a little. She’s still not entirely sold on the Shakespeare-could-be-interesting idea, but she’s willing to give it a go.

She smiles back at her, his soft, sweet, knowing little smile. ‘Don’t thank me yet – *Hamlet* is four hours long,’ he smirks and her eyes widen. Four hours. But then he’s turning and heading for the door. ‘Enjoy Beatrice and Benedick,’ he says, and he’s leaving and she’s so confused.

‘What? No!’ she says, and he stops, turning to look at her. ‘You’re not staying?’ she asks, frowning.

‘Oh, no, ma’am. I have plenty of work to do,’ he says, not quite meeting her eye, and she shakes her head.

‘But you can’t leave,’ she says, and she can almost hear the whine in her voice. She stops; Queens don’t *whine*. ‘Who will explain the parts I don’t understand?’ she says, her voice firmer.

His eyebrows rise slightly and he looks amused. ‘You? Not understand?’ he asks, and she can feel her grasp slipping.

‘I’ve never read this one,’ she argues again. ‘I would appreciate your assistance.’ The look on his face tells her he isn’t buying it for a moment. ‘And your company,’ she adds, but he’s still not completely sold. ‘And you always explain these things so well,’ she adds carefully, and she knows she’s won after just a few moments; his mouth quirks slightly and his eyes narrow. She’s not stupid; she’s discovered which buttons to push, and in what order.

‘If you wish, ma’am,’ he says, his voice a long-suffering sigh, and she resists the urge to throw the bag of popcorn she’s still holding at him. She smirks triumphantly anyway.

He’s not fooled; she’s smart, his little Queen, and he knows she likes to play. But she’s lonely, too, he thinks, and she hasn’t quite found the right people to completely fill that hole just yet. The Duchess of Sutherland is a great friend now, he knows, but he can’t quite see her enjoying a twenty-odd-year-old Shakespeare adaptation, and Emma has children.

He tells himself he is the best person for this job just now. Someone else will take his place one day, but until that day, he’ll enjoy these moments with his little Queen.

When he walks through his front door much later that night, he’s still smiling. She’d laughed at most of the jokes, thrown a cushion at the wall-come-projector screen at Claudio’s rejection of Hero, and smiled sweetly at the ending.

He hadn’t explained a word.

And he realises later when he’s nursing a whiskey in his study and ruminating on the evening – the fact that he’d spent a good part of the night watching her laugh, her wide-eyed wonder, her frustration, and decidedly *not* the film – that perhaps it’s not entirely the business that he loves and goes to with delight.
Emma notices the little things.

She notices the way that William seems to love his work again, enough to devote countless hours to it when he’d been slightly more than a lifeless doll in a chair in the House of Lords only months earlier.

He’s constantly in her study, and whilst he had initially resisted quite forcefully, it hadn’t taken long for the Queen to convince him to have dinner with her in her dining rooms one night when it had been somewhat of a hectic day of engagements and paperwork, and they hadn’t finished whatever it was they were doing.

She notices that at some point during the long hours of his patient tutelage each day, they will end up in the gardens outside, walking around as he quizzes her on something or other, or as they talk. She thinks that perhaps the political history of most countries isn’t quite as amusing as their quiet – or not so quiet, occasionally – laughter would often indicate.

She notices that he brings her coffee of a morning – every morning – and she rarely eats lunch – and often dinner – without him now.

She notices the complete lack of any sense of personal space they seem to have for each other. William has been closed off for so long that she has to devote some time to memories and photographs which only confirm her suspicions; beneath his closed, very British exterior, William loves through touch. But he’s a traditionalist when it comes to the Queen, so he does the next best thing.

The Queen, she notices, is the same; everyone else is at arm’s length, which is perhaps as it should be, at least in public. But she has a smile and laugh reserved almost only for him; for when he speaks quietly into her ear to encourage her at a function, or to make her smile when she’s tired but has to keep going.

She notices that he smiles again, and even laughs.

She notices that he seems to be the only one who can make her smile when she’s sad or angry; that he’s the only who can calm her when she flies into a rage, reason with her when she’s querulous and irrational. She notices that absolutely all the staff know this as well.

She notices John Conroy tell the Duchess quietly one evening that her daughter seems almost besotted.

She agrees.

She thinks the Queen is not the only one.

Chapter End Notes

Don't forget to let me know what you think!
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Oh I'll use you as a warning sign
That if you talk enough sense, then you'll lose your mind
And I'll use you as focal point
So I don't lose sight of what I want
And I found love where it wasn't supposed to be
Right in front of me, talk some sense to me

- I Found, Amber Run

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She’s off in her own little world when she enters the library, so when she turns to see her Mama there with Sir John, she’s caught off guard.

‘Drina,’ her mother says in that little breathless tone that tells Victoria everything she needs to know about the forthcoming conversation. ‘How fortunate. Sir John and I wanted to speak to you.’

‘Did you?’

‘Your upcoming coronation is the perfect time to consider your mother’s new role. I think the people would appreciate it if the Duchess were given a title that reflects her position. ‘The Queen Mother’ seems fitting,’ Sir John states, as if the conversation was already over, and she hates that he can do this, that he thinks he owns her still.

‘But your current title belonged to poor dear Papa,’ she starts, turning to her mother and frowning, before Sir John interrupts.

‘Yes, and now that you are Queen, the Duchess should be viewed through that lens. It would reflect beautifully on you both; the relationship between the Queen and the Queen Mother would be something to be proud of,’ he declares, and Victoria almost laughs at him. He has overplayed his hand this time, she thinks not a little triumphantly, and she almost feels the laughter bubble up inside of her. Does he really think her that childish that she cannot remember?

‘I see no reason to change your title,’ she replies, looking straight at her mother and pleased at how aloof she sounds, before turning and leaving the library before she can see the hurt on her mother’s face.

***

She was resilient, his little Queen. She didn't really know it yet, but she was.
It’s late one evening when the headlines and the gossip and the arguments and the study and the pressure of the previous months catches up with her and she tucks herself into a ball on the chair she’s spent most of the morning in.

‘They don’t think I can do it, do they?’ she asks quietly.

‘Who, ma’am?’

‘Everyone. They think that because I am young I am incapable of being Queen. They’re waiting with their lenses and their lip-readers and their disapproving stares for me to fall on my face in the mud,’ she spits, before quieting again.

She feels rather than sees him crouch down next to her. ‘And I know you will prove them wrong,’ he says quietly. She turns to look at him; his face is soft, but serious. ‘It is your youth, your enthusiasm and passion that sets you apart from the rest and that proves that you were born to wear the crown. You have a natural dignity and compassion that cannot be taught. That, ma’am, is what will make you a great Queen.’

‘Do you think I can do it?’ she asks in a small, quiet voice and he knows that’s not what she’s asking. Of course she can do it. She has no choice, and she knows it. She wants reassurance, for him to remind her that she can. That is his role for now, until she no longer has to ask; a role he revels in.

He's alive again. She has given him purpose again, his little Queen, and he will see her succeed because he knows without doubt that she can. That she absolutely deserves to.

‘Have I ever given you reason to think otherwise, ma’am?’ he says, the corners of his mouth turned up in a tiny smile. She smiles tremulously back at him, and she doesn't need to answer. ‘You can do anything, ma’am,’ he says with such affection in his voice that her eyes widen slightly and she bites her bottom lip before looking away.

‘You have so much confidence in me,’ she whispers after a moment, looking back at him. And the look on her face reminds him that he absolutely has to stop himself from mentally cursing Sir John so much, otherwise the next time he sees him he'll punch him. No, the best revenge on Sir John is for her to be a great Queen without him. Every success, every achievement without Sir John’s help is the sweetest, most perfect revenge. And he will delight in every moment of it with her.

‘Yes, ma’am. And I believe it is entirely deserved.’ And he feels something swell within him at her gaze, something familiar but thought long-dead, and the shock of it forces him to look away before standing. ‘I should return to my office, ma’am,’ he says, glancing down at her. ‘There is still much to do.’

‘Already?’ she asks, and he nods.

‘It’s after two o’clock, ma’am,’ he says, looking at his watch. ‘I’ve been here for most of the day.’ His brain reminds him that this is not at all unusual, and he mentally kicks himself.

‘Oh,’ she says, and that familiar feeling returns for just a moment, and his mind is screaming at him to get out.

‘I will see you tomorrow, ma’am,’ he says, giving her a small smile before heading out the door.

When he’s lying in bed early the next morning and all he can see is her soft smile and wide eyes, he tells himself he’s just a little infatuated with this beautiful, fiery young woman he spends a good chunk of his days with.
Infatuations pass in time.

***

With this new revelation comes an almost complete inability to judge his own emotions, and he hates it. He hates himself for his soft heart, for his inability to say no to the fire in a set of young, blue eyes.

‘It’s been so long since I’ve danced,’ she says wistfully as she enters the ballroom, and he’s glad he’s organised this in the middle of it all. She won’t need to dance at the Reception – just the ball – but she’s spent so much time working towards the former in the past few weeks that he can see she needs a break. The lessons will give her something small to look forward to, just once a week. And, really, it’s not all that long till her Coronation anyway.

When Wellington had mentioned some kind of celebration before the ceremony, she’d directed that look that he knew all too well right at him. ‘Can we have a ball?’ she’d asked, and he’d resisted the urge to glance at Wellington. There hadn’t been a Coronation Ball in a hundred years; they just weren’t done anymore, probably because they hadn’t had a monarch under the age of fifty in that hundred years. But he’d simply raised his eyebrows thoughtfully, before deliberately looking at Wellington, who had shrugged, clearly not opposed to the idea.

‘Just a small one,’ she’d said, and he’d smiled.

‘That guest list would be rather long, I think, ma’am,’ he’d said, and she’d frowned.

‘It would be quite expensive,’ she’d agreed, and he hadn’t been able to stop himself looking over at Wellington who looked just as surprised as he felt, but eventually shrugged and nodded.

‘Well, ma’am, I’m hoping you’ll just have the one coronation, so perhaps a little extravagance is acceptable,’ he says, and her response is a combination of derision and hope, and just a little excitement.

Thus, there is to be a ball and, therefore, dancing lessons.

He thinks she won’t feel the need to go for a walk in the gardens on these days, and his heart is torn – despite the mountains of work that required his attention, he hadn’t realised just how much he enjoyed that time. Not that he needed to dwell on it; perhaps it was good that he wasn’t spending quite so much time with her. Alone.

‘Not as long as me. I don’t remember the last time I danced,’ he lies. Memories of a white dress and a tuxedo and soft violin come flooding back, and he blinks.

‘I suppose it’s not something people do much anymore,’ she says, and his eyebrows rise at that.

‘I would imagine that the percentage of people in England who can successfully waltz is quite low, ma’am, and even lower for those younger than fifty.’ She looks at him, and he remembers that her childhood didn’t allow for much interaction with the real world. ‘Some of the more exclusive schools still teach some ballroom dancing,’ he adds quickly. ‘But it’s not generally a skill that people feel is needed anymore.’

‘It’s a pity,’ she says. ‘It’s so relaxing,’ she says, and his heart tells him she would look beautiful dancing a waltz.
‘Hmm,’ he mumbles, before looking around. ‘Your tutor appears to be late,’ he says, frowning and looking at his watch. His phone rings and it’s Emma.

‘Mr Christoff is running late. There is traffic,’ he tells an expectant Victoria a few seconds later as she’s pulling on her heels, and she nods.

‘Well, you’ll just have to practice with me until he gets here,’ she declares, and he can practically hear the alarm bells going off in his head.

‘Oh, no, ma’am. Really – I wasn’t joking when I said I hadn’t danced in a long time,’ he argues and she frowns at him.

‘Then how are you going to dance at the ball?’ she asks, and he can feel his mouth opening, but there’s nothing coming out. He doesn’t have an answer for her.

‘I suppose I hadn’t imagined that I would dance,’ he eventually stumbles out, and she’s looking at him like he’s sprouted a second head.

‘Wouldn’t dance?’ she asks, and she walks towards him. ‘It’s a ball, Lord M. Of course you’ll dance.’ She stops in front of him and pulls her phone out of her pocket, scrolling, and he blinks a few times, desperately trying to figure out how he’s going to get out of this. But in a few short moments a song is coming out of the tinny speakers, and she slips the phone into the front pocket of his suit jacket and looks expectantly up at him, her arms out from her sides, clearly waiting for him to slip his arm around her waist and grasp her tiny hand in his…

And if the music hadn’t told him already, her posture would have: of course, of course, it’s a waltz.

His brain is screaming all kinds of warnings at him and he blinks. He shouldn’t be doing this, he knows. He’s already in far too deep for his own liking, and dancing with her, alone, in a large ballroom on a wet afternoon was not going to help. But he’s reminded by her intent expression that she has no idea of the chaos in his mind; all she knows is that she’s asking her Private Secretary to help her practice for the most important event of her life to date. He couldn’t – can’t – refuse her that.

He looks at her carefully for a moment before resigning himself to his fate. So he slides his hand around to her waist, under the long, loose, soft braid that hangs down her back, and takes her other hand in his, and starts moving with the music.

He hasn’t done this in so, so long, but she makes it so easy, and he knows all too well now that she’s only having lessons to calm her own nerves.

It’s doing nothing for his.

She’s watching him, a small smile on her face, and he can’t help but give her a small smile back before fixing his eyes on her shoulder. Here, in this room, with her, he’d drown in her eyes, and he absolutely cannot afford to let her see. Her tiny hand is almost enveloped by his, and he feels like his hand covers up the whole of her back, and he’s obliquely aware of how warm and firm her skin is through her t-shirt.

This is the first time he’s ever actually touched a part of her that wasn’t her palm in a high-five, and his chest tightens at the thought.

He’s a fool.

Her voice breaks through his reverie. ‘You dance rather well for someone who hasn’t danced in a long time,’ she teases, and he gives her a small smile.
‘I suppose your feet never forget, ma’am,’ he replies, forcing himself to look up at her. ‘I wonder why you’re bothering with lessons,’ he shoots back, and she ducks her head.

‘I wanted to be sure of myself,’ she admits, and he nods. ‘It’s such an important evening.’

‘That’s wise, ma’am,’ he agrees, and he can see her happiness at his approval. Something swells in his chest, and he squashes it back down.

He sees movement out of the corner of his eye as he leads them around and his head flicks over to see a tall blonde man standing next to Emma. He stops immediately, letting go of her and stepping away a little before he realises what he’s doing.

‘Your real tutor is here,’ he tells her with a small, sly smile. He gives her a silly little bow – which she returns with a little curtsey and a giggle – and pulls her phone from his pocket, handing it back to her before turning to face the intruders.

He decides he doesn’t much like the look on Emma’s face.

‘Beautiful, your majesty. You are a natural dancer,’ the tall man says as they approach, and he wonders just how long they’d been standing there. He can feel the flush creeping up his cheeks and he curses his stupid, stupid heart and his stupid head for getting himself in this situation in the first place.

‘Ma’am, this is Johannes Christoff,’ Emma states, and the dance teacher gives her a small bow. ‘He’s here to take your dancing lessons,’ she says, and Melbourne shoots her a look when she glances at him, and she wisely says no more.

‘It’s lovely to meet you,’ the Queen replies. ‘This is Lord Melbourne, my Private Secretary,’ she says before Emma can speak again, and he makes a mental note to remind her that she isn’t really supposed to introduce anyone. He nods and shakes Christoff’s hand.

‘I can see that you’re no stranger to dancing yourself, Lord Melbourne,’ Christoff says, and he gives a small nod.

‘Courtesy of a mother who wanted all of her children proficient,’ he explains quickly, and he sees out of the corner of his eye Victoria turn to look at him. He hasn’t really spoken of his family, he realises. ‘But I leave you in Emma and Mr Christoff’s capable hands ma’am,’ he says to her, before nodding to Emma and Christoff and making a hasty departure.

He can still feel her tiny, warm hand in his, the warmth of her hand on his arm, the taut muscles in her back under his fingers, and his mind is spinning. He allowed her to flirt, and flirted back. It was all completely silly and innocent until it wasn’t, not for him, and he’s not entirely sure he can pinpoint when and where things changed.

It dawns on him as he reaches his office that she almost certainly has no idea what she’s doing – not doing. Her experience with men – and boys – was almost entirely limited to John Conroy and the occasional visit from a cousin. She’s likely never actually even considered that her behaviour could be anything other than what she intended – whatever that was. He’s overestimating her – she’s not actually doing anything other than being herself.

He’d said to Emma before that she was guileless, his little Queen. Perhaps, just perhaps, he’d been more right than he’d known.

This is all on him now.
He desperately needs to keep this under control before it ruins everything.

Chapter End Notes

There's a beautiful fan video for these two using this song:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRsUQUpaWs&t=146s

Well, the ball is well and truly rolling now. Let me know what you think!
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Little darling, it's been a long cold lonely winter
Little darling, it feels like years since it's been here
Here comes the sun
Here comes the sun, and I say
It's all right

- *Here Comes the Sun*, The Beatles

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the lovely comments - I really do love them all. It's so lovely to hear what you have to say, and to talk about these two idiots that we all can't seemingly get enough of.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When the first article about the relevancy of the monarchy surfaces not long the announcement of the Coronation Ball, he wonders how she’ll deal with them, these challenges to her very existence. So when he arrives the next morning with her letters and finds her standing in the middle of her study, her hands clasped and that look on her face, he takes a breath and waits.

‘I need to pay off my uncles’ debts. I cannot start my reign with the excesses and ills of the past hanging over my head,’ she announces.

He frowns thoughtfully and nods. ‘I think that would make you quite popular, ma'am.’

She frowns. ‘Will people find out?’

‘Yes,’ he says. ‘Wellington will probably want to tell Parliament.’

‘But surely that's a private matter? I will be paying it from my own purse.’ And he frowns a little.

‘You could ask the Duke to say nothing of it if you like, ma'am, but I would imagine he'd likely protest. It might not be so bad to have people know,’ he says and her frown settles more into confusion. ‘The public haven't really had much of chance yet to get to know you. This would be one way you could show them who you are, and your intentions for your reign.’

She’s still frowning but it’s turned into something more thoughtful. He knows she’s been schooled in something of the media and its power, but he thinks perhaps her lessons have been wholly negative; he doesn’t think she’s ever really considered actively using the media for her own good.

‘What do you think?’ she asks, and he raises his eyebrows a little in surprise.

‘Well, it would certainly silence some of the critics for a little while, but it would make the question
of your finances public discussion, so it has the potential to be a two-edged sword,’ he says. ‘But it must be your decision.’

He watches her think about it for a moment, before she looks up at him again.

‘If the Duke wishes to tell the Parliament, he can,’ she says in that tone that tells him she’s absolutely made up her mind. And so he nods, smiling.

She’s going to be a popular Queen, he thinks - she’s articulate, beautiful, young, clearly not given to the indulgences and extravagances of her Uncles. After years and years of old men, she was a breath of fresh air.

The spring had come.

***

She’s heading into her rooms when she meets her mother in the hall.

‘I hear you have paid off your uncle’s debts,’ she states, and Victoria nods.

‘I have.’ She pauses, waiting.

‘And yet you have no money to spare for your dear Mama,’ the Duchess replies, her tone accusatory and she feels the anger rise, not only at her mother but at herself – she should have known. She should not have expected anything less from her mother. ‘Your allowance is more than generous!’ Victoria cries.

‘I have expenses as your mother, Drina!’

‘And this is why they write these horrible articles!’ she flings back.

The Duchess looks like she’s swallowed something sour. ‘How dare you compare me to that man – those men!’ her mother spits.

And she doesn’t say anything to that, and her mother storms past.

She lets out a growl and kicks the wall, slightly ashamed to see the scuff mark her boot leaves behind.

***

She gets ravenous right before she gets sick.

When she complains about being hungry for the third time that hour, he quietly sends a message to Emma to ask the kitchens to prepare something small for the Queen to munch on.

When she complains again that afternoon, he frowns a little. She complains that all she’s done is eat for the last twenty-four hours, and that she’s so tired – the bags under her eyes had told him that
yesterday. A thought hits him, and he bites his tongue and sends another short text message.

When Emma appears at the door a few minutes later with a small bag of chocolates, she looks thrilled, and he smiles and rolls his eyes.

The next morning, she looks terrible and he’s confused. She insists that’s she’s fine, but he knows better – she’s pale, and she looks miserable – and tries not to argue with her about the doctor. That’s not his job – she has a mother, and Lehzen, and Nancy, and Emma, and even Harriet – all of whom have already mentioned resting and have filled her to the brim with vitamins. But she’s stubborn, his little Queen. Desperate to prove herself still. He understands.

Predictably, it all goes downhill quite quickly. By her third cup of some kind of herbal tea Emma insists on making and what seems like her hundredth sneeze, he suggests quietly that perhaps she take a short break to rest, which would be fine with him because he needs to speak to the Foreign Minister about a possible state visit from the German Chancellor anyway. She eyes him, looking for the deception, but he plasters a carefully concerned mask on his face, and she finally nods.

‘I’ll be back in an hour,’ she decrees, and he smiles.

When he rings Emma three hours later, she tells him that she’s still asleep.

***

She’s out for at least seven days, much to her disgust. The doctor declares that she has influenza – where she managed to pick up the flu, he has no idea – and this is the one time he’s happy to join forces with her mother. She needs to rest.

By the third day, she’s awake for more than an hour at a time. He knows this because she rings him to see what she’s missed, and she sounds like death warmed up.

‘Ma’am, you have missed absolutely nothing that cannot wait until you are well.’

‘I am well enough now.’

When he just hums in reply, she lets out a huff, eventually hanging up after he tells her to go back to bed.

By the fifth day, she’s bored. He knows this because she tries to come up to her study to do some work. He’s in his office, so Emma tells him later how the Duchess had found her sitting at her desk in her pyjamas, wrapped in a blanket, and that Emma now knew where the Queen got her temper from. He’d smiled; he’d known that one for a while.

Emma’s story explains the message she’d sent, asking him to ring and request that she come up to her study to sign something. He replies by telling her to go back to bed. He toys with promising to visit her later in the day, but decides against it.

So she starts sending him photos of Dash. She sends him twelve photos of her dog before he replies.

_Bored, ma’am?_

_Going crazy._
I can see that.

No, you can’t, because I’m stuck here!

And he chuckles. When he doesn’t reply, she starts sending him photos of random pieces of furniture, and then the view from her bedroom window, Lehzen looking rather unimpressed (he’d snickered at that one), her pillows, more of the furniture, and her pink-sock-covered feet.

He thinks she’s trying to be annoying, but he just finds it amusing.

So he sends her a photo of his chair, and his desk, his rubbish bin, the window, an unsmiling Robert Peel, and eventually, his coffee.

Not fair, she replies, and he realises she won’t have had coffee for a week. The tea would be holding the caffeine withdrawal at bay, but still. That’s rough.

I apologise.

Bring me one and you’re forgiven.

By the seventh day, he’s not surprised to receive a message asking for some detail about the role of the King in Thailand. She must have snuck away; he can imagine that she’s really, genuinely starting to lose her mind, stuck in her rooms with only Lehzen and her mother for company.

‘How are you feeling, ma’am?’ he asks when he’s standing at her door, and she jumps before her face breaks into a grin.

‘Better, thank you,’ she says, and she looks better. Not actually well, but better.

‘Are you sure you should be up here, ma’am? You probably don’t want to bother doing too much if you’re too sick to retain anything,’ he says, and she drops her highlighter on the desk in front of her.

‘I can’t go back there,’ she says, shaking her head, and he understands. But she really isn’t that well still, he can tell. Her voice is still scratchy, and her face pale.

An idea hits him, and he frowns thoughtfully. He thinks she won’t mind being bribed.

‘How long have you been up here, ma’am?’ he asks.

She eyes him. ‘Not very long,’ she says and when he raises an eyebrow, she sighs and looks at her watch. ‘Nearly two hours.’

Hmm. He’d suspected as much.

‘I have a copy of The Taming of the Shrew at home,’ he says, ‘one filmed just down here at the Globe Theatre, so it’s live,’ he says, waving his hands dismissively. And when her face lights up, he can’t help but smirk. ‘I assume you haven’t seen that one yet?’ he asks, and she shakes her head.

And this is where he’s not quite sure he’ll win. ‘I could bring it in later this afternoon,’ he says slowly, and her eyes narrow slightly at what is clearly not the end of his sentence – she’s not stupid, his little Queen – ‘if you were feeling well enough rested to watch all three hours of it.’ He schools his face into a mask of aloofness, and he can see she’s thinking, processing his subtle bribe. But the lure of freedom – substantive time away from her mother – is too great.

‘Fine,’ she says, standing, and he has to work to keep the smile off his face. ‘But you have to stay and watch it with me,’ she bargains, and he mock-frowns for a moment.
‘Deal,’ he says, as if he hadn’t intended to keep her company all along.

He reasons that they’ve spent a good seven days apart now, and he tells himself that it would be unkind to refuse her on this, not when the only company she’s had is her mother and Lehzen for a solid week. Even Harriet had been banned from visiting; he feels sorry for her just for that alone.

When she throws a cushion at him later that night when he teases her and says that perhaps Kate deserves a husband like Petruchio somewhere around the start of Act 4, he realises how much he’s just missed her, his little Queen.

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One afternoon he’s rubbing his eyes – it had been a long day, and he’s spent most of it in and out of her office – when he looks over at her wall. She’d made habit recently of leaving the screen on and the background pictures of her laptop cycling through every fifteen minutes or so. The photos were from a variety of the events she’d attended – mostly the official Palace photos – along with some beautiful shots of the British countryside she’d found on the internet somewhere. It had become quite entertaining, and occasionally the photos became a welcome distraction from long hours of memorising and studying and working.

He’s surprised then to see a photo of himself appear. He blinks at the wall in surprise. It’s from one of the more recent Garden Parties, he can tell – the sun is out, and he’s in a top hat and tails – and he thinks that perhaps Emma took the photo because it’s not quite as perfect as the rest.

But it says everything.

It’s the look on his face that makes him swallow. The photo has been taken from a good six or eight feet away – far enough away that he’d not even been aware that it was being taken – and he’s standing to the right of the photo next to the Queen, Dash sitting at her feet. The party is clearly over because the sun is setting off to the side the grass covered by shades of orange. He’s obviously just said something amusing because she’s laughing, her eyes bright as she looks up at him, and his…he recognises that look from his photos with Augustus; Emma and his sister had always been quick to point out the way he’d looked at his wife and, later, their son.

It’s adoration.

Oh, he’s such a fool and an idiot and how could he do this?

She must notice him staring, because she speaks and it distracts him from his self-flagellation. ‘It’s one of my favourite photos,’ she says. ‘Emma took it.’

He turns to look at her and her eyes are wide and a little anxious, he thinks, but he’s too distracted to understand why straight away. ‘You don’t mind me having it, do you?’ she asks, and he blinks before he lets out a small laugh.

‘No, not at all,’ he assures her. ‘It’s a lovely photo of you, ma’am,’ he says.

She lets out a huff. ‘It does remind me of how short I am. If there was one thing I could change about myself, it would be to make myself taller.’

He glances back at the photo; even in her low-ish heels, she is still a solid six inches shorter than him.
‘I wouldn’t change anything about you, ma’am,’ he replies before he realises what he’s saying. She’s looking at him with those wide eyes and he drops her gaze, cursing his weakness. How can this woman, this beautiful young Queen of his, reduce him to this?

But he cannot blame her. It is he who is caught in a spell she never intended to cast – never realised she could cast, he suspects – and he will ride out this silly little infatuation he’s got going without her ever knowing a thing.

But she’s still looking at him with those wide eyes and he must redirect her attention before this goes any further.

‘It reminds me of how old I am,’ he says with a rueful smile.

‘You are not old, Lord M!’ she laughs, and he pulls at his hair.

‘I think the few grey hairs I have betray me, ma’am,’ he says with a wry smile, and she laughs again and shakes her head. ‘They say grey is the colour of wisdom,’ he adds jokingly.

‘Then your head should be grey,’ she replies, and he laughs at that.

‘I don’t think I’m quite ready for that kind of wisdom,’ he says, and she grins at him.

When he looks back at the wall, the photo has changed.

Chapter End Notes

Don't forget to let me know what you think!
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Help, I have done it again
I have been here many times before
Hurt myself again today
And, the worst part is there's no-one else to blame

Be my friend, hold me
Wrap me up, enfold me
I am small and needy
Warm me up and breathe me

- *Breathe Me*, Sia

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Her hair is so long.

He’s never seen hair that long on a person in real life before.

She has it out one day when he arrives; it’s long and mostly straight and a beautiful, natural dark brown and she’s pinned it back at the sides away from her face. It cascades down her back like a waterfall. There’s just so much of it; he can’t look away. He’s never seen it out before - she’s always got it wrapped up in a bun or something, or it’s curled and somehow doesn’t seem as long as it does that day. It covers her entire back.

She catches him looking and she frowns. ‘Is everything okay, Lord M?’ she asks, and he nods quickly.

‘Oh, yes, ma’am,’ he says, and he knows he’ll have to explain. ‘I hadn’t realised how long your hair was,’ he says lightly.

‘It’s always been long,’ she says, shrugging, and he nods, changing the subject.

When he arrives at her study a week later, he stops dead at the door.

Her hair is gone.

She’s wearing it out again but now instead of the soft brown almost-blanket that had covered her back, it’s much shorter, now only going a good few inches past her shoulders - no longer the soft brown waterfall that had almost dwarfed her.

She’s standing, leaning against her desk and reading some document or other, her hair falling down around her face still, but then she tilts her head up a little and turns and pushes one side back behind her ear and he’s struck by just how much older she looks.

She’s not quite so little anymore, his little Queen – she’s starting to grow up. He swallows at the
thought.

He watches her a little longer; she bites her thumb as she’s reading and her eyes narrow – he knows that look of concentration so, so well – and when she stands taller, turning to put the paper down, he knows he’s not looking a girl anymore. She was beautiful, his little Queen.

And he was in so much trouble.

He shakes his head slightly, tearing his eyes away from her. He feels it in his gut; he knows this feeling all too well. He needs to get a handle on this. He’s a grown man, for goodness’ sake – he can control a little crush.

She’ll always be his little Queen, but she certainly doesn't look it anymore.

This will not be a problem, he tells himself, and he’s pleased to find he almost half-believes it.

He takes a deep breath and a step forward, and she turns at the sound of his arrival and smiles. ‘Good morning,’ she says, and she immediately drops his gaze slightly and blushes, and he thinks he knows why. He twists his lips before walking in as he makes a split-second decision - he's going to have some fun with this.

‘Good morning, ma’am,’ he says nonchalantly. ‘I have your letters here. Would you like to start with those, or shall we continue with the foreign policy?’

She stares at him for a second, blinking, before shaking her head slightly. ‘Foreign policy,’ she says quickly, glancing at her feet before looking back up at him, and he almost feels bad, except he doesn’t. She needs to be teased a little; needs to learn to be teased, and needs to learn to give as good as she gets.

‘As you wish,’ he says, passing her a coffee and sitting down in his usual chair at the extra desk they’d attached to hers. ‘Where do you want to start today?’ he asks, looking at her expectantly, and she blinks at him again before pushing her hair behind her ear and looking down at her laptop. He almost smiles; the pink is so pretty on her cheeks. She flounders for a moment, and he has to resist the urge to grin.

‘Argentina?’ she asks. ‘We started talking about the Falklands War yesterday,’ she says, grabbing her notes and a highlighter, before glancing up at him. He deliberately nods and starts arranging his paperwork. He can hear her huff a little, and he works hard to keep the smirk off his face. She’ll get there, he thinks.

It takes another fifteen minutes before she’s become genuinely upset with him, and he lets it go.

‘Is everything okay, ma’am? You seem a little off today,’ he asks, schooling his features into a mask of concern.

‘I’m fine,’ she huffs, and he can’t help but smirk now. She stares at him for a moment, frowning.

‘I’m going to ask Emma for tea,’ he says, standing and heading towards the door. ‘Would you like some?’

‘Yes, please,’ she replies a little sulkily, not looking up at him. So he stops and waits; it only takes a few moments for her to look back up at him. He angles his head to the side a little, as if examining her.

‘Yes,’ he says nodding, and she blinks at him before blushing again.
‘Yes, what?’ she asks – this time she can’t hide the sulk in her voice, and he smiles teasingly at her.

‘Yes, your hair looks lovely, ma’am,’ he says quietly, and he hadn’t thought it was possible for her to blush even more than she already was, but he was wrong.

‘I didn’t think you’d noticed!’ she almost cries, and he lets out a huff of amusement.

‘How could you think I wouldn’t notice you, ma’am?’ he says, before walking out the door.

When he returns she’s still sulking a little and he gives her a teasing look. ‘Did you really think I wouldn’t notice?’ he asks.

‘No,’ she admits. ‘Why didn’t you say anything?’ The hurt is still there, just a little, but it’s mixed with a good dose of confusion.

He shrugs, and he can’t keep the smirk off his face. ‘Just having a little fun, ma’am,’ he says, and she huffs again, looking away, before glancing back at him. He knows he’s won when the frown on her face breaks into a small huff of laughter and a reluctant smile. ‘My apologies, ma’am,’ he says, not sorry at all, and she narrow her eyes at him.

‘I don’t believe you,’ she announces, and he laughs.

‘Good,’ he replies, and he ducks, laughing, as she picks up and throws one of Dash’s soft toys across their desks at him.

***

It’s one week away, and he can tell even now that she’s nervous.

There are times she gives him whiplash - she is the picture of modern royalty in her elegance and grace, a wisdom beyond her years. And then she's almost a teenager again, as if she were more right than she knew when she said that her uncle’s crown wouldn’t fit. On these days, when it wobbles precariously atop her head, he chooses his words and the issues of the day carefully. He cannot teach her those days; he has to show her, to require that she draw it out of herself.

Today is one of those days.

She’s done so, so well in the past months; she’s learned so much, and can now converse quite easily about current world events. Even Wellington’s impressed, and that’s saying something.

But now that it’s only days away, she’s panicking. It comes in the form of mood swings, and the occasional almost-tantrum.

He arrives one morning to find her stamping around her office, muttering about cleaners and moving things and why can’t they just leave her alone? He raises his eyebrows and watches.

‘Morning, ma’am,’ he says as she stomps up to him and takes her coffee. ‘Sleep well?’

‘Fine,’ she grumbles, and she still hasn’t actually looked at him yet.
He doesn’t need to see much of her face to notice that she hasn’t slept well – again – she has the faintest of purple tinges under her eyes, and he worries now that if she doesn’t breathe, if she doesn’t find a way to deal with her anxiety, she’s going to get sick and they really, really don’t need that now.

‘Is everything okay, ma’am?’ he asks carefully after a moment, and she lets out a groan of frustration.

‘I can’t find my phone!’ she growls, and he blinks.

‘Would you like me to call it for you?’

‘I think it’s on silent,’ she mutters, and now she’s going through his small desk and he cringes at the way she’s just picking up piles of paperwork before tossing them back down haphazardly.

It was going to be a long day.

He pulls his phone out, and opens Safari, directing it to the ‘Find My iPhone’ page. He types in her login and password – he’s had that memorised since the day she got it – and waits patiently, eyeing her and the screen. She eventually looks up at him just standing there in the doorway, and her face is thunderous. She blinks at him a few times, and he knows what she’s about to say – maybe shout, he thinks. But he holds his phone up to her, and she stomps over to where he’s standing.

‘I’m no expert on the palace, ma’am, but I think that’s probably your rooms,’ he says, zooming in a little on the flashing green dot on the screen.

She lets out a huff before storming out the door.

He sighs, dropping his briefcase down on the desk, and trying to rearrange the now-chaotic mess of his desk. Not that it hadn’t been untidy before, but he had a system, and she’d messed it up.

He didn’t mind that she was nervous; in fact, he’s pleased. Nervous means she cares. She just needed to be far less petulant about it all. She was still so young in some ways, his little Queen, despite all that she had grown and changed.

It doesn’t take long for her to reappear – with phone and mood. It takes another twenty minutes and a whole lot more snapping and moodiness and just general petulance before he stops and looks at her, pursing his lips.

‘Ma’am, I’m going to head back to my office for a little while,’ he says, and she drops the pen she’d been holding.

‘Why?’ she demands, and he raises his eyebrows at her. Her face softens a little, and he stands.

‘Would you call me when you’re ready?’ he asks, and she nods, looking back down at her desk. She’s not quite ready to give in just yet, he knows, and he won’t force her; it would be unkind.

It’s a little while later when she calls. ‘I’m going for a walk in the gardens,’ she says. ‘Would you mind joining me?’

‘I would like that, ma’am,’ he says, standing and grabbing his coat.

He finds her standing in the sun on the balcony outside her rooms. He leans against the railing beside her, his arms folded, looking out over the gardens.

‘I think sometimes I add to your grey hairs,’ she says quietly after a little while, and he knows it’s her
way of apologising.

He turns to look at her and the corners of his lips curl up slightly, and she knows she’s forgiven. ‘Then I wear them proudly, ma’am.’

But her face is vulnerable, and he watches as she swallows, looking back out over the gardens.

‘Harriet brought my dress over yesterday,’ she says, and he nods. ‘I tried it all on, including the tiara I’m going to wear. She said I looked like a Queen.’ He smiles ruefully, waiting. It takes only a few seconds. ‘I’m afraid,’ she whispers.

And there it is.

He moves to stand next to her, their shoulders almost touching, and he leans on his arms on the balcony so that he can see her face. She’s biting her bottom lip. ‘I know, ma’am,’ he says kindly. ‘But I also know that you are brave.’

She looks at him. ‘Queens aren’t afraid,’ she says quietly, and he can’t really believe what he’s hearing. But he can, because she says things like this all the time. Stupid things about the way Queens should be and not be, what they should feel and how they should think, and he thinks that perhaps only about five percent of what she says is actually accurate. The rest of it is skewed and twisted and has only required careful undoing and carefully-managed new experiences.

‘Queens are human,’ he laughs. ‘And humans feel fear.’ She doesn’t look convinced, and he stands, looking down at her. ‘This is an important evening, yes. You are right to care about it. But you have spent months preparing, and I am sure you are ready for this.’

She looks up at him, her eyes wide, but he thinks he sees a little more hope in them. ‘You will be there,’ she half-asks, half-states, reassuring herself.

‘And Emma, and Wellington. And Peel. And Russell. And everyone else who will be more than happy to help should you require assistance.’

She takes a deep breath, and nods, and he thinks she will be okay.

***

He stares at the calendar on his desk.

It was getting closer, that day. But he was stronger now. He had something to live for. Someone.

She needed him.

He thinks he might, just possibly, be able to survive this year.

Chapter End Notes

Don't forget to let me know what you think!
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Wise men say, only fools rush in
But I can't help falling in love with you
Shall I stay? Would it be a sin?
If I can't help falling in love with you

- *Can't Help Falling in Love*, Elvis Presley

Perhaps they're not as subtle as they think they are.

Chapter Notes

Because someone asked: believe it or not, the songs are quite carefully chosen! (Why, yes, I am an intertextuality nerd.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He prepares himself for her arrival. She’s going to look incredible, he knows. He knows that Harriet has been working towards this for months, that she’s been getting dressed for the past couple of hours, doing goodness knows what – whatever women do to prepare for events like this.

He takes some deep breaths, forcing himself to be calm. He’s seen her so often now for the Garden Parties and the occasional official function that he knows she’s *beautiful* when she gets dressed up.

She is going to look beautiful tonight, he tells himself. Elegant. Regal. Lovely. He is fully prepared to be stunned.

He pulls out his phone for the tenth time that minute, and stares at the unlocked screen.

Emma’s soft *ooh* behind him tells him she’s here.

And, despite it all, he still can’t stop staring.

Her dress is a soft cream, the top to her tiny waist a fine lace with little capped sleeves, and the bottom a soft, flowing material that splays out around her feet. The dark-ish blue of her Order of the Garter sash matches perfectly.

When he drag his eyes up to her face, the musky pink of her lips captures his eyes, and he swallows thickly. Her hair is all wrapped up in curls at the base of her neck, and she’s wearing the tiara he’d suggested – it’s the Cambridge Lover’s Knot – and it’s as perfect for her tiny frame as he’d thought.
She’s radiant, his little Queen.

He watches as she walks up to him. She gives him a nervous smile, and takes a breath as she reaches him. Harriet’s done something with her make-up – her eyes are all smoky-looking and the blue of her eyes somehow matches the sash perfectly, but it’s all still elegant and understated and incredible. He swallows again, mentally berating himself. He will not gawk at her like some love-sick boy.

He clasps his hands together behind him and gives her a small smile.

‘What do you think, Lord M?’ she asks, and her voice is full of worry as she smooths her hands across the sash. As if she thinks that somehow, in some way, he might disapprove.

‘Perfect, ma’am,’ he says softly, and she bites her lip. He can feel Emma’s stare behind him, and he’s acutely aware that Harriet is coming up right behind the Queen.

‘You look rather handsome, Lord M,’ she says, and he huffs an embarrassed laugh. He knows Emma is laughing behind him - he’s worn a coat and tails too many times to really care, except that he does – he’d done and undone his bowtie four times before he’d given up and asked Emma for help.

Emma, naturally, hadn’t been able to resist.

‘How many times have you done this before?’

‘Enough.’

‘And yet you can’t seem to manage tonight.’

‘It’s a new bowtie. And it’s an important night.’

She hadn’t bought his flimsy excuses any more than he had, but she’d let it go, thankfully.

‘Thank you, ma’am,’ he replies. ‘Shall we?’ he asks, holding out his arm – she had asked for it every time he formally escorted her anywhere, and it had very quickly become habit – and she nods, her smile gone.

They walk in silence up to the ballroom, and he thinks he can hear her muttering names and titles under her breath. She stops in front of the doors, and this is it, he thinks. Her first official State Reception. The biggest night of the year on the standard royal calendar, and it’s her first.

He sends a silent prayer up to a God he thought he’d forsaken long ago.

He nods to Emma as she walks out through a side door, and he comes to stand next to his Queen, turning to face her profile. Her breaths are coming quickly, and her face is a mask of anxiety.

‘Breathe,’ he reminds her, and she stops, taking a deep breath through her nose and letting it out through her mouth, her eyes closing for a moment. ‘You will be fine,’ he murmurs quietly, and she glances down at the ground before looking up at him. ‘Wellington will meet you on the other side of the doors, and I’ll be right there behind you.’ She nods, and he can see she’s working to control her breathing, like he’s taught her. Even if she fails spectacularly tonight, he’ll still be so proud of her. She’s worked so, so hard for this.

He looks down at her, his face serious. ‘You look like a Queen.’

‘I don’t feel like one,’ she whispers.
‘What does being a Queen feel like, ma’am?’ he asks quietly.

‘I don’t know,’ she replies, looking up at him, and he thinks it’s a small realisation for her.

‘Then why don’t we find out?’ he asks, the corners of his mouth curling up slightly, and she gives him a small, tremulous smile in return.

‘Queen Victoria,’ he says, looking over her hair, her tiara, her face, before fixing on her eyes. He watches as she takes a deep breath, eventually looking forward at the doors that slowly open in front of her.

He steps backwards out of the way as the doors open, and lets out a small breath he didn’t realise he’d been holding as she lifts her chin.

***

She feels tight and awkward but she smiles as she’s introduced to each of the officials in the line.

She’s using all the tricks Lord M had taught her; pausing when unsure, emphasis on certain words, choosing her words carefully, controlling the conversation so she knew almost exactly where it was going – no surprises. He’d told her that most people are on the back foot when meeting her already – all she needed to do was take advantage of that, and she’s trying so hard to keep up as Wellington introduces her to guest after guest. Their names and titles and talking points flash before her eyes as she meets most, and she is so grateful for his suggestion of flashcards. Anyone she forgets Wellington knows anyway, so she’s fairly safe.

She knows he’s right behind Wellington as she’s introduced to the various officials, listening as she makes polite inquiries after their health, their recent arrival in London, or whatever the easiest topic is. She can feel him there, the warmth of his gaze on her. She occasionally glances at him, and his eyes are always there to meet hers. She finds solace in his eyes, relief for a moment from the chaos. There were so many people; people she didn’t know, couldn’t trust. So much colour and movement and she’s swimming along with it. All it would take would be one moment of panic, one look, one glance, one mistake even, and she’d be under, unable to resurface on her own. He is her life saving buoy, and she will keep him well within reach.

It’s during the dinner that she has time to breathe, take it all in. She is seated alone as the only member of the royal family, and she’s pleased when he takes the opportunity to speak to her.

‘How am I doing, Lord M?’ she asks, and he gives her a small smile.

‘Beautifully, ma’am,’ he murmurs, and she remembers that she shouldn’t speak so loudly.

‘I think I’ve remembered everyone,’ she says lowly. ‘But it’s easy when you’re introduced,’ she adds.

‘Yes, it will be a little more challenging after dinner,’ he says. ‘But Emma will also be with you then, and so will I.’

She lets out a breath. After dinner, when they’re all just mingling, will be the real test, she knows. When she has to be able to hold conversation with almost anyone in the room.
'I’m not sure I’ll know what to say,’ she says.

‘You will be fine, ma’am,’ he says, reading her mind, and she smiles gratefully at him. ‘Besides, anything the Queen says is interesting,’ he says with a small smirk, and she smiles.

Later, when she’s standing next to Emma after a successful conversation with the Israeli Ambassador, she remembers their first lessons, and she’s so, so grateful for her Lord M. The thought of doing this on her own makes her head spin and her stomach clench, and she presses down on the thought as she glances over to where he’s standing in the corner. His eyes are meet hers and she gives him the smallest of smiles, which he returns, and the world is right again.

***

It’s all going so well.

She’s elegant and poised in her dress and tiara. Her smiles are dignified and gracious, and she gives them freely. They’re not the wide grins he loves; they’re smaller, more official smiles – she learnt something from her time at Kensington – but no less genuine, he thinks. But then he’s not entirely sure she’s really learned how to be anything other than she is yet. She’s getting there, he knows, learning to be both Queen and Victoria, and he can see her trying tonight. But there’s a healthy measure of honesty in everything she says, and occasionally he’ll hear a surprised laugh or see a wide smile on the face of an Ambassador or their partner, and he knows that Victoria has said something the Queen perhaps, in time, might not.

But she’s beautifully charming, even as he can see her nerves.

‘Are you going to watch her all evening?’ Emma says beside him and he lets out an amused huff.

‘She’s just…she’s completely artless. She says whatever she’s thinking, no filter at all. She still has no real idea how to deal with politics yet beyond what we’ve taught her. She’s far too impulsive. And yet…’ he trails off.

Emma’s eyebrows rise slightly as she watches his expression, and he knows he’s revealing too much.

‘I worry that she will be taken advantage of,’ he says, and Emma nods.

‘I can see that,’ she replies, and he thinks perhaps that he’s going to avoid Emma and her knowing tone for the rest of the night. For the rest of his life, if he has to. ‘Have you introduced her to Emily?’ she asks after a moment.

‘No,’ he says, and he’s still in two minds about the whole thing, although he knows realistically that she’s going to meet them anyway, and better he be there to control the situation – as much as he can control his sister.

He’d been quick to advise her that his new brother-in-law had become the Shadow Foreign Secretary just before her ascension, and she’d simply nodded – it had been one in a long line of things he’d officially informed her when he’d taken the role. But she hadn’t put two and two together until she’d seen the guest list for the dinner. She’d practically squealed in delight when she realised his sister would be there, and he’d cringed inwardly. He knew his sister well; this would most likely not end well for him.
‘I’m not entirely sure she’d forgive you if you didn’t introduce her to the Queen,’ Emma says at his elbow. ‘No, actually, I’m entirely sure she wouldn’t.’

He knows this.

It’s later in the evening when he pulls her aside. ‘There’s someone I would like you to meet, ma’am, if you have a moment,’ he says, his voice low and a knowing twist to his lips. He’s rewarded with a wide grin after a moment in which she realises who he means, and he leads her to where Henry and Emily are standing.

‘Ma’am, Lord Palmerston you’ve already met, but may I introduce Emily Temple, Viscountess Palmerston. Lady Palmerston is my sister,’ he adds, as if she didn’t know already.

‘Oh, it’s so lovely to meet you,’ she says, when Emily has finished curtseying. ‘When I became aware you were attending, I told Lord M I had to meet you.’

Emily, of course, takes full advantage of the situation. ‘It’s such a pleasure to meet you, ma’am. William speaks of very little else – when we do see him.’ He feels his jaw clench, but maintains a carefully neutral expression. He glances at his brother-in-law who is clearly working hard not to laugh.

‘Oh really?’ Victoria laughs, but he thinks he can see her cheeks pink a little. ‘You do work very hard, Lord M,’ she declares. ‘I’d hate to think I was keeping you from your family.’

He shakes his head. ‘Not at all, ma’am,’ he says. ‘Emily has only recently returned from a rather long honeymoon, so I think it’s probably she that’s the busier one,’ he adds, and Emily’s lips twist briefly in amusement.

‘Oh, yes, congratulations,’ Victoria says. ‘Lady Portman said it was a lovely ceremony.’

‘Thank you, ma’am,’ Emily replies. ‘We were happy,’ and she glances at Palmerston who’s nodding and smiling.

And Melbourne thinks this about the right time for her to segue into another conversation that doesn’t involve his sister, but the Queen has other ideas. ‘Lord M speaks so fondly of your children,’ she says, glancing up at him mid-sentence. ‘He seems to thoroughly enjoy spending time with them.’

‘Oh yes, and they him,’ Emily replies. ‘Uncle William is very much the favourite. He spoils them terribly.’

And the Queen is laughing at him, clearly surprised. ‘What are uncles for?’ he argues in his defence.

‘George has decided he’s going to apply for the RAF, but Will has decided that he wants to be Prime Minister just like his uncle. He’s already working on his charm and debating skills,’ Emily says to Victoria, who laughs delightedly.

‘Oh, I would love to meet them,’ she says, and alarm bells start clanging in his head and he blinks. ‘Would that be possible, Lord M?’ she asks, turning to him, and he doesn’t need to look at Emily or Henry to see the surprise on their faces.

‘Perhaps, ma’am,’ he says, stalling, and her face falls just a little. ‘I’m sure something can be arranged,’ he says after moment, and he kicks himself for caving so quickly, but really, what else was he going to say? ‘You should continue, ma’am,’ he says, and she nods.

‘It was a pleasure to meet you, Lord Palmerston, Lady Palmerston,’ she says as he moves her away.
‘I should invite Lord and Lady Palmerston to dinner, don’t you think?’ she says quietly, after they’ve moved away, and he’s flustered.

‘I’m not sure that would be entirely appropriate, ma’am, given his current position in the government,’ he says, and it’s not an entirely weak excuse. She could probably get away with visiting Palmerston’s house, he thinks, but having them at the Palace was another thing altogether.

She frowns. ‘Is government to dictate all my relationships, Lord M?’ she asks not a little bitterly, and he lets out a small sigh.

‘Yes, because you chose me. And I let you.

‘Unfortunately, it will many of them, ma’am,’ is all he says, and he can tell she’s not satisfied.

‘It seems unfair,’ she says, and he nods.

‘It is,’ is all he can say.

***

The evening is almost over when Harriet catches Emma’s eye and smirks before crossing the room to join her.

‘She’s done well,’ she says quietly, and Emma nods.

‘Very well,’ Emma agrees, nodding to the Duke of Sutherland as he moves to stand next to his wife.

‘You weren’t kidding when you said they were close,’ he mutters, and Emma’s lips twist.

‘William certainly is…attentive,’ she replies. ‘She relies on him a lot.’

‘I’ve never seen Melbourne so interested in a woman he wasn’t bedding,’ Sutherland mutters quietly, and Harriet turns and smacks him on the arm as Emma lets out a horrified laugh before covering her mouth with her hand.

‘What?’ he says. ‘It’s obviously working. She’s even charmed the pants off Wellington,’ and Emma can’t help the laugh that escapes her at the Duke’s – clearly unintentional, if his horrified facial expression was anything to go by – pun. Even Harriet can’t help but laugh behind her hand after giving him a horrified glare.

‘God, he’s not, is he? Melbourne?’ Sutherland says suddenly in a low, urgent voice, barely enough for either Harriet or Emma to hear, and she feels herself gasp as she hears Harriet do the same.

‘No, of course not!’ Harriet growls quickly, glaring at her husband.

‘Good. Didn’t think so. Just…checking,’ he mutters, shaking his head, and Emma can tell he didn’t really believe it himself.

She looks around to see the subject of their conversation talking with the Prime Minister, and she shares a look with Harriet that tells her that they’re both thinking exactly the same thing: if George Sutherland is asking that particular question after half an evening, then who else is?
‘She seems to be holding her own,’ Wellington says to him from beside him. Their eyes are both on the Queen, only a few metres in front of them. She’s talking to Wellington’s wife, and Melbourne thinks she’s probably safe enough there to be left alone for a few moments.

‘She does,’ he agrees. ‘It looked a little awkward with the Canadian Prime Minister,’ he says questioningly.

‘She asked after his wife.’

‘Oh,’ Melbourne responds, his lips twisting before letting out a breath.

‘He was polite enough to say that he wasn’t actually married just yet, and we moved on rather rapidly after that,’ Wellington adds, and he makes a mental note to thank the openly gay man later – that was a faux pas big enough to unsettle her completely if she had realised.

But Wellington had been kind, and had led her through most of the major introductions, and he was grateful. He’d hadn’t really believed that the older man would have been anything other than the gentleman that he usually was, but it still could have been a whole lot worse.

‘She did very well, other than that,’ Wellington says after a moment.

‘Thank you,’ he adds. ‘Tonight would not have happened without your assistance.’

‘I did very little,’ Wellington says. ‘You, on the other hand, have performed a small miracle,’ he announces grudgingly, and Melbourne feels his jaw clench.

‘It was all the Queen,’ he says. ‘She just needed some assistance.’

Wellington lets out a small almost-humourless laugh next to him. ‘Whatever you say, Lord M,’ he replies, before returning to his wife and the Queen.

***

‘God, you weren't kidding. She's lovely,’ his sister says at his elbow, and his lips twist in amusement.

‘She's so...happy. And innocent. And chirpy. It's almost disgusting,’ she continues and he can't help let out a laugh at the horror in her voice.

‘She's very young,’ he agrees.

‘Yes,’ she agrees firmly. ‘She really seems as sheltered as you said.’

‘She would have been more exposed to the world in a convent,’ he mutters, and he can hear Emily let out a snort.

‘And yet, she thinks the world of you.’
He lets out a noncommittal noise; the Queen was smiling shyly at something, and looking down at her skirt – he thinks the Chilean Ambassador’s wife must have said something about her dress--

‘Goodness, William,’ he hears his sister breathe out at his elbow, and he turns to look at her, confused. She stares back at him, the kind of look she used to give him when she was about to call him thick. ‘You really do pick well, don’t you?’ she asks almost incredulously, and now he’s really lost.

‘What are you talking about, Emily?’

She just stares at him, and her face turns from an almost disapproving stare to something more like incredulous.

‘You really… Do you have any idea how much you talk about her?’ she asks, and he frowns.

‘Who?’ he asks before he realises. ‘The Queen?’

‘Yes,’ and that infuriating look is back. He frowns again, struggling to think of how to respond.

‘Obviously not,’ he replies eventually, turning to watch the subject of the conversation which was a far more pleasant sight than his sister’s incredulous face at that moment.

She lets out an amused chuckle at his elbow. ‘So, when should I expect the Queen for dinner?’ she queries, and he lets out a small sigh at the rubbish attempt she’s making to sound less than amused at his expense.

‘I’m hoping she’ll forget,’ he admits.

‘Don’t count on it.’

‘It won’t look good, Emily,’ he says quietly.

‘Why not? Henry is a Lord now, and a backbench minister, and it’s not like she’s asking me to be Mistress of the Robes,’ and he turns to look at her. ‘Has it occurred to you that perhaps no one else, except you, will really mind?’ she asks, and he looks away.

‘Wellington will mind.’

‘And you care what Wellington thinks?’ she spits, and he’s not surprised at the venom in her voice. She’d always taken every slight against him personally, defended him when no one else would.

‘I have to, while he’s Prime Minister.’ He ignores her snort of derision.

‘He didn’t seem to offer you the same courtesy,’ she mumbles, and he shoots her a look. He was not rehashing his sordid past with her again – particularly not tonight. ‘She is lovely,’ she says after a few moments. ‘Very sweet.’

‘Yes,’ he agrees.

‘Adores you, Lord M,’ she adds quietly and the fact that she’s the second person that evening to throw her little nickname for him – a nickname he treasures – in his face is not lost on him. He can feel his sister’s gaze on him, but he refuses to return it; he knows what he will see there. She’s always been able to see right through him, and he will not let her see more of this than he absolutely has to.

What little there is to see will be gone soon enough, he tells himself.
It’s late when she takes her leave, and he can’t help but smile at her exuberance. They exit the ballroom and are walking – she’s practically dancing – down the hall when she stops and turns her wide eyes on him.

‘I did it,’ she says breathlessly after a few moments.

‘You did beautifully, ma’am,’ he says, and she throws her hands in the air, twirling as she walks, her skirt flaring as she moves. It really was a beautiful dress, he thought – she was beautiful. Even now, after hours of talking and smiling and charming some of the smartest people in the country, she looked radiant.

‘Oh, it was so hard,’ she says, turning again, and his eyebrows rise slightly.

‘You didn’t make it look hard,’ he says, shaking his head at her, and she laughs.

‘I think you and the Duke and Emma had a lot to do with that,’ she says, and he nods once. ‘Are you proud of me, Lord M?’ she asks light-heartedly after a few moments, and behind the smiles and the laughter he can hear the desperate cry for approval in her voice.

‘How could I not be, ma’am?’ he says, and she closes her eyes with a happy sigh. If he didn’t know any better, he would have said she was perhaps a little bit tipsy, but given that she’s had all of half a glass of champagne all night, and more than enough food, he’s fairly sure she’s just high on adrenaline and success.

She walks further down the hall and impulsively pulls one of the balcony doors open, and he follows her out. The summer night air is cool, but not cold, and she takes in a deep breath.

‘I can’t believe it’s over,’ she says, looking out over the gardens, and he nods.

He can. He’s exhausted. ‘It certainly has been quite the event,’ he agrees.

‘And that’s every year?’ she asks, and he nods.

‘It won’t be quite so difficult next time. You won’t require a crash course in modern world history and politics again, I don’t think,’ he jokes, and she giggles.

‘No, I think my meetings with the PM will do well enough,’ she agrees.

And then they’re looking out over the gardens quietly together, and he feels content in a way he hasn’t felt in years. She makes him happy, his little Queen. He turns slightly to look at her as she stares out over her garden. She was so young, so impossibly young, but her elegance and dignity was beginning to shine through. She reminded him of his flowers; the new buds that look so little like the flowers they would become. But she was becoming the most exquisite flower, his little Queen, and it was his privilege to watch her.

And he’s acutely aware that he probably shouldn’t be standing here alone on a balcony with this beautiful woman who has wormed her way so thoroughly into his heart. Oh, but she was so beautiful tonight. He had earned this, these few minutes with her, these few minutes where they could relax and celebrate.
So he excuses himself and walks quickly back to where there are still glasses of champagne set up, and he steals two. The soft smile she gives him when he returns with them minutes later and proposes a toast to her is enough to keep his heart going forever.

They’ve been sitting on her balcony just talking about anything and everything for what feels like moments when he realises the time, and he stands. ‘Ma’am, with your permission, I’d like to retire for the evening,’ he says, and her face drops slightly.

‘But it’s so early!’ she cries, and he looks at his watch.

‘It’s after one, ma’am,’ he says. ‘We’ve been out here for two hours.’

‘Oh.’ And she’s frowning a little, and he wants to tell her he’ll stay, that they can sit there talking and revelling in her success until dawn, but he can’t. They really probably shouldn’t be doing what they’re doing now, he thinks. There are boundaries, lines that are being blurred. But she’d deserved this tonight. They both had.

‘Well done, ma’am,’ he says softly, and she’s looking at him with those eyes of hers, and he’s lost.

‘Thank you, Lord M,’ she says, and he can feel the weight of her thanks, knows that she means it all.

‘It was my pleasure, ma’am,’ he says, giving her a small smile, before picking up the two champagne glasses and heading for his office.

He thinks he’ll return them in a few days’ time, when no one is looking.

***

When he arrives the next morning, Emma tells him she hasn’t appeared just yet, and he nods.

‘Last night went well,’ she says, and he smiles.

‘Yes,’ he says firmly, nodding. ‘She did well.’

‘I didn’t see you afterwards,’ she says, eyeing him, and he looks away.

‘I escorted the Queen to her rooms and left,’ he says, and it’s not really a lie.

He thinks that this is how it starts; the omissions, the variations on the truth. He’s been here before. He knows what this looks like. He knows how it ends.

Emma’s eyebrows rise and she nods, and he thinks she believes him, but there’s something else odd on her face, something he can’t quite place. But he’s not sure he actually wants to know, so he looks down at the folders in front of him.

Later, when he’s sitting at his desk working through his paperwork and waiting for her to call, he thinks he’s going to have to be far more careful in so many ways.
Thanks for all the feedback so far. :)

Chapter End Notes
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

In my madness
I see your face in mine
I keep a photograph
It burns my wall with time
Time
An occasional dream of mine

- An Occasional Dream, David Bowie

Chapter Notes

Bonus extra chapter this week because I'm so nice. (And because I'm not sure when I'm going to get to update again in the next few weeks. Sorry.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He knows that he cannot succumb to it this year.

It’s the same day as her Coronation Ball.

When he’d told Emma the date, she’d stared at him. But there had been little he could do; it was one week before her Coronation, and a weekend, and it wasn’t anyone’s fault that it was right around that time.

So he says nothing, thinks nothing, and the date is planned and put in calendars and officially announced, and he thinks he’s going to have to be stronger this year.

As the day approaches, he throws himself into his work – not that that is hard; she’s easily the most wonderful and all-consuming distraction he’s had in such a long time – but it’s always the dark, cold hours that bring him back to reality. When he’s lying in bed, or waking from a nightmare, those days, those weeks, those moments come tumbling back, and the feelings overwhelm him.

He thinks perhaps it will be enough. He can almost ignore it if he distracts himself enough.

He has to ignore it. He can’t do this to her.

He can’t.
She thinks her mother must be able to smell her success, because every time she achieves something, wins at something – anything – her mother appears to tear her down just a little.

‘Drina. We must talk about my title,’ her mother says frostily, coming to stand in front of her whilst the jeweller fiddles with something on the crown that’s sitting in a velvet-covered box next to her.

‘We have, mama,’ she replies, and she can hear the boredom in her own voice. ‘I don’t see any reason to change it,’ she says as the jeweller puts whatever tool he was using down and lets out a small sigh, crossing the room to fetch something.

‘It seems your Lord Melbourne has turned you against me,’ her mother says quietly, and her head flicks up. She’s tired of this, so tired of these jibes and insults directed at him, her Lord M, the man who has helped her to become who she was born to be. The only one who sees the Queen, not Drina. The one who has shown nothing but unwavering faith in her and her abilities.

The one who treats her like a woman – a Queen – and not a little girl.

‘I make my own decisions, Mama, and I see no reason to make you Queen Mother, no matter how much Sir John might like it,’ she almost snarls, and she watches as her mother’s face hardens even further at her daughter’s refusal. But she doesn’t have time for this; she has to find Lord M so he can see her with her crown on, see that all her practice with the bucket he’d bought her had paid off.

Oh, she hopes it has. She’s not sure what she’ll do if it hasn’t.

‘It is a shame you don’t have a bigger head, Drina. It is too small for the crown, I think,’ her mother says quietly, and it hurts, oh, how it hurts and she feels the burn of impending tears in her cheeks, but she will not let her mother see her pain, and so she turns on her heels and leaves them all behind.

She’s so determined to find him that she almost barrels right into him in the hall.

He lets out a little noise of surprise. ‘Ma’am,’ he says, and she can hear the query in his voice. She’s not crying; she’s proud that she’s managed to squish that back down from where it came. Now she’s just angry and frustrated and ugh.

‘Lord M! I’ve been looking for you,’ she says a little too loudly, just glancing at him. ‘The jeweller is here with the crown for the coronation.’ She knows he knows this – he was the one who’d set it all up – but she has to say something.

‘Yes, I was just coming to see if you needed assistance,’ he replies, still looking at her and frowning, and she lets out a sigh, before turning and heading back down the hall. He falls into step beside her.

‘Is everything okay, ma’am?’ he asks quietly, and she sighs.

‘Mama,’ is all she says in reply, and he lets out a soft noise of understanding. ‘Sir John thinks she needs a new title. The Queen Mother,’ she explains a few moments later.

‘I see,’ he says quietly after a moment, and she knows he won’t pry or offer any kind of comment or advice. He never does, when it comes to her mother, only ever asking after her.
‘I don’t…I don’t think she deserves it,’ she says quietly.

‘That is entirely your decision, ma’am,’ he says noncommittally again, and she feels a momentary pull of irritation – why won’t he tell her what to do?

But she knows he won’t, so she sighs. ‘She wants an increase in her allowance as well. She’s always saying how she has no money for clothing appropriate for the mother of the Queen,’ she almost mocks at the end. ‘I don’t even know what she spends it all on.’ She sighs, and he thinks she has enough to carry without trying to carry her mother as well. ‘It’s all Sir John,’ she says quietly. ‘The title was his idea, I know it.’

‘It’s very likely, ma’am,’ he agrees as they enter the room where the jeweller is now standing alone, somewhat awkwardly, with the crown.

‘I’m sorry, Mr Perrett. Where were we?’ she says, and he marvels at the change in the tone of her voice; she’s gone from young woman upset from fighting with her mother to Queen Victoria, regal and elegant in her knitted jumper and trousers.

He doesn’t tell her that he’d arrived at precisely the right moment to hear the entire exchange from behind the partially open door, how he’d closed his eyes in pain at the Duchess’s harsh words to her daughter.

But as with everything, he files away this new information, to be thought upon later, and focuses on his little Queen as she stands, waiting to try on the crown that she had been so fearful of wearing not even a year ago.

‘I have made some changes to the padding based on the measurements sent through, Your Majesty,’ he says, standing in front of her. ‘All that is left is for you to try it on, ma’am.’

She swallows, her breath catching in her throat. What if it was still too big? Or too heavy? The Coronation was so close now; there wasn’t enough time for her to make any more real changes, or to strengthen her neck any more. This was it. If it didn’t fit, if she wasn’t able to hold it up…

‘The moment of truth, ma’am,’ Lord M jokes with grin, and she can’t help but return his smile briefly as she stands stock-still, waiting for the jeweller to lower this heavy symbol of her birthright onto her head, praying…

It’s heavy, and soft, and definitely a little wobbly, but then she’s standing there and it seems to mostly fit and it’s not too heavy – she’ll definitely be able to hold it up for a little while, she thinks – and she can’t help but let out a breath.

‘Perfect,’ he declares quietly but firmly from where he stands a few feet back, his head tilted slightly and a little smile on his face, and she grins triumphantly at him, her Lord M.

She can do this, she thinks.

Her mother was wrong.

***

He looks at Emma when he thinks he can hear music coming from the Queen’s study. It sounds like
something he’d hear on the radio; whatever they play on the radio nowadays. He’s not particularly familiar with whatever it is, and he’s surprised that he’s hearing it at all.

Emma simply smiles. ‘Harriet,’ is all she says by way of explanation.

‘Ah,’ he says in reply, before walking through to her study, and he lets out a small laugh. She’s got the music up quite loud, and she’s dancing.

Well, he assumes that’s what she’s doing. It’s certainly not the waltzing she’s been practicing for the Ball, but there’s music and she’s moving in time with the beat, and he thinks with a grin that it looks like his little Queen is going to experience something like a vaguely normal life after all; just ten years later than anyone else of her generation.

He wonders with a smirk how long it will take her to see him.

His question is answered within moments – her face flushes when her eyes land on him, and he’s amused to see her dance over to where her phone is sitting on a speaker.

‘Good morning, ma’am,’ he says once there is silence, still grinning at her. She smiles back, her face red, and her embarrassment is really quite adorable, he thinks. ‘I see those dancing lessons have paid off.’

‘Spotify,’ she says, pushing her hair behind her ears, and he nods in understanding.

‘I hear Ms Sutherland has been making suggestions,’ and she’s confused for a moment before she realises Emma has dobbed her in.

‘Do you like it?’ she asks, and he frowns in mock-thought.

‘It’s not Mozart, ma’am,’ he says, and she rolls her eyes at him.

‘Mozart?’ she says incredulously, and he shrugs.

‘I’m old, ma’am,’ he reminds her, putting his briefcase down on his desk, and she shakes her head at him.

‘Not that old, Lord M,’ she mutters as she moves around to her desk, and the emphasis makes him smile.

‘I like some more modern music,’ he admits, and her eyes brighten. ‘Have you heard of David Bowie?’ he asks, and her frown tells him she hasn’t.

He spends a solid thirty seconds the next morning standing outside her study door listening to the end of ‘Letter to Hermione’ and smiling to himself.

***

He stares at the ceiling.

It had been different this year; he’d had something to distract him for the weeks leading up to it. Something in the form of his beautiful little Queen, and the impending Reception and her Coronation.
He’d hoped it would be enough.

But as he stares at the ceiling in the early hours, feeling nothing but blank pain, he realises distantly that it’s not going to be.

***

He drinks himself into a stupor the night before the ball. Well, he starts sometime not much before dawn that morning, when he’s finally finished everything he has to do, sending the emails he has to send, reminding Peel and Emma of everything he thinks he has to, to ensure it is all absolutely perfect for her ball.

So when his phone beeps at ten that morning, he’s passed out on his bed and doesn’t even hear it.

***

When he doesn’t arrive with his smile and their coffees by 10am, she goes looking for him.

‘Emma, where is Lord M?’ and she doesn’t quite understand the look on Emma’s face.

‘He said to tell you that he has some matters to attend to, but that he would see you later tonight,’ Emma says, and she feels the familiar pull of panic low in her stomach.

‘But…there’s still so much to do!’ she replies, and Emma smiles at her.

‘I have a list, ma’am, and there really isn’t that much for you to do. Your letters are here,’ she says, handing her a folder. ‘Outside of that ma’am, Harriet will be here at two.’

But she feels anxious, uncomfortable. She needed him here to…well, to be here, she thinks.

She can’t do this without him.

‘But he will be here later,’ she says, and Emma nods firmly.

‘Yes, ma’am.’

***

Emma watches as the Queen walks away, bewildered and clearly upset, and she curses whoever thought that today would be a good day to hold one of the most important events of their young Queen’s life.

But the world can’t stop for William Lamb, she thinks, no matter how much she wishes it could.
So she sends him a message.

*She’s looking for you. Come when you can.*

***

When he hasn’t appeared by 5:45pm, she starts to panic a little. The Queen was due to enter in fifteen minutes, and would be appearing at her desk in less than five, and she was studiously avoiding thinking about how she would react when she realises her Lord M wasn’t there. She’s already called him four times.

She knows what she’d find if she were to arrive unannounced on his door-step; she’s been there before. She just hopes he’s salvageable at some point soon.

‘Where is Lord M, Emma?’ the Queen asks, her voice a little higher in pitch than normal and Emma winces.

‘He’s on his way, ma’am,’ she lies. ‘But he won’t be here for your entrance,’ she adds, and she thinks that the Queen is about to panic. Harriet is biting her lip, her eyes wide, and Emma shoots her a warning glance. She’s going to need all the help she can get if this was going to have even the remotest chance of working. ‘He’d be so proud of you, ma’am, if you did this without him,’ she says, and she sees the Queen swallow.

‘I can do this,’ she says eventually, her voice trembling and Emma’s not sure if she’s even managed to convince herself at all.

‘You can. We all know you can.’ And the Queen nods absently.

And when she’s standing at the doors, Emma takes his place at the Queen’s side, and she knows she is a very, very poor substitute.

‘Are you ready, ma’am?’ she asks, and the Queen lets out a breath.

‘I…Yes,’ she says, her voice suddenly stronger. ‘Lord M would want me to be.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ Emma says, a small smile on her face. She watches as the Queen takes several breaths, before her chin lifts slightly.

‘He’ll be here soon,’ she half-asks, glancing at Emma, who nods firmly.

‘Yes, ma’am.’ She’ll go and get him herself if she has to.

Chapter End Notes
Thanks for the feedback - I appreciate it so much. It's so lovely to hear what people think, both the good and the bad.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Oh lights go down
In the moment, we're lost and found
I just wanna be by your side
If these wings could fly
Oh, damn these walls
In the moment, we're ten feet tall
And how you told me after it all
We'd remember tonight
For the rest of our lives

- Wings, Birdy

Chapter Notes

Yeah, so I'm not happy with this really, but I've edited and rewritten and added scenes and deleted scenes and spent so much time on it that I think I'll never actually be entirely pleased with it. But now I've run out of time, so here it is. I'd love your feedback on what worked and what didn't; you're all so insightful and your feedback is always so helpful, and often makes me consider things I hadn't considered before, or look at things in a new way. Some feedback has inspired entirely new scenes, or new perspectives on existing scenes.

Also, as some of you have noticed, I have rearranged and changed (and added to) some elements of the original plot, so I hope it all still makes sense. Feel free to ask if something is unclear!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He knows he should be there.

He just…can’t. Not today. Not today of all days.

He can’t go out there and pretend to be happy and jovial and pleased when the ghost of his most soul-destroying failure haunts him.

But he knows she needs him, and the pressure of making a decision, of deciding to go or stay, is enough to make his mind blank out completely. And so he stares at the ceiling, succumbing to the darkness and pain and nothing that overwhelms his senses.

He hears his phone ring for what feels like the fiftieth time in the hour he’s been conscious, and he knows it’s her.
He can see her face in his mind. He cannot conjure it when he tries; all he sees is curly brown hair against the white of a pillow when he tries to focus on anything. But slowly, so slowly, she begins to appear unbidden, when he allows himself to sink under the waves; her blue eyes, her smile. He thinks he can almost hear her laugh every now and then.

Augustus would have loved her, his little Queen, and the thought triggers a flood of silent tears that flow over his temples and into his hair where he lies on his back on the floor.

Emma’s text message haunts him. *I know what day it is, William, and I’m sorry. But she needs you.*

She *needs* him.

She needs *him*.

He hasn’t been needed in so long, and the last time someone had needed him… He’s organised too many funerals.

But his little Queen needs him and he finds that now, as he lies on his back on the floor of his bedroom, the hangover still banging at his temples, that the thought of *her* is just, just enough. She is his star, and he cannot escape the pull of her for long.

He finds to his surprise that he doesn’t *want* to.

Augustus would have loved her, his little Queen, and his mind is filled with a new image, one that makes his heart almost beat again.

She’s the only thing that has made his life worth anything again. He wouldn’t – couldn’t – let her down any more than he already has.

And with what feels like superhuman, titanic, mammoth effort, he grabs at his phone with arms that feel like lead and forces his fingers to move.

*On my way.*

***

She can’t see him. She’s looked and looked, but she doesn’t need eyes to know of his absence. *He’s not here,* her mind says over and over. He’s abandoned her, on this day. She looks to Emma, who looks back at her, concerned. She knows Emma has tried to contact him, but he still hasn’t come.

He’s been there at every function, at every meeting, behind the scenes; standing surreptitiously against a wall, or behind a curtain, or in the crowd. But he’s *there,* and she breathes because she knows she is not alone.

But tonight, she cannot breathe at all.

Emma and Harriet look around with barely concealed anxiety, and she knows he’s later than even they had anticipated, and that sends her stomach into a spin. She’s grateful for their presence, their assistance, but they’re not him, and tonight of all nights, she needs *him.* There are too many people here, too many names she can’t remember, too many things she doesn’t know.

But he’s not here and…and…
She wonders what she’d done wrong.

Surely, he wouldn’t leave her unless she’d done something to make him angry or upset with her. Emma said that he’d had something to do, something important…but maybe Emma was wrong. Maybe Emma didn’t want to tell her that he was angry.

Maybe.

The waiter offers her more champagne and she gladly takes it. Sir John and Mama’s warnings echo in her mind – don’t overdo the champagne – and she thinks vaguely that they’re right and that she shouldn’t drink much. Champagne always makes her feel light-headed and giddy, and she needs to be at her best tonight. But he’s not here, and she can’t breathe.

She takes several long sips of the champagne before the Duke of Grafton asks her to dance and she knows she should say yes.

***

She’s dancing with the Duke of Grafton when he arrives, and he knows he’s late. She would have been announced a while ago – it’s well after ten now – but he knows she would not have been left alone for long between dance partners and Emma and Harriet and Wellington and Alfred.

If he didn’t have twelve missed calls and six text messages from Emma, he’d fool himself into thinking that she hadn’t even noticed his absence.

‘You’ve been missed,’ a voice says at his elbow, and Emma wraps her hand under his crossed arm to find his hand and give it a squeeze. He squeezes back; she knows how hard this day is for him, and he appreciates her sympathy.

‘She appears to be doing just fine,’ he replies.

‘I think she’s had quite a bit of champagne,’ Emma says quietly, and he flicks his head around to look at her. ‘I’m sorry; there wasn’t much I could do. She’s eaten, but…’ her voice trails off and he frowns. Champagne and nerves were never a good combination, especially not in someone so small.

He closes his eyes for a moment. He should have been here.

He watches her closely for a while; her cheeks are flushed, yes, but that could just be the dancing. She’ll have danced with a few of the Dukes by now and many others, he knows. She’s not particularly unsteady on her feet, he thinks, but it’s hard to tell. The music is too loud and she’s too far away for him to hear what she’s saying to the Duke, but she’s smiling and so is he and he feels a small shift in his stomach he promptly ignores.

Emma eventually squeezes his hand once more and pulls away, leaving him alone in the corner, watching his young Queen. She’s radiant. Her dress is perfect; the deep blue regal and elegant. She is the brightest star in a brightly lit room. He can see that everyone sees it, the way she outshines them all.

And, despite it all, he can feel himself almost, almost smiling.
She knows she should be more subtle, but she can’t help but look around the room for him every few moments. The Duke is lovely, and she responds to his inquiries after her health and the palace and everything, but after every answer, she finds her eyes scanning the room.

*He’s abandoned you,* a small voice whispers.

*But he wouldn’t do that,* she tells herself firmly. *He wouldn’t.*

And then her feet bring her around one more time and everything stops and he’s *finally here* and she can breathe again. She glances at him another couple of times, just to be sure her mind wasn’t playing tricks on her, but it wasn’t. He was definitely standing there in the corner, and he was watching her. The thought sends a pleasant shiver up her spine, and she feels safe for the first time that night.

***

And then the song is finishing, and she’s curtseying, and he sees out of the corner of his eye who he thinks must be the son of the Russian President approach. He purses his lips; this is not ideal. The Russian ambassador had sent his apologies two days’ earlier, saying that he would send the son in his place, and Melbourne hadn’t been fooled for a moment. But there had been little he could do.

He is very tall, and very handsome, and not too much older than Victoria, he notices. And they’re dancing, and Melbourne feels his face grow hot at just how close the boy holds her.

Within moments his hand is far too low on the Queen’s back, and he works to suppress his fury.

Alfred is, as they had arranged, only steps away. ‘Alfred, I think it’s time Mr Nikolaevich found another dancing partner,’ he almost growls, and the younger man nods. He watches as Alfred strides onto the dance floor and speaks to the dancing couple. But Nikolaevich isn’t interested in giving her up, he can tell, and it takes Alfred’s hand on his arm to pull him away, and she’s left standing in the middle of the dance floor.

He watches as she spins on her heel, and he thinks she’s looking for someone, and she looks just a little unsteady on her feet. He’s going to have to do something.

But then she’s frowning again and looking around and he’s already moving when his mind tells him that she’s looking for *him.*

***

She watches as her dance partner is led away by an apologetic but firm Alfred, and she’s lost. She spins around on her heel – where was he again? – but she can’t see him now.

Her mind is spinning; she’d moved too quickly.
But she was sure it was him she’d seen. Her eyes flit across the faces, the people who mean nothing to her, the people she doesn’t know…

And there he is, striding towards her, and oh…

He stops in front of her and she stops. ‘Would you do me the honour?’ he asks, and he’s here and she’s suddenly hot. She swallows and he moves towards her, and the look on his face stops her heart for a moment. He’s so safe and lovely and handsome, her mind tells her, and she feels her face flush, and suddenly it’s all she can think about. And then he’s close and he’s placing one hand on her back and she moves without thinking, her eyes locked on his and her hand wrapped in his larger one, and he’s leading them. It’s everything and nothing like that first afternoon he’d helped her practice.

And she’s floating.

‘I thought you weren’t coming,’ she manages to say, and he drops her gaze.

‘I’m sorry. I had a matter to attend to,’ he replies. Part of her mind tells her she should be confused – what on earth could he possibly have to do on the day of her Coronation Ball? – but the voice floats away as soon as it arrives.

‘I thought you were angry with me.’

His eyebrows rise and he glances around. ‘You? Never.’

He’s acting strangely and she can’t figure out why. Her brain is a fog and she can’t see through it. But it doesn’t matter; he’s here and she’s dancing with him and she’s not entirely sure how she feels, only that she feels.

How had she not felt this before?

‘You dance so well,’ she says happily, and he lets out a small huff of amusement. ‘I wish I could dance with you every night,’ and she means it. She loves this, this other-worldly feeling, this forced intimacy. She realises distantly that this is one of the few times he’s actually voluntarily touched her and yet here he is, holding her in his arms, and her skin burns with the thought.

‘I think perhaps you should drink some water,’ he says, and she frowns, confused.

‘Water?’

‘Yes, ma’am. You seem a little flushed,’ he says, glancing at her before looking around again.

‘I’m enjoying the dance,’ she says, and she thinks he must have misunderstood her because he looks embarrassed for a moment. ‘I’m enjoying dancing with you,’ she explains.

‘I’m glad, ma’am,’ he says quietly, not meeting her eyes.

And then the song ends and he lets her go and bows and he’s not touching her anymore. He gives her that small smile, the one he gives her when he’s teasing her, and she smiles back, allowing him to lead her out of the dancing area. Before she knows it, he’s lead her out of the room into a smaller room, and he’s pressing a bottle of water into her hands and telling her to drink.

‘Why am I drinking water?’ she asks, after she’s taken several large mouthfuls, and she then marvels that he’d known - she had been a little thirsty.

‘I’m concerned you haven’t drunk enough today, ma’am. It’s been a big day, it’s easy to forget at
these things,’ he explains haltingly, and she’s still confused. He’s looking around now, but she’s not sure at what; they’re all alone in this big, beautiful room she’s not sure she’s even seen before.

‘Emma’s been forcing food and water down my throat all day,’ she replies, putting the lid back on the water bottle and dropping it on the table. He turns to look at her.

‘You seem tired, ma’am,’ he says. ‘You should consider resting in here for a moment.’

Rest? Why would she rest? This is her night; she is almost officially and ceremonially Queen and nothing is going to stop her from celebrating all that she’s been liberated from and all that she’s found. From celebrating with him; her guide, her mentor, her saviour. Her Lord M.

‘I don’t want to rest, Lord M. I want to dance with you,’ she says, grabbing at his hands and pulling him towards her. But she’s all unbalanced and he’s strong and stiff until he’s not and then she’s falling. But he saves her, her Lord M, of course he does, and her hands are on his chest and his hands are on her waist, and he’s very close and warm and his eyes are deep and she’s falling, falling…

She watches his eyes dart all over her face and she feels herself suck in a short breath at the intensity of his gaze. She’s suddenly still and she knows something fundamental has changed. She can see it in his eyes, in his face. He’s never looked at her like that before.

She feels the breath catch in her throat. He’s so close, and his eyes are on her mouth and then he’s looking back up at her eyes…

But he’s the first to break the spell when he looks down, gently moving his hands from her waist to rest on her upper arms and taking a small step backwards until there’s space between them, and she feels the loss of his warmth through her dress.

‘Not tonight,’ he stumbles out, adding on the ‘ma’am’ a moment later, and he won’t look at her until he suddenly does, and she knows that they’re no longer speaking about dancing. His face is so serious and uncertain and so, so sad and that look she’s never seen before is still there. But his words cut like a knife and she feels the dread of rejection and embarrassment lower over her like cold, wet blanket.

Her breaths come in gulps and she moves away from him, each step agony. He doesn’t move, the same solemn, sad look on his face, and she can’t stand it any longer.

She flees.

***

He sends Emma after her. She must return to the ballroom, speak to her guests. Say her farewells when appropriate. She cannot make a mistake tonight.

He’s not going looking for her; he’s acutely aware that it would only heighten her embarrassment, and she needs all the self-esteem she can get.

He also doesn’t trust himself. His mind is spinning, replaying the scene in his mind over and over: their eyes had met and it was in that moment that he had realised how far this had gone, what a mess he’s made. It’s not the meeting of their eyes, he’d realised – it was the holding. It was the way time
had stopped and the whole world had melted away and everything, absolutely everything, was just the two of them standing there. Only this time, they’d both noticed. He’d seen it in her eyes, the way her breath had caught. The way her hands had rested on his chest.

He could still feel them.

He returns to the ballroom to wait until she appears, hiding in a corner that has full view of the doors and waiting, acknowledging those who came close. It’s been a good thirty minutes and he’s halfway through a conversation with Baron Dormer when she appears through the nearest door, Emma right behind her. He watches her closely; her chin is high and her walk confident.

He sees right through it, and curses himself.

But she continues to make the rounds, Emma and eventually Alfred by her side, and she’s smiling prettily for her guests, and the knot in his stomach slowly loosens. The effects of the champagne seem almost entirely gone; she is remarkably calm and composed, but he can tell her laugh is just a little off, her smile just a little wobbly. He’s not going to risk her seeing him and destroying the little façade she’d built; he’s careful to walk around behind her as he leaves the ballroom. He has more than enough work to do at his desk. He knows Emma will watch her, ensuring she says goodnight to those she must, and leave at an appropriate hour herself.

His heart aches.

***

It’s late when he leaves – or early, rather – and he’s glad they’d organised a late start for her administration staff. They were barely going to get home before they needed to turn around again. Emma had texted him to say that the Queen had taken her leave, and so he’d emerged from his office – from his daze – to ensure the night ended well.

He’s just stuck his head into the ballroom one last time to check on Alfred and send him home and is walking down the hallway when he spots her standing near the doors. He comes to a jerky stop when he sees her, but slowly continues walking when he realises she’s seen him.

It occurs to him that she’s been waiting for him; she’d known he wouldn’t leave her, not really. He takes in a deep breath and releases it slowly as he approaches her. Her face is nervous and vulnerable and his heart breaks at what has happened. What he’s done.

When he gets close he looks up at her and their eyes meet and it’s so, so painful that he blinks. She drops his gaze instantly.

‘You should be asleep, ma’am,’ he murmurs, looking down at her.

‘I am returning to my rooms now,’ she says, and he nods. He watches as her chin rises, and his heart swells at what he now knows is coming. His brave, brave little Queen.

‘I wanted to apologise to you,’ she says, and his heart breaks a little at how her voice trembles. ‘My behaviour this evening was inappropriate.’

He shakes his head. ‘No, ma’am. I am the one who should be apologising. I should have advised you I was going to be late. I should not have left you so unattended.’ He can’t look at her. He hears
her let out a little breath.

‘I’m sure that whatever detained you was important, Lord M,’ she says, and he lets out the tiniest huff of breath at the sincerity in her voice. If only she knew.

‘Important or not, it was unkind and unprofessional, and I am sorry.’

He hears her let out a small laugh. ‘Here I am trying to apologise to you and you end up apologising to me,’ she half-laughs, and he smiles as he looks up at her.

And it’s back, that thing that he’s been trying to suppress, been trying so desperately to squash – that thing he fears has a life of its own now, now that it’s been fed.

‘A Queen is never wrong,’ he declares quickly, and she gives a small laugh.

‘If only,’ she replies, and lets out a sigh. ‘I will see you this afternoon,’ she says, her statement more of a question and he nods quickly.

‘Of course, ma’am,’ he assures her, and he’s pleased to see she’s settled somewhat. This was just a bump in the road, he thinks, and he knows he’s a master at fooling himself. ‘Sleep well, ma’am,’ he says, before stepping out the door.

***

Her face is the only thing he can see as he lies in bed.

Her innocence, her purity calls to him; she is untainted by the world, uncowed by her handlers, desperate to prove herself and be the best she can be. She’s naïve and raw and so, so trusting and he’s like a moth to a flame; he basks in the simplicity of it all, the warmth of her on his skin. His world had grown so cold, so dark, and she has become the sun. She doesn’t have a hidden agenda, a double-meaning in everything she says and does; she just wants to be a great Queen, to do the task assigned to her in this life. It’s so, so refreshing, so warming, so pure that he feels an almost animalistic instinct to protect her, to shield her from it all.

But now…

He has to stop this.

She had been so close, so beautiful. The way she’d looked him...

His treacherous heart will walk him down this road to its own destruction, he knows. He’s done it before; only this time, the stakes are so much higher. Now his heart has betrayed him, as he knew it would, he can no longer hold her close to protect her, wrap her tight in his arms and hide her from it all. He must now shift, pivot and make himself the target, draw their fire away from her as he stands as the mark. It’s himself as well, now, that he must protect her from. He’s now the closest enemy; the fox inside the gates.

He cannot love her. He doesn’t have enough heart left to give, even if he could. Even if he was allowed. Even if it was a remotely good idea.

Loving her will destroy both of them.
His face is the only thing she can see as she lies in bed.

The pillow is wet with her tears; tears of anger, of embarrassment. She’d been so, so stupid. So arrogant. So childish.

She didn’t deserve the crown she would be wearing only days from now, she knew, and the pain of it all curls inwards in her chest and she lets out a sob.

She couldn’t even be trusted with the champagne at her own Coronation Ball.

The sad, pained look in his eyes haunted her.

What had she done?

He had been nothing but her kind, gentle pillar of strength, her greatest support, her saviour from Mama and Sir John. And now it was ruined.

Everything was different now. She didn’t know how, but it was. Something had changed. Shifted. Her was her Lord M, and he always would be, but there was just something…new. She didn’t like it, this new thing, whatever it was. She just wanted everything to be the same as it had been for the past almost year – the happiest almost-year of her life. The thought of that changing, morphing into something else, curls ruthlessly through her mind and into her chest and that cold, wet dread of rejection returns.

He had left her, after that moment, that…whatever it was in the ballroom, and she thinks that perhaps even her apology may not be enough.

He had looked so…so…she wasn’t even sure anymore. She’d never seen that look on his face before, doesn’t know entirely what it means.

But she had made him sad, she knew. Whatever he had looked like, that strange combination of emotions on his face – the sadness, the pain – they had all been her fault. She had done that. She had put the sorrow in his eyes, forced him to push her away when she’d been so childish and unrestrained and undisciplined.

A little spark of hope in her heart that was attached firmly to his reaction to her apology tells her that he may just forgive her. That perhaps all was not yet lost.

Emma’s gentle encouragement had made it possible. It had occurred to her when she’d been almost finished her goodbyes – she’d known he was gone almost as soon as she’d entered the room. When she couldn’t see him, couldn’t feel his eyes on her. She couldn’t breathe.

Emma’s kind, knowing eyes – her soft suggestion that perhaps she could catch him in the hallway in a few minutes when she’d asked where he was – had been enough to convince her that she was doing the right thing. She couldn’t last the night without knowing, without speaking to him, without apologising for her behaviour. Without seeing his eyes emptied of that haunted, sad look; the look she had put there.

They hadn’t been, not quite, but he’d smiled at her, that soft, familiar smile that quietened the voices
that had been screaming in her mind for what felt like hours. Perhaps there was hope.

As she lies in her bed, she prays until she falls asleep that she hasn’t lost him, her Lord M.

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The cold, harsh light of day – the grey skies of London – remind him that she’d had quite a bit to drink the previous night. The thought is a two-edged sword, he thinks: he’s hopeful that the moment was only brought about by the alcohol that had been running through her veins – the apology she’d given him hours later had been remarkably sober, but she had been really quite wobbly on her feet – but he cannot deny just how good it had felt to hold her, to have her look at him like that.

He wondered again when he’d allowed himself to start seeing her as a woman.

But her face in that moment had also told him something else; she has no idea what she’s capable of. The dangerous part of him, the part that had courted trouble his whole youth, thinks maybe it’s good that she begins to understand that she is a woman; the effect she could have on men. She had no idea, his little Queen, of just how beautiful she was – how attractive she could be. Of what love was – what lust was. He thinks that she’s beginning to learn, and as in so many things, it may just fall to him to be her teacher.

His heart ached; this was not a lesson he wanted to teach her. This lesson would sting, would hurt perhaps as much as the pain he knew without a doubt that she’d endured at Kensington. And he would be sure he couldn’t do it if he loved her any less.

And oh, he loved. His heart beat because of her.

He prays it was just the alcohol.

No matter what, they couldn’t continue like this, and it was his responsibility to fix it. There were boundaries that defined their relationship: boundaries that came with position and rank and title and gender. And they were so blurred now he almost couldn’t see them.

He could rely on her to only blur them further, if he let her, but that wasn’t her fault. She was guileless, his little Queen, almost childlike in bestowing her affections. It wouldn’t occur to her that the boundaries needed to exist, let alone what those boundaries should even look like.

No, he had to be the one to define them far more tangibly for both of them. Only he didn't know how without hurting her.

How did he let it get this far?

He knew. Oh, he knew.

It was his weakness that had led them here. His weakness for a set of beautiful, young blue eyes; a beautiful, radiant smile that she directed so often at him.

His heart had been waiting for the right moment to betray him, and it had caught him at his weakest. It had been a perfect storm of love and sorrow and fear and vulnerability in both of them on that night, that most painful night, that had led to this.
But he couldn’t blame her; he could never blame her for this. It was all him.

He didn't want to redraw the boundaries fully; they needed at least some of that blur for now. She was young. She would eventually know what was required of her and not rely on him quite so much for everything, and then he could pull back, withdraw more and more.

So he only would draw the ones they needed - the critical ones. The ones that kept their actions blameless and her reputation sparkling. The ones that kept his heart as intact as possible. The ones that would protect hers.

The most important boundary, the one he could most clearly enforce, was simple: he could not – would not – touch her, outside of formal requirements.

Certainly, no more dancing.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks as always for all the lovely feedback.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Everything is dark
It's more than you can take
But you catch a glimpse of sun light
Shinin', shinin' down on your face
On your face
Oh your face
Oh you're in my veins
And I cannot get you out

- In My Veins, Andrew Belle

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the encouragement in that last chapter - I really appreciate it. It makes such a huge difference to know it's all working out, and given that this is very much a work in progress (I'll leave you to guess which of those sections in the previous chapter was added quite literally the day before I posted the chapter - see if you can!), it's really very helpful to hear what you have to say. (And honesty is very much appreciated.)

A shorter chapter, just to tie up the Coronation Ball, before we move on to the next part of their lives. Not all the loose ends are tied up just yet, though. :)

It feels odd to arrive so late, despite the few hours' grace they’d decided on for everyone who’d worked the Coronation Ball. It hadn’t helped; he’d barely slept anyway.

He should be on a high; the night had been by all accounts extremely successful. Despite the little… incident in the middle, she’d carried herself gracefully and impressed everyone.

But it’s more complicated now.

He’s greeted by Peel with the morning papers, and he cringes. He wonders if she’s seen them yet; if she’s awake. Perhaps he can get in first, stop Lehzen…

He shakes his head. He can’t shelter her from everything, and nor should he. This was fairly tame, really – just some speculation about her dancing with the son of the Russian President, some quotes about how close they’d been. A stupid sub-headline in The Times about increased British-Russian relations.

He feels a mild anger build in his chest, and enjoys it for a moment, before dismissing it.
But there are no photos outside of the official ones, luckily. They’d clearly succeeded in getting all the mobile phones, he’s pleased to note, and this would die quickly without the visual. Besides, she was new, and the public was hungry to get to know their new Queen. And the media would be more than happy to capitalise.

No one seemed to have noticed her brief absence in the middle of the ball, or the way her feet were perhaps a little more unsteady than they should have been, or the way her cheeks had been flushed from the champagne and happiness. He finds himself biting his lip at the thought; they had been lucky.

But really, all in all, the media seem quite enamoured of their new Queen, as they should be. The others all have glowing reports of their new, beautiful little Queen; how elegant she’d looked, how everyone had been so happy to meet her, how sweet and lovely she’d seemed. And if he knew his little Queen, she’d go one of two ways – be gleefully happy at the success of the ball, or be frustrated at the insinuations. He wasn’t entirely sure where she’d land this time – it wasn’t quite that simple. There were layers of complexity now, layers he was keen to see removed.

He avoids Emma’s gaze when he arrives at her office, nodding when she tells him she’s ready, and walks straight down the hall to her study.

He wonders briefly what she’d told Emma, but then shakes his head; he’s not entirely sure he wants to know. Emma would make it clear soon enough, he thinks.

He takes in a breath before he enters her study. It’s up to him to set the mood if he can, to control the fallout as much as possible.

When he enters the room and meets her wide, slightly terrified eyes, it’s a little awkward – he’d known it would be – but he gives her a small smile and he watches as she visibly relaxes. She’d been anxious about seeing him this morning, clearly.

She reaches tiredly for the coffee in his hand, but otherwise she looks fine – no evidence of a hangover, he thinks to himself, and whilst he’s pleased she seems mostly well, he worries about just how much she remembers of the previous night. Enough to make her apprehensive about his appearance this morning, clearly.

She reaches tiredly for the coffee in his hand, but otherwise she looks fine – no evidence of a hangover, he thinks to himself, and whilst he’s pleased she seems mostly well, he worries about just how much she remembers of the previous night. Enough to make her apprehensive about his appearance this morning, he thinks. But then she was young; she’d bounce back quickly. Perhaps…

He blinks a few times; he’s being an idiot, getting himself all tied up in knots over nothing. It was nothing. Too much emotion and alcohol and exhaustion and nerves and now she was a little embarrassed.

‘Congratulations, ma’am,’ he says with a smile. ‘A very successful evening.’

She nods happily, but there’s still an element of shyness in there. It’s then he sees the newspapers in her hand and on her desk and he thinks the distraction will be good. ‘Read the paper this morning, ma’am?’ he asks lightly, and it generates exactly the response he wants.

‘Are they going to do this every time I speak to a member of the opposite sex?’ she demands, the derision clear in her voice, but he thinks he hears something else too.

‘Oh, yes, ma’am. Until the day you marry,’ he says firmly, and when her eyes widen slightly he thinks he knows what he couldn’t put his finger on.

‘But I’ve no intention of marrying anytime soon,’ she says, trailing off before letting out a small groan. ‘They said this would happen,’ she mutters.

‘They?’ he asks, knowing exactly who she’s talking about.
'Mama, Sir John. They said I should marry quickly to end the speculation,' she adds, and his eyebrows rise at that. They really have sheltered her, he thinks. There’s no way anyone would believe that.

Unless…

But that doesn’t bear thinking about right now.

‘I’m not entirely sure that’s the solution, ma’am,’ he says. ‘The press does not give up easily. And besides, once you’re married, they’ll just move on to impending children. There’s always something.’

She lets out a small huff of annoyance. But he sees his opportunity, and takes it.

‘Having said that, ma’am, much of England doesn’t live in the twenty-first century when it comes to royalty and marriage, especially not women. You should be careful who you’re seen with in public, unless you are willing for the public to speculate about some kind of relationship,’ he says. ‘It’s not fair, but it is what it is.’

She’s frowning. ‘Except you,’ she states after a minute, and it’s an afterthought. But it tells him so much, and he almost lets out a relieved sigh then and there.

‘Not even me,’ he replies, and she frowns a little.

‘But you’re my private secretary!’ she says, and he can hear the exasperation in her voice.

‘Yes, ma’am. But the press will look for scandal wherever they can find it, and more than happily invent it if needs be.’

She lets out another irritated huff, and he really has to stop her from taking everything so personally. She still hasn’t really learned yet that she must be two people: the Queen for the public, and Victoria for herself. The Queen will marry and have children one day, as will Victoria. But Victoria should not allow speculation about the Queen bother her so much.

‘My life really isn’t my own, is it?’ she asks, like she’d once thought it might have been, and he sees his opportunity.

‘The Queen belongs to the people, ma’am,’ he agrees. ‘But you belong to you alone, and to those you choose to belong to.’

He can see her thinking about what he’s saying, and he thinks she might understand just a little by the way she eventually nods slowly.

‘All other reports seem to suggest that the evening went quite well,’ he says, knowing he can’t avoid this. They need to debrief the evening – well, most of the evening – and it’s going to be awkward, he knows, but it cannot be helped.

‘Yes,’ she says absent-mindedly, her thoughts still on his previous words. The idea that she should be two separate people felt so disingenuous, so fake. She feels her own automatic resistance to the idea, but she resists the urge to dismiss his words completely. He’s never lead her astray before, and he’s been a public figure himself, so he would understand at least to some degree. Perhaps he’s right. Perhaps the venn diagram doesn’t need to be a circle; perhaps there is a way to be both the Queen and Victoria. She doesn’t need to lie, but she can’t share all of herself with everyone all the time - it would be exhausting.
Her thoughts are interrupted by his question, and she looks up at him while her mind processes his words. ‘Did you enjoy yourself, ma’am?’ he’s asked, and she realises he has this look when he asks her a question; like he genuinely wants to know the answer. He looks at her expectantly, like he’s waiting to hear what she has to say, not dismissing her outright before she’s even opened her mouth, or asking a question simply because it’s the polite thing to do.

He treats her like a Queen – he always has – but more than that, he treats her like a person, and it’s been so long since anyone has done that. She can’t remember the last time someone spoke to Victoria, not the Queen. She thinks she understands what he means a little more now. He sees both of her, requires different things from each.

Did she enjoy herself? Her mind flashes back to his eyes on hers in a dimly-lit room, the way his eyes had been dark and serious and sad. Apologetic, almost.

She shakes her head; she’d spent far too much time in her own head going over that moment, cringing at the embarrassment she’d made of herself. Worrying herself silly about the damage that she’d done to their friendship. But looking at him this morning, he hadn’t changed; he was the same Lord M she knew and loved.

Maybe, just maybe, it would be okay.

‘Yes,’ she says, dropping his gaze, and she knows she’s terrible at lying. ‘I did.’ She looks back up at him, and his gaze is soft and expectant and not awkward at all, and her heart slows – he’s trying to make this easier on her. He’s so good to her, her Lord M. But she still feels still a little awkward, and she thinks she knows how to break the tension – a little trick he taught her.

‘I think perhaps for future functions, I should limit the amount of champagne I drink,’ she says carefully, and he lets out a huff of a laugh, and the tension is broken. She’s pleased to have made him smile, but more, so much more than that, she thinks that perhaps he’s forgiven her.

It’s going to be okay.

Later, she wonders when exactly he became her Lord M. But the thought warms her heart; despite it all, he is hers.

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She’s survived two of the biggest tests so far – not just survived, but passed with flying colours. Everyone thought so; even her mother had told her how elegant she had looked at the ball.

But this was the third and final for the foreseeable future, and arguably the biggest.

When he arrives at her rooms that morning, just two days after the ball, she’s already dressed and mostly ready; Harriet, herself dressed beautifully, appears to be making the final touches to her hair.

She was nervous, he could tell, but it was tempered with the knowledge of her successes. She knew she could do it now; it was just now a matter of doing it again. He thinks she’s mostly worried about the crown. It was the weak link in the chain; the place where the most could go wrong. Despite everything Perrett had done, she really was just a small woman, and the crown had not really been designed with a young Queen in mind.
‘Ready, ma’am?’ he asks, and she looks at him with those wide eyes, but then her face firms and she nods.

‘Yes,’ she says, and he smiles.

Afterwards, he’s impressed that he doesn’t actually cry. He watches transfixed as she walks up the aisle, her head held high, and the emotion he feels startles him with its intensity.

If he’d been asked to describe how he felt, he would have struggled to find words. She was regal, elegant, resplendent in her dress and robes, and when the crown is placed upon her head in front of everyone he’s already sent up multiple prayers to a God he’s becoming rapidly familiar with again. It wobbles just the tiniest bit, infinitesimal really, but then she’s standing there, the Queen in every sense of the word, and his heart is overflowing.

She was the sun, and he was basking in her light.

Later, at the reception, her eyes find his the moment she enters the room and he can see her eyes become glassy as she sees his own unshed tears. But then he gives her the smallest of bows, blinking, and she’s smiling so, so happily at him, and oh, he adores her, his little Queen.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Only you ever make me care
Cause only you ever made me dare

So wherever you go
I'm your shadow
Desert to ice floe
I will follow
Wherever you go
I'm your shadow

I know, I know, I know
Everywhere you move
You stay, you go, you change
I am bound to you

- Shadow, Birdy

Chapter Notes

And it begins...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She’s beautiful, his little Queen.

When she’s dressed for a formal event, she takes his breath away, he’ll easily admit. He’s only a man, and he can appreciate that whilst his Queen isn’t gifted with height, she is careful to look after her figure, and Emma Portman and Harriet Sutherland know exactly what she should wear.

But this particular night, she is gorgeous.

Her hair is up and away from her face in a beautiful mess of loose, soft curls. The dress is long and some kind of silk and clings to her curves in a way that he’s almost ashamed to admit short-circuits his brain. The fabric scoops around just underneath her collarbone, and the tight fit accentuates her tiny waist. It’s elegant and sophisticated and he is acutely aware that she is very much a woman.

He wonders, not for the first time, when he started seeing her as the Queen and as a woman. He thinks perhaps it doesn’t matter now. It’s rather all too late for that kind of reflection.

She walks up to him and he can tell she’s wearing heels because her eyes are almost level with his mouth rather than his shoulder. His mind registers that her dress is the exact same shade of blue as
her eyes.

‘What do you think, Lord M?’ she asks, standing in front of him, and he hates the part of himself that’s glad he’d been kept behind to sort out some paperwork.

‘Stunning, your majesty,’ he manages in time to see Emma smirk behind her. Her smile is wide but still a little shy, and he smiles at her in return. ‘Enjoy the film.’

He shoots Emma a dirty look as the Queen passes him, but she just smirks at him.

(He’s decided that Emma Portman knows far, far too much and a part of his mind whispers that this is not a good thing, but he ignores it. He trusts her with his life, and trusts her to know where the boundaries lie – even if she does like pushing them a little every now and then.)

Despite his little Queen’s protests that he, too, needs to have fun every now and then, he manages to convince her that his duties do not – and should not – extend to film premieres, and that he’ll attend the movies like the commoner that he is.

But she corners him one afternoon, and tells him rather imperiously that she has decided that she will attend the London Symphony Orchestra’s performance of some of Mozart’s most popular works for the anniversary of his death and she absolutely requires someone to attend with her, and he can’t help but laugh before she’s even finished her sentence at how devious she is. He’d given her the invitation the previous morning with a little smile, and she’d grinned and made a joke about this being his kind of fun. He’d reminded her much to her amused outrage that she was the one invited, not him, and perhaps that was good because she needed to learn to appreciate real music. This, clearly, is what she’d come up with in the twenty-four hours since.

‘You must come with me,’ she all but demands with twist of her lips, and he’s still smiling. She’s clever, his little Queen. She asks him what he has planned for that evening, and he shrugs, shaking his head. He knows there would most likely be nothing; he’d just go home and work, or watch whatever on TV. Besides, he thinks he’s becoming quite adept at slipping in and out of places either before or after she does. Few people notice him – he’s no one now when she’s around. It’s liberating after years of the spotlight.

So he acquiesces, and her smile widens, and he feels a little happier than he had when he’d arrived that morning.

His mind reminds him to be careful. Despite it all, despite his feelings and the beyond blurred nature of their relationship, he was an employee and, at best, a friend, and should be nothing more. He’s pleased to note that everything seems to have returned to normal after the ball; the awkwardness that had tinged their meeting afterwards was gone, and they’d gone back to their usual easy relationship. She had been nothing more than high on the adrenaline and the beauty of the evening and the champagne and her gratitude towards him. His heart still beat for her, but as long as hers did not return that beat, they were safe.

He didn’t think attending a concert for Mozart would be an issue, but he still needs to outline the boundaries for her. ‘It’s not really appropriate for me to be seen attending these kinds of public functions with you, ma’am,’ he says the morning of the concert, and she frowns at him.

‘Why not?’

‘Because I’m your Private Secretary, ma’am. I’m technically nothing more than an employee, and should be treated as such.’ And the look on her face would be comical, except that he knows she doesn’t understand this, and she really needs to understand this.
‘Don’t be ridiculous! You might be my Private Secretary, but you’re also my friend,’ and the way she ends uncertainly on the word friend makes his heart cry out just a little.

‘Of course, ma’am, but that’s not how it will be perceived.’

She lets out a huff of frustration. She hates this, having to consider and reconsider every action, every movement. It goes so contrary to her nature; what you see is what you get with his little Queen. But she will learn. ‘So you will sneak in a side door?’ she asks a little bitterly.

‘No, ma’am. I’ll just arrive in a separate vehicle, and enter right before or right after you. It’s really only that initial arrival part, where the photographers will be all around wanting to take photos of you – and of anyone you choose to accompany you,’ he explains, and she relaxes a little, but he thinks she understands now what he’s trying to say.

‘So you will still sit with me?’

‘If you would like me to,’ he says, and she seems to settle at that.

The concert is excellent, and he knew it would be, and she – well, she is stunning. He has to remind himself constantly that he cannot watch her all night, not here where he is just as much a guest as anyone, when eyes will be on him because he was with her. But when she arrives, he’s standing at the top of the steps at the entrance, he’s hidden partly by the darkness and partly by her security, and he can just observe.

She’s come so far in so many, his little Queen, from those first awkward statements at the Privy Council, and he is so, so proud of her. She’s gorgeous, wearing something that Harriet herself had designed, she’d been excited to tell him. It’s elegant and long and covers everything from her neck to her feet, and he thinks the kind of netting that wraps tightly around it is a cream colour except for the little flowers of various sizes and earthy pastel colours that cover it. She stops for the photographers for the briefest moment, and he know she’s only doing it for Harriet, before waving gently to the crowds and moving slowly towards the entrance, offering them all a soft smile as she walks up the stairs.

His heart swells at the sight of her beauty, her grace, her elegance, and he feels that pull low and strong, that thing that he knows now most definitely has a life of its own, despite how desperately he’s tried to starve it.

She is beautiful, and he wants her.

The strength of the thought shocks him and he swallows against it, pushing it away. He cannot, cannot have her. She is not his to have, and she never, ever will be.

She’s walking up the stairs towards him, but he can tell she can’t see him yet by the way her eyes dart around, and soon she’s close enough that he can see that little furrow in her brow. He steps out of the shadows just slightly and that thing in his stomach is pleased to see her let out a breath – that little furrow in her brow disappear – at the sight of him.

He tilts his head towards the door, and she continues in with a small smirk, but without stopping. He waits a moment for her security to pass him with a nod, and for some more of the guests to start to filter through, before he heads in.

It’s not until they’re about to leave that he relaxes a little. She’s spent the intermission charming various members of Parliament, Lords and Ladies, and even the odd celebrity, and he’s happily standing in the background, talking to his own former colleagues and trying very hard not to watch
Russell raises an eyebrow at him as he approaches where he’s standing a few feet away from the Queen. ‘Enjoy the concerto?’ he asks, and Melbourne knows exactly what he’s asking.

‘Yes, it was an outstanding performance,’ he replies, and Russell’s lips twist at his non-answer as he moves away with a nod.

They’re standing at the end of the hallway, waiting for her security to clear the area behind the building so she can leave quietly through a back door. ‘What did you think, Lord M?’ she asks, a small smirk on her face, and he nods.

‘An excellent performance, ma’am,’ he announces, playing along.

‘I agree,’ and she can’t hold the grin in any more. ‘I’m glad you were able to attend.’

‘I wouldn’t miss a performance of Mozart, ma’am,’ he replies seriously, and she lets out a giggle, and he can’t help but smile back at her silliness.

It takes just a moment for the clicking sound to register, and he’s moving without thinking to stand in front of her, his arms back and pushing her behind him. It only takes him another moment to realise what has happened: a photographer is now being manhandled by one of her security. He purses his lips in annoyance.

Well, he knows what to expect in the papers tomorrow, he thinks. He wonders which page she will – they will, perhaps – earn. Probably not the front – not enough to put them there, he thinks bitterly. Concerts of classical music don’t tend to inspire too much bad press. But perhaps a few pages into a magazine…

‘Lord M?’ she asks quietly from behind him, and he turns as he watches the photographer disappear around a corner with several police officers.

‘Just a wayward lens, ma’am,’ he says, turning back and smiling to reassure her.

She purses her lips, and he can tell she’s a little perturbed by the intrusion. ‘I suppose Harriet’s dress will get more attention, then,’ she comments, and he smiles.

‘Quite possibly, ma’am. Ms Sutherland should be grateful for your efforts,’ he adds as they begin to walk down towards the waiting car, and she grins.

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‘I’ve just sent you an email,’ Peel announces from across the hallway, and Melbourne’s eyebrows rise. Peel doesn’t usually herald impending emails, so he switches straight to his inbox and clicks on the link in the email. It takes his brain about two seconds to realise what he’s seeing and he rolls his eyes. ‘Not again,’ he mutters under his breath at the all-too-familiar list in front of him.

‘Look familiar?’ Peel asks not a little derisively from where he now stands in the doorway.

He huffs an annoyed breath. ‘Yeah,’ he replies. He’s not quite sure why he’s made the list again; he hasn’t been on it since he was Prime Minister. It must be something he’s done recently, some photo
he’s missed in the magazines or the papers. They’d been on the lookout for the photo from the Mozart evening, but it hadn’t surfaced in the weeks since, much to his surprise.

But he frowns; his team were pretty thorough, as was Press & PR. He’d be surprised if they had missed anything. The fact that Peel has this tells him that they’re fairly well on top of things. But he’s just one name in many, and he thinks that perhaps he’ll stay down the bottom this year, now that he’s out of the spotlight. No one really cares too much now; he’d hidden himself well enough, made himself boring enough that they’d pretty much ignored him for well over a year. His announcement that he was taking a leave of absence from the House of Lord hadn’t even rated much of a mention.

‘I doubt it’ll turn into much,’ he tells Peel. ‘I haven’t made the papers in years.’

Peel doesn’t look convinced. ‘They have long memories.’

‘True,’ he acknowledges. ‘Let’s hope that nothing triggers that memory,’ he says, but even he doesn’t really believe his own words. Something has triggered someone’s memory, or he wouldn’t be staring at his name on the screen now, so many years later.

Perhaps he was just making up the numbers. That was likely it; someone’s gone through the old lists, looking for someone or something exciting, and they found him. He almost smiles to himself; when they had the likes of Wellington and Russell to choose from, he’s not surprised. The Duke was getting on.

He’ll just be sure to keep his head down, and it will all turn into nothing.

No one cares about him now, and that’s just the way he likes it.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the lovely feedback. :)
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

But I was never made to toil
Trapped inside some city walls
I'm wild inside and when I hear the call
I'm gonna chase it

So as you leave it all behind
Just keep your head up and follow
The atlas in your eye

- Atlas in Your Eye, Dustin Tebbutt

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He’s reminded rather suddenly that she listens to everything he says one afternoon when Wellington’s phone number appears on his screen.

‘What have you been telling her about our asylum seeker policy?’ Wellington demands down the phone, and Melbourne’s a little taken aback. His mind starts working through their conversations that week, and he frowns.

‘Nothing specific,’ he says slowly. ‘We haven’t actually discussed it at all.’ And he’s not sure why they would have; that bill had died a long and painful death months ago. Unless… he makes a short note at the bottom of a notepad by his desk.

‘Then why did I just get the third degree about it?’

‘I don’t know,’ he says honestly. ‘It really hasn’t come up at all.’ And there’s silence for a moment. ‘What did she say?’ he asks, not relishing the thought of Wellington shouting down the phone at him, but he’s also really keen to know what on earth she said to make the older man so angry with him.

‘She said that our current policy on refugees was not in line with what she would expect from her government in the twenty-first century – that it was archaic and close-minded!’ Melbourne smirks, and the pieces begin to fall into place. He’d heard that Lyndhurst had been trying to push some of the changes through in a Private Member’s Bill when it had all gone south not long before Melbourne had left the House, and it had appeared in the papers when a journalist had actually paid close attention to what was happening in parliament. She must have just spotted it in her morning reading – it hadn’t been a huge article, and she hadn’t said anything about it and he hadn’t mentioned it. Lyndhurst’s bill had quickly died a quiet death, but he’d heard through the grapevine that perhaps the ideas weren’t quite as dead as they’d appeared to be. Lyndhurst could be like a dog with a bone when he wanted to be, and if the Tory party wanted something done, well…
He wasn’t going to admit that it was only slightly gratifying to discover that the bill he’d personally argued against when he’d been a minister was something she disagreed with as well.

‘She compared it to our Foreign Policy in the 30s,’ he ends with, and Melbourne frowns; the 30s sounded familiar…

His eyes close briefly as he realises where this has come from. ‘Ah.’

‘What?’

‘There’s an opening of a new Jewish Museum she’s been invited to sometime next year; we aren’t sure if she should attend given the security concerns.’

‘So?’

‘Well, the Holocaust and general anti-Semitism did come up in conversation.’

And he thinks Wellington must be alone by the swearing. ‘Melbourne,’ and he can hear the warning and threat all mixed into one in the other man’s voice.

‘I did not discuss Tory policy with the Queen, Wellington. She came to her own conclusions.’

‘Conclusions that just happen to be the same as yours! And of those women you’ve surrounded her with!’ he growls, and Melbourne forces himself to be civil.

‘She has a mind of her own,’ he retorts.

‘A mind that hangs off your every word, Lord M!’ Wellington shoots back, and Melbourne feels his jaw clench.

‘This was not me,’ Melbourne says after a moment, his voice steely after he’s composed himself and is fairly certain he’s not going to lose it down the phone, and he hears Wellington let out a huff. ‘I made a promise to be as impartial as possible, and I have done my absolute best. She’s not going to agree with you on everything, Wellington. And she certainly doesn’t with me.’

‘I find that difficult to believe.’

‘Well, there’s not a lot I can do about that,’ he says angrily, but he finds he can’t really blame the Prime Minister. He would feel the same if their positions were reversed, he thinks. But he can’t resist one last jibe. Wellington was underestimating his little Queen, and he was happy to keep it that way for now. ‘Have you considered that, for all her youth and lack of political experience, perhaps the Queen has a point?’ he asks, and he doesn’t really try to keep the smugness from his voice.

He can’t help but smile a little when Wellington hangs up in his ear.

***

Even though she rarely misses anything, he still checks everything she’s signed at the end of each day, so when he flicks open the last document in the pile of that day’s paperwork, he’s surprised to see that she’s missed a page.

But then his eyes narrow, and he reads the front of the document before flicking back to find that she
hasn’t signed any of it. He stares at it for a moment, thinking, before letting out a huff of surprise and almost amusement. He knew she knew about this – he’d made sure of it very early on, when she’d first started getting that kind paperwork – but…

This was not a fight he needed – she needed. He knew how she felt – Wellington’s conversation had told him that. And it was like her, his little Queen, to be stubborn and obstinate on an issue she cared about, and it appeared that she cared about this more than he’d realised. But he hadn’t thought for a moment that she would actually go this far.

He’d been a little amused at her expression when he’d put it in front of her that morning; she’d made an irritated face at it, like the document had somehow personally offended her. But she’d listened and nodded at his explanation of what it was, and had given absolutely no hint that this was coming.

He looks at his watch; she’s probably just finished a meeting with the new ambassador to Hungary. He rings Emma only to find that she’s already left her office, so he meets her in the library.

‘Ma’am, you haven’t given Consent to this Private Member’s Bill,’ he says, holding up the document.

And she smiles, her chin high, and he thinks she’s been anticipating this conversation. ‘No.’

He begins to feel a slight throbbing at his temples. ‘Can I ask why not?’ He knows very well why, and she really should not do this.

‘I don’t agree with it.’ He closes his eyes for a moment. How was he going to deal with this?

‘Ma’am, that’s not really the point of Queen’s Consent,’ he says, and he wonders briefly if she listened at all to her tutors on the Constitution because he’s about a thousand percent sure this does not qualify as an emergency, and if the press got hold of this, oh, the articles they would write about royal interference in democratic processes and his head spins a little at the thought. Articles of that nature this early in her reign would not – could not – end well for anyone even remotely attached to her, let alone what it would do to her.

‘Why not? I don’t think this is in the interests of the nation,’ she says, her chin held high, and he thinks the battle is already lost. ‘The original bill this came from was debated endlessly in parliament months ago, and it was massively unpopular. This is just deception, the Tories trying to push through something they know isn’t right,’ she says, and he sighs. ‘The public has made their position clear. This way I can simply refuse to give my consent to the bill even being discussed.’

He closes his eyes for a moment. Technically, technically she can do this, prevent it from ever even making it to the floor. It affects crown interests in that it’s now technically an amendment of the Housing and Charities Acts; the original discussion was around the housing of asylum seekers while their applications were being processed. But her consent was merely a formality; no one would expect that she wouldn’t sign it – especially not this new, young Queen, still untried and untested in politics.

Well, based on her conversation with Wellington a few weeks’ back, perhaps he might not be so surprised.

‘On whose advice, ma’am?’ And she frowns slightly. ‘Usually, when a monarch refuses consent, it’s on government advice,’ he explains. He doesn’t think she’d speak to anyone without his knowledge – that would be really quite concerning, given that he handles her appointments – but he has to ask.

‘I had no advice. I decided for myself,’ she states, and he rubs at his forehead. It’s clear she knows
about this; her bi-weekly lessons with her tutor on the Constitution were evidently having an effect.

‘Are you sure you want to do this, ma’am?’ he asks instead of the million other questions he has.

She frowns slightly and takes a step closer to him. ‘Why are you so concerned about this, Lord M? I think my reasons are sound and defendable, and I don’t think the Crown really benefits either way from the amendments.’

And he thinks that no matter how sound or defendable her reasons are, it is going to do nothing for her already slightly strained relationship with her Prime Minister, or the public if it got out that she’d prevented discussion of a bill on the floor – even one as unpopular as this. He knows it’s highly unlikely; this kind of thing was not public information, but it would only take one request for information by someone with a grudge and some time and persistence…

That, and Wellington is still going to request his head on a platter. He wonders briefly if Wellington’s ever brought him up with her. Likely not, he thinks, given their first meeting, and the way he’s been throwing her little nickname for him in his face at every available opportunity.

‘This will not please your Prime Minister, ma’am.’

‘I am not in the business of pleasing Prime Ministers, Lord M,’ she says rather incredulously, and he’s going to have to explain.

‘Ma’am… I was not a supporter of the original bill,’ he says heavily, and when he looks up at her, her eyes are narrowing and he thinks she understands.

‘You think the Duke will think you’ve told me to do this.’

‘He thinks I’ve filled your head with my own political leanings on this matter, yes,’ he says.

‘But you haven’t!’ she cries. ‘I don’t agree with their stupid proposals about segregated housing and what is essentially slave labour! I told the Duke this at our meeting.’

‘I know, ma’am,’ he tells her quickly, and she frowns, before her eyes drop and she wanders away from him, clearly thinking.

He knew this would happen; he knew it would come to this. She would have to choose between her job and him: her desires and inclinations as Queen, and this Private Secretary she’s chosen, with all his political history. No matter how hard he’s tried, how he’s tried desperately to be impartial, to make his own views very clear from the alternative in their discussions, it’s still come to this.

And once again, he thinks for the briefest moment that perhaps, just perhaps, he shouldn’t have said yes to a blue-eyed girl-Queen all those months ago.

But then she turns to him, her chin high, and he awaits her decision.

‘If the Duke asks, I will inform him of my reasons for not giving my consent to this bill, and remind him that as Queen, I have the right to refuse consent on bills that affect the interests of the Crown, a right I will use sparingly, but when I feel is necessary. And I will also remind him that I am a grown woman with my own mind, and will not be told what or how to think by anyone, least of all by my Ministers.’

And that’s that, he thinks, as he stares back at this woman before him, whose voice had hardened on that last sentence.
He can see her there still, his little Queen, but he thinks that she perhaps isn’t so little anymore.

***

He makes a habit of making himself scarce when Wellington is due for his weekly visits, and he makes doubly sure this week. He’s had enough of the older man’s voice yelling at him down the phone; he doesn’t need it in person.

But it would seem that he cannot avoid it this week.

‘Wellington would like to see you,’ Emma tells him down the phone, and he purses his lips. ‘He doesn’t look pleased.’

Melbourne isn’t surprised, if she said to Wellington half of what she’d said to him a week ago. But he thinks it would be better if his entire department didn’t know about Wellington’s disagreements with the Queen – at least not from Wellington – so he heads him off in the hallway.

‘I tried to convince Her Majesty it wasn’t a good precedent to set,’ he starts, and he can see Wellington’s frown deepen.

‘Her exact words were ‘I have my own mind and I will not be dictated to by anyone, least of all current or former Prime Ministers’,’ and Melbourne has to bite down hard on the laugh that bubbles up in his chest. It would seem she’s refined her little speech in the week that has passed.

‘She’s had a tutor in constitutional matters,’ he explains. ‘But, apparently, she’d already covered this before her ascension – which isn’t particularly surprising, given the circumstances.’ He’d shuddered to think what Conroy could have done with Queen's Consent when he’d found out. ‘She’s done this all on her own.’

And the way Wellington is eyeing him tells him that he may have just convinced him. ‘What does she hope to gain?’ Wellington asks, and Melbourne sticks his hands in his pockets and looks down at the ground.

‘I think, perhaps, we are underestimating our Queen,’ he says, his eyebrows raised as he glances back up at the Prime Minister. He’s thought about this, letting their discussion play around in the back of his mind, and he keeps coming to the same conclusion. ‘I think she hopes to do what she thinks is the right thing.’

Wellington huffs, before shaking his head. ‘I am too old for this,’ he mutters, and Melbourne’s lips twist. ‘A monarch with a conscience. Who would have thought?’ he adds dryly, and Melbourne smiles at that.

‘Who, indeed.’

Chapter End Notes
Firstly, a Fun Fact: Almost every Jewish Museum in the Western World has at least one security guard on duty during opening hours - they get that many threats. I've been to eight different Jewish Museums in Australia, the UK and Europe, and several Synagogues in Germany and Austria, and it's really quite sad that some of them have more security than the National Galleries in London. (The one in Melbourne, Australia, has two at all times, and you have to be buzzed in and out through a whole airport-style set-up, bullet-proof glass boxes, double-doors and all. Security concerns are a thing.)

Secondly, a note: The Queen's Consent thing is a thing as well – google away. It got rather interesting in around 2013, when it was revealed that Queen Elizabeth and Prince Charles had been using their 'veto power' for bills. (Most people assume the Queen has zero power. Not quite true.)

Thirdly: I’m not British, I don’t know what the Tory policy on refugees and asylum seekers is, and I don’t mean to offend anyone. It’s just a story, a plot device, a deus ex machina (well, not really, but that phrase just sounds cool). The refugee thing isn’t the point of this section at all, really. This section has two other distinct functions, both of which will become apparent soon enough! (Can you guess?)

Thanks again for all the feedback! Keep it coming.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

And if the darkness is to keep us apart
And if the daylight feels like it's a long way off
And if your glass heart should crack
And for a second you turn back
Oh no, be strong
Walk on, walk on
What you got they can't steal it
No they can't even feel it
Walk on, walk on...

- Walk On, U2

Chapter Notes

**Trigger Warning:** some brief and non-specific discussion of terrorist attacks

I wrote this section at the end of April this year, well before the Manchester bombing, and I've tried to remove anything that would make people upset, but if you're particularly triggered by anything to do with that, then I'd suggest skipping the first 70-100 words of this chapter. I've been told it's okay, but I would hate to make anyone too upset. Again, the chapter has a point, but it's not really all that critical in the context of the entire story.

He answers his phone and it's Wellington’s PA, and he knows something is up because it’s an official call. ‘Please hold.’

Wellington’s on the phone only moments later. ‘There’s been an explosion. Shopping centre in York,’ he says gruffly, and Melbourne feels his stomach drop. He spins around in his chair to his television, grabbing at the remote and flicking the screen on. ‘None of the visuals appear have made the news just yet, but it will have made social media,’ Wellington says. ‘I expect it’ll be on the television in minutes.’

‘It already is,’ he says, watching the shaky phone footage being shown on the screen in front of him, the news banner down the bottom screaming in red and white letters about an explosion. He’s already out the door and walking quickly down the hall towards her office; he tosses the remote to a confused Robert Peel on his way out. ‘Casualties?’ he asks, and Wellington huffs.

‘It’s school holidays.’ There’s silence at the end of the line for a moment. ‘The Queen, Melbourne,’ Wellington says. ‘I don’t think she’s seen much like this before.’
He’s so very well aware that she hasn’t. He’d been the one to show her images of the World Trade Centre bombings on September 11, before the Diplomatic Corps Dinner. She’d almost teared up at the images of something that had happened in another country when she was just a child; he can’t imagine how she’ll react to this. Despite how much she’s grown and changed and learned, he knows that she’s still so soft, his little Queen.

And despite the strain of the previous months – years – he feels a rush of gratitude for the Duke’s consideration and care for their young, sheltered Queen. He knows how these things work; he must have instructed his PA to call within minutes of being told himself. ‘Thank you, Arthur,’ he says as meaningfully as he can, as he drops his phone and comes to a halt at Emma’s desk. He knows it’s all over his face; he sees Emma already standing out of the corner of his eye, grabbing at her phone.

‘She’s in her rooms,’ she says after a moment, and he nods, before pushing through the door and jogging down the hall. He prays she’s not on her phone, that she’s just reading a book or something – anything except watching television.

She has such strength, his little Queen, but she’s so, so tender, so easily bruised.

He sees Nancy standing at the end of the hall. Her face becomes anxious at the sight of him rushing towards her, but he doesn’t have time to explain. ‘The library,’ she says before he can speak, pointing down the hall, and he calls his thanks as he jogs past. He grabs the doorframe as he arrives, and his heart sinks.

He’s too late.

The images of smoke rising from the crowded shopping centre, people running past Special Forces Police, Ambulances and Police cars with flashing lights and white sheets cover the screen. Her head whips around at his arrival, her hand over her mouth and her eyes wide and glassy, and he knows she’s only just seen it. She spins back towards the television, and he walks slowly over to sit next to her on the lounge.

His heart is so heavy; the scenes are like they always are - heart-breaking scenes of death and pain, shock and anguish. He’s seen it so many times before, but the pain and shock are still the same; he feels it in his chest. But she’s new to this; she’s not prepared to see people on trolleys under white sheets, to see small children crying in the arms of yellow and blue-covered police. Her people.

They watch for a little while, listening to the newsreaders tell them more and more, before she lets out a sob next to him, the tears in her eyes spilling over onto her cheeks, and his heart breaks at the sight of his little Queen with silent tears running down her face. Before he realises he’s moving, his arm is around her shoulders and she’s falling into him, her head on his shoulder, her knees curling up to her chest, the tears slowly running down her face as she watches the horror unfold on the screen in front of her.

Eventually it becomes too much, he thinks, because after a little while – after a particularly heart-rending image of a group of dust-covered fathers hugging their children – she turns and buries her face in his shoulder, grabbing on to the lapel of his jacket, and he wraps his arms around her, drawing her to him. It’s awkward, the way they’re sitting, so he slides back a little and pulls her with him so that she’s curled up next to him, pressed into half to his front, half to his side.

It occurs to him that he’s breaking his rule in a big way, and he’s torn, but not torn at all. She needs him in this moment, his little Queen – this horrible, horrible moment. This is friendship, he thinks – one friend comforting another – nothing more. He can do this one thing. There won’t be many of these moments, he thinks, and for now, until she’s just a little stronger, a little more experienced, a little less raw and new and young, he won’t deny her this. She has no one else she will do this with,
he thinks. He can’t imagine that she allows her mother to see this side of her any longer.

So he holds her in his arms, gently rubbing circles on her back, while she quietly cries.

‘You shouldn’t watch too much,’ he says quietly after a few minutes, when she’s been still for long enough that he thinks the worst is over. ‘It will only upset you more.’

She pulls away just a little, snuffling and sitting up, and he feels the loss of her warmth at his side. It’s enough to jolt him into moving; he pulls his arm away from around her shoulders. The immediate pain is gone. Boundaries, he tells himself.

‘They’re my people,’ she says quietly. ‘I can’t not watch.’

‘Yes, you can,’ he says. ‘You aren’t serving anyone by exhausting and upsetting yourself, ma’am.’

‘But what can I do? I want to help!’ she cries. ‘I should be able to do something!’

She’s so naturally compassionate, his little Queen. Her heart is so big and full of love for her people, and he’s so proud of her, but she needs to learn where to direct it. ‘You can’t protect everyone from everything ma’am. That’s not your job, and it’s not possible.’

She looks almost mutinous for a moment before her face falls into something more like frustration, and she turns back to the screen. ‘I feel so powerless,’ she says quietly.

‘Right now? Yes, ma’am. You have to let the emergency services do their jobs,’ he says. ‘But later? You have a power that no one else in the country has,’ he says, and she stares at him.

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It’s a little over a week later and she’s walking through the Children’s Wing of York Hospital, and he thinks she might not make the car before she falls apart.

She’s been so strong, talking with each of the children and their slightly star-struck parents, smiling and laughing, mostly ignoring the photographers, handing out her little Tower Guard teddy bears – she’d insisted on the bears, even when she’d learned that some of the children were not really that young. Every child loves a teddy, she’d told him, and he’d simply nodded, acquiescing to her wisdom in this area.

Augustus had loved his bear.

He’d arranged for some of the emergency services to be there, along with some of the doctors, and she’d spoken so well he’d been surprised. It isn’t until he sees her face as she walks towards him between seeing the children and meeting the emergency services that he realises she’s barely holding it together. But she takes a deep breath and pushes on, and he’s so, so proud of his little Queen.

But now, at the end, it had been a long, emotional day, and he could tell she was faltering. She makes it to the doors to the carpark before her face crumples and her hand goes to her mouth. She steps outside of the door and turns towards the brick wall to the side, still shaded by the entrance, and stops, her hand on the wall almost holding her up as she lets out a sob. His heart breaks. She had given so much, held herself so well all morning, and now there was little left.
But he knows, this time, he cannot comfort her – touch her – not in front of all her security, out in the open, where he’s sure there are hidden photographers just itching for photos.

Not again. Not this time. He has to maintain the boundaries.

This is just emotional exhaustion, tears after a long, emotionally challenging day. She needs the release; she doesn’t need him. Besides, he tells himself, she has to learn to comfort herself, and to seek this kind of comfort from those who are allowed to give it. This is something she will do countless times as Queen, and she has to learn to do it without him.

He won’t be around forever.

So he stands beside her, facing her and shielding her from the world outside as she hits the wall with her fist, his own hands curled into balls in his pockets, and he despises himself just a little more with each passing moment, with every tear that he knows is falling. Every tear that falls cracks his heart open just a little further; he feels every sob in his chest. But he cannot blame her. It is he who is the weak one; he who loves when he shouldn’t.

And oh, he loves.

He’s known for a while, and he’s almost – almost – come to accept it.

And it’s slowly killing him, these moments where her heart cries out for love, and he cannot give it. He cannot establish – allow her to establish – that level of casual intimacy. He cannot allow her to love him in return. He must, absolutely must, build those walls. It’s for the best, for both of them, he tells himself, and oh, he longs to hold her in his arms, to protect her from all that would make her cry like that.

‘Breathe,’ he reminds her softly, more for himself than anything else. It takes a few moments, but she pulls herself together, taking a series of deep breaths. She looks up at him, her face red and wet, and he hates himself so, so much.

He may not allow himself to touch her, but he can love her in so many other ways, and so he gives her a small smile, his eyes soft. ‘You were so brave,’ he says quietly.

‘I just...’ and she stops, looking down at her feet. ‘I don’t understand why they would want to hurt children,’ she says eventually, wiping at her eyes.

‘Neither do I, ma’am.’ She’s pulling herself together now, straightening her back and taking a deep breath, and when she nods, he turns and leads her to the waiting car, his hand resting gently on her back. He can’t seem to bring himself regret acquiescing when she’d begged him to come instead of the Lord Chamberlain or one of his deputies.

They’re well on the way home when she speaks.

‘I think I understand,’ she says, before turning to him. ‘It was so wonderful to make those children smile again – to know that I could do that.’

And he smiles back at his little Queen and nods. ‘I’m glad, ma’am.’
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

How could it all fall in one day?
Were we too sure of the sun?
Who knows what State is in store?
If they all turn, will you run?
If you need to, keep time on me
If you need to, keep time on me
When I need to, I'll keep time on you

- *If You Need To, Keep Time On Me*, Fleet Foxes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She’s invited to so many things, and it’s part of his job to filter those invitations. He gives her most of them – well, most of the reasonable ones – so that she can choose what she will attend for herself. She’s still so new to this, has no idea what she really likes and doesn’t like, that he’s more than happy for her to try almost anything.

It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that she’s most definitely going to accept the one he’s just opened. He checks her schedule quickly to make sure she hasn’t already accepted some other invitation before he slides it to the bottom of the pile.

He sticks around a little longer than usual that morning just to see her reaction. She eventually lets out a small squeal of excitement, and he grins.

She loves the Ballet. He’s discovered it was the only thing she’d been taken to as a child, and it hadn’t even been here in the UK; it had been on a visit to Germany to see her cousins. So when it comes to her birthday, well, that’s an easy one, he thinks. But it’s not his place to organise her a party of any kind – it’s not a milestone, and he thinks she’d probably prefer something quiet, given the hectic pace of the past few months, so he rings a very excited Harriet who promises to throw her something small at the palace.

‘What’s this?’ she asks, pointing at her screen one morning, and his lips twist slightly when he sees what she means. He’s blocked out the afternoon and evening of the day after birthday, but he hasn’t put any details in.

‘That is a surprise, ma’am,’ he says, and she looks at him, a little surprised herself, and definitely a little confused.

‘A surprise?’ He nods, and her frown morphs slightly into a confused smile. ‘For me?’

‘Who else, ma’am?’ he asks laughingly, and she smiles that confused, slightly incredulous smile that she gets when she realises she’s going to experience something new and possibly wonderful for the
first time. It’s look that he adores, but is also tainted with a now-smaller amount of anger; this kind of look should be reserved for significant events, for the big things in life – not surprise birthday events at the age of twenty-three. But he’s dealt with that, has filed it away in the box with all those other elements of her past that make his heart sad and all the little joys of childhood she’d missed out on.

‘Oh,’ she says. ‘Is it for my birthday?’ she asks, and he nods. ‘But…’ and she trails off, looking confused. ‘Harriet’s already told me she’s organising a dinner,’ she says a little reluctantly, and he nods.

‘Yes, she told me,’ he acknowledges.

‘Oh. Okay.’ She very obviously doesn’t know what to do with this information, and he takes pity on her.

‘Don’t worry about it, ma’am. It’s all organised. You don’t have to do anything.’

And she nods, smiling a little wider at him, and he feels his stupid, traitorous heart swell with affection for his little Queen.

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He steps into the near-empty carriage, leaning back and resting his head against the carriage wall next to the door. It had been a long day, but a good one. She’d been frustrated at the bureaucracy around the Australian Prime Minister’s as-yet unannounced but definitely impending visit, but a few well-timed comments had slowly brought a small smile to her face, and then a fully-fledged grin directed at him. He felt himself smiling as he thought about it. Yes, today had been worth the frustrating phone calls and vaguely-worded emails and the piles and piles of paperwork.

A rather loud giggle broke into his reverie. He looks in the direction of the noise to see two teenage girls – they couldn’t have been more than fifteen or sixteen (what on earth were they doing on the tube at this time of night?) and they were, most evidently, giggling at him. He quickly looks away, automatically shaping his face into his most neutral look. He glances down at his jacket, pants, shirt, shoes.

Nope, all good.

He grinds his teeth together. The girls weren’t giggling so much now that they’d seen that he’d seen them, more looking what he assumed was at their phones, but it was still unsettling. They were too young to remember him as PM, and he can’t think of any other reason for their sudden attention. He lowers his head and shuffles to try to hide a scan of the carriage. There was only him and the girls, and another young woman on her own, also on her phone. He watches as she turns an irritated glare on the two giggling girls who completely ignore her.

He’s almost decided to ask them what they were laughing at, when the young woman walks past and grabs the handrail next to him, facing the doors as if to get off.

‘You might like to check Twitter, Lord Melbourne,’ she mutters quietly, emphasising his name. His head flicks around to look at her, and she gives him a small sideways look, a wry smile on her face. ‘Or perhaps just wait for the magazine in the morning, if you’re hoping to keep that smile on your face for tonight.’
He can feel himself gaping, and closes his mouth shut with a snap.

*Bollocks.*

He watches as she gets off the train with a casual ‘Evening,’ before turning back into the carriage.

It takes one more giggle for him to decide to catch a taxi the rest of the way home.

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He can see, even from as far back as he is, that Emma Portman is trying hard not to laugh. ‘Don’t,’ he warns her, as he approaches her desk. She lets out a snort at that, and he sighs.

‘It must be nice to be objectified at your age,’ she says with a completely straight face.

‘Not. Funny.’

‘Oh, I think it’s hilarious,’ Lady Emma replies. ‘I’m going to start a scrapbook.’

He throws a withering look her way before she waves him into the Queen’s office with a smirk.

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She’d spent far more time than she’d ever care to admit thinking of the best way to greet him that morning.

‘How does it feel to be considered one of the sexiest politicians of 2017?’

‘Do you practice those poses for the paparazzi, or does it just come naturally?’

‘Which month of the 2018 Politician of the Year calendar would you like to be?’

She thinks perhaps it should feel weird reading about her Lord M on Glamour Magazine’s website; he’s not a celebrity or someone famous. He’s just her Lord M.

But there’s one photo that draws her in. It’s obviously not posed at all – he’s just turned around and is looking directly at the camera, and his gaze is so serious and a little intense, his eyes a little hooded, and she sees it’s only a couple of years old. And he has a beard.

She’s never seen him with a beard before. He looks so different; not like her Lord M almost at all, if it weren’t for his eyes. It’s his eyes that surprise her; they were so light and pale in that shot and she thinks she’s seen that look in his eyes before.

Something tightens in her stomach a little, and she’s not entirely sure how she feels about the whole thing.

But she knows without a doubt that he’s going to hate the fact that he’s in the media again, and for something so inane, so banal. She knows how hard he’s worked to manage her ‘public image’, as he
calls it, and she suspects he’s going to be displeased that he’s somehow missed this.

She’s going to have some fun, she thinks. It’s her turn.

She still isn’t entirely sure she’s decided on the best greeting when he walks into her office. She gets so few opportunities to tease him – to really tease him – that she doesn’t want to ruin this one. She still needs to get him back for the day she got her hair cut.

She just hopes she does it right. She doesn’t want him to get angry with her. But then she thinks he probably won’t be; he’s never really been angry with her before, just endlessly patient. But there’s always a first.

‘Good morning, ma’am,’ he greets her, handing her a coffee, and she knows she’s not quite succeeded in hiding entirely the smirk that is threatening to spread across her face.

‘Apparently, you’re the reason why I always look good,’ she states matter-of-factly, and she bites down on a grin when he stops and very clearly bites down on some kind of retort himself. ‘I think Harriet might be a little offended at that,’ she continues, and she can’t help but smile when he closes his eyes and lets out a sigh.

‘I take it you’ve seen the article, ma’am?’ he asks, and she’d been right – he is rather nonplussed.

‘Oh yes. And it’s all over Twitter. You’re a hashtag!’ she laughs, and he shakes his head, pursing his lips in a vaguely futile effort not to smile at her exuberance. This was not good, not matter how amusing she found it.

‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘And I can never catch the tube again,’ he mutters, and her eyebrows rise at that.

‘The tube?’ she asks, and he looks back at her.

‘It’s nothing, ma’am, sorry.’ He looks really quite annoyed now, she thinks, and she’s a little confused. ‘Ma’am, whilst I’m sure everyone is deriving some amusement at my expense out of this, this is not good news. You need to be the focus, not me.’

‘And I am, Lord M. It’s just one article in a magazine,’ she reminds him.

‘And, apparently, half the internet,’ he replies quietly. ‘This is how scandal starts, ma’am. Someone takes an interest, and then they start digging – they already have. This cannot end well.’

She narrows her eyes slightly at him, confused. He isn’t usually this upset by the media. ‘Why are you so affected by this?’

He turns to face her, and shakes his head. ‘My apologies, ma’am. I am only trying to protect you.’ He claps his hands together. ‘We should run through the guest list for tomorrow’s lunch.’

But she doesn’t move and he doesn’t look at her and she can’t quite work it out, but she doesn’t want to push. So she nods and sits at her desk and he passes her the folder, and she resolves to watch him for the rest of the day.

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He’s quieter than usual, and preoccupied, and when he leaves he barely looks at her, and she really
doesn't understand. She wonders if his heightened annoyance is because they’re talking about him, but then she thinks he’s not the kind of person to get this upset about media reports in general, let alone anything so simple. It’s not like they were unkind; in fact, they were extremely flattering. The few photos that accompanied were quite well chosen, she thought – the one of him as PM delivering some kind of speech was one of her favourites. He looked powerful, in control. Strong. She could understand why he’d been quite a popular Prime Minister. The story hadn’t even mentioned his wife, just that he had a ‘tragic backstory’ that made him seem like the sympathetic character in some kind of tale.

And then a thought struck deep and sharp: perhaps he didn’t want everyone to know he was her Private Secretary.

Maybe he was embarrassed. Maybe he didn’t really like working for her. Maybe she was too silly, too childish, and he regretted saying yes. And oh goodness, what if he regretted saying yes, now, after all this time?

Or maybe she’d done it wrong, somehow messed up her teasing. Maybe she’d read the whole situation wrong, and this wasn’t something that you teased someone about. Yes, that was an infinitely more palatable suggestion, and more likely, too. Surely if he didn’t enjoy being her Private Secretary, his eyes wouldn’t always speak kindness and gentleness to her, his voice softness and warmth, his explanations endless patience? Surely…

And she wasn’t sure at all, and she could feel the anxiety bubbling in her stomach.

She had to see him, to talk to him. To apologise for what she’d said. She couldn’t stand to think that he was upset with her, especially over something so silly. She was so stupid. Why did she even think she could do this?

So she sends him a message a little later, asking, if he was free, would he like to go for a short walk in the sunshine? It really was a beautiful day, she thought – one of the first for the year, she thinks a little ruefully, eyeing the grey clouds that were forming on the horizon. It would be churlish to not take advantage of it. And she thinks he probably won’t say no.

If he says no, she’s not sure what she’ll do.

He’s at her door within minutes, and she smiles tentatively at him before they head down the hallway and down the stairs to the grass outside. Neither of them say anything, and she knows now she’s done something wrong. She just wasn’t sure what exactly it was.

What if he really was mad at her? Well, she would deserve it, she thinks. She’d been unkind.

And so she takes a breath and lets it out slowly, trying to calm the butterflies that were taking over her stomach. ‘I’m sorry I teased you earlier today.’

And she knows he’s turned to look at her, but she can’t look back at him, afraid of what she would see. ‘What? What is friendship if it cannot withstand a little teasing?’ he says lightly.

‘You seemed unusually affected by it though.’

And he’s still looking at her – she always knows when his eyes are on her – and so she wills her eyes to meet his, but she finds that he doesn’t look angry. His face is troubled, but it’s his usual soft look, and she thinks he’s studying her a little. She frowns a little, and he lets out a small sigh, looking back ahead at where they were walking.

He clasps his hands in front of himself. ‘I’m sorry, ma’am. I…I know the pain and humiliation of a
scandal. And I have no desire to see that happen to you.’

She frowns in confusion. ‘I…I don’t understand,’ she says after moment.

He lets out a short breath. He promised he’d always be honest with her. She knew so little of the world, of people and what they were capable of, both good and bad. Perhaps it was time she knew just how bad people could be, and just how easily that could all resurface and taint everything he touches – including her. And if he cannot be honest with her about his own life, then what was he really doing? He swallows. ‘I assume you have heard about my wife.’

She was silent for a moment. Harriet had told her the story; how his wife had humiliated him, had affair after affair. But Harriet had also told her how he’d stood by her to the end. How he’d never given up on his wife, this woman he’d loved. How it had almost broken him. So she uses what he’s taught her and forces her words to be kind. ‘I heard that she left you for another man, and passed away not long after you reconciled.’

He smiles ruefully. ‘When you put it like that, it sounds almost civilised.’

And she has to tell him. ‘I’m not sure I could forgive such a betrayal. I wonder that you could.’

He turns to look at her, surprised at the hardness of her voice, and he’s reminded of just how inexperienced she is at life and love. But he cannot give her that experience in a day and he knows the limits of explanation. Now wasn’t perhaps the best time for that explanation, either.

He’s silent for a minute, and when he speaks again, his voice is soft. ‘Perhaps you’re too young to understand.’

And that’s the closest he’s ever come to treating her as young, but she’s still confused about so many things. ‘But surely they would not dredge up the past; what does that matter now?’

‘They will not consider what matters, they will only print what they think will sell. And I’m told that based on the response to this online, anything further on me will sell. Add you into the mix, ma’am, and it’ll sell like wildfire – good and bad.’

‘Oh,’ she says, and she thinks she understands why he’s so upset by this, and oh, she’s so relieved. ‘So you’re not angry with me?’ she blurs out before she can stop herself.

‘Angry? No. Why?’

‘I thought you were angry with me this morning,’ she says quietly, and she feels so, so silly. Of course it wasn’t about her. Not everything was about her. Stupid.

‘Not at all, ma’am,’ he says softly, and he stops, turning to face her, and his face is grave, but his eyes still soft. ‘I was frustrated at the article, and I let it get to me, ma’am. I apologise for taking that out on you.’

She nods, and he gives her a small, almost rueful smile, and they continue to walk.

‘So I suppose you won’t be accepting Harriet’s invitation to model for her winter show then?’ she jokes after a few moments, looking tentatively up at him, and she’s pleased – and relieved – to see him let out a laugh.
Firstly: Credit to Rachel for the third headline - and for being the most wonderful sounding board!

Secondly: Glamour Magazine has a 100 Sexiest Men for each year, so I just added a category. You’ll be pleased to know that Rufus Sewell made the list this year – at only #74 (and it’s really not the best photo), and Tom Hughes made #11 (yeah, they need to pick professional shots next time). Yay for Victoria!

Thirdly: I know I've said it before, but it's all working towards something... :)}
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Summer comes, winter fades
Here we are just the same
Don't need pressure, don't need change
Let's not give the game away
There used to be an empty space
A photograph without a face
But with your presence and your grace
Everything falls into place

Just please don't say you love me
Cause I might not say it back
Doesn't mean my heart stops skipping when you look at me like that
There's no need to worry when you see just where we're at
Just please don't say you love me
Cause I might not say it back

- Please Don't Say You Love Me, Gabrielle Aplin

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘Did you see the article about Lord M this morning?’ she asks, smirking as Harriet walks in.

Harriet looks shocked. ‘What? No! What did I miss?’

Victoria gapes at her. ‘I am shocked, Harriet,’ she teases. ‘How did you miss this?’ She holds up her iPad after a few moments of searching. She can’t help but laugh at Harriet’s expression – she goes from reading to wide-eyed to open-mouthed and laughing.

‘Oh, goodness, ma’am,’ she cries, and Victoria grins.

‘Isn’t it funny?’

‘Hilarious!’ Harriet agrees, studying the photos. ‘These aren’t bad photos,’ she says, and Victoria nods in agreement.

‘But Lord M doesn’t seem to think so.’

Harriet’s eyebrows rise knowingly. ‘I assume he wasn’t overly happy?’

‘Oh, not at all.’

Harriet shrugs. ‘It’s not bad press,’ she says, and Victoria nods.
‘That’s what I said. But then he started talking about scandals, and I suppose he has a point.’

Harriet frowns. ‘Did you know he’s been named Sexiest Politician before, ma’am?’

She turns to look at Harriet, shocked. ‘Really?’

‘Oh, yes. Just before he became Prime Minister.’

And something tightens in her chest and she’s really not entirely sure how she feels about this information. And she’s not sure how she feels about that uncertainty, and she’s now just confused. He was her Lord M. He’d obviously had a past – he’d been married, of course, they’d just spoken of it – but this felt…different. She didn’t know why it was, only that it was.

But she smiles at Harriet and looks down at her iPad. ‘This, I have to see,’ she says, and she thinks perhaps she sounds little strained. She wonders how she missed this when she’d googled him a few days ago.

It had been a revelation, googling people. She’d made the mistake of googling herself, and had eventually regretted it. Some of it had been just lovely – sweet, like some of the letters she received – but she also knew that the papers lied, and so did the internet, it seemed. She had wondered at the time why he hadn’t warned her, but then she’d answered her own question – even if he had warned her not to google herself, she’d have probably done it anyway. She knows – and he’d known – she wouldn’t have been able to resist.

She types in the date and search terms and the pages and pictures begin appearing.

And goodness.

She swallows as she stares at the much younger face of her Lord M, and she feels a tinge of pride. Her Lord M was handsome. He was still her Lord M – she’d recognise those eyes and that mouth anywhere – but his hair had been slightly longer and curlier, she thinks, and he’s just…younger. Lighter. He doesn’t quite look like he’s carrying the world on his shoulders.

‘I found it!’ she crows to Harriet, who moves to sit next to her, and they spend the next few minutes giggling at the various photos and captions.

And despite it all, she thinks that she likes her Lord M just the way he is now.

She decides, however, that she does like the beard.

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She’s clever, his little Queen.

She’s learned very quickly where his most obvious buttons lie, and pushes them quite happily when it suits her. He knows she does it, and often knows when she’s doing it – or at least as she’s doing it – but he humours her anyway.

Today is one of those days. They’re walking down through the garden – it had rained for a solid twenty-four hours after their walk yesterday and as soon as the sun had poked its head out from behind a cloud, he knew it was useless trying to keep her inside. She’d already begun bemoaning the
unpredictable spring rains. She’d grabbed her laptop and folders and he’d grabbed his laptop and briefcase, and they were headed for the little pavilion in the middle of the gardens.

‘So have you booked your photoshoot yet?’ she asks as innocently as possible.

‘Do we have to talk about this, ma’am?’ he asks, pained, and she laughs.

‘Are you embarrassed, Lord M?’ she teases, and he lets out an anguished little noise.

‘Yes,’ he admits, a little laughingly. The fact that most would consider this positive news is not lost on him, especially after the way he’s spent most of his adult life being dragged so thoroughly through the mud. But he still hates it, hates being the centre of attention. Hates that people are reading about him. He’s meant to be in the background now, behind her, not the focus. He hopes that they forget about him soon; he thinks they probably will. These things have a tendency to be a flash-in-the-pan kind of press, so he hopes that all he has to do is wait, but he’s been on the end of too much for that wait to keep him anything but vaguely nervous. Not for himself, though, never for himself – he couldn’t really care less what they said about him. He’d stopped reading the papers when his life had fallen apart. But her? Well, she was fresh, new, untainted, and he would not allow them to tar her with the same brush they’d used on him.

She laughs as she steps up on the edge of one of the fountains, walking along the sandstone, and he eyes the arm that’s holding her laptop out over the water to balance. She’s deliberate in her actions, his little Queen, but she’s also a little clumsy. Not that she’d admit it.

‘Why?’ she asks, stopping and turning to face him, and she’s genuinely curious. ‘They’re not saying unkind things about you.’

‘Yet,’ he mutters, and when he looks at her face, he realises that, for what he thinks is the first time in the entire time he’s known her, she’s at eye-level with him. He finds it disarming, and he can tell she does too.

‘What colour are your eyes?’ she asks, staring at him, and he ducks his head and huffs a laugh.

‘I don’t know, really… I think they’re green, ma’am, but I’m not really sure,’ he replies. ‘I don’t really look at them.’

And she’s staring into his eyes again with her big blue ones, examining him and clearly trying to decide, and he can’t help but smile at her earnestness.

‘I’ve always thought they were a light brown, or maybe green, but now outside in the sunlight…’ she trails off, leaning a little closer to him.

‘What do you think?’ he asks with a smile, and she frowns thoughtfully.

When she bites her lip in concentration, he feels it low in his stomach and suddenly the mood has changed. Her mouth drops open just a little, and when she sucks in a breath he thinks vaguely that he understands those articles that suggest staring into someone’s eyes in order to fall in love with them.

He lets out a breath and blinks, pulling back slightly, and it’s enough to make her do the same. They walk on for a few moments before she speaks.

‘They’re golden – in the sunlight,’ she announces, and he feels the corners of his mouth turn up slightly.

‘And yours, ma’am, are very blue anywhere,’ he counters, trying to lighten the mood again.
‘Yes,’ she replies. ‘Mama used to say that it was the only thing German about me.’

‘Well, I doubt your subjects mind so much that their Queen is rather English,’ he teases, and she grins.

‘I think perhaps you’re right, Lord M,’ she states. ‘But then you are supposedly an expert in beauty.’ And she’s laughing as he groans and covers his face with his hand.

It was these moments that reminded him of the Coronation Ball; that it would be so, so easy for her to develop a fairly serious crush – if she hadn’t started already. It was dangerous, this game they were playing; so, so dangerous. But as long as she remained unaware of his love, her sometimes-dreams would remain dreams. He couldn’t allow them to turn into hopes.

***

He sees the gossip. He could avoid it, if he wanted to, but he doesn’t - it’s important to know what the public think. What the media tells them to think. He ruthlessly squashes the small part of him that secretly loves the idea and focuses on the largest part of him feels anger at the slight on her reputation.

And when he scans through the alerts he’s got set up on everything and anything to do with her on his phone as he lies in bed the next morning, he closes his eyes and lets out a sigh.

He’d been right.

‘Recognise this?’ he asks, showing her the photo on one of the culture pages of The Guardian. It takes her approximately two seconds to go from happy to outraged.

‘That photographer!’ she cries, and he nods. ‘But I thought he wasn’t allowed to take photos there,’ she says, and he shakes his head.

‘He wasn’t. He was given a caution by the police.’

‘But the photo…?’

‘These cameras are quite sophisticated, ma’am. As soon as a photo is taken, a copy is uploaded somewhere that we don’t have the right to access.’

‘Ugh,’ she mutters, frowning, before looking back at the page.

‘The article isn’t all bad,’ he says while she reads. ‘It’s mostly about the concert. And they do seem to like Ms Sutherland’s dress.’ And her lips twist in amusement.

She reads through the article and her eyebrows rise a little. ‘They think…this line near the end,’ she says, looking up at him. ‘The implication…’ And she’s blushing a little and he’s amused that she can’t seem to say it.

‘They’re implying that perhaps we spend more time together than is strictly necessary,’ he says, a smirk on his face. ‘Yes. A clarification is being printed tomorrow,’ he says, and her eyebrows rise even further.

‘That was quick,’ she says, and he nods.
'They can say what they like about me, ma’am. They cannot say what they like about you.’ And she nods. He’s not going to tell her that he threatened to delay their access to future royal public events if they were going to continue to cast aspersions on the reputation of his little Queen.

‘Do you think they’re right? That we spend more time together than we should?’ she asks quietly after a moment, and he can hear the strain in her voice, what it’s costing her to ask this. But as he looks at her face, all he can see is worry and concern that she’s perhaps done something wrong – and a good dose of confusion. He doesn’t think she really quite understands just what they’re alluding to, but it’s clear she knows it’s not good. But nonetheless, they’re not really entirely wrong. He’s more than aware of how much she relies on him; it’s a tightrope he walks every day.

So he lets out a little amused huff. ‘Probably, ma’am,’ he admits. He’s not going to lie to her, but he’s also very aware of balance she knows nothing about. ‘What do you think?’

‘I don’t know,’ she admits. ‘I’ve never had a Private Secretary before. Unless you count Sir John,’ she says, and she cringes a little. ‘I think we work well together,’ she says decidedly after a moment, and he nods.

‘I agree, ma’am.’

‘And I like that we’re friends,’ she adds, and he smiles.

‘So do I, ma’am.’

And her smile becomes a little firmer, and her face a little less vulnerable, and he’s pleased.

He thinks later that perhaps the stories could be used for good. The media would speculate as they always did, and he could dismiss it all as idle gossip brought about by a public who loved a hint of a story no matter how ridiculous and barely there it was, and thrived on scandal. It would give them both an out. If there was to be mud, it would stick to him – he would make sure of it. Her reputation was spotless – one thing to be thankful for from her seclusion at Kensington. He would make sure it stayed that way.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed!
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

He’s developed a solid relationship with his barista, the kind of relationship one has with a barista they see every day – but in his case, there’s two of them. They’re friendly and mostly unshaven and the very definition of young Australians working in London (except for the fact that they’re twins, he realises one day, when they both appear clean-shaven). And, pleasingly, they hadn’t been in the UK when he was PM, and appear to have no idea who he is. That, coupled with the fact that the coffee really is very good, is what keeps him coming back.

Eventually, though, one morning when it’s bit quieter than usual, one of the twins asks him where he works. He trots out his pre-prepared reply – he’s just a lowly public servant working up near Downing Street – and they nod.

He knows things are really bad – really very bad – when he arrives to get his usual coffees, and twin number one – Joe – does a small double-take when he sees him. It’s such a cliché, he thinks bitterly, as he gives the barista a tight smile and waves his card in front of the machine.

She’s going to be rather disappointed if he has to give up her coffee of a morning. Maybe he’ll buy one of those pod machines, he thinks. She could keep it in her office.

But they say nothing else that morning, and he thinks it might be alright. He may not have to resort to coffee in a little metal shell.

It’s two days later when twin number two, Jack, asks, as he passes the tray over to Melbourne. ‘I keep meaning to ask – who’s the second coffee for?’

And there are so, so many reasons why he cannot answer that question truthfully – her safety being the most important – so he keeps his face as neutral as possible. ‘My assistant,’ he says, before giving
the man a small smile and a nod. ‘She loves your coffee.’

‘Ah, awesome,’ Jack replies, nodding. He can tell he’s disappointed, but he really, really can’t tell him that he’s been making coffee for the Queen of England for a couple of months shy of a year now.

He probably shouldn’t be buying coffee for the Queen of England from a coffee shop on the edge of Hyde Park every day, either, but he’s not about to stop now.

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He’d known it wouldn’t die down quickly – that was a little naïve, even for him – but he hadn’t anticipated _brand new photos every day._

He also should have known that they’d gotten off a little easy with the Coronation Ball. Normally, he knew people would respect the Monarch and the monarchy enough to not take photos, and even if they didn’t, it was usually more for a souvenir – they very rarely then sent the media such a gift. But clearly someone’s desire for money – or scandal – was now, quite suddenly, after all this time, trumping that respect. And he thinks he knows who that someone is.

He’s going to struggle to fight this on two fronts, but it would appear that this was his challenge now.

He toys with telling her, with letting her know exactly who is behind the plot to see him fall and her fail, but he decides against it; he can’t really see what good it would do. She knows to be careful already, and this would just make her more anxious than she already is. Besides, he knows his little Queen; it would set her on the warpath, and he thinks that perhaps her heart may not emerge from that unscathed.

She may just work it out for herself anyway. She was smart. But then she wasn’t particularly well-versed in these kinds of politics, either. He would have to deal with this himself, he thinks. He’s not entirely sure how just yet, but he has time.

They haven’t spoken of the Coronation Ball since the day after, and that was tinged with just a little awkwardness. He wonders briefly if that awkwardness will make a return with these photos. He’s pleased that the photo is from a little distance, and her face is partly obscured. The look on her face when they’d danced at the Ball was seared into his memory, and he thinks it’s one that shouldn’t be shared with the world. He’d let out a sigh of relief when he’d finally finished the article and there was no mention of champagne.

He knows she’s seen the article when he arrives because she holds up her iPad when he walks in the door. ‘I thought people weren’t allowed to take photos at the Ball,’ she says after greeting him and taking her coffee.

‘They weren’t.’ And he frowns. ‘You’re reading the news early, ma’am,’ he says, and she shrugs.

‘Harriet messaged me.’ And he nods. He’s okay with that. He’s happy as long as she’s not googling herself every five minutes. He knows the pain that can come with that.

The headline he thinks is perhaps the most vaguely offensive – _QUEEN DANCES WITH SCANDAL_ – and he’s surprised it wasn’t the first thing she mentioned. But the day was young; she’d get to it.
'If they weren’t supposed to be taking photos, then how are there photos of me dancing with you? And with the Russian president’s son. And Lord Grafton.’

He wonders if she’s figured out why those particular photos are the ones they chose to publish; the ones with him and with two of the better-looking men with the poorest reputations. Probably not, he thinks. ‘Someone broke the rules,’ he says, and she shoots him a look.

‘Obviously. Who?’

‘I don’t know,’ he says carefully.

‘Can we find out?’

‘Not really, ma’am. Not unless the editor is willing to give up his source, and the chances of that are extremely slim,’ he says, and she lets out a huff.

‘I can’t trust anyone,’ she says, and his heart breaks a little at that. At least it wasn’t too rough a lesson for this particular truth.

‘You will have to choose your confidants carefully,’ he agrees. ‘But you can trust a few people.’ And she smiles at him, and he’s pleased she’s not too upset at this - that’s his job. He’s already drafted a letter to editor of The Daily Telegraph that he’ll get Peel to edit and likely tone down a little before he sends it off to Press and PR to handle.

‘They print such rubbish,’ she says. ‘But you were right.’ She looks up at him, her face sad.

‘It doesn’t bother me what they print about me, ma’am,’ he assures her, ‘apart from the slight on your reputation.’ And really, with what little they printed about him, it would be a little sensitive of him to get offended. He’s read far, far worse.

‘If I were to dance with only completely perfect men, then I would never dance with anyone,’ she scoffs, and he can’t help but agree. ‘At least they’re relatively nice photos,’ she adds after a moment.

Well, at least she could see the bright side, he thinks. She’s learning to shrug it all off. ‘Don’t you think?’ she says, coming to stand next to him with her iPad. The slightly grainy off-colour photo of the two of them took up the whole screen. ‘You look very elegant, ma’am,’ he agrees, and she huffs a little at him. ‘It’s an old man dancing with a beautiful young Queen,’ he mutters, and she frowns at him, now clearly exasperated.

‘You are not old, Lord M,’ she insists.

‘If only that were true.’

‘What, is forty-two old now? Don’t tell Emma. I’m not sure she’d forgive you.’

He glances at her, amused. ‘I’m impressed you know my age, ma’am.’

‘Everyone seems to know mine,’ she retorts, and he can’t help chuckle at her indignation.

‘Fair enough.’

‘It’s in the article anyway,’ she says with a smirk, and he rolls his eyes.

He thinks he’s done enough to dispel her anger at the photos, and really, the articles were really quite complimentary for the press. He just hopes they stay that way.
And they’re so high after all her successes that when they crash to the ground so hard and fast it makes his head spin.

He picks up the papers that are sitting on his desk and their coffees and walks slowly to her office. In this world of instant news and long lenses, she has to be careful. So, so careful. She knows this; she’s known it since long before he came into the picture, and he himself has been doing this public dance for most of his life. He knows how cruel the papers can be, how they’ll twist anything to make a story. But this isn’t that. This is someone else, someone closer to home who has given them this. Someone clearly and methodically taking advantage of the current situation. Someone who would still do anything to see her fail and him gone.

And oh, they’ve picked their situation well. His jaw clenches.

But this is the game, his mind reminds him, the game that he’s played for years. But of late he’s relaxed, become slack, allowed his heart to rule his head, and it’s down to his folly now they were both in trouble.

Emma sees him coming and her face changes at his expression. He just holds up the paper for her to see, and she lets out a heavy sigh.

He pauses at her office door to take a breath. She hasn’t arrived yet, so he puts her coffee down on her desk before sitting down on the lounge, dropping the papers on the seat next to him. It’s not long before she comes striding in, all smiles and youth and her but he can’t bring himself to return her smile, and her face drops quickly when she sees his. ‘What’s wrong?’
He grabs the paper next to him and hands it to her, and it only takes a glance at her face to see the fear that’s written all over it. He sees all the emotions play across her face in the few seconds it takes her to read the headlines and the first few paragraphs – fear, anger, embarrassment, panic.

**PARTISAN QUEEN**

*Melbourne creates Whig Queen*

*What kind of influence is the ex-PM having on our Queen?*

*The Daily Mail has discovered that our new Queen is clearly anything but impartial in her political views. At a recent dinner held at the Palace for the new United States Ambassador, the Queen was overheard saying that she thought that the Duke of Wellington was a ‘good PM – for a Tory’. Other sources have confirmed that the Queen lends her support to a number of Whig-favoured charities… Most of the positions in the Queen’s household, including her Ladies-in-Waiting, have Whig leanings…*

*Lord Melbourne was leader of the Whigs and Prime Minister from January 2009 through to his resignation in late 2010 after his wife’s death…*

When she turns to him, her eyes are scared and her face ashen, and he thinks that she’s going to punish herself more than enough for the two of them.

‘Did you say it, ma’am?’ he asks as gently as he can, but he already knows the answer. It’s written all over her face.

She looks down at her shoes, and the way his heart sinks tells him that a small part of him had hoped just a little that it was a lie. ‘I didn’t mean it to sound so terrible,’ she says. ‘I was joking. I regretted it as soon as I said it. I like the Duke,’ she says miserably, and he lets out a sigh. ‘I’m sorry,’ she whispers as she sits down next to him on the seat.

He’s not angry. She sounds so miserable that there would be little point to him being angry anyway, even if he was. He thinks to himself that if she was going to make a mistake, this really wasn’t *that* terrible. And he’s so glad it happened after her visit to the hospital. She’d needed that lesson, to learn what she could actually do – it would only be misconstrued if she did anything like that now.

But this did have some serious potential; this meant a shift into full damage control. And she’s going to have to start with Wellington.

‘What can I do?’ she asks, her voice small.

‘Well, you could apologise to the Duke,’ he says, and she nods. ‘But that’s all.’

She frowns. ‘But shouldn’t I say something? Apologise to…to everyone? Make some kind of statement?’

She sounds terrified at the thought, and he’s impressed that she’s even suggested it. But he shakes his head. ‘No, ma’am,’ he says. ‘That would only add fuel to the fire, and it would only give credence to their claims. It’s best to let this die off on its own.’ And her frown is shifting into something more thoughtful.
'Oh.'

‘And perhaps avoid making any other comments about any politicians that aren’t the standard line,’ he adds gently, and she nods again.

When he leaves her office later that morning, his mind is still working overtime, thinking of all the ways they could control this, all the things they could do or say, or not do, not say. It’s the beginning of the end, he thinks briefly, and after a second the thought hits him like a freight train. It really could be the beginning of the end.

He swallows as the whole idea threatens to overwhelm him. The last few days had been nothing; a silly article and some internet chatter about his apparent attractiveness that would have easily faded into nothing, if not for this.

But he couldn’t think about that now. This wasn’t about him; it was about her, and about pulling her out of this slump.

Her crown was wobbling precariously now, and it was his duty to help keep it on her head.

***

When he’s put through to Wellington, he can hear the older man sigh. ‘I know she didn’t mean it,’ he says by way of greeting.

‘The Queen would like to apologise,’ he replies matter-of-factly.

‘I see.’

‘Today, if possible.’

‘So soon.’

‘She wishes to rectify her mistakes quickly.’ He doesn’t tell Wellington that it’s eating her alive, this mistake.

‘I assume you want me coming in the front entrance?’

‘That would be helpful.’

‘Her first real blunder,’ Wellington says. ‘And it would have to be this, Lord M.’

He really, really doesn’t need the reminder.

***

She looks terrified, and he doesn’t blame her at all.

‘The Duke is here,’ he tells her softly, and she sucks in a deep breath before nodding. She’s biting
her lip, and he hates this. He hates that she has to learn this lesson, hates that she’s so, so anxious. He hates that this was her mistake, and that she alone can fix it. He hates that he cannot string Conroy up by his toes from the underside of London Bridge.

‘I’ll be in my office,’ he says gently. It would not help matters to be hovering around; Emma will tell him when Wellington is gone. He watches as she purses her lips, and he knows what she wants to ask, can see it in her eyes. But she cannot, she knows, and she knows he would only tell her no anyway.

But then she sucks in another breath and nods, and he gives her a soft smile.

***

She curses her tongue for the millionth time as she watches him leave her study. Stupid, stupid.

If only she hadn’t relaxed, if only she hadn’t been arrogant enough to think that she could do this. That she could speak her own mind. Now, so much was broken and ruined.

And she’d hurt him, her Lord M. She’d made him look like something he wasn’t, and that? Well, she’d never forgive herself for that. She could only hope that he forgave her. Not that she deserved it.

She still hadn’t really figured how she was going to apologise to him. She wanted to mean it, for him to know just how sorry she was, but she didn’t think she could do that yet without crying. She didn’t want to cry in front of him.

She can hear the soft footsteps of Emma and the Duke on the carpet outside, and she closes her eyes.

Breathe.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the feedback! Keep it coming.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Everyone keeps a darker place  
To lose control, you're not alone  
And when you come looking for embrace  
I know your soul; I'll be your home  
Til you can breathe on your own

You never think that you can fly  
You'll always swim against the tide  
Don't you know your pain is mine?  
And I would die a thousand times to ease your mind

Hold tight; you're slowly coming back to life  
I'll be keeping your head up  
I'll be keeping your head up, darling  
Let go of all your haunted dreams tonight  
I'll be keeping your head up  
I'll be keeping your head up, darling

- Keeping Your Head Up, Birdy

Chapter Notes

I managed to confuse myself – and, apparently, a few of you – in Chapter 15 where Victoria refused to give Consent to a private member’s bill being discussed in Parliament. I used the phrase ‘Royal Assent’ instead of ‘Queen’s Consent’. Queen’s Consent is different to Royal Assent. Queen’s Consent is required before the House can debate a bill affecting the interests (hereditary revenues, personal property, other interests, etc) of the crown (interestingly, this currently includes the Duchy of Cornwall – Charles – as well). Royal Assent is when a bill has already been debated and passed in parliament, and the Queen is required to sign it into law (considered a mere formality these days – the last time it Royal Assent was withheld/reserved in the UK was in 1708). The former, however, is something that Queen Elizabeth has refused to give on a quite a number of occasions over the past decade or so, and it’s not really been an issue given that the bills have been really very minor things that no one particularly seems to care that much about. If she refused to give Royal Assent to something – well, that would make headlines and cause a constitutional crisis.

Please accept my apologies for the confusion. It was only the terminology that I had accidentally swapped around, so story-wise nothing has changed, and I have changed the language in Chapter 15 to make it all clearer.
Her personal popularity has slumped to a new low, no longer buoyed by her novelty. To be fair, she didn’t have a long track record to compare it to, but still. He’d tried reminding her that her Uncle’s highest popularity rating hadn’t even been as high as her lowest, but it hadn’t really helped.

The press had been fairly brutal over the past forty-eight hours; her apparent partisan beliefs, her disdain for the current Tory government, speculation around her lack of basic social graces. At least that business with Lyndhurst’s second bill hadn’t come out, he thinks to himself.

Yet.

He doubts Conroy knows about that; he suspects that Conroy’s friends in the Tory Party aren’t really as many as he’d like to think, and his little Queen’s distaste for her mother’s Private Secretary is no real secret – anyone with common sense had figured that out when she’d chosen Melbourne over the man who had managed her life for a solid twenty years the moment she had her freedom.

He takes some small comfort in the fact that Wellington and friends still seem to prefer him to Conroy.

But there’s always Cumberland, he thinks bitterly. He hopes Wellington can keep him reigned in, but it’s with some animosity that he acknowledges to himself that it’s unlikely. Her remaining uncle was remarkably adept at getting his own way, and he wouldn’t put it past the man to leak it out of sheer spite.

He thinks perhaps he’s managed to shield her from most of it, even calling Harriet, who’d been furious on her friend’s behalf but promised to do whatever she could.

He’s halfway through some paperwork when his phone rings. ‘She’s supposed to be at the Veterans’ Reception at two and Harriet’s here, but no one can find her,’ Emma says, and he lets out a sigh.

‘Okay,’ he says, hanging up, before slumping in his chair a little.

She was taking this hard, and he couldn’t blame her. Her first official screw-up, and it’s all over the news, not helped by the fact that the Tories were having a field day behind the scenes, playing the victim all over the place. Her meeting with Wellington had been hard – walking out of her study and leaving her to it had felt a little like tearing himself in two – but it had been successful. By all accounts, Wellington had been gracious and she had been so, so sorry. But she’d been exhausted afterwards, retiring to her rooms early. She’d been quiet this morning, and he’d eventually left her to her work after he’d elicited at least one weak smile. She needed time, he knew.

Perhaps *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* would be an appropriate distraction.

But he thinks he knows where she is, so he grabs his jacket and walks slowly through the palace and out to the little rotunda at the end of the gardens that she loves; it was built by her ancestor for his wife and was the epitome of renaissance architecture in that period, hidden away on the little almost-island in the middle of the lake. He thinks she likes the ancient-Greek-style columns, the beautiful limestone walls, but, most of all, the seclusion.

He wonders why no one has checked there yet.

When he reaches the doors, he sees her sitting on one of the benches just inside and his heart breaks. She stands when she hears him, and he doesn’t think he’s ever seen her look so blank, so beyond
anxious that there’s nothing but wide-eyed panic on her face.

He gives her a small, understanding smile, and then there are tears in her eyes and running slowly down her cheeks and he moves with his heart’s permission, not his mind’s. As he opens his arms, she stumbles into them like she’s done it a million times before, her cheek pressed against his chest and her hands grabbing at his jacket, desperately trying to cling to something, anything, and he knows she’s no longer able to stop herself drowning in her pain. He wraps his arms around her and holds her close, his thumb rubbing on her shoulder blade and her fists curled on his chest. He’s breaking one of his rules and he can’t bring himself to really care right now. He can care later, when she’s not falling apart in front of him.

He has to talk himself out of the almost unconscious urge to press a kiss into her hair.

‘I can’t do it. I can’t,’ she’s mumbling into his chest, and he understands. He really does. He knows what it feels like to walk back out into the arena when they’re all baying for your blood. ‘I’ve made everything worse, haven’t I?’ she asks, her cheek pressed to his chest, and he purses his lips. There is no answer to her question that isn’t going to make things worse, so he changes topic.

She needs to know she can do this. She needs to know that she can overcome these things, that she can face her mistakes head on with grace and dignity. That even as Queen, she’s not perfect, and must own it. She can’t succumb to this paralysing fear of failure and of self-criticism that he knows without a doubt she learned as a child. She has to know her worth, to know that she’s better than this, and that she can pull herself out of it.

But he can’t just say that. That will just come out as trite and unhelpful and isn’t really equipping her with the tools to deal with it long-term. But there isn’t time for that now, and it only takes a moment for his mind to settle on the answer. He immediately shies away from it, but his heart tells him it’s the best way. They don’t have weeks, months, years to rebuild her self-confidence; she’ll have a room full of war veterans waiting to meet her in an hour.

He knows she listens to him, and he would do anything for her, he thinks – anything to soothe the wounds of the past days. So he takes a breath and tells her his own story.

‘I don’t think I ever told you why I was late to the Coronation ball,’ he says as he slowly un wraps his arms from her shoulders, and she pulls back slightly, looking up at him with red-rimmed eyes and that same blank stare, but this time there’s a slight furrow in her brow that tells him she’s listening.

‘Did you know I had a son?’ he asks. ‘Augustus. Gus. That day was the anniversary of the day he died.’

He’s never really told the story, spoken the worst days of his life out loud, he realises. There was no one left to tell. The very few that remained had witnessed it all first-hand.

‘When Caro left, it was just he and I, and he became quite anxious that I’d leave him too. He’d constantly be asking to speak to me on the phone when I was at work, asking when I’d be home. He’d wait by the front window of Dover House, his little watch in his hand. If I was a minute late, he became quite upset.’ He could still see his son’s little hands pressed to the glass, his little face watching for him. ‘He wouldn’t go to sleep until I’d read him a story, and for while he wouldn’t sleep unless I was there in the room with him.’ He swallows. ‘And then he got sick; we spent days at the hospital, trying to figure out what was wrong.’ He can feel his voice cracking, his eyes burning, but he can’t falter here; he has to finish this. To tell her how he survived, so that she can too. ‘When he died, I thought there was no reason to continue living.’

He hears her suck in a breath. ‘How can you say that?’ she asks, horrified.
‘Because I don’t believe that anymore,’ he says quickly. ‘When he died, I think a part of me died inside too. I felt nothing for so long.’ He looks down at her enraptured face, and the corners of his mouth turn up just a little. ‘And then I met this incredible young woman, this new Queen of mine, and I became her Private Secretary, and her friend, and I found a reason to get out of bed every morning.’ He lets out a gruff laugh. ‘It’s a terrible cliché, but it’s almost like colour returned to the world. It had been…grey for so long.’

And she’s still staring at him with those wide eyes of hers, and his heart is so full for his little Queen.

‘We can’t turn back the clock. Nothing will bring Gus back, just as you cannot unsay what has been said. So, you must find a way to keep going.’ And her face crumples a little again.

‘But it’s not just me. It’s you too!’ she cries, and he shakes his head. ‘They’re saying horrible things about you, and it’s my fault.’

‘They’ve said far worse, ma’am, and I’m sure they’ll find many, many more cruel and malicious things to print. But that is part of the democracy in which we live. It helps to keep us accountable, even when what they print is unkind or even untrue.’

She swallows, and he sees another tear slip down her cheek. She swipes at it with her hand. ‘I’m sorry,’ she mumbles, sniffling. ‘I hate crying.’

‘I think most people do,’ he agrees, and he gently rubs her the outside of her arms when she shivers. She’s only wearing a light jumper and it’s freezing. She must have just run when it all became too much.

‘You must not let it get to you,’ he says firmly. ‘You know well enough that most of the press will print whatever they think will sell.’

She looks up at him, her red-rimmed eyes still wide. ‘How? How do you do it?’ she asks.

He lets out a sigh. ‘After Caro’s death, I resigned as Prime Minister and I stopped reading the newspapers, stuck to reputable sources of news I knew would be unlikely to delve into the sordid private life of a now-nobody. Not even my title or position was enough to keep them interested that long,’ he explains. ‘Even when Byron published his book, it was headlines for a few days, and then it all died away.’ He lets out a sigh. ‘You read what’s reputable, you consider their arguments, and you discard the rubbish. You don’t take it all on.’

She’s staring at him, but the tears are gone and he thinks she understands.

And she steps back and nods, and then shivers violently. He pulls off his jacket and wraps it around her shoulders, and she shoves her arms through the sleeves, wrapping them tightly around herself. He almost chuckles; his suit jacket is a dress on her tiny frame. He rubs her arms again, and she gives him a tiny smile.

‘Now, you have a reception to host, Your Majesty. You must smile and laugh, and never let them know how hard it is to bear.’

He walks beside her as they head back up to the palace, and he picks one of the last flowers left, a little purple thing struggling against the frosts that still greeted them each morning, and hands it to her, and the little smile she gives him makes everything, all of it, worth it. No matter how much he’s dragged into this, how much this will cost him, he can’t bring himself to regret saying yes.

Later that evening, he gets a message.
Did I do okay?

You were splendid, he writes back.

I couldn’t smile much. He’d noticed for the few minutes he’d been there, but hadn’t said anything. She’d smiled more than enough for the Vietnam War veterans she met, who’d all told Emma later how lovely and sweet she was, their pretty young Queen.

But I think I will be able to smile at the lunch tomorrow. And he smiles down at his phone. You’ll be there?

Of course, ma’am.

Then I’ll definitely be able to smile.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

And if I fall and crash and burn
At least we both know that I tried
And as I crawl those lessons learned
Yeah they remind me I survived

- Crash and Burn, Lifehouse

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It takes another twenty-four hours for him to actually begin to think a little more calmly about the whole situation, to take a step back and see it for what it was. Actually, it’s nothing he does at all.

It’s more the hundred-plus photos – he’d stopped counting, eventually – that he’d found blu-tacked to almost every conceivable space in his office upon his arrival the next morning. He couldn’t help but laugh as most of his staff, who had gathered just down the hallway – quite obviously in preparation for his arrival – had burst out laughing when he’d shouted Not funny out the door.

It wasn’t funny; he was really quite sick of seeing his own face in print and on his screen and he could do without paper versions of every photo the press dredged up of him in the past few days taped to his bookshelves. But the vaguely nervous faces of his staff and their clear intent to try to lighten the mood and bring a little humour to the situation had forced him to relax. It was, in a round-about way, rather sweet of them. He wonders if he’s been that obvious, or if they just knew him well enough now to know that he hated this kind of publicity.

They’d merely laughed when he’d commented about their workload – that they’d found the time to do this to his office – and left him to pull them all down.

He wonders how much it has to do with her meltdown yesterday. He’s entirely sure that all the palace staff know, despite how discrete Emma and Harriet had been.

He’s about half-way when he hears a snort from the door. He turns to see Emma’s face contorting into a faux-sympathetic look, which he rolls his eyes at, and she lets out a laugh. ‘I assume you were in on this?’ he says, standing on his desk to pull one that was dangling from the light fixture in the middle of the room.

‘No, not at all. Helena called me a minute ago,’ she replies, fingering the photos that were now piling up on his desk. ‘This one’s lovely,’ she drawls, and he ignores her. ‘Really. You should keep these. You could give them out as souvenirs,’ she jokes. ‘Can I keep this one?’ she asks after a moment, and he can’t help turning to see which one she means.

He rolls his eyes and shakes his head at her; it’s one of his first as Prime Minister, judging by his suit
and hair. ‘Keep whatever you like,’ he mutters. ‘No, actually, I take that back. You can’t keep any. I’ll just find them everywhere,’ he says, and she shakes her head amusedly at him.

‘Perhaps I’ll give this one to Victoria,’ she comments dryly after a few moments, and he looks around before frowning; it’s the one from the Mozart Concert. That damned photographer, he thinks, but he can’t really damn him too much. It’s one of his favourite photos for reasons he refuses to examine too closely.

‘No,’ he says, eyeing her.

‘Oh, I think it’s quite a lovely photo,’ she replies, looking back down at it. ‘He did a good job, given the circumstances. I think she’d rather like a printed copy.’ Her lips twist slightly as she looks back up at him, and he drops her gaze.

‘I would imagine that if she wanted a copy, all she would need to do is save it from the digital version,’ he says as he turns and continues to pull down the photos from his bookcase.

‘She already has,’ Emma says, and he very deliberately doesn’t stop what he’s doing. ‘But I suppose you haven’t seen that it’s one of her backgrounds on her computer.’ There’s a pause as she very clearly waits for his response.

‘Nope,’ he replies.

‘Harriet has it in the scrapbook as well. She insisted.’

‘Well, it’s a nice photo of her, as you say,’ he replies as nonchalantly as he can, placing what he hopes is the last of the photos in the now rather high pile on his desk.

‘Yes, it is,’ Emma adds, and she has the same look in her eye that she did after the Diplomatic Corps Dinner, and after the Coronation Ball. A look he finds makes him feel uncomfortable.

‘I think I’ll send it to Emily,’ she says. ‘There are so few recent photos of you smiling.’ He can’t help but let out a long-suffering sigh at that, but he doesn’t protest. She wasn’t wrong.

But their silliness – the stupid pile that’s still sitting on the corner of his desk hours later – reminds him that he needed to calm the hell down.

It was nothing, and it would be nothing, and now that she’d apologised and accepted her mistake and everyone was happy, the press would eventually let it go and it would die. Even if Cumberland tried to tell someone about her refusal to allow Lyndhurst’s bill, it would not likely make much in the way of waves; it was only the once, and unless they had something else equally as damning, it wasn’t much of a story, even for the Mail.

Yet, anyway.

He didn’t think they had anything else on her. But then again, he hadn’t known about her comment about Wellington either. She had sworn she hadn’t said anything else, nothing she could remember that she thought would be bad, but who knew what they’d take and twist. The fact that it’s been four days and it still hadn’t appeared gave him hope; there was no reason to wait on this. It wasn’t big enough to drop alone.

He wonders briefly if Conroy and Cumberland were working together. He thinks likely not; he thinks both were too arrogant to admit they may appreciate the assistance of the other. Besides, Cumberland doesn’t have much to gain in this other than to simply unsettle his niece, and he doesn’t think that would trump his political ambition; Wellington would likely be livid if it got out that she’d
refused consent on a bill from his government. Opposition bills were one thing, but to be in government and have a bill refused Consent was something else entirely – especially if it came out exactly what that bill had been about. It had been mightily unpopular in the end. It really wouldn’t do anyone any favours for that to come out, he thinks – including him.

He’d been so caught up in protecting her from it all, shielding his little Queen from the pain that the press so dearly loved inflicting, that he’d taken it all on board himself. He needed to step back, assess everything objectively.

The feel of her warm face pressed into his shirt, her fists curled against his chest as she’d cried haunts him.

He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. He had to step back, for her sake as much as his. He couldn’t serve her best if he was all wrapped up in his own emotions.

He’s just not entirely sure how.

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And the articles come thick and fast, and, even when he’s at his most objective about it (which he will admit is really not all that objective, no matter how hard he’s trying) he’s not entirely sure that this topic really deserves this level of scrutiny. But the media clearly disagree, and they dredge up everything.

The headlines, he thinks, are unimaginative.

*Whigs’ Playboy Finds a New Job*

*Playboy Private Secretary*

*Melbourne’s Mistresses*

He’s been out of practice; he’d forgotten how long a week could feel when you were the main topic of conversation. But a week it had been since that first stupid list he’d somehow been deemed worthy of, and he had to admit that he could see no signs of this abating.

Fortunately, nothing too much else appears to have come out of the woodwork about her; they’re just repeating the same lines over and over, and he’s grateful. But he’s a veritable gold mine, he knows, and the press leave no corner unsearched.

They’re clever this time, he thinks. They’ve tested the waters around the Queen and found him ready and waiting, so now they’re shifting the focus and going after him. He’s a nobody, really. He can’t bring the full weight of the Palace down on their heads when they say nothing particularly negative about her.

He is, however, really quite pleased to see that none of them seem to be too interested in publishing all that much from Byron’s letters; most of it isn’t about him, and the worst of it was too explicit to publish in the press anyway. He could do without that reminder of his most public failure.

He gets a call from a friend at *The Guardian* late that evening, warning him they were about to publish a rather long article about his influence over the Queen under the guise of his new role as
Private Secretary – a double-page spread – and he sighs. He’d been waiting for this, for them to finally put two and two together – these things took time to research and write – but he’d known it was coming, and he’s grateful for the warning. It’s neatly wrapped in an expository text about the role of the Private Secretary to the Queen, but all the examples are about him, and not all of the comments are favourable, or indeed, fair.

And when he looks at who wrote it, he feels a stab of anger. Of course, of course it would be him. Dickens. The man had been obsessed. It stands to reason that he’s still following him, waiting for his opportunity to tear his life apart yet again, uncaring of the damage he would do to everyone else along the way.

But there isn’t a whole lot he can do. The article says nothing that isn’t true; it just carefully omits parts of the truth that would make him look less like a puppet-master, pulling the strings of his young, vulnerable marionette-like Queen.

They weren’t wrong; she was young, and she was vulnerable. But they just ignored the fact that she was strong and passionate and intelligent. Beautiful.

He wonders briefly what she must think of him now, this Private Secretary she has chosen. Did she choose him knowing all this?

And when he sits at his desk at home late that night, whiskey in hand, he wonders how much longer he can hold on to her, his little Queen.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all the wonderful feedback. You know I appreciate it all! :)
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Like the leaf clings to the tree
Oh, my darling, cling to me
For we’re like creatures of the wind, and wild is the wind
Wild is the wind

- *Wild is the Wind*, David Bowie

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He doesn’t usually make a habit of watching television, but he knows he needs to stay on top of this if he’s to have any hope of controlling it. Or, more realistically, riding it out.

Glancing at his watch, he flicks the television to Sky News while he wanders around getting dressed. It had come up on one of his alerts that they were going to talk about him that morning, and if his guess is right, it’ll be right in the middle of their prime-time. News about the new Queen was always prime, even when it wasn’t technically about the Queen. Scandal surrounding the Queen? Well, that was television gold.

‘Speaking of attractive older men,’ the hostess starts with, and he cringes. No matter that it was about him - that was never, *ever* a good line. ‘The Queen’s Private Secretary, it has recently been revealed, is none other than Lord Melbourne, the former Prime Minister,’ she says almost conspiratorially, and his eyebrows rise. This is not new information; that stupid article had come out days ago, and if anyone had actually cared to remember, he’d had to notify the House of Lords of his intention to abstain from the House to do the job in the first place.

The headline at the bottom of the screen tells him all he really needs to know – ‘Her Majesty’s Scandalous Private Secretary’ – but he watches anyway. He watches, grimacing, as they discuss his political career; his achievements, his resignation as Prime Minister. And, of course, with the discussion of the resignation comes the reasons why. He hits the mute button when they start to talk about Caro. It was inevitable; with Caro would come Augustus. Byron. The most painful part of his existence to date, casually discussed as if it were yesterday’s breakfast.

The ache in his heart returns when the pictures appear, unimaginative in their order. Happier times with the three of them; Augustus and him at a local park after Caro had left; Caro with Byron. A picture of one of the emails, and Byron’s interview. Him in sunglasses, striding down the street, clearly trying to avoid paparazzi.

The hospital.

The ambulance outside his house.

The funeral.
The tiny, tiny coffin. Had his boy really been that small?

And then Caro’s, only a couple of years later.

He’s lost in thought when he notices the scene has changed; they’re back to the panel now, and they’re avidly discussing something. He flicks the volume button again and their voices are roaring back to life. Suddenly there’s a picture of her on the screen; it’s one of the first official Palace photos, and it’s pre-Harriet, and he knows why they chose it. It’s been almost a solid year now, he thinks bitterly, and she’s changed so much since then. It’s so little like the beautiful, intelligent, articulate woman he sees every day.

‘I just question whether perhaps the appointment of Lord Melbourne is the best decision,’ one of the male panellists asks.

‘Are you saying he’s not qualified?’ another asks, and he’s slightly appeased by the incredulity of her voice.

‘I don’t think you can reasonably argue that a man with a career in politics as long and as successful as Lord Melbourne’s is unqualified for this job,’ one argues.

‘He’s less than impartial, as we’ve heard,’ another fires back. ‘The Queen’s private secretary is not supposed to support a particular political party.’

‘It’s worth noting that Lord Melbourne resigned his membership of the Whigs when he started as Private Secretary to the Queen,’ the main host interjects, and he’s pleased that finally someone is bringing in some facts.

‘No one is questioning his qualifications,’ the other replies. ‘Just his suitability to be spending so much time with the Queen,’ he says, and there’s an outcry. He realises why else they chose that particular photo of her; knows where this is going. ‘Of course I am in no way suggesting anything about the Queen,’ he says, clearly trying to defend himself, and Melbourne wonders how long his career will last after this. ‘But Lord Melbourne’s recent history suggests that perhaps his influence may not be the best.’

Before he can think, a familiar picture flashes up on the screen, and he closes his eyes. He knows the picture well enough that he doesn’t need to look anymore. It’s similar to the earlier one; him walking down the street in sunglasses and his favourite leather jacket, clearly unimpressed at the flashing bulbs of the photographers. But he’s not alone; next to him is Annabelle Norton, and it’s very clearly not daytime.

He should have known they’d drag this up. It had been years ago – a good three years ago now – but it would seem that the scandal would dog him until his dying day. They’d never been anything but friends, he and Annabelle, despite it all. There had been the one drunken kiss, early one morning at a party, but they’d both recognised that quickly for what it had been – two lonely, heart-broken people, desperate for affection. But she was attractive in so many ways, and he had loved her briefly, this beautiful, broken woman whose strength to fight for her boys he had admired beyond anything.

But it didn’t help that Annabelle and her brutish, businessman husband were now rather bitterly divorced, but that’d had little to do with him; they’d been separated when he met her.

But then another image appears next to it, and he lets out another sigh. It’s a frowning, much younger William Lamb with his arm around one Elizabeth Branden, socialite and actress, and that’s about the only reason she’s on the screen. Their ‘relationship’ had been little more than a brief fling and friendship – he was one of the few people in the world who knew she was actually not only - or
particularly interested in men. But she’d had a reputation to uphold, and in his petty desire for revenge, he’d been more than happy to help her uphold it. Now that he’s older, he’s happy enough to admit that he’d loved her, briefly; he’d been in love with the crazy way she expected far too much of him, and didn’t judge him for any of it – the way she’d so obviously recognised his wounds and patched him up as best she could.

The speaker continues. ‘The situation with Annabelle Norton was less than savoury,’ he says.

‘But really; does it matter what Lord Melbourne does in his spare time? And that was really quite a long time ago,’ another asks.

‘All I’m saying that is that the Queen’s Private Secretary really should be entirely impartial – as much as possible – and have a spotless reputation, and Lord Melbourne most certainly does not meet that criteria.’

He’s vaguely aware of the outrage that statement causes on the show; the way that one of the other panellists defends him, defends the Queen, but the words ring in his ears. He feels a sense of outrage himself – how dare they think that he would lead the Queen astray? Why do they assume that he’s in this for his own benefit, when he’s only ever wanted what was best for her?

But the larger part of his heart – his mind – tells him that they were right. Despite his entirely noble, spotless intentions, on paper, he’s a mess. He himself wouldn’t want him so close to the young, so very impressionable Queen.

He flicks the television off; he’s seen enough.

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He finds he’s not entirely surprised when he looks down at the name on the screen of his ringing phone, but he doesn’t mind; it’ll be nice to speak to an old friend. ‘Hello, Elizabeth,’ he says.

‘William! I haven’t seen you in months,’ she starts. ‘Unless you count the front cover of the Daily Mail, or perhaps in Glamour Magazine?’

He sighs. ‘And I’ve seen a rather unflattering photo of you and I on the TV this morning,’ he replies, and she grunts in annoyance.

‘Yes, I saw that. Asher mentioned it. Did you see the cartoon in the Mail?’

He sighs. ‘And I’ve seen a rather unflattering photo of you and I on the TV this morning,’ he replies, and she grunts in annoyance.

‘Yes, I saw that. Asher mentioned it. Did you see the cartoon in the Mail?’

He rolls his eyes. ‘The one where I’m nursemaid, or the one where I appear to be pulling the strings?’

‘Oh, I haven’t seen the strings one,’ she chuckles.

‘It’s not their finest work,’ he replies. ‘I’d give it a seven out of ten.’

She laughs, and there’s silence, and he waits. ‘William, they’re all calling about you,’ she says quietly. ‘I’ve told them where to shove it, obviously, but it’s been a good week now.’

He sighs. ‘I’m sorry, Liz.’

‘Don’t be. I don’t care – Asher deals with it all. I care about you,’ she says, the emphasis clear.
'I’m alright.’ He says nothing at her humourless laugh. He knows what she would tell him to do; he’s never been loud enough or brash enough or impulsive enough for her.

‘And that Queen of yours?’

He purses his lips. ‘She knows nothing of this,’ he says, shaking his head, and he’s so angry and sad for his little Queen. ‘She’s trying so hard, and they just…” he trails off. ‘She’ll be okay,’ he settles on, and it’s the truth. She will be fine, no matter what happens.

‘Oh, William,’ and he closes his eyes. He’s never been able to hide from her, this woman he’d once loved so long ago. ‘Don’t go back there,’ she almost commands, and he lets out a huff. ‘Don’t make me drag you out of that again,’ she half-commands and half-pleads, and he nods to himself.

‘I won’t. I promise,’ he says, and he just prays he can keep this one.

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She can’t believe that even now, in the twenty-first century, they want to paint her portrait. They had the Rover sending images in high definition back to Earth from Mars, and yet here she sits, in her Coronation Robes and full regalia whilst the portrait painter the palace had officially commissioned – a tall man named Hayter – paints her portrait.

And it was taking forever.

But Harriet’s promised to keep her company – keep her from going crazy – and she’d already told Emma tongue-in-cheek that it was part of her job description to keep the Queen from losing her mind – so she sits and tries fairly unsuccessfully not to move.

‘Goodness, all this stuff about Lord Melbourne in the papers is getting a little out of hand,’ Harriet comments, flicking at something on her iPad, and Victoria lets out a huff.

‘It’s ridiculous,’ she replies, trying not to move her head. ‘And it’s making Lord M so frustrated.’

‘Yes, he wasn’t best pleased with the most recent one from The Guardian,’ Emma agrees.

And she feels it now, what’s made her feel unsettled for the last few days; she’s worried about him. He’s always been so nonchalant about the press. In fact, nothing’s ever seemed to really worry him all that much. But he’d been off the last few days; distracted. Preoccupied. Almost…unhappy.

She doesn’t like it at all.

‘Well, the press do like a good scandal, even when one doesn’t exist. And they’re so very good at creating them,’ Harriet says.

‘I’m a little concerned about him,’ she admits quietly. ‘He doesn’t really seem himself at the moment.’

From her left, Victoria hears a soft clearing of a throat, and she flips her head back around.

‘You know, ma’am, I haven’t seen William smile so much as he has in the past year,’ Emma comments after a few moments, looking up from her paperwork, and Victoria frowns. ‘He’s so much happier than he used to be.’
‘Really?’ Victoria asks, and she’s confused.

‘Oh, yes,’ Emma replies.

‘I remember. He was always complaining about how trivial it had all become; how tiresome all the politics was,’ Harriet interjects, and Emma nods.

‘He was set to retire not long before you became Queen, ma’am,’ Emma adds.

‘George had been trying to convince him to stay, but he’d said it was a lost cause.’

Victoria’s frown deepens. Retire? ‘But Lord M isn’t old enough to retire,’ she replies. Her mind drifts back to a conversation in a little pavilion at the end of the gardens just days earlier; of sad eyes and aching pain and his warm, strong arms holding her while she sobbed. He’d been about to retire. But then he’d agreed to be her Private Secretary. She’s having trouble reconciling these two different versions of her Lord M. He’d been so unhappy before, she knew – he’d told her – but now… Well, she wasn’t entirely sure he was happy with everything that the media was saying just this week, but his small smiles and kind words and gentle laughter were such a constant in her life that she really couldn’t imagine him as anything other than as he was.

She was beginning to see that he was an iceberg, and she really had only just begun to see below the surface. This Lord M she didn’t know intrigued her.

‘Your Majesty, sorry to interrupt, but could you just hold the sceptre up a little higher,’ Hayter calls from his seat, and she realises she’s let it drop.

‘I agree, ma’am, but that’s all in the past now.’ Emma lets out a little huff of amusement. ‘It’s funny; it wasn’t all that long ago that he was telling me that Edward and I should visit him at Brocket Hall when he retires; bring the children up for the weekend. Now? Well, I’ve never known William to be on time to work so many days in a row in my life,’ she laughs and Victoria lets out a huff of a laugh with her automatically.

‘I don’t remember Lord M ever being late,’ she says after a moment.

‘No,’ Emma says knowingly, and Victoria feels a swell of happiness and affection and something else she can’t quite name. ‘Yes, he’s definitely much less interested in retirement,’ Emma says after a few moments, before looking down at her paperwork, and Victoria can’t help her small smile.

‘Ma’am,’ a slightly pained voice calls, and she automatically turns her head and readjusts her hands.

Chapter End Notes

Elizabeth Branden was a real person who was involved with Lord M before Caroline Norton. I took a few liberties, but she was a strong, impulsive, rather intense woman. As junoinferno has said, Lord M most definitely had a type.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

And it's times like these
And it's days like these
It's been a long time comin'
But I'm falling short
Cause you could say
This is not too far to carry this

- Falling Short, Lapsley

He’s in his car on his way to the Palace when Emma rings.

‘You have definitely reinvigorated your fan club,’ she says, and he lets out a sigh.

‘What now?’

‘I have a young man on the phone from a coffee shop up near Hyde Park,’ she says, and he frowns. ‘His name is Joe. He says that you get coffee there every morning.’

And he’s so confused. ‘Yes,’ he says.

‘He says that unless you’re feeling particularly photogenic today, you might want to take up his offer of delivering your coffee this morning.’

Emma hasn’t heard William Lamb swear in over a year, but she can understand why he does today. She waits, hearing him sigh heavily.

‘That would be very much appreciated. I’ll ring and pay over the phone,’ he says resignedly, and she hangs up. She knows he’s not thinking of himself – he could quite happily have the instant coffee at her desk, or the pod machine coffee in their office. But the Queen would be quite disappointed to miss her coffee, and Lord M was not going to disappoint his Queen if he could help it.

This was all getting just a little bit out of control in so many ways, she thinks.

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‘Could I speak to Joe, please?’ he says into the phone. He waits, listening to the shuffle of people and the sound of grinders in the background, before Joe picks up the phone.

‘Yo.’

‘Joe? I wanted to thank you for your consideration in delivering my coffee this morning.’
He hears the momentary stunned silence on the other end before Joe speaks. ‘No worries, mate. There were four of them that we could see from the shop, but Jack reckons there were a few more down the road.’

Melbourne sighs. ‘I’m sorry to be the cause of all this trouble. I’m afraid they’ll probably hang around for a while,’ he says.

‘I don’t mind for us. It’s great for business – everyone wants to know who they’re waiting for. And they drink a heap of coffee.’

Melbourne lets out a small chuckle at that. ‘I’m sure they do.’

‘So what time do you want your coffee delivered in the mornings?’

‘Oh, no, I couldn’t ask that of you. You’re far too busy.’

‘Nah, it’s all good. I wouldn’t want you and your assistant to miss out.’ He doesn’t miss the so very brief hesitation on the word assistant. ‘Besides, it’s a nice walk.’

‘8:30am would be ideal,’ he says grudgingly.

‘Done.’

***

She’s mindlessly scrolling through her Twitter feed when she sees it.

It’s him, and he’s not alone.

Her fingertips automatically click the link, and then she’s looking at the headline – Her Majesty’s Scandalous Private Secretary – and frowning. But like most of the articles, it’s the pictures that draw her in. She doesn’t believe their words – she knows she can’t and she shouldn’t. The press lies for a living, makes something out of nothing, fans the flames of scandal willingly and happily, caring not for who they destroy in their quest for dominance and money.

But photos can’t really lie, she thinks. They’re photos.

It’s him, much younger, dressed in a suit and tie with a woman at his side, and she feels something twist in her stomach. She was tall and fair with long, wavy brown hair, and Victoria thinks she could be a model, but she knows who this must be, this beautiful woman on his arm.

Caroline Lamb. The wife that he had loved and who had left him, wounding and humiliating him.

She should hate this woman who had so callously broken his heart in full view of the world – and she certainly feels the pull of anger, but it’s not a fiery thing that makes her want to spit words of venom. It’s a hardness that she feels, a detached yet hard and fierce sort of protectiveness for him, her Lord M, she realises. She doesn’t particularly care who hurts him, only that he hurts. And oh, that stirs an emotion in her chest; that familiar sense of worry and… and - almost dread.

They’ve been treading water on this for too long. She can’t wait until it’s over, until this cloud that’s been hovering over their heads disappears and they can relax and laugh and just go back to the way things were.
But his wife was beautiful, she thinks, looking back down at her screen, and her stomach is still doing that odd, twisting thing that she doesn’t quite understand. And she thinks momentarily and none too guiltily that she’s almost glad that Caroline Lamb no longer walks the earth.

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It would seem that she’s trying to stay as on top of this as he is, and he’s not sure he’s entirely pleased about that. It’s good that she’s taking an interest, that she’s aware of some of this, but it’s also making her angry. And anxious.

She knows this isn’t good now, this pivot in the focus to their relationship, but he doesn’t think she’s aware of just how bad it really is. And this is one thing he does not want her to learn just yet; this can be learned in hindsight when it was all over and she couldn’t get worked up about it.

If he survived.

‘This article makes me sound incompetent and you a bad influence on me,’ she announces when he walks into her office the next morning. ‘And they have that photo from the Coronation Ball, and the one from the Mozart Concerto. It’s a two-page spread!’

‘It does make you sound young and inexperienced,’ he replies, and she tilts her head slightly in acceptance.

‘I don’t like the way they talk about you,’ she says quietly, frowning at him as he puts his briefcase on the floor next to the desk, and he knows she can feel it, this strain on their relationship. She had become rather perceptive, his little Queen.

‘Neither do I, ma’am,’ he agrees, deliberately keeping his voice as light as possible. She’s frowning at him, and he can tell she wants to say more, but she perhaps doesn’t quite know how. He thinks she’s not used to this kind of language – the insinuations, the underhand comments about the beautiful, young, innocent Queen and her cynical, womanising Private Secretary. There had been allusions after the Coronation Ball, but they’d been veiled and non-specific and he thinks she hadn’t really considered exactly what they were insinuating about her. She’s been so sheltered, so hidden from the world that this kind of thing has never really come up before, and certainly not in such stark reality and blatant reference to her. She’s awkward and uncomfortable and he’s not going to push her to talk about it at all. ‘There is not much I can do, ma’am. There is little that is technically untrue in the piece.’ And he lets that hang there, the truth about his past, and he wonders again if her opinion of him will change.

But then she frowns a little, confused. ‘Coffee?’ she asks, and he glances at the floor.

‘It’s on its way,’ he says, and she still looks confused. ‘It is now being delivered, ma’am,’ he explains. ‘There were photographers waiting for me on Monday.’ And her mouth forms a little O, and he thinks she is beginning to realise the extent to which they’ll go to get a photo. Alex has already requested an increased Police presence around the perimeter of the gardens and he’s pleased they have; they’ve already confiscated two long selfie-stick-style devices and caught two amateur photographers on ladders only three days in. The trees around the walls of the gardens were thick, but not impenetrable.

And then her face crumbles a little and her shoulders drop. ‘I’m sorry, Lord M,’ she says quietly.
‘This is all my fault.’

‘No, ma’am,’ he says, shaking his head firmly. ‘That is not true. This is, unfortunately, the life of royalty in the twenty-first century,’ he says.

‘But you aren’t royalty!’

‘No, ma’am, but I am connected to you, and I have been a public figure. The public have a strange way of deciding who they wish to hear about.’

‘It’s not fair.’ When she looks up at him, he can see the frustration and concern in her face, and he thinks she’s sweet, his little Queen, to worry about him. But she needs to worry more about herself than him.

‘Don’t worry about me, ma’am. As I’ve said before, there is little they can say that they have not already printed.’ She looks unconvinced. ‘You will ride this out, ma’am,’ he says, injecting as much hope into his voice as he can find. It isn’t much, but he thinks it will be enough to fool her.

She nods, but the look on her face stops him, and he thinks she’s been worrying about this for a while.

‘I guess they’re learning that even Queens make mistakes,’ she almost whispers, and he blinks for a moment before he remembers a conversation on her couch so, so long ago, and he’s reminded of just how closely she listens to him. Just how much she relies on him. The warning bells that have been going off in the back of his mind for days start ringing just a little more insistently, and he swallows.

‘And they’re about to watch their Queen rise above it all,’ he reminds her, and she gives him a small momentary smile before dropping his gaze again, and he waits.

‘Do you regret saying yes?’ she asks after a moment, her voice small, and he thinks she doesn’t want to hear his answer by the way she has to drag her eyes up to his face. He wonders how she can be so blind, this beautiful young Queen of his, this woman who has captured his heart and holds it in the palm of her hand. This incredible woman who astounds him every day with her fire and her passion and her love for life. This woman who is bringing spring to a world that has lived in winter’s shadow for so long. This woman who chose him to help her do it.

‘Not for one moment,’ he replies slowly when she’s finally looking him in the eye, his voice as serious as he can make it, and when she bites her lip, her gaze still soft and vulnerable, the mood changes. He lets it hang there, the weight of his words and their meaning, before nodding to her once and walking from the room before she can see the tears in his eyes.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

You are my sunshine, my only sunshine
You make me happy when skies are grey
You'll never know dear, how much I love you
Please don't take my sunshine away

- You Are My Sunshine – Johnny Cash

Friday 13 May

The last one, the straw that breaks the camel’s back, is the headline Mrs Melbourne.

He has made a career of not allowing the media to get to him, especially not glorified tabloids like the Daily Mail, but this one throws him, and it’s everywhere, in all the papers. It’s like they had a meeting to decide collectively on cruel epithets and this was what they decided upon. He feels everything all at once: anger, frustration, fury. That they’d dare drag her name through the mud like this.

But in there, under all of it, is guilt.

He doesn’t hate that headline anywhere near as much as he should; not even remotely close to it.

He can no longer see the wood for the trees, can no longer be sure in his responses. He’s lost control of that thing that lives inside of him; that thing that lives for her smiles and her laughter and her very presence. That thing that sparks warmly in his gut at the sight of their new name for her; a name that paints her as his.

Even his wildest imaginings had not come up with this most painfully beautiful title, but now he knows his dreams will be haunted by it. He cannot unthink this now that they’ve planted the seed.

And the secret fire it brings to his belly tells him everything he needs to know.

He's not ready to give her up. But he's beginning to realize that giving her up may be the best thing he can do.

With his resignation, the whole scandal would come to a head. It would be painful for a week or so, but they would soon forget. And she could go on being the Queen they want - the Queen he knows she can be. Without him.

The desperation and rage that had been simmering for the past week bubbles up in that moment and he hurls the paper across the room before falling back into his chair, breathing heavily, his anger deflating and morphing into something sharper, a throbbing in his chest.
As he runs his fingers roughly through his hair, his mind slams him with the thought of her reaction
and his eyes burn. He has to push away the thought; his chest is already aching at the thought of not
seeing her again. Oh, what he wouldn’t do to stay at her side.

But this is what is best for her and is therefore his only option. There are no shades for grey here, no
equivocating. No more considering the options. It's both a relief and a noose around his neck.

He’s sitting at his desk, staring blankly at the screen in front of him, when his phone rings. He
recognises the number; he’s been waiting for this.

‘Wellington,’ he says, and his voice sounds distant in his ears.

‘Have you seen the Mail?’

‘Yes.’ There’s silence for a moment, but he knows what he has to do. ‘I’m resigning.’

He’s distantly aware of Wellington heaving a long sigh, but the buzzing in his head is starting to take
over everything. ‘I don’t think we’re quite there yet,’ Wellington says, but there’s little conviction in
his voice. He lets out another sigh when Melbourne says nothing. ‘Have you spoken to her?’

‘Not yet.’

And there’s a silence of another kind at the other end. Pity.

‘It might yet blow over,’ Wellington says, the faintest hint of hope in his voice, and Melbourne closes
his eyes and says nothing. ‘Where else can they go now?’ he asks a little dryly, and Melbourne
resists the urge to snap at him. They both know that if this was going to blow over as easily as
Wellington is implying, it would have well and truly done so by now. He knows exactly who is
fanning this, and he is virtually powerless to stop them.

‘It’s done,’ he says, closing his eyes against the chaos in his head.

Wellington sighs again. ‘I’m sorry, Melbourne,’ he says, and he almost believes him.

‘Yeah,’ he mumbles, before hanging up the phone.

He thinks telling her might just kill him. He rests his head in his hands, and he can feel the sting of
tears forming behind his eyelids. He would *not* let her see his tears.

She had brought him back to life. She was the reason he was still going, why his heart still beat. It
beat for her in so many ways. And now he had to give her up.

It would be enough, he tells himself, to see her succeed. To read in the papers how she was winning
the hearts of her people, how they loved her. How she was revitalising the monarchy.

He really was very good at lying to himself.

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‘Your Lord M has been in the news a lot lately,’ her mother says from where she sits on the other
side of the room.
'Has he?’ Victoria replies, trying her best to feign disinterest.

‘Drina. Don’t pretend that you don’t read the newspapers.’

‘Not the gossip sections, Mama.’

‘A suggestion from Lord Melbourne, I assume?’ she asks, and Victoria resists the urge to roll her eyes. ‘You seem to hang off his every word.’

‘Mama,’ she warns, not turning around from where she was tying her shoelace.

‘Some would say he’s rather attractive,’ her mother adds slyly. Her head spins to stare at her mother, but she’s not looking at Victoria and so she quickly looks away.

‘Are you considering remarrying, Mother?’ she replies after a moment, not looking up. ‘I think Sir John might be a little offended.’

‘Drina! Sir John is merely a friend and advisor,’ the Duchess exclaims.

‘As is Lord Melbourne,’ Victoria responds icily.

‘You must be more careful, Drina,’ her mother says, ignoring her daughter’s frosty glare. ‘People will not care too much about me, but they will most certainly speak about you. They are already saying unkind things.’

Victoria didn’t respond. She knew her mother was right, but she pushed the thought away. Lord M was only a friend and advisor. But she was uneasy; he’d tried harder to hide it all from her, to shield the concern in his eyes, but he hadn’t quite succeeded. She was watching him closely, her Lord M, and what she saw made her worry.

‘Have you seen this?’ Her mother asks, handing Victoria her iPad. Victoria rolls her eyes at her mother before taking the iPad.

**MRS MELBOURNE?**

*Does the Queen see more than just a Private Secretary in Lord Melbourne?*

*Questions are being raised about the nature of the Queen’s relationship with Lord Melbourne, her Private Secretary and closest confidant. An unnamed source close to the Queen tells The Daily Mail that the former Prime Minister is constantly at the Palace late into the evening, and regularly dines with the Queen…*

‘They are very close,’ the source says. ‘It certainly isn’t an employer-employee relationship.’ And is it any wonder? The 42-year-old widower was named one of Britain’s sexiest politicians in 2009 and again in this year…

*Lord Melbourne is no stranger to scandal, or to powerful women. His high-profile affair with socialite Annabelle Norton and on-again-off-again relationship with actress Elizabeth Branden…*

Victoria thrusts the iPad back into her mother’s hands, her heart racing.

‘I do not consider The Daily Mail a reputable news source, Mother,’ she declares a little too loudly.
‘And neither should you.’

‘I do not, Drina. But there are many who do.’ She hears her mother sigh, before fixing her gaze on her daughter, her voice suddenly serious. ‘Be careful, Drina. He has a history of stealing hearts. Make sure he does not steal yours.’

Victoria glares at her mother’s retreating form before sagging back into the chair in front of her.

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She’s been following his hashtag ever since she’d discovered he was one, and at first it had been amusing and a just little strange. There had been so many people – women, mostly, and hadn’t that been interesting – tweeting about how good-looking he was, how lucky she was to be working with him every day.

She agrees.

But this latest headline was everywhere in just a few hours, and she’s really, really not sure how she feels about it. Her stomach is in knots, and she feels the pull of shyness and something else she can’t name whenever she thinks about it.

She sees the other kinds of tweets, the more explicit ones that talk about how they don’t blame her, about his eyes and her innocence and just exactly what they would like to do to him, and she always scrolls past them quickly.

She wonders suddenly what he thinks of it all, and she can feel the blush spread across her cheeks at the thought.

But it’s the photos again that draw her in; there were so many now, and he was with so many different women. Beautiful women. Sophisticated, older women.

But the press lied, she knew. They would twist anything to make it sound bad, and make up whatever they needed to sell papers. He’s always told her to ignore them, to seek the truth from the source, but also to be careful of her own image. He’s even taught her how to use them for her advantage.

She’s not even sure what this is now. She knows it's bad; he’s always defended her reputation, she knows, contacting editors and papers and requesting retractions of things that were untrue. But she’s read the article so many times now and she can’t really see anything that wasn’t true in it, outside of the obvious allusions to their friendship. But they’d been saying that for weeks, implying that perhaps there was something else going on, suggestion that they were more than just friends, that they were…were…and her stomach is in knots again at all the innuendo and insinuation and she doesn’t know what to think.

But she lets out a breath, forcing herself to step back again, consider the arguments and discard the rubbish like he’d told her to. She thinks that this isn’t anything new. They’ve been speculating about their friendship for a while; they were just now finding new and creative ways of talking about it.

They weren’t doing anything wrong, she knew. He’d said that they were probably too close, too much like friends rather than employee and employer, but she wasn’t about to change that and he didn’t seem to want to either. He was her friend, and he always would be. Nothing they could say
would change that, she thinks. She wouldn’t let it.

She would focus on the facts. He did spend a lot of time at the Palace, but he had to – he was her Private Secretary! And he did occasionally have dinner with her. Well, it had become more of a regular thing around the Diplomatic Corps Dinner, when she would ring down and find him sitting at his desk late into the evening, having eaten nothing since the lunch she’d shared with him. She’d request his presence at her dining room – and threaten to go down and get him, if he refused – to eat with her, and occasionally Harriet or Emma.

She loves those nights, where it’s just the two of them, and they talk about anything and everything and he tells her stories from when he was still in office, and she tells him about her childhood and her extended family and her Uncle who still emails her once a week.

And he really was quite handsome, she thinks. He’d deserved that award. It’s not surprising that he should have attracted the attention of so many women, she tells herself. She knows he’s single now; he’s told her as much himself.

But Mrs Melbourne? She thinks that she should perhaps feel more offended, but it was just so…ridiculous that she couldn’t seem to summon up any kind of real anger. She feels a giggle bubble up in her chest as she repeats the title they’d given her to herself. Ridiculous.

The last photo is the same one they’d trotted out for most of the articles; him in his tuxedo at the Mozart Concerto, smiling at her as she laughs back at him.

He was handsome and safe and home, her Lord M, and she smiles as she feels the warmth spread through her: no matter what they said, what they took and twisted, he was hers.

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His legs are like lead; he's walking through treacle down the halls of Buckingham Palace. It's almost surreal – he doesn't know how he's moving, only that if he stops, he'll never start walking again.

He can feel the tightness in his chest, the dull ache that rests behind his ribs, and he thinks he deserves it, really. It was selfish of him to say yes. He should never have allowed her to keep him this long either. The worst part is that he cannot bring himself to really regret it.

He loves her so, his little Queen. She has been a bright star in his slowly decaying world, and now it was for his sins that he was required to give her up.

He stops at her door and just watches her for a moment; she’s sitting at her desk, reading through something and making notes, her eyes focused and her pen between her teeth. And then she sees him and her face brightens and he thinks this is the most cruel punishment the fates could have devised.

‘Lord M! You’re early.’ And she sounds so pleased to see him, he thinks bitterly. He’s allowed her name to be dragged through the mud and yet her response is happiness when he appears.

He nods, not holding her gaze, and she stands, her face dropping, contorting slightly into something like fear. ‘Lord M? What’s wrong?’ she asks, and he can hear it in her voice.

‘Have you seen the Mail, ma’am?’
He can almost hear her swallow. ‘Yes,’ she replies, her eyes not leaving his face.

And he has to force the words out. ‘Ma'am, I've been speaking with the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Secretary. They feel, as I do, that given the circumstances, it would be best for you – for your reputation, and your relationship with parliament and the public – if I were to resign.’

He hears his voice catch on the last word, and his eyes flick to the ceiling. He cannot cry. He must be strong for her.

When he blinks and his vision clears, she's staring at him with those wide eyes and her mouth is hanging just a little open, and his heart is breaking, ripping in two in his chest. He wouldn’t do it, couldn’t do it, if it wasn’t absolutely the best thing for her. But oh, how it hurts.

‘But…’ she trails off, and he can see she’s panicking, but there’s nothing he can do to soothe her now. ‘I don’t understand,’ she says, shaking her head and coming to stand before him. ‘They're just headlines, just newspapers. It’s rubbish. No one cares what they say.’ Her voice is breathy with panic and fear.

‘You know that’s not entirely true,’ he says, shaking his head, his voice low and gravelly with emotion.

‘But…why…’ And he can’t drag his eyes away from her devastated face. ‘Do you really mean to forsake me?’

And oh, she has no idea how much this is costing him, he thinks, how much his heart is breaking. She doesn’t understand that he would never leave her if he thought he could stay. He only wants the best for her, for her to be safe and protected and happy, and she can’t do that now while he is there next to her, clouding her reign with his past.

His eyes sting with unshed tears and he swallows. ‘I don’t think I have a choice, ma'am,’ he eventually stumbles out, and she’s shaking her head at him, and the tears start falling and then she’s running and he can’t stop her.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

I don't want to know who we are without each other
It's just too hard
I don't want to leave here without you
I don't want to lose part of me
Will I recover that broken piece?
Let it go and unleash all the feelings

I don't want to know what it's like to live without you
Don't want to know the other side of a world without you

- The Other Side, Ruelle

Chapter Notes

You'll have noticed that from the previous chapter, I've started putting dates. This will hopefully make the timeline a little less confusing for this next section of the story.

Thanks again for all the wonderful feedback. :)

Saturday 14 May

He knows it’s Emma before he even looks at his phone.
She’s refusing to leave her room.
She’s upset.
She hasn’t eaten since yesterday.
What do you want me to do?
Call her. Send her a message. Something. She won’t listen to any of us.
Have you tried Harriet?

Harriet, Nancy, me. Lehzen. Even the Duchess.

His tongue felt thick in his mouth. He couldn’t call her; he couldn’t bear to hear her tears over the phone. But he clearly needs to do something. Emma wouldn’t ask if she thought she had another option.
Emma is worried about you.

He stares at the screen of his phone, waiting for the little dots he knows will appear. Now that he thinks about it, he’s almost surprised that she hasn’t tried contacting him already. It was a Saturday – a blessing and a curse – but he knew that weekends didn’t really mean all that much to the Queen.

And when her response – I’m fine. – appears on his screen a good few minutes later, he lets out a sigh.

She tells me you haven’t eaten.

I’m not hungry. And he would have let out an incredulous laugh at that if he could laugh. She’s always hungry, his little Queen.

I don’t believe you, ma’am.

When she doesn’t reply, he wonders if he’s crossed a line.

Sir Robert Peel is my deputy, and will take over as your Private Secretary once everything is sorted. And it’s killing him to type these words. He’s a good man, ma’am. He will do a good job.

He’s not you.

And as the tears burn his eyes, he knows he can’t say anything to that.

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Sunday 15 May

It’s late, well past sunset, well past her normal bed time, and she’s spent most of the day and night in bed, her pillows now wet with her tears. Now, it just feels like a cage.

She has to get out.

So she pulls on her running gear and heads out into the darkness of the gardens; the lights are on, but she knows these paths like the back of her hand now anyway, and she needs to run, needs to feel the wind on her face, her heart pumping in her chest, the speed of her legs, the burn of the cold air rushing into her straining lungs.

She runs.

She doesn’t know how long she’s been running for before it starts raining, and she can’t hold it in anymore; she falls to her knees in the dirt and curls up in a ball on the ground and cries. It’s back, that desperate feeling that has haunted her most of her life, that feeling that disappears when he’s around. That feeling that defined her childhood, her teen years, that feeling she thought she’d managed to leave behind at Kensington when she’d become Queen and he’d become her Private Secretary and her friend and he’d introduced her to so many wonderful people, people like Emma and Harriet, people she could now call friends.

She’d gotten so used to being happy.
But now, it's back, that feeling, like her chest is hollow and aching.

She’s alone.

But more than that, so much more than that – she’s lost him. He was hers, her Lord M, her faithful, patient teacher and friend and he was gone, just like that, and the ache, the pain in her chest is overwhelming.

She can’t. She can’t. She needs him. How was she to live without him?

Her mother finds her a little while later, and later she thinks perhaps it’s ironic that of everyone, her mother would know where to look for her distraught daughter.

‘Oh, mein liebling, my Drina, it’s the middle of the night, my love. You are saturated! How long have you been out here? Oh, mein liebling,’ she can hear her mother rambling next to her as she pulls her up out of the dirt and mud and into her arms.

‘Oh Mama, how will I manage?’ she sobs, pressing her wet face into her mother’s warm shoulder, suddenly desperate for the closeness, the comfort of her mother.

‘It’s so hard, I know,’ her mother replies. ‘I know.’

‘It’s not fair. He’s the only one who understands,’ she sobs, and she feels her mother’s warm hand stroking her sopping hair.

‘Not the only one, my love. Not the only one.’

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‘Ma’am, a word,’ he calls from behind her, and she flinches at the sound of his voice. But she turns anyway, knowing he’ll just find her later if she doesn’t hear him out now. ‘I’ve heard about Lord Melbourne,’ he says. ‘I’m very sorry you’ve had to give up your Private Secretary.’

She’s surprised. It had been a little less than two days-- Of course. Mama.

‘I would merely like to let you know that you have not been completely abandoned, Your Majesty. There are still those who are willing to step in to those vacant roles and provide the assistance you so clearly need.’

And she realises he’s been waiting for this, for Lord M to leave, and the fury explodes like a volcano inside of her. ‘That won’t be necessary, Sir John,’ she bites out, and he speaks before she can finish.

‘It’s imperative that the Queen have a dependable and capable Private Secretary. It is really very hard to find people you can trust; people you can rely on to stand by you when things get tough.’

His words make her stomach twist in knots. She can’t hear this. She won’t.

‘I am quite capable of organising my own household,’ she declares, and his face contorts into that expression she’s so familiar with, the one that tells her he’s about to be cruel. She feels herself brace as best she can for the impact, knowing that it’s going to hurt.

And hurt it does.
‘Are you sure, ma’am?’ he asks, his eyes narrowed slightly. ‘After one disastrous choice, do you think it’s really wise for you to be making any more significant appointments on your own?’ he sneers under veil of concern, and she can’t help but swallow.

But she’s alone now – he is not here to rescue her this time – and she must be strong. So she lifts her chin and squishes her panic down as much as she can and uses one of the tricks he’s taught her.

He can still save her even when he’s not here, she thinks, and the thought blinds her a little, so she blinks and fixes her gaze on her target.

‘Good afternoon, Sir John,’ she says quietly, before turning and walking away.

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Sir John’s words circle around and around in her mind. She pushes them away again and again, but her traitorous mind just won’t leave them alone, and she finds herself halfway through a thought process before she can catch herself.

He had left her, abandoned her when things had gotten rough. He’d said it was for her; that things were rough because of him, because of his past, and she believed him. That if he left, things would calm down and she would be fine. He’d told her that he did not regret being her Private Secretary.

_Not for one moment._

She most certainly did not regret asking him. Perhaps the world did not approve, but they didn’t understand. How could they? They didn’t know him like she did.

He is soft and calm where she is not. He’s all soft smiles and calm reasoning when she feels angry and chained down and drowning. He’s kind where she’s had criticism, and he teases her gently when he knows she’ll laugh. He is so, so gentle with her, and she knows she doesn’t deserve it.

Occasionally she can hear the frustration in his voice, and sometimes she revels in it; she likes to argue, and occasionally she’ll be just belligerent enough to get a rise out of him. But she can never do it for long; the moment he shows any kind of unhappy emotion she caves, her heart crying out.

She thinks it’s comforting sometimes to know he’s not entirely perfect, that he’s human like her.

But then there are the times when she is angry and he is frustrated, and they reach an impasse. There have been days where he’s left earlier than usual, and she knows it’s her fault. It’s taken her a long time, but she’s becoming more and more aware that she can’t always have her own way.

But this time she can’t give in. She _will not_ give him up.

Everyone speaks like this is the end, like he’s gone and he’s never coming back. Like she has no choice.

And they’re right. She doesn’t have a choice.

She can’t do this without him. She doesn’t know who the Queen is on her own just yet.

She isn’t the Queen without him.
Monday 16 May

She hasn’t slept much, up all night thinking about how best to approach this, to convince him to stay. The media hadn’t gotten wind of it yet; it had only been just over forty-eight hours, and most of those hours had been weekend – but still, she’s surprised. They had seemed to know everything almost before she did, but they were clearly not all over this. How long would it take? Did she have time to convince him before the headlines appeared? And she knew what they would be – something about how he’d resigned in disgrace, forced by public pressure to leave.

They might even say she’d fired him.

The thought catches her in the chest. No, she thinks. Never. She would never, ever do such a thing.

So she waits, the words and phrases a chaotic mess in her mind, whirling around as she paces her study. She feels frayed, on edge, like she’s a single thread being pulled too tight.

She has to do this. She has to convince him to stay, that it will all blow over. That it didn’t matter what people said, or thought – she knew the truth, and people would eventually realise that it was all rubbish.

She sucks in a breath. She has time. She has some knowledge about how these things work; he has to give a certain period of notice – he couldn’t just up and leave.

And then she hears footsteps, and…

She frowns when Sir Robert arrives at her office door, holding a very familiar cardboard coffee cup in front of him and how dare he bring her Lord M’s coffee? ‘Where is Lord M?’ she demands before he can speak, and she doesn’t care that he looks rather discomforted.

‘He has taken a short leave of absence, ma’am. He apologises for the sudden nature of his departure,’ he explains.

Leave of absence?

‘I’m not entirely sure, ma’am,’ Emma replies awkwardly, when Victoria storms up to her desk moments later.

Victoria raises an eyebrow. ‘Where might he be?’

‘He is most likely to be at his house here in London, ma’am,’ Emma concedes, and she frowns. ‘He felt it best to avoid the palace for the next few days, until everything dies down,’ Emma adds quietly. ‘Doesn’t want to add fuel to the fire.’

‘But...’ She didn’t know what to say. She didn’t have a response for that. She knew there were photographers camped out at the entrances; she’d seen them with her own eyes from one of the windows. He’d pointed them out to her one afternoon earlier that week, a few hours after she’d asked why their coffees were being delivered. But she’d counted on his reliability, his steadfastness
in the face of everything up to this point. It hadn’t even occurred to her that he might choose to stay away.

This is ridiculous, she thinks. She has to see him. She has to convince him to stay.

She could ring him, talk to him over the phone, but she dismisses the thought. That wouldn’t do. She has to see him, see his face, his eyes, and she can’t do that over the phone.

Well, if he won’t come to her, she’ll have to go to him.
Chapter Summary

After all this time
I never thought we'd be here
Never thought we'd be here
When my love for you was blind
But I couldn't make you see it
Couldn't make you see it
That I loved you more than you'll ever know
A part of me died when I let you go

I would fall asleep
Only in hopes of dreaming
That everything would be like it was before
But nights like this it seems are slowly fleeting
They disappear as reality is crashing to the floor

- Blind, Lifehouse

Chapter Notes

Well, posting this isn't nerve-wracking at all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Monday 16 May

It’s been a long time since he hasn’t had anywhere to be on a Monday morning, and it’s nowhere near as pleasing as he had anticipated a year ago. The reason, he well knew, was five-foot-two with blue eyes.

He doesn’t think about it too much. He can’t. If he does, he’ll drown in his sorrow and in reality and he can’t do that yet. She still needs him, his little Queen, and he won’t let her down. He still has work to do, so he decides against the whiskey, going for coffee instead, and heads for his study.

The whiskey will come later.

***

She’s sitting in the car on the way to his house, curled low in her seat and the hood of her jumper
pulled tightly down to cover her face, and suddenly, out of nowhere, it grips her.

What was she doing?

What would he say when he saw her? She was going to his house uninvited - what if he turned her away? What if he said no? Refused to come back? Refused to help her? Refused to see her?

She can feel the panic rising in her throat and she thinks she might be sick, right here on the back seat of the car.

But she closes her eyes and swallows against the backflips her stomach was most determinedly doing. She was being ridiculous. This was Lord M. Of course he’d at least see her. And if she could just see him, just talk to him, she knows she has a chance at convincing him.

Besides, she knew he would see her. She was the Queen. She wasn’t going to give him a choice.

***

She watches from the car as Peter speaks into what she assumes is his security system, before he nods to Callum who pulls the car door open for her. His street is quite lovely, she thinks, as she glances around; all white houses and bright flowers hanging from street lamps and huge green trees that allow only dappled sunlight through, and she thinks it’s perfect. But then Callum’s slightly tense Ma’am reminds her that he’s a little nervous about this short excursion out of the palace unannounced and unplanned, so she takes pity on her poor security duo and heads up the stairs to where a man she assumes is Lord M’s butler is holding the door open for her.

And oh, his house is lovely. The large, bright, open entrance hall is dominated by a rather grand and imposing dark wood staircase, and there’s a large, brightly coloured Indian-style rug that covers a good portion of the otherwise white-tiled floor. It’s him, she thinks; so very English, but with a hint of something else underneath.

She takes a few steps forward, and stops; she has no idea where she’s going. She assumes he’s in some kind of office; Emma had said he was working from home. She turns to the butler who immediately bows.

‘Your Majesty,’ he almost splutters. ‘If you would be so kind as to wait here, I will inform Lord Melbourne of your arrival—’

‘There’s no need to announce my arrival,’ she says, pulling her hood back from her face and shaking her head. ‘Please just show me to Lord Melbourne’s office.’

And the butler blinks at her, and she wonders if she’s said the wrong thing, but there’s not time for that now. She has to see him. She raises an eyebrow at the butler – who, by his stammering, seems to have no idea what to do with her now – before she turns and walks over to the nearest doorway and into the room. He was around here somewhere. If the butler was not going to be helpful, then she would just look in every room until she found him.

And her mind registers that she’s walked into a library, and the room is beautiful. The full-to-overflowing shelves that line three of the walls go right to the high ceilings, much like her own library, and the panelling is a lovely warm brown wood, and she thinks he fits here, her Shakespeare-quoting Lord M.
‘Your Majesty,’ she hears from behind her. ‘It’s just this way, ma’am.’ She turns to see his butler hovering awkwardly at the door, his arm out as if to point the way, and she purses her lips and nods, following him out of the room and up the stairs.

When she’s shown into his office, he has his back to her, sitting at his desk. But he whirls around at the sound of people entering the room and his face is thunderous and she sees for a moment how he could be quite intimidating when he wanted to be, and her heart’s suddenly in her throat.

‘What could possibly…’ and he trails off when he sees her, the shock and surprise clear on his face. But then she notices the rest of him. His hair is all curly and messy and he’s wearing brown pants and a blue button-down shirt that’s not quite done up and…socks.

She feels her breath catch in her chest at the sight of him. Her whole body reacts to him, and she suddenly realises why they voted him *sexiest* politician.

It takes about a second for his brain to realise it’s *her*, and he blinks at her while his brain processes the fact that it’s *her* and she’s in his *study*.

It takes about a second after that for his brain to tell him she’s wearing the tightest black jeans he’s ever seen on her, black boots, a denim jacket over a black *hoodie*.

Of all the things he’s seen her wear, all the beautiful gowns and business clothes and dresses and her running gear and even something like her pyjamas at one point, he’s never seen her quite this…casual. Relaxed. *Normal*.

She’s standing in his office, in his home, her long hair in a ponytail, wearing denim and a hoodie and looking *perfect* in the simplicity of it all and he has to swallow.

He stares at her for too long; it’s not until his butler moves away that he’s jarred into action. The Queen of England is standing in the chaos that is his *study*, and he has no idea what on earth is going on.

Until he does, and he lets out a breath.

‘Forgive…the mess, ma’am. I wasn’t expecting visitors.’ *Certainly not you*, he thinks, and she’s at the top of a very short list of visitors that would matter, really.

She looks around and her lips twist slightly. ‘Evidently,’ she says, her eyes wide and her voice tentative and he lets out a huff of incredulous amusement.

Of course, today is one of those days where the Queen decides to *tease* him. But then he looks up at her bright, nervously smiling face, and he has about a million questions, at least four of them about what she was wearing, and what on earth was she *doing*?

And then her eyes drop to his chest and he remembers that he hadn’t quite done up all the buttons on his shirt that morning, and his hands fly to the buttons as he feels the flush creep up his chest towards his face. He looks back at her, and her eyes are still wide and the phrase *a deer in headlights* really works right now.

But then his mind catches up – the Queen of England was standing in his *study*. Alex was going to *have his head for this*, his mind suddenly supplies, and it dominates all other thoughts. ‘Where are Peter and Callum?’ he asks a little urgently, walking forward and glancing out the door to the
hallway. They must be around somewhere, if for no other reason than she doesn’t know how to drive.

‘They’re in the foyer. Oh, well, Peter’s in the hallway, I think,’ she adds, and she’s far too relaxed about this.

‘Does Alex know you’re here?’ he asks, because it’s fairly clear to him now that this little excursion of hers likely wasn’t planned.

She frowns at his questions. ‘Of course. I couldn’t take one of my cars, not with the formal escort and all. He let me borrow his,’ she says.

And his stare is just a little incredulous. How could she be so cavalier with her own personal safety, especially now? She’s seen the most recent devastation first hand, and yet, here she stands with just two bodyguards in his rather un-secured home. He was going to have Alex’s head for this.

But his mind plays that conversation for him, and he thinks that perhaps he’ll go a little easy on Alex; he suspects that if he looks outside, he’ll see more than one unfamiliar car.

It doesn’t change the fact that she’s here. ‘Ma’am, you shouldn’t leave the palace without the proper security. It’s not safe!’

But then another thought hits him: what if someone had seen her?

But then she’s speaking. ‘Peter drove me. And I think I’m quite safe here, Lord M,’ she says, her tone making it clear she thought he was overreacting, and he sighs. Yes, he thinks. Now only my entire household and your security know you’re here. ‘Peter and Callum have already checked the house all over – they insisted, even though it’s your house and I’m sure it’s fine. And I trust them,’ she says slowly, seemingly reading his mind, and he raises his eyebrows before blinking and shaking his head. But she’s just standing there, and he should probably do something, and he flails around a little before his eyes settle on the lounges behind her.

‘Come, please, sit down,’ he says, walking past her and waving at the couches. ‘Would you like some tea?’ he asks, when she’s sitting in front of him, and she blinks.

‘No, thank you,’ she says, so he nods, grabbing his desk chair and pulling it up to sit in front of her, before fixing his eyes on hers and waiting, his eyebrows raised.

‘Why didn’t you come to the palace today?’ she asks after a moment, and he purses his lips. ‘I thought it best not to. Despite the obvious, you need to work with Robert Peel now.’

‘But I don’t want to work with him, I want to work with you,’ she says, and there’s a petulance in her tone he’s so, so familiar with, but she speaks before he can get a word in. ‘Lord M,’ she almost, almost whines. ‘How can you just leave like that?’ And her face settles into something smaller, more hurt. ‘You didn’t even say goodbye.’ And he cannot believe what he’s hearing. What she’s saying. How completely unobservant and clueless she is – how can she not see how this is killing him? ‘Do you think I want to, ma’am?’ and her face shifts, and he thinks she might, perhaps, understand. ‘It doesn’t matter about my feelings, or even yours. You are the Queen and your reputation is paramount. Your entire existence depends on this. You have started so well, ma’am, and I will not see your reputation suffer when I can do something about it, no matter how much I want to stay with you.’ His voice trails off at the end and he thinks by the look on her face that he’s said too much, revealed too much. ‘Sir Robert is very capable and reliable and will do a good job, ma’am,’ he adds, looking away and changing the
subject. ‘Just tell him what you like and don’t like and he’ll learn it all.’

Her face is a little mutinous, and he knows he hasn’t convinced her.

But then it shifts slightly. ‘I thought perhaps that if you couldn’t come back officially as my Private Secretary, then perhaps you could come back as a consultant,’ she announces, and her eyes are suddenly so wide and hopeful and he blinks. ‘I would pay you out of my own purse, and then you wouldn’t technically have to be part of the official palace staff,’ she adds, and he can’t help but let out an incredulous huff, his heart softening. But there was no way it would work, and she knows this. She’s just grasping at straws now, trying to solve the problem on her own, and part of him is proud of her resourcefulness and creativity. But he gives a small shake of his head, a gentle smile on his face, and her face falls.

‘Why not?’ she demands more than asks, and he needs to redirect this, to calm her before it all becomes too much.

‘I think you must know why,’ he says quietly, and she’s confused for a moment, until she remembers; her reputation. It wouldn’t make sense for him to resign and then for him to be at the palace every other day; it would defeat the purpose of his leaving, really. But there’s a strange earnestness in his eyes, in his face, and she’s maybe not entirely sure she completely understands. ‘Are the photographers still camped out at the all palace entrances?’ he asks gently, and her shoulders drop. Of course he was right. Of course he would have already thought of all of this. ‘Give Sir Robert a chance,’ he almost pleads, and she can feel the voices in her head screaming again, desperate to take control, but she swallows, pushing them back down enough that she can just think.

‘Will you come for dinner tonight so I can tell you about it?’ she asks hopefully, and surely, he can still come for dinner. Surely she still has time. But he lets out a breath and looks a little exasperated with her and no, this is not fair. She will not lose him, her Lord M, no matter how many photographers choose to take up residence at her front door. ‘Why not? Even if you can’t be my Private Secretary, you can still be my friend!’ she cries, and his face falls, and she feels like crying.

‘I am honoured to be your friend and will be for as long as you wish, ma’am,’ he says, his voice low and gravelly, and she swallows at the emotion in his voice and his face, and she doesn’t understand him at all, how he can do this when he so clearly doesn’t want to. ‘And when this has all settled and blown over, I’ll come and you can tell me everything. But until then, I cannot be seen at the Palace.’

And her mind is spinning, the voices almost out of control now. Cannot be seen at the Palace. ‘How long will that be?’ she cries, and anything he says here she knows will be too long. She won’t survive that long without him, she thinks.

‘A week, perhaps. Maybe two,’ he says gently, and she can feel her eyes burning. ‘It will depend on what happens to distract them – how long it takes the stories to die.’

Two weeks, she thinks, and oh no, that’s too long. She can’t do two weeks without him. ‘Can I call you?’ she asks quietly, hopefully but tentatively at the same time, and he smiles.

‘Of course, ma’am,’ he replies, and she feels the voices screaming in her head subside just a little. ‘And you can email, and message, if you like. But you must work with Sir Robert,’ he adds firmly, his gaze stern, and she nods reluctantly. She will try, if only because he says she should. Only for him.

Working with Sir Robert will give her time, too, she thinks. Time to come up with something else
that will convince him to stay. ‘Wellington will be at the function for the Archbishop’s retirement tomorrow, and I’ve asked him to ensure that he stays close to you to give you as many photo opportunities as possible,’ he explains. ‘Just make sure you smile, laugh a little, look happy to be there and to be with Wellington and the other MPs.’ And she nods again. ‘It’s important now that you are seen to be as impartial and independent as possible,’ he adds.

But he won’t be there, she thinks, and her heart is heavy.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you think. Did I do the Dover House scene justice? :)


Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Don't, don't go changin'
You mean everything to me
And hope
You shine a light that covers me
My love for you grows stronger when we are apart
My love for you grows stronger when we are apart
So set me apart
I've been waiting all this time
I miss you

- Forever Ago, Woodlock

Monday 16 May

‘I know it’s late, and I’m sorry, but I thought you’d like to know.’

‘Know what?’ Her heart sinks. She already knows what Harriet is going to say, but a small part of her hopes against hope that her intuition is wrong.

‘Lord Melbourne’s resignation has made it to the news,’ she hears Harriet say quietly down the phone.

‘How?’ she cries, grabbing her iPad from her bedside table.

‘I don’t know,’ Harriet sighs. ‘The only report I can find just attributes it to the eponymous ‘source inside the palace’.’

And Victoria thinks that if she ever gets a hold of that source inside the palace, she’s going to find it rather difficult to restrain her temper.

***

Tuesday 17 May

She stares at the ceiling.

She has to meet with Sir Robert today.
His phone is ringing and he grabs at it, squinting against the light to see who it is.

‘Liz,’ he mumbles through the headache that had already taken up residence in his head, thumping a steady beat behind his eyes.

‘So I assume you haven’t seen the paper yet this morning?’ she asks, and he lets out a sigh before opening his eyes to look at his phone before squeezing them shut and covering them with his hand.

‘Not yet,’ he mumbles, slowly removing his hand from his face and squinting against the brightness of his phone screen.

‘Water,’ she says matter-of-factly as she puts him on speakerphone, and he can hear her moving around in the background. He presses against a familiar icon on the screen, and he closes his eyes as the headlines load. He’d drunk enough last night to drown a small town.

‘Bad?’ he asks.

‘By the sounds of you, I assume it’s true.’

_Oh._

He opens his eyes, and the headline is right there, timestamped and all, and he’s surprised it’s taken this long. That’s got to be a record, he thinks. Sixty-eight hours.

But seeing the words there in black and white, her picture next to his at the top of the page doesn’t hurt any less. ‘Yes,’ he mumbles, and she lets out a sigh. ‘Well, partly. I did resign.’

‘I assume it was a mutual decision?’

He can’t help but let out a small snort at that, which he immediately regrets as the pounding at his temples becomes more insistent. ‘Not quite.’

There’s a silence that he doesn’t break.

‘What will you do now?’

‘I’m not sure,’ he says. He hadn’t thought of anything beyond drowning his sorrows.

An image fills his mind; Brocket Hall was calling his name.

‘Well, at least Ant will be happy. He’s been chasing you for the Red Cross for forever.’

‘Hmm.’

There’s a pause as he debates the merits of trying to stand; now that she’d mentioned water, it was all he could think about. He puts his phone on speaker and drops it on his bedside table.

‘I assume the rest of it is true,’ she says a little too flatly for his liking.

He stumbles into his bathroom and downs an entire glass of water with two panadol before he
answers. ‘What’s the rest of it?’ he asks, because he’s too hungover and it’s too hard to think about any of it.

‘That you’re sleeping with her.’

And his brain explodes. ‘They said that?’ he cries, stumbling forward and grabbing at his phone.

‘No, of course not,’ she says. ‘But I can read between the lines.’

He throws his phone down again on the bed in front of him, that stupid, ridiculous headline teasing him from where it screamed out from the screen.

And he runs his hands over his face. This last article had crossed a line; they’d been made brave by the hype and the constant drip-feed of information and the competition for the next headline.

And there had been almost nothing he could do. Oh, the angry letters had been sent – via PR, of course – but given that at best they’d violated her ‘reasonable expectation of privacy’ as the code of ethics stated – which Peel was currently following up – he could do little else to protect her. He will not risk her relationship with her mother over him, whatever little there is left.

But to hear it out loud? ‘God, Liz, it’s the Queen,’ he stumbles out.

‘Yes, it is, William.’ He splutters a little and he can almost hear her laughing at him down the phone. ‘Okay, okay. Just wanted to be sure.’

‘Just what do you think of me?’ he mutters, and she chuckles again.

‘Perhaps that was a little unfair.’

And the pounding in his head is starting to dominate everything. ‘A little?’ he mumbles from where he’s crawled back into bed.

‘Okay, a lot.’ She’s still chuckling, and he can feel his face burning with embarrassment. ‘Well, you do have a reputation to maintain.’

‘Liz!’ he moans, and she laughs again.

‘Call me tomorrow, William,’ she says before hanging up, and he sighs heavily before burying his head in his pillows.

***

She walks through the door to her office, and it’s all wrong.

Sir Robert jumps up from where he was sitting on the lounge by the door, standing awkwardly and watching her as she stops in front of him. When she turns to face him, she realises that he doesn’t have her coffee this time. She knows it’s unfair to count that against him, but a small part of her still does.

‘Good morning, Your Majesty,’ he greets her with a stiff little bow.

‘Good morning, Sir Robert,’ she replies flatly. He stares at her for a moment and she blinks, waiting.
‘Oh, I have your letters and invitations, ma’am,’ he says, pulling a folder from his briefcase, and she
sucks in an irritated breath.

‘Thank you,’ she says, taking the folder from his outstretched hand before turning and walking
around to sit at her desk. The folder feels lighter than usual; she frowns as she opens it and flicks
through the papers.

‘Where are the rest of the invitations?’ she asks, and he frowns.

‘I was under the impression, ma’am, that you only looked at a select few.’

‘Well, I certainly don’t look at all of them, but usually much more than this,’ she replies, and he nods
awkwardly.

‘I will review the invitations again,’ he says, and she nods after a moment. She hears him clear his
throat quietly. ‘There’s also some legislation to sign, ma’am,’ he says, and her head flicks up. ‘You
also have the reception at six o’clock tonight, ma’am.’

‘Yes, Sir Robert. I can see my calendar,’ she says, almost interrupting him, and her stomach twinges
a little at how rude she knows she sounds. She can almost see Lord M’s raised eyebrows in her
mind, and she clenches her jaw against the emotion. Well, if he was here, she wouldn’t have cause to
be annoyed then, would she?

‘Where is the paperwork for the new legislation?’ she asks, and he pulls out a folder from his
briefcase and hands it to her.

She opens it to the first page and scans it; it was the bill Wellington had been trying to pass for
months around the adjustments to income tax. Lord M had been explaining it all to her, and how it
would affect various groups. She would have to try to read it herself, she thought, now that he wasn’t
here to explain all the changes they’d made, and she feels the pain of his absence again.

But she couldn’t dwell on that anymore; she had work to do. She sets it aside to attempt to read later
– that would require coffee and full concentration, she knew – and returns to her letters. ‘I’ve put tabs
where you are required to sign, ma’am,’ Sir Robert explains, and she looks up at him, frowning.

‘Thank you, Sir Robert, but I would still like to know what I’m signing.’ And when he looks a little
confused for a moment, she frowns. ‘I may not exercise much power within the workings of the
government, Sir Robert, but I still like to keep abreast of what my government is actually doing,’ she
explains coolly.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ he replies, and the surprise in his voice is clear.

He thinks she’s stupid, her deputy Private Secretary, and a wave of fury crashes over her at the
thought. But she quells it immediately. Sir Robert was not Lord M.

She had taken her Lord M for granted, and now he was gone. She would need to learn to work with
Sir Robert, as much as the idea left a bad taste in her mouth.

‘What time is the Prime Minister arriving?’ she asks, not looking up from her computer.

‘Ah, I took the liberty of rescheduling his meeting to next week,’ he says hesitantly, and her eyes
flick to his face. ‘Your Majesty has the dinner with the archbishop tonight, and I was informed that
time was required to prepare.’

She stares at him, sorting through what he’s just said. Surely not…
'What time was Wellington’s meeting scheduled for?'

‘Three o’clock, ma’am.’

‘And the dinner commences at?’

‘Pre-dinner drinks commence at six o’clock, ma’am.’

‘You thought it would take me two hours to get ready for a dinner?’ she almost shouts, standing, and Peel turns an even brighter shade of red.

‘I was advised that you required a minimum of two hours, in case of delays.’

‘And there was two hours!’ Her voice is most definitely raised now, and she doesn’t care. How dare he treat her like a…a…brainless harpy who is more concerned with getting dressed up than the business of government? ‘You will not reschedule my appointments without confirming with me first,’ she demands quietly, and Peel’s eyes almost pop out of his head.

‘But ma’am, that’s—that’s a significant portion of my responsibility. It would take up a substantial amount of time…and seriously compromise my ability to perform my role,’ he splutters out, and she couldn’t care less in her anger and offence. He would need to learn who he was dealing with, this new Private Secretary of hers.

‘Nevertheless, Sir Robert, I find that I would like to take a more active interest in my appointments.’ And she can see it in his eyes, the protest, the indignation, and something clicks in the back of her mind, something… ‘Thank you, Sir Robert,’ she says, sitting down again. ‘I will contact you when I have finished my correspondence.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ she hears him stumble out after a moment, before he turns and leaves, and she lets out a sigh, before pursing her lips.

Maybe…it’s there, in the back of her mind, something she can use, but she can’t quite see it just yet. But she had time – time to think, to plan. Perhaps, just perhaps, she might still win this round.

***

‘You’re hungover.’

And he thinks he has far too many women in his life, and all of them far too interested in his wellbeing and why can’t they just leave him alone to drown in his sorrows? ‘Nope.’

‘You’re also a terrible liar.’

It irked him that she wasn’t wrong. ‘What do you want, Emily?’

‘Is it true?’

‘Yes,’ he says on a sigh.

He hears Emily let out a disbelieving laugh. ‘I can’t believe she just let you go.’

Melbourne closes his eyes. ‘She…didn’t.’
‘Oh.’

‘It’s for the best, Emily.’

‘Do you feel the express need to deliberately sabotage every good thing in your life, or does it just come naturally?’ she cries, and he cringes. Despite the panadol and gallons of water, his head was still a little sensitive. ‘You were obviously perfectly happy working for her.’

‘Have you been reading the papers?’ he shoots back.

‘Oh, and you do now?’

‘I have to.’

‘And you’ve suddenly started believing it all?’

‘Not all of it was wrong, Emily,’ he says quietly. ‘I won’t let her be dragged down by my stupidity.’

She snorts. ‘I don’t think anyone else actually sees it that way.’

‘No, they just see a marriage-wrecking, womanising ex-politician spending copious amounts of time alone with their innocent young Queen!’ he shouts, and stops, rubbing his hand over his face. He must be really very hungover; he’s not even sure where that came from.

Maybe he’s still drunk.

Emily is silent down the phone for too long before she speaks.

‘William Lamb, you have never let the press bother you before. Don’t start now,’ she says quietly.

‘It’s not just about me!’ he almost cries.

‘And what are you teaching her, then? That it’s alright to sacrifice yourself on the altar of possible public opinion served up by the press?’ she shoots back, and he lets out a huff. ‘You and Emma are the only ones with any sense in that place. You’re stronger than this – you have to teach her the same.’

‘It’s too late now,’ he mumbles.

‘Oh, I really don’t think it is, Lord M,’ Emily replies wryly.

It hits him later when he’s staring off into space that he hasn’t once, in any of the articles, read her little nickname for him in the press.

***

It’s late and she’s tired and she just misses him, her Lord M, and his gentle explanations. She’d bitten off far more than she could chew with this new legislation. She just didn’t understand all of this language. It was heavy, dense text and even if it had been in basic language, she didn’t have the economics knowledge to really decipher it. She needed him to explain it.

*I don’t understand some of the changes in the tax bill.*
It takes a little while for him to respond, and she feels a little guilty. It was quite late.

*Ask Peel, ma’am. He will explain it. Or the Duke.*

And she throws her phone down on the other side of the couch. It bounces a few times before sliding down between the cushions and she lets out an annoyed noise. She doesn’t want to ask Peel, and she feels the pull of annoyance and hurt and tears. She just wants *him* back.

She felt adrift, lost, just drifting along at the mercy of the waves, and her lifesaving buoy was nowhere to be found.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

So I’ll be bold  
As well as strong  
And use my head alongside my heart  
So take my flesh  
And fix my eyes  
That tethered mind free from the lies

Cause I will wait, I will wait for you

- I Will Wait, Mumford and Sons

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the lovely feedback - I love hearing it all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Friday 20 May

‘How many this morning?’ she asks Emma as she peers out the window from behind one of the curtains. It was overcast, but she could still see the tourists gathering at the gates. The photographers were sometimes difficult to spot, especially later in the day when they blended in easily with the crowds, but now, this early, they were quite obvious to her now-trained eye. Watch long enough, and you’d notice that they were the only ones not actually taking photos of the palace she called home.

‘I count only two today, I think, ma’am,’ Emma replies, looking out from the other side of the window. ‘And I’m fairly sure the one who was in the trees on the edge of Green Park yesterday has given up.’

‘Excellent,’ she says. With every day the photographers become fewer, her argument for his return grew. He’d been right; without anything new to go on since the news of his resignation had broken on Monday, the headlines had all but disappeared. And oh, hadn’t she yelled at Peel when he’d suggested an official statement about his resignation. She cringed slightly at the memory of Peel standing awkwardly in her office only yesterday, suggesting that perhaps if they issued a formal statement confirming that Lord Melbourne had resigned that the photographers might give up and they could all come and go in peace.

What good was peace if she didn’t have Lord M?

She couldn’t issue a statement. It would be like the final nail in the coffin, the signal to him and the
world that she’d given him up. That she’d given up on him.

And oh, she would never, ever give up on him, and she would never, ever let him think that she had.

She still had time. Emma had more than happily told her that he was required to give two weeks’ notice, and that technically, as he’d not officially given her a resignation in writing, that two weeks hadn’t officially begun yet.

She thanks God for whoever thought that Emma Portman would be a good Personal Assistant.

‘There weren’t any new stories again this morning,’ she tells Emma rather smugly, and Emma smiles knowingly at her.

‘I noticed that too, ma’am.’

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She wanders out to Emma a little while later with the folder with her letters, and Emma gives her a sympathetic smile.

‘Could you let Sir Robert know I have finished with these?’ she says, and Emma nods. She is not hiding from Sir Robert; this is part of Emma’s job. She’s just frustrated.

She thinks also that Sir Robert doesn’t mind not seeing her at the moment.

‘Yes, ma’am.’ Emma holds up a cardboard coffee cup, and Victoria blinks against the pain in her chest. ‘I was just about to call you – it was delivered a little late this morning,’ she explains, her face soft, and oh, he was so good to her, her Lord M.

He wasn’t even here and he was still looking after the little things. She’d had coffee every day this week.

She takes her coffee with a quiet thank you and wanders back to her study, curling up in a ball on her lounge.

She can’t get the image of him just standing there in his study out of her head. She’d never seen him in anything less than a suit and tie until that moment. She knows in her head that he’s a man, her Lord M, with a house and a life and a past, but it had never really seemed real – more like an idea, an intangible thing she’d never really cared to contemplate all that much.

There’s something else about that image that has haunted her in the quiet hours since her visit; something she can’t quite put her finger on, but she cannot get the picture of him standing there so… rumpled…masculine…out of her head, and she finds that she doesn’t actually want to.

But there, in his house, the home he’d lived in for so long, all dishevelled and relaxed and human, she realises that she doesn’t really know him at all. He’s seen her at her best and at her worst; she’s danced with him in an elegant ballroom as the Queen and she’s cried her heart out in his arms as Victoria.

She’s never even seen him get all that angry.
She doesn’t really know anyone, she realises, and she feels so, so small.

So alone.

But then his face flashes in front of her eyes. *Do you think I want to, ma’am?*

She can see it in his face, the pain, and she knows he really didn’t want to leave. This is hurting him too. She hadn’t really seen it when he’d told her, too consumed by her own shock and distress. But in the quiet moments when all she can see is him and the soundtrack in her mind is their conversation only days earlier, she can see it - he doesn’t want to abandon her any more than she wants him to. But he’s noble, her Lord M, called by duty.

She thinks he’s a little too swayed by his sense of duty.

She thinks of his words to her at her lowest; when she’d seriously thought about abdicating and running away. He’d told her that he’d had no reason to continue living – until he’d become her Private Secretary, and her friend. But now he was only one of those things, and she was afraid that just being her friend wasn’t going to be enough to convince him that the world should continue turning, that he should get out of bed in the morning. That his world shouldn’t slip back into the black and white existence it had been.

He had found the strength to go on; she would too. But she wouldn’t allow him to sacrifice himself for her. She would not allow him to give this up, to give up the only reason he has to continue. Emma’s words play in her mind; that he’d seemed so much happier since he’d agreed to be her Private Secretary.

She would not allow his world to become devoid of colour again, not if he didn’t want it to. And she thinks that he very, very much does not want it to.

He needs her just as much as she needs him.

***

The silence of his house mocks him. He is so used to noise now, even the noise in his head of her voice through the day as he replayed their conversations, but even that is silent now.

It mocks him for thinking he somehow was worthy of happiness. Of her.

She’s doing well enough without him. He’d seen the photos of her with Wellington at the Archbishop’s farewell dinner; she’d been as beautiful as always, and there was a lovely one of her smiling as she talked with her Prime Minister and his wife. But she cannot hide from Emma, who is more than happy to give him regular updates on the Queen’s general unhappiness, despite how much he knows she’s just trying to make him feel guilty. He knows she hopes he’ll give in and return, but in reality, her words are having the opposite effect. She’s reminding him that his little Queen is suffering because of him, because of his weakness, his inability to think further than his own selfish desires.

He’s been so caught up in her light, in her orbit, that he’d missed what had been going on around him. It was like being woken from a particularly delightful dream, the harsh, jarring, grim cold of daylight so garish compared to the warmth of her light.
But he cannot cut off all contact with her – he’d promised that they’d still be friends, at least, and he wants to – so when she sends him a photo of her coffee later that day with a Thank you, he replies and tells her she’s more than welcome.

***

She’s tired and on edge when her mother asks. ‘How is your new Private Secretary? Sir Robert?’

Her eyes flick to her mother’s, narrowing. ‘He is fine.’

‘Just fine?’

‘He is very capable,’ she replies after a moment, repeating his phrasing and not trying to keep the bitterness out of her voice. She doesn’t care.

‘But you do not like him.’

She lets out a sigh. ‘I don’t know him very well yet, Mama.’

‘You know, Sir John would more than happily step in and help you,’ her mother starts, and Victoria’s head flicks around.

‘Mama,’ she warns, her voice hard.

‘Let him help you, Drina,’ her mother pleads. ‘He has always been there for us,’ and she can’t listen to this. She won’t. She can’t go back there. Not now that she knows what it’s like. What he’s shown her.

Freedom.

She can feel her heart racing and the screaming in her mind becomes more and more insistent. ‘I will never let that man control me again,’ she spits before standing and fleeing the room.

***

She marches out to Emma’s desk and stops as another idea dies in her mind. Emma looks up at her expectantly, waiting, but she doesn’t even know what she wants now.

She lets out a breath. There was little point in visiting him now, she thinks. She needs more time to think things through. He would not come back on the strength of his own need; she needed something more.

Emma’s voice breaks through her thoughts. ‘I was actually just about to call you, ma’am. I believe you may have been looking for something earlier this week.’

She frowns, staring at Emma’s knowing look for a few seconds before it hits her. ‘Yes,’ she replies quickly, and her chest is suddenly tight.
‘I think Sir Robert mentioned something about having something delivered to his office at around 2pm,’ Emma says nonchalantly.

He would be here. At 2pm. She glances at her watch - it was 1:45pm. She had fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes to plan what she would say, the words she would use to convince him to return.

‘I think I have a question for Sir Robert that I didn’t ask this morning,’ she says slowly, because there is no way she’s having this conversation in front of Sir Robert Peel.

‘Shall I request his presence, ma’am?’ Emma says, already reaching for her phone.

‘I would appreciate that, Emma.’

Chapter End Notes

So who thinks she'll be able to convince him to return?
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

And I will ask you, I will ask you
How about my dreams

But you say life is a battlefield
And you have given me the arms
You say I have to fight
I have to keep moving on

- *Your Battlefield*, Susie Suh

Chapter Notes

Please don't hate me.

*Friday 20 May*

‘Melbourne,’ Peel greets him as he walks through the door into their foyer of his department.

*Old department,* his mind supplies.

‘Peel,’ he says. He hasn’t really heard from her how their first meeting went other than her request for assistance with the tax bill, and he’s not entirely sure he wants to ask. He’s been trying to read between the lines, but Peel is almost frustratingly official; the tone of his emails never changes. But he has to know, so he turns and heads to Peel’s office.

Peel’s face tells him everything - he just glances up at him, his mouth in a frown and his face reddening. ‘She’ll come around eventually,’ Melbourne says quietly after a moment, wincing a little.

‘Her Majesty has requested that I confirm all appointments with her, including all rescheduling,’ Peel announces stiffly, and Melbourne closes his eyes for a moment before glancing down at his feet.

Well.

Peel hadn’t put *that* in any email over the course of the week.

‘I advised Her Majesty that that would make it very difficult to actually do my job.’ Melbourne nodded; he was absolutely right. That would make any Private Secretary’s job really *very* painful. If he didn’t know any better, he would have thought she was trying to make this as difficult as possible.

But then Peel’s phone rings, and Melbourne is surprised to hear a sigh come from the other man’s mouth. ‘I’ll be right over,’ he says heavily into the phone, before glancing up at Melbourne. ‘Her
Majesty has a question,’ he announces, before standing and walking around his desk and past Melbourne out the door. Melbourne resists the urge to tell him it could potentially be about the tax bill; it’s probably best that Peel doesn’t know that the Queen is still in contact with him about things that weren’t really supposed to be his responsibility anymore.

He stares at the chaos that is his own desk and frowns. It was going to take a while to sort through. He’d tidied some of it last Friday night, but he’d been too consumed with grief and too desperate for his whiskey decanter to make much headway, so it needed to be dealt with today.

He turns and looks down the hall without thinking before closing his eyes and sighing. It’s killing him that she’s only a few seconds’ walk away, a walk he’s done a thousand times. It’s a walk he will make one more time later today. The letter feels like it’s burning a hole in his jacket pocket, and he cannot wait to give it to Emma in a few hours’ time when he knows she’ll be back in her rooms and not in her study and highly unlikely to run into him. It’s for the best. It would not do her any good to see him just now.

He has fully accepted the fact that he’s a coward.

He pushes the thought out of his mind and starts working through the first pile. He’s only a couple of documents through when he hears footsteps. ‘That was quick,’ he says, but the footsteps stop and he turns.

And she’s standing in front of him, her face a mask of determination and anxiety and the sight of her hits him like a truck.

He’s missed her so, so much, his little Queen, and her face is so soft and beautiful and he knows exactly who is behind this, and he thinks that Emma Portman should stop meddling.

‘Lord M,’ she says breathlessly after a moment.

‘Ma’am,’ he says automatically, and he can’t seem to drag his eyes away from her.

‘I’ve missed you,’ she says, and he can see her heart right there on her sleeve, and no, no, he can’t do this. He’s only just barely holding his own heart together; he’s not sure he can hold hers too.

‘It’s been less than a week,’ he half-laughs humourlessly instead, and she blinks at him, and he knows exactly why she’s here. Why does she persist in doing this to him? He knows how much she wants him to return, and he thinks that after her excursion to his home she would have at least some idea of how much he doesn’t want to leave. But still she stands here, ready to do this all over again.

‘I tried to do as you asked. I tried to work with Sir Robert,’ she says, almost pleads, and his eyebrows rise slightly at that – his frustration must have appeared on his face. He’s slipping, he thinks.

‘Confirming every appointment, ma’am? That’s going to make his job almost impossible,’ he warns her, and she’s definitely annoyed now.

‘He doesn’t understand! He rescheduled my meeting with the Prime Minister because he thought I needed more than two hours to get ready for a dinner,’ she mutters darkly and he frowns, his mouth opening and closing a little as he works out just how to say what he wants to say. But they can’t have this conversation here, half in and out of his office, so he steps back and holds his arm out, and she moves into the room and sits in one of the soft leather arm chairs.

‘Sir Robert is an excellent man, very organised and principled and committed to his job, but I fear he has never quite understood…social skills,’ he says a little haltingly as he sits in the chair opposite her.
And when he looks up, she’s looking at him almost happily, and he has to drop her gaze. He can’t do this. He has to push her away, to move away. He can’t do this again.

‘Ma’am,’ he begins, and stops, throwing his hands in the air a little.

‘Did you see that the photographers are almost all gone?’ she asks, and he blinks.

‘I did not,’ he replies haltingly.

‘Emma and I have been keeping watch. There were only two this morning, although one of them we weren’t entirely sure about. He was acting a little oddly. And there haven’t been any articles about you or this since Tuesday.’ she says and the hope in her voice is killing him. She’d been so quiet since her little sojourn to his home that he’d thought she’d given up and accepted that he wasn’t coming back. He’d been naïve enough to assume that he’d convinced her. His mistake, it seemed.

‘Whilst I’m thrilled that the interest in this is disappearing,’ he starts, ‘It is still not in your best interests for me to come back. I shouldn’t even be here today, but Emma was kind enough to organise a car for me so that I would hopefully be able to avoid any of those photographers waiting outside the gates.’

‘I don’t understand,’ she says, and he thinks for a moment that perhaps she doesn’t really want to.

‘No one cares about this anymore. You said that if a story is out of the press for a week, it’s dead. It will have been just about a week on Monday.’

He sighs. ‘Ma’am, your power is almost entirely in your reputation. What you wear one night is for sale the next morning online. What you say could be tweeted within moments, as you well know,’ he reminds her, and she pouts a little. ‘One of the benefits of Sir Robert is that he is very, very unlikely to draw a scandal,’ he says dryly, and she frowns at him.

‘Sir Robert treats me like I’m a stupid girl,’ she spits, and he mentally curses Peel for pressing that one most sensitive button of hers. Had the man listened to any of his advice? ‘You never treated me like a child,’ she says, and her voice has returned to a kind of soft pleading.

‘Yes, well, as I said, he perhaps doesn’t have the greatest understanding of women,’ he concedes, frowning a little, and he briefly wonders again how the man ever married. ‘But you will have to learn to work with him,’ he says again, and he knows that semi-mutinous look that’s now on her face so well now. But she has to understand this. He will make sure she does, if it’s the last thing he does. ‘There’s something more at stake here than just my feelings, or yours. You are the Queen of England. You are someone the people of Britain – of the Commonwealth – the world, even – look up to and respect. You represent everything that is British – everything that is good and right for so many. They hold you to a higher standard, and you must respect that.’

‘And I have done nothing wrong!’ she cries.

‘But I have!’ he cries, before looking away, softening just slightly. ‘And you are being tainted by the association.’

_I am the problem_, he wants to cry. _You are perfect, and you are suffering because of me._

He lets out a heavy sigh, and she can feel her heart sink, and she knows that tears are not far away. She’s scrambling, desperate to keep it together, to think, to focus. If only the voices in her head would stop screaming so loudly…
'If I return now, the press would merely crow that they were right all along, that I had somehow manipulated you.'

‘And they would be wrong!’

‘But the public wouldn’t know that! It’s all about how it looks, ma’am!’

And he’s very clearly frustrated with her now, and she’s beyond frustrated – she’s angry – and why can’t he just see? ‘I’m not a piece of clay to be moulded by anyone!’

‘No, definitely not, but that’s not how it will be seen! It doesn’t matter that you don’t like Peel, it matters that he is not me!’ And then he’s closing his eyes and shaking his head and she thinks he’s exasperated with her. And suddenly she’s all nerves and fear and panic and she thinks for a moment that she is not going to win this.

And she can feel her determination fading as the panic rises.

She’s going to lose him.

‘You are always telling me not to read the papers, not to listen to what they say,’ she says weakly.

‘This is different, ma’am,’ he replies, his voice quiet again.

‘How?’ she demands, her voice high and he can tell she’s about to cry and he can’t watch her cry over him again.

Because it’s almost true, he wants to cry. Because I love you.

And the thought stops him in his tracks because in his anger and frustration it almost, almost left his mouth.

He has to redirect this. He has to make her see. He cannot stay. He loves her, and along with everything – the damage to reputation, the whispers about her private life, the almost-loss of the sweetness and innocence that has so far won the hearts of her people – that headline hit far, far too close to home. He will not let that happen. He won’t allow them to see her as anything other than as she is: their sweet, beautiful, innocent, compassionate young Queen. He loves her far too much to let that happen. He loves her too much to stay.

He says nothing. He can’t look at her; she’ll see it on his face. She’ll know. It’ll be the Coronation Ball all over again, but this time, there’s no champagne or success or ballrooms to hide behind. So he closes his eyes and shakes his head once, praying that she will just see that she cannot have her way here.

‘Don’t you want to be my Private Secretary?’ and her voice breaks his heart. He’s not felt pain like this in so long.

‘More than anything, ma’am,’ and his voice is full of everything he has because he can’t help it. 'But not at the expense of your reputation.'

And when he looks into her eyes and sees the tears there, tears because of him, he mumbles a broken I’m sorry before standing and walking out the door.
When she arrives at her study desk late the next morning to pick up her laptop, her crying-sore eyes spot the envelope resting on top, his familiar sharply-looping scrawl on the front, and she stares at it until the fresh tears blind her.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Where do we go from here
Where do we go from here
How do you fly with no wings
How do you breathe without dreams
Where do we go from here
From here

Like waking up from a fantasy
And all that's left is you and me
We're invincible in a violet sea
Dare to move, dare to believe

- Where do we go from here?, Ruelle

Chapter Notes

Yeah, remember what I said about things getting worse before they get better?

I'm sorry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tuesday 24 May

He thinks that sometimes it’s the little things that seem the most brutally unfair.

Today is her birthday.

He’s had her present sitting in his office for weeks, and he’s already asked Emma to give it to her for him, so he knows she’ll get it, but oh, what he wouldn’t give to be there to see her open it.

***

She lies in bed, staring at the ceiling.

Today is her birthday.

She does not feel like celebrating at all.
Her mother and Sir John are waiting for her at breakfast.

‘Happy Birthday, Drina,’ her mother coos, and something about her mother’s voice sets her on edge. But she goes forward and returns her mother’s hug. ‘You seem to have developed a sudden interest in Shakespeare,’ the Duchess says, and she hands her a soft, rectangular-shaped present, wrapped in tissue paper.

‘Thank you, Mama, Sir John,’ she replies, her voice even as she pulls the wrapping paper off. It’s a book; a soft leather-bound copy of *King Lear*, and it’s beautifully soft and worn, and she loves it. Her heart swells and softens and she almost smiles at her mother.

Until she opens the book to where the bookmark rests, and she feels her stomach tighten into something painful.

‘How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child,’ she reads, and her head shoots up to see a smug look on her mother’s face.

She throws the book on the floor and storms from the room.

***

She keeps her phone with her all day – well, as much as she can with all the carriage rides and waving and ceremonies. It was her birthday, after all.

When she’s heard nothing by the time she returns to her rooms to dress for her dinner, she thinks that perhaps he’s forgotten, and she blinks the tears away.

***

She’s farewelling the Duchess of Wellington – she’d been as lovely as Victoria had thought from the few times she’s spoken to the older woman, and Harriet had been a genius to invite her – when Emma appears with a hesitant smile on her face.

‘Ma’am, I have this for you,’ Emma says, carrying what appeared to be a large-ish box wrapped in pearlescent purple paper, and she frowns. Emma had already given her some perfume and a beautiful pen. ‘I was asked to deliver it.’ And the look on Emma’s face says it all, and she looks back at the box as Emma sets it down on the table in front of her.

She can feel her eyes burn. She looks away, biting her lip before clenching her jaw. She would not cry. She wouldn’t. He had forsaken her. He didn’t want to be her Private Secretary anymore. She would not pine after him.
She hates that she is still desperate to know what he would give her for her birthday.

She looks down at the card that’s resting just underneath the purple ribbon that encircles the box and sucks in a shaky breath, glancing up at Emma and Harriet before pulling it from its place and sliding it open, and stopping. She’s not sure she can bear to read his words to her on her birthday, not here, not in front of everyone, so she places the card on the table next to her, and pulls at the ribbon. It comes apart easily, and she slides it off, before pulling the paper off at the sides and opening the top. Her mouth falls open just a little, and she hears Harriet’s sharp intake of breath. She pulls the larger of the two boxes out of the bigger box they sit in and stares at it, swallowing a little.

‘Wow,’ Harriet says after a moment. ‘That is a very good camera.’

She knows; she’s been looking at digital SLRs online for weeks, ever since she’d spent a good half an hour talking to the official palace photographer after her last garden party. She’d been playing with her phone, but she wanted to do more, and she’d quickly realised the limitations of an iPhone camera. They were just so expensive; she didn’t think she could justify it, really. She wasn’t going to be like her uncles, spending ridiculous sums of money on frivolous things, and she thought an expensive camera when she had an official photographer would count as frivolous.

She wonders when he bought it, how long he’s waited to give this to her. He’d never said a word.

She puts the camera back in the box, and pulls out the smaller box; it was a lens to go with it.

When she goes to put the lens back, she sees there’s a simple piece of white card at the bottom of the box. She reaches down to pick it up before she can think.

*I hope you will enjoy capturing the little moments – and perhaps some of the bigger ones.*

And she’s so tired of crying, thinks she has to run out of tears at some point, but she finds that she hasn’t yet, because despite it all, despite her best efforts, she can feel them pooling in her eyes. She puts the lens back in the box blindly, blinking at the tears she’s desperate for Emma and Harriet not to see, and picks up the card she’d put down earlier. She has to know what he’s said to her, what else he’s written to her.

Inside was small, pearlescent folded card, and a simple piece of white card.

*Surprise. Happy Birthday.*

*Yours always,*

*Lord M*

She opens the smaller pearlescent card and lets out a shaky sigh, as she feels the familiar tightening of her throat yet again. She runs her fingers over the familiar embossed logo of the Royal Ballet, fingerling the rough edges of the two tickets inside.

Surprise, indeed.

She swallows and stands, walking over to the window and looking out but seeing nothing through the blur of her tears. She hears Emma approach from behind, her hand coming to rub gentle circles on her back, and she rests her head on the older woman’s shoulder.

How could she think she could just give him up?
It’s late and dark and she’s been sitting on her bed with Dash curled up on her lap for what feels like hours.

*Thank you for my present,* she types, pausing before she bites her lip and hits send. His reply is on her screen in only a few short seconds.

*You’re most welcome, ma’am. Happy birthday.*

She’s spent the better part of an hour toying with the idea of asking him, but she knows what he’d say. Her heart tells her to throw caution to the wind; to ask him anyway and *make* him tell her no. Force him to deny her. But as much as she wanted him to feel that pain, she also really, really didn’t want to see his refusal on the little screen in front of her, so she hedges her bets a little.

*I don’t have anyone to go with.*

And when his reply appears on her screen a good few minutes later – *I have it on good authority that Ms Sutherland loves the ballet almost as much as you do* – her heart tells her that perhaps he’s not quite as unaffected as she would like to imagine that he is.

***

**Wednesday 25 May**

The night is cool and her dress is beautiful and she feels like she’s walking through a fog. It was all wrong. He should be here, walking beside her.

Harriet had indeed been thrilled to be asked to accompany the Queen to the ballet, although Victoria hadn’t been able to avoid the almost pitying look in her friend’s eyes when she’d asked; Harriet had known she was a second choice. It was the same look that she’d been greeted with tonight, but that had vanished after a few moments and a more conspiratorial one had replaced it.

‘There weren’t any photographers this afternoon,’ she’d said quietly as they’d walked down the hall towards her rooms. Victoria had glanced up at her, her eyes wide, and Harriet had nodded once.

She’d felt a swell of hope in her chest at the thought, but she’d squashed it. She had been so sure of herself, that she’d be able to convince him.

She’d been wrong already. Twice.

She couldn’t be wrong a third time. She didn’t have the strength.

But as she sits in her seat waiting for the show to begin, she thinks she has nine days left, and no ideas.

But she must smile and wave and never let them know how hard it is to bear.
Thursday 26 May

He can’t resist. He knows what she’s going to say, but his sick heart has to hear it anyway. It’s early, but he knows she’ll be awake. Her coffee should be arriving right about now.

Did you enjoy the ballet?

Her reply appears within a minute, and he doesn’t particularly like how it warms his heart, the speed of her response.

It was wonderful. I loved it. Thank you.

And despite it all, he feels his lips curl up into the smallest of smiles.

I’m glad. You’re welcome.

And when her reply appears only a few minutes later – I wish you’d been there – he remembers why he didn’t want to message her in the first place. He’s already seen the photos; she’d looked beautiful.

So do I, he thinks, but he doesn’t reply.

She growls when she opens her inbox. She was so tired of Sir Robert and his bland, rule-following, grey-cardboard efficiency. But then she thinks that Lord M was just as efficient, but he just wasn’t so…annoying. Her phone rings and it’s Emma. ‘Sir Robert, ma’am.’

‘Please send him in.’

She waits until he’s just inside the door before she speaks. ‘Surely there cannot be this many changes required to my official diary?’ she asks, and Peel grimaces.

‘Unfortunately, ma’am, there are. And you did request that I confirm every new engagement and any changes to the schedule with you, ma’am,’ and he’s doing little to hide the annoyance in his voice, she thinks, and she feels her own anger rise, but she can’t really say much. He’s doing exactly as she asked. ‘I have brought your letters, ma’am, along with three new pieces of legislation for you to sign.’

‘Wellington’s been busy,’ she mutters, but Peel says nothing. ‘Thank you, Sir Robert. I’ll let you know when I’m done,’ she says, and he gives a little nod of his head.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ he says, but when she hears him shift uncomfortably on his feet, she looks back up.

‘Sir Robert?’
‘Mr Harper’s office – your legal counsel – has requested an appointment, ma’am,’ he says, and she blinks, frowning.

‘I know who Mr Harper is,’ she mutters. ‘Yes?’

‘They requested it last week, ma’am. I believe that the implication was that this appointment was of a somewhat pressing nature,’ he says stiffly. ‘To do with the most recent press activity,’ he adds, and she frowns again.

‘Fine. Book him for whichever morning you deem most appropriate,’ she says, waving her hand, and he nods.

She watches as he leaves before letting out a sigh and slumping down in her chair. She really couldn’t be bothered looking through all her appointments, but she needed to, she knew, in case Sir Robert got it into his head that he had to cancel a meeting with foreign royalty because she had a hair appointment or something.

She’s scrolling through the list that Peel’s put together, and there are so many new things, and so many changes and so many events she’s not sure if she should attend or not and she feels so overwhelmed and she wishes he was here with his kind words and gentle explanations.

But if he was here she wouldn’t be doing this right now, and she lets out a huff.

She wonders what has been most pressing about the past weeks that Mr Harper thinks his meeting is urgent, she wonders, before dismissing the thought. Her lawyers probably don’t particularly care about the headlines; at least, not enough to need to meet with her about it. He probably wants to finalise Lord M’s departure, she thinks bitterly.

Eight days left, and still no ideas.

She looks down at where Dash is curled up in a ball on his little bed in the corner just behind her, and she envies him, her little dog. ‘If only I could sleep the day away with you, Dash,’ and the little dog’s head rises at the sound of his name. ‘You have no idea how lucky you are.’

But then a thought hits her and she blinks.

Yes.

Well, he would have to return then, wouldn’t he? His sense of duty would demand it.

She races out the door and around the corner to where Emma is sitting. ‘I think I have a plan,’ she announces. ‘But I’d appreciate your help.’

And when Emma smiles knowingly after she’s explained her idea, she thinks that maybe, just maybe, it’s third time lucky.

Chapter End Notes

There were about a dozen references to things in earlier chapters - did you spot any? :)
(Note: The real Queen Victoria's birthday was 24 May 1819. It was so much fun tying myself in knots trying to make everything fit into the timeline.)
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

We never fought to lose it
We didn't build to burn this
You don't have to carry the weight of your sin
We didn't rise to cave in
We never left for safety
I will not just age to grow weary and bleed

It's worth too much to give it in
You gave it all for this

- Whispers, Vancouver Sleep Clinic

Chapter Notes

Thanks for the feedback so far! It's lovely to hear people are reading. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Friday 27 May

He blinks at his screen. ‘She’s sick?’ he asks when Emma answers.

‘Her Majesty is unable to attend to her letters and appointments today,’ Emma says rather imperiously.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘I’m not sure, William.’

‘Emma,’ he warns.

‘She didn’t say,’ Emma says, and there’s something in her voice that puts Melbourne on edge. ‘You could call and find out for yourself.’

‘Yeah. Thanks,’ he says, before hanging up.

She’s only ever been sick once – she’d barely been able to stand and had still tried to drag herself to her desk. There’s something else going on, he thinks. He’s just not sure quite what – yet.
‘Do you think it’ll work?’ she asks quietly, and it’s the most vulnerable she’s seen the Queen since her birthday. She’d been so confident in her plan, her plotting to get her Lord M back, that Emma’s almost surprised that she’s questioning it now.

Emma smiles a little sadly. William was nothing if not noble and duty-focused when it came to the Queen, and she knew why.

His heart was all too clear to her.

She wonders if perhaps that was part of the problem.

‘I’m not sure, ma’am,’ she answers honestly. ‘But I do know that we don’t treasure what comes easily.’

***

Monday 30 May

When Peel tells him over the phone three days later that she’s still too unwell to work, he rings Emma again.

‘Four days?’

‘It would appear that the Queen is quite unwell, William,’ Emma says a little too matter-of-factly for his liking.

‘What’s going on, Emma?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You know exactly what I mean,’ he growls down the phone. ‘She could be on death’s door and she’d still try to answer her letters.’

‘I’m not sure what else to tell you, William,’ Emma says, and he clenches his jaw.

‘Okay,’ he mutters before hanging up.

***

I hear you’re unwell, ma’am.

And she almost drops her book and cringes. She hadn’t factored this into her plans. She hadn’t heard from him in days – since his message about the ballet – and hadn’t even considered that he’d go
around Emma and contact her directly. In hindsight, she thinks she should have known better.

So she races up the hallway to where her Personal Assistant was sitting. ‘He’s messaged me,’ she says a little breathlessly before stopping. ‘I don’t know what to say,’ she admits.

And the way Emma cringes makes her think she’s not surprised. ‘He rang a few minutes ago. He was…concerned.’

‘I don’t want to lie,’ she says frowning, and Emma smiles.

‘Then don’t, ma’am.’

***

I’m taking a leave of absence.

And he stares at the screen in front of him, blinking. A leave of absence? What is she going to gain from a leave of absence? Surely she’s not that distraught…

‘Emma.’

‘William.’

‘Please. What’s going on?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Emma,’ he pleads. He has to know. He has to know what he’s done, what’s going on. He might not be able to do much, but maybe he can…

He can’t stand the thought that she’s hurting any more than he’d known she would, and that it would be entirely on his head.

She lets out a sigh, and he knows he’s won. ‘She doesn’t want to work with Peel.’

Of course. Of course she would just be stubborn. She’s as stubborn as a mule, his little Queen, and whilst her ability to put her (albeit tiny) foot down when she cares is one of the things he’ll never admit he loves most about her, in this it will not serve her well. ‘She doesn’t have a choice!’

‘That’s not how she sees it.’

He can’t believe this. He can’t believe that it’s come to this, that she’s refusing to work with his deputy, the man who would be her Private Secretary once his notice period has been served. Peel must be beside himself.

Well, he will be when he figures it out.

‘So, what is she going to do – be ‘sick’ for the rest of her life?’

‘I think she’s hoping it won’t come to that,’ Emma says quietly, and he ignores her tone, ignores what she’s saying. And he’s racking his brain, thinking of what’s coming up that she cannot miss, that would actually be disastrous, but he was coming up empty. She would disappoint a few people,
but nothing that couldn’t be rectified…

And it hits him that she won’t have signed anything in a week. She was usually so prompt with her paperwork; even the difficult pieces she’d implored both he and Wellington to explain to her after a solid few days of her attempts to read it on her own. Well, that wasn’t going to end well. ‘She’ll have to meet with Wellington. Her meetings with Wellington are on Mondays or Fridays. She can’t avoid those for long.’ If anyone could pull her out of it, it would be the Duke. If she saw him, that was.

And what if it got out that she was sick, that she wasn’t well enough to do her most basic duty? The press would be all over her, all over them.

Or worse – so, so much worse, he thinks – the real reason for her absence.

He swallows, rubbing a hand over his face. He wouldn’t think about that now. He couldn’t. It didn’t bear thinking about.

‘I wouldn’t underestimate her, William. She’s very determined.’

And he can feel his jaw clench. No matter what, no matter how much Emma thinks she’s helping, she is not. But he has to trust the Queen’s judgement, he thinks. He cannot return because she…she throws a tantrum. Because that’s exactly what this is, he thinks, and how could she do this?

But the flare of anger dissipates as quickly as it appears; he knows exactly why she’s doing this, and the conflict within him is physically painful. He can feel it in his chest.

But he can’t go back. Not now. As she was so fond of telling him, everything was settling nicely after his resignation had become public. If he returned now, it would only stir things right back up again. It would have made the whole exercise pointless.

But the tight knot that’s been slowly forming at the bottom of his stomach for days has suddenly become much bigger and he thinks he only has a very short window in which to contain this.

She can only hide from her mother for so long.

‘I think, Emma, the Queen knows her duty.’

I hope you enjoy your break, ma’am.

***

Tuesday 31 May

Peel eventually gives up and calls him the next day.

‘Her Majesty is still unwell,’ he says. Melbourne notes the emphasis on the word ‘unwell’ and cringes inwardly. ‘And the paperwork is piling up. I’ve had to reschedule her usual meeting with Wellington twice – goodness knows what he’ll say if I have to reschedule it again.’

‘I’m not sure what you want me to do.’
He can hear Peel shift in his chair. ‘Why do I get the feeling that there’s more going on than I’m privy to, Melbourne?’ he asks.

He lets out a sigh. Well, it’s only taken him a week, he thinks, and he debates the merits of telling Peel. He’s not entirely sure yet how it would reflect on her, the fact that she’s taken a ‘leave of absence’ right around the time she’d been forced to let Melbourne go, so he decides to say nothing for now.

‘I’ll speak to Emma,’ he replies.

‘I’d appreciate that. I don’t need both Wellington and the Cabinet Secretary breathing down my neck.’

She was so tired.

The one downside of celebrating your birthday in public as Queen is that everyone wants to share their best wishes the very next time they see you, which, for some, could be weeks later, so despite her role in the function being very minor, she was exhausted. Everyone was just so lovely, so sweet and kind, but even their well-wishing had only managed to put a smile on her face for a moment.

She hadn’t realised how hard smiling was without him.

But Peter and Callum and Harriet had been wonderful; they’d pleaded the recent events for her increased security and had ensured that she had left quietly and quickly at the end of the meeting. She doesn’t really want to be alone when they return to the palace, and so she asks Harriet if she wouldn’t mind staying for a little while.

They’re sitting on one of the balconies off her rooms, tea in hand and Dash curled on Victoria’s lap, when Harriet speaks.

‘Is Lord Melbourne still being horribly stubborn?’ she asks, her voice a mixture of indignation and gentleness, and Victoria frowns a little, nodding. ‘Well, I don’t think you should give up, ma’am,’ Harriet says. ‘You still have time. And it’s all gone from the papers now. They don’t even know what to print anymore.’

And at the mention of the papers, Victoria’s stomach clenches. ‘They’ve said such horrible things about him,’ she growls, and Harriet nods.

‘The papers will twist anything,’ she says. ‘Even the most innocent of relationships.’

And Victoria’s confused. ‘What do you mean? I thought all that rubbish in the papers was made up.’

Harriet laughs a little. ‘Not all of it – most of it has just been warped and misrepresented.’ Victoria stares at her, and Harriet stares back. ‘Lord Melbourne isn’t a saint,’ Harriet laughs a little incredulously after a moment.

‘What do you mean?’ And it’s conversations like these that make her curse her sheltered upbringing; she didn’t really understand how these things worked. She’d always been told that it was expected that she would marry, have a family, be faithful to her husband and the crown. She knew that people
did the wrong thing, had affairs, but that she would never be one of them. She knew how painful affairs were; she’d seen it in his face when he’d told her of his wife.

But the more she learns, the more she realises that perhaps that isn’t how the rest of the world works anymore.

‘There were rumours,’ Harriet says, a cheeky smile on her face that Victoria automatically tries and fails to replicate. ‘Goodness, you’ve seen those eyes. Those cheekbones. The man could seduce lamppost if he wanted to.’

The tightness in her chest constricts her breathing, and she grips onto her tea cup, looking out over the dark gardens but seeing nothing. Rumours.

‘I don’t blame him,’ Harriet continues. ‘After all that rubbish with his wife and Byron. And I don’t know how he can look Wellington in the eye without hitting him.’

‘Wellington?’ she almost yelps. ‘What about Wellington?’

And Harriet’s face has changed; she looks like she suddenly regrets this whole conversation. But she has to know now, whatever this is between Wellington and Lord M. She has to know.

Harriet purses her lips slightly, but Victoria knows she’ll tell. ‘Wellington had an affair with Caroline not long before Augustus died.’


‘From what I heard, it was only a very short thing, never made the papers, but…’

Her breath is coming in gulps now, and all she can hear in the back of her mind is him telling her to breathe, like he always does.

He’s always been there for her; her rock when all else was shifting and shaking beneath her feet. She’d considered what he would have to sacrifice politically to be her Private Secretary when she’d asked him, but Emma had been so positive, and she’d been so desperate that she hadn’t really considered what she was actually asking.

She realises now she’d really had no idea what she was asking of him.

It hadn’t been her fault; no one had told her…but she hadn’t asked, either. She should have asked.

But she hadn’t; her ignorance and selfishness had forced him to work so closely with a man who… who…

She swallows; she feels sick just thinking about it.

But then something clicks in the back of her mind, something…she can see it now, all the pieces starting to fit into place, and she just needs time, time to think, time to grab them from the air and slot them into place and then she’d understand, understand why he had felt it his duty to give her up. Why he felt so, so strongly about her reputation. How to get him back.

‘What have I done?’ she breathes, and she can feel Harriet’s hand on her back.

‘Ma’am? Are you okay?’

‘I’m fine,’ she says, staring up at Harriet. ‘I’m fine.’
But her mind is spinning, and she needs to *think*.

***

The thoughts buzz around in her mind like bees, refusing to be caught until they’ve exhausted themselves.

*Affairs.*

*Byron.*

*Wellington.*

It makes so much sense, but none at all.

Wellington was a Tory, and Lord M had been a Whig. She’d always assumed that was why they’d been so at odds, why there had always been a tension between them.

But this?

She would never have imagined this. That the Duke…

She’d been so, so angry. How could the Duke, someone she respected and admired, do something so…so terrible! So immoral. So…

But it had cooled into something else, something more like hurt. Something else that told her that she was just a little girl in a world she’d only been allowed to play in for such a short time that she didn’t know the rules yet.

His words return to her, his mantra that they couldn’t hurt him more than they already had. *There is little that is technically untrue in the piece.* She’d always been a little surprised at his lack of venom, the way he’d simply shrugged when it came to their discussion of him. And everything she’s ever read about him comes racing back and she blinks against the picture that’s forming in her mind, this slightly darkish edge to her beloved Lord M.

She really, really didn’t know him at all.

But then she remembers Harriet’s words: *even the most innocent of relationships*, and she thinks that perhaps she’s overreacting, and the light returns to her image of him.

But the press hadn’t mentioned Wellington, and she can feel a tear slip from the corner of her eye and into her pillow.

She’d been so cruel.

She hadn’t meant to be – she hadn’t known. But it had been her ignorance, her sheltered life that had hurt him once more, and she pounds the pillow with her fist.

Maybe he didn’t want to come back? Maybe he didn’t want to work with Wellington anymore? Maybe it was too hard for him, and this was his escape?

But she thinks back to her visit to his house, his visit only days ago here at the Palace, and she
pushes away the thought. *Do you think I want to, ma’am?* He’d never lied to her before about anything, so if he said he didn’t want to leave, then she would believe him.

But Wellington… She knows that knowledge is power. He’s always told her that; to listen and learn and play your cards just right. She’s just not entirely sure how to use this knowledge just yet – if it even can be used. She just needs an idea. Something, *Anything* that would convince him. Nothing she’s tried so far has worked. She's losing him; she can feel it. He's slipping away, slowly but surely.

She would eventually have to meet with Wellington – oh, how was she going to look him in the eye *now*? – or sign some of the legislation that was piling up on her desk. There was only so long she could hold out, and she wasn’t entirely sure Lord M wouldn’t call her bluff.

*Lord M would know what to do,* she thinks, and she rolls her eyes. The biggest problem in her reign to date and of course, *of course* he wouldn’t be here to help her solve it.

There were so many layers to this now, so much complexity that she was struggling to keep all the pieces together in her mind. She was new to this, this level of political and personal intrigue and games and she wasn’t enjoying it at all. But it was a challenge, and she would rise to it. She would not give up on him.

The layers were political, and personal…

*Ma’am, I’ve been speaking with the Prime Minister…he thinks it would be best if I were to resign.*

And the thought hits her like a freight train and she knows exactly, exactly how she’s going to get him back, her Lord M.

Chapter End Notes

Maybe one day you'll hold on to all those straws you're grasping at, Victoria…

**Note:** The Duke of Wellington and Lady Caroline Lamb did actually have a short affair when she was in Belgium caring for her injured brother after Wellington’s win at the Battle of Waterloo. It’s believed that he gave her a cloak of his as a souvenir.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

A strangled smile fell from your face
What kills me that I hurt you this way
The worst part is that I didn't even know
Now there's a million reasons for you to go
But if you can find a reason to stay

I'll do whatever it takes
To turn this around
I know what's at stake
I know that I've let you down
And if you give me a chance
And give me a break
I'll keep us together
Whatever it takes

- *Whatever It Takes*, Lifehouse

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Tuesday 31 May**

‘Peel is now calling *me,*’ he says when Emma answers the phone.

‘This doesn’t sound like my problem,’ she says in a slightly sing-song voice, and he feels the frustration rise.

‘It’s going to be everyone’s problem when *someone* leaks to the press exactly what’s going on,’ he replies, his voice hard, and he hears Emma sigh. He knows she understands this; she’s been doing this almost as long as he has. They both know what will happen if the press finds out she's refusing to work with anyone but him. They’ll have a field day; she’ll look weak and childish and he’ll look like a monster. They’ll prove those stupid cartoons true that paint him as her minder, her nursemaid. The puppeteer.

‘I know. What do you want me to do, William?’

‘Talk to her!’ he almost shouts, and when Emma lets out a huff, he sighs. ‘She has to forget about me, Emma. She cannot rely on me anymore.’

‘And just who else is she going to rely on, William? The Duchess? *Conroy*?’ Emma’s voice is hard and frustrated and he opens his mouth to fire back, but he finds he has nothing to say. ‘She needs you, William. After Harriet and I, she doesn’t have anyone else.’

His heart seems to pause in his chest, his mind suddenly silent and loud with a buzzing all at the
same time.

Emma was right. She was alone.

She would likely never trust the Duchess again, and as much as he hated that their relationship was so broken, he could understand why. Besides, the Duchess was far too wrapped up in Conroy, and until he was gone, that was very much a deal-breaker on many levels.

That left Lehzen, Harriet, Emma…and him. From her perspective, she’d lost him, one of her few allies. She felt alone, exposed. Unprotected.

Her reaction suddenly seemed just that bit more rational, more understandable. He lets out a heavy sigh, and Emma hums.

‘It’s not as simple as I think you’d like it to be, William,’ she says gently. ‘You’re her mentor, her closest friend. She loves you.’

‘I know,’ he whispers after a moment, and he closes his eyes against the pain of it all.

‘But you’re in love with her, and that’s the problem. Isn’t it?’

He sucks in a breath at her words. He’s known that she’s known for a while; for months. But he says nothing to that; he can’t. ‘It’s over now. It has to be,’ he says instead, his voice low but even he can hear the lack of conviction in his words.

‘Oh, I’m not sure it is. Or that it needs to be.’ He can hear her take a breath. ‘And I don’t think it should be.’

***

Wednesday 1 June

Emma’s face tells her that she’s known all along.

‘It was a very long time ago, ma’am,’ she says, and Victoria frowns.

‘He’s never liked Lord M,’ she argues back. ‘He doesn’t like that he’s my Private Secretary. He thinks that Lord M is turning me against him, against his whole party! Of course it’s him!’

‘Maybe, ma’am, but Wellington is a powerful man. And he’s smart. This won’t be easy. And if it doesn’t work…much could be lost. You would be essentially blackmailing him, ma’am.’ Emma’s voice is full of reluctance and hesitation, and she knows why. It was going to be hard; she would have to get everything just right, say just the right things, time everything perfectly. There was so much room for error, she knew. To fail would be disastrous.

But she would risk it. She didn’t have a choice; it was the only card she had left. She had to play it now, and play it well. She can feel the desperation rise in her throat again; it’s been sitting there for hours, just bubbling away as she tries to squash it.

But she is the Queen. She has to fight for the important things, and this? Oh, this was the most
important thing. Her friends, the people she cared about, were the most important.

He needed her.

‘I won’t let him fade away again,’ she whispers, staring at nothing. She looks down at Emma’s wide eyes, watching them fade into sympathy and understanding and what she thinks is a little compassion, and she knows she’s doing the right thing for him. For both of them.

She needed him. She couldn’t live without him, no matter what Wellington wanted.

But then she lets out a laugh as the realisation hits her. ‘It was never really about me at all,’ she says.

‘Oh, I’m not sure that’s entirely true, ma’am,’ Emma says with a small, rueful smile that Victoria doesn’t quite understand.

***

He flips over the calendar in his office and sucks in a long breath.

That date that has haunted him for so long now is mere weeks away, and the thought of surviving it alone, without her, without knowing that he’ll see her smile the next day, that she’ll be there waiting for him with her brightness and sunshine, unleashes something wild in his mind; a return for the briefest moment to the dissociation and nightmare of those days. But then it’s gone, squashed down by his own survival instinct, and he blinks, letting out a long breath, trying to control the adrenaline of those seconds that was coursing through his veins.

He’s not sure he can survive it without her.

He’s not particularly sure he wants to, and the thought shocks him.

Emma’s words play in his mind. He can feel it in his stomach – the dread. Maybe, just maybe, he’d made a mistake.

But then he’d never deserved her in the first place.

***

‘Drina, it’s ten in the morning. Why are you in here?’

Victoria jumps up from her position on the lounge, almost dropping her iPad. Damn. ‘Mama. I’m reading,’ she explains, holding up her iPad.

‘Reading on that? What happened to books? Or are you too sophisticated for those now?’

Victoria rolls her eyes before lying back down on lounge. ‘It’s the news, Mama.’

She can hear her mother huff a little. ‘You have finished your letters early today,’ she says, sitting in the chair opposite, and Victoria deliberately doesn’t meet her gaze.
‘Yes.’

‘So quickly. Well, I suppose now that your Lord M is not here to distract you, you get things done much more efficiently,’ she says, and Victoria sits up, ready to yell, but her mother is still speaking. ‘I suppose Sir Robert isn’t quite as exciting. Sir John says he is known for his competence, but not for his sense of humour,’ she adds, and Victoria frowns.

‘He is a very capable Private Secretary,’ she replies, crossing her legs in front of her.

‘He must be. You’ve barely been in your study all week,’ her mother replies, and Victoria frowns, shrugging.

‘The requirements on my time are different at the moment,’ she says, struggling to think of what to say.

‘Yes, I’m sure they are.’

They both look up as Sir John appears at the doorway. ‘Your Majesty, ma’am,’ he greets, before frowning at Victoria. ‘Good to see that you’re busy, ma’am.’

‘Drina is working from her iPad today,’ the Duchess says. ‘So much new technology.’

‘Yes,’ Sir John says, his eyes narrowed. ‘I’m sure it’s all much easier.’

And the way he’s looking at Victoria makes her skin tingle, like he knows something she doesn’t, and she feels the fear swirl around in her stomach. ‘Sir Robert is out of the office today, and so I am taking the opportunity to catch up on some other reading,’ she explains. ‘I have a meeting with the Prime Minister tomorrow morning, and the Ambassador to France tomorrow afternoon.’ And she’s not really sure why she’s justifying herself to Sir John, only that she somehow feels desperately like she has to.

‘You are quite busy,’ he replies, still frowning, before turning back to the Duchess. ‘Ma’am, shouldn’t you be preparing for your lunch at the British-German Association?’

‘Oh, yes,’ she replies, standing, and Victoria blinks. ‘I am their patron, Drina,’ she explains.

‘Yes, I know,’ she lies. ‘Enjoy your lunch.’

‘I will, thank you. Enjoy your reading.’

And the look that Sir John gives her as he leaves makes her worry about what she’s missed.

***

_Thursday 2 June_

‘I’m pleased to hear you have returned to full health, Your Majesty,’ Wellington says, greeting her, and she blinks at him for a moment before she remembers: Peel would have told him she’d been too ill to work.
‘Thank you, Duke,’ she replies. ‘I apologise for delaying our meeting, and for being available on an unusual day.’

‘Perfectly fine, ma’am. Couldn’t be helped.’

Her stomach tightens at the silence - she’s so nervous she thinks she might be sick. But she can’t be; she has to be strong if she wants to achieve her aim. She can’t fail. She can’t. She has to have him back, her Lord M. She would fight for him.

_Breathe._

‘I am so very behind in it all,’ she says. ‘And adjusting to a new Private Secretary…’ she trails off and the Duke nods.

‘I’m sure it will all take some getting used to, ma’am, but there’s no rush.’

‘The papers have been so unkind to Lord Melbourne,’ she says, taking a sip of her tea and desperately trying not to look like she’s scrutinising his every movement.

_Breathe._

‘They can be cruel, ma’am,’ Wellington agrees.

‘Yes,’ she says, lifting her gaze to the man sitting opposite her. ‘Especially when someone’s feeding them such juicy information,’ she adds, watching carefully for his reaction. He frowns for a split second, looks confused for just a moment, before shifting in his seat.

_Breathe._

‘Do you suspect someone, ma’am?’

Victoria frowns. ‘Perhaps. There are very few people who would have that very specific kind of information.’ She levels her gaze at Wellington, and she watches as his chest puffs out a little.

‘Ma’am, if you’re suggesting—’

‘I’m not suggesting anything, Duke. Only considering what would be best for my household.’ He says nothing to that, his eyes narrowed at her, and she continues. ‘So much fuss made about Lord Melbourne’s influence,’ she says, trailing off. ‘The public seemed quite scandalised at the suggestion that politicians might be influencing the monarchy in such a way.’ The Duke is eyeing her now, his breathing a little faster than she thinks is normal, and she feels the thrill of success begin to flood through her. He’d been right; knowledge was power. ‘But I also think whoever is sharing this information might find it in themselves to bring change, if there was motivation. Or, perhaps, redirection.’

And Wellington goes very still, saying nothing, only staring at her, and this is going very well.

_Breathe._

But she has one card left in her hand still to play, and she thinks she will play it.

‘I’m quite aware that Lord Melbourne’s past is viewed by some as less than savoury, much of it reported in the _Daily Mail_ in the last month. But I think Lord Melbourne has been rather unfairly targeted; scandal seems to dog the aristocracy.’

_Breathe._
‘I think that, perhaps, Duke, your own reputation is not quite so spotless.’

‘Ma’am?’ His voice is ever so slightly stressed now; she can hear it in the tone, in the speed of his response.

_Breathe._

She forces herself to take another sip of her tea before speaking again. She must seem relaxed; there was no margin for error, particularly error brought on by panicking, so she pauses, gathering herself before levelling her gaze at him. ‘I am quite aware of your…personal history with Lord Melbourne, Duke.’

And his gaze drops for a moment as he shifts again in his seat. ‘I see, ma’am.’ He looks back up at her, and she can see that he’s angry. ‘I wasn’t aware that Lord Melbourne discussed such things with you.’

‘Oh, he doesn’t. Lord M has never said a word against you. I may be young, Duke, but I have friends.’

‘I see, ma’am.’

_Breathe._

‘Although I’m quite sure that these…rumours…are quite well-contained…at the moment.’ And she wants to jump up and down and laugh at the way her voice is smooth and steady and the way the Duke turns a rather unattractive shade of pink. ‘But I do rather resent being a pawn in a political or personal game,’ she adds, her voice hard, and the Duke just stares at her.

But this is where she thinks she may – perhaps, if she can keep it steady, finish things off coolly and carefully, not faltering – she may just win. It would not do to have the Duke of Wellington off-side any more than he already was. She needed to make her position clear, but also offer an olive branch. She was willing to put this all behind her, and to recognise that perhaps there may have been a kernel of truth to the perception that had permeated all the articles. A problem she was willing to rectify.

_Breathe._

‘But as I said, Duke, I’m only considering what’s best for my household. I have not finished appointing all my ladies-in-waiting, and I am keen to see some diversity in my household.’

His eyebrows rise at that, and he blinks. He hadn’t been expecting this, she can tell, and she’s pleased. ‘Yes, ma’am.’ He pauses, studying her for a moment, before deciding something. ‘May I suggest the Duchess of Buccleuch, Lady Anna Scott? She is perhaps a couple of years older than yourself, ma’am, but quite friendly. My wife tells me she’s sensible and clever, and quite good with fashion and society and other matters that may be of interest to you in a lady-in-waiting.’

And she nods once. ‘Thank you, Duke. I will consider Lady Anna.’

She stands, and he follows, taking a breath, and she can see he really doesn’t want to say what he’s about to say. But she also knows that he values his reputation in this particular area a little too much to leave it to the mercy of his young, angry Queen. ‘Perhaps I might speak to Lord Melbourne, ma’am. It is possible that his departure was a little too hasty.’

‘If you wish, Duke. If you think your speaking to him might make some difference,’ she says a little too quickly, too earnestly, and she thinks by the look on his face that she’s revealed too much.
He looks down at her not unkindly, and she hopes that they can salvage at least something of a vague sort of friendship after all this. She really did like and respect the Duke, despite it all.

‘And, ma’am, if I may: I suggest re-examining a little closer to home for the players in this particular game.’

And she stares at the Duke as he leaves, and for the first time she wonders if she’s just made a huge mistake.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Victoria...

Minor detail: I have changed the name of the Duchess of Buccleuch to her middle name – there are just too many Charlettes (spoiler alert…?). I also have no idea what the show is doing, because the Duchess was thirty when Victoria became Queen, so she certainly wasn’t anywhere near (the brilliant) Diana Rigg’s age in the 1840s.
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Maybe I'm a fool, doesn't matter anyway
My chest is all tight, my heart still aches
These are the days, you need double what it takes
I've missed you so much I shiver and I shake

- Shiver and Shake, Ryan Adams

Thursday 2 June

He’d abandoned her.

He’d left her alone, his little Queen, had abandoned her at the first sign of trouble. He’d panicked, overreacted, and played right in to Conroy’s hands.

He closes his eyes, allowing the whiskey to flow through his veins.

He’d known that headline had hit far too close to home, had targeted a place in his heart he was desperate to keep hidden from the world – from her. And yet he’d still overreacted, panicked at the first sign of danger, and he’s ashamed. So, so ashamed of what he’s done to her.

This is his fault, he thinks.

He’s better than this. Emily had been right. When had he started listening to the news?

He knew; it had been right around the time they’d started talking about her.

Before, he would have scoffed, told her to ignore the comments, and made sure he was seen in public with someone who would deflect the rumours away from her and on to him. Drop a hint here or there, pose for a photo or two. Liz would have more than happily helped. He’d have laughed at it, made fun of the photos and cartoons, and continued on merrily with life.

She would have learned to do the same.

But unlike him and so many others, she didn’t deserve their rubbish, the crap that they’d fling around about her, and that, coupled with his love for her, had made him far too protective. He knew the pain those stories could cause; the impact they could have on so soft a heart and mind, and he’d been so, so desperate to shield her from it all.

His reaction made his traitorous heart all too clear, and now so much had been tainted and ruined by his inability to control his own emotions.

But maybe Emma was right. Maybe, just maybe, it wasn’t as over as he’d thought. Maybe he had panicked, given in to Conroy too easily. Maybe he’d shown his hand just a little too early.
But he doesn’t know anything anymore, so he closes his eyes and lets the alcohol mute the pain once more.

***

Wellington eyes the door to the press room with a level of disdain he reserves for the boyfriends of his daughters. But he’s made his decision, and he would abide by it, as much as it made his stomach tighten.

He’d resisted the urge to ring Melbourne and hurl abuse down the phone at him. What would he say? Melbourne had done nothing other than win the heart of the Queen with his charm and his good looks; a Queen who would very clearly fight tooth and nail to keep him. Even when her assumptions and conclusions were wrong.

Yes, he’d have to deal with that. But he couldn’t really fault her for it. From where she stood, in all her youth and inexperience, it all made perfect sense.

In his charitable moments, he thinks that Melbourne probably doesn’t even know that she knows. He doesn’t particularly care if the world finds out; given everything that had happened in all of their sordid lives, it really was a tiny blip on the radar. But she could turn it into so much more, if she wanted to. She could bring down his government if she tried hard enough, played her hand carefully. Had the kind of help that would be more than willing to exert that kind of power.

He doesn’t think she would go quite that far. She still hates Conroy, he thinks. And it’s so, so clearly not what she really wants, and he thinks Melbourne is going to have to teach her how to really bribe someone properly if she’s ever to try this again. He’s had too much of a bird’s eye view into the Queen’s affections, and it’s really quite clear that she just wants Melbourne back.

He doesn’t think she’s quite that vindictive, but he’s not going to wager his government on the caprice of a twenty-three-year-old Queen who has just lost her favourite toy.

He would do this for her, his Queen, and for himself. He won’t begrudge her her Lord M, if that was what she really wanted. Besides, Melbourne really had bent over backwards to make this awkward three-way relationship work, and he couldn’t deny that she was flourishing under his patient encouragement – even if he didn’t like some of her opinions. But there was time for that.

He wonders for the briefest moment before letting out a snort and shaking his head. No, the papers weren’t wrong; Melbourne and the Queen were far, far too close. But it wasn’t the kind of close they were insinuating.

She was so very clearly infatuated with him, and he with her, but he would bet his house on the fact that neither of them knew just how strongly the other felt. And oh, he prayed it stayed that way, at least until he retired. He was too old for that level of scandal.

He was too old for this level of scandal, and he rolls his eyes. Melbourne had always just been a little too romantic for him; a little too chivalrous, too bent on doing the right thing over what was practical.

Her attempts at an olive branch, at trying to assuage his fears of a partisan Queen, were admirable, if nothing else. It wasn’t going to help much; heaven knew she listened first and foremost to her Lord M, but he couldn’t fault her for trying. And he was more than keen for a voice that favoured his Party in the Palace. Balance was crucial, and even more so when his party did eventually depart from
power.

But most of all, he thinks – she’s not going to be able to get rid of Conroy on her own. Conroy was too smart for that, had been playing the game for too long. He would more than happily destroy her for his own advantage – and had been, over the past months. He’s not sure what Conroy’s endgame is; he suspects it’s just Melbourne’s job and the power and influence that would come with it. But no matter what it was, it was only going to benefit Conroy, and whilst he doesn’t love Melbourne’s influence, he would take William Lamb over John Conroy any day. At least Melbourne has some honour; Conroy’s a worm. His country and his Queen would not be best served by allowing John Conroy any more power than he already had.

No, Conroy had to go, and she would need help. After the events of the past months, he thinks Melbourne won’t mind the task.

He sighs as he enters the room, blinking against the lights. He gives his speech, something small and unimportant, and answers a few questions briefly before his eyes find what they’re seeking.

‘Charlie,’ he calls, pointing slightly at a young man in a blue shirt.

‘Is it true that the Queen asked Lord Melbourne to resign?’

‘Really?’ he asks disdainfully, and the reporter nods his head, smirking. ‘It’s not the place of the Prime Minister to comment on Her Majesty’s household,’ Wellington replies, his tone as disinterested as he can make it. ‘And as far as I know, there has not been any official statement from the Palace about any kind of change in senior positions in the Royal household.’

‘Sources inside the palace are reporting a rift between yourself and Her Majesty over Lord Melbourne’s position – which holds considerable political influence – and that she fired Lord Melbourne to appease the Tory government,’ the reporter calls, and Wellington scoffs disgustedly. ‘Word is that he resigned at your request,’ the man adds slyly, and Wellington thinks that the editor of The Guardian has primed his reporter just a little too well. His lips flatten.

‘Her Majesty alone selects the members of her household, and it behoves me to say that the government should not, has not and will not play any part in those most private decisions. I am honoured and privileged to work with Her Majesty, and at no point have I or will I request something so wholly unrelated to me or my position,’ he almost snarls. ‘And, again, it is not the place of the Prime Minister to comment on the Queen’s household,’ he adds, turning away.

‘Lord Melbourne hasn’t been seen entering or leaving the palace in nearly three weeks,’ the reporter pushes.

Wellington arches an eyebrow. ‘From what I understand, Lord Melbourne has taken a long-scheduled leave of absence. He’s been trying this rather novel idea called a holiday, something I may just try myself very soon,’ he says, and the press gallery sniggers. ‘And given that I met with Her Majesty just this morning, I’d say I’m probably the best source of information on that topic.’ And when the reporter nods and sits, Wellington thinks the first part of his job is done.

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Friday 3 June
When he wakes, he’s confused. He looks around; he’s still in his chair, his head is thick and heavy, and his phone is beeping at him. He lets out a huff when he sees it’s Emma, but the only text in the message is a weblink. He clicks it anyway before forcing himself to stand and move; his throat was dry and his head was now pounding.

When he returns, the page has loaded and he stares at it for a few seconds, blinking, not entirely sure he’s actually awake.

Surely he wouldn’t feel quite this hungover in his dreams.

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**MELBOURNE STILL PRIVATE SECRETARY**

Is Lord Melbourne still Private Secretary to the Queen - with the support of the PM?

Despite rumours to the contrary, the Prime Minister yesterday confirmed that he had not requested the removal of Viscount Melbourne as the Queen’s Private Secretary. Sources inside the Palace indicated a rift had formed between the Queen and the Tory Prime Minister over the former Whig Prime Minister’s appointment, a role that exerts considerable influence…

The Prime Minister explained Melbourne’s apparent recent absence from Buckingham Palace as a ‘scheduled holiday’, and indicated that all was well between the Monarchy and the Government…

And he’s so confused, but he can’t speak to anyone like this, so he drops his phone on the seat of the chair and heads for his shower.

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‘I was wondering when you’d call,’ Wellington greets him.

‘I’m on holiday?’

‘Yes.’

He blinks a few times. ‘How long am I on holiday for?’

‘Oh, I’d say the Queen anticipates your return on Monday.’ And Melbourne lets out a sigh, torn between shouting and caving into the older man’s clear request, but mostly he’s just confused. He doesn’t like the feeling. ‘It’s dead, Melbourne,’ Wellington says after a moment. ‘The hounds have moved on, lost the scent.’

‘Clearly not,’ he retorts a little incredulously.
‘Ah, Melbourne, you know better than that. You’ve gone soft,’ Wellington says a little smugly, and Melbourne’s brain is suddenly firing on all cylinders. ‘You’ve read whatever they’ve written, or you wouldn’t be calling me.’

He thinks back to the article. *A rift...*

And it’s all beginning to make sense, except he’s still missing just one piece of the puzzle. Why was Wellington defending him? He could easily have silenced the idea of a rift between the Queen and her Prime Minister without the little addition of his ‘holiday’. Wellington always been against his appointment, and despite everything, all their successes and her achievements and their sudden ability to work together, he doesn’t really think that Wellington was too unhappy to see the back of him. What on earth could have prompted Wellington to defend him like that? He suspects that as much as he knows Wellington loves the Queen, he wouldn’t be doing this out of the kindness of his heart.

But maybe he was. Maybe she’d gotten under his skin. God knows she was good at that, his little Queen. He was the living, breathing exhibit.

He wonders briefly why he hasn’t had a phone call from Emma. But he’s still not sure about any of it, so he goes fishing. He needs to know why he’s having this conversation at all.

‘I trust you met with the Queen yesterday,’ he says slowly. ‘Peel was having trouble rescheduling as the Queen has been quite unwell.’

‘Oh yes, Her Majesty seems very well now,’ Wellington says none too derisively. ‘You’ve taught her well, Melbourne. Perhaps too well. She’s become quite the little politician.’

Oh. *Oh no.*

What has she done?

And he has a million questions, most of which are to do with how on earth she managed to get the kind of dirt on Wellington that would make him defend William Lamb to the media, and oh, she’s likely in so far over her head and if Emma knew, had *helped...*

‘She has to get rid of Conroy. You’ll have to convince her,’ Wellington says, breaking into his thoughts. ‘You’ll probably have to do most of that. Actually, maybe not, after today,’ he mutters. *Conroy.*

And oh, he thinks he knows exactly what she’s done and he runs his free hand through his hair. She’s pulled all the pieces together and made a picture, and when the picture made sense, she’s run with it. He’s torn between cursing her and being ridiculously proud of what she’s managed to somehow do.

Maybe that had been all it was. She’d added two and two and was desperately trying to leverage that information against her Prime Minister in exchange for him, and *oh.*

It hurts. It’s so painful a thought that he closes his eyes and sits in his chair. That she would do *that* for him, the desperation she must have felt...

He prays that Wellington was kind. It can’t have been an easy conversation.

‘I’m not quite sure that’s up to me,’ he says slowly.
Wellington snorts. ‘Are you kidding?’

‘I don’t want to interfere.’ He sighs. ‘The Duchess,’ he explains.

‘He’s interfering in everything,’ Wellington says, and oh, he knows. He’s standing in his study on a Friday afternoon because of it. But his first concern is still her.

‘I don’t think she knows.’

‘Oh, she knows,’ Wellington adds smugly. ‘I told her.’

‘Oh. Good,’ he mutters, throwing his free hand in the air.

‘Well, not in so many words. But I think she’ll figure it out.’ He lets out what Melbourne thinks is something like a laugh. ‘The damage has been done. You can manage the fall out. You made the mess, Melbourne. The least you can do is stick around to clean it up.’

And when Wellington hangs up in his ear, he wonders what on earth has happened – what else she could possibly have said to her Prime Minister – to create a world in which he’d just had *that* conversation.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

I'll give you everything I have
I'll teach you everything I know
I promise I'll do better
I will always hold you close
But I will learn to let you go
I promise I'll do better
I will soften every edge
I'll hold the world to its best
And I'll do better
With every heartbeat I have left
I will defend your every breath
And I'll do better

Cause you are loved
You are loved more than you know

- Light, Sleeping At Last

Friday 3 June

When he looks at his watch as his phone rings, he thinks she must have been busy with one of the children. ‘That took a solid fifteen hours, Emily Temple. You’re slipping.’

‘You’re on holiday?’ she asks incredulously.

‘Apparently.’

‘Please tell me you know what’s going on. Henry’s been digging around since the press conference, but he hasn’t found anything. Wellington is playing this very close to his chest.’

He’s not surprised; he would too. ‘I have my suspicions.’

‘Have you spoken to her?’

‘Not yet,’ he says after a pause.

‘William,’ she says, he thinks she sounds more and more like their mother every day. He hears her let out a sigh. ‘You’re coming for dinner on Monday after work and you are going to tell me all about it,’ she decrees, and he doesn’t miss the emphasis.

‘I look forward to it,’ he replies, and she huffs.

‘I’m glad it’s sorted,’ she says a little more quietly. ‘I think you’re good for each other. You need her just as much as she needs you.’
He closes his eyes and lets out a sigh. Between Emma and Emily, he hated, hated that he was so transparent. ‘It’s not sorted just yet,’ he adds a little futilely, before letting out a sigh. ‘Yeah,’ he mutters. ‘Maybe.’

She snorts. ‘See you Monday.’

***

Saturday 4 June

He wanders in, standing at the back, just watching her talk and smile at her guests – all of whom are admiring Hayter’s portrait which has taken centre stage in the middle of the room – and he feels the warmth bloom in his chest. He’s missed her, missed this.

It only takes a few seconds – five at most – before she’s frowning slightly and looking around and her eyes find his. Her mouth drops open and her cheeks pink, and then she’s biting her lip and dropping his gaze before looking back up at him. He gives her a small smile that she doesn’t return, and he thinks she’s squashing her hopes back down, afraid of being hurt again, and his heart aches just a little. He’s done that. He’s made her gun-shy.

He glances around the room, and his eyes land on Conroy, who is looking at him with something akin to shock. But he can’t hold Melbourne’s eye; he looks away almost instantly, his mouth twisting in distaste.

He smiles; he’s going to win this. Oh, he was going to destroy John Conroy for what he’s done to his little Queen, if it was the last thing he did. And he was going to relish every moment.

But that was not going to happen today, he thinks, as he turns back to where she’s standing now, her eyes flicking to his every few moments. He’s already thinking about it, how to make it work, to force Conroy’s hand, but he’s not going to bring it up today. That’s quite firmly on the agenda for next week.

If she took him back.

It still sat in the back of his mind, niggling him more than he’d care to admit, that thought that perhaps she wasn’t going to take him back. That it was too late. That his notice period was officially up as of 5pm yesterday and she was going to hold him to it. He may have already lost her.

He would deserve it – more than deserve it, he would have earned it. He didn’t deserve her, his little Queen. He had abandoned her, played right into Conroy’s hands, let his emotions control his head. No, he deserved little more than for her to turn him out on his ear.

He really hopes she doesn’t.

But then Peel is speaking at the front, and everyone’s attention is diverted, and he takes the opportunity to slowly work his way through the standing crowd to the front of the room, where she’s standing just off to the side. He’s halfway through the crowd when she steps forward to the podium
to speak, and her eyes immediately find his. He almost automatically gives her a tiny smile and a
nod, and she drops his gaze instantly, focusing on the paperwork on the podium in front of her. And
the memories of a similar room and a tiny, new, terrified Queen standing before him come flooding
back; but this time she is not tiny, nor terrified, and he’s so proud of her clear voice and kind words
for the artist.

He doesn’t miss the fact that every time she looks out into the crowd, her eyes eventually, somehow
find his.

By the time he reaches her, the ceremony is over; she’s thanked Hayter for his work, thanked her
guests for coming, and he moves through the milling crowd to stand just behind her.

‘It’s lovely, ma’am,’ he says quietly, and she lets out a huff.

‘I think I like it,’ she says haltingly, before her back straightens and she turns to face him, her eyes
wary and face vulnerable, and he’s thrown a little by it.

‘I gave you a letter, ma’am,’ he says quietly, looking down at his feet briefly, and oh, just where did
those butterflies that were now swarming in his stomach come from? ‘If you’re willing, ma’am, I’d
like it back.’

The way her mouth drops open just slightly makes him think that perhaps she hadn’t actually
anticipated that any of this would actually work. That she’d be able to convince him to return.
‘Really?’ she asks a little breathlessly.

‘Yes, ma’am.’

And then she’s smiling at him and biting her lip, and he can’t help but grin back, the warmth
blossoming in his chest now spreading across his face.

But then she drops his gaze, and she’s blushing, and he wonders what on earth he’s said or done. ‘I
don’t have it, Lord M,’ she declares.

He frowns. ‘I left it on your desk.’

‘I know. I, uh, tore it up,’ she admits, biting her lip and looking away from him. He closes his eyes
and shakes his head, letting out a quiet laugh.

Of course she did.

***

He’s standing off to the side with Emma when he sees Wellington coming. She must see him too,
because she mutters a quiet good luck before walking off.

‘Melbourne,’ he says by way of greeting, turning to stand next to Melbourne, surveying the scene in
front of them.

‘Arthur.’

‘Good to see you got the message,’ he says, and Melbourne’s lips twist.
‘I’m wondering when the press will,’ he replies, and Wellington nods.

‘I’m confident that they’ll leave well enough alone now. It’ll just appear to be business as usual,’ he says. ‘But you do have some unfinished business. Don’t leave that too long,’ he warns and Melbourne nods slowly. Conroy lost this round, but he thinks round two won’t be far away. Wellington turns to mock-study Melbourne’s face. ‘I’m surprised you don’t have more of a tan.’ Melbourne just rolls his eyes, and Wellington lets out a sigh. ‘I told you you’d given up too soon. You’ve lost the fight, Melbourne.’

Oh, he feels it in his chest. That’s where Wellington was so right and so wrong. He would fight tooth and nail to keep her safe. He would sacrifice everything, everything he had, to ensure that she was the best Queen she could be.

He would not fight for himself.

‘Perhaps,’ he says. ‘Or perhaps I was fighting for the wrong thing.’

‘Don’t make me regret this, Melbourne,’ is all Wellington replies with before moving away.

***

He’s standing on one of the balconies of the Palace, waiting, allowing what was left of the sun to warm his skin. He’d more than happily acquiesced to her request that he stay behind after the unveiling – he’d anticipated that she’d want to talk – and so he waits while she changes. It was still cool – summer was taking its sweet time this year – but the sun was out and he thinks she just doesn’t want to be locked inside any more. He has some idea of what the last three weeks have looked like for her; they’ve looked much the same for him.

She appears a few minutes later in jeans and a jumper with flowers all over it, and with two coffees in hand, and he smiles as he takes his. They stand in silence for a moment, before he speaks. ‘I had a very interesting phone call yesterday,’ he says, and she looks up at him in what he knows she thinks is innocence, but is not fooling him for a second. He waits, his eyebrows raised, but she says nothing. He almost laughs at the way her lips tremble ever so slightly after a few moments. ‘Might I enquire as to your conversation with the Duke, ma’am?’ She goes bright red but says nothing, and his lips twist in amusement at his little Queen. ‘I’m pleased to hear there’s no rift between the monarchy and the government,’ he teases gently.

‘Wellington just wanted you to go because he thinks you’re corrupting me,’ she says, and he nods.

‘I can see how you came to that conclusion, ma’am,’ he says carefully. He’s not going to correct her today; that can be Monday’s job. Or Tuesday’s, he thinks, if she really hasn’t done any work in the past week. Conroy wasn’t going anywhere this afternoon.

‘There was something else,’ she says in a rush, ‘about the Duke.’ And the way her cheeks go an even deeper shade of crimson sets off warning bells in his head. He’d been right; she’d somehow, somehow found something else. He turns to face her more fully. She is so, so uncomfortable; she’s dancing on her feet a little and playing with her fingertips in the way she does when she’s worried about what she’s going to say.

‘Yes, ma’am?’
'It was about…the Duke and your wife,’ she says quickly, staring up at him, and he’s blindsided.

‘Oh,’ he says, in lieu of anything intelligent, as he processes this new information. He can feel his mouth open and close as he desperately thinks of the right thing to say here; her eyes are still burning into him. ‘That was a long time ago, ma’am,’ he says, blinking.

‘That’s what Emma said,’ she says, and he closes his eyes for a moment. ‘I’m sorry, Lord M. Harriet told me. She didn’t mean to, it just sort of slipped out. There were so many stories about you in the press and I thought…’ and she trails off, and she’s so anxious and worked up about it and he has to calm her. He thinks he’s going to have to explain this, all his sordid past. Well, whatever of it she hasn’t already read on the internet, and anything he says will probably be far more tame.

‘I…I’m not…angry with the Duke, ma’am,’ he says slowly, before letting out a huff. ‘Well, not anymore.’ He looks out at the freshly-mown lawns in front of them. ‘Caro was…unhappy. We both were, and we…fought. A lot. Even after she’d returned, it wasn’t great. I was away a lot, and…’ he trails off, unable to look at her in his shame. ‘Neither of us is blameless, as I’m sure you’ve read.’ She’d been vindictive like that, his dead wife. It had stung like nothing else, but he wasn’t perfect. He’d let his own eyes wander more than he normally would have, in his own petty revenge. He wasn’t sure he’d ever forgive Wellington, though.

But it was all ancient history; he had put it aside for her. ‘As I said, it was a very long time ago, ma’am,’ he says eventually, forcing himself to meet her gaze. ‘It’s all water under the bridge now,’ he says as flippantly as he can, but she’s still staring at him, and he hasn’t fooled her.

‘I would never have told anyone,’ she says quietly. ‘I just…’

‘I know,’ he says, letting out a breath, and she turns to stare at him. He meets her gaze, the small smile on his face masking everything.

He absolutely has no idea if she would have made good on her apparent threats to the Duke. She had been very clearly desperate, his little Queen, spurred on by the pain of loneliness and hurt, and desperation had skewed everything. Now, in hindsight, in the light of relief, it’s different.

‘I think, Lord M, that you care deeply. You just don't like to show it,’ she whispers, and he can’t bear to look at her any longer but he can’t drag his eyes away from this beautiful young woman standing in front of him. He can see her there, his little Queen, but oh, she’s certainly not so young or little anymore.

‘I think you know me too well, ma’am,’ he says quietly, with a small smile. When she returns his smile with her own tiny one, he forces himself to look away, back out over the gardens, and take a sip of his coffee.

But she doesn’t know, not really. He told her it was for her reputation, that she needed to protect herself, and that he wasn’t what was best for her, and he hadn’t lied. It had been the truth. There had just been so many more layers to it than she knew.

He needs to explain, somehow, his change of heart. He’s imagined this conversation a thousand times in the past twelve hours, and each time he cannot think of the right words to explain. He cannot tell her the truth – not all of it, anyway – and anything else just seems not enough, somehow.

But first, before anything, he needs to apologise. ‘I am sorry for hurting you, ma’am,’ he says quietly, in lieu of any kind of real explanation, and her face is so soft and vulnerable, and his heart aches. Even if his decision had objectively been the right one, he’d still caused her pain. ‘It was not my intention.’
In a round-about way, it has all worked out fairly well, he thinks. His resignation had forced the issue to a head; the press had reported his resignation, and the stories had died. He just never imagined that it would end quite the way it has.

‘I know,’ she says. ‘I think I understand. You know what it’s like for people to think things of you that aren’t true - what it’s like for them to treat you based on your reputation rather than who you are.’ He watches her carefully. ‘You didn’t want that for me.’

He’s surprised at how perceptive she is in this, but she has had some time to think about it. ‘No, ma’am.’ He studies the coffee his hands for a moment. He should say something. Try to explain further. ‘I think…’ he lets out a huff of a laugh; he just can’t find the words. ‘I overreacted,’ he says bluntly. ‘I should have been more patient.’

She gives him a half-smile. ‘It’s okay, Lord M,’ she says gently. ‘I understand. You did what you thought best at the time.’ He nods slowly; that certainly was a fair assessment. ‘You’ll stay?’ she asks in a quiet voice, and he nods.

‘It would seem I have no choice, ma’am,’ he replies lightly, a small smirk on his face, and she smiles.

It takes a moment, but then she lets out a giggle, and he a quiet laugh, and he allows his heart this moment of lightness, where he can just be happy.

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She watches him smile, laugh, and she knows, knows for sure, is absolutely certain that she’s done the right thing. She had fought for him, her Lord M, and she had won. She had him back.

His smile, his quiet laughter, tells her that he’s pleased, too. She had vowed not to let him fall apart again, not to allow the colour to seep from the edges of his world till there was nothing but grey, and she couldn’t do that unless he was by her side.

But she knows why he gave her up, and as she watches his smile slowly fade into something more relaxed, she knows that he willingly sacrificed his own happiness for her.

He’d told her that being her Private Secretary had brought the colour back into his world, had given him reason to smile again, reason to continue with life, and he’d been willing to sacrifice all that for her. To protect her from the press, and from herself. And oh, the thought fills her chest and she thinks she might burst with this emotion that she realises is gratitude. She doesn’t deserve him, her Lord M, and she would treasure every moment that she has with him.

She knows what she could have had. But instead, she has him.

Before she knows what she’s doing she’s wrapping her arm around his and squeezing it, pressing herself into his side for a moment before pulling back a little. She feels his other hand cover hers at the crook of his arm and squeeze gently, and she feels a happy twinge in her chest.

‘Thank you,’ she whispers, looking up at him, and when he turns his warm, soft gaze on her, something curls low in her stomach, some other thing that replaces the swelling in her chest – something that she thinks she’s beginning, slowly, to understand.
It’s much later when he’s driving home that he thinks something has changed. He’s not sure what yet; can’t put his finger on it, but something is different. Perhaps he shouldn’t be surprised; they’ve weathered this storm together and separately, and he thinks it has revealed more than he’d like about their friendship. He would have to be as careful as ever. He loved her so, this beautiful Queen of his, but he would never allow her to see it.

But there really was no going back now; he would simply have to contain it, and do a far better job of it than he’d done so far. As Wellington had said: he needed to clean up his own mess. He doesn’t think Wellington really knew just how right he’d been, and on just how many levels.

He knows one thing for absolute certain: he had misjudged. She relied on him far more than he’d cared to see, and not just as her Private Secretary. Her fighting so hard has made it so very clear that she cares all too much.

He would have to do better. He’s just not entirely sure how.

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Monday 6 June

When he walks up to the counter, Joe grins widely. ‘How was the holiday?’ he asks with a smirk, and Melbourne grins back.

‘Quite relaxing, thanks.’

‘Won’t need the coffee delivered anymore?’ the barista asks, and Melbourne shakes his head.

‘No, I think we’re good for now,’ he replies, looking around.

‘It’s been quiet for ages,’ Joe says quietly. ‘They gave up pretty quickly.’

‘They always do,’ he replies, waving his card in front of the machine. ‘Thank you for all your help,’ He says as Joe passes him the tray. ‘Everyone was quite grateful for your efforts.’

‘All good, mate. Happy to help,’ he shrugs. ‘She’s our Queen too.’

Melbourne grins at that.

When he walks through the gate to the palace, a voice calls from the other side. ‘How was your holiday, Lord Melbourne?’ and his lips twist in amusement. He turns to see a young woman standing at the gate, a photographer next to her. ‘Very relaxing, thank you,’ he replies, not stopping.

‘Where did you go?’ the reporter asks, and she must be new if she thinks he can trap him so easily.
‘Oh, here and there,’ he replies noncommittally.

‘So there’s no truth to the rumours of a rift between Her Majesty and the Prime Minister?’ she calls after him, and he lets out a laugh.

‘After all this time? Of course not. But you print what you will,’ he says.

When Peel sees him walk through the door in his suit and tie, coffee in hand, he lets out a long, heavy sigh that is quite distinctly relief and Melbourne can’t really blame him. ‘The rumours are true, then,’ Peel says from behind his desk when Melbourne walks into his office.

‘Yes,’ he says. ‘My resignation was officially rejected on Saturday afternoon.’

‘I see,’ Peel says, his eyes narrow. ‘Well, she hasn’t touched anything in over a week.’

‘I guess we’ll all be a little busy for a while then, won’t we?’ he replies, quirking his eyebrows slightly. ‘Including Her Majesty.’

‘Fantastic,’ Peel says, and Melbourne smiles.

‘I think we’ll find she’s had a fairly quiet weekend,’ he says as he heads back to his own desk.

‘You’ll find,’ Peel calls from behind him. ‘You. You will find.’

‘Yes, I will find,’ he replies, he lets out a quiet chuckle when he hears Peel mutter Thank God under his breath.

When he arrives at Emma’s desk, she gives him a look. ‘Good morning,’ she says, and he raises an eyebrow at her.

‘Did you even try to convince her that attempting to blackmail the Prime Minister wasn’t the best idea?’ he says quietly but forcefully.

‘Oh, yes. I don’t think she could see the wood for the trees by that point,’ she replies, and he eventually nods.

‘You should have called me.’

‘And said what?’

‘You should have told me what she was going to do.’

She snorts. ‘What would you have done? Tried to talk her out of it?’

‘Yes!’

‘Well, aren’t we all glad that I didn’t call, then?’ she says, her tone hard, but smug, and he sighs.

When he walks into her office with his usual coffee tray, it’s like he’d never left, except for the wider-than-usual smile she gives him, the way she practically jumps out of her chair to greet him. He
can’t help but grin back at her as she takes her coffee; his tattered heart is so, so full, and oh, he has missed her so, his beautiful Queen, with her eager blue eyes and smiles that light up her face. He wonders how he found the strength to give this up – to give her up.

‘Good morning, Lord M.’

‘Good morning, ma’am.’
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Taking over this town, they should worry
But these problem aside, I think I taught you well
That we won't run, we won't run, we won't run

And in the winter night sky ships are sailing
Looking down on these bright blue city lights
And they won't wait, they won't wait, they won't wait
We're here to stay, we're here to stay, we're here to stay

Howling ghosts they reappear
In mountains that are stacked with fear
But you're a king and I'm a lionheart

- King and Lionheart, Of Monsters and Men

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, but, you know, Christmas.

Merry (belated) Christmas!

Monday 6 June

But no matter how pleased she is to see him, how happy he is to have her back, his little Queen, they need to deal with the practical fallout from the last three weeks.

That means piles and piles of invitations and letters and legislation and it’s a mess. Half of it is in her office, and half of it has been rather unceremoniously dumped (yet characteristically of Peel, organised into neat folders) on his desk. He’s just managed to find it all and re-sort it into various different folders – the man really had no clue what she liked and didn’t like – and he’s heading to her office, his arms full, when she appears in front of him in the hallway. ‘I know who it was – who leaked all that rubbish to the papers. It wasn’t the Duke,’ she says a little breathlessly.

He blinks, surprised. She’s probably only just worked it out, he thinks, by the tone of her voice and the way she’s clearly run some of the way to his office. But the little furrow in her brow and the way her eyes are wide and bright tells him she’s angry and hurt – and he thinks perhaps a little resigned, too. He just frowns a little and nods, and her eyes narrow a little at him. ‘You already know.’

‘I have my suspicions.’ He’s acutely aware that they’re just standing in a hallway of the palace where anyone could overhear. ‘Shall we continue to your office, ma’am? These folders are rather heavy,’
he lies, and she nods after a moment.

‘It was Sir John,’ she says bitterly as he places the folders on the desk.

‘Yes, I think so,’ he replies, and she stops pacing angrily to stare at him.

‘You think so?’

‘I don’t have proof, ma’am,’ he replies. ‘But it makes sense.’ She stares at him, her gaze heavy, and he waits for a moment for her to process it all. ‘You seem very sure, ma’am,’ he says carefully, and he watches as her shoulders deflate a little, and he thinks she understands what he’s getting at; he’d have thought she’d be a little less eager to make another mistake like this. ‘What makes you so sure?’ he asks as matter-of-factly as he can. *Work it through logically. Learn this.*

‘I went back through as many of the articles as I could find and made a list of what they seemed to know – facts and information.’ He blinks. Well, that explains why she hadn’t made much headway into her letters over the weekend. ‘It had to be someone who knew the inner workings of the palace,’ she says, and he nods. ‘They knew that you often worked late, stayed to have dinner often, and where you got our coffee from,’ she says, holding out her hand and counting off her fingers. ‘They knew what I had said about the Duke,’ she continues.

‘A direct quote, ma’am,’ he interjects, and she hums in agreement, tilting her head slightly as she considers the implications of his words.

‘Yes. And they had the photos from the Coronation Ball. And they knew you had resigned before you’d officially submitted any paperwork – before most people knew. I only told Emma, Harriet, Nancy and Lehzen, and I assume Sir Robert knew,’ she says. He nods; he’d sent him an email that Friday right before he’d left.

‘And your Prime Minister,’ he adds.

‘And Mama,’ she adds a little awkwardly, not looking at him, and he think she’s a little embarrassed at her behaviour that weekend. Emma had told him she’d only finally come out from her room on the Sunday after the Duchess had spent some time with her; he’d wondered at the time what the Duchess had said to convince her.

‘But assuming at least some of the Palace staff also knew, that’s still a very long list of people,’ she says quickly, and he doesn’t blame her. ‘I was thinking this morning about it all, and I wondered who else might want to discredit you in the press. Who would know all of that and what would they stand to gain by your departure? And then it was so obvious,’ she says quietly. He grimaces at the way she’s so obviously beating herself up over it all, all her mistakes and what he knew she would see as her own weakness. ‘I should have known,’ she all but whispers, and he shakes his head.

‘No,’ he says firmly, and her eyes flick up to his. ‘You couldn’t have known that he would stoop so low.’ He can feel his own anger rise again now, bubbling away.

‘He’s always resented you, and he’s always wanted to control me. He even told Mama you were manipulating me!’ she cries, and he nods. He knows. But then she goes quiet again, dropping his gaze. ‘It was the timing of the news of your resignation that confirmed it,’ she says, and he nods after a moment, and he can feel the tug of a smile. She was so clever, his little Queen, to figure that out. It had taken him a good few days to put that together, even after Liz had called.

‘It took too long,’ he agrees, and she nods.

‘Mama only found out on Sunday morning,’ she says slowly, and she can’t meet his eyes, and this
hurts. He can see it on her face, in the way she’s biting her lip.

‘Everyone else found out Friday night. The Duchess would have told Sir John sometime on Sunday or maybe even Monday morning, and it appeared in the news on Monday afternoon,’ he finishes for her.

‘Sir John knew by Sunday evening,’ she says quietly, and he stares at her for a moment before nodding slowly. Of course, Conroy would have twisted the knife at the first available opportunity. ‘I can’t believe she would…’ she trails off, looking up at him, pained. ‘She knows how much I hate Sir John.’

‘I imagine that she believed she was doing what was best for you, and for him. I don’t believe for a moment that the Duchess would ever deliberately hurt you in such a way, ma’am,’ he reassures her, and he believes what he’s saying: he’s sure the Duchess wants what is best for her daughter, and in her mind – a mind that has been warped by Conroy’s twenty-year reign – it is not Melbourne who fits that role. ‘No, if I were to guess, I would bet this was all Sir John.’

‘But surely he cannot imagine that I would ever allow him to be anything in my household, even with you gone!’ she says angrily. ‘I have told him so many times!’

‘He’s an ambitious man, ma’am. And it’s hard to look a gift horse in the mouth.’

She frowns, confused. ‘Gift horse? What do you mean?’

‘I suspect there was quite a bit of money paid for those photos of you at the Coronation Ball, ma’am.’

‘Money,’ she breathes, and she’s frowning. ‘Well, that explains my mother’s new bracelet,’ she mumbles, and he frowns. ‘He bought it for her,’ she explains. ‘She tells me she can’t afford clothes, but he buys her a diamond bracelet.’

Well, that answers that question, he thinks. The going rate for private photos of the Queen was higher than PR had estimated. He’d have to send an email.

‘He has to go,’ she says, interrupting his thoughts, and he nods.

‘Yes, ma’am, I think that would be wise,’ he agrees, but stops. This is where it was difficult. ‘But you can’t really make him do anything,’ he says slowly, and she frowns.

‘What do you mean?’

‘He’s technically not a member of your household, ma’am. He’s comptroller of the Duchess’s household. He doesn’t actually work for you.’

He watches as she realises what he’s saying. ‘So Mama would have to fire him,’ she says, and he nods. ‘That’s never going to happen.’

He tilts his head in acknowledgement. ‘It’s unlikely,’ he agrees, and she stares up at him, and he knows she’s waiting for him to come up with a solution, and it pains him more than he’s willing to admit that he doesn’t have one for her. Yet.

Even if she were to tell her mother about Sir John’s role in discrediting him – and the tarnishing of her daughter’s reputation at the same time – he doesn’t think it would be motivation enough to make the Duchess give Sir John up; she’d likely just blame him instead for corrupting her daughter. And that’s assuming the Duchess didn’t already know, which he thought was entirely possible, but
somewhat unlikely.

It’s Conroy that’s been dominating his thoughts for the past forty-eight hours, and he was still no closer to a solution. Conroy had failed, and he knew it, and he’s absolutely certain that he’s going to want to exact some kind of revenge. He’s all too aware of the Queen’s history with Conroy. It’s been sitting in the back of his mind, an obstacle in her path to freedom. He’s been waiting for the announcement, for something that tells them that it’s coming, that tell-all book about the young Queen’s early years at Kensington Palace. He knows why Conroy hasn’t done it yet – it would ruin irreparably his relationship with both the Duchess and the Queen, and Conroy wasn’t quite done with them yet. But as soon as the easy money dried up…

He has to warn her.

He really, really doesn’t want to. She’s not going to react well, he thinks. He doubts it’s even occurred to her that Conroy would do such a thing.

As much as Wellington was right – Conroy had to go – he also knows it’s not going to be easy.

‘Give it time, ma’am,’ he says instead. ‘We’ll think of something.’

She lets out an angry huff, but nods. ‘I’m going to ban him from the palace! Everywhere but Mama’s rooms,’ she declares, and oh, no, she can’t do that. He understands, he really does – he has already imagined what he’ll say when he sees Sir John in the hallways of the palace next – but she has to be careful.

‘Does Sir John know that you know it was him, ma’am?’ he asks.

She thinks for a moment before shaking her head. ‘I haven’t seen him since Saturday, at the unveiling of the portrait,’ she says.

He nods. ‘Can I suggest that you perhaps wait until you know exactly how you’re going to remove him? If he thinks you know what he’s done, he’ll likely close ranks, be on his guard, and it’ll be that much harder to do anything.’

She lets out a breath, but nods, and he can see she doesn’t want to. She wants to scream and shout and tear Sir John limb from limb and oh, he understands. Betrayal hurts like nothing else, and he has long since accepted that he would struggle not to end anyone who hurt her.

But she can’t. Not yet. She has to be patient. They both have to be.

Looking at the anger in her eyes, the desire for revenge, he knows without a doubt that he’s going to have to be patient enough for the two of them. She has grown and changed so much, his little Queen, but she is still learning not to let her emotions rule her. This is going to be a long road, and she’s going to need all the self-control she can get.

‘Be patient, ma’am,’ he says gently, and she shakes her head, her hands in fists.

‘That’s not going to be easy, Lord M,’ she says, pacing a little.

‘I know,’ he agrees. ‘But think of it this way: Conroy’s lost, ma’am. If his aim was to get rid of me, ma’am, well, I fear he underestimated his true opponent – you.’

She looks up at him, and he watches as she processes his words. He’s made a study of watching her think; next to her laugh, it’s become one of his favourite pastimes, just watching her work through or slowly realise something. All her emotions show on her face in the subtlest of ways; her eyes become
a little unseeing, her lips move a little, and she gets that little furrow in his brow, the one that makes him smile when it disappears. He can’t help but smile a little at the way her face transforms from anger to an almost smug happiness this time. ‘But you’ve only won the battle, ma’am. You now have to win the war. If Sir John can wait twenty years for this, I think we can wait a few weeks while we figure something out. You are far stronger than he’ll ever be,’ he finishes with, and her smile turns a little shy before she nods.

‘We’ll come up with something,’ she repeats, and he nods.

‘Yes, ma’am. I just have no idea what.

‘I need to apologise to the Duke,’ she says out of the blue, and he nods. ‘Again,’ she adds, and he can’t help but smile at her wry cringe.

‘I think he will be as gracious as he was the last time,’ he says, and she shakes her head at herself.

‘The Duke is kind to me,’ she agrees. ‘I think he’s probably too kind to do what I accused him of.’ He lets out a huff of a laugh. ‘Maybe. He is a politician, ma’am,’ he jokes, and she smiles wryly at him.

‘Would you have done it?’ she asks after a moment, the little furrow in her brow returning.

‘I doubt it,’ he concedes after a moment’s reflection. Especially not if I knew you, he thinks. There’s no way he would be able to hurt her the way Conroy had – the way Conroy had spent twenty years trying to mould and suppress her, to turn her into a puppet for his own ambition. He squashes the thought down; his own anger was there, simmering away. He just had to keep it under control for now, until they could come up with something, some way to get rid of Conroy without hurting her further. He worries about what Conroy will do in his revenge, but he thinks for now they have at least some time, and that’s all he needs.

But there’s just one more thing he needs to deal with today, and he doesn’t really want to, but he knows that he really, really should. She’d been so, so brave, his little Queen, in her desperation to have him back – he would do everything he could to not allow the conditions that created that kind of desperation in her to return – but she really cannot do this again. ‘Can I make one other suggestion, ma’am?’ he says, and she looks at him and nods. ‘Despite what the movies might suggest, blackmail rarely works out well for the person doing the blackmailing.’ And her cheeks pink, and she drops his gaze, nodding slowly. ‘Having said that, I don’t think I’ve ever had such a… satisfying conversation with the Duke of Wellington before,’ he adds after a few seconds, his lips twisting slightly.

And when she smiles a little bashfully, he can’t help but smile back at her.
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

I've got my memories
They're always inside of me
But I can't go back
Back to how it was
I believe in now
I've come too far now I can't go back
Back to how it was
Created for a place I've never known

This is home
Now I'm finally where I belong
Yeah, this is home
I've been searching for a place of my own
Now I've found it
Maybe this is home
Yeah, this is home

- *This is Home*, Switchfoot

Chapter Notes

And this is where the timeline might have become a little confusing. My apologies.
We’re now a good eighteen-twenty months after her ascension, and just on a year after the Coronation. I’ll continue with the general dates at the start of the various sections to make it easier for now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Week of Monday 6 June**

She’s about to grab her phone and call to Dash when she sees it – he’s left his phone behind. It’s unlike him, she thinks; he’s so careful with everything, but it had been a long and busy day, his first day back, and he’d been a little distracted when he’d left. She picks it up and the screen lights up, and she blinks.

The screen is filled with the face of a little boy with dark curly hair and brown eyes – soft brown eyes that seem to look into her heart, and her mind fills in the blanks for her.

*Augustus.*

She’s captivated by the sweet smile and the big dark brown curls and the way his cheeks dimple in
the same way Lord M’s do when he’s smiling, her heart aches for this adorable little boy.

But then his phone screen fades to black, and she frowns, pressing the home button again, and the screen springs back to life. She smiles a little as she studies the little boy’s face; she thinks he can’t have been more than six or seven years old in the photo. She thinks he’s adorable, this little boy, whose cheekbones already belie his parentage, and something softens in her chest.

She sucks in a breath when she remembers. *His little boy.*

The pain of it surprises her; it seems so patently *unfair* that this beautiful little boy, his son, should have been taken from him. So *cruel.*

She lets out a breath as she taps the home button again.

He doesn’t quite have her Lord M’s eyes, she thinks, as much as they are bright and kind as they gaze at her – she knows whose eyes he has – but he definitely has his smile.

But then the screen blinks out again, and she frowns a little as a cold settles over her. She’s prying, looking at something personal that he hadn’t willingly shared, and she turns the phone over in her hand and walks out to Emma. ‘Lord M left his phone behind,’ she tells her, and Emma’s eyebrows rise.

‘I’ll call his office,’ she says, picking up the handset of her phone.

‘It’s okay,’ Victoria says, and Emma blinks at her, and she’s surprised herself. ‘I can take it down to him,’ she shrugs, and she watches as Emma’s eyebrows rise even further.

‘Are you sure, ma’am?’ is what she eventually decides on, Victoria thinks, and she nods in reply, shrugging.

She’s only been all the way down to his office once before, not all that long ago – Emma had given her directions – but she’d been distracted that day, so desperate to see him, and so it takes a few moments to figure out where she’s going once she gets a little way down the hall. But she eventually finds her way, and when she arrives at his office door, she pauses. He’s got his head down, and he’s focusing on something on his desk, and she can’t help but watch him as he works.

It only lasts a moment; he looks up, and the look of surprise on his face makes her grin. ‘Ma’am!’ he exclaims, standing up from behind his desk and frowning slightly at her.

‘You left something behind, Lord M,’ she says, waving his phone in the air, passing it to him as he approaches.

‘Oh. Thank you,’ he says, frowning again. ‘You didn’t need to deliver it personally, ma’am. I would have come and collected it.’

She shrugs again, and she’s really not sure why she’s doing this. ‘I haven’t really seen your office before,’ she says by way of excuse as she looks around. It wasn’t a large room, made smaller by the built-in bookshelves and the general clutter – he wasn’t *neat,* her Lord M – but it was all warm colours and high ceilings and leather and dark wood, and she’s reminded very briefly of his library.

‘I apologise for the mess,’ he says, seemingly reading her mind, glancing around. But she feels like she should ask him, tell him that she knows. That she’s seen the picture of his son on his phone, that image that had felt so private.

‘Your lock screen,’ she starts, and he looks at her. ‘I didn’t mean to pry, it turned on when I picked it
up,’ she explains, and he shakes his head in acknowledgment and dismissal. ‘Is it Augustus?’ she asks a little timidly, and his eyebrows rise momentarily in surprise, and he glances down at the phone in his hand.

‘Yes,’ he says. ‘It’s my favourite photo,’ he admits a little more softly, and she hadn’t realised just how desperately she wants to hear more about this little boy that had been his. This little version of her Lord M.

‘He has a sweet smile,’ she says, grimacing as she realises what she’s said. Had. Had a sweet smile.

‘Yes,’ he replies, his face a little sad, and she suddenly regrets everything, wishes she could take it all back, the pain she’s caused. But then he looks at her, his gaze a little shrewd before it softens. ‘He was autistic,’ he says quietly, and she blinks.

Autistic.

‘He was fairly high-functioning, but he didn’t love eye contact,’ he explains, his voice soft as he glances down at his phone. ‘That’s one of the only photos where he’s actually looking into the camera.’

And oh, her heart is breaking and why did she have to ask? She has to make it better.

‘I wish I could have met him,’ she says, and when his eyes crumple just a little, his chest sinks in just slightly, she wants to flee, to run from his pain-filled gaze, to reach out and hug him and take all the pain away.

‘I think he would have liked you, ma’am,’ his voice low and rougher than she thinks she’s heard it in a long time, and she can’t help but bite her lip and smile.

He would have liked her.

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She’d promised. He’d held up his end of the deal, and she would, of course, honour hers.

Maybe she’d be nice, she thinks. She would never be Harriet, or Emma, but maybe that was okay. She would make the most of this, whatever she was met with.

Maybe it would be good for her. Lord M always encourages her to think about different perspectives on things, always tries to get her to stand in someone else’s shoes on so many issues. Maybe Anna Scott would be another perspective. Someone else to learn from.

She turns to Harriet. ‘She’s twenty-nine.’

‘Yes.’

‘And she mostly does charity work.’

Harriet nods. ‘She works a lot with the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development – it’s the Church’s international development charity, and the official aid agency of the Catholic Church in England and Wales.’
She nods. ‘I’d never heard of it before yesterday.’

‘Me neither, ma’am, but they apparently do a lot of great work around the world.’ Harriet purses her lips. ‘I wonder just how Catholic she is,’ she muses. ‘She’s already got a son, and she’s been married for not quite two years,’ Harriet says, raising her eyebrows and smirking a little. Victoria frowns a little, shaking her head. ‘Very strict Catholics don’t believe in contraception,’ Harriet explains quietly, glancing at the door. ‘They think it’s immoral – something about it being a barrier between husband and wife.’

‘Oh,’ she says, blinking. ‘Well, I guess we’ll find out,’ she replies, and Harriet nods.

‘I’m sure she’s lovely,’ Harriet says. ‘George says her husband has a good reputation, even if he is a Tory.’

Emma appears with a short, pretty woman with dark brown hair following behind her. ‘Ma’am, Lady Anna, Duchess of Buccleuch,’ she says, and Victoria smiles politely as the Duchess curtseys.

‘Your Majesty,’ the Duchess says.

‘Duchess. Thank you for coming.’

‘Of course, ma’am,’ she says. ‘When royalty calls, one heeds the call.’

Victoria blinks. ‘Oh. Well, thank you.’

She introduces Harriet before accepting the tea that Emma has poured for them. ‘I believe your husband knew my Uncle,’ she starts, and the Duchess nods.

‘Oh, yes, ma’am. The late King stayed at Dalkeith a number of times. That was a few years before our marriage – before I really knew Walter,’ she says, and Victoria nods. ‘I did not have the pleasure of meeting the King.’

‘Dalkeith Palace is in Scotland?’ she enquires, following the natural line of the conversation, and the Duchess smiles.

‘Yes. It’s just beautiful, ma’am.’

‘I’ve not been to Scotland,’ she admits. ‘Well, not a visit I remember.’

The Duchess’s eyes widen. ‘Oh, ma’am, it’s some of the most magnificent country. I can’t recommend it highly enough. Nothing like the south of England.’

Victoria smiles. ‘Yes, I’ve seen photos. It looks rather stunning. Wild and rugged.’

‘It has a wild beauty, ma’am,’ the Duchess agrees, before frowning slightly. ‘Has Your Majesty not been to the Castle at Balmoral yet? Or Holyroodhouse?’

Victoria purses her lips. ‘Not yet. I’ve been more focused on London for now. I do have plans to visit soon,’ she explains, but the explanation rings hollow in her ears. Should she go to Scotland? She should ask Lord M.

She could really use her camera in Scotland.

‘Of course, ma’am. I imagine it has taken some adjustment,’ the Duchess says, nodding seriously.

‘Some,’ Victoria says, shifting uncomfortably under the Duchess’s gaze. ‘Although I feel quite
settled now.’

‘Of course, ma’am,’ she says, and there’s a thick silence in the air. Victoria can feel the flush creeping up her neck; just how much has the Duke of Wellington told Lady Anna? She can feel her heart racing in her chest at the thought. He wouldn’t have told her everything, she thinks. But then perhaps she already knew. Maybe he had told her the whole story. Maybe she knew everything – all about Lord M and his wife and the Duke and she feels sick at the thought of everyone knowing.

Breathe. She chose this, chose her path. She’d known what she was getting herself into. This meeting was always going to be awkward, and she had to overcome that and do her job.

Explaining her choice to a very confused Harriet had been almost impossible.

I made a deal with Wellington.

A deal?

Yes. I needed something from him, and this was the compromise.

It was a deal that she was going to ensure Sir John paid for, and dearly.

‘I understand you have Sir Robert Peel working in the Office of the Private Secretary,’ she hears the Duchess say, and Victoria forces her voice to be light and even. She knows by now that her cheeks are bright red; she can feel them.

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘He was Acting Principal Private Secretary whilst Lord Melbourne was on holiday,’ she replies as evenly as she can. She can feel Harriet’s eyes on her.

‘Oh, of course. He’s an excellent man – one of the finest men I know. He’s good friends with my husband,’ the Duchess explains.

‘I see,’ Victoria replies automatically, blinking. ‘He is certainly most…capable,’ she stumbles out.

‘I understand you’ve done quite a bit of work with the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development,’ Harriet says after a moment, and she lets out a breath she didn’t realise she was holding. She lets Harriet chatter away with Lady Anna for a minute, just listening to them talk about young orphans in South-East Asia, and she feels the familiar pull in her chest, the one that makes her want to run, and she squashes it ruthlessly. She was the Queen, and she was strong. Stronger than this. She had held her own with the Duke of Wellington; she could do this. It didn’t matter what Lady Anna knew or didn’t know. It would have no impact whatsoever.

Lord M was back, and everything was back to normal. Everything was good now, she reminds herself, and the thought makes her smile.

And the Duchess seems nice enough. She’s dressed well, and the fact that the Duchess of Wellington thinks she’d be a good addition to her Ladies really says enough about how sensible and competent she would be.

She waits for the conversation to come to a natural conclusion before speaking. ‘Lady Anna, I was wondering if you would be willing to work in the role of one of my Ladies-in-waiting,’ she says. ‘I have yet to fill all the positions, and you have been quite highly recommended.’

The Duchess blinks, clearly a little surprised, before smiling. ‘I would be honoured, ma’am,’ she says. ‘My mother served Queen Adelaide a number of years ago, and I would be honoured to continue that responsibility.’
She collapses on the lounge when the Duchess has left. She was exhausted, but it was done.

She thinks that perhaps the Duchess doesn’t know all that much, judging by her reaction to her request. The Duke had stayed silent.

It had been a kind of payback, she thinks wryly. Wellington was getting his revenge for her accusations, for the horribly awkward conversation the older man had been forced to sit through with his young Queen. Horrible man, she thinks, but she couldn’t blame him. She deserved it. They were even now.

The Duchess had been quite lovely, she thinks, and she obviously took her position seriously. Maybe she would fit in well enough.

Harriet pours some tea and puts it on the table next to her with a comforting smile, which Victoria returns gratefully. ‘She seems nice. Sensible,’ Harriet says. ‘Not too Catholic,’ she jokes, and Victoria smiles as she sits up on the couch.

‘It will be nice to spend time with someone who is a little closer to my height,’ she replies, and grins when Harriet lets out a laugh.

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When he answers a question about the political history of some country or other over the phone for the third time in half an hour, he starts getting flashbacks of pens and pencils as props and maps on walls where paintings had once sat. He flicks his screen over to her calendar.

‘Ma’am, can I ask what you’re doing?’

‘Reading through the notes we made last year for the Diplomatic Corps Dinner,’ she informs him. ‘It’s the end of next week and I’d forgotten all about it.’

He’s impressed that she’s doing this on her own; he hadn’t even had to suggest anything. It’s down in his diary to discuss the next morning – on the list of urgent things to deal with, this hadn’t really been too high. He was fairly confident that she would be fine this year, between her conversations with Wellington and the talking points she’d been given already. But it would seem that she’s beaten him to it. She mustn’t feel as confident as he does about her capacity. ‘It’s a good idea to review, ma’am.’

‘I thought so.’ He hears her sigh. ‘I can’t believe it was a year ago.’

His heart twinges a little at the memories; countless hours spent in her office in front of her little projector, debating the merits of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, or the contribution of colonialism to the spread of communism in post-war Asia. He missed it, that time with her, where they’d talk about anything and everything and he’d leave at the end of each day exhausted, but satisfied.

‘It certainly doesn’t feel like it,’ he agrees.

‘So much has happened since,’ she says, and he thinks she sounds wistful. ‘I enjoyed our lessons.’
‘I did too, ma’am,’ he agrees.

‘When you weren’t tearing your hair out?’ she laughs, and he chuckles.

There’s silence for a while on the other end of the phone, and he puts his own phone on speaker, setting it on the desk next to him, returning to his own work. He smiles to himself; they hadn’t done this in a while, he thinks. She’d started it one day when she was reading in her rooms over a year ago; she’d had a question about something to do with the dinner, and he’d been sorting something out on his desk, so he’d just shut his office door and put her on speaker, answering her questions while he tidied whatever it was he was tidying at the time.

He’d realised later how ridiculous it was, what a waste of money it was, that they’d sat on the phone for well over an hour in on-and-off silence while they’d both worked, her asking the occasional question and him explaining or looking up something on his computer. She was all of two minutes’ walk away in her rooms.

He’d made some kind of comment, and she’d sighed and said that Dash was asleep on her lap and she was comfortable, and he could practically hear the blush spread across her cheeks over the phone. The next time she’d rung him when he’d been in the building, she’d told him she was using the wifi and thus it wasn’t really a phone call and is costing nothing, and he’d chuckled at her ingenuity.

But she’s not in her rooms this time, and sometimes it’s easier to do this face-to-face.

‘Are you planning on continuing your study for much more of today?’ he asks.

He can hear her fiddling with the paperwork down the phone. ‘I’m about a third of the way through this part. I’ve divided it up into sections so that I’ll get through it all by the start of next week,’ she tells him.

So when he appears at her door with his laptop, a pile of paperwork and two coffees, she looks happy to see him, but confused. ‘I thought my phone battery might have a better chance of lasting until I get home if I just moved down here for a little while,’ he says wryly, and she just grins at him. An hour and what feels like a hundred questions later, he’s all but abandoned anything that requires sustained thought and is scrolling through his twitter feed, reading various articles and making a mental list of what’s happened in the last twelve months that she’ll need to know. He’d forgotten, in all his nostalgia, just how exhausting it had all been. It had been hard work, bringing her up to speed on the political history of most of the world in just a few short months. Her questions now are insightful, thoughtful things, and he thinks with a touch of sadness that she no longer tries quite so hard to solve the world’s problems in a sentence. There’s a depth to her now, a complexity that is becoming more and more evident. Her exploration of the world outside her walls was beginning to have an impact.

She had changed, his little Queen, in the year that had passed.

‘I’m sorry, Lord M,’ she says from her desk, and he looks up at her.

‘What for, ma’am?’

‘You have so much to do,’ she says, grimacing and glancing at the phone in his hand.

He wants to shake his head, tell her no, this is exactly where he wants to be – needs to be – this was part of his job too – but it’s not entirely the truth. The piles of paperwork and emails were almost intimidating; he really did have quite a lot to catch up on. He’s never lied to her, so he tilts his head in
acceptance. ‘This is important too, ma’am,’ he says, and she gives him a small, pleased smile.

He’s not entirely surprised when she asks if he’d like to work from her office for a couple of hours each day for the rest of the week, and he’s definitely not going to say no.

The paperwork could wait.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the feedback! Let me know what you think.
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

If you can learn to do it
I can learn to do it
He can learn to do it
You can learn to do it
Pull yourself together
And we'll pull through it
Tell yourself it's easy
And it's true
You can learn to do it too

- Learn To Do It, David Newman [Anastasia Soundtrack]

Chapter Notes

Let’s play ‘see if you get the reference to one of the earliest chapters of this story’! It'll probably be obvious, but I don't like to assume.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Saturday 11 June

They’ve never really spoken much about her time at Kensington. What he knows he’s gleaned from a thousand conversations about anything and everything else along with what little he learned from the King when he was Prime Minister, but it doesn’t take a psychologist to see that she was sheltered beyond what would be considered even vaguely reasonable by most.

The biggest tell is her lack of emotional maturity; she’s growing in leaps and bounds, but there have been times when he’s reminded of his fourteen-year-old nephew. Or his two-year-old niece. She just hasn’t had the socialisation, the rough edges to rub off on, that most people had – and it showed. He’d initially thought that it would take years for her to reach something like an appropriate age match; he and Emma had shared many a discrete look in her early days. He’d been happy to have that job – was still happy – to be the rough stone that blunted her still-sharp edges.

But he’d been wrong; like so many, he’d underestimated her, his little Queen. It had been the work of many – he and Emma, but also Harriet, Wellington, the rest of her staff, and even the public – but she was finally getting there. She was clever, intuitive, and fairly anxious to fit in and do well as Queen, and the pressure she was placing on herself – probably unconsciously, he knows – was having an effect.

The events of the recent weeks had also played a part. He’s not entirely sure just how big a part yet, but he could see it every now and then, in a look she’ll give, or in the way she’ll say something.
There was also the practical side of things. Occasionally he’ll mention something, or an invitation will appear, and he’ll deduce from a questioning tilt of her head or the way her eyes seem to brighten that this is something new. Sometimes she tries to hide it, and he doesn’t call her out on it; he’s more than happy for her to go searching for most of it on her own. Google will answer most of her questions and allow her to salvage some dignity. But then there are times when she’ll come out with a question days later, after the conversation was well out of his working memory, and they’ll talk about these inane little parts of life that he’d completely taken for granted. He’d realised one day in a rare conversation with Harriet that she and Emma both do the same thing.

But she’s so elegant and regal and intelligent and she knows so much about so many things now that he has to continually remind himself of just how sheltered she has been, and despite all of Harriet’s and Emma’s and his best efforts, there are just things she didn’t grow up with in the same way they did; the kinds of things she should just know being a twenty-three-year-old English woman.

But her sheltering was a little odd, a little sporadic, and he thinks Conroy himself eventually must have just given up on a few things because whilst she’d had very little idea about how the internet worked, she’s seen quite a few movies and television shows he would not have imagined she’d have been permitted to see by either Conroy or Lehzen.

She’s read all the classics, as one would expect, but not seen many of the adaptations; so, where he had Shakespeare, Harriet and Emma had Austen and Bronte and Gaskell. He was more than happy to leave them to it.

They’re standing at the doors one afternoon waiting to go outside for the first of her second year of Garden Parties with Harriet and Emma and Anna, only waiting on the Earl. She and Harriet are standing at the window, peering out at the people milling around on the grass outside and commenting on the dresses when Harriet lets out an excited ooh. ‘There she is!’ she says excitedly, and he watches as Victoria frowns.

‘Who?’

‘It’s Maggie Smith!’

‘Oh, is she the actress? I don’t really know her,’ Victoria says, and his eyebrows rise.

‘Didn’t the Earl send you the list for today?’

‘Oh yes, I just didn’t realise she was so famous,’ she replies, turning to look at him. ‘What has she been in?’

‘She’s Professor McGonagall,’ Harriet says, frowning. ‘Harry Potter?’ she says incredulously at Victoria’s lack of response, and there’s a slightly stunned silence as Harriet, Emma, Anna and he all look at each other. ‘You’ve not seen Harry Potter?’ Harriet says quickly, and he can see Victoria’s cheeks turning pink.

‘No. I remember asking about it once, but Lehzen said they were children’s books,’ she says, her voice trailing off, and Harriet looks at him helplessly. He understands why.

‘She wasn’t really wrong,’ Anna agrees. ‘They are, mostly. Brilliant, though. Worth reading, ma’am,’ she adds.

‘Yes. We’ll just have to rectify that then, won’t we?’ Emma says matter-of-factly.

‘Is it important?’ she asks, her eyes flicking to his, and he can see she’s panicking a little.
He tilts his head. ‘It’s a little unusual that you haven’t read them, ma’am,’ he says, a little nonchalantly. ‘But it’s not a problem. The Dame was made a member of the Order for far more than her work on a series of films – she’ll probably be quite pleased not to talk about it.’

‘Oh,’ she says quietly, still looking at him uncertainly. He groans inwardly; of course, it would be today that they had decided he wouldn’t attend the Garden Party, he thinks. He’d managed to convince her that, just for now, when everything was settling, it would be best for him to be seen only at functions where he would be expected; her Garden Parties are really her Lord Chamberlain’s domain, not his. Despite all that she had grown and matured and won her battle, she was still wary, still uncertain. She knows she could lose him now, that it was possible, and it had made her almost clinging. He didn’t mind; he knew it would just take time.

And he’d missed her, his little Queen. He didn’t mind spending a few more minutes with her every day, whatever the reason.

But her eyes are still wide and her cheeks a little pink, so he shakes his head infinitesimally at her, giving her a small half-frown, and he’s pleased she seems to settle somewhat at his reassurance. ‘She does a lot of charity work, I read, and has done a lot of theatre,’ she says, her voice still a little wavering.

‘Oh yes, ma’am,’ Harriet agrees, seemingly picking up on the mood, her face now a picture of calm reassurance. ‘I think Lord Melbourne’s right – it’s probably best to stick to that today. She’d get questions about Harry Potter constantly; it’ll be refreshing for her to talk about something else.’

He can see Anna nodding at her from the corner of his eye, and watches as she lets out a breath and turns back to look out the window again.

He wonders how they’ve managed to get through her reign to date without realising she hadn’t read Harry Potter. He wonders what else she hasn’t read, hasn’t seen, hasn’t done that they’re all just taking for granted still – the things they’ve missed. How do you compile a list of cultural experiences you don’t even know you’ve had? She was the Queen, and she’d grown up in England; there was an expectation that she would at least know the basics. He lets out a small sigh, and makes a mental note.

When he arrives at her office Monday morning, Harriet is there.

‘I’ve told Her Majesty that she really should read the Harry Potter series,’ she tells him. He looks over at the Queen, hiding his amusement at the blank look on her face; she’s holding what looks like the first book, and he can see her confusion at the pictures on the cover. He notices that the other books are in a pile on her desk, well-worn with all completely different covers, and he bites his cheek to cover a smile.

‘I agree,’ he announces when he’s swallowed his laughter, and she looks up at him and blinks.

‘Harry Potter is a British institution – like tea, and the monarchy. You have to read them,’ Harriet tells her. ‘You’ll love them, ma’am,’ she assures her, so she nods.

‘Okay,’ she says, and Harriet smiles.

‘They do look like children’s books,’ she tells him minutes later when Harriet has left for work.

‘They are, ma’am,’ he says. ‘Well, they start quite young, but from what I can tell, the later ones are quite dark.’
She frowns up at him. ‘From what you can tell?’

‘I’ve really only read the whole of first one,’ he admits, before letting out a sigh. ‘I was reading them to Augustus,’ he adds, and her mouth falls open briefly before she purses her lips and nods sadly. ‘I just never really got around to finishing them.’

‘Well, if Harriet thinks it’s important, then I’ll read them.’

He frowns a little, trying to figure out how best to explain what he wants to explain. ‘Ma’am, there’s probably not a person – adult or child – in England who hasn’t read at least one of the *Harry Potter* books,’ he says, and she blinks at him. ‘Ms Sutherland wasn’t really overstating it much when she said the series was a British institution. They seemed to transcend traditional age barriers.’ He smirks a little. ‘I may have caught your uncle reading the last one just before one of our meetings one afternoon,’ he adds, and her mouth drops open a little, and he nods knowingly.

‘Wow,’ she replies, her slightly open mouth twisting into an incredulous smile, and flicks open to the first page.

‘Perhaps you could start tonight,’ he adds, eyeing the folders that were still piled on her desk, and she smirks at him.

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**Week of Monday 13 June**

‘Lord M, the Earl has just submitted his resignation,’ she tells him with a frown when he arrives at her office at her request later that day. ‘He has cancer.’

He sighs heavily. ‘Yes, he spoke to me just before his appointment with you,’ he replies.

‘It’s horrible,’ she says quietly, and he nods.

‘He told me he anticipates a full recovery, ma’am.’

‘Yes, that’s what he told me too. Still, it’s a little scary,’ she says, and he nods. He knows that; his own father had succumbed. It had been quick, but brutal. ‘He said that he couldn’t focus entirely on his duties while he was unwell.’

Melbourne nods. ‘You’ll have to appoint someone new, ma’am.’

She frowns slightly. ‘I’ve not appointed anyone to such a senior role yet,’ she says worriedly, and he raises his eyebrows at her, before letting the slightly incredulous grin spread across his face at her confusion.

‘I beg to differ, ma’am,’ he almost laughs after a few seconds, and she frowns at his smile.

‘Who?’

He drops his head slightly, a smirk on his face, and it takes a few moments before she flushes pink.
‘Oh. You,’ she says, scrunching up her face momentarily, and he chuckles at her.

‘I think your first appointment showed a wisdom and understanding of the requirements of the role,’ he jokes, pursing his lips. ‘Although we do know there are some who disagree.’ She pushes his arm playfully, rolling her eyes, and he can’t help but smile. ‘Shall I ask Emma to do up a list?’ he asks more seriously, and the way her head flicks around and her lips twist in a kind of smile makes him frown slightly. He’s not entirely sure what he missed.

‘That would be helpful,’ she says, the ghost of a smirk on her face still, and he nods. She must notice his confusion because she smiles a little more after a moment. ‘The last time I asked Emma to put together a list for a senior position, there was really only one name on it,’ she says a little wryly, and it takes a moment for him to understand what she’s saying, and his lips twist a little.

‘I put some thought into that list of names,’ he says, his eyes narrow, and her cheeks pink a little again, but she holds her ground.

‘I know,’ is all she says somewhat smugly in reply, and he resists the urge to shake his head at her.

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When he arrives at her office Tuesday morning, she smiles up at him triumphantly. ‘Done!’ she announces, holding up that oh-so-familiar folder – her year-old notes on the modern history of the world – proudly, and he grins at her.

‘Well done, ma’am,’ he says. ‘That’s no mean feat for a week.’

‘Thank you,’ she says proudly, before her mouth twists a little. ‘Better than four months,’ she jokes, and he shakes his head in amusement. ‘I did have one other favour to ask,’ she says, and he raises his eyebrows. ‘I asked the Foreign Secretary’s office for a list of all the new Ambassadors and other relevant people who’ve started in the last twelve months and I’ve updated their names and faces on my flashcards, and I’ve checked them all against the list you gave me of those attending, so that’s covered. But so much has happened over the past year politically that I haven’t really kept up with, and I was wondering if you’d like to stay for dinner tonight and explain some of it to me? Just a quick review; I thought we could just go region by region.’ Her face is so hopeful, but wary, and he eyes her a little.

She doesn’t need his help. They’ve had so many conversations about the events across the world this year, and she’s worked so hard to stay on top of it all, with his and the Duke’s help, that all she really needs to do is understand and memorise the talking points.

She’s missed him as much as he’s missed her, he thinks, but the thought doesn’t thrill him quite as much as he thinks it might have a year ago. It sits awkwardly at the back of his mind, her desire to keep him close. But it’s been a difficult few weeks, he concedes, and he understands. She will settle soon enough.

He’s just happy that he still gets to see her every day.

‘I think I could do that,’ he agrees, and she smiles. ‘I have allocated a little more time than usual for your meeting with the Duke this Friday, ma’am,’ he tells her gently, and she scrunches up her face a little at him. She hasn’t seen the Duke in the week since his return, and they have yet to have that awkward conversation. She doesn’t seem as anxious this time though, he’s pleased to note.
'Yes, thank you,’ she says, before letting out a sigh.

‘He’s been away, and you do have a little more than usual to discuss,’ he says wryly, and she pulls a face. ‘But I thought you might also like to ask the Duke to run through the talking points for the Dinner with you,’ he says.

‘Yes, that’s a good idea,’ she agrees, but her mind is elsewhere. ‘The Duke thinks you told me,’ she says quietly after a few seconds, and he grimaces a little – he knows exactly what she’s talking about, and he doesn’t like that she’s still thinking about this. ‘I told him you hadn’t, that you would never do such a thing, but I’m not sure he believed me.’

‘It’s not unreasonable,’ he says quietly after a moment. ‘I didn’t think that many people knew.’

‘Harriet knew.’

‘Yes,’ he says heavily. This fact is why he’s still baffled as to why he hasn’t read about it in the papers; it would have made the perfect scandal to finish both of them, and reduced her to a pawn in the personal games of her most powerful subjects. It would have all been just so…undignified. ‘I suppose there’s not much you can do about that, ma’am.’

‘I don’t like that he thinks it,’ she says a little more emphatically. ‘It’s not true. You’ve never talked about the Duke that way.’

‘The Duke is a politician, ma’am, and a good one, and as you well know, knowledge is power. Every piece of information is stored away to be used at the perfect moment.’ He shrugs. ‘He told me you were becoming quite the politician yourself, ma’am,’ he says wryly, and she purses her lips at him.

But she lets out a frustrated sigh after a few moments, and he thinks it’s sweet that she’s trying to defend him to the Duke. It says volumes about her respect for her Prime Minister that she cares what he thinks about anything.

‘I think it’ll be fine, ma’am,’ he says. ‘I think that if the Duke really thought that his private life was a serious topic of discussion between us, I wouldn’t be standing here right now.’

She nods after a moment and, for the first time, he worries just a little about how she’s going to handle that particular conversation.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you think!
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Every breaking wave on the shore
Tells the next one there’ll be one more

- Every Breaking Wave, U2

Week of Monday 13 June

He knows that for all his words, for all her calm now, how much Emma tells him she’s relaxed since his return, the moment she sees Conroy or her mother she could explode.

She needs to be distracted.

Her calendar is relatively full already, especially now that it’s summer, but there are still whole days where she has nothing really on other than the paperwork she mostly does in the morning and some event in the afternoon or evening, and these blocks of time where she’s alone somewhere in the palace, and where the Duchess or Conroy could appear out of nowhere, make him nervous.

She has grown so much in the past year, but she’s still learning how to moderate her reactions to the things she cares most about. It’s safer to simply remove the problem until she’s settled more, and since they couldn’t exactly remove the Duchess from the Palace, they would have to remove her. He hates the idea that she can’t be free in her own home, but it’s only temporary. He’ll make sure it is.

Conroy will want his revenge, but for now he’ll likely just settle for those little barbs he flings her way, the ones that always seem to find their mark. If he can keep her out of his line of sight, this has a far greater chance of succeeding.

On top of that, Emma’s words to him over the phone only days ago also worry him.

She needs you, William. After Harriet and I, she doesn’t have anyone else.

She needs more friends.

As much as Emma and Harriet and he were working on it, they were just three people, and he knows that perhaps they don’t call her out enough. She needs more people to bounce off, to see that there were more perspectives in the world than just theirs. He was pleased to hear about her new Lady-in-waiting, but one more wasn’t really enough.

She needs to rely on him less. He’s known it for a while – too long – he’s just been too selfish to really do anything about it, telling himself it wasn’t really that bad, that she was learning and growing and would naturally move away from him as she grew more confident. But the events of the previous weeks had proven him very, very wrong. It wasn’t what he was doing – it was what he wasn’t doing that was the problem. He needed to join Harriet and Emma in actively encouraging her to slowly increase her circle of friends. Not only as Queen – Harriet and Emma would one day not be available to attend something, and she would have no one – but also as a woman.
He was acutely aware that he was more than happily allowing her to hold him too close.

Her current reading list has given him an idea; he thinks they can probably kill two birds with one stone. But he can’t do this alone – at all, really – so he enlists some help.

‘It was Sir John behind the newspapers last month,’ he tells Harriet as she and Emma stand in his office later that evening. She cringes, but then shrugs.

‘I’m not surprised,’ she says. ‘Victoria says he hates you.’

Melbourne nods in response. ‘But Her Majesty has also figured out that it was him,’ he adds, and Harriet cringes again.

‘Did she let him have it? I would have.’

‘No. She wants him gone, so I’ve convinced her to hold off until there’s a clear plan in place.’

Harriet frowns as he explains the situation. ‘So Conroy is still working for the Duchess?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh, good luck. He’s going to open his mouth and she’s going to lose it,’ Harriet declares, and both he and Emma nod. ‘She detests the man, and she will even more so now.’

Well, if he’d had any questions about just how much Harriet knew, they were answered now. ‘That’s what I’m afraid of,’ he says. ‘I think it would be best if we try to keep any interaction between her and the Duchess and Conroy to an absolute minimum.’

‘Good plan. How?’

‘We want to keep her distracted as much as possible, outside the palace.’

Harriet frowns for a moment, before she realises what they’re getting at. ‘We need to fill her calendar and keep her busy.’

He tilts his head in acknowledgement. ‘Essentially, yes.’

She frowns. ‘It’s summer. How hard could it be to keep her entertained?’

‘I’m not concerned about what she could attend. The problem would be in organising it in time; there simply wouldn’t be enough notice for most things, and with the Earl’s resignation, anything is going to be more of a challenge than usual.’

‘Surely not everything needs to go through the Lord Chamberlain’s office?’ Harriet asks.

‘No, not everything,’ Emma says. ‘Just the ones where she would interact with the public, and we can limit those,’ Emma says. ‘Pick the best ones.’

‘Yes. I gather PR are still a little concerned about her image, although they’re being rather coy with me,’ he says, raising his eyebrows.

‘Can’t imagine why,’ he hears Emma mutter, and he shoots her a look.

‘She still needs to be seen as independent and impartial. I think there are enough public engagements in her calendar at the moment, but we can add more if you think we should. I was actually thinking more fun, personal events.’ Harriet nods, and he can see her thinking already. ‘Perhaps you might
include her new Lady-in-waiting,’ he says, and Harriet’s eyes widen before her lips twist in amusement.

‘Anna Scott? Sure. We can go for a picnic,’ she jokes, and Emma chuckles. He frowns a little. ‘The Duchess of Buccleuch told the Queen on their first meeting that she thinks Robert Peel is one of the finest men she knows,’ Harriet explains, trying not to laugh, and he closes his eyes briefly.

‘Good,’ he says after a moment, and Emma looks at him quizzically. ‘Need I remind you what you told me? That the list of people she can rely on is not long – it’s not long enough,’ he says, and Emma blinks at him. ‘And Wellington was right – her circle is very one-sided. She can’t always hear what she wants to hear.’ He knows his voice sounds even – he can hear it. But Emma has known him for too long, and he can’t hold her gaze.

‘Anna Scott was Wellington’s suggestion,’ she says quietly, and his eyes shoot to hers. What on earth was Wellington doing suggesting Ladies-in-waiting? This wasn’t the nineteenth century – she could choose whoever she liked, regardless of the politics. He watches as she glances at Harriet before speaking again. ‘It was part of her trade-off at their last meeting,’ she explains. ‘An olive branch.’

He can feel his mouth drop open. *Trade-off.*

It explained why the Duke hadn’t been quite as angry as he’d imagined he should have been when he’d spoken to him that day. She’d certainly tried to blackmail him, yes, but she’d also tried to *bargain* with the Duke. For him.

He closes his eyes and drops his head. Oh, this was worse. This was so, so much worse.

A tiny bit of him that he hates is thrilled at just what she’s done – the extent of what she’s done in her desperate attempts to keep him, what she’s risking and committing to for the long term for *him* – but he can’t squash it as his heart swells and aches in his chest at the same time.

He looks up again, nodding, before letting out a breath. ‘It’s been an interesting month,’ Emma says with a small smile, and he stares at her, wondering what else he doesn’t know. But that’s not a conversation for now – not in front of Harriet, he thinks. As much as he thinks the Duchess of Sutherland is lovely and sweet and an excellent Mistress of the Robes and great friend to the Queen, he’s not entirely sure she can keep this secret.

‘The Garden Party on Saturday also made me wonder what else she hasn’t done that would be expected of a British monarch in the twenty-first century,’ he says, before sucking in a breath.

‘Yes, I’ve been thinking about that too,’ Harriet replies, obviously pleased with the subject change herself. ‘I’ve been working on the music, but I’m sure there’s other places she hasn’t been, books she hasn’t read.’

‘Has she done any of the major landmarks?’ Emma asks suddenly. ‘She’s obviously done Westminster, but has she done anything else?’

‘Given that she’d never been to the Ballet here in London, I’d assume not,’ he replies dryly, and Harriet is nodding.

‘Leave it with us,’ Harriet says, the smile spreading across her face.

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‘I’d like to do this,’ she says, handing him one of the letters he’d given her in the previous week. ‘I think it’s important.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ he replies, looking down at the invitation. He’s not surprised. It’s the opening of the new Children’s Wing at the hospital in York; the one she’d spent a day at handing out teddies and learning so much about what she could do as Queen. Delay in construction had meant that it hadn’t been ready earlier in the year when it should have been, and wasn’t ready when the attack had happened, and there had been criticism of the hospital. Yet another element of her role she had discovered: she could bring a smile to the faces of even beleaguered hospital executives.

But along with the opening is a commemoration service; it had been half-term break, and the opening is scheduled for the first anniversary of the attack.

‘It feels so long ago,’ she says. ‘So much has happened since.’ He nods in agreement. ‘The letter says that grief counsellors will be on hand,’ she says, frowning slightly, before looking up at him.

‘I imagine that recollecting the events will be quite traumatic for many, ma’am,’ he says quietly. ‘Especially for the children. Or those that lost children.’

And her eyes widen and he knows what she’s thinking, so he plasters on what he hopes is a calm, mostly unaffected face and hopes she’ll move on.

‘Oh,’ she says, dropping his gaze. ‘Yes, of course,’ she says eventually. ‘I suppose all the children will still have the bears I gave them, so I won’t take those,’ she announces, looking up at him.

‘Probably, ma’am,’ he agrees. ‘Whilst the bears were very warmly received, I imagine your presence will be enough this time.’

***

When the Earl suggests it, he thinks it’s a good idea. She hasn’t left London yet, and whilst she’s the Queen of England, she’s also technically the Queen of Scotland, too, and it would be good for her to be seen there, even for just a brief trip. She can always make a longer one in summer next year, he thinks, and he makes a mental note to suggest it to whoever replaces the Earl. She needs to get away, he thinks, and given that she hasn’t actually left London yet, he thinks she’ll be rather excited.

But Scotland in winter.

For all his Britishness, he doesn’t love the rain. And whilst Scotland was truly stunning on a sunny day, it more than made up for it by raining the other 364 days of the year. She has no idea what she’s getting herself into. She’ll have to get used to running in the rain, he thinks.

The Earl is on reduced hours until he officially leaves and so he’s left it with Melbourne to discuss with the Queen in their morning meeting. He doesn’t mind; the Earl is good man, and he’ll be sad to see him go.

But it would seem she’s beaten him to it. ‘Lord M, I was talking with Anna yesterday at the National Forest lunch, and she suggested that I visit Scotland,’ she says excitedly when he arrives. ‘Her husband’s family comes from just south of Edinburgh.’
'It’s funny you should mention that, ma’am, because the Earl was thinking the same thing,’ he says with a smile, and her face brightens. ‘The Visitor’s Centre at Holyroodhouse Palace is being renovated between Christmas and New Year, and he thought it might be a nice opportunity for you to spend Christmas outside of London this year.’

And the way her face brightens makes him smile. ‘Oh! I would love to!’ she cries. ‘I’ve never been to Scotland. At least, if I have, I don’t remember.’

‘Yes, the Earl noted that, and thought perhaps you might hold a reception or two while you’re up there. He was going to suggest that you head up a few days before Christmas, and return just after New Year’s, when the Visitor’s Centre is open again.’

‘That sounds perfect, Lord M,’ she says happily, and he narrows his eyes slightly at her. ‘I’m going to take my camera,’ she says gleefully.

‘I should warn you, ma’am – it gets cold in Edinburgh in December, but it doesn’t always snow.’

‘I don’t mind.’

‘And it rains. A lot. Possibly not a lot of photography opportunities.’

She shrugs. ‘Then I guess I’ll have to amuse myself indoors.’

‘Probably no snowmen.’

‘I’ll survive,’ she says, shrugging, and he just smiles and shakes his head at her. She’s clearly just happy to get away.

Emma appears at the door at that moment. ‘I’m going to Scotland for Christmas,’ Victoria announces and Emma smiles.

‘I do think a holiday is in order, ma’am,’ Emma says, and she grins, turning to him. He raises his hands in defeat.

‘Don’t say I didn’t warn you,’ he says jokingly.

 ***

She thinks her mother needs lessons on hiding her displeasure. She’s never been good at it.

‘I see your Lord Melbourne has returned,’ she says as she walks in for breakfast.

‘Last week, Mama,’ Victoria replies calmly. She knows that her mother knows this; she’s just baiting her. Breathe. Don’t overreact. Don’t give it away.

‘I thought he had resigned.’

‘He did. But I convinced him that it was unnecessary.’

‘So chivalrous, to fall on his sword like that,’ her mother comments, and she frowns. ‘No wonder you didn’t want to let him leave.’
‘I didn’t want him to leave because he is a good Private Secretary, and a good friend,’ she says, proud of how even her voice is.

Her mother frowns at her. ‘You rely on him too much, Drina,’ she chastises. ‘You need to learn to stand on your own two feet.’

And oh, if her mother knew everything, what she’d done these past weeks, how she’d had to fight for him on her own with only some help from Emma, she wouldn’t say such things – talk such rubbish.

But she felt it, that queasiness that came with fear. Maybe her mother was right. Even just a little. But she also knew all her mother wanted was for Sir John to be her Private Secretary and for Lord M to be gone, and she was not going to let that happen.

‘I am, Mama. And you’re the only one who cannot see that,’ she bites out.

‘Drina, there is no need to get so angry. I only worry. Lord Melbourne will not be your Private Secretary forever. He will want to move on, do something new eventually, and you will have a husband soon enough who will be able to take on some of his duties and help you be Queen.’

She blinks at her mother.

_Husband._

She swallows, forcing her food down her throat as the darkness of the past that dictated the future suddenly takes over her mind. A husband. Marriage. _Forever_ bonded to another, someone who would clip her wings and chain her to the ground, lock her in her gilded cage for the rest of her life.

_No._ She was not entertaining that thought now. She was _not_ interested in getting married just yet, despite all her mother’s prodding and poking. She had too much else to do, too much to see and experience and she _couldn’t_ get married. Not yet.

She wants to _live_ first.

But his words come back to her, and she knows she shouldn’t fight. She has to keep calm.

‘Yes, Mama,’ is all she says in reply.
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

Well, I know, I know, the sirens sound
Just before the walls come down
Pain is a well-intentioned weatherman
Predicting God as best he can
But, God, I want to feel again
Oh, God, I want to feel again

- Touch, Sleeping At Last

Week of Monday 13 June

She really had done absolutely nothing in that final week he’d been away, and despite trying to catch up on the Sunday afternoon before he officially returned, she’d really not made much headway.

So when they’d finally found it all and sorted it all out, she had ended up with quite a stack of yellow manila folders – not to mention the dark red boxes that had been full to overflowing. She’d worked on them solidly all week – between all the engagements she’d had in her calendar and everything extra Harriet had been organising, refusing to let him reduce the number of letters she would respond to on the basis that her people shouldn’t pay for Sir John’s cruelty and ambition – but she still had quite a bit left to catch up on.

He finds her that morning on the floor with a pile in front of her where she’s clearly camped out in an attempt to sort out some more of it. As they both look at the pile, and then at the folders in his hands, she lets out a huff before eyeing him. ‘I blame you,’ she says in mock-accusation, and he raises his eyebrows.

‘Oh really?’

‘Yes,’ she says, before shaking her head as she lifts one of the folders with one of the pieces of legislation she’d snubbed for a week. ‘Actually, I blame the Duke,’ she decides, before hefting one of the thick documents from the pile on her floor into her lap.

‘I’m sure he’d consider it payback, ma’am,’ he jokes, and she snorts a laugh.

It’s hours – and two coffees later – and they’re still sorting through the piles of paperwork, organising her calendar and signing documents when she holds up a piece of paper.

‘Oh, I wanted to ask you about this,’ she says. ‘The Earl thought it might be a nice idea, but he thought I should talk to you about it,’ she explains as she hands him the letter. He’s grateful to the Earl; the job of Lord Chamberlain isn’t easy at the best of times, but the last months must have been really been quite a challenge on multiple levels.

It takes him a few moments to process the words on the page, and he lets out a huff of a laugh. She’s
grinning a little hesitantly at him, and he shakes his head in amusement.

‘Vanity Fair. Well, I suppose the most recently published photos of you aren’t quite as official as we’d like, ma’am,’ he says.

‘That’s what the Earl said,’ she says happily.

He thinks a photo shoot will be a good and a bad thing; she’ll be more relaxed, less anxious than she otherwise would be with the distraction. This would give them a chance to control the narrative a little more, to put something out there to change the image that had been presented in the past months. But then there’s always the risk that she’ll speak her mind, and as much as she’s grown and changed, he’s still a little wary. He doesn’t like that he cannot control this, especially not after everything that’s happened in the past months.

He knows she’s learned her lesson, after everything with him and the Duke, but he’s more worried about what she’ll say inadvertently, the discussions on topics she won’t even see as an issue. Like him. She’s just so…honest. For all that she’s learning to hide it, she still wears her heart on her sleeve, his beautiful Queen.

So when he tells her a few days later it’s all organised and the date is provisionally set for the first week in July, she smiles happily at him before her smile drops slightly. ‘I’ve never done a photo shoot or an interview before,’ she says a little uneasily, and he nods.

‘Yes, your first interview, ma’am,’ he replies as lightly as he can, but it doesn’t do much to soothe the little furrow in her brow. The ghosts of her failures haunt her eyes, and he’s keen to see them removed. ‘I have the list of possible questions and topics for discussion. You’ll prune it and then rehearse some answers with the Lord Chamberlain’s Office, and you will be fine, ma’am,’ he tells her.

She purses her lips a little, before letting out a small breath. ‘Okay.’

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When she arrives a few minutes later than usual at her office the next morning, yawning, he’s confused. ‘I see this will be put to good use, ma’am,’ he teases as she reaches for her coffee.

‘I was up late finishing the first Harry Potter book,’ she explains, her tired eyes wide and bright. ‘Harriet was right – they’re so good.’

He smiles at her enthusiasm. ‘I’m glad you’re enjoying them, ma’am, he says, amused.

‘They’re brilliant. The owl – Hedwig – and the train and Hogwarts! And He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named hiding in the turban. And Hermione is brilliant. I couldn’t put it down.’

‘I can see that,’ he chuckles as she yawns again, blushing.

But then she’s looking at him, and her face falls and she bites her lip and he’s confused. ‘I’m sorry, Lord M. I don’t have to talk about them if it makes you sad,’ she says in a rush, her face contorting a little with worry and sadness, and he blinks at her before he realises what she’s saying.

Augustus.
Oh.

He shakes his head and smiles. ‘It’s okay,’ he says gently. ‘If I never thought of anything that reminded me of Augustus, I’d never actually think of anything,’ he says, and she’s still frowning a little, but she nods anyway. ‘Book number two tonight?’ he asks, and she blushes again.

‘I’m almost halfway through book two,’ she admits after a moment, and he laughs.

***

‘I was wondering,’ she says tentatively when he arrives to collect her paperwork later that day, ‘if maybe you’d like to read them with me,’ she says a little breathlessly, and he thinks she’s studying his face for his reaction.

‘Read what, ma’am?’ he frowns.

‘The Harry Potter series,’ she says. ‘I thought it might help make things better,’ she says nervously, dancing on her toes a little. ‘You don’t have to; I understand if you just want it to be a memory, but I thought that maybe it might make you feel better – to make a happier memory because it really is everywhere and I thought that if you didn’t always think immediately of Augustus when you saw Harry Potter things, it would help make everything not so…grey,’ she says in a rush before stopping, and he blinks at her, frowning slightly. There’s something else in her words, something more…

It’s almost like colour returned to the world.

Oh.

He’s aware that he’s always been transparent with those who know him well; Emma, Emily, even Fredrick. But he hadn’t realised that she had now joined that list, in some measure, his little Queen. Of all the things that trigger the avalanche of pain, these books were not particularly high on the list at all, but she knew at least that anything with Augustus meant anguish on some level. His heart softens at her compassion; her consideration for something he knew she couldn’t possibly understand, but was so desperately trying to.

‘Lord M?’ she asks after a moment, and he realises he’s been silently staring at her for too long. ‘I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked,’ she says, dropping his gaze.

‘I’d like to, ma’am,’ he says, and her eyes shoot back up to his. He takes a breath, leaning against the edge of her desk, pausing, contemplating how to explain this to her. ‘It will always hurt, losing him. I cannot think of a worse pain a person could experience,’ he starts, and he believes it. Even Caro’s death hadn’t hurt quite as much as holding his little boy as he took his last breaths; or perhaps it was just a different kind of pain. ‘There are some things that I think will always bring that pain back. But not everything. Gus loved books – he was a voracious reader. There are so many books we read together, and whilst he did love Harry Potter…’ He trails off, looking across at her. ‘I think I would enjoy reading them with you,’ he says, and she nods, her eyes wide, and he thinks a little glassy.

‘I’m just not entirely certain about one thing,’ he adds, and her head tilts slightly in query. ‘I don’t think I’m going to be able to do a book a night,’ he admits, and she lets out what he thinks is a half-amused, half-embarrassed chuckle. ‘You forget my age, ma’am. Us old folk need our sleep.’
She batts at his arm playfully, rolling her eyes, and he nods emphatically in jest. ‘I don’t think I’ll be able to do a book a night,’ she admits, her hand covering a perfectly-timed yawn. ‘A book a week?’

‘A week, ma’am? Have you seen the size of those later books?’

‘True. A book a month, maybe? That will give you time to catch up on the first and second ones.’

He agrees and she smiles triumphantly, and it’s not going to be easy, he thinks – nothing about that part of his life would ever be easy or simple – but maybe, just maybe she’s right.

And even if she’s not, even if it just hurts, he thinks that perhaps that will be good, too. He’s been so afraid of that pain that swallows him whole when he lets it, and even when he doesn’t. Maybe this little part of his shared life with his son doesn’t need to be owned by the darkness that the pain of loss brings, that darkness that lives constantly on the edges of his world now, in the periphery, partly banished by the brightness of the woman he now served. Maybe, just maybe, it will remind him in some tiny way of some of the beauty and goodness his little boy had brought to his life.

He thinks that maybe it’ll make this year just a little more bearable.

He’s managed to avoid thinking about it too much, too busy catching up on everything and simply enjoying being back with her, but time stops for no one, least of all him. But the pull of the darkness doesn’t seem quite so strong this year, somehow.

He’s still sure to check her calendar to make sure his absence for that day is there.

It hits him like a freight train, much later in his office when it’s quiet and his mind works through his subconscious without his permission – the realisation, just what she’s trying to do, has been trying since probably not long after he left. He’d always assumed she’d fought for him because she wanted him back; that she was simply being stubborn and a little petulant and determined to get her own way. He is one of her allies, and her friend; he knows how much she relies on him, and for so much. She was not willing to give him up, her Lord M, to go back to the darkness of her time before her freedom. He’d always assumed without ever really giving it any thought at all that it was all about her.

He’d never thought… In her own way, she was trying to rescue him too.

And he’s back in the little pavilion on that cold afternoon with her fists grabbing at his jacket, her tears wetting his shirt, her wide, red-rimmed eyes watching him, hanging off his every word, as he’d explained how she’d managed to drag him out of the darkness and into the light again.

Oh, and what a bright, warm light she was, his beautiful Queen, and he will never, ever understand why she chose to shine it on him.
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

No silver or no gold
Could dress me up so good
You’re the glitter in the darkness of my world
Just tell me what to do
I’ll fall right into you
Going under cast a spell just say the word
I feel your love
Boom clap
The sound of my heart
The beat goes on and on and on and on and

- *Boom Clap*, Charlie XCX [or Lennon and Maisy, which is the version I much prefer]

Chapter Notes

My apologies for the huge delay. I’ve never had a start to a working year like this one, and it doesn't seem likely to get better. I absolutely hate keeping you waiting and really appreciate your patience.

The first Diplomatic Corps Dinner is Chapter 10, in case you'd like to refer back.

*Friday 17 June*

She lets out a sigh as she stands in front of the almost intimidatingly-large but now familiar doors of the ballroom, Lord M by her side.

It’s been a *year*. It had been her first major event, the Diplomatic Corps Dinner, and she’d been *terrified*. It had been all she could do not to be sick on the walk down; the only thing keeping her going was his strength as she’d gripped his arm all the way from her rooms to the ornate doors, knowing that she would not be left to flounder on her own.

Now, she just feels a generalised sort of anxiety; the kind she feels when she knows she’s most definitely the dumbest person in the room.

‘Ready, ma’am?’ he asks softly from her side, and she turns her head and looks at him.

‘Do you remember?’ she asks, and his face curls into a little smile.

‘I remember praying you wouldn’t hyperventilate,’ he jokes after a moment, and she lets out a huff of laughter. ‘I remember thinking you looked like a Queen,’ he says, his voice a little more serious, and
she looks up at him again, her heart swelling with affection.

‘I remember thinking I couldn’t do it without you,’ she says, and he drops her gaze.

‘That’s not true, ma’am,’ he replies, shaking his head, and she lets out a huff. How could he think that? She was only standing here today because of him. Emma, and Harriet, and Wellington, yes, but mostly him.

‘I think you’re looking at the past with rose-coloured glasses, Lord M.’

He smiles a little at that. ‘Perhaps,’ he says. ‘I remember the Canadian Prime Minister,’ he says after a moment, and she can feel her face turning red.

‘Oh, don’t remind me,’ she groans, and he’s chuckling beside her. ‘I will not make that mistake again.’

‘I have no doubt, ma’am,’ he laughs.

‘I’m glad you’re back, Lord M,’ she says, and she truly means it. She’s nowhere near as worried as last time; she knows what to expect now, knows what to say and how to say it. She’s had so much practice now – learned and applied all the tricks he’s taught her – that they’re almost second nature. But she couldn’t do this without him, her Lord M. He was meant to be here, by her side, with her through everything. She can’t face the world without his strength, his eyes that follow her and keep her warm and safe.

He smiles, that sweet little shy smile that appears when she says something nice about him. She loves that little smile; it makes her feel so warm inside.

‘Me too, ma’am.’

***

It’s everything and nothing like a year ago. She’s as regal, as elegant as she was the last time, resplendent in a sea-green dress, heels and beautiful gold tiara, the order of the garter sash again matching perfectly and her hair in curls against her neck.

She’s beautifully charming as she smiles and laughs and entertains little pockets of her fifteen hundred guests happily. But there’s a calmness to her, a confidence and sophistication that hadn’t been there a year ago, and he struggles not watch her the entire evening.

He needs to be more careful this year. He’s been back all of a fortnight, and they did not need to add fuel to a fire he knows could be rekindled at any moment with very little evidence. He knows how his gaze turns when he looks at her for too long.

‘Well, this is far easier than last year,’ Wellington says as he takes up residence next to him, both sets of eyes on the Queen who was laughing and smiling with the Italian Ambassador and his wife.

‘Yes,’ Melbourne replies emphatically. ‘Much.’

‘Just imagine how fun this would have been if you’d decided to remain departed.’

Melbourne resists the urge to roll his eyes. ‘She would have been fine. She would have just relied on
you more,’ he shoots back.

Wellington just snorts scornfully. ‘How goes things with Conroy?’

He lets out a sigh. ‘It’s proving a challenge,’ he says. ‘Any suggestions?’

‘A diplomatic posting in Syria?’

Melbourne almost snorts. ‘Perfect.’ He pauses. ‘I assume all went well this afternoon?’

Wellington nods. ‘Oh yes. She was very apologetic, very genuine. Again. Do you think we could
not hit the trifecta of apologies? Two in one year is more than enough.’

He eyes at the older man; he thinks perhaps his party – or his wife – is giving him grief over
something because whilst the Duke rarely beats around the bush, he’s not usually quite this
cerbic.
He’s on fire tonight, and Melbourne is clearly the target. He supposes Wellington thinks he deserves
it, and he agrees – at least a little.

‘I am sure the Queen shares your sentiment.’

Wellington lets out a huff. ‘Yes, I’m sure she does. She was rather adamant about certain points,’ he
says, and Melbourne closes his eyes for a moment. ‘I think I managed to convince her that I, too,
consider you almost as perfectly noble as she seems to think you are.’

‘You know I had nothing to do with that,’ he grinds out. ‘She only told me later. Harriet Sutherland
let it slip – how on earth she knows, I don’t know,’ he says, looking at Wellington who frowns. ‘If
I’d known she was…’ he trails off, shaking his head a little and rubbing at his temple.

‘Yes,’ Wellington says on a sigh. ‘Strangely enough, I believe you.’

Melbourne lets out a sigh. His concern for Wellington’s opinion of him rests solely in keeping their
awkward three-way relationship with the Queen at least mostly stable.

‘I’ve been trying to figure out what exactly it is,’ Wellington says slowly after a long moment, and
Melbourne glances at him. ‘She seems to engender that kind of reaction in everyone she meets. Even
Greville now thinks she’s delightful,’ he mutters.

Melbourne lets out a huff of a laugh before he can stop himself. ‘Yes,’ he agrees.

‘Just do me one favour,’ Wellington says, his tone just a little harsher, and Melbourne looks at him.
‘Give me fair warning before you choose to announce anything, Lord M,’ he says, and Melbourne
blinks. ‘Better yet – wait until I’m retired,’ he adds before turning and walking off.

***

Wellington’s words ring in his ears.

Surely, he didn’t think…surely…

Wellington has had a bird’s eye view into their relationship for far too long, and Melbourne knows
she’s more than happy to make it clear to everyone just how important he is to her, and she to him.
But to think…
He shakes his head. He’s overreacting, he thinks. Wellington is just irritated at being pulled into the mess in the first place, and he’s getting his own back, poking Melbourne where he knows it will hurt, given the rather specific fun of the past month. He was good at that.

Maybe the Prime Minister had been right; he’d gone soft in his time with his Queen and away from the chaos and backstabbing of politics. He couldn’t take a hit anymore.

‘Is it that obvious?’ he asks Emma a little later, when they’re both standing to the side, and she looks up at him inquiringly. He just looks over at the Queen, and he hears Emma let out a small sigh.

‘To me? Yes,’ she admits. ‘But I’ve known you forever, and I see the two of you every day,’ she says. ‘But I don’t think anyone else really sees enough to make that kind of judgement. Or even really entertains the possibility.’

‘Emily.’ She just tilts her head at him knowingly, eyebrow raised, and he nods, acknowledging her point. Emily has always known him too well, and has always loved stirring up trouble. ‘Wellington,’ he adds, and Emma rolls her eyes.

‘Wellington is just cranky she called him out and he’s taking it out on you,’ Emma says bitterly. ‘He deserved it.’ He purses his lips. ‘Relax, William. It’s nothing. Besides, no one with half a brain cell really believes what they print in the papers.’

No, he thinks. Especially not when it’s so close to the truth.

***

‘You should know I have invited the Queen to dine at our house,’ Emily says, and he frowns at her. He’d seen them talking but had resisted the urge to join them; it would only end badly for him, and really, Emily was the wife of the Shadow Foreign Secretary and a Viscountess in her own right, and they’d already met once. It was perfectly normal that they would talk. He just doesn’t really want to know what they’re talking about.

‘Why?’

‘Don’t worry, you’re invited too,’ she says placatingly, and he would glare at her if he thought it would actually do anything. ‘She asked about the kids,’ she explains. ‘I couldn’t not say something, especially after we spoke about meetings in general terms last year.’

Yes, you could, he thinks. ‘Excellent.’

‘What? You’re not the one who’ll be entertaining royalty in your home,’ she says dryly, and he shakes his head at her.

‘You make your own bed,’ he retorts, and she lets out a huff.

‘She does seem…older this year,’ she says a little more seriously, and he nods. ‘I don’t think you were the only one who didn’t cope particularly well with your holiday.’

He lets out a sigh. ‘It’s been a long year.’

‘Yes,’ she agrees. ‘But some things don’t change, Lord M,’ she says quietly, looking up at him not a
little concernedly, and he thinks that things are getting just a little bit out of hand again.

***

‘I did it! Again!’ she cries jubilantly, spinning around in circles ahead of him, her arms in the air, as they walk down the corridor and away from the ballroom, and he can’t help but smile as the memories of a jubilant Queen Victoria dancing down the very same hallway a year ago flood his mind.

She had been beautiful again tonight, his little Queen. She was beautiful, in her dress and with her smile, all grace and elegance and dignity – more so now that she had grown. She’s worked so hard and for so long, and it’s all starting to pay off.

‘Yes. Well done, ma’am,’ he says, and she grins at him before letting out a sigh.

‘It was easier this year,’ she says.

‘I should think so, ma’am,’ he replies dryly, and she shoots him an amused look.

They reach the corridor that leads to his office and he slows, and she turns to look at him, confused. ‘Where are you going?’

He knows what she will say, but he thinks it’s not a good idea, not tonight. Not after everything; all of Wellington’s jibes, Emily’s knowing looks. ‘My office?’ he replies after a moment, pointing down the hall, and she frowns at him and shakes her head.

‘You have to stay, Lord M. It’s tradition, now,’ she tells him, and he thinks her voice sounds almost a little hurt.

‘Is it?’ he half-laughes, and she nods firmly. Once does not make tradition, he thinks, but he’ll play along.

‘Yes,’ she confirms, and he nods his head once.

‘Far be it from me to mess with tradition, ma’am,’ he says. ‘But I do remember another part of this tradition,’ he adds, before turning and heading back to where the champagne was still set up. The grin she gives him when he returns makes it worth it, he thinks.

Emma was right. He would enjoy these quiet moments, away from the prying eyes of those who would tear them down, who would take their friendship and twist it into something unrecognisable. She had won tonight, again, his beautiful Queen, and he would celebrate with her.
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

You got a cold, cold heart
Do you feel at all?
You build a house of cards
But it's gonna fall
I know all your secrets
I know all your lies
I know where you keep 'em
Buried deep inside
No, you can't hide your secrets and lies

- Secrets and Lies, Ruelle

Chapter Notes

A short but crucial chapter. Thanks for your patience, and all your wonderful encouragement.

Saturday 18 June

She sees her mother coming out of the corner of her eye and she feels her heart beat just a little faster in her chest.

She’d managed to avoid her almost entirely for so long, save for once – to arrive at breakfast just as she was leaving, or to leave after only a few mouthfuls and surviving the morning on coffee. But she knows that walk; her mother is on a mission. It’s too late to get up and leave; Mama has already seen her and it would be too obvious. She would have to see what she wanted.

She takes a deep breath before letting it out and reminding herself of his words. Patience.

She still didn’t have a solution, and he hadn’t said anything either. But she would wait, keep her eyes open and her mind alert. He knew how to do these things, and he would teach her.

‘I am so offended, Drina,’ her mother huffs, almost throwing herself down on the chair opposite, and Victoria blinks.

‘What’s wrong, Mama?’

Her mother turns her furious gaze on her. ‘The impertinence of that man, insisting that Sir John sign that contract again,’ she says, and Victoria is now well and truly lost.
‘What contract?’

‘The one about the conditions for being a part of the household. The one that tells everyone what they can say and cannot say and where they can go and who they have to report to. It’s insulting, Drina.’

Oh. That contract. ‘Oh Mama, it’s just a formality. Mr Harper insisted that we review the contracts after all that rubbish in the papers, and all the staff have to re-sign because they made some changes,’ she replies.

‘I wasn’t aware your lawyers were so interested in protecting your Lord Melbourne,’ her mother practically hisses, and Victoria sees red.

‘They’re interested in protecting me!’ she cries, before catching herself. Patience.

‘And is Sir John your enemy?’ her mother replies, and Victoria clamps her mouth shut, and her mother continues. ‘I simply do not understand why Sir John is expected to sign such a ridiculous contract when it is clear he is a devoted and dependable member of my household. How dare they doubt his discretion and loyalty in asking him to sign such an agreement? It is an insult to all his years of devotion to us!’

She feels the rage build within her and the voices in her head are screaming and she can’t do this. She can’t. She has to get out or she’ll say something - scream something - and she can’t do that. She has to be patient. She won’t ruin this. She has to wait, to hold it all in for now.

She stands and takes a breath, forcing herself to be calm.

‘Sir John, like everyone, including Lord M, signed that contract when they started working here at the palace, Mama. It’s important, and I’m not going to change it.’ And oh, this is her chance, she thinks. This could be the thing that makes him go. ‘Sir John must sign the contract like everyone else if he wishes to remain a member of your household.’

And she spins on her heel and walks out before she can say anything else.

***

Monday 20 June

‘You’d be so proud of me, Lord M,’ she says dryly. ‘Mama was so angry.’

‘Oh?’ he says, rubbing at his eyes. Sleep was once again becoming optional; he’d spent most of the night staring at the ceiling, dozing in and out of nightmares.

‘Sir John is insulted by the new contracts. Mama doesn’t think he should have to sign one. He’s been such a loyal and devoted member of her household for so long and how dare they ask him to sign such an agreement?’ she half-mocks, and he lets out a huff of amusement at her imperious voice. ‘But I said he had to sign it again if he wanted to work here at the Palace,’ she says smugly.

And suddenly his mind is blank and spinning all at once. ‘Contract, ma’am?’
She frowns. ‘The one that Mr Harper insisted I update after everything. I assume you’ve signed yours?’ she teases.

‘Yes, of course,’ he replies quickly, staring at her. ‘Why is Sir John signing one?’

‘Because he works here at the palace,’ she says slowly, and he really is confused. Surely… ‘Lord M, I don’t understand,’ she says eventually, interrupting his thoughts.

‘Sir John isn’t part of your household, ma’am, so he shouldn’t have to sign that contract. The Duchess would have her own,’ he explains. ‘Mr Harper would know that.’

‘Oh, my Uncle changed all that before he died,’ she replies. ‘Mr Harper reminded me when he was here the other day. Any household that is based in any of the Queen’s properties is bound by the same contract that governs the Queen’s household, even if the household is entirely separate,’ she says, almost as if she’s memorised it, and he blinks as it sinks in. ‘He signed the stupid contract when I became Queen. I don’t know why he’s kicking up such a fuss again now,’ she grumbles.

He can’t believe it. It’s that simple. His respect for the old King has just increased a hundred – a thousand – percent. He knew the old King had loved his niece, he knew there had been rifts – the King had made no secret of his contempt for his sister-in-law – but to do this was brilliant. Never did he think it would be this easy.

‘Got him,’ he whispers, his eyes wide. *Got him.*

‘Lord M?’ He can hear the confusion and concern in her voice, but he can’t stop the smile spreading across his face as he focuses back on her.

‘He signed it when you became Queen.’

She shakes her head, clearly confused and frowning more deeply at him now.

‘The contract that your household staff are required to sign makes provisions for staff sharing information publicly, including leaking anything to the press. It’s part of the confidentiality clause, which is what Mr Harper was reviewing – he’s essentially not allowed to say anything about you or the inner workings of the palace in any public space. Sir John has broken that,’ he says, and this is where it gets tricky, he thinks. ‘If you had evidence, you could sue him for breach of contract.’

And her eyes widen. ‘And then Mama would have to fire him,’ she breathes, and he purses his lips. *Technically* not, but it would look terrible if she didn’t. She frowns, thinking, and he can see she’s as doubtful as he is of her mother’s desire to get rid of her advisor, even in the face of such a scandal.

But oh, this could be it. His heart is racing in his chest, and he forces it to calm. It would be unkind to get her hopes up. ‘And at this stage, we don’t have any real evidence, ma’am,’ he says as seriously as he can. ‘But perhaps you won’t need it.’ He sits back in his chair. It could work. It would have to work, he thinks. But they’d have to get her lawyers involved. He cringes slightly; Harper had already informed them that he’d be away for several weeks for surgery, and he’s not sure she should trust anyone junior with this. They would just have to wait. ‘Ma’am, can I suggest you make another appointment with Mr Harper for when he returns?’
Monday 20 June

‘Good morning, sister,’ he says into his phone.

‘You’re cheery,’ Emily replies dryly, and he sighs.

‘I’m busy.’

‘Catching up on all that paperwork you abandoned on your holiday?’

‘Something like that.’

‘Would now be an appropriate time to issue the Queen that formal invitation to a dinner party at our house, or should I wait a few more years?’

He blinks. ‘I’ve been back for all of five minutes, Em.’

‘It’s been a fortnight, William, and you can’t tell me you need time to settle in.’

He sighs. ‘Who else will be invited?’

‘You.’

‘And?’

‘…Henry?’

She can’t be serious. ‘Just the four of us?’

‘And the kids.’

‘Emily,’ he warns.

‘Fine. I’ll invite Emma and Edward, and George and Harriet Sutherland. And I’ll even invite Anna Scott, if you like. I hear she’s become one of her new Ladies – I’m so interested to hear that story.’ And there was no way in hell that story was ever leaving his lips – or Emma’s, if he could get
to her in time. He’s almost surprised that Emily doesn’t already know all about it, but then Emma could be the most discreet of people when needed. And he’s glad she appears to have considered this important enough to keep quiet – for now.

‘You’re feeling generous today,’ he says instead.

‘Well, you did promise the Queen that she could meet your niece and nephews quite a long time ago, and I’d hate for you to break a promise. Besides, she seems fun.’

He rolls his eyes. ‘How magnanimous of you.’

‘I know. I do what I can.’

He knows his sister too well; this invitation can only mean trouble, and trouble for him, and he thinks he’s had enough trouble for a lifetime. ‘Fine,’ he eventually says. ‘Send your invitation.’

‘I already have,’ she says smugly, and he sighs.

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She gets so many requests to be patron of so many different charities – all of them worthwhile causes – and he knows it hurts that she can’t say yes to them all.

It’s the children’s charities he knows that sting the most. Ever since the terrorist attack in York, she’s been determined to say yes to everything she possibly can that involves children. He thinks perhaps she’s also making up for her own childhood, exorcising her own demons just a little. But if this is how she works it through, throws those chains off her back, then he’s more than willing to do whatever he can to support that. He also tries not to have too much input in this; these are decisions that will affect her long after he’s gone, and it’s important that she chooses what she wants, not what others want for her.

He gives her them in bunches periodically; all of the reasonable ones, and she sorts through them with varying degrees of frustration and interest – there are only so many hours in the day, so many things she can attend, and she knows she cannot overcommit herself. Once she’s committed to something, she’s likely in it for life, so she has to choose wisely. There are so many factors for her to consider on top of her own personal considerations; the size of the charity, any other patrons they may have, whether they receive government funding or are solely reliant on donations. He knows she finds it overwhelming, so one of his deputies is tasked with working with the Lord Chamberlain’s office to do up a mini-fact sheet with links to the relevant websites for each of the charities to help her decide. It often takes her a long time to decide; weeks, sometimes, and he doesn’t press, just making a note on his list of things to do to ask her for them after a fortnight or so.

But there seem to be more children’s charities than usual in this bundle, he thinks, and so when she hasn’t returned them all to him after the three weeks he’d tentatively allowed her this time, he asks. Her huff of frustration, the way she picks up half the bundle and skims them and throws her hands in the air in surrender, confirms his suspicions – she can’t decide.

‘There are so many, Lord M. And they’re all such wonderful charities,’ she groans, and he nods.

‘Yes, ma’am. But you really can’t help them all,’ he points out, and she sighs.
‘I know,’ she says, absent-mindedly pushing her fingers into her hair above her temple. ‘I hate that there seems to be a need for so many,’ she says quietly.

‘Childhood should be happy time,’ he agrees. ‘But at least when it’s not, there are people to turn to.’ She nods, and he can see she’s not there with him at all; he wonders where she’s gone. ‘Shall I give you some more time to think about it, ma’am?’ he asks gently after a few seconds, and she lets out a long sigh.

‘Please.’

***

He loves Emma Portman. He really does. She’s been there for him through everything; through Caro, through Augustus, through the years of stupidity and politics and tragedy. He wouldn’t give up her friendship for the world.

But there are times when he thinks she’s bored. How, as a wife and mother and Personal Assistant to the Queen of England, she is bored, he’ll never know, but the way she stirs the pot tells him she’s clearly not got enough to worry about. That, or she really just enjoys making his life difficult. She has a bird’s eye view now; she enjoys watching him pick up the pieces of the messes she creates. Maybe it was some kind of payback for picking him up so many times.

It’s late, and they’re standing on the balcony down near her rooms. Harriet has been away for a week on some show, and when she invites him to stay for dinner on one of the few nights she has free, he doesn’t have the heart to say no. He thinks she’s just a little lonely; she had invited Emma to stay for dinner a few nights ago, and he thinks perhaps that Anna Scott is still a little too new for one-on-one time.

He’s also more than happy to keep her distracted on the nights she’s at the palace.

‘Oh, I was talking to Emma this afternoon,’ she says suddenly, her face an excited kind of hopeful, and he automatically plasters a calm look on his face.

‘Yes, ma’am?’

‘All the people who have held the post of Lord Chamberlain in the history of the English monarchy have been men,’ she starts, and he blinks.

‘Yes, that’s why the role was titled the Lord Chamberlain, ma’am,’ he half-jokes, and she lets out a little huff.

He knows what she’s going to ask. They’re just managing to seemingly strike a more comfortable balance with the media and the public after the months of rubbish, and he’s loathed to put that in jeopardy. The aristocracy – the old men who still claimed their birthright as some higher calling, some noble existence – would unlikely take this lying down. It would alienate her further with them, but also ingratiate her with some of the younger public, he thinks. But it would likely make the news, again, make her decisions the topic of debate, again, and he’s not so keen to see that. He doesn’t like change for the sake of change; it only brings prying eyes and comments and criticism, and really, if it isn’t broken, then don’t try to fix it.
But maybe there’s more to this than he thinks. She definitely does things with little thought – acts on a whim more regularly than he enjoys – but her decisions have been a little more considered of late. She’s far more aware in a practical way of the importance of her more public decisions now, and experience has tempered her just a little.

‘I’d like to appoint a woman,’ she announces, her chin tilted up just slightly in that now so-familiar gesture of confidence and just a little defiance.

He purses his lips thoughtfully before shrugging and making a thoughtful noise. ‘Yes, ma’am.’ She narrows her eyes at his lack of objection. ‘I can’t see why not, ma’am,’ he adds. ‘I’ll have to check that there isn’t some obscure law that dictates that the position must be held by a man – but I would be surprised if there was.’ She gives him a questioning look. ‘I imagine that when the role was created some time in the Middle Ages it was not conceived that a woman would ever hold the role, but you never know.’

She tilts her head in acknowledgement. ‘Probably not,’ she agrees.

‘It will be vaguely controversial, ma’am,’ he says seriously. ‘You would be breaking literally centuries of tradition. The traditionalists will cry about tradition, and those more progressive will applaud you for bringing the monarchy into the twenty-first century.’ And he knows she hates this, having to think about every decision from more angles than seems entirely fair. ‘There will likely be some discussion in the press about it, especially given how popular the royal household has been of late,’ he says, raising his eyebrows, and he sees her face fall, and he knows where her mind has gone, but it would be remiss of him not to warn her. ‘You could chat to Press and PR if you’d like, ma’am, but I don’t think it will be a problem,’ he adds, and she nods.

‘Thank you,’ she says, nodding, and he wonders a little that Emma didn’t warn her of this. It’s all a little too fresh and raw still, he thinks, even though he’d returned a couple of weeks ago now. The revelation about Conroy’s betrayal – her mother’s possible betrayal – is still just a little too painful.

She says nothing for a long while, looking out over the balcony, and he lets her think. He can’t rescue her from everything. She needs time to process, to think through it all.

He knows she’s still avoiding her mother. He wonders if the Duchess has figured out why. He wonders a little cynically if she’s even noticed.

She suddenly sucks in a breath, and he turns to look at her. ‘You said once, ages ago, that I could choose who I belonged to,’ she starts. ‘I think it’s time I started filling my household with the people I want, Lord M,’ she says quietly, her voice strained. ‘I did not choose Sir Robert, and look how well that worked out.’

He thinks perhaps that wasn’t entirely Sir Robert’s fault, but now is probably not the best time for that lesson. Not while he’s desperately trying to keep her off the warpath after the revelation about Conroy, or while she’s still brittle from the past months.

‘You are the only person I chose,’ she says, looking at him, and the weight of the past months hangs there between them, and he feels it in his chest. ‘Everyone else was chosen for me, or I inherited from my uncle.’ He nods; he understands. It’s painful, betrayal. He’s acutely aware of what it does to your senses, making you question everyone and everything, suspicious of those closest to you.

He wonders vaguely if she will turn on him in her anger. She has never really lashed out at him before. Not with any real strength.

He’s so lost in his thoughts that when she speaks, her voice a broken, sad thing, his heart breaks.
'You’re the only one I trust, Lord M,’ she whispers.

‘Oh, no,’ he replies, pushing himself up from where he was leaning on the balcony and turning to face her. ‘What about Emma? Harriet?’

‘Oh, yes, of course,’ she says almost a little tearfully, and he resists the urge reach out and hug her.

‘And I hear only good things about Nancy,’ he adds, and she smiles a little. ‘It is important that you trust your senior staff, ma’am,’ he agrees. ‘But I think it’s good to have diversity also,’ he says carefully. ‘It’s good to hear opposing opinions sometimes.’

She nods. ‘I don’t like hearing opposing opinions much,’ she says, and he can’t completely hold in the bark of laughter. She looks at him, frowning slightly, and he narrows his eyes at her mock-questioningly. It takes a moment for her to crack, and she huffs a laugh.

‘I think, ma’am, I can confidently give that understatement of the year,’ he says carefully, eyeing her, and she huffs another reluctant laugh, and he’s pleased to have made her smile. ‘Did you have someone in mind, ma’am?’ he asks, knowing the answer already.

Her face breaks into a determined but more hopeful smile. ‘Yes.’

He nods slowly, and he’s just about to ask, when she speaks again. ‘I’m really glad you’re back, Lord M.’ Her smile has dropped into something smaller, slightly less certain, and it’s these moments that show him just how wounded she had been by the previous weeks, and he curses himself. For all her newfound strength, she was still learning how to paper over those deeper wounds. ‘So am I, ma’am,’ he replies, a small smile on his own face.

When he’s walking out to his car, it strikes him that she’d not really asked him. She was going to do it anyway, he thinks, unless perhaps he’d really been very vehement in his protests against the idea. A year ago she would have turned her wide, blue eyes on him, vaguely terrified, desperate for his approval and support. Now? Well, now, she was getting stronger, more independent, his little Queen. Slowly, but surely. It wasn’t without cracks - he saw them regularly - but she was light-years away from the girl-Queen in Kensington. She was learning to trust her own heart, her own voice, and his own heart swells a little; he’s so proud of her.

Chapter End Notes

I spent quite a bit of time researching how members of the Royal family choose their charities, and there (surprisingly) isn't a whole lot of information available, so you'll have to forgive a bit of poetic licence there.
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

And if I stumble
And if I stall
And if I slip now
And if I should fall
And if I can't be all that I could be
Will you, will you wait for me

- *Wait*, Alexi Murdoch

**Tuesday 21 June**

‘You look like you should have ordered a slightly bigger coffee this morning,’ she says, and he smiles ruefully at her but it doesn’t reach his eyes, and she’s now officially worried about him.

She can see it, the way he’s been fading over the last week: the shadows beneath his eyes have grown more pronounced, his skin is pale and taut, and he seems sad and tense at the same time, and she doesn’t understand at all.

He’s back now, and he’d seemed so happy to be back, laughing and joking with her, and things had fallen mostly back into their same easy pattern, and she’d felt content again. It wasn’t *exactly* the same as before – she supposes it won’t be, after everything – she knows he can see how hard she’s trying to be better, and he’s helping. There’s a depth there, she’s realised, a depth borne of their shared pain, the way they’d seen a little more into each other – a depth that she secretly treasures. But things had mostly returned the same easy rhythm she’d loved so much about their relationship, and she’s happy.

But the last few days – maybe a week, she thinks – he’s been fading. She’s worried, because no matter how late she stays up worrying, thinking, cataloguing every moment she can remember, every discussion they’ve had, she cannot, *cannot* think why.

Something has held her back these few days, but she’s now on the verge of asking him what *on earth* is wrong. He had been so happy to be back only days ago – she *knows* he had been – and now? Well, now he looks…haunted.

She’s looking through her calendar when she sees it, and something triggers in the back of her mind, and she continues scrolling but her mind is elsewhere until it hits her. She closes her eyes, shaking her head at her own stupidity. He’d told her the date only months ago, and she’d forgotten already. What a wonderful friend she was.

But he’s fading, and that’s unacceptable.
‘It’s the anniversary of the Coronation in a couple of weeks,’ she tells Emma, who nods.

‘Yes, ma’am. Andrew has organised the dinner,’ she replies.

‘That means it’s the anniversary of the Coronation Ball in a week,’ she says, and Emma nods.

It’s the anniversary of his son’s death, she wants to say, but the words stick in her throat. She looks at Emma, willing her to understand. ‘Lord M is taking the day off,’ she eventually says, and Emma nods slowly.

‘Yes, ma’am. He has done the same every year, no matter what.’

That night is seared into her memory for so many reasons; the giddiness of freedom and too much champagne, the joy of dancing with him, the look in his eyes when she’d begged him to dance with her again, the look on his face when she’d apologised hours later.

The way he’d been hours late with no real explanation.

But she doesn’t know how to ask; she doesn’t want to pry, but she worries.

‘What…what does he do?’ she asks quietly, and Emma’s face quirks in a sad smile.

‘I imagine what I’d do if I lost my son, ma’am,’ she says quietly. ‘Drown myself in whiskey until it didn’t hurt anymore.’ She thinks the shock must register on her face because Emma smiles sadly again. ‘It’s been a few years now, ma’am. He’ll be fine. Everyone grieves in their own way.’

She nods dumbly.

Oh, she hates that, she decides after a few minutes. She hates, hates that he’s alone in his grief and pain and there’s no one there to console him and oh, she hates that he’s done this for so long, and how can they do that to him, just leave him there?

But the emotions settle and she breathes, and she thinks that maybe Emma was right. This was his way of grieving.

She still hates it, but she would respect it. She would respect him. But she would not let him think he was alone.

She has to do something, to help in some way, to let him know that she was there for him, thinking of him. But she also has absolutely no idea where the boundaries are. She was his friend, yes, but so was Emma, and she let him drown his sorrows. She wonders briefly what his sister does, or his brother.

She thinks they must let him grieve in his own way too.

‘Is there nothing we can do?’ she asks Emma a little later.

Emma purses her lips. ‘I’m not sure, ma’am. If there is, I haven’t found it yet. Perhaps someone else might.’
She can’t fix this, she knows. She would be foolish to try. But there has to be something she can do, something she can say or do for him to help.

So she looks up dealing with the death of a child and there are just so many contradicting stories and so much contradictory information and so many things that definitely work and definitely don’t that her head spins and she feels more lost than when she started. She thinks if there was an easy solution, he would have already applied it.

She’s halfway through reading some advice from a bereaved parents’ blog when she realises that she doesn’t even know how he died, and oh, she does not want to ask.

She messages Harriet, who, to her credit, doesn’t ask why.

*It was a stroke. Very sudden. So sad.*

She’s just typing in the words to look up strokes in children when her phone screen lights up again.

*It was in the news.*

The next message is a link to an old BBC news report, and she reads with increasing horror of the death of the Prime Minister’s son; the pictures of the Ambulances outside his house, the way they’d made the decision to turn off the life support after three days.

The tiny, light wood coffin resting on his shoulder. His own *son*.

A tear slides down her cheek, and she thinks she understands grief counsellors a little bit more now.

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‘Did Lord M ever see a grief counsellor?’ she asks, and Emma blinks, and she flushes red as she realises what she’s asking. *Too personal. Stupid.* ‘I don’t…I don’t want to know,’ she says haltingly. ‘I just…maybe it would help,’ she says a little helplessly herself, and why does she speak before she thinks? Surely, surely by now she would know better…

‘It might,’ Emma says slowly.

Her shoulders deflate slightly. ‘I don’t think I’d want to talk to anyone for a long time. Maybe ever. Particularly someone I didn’t know.’

‘Yes,’ Emma agrees. ‘But talking to someone whose opinion doesn’t matter to you can also be cathartic. You can be more honest.’

But then a thought hits her. ‘Where was his wife?’ she asks, and Emma’s eyes drop immediately, her face hardening, and oh, she shouldn’t pry. She shouldn’t *ask*. ‘I’m sorry, Emma. It’s not…it’s none of my business,’ she says.

‘It’s okay – I understand, ma’am,’ Emma says gently, offering her a smile. ‘I asked myself all the same questions ten years ago.’ She lets out a sigh. ‘You’d find it all on the internet, anyway,’ she
says, and Victoria thinks she’s telling herself more than anyone. ‘Caro had only just moved back in when Augustus died. She wasn’t well herself. She didn’t cope at all.’

‘Oh,’ she says, and she feels the weight in her chest. He’d been alone for so long.

‘Augustus was her son too, despite everything,’ Emma says, and Victoria feels a sudden stab of compassion for his dead wife. ‘It was a pretty horrible time all around, ma’am,’ Emma says, and she nods.

‘It seems so unfair,’ she mutters. ‘He doesn’t deserve this.’

‘Who does?’ Emma asks more to herself than anything, but she flushes anyway, before nodding.

No one deserves this kind of pain. No one.
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

Speak and open up your mind
It's something you should do all the time
Keep exploring, seek and find
You know you might surprise yourself
Talk without a taint or hold
The doubts that should embrace your heart
The calm and chaos of your soul
You know you might surprise yourself

- *Surprise Yourself*, Jack Garratt

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry for the delay.

(In some vague yet completely insufficient defence, I *did* try to post this last night but AO3 gave me unicorns instead.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*Week of Monday 20 June*

There’s always been this undercurrent, almost since day one, one that he doesn’t think she’d really noticed until it had been thrown in her face after the Coronation Ball, but one he’s been acutely and ceaselessly aware of.

Her future husband.

He’s pushed it to the back of his mind, ignored it as much as possible, and it hasn’t been too hard; he really doesn’t enjoy thinking about it, and she’s not even remotely interested in getting married. He’s not really surprised; she’s been too focused on being Queen and simply getting through everything the previous almost two years had entailed. Too focused on learning about this world she’d barely discovered, learning about who she really was without the constraints of Sir John and her mother. But now things were settling, and he knew it would surface again soon.

With the Earl on leave until his replacement is finalised, she asks him to help her with the questions *Vanity Fair* had sent through for approval prior to the shoot. He doesn’t bother asking why she doesn’t ask one of the other members of the Lord Chamberlain’s office to assist; whilst he’d spent his life working with – and against – the press, he certainly wasn’t an expert, but he thinks the trauma of Sir Robert was a little fresh in her mind – for all three of them – so he doesn’t resist. Besides, he thinks she’s still a little shy about everything. He’ll make sure whatever they decide makes its way
down there for checking anyway.

So they’re sitting outside in the gentle morning sun – it’s been virtually impossible to keep her inside now that she’d caught up on her paperwork – coffees beside them, and they’re working through the list the magazine had sent through a few days earlier.

And it takes about two minutes into the list of topics for discussion for her frown. ‘Why is ‘Prince Consort’ a topic for discussion?’ she asks not a little defensively, and he draws a line through the words.

‘He’s not now,’ he declares, and she looks at him, still a little outraged, and he shrugs. ‘It’s up to you who and what you discuss, ma’am.’ She’ll have to address this one day, but he thinks it’s probably not entirely unreasonable that she requests not to discuss it at this time.

She lets out a huff of annoyance as she stares at him. ‘I don’t even know what I’d say!’

He frowns thoughtfully. ‘Well, I imagine you could say something like you don’t have any plans to marry at this stage, that you are focused on your role as Queen and serving the people in that capacity.’

She stares at him for a moment before frowning and sighing resignedly. ‘Why can’t you just answer the questions for me?’ she mutters and he lets out a bark of a laugh. ‘You’re so much better at this than I am!’

‘That’s because I’ve been doing this for years, ma’am.’ He pauses, waiting for her to look at him. ‘I had to learn how to do this too, ma’am, and I didn’t have a whole team of people there to help me. That’s why we’re crafting your answers together,’ he says, and she seems to settle a little. ‘One day, you won’t even need me.’

‘Don’t say that, Lord M,’ she says quietly, and there’s a pause as she looks up at him with wary eyes, the ghosts returning.

‘I’ll be privileged to work for you for as long as you’ll have me, ma’am. You know that,’ he replies, and she gives him a small smile, which he happily returns. ‘So, shall I return future husband to the list?’ he asks with a small smirk, and she rolls her eyes at him.

‘If you must.’

He looks at her gently. ‘You know why they ask.’

‘Yes,’ she says on a sigh. ‘I just…aren’t I more than who I choose?’ she asks.

‘Of course,’ he says, letting out a sigh. ‘The public want their Queen to marry, to be happy. To them, it’s a love story, ma’am. There’s nothing they love more.’ He tells himself they’re talking in the abstract, something that is not reality, and likely won’t be for a while yet. She’s not shown the slightest interest in any of the young men she’s met. And he knows full well why his heart twists in his chest at the thought.

She would make the most beautiful bride.

And oh, the pain of that thought is enough to make him blink and he stops that train of thought – the thought of her as a wife and mother – firmly before it even gets going.

‘I suppose,’ she says, breaking into his thoughts. ‘But that’s a long way off,’ she says dismissively.
‘Yes, ma’am,’ he replies as neutrally as he can.

They work through the rest of the topics on the list, and none of them surprise him; they’ve obviously done their research and are sticking to the agenda they’d proposed – the Queen two years into her reign, as part of a series on powerful British women. They’re all around her time at Kensington; her Father’s death; the relevancy of the Monarchy in the modern world; silly, fun little things about her favourite foods and favourite designers and what she feeds Dash, and she’s relatively happy to answer all of them – although she refuses to talk about her mother or Sir John, and he agrees – but it’s when they get to her household, and more specifically Lord Melbourne, that she pauses.

‘They were always going to ask,’ he says, and she looks quite a bit more concerned at the thought than he thought necessary, and he doesn’t like that he’s not too sure why.

‘I suppose,’ she agrees, before pursing her lips. ‘Are they going to want to talk about everything?’ she asks, and he frowns a little.

‘I imagine they’ll likely ask a leading question, and allow you to say what you wish,’ he says. He almost adds and hang yourself with your own noose, but he doesn’t. That’s not really helpful now, and besides, she’s not in politics, he reminds himself. Not everyone was out to get her.

‘I…I don’t want to say the wrong thing,’ she admits quietly, and the pain of the previous weeks is so clear in her eyes that his heart breaks a little.

‘I don’t think you will, ma’am,’ he says honestly, and he doesn’t. He thinks she could sing his praises and it wouldn’t be anything really new. They’ve been down that road, speculated like crazy about their relationship and it had all come to nothing, in the end. They’ll publish it, for sure, but it’s not going to be the headlines that it had been. He thinks that unless she declares outright her intent to marry him, tells them in no uncertain terms that the rumours of their apparent relationship are true, no one is really going to think too much of anything she says.

He swallows at the thought, pushing it away.

Besides, she’s smarter now, and far more wary than she’s ever been. She’s learned that lesson.

He looks up at her, and her face is thoughtful. ‘You’re my Private Secretary, and you’ve been an invaluable source of guidance and assistance, given my age and inexperience,’ she says slowly. ‘Along with Emma and the Earl and Harriet and the Duke. I can’t do any of it without you,’ she says, her blue eyes on him, serious and determined, and he gives her a small smile, eager to deflect the intensity of her gaze just a little.

‘Sounds good, ma’am,’ he says, smiling to himself and writing down her words.

***

She’s pacing, she knows, but she can’t seem to bring herself to stop.

‘Ma’am,’ a soft voice calls from behind her, and she stops, turning to look at him. His eyes are their usual soft, gentle green, and she lets out a breath.

‘I’m nervous.’
His eyebrow rises ever so slightly, his mouth tilting upwards just a tiny bit, and she lets out a huff, rolling her eyes at him as she feels the smile spread across her face. He was infuriating and wonderful at the same time, her Lord M. He always seemed to know what was going on in her head and just how to pull her out of it.

Yes, she’d been right. She had chosen well when she’d chosen him as her Private Secretary. Hopefully she would be able to do the same again today. The Lord Chamberlain was such an important position.

*Lady Chamberlain,* she corrects herself. *Hopefully.*

Emma appears at the door. ‘Ms Canning is here,’ she says, and Victoria nods. She flicks her head around to where he was now standing next to a chair to the side, and she thinks he looks a little uncomfortable.

*I don’t think you need me, ma’am.*

*Of course I need you there, Lord M.*

*You know there is no hierarchy here, ma’am. If you choose her, Ms Canning will technically be my equal. I would have no authority over her at all.*

She’d almost scoffed. As if she would trust anyone over him.

*All the same, I would appreciate your assistance. Besides, you’ll have to work closely with her. It would be good to have your perspective.*

He’d eventually conceded with a *Fair enough, ma’am.*

She hears the soft footfalls and looks up as Charlotte Canning walks into the room and curtseys, and she is really nothing like Victoria is expecting, and she blinks.

But some of the pieces begin to fall into place, and she smiles a little.

‘Your Majesty,’ she says gently, and Victoria likes how her voice is steady. Most people seemed to have a slightly tremble to their voice when they meet her for the first time; she could still remember Lord M pointing it out at her first Garden Party. But Charlotte Canning’s voice is nothing but polite deference, and Victoria stares at her.

‘Ms Canning,’ she says. ‘Thank you for coming.’

‘Thank you for inviting me, ma’am,’ she replies, her face a small smile, and something in Victoria warms slightly. She watches as her eyes flick to where Lord M stands, and he offers his hand.

‘William Lamb,’ he says, as they shake hands.

‘Lord Melbourne,’ she replies, and the way his lips twist ever so slightly throws her a little, but neither of them says anything, and when Charlotte looks at her almost expectantly, she points to the lounge.

‘Please,’ she says, sitting. ‘Emma has spoken to you about why you’re here,’ she starts, and Charlotte nods.

‘Yes, ma’am. I must say it’s an honour to be considered for such an important role,’ she replies, and Victoria thinks she means it, the way her voice sounds a little incredulous.
‘Your resume is rather impressive.’

‘I’ve been very fortunate in the opportunities I’ve been given, ma’am.’

She nods. ‘I note that you can speak Hindi,’ she says.

‘I was born in India, ma’am,’ Charlotte explains. ‘My father was a British diplomat, my mother a politician’s daughter. We moved to the UK when I was eight.’

‘You appear to have continued the tradition,’ Victoria says, smiling a little, and she's pleased to see Charlotte’s smile in return.

‘Yes, ma’am.’

Victoria studies her for a moment. She thinks it’s best to get this out of the way early; to see if she can handle the pressure. Lord M had told her to start with some small talk, to make her guest feel more comfortable, but she thinks Charlotte Canning isn’t the kind of woman who enjoys small talk for the sake of it.

‘It’s likely that some objections will be raised to your gender,’ she says, watching carefully. ‘The role of the Lord Chamberlain has been since its inception the purview of men.’

‘I’m sure there will be, ma’am. And to my colour. And my background.’ She lets out a small sigh. ‘I am sure it will be nothing different to what I have endured in the past, ma’am. Just a little more public,’ she adds.

‘How do you anticipate handling these objections?’

‘The same way I always have, ma’am. Ignore them, and then silence them with my success.’

She smiles before glancing at Lord M, who gives her a tiny, amused smirk in return.

Perfect.

***

When the news breaks that the Queen has chosen a woman for her new Lord Chamberlain, and worse, not someone from the aristocracy, it prompts exactly the reaction he’d imagined it would.

‘I really don’t understand why they’re so upset,’ she says, waving the remote at the television, and he snorts.

‘Maybe we should listen, ma’am,’ he suggests, pointing at the television, and she flicks the mute button on a man who is halfway through saying something.

‘—tradition. Political correctness is infecting even the monarchy.’ And of course they’d get Perceval on, he thinks. The man hasn’t had a progressive thought in his sixty years of life. He probably thinks she’s too young to be Queen, he thinks a little uncharitably, but he’s so tired of people tearing her down simply because they can.

‘I’m not sure how a woman doing a job she is eminently qualified for counts as political correctness,’ another panellist argues. ‘Charlotte Canning has been Head of Public Relations for
IBM and Burberry and has years of experience in managing the public profile of quite a number of British politicians, including William Grenville and Sir John Moore.

‘All popular business brands, and a politician hardly equates to a member of the royal family. The Lord Chamberlain requires an understanding of the delicate balance the monarchy strikes with the people—’

‘And you’re saying a woman cannot understand that balance? A woman whose role prior to returning to Britain was as the Ambassador to India’s wife?’ Melbourne’s lips twist at the dangerous note in the woman’s voice.

‘I am saying that someone who has worked with the monarchy in their lifetime should hold the role.’

She turns to him, frowning, and the television goes silent.

‘Ma’am,’ he says carefully, and her shoulders deflate slightly. ‘You know that anything you do will be examined from a hundred different angles,’ he says, and she nods.

‘Do you think I made the right decision?’ she asks, and he raises his eyebrows at her. She can’t always turn to him for this; she has to learn to trust her own decisions. He won’t be around forever.

‘I don’t think you need me to tell you that, ma’am,’ he says gently.

‘You do not mind that her husband is a Tory supporter?’ she asks.

‘It’s not for me to mind, ma’am,’ he says, a little exasperated. ‘This is your decision.’

‘Yes, but I don’t see why I should make it entirely alone,’ she retorts with some strength, and he has to concede her that. She lets out a sigh, before turning and pacing. ‘It’s such an important decision.’

‘Yes, it is,’ he agrees. ‘And you have done all I think you can do to make the most informed decision possible. You have the Earl’s approval, and everything you’ve heard has been positive. She has more than enough experience in Event Management and Human Resources and PR, and in International Diplomacy, and you liked her when you interviewed her,’ he says. ‘Is there anything else?’

She purses her lips. ‘It will make Wellington happy,’ she says a little too flippantly, and he shakes his head.

‘Since when are you in the business of pleasing former or current Prime Ministers, ma’am?’ he asks dryly, his lips twisting slightly and an eyebrow raised, and it takes her a moment, but then she’s grinning wryly at him.

‘True.’ But then she’s pacing again, and she looks up at him for a moment, before looking away, her face firm. ‘Yes. Charlotte Canning will do a good job,’ she says, and he can tell by her tone that she’s convincing herself as much as anything.

He just prays she’s right.
The inspiration for Charlotte Canning was the real Countess Canning, who was the wife of the 1st Earl Canning and the first vicereine of India, made so when her husband became Viceroy after holding the post of Governor-General until the wars of independence. Prior to her move to Calcutta, she served as Lady of the Bedchamber to Queen Victoria from 1842 to 1855, and they were apparently quite close. She was a prolific artist and botanist, could speak French fluently, and seemingly quite intelligent.

So, really, I've just played with the details a little. ;)
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

I can hear the sound of your barely beating heart
Pieces on the ground from a world that fell apart
Just hold on
It won't be long

I will find you here inside the dark
I will break through
No matter where you are
I will find you
I will find you

I’ll be the light and lead you home when there's nowhere left to go
I’ll be the voice you always know when you're lost and all alone

- I Will Find You, Ruelle

Monday 27 June

It’s the day before and he’s faded so far that she’s now genuinely concerned for his health, let alone anything else. He looks terrible.

She wonders how she didn’t see it last year.

She knows. She doesn’t want to examine it too closely. It stings that she’d been so wrapped up in herself she hadn’t noticed the change in him. Maybe she had, but had assumed he was busy and tired with the Coronation and the Ball and everything.

Her heart tells her the truth.

But she holds her tongue, says nothing, and he doesn’t offer, and they dance around each other a little, she thinks.

He must know she knows. He told her. It had been months ago, but he’d still told her – the date and everything.

He must know.

But she’s still no closer to finding something, anything that might help, and she’s beginning to feel small again, like she’s a child just entering the adults’ world, and maybe there isn’t a solution to this, maybe she can’t do anything, and it all just seems so unfair.

So she searches once more, reading everything she can, until finally she stumbles across the answer, and it’s that same thought that she’d had a week ago.
Ensure those who are suffering know that they're not alone.

***

It’s late and all he wants is to go home and curl up into a ball and fall apart, but he has work to do, so he pushes on through the fog of pain and exhaustion.

He’s just coming back from collecting some paperwork from the Treasurer’s Office when he finds her on the floor of his office leaning up against a bookshelf, reading what looks like the third *Harry Potter* book.

‘I’m avoiding Mama,’ she explains a little nervously, and he sees *right* through it. Seven hundred and seventy-five rooms in Buckingham Palace and she chooses *his* office to hide in, on this day of all days.

He’d wondered briefly if she’d remember – she’d been so upset that day – but he’d tried to squash the thought. It would hurt too much if she didn’t, and it wouldn’t be her fault at all. But in hindsight, it did explain why she had been almost tiptoeing around him for days.

‘I didn’t think you’d mind if I hid in here for a bit,’ she adds, and he smiles down at her. Despite it all, she can still pull smiles from him, even small ones, without even trying.

‘You’re always welcome to hide in my office, ma’am,’ he tells her, and she smiles back up at him.

‘Where are you up to?’ she asks teasingly, waving the book at him.

‘Not as far in as you,’ he admits, dumping the paperwork he’d been carrying on his desk.

‘Want to stay and read with me for a while? I brought the second one because I know you haven’t quite finished it. And snacks,’ she says, and he can see she’s trying so hard to seem relaxed about it, to give him an out if he wants to say no.

‘Sure,’ he says, not even really understanding why, but he takes off his tie and plonks himself down on the carpet next to her, taking the offered book and a few pieces of caramel popcorn.

Within moments she’s leaning against him, her arm from shoulder to elbow firmly pressed against his as she focuses on the book in front of her, and she’s so sweet, his beautiful Queen.

It’s a good hour later, when she’s lying on the floor next to him with her book in the air and his back is a little stiff from sitting on the ground, that he thinks to speak.

He’s been watching her on and off for a little while, watching her giggle and outright laugh at parts - and then refuse to spoil him until he caught up - and squirm around to find a comfortable position, but in all that time, she’s never stopped touching him in some way. Her shoulder was currently pressed against his thigh just above his knee, and if he just reached down, he could push that little bit of her fringe away from her face, that stray bit caught on her eyebrow that had been bothering him for longer than he cared to admit.

He knows what she’s trying to do, and he thinks his broken, aching heart couldn’t possibly love her more, his beautiful Queen.
So here, in the safety of his office floor, with this beautiful woman who is so compassionate and so desperate to keep him alive, he tells her a story of his boy that he’s been thinking about ever since she asked him to read these books with her.

‘Augustus loved Hedwig. He asked for an owl for his tenth birthday – specifically a snowy owl.’

She drops her book on her chest and looks up at him from the floor, her eyes wide.

‘I told him that, unfortunately, Hedwig was a magical owl, and that only magical owls could be kept as pets in London. He told me that I should change the rules because I was Prime Minister.’

He looks down at her captivated, half-smiling face, watching as she bites her lip. ‘He was right,’ she declares. ‘You should have.’

He nods. ‘That started the obsession with owls. I don’t know how many books he read on owls, but I would come home from work and he would tell me everything he’d learned about owls that day over dinner, and dinner would take hours because he remembered almost everything he read, I think.’ He sighs. ‘And then one day he told me that he’d read that JK Rowling said that we shouldn’t keep non-magical owls as pets because they needed their freedom and so he didn’t want one anymore, and I shouldn’t change the rules.’

‘Good thing you didn’t change them then,’ she says slowly.

‘Yes,’ he agrees.

She pushes herself up from the floor to sit next to him again, her shoulder pressed firmly against his upper arm, before she speaks. ‘Do you have any other photos of him?’ she asks tentatively, her voice soft and gentle, so he pulls out his wallet from inside his jacket and pulls out a worn photo of a toddler with large dark curls and big brown eyes.

She lets out a soft ooh. ‘He was so cute,’ she says, studying the picture in front of her. ‘Those little overalls are so sweet.’ She looks up at him. ‘He looks like you.’

‘Yes, he did.’

She stares at the photo for a few moments longer before handing it back to him. ‘Thank you,’ she says, and his throat tightens a little, so he just nudges her a little with his shoulder. When she loops her arm through his and rests her head on his shoulder he feels the tears burn behind his eyes, so he just sits, resting his head against the books on the shelf behind him, and breathes as he watches her read.

***

The message comes through at five the next evening, when he’s awake and his head is fuzzy and he’s just staring at the ceiling, and he blinks when he reads it.

Sir Robert was here. Emma said he looked like he was walking towards his own beheading. I wonder if I should buy a toy guillotine for when you’re away? I could strategically place it on my desk.

He feels the pull of a smile that doesn’t reach his face.
He reads Emily’s much earlier message next.

Love you.

He stops for a moment, staring at the words on the screen, all that his sister had done for him over the past ten years creeping back into his mind, and so he replies with a couple of x’s.

Emma’s message appears a few minutes later.

You’ve been missed. And then a second: I missed you too.

But he finds he can, for once, think through the fog and haze, and so he replies to her, his beautiful Queen.

I think they sell toy ones at the British Museum.

Her reply is almost instant. Can we go one day?

Of course.

Another message comes through a minute later, and he can see her tentative, nervous face in his mind.

Are you okay?

He’s spent the previous twenty or so hours wallowing in grief and alcohol and pictures of his boy, but it hasn’t been quite the same unbearable, unending pain that had tormented him for the weeks around this time every year for the past ten years.

He just missed him, his sweet little boy, but he thinks perhaps it’s time to allow the memory of his smiles and laughter, his quirky comments and love of learning, cloud this most painful of days as well.

He’d realised on his way home that night that he’d allowed his grief to overshadow those beautiful moments, those wonderful things about his son that he’d loved. She’d reminded him that there can be happiness in grief; that not everything needed to be hijacked by the tragedy of death. That it was okay to grieve, to feel the soul-destroying pain, but that it was okay to remember the good times, too.

I’m okay.

***

When he arrives the next morning, Emma stands and pulls him into a hug, which he gratefully returns, before she pulls back and studies his face for a moment. Seemingly mostly satisfied with what she sees, she returns to her seat.

‘You know, she never said a word all day. And she was polite to Robert.’

He wonders for a moment if he should tell her. ‘I heard,’ he says, decision made, and she frowns, confused. ‘She messaged me last night,’ he admits, and Emma’s eyebrows shoot up. ‘Add the British Museum to your list of things to do. She’s never been,’ he calls over his shoulder as he heads for her office.
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

Hold
Hold on
Hold on to me
'Cause I'm a little unsteady
A little unsteady

If you love me, don't let go
If you love me, don't let go

- Unsteady, X Ambassadors

Wednesday 29 June

He’s been so distracted, so focused on putting one foot in front of the other for the past week, that it’s slipped his mind.

He doesn’t often walk the halls of the palace; there’s usually not much need to go anywhere other than the various offices of the staff and her office. But then there are the nights he stays for dinner, the usually rare nights he meets her at the palace entrance for some official Palace function she’s told him he must attend – but those are even more now in between the Earl’s departure and Charlotte Canning’s commencement.

It’s one of these nights that he sees Sir John for the first time since the unveiling of her portrait, and he feels his heart speed up a little in his chest at the sight of the man who had so brutally abused his position – his Queen – for his own gain. The man who had made his Queen think she was less than she was. The man who had made his Queen cry.

He loathes him.

He thinks it’s ironic; for all his worry and concern around what she would say when she saw him, he was the one who felt most in danger of being charged with assault.

But he can’t avoid him when he appears quite suddenly from behind the door to the Duchess’s rooms. ‘Sir John,’ he says as he walks past, not stopping.

‘Lord Melbourne. Welcome back to the Palace,’ Sir John says, and Melbourne stops, turning to face him, inclining his head in acknowledgement. ‘I see you just couldn’t stay away.’ Melbourne frowns slightly, unwilling to speak. ‘But then I suppose the Queen is a high prize, even for a former Prime Minister,’ Sir John sneers, and he feels his jaw clench.

‘If you view the Queen as a kind of property to be bought and sold.’

‘And you do not? Your reputation suggests otherwise.’
‘You may think what you like, Sir John. I can’t bring myself to care for your opinion on anything, really.’

‘I suppose very few opinions really matter, when you have the undying devotion of the Queen,’ he retorts, and Melbourne lets out an exaggerated sigh. ‘I did find myself wondering what exactly it was that caused you to return,’ Sir John says. ‘All that fuss, and then all is suddenly well again.’

He’s heard enough. ‘If you’ll excuse me, Sir John,’ Melbourne says, going to turn, but stopping as Sir John speaks again.

‘She always did throw tantrums to get her own way. It is a rather unpleasant behaviour that it would appear she hasn’t yet grown out of.’

And there it is, he thinks, the hint, the tell-tale snide remark that revealed so much. He’s been waiting for it, and it would seem that Conroy has been waiting to drop it. He’d missed it the first time, misinterpreted the warning signs as the snide comments of an inconsequential and bitter man. But no matter how obvious it is this time around, he cannot give any indication that he sees the comment for what it is. No matter how much he wants to tear the man apart here in the hall of the palace, he must practice what he preaches and wait.

‘It seems to me, Sir John, that the Queen is not the one throwing the tantrum,’ he retorts, spinning on his heel and striding away before he can say or do anything else.

And oh, he is going to eviscerate John Conroy if he hurts her again.

He’s not sure he’ll forgive himself if he lets him.

***

Her meeting with Harper is tomorrow, and she has to ask, and he still hasn’t brought it up.

He’s deliberately put off that discussion, waiting to see if she figures it out on her own. But they have to prep for the meeting at some point, and putting it off isn’t helping.

He’ll have to tell her this morning.

He wonders how she’ll react. She’s stronger now, he’s seen it in her eyes, but she’s still unsettled and will be until this whole mess is sorted out. They all will.

Anything to do with Conroy sets her on edge; it’s a combination of fury and loathing and a healthy dose of anxiety, too. For all her strength, Conroy was still a looming shadow in her mind. Objectively, he held no power over her anymore, now that she was Queen, but she wasn’t breaking the shackles of nearly twenty years of emotional manipulation in a day, no matter how hard she tried.

When she greets him with a smile and a giggle as she shows him the silly photo she’d taken the night before of him and Harriet at the concert, he just can’t. She’s had so little reason to smile of late, and he’s too weak and selfish to say anything that would remove that smile right now. She’s tired, he can see; she has lines under her eyes this morning that she wouldn’t normally have. It’s been a long few weeks, and she’s been flat out with everything.

He’ll talk to her this afternoon, he thinks. There was some time he’d deliberately blocked off in her
schedule that afternoon just in case. They can go for a walk in the gardens.

When he tells her before he leaves that he’ll be back to discuss the meeting later, she just smiles and nods, and his stomach sinks.

***

‘Good to see you’re spending your time wisely, ma’am,’ she hears from behind her, and the surprise is enough to make her sit up before her brain can tell her who’s speaking.

‘I don’t think how I spend my time is any of your concern, Sir John,’ she counters, not looking up at him as he walks past.

‘Drina!’ Her mother’s voice makes her look up. ‘Don’t be so rude!’

‘I think it was Sir John who was being rude, Mama,’ she shoots back, and her mother frowns at her before following Sir John. She lets out a huff before lying back down and reopening her book. But as much as she tries to keep reading, she can’t focus now – she’s too annoyed – so she pulls out her phone.

He appears at the doors only a few minutes later, a mildly puzzled look on his face, and she suddenly feels little silly. She’s overreacting. Again.

‘I’m sorry to disturb you early, Lord M,’ she sighs. ‘I’m sure you’re busy.’

He tilts his head in acknowledgement, shrugging a little in that funny way he does when he sees her point, but thinks she’s focusing on the wrong thing. ‘Never too busy for a walk, ma’am,’ he says, giving her a playful look, and she grins back and they head down the stairs. It’s overcast, threatening rain, but she doesn’t care. She’s pleased she’d called him now. He always knows how to make her smile.

Besides, she’s missed their walks in the gardens. She’s been so busy of late that they haven’t really been able to do anything much other than official business, and whatever Harriet or Emma or Anna had organised for her, and he so rarely attended anything with her anymore.

‘Sir John,’ she says after a minute, and he lets out a hum.

‘I figured, ma’am.’

‘He thinks I don’t use my time wisely,’ she says, and he lets out a laugh.

‘I’m sure.’ She frowns up at him. ‘Ma’am, when you’re angry with someone, do you ever just say whatever you think will hurt them most in that moment, just to inflict some kind of pain?’ he asks, and she blinks.

‘Yes,’ she admits. ‘Oh.’ Of course. Sir John was just baiting her. He was annoyed that Lord M was back, and that he had lost. She lets out a sigh. ‘I shouldn’t let him get to me. I just…he just makes me so angry,’ she admits. ‘And Mama just follows whatever he says.’ She looks out towards the trees. ‘I could just ban him from the palace,’ she muses, imagining Sir John’s face when she told him, how it would contort with anger, how his lips would purse as though he’d bitten into something sour, and there would be nothing he could do about it. Oh, it would be so good. ‘And I’d have him charged
with trespassing if he tried to see Mama. That would be extremely satisfying,’ she says.

‘You could, ma’am,’ he says, pursing his lips, and she thinks he doesn’t understand she’s just
dreaming. She would love him to say yes, that she could absolutely ban Sir John, but she knows that
she cannot, and she knows why. ‘But it wouldn’t solve the problem, ma’am, and I imagine now that
it would only create a larger one.’

‘Larger?’ She watches as he cringes slightly, looking up, and the look on his face makes her heart
sink a little in her chest.

When he speaks, it’s slow and halting. ‘I imagine there’s a market out there for a rather long book all
about the Queen’s early years at Kensington Palace.’

Oh. His words stop her in her tracks and she stares at him.

A book. About her.

Sir John – Sir John – would write a book…all about her as a child and a teenager and oh, no…

Her mind frantically catalogues the things he could write about, what he could say, the stories he
could tell, how he could make her look small and stupid and weak and absolutely nothing like the
Queen she wants to be, and how people would read it – would believe it – and her heart is throbbing
wildly in her chest and the voices are screaming silently in her head and she thinks she’s going to be
sick.

But then he’s standing in front of her, his hand on her upper arm, and she can’t do this. ‘No,’ she
says, shaking her head at him. ‘He can’t.’ He can’t. He can’t put all of it – all of her life – in a book,
expose everything about herself that she hates, all the stupid things she’s done, for the world to mock
and ridicule and judge and know. But he would; she knows he would, given the chance, and he
would say it was just the truth. But it would be his truth: it would be spiteful and malicious and
pitiless and he can’t write terrible things about her. Lies about her. The truth.

And they would all read it, talk about it, laugh, judge, disapprove, mock, and she would be left there,
on open the operating table as they dissected her entire life as she watched, helpless…

‘I’m hoping not,’ he says, and her mind is absentely aware that his thumbs are stroking both her arms,
and she looks up at him. ‘I’m sorry,’ he says quietly. ‘When Mr Harper comes for his meeting
tomorrow, you need to ask for the contract Sir John signed when he first started working for the
Duke, your father,’ he says, and she nods, trying to focus on his words. ‘I’m hoping that it has the
same kind of confidentiality clause that yours does now. It should, but we won’t know until Mr
Harper can find it and check.’

His words are calm and slow, and she nods, blinking, and is there no end to the havoc Sir John
would wreak? Would he destroy everything that was important to her? Everything she loved?

Would he ruin everything she’s done, everything she’s worked so, so hard for?

And suddenly she’s crying, the tears slowly sliding down her face and oh, it hurts, her chest is
aching, burning with anger, and why, why does he always want to hurt her? Why does he hate her
so much?

‘Ma’am,’ he whispers, and he wraps his arms around her, pulling her to him and she goes willingly,
burying her face in his chest, her head fitting neatly under his chin, and she’s so angry and it hurts
and by the time her fist hits the solid that is his chest she’s barely hitting him at all because she’s so
angry but it hurts.
He just holds her there in his arms, letting her press her fist against his chest, holding her tighter still when she feels her anger slide completely into despair and she slides her arms inside his jacket and grasps at his sides and oh, it hurts.

It hurts like the past, like his resignation, like her mother’s pleasure at her failure, like all her failures mixed into one.

But his arms feel like home, like safety and warmth, and she hasn’t felt this in so, so long. She never wants to let go, and it’s like everything from the past months just erupts out of her, and she cannot, no matter how hard she tries, help but sob against his chest as he holds her close, his arms rubbing her back, rocking her gently. She can feel his cheek pressed against the top of her head, and oh, she knows now for sure that she cannot do this without him, her Lord M, and the desperation makes her chest ache.

She can hear him mumbling into her hair, telling her it would be okay, that she would be okay, that he’s sorry, and she doesn’t know what he’s apologising for but she doesn’t care, because she hadn’t realised before now how much she loves his voice, the way it’s soft and gentle, it speaks kindness and warmth when she needs it, but how low and deep it becomes when she knows he’s struggling with his own emotions, and that depth reverberates through her soul as she presses her head against the solid warmth of his chest, the sobs slowly dying in her throat until she’s just resting, eyes closed, against him.

‘I’m sorry,’ she whispers, her hands flat against his chest now as he holds her close, and he’s still rocking her gently, side to side, and she never, ever wants him to let go. But he’s still telling her it’s okay, that she’s okay, and she lets out a long shuddering breath.

‘Why does he hate me so much?’ she asks, scrunching her face up against fresh tears, and she doesn’t understand what she did, what she’s done, to make Sir John treat her so cruelly. She’s tried, she has, she’s thought long and hard about what she could have done differently, but she’s never been good enough. Ever. Not even when she tried her hardest did she ever meet his standards for long.

‘He doesn’t see you,’ he says quietly. ‘He has never seen the Princess, the beautiful young Queen. He has only ever seen himself. You were only ever a means to an end.’

But then he’s unwrapping his arms a little, and no, she doesn’t want to let go, but she knows she has to, so she pulls back slightly so she can see his face, and his hands go to her upper arms. ‘It was never about you,’ he says deliberately, seriously, and she focuses on his words. ‘If it was, he would have realised very early on that your fire was never going to be extinguished.’

She thinks on his words for a moment and realises he’s right. She’d forgotten. It was never about her; it was only ever about her crown – the power and the prestige it would bring him. He gives her a small, sad smile, and she nods.

‘Thank you,’ she whispers, and he nods. She blinks, and another tear slides down her cheek, and before she knows what’s happening, he’s brushing it away with his thumb.

‘What are friends for, ma’am?’ he says more lightly, dropping his hand from her shoulder, and she smiles weakly before taking another step forward and resting her forehead on that flat, hard part of his chest just below his collarbone. It takes him a moment, a moment where she suddenly thinks that she’s crossed a line, that she should step back, but then his arms are around her again, and he just holds her firmly but gently to him and she thinks she never, ever wants him to let go.

‘What were you doing that Sir John thought you were wasting your time, ma’am?’ he asks,
frowning, as they walk back up towards the palace a while later, when she thinks she feels ready to face the world again and her face has lost some of its blotchy redness. But she doesn’t really want to go back inside, not just yet, so she detours slightly to sit on one of the chairs near the door.

‘Reading. I’ve almost finished the third book,’ she says, and she watches as he blinks and his face flattens, and he’s angry, and at himself, she thinks, but she can’t think why. But then she remembers that they were reading the books together, and he’s somehow blaming himself for this, and she puts her hand on his arm.

‘I should be free to read a book, I think,’ she says carefully, and he nods at her.

‘What you do with your time is none of Sir John’s concern, ma’am,’ he replies a bit woodenly, and she shakes her head at him.

‘Where are you up to?’ she asks deliberately, and he blinks at her.

‘I’ve just finished the second book,’ he says, letting out a breath, and she nods.

‘Then I think I’m spending my time very wisely,’ she asserts, looking at him, and he returns her gaze for a heartbeat longer than normal before nodding once, and she thinks he understands. ‘Besides, I think learning about British institutions like Harry Potter is a very good use of the Queen of England’s time,’ she declares. ‘Especially since it’s really due to Sir John’s negligence that there are gaps in my education.’

He looks at her for a moment, a smile on his face. ‘I agree, ma’am.’

When he texts her later that afternoon with a picture of a DVD of A Midsummer Night’s Dream and a question mark, she sighs happily. They haven’t watched anything new since before he left – she’s just been so busy – and she’s missed those Shakespeare nights, just the two of them.

Yes! I will provide the snacks.

She’s lying in bed later that night and she closes her eyes and remembers how warm and strong his arms felt wrapped around her, how safe and protected and loved she felt, and something in her chest swells and something low in her stomach stirs.

She doesn’t examine it closely.

She had him back now, her Lord M, and Sir John was going, and everything was perfect just the way it was.

Nothing needed to change.
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

If you ever find yourself stuck in the middle of the sea
I'll sail the world to find you
If you ever find yourself lost in the dark and you can't see
I'll be the light to guide you
You can count on me 'cause I can count on you

- Count on Me, Bruno Mars

The way Harper smiles at the Queen makes him think that she must remind him of his daughter or granddaughter. But it’s perfect, especially at the moment; her smile in return is wide and genuine, and he thinks she could do with more of that. He wonders if Wellington still smiles at her in the same way, given everything.

‘Thank you for coming to the palace again, Mr Harper,’ she says, smiling back at him. Harper kisses the back of her hand as he usually does, and Melbourne suppresses his smile at the Queen’s almost-giggle.

‘I’m so sorry I was unable to come sooner, ma’am,’ he apologises. ‘Knees are the first to go,’ he says, shaking his head. ‘So inconvenient.’

‘Are you recovered now?’ she asks, and he nods quickly.

‘Oh, yes, thank you, ma’am. Just need to get rid of this wretched thing and I’ll be perfectly fine,’ he replies, resting the walking stick against the edge the table. ‘Lord Melbourne,’ he says, shaking Melbourne’s hand. ‘How was your holiday?’ he asks, his eyes bright, and Melbourne’s lips twist.

‘Delightful, thank you,’ he replies dryly, and Harper nods, frowning.

‘That’s actually why I’ve asked you here,’ she says as they sit, and Harper nods.

‘Ah, yes, ma’am. My office tells me you wished to speak only to me. What can I do for you?’ he asks, looking directly at the Queen, his eyes kind but shrewd.

‘I think I may have uncovered the source of the information that has been fed to the media of late,’ she says, and Harper nods. ‘I think it was Sir John Conroy, my mother’s Comptroller. I believe the information published in the press may constitute a breach of contract.’

Harper nods sagely. ‘It’s possible, ma’am. Those contracts weren’t perfect, but even with the few loopholes we’ve closed, they were still quite specific. Do you have any evidence?’

‘No,’ she says, letting out a breath. ‘This is where I was hoping that perhaps you might be able to assist, Mr Harper.’

The older man purses his lips and leans back in his chair a little. ‘Well, the first logical step would be to investigate whether or not the information printed in the media does, in fact, constitute a breach of the Palace contract. In the course of our investigation, if we were to discover evidence that led back
to a particular individual or individuals, then you would, of course, be in a position to make a
decision about legal recourse, ma’am,’ Harper replies, and she nods.

‘I would like for you to investigate, Mr Harper.’

Harper nods. ‘Yes, ma’am,’ he replies, scribbling down some notes on the pad in front of him.

‘There is one other thing,’ she says, sucking in a breath, and he wills her on, to be strong. ‘I am
concerned that private information about my childhood might also be made public,’ she says, her
voice just slightly wobbly. He watches as she takes a quick breath and lets it out, steadying herself.
‘Lord Melbourne suggested that my father may have had a similar contract in place for Sir John
when he first started working for him when I was a child.’

‘It’s possible, ma’am,’ he says thoughtfully, looking at Melbourne and nodding, before frowning.
‘We would have a copy of anything from the Duke’s estate, so locating a copy if it existed should
not be too difficult, and as one of the beneficiaries of his estate, you would be entitled to access to it,’
he muses, before frowning. ‘This is, however, assuming that the Duchess didn’t ask Sir John to sign
a new contract at any point that removed that requirement for confidentiality. But you could perhaps
successfully argue your right to privacy as a member of the royal family, and, if it was Sir John, that
he was technically an employee of a member of the royal family at the time. But it would be
challenging,’ he adds carefully, before glancing at Melbourne. He gives him a small nod; they’ve had
this discussion. He doesn’t think the Duchess would have been quite that responsible with her
paperwork. Sir John, however, definitely may have.

‘Yes. I understand that this may be difficult,’ she says.

‘Well, it was before my time, ma’am, but I will look into it for you.’ Harper looks pensive for a
moment, his eyes flicking to Melbourne’s. ‘I should warn you that it could potentially be difficult to
obtain an original copy of that first contract. Unfortunately, ma’am, the Duke was not the most
reliable person when it came to paperwork. I imagine that we likely have a digital copy of the
original typed contract somewhere, but that could potentially pose a problem.’

She frowns, looking at Melbourne, who shakes his head.

‘I don’t know that you need the signed copy, ma’am,’ he says, and she frowns at him. He notices
Harper start smiling as he catches on, and his lips twist. ‘You don’t need to hold the ace to have the
players think you do.’

She stares at him for a second before her eyes narrow a little. ‘You mean bluffing?’ she says, and he
nods. He can see her processing this new idea, her lips curl at something this disingenuous, and he
wants to laugh at the irony. She’d attempted – and mostly succeeded at – blackmailing the Prime
Minister of Britain, and she was worried about bluffing Conroy.

But he can’t say any of that in front of Harper. ‘You may not have to, ma’am,’ he says. ‘I would
suggest that we cross that bridge when we come to it.’

She nods, letting out a sigh, and Harper seems to pick up on the mood. ‘I’ll do my very best, ma’am,’
he declares, and she gives him a small smile.

‘Thank you, Mr Harper. I know you will.’

‘This is going to take some time, ma’am,’ he says, and she nods. ‘We’ll have to look through every
article that mentions you, Lord Melbourne or any other member of your staff, and anyone else
connected with the royal family,’ he says, and she just nods. She’s obviously thought this through, he
thinks.

‘Yes, I realise that this will be a significant amount of work,’ she says, letting out a small sigh.

‘Nonetheless, ma’am, your privacy is crucial. And I would suggest that setting a precedent that allows members of staff to get away with this kind of thing is not something you wish to do, especially this early into your reign, ma’am,’ Harper says.

‘Definitely not.’

‘It’ll work out, ma’am,’ he says, when Harper has left and she’s still looking pensive.

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘There are just so many things that could still go wrong.’

‘Yes. But Mr Harper is an excellent solicitor, and there’s really not much point in worrying,’ he reminds her. ‘Don’t let Conroy win any more than he already has.’

She nods a little more strongly, and he smiles. But she’s right; this is by no means a done deal. There was much to do yet, and she still had to hold it together until it was done.

He just prays the Duke cared for his infant daughter who would be Queen as much as the old King cared for the niece he barely knew.

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He’s sorting through the last of the paperwork she’d given him, and he smiles; she’d finally chosen her charities for this quarter. He reads through the pile she’s clipped together as accepted at the top. It only takes a few seconds to realise what she’s done, and he drops the paperwork in his hands onto his desk and lets out a long breath.

*Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Trust*

*The Stroke Association*

*The National Autistic Society*

*Starlight Children’s Foundation…*

She can’t do this, he thinks. She cannot show such partiality for no other reason than it wasn’t fair.

That, and someone would notice eventually, he thinks.

So he picks up the folder and walks slowly down to her office, stopping at Emma’s desk. ‘Did you help with the selection of her charities?’ he asks, eyeing her, and he watches as she lets out a sigh. He knows she would know; she would have sorted the paperwork into their relevant folders for him to collect.

‘No, not at all,’ she tells him, and he lets out a breath. ‘She did ask if there was anything she could do to help.’ He looks at her. ‘She was so worried about you, William,’ she tells him quietly, her voice heavy, and he nods reluctantly. ‘This is her way of helping.’

She looks up at him expectantly when he arrives, and he glances at his feet before looking back up at
‘I see you’ve made your decisions about which charities you will give patronage, ma’am,’ he says and he can see it in her eyes. She’d known he’d say something; of course she did, his beautiful Queen that grew stronger and bolder every day. She’s been waiting for him.

‘I have,’ she says. ‘Is there a problem?’ She meets his gaze evenly, and he purses his lips, raising an eyebrow at her.

Was there a problem? *No.* Not really. She could pick whatever she liked. And *yes.* A huge problem.

He lets out a huff after a moment, shaking his head and staring at her, his beautiful, passionate, stubborn Queen. ‘The Queen must be seen to be impartial, ma’am,’ he says half-heartedly, and she stands, walking around her desk to stand in front of him.

‘I’m patron of over one hundred organisations in Great Britain alone, and sixty of those are charities, Lord M. My Uncle was patron of over five hundred charities across the Commonwealth,’ she tells him, and he thinks she’s almost rehearsed this little speech. ‘I’ve weighed up all the information, and my own personal preference, and I think these are very worthy causes,’ she tells him, her voice earnest as she tries to convince him. ‘Did you know that there are over four hundred childhood strokes a year in the UK alone?’ she adds quietly, a note of vulnerability hidden behind the strength.

He nods. He knows; he’s donated money to the Stroke Association every year for ten years.

‘The Great Ormond Street Hospital has a children’s charity that works with parents of childhood stroke victims through recovery, but they’re mostly volunteers,’ she tells him, and he nods. ‘Emma said they were really brilliant,’ she adds even more quietly, and he studies her as she stares up at him, confident in her decisions, but eyes that were so soft, trying desperately to read him too, he thinks. ‘I get to choose for me too,’ she says softly, her blue eyes soft with compassion but certainty, and he feels that tightness in his chest, the one that’s all emotion. ‘I know my duty is to everyone, but I can support my friends too.’

He thinks it endlessly, that same thought, the one where he wonders what on earth she sees in him that she seems to care so much. He wonders very briefly if she knows, if she unconsciously suspects his feelings, but brushes the thought aside. She loves her friends fiercely, protects those that she loves with that fire in her eyes, and he was no exception.

‘Thank you,’ he says after a moment, and she gives him a soft, pleased smile.
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

If I dare to ask it, then I dare it to be true
If I dare to risk it, then I know that I'm willing to
If I dare to want this, to want more than I have
Then I dare to believe I'll have it in the end

I am holding out for more than what I have now
I'm holding out

- *If I Dare*, Sara Bareilles

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He won’t admit it, but he’s been both dreading and looking forward to this night since they first settled on a date. She, on the other hand, has been brimming with excitement for days. He supposes he should be pleased; along with everything that Harriet and Emma – and now Anna – have been taking her to, it’s been a welcome distraction from all the rubbish with Conroy.

But she’s about to arrive, and he’s nervous.

He’s a fool.

‘Would you like to start with wine, or should we just cut straight to the whiskey? You look like you could use one,’ Emily says at his elbow, and he shoots her a look.

‘Wine,’ he says. ‘I’ll save the whiskey for later.’

‘You really are nervous about this, aren’t you?’ she says, pouring his glass.

He lets out a sigh. ‘Yes,’ he admits. ‘She’s still learning,’ he says quietly.

‘She’ll be fine. We’re all friends.’

She appears minutes later, right behind Emma and Edward, and her eyes search for his as soon as she enters the room. She’s nervous too, he realises. He wonders why.

But she’s beautiful in a simple green patterned dress and stockings and her hair hanging loose past her shoulders. She looks so much older than her twenty-three years, he thinks, and he swallows, looking down at the glass in his hands.

He really is a fool.

‘What would you like to drink, ma’am?’ Henry asks. ‘We have wine, or champagne perhaps? Or something else?’

He looks up and her eyes flick to his at the mention of champagne and he feels lips quirk in
amusement. He raises an eyebrow quickly at her in jest, and can’t help the smile when she looks away, her own lips pressed together in an attempt not to laugh.

‘Wine, please,’ she replies, and he glances down at his own glass, trying to keep the smile off his face and not succeeding at all. He’s thrilled they can joke about this now. It had been a year, and she was learning to laugh at herself, even at the big things.

‘I think you’re laughing at me, Lord M,’ she says quietly as she comes to stand next to him.

‘Never, ma’am,’ he jokes. ‘I wouldn’t dare laugh at the Queen.’

‘No, I believe not,’ she says. ‘But you would definitely laugh at me.’

His eyebrows rise at the distinction she’s made, and he wonders if that’s what she’s trying to do tonight, to throw off the crown and just be Victoria.

And oh, she can’t do that to him. Tonight was already far too close to his heart.

‘Perhaps,’ he hedges slyly, and she grins at him.

‘Where are your niece and nephews?’ she asks suddenly, looking around. ‘Aren’t they eating with us?’

‘I imagine Emily has banished them to the playroom or their bedrooms for the evening, ma’am,’ he says. ‘Boys tend to be bored by dinner parties, and Frankie’s only two,’ he says, and she nods.

‘Oh. I was hoping to meet them,’ she says, trailing off a little. ‘But I can appreciate that Emily has more than enough to do,’ she says seriously, and he feels the pull of a smile.

‘I’m sure a meeting can be arranged, ma’am,’ he says, and she looks up at him.

‘I don’t wish to cause trouble,’ she says, frowning, and he shakes his head.

‘I’d be surprised if Emily hasn’t already planned something. I’ll handle it.’ They both look up as Harriet arrives, and she smiles at her friend. ‘Excuse me, ma’am.’

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‘Turns out I was right,’ he says when he reappears a few minutes later. ‘Emily has them all prepared,’ he jokes, and she smiles delightedly.

‘Ma’am, this is George, my eldest,’ Emily says, as she introduces her to a tall, dark-haired boy who she thinks is determined to look serious.

‘It’s a pleasure to meet you, Your Majesty,’ George says, bowing slightly, and she’s impressed.

‘It is a pleasure to meet you too, George,’ she replies, nodding to him. ‘I understand you want to be a pilot in the RAF,’ she says, and he blinks before nodding seriously.

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘That sounds both thrilling and terrifying,’ she admits, and he nods, smiling a little. ‘My father was in
the Army,’ she says. ‘He was a soldier. But I don’t think they’d let me follow in his footsteps,’ she adds, and George frowns and shakes his head a little.

‘Women are allowed now, ma’am,’ he says with a note of confusion, and she nods.

‘Yes, but likely not Queens,’ she adds with a rueful smile, and his cheeks pink before he nods.

‘Of course, ma’am,’ his voice serious again, so she takes pity on the teenager.

‘I wish you all the best with your studies.’

‘Thank you, ma’am,’ he replies, bowing his head briefly again before moving to stand with his father.

‘George is going to dine with us,’ Emily tells her as they walk towards the nursery, and she smiles. ‘He’s fourteen and has suddenly decided that he needs to grow up.’

‘Oh,’ she laughs. ‘He’s very serious.’

‘Not that he’d admit it, but he was terrified of meeting you, ma’am,’ Emily says conspiratorially, and Victoria’s heart melts.

‘He was so well-spoken.’

‘It’s amazing what the presence of royalty can do to a fourteen-year-old’s behaviour, ma’am,’ she says, and Victoria lets out a laugh.

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She thinks Emily’s children are all adorable – and blond-haired Will at nine years old was already a charmer – but it’s little Charlie that takes her breath away.

He’s the spitting image of Augustus.

‘Charlie, this is the Queen,’ Emily says, standing behind him.

She squats down until she’s eye-level with the six-year old, who wriggles nervously. ‘Good evening, Your Majesty,’ he says slowly, and she swallows at the small lump in her throat and smiles at him.

‘Hello, Charlie,’ she says. ‘It’s nice to meet you.’

‘It’s nice to meet you too,’ he says, and she smiles at how clearly rehearsed it sounds. But it’s adorable, she thinks, and she wonders if Augustus would have sounded the same.

‘They’re lovely,’ she tells Emily as they watch the boys play.

‘Thank you, ma’am,’ Emily replies with a sigh.

She wonders if this is what it would have been like to have siblings, as she watches Will and Charlie duel with the characters on the screen in front of them. People to play with. Fight with. People to love you, no matter what.
She wonders if she might have had siblings if her father hadn’t died.

‘They’re all so different,’ she says, and Emily glances at her.

‘Yes. George and Will look like their fathers,’ she says, and Victoria blinks. Fathers. ‘And Charlie is William in miniature, as you can see. And Frankie is really the only one where I got a look in,’ she says, shaking her head. ‘I’m sorry you didn’t get to meet her, ma’am, but she’s in bed.’

‘Oh, that’s fine. One day,’ she says quickly. She needs to ask Lord M what Emily means by fathers. She knew Henry was her second husband, and about Lord Cowper…

‘And now we’ll get to see just how lovely they are, ma’am,’ Emily says before turning to the boys. ‘Bedtime!’

Emily excuses herself to check on dinner on their way back and she’s standing in the doorway when she sees him talking to George, so she watches for a moment. They’re deep in discussion about something – what, she can’t tell – but he seems genuinely interested in what the boy has to say. It’s nothing like her own childhood; children should be seen and not heard, she’d always been told. She was to be Queen of England, but never to speak until someone requested her voice.

She wonders if he looks that interested when he speaks to her.

But then his eyes catch hers and he gives her a small smile before turning back to George, and she waits for him to come over and talk to her.

But he doesn’t.

He just continues his conversation with George, and she watches, but the longer she watches him the more she thinks he’s not coming to talk to her and she frowns a little as she looks down at the glass in her hands.

She looks back up at him after a few moments, and he glances over at her, and when his eyes don’t hold hers for long, she thinks she understands, and she looks around.

She’s the Queen, yes, but this is not Buckingham Palace, and he is not working. He’ll always be Lord M, but here, he’s not her Private Secretary. He owes her nothing.

And she realises that this is what she’s wanted all along, to just be Victoria, not the Queen, not Your Majesty, just a woman at a dinner with friends, and she blinks.

She has no idea what she’s supposed to do.

She never has to insinuate herself into a conversation at a public gathering; everyone always approaches her, or she’s introduced to various people. She looks around the room at the various groups; Emma was talking with her husband and George Sutherland, and Harriet was talking to Henry. Should she wait? Should she join a conversation? It feels awkward, that idea, she thinks. She doesn’t want to interrupt.

She feels it, that awkwardness she’d so happily lost now that she had him, but he wasn’t there by her
side telling her what to do, and she has no idea. She doesn’t want to do it wrong, embarrass herself or anyone.

She looks back at him, begging him with her eyes to help her, to show her what to do, and when he finally glances back at her, his eyes are soft, and he nods towards Harriet.

Right. She should join their conversation. So she sucks in a breath and heads over to where they stand, and Harriet smiles widely at her approach, and something in Victoria’s chest loosens.

‘We were just talking about France, ma’am,’ Harriet says. ‘Henry and Emily spent some of their honeymoon there,’ she says.

‘I’ve never been to France,’ Victoria says, almost sagging with relief at how easy it was. ‘Is it as lovely as people say?’

‘The countryside is, ma’am,’ he says, nodding. ‘Paris is like any city – full of people,’ he says disdainfully, and she and Harriet both let out a laugh.

She glances over to where he’s standing against the wall; George is showing him something on his phone, and he’s staring at the screen intently until his eyes flick up to meet hers, and he gives her a small, quick smile that she happily returns.

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‘Ma’am,’ she hears, and she looks up from where she’s been studying her glass. ‘I was just telling George that you’re reading the Harry Potter series for the first time,’ he says, as they walk over to where she’s standing.

‘Yes,’ she says, smiling at his nephew. ‘I’m loving it.’

His eyes widen and he smiles a little. ‘What book are you up to, ma’am?’ he asks, and she sighs, shooting Lord M a look.

‘I have just finished the third one,’ she says with an exaggerated sigh. ‘Where are you up to, Lord M?’

He rolls his eyes, and she can see George is confused. ‘I’m at chapter nineteen,’ he says proudly, and she’s surprised. He’d been so far behind her that she’d deliberately stopped reading so he could catch up. He nods at her surprised look, and she can’t help but smile at how proud he seems to be of himself.

‘Your uncle hasn’t read them either,’ she explains to George, who blinks at him. ‘So we’re reading them together.’

‘Oh,’ George says, frowning momentarily at his uncle. ‘The third one is pretty good,’ he says. ‘The movie was alright. Who’s your favourite character?’ he asks.

‘Hermione, definitely,’ she says, and she can see him almost roll his eyes. Lord M pokes him in the side, and he shoots his uncle an annoyed but amused look.

‘She’s all the girls’ favourite. Her, or Ginny,’ he complains, and she laughs.
‘Fair enough. I haven’t read too much about Ginny yet,’ she says, and he nods.

‘Nah, apart from the second one, she’s more in the later books. She’s actually pretty cool,’ he admits.

She nods. ‘Who is yours?’

‘Sirius. And Fred and George,’ he says, and she almost rolls her own eyes at him.

‘Of course,’ she says, and grins at the semi-mutinous face he pulls. ‘Fred and George are hilarious,’ she agrees. ‘Have you read the whole series?’

‘Yeah, ages ago,’ he says. ‘Ma’am,’ he adds quickly, his eyes widening, and she can see the blush spread up his cheeks. ‘I’m sorry, ma’am,’ he says, glancing up at Lord M who’s eyeing him with raised eyebrows.

‘Don’t worry about it. It’s nice to not be called ma’am every now and then. It makes me feel old,’ she admits, and he blinks at her.

‘You’re not old, ma’am,’ he blurts out.

‘I agree,’ she laughs.

‘Certainly not as old as me,’ Lord M says, and she shakes her head at him.

‘You’re not old, Lord M,’ she says, and she sees George frown a little. ‘What do you think, George?’

‘Uh…isn’t it treason to disagree with the Queen, ma’am?’ he asks after looking at both of them, and she can’t help laugh out loud.

‘Yes. Yes, it is, George,’ she agrees, looking at Lord M, who is rolling his eyes and pretending to cuff the back of his now-ducking nephew’s head. ‘I like you,’ she says, and when he flushes bright pink again, she thinks she’s said the wrong thing, so she glances up at Lord M who is just smirking at his nephew.

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They’re all sitting at the table later and she’s just watching them all interact, these people who have been friends for so long, who knew each other so well.

Oh, she wants this. The yearning swells in her chest and it’s almost painful; she blinks against it.

Friends. Family. People who loved and cared about you, no matter what. People to spend time with. She’s never wanted anything so much in her life, and she looks down at the plate in front of her.

‘Ma’am?’ Her head flicks up to where he’s sitting next to her, his face concerned.

‘I’m fine,’ she says, plastering a smile on her face, but she knows she hasn’t fooled him. She could never fool him, she thinks. She hasn’t had enough practice. He knew her too well.

‘I like that you are all friends,’ she says by way of explanation, and his face falls a little.
Queens don’t have groups of friends they have dinner with. Friends who laugh and tease in jest, friends who they can call and visit whenever they like.

‘I think, ma’am, they would be honoured if you considered them friends too,’ he says, his voice low, and she stares at him.

‘I…Mama…’ she starts, trailing off, before stopping. ‘Mama always said that Queens don’t have friends,’ she says. ‘Well, not like this.’

His mouth twists in that way that she recognises is a combination of something like frustration and pity, and he glances down before looking back up at her. ‘Times have changed, ma’am. I think that’s probably for the Queen to decide for herself,’ he says carefully.

His words give her hope. Maybe she could have this. Maybe Mama was wrong. He was right: things were different now to when her mother was young.

‘Besides, I’m pretty sure Harriet would be hurt if she thought you didn’t consider her a friend, ma’am,’ he adds, with one eyebrow raised, and she feels the pull of a smile. ‘And Emma.’

‘Of course.’

‘Can I make a suggestion, ma’am?’ he asks, and she nods. ‘Relax, and just try to enjoy yourself.’

***

He’s watching her later, when they’re all milling around after dinner, and she seems to be deep in conversation with Harriet’s husband about architecture, he gathers, from the hand gestures they’re making.

‘She seems to have mostly enjoyed herself,’ Emily says at his elbow.

‘Yes,’ he says, letting out a sigh. ‘Thank you.’

‘Thank you. It’s not every day one entertains royalty,’ she says, and he rolls his eyes. ‘You’ve got competition,’ she says after a moment, and he frowns down at her. She just nods across the room, and he looks over to see his fourteen-year-old nephew staring at the Queen.

Well, then. Poor kid, he thinks. He can sympathise.

His mind catches up – what she had actually said – and he frowns a little, looking around to see that no one was listening, before looking back at his sister.

‘Don’t,’ he warns, his voice low, before looking away.

‘Emma told me what she did,’ she says after a moment, and his head flicks around to stare at her. ‘It wasn’t hard to work out, William,’ she pointed out. ‘Between you, Emma and Henry, I just had to piece it all together.’ He lets out a huff. ‘She certainly is brave,’ Emily says, and he lets out a humourless laugh.

‘Yes,’ he agrees. ‘She’s been alone for a long time. The prospect of returning to that…’ he says by way of explanation.
‘Well, she’s certainly your type,’ Emily says, her voice low, and he stares at her. ‘Strong, assertive, beautiful, slightly volatile,’ she lists, and he looks away, clenching his jaw. ‘She’s definitely the shortest, though. But also the sweetest.’ He looks down at his glass. She wasn’t wrong; she certainly was the sweetest and most compassionate of the women he’d loved. ‘Absolutely the most innocent,’ Emily continues. ‘Has she even kissed anyone before?’

That’s the last straw. ‘Emily!’ he hisses, and she smirks a little, raising her eyebrows at him.

‘So I take it that’s a no?’

‘How would I know?’ he asks, frowning, and she snorts.

‘I imagine you would,’ she says, and he stares at her, not quite certain of her meaning. She just raises her eyebrows at him. ‘Doesn’t she tell you everything?’

He looks away. ‘No.’ Emily just hums, and he shakes his head. ‘I need to talk to George Sutherland about a trip to the British Museum,’ he says, walking away from his sister before she says something he would actually have to deal with.

***

She’s watching them later, when George is saying goodnight to his parents, when she realises that it’s so much more than friends she wants.

It’s family.

She’s been watching them all, the way they interact, tease and laugh at each other, the way that Henry looks adoringly at his wife, and the way Lord M teases his nephew, who tries to give as good as he gets.

She watches Emily hug her son, pressing a kiss to his cheek when he’s heading for bed, the way Henry hugs this boy who she realises isn’t technically even his with clearly as much love as his mother.

She wonders what it’s like to be hugged like that.

She thinks back to only a few days ago in the shade of some of the ancient trees in her garden and warm, strong, safe arms, and she thinks that maybe it feels something a little like that.

Her heart burns for what she’s missed, the father she never knew.

She thinks that perhaps even if her father were alive today, it wouldn’t be quite like this. She can’t imagine her mother laughing and teasing her uncles the way Emily laughs at Lord M.

And oh, hasn’t she seen him smile tonight. It made her heart soar to see him so happy, especially after the pain of the anniversary.

She’s caught him a few times looking at her. She thinks he’s worried about her, at this new thing she’s trying. She’s given him cause, really, with her helpless looks and her lack of understanding. She’s never done this before.

And oh, if this is what family is like, this kind of love and acceptance and caring and good-natured
teasing, this *happiness*, then she wants it.

She *will* have it. She feels the determination rise in her chest.

As much as she doesn’t want to think about it, she knows she should marry, have a family of her own. But she would have *this*, when the time came. She would not have the life she and her mother had, the unhappiness and pain and *loneliness*.

Now that she knows what family is, what it *can* be, she will not have anything else.

***

‘It was so lovely to meet your nephews, Lord M,’ she tells him as they sit outside in the rotunda near the stairs the next morning.

‘I’m glad you liked them, ma’am. You definitely made an impression on George,’ he says wryly.

‘Oh, he was so sweet. Very serious,’ she says, and he chuckles.

‘He told Emily later that when he’s finished being a pilot, he wants to be your Private Secretary, ma’am.’

‘Really?’

‘Well, a while ago, he asked me what my job entailed. I told him that working for the Queen meant that I got to spend a good deal of my days in her company.’

She frowns, puzzled, so he raises an eyebrow at her, and he smirks when her eyes widen in realisation. She immediately blushes, and he chuckles at her. ‘He is cute. But maybe a little young,’ she says.

‘You’ll break his heart, ma’am,’ he teases, and she looks at him imploringly.

‘Oh, don’t! He’s so sweet,’ she says, and he laughs.

‘I won’t say a word,’ he promises.

But her face grows a little more pensive. ‘I was talking to Emily about the boys,’ she says, and she looks a little wary now, he thinks. ‘She said that George and Will had different fathers. But I thought that Lord Cowper only died a few years ago.’

Yet another thing to explain, he thinks. Carefully, as always, but he knows this will shock her. He suspects she’s been taught about love and marriage in a very specific way.

‘Yes. George is Lord Cowper’s son,’ he says. ‘Will is Henry’s.’ She blinks at him a few times.

‘Emily and Peter’s marriage was not…well, they were very young and our parents didn’t love the idea, so they decided to elope.’ He sighs. ‘There were problems within months, and it had all fallen apart before George was two. They wanted to stay together for George’s sake, but then Peter met Holly, and Emily had already met Henry…’ He trails off, and glances at her. ‘They decided to finalise the divorce eventually, after years and multiple children apart, but then Peter got sick.’

‘Oh,’ she says, after a few moments where he says nothing. ‘I didn’t mean to pry,’ she adds quietly.
'I don’t think Emily would mind you knowing, ma’am. She wouldn’t have said anything otherwise.’

‘Oh.’

And he wonders what she’s thinking as she sits there. Two Lamb children, two spectacularly failed marriages. ‘I’m sorry, ma’am,’ he says. ‘I should have explained the situation beforehand.’

She blinks at him before shaking her head. ‘No, Lord M, I’m sorry. I’m just…’ She frowns slightly, clearly searching for the words, and he waits. ‘I haven’t seen many happy marriages,’ she says, her voice sad, and he nods.

‘No. Neither have I,’ he agrees quietly.

‘Sometimes I wonder why people even bother getting married anymore,’ she says in a small voice a few minutes later, a bitterness – hardness – to her voice. ‘You don’t need to be married to live together, to have children – to do anything.’

He lets out a sigh. He hates that her view of something so wonderful, something she should be looking forward to, is now being, in her mind, skewed and tainted by the world. But she hasn’t even had a chance to decide for herself what marriage really was and wasn’t. He doubts she’s even really seen a marriage – or any kind of good, decent relationship – up close for any length of time. She has no idea what marriage really is. What it could be.

And what a good role model he was.

‘Marriage is wonderful, ma’am, but hard. And I think people often get married for reasons that aren’t probably the best.’ He glances down at his coffee. ‘Marriage doesn’t mean the same to everyone.’

He looks up to see her eyes go wide. ‘I’m sorry, Lord M. I didn’t mean to…’

He huffs a breath and shakes his head a little at her. ‘You should decide for yourself what you want marriage to be,’ he says carefully, looking at his hands before looking back up at her. ‘Only you can decide that, ma’am,’ he says gently, and she looks down before nodding.

‘I think I would want my marriage to be happy,’ she says, and he gives her a small smile.

‘Most people do.’ He lets out a sigh. ‘But – you must get married before you have children, ma’am,’ he declares.

‘Why?’ she all but demands, frowning.

‘Any child born out of wedlock is by law ineligible for the throne. And that is a fight you do not need.’

She stares at him for a moment before looking away, her face somewhat resigned, he thinks. ‘Yes, I know.’ It’s heavy, this topic – too heavy for today, he thinks, but he’s on what he is absolutely sure is the Duchess’s side for this particular point. He’s entirely sure she doesn’t envisage her future as anything other than what she’s been taught – she holds her position and duty in too high esteem to consider anything other than what social expectation has outlined for her – but he also knows just how much the past eighteen months has thrown her childhood into stark relief.

‘Besides, you’re right, ma’am – George is a little young for fatherhood,’ he deadpans, and can’t help but laugh when her eyes narrow at him before she covers her face in her hands and groans.
Chapter End Notes

I hope it lived up to your expectations...! Let me know what you think!
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

And you can tell everybody this is your song
It may be quite simple, but now that it's done
I hope you don't mind, I hope you don't mind that I put down in words
How wonderful life is while you're in the world

- Your Song, Elton John

Chapter Notes

CHAPTER FIFTY. What.

This was one of my favourite chapters to write - and one I wrote before most of the previous thirty chapters - so I think it's worthy of the milestone. Hopefully you all enjoy reading it as much as I did writing it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When the shoot runs horribly overtime, he’s pleased he’d organised it for an afternoon where she had no official functions in the evening. He’d known she wouldn’t be able to resist the lure of a professional photographer – certainly not a whole team from Vanity Fair – so he’s not surprised to find that she spends most of her time chatting to the photographer and the interviewer about lighting and angles and colour and types of lenses, rather than having her photo taken, much to his and Emma and Harriet’s amusement.

Harriet’s thrilled to have another reason to dress her in some of the latest fashion and the two of them have spent what feels like collective weeks planning and organising, so when everyone arrives, she’s positively bubbling with excitement.

‘You have to come back down and see, Lord M,’ she says when he tells her he has work to do once everything is set up and going. But he cannot resist her smile, not now when he’s spent the weeks since his return treasuring every one she’s given him – absence really did make the heart grow fonder, and her smiles are all the more precious to him now after he’d almost lost her – so he quietly promises to return later in the day.

When he finds he’s a little more distracted than usual at his desk, accomplishing little that morning, he chooses not to examine it too closely; the weather really was perfect – all warm sun and cool breezes – and he was restless. So he wanders down to the corridor near her rooms, looking out the window that currently affords him the best view, and just watches. She stands on the back steps of the palace, striking in the long floral patchwork-looking dress Harriet’s selected, before walking carefully back down to look at the screen and talk to the photographer before returning to her pose. He chuckles; she must be driving the poor woman crazy. He wonders briefly how many questions the interviewer has managed to get in.
He’s about to head back to his office when a short bark grabs his attention. He looks down the hall to see Dash racing towards him, and when he squats down to pat the excited little dog, an idea springs brightly to mind and he smiles. He thinks she won’t mind.

When she spots him walking down the lawn towards her, her happy cry of Dash! makes him chuckle. He wanders over to where she’s standing off to the side, the dog in his arms, and she coos delightedly at her pup.

‘He seemed so forlorn without you, ma’am,’ he explains, and she grins up at him.

‘Oh, someone has Lord M wrapped around their little paw,’ she coos to the dog as she takes him from his arms. He tilts his head in acceptance. He thinks perhaps the little dog’s owner is the one who has him wrapped around her little finger, but he’s not going to say that out loud.

‘Having fun, ma’am?’ he asks.

‘Oh, yes, I’m learning so much,’ she says, eyes wide, and he chuckles.

‘Not quite the point, ma’am, but I’m glad you’re finding it interesting.’

‘Harriet is having fun dressing me,’ she says loud enough for Harriet to hear where she was standing next to what looked to him like a rack of dresses.

‘It’s not every day you get to shoot for Vanity Fair, ma’am,’ Harriet shoots back. ‘I know models who would kill to be doing what you’re doing today.’

‘Well, they’re welcome to it,’ she replies. ‘I find the constant changing of clothes and hair and make-up exhausting,’ she tells him.

But he thinks she’s gorgeous, her dark hair brushed back from her face in what looks like a messy, more sculpted version of her usual bun, her makeup soft, and the patchwork pastels and florals of her high-necked dress matching perfectly with the blue of her eyes and the dark brown of her hair. She looks elegant, regal, and youthful all at the same time, and he’s a little in awe of Harriet’s skill.

‘More exhausting than reading through legislation, ma’am?’ he asks, distracting himself. ‘Because I can bring that down for you, if you’d like,’ he deadpans, and she shoots him a look, and he smirks. ‘It’s a lovely day for it,’ he says, before looking down at his watch. ‘But you do appear to be behind schedule.’

Her lips twist. He’s already teased her today.

You must promise one thing, ma’am.

What’s that?

That you will allow the photographer to get at least some photos, ma’am, before you hound her with questions.

He’d merely smirked at the look she’d shot him. It’s all your fault, you know. You gave me the camera.

‘We’re going to do some of the last photos inside when it gets dark if we need to. I’ve already told Lehzen.’

‘How are you finding the questions?’ he asks a little more quietly, eyeing the interviewer who was
sitting a good few metres away, typing away on a laptop.

‘She’s barely asked anything. She seems more interested in listening to my conversation with Amalie, the photographer,’ she says, frowning a little, and he nods.

‘Ah. I’ll leave you to it, then, ma’am,’ he says, and she frowns.

‘Are you very busy? It does get a little boring while they set up everything,’ she asks, and he gives her a small smile.

‘I’ll be back in an hour,’ he promises.

When he returns an hour later with coffee for everyone, she tells him in her excitement that he’s her favourite person in the world, and he’s just pleased that no one other than a now-smirking Emma seems to hear it.

He finds them in her library later, and he’s leaning against the door, just watching her be beautiful in a maroon, flower-covered gown that looks like a modern version of something her great-grandmother might have worn, and he’s struck by how mature she looks. How old.

She’s stunning.

He feels that familiar pull in his stomach that reminds him that he’s probably staring, and he pushes himself off the door frame, glancing around.

‘She’s beautiful,’ Emma says quietly at his side. He turns in surprise; he hadn’t heard her coming.

‘Yes,’ he agrees quietly after a moment. ‘Is it going well?’

‘It appears to be,’ she says, as they watch her talk with the photographer. ‘You’ll see the photos later, I assume,’ she says, and he nods.

‘Everything is on approval,’ he says. Neither he nor the Earl were new at this; they’d refused to allow them any access unless they could approve the photos and text that would be published in its entirety.

‘There are some lovely ones of you,’ Emma comments before she walks quickly away, and oh no, no, that was not the plan.

‘Lord M!’ Victoria calls, interrupting his mild panic. ‘Come and see.’

He walks over to where she’s standing with her camera, the one he’d bought her, and she holds up the little screen for him to see. ‘It’s not brilliant on this size screen, but you get the idea. What do you think?’

It’s one of the roses from the garden; it’s in the foreground, the rest of the roses behind it blurred, and it looks like something she’d download from the internet for the background of her laptop. He’s impressed. ‘Wow, ma’am. Did you take that?’

‘I did. Amalie has been showing me how to use some of the features I hadn’t quite figured out yet,’ she explains. ‘It’s been such a brilliant day,’ she says, smiling broadly up at him, and he can’t help but smile back.

‘I’m glad, ma’am.’

She turns as Emma walks up to them. ‘If you’re not too tired, ma’am, Amalie would like just a few
more photos.’ She nods and turns to him.

‘Will you stay for dinner? You have to see the photos I’ve taken,’ she says, and he thinks that perhaps he shouldn’t, not tonight, but she must sense his hesitation, and she frowns a little petulantly. ‘It’s only fair, Lord M, since you bought me the camera,’ she argues, and he shakes his head and smiles.

‘If you like, ma’am,’ he says, and she smiles happily at him before following Emma back to the photographer.

He thinks back to her first meeting with Harriet, how she’d been terrified and all but begging him with her eyes to stay, and he thinks she’s getting there, his little Queen, who really isn’t so very little anymore.

She’s grown and changed and he thinks that’s what’s different. She’s still the same beautiful, fiery young woman he’s loved for so long, but the trials and struggles of the past months have refined her, strengthened her. She’s risen to the challenge, done far more and far better than anyone really expected. She knows so much more of what she’s capable of now. She might have fought tooth and nail to keep him, but that same fight has shown that she doesn’t need him quite as much anymore. It’s both a relief and a sadness; with her growing, she won’t rely on him so much, her Lord M. He will eventually become obsolete, replaceable.

Which is how it should be.

But that is a long way off, he tells himself. He knows there will be times where her crown still wobbles, where she reverts to the girl-Queen he met at Kensington what feels like a lifetime ago, but those times are so few and far between. She’s more sure of herself now. She’s lost some smaller battles and won some bigger ones, fought hard and bravely, even when everything seemed against her – even him – and wears her scars with pride.

He’s so proud of her, his little Queen, and of the beautiful woman she’s becoming. She’s slowly transforming into the Queen he knows is there; the Queen that is now flourishing in the light.

***

He’s sure to walk over to the head photographer as she’s packing up.

‘Ms Baden?’ he asks, holding out his hand. ‘William Lamb – Lord Melbourne,’ he introduces himself, adding his title at the end, and the photographer nods in recognition and shakes his hand.

‘Yeah. Amalie is cool, Lord Melbourne,’ she replies, and Melbourne shakes his head.

‘William is fine. Thank you for everything you’ve done today. It seemed to go very well.’

And the photographer nods. ‘It was great. Her Majesty was a delight to work with,’ she says a little awkwardly. ‘Am I allowed to say that?’ she asks after a moment, her face suddenly contorting a little with concern, and Melbourne smiles.

‘Yes, it’s fine,’ he says.

‘Oh, good. Sorry, I’ve never shot royalty before. I’ve never even met royalty before,’ she adds, and
Melbourne’s lips twist slightly. ‘She’s really into photography,’ she says after a moment, her eyes widening slightly.

‘Yes, Her Majesty is a very keen photographer. She was very grateful that you were kind enough to answer her many questions,’ he replies.

‘It was pretty amazing,’ Amalie replies, and Melbourne has to resist the urge to laugh at just how star-struck this photographer – who works with models and celebrities and all the most famous people for a living – is by the Queen. ‘That’s a really brilliant camera for a first,’ she says knowingly, and Melbourne nods. ‘Good selection.’ Melbourne blinks at her before it registers. ‘She said you bought it for her birthday.’

‘Ah. Yes.’ And that increasingly familiar feeling of discomfort settles into the back of his mind, and he resists the urge to shove his hands in his pockets. ‘Ah, the photos from today,’ he starts.

‘Yeah, Michaela will email you their selection. I don’t really have too much to do with it once the editing is done,’ she explains. ‘Oh, I gave a copy of all the photos to…Her Majesty,’ she says, stumbling a little at the end. ‘Just the hi-res JPEGs. Her Assistant had a hard drive.’ She shrugs, smiling. ‘Not technically supposed to, but it’s the Queen. And she was really nice.’

‘Ah. Thank you,’ Melbourne says, swallowing a laugh. Completely star-struck, he thinks, and he doesn’t really blame her. But this is not really why he’s having this conversation. ‘I believe there were some taken of me,’ he starts, his eyes narrowing slightly, and Amalie smiles.

‘Yeah, mostly when you came down with her dog and the coffee before,’ she replies. ‘Nice shots – she really liked them. Cute pup.’

And Melbourne blinks before nodding, and oh, that was not supposed to happen. ‘Yes, he’s much loved,’ he replies, pausing, unsure of exactly how to word this. ‘I would prefer Her Majesty remain the subject of the photos that are published,’ he says carefully, and Amalie nods slowly.

‘Sure, I’ll tell Michaela,’ she says, and he smiles wryly.

‘Whilst I’m sure discretion is something I can take for granted, I would rather they didn’t make it that far,’ he says, and Amalie eyes widen before she nods.

‘Right. Lord Melbourne,’ she says after a moment, giving him a thumbs-up, and he thinks she understands what he’s saying. After everything that had happened in the past months, he was not taking any risks. ‘I’ll make sure they disappear,’ she says.

‘Thank you,’ he explains. ‘I appreciate it, and I think Her Majesty would as well.’ The photographer nods before pursing her lips.

‘Actually, would you mind if I just cropped you out of the raws before I send them in?’ she asks. ‘There’s just this really great one with Dash,’ she says, trailing off, eyeing him a little, and he thinks for a moment he’s being studied.

‘Sure,’ he concedes. As long as he doesn’t make Vanity Fair at any point in the future, he doesn’t really mind.

‘Fabulous. Thanks,’ she says, smiling. ‘It’s a really lovely photo,’ she says, clearly trying to convince him, and he smiles.

‘I’m sure I’ll see it,’ he says, and she frowns.
‘Ahh, yes. I assume you’re all good with Her Majesty having those?’ she says.

‘Oh, yes. Yes, that’s fine,’ he agrees. ‘I doubt there would be much I could about it now anyway,’ he says good-naturedly and she grimaces slightly.

‘Sorry,’ and he shakes his head, smiling. At least he knows what some of her backgrounds will be for the next little while.

But then a thought hits him, and he stops, thinking. ‘Actually, I do have one other favour to ask.’

***

Emma texts him later that evening: *I sent you an email.*

He sees that there’s no text, just attachments, so he clicks on them.

He thinks he understands why the photographer wanted to keep the ones of her with Dash, and he swallows.

She’s radiant as she laughs up at him, Dash panting happily in her arms, and he curses his weakness.

The next is even more telling, he thinks, and he chews on his lip as he studies it. He thinks it must have been when he was asking her about the questions; they’re standing close together, his back angled slightly towards the camera and his hand in his pocket, and she’s caught them in a silent moment, because it looks for all the world that they’re just staring into each other’s eyes. She has an earnest, open look on her face, and he looks vaguely concerned, and oh, he doesn’t deserve to be sitting at the desk, calling himself her Private Secretary because he clearly had learned *nothing* from the past months.

He’s been back for all of a month and he quite literally hands the press their much-loved scandal on a platter and all that would need to happen is for the photographer to send the wrong photo, to forget that she was going to crop him out completely, to forget to delete the photos, and it’s all over again. Only this time, there was no coming back from it. It was there in high definition splendid colour for the world to see in the Gardens of Buckingham Palace and he is an idiot and a fool and so, so careless.

His phone screen lights up on the desk next to him. *They’re lovely.* He runs his hand over his face, letting out a sigh.

*They’re going to get us both into trouble.*

*They’re not leaving the palace.*

*They already have.*

*You said she said she’d crop them. And it’s all on approval. They can’t publish anything we don’t approve. Stop worrying.*

It’s all well and good for Emma to say, he thinks, but it’s not so much the published photos he’s worried about. It would take nothing, nothing at all, for one of those photos to make it onto the internet.
Besides, she adds, it's old news now. You're old news. It'd only make page four.

He rolls his eyes, but her point is clear. Maybe she’s right. Maybe it would be okay. There were contracts and clauses and if anything did leak, there would be hell to pay for *Vanity Fair* and everyone involved. The damage would be done, for sure, but he hopes the threat is enough.

There was little point worrying about it now. He would just have to wait and see.

***

Emma notices the little things.

He never swears anymore; the worst she’s heard from his mouth in months is a quiet ‘Damn!’.

And, despite his reputation as a womaniser, she knows better – he’s always had many female friends – but even she’s noticed that he only has eyes for one woman now.

She notices that he has settled into a pattern of loving her quietly. No longer is he tormented, pushed and pulled by emotions. She thinks he’s come to accept it and is just going along with the flow. She thinks he believes the Queen will never see him that way.

She notices that the Queen, on the other hand, loves him as fiercely as she always has. She keeps her Lord M close, even as she grows and strengthens and no longer leans on him quite so much for everything.

She thinks there’s a strength to that fierceness, that tight grip she maintains, a strength borne of the knowledge that the world was a cruel place and her Lord M her hard-won beacon, guiding her through those cold, dark waters.

But most of all, she notices that those once-dull, now-bright green eyes contain a certain softness when directed at his young Queen, but at times contain a fire that she watches him try desperately to quash.

She notices that despite the parade of young, very eligible – and some very handsome – bachelors, the young Queen only has eyes for her Lord M. And those eyes speak the same volumes back to his as his do to hers, only she doesn’t think either of them has quite noticed the other just yet.

She wonders just how long it will take.

Chapter End Notes

I'll write a short prompt-based ficlet for whoever can figure out who Amalie is!

Most of the dresses that Victoria wears are based on ones that Jenna Coleman wears. *This is the maroon one* I envisage her wearing in the evening, for example. If you’d like to know more about the others (in any chapters), just ask, and I'll link you.
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

You know my paper heart  
The one I fill with pencil marks  
I think I might have gone and inked you in

- *A Face to Call Home*, John Mayer

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_First week in July_

He eyes the email in front of him before picking up his phone.

‘Do you think this is wise?’

‘It’s just a suggestion,’ Wellington says, his voice practically dripping with condescension. ‘Someone to add to your list.’

Of course he has a list, but he won’t admit that to Wellington. He’s been making a list of suitable replacements in his mind since she first declared that Conroy had to go a few weeks ago. He is not adding anyone Wellington suggests to it.

Well, he’d never admit it to Wellington if he did.

It’s also not really his place to have a list at all – as much as he knows she will eventually ask his advice anyway – and it’s certainly not her Prime Minister’s place to be adding to it.

He hates that it’s all so clear to Wellington of all people. As much as they were tentative allies in the protection of their Queen, it’s also Wellington.

‘Your point has been made.’

‘Any progress?’

‘Some.’ He cannot really tell her Prime Minister much at all; it’s not his to share. ‘There is a light at the end of the tunnel,’ he offers. It was going to be a long tunnel, he thinks, and he’s still not entirely sure what the scenery will be like at the end.

‘Finally. I’m glad to hear it.’

***
She’s made it her mission to invite him to everything she can, he thinks, and it’s become something of a game. He has to remind her occasionally that he actually has a job to do. But he hates telling her no, so he says yes to whatever he thinks he can get away with. Which isn’t much, really; he’s so far been to two concerts, and he knows she has plans for more. He thinks it’ll be both a blessing and a curse when Charlotte Canning officially begins in a week.

But he simply can’t attend everything, and nor should he. He’s trying to keep more to the background, to stay away from anything and everything might potentially have a photographer. Despite all Emma’s assurances, he isn’t going to risk anything. But Emma is also one hundred percent on the Queen’s side in this.

‘I see your roses are happy,’ Emma says, looking down at the small vase on her desk. ‘They’re lovely.’

‘You’re welcome,’ he replies, smiling. ‘They are under-appreciated at home.’

‘Come around for lunch on Sunday?’ she asks, and he frowns for a moment.

‘What’s died this time?’ he asks, and she smiles.

‘My azaleas,’ she says with a sigh. ‘I moved them like you suggested, but they’re still unhappy.’

He turns as he sees the Queen appear around the corner, folder in hand. ‘Ma’am,’ he greets and she smiles at him.

‘I was just bringing this out for you,’ she says, handing him the folder. But then she spots the yellow roses on Emma’s desk, and bends down to smell them. ‘Oh, these are lovely,’ she breathes.

‘William grew them,’ Emma takes great pride in saying, and he resists the urge to sigh.

‘I didn’t know you grew roses.’

‘He grows many things,’ Emma says, eyeing him with a smirk, and he shoots her a look. ‘But the roses seem to love it here in London,’ she finishes with, and his lips twist.

‘He’s the best,’ Emma adds, and he blinks at her. She just smirks back.

‘I used to, ma’am,’ he says. ‘The roses really take care of themselves.’

‘You’ll have to show me one day, Lord M,’ she says, and he nods.

‘I’d be honoured, ma’am,’ he replies. ‘Perhaps it can be a planned visit, this time?’ he jokes, and she shakes her head at him as she rolls her eyes.

It’s about an hour later when she sends him a message.

_The Hampton Court Palace Flower Show is in my calendar._

_Yes, ma’am._

_I think I need a flower expert on hand to explain everything._

He can’t help but smile at her silliness.

_The Royal Horticultural Society has advised that Sir Nicholas will be your guide._
I hate to trouble him. I’m sure he’s very busy. It’s such a significant event in their calendar.

He grimaces a little; Sir Nicholas would be really very offended if she chose her Private Secretary over him as her official guide for the day.

I’m sure he’s looking forward to it, ma’am. He’s very proud of the Flower Show.

I suppose.

And with that, he’s won this round.

***

She’s tired, he can see it. For all their attempts at filling up her calendar to keep her busy, along with all her normal engagements as Queen over the summer, she’s barely had a break, and that, along with the strain of the previous months, have taken their toll. He can see it in her face, her manner; she still looks beautiful, but she’s just a little worn, he thinks. A little thin. Harriet had taken up his challenge with gusto, and she’s had virtually no free time in the weeks since his return. It’s working; she hasn’t seen Conroy since before her meeting with Mr Harper, and her mother has already complained to Emma that she never sees her daughter anymore.

He thinks he’ll ask Peel to get a copy of the Duchess’s calendar if he can. He’d tried once, but Conroy had flat out ignored his requests; perhaps he’ll respond to Peel – or Emma, maybe. She doesn’t need to be gone from the palace twenty-four-seven – just when Conroy is around, which is most likely when the Duchess is around. And most likely during the day.

He thinks he might place a call to Harper, too. He knows these things take time, but Harper has a soft spot for his sweet young Queen – he’d told him as much at their last visit – so he wonders if they might perhaps hurry the process a little.

But when she’s tired, like everyone, she becomes cranky and snappish, he well knows, and he’s oh so keen to keep her as even as he can. So when Amalie arrives at Emma’s desk the next day at midday, he’s pleased he’s organised this little thing for her, something fun that she can do at home in jeans and a shirt that will keep her occupied most of the afternoon. Harriet hadn’t minded an afternoon off herself.

‘So this is still a surprise?’ Amalie asks as he escorts her to the Queen’s study, and he nods.

‘Yes,’ he says. ‘Her Majesty’s schedule has been rather full of late, and she’s keen to have some time out and learn how to use her camera,’ he explains, and she nods.

‘Cool. We can definitely start in the gardens,’ she says. ‘We’ll start with the basics; grids and lines, rule of thirds – stuff we didn’t really talk about when I was here – and then move on to the more complicated stuff.’

‘Sounds good,’ he says as they get closer to her door. ‘Would you mind waiting here?’ he says, and she shakes her head and smiles.

‘Good afternoon, Lord M,’ she says when he walks in.

‘Good afternoon, ma’am,’ he replies. ‘Sleep well?’
‘Yes,’ she says. ‘It was nice to not have to wake up to an alarm.’

‘Are you busy, ma’am?’ he asks, and she looks at him oddly. He usually knows her schedule inside out.

‘No. I don’t have much now for the rest of the day,’ she says slowly, and he smiles.

‘Excellent,’ he replies, walking to the door and sticking his head out to where Amalie was waiting.

‘I thought perhaps you might like to learn a little more about your new toy from a professional,’ he says, as Amalie walks in behind him. ‘Ms Baden has offered to teach you for a few sessions.’

And the way her face lights up, the smile spreads across her face, makes his whole world shine, and he can’t help but smile back at her.

***

An hour later, he gets a message on his phone.

It’s a photo of the little pavilion at the end of the gardens, the white of the limestone shining brightly against the dark leaves of the trees that surround it, and he thinks she’s really very good at this. But he’s curious as to why it’s appeared on his phone.

Wow. Lovely, ma’am.

Thank you.

I thought you were using your camera?

I am. It has wifi and I transferred it across.

When he gets another three photos that afternoon – a beautiful photo of the back of the palace, another of the creeping rose vines on the brick walls, and another shot down the gardens towards the lake – he thinks this was a good decision.

When he sees her in the evening at her summons, right before he leaves for the day, he’s reminded of why he has to be so careful. ‘Did you have fun?’ he asks, and she smiles widely up at him.

‘I learned so much. I’m never going to remember it all,’ she says, her eyes wide. ‘But it was wonderful,’ she says, her smile soft, and he nods, dropping her gaze.

‘I’m glad, ma’am. I wasn’t about to see your present go to waste,’ he jokes, and she smiles knowingly at him.

‘Of course not.’ She reaches out and brushes her hand across his arm. ‘Thank you. Amalie told me you asked her and organised it all,’ she says, her eyes wide but soft, and he nods.

‘You’re welcome, ma’am,’ he says. But he can’t hold her gaze, his beautiful Queen, not when she looks at him like that. Not anymore. ‘I will see you tomorrow, ma’am,’ he says, plastering a small smile on his face, and she nods.

When he’s checking his emails later that night, he finds a photo from her. It’s the little Pavilion at
sunset, the orange of the sun shining through at an angle from behind the trees, and there’s a note at the bottom of the email.

Thank you.

He lets out a sigh and sets the photo as the background on his computer.

***

She’s frowning when he arrives at her office. ‘I had invited the Duchess of Wellington to sit with us at Wimbledon,’ she says, ‘but her daughter is now due to give birth the day before.’

‘Ah,’ he says. ‘I think grandchildren might trump tennis, ma’am,’ he says. ‘Even Wimbledon with the Queen.’

‘Of course. But now I have a spare seat.’ He raises his eyebrows at her, and of course. ‘Would you like to come?’ she asks, already knowing the answer but asking anyway, and he blinks at her before pursing his lips, his eyes narrowing not unkindly, and ugh. ‘Yes, I know,’ she says before he can speak, letting out a huff.

But this was her life. She had already paid the price for her lack of thought, for not caring enough what the public or the press would think. She was not risking anything, especially not him, again. ‘I’ve invited Amalie,’ she says, and he raises his eyebrows.

‘Oh? She’s now a friend?’ he asks, and she thinks he’s pleased.

‘Maybe,’ she replies. ‘I like her. And I think I can trust her,’ she adds, and he nods. Amalie was just so different and despite some initial awkwardness – which was such a constant in her life as Queen that she’d almost perfected the art of ignoring it – she’d had fun learning about her camera, and spending time with someone who was nothing at all like the people she spent most of her time with. She was so down to earth, so effortlessly cool with her perfect dark skin, and her ringlet-curly, slightly hectic hair, and her style that makes Victoria almost jealous that she’s not five-foot-ten, and her confidence – so far beyond anything Victoria’s really known that she’d almost struggled to keep up.

But that doesn’t really leave too many others on her list of friends, and she frowns.

‘Have you considered the Duchess?’ he asks tentatively, and she just looks at him, disbelieving.

He wants her to ask Mama?

‘Sir John will be gone soon enough,’ he says quietly. She eyes him for a moment longer before her gaze softens. She knows he means well, she knows he does. She’s just not sure that she’s ready to forgive her mother yet. If ever. ‘You wouldn’t have to spend the entire time talking to her. I assume Harriet’s also going?’ he says.

‘Yes.’

‘And Anna?’
She nods reluctantly, and he just looks at her with those eyes that see everything, that seem to know exactly what she’s thinking but don’t judge her for any of it. His gaze draws the best from her, she knows, as reluctant as she is willing to give it sometimes.

‘I’m still angry with her,’ she tells him, and he nods.

‘No one is saying you shouldn’t be,’ he says, shaking his head a little, and she purses her lips. ‘But she’s probably wondering why you’re avoiding her. It could potentially be a good opportunity to spend some time with her without having to worry about Sir John, ma’am,’ he says, and she frowns at him. She hates that he’s making perfect sense with his logic and rational arguments.

‘Maybe,’ she says, and he nods in acceptance. But then an idea strikes her. ‘If I take Mama to the tennis, you have to come to the Hampton Court Palace Flower Show with me,’ she decrees, and he eyes her, and she thinks she will definitely win this. He hates how broken her relationship is with her mother, and she knows now that he enjoys his flowers.

He waits a beat longer before speaking. ‘Fine, but Sir Nicholas still has to be your official guide,’ he says, and she smirks triumphantly at him. That was an easy win.

***

‘Mama would like to Sir John to come to Edinburgh for Christmas,’ she announces that afternoon when the rain is pouring in sheets outside, and his eyebrows rise. He wonders briefly how long Harper meant when he said it would take some time to sort through everything. ‘I don’t know if I can survive living with the man for a week,’ she tells him darkly, and he purses his lips and nods. This is not news to him.

‘Holyroodhouse Palace has nearly three hundred rooms,’ he offers.

‘But one dining room,’ she retorts. He concedes her point with a tilt of his head. She wouldn’t be able to avoid him in Edinburgh the way she avoids him here.

‘Well, let’s hope that everything is sorted before December twenty, ma’am,’ he says gently.

Chapter End Notes

No one managed to guess who Amalie is, so I’ll give you another chance, along with a couple of hints:

1. Everyone in the Victorian era has the same damn name so Amalie isn’t her original first name.

2. She’s going to be important to more than just Victoria.
Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

Your telescope eyes see everything clearly  
My vision is blurred but I know what I heard echoing all around  
While I am tuning you in, you are deciphering me  

It's love, it's love that holds us  
We will be alright

- *Deciphering Me*, Brooke Fraser

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Early July*

When they arrive, he bids her farewell and leaves to wander the gardens alone. She pouts a little at him, before letting out a sigh at his raised eyebrow. The cameras would be following her today.

He was likely going to struggle to avoid them anyway, he thinks. But he has her route memorised and on his phone, so he heads in the opposite direction – and runs right into Liz.

‘Will!’ she cries, throwing her arms around him, and whilst he’s internally cringing, he also can’t help but smile at how pleased she is to see him. So much for avoiding the press, he thinks as he glances around. But he also can’t help but be happy to see her as he hugs her in return. ‘What are you doing here?’ she asks, taking in his suit and tie before she realises. ‘You’re working.’

‘I am,’ he replies. ‘The Queen is currently in the Rose Garden,’ he says quietly, looking at his watch. There were very few people around; it was early, and they’d deliberately reduced the ticket numbers right down for the first hour she would be there as a security measure. Despite all that, he still wasn’t overly keen to advertise her presence.

‘That explains today,’ Liz says, looking around. ‘Security’s crazy,’ she says, shaking her head, eyeing him. ‘You look good.’

He glances down at his feet. ‘So do you,’ he replies. ‘But you always look good.’

She narrows her eyes at him before putting her arm through his. ‘Mind if I join you?’ she asks quietly, and he smiles.

‘Not at all.’

‘How’s it all going?’ she asks a few moments later, as they wander through the Floral Marquee.

‘Good,’ he says carefully. He’s not sure what else to say. Things had been bad, and now they were good again; a tentative kind of good, the promise of trouble hovering at the back of his mind.
continually. He’d been a little too blinded by happiness before, and it had caught him off-guard. Not again.

‘I saw that you went on holiday,’ she says, her voice full of sarcasm, and he huffs a laugh.

‘Yes.’

‘How was that?’

‘Not as relaxing as I’d hoped,’ he says, smiling wryly at her.

When she smiles back at him, he gets the distinct impression that he’s being studied. But she looks down at her feet after a second, and he lets it go. She’s always tried to look after him, her bruised autumn rose, as she’d called him once.

‘Still growing your flowers?’ she asks, stopping to finger the petals of some lilies.

He smiles. ‘Some. I’m a little busy now here in London.’

‘Yes, I see,’ she says. ‘You seem to be enjoying this job a little more than the last,’ she says wryly, and he huffs a laugh. He’s not sure enjoying is the word.

‘I am enjoying it. It’s a much more satisfying role.’

‘Than being a politician? I’m shocked,’ she says, and he chuckles. ‘Well, you’re definitely busier. You’re never at anything much anymore. Even Ellie Holland asked where you were a few weeks’ back,’ she comments.

He shrugs a little, not entirely sure what to say. How does he tell her that his life seems to have some purpose now? That he loves her so, his beautiful Queen, has settled into loving her quietly, guiding her as he basks in her light, his life no longer the dull series of greys or the pinball machine of parties and chaos it had been? That he no longer feels the desire to hide the pain of death and loss and futility behind a façade of alcohol and noise? That she has shown him, his beautiful Queen, however inadvertently, that he could love again?

‘I think that season of my life is over,’ he says carefully, looking down at where they’ve stopped in front of a sea of hydrangeas. He looks up and she’s smiling at him softly, almost knowingly, and he nods.

‘I’m not surprised,’ she replies, her voice quiet. ‘She seems lovely,’ she adds a few moments later.

‘She is,’ he agrees. ‘She’s exactly as she seems.’ He looks at her when she says nothing, and she’s just smiling at him.

‘I’m glad you’re happy, Will,’ she says, squeezing his arm.

***

He finds her later back in the Rose Garden, meandering slowly amongst the rows of colour. ‘How was the scarecrow judging, ma’am?’ he asks, and she shoots him a wry look.

‘It was actually brilliant,’ she tells him a little imperiously. ‘They’re so creative. And they were so
proud of their work – as they should have been. I found it difficult to award a winner.’

‘Excellent, ma’am,’ he replies with a smirk.

‘Did you enjoy roaming the Flower Show without me?’

‘I did,’ he says, shooting her a sly look at her choice of words. ‘Flowers have a way of making people smile.’

She nods. ‘They make me happy,’ she says on a sigh, and he understands. ‘It’s your roses!’ she says suddenly, spotting some bright yellow roses in the middle of an archway and walking over to them.

‘Close,’ he says, looking at the tag. ‘Not quite. But very similar, ma’am.’

‘These names are such a mouthful,’ she says. ‘I don’t know how you remember them.’

‘Years of practice?’ he guesses, and she smiles.

‘Emma said you used to grow many different kinds of flowers out at Brocket Hall,’ she says, as they continue walking.

‘Yes. I tried, anyway. My mother was very good.’ She’s watching him, and he smiles. ‘Augustus used to love watering the roses when we were there. He loved all the different colours.’

‘Flowers make people happy,’ she says again, and he nods. ‘Would you show me Brocket Hall one day?’ she asks tentatively, and he blinks at her.

He thinks he’d like nothing more than to show her his family home; the grounds, the river, the bridge. Augustus’s favourite tree. The rooks.

And the way she smiles brightly up at him when he tells her he’d be honoured sits in his heart for the rest of the day.

***

She checks her Twitter feed every morning now either before or at breakfast. It’s mostly news outlets – The Guardian, the BBC, the Daily Mail, the New York Times – along with other world leaders, important organisations like the UN, and other people she just likes.

Occasionally she checks his tag; it would not do for him to make a return to the headlines. She would not risk losing him again. She’d been blindsided by everything before – she had learned her lesson, and would stay on top of everything as much as she could.

She’s mindlessly scrolling through her feed when she sees it.

It’s a photo of him at the Flower Show, a tall, beautiful woman on his arm and something drops low and heavy in her stomach. She clicks the link, waiting impatiently as the page takes a few moments to load.

On-Again: Lord Melbourne and Old Flame Reunite in the Flowers

He’s smiling, looking down at his feet, and she’s laughing, and she knows this woman – she’s seen
her before. *Elizabeth Branden.* The next photo makes something in her chest tighten and she puts her toast down, the thought of food making her stomach revolt. He’s smiling at her, and she’s smiling at him, and oh, she can’t look at this anymore, she thinks. She doesn’t want to.

She’s being irrational, she thinks a few minutes later as she looks out the window at the rain that was steadily saturating the garden. He’d told her that Elizabeth Branden was just a friend now, nothing more.

Maybe he’d changed his mind.

She unlocks her phone and the picture appears again. He looks happy, she thinks, and that twist in her stomach returns.

She rolls her eyes and lets out a laugh. Here she was, after everything, after the events of the past year, reading and *believing* headlines.

***

She smiles up at him when he appears, but she drops his eyes almost straight away, and she kicks herself. She wouldn’t make a big deal out of this.

She was already *making* a big deal out of it, and she needed to stop. She doesn’t even know why she *cares* so much.

She takes her coffee with a quiet thank you, and when she glances at him, she realises he’s looking at her rather intently, and she looks away again. *Stupid,* she thinks. *Just ask.* ‘You made the internet again,’ she announces, holding up her phone, and to her surprise, he looks away.

She knows very well now what he looks like when he’s uncomfortable; he blinks more frequently, he rubs his forefinger and his thumb together at his sides. When it’s about her, he refuses to meet her eye for long.

He is *definitely* uncomfortable, she thinks, and she’s not sure why, and the thought does nothing for her nerves.

‘Yes, it would appear that I was unsuccessful in my attempts to remain incognito at the Flower Show, ma’am,’ he replies a little resignedly, and she nods.

‘They’re nice photos,’ she says, and she means it.

He lets out a dry laugh. ‘For paparazzi shots, sure.’

‘I’m glad you weren’t alone the whole time,’ she blurts out, surprising herself. She’s not sure where that came from, and she’s not really sure if she means it, but she should. She should be happy for him, her Lord M. He’s had so much tragedy in his life; he deserves all the happiness in the world, she thinks, and oh, she wants him to be happy but——

She stops herself mid-thought. No, if she was truly his friend, she would want him to be happy *no matter what.* He’s always telling her that she should be happy, that she needs to weigh her duties with her own happiness, and she would want the same for him. He should be *happy.*
She tries to ignore the conflict within her, that gnawing at her, that but—

The shame that but brings makes her cheeks hot and she blinks.

‘It was nice to see Liz,’ he says haltingly, and her eyes flick up to his, but he’s not looking at her. ‘I haven’t seen her in a good year.’

She nods quickly when his eyes meet hers. ‘Friends are important,’ she says, and she’s proud of how even her voice is.

‘Friends are important, ma’am,’ he repeats, and his eyes narrow slightly before he smirks a little at her. ‘We’re having dinner tomorrow night,’ he says, and she forces herself to breathe.

‘Oh, that will be nice,’ she replies.

‘Yes. She would like me to meet her girlfriend,’ he says conspiratorially and oh.

*Girlfriend.*

She feels her cheeks grow hot and she’s not sure whether it’s embarrassment at her assumption about him or the whole idea of girlfriend that’s the main culprit. She looks away, and she knows he can see it, the way she’s blushing furiously, and she glances up at him and it’s in his eyes.

He’s laughing at her.

Oh, horrible man.

But then she remembers the photos, what the press had said months ago — what he’d told her himself about him and Elizabeth Branden — and she’s now really confused, and she can feel her cheeks growing more and more red, but she has to know.

‘But…I thought…you…and her…’ She stops and scrunches up her face, begging him not to make her continue.

His lips twist a little. ‘Yes, ma’am,’ he says, and he’s going to make her say it and she hates him so much sometimes. So much.

‘I don’t understand,’ she eventually settles on because she doesn’t. She doesn’t understand. They had been together for however brief a time, she knew, but now there’s a girlfriend and-- oh.

*Oh.*

‘Some people have a wider variety of…taste than others, ma’am,’ is all he says, and she can see he’s trying not to laugh now. ‘Not everyone is attracted solely to the opposite sex.’

‘Yes.’ She knew this, in an oblique, abstract kind of way, but it was still a slightly odd feeling after growing up with years of Kensington and Lehzen and scriptures about the sanctity of marriage.

‘But you don’t know anything, ma’am,’ he says quickly. ‘It’s not public knowledge.’

‘Of course,’ she says quickly, shaking her head. ‘I hope it’s a nice evening.’

‘Thank you,’ he replies, and she thinks she’s going to throw something at him if his stupid golden-green eyes continue to laugh at her like that.
Chapter End Notes

Congrats to rediswriting for guessing that Amalie is Princess Alexandrine of Baden!

Thanks, as always, for all the feedback.
Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

I'd like to show you a million things
I'd like to make the world for you a better place
But when it pours, it really rains, so
Put on your boots, and let's play

- *Lions and Tigers*, Sleater-Kinney

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Early-Mid July*

She knows he chooses her letters carefully, that they’re vetted before she gets to see them, and she understands why. She gets around four hundred letters a day, and whilst she’d love to answer most of them, it’s an impossible task.

He knows she loves the ones from the children, the little drawings and handwritten pages, some of them barely decipherable but so sweet in their earnestness. She loves replying to these letters the most, knowing that it will bring them such a thrill to get a letter from the *Queen*.

But by the time she’s finished this last letter, the tears are slipping down her cheeks and she’s sniffing.

Emma appears at her door at just the wrong moment, and she’s at her desk with a gasp. ‘Ma’am, what’s wrong?’

Victoria shakes her head and passes her the letter, and watches as Emma reads the typed words, glancing at the picture attached at the back of the boy and his slightly worn Tower Guard bear. She watches as Emma’s face crumples a little as well. ‘Oh,’ she says eventually. ‘What a beautiful letter, ma’am,’ she says, handing it back, and Victoria nods, sniffing and wiping her eyes with a tissue.

‘I don’t even know what to say,’ she says. ‘He’s been through so much – so many surgeries, so much pain and rehabilitation. That bombing was months ago and he’s only going home now!’

Emma nods. ‘And he appreciates how lucky he is to be going home at all,’ she says with a shake of her head. Emma was right; many – too many – hadn’t made it home, and the thought still makes her want to cry.

‘But that’s why we have such wonderful children’s hospitals, and charities like the Starlight Foundation, ma’am,’ Emma tells her decidedly. ‘They give these children the kinds of opportunities they would never normally get.’

Victoria smiles a little and nods. They certainly did wonderful things, she knew; they sent her updates all the time, now that she’d been officially announced as patron. She’d told an amused Lord
M that she wanted to go to Disneyland in France one day after watching a short video of one of their young recipients meet all her favourite Disney princesses.

And a thought hits her, and she sits up in her chair.

‘Yes,’ she breathes. ‘But maybe we can help too.’ She looks up at Emma. ‘I think I need to see Charlotte.’

***

When Charlotte appears at her door, she has to remind herself that she’s not Lord M – she’s new, and she hasn’t really settled in yet. Well, she assumes she hasn’t after only a few days.

‘Thank you for coming,’ she tells her, and Charlotte nods.

‘Of course, ma’am.’

‘How are you settling in?’ she asks, and Charlotte smiles.

‘Very well. Everyone is so kind, and the Earl has been in each morning.’

‘Yes, I’m pleased he’s been feeling well enough to make the trip,’ she replies, nodding – she’d made a point of inviting the Earl up to say hello.

‘What can I do for you, ma’am?’ Charlotte asks, seemingly sensing her nerves, and she drops her hands by her sides. She knows it’s her tell, the way she rubs her hand with her opposite thumb; Lord M had pointed it out once, much to her horror.

‘I know it’s late, but I wondered if it would be possible to add another Garden Party to the schedule this year,’ she says, and Charlotte’s brow furrows a little.

‘I’m sure it’s possible, ma’am, but it would depend on your schedule,’ she says. ‘What did you have in mind?’

‘I want to invite children.’

***

She works hard, his little Queen, and he knows that she expects – but appreciates, too – the hard work of others. He wonders how much of that is his own influence and Emma’s, and how much is from before; he thinks perhaps all her work around the Diplomatic Corps dinner last year set something of a tone – you never know how much you can do until you do it. He’s not entirely sure it’s a good tone, but she seems happy enough, and thus it’s not really his place to tell her otherwise.

‘How terrible would it be if I didn’t attend the State Reception for the Australian Prime Minister?’ she asks him when he arrives at her office at her summons right before lunch, and his eyebrows shoot up. He glances at Charlotte who he thinks is trying not to smile.
‘I’d say fairly catastrophic, ma’am, given that you’re hosting it,’ he replies, and she purses her lips.

‘Does it have to be that Sunday?’

He blinks, his eyes flicking to Charlotte’s, and he can see it in her eyes too; he’s spent hours and hours organising this Reception, with Charlotte coming in now on the tail end to help finish it off, and no, she cannot move it. Wellington would lose his mind, let alone what he’d tell the Australians. ‘Can I ask why, ma’am?’

‘I want to host a Garden Party for the children who were involved in the bombing, and their families. And the children honoured by the Children of Courage this year. And the Trauma Recovery Centre here in London,’ she says, and he blinks. ‘We’re trying to schedule it for some time at the end of September or maybe early October, before it gets too cold.’

‘Sounds wonderful, ma’am,’ he says, as his brain whirs into action. ‘It’s mid-July now, ma’am,’ he warns, narrowing his eyes at her a little, and she nods.

‘Yes, I know it’s late, but Charlotte thinks we might be able to do it.’

He looks at Charlotte, who is looking rather calm for someone who has been thrown in the deep end of a very large and, at times, rather unforgiving pool. ‘Not that Sunday, ma’am,’ he says gently but firmly, shaking his head, and she and Charlotte nod.

It’s half an hour later and they’ve finally locked in a tentative date and he’s now more than curious. ‘What did you have planned for the party, ma’am?’ he asks, and she looks at him blankly.

‘Something fun,’ she says, and he can’t help the smile that spreads across his face.

‘Did you have anything specific in mind?’

She frowns at him. ‘I’m not sure yet,’ she says eventually, eyeing him a little.

‘You’ll have children from three years right through to seventeen, ma’am,’ Charlotte says. ‘Perhaps something carnival-themed?’

She blinks at Charlotte, and he wonders momentarily if she’s ever been to a carnival before; it doesn’t sound like something the Duchess would have approved of the young Princess attending. ‘Yes,’ she says a little hesitantly, and he nods.

‘A jumping castle, maybe? Some sideshow alley-type games,’ he muses, and Charlotte nods.

‘A reading nook. Face painting.’

‘A mini-soccer pitch.’

‘A lolly-hunt through part of the gardens,’ Charlotte suggests, and he smiles.

He glances at the Queen who is smiling tentatively, eyes wide as she looks between them. ‘Lots of cupcakes and sweets,’ she offers, and he nods.

‘Sugar for all,’ he says, and Charlotte chuckles.

‘And tea and coffee for the parents.’

‘I think it’s a wonderful idea, ma’am,’ he tells her, and she grins happily. ‘Let’s hope there’s enough time to organise it all.’
Charlotte nods. ‘I think there will be,’ she says.

He’s walking back towards the staff offices with Charlotte when she lets out a long breath.

‘Welcome to Buckingham Palace,’ he jokes, and she eyes him.

‘When did you first think you’d bitten off more than you could chew?’ she asks, and he lets out a laugh.

‘The moment she offered me the position?’ he guesses, and she smiles. ‘I think it was when she asked why the Iranian and Israeli ambassadors shouldn’t be stationed next to each other in the receiving line at her first Diplomatic Corps Dinner,’ he says honestly, and she gives him a horrified look. He knows that she of all people would understand, and best she does understand – she’s essentially the head of most of the Queen’s household as the most senior Official, and, he suspects, envisages herself as in this for the long haul. ‘That was a long time ago,’ he says. ‘She’s come a long way in the eighteen months since. But that’s where we started.’

‘Right,’ Charlotte says, nodding slowly, and he lets out a breath.

‘Assume nothing,’ he says. ‘But don’t underestimate her, whatever you do.’

She nods. ‘Noted.’ She looks up at him. ‘What else do I need to know?’ she asks matter-of-factly, and he purses his lips, before letting out a sigh.

‘She doesn’t get on well with the Duchess. Or the Duchess’s Comptroller, Sir John Conroy.’ He shakes his head. ‘Be careful there.’

She nods. ‘Good to know.’

‘Otherwise, Harriet Sutherland and Emma Portman know everything.’

‘Not you?’ she asks, eyeing him, and his lips quirk. He wonders how much she’s read; how much she knows. He assumes she’s read everything she can find; whether or not she believes it is another matter entirely. He would have to be careful around Charlotte Canning, he thinks; he suspects she sees much more than she lets on.

‘No,’ he replies with a small smile, giving a small shake of his head, and she nods after a moment.

‘Okay. Thanks.’
Chapter 54

Chapter Summary

Love is drowning
In a deep well
All the secrets
And no one to tell

Love is blindness
I don't want to see
Won't you wrap the night
Around me?
Oh my love
Blindness

- Love is Blindness, U2

When Emma tells him it’s his turn to take her, he doesn’t put up much of a fight. He quite enjoys the National Portrait Gallery, and he thinks she might like to see the paintings of some of her ancestors. Her own portraits would end up in there one day anyway, long after they’re both gone.

He wonders if they’ll end up getting down to the more modern portraits. He doesn’t really mind if they do; he’ll just redirect her, he thinks. The possibility sits at the back of his mind, that it – that he – might become part of the conversation, but he squashes it. It was unlikely.

It’s become something of a ritual; every week or two, Harriet, Emma or Anna – usually a combination of the three – quietly organise to take her somewhere new that she wouldn’t be able to visit during the standard hours without creating some kind of organised public chaos. But she’s a little tired, his beautiful Queen, so he’s requested that Harriet perhaps pull back on her exuberant planning. So far, she’s done a helicopter ride over London, a private boat trip on the Thames, another trip to the Ballet, and more than a few classical concerts at Royal Albert Hall (most of which she’s dragged him along to, arguing that she knows he enjoys them), and along with her very full summer schedule of Royal duties, he’s not surprised she seems a little weary. He feels like he barely sees her anymore.

These trips are always for a night when the Duchess is home; Emma has managed to keep a track of her published schedule, and so it’s fairly easy to work out when she’s likely to be around. She’s struggling, he can see. Every conversation with her mother that references Sir John drains her just a little further, and he knows that it plays in the back of her mind, that fear that he’ll do or say or publish something else about her, something more, and it’s eating away at what little love she has left for her mother.

He hates it. It’s killing him to watch that most precious of relationships be destroyed by that waste of space of a man that has ruled most of her life.

He just hopes that there will be something left to salvage when all is said and done. He prays the
Duchess chooses her daughter over the memory of Conroy; he knows for sure that Conroy will choose freedom over the shackles of any kind of relationship with the Duchess.

She will have to forgive her mother first.

He’s been pushing gently, merely raising the idea once or twice, and each time he does, she turns on him, her eyes blazing, and he just quietly holds her gaze. She knows how he feels about this, and he’s not going to back down. She’s strong, and stubborn, his beautiful Queen, but he’s still playing to win.

He treasures the smile she gives him that afternoon when he tells her it will be him that accompanies her on this particular trip. So they work chronologically, starting at the Tudors, and she stops at Elizabeth.

‘She was a great Queen,’ she muses, staring at the painting in front of her.

‘She was, ma’am,’ he agrees.

‘She never married,’ she says, and he shakes his head. ‘I wonder if she wanted to,’ she says after a few seconds.

‘Possibly,’ he says, and she looks up at him. ‘She was close to several men during her life, according to historians.’ She looks thoughtful as she stares up at her ancestor, and he wonders what she’s thinking. They’ve not talked about this much, the idea of her marrying, beyond their discussion about his sister and what she’s said at the photoshoot. He thinks she would like to marry one day in theory, but that she hasn’t really given it much thought. No one had really caught her eye.

She’s young, he reasons. There was still plenty of time for that.

But he pushes the thought away as they continue walking through the rooms, talking about the various people and painters, him offering what he knows and her filling in some of his gaps with her own knowledge.

‘You seem to know quite a bit about medieval and modern European history, ma’am,’ he comments at one point, and she smiles ruefully.

‘The constitution may have been optional, but my mother insisted I know my ancestry.’

‘Ah.’

She stops for a while at quite a few of the portraits: Jane Austen’s drawing (he’d requested that one just for her visit), the Bronte Sisters – she loves *Jane Eyre*, he discovers – and, of course, Shakespeare. But they’re moving through quite quickly – she likes art, but there’s only so many paintings one can take in in one hit – and before he realises, they’re downstairs in the twentieth century paintings, deep in conversation about whether photos really counted as portraits, and he glances around at the next paintings and kicks himself. He knows this section well enough, he’s come here that often, and he’s just happily strolled in here with her without even thinking, too distracted by their conversation and just spending time with her, and he wonders if she’ll notice.

He thinks not. He is almost the spitting image of the man, as his own son was of him, but even that’s hard to tell from a painting. Even a remarkably good one, as this one is. But he can’t really redirect her now without turning her around, and so he just lets her wander along, waiting to see what will happen. She’ll probably walk right on by, he thinks. Even if she does stop – it was a rather prominent painting, and the way it was positioned by the Gallery makes it stand out – she’d be unlikely to figure it out.
They get closer and his stomach begins to twist, and he curses his own stupidity. This was who he was. He’d long made peace with it, and he would not be ashamed of something so completely outside of his control.

He could never be ashamed of his mother.

But they’re right at it now, and he’s holding his breath and she stops, turning to look at this portrait that’s in the middle of its own section of wall, and she tilts her head slightly as she studies it. He stands just behind her as she reads the little plaque on the wall that he’s practically memorised:

George Wyndham, 3rd Earl of Egremont (18 December 1932 – 11 November 2000). Petworth House in Sussex and Orchard Wyndham in Somerset, was a British peer, a major landowner and a great patron of art… Several other painters including John Constable, C. R. Leslie, George Romney, the sculptor John Flaxman, and other talented artists received commissions from Wyndham, who filled his house with valuable works of art… Died childless… Bequeathed a significant number of priceless pieces to the National Gallery and National Portrait Gallery…

‘I don’t think I’ve met a Lord Egremont,’ she muses. ‘But I suppose the title passed with him?’ she asks.

‘Uh, no. It went to his nephew,’ he replies in a rush. ‘You’ve not met him, I don’t think.’

She shakes her head before returning to look at the painting. He understands why: it’s mesmerising. The brushstrokes and wisps of white around the edges give it a dreamlike quality.

Maybe he’s biased.

‘The style of the painting makes him seem kind of handsome,’ she says, and he lets out a surprised laugh.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ he agrees, blinking a few times, and she frowns a little at him, and he thinks he’s hurt her feelings a little. ‘You’re right. It does,’ he says more seriously, and she turns back to look at it.

It’s sitting there, on the edge of his tongue, and all he has to do is say it, to make the comparison, and he thinks she’d see it, the similarity. But he can’t bring himself to speak the words, to tell her – this woman who holds his heart in her hands – his darkest secret, this thing that has overshadowed everything he’s done – who he is and who he will become.

But she’s still studying the painting, and he can see by the way her hands twitch that she wants to reach out and touch it, to feel the brush strokes. She’s quite tactile, his beautiful Queen; she loves to touch and feel things, and she’s commented once already that she finds portraits a little haunting.

‘I think I’d like this artist to paint me one day,’ she says, and he smiles. ‘He’s very good.’

‘He is, ma’am, but you might find that a little difficult.’

‘He’s dead?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘Of course.’
'I thought you considered portrait painting an old-fashioned thing,’ he teases, and she smiles wryly at him.

‘I do. But Charlotte says that I should have one done at every milestone.’

‘It is tradition, ma’am,’ he muses, looking back at the painting.

‘Yes.’

‘It says he donated quite a bit of art to the Gallery,’ she says. ‘Oh, of course – I’ve seen his name on the plaques.’ He nods; she’s likely seen his name in small letters many times already tonight. ‘That’s rather kind of him. I wonder why he didn’t bequeath it to his nephew.’

‘The current Lord Egremont is no lover of art,’ he says dryly, before looking back at the painting and avoiding her stare, shoving his hands into his pockets. ‘I think the former Lord felt that he could share his passion for art more effectively in the National Galleries.’

He can feel her eyes on him, and he’s keen to move on now, away from her stare. ‘Did you know him, Lord M?’

He lets out a huff of breath, and he knows he’s going to tell her, but his chest still tightens painfully at the thought. ‘You could say that, ma’am.’ He looks at her, and he feels the stab of fear in his stomach. ‘Our families were close; I spent quite a bit of time at his estate as a boy,’ he says, and she nods. He sucks in a breath, summoning his courage. He might find out one day, he thinks. He’d rather it be him to tell her than some cruel journalist. ‘I’m pretty sure Lord Egremont is my biological father,’ he says quietly, studying her, holding his breath, waiting for her to get angry with him for lying to her and holding a title that many would argue isn’t rightfully his, if they knew.

He’d never really wanted it in the first place, but it would not have helped for him to refuse his distraught mother’s wishes.

He watches as her mouth drops open and she draws back slightly, and he tears his gaze away and back to the painting he knows is the man who shares his genes, bracing himself.

‘Oh,’ she says after a few moments, and it hurts, that she thinks less of him now. But he wouldn’t lie to her – has never lied to her, not really. ‘I…’ He thinks she doesn’t know what to say at this revelation – what does one say? – so he speaks again.

‘Well, it’s never been officially tested, and my birth certificate certainly has Lamb on it, but it was a source of some tension between my parents.’

‘I don’t know what to say,’ she admits quietly after a moment, and he gives her a small smile.

‘I’m sorry,’ he says just as quietly, and he is. He’s sorry that she will see him as less now, that he’s put a hole in her image of him.

‘No,’ she says quickly. ‘I’m not…I just…’

He smiles a little, gives a bit of a huff, and she stares back at him. ‘My parents’ marriage was not an entirely happy one. My father was away a lot, and my mother…well, I think she was lonely,’ he says carefully, watching her enraptured face. He stares back at the painting. ‘They had been married for almost ten years before I came along. My mother…the strain of a childless marriage when a child is so desperately desired…’ he says, trailing off. ‘I think he forgave her, in the end.’

She stares at him, her face hardening just a little before she flicks her head away.
‘I don’t…’ she starts before trailing off, shaking her head a little. ‘It seems such a huge thing to forgive,’ she says quietly, after a long moment.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ he agrees. He knows. Oh, he knows. ‘He discovered officially much later — after Frederick was born — that he couldn’t have children.’

He waits as the weight of his words settle on her. He is not ashamed of his mother, and truly, he has no right at all to judge. The way he’d raged at her when he’d found out — worked it out for himself — and her attempts at explaining the depths of her deception. *If only you had stopped asking questions, William,* she had cried. He had countered that he deserved the truth.

If only you had stopped asking questions, William, she had cried. He had countered that he deserved the truth.

He’ll never forget the way she had quietly but firmly asked whether the truth was worth it. After all these years, he’s still not sure he has an answer for her.

‘But he forgave her anyway,’ she breathes, her eyes wide, and he nods.

He rarely tells her things, but it’s so important that she understand this — not for him, but for the rest of her life. Hatred and resentment only make a person bitter, and he desperately doesn’t want that for her. ‘Forgiveness is crucial in any relationship — if you consider that relationship worth saving,’ he says deliberately, forcing himself to meet her eyes, and she lets out a breath before nodding. He says nothing for a while, allowing her to think on everything, the weight of this new information, and letting his own mind wander a little.

And when she speaks again, her voice just a whisper, his heart tightens in his chest, and oh, when did she become so perceptive, his beautiful Queen? ‘And so you forgave your own wife.’

He blinks a few times. ‘I suppose,’ he says, nodding, and she’s staring at him with her wide blue eyes, and he’s done for now, he thinks. He can’t handle this level of emotion for much longer, not now. He’s been so focused on loving her quietly, just day-to-day enjoyment of her company, basking in her light from afar, that this foray into closeness almost burns. ‘Although, I think my mother was definitely more subtle.’

She lets out an incredulous huff, and he smiles wanly. But she’s looking between him and the painting, and he thinks she can see it, the resemblance, and he just waits.

‘Do you really think he is your father?’ she asks quietly, and he can hear that she’s trying to be gentle with her questions, but that she really wants to understand.

‘Do you see the resemblance?’ he asks, waving at the portrait, and she looks back up at it.

‘I think you look very much like him,’ she says quietly, and he smiles. ‘You have the same eyes,’ she says softly, turning to look at him, and he takes in a breath at the depth of her gaze.

‘Wait till you see a photo of him, ma’am,’ he says with a small, wry smile. ‘You may also have noticed how similar Emily and I are,’ he says, his lips twisting, and when her eyes widen a little and her mouth drops open before clamping shut again, he thinks she understand what he means.

She’s quiet for a long moment before she speaks again, her voice soft. ‘I wish I knew my father.’ She turns to look at him, and he gives her a small, sympathetic smile.

‘Of course.’

She looks back at the painting. ‘Mama refuses to speak of him. I learned long ago not to ask.’

He keeps his face as neutral as he can; there are any number of reasons why the Duchess would
refuse to speak of the Duke, her dead husband and her daughter’s father, although he’s almost entirely sure Conroy is a significant part of the reason. It would not do for the young Princess to enquire about her immediate family too closely, the father that had passed down a birthright, and risk any hold he had over her. The animosity that had existed between the Duchess and the King had been one of the monarchy’s worst-kept secrets.

A small, softer part of him whispers that perhaps it’s for the same reason that he still doesn’t particularly enjoy speaking of Caro.

‘Perhaps one day you will be able to ask why,’ he says gently, and she looks at him thoughtfully before nodding slowly, the understanding slowly dawning on her face: *when Conroy is gone.*

‘Maybe,’ she says.

There are so many ways she could learn about her father – old news reports, despatches from his days in the Army, articles in various magazines or books. But it would be a poor substitute for those personal stories from the one person left who would have the most personal stories of them all. But if she can’t ask her mother, then perhaps she do the next best thing.

‘There are many who knew him, ma’am. Perhaps you could ask others what they remember. I believe the Prime Minister might be able to suggest some among his Army colleagues who may be able to help. And there’s always the rest of the aristocracy – perhaps you could ask Anna if her family knew him, or perhaps Walter’s family. Even George Sutherland’s family.’

She nods, her face thoughtful, before sucking in a breath and levelling her gaze at him. ‘We make a fine pair, Lord M,’ she tells him, and he gives her a warm smile, the tightness in his chest slowly starting to leech away.

‘That we do, ma’am.’

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‘Why did you forgive Wellington?’ she asks tentatively a little later when they’re sitting on her balcony.

She’d insisted that he stay for tea; she’d argued that it wasn’t really *that* late, and that she’d more than happily let him turn up late the next day. He’d just smiled and nodded; he’d been anticipating this. She’d been quieter than usual for what little time they’d had left at the gallery, and he’d understood why. It had been a big evening; that was quite the bombshell he’d dropped, and completely unannounced. He’d wondered which direction the questions would go; whether she’d be more interested in him and his life, or more the concepts and ideas. He’d been a little surprised by her reference to her own father – she never speaks of the man – although, in hindsight, he knows he probably shouldn’t have been.

‘I don’t think he deserved it,’ she adds, a hard edge to her still-nervous voice.

‘Forgiveness is rarely deserved, ma’am,’ he says. She says nothing, and he wonders if she’s ever had to genuinely ask for forgiveness for anything. ‘I’m not sure I have forgiven him,’ he admits, and when he looks at her, she looks confused.

Wellington had never apologised for what he’d done; he’d always maintained that Caro had told him they were separated, and thus, in his mind, he’d done nothing wrong. He hadn’t wanted to believe him – not sure he ever will believe him; Wellington’s indiscretions were well known in the right
circles – but he knows Caro would have said anything to get her way. ‘It’s complicated,’ he says finally. ‘But I have let it go, ma’am. It wasn’t worth holding on to, especially not now,’ he adds, and she nods. ‘Then I suppose I have forgiven him, actually,’ he says eventually, turning to look at her, and he realises that he has – he wouldn’t be standing here now if he hadn’t, he thinks. ‘I had to, I think, if I wanted to be able to work with him.’

She cringes slightly, and he knows what she’s thinking. There is nothing she could have done differently. She couldn’t have been expected to know about his history with Wellington, especially not fresh out of Kensington; the list of people who knew was already extremely short. Although, he is still surprised he didn’t read about it in the papers during his absence.

‘I had to decide what was more important,’ he says slowly, just realising it for himself, and she stares at him for a moment, her mouth curling into a little frown that he knows is just emotion. ‘Time helps,’ he adds, and she nods. ‘I’ve had a good decade to get over that one.’

But he thinks he knows what she’s thinking, and the hurt is still far too fresh. They haven’t even begun to get over it, and can’t – not until Conroy is well and truly gone, and even then, it’ll depend a lot on the Duchess.

He prays she’s strong enough to forgive her daughter.
Chapter 55

Chapter Summary

And if I've built this fortress around your heart,
Encircled you in trenches and barbed wire,
Then let me build a bridge, for I cannot fill the chasm,
And let me set the battlements on fire

This prison has now become your home,
A sentence you seem prepared to pay

- *Fortress Around Your Heart*, Sting

‘How was your lunch yesterday, Mama?’

‘It was fine, thank you.’

‘Have the curtains been fixed in your sitting room?’

Her mother turns to look at her across the leather car seat. ‘If you came to visit, you would know, Drina.’

She knew it would be like this. She had known it when she’d sent her mother the message, that no matter how nice she was, how polite, how carefully she spoke, her mother had not and would not change. Breathe.

‘To what do I owe the pleasure of this invitation, Drina?’ her mother suddenly asks, and she turns to look at her. ‘Is there some reason I am momentarily freed from my banishment to a corner of the palace, and suddenly permitted to see my own daughter?’

The irritation curls inside of her, but she looks away as she sucks in a breath and lets it out. ‘I thought you might enjoy the tennis, Mama. It’s the Women’s Final.’

‘Surely you have better things to be doing as Queen than watching the tennis.’

‘It’s Wimbledon, Mama, and I’m their patron. As Queen it’s important that I support events like this – British institutions.’

‘I never see you anymore, Drina,’ her mother almost chastises, and she can feel herself on edge, bracing for whatever was coming.

‘I’m busy with my duties as Queen, Mama.’

‘I see,’ she says, and Victoria frowns. ‘You have time for helicopter rides over the Thames, but no time for your Mama.’

She lets out a huff, swallowing each fiery retort that surfaces about Sir John and photos and destroyed trust and emotional manipulation.
'Perhaps if you had Sir John as your Private Secretary, he would do a better job of arranging your schedule,' her mother adds, her voice smug, and she can’t get angry, she can’t, she can’t say anything because she knows she’ll say something she shouldn’t and she will not spoil their plans by taking the bait left by her mother.

'I wouldn’t wish to deprive you of your Private Secretary, Mama. He does such a good job for you,’ she adds quietly.

'Not as good as your Lord M, apparently,’ her mother shoots back, and breathe.

'No,’ she agrees rather viciously, shaking her head, just as the car stops and the door opens, and she gets out before her mother can say another word.

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She can’t believe she let him talk her into this.

She can’t kill her mother in front of fifteen thousand people and half the world’s television sets at Wimbledon. She can’t even get angry at her.

Emma had pointed out that her mother was really the only family she had left here in England, and she’d eyed him grumpily when he’d mentioned in his soft, gentle way that perhaps it would be nice for her mother to experience some of the fun and exciting things she was – things like the Wimbledon Women’s Final. When he’d asked a few minutes later how many friends the Duchess had, she’d had to bite down on the unkind retort that she didn’t particularly care because she’d never really been allowed friends as a child and so now her Mother knew how it felt and she only had friends now anyway because of him – because it truly was mostly because of him that she had friends to go to the tennis with today, and Sir John is not Lord M.

Well, he was similar in one way – Lord M knew what buttons to push and how to push them and they both knew it. Only, he used his guilt-trips for good.

Objectively, she knows both he and Emma have a point but… It still hurts.

She should try.

It’s only one afternoon, she tells herself. Surely, surely she can survive one afternoon with her mother and three of her friends.

Surely.

She takes heart from the thought that Lord M had suggested it; if he thought it dangerous, he wouldn’t have suggested it himself. He wouldn’t even be there when she returned to hear about it, she thinks a little wryly; it was a Saturday, so she’d have to wait until Monday morning. Perhaps a well-timed text message would suffice.

She waves happily to the crowd as they applaud her entrance; Lord M and Charlotte had both warned her that her arrival would be displayed on the screen and that she’d have to wave, and despite being Queen and performing her duties for the public for over two years now, she’s vaguely nervous when all eyes are so clearly on her. It’s easy to hide when you have something to focus on – something more than not tripping down the steep stairs in heels.
But the applause had felt so warm and pleased to see her that her smile had been genuine, and the butterflies in her stomach had dispelled somewhat.

She puts herself next to her mother in the seating, Anna on her mother’s other side, and Amalie between her and Harriet at the end. It was a warm day, even for July – she’s pleased she took Harriet’s advice and wore the white flowery sleeveless sundress she’d suggested – so she smiles gratefully at Harriet when she appears a few minutes later with a Pimm’s for everyone.

‘I don’t understand why they have to make such noises,’ her mother says after the first rally, as she sips on the ice-cold drink. ‘They sound so…masculine.’

‘No, Mama, it’s about strength and intimidation,’ she says.

‘It sounds terrible. I had forgotten. Are they going to do it the entire match?’

‘Yes, Mama.’ The Duchess pulls a face and Victoria resists the urge to drop her head into her hands.

‘Be cool, ma’am,’ Amalie says to the left of her. ‘Cameras.’

Victoria’s eyes shoot up to the screen at the end; there she is, her face a good six feet tall on the screen, Amalie and Harriet next to her. She forces herself to smile for the camera before refocusing on the match in front of her for a few seconds before turning her head towards Amalie and Harriet, blinking.

‘Do you think they have lip readers at the tennis?’ she asks with a small smile on her face, and Amalie’s eyes widen slightly.

‘I don’t remember ever hearing anything in coverage before,’ Harriet says, frowning, looking for all the world like she does this every day, Victoria thinks.

_She_ does this every day and she’s struggling. Meeting people was one thing; cameras and your face on a twenty-foot screen were another thing _entirely._

‘Maybe. They’ll certainly study it and comment on anything vaguely interesting later,’ Harriet adds, her hand rubbing at her nose in what Victoria assumes is an attempt to cover her mouth.

‘Are they gone yet?’

‘Nope,’ Amalie mutters, barely moving her mouth, and she looks so tense that Victoria can’t help the bubble of laughter that erupts from her chest. She can see Amalie then desperately trying to keep the smile off her own face, and it makes her want to giggle even more. But she’s _the Queen_, she can’t _giggle_ on national television, so she sucks in a deep breath and looks at Harriet who has plastered an overly calm, serene look on her face, and Victoria nearly loses it.

‘Oh, Drina! You’re on the big screen,’ her mother says at her side, and she flips her head around.

‘So are you now, Mama,’ she says, looking up and smiling, and her mother grips her daughter’s arm where it lies in her lap.

‘Oh,’ she says, clearly biting down on what else she was going to say and smiling and waving like some kind of demented doll, and oh, goodness, this was a _terrible_ idea.

She hears Amalie and Harriet snort with laughter next to her, and she can feel her blood pressure rising and she has no idea what to do.
‘You shouldn’t giggle, Drina,’ her mother says, frowning, when the screen has changed. ‘It’s so unbecoming for a Queen. You must be more dignified.’

She’s just about to reply that she knows, that she wasn’t giggling, that she’s allowed to laugh with her friends, and her cheeks are hot and--

‘Duchess,’ Anna says from her position next to Mama. ‘I hear you are to be the patron of the Edinburgh International Festival next year.’

‘Oh, yes,’ the Duchess replies in surprise, turning to Anna and oh, thank goodness.

‘That’s wonderful. And so important to Edinburgh,’ Anna says. ‘It’s on in August each year, ma’am,’ Anna tells Victoria, leaning forward slightly. ‘I saw the Budapest Festival Orchestra earlier this year – they’re due to play at this year’s festival. Just outstanding.’

‘We haven’t been to Scotland before,’ the Duchess says, glancing at Victoria, and Anna’s face lights up, and Victoria lets out a breath as Anna takes over.

She turns back to Amalie and Harriet both of whom are looking a little shamefaced, and she shakes her head at both of them as they both start giggling again.

‘For that, I’m putting her in between you two in the second set,’ she mutters, and they laugh even harder. She can’t help but smile with them.

As she watches the next few rallies in peace, she thinks the Duke of Wellington’s ego is going to inflate to epic proportions if she actually tells him, but she cannot deny that Anna Scott is a godsend. Apart from everything else she’s done, how she’s been so wonderful at every event, all sensible and reliable and eventually just comfortable, today alone deserves all her thanks.

‘Thank you,’ she says quietly to Anna later as they’re moving around a little in the break. ‘For distracting Mama before. She…’ she starts, trailing off and grimacing. How do you describe Mama? she wonders.

Anna smiles and shakes her head. ‘That’s what I’m here for, ma’am,’ she says matter-of-factly, and Victoria smiles gratefully back at her. ‘She reminds me of my mother-in-law,’ she adds thoughtfully. ‘Product of a different era.’

‘Yes,’ Victoria says, nodding her head emphatically. Godsend. ‘Completely.’

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She makes good on her threat in the second set, putting herself between Anna and Amalie, with Mama and Harriet at the end.

‘You used to play tennis, Drina, but you stopped rather suddenly,’ the Duchess comments, leaning forward. ‘Do you remember why?’

The memories come flooding back – the hurt, the way she’d just shut down – and she stares at her mother before answering. ‘You told me I wasn’t good enough to continue once I’d learned the basics. Sir John said it was a waste of money.’
‘Oh,’ the Duchess replies, and this was a terrible, terrible idea. ‘Yes, of course,’ she agrees, because of course he was right. Sir John was always right.

It hadn’t mattered that she’d loved learning how to play, loved racing around the court, hitting the ball as hard as she could, the freedom of being outside and away from her mother for a couple of hours every few days…

‘I never quite got the hang of tennis,’ Harriet says quickly. ‘I was too tall. Too gangly. I couldn’t hit the ball hard enough.’

‘I never played,’ Amalie adds. ‘Would’ve been cool, but I was more into basketball.’

‘Oh, those sisters are so good,’ the Duchess adds, and Victoria blinks at her. ‘What are their names? They’re odd names.’

‘Venus and Serena Williams,’ Amalie says from in between them, and Victoria purses her lips.

‘Oh yes! That’s them. So successful. But so loud.’

‘Mama,’ Victoria growls, and the Duchess looks confused.

‘They are! They’re very good, though. Very talented. Their mother is their manager, Drina,’ her mother says knowingly. ‘So successful.’

Victoria blinks and Amalie lets out a low breath and she thinks maybe she shouldn’t have put her new friend in between her and her mother, no matter how much she deserved it.

‘Yes, she is, Mama.’

***

It’s the third set – because of course – and she thinks that she might just survive. Maybe.

She’s taken pity on her friends and placed herself next to her mother who is sitting at the end of the row, and she lets out a sigh.

‘I’m surprised you didn’t invite your Lord M, Drina,’ Mama says quietly, and her head flicks around, but her mother is watching the match.

‘Of course not, Mama,’ she lies as they applaud. ‘Besides, Lord M doesn’t find tennis all that interesting.’

‘I see. Sir John—’ she starts, and Victoria can’t do this today.

‘Mama!’ she growls through her teeth, and her mother stops and stares at her. ‘Do you think—’ She bites down on her tongue. No, her mother didn’t think. That was the problem. She didn’t know. She lets out a small sigh. ‘I didn’t invite Sir John, Mama. I invited you,’ she says quietly, and watches as her mother’s face softens after a moment. She turns away, looking down at the court, and Victoria closes her eyes momentarily. She’s tried so hard all afternoon to be nice to her mother, to include her, to go for more than ten minutes at a time without getting angry or shouting. But now…

But then her mother is picking up her hand from her lap and holding it tightly in her own, and she
turns to look at her, but the Duchess is just looking out at the court. Her mother’s hand is cool from her second drink, and soft, just like she remembers. She can’t remember the last time she did this – just held her hand.

She’d spent so much of her childhood holding her mother’s hand as she walked around outside, visited her Uncle, walked through the gardens at Kensington. But since she’d become Queen, she’d barely spoken to her mother, let alone held hands with her.

She’s not sure how she feels about the whole thing, but she thinks that maybe her mother is trying, so she squeezes her mother’s hand. The gentle squeeze she feels in reply makes her sigh.

When she looks up, she can see herself reflected on the big screen, her mother’s hand holding hers, and she lets out another small sigh, and plasters a small smile on her face.

At least Lord M would be happy, she thinks.

***

‘I’m sorry,’ she says to Amalie, deliberately dropping back behind where her mother was talking with Anna and Harriet on their way to the car. ‘Mama can be so embarrassing.’

Amalie shrugs. ‘It’s fine, ma’am. So’s mine,’ she says, and Victoria frowns a little at her. ‘All mothers are embarrassing every now and then. Especially when it’s something new and you have friends around.’

‘She’s just so…’

‘Old?’ Amalie supplies.

‘Yes!’ she agrees, thinking back to a conversation with Anna only a little while earlier.

Amalie smiles. ‘I thought she was alright, ma’am,’ she says. ‘You should meet mine. Wait, no, that’s never happening.’

‘Why not?’

‘She doesn’t love the monarchy, ma’am,’ Amalie says haltingly, grimacing, and Victoria lets out a little breath.

‘Oh.’

‘Embarrassing,’ Amalie says with a knowing nod. ‘Sorry.’

‘No, it’s fine,’ she says. ‘It doesn’t matter to me.’ It doesn’t, not really. Amalie was her friend; what her mother believed didn’t really matter. ‘Mothers can be embarrassing,’ she says, smiling and nodding, and Amalie smiles back.

***
The short car ride from the tennis centre to the Palace is quiet. Her mother has been quiet since the last set, just applauding and cheering at the right moments, pointing out the occasional success to her daughter, but Victoria knows better. She’s subdued, brooding.

She’s so tired of this, so tired of bracing herself for her mother’s words whenever she sees her. She’s too tired today to care. So she sits in the car, watching the world go by in silence, just waiting for whatever insults would be flung her way.

Her mother speaks as they walk into the Palace.

‘I had a lovely afternoon, Drina,’ she says softly, stopping at the end of the hallway. ‘Thank you for inviting me.’

She waits, waits for the inevitable barb, the comment that is a criticism wrapped up in advice, but it doesn’t come. ‘You’re welcome, Mama,’ she says eventually, but her mother doesn’t move, and she waits.

‘Your Papa took me to Wimbledon the year before you were born,’ she says suddenly, her voice softer than Victoria’s heard it in years, and everything stops.

*Papa.*

‘He enjoyed the tennis. It surprised me at first, given that he was in the Army. I had assumed that he would consider tennis too feminine. But he enjoyed the strategy.’ She smiles sadly and looks down at her hands. ‘We were supposed to go the year after you were born…until he became unwell…’ she trails off.

‘Do you miss him?’ The question is out of her mouth before she can stop herself and she holds her breath as she watches the emotions play across her mother’s face, so many different emotions that she can’t keep up, before she settles on a calm half-smile.

‘Of course, Drina. He was my husband.’

This is her chance, she thinks. *This is what he meant. I should ask.*

‘Will you tell me more about Papa?’ she asks quietly. ‘One day?’ She swallows against the lump that’s suddenly appeared in her throat, and when she speaks, her voice is barely more than a hoarse whisper. ‘I would like to hear about him.’

‘If you’d like,’ her mother replies after a few moments. ‘You will have to visit me,’ she adds, and Victoria feels the pull of pain, how *unfair* it was that she should hold this – her past, her *Papa* – from her.

But she nods dumbly, and her mother gives her another small smile before turning and walking away.

It’s later, when she’s lying in bed that she realises that this is another part of her life that has been hidden – stolen – from her by Sir John. He’s always encouraged the barrier between them, played on her mother’s fears and insecurities, desperate to hold on to his own power over both of them. Divide and conquer, she realises, and the thought makes her burn with anger.

The knowledge that her mother allowed it, either didn’t see it for what it was or simply chose Sir John over her own daughter, makes her eyes sting with fresh tears.

But none of this will matter soon, she thinks with a vicious sense of satisfaction – soon Sir John will
be gone and they will be free and maybe, just maybe her mother will be different without Sir John’s cruelty and unkind words.

She prays that Mr Harper can find what he needs, and soon.

***

You didn’t tell me the trophies were that heavy.

He lets out a huff of amusement before making a mental note to remind any other event organisers that their Queen really was a rather petite five-foot-two.

I’m sorry, ma’am. I wasn’t aware.

He thinks as he types that he knows what she wants, and he pauses for a moment before deciding to humour her.

Who was he kidding? She would know full well that he’d have been watching.

You seemed to manage quite well. Very regal. I couldn’t tell.

Thank you.

He can almost see the smug smile, and he can feel the tug of a smile on his own face. He wonders how it all went; she looked lovely on the television – all youthful beauty and elegance in her white flowery dress and heels – but she was getting better at hiding her emotions from her people, better at allowing herself to be distracted from the things that would make her unhappy.

She couldn’t hide from him, but even he struggled with a television between them.

Did you enjoy the day?

Mostly. I’m quite proud of myself.

He waits; when there’s no reply forthcoming, he takes the bait again.

Oh?

My mother has returned to the palace unscathed. And none the wiser.

He snorts. Fair enough, he thinks, at the tiny twinge of guilt in his stomach. Very impressive, ma’am. I’m so proud.

He smiles at the little emoji that’s poking its tongue out at him she sends in reply.
Chapter 56

Chapter Summary

This is a man who thinks with his heart
His heart is not always wise
This is a man who stumbles and falls
But this is a man who tries
This is a man you'll forgive and forgive
And help protect, as long as you live

You'll always go along
Defend him where he's wrong
And tell him, when he's strong
He is wonderful

- *Something Wonderful*, Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein II

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry for the delay. Work is eating me alive, and will continue to do so until early July, so posting may be a little sporadic until then.

Note #1: A part of this chapter refers to the last part of the [Augustus chapter (Chapter 46)](#) - you might like to do a quick reread if you like those kinds of references. :)

Note #2: The original George Sutherland-Leveson-Gower, 2nd Duke of Sutherland was one of the trustees of the British Museum from 1841 through to his death in 1861.

I know some of you were looking forward to the British Museum visit, so I hope you enjoy it!

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*End of July*

When he tells her that they’re leaving at six and that she needs to wear comfortable shoes, she looks thrilled and he can’t help the way his mouth twists into a smile.

‘Where are we going?’ she asks, and he shakes his head.

‘Surprise.’

She stares out the window as they travel, and her excitement is infectious. He knows she’s trying to guess from the landmarks and the general direction, but he doesn’t think she’ll figure it out. The building wasn’t really that obvious - he’d be surprised if she’s even seen it before. It’s well back from
the main street, and it wasn’t particularly well signed for one of the most visited places in London.

‘I hope you’ll enjoy it, ma’am,’ he says a little nervously. The last surprise had been the Ballet for her birthday; he doesn’t think this will quite compare.

‘I’m sure I will, Lord M,’ she tells him, like it was obvious, and he marvels a little at how complete her faith is in him.

The crowds are long gone by the time they get there, and when she sees the sign as they pull in, she lets out an excited laugh before turning and grinning at him. He smiles back before getting out of the car to greet a waiting George Sutherland. ‘Welcome to the British Museum, ma’am,’ George says, and she smiles at him. ‘William says you’ve never been.’

‘No,’ she says, shaking her head.

‘Well, I hope you enjoy it, ma’am,’ he says, leading them inside.

He watches her marvel at the brightness of the foyer, craning her neck to stare up at the glass ceiling.

‘Three thousand, three hundred and twelve panes of glass,’ George says. ‘Hell of a cleaning bill.’

‘I can sympathise,’ she mutters.

‘The museum is the world’s oldest national public museum,’ George says, pausing in front of the gift shop. ‘It was founded in 1753, which makes it older than the United States,’ he says, and she smiles. ‘When Sir Hans Sloane first envisioned the museum, he needed a venue, and Buckingham House was one of the locations considered,’ he says with a wry smile, and her eyes widen. ‘Luckily for you, ma’am, the trustees at the time chose the current site, Montague House, instead.’

‘Yes, luckily,’ she laughs.

‘The museum is free to the public, has its own tube station, and is officially the United Kingdom’s most visited attraction. Sorry,’ he jokes, and she shakes her head.

‘Wow.’

‘The museum will stay open for as long as you like, ma’am,’ George says, and her eyes widen. ‘A few members of our security team were more than happy to stay behind so you could wander the halls in peace.’

Her face softens. ‘How kind of them,’ she says.

‘You’re quite popular, ma’am,’ George says with a knowing look, and she blushes a little. ‘Now, I’m happy to show you around, ma’am, but I’m not really an expert and to be honest, the audio guide really is quite brilliant for the key pieces. I thought perhaps it would be best to allow you to wander through for yourself this first visit, and then we could arrange for one of the curators to take you through any of the rooms you were particularly interested in at another time,’ he says, handing her one of the little black boxes and a map. ‘And William has said that he’s going to accompany you.’ She turns and shoots him a grin, and he smiles back at her.

‘Thank you, George,’ she says sincerely. ‘I really appreciate all your time and effort.’

‘You’re most welcome, ma’am.’

When George is gone, she opens the map and her mouth drops a little. She looks up at him in
concern. ‘There’s over a hundred rooms, Lord M. I’m never going to be able to see it all tonight,’ she says, and he shakes his head.

‘No, ma’am. But I’m sure George would be happy to arrange another visit,’ he says, and she nods.

‘Where do you think we should start?’ she asks, scanning the map before looking around.

‘With one of the most famous pieces in the museum, ma’am,’ he says.

She stands in front of the Rosetta Stone and blinks. ‘Wow,’ she mutters, leaning in to peer at the inscription and listening to the audio guide. ‘I can’t believe this is thousands of years old,’ she mumbles, and he blinks. ‘It’s in such good condition.’

‘Yes, the sand in Egypt is quite good at preservation, and stone is remarkably durable,’ he says, frowning as a thought hits him. ‘Ma’am, have you been to a museum before?’ he asks after a few moments, and she looks at him thoughtfully before shaking her head.

‘Not really. I remember Uncle Leopold telling me that some of the paintings in the Duke of Coburg’s palace were over three hundred years old, but that doesn’t really count.’

Ah. Well, he was in for a long night. He finds that he doesn’t mind at all.

***

They’ve made it through a good portion of the ancient history when he can see she’s fading. It’s late, and she’s listened to practically everything she can in the audio guide, and he can see she’s desperate to keep going, to see everything she can possibly see, and her excitement has been infectious. He loves the museum, always has, but seeing it with her, with her wide-eyed wonder and excitement, has been fun.

‘Wow,’ she breathes, as she walks into the next room, and he thinks he hasn’t heard the same expression repeated so often in such a short space of time since his son. She stands in the middle of the room, turning and taking it all in – the grey-brown walls, the square marble sculptures that have been arranged to form a long line around the edge of the room. ‘What are these?’ she asks, and he purses his lips.

‘A diplomatic nightmare,’ he mutters before he can stop himself, and she turns to face him, puzzled. ‘They’re the Parthenon Marbles, ma’am. Better known as the Elgin Marbles, after the man who chiselled them off the top of the Parthenon in Athens and sold them to the museum around two hundred years ago.’

‘Oh.’ She looks back at the sculptures, walking over to examine one a little more closely. ‘There’s so many of them. The Parthenon must be huge,’ she adds, turning to look at him, eyes wide.

‘Oh yes. This is a little over half – the other half are in the Acropolis museum in Athens.’ He watches as she walks around to read the little sign in the middle of the room; the carefully-worded treatise on why the British Museum should be lauded for its efforts in preserving Greek history for humanity, of their shared responsibility as nations to preserve and educate. She turns to face him, frowning.

‘Why are they a nightmare?’ she asks, and he lets out a sigh. Was there nothing in his sordid life she
wouldn’t uncover with her infernal curiosity, and his inability to keep his mouth shut?

One day, he thinks, he’s going to tell her something, something inconsequential and insignificant, and it’s going to be the final straw and her opinion of him is going to sour. She’ll realise he’s not as wonderful as she seems to think he is, her Lord M. It will come, he knows. He wonders if he’ll see it in her eyes, the moment that her opinion of him starts to shift.

He wonders if it already has, and he’s missed it.

‘Elgin took the marbles when Greece was ruled by the then-Ottoman Empire – with the permission of the Ottomans at the time, who were an invading force – and the Greek government has been trying to reclaim them for almost as long as we’ve had them. Many believe that he stole them, and that they should be returned to Greece.’ She frowns, thinking over his words. ‘It’s complicated,’ he admits. ‘But the popular vote is that the marbles be returned.’

‘Why aren’t they?’

And isn’t that the million-dollar question, he thinks. ‘There are many reasons, but I think the primary concern is that once you start handing things back, ma’am, you may not be able to stop.’

She nods slowly. ‘I think we should give them back,’ she says eventually. ‘They’re not ours. And if they can take care of them, then they don’t really belong to us.’

‘The Museum would argue that they belong to humanity and should be shared,’ he says. ‘And the Greek economy is anything but sound; many wonder how they can afford to keep the lights on in their new Museum, let alone pay for expensive preservation work,’ he points out, and she purses her lips thoughtfully. ‘I agree with you, ma’am,’ he says with a smile. ‘But nothing is ever quite that simple.’

‘It should be,’ she says.

‘Yes,’ he agrees. But he should tell her, lest she go looking. ‘It became an issue again when I was Prime Minister, only very briefly and only because of the person leading the charge,’ he says, glancing at his feet before back at her. She frowns. ‘Byron.’

Her mouth drops open a little before it settles into something he thinks like disapproval. ‘What would he know? He’s a singer,’ she mutters disdainfully, and he lets out a huff.

‘I agree, ma’am, but he was very popular and you know the power of celebrity.’

‘Yes,’ she agrees, staring around at the marbles, before looking back at him. ‘Did he…was he just trying to be unkind?’ she asks eventually, and he knows what she’s asking. He frowns and shrugs.

‘Probably. He’s always been one of those activist-types,’ he says. ‘He was really very passionate about this. And I’d say he was likely betting on the fact that many in my party did not support his cause.’

Her mouth drops open a little before she clamps it shut again, and he can see the anger in the shape of her mouth, the furrow in her brow. He doesn’t tell her that he still doesn’t know why Byron had been so determined to give him such grief over this; Byron had been the one who’d sent Caro packing, not the other way around.

‘But that was a long time ago, ma’am,’ he says, smiling at her before looking at his watch. ‘It’s after eleven, ma’am,’ he says, and she frowns almost sulkily before letting out a sigh.
‘I suppose I should let their security go home,’ she says a little guiltily a moment later, and he nods.

‘I think they might appreciate it,’ he agrees. But they can’t leave just yet. ‘But there’s one more room I think you should see,’ he says, smirking at her, and her eyes narrow at his silliness.

He leads her back out into the Great Court and up a set of stairs and through a few rooms before he stops in a doorway, looking around, before he spots what he’s looking for. ‘I don’t think they have an actual guillotine, ma’am, even in the British Museum’s famously impressive collection, but they do have a print of one,’ he says, walking up to one of the glass cases on the wall, and he grins when she lets out a surprised laugh.

‘I suppose the gift shop is closed,’ she says after a moment of studying the print in front of her.

‘Oh yes. But I believe they have an online store,’ he says, and she grins at him. ‘I don’t think you’ll need a toy guillotine for your desk when I’m away,’ he says after a moment. ‘I think Sir Robert already feels like his head has been bitten off,’ he says wryly, and she looks up at him almost mutinously, almost opening her mouth to speak, but he watches the words die on her lips. She lets out a small sigh.

‘Maybe I was a little too harsh on Sir Robert,’ she says.

She looks up at him when he says nothing, so he shrugs. ‘I don’t know, ma’am,’ he says. ‘I wasn’t there.’

She purses her lips at him, and he merely plasters a serene look on his face, one that he knows drives her a little crazy, but also makes her laugh.

***

‘Was that you?’ Peel asks at his doorway the next afternoon. He looks up and blinks. ‘Why am I asking? Of course it was,’ the other man mutters to himself, shaking his head before turning and walking away.

He stares at the retreating figure, wondering what on earth was going on, when he remembers the events of the previous evening and grins to himself.

When he wanders back down the hallway later that afternoon, he feels the pull of a smile again. He’s proud of her, his beautiful Queen; apologies were terrifying, and some would argue unnecessary in this case. And so when he hands her a small gift-shop bag, she looks puzzled for a moment until she opens it, and he can’t help but chuckle at the way she bursts out laughing.

***

It’s all been whirring in the back of her mind, all of the things she’s discovered in the past weeks, and she just needs time to think. She lies on her back on her bed, her headphones playing something instrumental and soothing, and she closes her eyes.
Forgiveness is so complicated.

She’d found it almost easy to apologise to Sir Robert. Even the Duke of Wellington hadn’t been that hard, but then she’d had some experience at that. The first time had been horrifying; this time, not so much. Both had been willing to forgive her straight away, although she wonders if that’s a little due to her position; but then they didn’t have to forgive her, not really, and they’d both seemed genuine – Sir Robert, once he’d picked his jaw up from the floor, she thinks with a smirk. His face had been really very amusing.

She knows what he would have her do eventually, and the thought of forgiving her mother makes her stomach clench. The voices in her head scream no, that she doesn’t deserve it, that she hasn’t asked for it. That she won’t appreciate it if it’s given.

Forgiveness is crucial if the relationship is worth saving.

Even Harriet has almost obliquely mentioned letting some of her anger towards her mother go eventually, in a roundabout way – for her own sanity – and she knows that like him, her friend just wants the best for her.

It’s there, in the far distance, that place where she forgives her mother, but it’s so far away that she doesn’t even really know what it looks like.

She doesn’t even entertain the idea of forgiving Sir John. He would never, ever receive forgiveness from her, even if he begged.

Lord M had said that time had made a difference; that ten years had passed and he’d finally forgiven the Duke for that horrible, terrible thing he’d done. A small voice tells her that he’s only forgiven him because of her, and she’s not entirely sure what to make of that.

He’s sacrificed so much for her, she thinks, and something twists in her chest. She wonders how willingly it had been. Did he really want to forgive Wellington, or had he done it because he’d felt obligated, like he had to, knowing that if he didn’t, none of this would have worked?

Her mind drifts back through the past weeks, and oh, she’s been so selfish.

He’d asked for her forgiveness when he’d returned, for hurting her by leaving. He’d overreacted, he’d said, and she’d almost dismissed his apology outright as ridiculous, except for the look on his face. He’d genuinely believed that he’d made the wrong decision, looked so troubled, so upset that she couldn’t help but try to make him feel better. She hadn’t been angry at him at all. She doesn’t think she could ever be angry with him, at least not for long – the thought is so alien to her that even when she’d been hurt by his refusal to come back, it had been more disappointment than anger. He had never intentionally hurt her, but he’d apologised anyway, and oh, she’s so selfish.

She’s thought about this before, about what he’s done for her, what she’s unintentionally required of him, and she’s never once apologised for it.

She’d been so wrapped up in getting him back, her Lord M, that she’d then never actually apologised for what she’d asked of him once she really knew. She’d been cruel in her ignorance, and yet once she’d known, once she’d used her knowledge for her own gain, she’d not even considered his feelings.

He’s happy to be back, she knows. But perhaps she hadn’t rescued him quite as much as she was focused on saving herself.
It’s a week later and he thinks that he should be warier of spending time at night with her. He’d read somewhere that people are more open at night time, more likely to be vulnerable and share themselves, and he knew from years of experience it was true. Night time was when his guard – and hers – were down. Night time was when things happened, tongues were loosened and conversations took place in the alluring safety of shadows and darkness.

He doesn’t regret telling her about his father, not now that it’s so clearly given her something else to ponder, another perspective to add to her growing collection. He knows he can trust her with this.

But then he does regret telling her – just a little. The strength of their friendship was perhaps not enough for such a weight. It may have been a little unkind, he thinks in hindsight.

She does need to know he’s not perfect, that the same rubbish that seemingly taints the entirety of the aristocracy taints him also. Despite their intent to mock, to poke and question, Wellington’s words, that she thinks him noble and perfect, sit restlessly at the back of his mind. All in all, better she find out from him than someone else.

Here he stands on another balcony on another summer’s evening, and he’s only here because she’s invited him for dinner, but the way she’d said it, wouldn’t quite meet his eye, made him think that she has some kind ulterior motive for this particular meal.

‘I was thinking about what you said about forgiveness last week,’ she says, at the end of the meal, and he looks at her. He knows this; she’d apologised to Sir Robert for her behaviour. ‘I think maybe I should ask for yours,’ she adds in a rush, and he blinks at her.

‘Mine? What on earth for?’

She bites her lip, sucking in a breath. ‘I realised that if I hadn’t said what I said about the Duke at the dinner, about him being a good PM for a Tory, none of that rubbish in May would have happened. They wouldn’t have said all those terrible things about you – and no one would have questioned your influence at all. You wouldn’t have felt like you had to leave.’

He resists the urge to shake his head at her. He doesn’t agree – Conroy would have had his day no matter what – but he thinks there’s something bigger here. ‘You’ve already apologised to Wellington for the quip, ma’am. And I don’t think you can really hold yourself entirely responsible for what Sir John does, or what the press publishes,’ he replies evenly.

She shakes her head. ‘Then when you were gone, all I could think about was how to convince you to return,’ she says. ‘I didn’t really stop to think about whether you actually wanted to return, until Harriet told me…’ she trails off. ‘Even if it wasn’t right…I’m sorry, Lord M. I should have respected your wishes and been less selfish about it all,’ she says deliberately, and he just stares at her, this beautiful woman sitting in front of him. This beautiful woman who had fought for him, and not just for herself, but for him.

She looks at him for a moment before looking away. ‘Thank you,’ he replies quietly, and she looks back at him, eyes wide, and so he gives her a small smile. ‘Although I don’t really think there’s anything to forgive.’

She smiles a little sadly at him. ‘I do.’

‘Then consider yourself forgiven, ma’am,’ he tells her simply, before leaning forward and taking a
sip from his wine glass before sucking in a breath. ‘I’ve also been thinking,’ he says, looking down at the glass in his hand. ‘I apologise for telling you about my family in such a way,’ he says quietly, and her head shoots up, her wide, serious eyes meeting his, and he looks away. ‘I didn’t intend to, but…’ He trails off. He doesn’t have an answer for that; not one he can tell her, anyway.

‘Oh, no,’ she says quickly, shaking her head, and he looks at her. ‘I like – I appreciate that you told me,’ she says in a small voice. ‘You know so much about me, Lord M,’ she says on a huff, before looking back up him, eyes stronger. ‘I like getting to know you better,’ she almost declares, and he nods.

‘Okay,’ he replies, and she nods once.

Maybe there’s hope for her mother yet, he thinks.
Chapter 57

Chapter Summary

Cause I'm so, I'm so in love with you
You know I can't control it, acting like such a fool
And I'm so, I'm so in love with you

- I'm so in love with you, Jill Andrews (feat. Seth Avett)

Early August

He hands her a plastic folder, and her eyes go wide as she opens it. She blinks up at him.

Britain’s Most Influential Women: Queen Victoria.

‘It’s on approval, ma’am, but assuming you approve, it’ll be the October cover of Vanity Fair magazine around the world.’

And her mouth drops open a little as she looks between him and the folder, eyes wide, and he’s a little confused. What did she think they would do? She was the Queen.

But her mouth opens and closes, and he can see her working it out, and then she’s looking up at him. ‘I’m going to be the cover,’ she says slowly, and he nods just as slowly.

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘Oh.’

He narrows his eyes a little. She really didn’t get it, he thinks. ‘Ma’am, you’re the Queen. You’re young and beautiful – exactly what Vanity Fair looks for in a cover anyway – and as the Queen you were always going to be the cover,’ he says slowly. ‘I didn’t realise I needed to say that,’ he says, more to himself, and he thinks that all of this so long ago would have been better handled by the Earl. Charlotte would have done a great job, he thinks. But needs must, and all in all, it had worked well.

But her face quirks just a fraction for just a moment, and he’s not sure why.

‘Do you think I’m beautiful?’ she asks – genuinely asks, he thinks – and oh, he should not have said that. He feels all the emotion she’s trying to hide in the perfunctory tone she puts on, and he knows that this will be one of those moments that define identity. He is more than aware of just how much weight she places on his words, but he’s also aware that they’re his words.

‘You know I do,’ he replies, his tone casual but his eyes not leaving hers. ‘And you know I’m not the only one, ma’am,’ he adds. ‘Or do you not remember Lord Grafton at the National Forest Lunch?’ he teases, and she flushes a little before glancing away. When he pulls a face, she shakes her head at him and chuckles, and he thinks he’s managed to deflect this for now. He hopes forever, but she was an elephant, his beautiful Queen – she never forgot anything.
He wonders momentarily if anyone close to her – her mother, Lehzen, her uncle – has ever told her to her face that she’s beautiful. Likely not, he thinks a little sourly.

‘Is it good?’ she asks, moving to sit on the lounge, and he feels his eyebrows rise as he sits beside her.

Good? She was gorgeous. Regal, elegant, stunning, incredible, but human – the warmth in her eyes, in her smile, had translated beautifully into the photos, and oh, he’d stared at that email for far longer than he’d care to admit before he’d forced himself to print it on the glossy paper he’d organised and take it straight to her.

‘Have a look,’ he says, as she looks up at him expectantly. ‘You’re the one who will approve it.’

‘Oh, Dash!’ she laughs when she opens to the first page, and he smiles – he knew she’d like that one. The little dog bounds around to her at the sound of his name. ‘Look! It’s you!’ she says, showing her dog who just barks happily at her. He makes a mental note to thank Amalie as he picks up the dog and holds him in his lap, stroking his silky fur absentmindedly. She’d kept her word, it would seem.

She lets out a humph. ‘This is exactly what I said,’ she mumbles. He leans over to see what she’s talking about, and she points at a section he’d read several times.

And for those of us waiting desperately for a royal wedding – the first in centuries for a reigning monarch – our time has not yet come. The Queen is adamant that she’s focused on her role as monarch for the foreseeable future; there is no Prince Consort in the wings just yet.

‘Oh - they did ask about you,’ she says suddenly, holding the folder to her chest, and his eyebrows rise slightly.

‘I noticed,’ he says slowly. ‘I’ve already read it, ma’am.’ And oh, hadn’t he breathed a sigh of relief as he’d reached the end of the proofs.

‘Oh,’ she says, flicking it open again. It takes her a minute to read through to the end of the article.

But the Queen’s hobbies are many and varied, and much of our day is spent discussing lighting, colouring and angles – one of her many birthday presents was a DSLR camera, and photography is clearly a passion, if only a new one…

The Queen is tight-lipped on several topics, most notably her relationship with the former Prime Minister and her current Private Secretary, Lord Melbourne, and understandably so, given the recent public discussion. But we’re graced with the presence of the man himself several times throughout the day; once with the Royal dog, Dash (who won everyone’s hearts), and once with much-appreciated coffee. It’s clear that the two are close – Lord Melbourne, our rather impressed photographer discovers,
is responsible for the camera. But even the Queen herself notes that she and her senior staff – all of whom are present on the day – are a tight-knit group. ‘They’re invaluable,’ she says. ‘Lord Melbourne is an essential part of that team.’ We press a little more, and she reveals little with her small, knowing smile. ‘They believe in the role of monarchy, in everything I am trying to do. They believe in me.’

After our day at Buckingham Palace, we do too.

She looks back up at him. ‘They wanted to know what made you such a good Private Secretary.’

He smiles a little; a nice, vague, leading question to get her talking down the path they wanted. It explained the answer she’d given – or what they’d printed of whatever her answer was. ‘Well, we knew they would ask something, ma’am,’ he says, because he suddenly finds he doesn’t want to know what she actually said. It’s too close; too vulnerable.

‘Don’t you want to know what else I said?’ she says, and he blinks.

No. ‘Only if you wish to tell me, ma’am,’ he says carefully.

‘I did say it was because you believed in me.’ Her voice is a little strained, a little rushed, and his face softens. ‘You’re patient, and kind, and you work so hard to help me be the best Queen I can be.’

Her answer has caught him off guard and he stares at her, this beautiful Queen who has captured his heart. ‘That’s very kind of you, ma’am,’ he says after a moment, giving her a small smile.

‘It’s true,’ she argues. ‘I wasn’t being polite; it’s the truth.’

‘Well, how could I not, ma’am?’ he says quietly after a moment, and she lets out a little huff of a breath, and he drops her gaze, looking down at where his fingers were mindlessly stroking the soft fur around Dash’s little head.

‘I think Sir John would not,’ she says darkly.

‘And I believe he would be the exception,’ he replies, looking seriously at her, and she lets out a sigh. ‘Are you happy with it, ma’am?’ he says, redirecting her, and she looks down at the photos in front of her.

‘I’m happy with the article,’ she says, and he nods.

‘I don’t think there’s much to change about that,’ he says. ‘I think it’s quite fair, all in all.’ She nods. ‘It’s more the photos.’

‘I think the photos turned out well,’ she says, a little unsure, and he blinks at her.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ is all he says because, really, he can’t tell her what he actually thinks. ‘They’re beautiful photos, ma’am,’ he says, when she looks at him, because he finds he can tell her when she’s looking at him like that.

She’s the first to drop her eyes.

‘I hardly think beauty should be a requirement of royalty,’ she scoffs, pointing to one of the pull quotes about the young Queen signifying a beautiful new beginning, and he lets out a laugh.

‘No ma’am. I doubt many of your ancestors would have qualified and that would be quite
unfortunate for you,’ he jokes, and she chuckles. ‘Maybe you should send a copy to Harriet,’ he says, and her eyes light up. ‘I’m sure she’s dying to see the finished product.’

‘Yes. She’d be so upset if I approved it without showing her first.’ She turns to face him and he speaks before she can ask.

‘It’s in your inbox,’ he tells her, and she grins at him.

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‘Did she show you the article?’ he asks the next morning, and Emma nods, smiling.

‘Stunning,’ she says, and he nods. ‘Good decision.’ He tilts his head in possible acceptance.

‘Maybe. We’ll see,’ he says, as he takes a sip of his coffee. ‘I’m going to wait until after it’s published and people have responded positively before I celebrate,’ he says, and Emma shakes her head at him. After everything, he was not taking anything for granted.

‘We were thinking about a day trip to Brocket,’ she says calmly, and he almost chokes on his coffee. He eyes her. ‘Why? I haven’t been out there in a long time,’ he warns. ‘Months. I don’t know what state it’s in.’

She narrows her eyes at him. ‘Liar. You were out there two months ago. While you were on holiday.’ He stares at her. ‘Emily was worried,’ she shrugs. ‘And has something happened to Ian that the gardens wouldn’t be ready for visitors?’

He lets out a sigh, eyeing her. Of all the places in England she could go, of course Emma would have to choose Brocket.

‘It wouldn’t be for a few weeks – we were thinking a Sunday. It’s an easy venue, given that it’s yours – no prep, minimal security. And it would make a nice day trip.’ She pauses. ‘The Duchess has nothing in her calendar as yet for that particular Sunday,’ she says, and he purses his lips. Of course, he thinks. ‘Surely there are other places.’

‘Harriet’s taking her to Cliveden next weekend. Oh, and you’re invited. We’re making a day of it.’ And this keeps getting better and better. So much for keeping a low profile. ‘Oh, am I?’

‘Yes. Why, are you busy?’ she fires back, and he shoots her a look. ‘She’s desperate to see Brocket, but she’d never ask. And it’s beautiful at this time of year.’

‘Oh, and where did she get this idea from?’

‘Where do you think?’ she asks incredulously, and he looks away. He knows exactly where she got it from; the conversation hadn’t been that long ago, but he hadn’t anticipated that they’d want to go so soon. He sighs. What can he say? He has no real grounds to refuse.

‘I suppose.’

‘You can show her the gardens,’ she says, and he shoots her another look before caving. He wasn’t
going to win this. He hated that she knew him that well.

‘I hadn’t been in months and the place needed tending,’ he says a little more harshly than he intends, and Emma just nods. ‘Fine. Give me the date and I’ll make sure Lewis knows you’re coming.’

‘We’re coming, William. You are coming.’

He lets out a sigh. ‘Yes, of course.’

‘I’ll make sure it goes in your calendar.’ He rolls his eyes before turning to walk away. ‘Why is it a problem?’ she calls, and he turns back to face her.

‘You know why.’

‘No, I really don’t.’ She sighs at his look. ‘We’ll take a bunch of people – Harriet has already advised Anna that she needs to be free that weekend, and we’ll come too. I’ll invite Charlotte, and Amalie if you like; they all get on well. If anyone gets wind of it, it’ll just look like a day trip with friends.’

He lets out a sigh. ‘I’m not so much concerned with what it looks like; I’m more concerned with what they’ll make it look like.’

‘No one is going to find out.’

‘We’d better hope not,’ he retorts, before turning on his heel and walking away.

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He knows he was too harsh on Emma, but she of all people should understand.

Seeing her at Brocket was going to be…well, a whole world of emotion that he does not want to examine too closely.

He wants to show her his childhood home, the beautiful, old house with its wild gardens; the river and the bridge and the grounds that went on for miles, filled with trees and happiness and freedom. He wants nothing more than to walk through the woods, the little forests at the edges of the estate, talking and laughing like they do here at the palace. He wants her to love it like he does.

She knew so much about him already; he’d always said he’d be honest with her, and honest he has been, and she’s been nothing but compassionate and kind about everything.

But it was like Mrs Melbourne all over again, and his reaction tells him that for all that he’s tried to calm his heart, to move out of her light just a little, he had failed, and failed dismally. His heart beat for her, and he’s beginning to think it always will.

But he had a matter of weeks to get himself together, to prepare himself. To shut down that little corner of his heart for a day.
Chapter 58

Chapter Summary

The burdens that you carry now
Are not of your creation
So let's not weep for their evil deeds
But for their lack of imagination
Today's the time for courage, babe
Tomorrow can be for forgiving

- Sweetheart Come, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Early August*

It would seem that the preview photo released in advance of the *Vanity Fair* article has only highlighted how much she’s grown, how beautiful she is, and it attracts everyone and everything to do with *men*.

He’s been waiting for more of this. They’d been fairly quiet since June, and although PR is ridiculously careful about what they publish on the official social media accounts, and Charlotte is organising everything so carefully, he’s not surprised that they’ve started again.

He feels sorry for her. This is the third bout of headlines in as many weeks, and this will continue to irritate her until she develops a thick enough skin that the stupidity and speculation merely bounces off. But she’s not there yet, and definitely not on this particular issue.

He wonders if she’ll ever get there. It’s a sensitive topic, and he thinks he knows why.

She’s been groomed for this her entire life.

He knows that it is her mother’s dearest wish that she marry young and have a family, and he suspects that the Duchess still hopes somehow that Sir John will play a part in that future. In the Duchess’s mind, they’re only biding their time, he suspects.

It’s been instilled in her since she was a small child, he assumes – that she will marry whoever they deem appropriate and be a good wife and Queen and Head of the Church of England and have a prince and a princess and do her duty. On top of that, there are whole worlds of layers attached to public expectation around this, from who she’ll choose to when and where she’ll marry, when she’ll have children to how many she’ll have. There was a moral standard she would be expected to fulfil as the Head of the Church – one he’s entirely sure she’s intimately familiar with. But it all contributed to the pressure, that weight of expectation that she would be expected to somehow carry as a young Queen in the modern age.

But as in so many things, she did not bend to their will, refusing to be tamed, and it’s another
battleground that she’s learning to fight through. She doesn’t know yet what she wants, how to balance it all with the weight of expectation leaning so heavily on her shoulders; she’s wandering around in that no-man’s land between the desires of her mother and Sir John and the country, and what she sees as freedom and her own mind, and every barb stings that little bit more now that she’s exposed.

He wonders what she thinks marriage actually is, now that she’s had some small time with and exposure to married couples. He’s always taken for granted that she wants to get married, but perhaps it’s not just bluster when she says she’s *not interested yet.*

It’s an unofficial photo they’ve picked up on this time, though, and they really were reaching, he thinks. Henry Grey was certainly an appropriate age, and, as the heir to an Earldom, of the right parentage – as were several of the other young men she’d talked with, he’d noted. But it had been a charity polo match she’d attended with Harriet and Anna where they’d had the gall to talk to several of the players after the match, most of whom just happened to be young, eligible bachelors. *Heaven forbid she speak to members of the opposite sex,* he thinks cynically.

Charlotte had warned her, but there was nothing she could have really done about it – the press would pick up on *anything.* He lets out a sigh as he eyes the headline. They’re brazen, he’ll give them that.

He walks down to her office, bracing himself, and he’s right; she’s already seen it.

‘*Shopping for Suitors?*’ she cries when she sees him, and he grimaces. ‘*Is the Queen looking for a husband?*’ she reads from her iPad, and she was right; it really was a god-awful headline. ‘Ugh, this whole thing is so humiliating! Being paraded around like a prize horse at an auction,’ she growls, and he decides to put her coffee on her desk this morning rather than hand it to her. ‘I am not a prize to be bought or sold!’

He’s thrown by the analogy, and he pauses for a moment before speaking. ‘I’m not sure you’re the only one who feels as if they are being *paraded,* ma’am,’ he eventually decides upon, and she glares at him. He just holds her gaze. She would be the greatest prize for any man; Lord Grey especially has made absolutely no secret of the fact that he considers his twenty-eight-year-old son a perfect candidate for the Queen’s hand.

‘Peter Brougham was nice enough,’ she mutters after a moment. ‘But Henry Grey is opinionated and irritating,’ she points out, and he nods.

‘I don’t think you necessarily have to worry about Brougham, ma’am,’ he says, and she frowns. ‘I don’t think he’s particularly interested in you.’

She looks at him, confused for a moment, and he resists the urge to smirk at her. He can tell she wants to ask, is desperate to know why he thinks that any man wouldn’t be interested in her, but her pride is holding her back. He can see it in her eyes.

Eventually her lips quirk and she lets out a long-suffering sigh, rolling her eyes. ‘Why not?’ she asks as disinterestedly as she can.

‘According to the rumours, I don’t think his father has quite accepted that he likely won’t be marrying any woman,’ he says slowly, and she stares at him, that little furrow in her brow suddenly disappearing as she realises what he’s saying. Her face contorts as she tries not to laugh, and he grins when she fails.

‘I see,’ she says, shaking her head, a wry grin on her face. She glances at him after the smile has
faded and she’s picked up her coffee from her desk. ‘I’m sorry, Lord M,’ she says, and he eyes her a little. He doesn’t mind bearing the brunt of her frustration. He understands.

There’s something else; she’s still tired, he thinks. They’ve pulled back a bit, Harriet and Emma, but he’s beginning to wonder if this whole keeping her occupied plan was a good idea in the first place. He wonders just how much longer before Harper rings to book an appointment; he’ll move heaven and earth to fit him in whenever he wants. It had been a good seven weeks, now, and he can see she’s struggling with the strain of patience along with everything else she’s expected to carry.

‘I shouldn’t get so angry,’ she says on a sigh. ‘It’s just…’ she trails off, pursing her lips.

‘I know,’ he says, nodding, and she looks up at him, giving him a wry smile.

It’s exhausting, he understands, having your private life splashed all over the papers, wondering what you’ll have to deal with next, what they’ll say next that will dictate how the public see you. He knows that’s a big part of the problem; she hates the fact that people will form their judgement of her based on these images and words, and it’s so not her.

He’d hated it too.

He purses his lips; maybe he can shift her perspective a little. She’s on the back foot; maybe she just needs to look at things a little differently. She’ll need to learn to laugh at this all eventually. Maybe he can kill two birds with one stone.

Despite the wonderful selection of friends she now has – Harriet, Amalie, Anna, Emma, and even maybe Charlotte – she’s still keeping everyone else at arm’s length, and it’s not ideal. She knows what it is to have friends now; she has a better idea of what she likes and doesn’t like. Now she needs to learn to start to forge her own friendships, not just accept the ones handed to her on a platter. She’s still hiding behind them all, he thinks, and that’s no way to live.

‘Can I suggest you consider these events less like…auctions,’ – and he grimaces as he says the word – ‘and more like chances to meet new and interesting people, ma’am? There’s great potential for isolation here in the palace,’ he adds gently, and she frowns a little at him.

‘I have enough friends,’ she grumbles, and her voice is stubborn – almost petulant. Well, petulant he knows how to deal with.

‘If you’re certain, ma’am.’

She raises her eyebrow at him. ‘I am.’

‘Excellent, ma’am.’

She huffs at his platitude. ‘I have Emma and Anna, and Amalie and Harriet. And Nancy. And you! Is that not enough?’

No, he wants to say. That is not enough. He mentally curses John Conroy and her mother for what feels like the millionth time for sheltering her so much.

‘Perhaps a wider circle of friends would be beneficial. It’s good to have more people you can talk to about things that are unrelated to state visits and official paperwork,’ he says, waving the folder he’s holding, and that little furrow in her brow deepens.

‘But we talk about lots of other things, Lord M,’ she says, frowning a little. ‘I like that we’re friends.’
Maybe it was too early, he thinks. Maybe he was asking too much. She’s only been doing this for barely two years, and whilst he’s so proud of how much she’s learned and grown, these things take time.

‘We do, ma’am, and so do I,’ he says, smiling softly at her. He resists the urge to sigh; this was not an argument he was going to win today; she simply didn’t understand, and perhaps wouldn’t for a while. She needed time. He makes a mental note to discuss the issue with Emma; maybe she could offer some kind of insight.

He tilts his head slightly at her. ‘I am continually honoured that you consider me a friend, Your Majesty.’ She narrows her eyes at his high-and-mighty but playful tone.

‘But?’

‘I am not, under any circumstances, going to plait your hair and gossip about boys with you.’

It was worth it to see her laugh out loud.

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‘I think you should read this one,’ he states, before handing her a piece of paper. He watches as she reads; knows the exact moment she realises.

‘Uncle Leopold is coming to visit for Christmas,’ she groans, before rolling her eyes.

‘And how excited you look at the prospect, ma’am,’ he replies dryly.

‘Clearly, email isn’t enough: he wants to lecture me in person. Is there nothing I can do to stop him from coming?’ she asks a little half-heartedly, the distaste clear on her face.

‘Not without causing an international incident, ma’am.’ Leopold had been smart; by sending his notice through the official channels, she would have to reply via official channels, and that could easily be leaked to the press.

She huffs, to his mild amusement. ‘He hasn’t mentioned this in any of his recent emails.’

‘Well, even though he is family, it’s technically also a State visit, given that he’s the Head of State for Belgium, and so it has to come through the official channels as well.’

‘How do other people deal with their uncles?’

He raises his eyebrows. ‘In much the same way, I think,’ he replies. ‘I thought you liked your Uncle,’ he says carefully, and she nods, pursing her lips.

‘I do – he’s always tried to be a kind of surrogate father,’ she says. ‘But he’s always trying to suggest things, especially since my ascension,’ she says, rolling her eyes, and he nods knowingly. ‘He wrote to Mama to ‘remind’ her that Albert has just reached some fantastic milestone in his military career,’ she says. ‘I’m not sure what the magnificent achievement was; I confess I tuned her out at that point.’

He swallows a smile.

Albert. Well, he had wondered. Families such as hers always have plans. ‘Albert?’ he asks.
‘He’s the Duke of Coburg’s son. We’re technically related going back something like four or five generations, I can’t remember,’ she tells him, waving her hand around dismissively. ‘Uncle Leopold was good friends with his mother before she died.’

‘Ah.’

‘Apparently, Albert and I have been destined since babes,’ she says with a flourish, and he feels his heart tighten in his chest.

‘Destiny is over-rated,’ he responds before he can stop himself. ‘Oh, I don’t know, ma’am. It all sounds rather romantic,’ he adds quickly, quirking his eyebrow at her.

She looks vaguely horrified at the suggestion. ‘An arranged marriage? Romantic?’

He tilts his head acceptance. ‘Well, that part, maybe not.’

‘I haven’t actually seen Albert in person since we were children. He was chubby. And annoying,’ she says. ‘He’s probably just like Uncle Leopold.’

‘Let’s hope not, ma’am. For the sake of whoever he ends up marrying,’ he replies dryly, and she laughs. ‘Not all Queens marry,’ he adds after a few seconds, thinking back to their visit to the National Portrait Gallery. He watches as she stares off into the distance, clearly thinking through the implications of his words.

‘That sounds rather lonely,’ she eventually settles on.

‘I imagine it may be, if one didn’t have…companions,’ he says haltingly, frowning briefly at his choice of words. It sounds so…seedy, and entirely not what he means.

‘Companions? What is this, the eighteenth century?’ she asks with just a little derision before he can open his mouth to clarify.

‘Not what I meant!’ he laments, shaking his head, and she laughs.

‘I hope not!’

And it’s this topic again, the one he broaches so carefully but what feels like so often. ‘Ma’am, whilst marriage is no longer the institution it was, many of your people still think it’s important that their monarch marries and has children,’ he says tentatively. He doesn’t really need to tell her, he knows, but better that it’s clear.

She raises an eyebrow at him at the mention of children, and she’s feeling particularly combative today, he thinks. ‘What am I, a brood mare?’

He frowns in mock-thought. ‘Well, I do suppose your cousin George would very much like his children to be King or Queen one day.’ She narrows her eyes at him but says nothing.

She’s quiet for a while, and he goes back to sorting out the paperwork in front of him. When she eventually speaks, her voice is small, and his heart breaks at her words. ‘Have any royals ever married for love, Lord M?’

He thinks she must have studied this with Lehzen long ago, and he resists the urge to let out a sigh; he knows she will misinterpret it. ‘Oh, yes, ma’am. Many. Henry VIII married Anne Boleyn for love.’ He tries to suppress the grin that threatens at her look of derision, but he can’t.
‘Very funny.’

They sit in silence for a while, before he speaks again, knowing that her question – her real question – deserves an answer. ‘Many royals have married for love, ma’am. Just not many Queens,’ he says quietly after a few moments. He turns to look at her. Her face is pensive, and he can understand why.

But he can’t let her dwell on this; she’ll brood and react to every little implication and she can’t do that. She needs her wits about her for this visit. He needs to help her prepare, and he can’t do that if she’s too wrapped up in her own emotions. ‘There you go, ma’am: a challenge. The first British Queen to marry for love.’

She smiles ruefully at his enthusiasm, before cheering slightly at his wry grin and raised eyebrows. To his surprise, she thrusts out her hand for him to shake. He stares at it for a moment before taking it. ‘Challenge accepted, Lord M,’ she declares haughtily as they shake, her chin high in the air.

‘Excellent, ma’am. Shall I draw up a list of possible contenders?’ he retorts, and she shoots him a look.

‘I have no intention of marrying at the moment, no matter how much the press speculates or how much Uncle Leopold and Mama huff and puff. I’m twenty-three!’

He ducks his head to hide the smile that threatens to spread across his face. ‘Of course, ma’am.’

He could do it, he thinks later. The pain would be unimaginable – it would finish him – but he thinks he could just survive watching her walk down the aisle if he knew she was happy.

Chapter End Notes

In case you missed it, Albert is not a first cousin. This is for two reasons:

1. Modern era = eww.

2. I want him to actually play a fairly significant role later in the story and he can’t do that if he’s a cousin now, can he?
Chapter 59

Chapter Summary

We keep this love in a photograph
We made these memories for ourselves
Where our eyes are never closing
Hearts are never broken
And time's forever frozen still

*Photograph*, Ed Sheeran

Chapter Notes

Well, international symposium is over (whoo!) and I'm on holidays (whooooo!) and of course, I'm exhausted and now sick (waaaaahhh). Apologies for the delays; hopefully I'll be able to resume something like a vaguely normal posting schedule from now on - now that I have something like a life back.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Early August**

She’d become quite adept at taking photos of him on her phone when he wasn’t looking, and it had become something of a game. He knows her phone is full of secret photos of him doing goodness knows what, but he doesn’t mind.

It had started not long after that first photo of them at the Garden Party so long ago; she’d obviously decided she liked candid photos, and then silly ones at that – and he would occasionally catch her with her phone out, or she’d forget to put it on silent and he’d hear the shutter noise. It hadn’t taken him long to decide that payback was in order.

It’s not a constant thing – here and there, every couple of months or so, in short one or two-day bursts. She always sends him her latest capture. They’re invariably rather boring; him reading something, or standing in a corner at some official function, or on his phone somewhere. There was one rather good one of him standing in a coat and tails, obviously waiting for her for some official function, and he’s got his hands folded in front of him and he’s very clearly completely absorbed in his own thoughts.

He bides his time, waiting for the perfect moment, and he’s got a few now, he thinks. One of her mid-step and she looks like she’s marching down the hallway; one where she’s just looked up at him mid-sentence that is really not very flattering at all. One of her biting her thumb, her hair tucked behind one ear as she reads something at her desk.

His favourite thus far is a recent one; she’s all dressed up for something in a long, red and black
checked dress, her hair curled just a little, and she’s sitting sideways on her couch, high-heelied legs crossed at the ankle on the seat, reading one of the *Harry Potter* books while she waits. He’s really very proud of that one. He’d managed to get quite close and frame it nicely before she’d spotted him.

But she’s getting really very good at it, he thinks. He rarely catches her anymore, and the photos were getting better and better.

He’s scrolling through his photos one day when he realises just how many are of *her*, and it hits him that unless she’s deleting them – which he’s positive she’s not – she would have easily as many – probably more – of him, and he thinks briefly that it would be a *nightmare* if one of them lost their phones. A quick phone call to Alex confirms that they have an option to wipe her phone completely if something happens; he knows that IT backs it up once a month for her anyway, and they’re constantly changing her password to new and more creative things. He could set his calendar at the regularity with which she moans that she can’t be expected to remember the crazy set of numbers and letters and punctuation they give her so often.

He sets up the same on his own phone.

They’re careful about it, though, especially now. They’ve never discussed it, but they don’t play their silly game in front of other people, and they certainly don’t share the photos. He doesn’t really examine why too much. People would think they were strange, childish, and they’d probably be right; he wonders if he’s being a little silly himself. But when he sends her one of the photos late one evening that he’d captured that day, and she rings him and she’s laughing so hard she can’t even get mad at him, he thinks there’s no way he’s giving this silly, slightly immature little game up.

He’s just finished reading through the finalised program sent through by the Australian Government and making his own notes when he hears it. It’s a sound he knows better than his own voice; one he’d gotten used to over years and years in the spotlight. His brain processes it just in time for it to process another sound – a sound that’s now easily as familiar, but one that makes his heart smile.

His head flicks up to his door, and he can see the edge of a very familiar brown-haired head poking out from behind a round camera lens.

‘Oh, Lord M!’ she laughs, looking out from behind the camera – that he now realises is on a tripod, and wow, he’s getting soft because he hadn’t heard a *thing* – and he thinks he can hear another laugh mixed in with hers. He’s not at all sure what’s going on, but whatever it is, he doesn’t think he likes it.

‘Can I help you, ma’am?’ he asks, standing as she lifts the tripod and walks towards him, her wide smile bringing a half-smile to his own face.

‘Amalie is teaching me more about lighting,’ she explains as she unclips the camera, and he glances past her to see the photographer wave from the doorway. ‘We were wandering around the palace looking for some low lighting. The different colours of the walls and the position of the lights all make such a big difference,’ she says, looking at him with her eyes wide and a little playful, and he knows what she’s thinking so he smirks knowingly at her.

‘Amalie,’ he greets the photographer as she walks over to his desk.

‘Hey,’ she says, smiling.

‘It’s a good shot,’ Victoria says, and Amalie peers down at the screen.

‘Yeah, actually – that’s great,’ she says and Victoria grins at him, so he moves around his desk to
look at the screen of her camera. She’s managed to get most of his office into the shot, with him at his desk, the lamplight making him and his desk the brightest thing in the room and the focus of the shot even though he was off to one side, the rest of the room barely visible in the dim light. She really was becoming quite good at this, he thinks.

‘I’ve been playing with my new lens,’ she says, and he nods.

‘I can see that.’

She frowns. ‘You’re here late.’

‘State visits take some time and preparation, ma’am,’ he says, and she nods.

‘I wasn’t actually expecting to find you here. I wanted to take a photo of your office,’ she says.

‘I’m sorry to disappoint,’ he jokes, and she grins at him. ‘I suppose it is late,’ he says, looking at his watch.

‘Have you eaten?’ she asks suddenly, and he blinks.

‘Not yet, ma’am, but I have one of Emily’s curries waiting at home for me,’ he says and she smiles, but he thinks she’s maybe a little disappointed, too. But Amalie is there, having wandered over to his bookshelf during their discussion, and he doesn’t want to interrupt their time.

‘We’re just about to head down and have dinner,’ she says, glancing at her watch. ‘Then we’re going to do some night shots. Want to eat with us?’ she asks, and he glances over at Amalie.

‘Oh, you don’t want me hanging around,’ he says quietly. ‘Enjoy your time with Amalie.’

‘I don’t mind,’ she says, shrugging. ‘Besides, it would just be dinner. You wouldn’t have to hang around afterwards. We’re just waiting for the sun to disappear completely.’ He studies her for a moment, her eyes wide and wary and when she bites her lip he thinks he has to say yes.

She’s still clingy, his beautiful Queen, and he thinks he knows why.

He wonders why she’s so nervous about this, what exactly about the impending arrival of her uncle that she normally speaks quite fondly of is setting her on edge, making her draw back into her shell. Back towards him. She’d been doing so well until a few days ago.

Perhaps her Uncle wasn’t quite as kindly as he’d imagined. Kindness in her family was all but non-existent; it would be easy for her to latch on to anything even remotely close to basic human decency. A thought strikes him: maybe Leopold had said something about him.

It wouldn’t surprise him, not really; he’s one hundred percent sure that this uncle who was King of Belgium and took the time to write to his niece once a week would have followed the Mrs Melbourne rubbish oh so closely through to its conclusion. He wonders if she’s told him what really happened – about Conroy’s role, and his own departure and her fight to keep him. He figures he’ll find out soon enough; the King will arrive in a few short months.

On top of it all, he knows she still struggles with just how much she’s missed during her childhood and teen years. She’s trying so hard to catch up, to keep up, and they’re all trying to help, but there were only so many hours in the day. He has to remind her that it’s okay to not understand some things, to not know everything; some level of distance from the public is expected. He thinks that for all Amalie is fun and interesting and personality-wise almost the antithesis of Victoria – and apparently turning into something of a good friend – she also inadvertently presses buttons with her
Add the disaster that is John Conroy and the Duchess to the mix, and he thinks he knows why she draws back every now and then.

So he ignores the unease that sits at the back of his mind and nods. ‘Sounds good, ma’am,’ he concedes, and she smiles brightly at him.

‘Whoa, you have a collection of Wole Soyinka’s poetry?’ Amalie says from where she’s been standing and perusing his shelves, politely ignoring them. ‘That’s awesome,’ she says, turning around. ‘Sorry - didn’t mean to interrupt,’ she adds, grimacing a little.

‘Who’s Wole Soyinka?’ Victoria asks, frowning.

‘He’s a Nigerian poet and playwright,’ he says.

‘He’s amazing,’ Amalie adds, motioning at the book, and he nods.

‘He wrote quite extensively about British colonial rule in Nigeria in his poetry and plays – won the Nobel Prize for Literature years ago, ma’am,’ he says. ‘And he’s quite active in politics in Nigeria, as a critic.’

‘Oh,’ she says, and he can see her start to shrink.

‘Have you read anything by Chimamanda Adichie?’ Amalie asks him, and he shakes his head.

‘I saw her TED talk, but I haven’t really read much, no.’

‘She’s like a female Soyinka, early-on, but more active in the rights of women. She’s a brilliant author,’ she says, and he nods.

‘I’ll have to look into her,’ he says.

‘I can lend you some of her books, ma’am,’ Amalie says to Victoria, who nods quickly.

‘I’d like that,’ she says. ‘I haven’t read much outside the classics,’ she admits, and he’s a little surprised at the bravery of her admission.

Amalie just nods knowingly. ‘Yeah, neither had I until a few years back. The curriculum at school wasn’t exactly liberating,’ she adds, and Victoria smiles a little weakly.

‘Neither was mine,’ she adds, and when she looks down at the ground, her shoulders dropping a little, he thinks it’s time for dinner.

‘Shall we eat, ma’am?’ he says, looking at his watch, and she almost jumps.

‘Oh, yes – Andrew will get cranky if we make the chefs keep dinner warming for too long,’ she says to Amalie, whose eyes widen.

‘Sure,’ she says, putting the book back on the shelf.

When she goes to grab her camera and the tripod, he lifts the tripod from her hands and raises an eyebrow at her – she’s clumsy, his beautiful Queen, and despite the fact that she now has a handgrip for the camera, he thinks the perfect way to cap off the evening would be for her to drop and break it. She smiles up at him as she lets him take it.
He’s all but forgotten the photo until his phone beeps later that night; she’s sent him the photo with the words *NEXT LEVEL* underneath, and he smiles and shakes his head.

Chapter End Notes

A link to the [Red and Black Dress](#) Victoria's wearing in one of Lord M's favourite photos.
Chapter 60

Chapter Summary

Good day sunshine
I need to laugh, and when the sun is out
I've got something I can laugh about
I feel good, in a special way
I'm in love and it's a sunny day

- Good Day Sunshine, The Beatles

Chapter Notes

The next three chapters all take place in one day, so I'm labelling the parts to (hopefully) avoid confusion.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

* Early-mid August *

* Cliveden House: Part 1 *

It’s not a good idea, he thinks, but he’s so torn that he doesn’t know what to do. He wants to go; he doesn’t like to disappoint her, and a picnic at Cliveden sounds like a great day. And he genuinely likes George Sutherland and Edward Portman; the Duke of Buccleuch he doesn’t know particularly well, but he supposes he’ll survive. It’s just so close, so personal and not work-related at all, that he shies away automatically.

He’s reminded briefly of a morning in his office and a newspaper he’d flung across the room in his anger, and he thinks perhaps he’s overreacting again.

‘I’m so excited for Sunday,’ she says happily, and he smiles at her.

‘Yes, Cliveden House is very impressive, ma’am,’ he tells her, and she nods.

‘You’re still coming?’ she asks, and when he doesn’t answer, she flicks her head around to look at him and the little furrow in her brow convinces him.

‘Yes,’ he says. ‘Of course. Weather looks good,’ he adds quickly, and her face smooths into a smile.

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‘Harriet, this isn’t a house. It’s a palace,’ Amalie tells her as they stand at the end of the long formal front gardens looking towards the house, and Harriet snorts.

‘And it costs as much as a palace to run,’ Harriet says flatly. ‘Hence why two-thirds of it is a hotel.’

He glances at Victoria; her eyes widen as she looks between Harriet and the house and Amalie before she looks down at the grass in front of her.

The cost of running a palace is something he knows she’s aware of; she’d spent enough time with her Keeper of the Privy Purse early on just trying to understand it all when it became apparent that her Uncle hadn’t particularly cared for his finances. But this is another thing that is new; she’s never had to manage her own finances outside of that and never will. It’s good that she understands at least something of what it’s like not to be royalty, no matter how much George and Harriet Sutherland are very much in the minority.

He thinks she’s beginning to become aware of the difference in her friends. He’s pleased. She doesn’t need to hear the same line all the time, and he, Emma, Anna and Harriet – and even Emily – all come from that same group of manor houses and family names and titles. Amalie – whilst very successful for a young woman her age – is something completely different.

She is also another thing entirely. Unique. She has to learn to own it without flaunting it.

‘We keep the top floor on the eastern side closed to visitors,’ Harriet explains. ‘So much more manageable.’

‘It’s lovely,’ Victoria announces.

‘I think I’ve seen it in a movie,’ Amalie comments.

‘Yup,’ George says. ‘Mostly those period dramas that you all like watching.’

Harriet looks across at him. ‘You all?’

Now Amalie and Victoria are looking at him expectantly, and his lips twist as George backpedals.

‘Yes,’ he says carefully. ‘You know, the Jane Austen ones you like to watch.’

‘We should move so they can reopen the road,’ he interjects, opening the door of the car.

‘Your driveway is as long as my street,’ Amalie says. ‘Yours is – surprisingly – not actually that bad,’ she tells Victoria, who grins.

‘Have you been to Windsor?’ he asks, and he plasters an innocent expression on his face when Victoria turns to look at him, eyes narrow.

‘Is that actually a driveway?’ Amalie asks, and he nods.

‘Technically it’s still used by the royal carriages,’ he confirms and almost smirks at Victoria’s look of mock-outrage.

‘Oh, yes, then that’s the worst,’ Amalie agrees. ‘You win, ma’am,’ she tells Victoria who just shakes her head good-naturedly.
It’s a perfect English summer’s day – beautifully warm, all sunshine and flowers and birds singing and bees flying around lazily and general happiness. The little cottage on the side of the river is picture-perfect, Harriet has set up huge, soft picnic blankets with cushions on the grass next to the river under the shade of the huge trees and there’s food on the tables, and the whole scene has a fairytale, dream-like quality to it.

But he can’t seem to drag his eyes away from her. She’s wearing a pretty blue and white top that has left her shoulders and neck exposed, and in her white shorts and with her hair in a lose braid and the sunglasses, she looks just like any other woman in her mid-twenties enjoying a picnic with friends.

Except she’s not. She’s perfection, he thinks, and he absolutely has to drag his eyes away. Even in his own sunglasses, there’s only so much he can hide.

She’s obviously caught some sun somewhere in her escapades with her friends recently because her skin looks like it has just the barest hint of a tan to it, and when she laughs, she’s all bright blue eyes and white teeth and he’s captivated.

He does not allow himself to think about how soft her skin would be, how smooth and warm it would feel under his fingers.

When they reach the cottage, she smiles and sighs. ‘Look, Lord M – roses,’ she says, and he walks over to where she’s standing looking at one of the walls. It’s covered in rose vines, the dark green leaves and little pale pink roses almost completely obscuring the brick wall underneath.

‘They’re so pretty,’ she breathes, fingering the petals. ‘And so small – so delicate.’

‘They’re a particular type of rose,’ he says, following the vine along the cottage wall to the end; it had wrapped itself right around two sides of the little building. ‘This one is happy here,’ he mutters in surprise. ‘Very happy.’

‘The one at the Palace isn’t quite as happy, I don’t think,’ she says with a frown. ‘It’s nowhere near as big.’

‘They can be temperamental, ma’am,’ he says, and she frowns again, and he watches as she runs her fingers across one of the buds. He glances over to where the others were settling on the picnic blankets before he reaches forward and picks one, handing it to her with a finger over his mouth, and she grins at him. ‘I don’t think Harriet will mind,’ he says quietly.

‘I doubt she’ll even notice,’ she agrees, studying the little flower as she spins it gently in her fingers.

A few minutes later, he sees it poked in behind her ear, and he thinks the pale pink looks so pretty against her dark hair.

It’s later – when the sun isn’t quite as hot and they’ve eaten lunch – that he’s sitting on the edge of the little wooden deck that juts out over the stream, letting his feet dangle in the cool water. He’s
tired, a little sleepy with the warmth and the food, and he’s more than happy to just relax in the warmth of the sunlight and leave them to socialise for now.

‘This is ridiculous,’ Amalie mutters as she sits down next to him and he lets out a huff of surprised amusement. ‘I mean, I do well in London. But this…it’s like being royalty,’ she says wryly, and he laughs his agreement.

‘Why am I telling you?’ she says, looking at him sideways, and he grins. ‘Like you can talk.’

‘I cannot,’ he agrees. ‘Privilege of birth,’ he comments questioningly, and she lets out a huff. He smiles as Victoria comes to sit on the other side of him.

‘Well, if I had a title and a house in the country anything like this, I don’t think I’d ever leave,’ Amalie tells him, and he chuckles.

‘If only it were that simple,’ he says, and Amalie looks at him a little incredulously. ‘One has to work to help pay for the house in the country,’ he says, and she purses her lips.

‘I suppose.’

‘But it is nice,’ he tells her. ‘Expensive, but I cannot complain.’

‘We’re going to Brocket Hall soon, Amalie. You should come,’ Victoria tells her, and Amalie nods.

‘I’d love to, ma’am. Thanks.’ She pulls her legs up from the water. ‘If you’ll excuse me, I need wine,’ she announces, and Victoria chuckles at her. ‘And then I thought I might wander off with my camera,’ she says, and Victoria’s eyes widen.

‘Ooh, take me with you?’

‘Of course, ma’am. I’ll come and get you?’ she asks, and Victoria nods.

‘This is beautiful,’ she says next to him a few moments later, and he smiles.

‘It is,’ he agrees, and she looks over the ledge at their feet in the mostly-clear water. ‘It’s days like this that make winter in London almost worth it,’ he says, and she nods.

‘I’m excited for Edinburgh,’ she says, and he eyes her.

‘I wouldn’t recommend shorts in Edinburgh in December, ma’am,’ he jokes, and she rolls her eyes at him.

They sit in silence for a little while, just looking out at the trees and the house in the distance, swirling their feet around in the wonderfully cool water, hers bumping into his every now and then as they’re carried by the current.

‘Having a good day, ma’am?’ he asks after a while, and she gives him a small smile.

‘The best,’ she says softly, and he smiles as she gently bumps his arm with her shoulder.

A shriek to their left grabs their attention; it’s Harriet, and George is splashing water at her and Anna as they stand with the others on a little pebbled almost-beach only a few metres upstream of them. They watch, laughing as Harriet splashes him back, and within seconds it’s on for all, with all five of them lightly splashing water at each other.

But then Harriet sees them and points, and Victoria squeals next to him as George turns and splashes
water in their direction. She curls up in a little ball, grabbing at his shirt and pressing herself into his side and back in an attempt to get away from the few droplets of water that actually come close. George’s attempts are half-hearted at best, and he knows why; he’s not sure any of them would be brave enough to splash the Queen just yet, no matter how much she’s also a friend. When he reaches down to flick water back at George who has already almost given up with a quirk of his eyebrows, he can feel her curl around him more, pressing her face into his back between his shoulder blades, trying to hide.

She looks up and over his shoulder after a moment when Harriet shrieks again – George has picked her up and is threatening to dump her into a deeper part of the stream, and she’s clinging to him for dear life, and he can’t help but chuckle at their silliness.

‘Oh, he wouldn’t,’ she says in his ear, and he’s quite aware that she’s still pressed up against him, half-curl into her little ball, her hand still wrapped around his bicep where she’d tried to hide against his back.

‘I think he would,’ he teases, and he can hear her suck in a breath at that.

‘That’s so mean,’ she breathes in protest, and he turns his head a little to glance at her out of the corner of his eye.

‘Ah, they’ll dry pretty quickly today. And there are towels in the cottage.’ She pulls back slightly to glance at him, a little furrow in her brow, before looking out at where George was carrying his still-dry wife back to shore. ‘It’s just some fun, ma’am,’ he says gently as she watches George gently place Harriet feet-down on the pebbles, laughing with Anna and Walter and Emma.

‘Yeah,’ she says, clearly ascertaining that the danger had passed and slowly moving back to dangle her feet in the water again, and he misses her hand on his arm.

She’s quiet for a while, and he lets her think. He thinks today will be good in so many ways; not only did she need a sleep-in and a day away from the Palace – from everything – but this is an opportunity for her to see what something like a vaguely normal life looks like; picnics with friends, fun and laughter, happily married couples spending time together. Her comments about marriage have sat in the back of his mind for the past months. He cannot teach her this. He can tell her all about bad marriages, about infidelity and shame and death, but he cannot tell her about those happy unions, two people committed to each other forever, in love through it all.

But here today, there were several fairly shining examples, and he lets out a sigh.

‘I think George and Harriet have a happy marriage,’ she says quietly, looking up at him with her blue eyes wide and a little wary, and he blinks at her. He hadn’t realised she was on the same train of thought he was.

‘It seems that way,’ he replies, following her gaze when she looks over at them. ‘Why do you think that?’ he presses. He cannot teach her what it looks like, but he can make her think about it.

‘She talks about him a lot – she values his opinion on things, but she doesn’t let him control her,’ she seems to decide. ‘And they just…seem happy when they’re together.’

He smiles. ‘Yes.’

He doesn’t have to teach her everything, he thinks, resisting the urge to laugh to himself. He’s underestimating her – again. He just has to point out what he can and she’ll figure it out for herself.
‘He’s so cute,’ she says, leaning forward and smiling at the baby, who scrunches up his face and squeals excitedly at her. ‘So sweet.’

‘I think so, ma’am,’ Anna laughs. Victoria watches as his eyes land on the little yellow flower she’s holding. He grabs at it with his pudgy little fingers, and she allows him to take it from her.

‘Oh, what do you want with this?’ she coos, and he puts it straight in his mouth. ‘Oh, no,’ she says, horrified, but she can’t stop him now, he’s managed to shove it – and half his fist – into his mouth and he’s going to get sick and— ‘Anna, I’m sorry – he just put it straight into his mouth!’ she cries. She looks up as Anna looks around at him, and chuckles.

‘Oh, don’t worry. He’ll be fine, ma’am,’ she tells her, and Victoria watches as he pulls his fist out of his mouth and scrunches up his face in disgust, spitting out little bits of yellow flower. She lets out a vaguely horrified laugh as he holds his hand out and tries to drop the sticky stem, and Anna wipes away the tiny petals that were now dribbling down his chin.

‘Rule number one of babies, ma’am: if they can hold it, it will go into their mouth,’ she tells her with a nod. ‘He’s tried all sorts of things.’

‘Ah,’ Victoria says. ‘I’ve hardly spent any time with babies at all,’ she admits, and Anna nods.

‘I hadn’t really either, before Tommy. But there are books, and you learn quite quickly, ma’am,’ she tells her.

‘Ooh, hello Tommy,’ Harriet coos from where she’s sat down next to Victoria, before she frowns slightly. ‘What has he been eating?’

‘A flower,’ Victoria tells her, and Harriet scrunches up her face.

‘Yuck, Tommy,’ she tells the baby who is now chewing on the flower, and she feels terrible. ‘He’s tried this before.’ She watches as he pulls his fist out of his mouth and scrunches up his face in disgust, spitting out little bits of yellow flower. She lets out a vaguely horrified laugh as he holds his hand out and tries to drop the sticky stem, and Anna wipes away the tiny petals that were now dribbling down his chin.

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‘A flower,’ Victoria tells her, and Harriet scrunches up her face.

‘Yuck, Tommy,’ she tells the baby who is wriggling in his mother’s lap and reaching forwards.

‘Would you like to hold him?’ she asks Harriet whose eyes widen, and Anna chuckles. ‘What about you, ma’am?’

Victoria’s heart plummets. ‘I don’t know how. I don’t think I’ve ever held a baby,’ she tells her, shaking her head.

‘It’s fairly easy,’ Anna says, putting him down on the rug on his hands and knees, and he crawls directly towards Victoria.

‘Looks like you don’t have a choice,’ Harriet says, and Victoria would glare at her only now he’s putting his little hands on her crossed legs and pulling himself up and into her lap.

‘Ah, hello,’ she says, putting her hands underneath his arms and helping him stand like she’s seen Anna do. ‘Oof. He’s heavier than I thought,’ she says, and Anna nods.

‘They’re deceptively heavy,’ she agrees, as Victoria holds onto his little chest.

‘Hi Tommy,’ she coos at the baby who just stares at her, before bouncing on his legs, and oh, he was so strong and wriggly and she doesn’t really like this at all. What if she hurts him? What if he hurts
himself and she can’t stop it?

She glances up at Anna who doesn’t look worried in the slightest. She must be doing something right, she thinks, so she smiles down at Tommy who squeals and grins widely at her, waving his fists in the air.

‘Goodness, he’s a happy baby,’ Harriet says.

‘They’re not all that complicated at this age,’ Anna says. ‘Food, water, comfort, sleep, entertainment. That’s about it, for the most part.’

Harriet grimaces. ‘Still. I have no room for babies in my life,’ she says. ‘Not yet, anyway.’

As she looks down at the little boy who has just plonked himself down on the mat in front of her with a giggle, she thinks that he’s cute, little Tommy. But having one of her own? It wasn’t even a thought she even wants to have, and she’s so glad she doesn’t have to have it yet.

It’s later when she’s watching Harriet play peek-a-boo with a wide-eyed Tommy that she realises that Harriet has been married for four years and didn’t have children, and had stated clearly that she had no intention of having a child any time soon. She remembers her comment about Anna and having a child so soon after marriage, and she wonders if perhaps this is all another perspective she hasn’t seen before. Perhaps she had time. She was the Queen and things were different for her, she knew, but perhaps things weren’t the way Mama and Sir John and Uncle Leopold had always told her. She thinks back to George and Harriet in the stream, and Anna and Walter with their little boy.

Perhaps marriage wasn’t quite the end of her life she’d been envisaging.

Chapter End Notes

For those who were paying particularly close attention to the recent Royal Wedding, you’ll have noticed that Cliveden House is where Meaghan Markle stayed in the days leading up to the ceremony.

The history of the House is complicated, but the current building was built in the 1850s for the Duke and Duchess of Sutherland. It’s now owned by the National Trust and is leased as a Hotel (and is apparently one of the National Trust’s most popular pay-to-visit houses).
Chapter 61

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Early-mid August

Cliveden House: Part 2

When she disappears with Amalie and Harriet and her camera, he takes the opportunity to join the conversation between George Sutherland, Walter Scott and Edward Portman.

‘I was just saying, Will, about the Queen,’ George says, and Melbourne blinks. ‘When I first met her, I thought she looked about twelve.’

He has to work hard to keep his expression neutral, but he can’t help the quirk of his eyebrows; George wasn’t wrong, he reasons, as that thing in his stomach that has a life of its own growls. ‘But now…well, Harriet’s worked wonders,’ he says, and Melbourne has to agree. She’s always been beautiful, his little Queen, but now, with some help, she was shining so brightly that others were really beginning to notice.

‘Harriet has done a fantastic job,’ he agrees carefully. He really doesn’t like this, talking about her when she’s not around to defend herself, but he can’t really say too much about it right now. He hates this kind of conversation, when all the usual topics are exhausted and they turn to the more gossipy topics. When they forget that they’re talking about a person. About her.

‘She’s lovely,’ Edward Portman says decidedly. ‘She’s the talk of so many circles,’ he adds knowingly, and oh, no, he does not want to be a part of this conversation. They can speculate all they like on who she’ll choose – just when he’s not around to hear it.

‘She told Harriet she’s not interested in anyone,’ George says.

‘She’ll have to marry one day,’ Walter Scott throws in.

‘She’s still young,’ he says. He can feel their eyes on him. ‘She’s twenty-three,’ he reminds them. ‘She’s got time.’

‘Brougham’s all but throwing his eldest at her,’ Edward says. ‘So’s Grey.’

‘Henry Grey?’ George says incredulously. ‘He has all the personality of a dead fish.’

‘Grafton is keen too.’

‘The press isn’t leaving it alone,’ Walter says. ‘Every time she breathes in the general direction of a male they’re all over it.’

‘God, that’s got to be annoying.’

‘Ah, if she’s anything like the young girls these days, I’m sure she’s loving the attention.’

‘Celebrities might love it, but the Queen doesn’t,’ he says bluntly, and they all turn to look at him. ‘Ask Emma, or Harriet, or Anna. She hates that they reduce her to that.’
There’s silence for a while, and he kicks himself. He doesn’t need to jump to her defence at every opportunity. He shouldn’t; he knows what it will look like.

He turns as he hears Emma and Anna return with Anna’s baby son. ‘Secret men’s business?’ Emma jokes, and he knows the smile doesn’t reach his eyes.

‘We were talking about Henry Grey,’ Edward says, and Emma rolls her eyes.

‘Oh good,’ she says, and Melbourne squashes a smile. ‘He’s a barrel of laughs.’

‘He was less than pleasant at the match last week,’ Anna adds, holding the baby up so he can stand, and Melbourne watches as he bounces happily on his chubby little legs. ‘He tried to tell the Queen that the monarchy doesn’t take a strong enough stance on child slavery.’

‘Idiot,’ Walter huffs, and Melbourne smirks. Well, that explained that conversation, he thinks.

‘We hear the Queen isn’t interested in getting married anytime soon,’ George says.

‘Not with options like Henry Grey,’ she retorts, and the whole party laughs. ‘She said so herself,’ Emma adds. ‘You’ll read all about it in Vanity Fair soon enough.’

‘Ah, well, it’ll only be a matter of time,’ Edward says, and Melbourne blinks. ‘She’s young and beautiful. She could have whoever she wants.’ He sees Emma’s eyes flick to him out of the corner of his eye but he deliberately doesn’t look at her.

It’s later and he’s standing by the cottage, watching her, Harriet and Amalie taking photos a little way away when Emma comes to stand next to him. ‘She was right. They do treat her like a horse at auction,’ he mutters, and Emma stares at him. He knows he’s being sensitive, that his heart is on his sleeve, but he can’t bring himself to care.

‘They don’t think,’ she says quietly.

‘No. They don’t, he agrees bitterly as he walks away.

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She gives him a smile when she sees him walking towards them, but before he can say anything, she’s pointing her phone at him and smirking. He just narrows his eyes at her as she grins at him triumphantly. ‘Gotcha,’ she whispers when he gets close, and he shakes his head at her.

‘Having fun, ma’am?’

‘We went all the way around, behind the cottage, and snuck down to the formal gardens,’ she tells him and his eyebrows rise; Peter and Callum were obviously still just as susceptible to those eyes as he was. ‘There wasn’t anyone around that far down the path. I got some great shots,’ she tells him, looking down at the camera, but his eye is caught by her hair.

There are little pink and white flowers all through it, poked into her thick, loose braid, and it’s beautiful, he thinks. The rose he’d picked for her is tied to the end of her braid, he notices with some pride. She looks up at him, confused as to why he’s not looking at her photos, and he nods at her hair. ‘I see you found some more flowers, ma’am,’ he teases, and she smiles shyly.
'Yes. The formal gardens are full of beautiful flowers,’ she tells him, her hand going back to touch them.

‘I’m sure the gardeners appreciated you picking them,’ he teases, and she pulls a face at him.

‘Harriet started it. She even re-braided my hair so they’d stay in.’

‘I believe you.’

‘Actually, it’s your fault,’ she says, pointing a finger at him, and he looks at her, amused. ‘Amalie saw your rose.’

He nods. ‘Okay.’ She narrows her eyes at him as Amalie and Harriet approach, both with flowers in their hair as well, he notes.

‘Did you get it, ma’am?’ Amalie asks, and she nods.

‘I think so,’ she says, holding up the camera and Amalie nods.

‘Nailed it,’ she agrees, and Victoria grins triumphantly.

‘I was trying to get a candid of all of you on the blanket with the House in the background,’ she tells him, holding up the screen to show him.

‘Insta-worthy,’ Amalie comments, and she frowns.

‘What?’

‘Insta-worthy. Worthy of Instagram,’ she explains, and Victoria shakes her head.

‘I don’t have Instagram,’ she says, and Amalie blinks at her.

‘Not even a private one?’ She shakes her head. ‘Oh. That’s not cool. Every amateur photographer has Instagram, ma’am,’ Amalie tells her.

She turns her wide eyes on him and he shakes his head. ‘Alex,’ he says, and she nods. He glances at his watch. ‘If you were to ring him now, he’d probably forgive you as long as you were particularly nice to him for a few weeks,’ he jokes, and her eyes brighten. ‘I was kidding,’ he says, but she has that look, and he shakes his head at her. ‘I said nothing.’

She grins at him as she presses her screen a few times before putting the phone to her ear, and he knows Wellington was right about her, about the power she seemed to hold over those she had anything to do with on any real level; her Head of Security wouldn’t really mind that his beautiful young Queen was ringing him at four o’clock on a Sunday afternoon.

He watches as she talks to her Head of Security, smiling when she turns and grins widely at him. ‘That’s a yes, then?’ Amalie says next to him, glancing up at him and back to where Victoria was nodding as she listened to whatever Alex was telling her.

‘I’m going to assume so,’ he replies with a small smile.

‘Is there anyone who isn’t quite happily wrapped around her little finger?’ Amalie says on a laugh, and he grins.

‘Very few,’ he agrees.
She’s grinning as she walks back up to them. ‘He said yes!’

‘No kidding,’ Amalie deadpans, and Victoria shoots her a look.

‘I have to keep it private, and I can’t use my real name, obviously.’

‘Fair enough, Your Majesty,’ Amalie says, and Victoria rolls her eyes. ‘What will you use?’

She raises her eyebrows before frowning, and he smirks at her. ‘Neither of them?’ he teases, and she shoots him a filthy look.

‘Oh, yeah. I’ve heard about this. Spill, ma’am,’ Amalie says.

‘Alexandrina,’ Harriet supplies, and she rolls her eyes.

‘Yes, thank you,’ she says, and Harriet hides her smile behind her hand.

‘It’s…unusual,’ Amalie says diplomatically.

‘I hate it.’

‘Obviously,’ Amalie says. ‘How many names do you have?’

‘Just two.’

‘Oh, cool. Me too.’

Her eyes narrow at him and he eyes her; he knows what she’s going to ask before she opens her mouth. ‘How many names do you have, Lord M?’ she asks, her face a picture of innocence.

His mouth twists. ‘Just the one.’

‘Only one?’ Amalie asks a little incredulously. ‘Son of a Viscount and you only have one?’

He shrugs and nods. ‘All three of us only have the one name.’

‘Huh.’

‘He hates his surname,’ she tells Amalie, and she can’t help the grin that spreads across her face at his exaggerated eye-roll.

‘Surname?’ Amalie asks, and Harriet snorts.

‘I don’t hate it,’ he says.

‘At least you only have one,’ Harriet points out and he raises his eyebrows in acknowledgement.

‘Excuse me, left out here,’ Amalie declares. ‘Surname?’

‘Lamb,’ Victoria supplies, plastering an innocent look on her face when he just shakes his head. She’s getting quite good at this whole teasing thing, he thinks wryly. He blames Amalie.

‘What’s wrong with that?’ Amalie asks.

‘Just imagine that I’m a politician, and you’re a journalist or a cartoonist for a newspaper,’ he says slowly, and Amalie’s eyebrows rise before her lips flatten as she tries desperately not to smile. She nods slowly.
‘I see how you might not enjoy having that in public life,’ she concedes, and Harriet snickers.

‘Some of them were pretty clever,’ she says, and Victoria grins as he just shrugs.

‘They certainly made the most of it,’ he agrees.

‘Okay, your turn,’ Amalie says, turning to Harriet who sighs dramatically. ‘I know it’s Sutherland.’

‘Officially, we have three surnames,’ she says blandly, and Victoria laughs at Amalie’s expression.

‘Are you kidding? What on earth do you need three for? I mean, aristocracy equals double-barrels, but don’t you think three is a little bit overkill?’

By now even Lord M is chuckling, she notes, and the sight of his almost wide smile is enough to make that thing in her chest squirm. He doesn’t laugh enough, she decides. His whole face changes into something open, something more carefree.

She likes it, she thinks.

‘It’s not like I chose them,’ Harriet retorts, holding up her left hand. ‘Married!’

‘Still! What are they?’

‘Sutherland-Leveson-Gower.’

Amalie’s eyes widen further. ‘Oh my goodness. Could you get any more pretentious?’

‘No,’ Harriet decrees, and by now they’re all laughing.

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‘Okay, this is me officially hiring you to do the promo shots for the website,’ Harriet tells Amalie. ‘Your photos of the house from back here are so much better than the ones we have now. That’s the last time I leave George to organise something aesthetic.’

Victoria peers over Amalie’s shoulder to look at the screen. Harriet was right: the picture was good.

‘You let George organise it?’ Amalie asks incredulously, and Harriet nods.

‘I got the flu, and it needed to be finalised,’ she explains. ‘I love him, but he has no idea about photography or marketing or that side of business.’

‘Sure,’ Amalie says, nodding. ‘I’d love to. I haven’t done anything much outside portraits in a while. I need to re-expand my portfolio.’

‘When can you come out?’ Harriet asks, grabbing at her phone, and Amalie does the same.

After a minute of discussing dates and travel times, Victoria speaks. ‘Why don’t you go now?’ she says, and they both look at her. ‘I’ll head back to the picnic. Lord M and Emma and Edward are all still there.’

‘Oh, no, it’s fine, ma’am,’ Harriet says, shaking her head. ‘We’ll work it out.’
'The house is an hour from London on a good day,' Victoria reasons. ‘And you don’t have a car,’ she adds to Amalie.

Harriet looks at Amalie before looking back at Victoria and frowning. ‘Are you sure?’

Victoria nods. ‘Of course. Besides, Peter’s getting twitchy that we’re this close to the house,’ she says, glancing at where one of her security duo was standing in the shade of a tree a little while away.

‘I thought Callum was the twitchy one,’ Amalie says, eyeing the security guard.

‘They’ve both learned the hard way,’ Harriet says wryly, and Victoria smirks.

‘I’ll see you later,’ she says on a laugh, turning and making her way towards Peter.

‘Harriet and Amalie want to go up to the house,’ she says mock-hopefully as she approaches him, and she watches his face tighten.

‘Ma’am, we haven’t looked through the house - there are people everywhere. We technically are already outside the boundary here,’ he starts, his voice pained, and she smiles.

‘It’s okay, I know. I’m not going,’ she says, and she smirks a little at the huff he lets out.

‘Ma’am,’ he mutters, and she can’t help but giggle a little at the look he gives her.

‘You are so devoted to your Queen, Peter,’ she tells him, as they turn and starting walking back towards the river.

‘My penance, ma’am,’ he replies dryly and she lets out a laugh.

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When she returns, she can’t help but smile at the scene before her. The remaining four of them, Emma and Edward, George, and Lord M, were all sitting on the large picnic rug, and she can see George’s hands wave as he obviously tells some kind of story, their laughter drifting back to her.

‘You’re back, ma’am,’ Emma says, looking around in surprise when she gets close. ‘What happened to Harriet and Amalie?’

‘They’ve gone to look at the house,’ she explains, sitting down between George and Lord M. ‘Amalie is going to take some photos for the website.’

George frowns. ‘We have photos on the website.’

‘Harriet said something about new ones,’ she says as diplomatically as she can.

‘Oh.’ He looks a little concerned, she thinks. ‘Maybe I’d better go and see what they’re planning,’ he says a little warily, standing, ‘Excuse me.’

‘I thought it wise not to give Peter a heart-attack by visiting another house unannounced,’ she jokes when George has left, and she bites her lip to stop herself from laughing at the way Lord M ducks his head and lets out a huff of a laugh. Emma shoots her an amused look, her lips twisting, and she
ducks her own head to hide her grin.

It felt like a lifetime ago, her impromptu visit to his house; so much had happened since. Her mind flashes back to his face when she’d walked in; he’d been so surprised, standing there and blinking at her in his socks and trousers and half-buttoned shirt. She glances at him now, sitting on the blanket next to her, his legs out in front of him. She likes this, she decides. He looks so different – so relaxed in his pale trousers and pale green shirt that make his eyes seem that little brighter. She likes that he seems relaxed – he seems to be enjoying the day almost as much as she is and the thought makes her heart swell a little in her chest. She’d been so tired lately – so busy – but he had been too, and she’s glad she can see him breathe for a few minutes with her.

‘Walter and Anna send their apologies, but they had to leave,’ Emma tells her, and she nods. Anna had told her already. ‘And we also need to head off.’

‘Oh. But it’s so early,’ she says, looking at her watch, and no, it really wasn’t early. It was almost five o’clock.

‘I’m sorry, ma’am, but Harry has a concert tonight, and we promised we’d attend.’

‘Oh, of course,’ Victoria says, shaking her head. ‘I hope he does well.’

Emma smiles. ‘Thank you, ma’am.’

‘We’ve been abandoned, ma’am,’ he says with a smirk as they watch Emma and Edward walk back up the path, and she grins at him.

‘Yes, Lord M, it would seem we have,’ she agrees with a laugh, before lying back on the blanket next to him, watching the trees above them move slightly with the light breeze, and the wispy clouds slowly float past. Her heart is light and she feels weightless and grounded at the same time; it’s been a perfect day, she thinks. She closes her eyes and lets out a long, contented sigh.

She opens her eyes to see him looking down at her, his eyebrows raised and the corners of his mouth turned up in amusement. ‘This is heaven, Lord M,’ she sighs happily, and he chuckles.

‘It’s definitely very close, ma’am,’ he replies, looking out across the yellow-green grass and the stream in front of them. ‘Good day?’

‘It’s been wonderful,’ she says, grabbing a cushion from next to her and putting it under her head. ‘I wish every day could be like this.’

‘But then who would be Queen?’ he teases, and she bats at his arm.

But as she lies here next to him, the day spent with her friends, the people she loves, she thinks that this is what happiness is. These days are perfection, where she can forget everything she’s held to, all the pressure and the papers and Mama and Sir John, and just be happy.

So she closes her eyes and dreams of more days like these.
1. Just google 'Lord Melbourne political cartoons'. They certainly enjoyed themselves.

2. Competition time! Please feel free to leave suggestions for Victoria's Instagram name in the comments. If I like one in particular and end up using it, I'll write you a little ficlet to say thanks! (I know I still have one owing to rediswriting - I'm getting there, I promise!)
Chapter 62

**Early-mid August**

**Cliveden House: Part 3**

She’s asleep, he realises after a while, when he looks back down at her.

He’d been so lost in his own thoughts, thoughts of houses and children and warm summer days spent climbing trees and running across fields, so content in their shared silence, that he hadn’t noticed that she’d drifted off. She’s rolled over onto her side, facing him, arms up by her head; it was her movement that caught his eye and he watches her sleep, his beautiful Queen, lying beside him, lovely with her flowers in her dark hair.

He can’t resist; he makes sure his phone is on silent before he snaps a picture.

He thinks she has the right idea, however: it was late-afternoon and he was tired too. The past weeks had been wonderful but so busy, and he understands why she sleeps here on the soft blankets, the weather warm and the breeze cool. But he shouldn’t sleep; Harriet and Amalie and George would be back soon, and he really doesn’t want anyone discovering them like that.

So he grabs a cushion and his copy of *Harry Potter* and lies down next to her, careful to keep some distance between them, and reads.

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‘William.’ It’s like being dragged back from the dead; he blinks as Emma’s face comes into focus. Something is heavy on his chest, and he’s warm and comfortable and…

Oh.

He’d fallen asleep.

He grabs the book and sits up quickly, looking down where she was still asleep next to him before leaning back on his elbow and rubbing his eyes.

‘Well,’ he hears Emma say quietly from next to him, and he turns to look at her. He thinks through the fog of sleep that he doesn’t much like that expression on her face. ‘Enjoy your nap?’ she asks, and he lets out a breath.

‘I was reading,’ he tells her, his voice rough, and she looks at him a little incredulously.

‘I can see that.’

He frowns. ‘I thought you’d left.’

She purses her lips at him. ‘Yes, nearly half an hour ago. I left my phone behind,’ she says, waving it at him, and he nods. ‘Aren’t you pleased I came back,’ she says more than asks, and he nods once.
'Will you be okay if I go again?' she asks, and he shoots her a look. ‘I’m keeping the photos though,’ she tells him before she stands and walks away, and oh, he’s going throw something at her one day, he thinks.

He rubs at his face as he leans on his elbow, dropping the book next to him. *Stupid.*

But then she’s stirring, and he looks down at as she moves around a little before her eyes blink open and she blinks up at him a little blearily. She takes in a long breath before letting it out slowly and stretching a little.

‘I think I slept,’ she says slowly, and he smiles.

‘You did, ma’am.’

‘How long did I sleep for?’

‘About half an hour,’ he says, looking at his watch.

‘Oh,’ she says, and he thinks she’s still not quite awake yet. But she’s adorable, all sleepy and sweet, and he can’t help but smile down at her as she blinks away the last vestiges of her nap. ‘Where is everyone?’

‘Not back yet,’ he says, pushing himself up from his elbow to sit, and she does the same.

‘Oh.’ She spots the book next to him. ‘You’re reading.’

‘I was, ma’am,’ he says, and it’s not a lie, not really. He had been reading at some point.

They sit and look out over the river for a little while before she pulls out her phone. ‘I can’t decide what my first Instagram photo should be,’ she tells him, scrolling through the photos. ‘Help me choose?’

‘I don’t think I’m the one to ask, ma’am,’ he replies. ‘You should ask Amalie.’

‘She said I should choose my favourite.’

‘From today?’

She turns to look at him. ‘Oh. Yes, I suppose,’ she says, frowning.

‘That seems fitting, given that today is your first day on Instagram, ma’am,’ he agrees, and she nods.

‘What’s your Instagram name?’ she asks after a moment, and he shakes his head.

‘I don’t have Instagram, ma’am.’

‘Oh,’ she says, frowning.

‘I’m old, ma’am,’ he teases, and she bats at him with her phone.

‘You can get it,’ she says slowly. ‘It’s an app. You just go to the app store on your phone and type Instagram,’ she says slowly. ‘I can show you how if you like.’ She smirks when he shoots her a look.

‘I think I can manage, ma’am.’
‘Good. Then you can set it up now,’ she tells him, her chin high in the air, and he lets out a huff before shaking his head at her.

‘Yes, ma’am.’

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The sun is getting low, hiding just behind the top of the main house now, and she’s standing by the little cottage wall fingerling the tiny, tight petals of the roses when she sees him standing by the edge of the stream, hands in his pockets, and she realises that he’s alone.

She looks around at Harriet and George who are talking quietly off to one side, and she thinks back to the other couples – Anna and Walter, Emma and Edward – all the happily married couples, in love and together – and he’s alone. All this talk in the press about who she would marry; all their conversations about it, everything he’s told her about his life and his family, everything they’ve discussed about hers, and he’s alone.

The sadness almost overwhelms her and she stares at his back as he stands there, looking out over the stream.

He shouldn’t be alone, she thinks, but she feels that thing in her stomach curl again, like it had after the flower show, that gnawing, and she doesn’t understand – doesn’t like – this conflict within her. She doesn’t want him to be alone but… She can’t…

No. He should be happy.

The thought that he could be unhappy sits heavy in her chest; that she might be contributing to that sends that weight crashing straight down to the pit of her stomach.

He’d told her he was happy, but what if he wasn’t anymore? What if he wasn’t happy with her, being her Private Secretary? She wants him to be happy.

But happiness wasn’t that simple he’d said, and she knew it wasn’t.

So she walks over to where he stands, and he smiles down at her. ‘Thank you for coming,’ she says quietly, looking up at him after a moment, and he looks back down at her, frowning slightly.

‘Of course, ma’am. Thank you for inviting me.’

‘I…’ she trails off because she doesn’t know how to say this, doesn’t know what to say at all. She doesn’t even know what she wants, only that she hates that he might not be happy. That she might have made him unhappier today by asking him to come along and rubbing all this happiness in his face. ‘Are you happy, Lord M?’ she blurts out and he blinks at her, frowning a little as he clearly tries to figure out how to answer her, and oh, why does she do this?

‘Right now? Yes,’ he says eventually, and she nods, but he’s still looking at her, confused, and she thinks maybe he’s a little concerned.

‘I wonder that you never remarried, Lord M,’ she says in a rush, looking up at him.

He stares at her for a long moment. ‘I suppose I never found the right person,’ he replies slowly,
turning to stare straight ahead, sighing.

‘You did not fall in love again?’ she asks, and he whips his head around to look at her, and she
wonders what she said wrong. He drops her gaze, blinking.

‘Love is not always enough, ma’am,’ he says quietly, before looking away.

She doesn’t understand at all, how someone could love him, how he could love someone and it not
be enough. Love was everything. People married for far, far less, she knew. Why would you not
marry if you had love?

But she knew nothing of marriage, not really. She’d realised when they’d talked about it a few
weeks ago; she hadn’t even seen her parents’ marriage up close. She didn’t have any idea at all, other
than what she’s read in books and seen on television and in movies, and that wasn’t real. She’d seen
more today, but it was only one day, and a handful of conversations before that, and she knows
nothing.

She studies his profile for a few moments. Perhaps he was right; she’d also never really been in love
before. Sure, she’d definitely had those silly childhood crushes that make her blush to think about,
but she was never really left alone to build any kind of real friendships, let alone relationships. Her
mother – Sir John – would have had a fit if she’d even mentioned boys. She could almost hear the
lecture from both of them: You are the heir to the throne of England. You cannot just cavort around
with boys of no reputation.

Maybe he was right; love wasn’t enough. He’d told her of his own marriage, and his sister’s: they’d
started with love but neither had survived. Obviously, love wasn’t always enough – he knew first-
hand.

And as in everything, he was filling in the gaps and showing her other perspectives, what life could
be like if she chose it, and she would trust him in this.

‘What’s wrong, ma’am?’ His voice is gentle and soft, and she sighs as her shoulders drop.

‘I…I want you to be happy, Lord M,’ she says honestly, frowning as she looks up at him. She
should have just started with this, she thinks. ‘I worry that you’re not.’ He smiles at her, that soft,
sweet little smile he does when she’s being nice, but she thinks she’s not just being nice now. She
worries.

‘I am, ma’am,’ he says softly. ‘You don’t need to be married to be happy,’ he adds gently.

‘But you do need love,’ she returns and he nods.

‘Yes,’ he agrees, looking at her for a moment before dropping her gaze. ‘There are many different
kinds of love, ma’am. And there are a lot of people who love me,’ he says quietly before smiling at
her, and she can’t help but smile back as that thing in her chest swells.

Maybe he is happy, she thinks.

She wraps her arm around his and squeezes it, and he gives her that sweet little smile that warms her
heart.

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She’s lying in bed and scrolling through her Instagram feed when she realises he hasn’t liked her photo. It’s easy to tell; she has a grand total of three followers of her own personal, private account so far – Harriet, Amalie and him.

_Do you like my first Instagram picture?_

She’d eventually selected one of the wall of the cottage with the little roses covering it. Amalie had shown her on the way back how to play with the settings to make the colours stand out and soften the pink of the roses and the dark green of the leaves, and she was really quite proud of it.

_Very nice._

_You double-tap on a picture to like it._

It takes all of about seven seconds for the notification to appear at the top of her screen, and she smiles to herself.

_I thought you might like to post this one._

And she lets out a gasp of amused outrage before laughing – it’s her, asleep on the picnic rug that afternoon, and he’s so _sneaky_, her Lord M.

When his message comes through moments later – _Gotcha._ – she can’t help but laugh again.
Chapter 63

Chapter Summary

She said, 'Honey, what you gonna do today?
You're second guessing every single move you make
You're definitely gonna have some very hard days
But I'll be right here for you.'

- *Give Love*, Andy Grammer feat. LunchMoney Lewis

Chapter Notes

Sincerest apologies for the delay in posting a chapter and in replying to all your truly lovely comments! (Vicbourne has the most beautiful fans - you're all just delightful. I'm so grateful.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Mid-September**

‘Did you get the photos Amalie sent you?’ she asks Charlotte from behind her desk, who nods.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ she says, smiling. ‘There are some lovely ones in there. It looked like a great day.’

‘It was,’ she says on a sigh and he can’t help how his own mouth curls into a smile. ‘The weather was beautiful, and the cottage was lovely. You and Charles will have to come next time,’ Victoria tells her, and Charlotte’s eyebrows rise slightly in surprise.

‘Oh. That would be lovely, ma’am. Thank you.’ He’s pleased; he thinks Charlotte’s influence might be a good one. She’s closer to his age, widely travelled and well-educated, and she seems stable and calm. He makes a mental note to tell Emma.

He’s just closing the folder in front of him and grabbing another when Charlotte speaks again.

‘Ma’am, the photos from the tennis were quite popular,’ she says, and he looks up to see Victoria’s eyes widen ever so slightly. ‘Apart from the fact that people seem quite pleased that you’re friends with Amalie, there was also a good general feeling around the fact that you were there with the Duchess.’

Her eyes flick to his too quickly for him to school his expression into anything other than vaguely pleased – oh, he’s going to hear about this later – before she glances down at desk in front of her.

When he looks back at Charlotte – *what is she doing?* – her face is a calm sort of pleased, and he wonders where she’s going with this.
When the Queen speaks, her mouth is flat and her voice is carefully even. ‘Really?’

‘Yes. The public seemed to like that you appear to have a good relationship with your mother, ma’am. Although, according to Twitter, a good number of people still don’t understand why you’re Queen and she’s not, but that’s by the by,’ she adds. ‘Perhaps it would be helpful to schedule some more public appearances with the Duchess, ma’am.’

Victoria’s eyes widen even further and her eyes flick to his again, but he’s careful this time to remain neutral. He’d been right; she was clever, this new Lady Chamberlain she’d picked. As far as he knows, the topic of the Duchess hadn’t really come up in her discussions with the Queen – not in any great detail, anyway – and despite the fact that he’d told Charlotte that things aren’t great, he thinks that it hasn’t quite occurred to Victoria that they would discuss her in that level of detail when she wasn’t around.

But this was clever. Victoria would have to tell her outright that she’s not interested in having anything to do with her mother, and then possibly feel compelled to offer some kind of explanation, or to acquiesce to Charlotte’s suggestions. Either way, Charlotte was probably the only one now able to really push those buttons, to open the can of worms and force some kind of response. He can’t now; there’s too much water under the bridge there, and whilst Charlotte knew none of that, she’s probably guessed his position. No one else was game enough or had the position really to do so, and she was new enough that she could happily plead ignorance if it came to it.

He wonders how much of the Queen’s reaction to the idea is related to the email he’d received this morning – they’d both received.

‘Perhaps,’ she hedges, and her eyes flick to his momentarily again. ‘I’m happy to consider some suggestions if you think it will be beneficial,’ she says diplomatically, and he has to fight the smile at such a diplomatic non-answer from his usually so decisive Queen. He understands why.

‘Excellent. I will ask the staff to liaise with the Duchess’s office and let you know what we come up with, ma’am,’ she says, and he sees Victoria swallow at the mention of the Duchess’s office.

Not long now, he thinks. He hopes. Oh, he hopes. She’s so tired, he can see it, wearied by holding herself in so tightly. The picnic had been the perfect break away from it all, but it had only been one day. He wonders if she’s seen Sir John recently.

Charlotte stands. ‘If that’s all, ma’am, I’ll leave you to Lord Melbourne,’ Charlotte says, and Victoria nods.

‘Yes, I think so. Thank you.’

Charlotte smiles innocently as she walks past him and he plaster a serene look on his face. Well, at least the topic was broached, he thinks.

She lets out a huff when they’re alone. ‘The tennis was a nightmare,’ she tells him, and he grimaces. That was his fault; he encouraged her to ask her mother. ‘Well, mostly a nightmare,’ she concedes. ‘Did you ever find your mother embarrassing?’ she asks him suddenly, and his eyebrows rise in surprise.

‘Oh yes, ma’am,’ he says. ‘I think that’s a pretty standard phase that most people with mothers go through.’ He lets out a small sigh when she just hums in response.

‘Do you think I should?’ she asks after a moment.

He just purses his lips, unwilling to suggest that she do anything at all with her mother, especially not
at the moment with the shadow of Sir John still looming. Besides, he’s interfered enough in the past weeks in his vague references to forgiveness and parenting, and clearly the tennis was not the remote success he’d hoped it would be.

She interprets his silence exactly as he wants her to and lets out a sigh. ‘I suppose I should at least consider it.’

‘It’s always wise to consider your options, ma’am, but you have to be comfortable with the decisions you make,’ he says carefully, and she eyes him. ‘Would it be safe to assume that you haven’t told Ms Canning about Sir John, ma’am?’ he asks carefully, and she nods.

‘Yes.’

‘Okay,’ he says, nodding, and she blinks at him.

‘Do you think I should?’ she asks after a moment.

‘That’s entirely up to you, ma’am,’ he says, and she frowns at him, confused.

‘Then why did you ask?’

‘I meet with her almost every day at the moment, ma’am. I need to know what I can and cannot say,’ he explains.

She fiddles with something before looking back at him. ‘I would like to know what you think,’ she announces, her gaze serious.

He lets out a breath. ‘I’m not sure, ma’am,’ he says honestly. ‘You need to decide if you think it would be helpful for her, as your Lady Chamberlain, to know, and if so, then how much she should know, and if you trust her with the information.’

‘I think I should be able to trust her,’ she says after a moment, nodding. ‘And I suppose it would be helpful to warn her about Sir John.’

‘Especially since his exit is likely imminent,’ he adds, and she nods, swallowing. Today was going to be a day of tense topics, he thinks, and he purses his lips before speaking.

‘Ma’am, I received an email from Mr Harper this morning,’ he says carefully. ‘It was the one he’d sent to you; I was cc’ed in on it.’

‘Yes,’ she tells him. ‘I requested that Mr Harper include you on all email correspondence.’

He frowns. ‘Can I ask why, ma’am?’ And she’d better have a better reason than she wants his advice. He’s not really a lawyer, has only ever studied law, never really practiced much, and the breach of contract is entirely an issue for her and her lawyers. He is more than willing to help, to stand beside her and be whatever she needs him to be, but it really has nothing to do with him legally and she has to be careful here.

‘I wanted you to know what was going on,’ she starts. ‘And when I spoke to Mr Harper the other day, he asked if I was considering a defamation claim on top of a possible breach of contract suit. And then I thought you might want to as well and he said that it was possible, depending on what they found, so I asked him to include you on anything he thought relevant, just in case.’

He blinks. He’d briefly thought of it, suing the man for everything he had, destroying him financially if he could, but when he’d examined his motives – and that hadn’t taken long, or much effort at all –
he wasn’t actually concerned for himself almost at all.

He wanted to destroy Conroy for her. He was furious with the man for everything he’d put them through – put her through – and he wanted revenge.

It would be an expensive revenge, and without concrete evidence, a likely unsuccessful one. It would also be a painful one for all involved; on top of the potential court documents, the statements, she would be dragged into the press again – their non-existent relationship would be the centre of attention – and it would be hell.

He’d fairly quickly decided against it. She was determined to rid herself of Conroy, and that would be revenge enough for him. Conroy would be gone with minimum public fuss, and the sordid details of the man's selfish ambition and stupidity – along with her – would not be dragged through the press for what would likely be months, if not years. He couldn’t inflict that kind of pain on her, and certainly not for something so insignificant.

Besides, something in him tells him that she needs to do this. She needs to conquer this, to remove the final vestiges of a life she’d had thrust upon her and defeat a man who had held so much power over her - who had done so much damage with virtually no consequences. She had the strength, he knew; she needed to learn how to use it. She needed this victory for herself.

‘I said I wasn’t sure, and Mr Harper said we should discuss it at some point, but that’s all,’ she says after a moment.

‘Okay,’ he says. ‘Thank you, ma’am.’

‘Do you think you will?’ she asks, and her voice is so vulnerable, and he hates this whole damned saga and Conroy and his selfish behaviour and damn him.

‘I don’t think so, ma’am,’ he says quickly, shaking his head. ‘It’s not worth it for me.’

She nods slowly, and even if Harper had explained it, he thinks she doesn’t really understand what it would look like for her, if he or her or both of them were to sue Conroy; he thinks she’s just keen to have this over with and Conroy gone. ‘I’ve signed the paperwork they couriered over,’ she tells him, and he nods. ‘Less than a month,’ she breathes, her wide blue eyes so full of trepidation he has to resist the urge to reach out and hug her. Harper had said in the email that he hopes to be ready to schedule an appointment by the end of next week if possible, and he understands why she’s worried; they’d both reminded her more than once that there was no guarantee Harper would come back with anything they could use at all.

‘Maybe,’ he says gently, and she nods once. ‘Don’t waste time worrying, ma’am.’

‘He’s not worth the worry,’ she says determinedly, and he gives her a small smile.

‘Was the tennis really that bad?’ he asks after a moment, and she narrows her eyes at him.

“Yes,” she says decidedly, and he can’t help the twist of his lips at the way she scrunches up her face to hide her smile.
He can’t stop the smile from spreading across his face as he leans back in his chair, staring at the email on the screen in front of him, all bright colours and bold, dramatic lettering.  *Perfect.*

‘Mr Kean? It’s William Lamb, Private Secretary to Her Majesty, the Queen,’ he says into the phone. ‘We spoke several months ago about the possibility of arranging Her Majesty’s attendance a production.’

There’s a pause at the other end - a stunned silence, he thinks - before the voice speaks. ‘Lord Melbourne! Yes, of course. I assume you received my email?’

‘Yes, thank you.’

‘Excellent! When would Her Majesty like to attend?’

‘January seventh, if possible.’

‘Of course. I’ll organise that. I assume the usual place for members of the royal family?’

‘Yes, that would be ideal. It will need to be sealed; Her Majesty’s Head of Security will be in touch closer to the time to coordinate security with you.’

‘Of course. Perfect. It’s all locked in. I’ll send through the paperwork today.’

‘Thank you,’ he replies. ‘I do have one other request,’ he adds quickly.

‘Anything for Her Majesty, Lord Melbourne.’

He smiles. ‘Whilst Her Majesty will be more than happy to be acknowledged once inside the theatre and afterwards, we would appreciate it if any discussion of the Queen’s attendance - or any mention of royalty at all - was kept in the strictest confidence until after January seventh.’ He lets out a sigh – this was always going to be awkward, and he hates these kinds of variations on the truth. ‘This will be a private visit and therefore not published in the Queen’s public schedule.’

‘Oh, of course. Yes. Definitely. That’s completely understandable. No one else here needs to know; I’ll handle the arrangements personally.’

‘Thank you. I will be coordinating Her Majesty’s visit, so please ensure any communication comes directly to me unless you are communicating with the Head of Security.’

‘Yes, of course. That’s fine.’

‘Thank you. I realise how challenging it can be, making arrangements for the royal family,’ he adds, and he can hear Kean bluster a little.

‘Not at all, Lord Melbourne. We’re thrilled to have Her Majesty attend one of our productions – I personally was delighted to discover how much Her Majesty appreciates theatre, and particularly our little corner of the world! The Queen’s support of British theatre will obviously be significant for the industry.’

Melbourne smiles. ‘I’m glad,’ he agrees. ‘It’s certainly Her Majesty’s intent to support the arts in Britain.’

‘I’m personally really very excited for this production in particular – so many wonderful actors, and such an interesting twist on a classic.’

‘I’m sure Her Majesty will thoroughly enjoy it.’ He wonders if she will; they haven’t watched this
particular one before. It certainly wasn’t his favourite.

He can’t wait to see her face, he thinks with a smile.

Yes, this would be the perfect Christmas present.

Chapter End Notes

Ooh, Lord M! Where are you taking our little Queen for her Christmas present?
Chapter 64

Chapter Summary

I, I who have nothing
I, I who have no one
Must watch you go dancing by
Wrapped in the arms of somebody else when, darling, it's I
Who loves you

- *I (Who Have Nothing)*, Ben E King

Chapter Notes

Note #1: This is Part 1 of 2.

Note #2: I picked Australia because it’s where I’m from and thus was about the only country I felt comfortable really picking on in any depth. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

End of September

For the first twelve months of her reign, as she met a whole host of new people from foreign dignitaries at various functions to young children at Garden Parties, he’d focused on two things: hoping she didn’t stick her foot in her mouth inadvertently and hoping she didn’t pass out from hyperventilation at any point during the event. She’d been young, obviously so, and most people had been charmed by her, interested in her as Queen, but she hadn’t really turned heads the way she’d quite quickly turned his.

Now, well over a year after her Coronation, he watches as they stare at her, their beautiful Queen, as though she had suddenly transformed from a caterpillar to a butterfly. They wouldn’t be entirely wrong. She’s always been a butterfly, his little Queen. They just hadn’t seen it; it had been hidden behind layers of fear and ignorance, layers that were slowly disappearing.

He sees the eyes of every man from fifteen to fifty turn to stare at her when she enters a room. She was beautiful, his Queen, and now *everyone* knew it. He despises the part of himself that regrets that *Vanity Fair* article. It had attracted exactly the kind of attention he’d imagined it would: discussion around the wealth of the monarchy in a fiscally challenging time, the relevance of the monarchy in today’s democratic age, her duties as Queen in a male-dominated age.

But mostly they talked about how beautiful she was.

He *knows*.
It’s stupid, the way that thing in his stomach curls in on itself, the way he feels almost angry that they speak of her this way.

He knows this feeling, knows it well. He’s intimately familiar with that emotion that makes men see red like no other, that makes men kill and maim and destroy, devoid of rational thought.

\textit{Jealousy.}

He could teach whole lessons on how not to deal with jealousy when it came to women, on the most self-destructive ways to release your hurt and rage. He hasn’t felt jealous of anything or anyone in a long, long time. He really didn’t think he’d ever feel jealous again, but oh, he was wrong.

He’s not actually sure this is jealousy, he thinks at one point; he wants to wrap her up and protect her now that she was out there, her beauty exposed for the world to see, for men to notice, for men to want her. He knows what men can do, what love and lust can do. He wants to keep her safe from the pain of failed relationships, of deception, from those who would take advantage of her. Those who would love her for her crown and not her fire. Those who wouldn’t love her like she should be loved. Like she deserved.

(He’s careful to stick to the published press; he is not going to read anything that isn’t entirely approved by an editor. He knows what the average man is thinking, and he knows what the basest version of man will say unfiltered on social media.)

But none of this quite suppresses his smile at her reaction when he hands her the official printed copy. Her face lights up in wonder and she bites her lip as she takes the magazine from him, these beautiful photos of her now printed in high definition, glossy and perfect, on sale from the next day for the world to buy and see and fall in love. \textit{This}, he wants to say, \textit{is using the media for good}. But he doesn’t. He can’t bring himself to. He thinks she’s probably figured that out for herself, anyway.

He despises that part of him, that tiny part, that screams that she is his; she is not. She is his to protect, to organise her appointments, to guide and mentor where she needs it. But she never will be his to love, to cherish, to adore.

He also despises how obvious he must be, and how very good at reading people – reading \textit{him} – Emma Portman is.

He stands off to the side only days after the article is released, the Queen talking to several of her guests a few metres in front of him, and it’s like that first Garden Party all over again, he thinks, only this time that young, terrified Queen is gone, and in front of him stands a beautifully elegant woman, clothed in a pale blue dress and heels.

And he can see that the two young men that are a part of the conversation have noticed just how beautiful she is too.

This is not jealousy; this is his job, in the absence of a father or older brother. Or Charlotte, today, as she nurses a sick child.

He resists the urge to roll his eyes when they laugh at something she’s said. He glances at his watch; she’s been talking to this group for a good few minutes now, he thinks. She has to share her time equally, as equitably as possible, and he knows how tongues will wag if she spends too much time - or too little - with twenty-something-year-old men. He’s about to move when Emma appears at his arm. ‘William, you cannot frighten away every suitor vying for the Queen’s attention,’ she mumbles, and he looks at her disbelievingly.
‘Frighten?’ She just narrows her eyes at him. He spreads his arms a little, and he knows he’s lost. ‘I’m not going to support someone I don’t think is worthy of her.’

‘And who exactly is worthy of her?’ Emma’s eyes seem to pierce his heart, and he looks away.

‘There are not many,’ he admits. He sighs when he looks back at Emma to see her raised eyebrows. ‘Certainly not Henry Grey, I don’t care how brilliant his father was, or how much he’s suddenly developed the capacity for tact and charm,’ he says quietly, and Emma frowns. ‘She is the Queen. Who she chooses will affect the monarchy and Britain for as long as Britain has a monarchy. It’s imperative that she choose well.’ When Emma’s eyebrows rise again, he knows he perhaps sounds a little too passionate. ‘She should also be happy.’

‘And you know who would make her happy, William?’ she asks, her gaze piercing again, and he says nothing. ‘I don’t think the Queen knows what she wants just at the moment,’ she says, looking at where the Queen was smiling at something someone in the group has said. ‘But I think she will, in time. Let her figure it out for herself.’

He lets out a sigh, and Emma walks away. He watches as the men stare, their eyes enchanted by her smile, her laugh.

He knows.

But most people are well-behaved; she rarely has too many complaints, apart from the rare faux-pas by some terrified, socially-inept young man, and so he just watches. He knows Emma does the same, and, to some degree, Charlotte. He thinks her mother does too, at any of these events she’s actually invited to attend with the Queen, but he’s not entirely sure that’s a good thing. But most people are too intimidated, too respectful of the Crown to really be anything other than vaguely chatty.

He’s happy for it to stay that way.

He’s not sure anyone has flirted with her quite so obviously before. No, that’s wrong – he’s entirely sure no one had dared. Most of the men she’d met were still in awe of her a little; she was still fairly new, and hadn’t spent enough time with many of them for anyone to be entirely comfortable. But this? This Australian? Well, it would appear that basic propriety was optional.

He was the classic cliché: tall, blond, fairly well-built, and he was getting on every last one of Melbourne’s nerves. Everything about the man sets his teeth on edge. He does not like him.

He can feel it low in his stomach, that desperate pull of protectiveness, that desire to destroy anyone who made her feel uncomfortable or hurt her in any way. It’s not jealousy; it’s his job, as her friend and her mentor, and in the absence of any other kind of support. There’s no one else looking out for her, working to keep her safe in that way, and he’s not about to leave her alone, his little Queen, to fend for herself.

Despite all that she has learned and grown, how beautiful and elegant and brilliant she is, she is still so young, even at twenty-three, and his desire to protect her is not solely born of his own deep, unrequited love for her – she’s had so little experience with men. Her entire childhood, with the exception of Sir John, had been almost exclusively female, he knows, and he worries more and more that she’ll be taken advantage of. And this Australian, with all his apparent charm and good looks, is
just the kind of man to do it.

He’d watched from his position in the corner of the room with Charlotte as she’d welcomed the Australian Prime Minister – the currently unmarried and apparently attractive Australian Prime Minister, the *Daily Mail* had announced in big letters that morning – and his entourage, smiling politely and making small talk for the official palace photographer. It certainly wasn’t her first rodeo, and she handled the conversation as well as she always does, discussing the Prime Minister’s recent visit to France and his intentions for the rest of his visit to the UK – the usual visits to memorials and parliament and other cultural venues. The Australian had initially seemed enamoured in the same way that most people were when they met the Queen one-on-one for the first time. She wasn’t gifted in height, his beautiful Queen, and she certainly didn’t carry the weightiness that came with age, but her eyes were piercing and her questions insightful, and most people left charmed and impressed.

But then the cameras leave and it takes him about a minute to realise just from his facial expression and gestures alone that this *Australian*, with his tanned skin and closely-cropped blond hair, was *flirting* with the Queen.

How *dare* he? She is the Queen of England – his Queen – and he’s *flirting* with her.

It takes Charlotte another twenty seconds to elbow him and shoot him a wondering and then incredulous look. He just tilts his head and gives a quick raise of his eyebrows in acknowledgement, his lips tight, and she looks back at the Queen.

He thinks she knows now, too, by the way her cheeks are now turning a soft pink and she’s smiling and oh, yes, she *knows* now.

But she is a grown woman, and this is an official visit, and unless she makes it clear that she wants help of some kind, there is absolutely nothing he can do, or should do.

It takes another minute of quiet fuming before his brain kicks in and reminds him that he was overreacting yet again, and he lets out a quiet sigh. She really was quite capable of looking after herself, his beautiful Queen. Besides, both he and Charlotte were standing right in her line of sight if she needed them, and really, what was the man going to do in a room in the middle of Buckingham Palace?

He wonders idly if he should take up running again. He’s been thinking about it for a while; he’s firmly on the wrong side of forty now, and eating at the palace so often was doing little for his waistline. He’d been working out again; Emily had poked him in the stomach at dinner on his first day back and raised an eyebrow, and he’d taken the hint and resumed spending time in his gym most evenings.

It’s another ten excruciating minutes, where he watches her on and off and carefully revises her schedule for the next month in his mind, before she catches his eye. He holds her gaze for just a moment before giving her a small nod – her time was definitely up – and he watches as she wraps up the conversation.

‘Thank you again, ma’am, for your time and for such a pleasant discussion,’ he hears the man say with a small bow, and he watches as Victoria smiles at him.

‘You’re welcome, Prime Minister. I’ll see you at the Reception tonight.’

‘I’m very much looking forward to it, Your Majesty.’

He walks towards her, watching as the man is escorted from the room by one of Charlotte’s staff.
before looking back down at her. ‘Did you enjoy your meeting with the Australian Prime Minister, ma’am?’ he asks, and he knows he’s failed to keep all traces of derision out of his voice. She smiles up at him as they commence the short walk back to her office.

‘Oh, yes. He’s charming. Rather sweet, actually,’ she replies, and he manages to almost cover a snort.

‘Yes. Sweet,’ he mutters as they walk into her office. And she’s looking up at him, eyes narrowed as she stops. ‘Charlotte and I noticed that he seemed very…complimentary, ma’am.’ And the way she looks at him tells him that he’s not hiding his emotions well at all.

‘Maybe. He did request to dance with me tonight,’ she tells him, looking back at him over her shoulder as she walks to her desk and he knows what she’s doing, his beautiful Queen, and he wonders if he’ll ever be able to actually successfully hide his feelings – any of them – from her.

‘I have no doubt, given that it is a ball at your request, you are the host, and he is an honoured guest,’ he retorts, and her lips quirk into a small smile. ‘I would be careful though, ma’am,’ he adds thoughtfully, and she frowns.

‘Careful of what, Lord M?’

‘Your toes,’ he announces, and she lets out a vaguely horrified snort of laughter, and he just smirks at her.

Her next words, the way she says them, so obviously playing him, remind him that his emotions rarely lead to anything good; in fact, they usually backfire spectacularly. ‘You’ll just have to show him how it’s done, Lord M.’

His lips twist. ‘Maybe I will, ma’am.’ He ignores the alarm bells that are going off quietly in the back of his mind. He’d tried listening to those warnings before, and it had gotten him approximately nowhere.

Besides, she’s learned her lesson; she’s managed to stay sober for every official event since the Coronation Ball. One dance couldn’t hurt.

Yes, the weather was perfect for a return to his long-ago-loved running route. It’s wise to balance strength with cardio, he thinks, as he walks back to his office.

***

That had been the morning. Tonight, however, there were no cameras outside the official ones around, and she was gorgeous in her long pale pink dress and tiara, and the gloves were clearly off.

‘Forgive me, ma’am, but you really are a far more pleasing sight than the King,’ he drawls at the top of the receiving line after he’s given her a short little bow, and Melbourne has to physically turn his head to avoid rolling his eyes.

She just seems amused at the attention; he can hear the smile in her voice. ‘I’d hope so, Mr Watson.’

And Melbourne knows exactly what’s coming and oh, goodness, it’s so predictable that he almost groans out loud when the words come right out the man’s mouth. ‘You’re welcome to call me Ben,
‘This is Lord Melbourne, my Principal Private Secretary. He is a former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and a member of the House of Lords,’ she says before he can speak, and he wonders where that whole stream came from. She’s never introduced him like that before. She rarely actually needs to introduce him, and never should, but he can’t seem to break her of the habit. He’s not even entirely sure why he’s being introduced at all.

‘Oh, yes, Lord Melbourne. Nice to meet you,’ the Australian says, clearly appraising him. Melbourne gives him a tight smile and nod as they shake hands.

‘Are you enjoying your visit to the UK?’ he asks.

‘Yes, it’s been extremely productive, and surprising,’ he says, and when he glances at the Queen as he says it, Melbourne feels his jaw clench.

‘I’m glad to hear it,’ he grates out, and this man is going to sit next to her for almost the entire evening.

‘Will you be joining us this evening, Lord Melbourne?’

‘No,’ he says. ‘I’m not necessarily required at the smaller Official Dinners.’ Watson nods. ‘Only really at the politically significant State Dinners,’ he can’t help but add, and he can feel her eyes on him.

‘I see,’ the man replies, turning back to her. ‘Thank you again for offering to host a reception, ma’am,’ Watson says, and she smiles again.

‘Of course. It’s important to reaffirm the importance of the relationship between our two countries,’ she says graciously.

‘Very,’ Watson replies, and oh, he’s had enough.

‘Ma’am,’ he says quietly, and she nods.

‘Excuse me, Mr Watson,’ she says, before turning and walking down the hallway. ‘I’m seated next to Mr Watson for dinner?’ she asks, stopping and smiling sweetly up at him when she reaches the doors for her official entrance, and he just eyes her.

‘Luckily for you, ma’am,’ he replies, her lips twist a little.

‘What time does the dancing start?’

‘After dessert, ma’am.’

‘I’ll see you then, Lord M,’ she says, and he sucks in a tight breath.

‘I’m not sure it would be advisable, ma’am,’ he tells her, grimacing slightly. He’s been thinking about this on and off all afternoon. There’s no reason for him to even be present during the dancing; both he and Charlotte were hanging around to make sure it all went smoothly, but they certainly weren’t on the guest list. It would do nothing for the gossip about them – gossip that seems to have died down to nothing in the months since his return – for him to dance publicly with her at a ball he’s technically not a guest at. That part of his life was firmly over now. It hadn’t even been a good idea at the Coronation Ball but needs must, and hadn’t that turned out well.
But that was so long ago now, and oh, he wants to dance with her, his beautiful Queen; his heart aches at the thought. She was stunning in the pale pink dress that seemed to make her glow, the fine white-gold necklace and tiara gorgeous against her very lightly-tanned skin and dark hair.

Mrs Melbourne sits in the back of his mind, clouding everything.

She looks up at him, frowning, and a small part of him cheers at her clear disappointment; the bulk of him, though, aches at disappointing her. ‘Why not?’

‘I’m not a guest, ma’am,’ he tells her quietly as he glances up to see the footman move into place. When he looks back at her, he can see his own sadness is reflected in her eyes. He deliberately looks over to where the Duchess was walking into the room just a few metres away, and she lets out an angry huff when she follows his gaze. He knows she sees what he’s saying; the memories of those photos splashed across the front pages of so many papers would not leave either of them soon. ‘Besides, you have quite the request list already.’

‘I don’t care,’ she mumbles, glancing down at her hands, but it’s half-hearted and he knows she understands.

He should never have said he would dance with her. It hadn’t been fair. ‘There’ll be another time, ma’am,’ he says a little more lightly, and when she looks back up at him her mouth has that determined set about it, and he wants to shake his head at her. There is no way she can win this, not tonight. Not with everyone watching.

‘Yes,’ she says eventually, and he gives her a small smile.

‘Enjoy Mr Watson,’ he says, and her lips quirk.

‘I’ll be sure to watch my toes,’ she retorts, and he squashes the grin that threatens to spread across his face as she turns and enters the room.

***

‘You’re still here?’ he asks quietly as Emma moves to stand next to him in the corner of the room, listening as the Australian Prime Minister gives his speech.

‘I’m leaving now. How’s it all going?’ and he just manages to resist the urge to roll his eyes, letting out a quite hum instead. ‘That well?’

‘I don’t like him,’ he tells her, and she nods.

‘Charlotte wasn’t impressed either.’

He just hums again in response. Charlotte had been mortified and he’d shared her outrage. She is the Queen of England, and this Australian’s Head of State, and he’d been flirting with her like she was just another woman he’d met on the street. He’s not as fastidious about traditions and rules and protocol as some, he knows, but this Australian wasn’t even acknowledging the existence of the basic respect and decorum due the royal family.

‘Harriet says he’s hot,’ Emma tells him, and he really does roll his eyes this time. ‘Oh, what’s the matter, William? Afraid he’ll steal your title, mister sexiest politician?’
He turns slowly to look at a now-smirking Emma. ‘Thank you, so much, for your input,’ he mutters slowly and deliberately, and she’s laughing quietly behind her hand at him now.

‘Oh, relax. The man will be here for all of twenty-four hours,’ Emma says dismissively, and that’s not helping. She still has to get through tonight. ‘Besides, what would you do if she decided she liked him?’ she says quietly, looking up at him as he turns to look at her.

What would he do?

Sabotage the man as much as possible behind his back. Resign. Walk away.

Nothing.

He would do nothing at all.

She is not his to do anything about.

The thought is fine when it’s in the abstract; it hurts, the thought of giving her up, watching her fall into the arms of someone else, give her precious heart – her mind – to another man.

The pain is dulled by the knowledge that he dreads the inevitable.

But he pushes the thought aside. She’s amused – flattered, even – by the attention, as she maybe should be, he reasons. But she’s also quite clearly keeping the man at arm’s length; she’s not leaning towards him, and whilst her smiles and laughter are genuine, they’re also polite. He knows what she looks like when she’s interested in a conversation, in what someone has to say, and she’s certainly been entertained by this Australian’s words, enjoyed their conversation so far, but he thinks it’s for lack of any other conversation. Her mother is on her left, and she has appeared to be deep in discussion with the Australian Foreign Minister for most of the night.

Besides, there was nothing subtle about this Australian at all – he doesn’t even think he’s trying to be subtle – and even she, in all her innocence and lack of experience, can see right through him – her jests this morning had told him that – and he was quite sure now that she was not interested.

He doesn’t feel smug at all.

***

As much as he wasn’t a guest, Charlotte has young children, and he’d offered to stick around in case anything came up. So he enters quietly while each course is being served, standing by the door and waiting until she sees him. It never takes long; she seems to find his eyes within seconds, giving him a small smile and a nod confirming that she’s fine, and he smiles and nods back before returning to his office.

When he steps through the door this time, he hears the music playing and she’s dancing with the Australian in the small ballroom and his heart twists painfully in his chest.

His arms almost ache at the thought of dancing with her again, his beautiful Queen.

He’s just about to leave when he sees Wellington move away from the group he’d been talking to. The Duke had been seated next to the Australian PM; he would know better than most how it was all
going and he’s a sucker for punishment, so he puts the pain of disappointment aside and walks towards the Duke.

As soon as Wellington sees him, he rolls his eyes and strides towards Melbourne. They manage to detour to stand near the wall, away from listening ears. ‘God, Melbourne, this is painful,’ Wellington mutters. ‘The man’s practically drooling. Tell me it wasn’t this bad at the reception this morning.’

Melbourne blinks. The Duke was likely exaggerating, but still. ‘Well, based on your reaction, I’m going to say it was equally as agonising,’ he says, and the Duke lets out a huff.

‘He’s a charmer, for sure, but what does he actually hope to achieve in one night?’

‘Who knows,’ Melbourne replies a little bitterly. He knows exactly what he thinks the man hopes to achieve, but he’s not going to think about that. There was a reason he was still around and dressed in his suit and bow-tie; he’d decided about five minutes after the reception this morning that he wasn’t letting her out of his sight once this dinner was over, Charlotte or no Charlotte.

‘Well, I think she’s just about done with him now,’ Wellington mutters in surprise, and he turns to watch her brow crease into a very distinct and familiar frown, and he feels a small part of him cheer. But then the song comes to an end, and she’s smiling tightly and moving away from Watson as he finishes giving her a small bow, and she’s almost furious, he thinks, by the way her eyes are focused and her mouth has firmed into a line now that she’s off the dancefloor.

‘Uh oh,’ Wellington mutters next to him as she slowly approaches them, making her way through the crowd with a gracious – but tight, he can tell – smile for her guests.

Chapter End Notes

The dress in my imagination I couldn't really find in reality, but I envisage something in this colour and fabric. You can fill in the rest with your imagination. :}


Chapter 65

Chapter Summary

She took my arm
I don't know how it happened
We took the floor and she said

Oh don't you dare look back
Just keep your eyes on me
I said you're holding back
She said shut up and dance with me
This woman is my destiny
She said oh oh oh
Shut up and dance with me

- *Shut Up and Dance*, Walk the Moon

Chapter Notes

Bet you can't guess what's going to happen in this chapter from *that* chapter summary!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘You do me a great honour, Your Majesty,’ Watson tells her as they move around the dancefloor. ‘I have to say that I never imagined that as Prime Minister I would be privileged enough to dance with the monarch, especially not one such as yourself.’

‘I can’t imagine so, given that I’m the first Queen of England in several hundred years, and I do believe that even in this day and age it likely be considered unacceptable for a King to dance with a man at a royal reception,’ she replies perhaps a little more dryly than she should, she thinks, and Watson lets out a huff of a laugh. ‘And do not presume to think that I do not know your own republican leanings,’ she half-teases, half-retorts, and Watson has at least the good grace to blush just a little.

‘Touché, ma’am,’ he replies, ducking his eyes. She glances around at the people gathered around; there were a few couples on the dancefloor now. ‘I will admit that my leanings have shifted somewhat in the past twenty-four hours,’ he adds quietly, looking directly at her, and she raises an eyebrow in response. ‘Your Majesty professes an interest in my country that I have to say we haven’t seen from our monarchs in a number of decades,’ he explains, his voice clearer. ‘My priority is obviously what is best for Australia.’

‘Of course,’ she replies smoothly, and his lips twist a little.

‘I will admit that I had to brush up on my waltz.’
‘Most people do. Lord Melbourne tells me that ballroom dancing is becoming an increasingly rare skill, especially in young people.’

‘Lord Melbourne would be correct, ma’am,’ he replies. ‘It’s a shame. It’s a great way to spend an evening.’

She resists the urge to let out a sigh. *If one has the right partners*, she thinks, but she mustn’t dwell.

‘Yes.’

‘Do you plan to make dancing at formal receptions a feature of your reign, ma’am?’

Would she? If she couldn’t dance with the people she wanted to dance with – with Lord M – at least some of the time, then why would she?

‘Perhaps,’ she hedges. ‘I do enjoy dancing, but as you say, it is not a skill that many can claim in their repertoire and I would rather not inconvenience people more than they already are.’

‘Very gracious, ma’am.’ Watson’s lips twist and he looks down at her. ‘I consider myself doubly-honoured then, ma’am,’ he adds more quietly, his warm brown eyes set intently on hers. She can see how people would be drawn to him, but where she didn’t mind his attention before – even enjoyed it – something in her chaffs against his gaze now and she looks away.

‘I thought Lord Melbourne wasn’t required at Official Dinners, ma’am,’ Watson says after a few moments, his eyes dropping back to hers from somewhere over her shoulder. She thinks Lord M must be standing somewhere in his line of sight behind them, and she looks up at Watson, frowning.

‘He’s not, but it’s important to ensure everything is running to schedule,’ she says. Of course he would be there. It was an important official function – she was here, and so he was here.

‘Does he always stay so…close?’ he asks, tilting his head slightly, and something in his tone puts her on edge. But she must be diplomatic; most people had no idea how the monarchy functioned – especially those who didn’t live in the UK – and she often found herself explaining some things on a very basic level.

‘Yes,’ she says on a laugh. ‘That’s his job.’

‘Then he’s very good at his job, ma’am,’ Watson says a little slowly, and she feels a little swell of pride.

‘Yes, he is,’ she tells him with a smile.

‘Are you able to tell me when he was Prime Minister, ma’am? I don’t recall him at all.’

‘It was a number of years ago now,’ she says vaguely. ‘He was one of the youngest Prime Ministers in our history,’ she says proudly.

‘Oh. I’ll have to google him, ma’am. I know of him through the unfortunate media coverage of late, of course,’ he comments sympathetically, and her jaw tightens slightly. ‘But I really can’t think what he might have achieved during his term in office,’ Watson says thoughtfully, and despite all his charms, this Prime Minster was beginning to get on her nerves.

‘Lord Melbourne did some excellent work with the government in Ireland during the crisis, and was responsible for collaborating with the Trade Union Congress to bring about reform in the laws surrounding union rules and membership, which helped end the strikes,’ she tells him, and Watson
blinks at her. ‘Amongst other things. He’s had quite a varied career and was a very popular Prime Minister.’

‘Oh, excellent, ma’am,’ he says, nodding. ‘The situation in Ireland seemed very tense.’

‘It was,’ she agrees, despite the fact that she really only knew about it because she’d studied it and he’d told her all about it. But her she thinks her point is made, and she almost glares at the man who is currently dancing with her.

Lord M really was a much better dancer. Her toes were intact – it wasn’t that bad, for all his joking – but he wasn’t as comfortable as Lord M. No one was, she thinks a little wistfully, her bitterness at not being able to dance with him returning.

‘Well, it’s pleasing that you have such an attentive assistant, ma’am,’ he says with a smile, and she feels all the veiled insult in his words. Assistant? Attentive? How dare he? He couldn’t possibly know what Lord M had done for her, what he’d sacrificed, how he’d been her rock through everything. What he put up with from small men like Watson, who was Prime Minister of a tiny country that her great-great uncle had invaded and set up with convicts only two hundred years ago. A country of which she was still Head of State.

But she cannot get angry, not here on the dancefloor in front of everyone. She can hear his voice in her head, telling her to be diplomatic, to forgive those who would be rude and rise above them.

Blessedly, the music comes to an end, and he releases her, giving a small bow. ‘Yes,’ she says evenly. ‘Excuse me.’

She turns to where she’d seen Watson’s gaze find Lord M. It takes a second, but she can see him standing there with the Duke, and she doesn’t care about propriety, what’s appropriate and not appropriate. Sir John would be gone soon, and she would get her way.

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‘Lord M, Duke,’ she says tightly in response to their greeting, her face now a diplomatic mask, and he wonders what on earth the other man said.

‘Enjoying the dancing, ma’am?’ the Duke asks, and she looks at him.

‘Not as much as I’d hoped,’ she announces, and he can see it in her face, the set of her jaw, the way her eyes are fire in front of him. But he won’t let her do this – he won’t let her give Conroy more than he already has, not while he’s still around to wreak havoc.

‘Perhaps the Duke might oblige you, ma’am,’ he says before she can speak, and she stares at him. He just holds her gaze, his eyes as firm – but kind – as he can make them. ‘I’m told he’s an excellent dancer,’ he adds evenly, and he’s not giving in on this. He’d fly her through the stars if she wanted, but he would not let her burn herself on the way.

Her eyes eventually soften, and he drops her gaze. He’s won, but oh, it hurts.

‘I would be honoured if you would be willing to dance with a less spritely Prime Minister, ma’am,’ the Duke says at his right, and his mind tells him belatedly that the Duke waited too long to ask.
'Please,' she says after a beat, tearing her gaze away and smiling up at the Duke. ‘I’d like that.’

The Duke holds out his hand and she takes it, and he slips out the door while her back is turned.

***

He’s just turning his desk light off when his phone vibrates in his pocket. He pulls it out and frowns.

_Can you meet me in the Ballroom?_

_I’m on my way._

He’s confused; he’s already stood with her at the end of the evening, watching carefully as she farewelled her guests, cheering a little worriedly as she’d only given the Australian PM a tight smile, and walked her back in the general direction of her rooms. She’d seemed fine then, only really minutes ago, giving him a tired smile before heading down the hall.

He walks quickly down the halls to the room, slipping in through the door. His eyes find hers the minute he enters the now-empty room – she’s standing in the middle of the dance floor, still in her dress and tiara, smiling happily at him and he lets out a breath.

She was so, so beautiful, his Queen, and he knows _exactly_ what she wants.

‘You didn’t think you’d get away without at least one dance, did you, Lord M?’ she says, her eyes twinkling as he walks towards her, and she’s _proud_ of herself, his beautiful Queen. ‘Besides, you said you would.’

‘A rookie mistake, ma’am,’ he says, smiling down at her. But then he frowns and looks around. ‘There’s no music.’

‘Oh, Lord M,’ she mutters as she holds up her phone. It takes her all of a few seconds before she’s found the song and has slipped the phone into his front pocket and he takes her in his arms and starts leading her around the room in a _waltz_, because of course she would choose a _waltz_. They’ve danced together a grand total of three times, and each time has been that most intimate of slow dances, and each time she’s stolen just a little more of his heart with her tiny hands in his, the way she stares up at him unabashedly with her wide blue eyes.

‘You dance so well,’ she sighs, and he ducks a smile.

‘Not as well as you,’ he replies, she shakes her head a little at him, a small smile on her face.

‘I think we’ll have to agree to disagree, Lord M.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

It’s nothing like the Coronation Ball, he thinks – he can’t help but compare the two. She’d been so young then, so beautiful and regal in her dress and tiara, and he’d been so worried, so terrified of his own burgeoning feelings and her champagne-induced adoration, that he’d barely appreciated it. But now, as they dance in the dimly-lit room, her soft hand warm in his and his other hand wrapped around her tiny waist, he can’t believe it’s been not much more than a year since that last dance. She had changed so, his beautiful Queen. She was still young, but age and experience had grown her,
shaped her a little more, and he’s acutely aware that she’s so much more a woman than she was eighteen months ago. He’d thought her beautiful then; he’s captivated by her now.

‘One day, we will dance to an actual orchestra,’ she muses as the song ends and he lets her go.

‘I think the London Symphony Orchestra may be offended by that comment, given that they played at your Coronation Ball,’ he replies, and she rolls her eyes at him as she reaches for her phone. ‘Shall I officially advise them of your opinion formally, or did you want to just drop that one into a conversation somewhere?’ he teases, his face a picture of innocence.

She narrows her eyes at him. ‘For that, Lord M, you’ll have to dance again.’ He blinks and smiles, nodding once.

‘Now?’

‘Yes,’ she declares, pressing her fingers to the screen before slipping her phone into his pocket again and looking up expectantly at him. ‘Well, you seem to think you need the practice,’ she tells him, her head cocked slightly to side, and his lips twist.

‘That I do, ma’am,’ he replies, pulling her close again as she smirks up at him.

He has to be careful not to drown in her eyes, he thinks, as she smiles proudly up at him. He loves her so, his beautiful Queen, but she cannot see how she holds his heart in her hands.

***

‘The Australian Prime Minister has requested a brief audience with the Queen sometime today or tomorrow, if her schedule permits,’ Charlotte tells him from his doorway early the next morning, and his eyebrows rise. Not bloody likely, he thinks.

‘For what reason?’

‘They didn’t say, initially.’

‘Not without a reason,’ he tells her incredulously, shaking his head, and she nods.

‘That’s what I said,’ she says. ‘Apparently, he feels that perhaps he may have offended the Queen in some way, and wishes to apologise. He doesn’t want the relationship between the monarch and the Australian people to be harmed by any inadvertent offence caused,’ she declares, her eyes narrowed at him a little, and he lets out a snort. ‘I said I’d get back to them.’

He hadn’t asked, even after their dance and he’d said goodnight for the second time. If she wanted to tell him, she would. She had dealt with it, clearly, and he’d been happy to leave her to it. He wonders a little scornfully if it really was that bad, or if the man just wanted another opportunity to see her before he flew the ten thousand miles home. He purses his lips before letting out a sigh and looking at her calendar. She almost always had most of the morning free to answer her letters and complete other paperwork, and he knows she doesn’t have anything until two today.

‘I’ll speak to her,’ he says, pushing himself up from his chair. ‘But I wouldn’t hold out hope,’ he says wryly, and Charlotte frowns.
‘What actually happened?’ she asks, and he shakes his head.

‘I don’t know,’ he admits with a small shrug of his shoulders.

***

The fact that she purses her lips at him when he informs her of the request tells him she was more offended than he’d actually thought. What on earth had the man said?

‘Do I have to?’ she asks from behind her desk.

‘No,’ he says tentatively after a pause.

‘But I should.’

He grimaces. ‘Probably,’ he agrees. ‘If he makes you uncomfortable, ma’am, you can ask Emma or Charlotte to join the meeting, or I can be there,’ he says with a frown. She lets out a huff at that, and he has to know now. Maybe he’d said something they actually had to deal with on some other level, made some kind of remark or insinuation or proposition. ‘Ma’am, you don’t have to tell me, but I’ll admit that I’m a little concerned about what was said,’ he starts haltingly, and her eyes flick to his.

When she speaks, her tone is icy. ‘He insulted you.’

Oh.

Oh.

‘He implied that you weren’t a good Prime Minister. And he called you my assistant,’ she almost spits, and this was only a little awkward, he thinks. Of all the most delicate areas to prod, this Australian had to pick this one, and now of all times. She’s a touch sensitive, his little Queen. He lets out a small sigh. ‘He was so condescending!’

He resists the urge to ask her if she’s overreacting; as much as he doesn’t particularly want to see the man ever again, he’s almost entirely sure she’s reading far too much into it. ‘Ma’am, you don’t have to defend me to men of such little consequence,’ he says instead. ‘It’s not worth it.’

‘Of course it’s worth it, Lord M!’ she cries. ‘I won’t have anyone casting aspersions on the capability of any of my staff, especially not you.’

‘Thank you, ma’am, but it’s really not worth an international incident,’ he tells her, and her eyes flash angrily. This is diplomacy, and this is her weakness, he thinks. She’s not really had to deal with this before, and it shows. She should have brushed off his words or fired a salvo or two back and let him know then and there that she wasn’t having it – whatever he’d said. Not this, he thinks. This required deviation from the official public schedule, something that would be noticed.

She shouldn’t get so angry, so worked up, so offended. She shouldn’t care so much. She reveals too much when she gets this angry – when she has almost any emotion of any strength at all. She still wore her heart on her sleeve, his beautiful Queen.

She’s a little offended for herself as well, he thinks, and he understands.

‘Ma’am, I’m not sure anyone particularly cares what he thinks,’ he says gently. ‘And I highly doubt
he’s going to waste his time telling people about the Queen’s staff. But if he insulted you, then you are well within your rights to refuse a meeting.’

She eyes him. ‘He was starting to annoy me a little anyway,’ she admits.

‘Really?’ he deadpans, and she narrows her eyes at him.

‘I suppose I should give him the opportunity to apologise,’ she says on a sigh, before she looks at him, her eyes suddenly twinkling mischievously. ‘Lord M, would you be free to attend a brief meeting between myself and the Australian Prime Minister today?’

***

Despite her laughter and mock-protests that she needed his assistance at the meeting, he’d advised her that perhaps it would be unwise for him to attend – he didn’t like the man, but he wasn’t about to be that deliberately provocative – and she had asked Emma to sit in on the meeting instead.

‘Did it go well?’ he asks later, handing her a coffee, and she grins at him.

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘He’s issued an official invitation for me to visit Australia,’ she says, her face bright but amused, and he smiles incredulously at her.

‘Oh, really?’

‘Yes. He offered to teach me how to surf,’ she tells him, and he tilts his head slightly.

‘I’m sure he did, ma’am,’ he says wryly, and she laughs.

‘He said he surfs every morning when he’s not in Canberra. Apparently, it’s excellent for overall fitness,’ she tells him with a smirk, and he just nods knowingly at her, and she laughs. ‘He was most apologetic. He was concerned that the relationship between our two nations might be affected,’ she says, and he smirks. ‘I advised him that all was forgiven.’

‘Excellent, ma’am,’ he says. ‘I’m glad he felt it necessary.’

‘He had to,’ she says, her chin high. ‘I’m the Head of State of Australia. I could fire him if I wanted to.’

She laughs at him as he almost chokes on his coffee.

***

He stands outside her door and takes a breath before letting it out slowly.

‘Oh, hello,’ she says smiling up at him from her desk as he knocks.

‘Do you have a minute, ma’am?’ he asks, and she nods. ‘Mr Harper’s office called,’ he says carefully, and her face drops into something vaguely terrified. ‘I’ve scheduled Mr Harper in for
Monday morning.’

She stares at him, her eyes wide, and he watches as she swallows, her thumb rubbing against the other. ‘Monday,’ she repeats.

‘Yes,’ he replies, nodding.

She looks down at her desk. ‘Right. Finally,’ she adds quietly, and he lets out a tiny huff. He agrees. She’s waited almost three months for this meeting. Granted, the task assigned to her lawyers hadn’t been small; they’d had a huge amount of work to do, massive amounts of information to sift through and cross-check and organise, a mountain of research and digging to do. But none of that has made the wait any easier.

‘I’m glad we’re going to Brocket Hall on Sunday,’ she declares, looking up at him. ‘A picnic will be a nice distraction.’

He nods. For the first time since Emma had mentioned it, he’s glad too.

Chapter End Notes

Overreact much, Victoria?
Chapter 66

Chapter Summary

Your love is a symphony
All around me
Running through me
Your love is a melody
Underneath me
Running to me
Your love is a song

With my eyes wide open
I've got my eyes wide open
I've been keeping my hopes unbroken

- Your Love is a Song, Switchfoot

Chapter Notes

Note: This is Part 1 of 4.

Early October

He hasn’t been in this room in…well, years. It’s as it was when the three of them had last left; a row of colourful boxes filled with toys, shelves full of neatly-stacked books, the space-themed quilt cover and pillow, the glow-in-the-dark stars arranged on the ceiling in their constellations.

He pulls the door shut behind him. The past could wait for another day.

***

‘William! Twice in three months, and staying overnight? What on earth is going on?’ his gardener calls from his left when he steps out the door, and he smiles.

‘I’ve been busy,’ he replies, and the old man studies him in the same way he’s been doing since William was a boy.

‘Still looking after our Queen? Well, I suppose that’s a reasonable enough excuse. She looks very young,’ Ian replies in his usual slow, time-roughened voice. ‘But then so are you.’
‘Not quite as young,’ he replies a little sardonically, and Ian eyes him.

‘Close enough,’ he throws over his shoulder as they walk around to the back of the house. ‘I don’t know what she was thinking, choosing you,’ he mutters without malice. ‘Thelma thinks she picked you because you’re good-looking,’ he tells him, and William grimaces slightly as the gardener turns to look at him. ‘I told her that that was rubbish, that she chose you because you’d been Prime Minister, and because you’re Lady Melbourne’s son, and you’ve been in politics your whole life,’ he declares, and William lets out an amused sigh. ‘I think Thelma’s probably right too,’ he says, eyeing him. ‘But you tell her I said that and you’ll regret it,’ he says, and William nods obediently. He’d spent enough of his childhood both loving the old man and racing cheekily away from him with a freshly-picked flower in his hand to know he meant it.

‘About the Queen, Ian,’ he says carefully as they reach the back of the house, and Ian grunts. ‘She’s part of the group that’s coming tomorrow.’

Ian comes to a dead stop and turns to stare at him. ‘The Queen? Of England?’

‘Yes.’

‘Queen Victoria?’

‘Yes.’

‘Coming here?’ He nods, and Ian gapes at him for a moment. ‘What on earth for?’ he cries. ‘And why didn’t you tell me before? I’d have pruned the hedges by the bridge last week, and the roses need tending, and I haven’t tidied up around the back of the house yet! William Lamb,’ he growls.

‘Ian, it’s fine,’ he laughs, dodging as the old man mock-swipes at him. ‘She’s not coming to inspect the property! It’s just a picnic.’

Ian eyes him again. ‘A picnic? The Queen is coming to Brocket Hall for a picnic?’

‘Yes. There’s a group coming,’ he explains.

‘Why on earth is she coming to your house for a picnic? She’s the Queen!’ he all but shouts.

‘She asked to see the estate, and even Queens like to enjoy summer with friends on weekends,’ he says, and Ian eyes him again. ‘And there are few places a Queen can relax, away from the prying eyes of the press.’

Ian growls at him again but purses his lips a little resignedly. ‘Lucky for you, I mowed down by the river yesterday,’ he says gruffly, and William smiles.

‘I noticed. Thank you.’

‘You’re lucky I like you,’ Ian grumbles at him, and he grins.

‘What would I do without you?’ he laughs.

‘Get yourself another gardener,’ Ian retorts, and he shakes his head, voicing his disagreement loudly until Ian starts waving his hand and shushing him.

‘I planted that climber, like you asked,’ the gardener tells him as they reach the corner of the house, waving at a patch of freshly-turned soil. ‘It’s a bit late in the year perhaps, but it’s a good spot for them, and with some decent pruning, it should look alright in a few years.’
He smiles down at the little sticks pointing out of the ground against the wall, and he thinks briefly that he’s being silly. He doesn’t really care. ‘Thank you.’

He can feel it; the tides are shifting. Something’s coming. Things have felt different since his return; he’s standing on the horizon and the clouds are rolling in, only he doesn’t know quite where they’ve come from, or where they’re going, or just what they’ll destroy – and uncover – in the havoc he knows they’ll wreak. Her Uncle’s visit and all this talk of her marriage and Conroy’s impending demise have all played a part; they’re sitting in this lull before the storm, a storm that may start tomorrow, but certainly won’t end there. It’s making him uneasy.

Anything that reminds him of her, of her smile and happiness, is thus to be treasured, and, hence, the pile of dirt in front of him with several little sticks poking out.

‘I hope you understand why I couldn’t tell you any earlier,’ he adds later, when they’re walking back around to the front of the house, and Ian lets out a huff.

‘Ah, I know, security and all that,’ he says. ‘Goodness, I’d better not tell Thelma,’ he says, scratching at his cheek. ‘Half the county’ll know within the hour.’

***

It’s another beautiful day, the early October weather quite a bit cooler than their visit to Cliveden, the sky holding just a few more clouds, but the sun was mostly warm and the breeze light, and he thanks whoever is listening that it isn’t raining.

She’s been so tense since Harper’s call that he’d almost regretted telling her as quickly as he had. But he couldn’t have kept it from her for long, not once the appointment was in her calendar, and she deserved to know. He’s so glad that they’ve somehow managed to time this all so perfectly.

The week ahead was looming large in his mind, a mind that had dealt with far worse than John Conroy. He worries how she’ll cope. She’s stronger than she knows, but she has yet to learn just how strong. This will be her biggest challenge yet.

He hears the car well before he sees it – the benefits of gravel driveways and the quiet of the countryside mid-morning on a Sunday – and he turns to watch the car emerge from behind the trees, his chest suddenly tight. He’d tried to shut down his heart, to close it off, but the moment he sees her arrive, when the car pulls up halfway down the driveway and she gets out and looks up at the house, eyes wide and her slightly-open mouth slowly curving into a smile, his stomach bottoms out with nerves and he knows that he’ll never be able to shut her out of his heart. Her opinion means far too much, he notes belatedly. Not that he could do anything about it, even if he wanted to.

She’s standing next to the car, and she waves when she sees him. He waves back, walking quickly down to where the convoy had stopped.

‘I love it, Lord M,’ she declares when he gets close, and he tries and fails to squash the smile her statement brings.

‘Thank you, ma’am,’ he says, and he stands next to her as she takes it all in.

‘I like that it’s red-brick,’ she says after a moment.
‘Me too,’ he agrees, looking back at the house.

‘I think we’ll get some good photos today,’ she announces.

Amalie smiles from across the car roof, before turning and looking around. ‘North?’ she asks, and he points to the right of the house.

‘The house faces south-south west,’ he says, and she nods.

‘Sunset over that bridge,’ she comments, smiling.

‘Yes,’ he agrees. ‘On a clear day.’

‘It’s pretty clear,’ Victoria says hopefully.

‘It is, ma’am,’ he agrees.

‘Oh, and congratulations,’ Amalie tells him. ‘Your driveway is officially the worst – and yours is actually the driveway.’

He shakes his head when Victoria turns and smiles haughtily at him in triumph.

***

When he opens the door, she can’t help but smile. It’s light and open and perhaps a little more ornate than she’d imagined, but the flowers and the paintings and the stairs that appear are stunning. ‘Oh,’ she breathes at the entranceway, looking up at the stairway and the brilliantly sun-lit domed ceiling, and she turns to smile at him. ‘It’s lovely.’

‘I don’t mind it,’ he agrees.

‘I feel like we stepped into the eighteenth century,’ Amalie announces.

‘Yep,’ he agrees. ‘It hasn’t changed much since then.’

‘I love these old houses,’ Charlotte comments as they walk through the doors and into the large dining hall. ‘So much character.’

‘So much gold,’ Amalie mutters, and Victoria agrees, but she thinks perhaps she shouldn’t say anything. Those in glass houses, and all that.

‘In here, yes. Not so much in the rest of the house,’ he replies. ‘Thank goodness,’ he adds, and she grins. It was a bit much in places, she thought. So unlike him, her quiet, unobtrusive Lord M.

‘One room of gold is enough, then?’ Amalie replies.

‘More than enough,’ he agrees.

The rest of the tour through the house is filled with discussions around wallpaper and cornices and old furniture – there were some incredibly detailed pieces, and she’d been as impressed as the others – and with his explanations of the many paintings on the walls.
But then they’d reached the painting of his father – Peniston Lamb – and she’d worked hard to keep her expression as neutral – as calmly interested – as possible. It wasn’t too hard; she’d never really seen a picture of the previous Viscount Melbourne, and she was interested to see this man who had been a father to her Lord M. But it had felt awkward – odd – and she’d eventually moved back and looked over at him standing there with his hands in his pockets, his face a picture of calm. He’d eventually turned his head slightly, catching her eye, and quirked an eyebrow at her quickly, and she couldn’t help but let out a huff of a laugh at his silliness. She didn’t need to feel awkward, she thinks, and she shrugs it off, smiling to herself. He’s clearly fine, and she likes that they share this secret.

The next painting is of a woman in her early forties, she thinks, and she knows exactly who this is without even having to ask. ‘Your mother,’ she says, turning to him, and he gives her a small, pleased smile.

‘Elizabeth Lamb,’ he agrees, turning to look up at the painting.

She thinks she likes the look of this woman who was his mother and feels a pang of sadness that she’ll never get to meet her. Her hair is light brown and curly, and her face soft, but there’s a strength to it, something of a command in her eyes, and she thinks she understands why the artist hasn’t painted her looking directly out; it would be quite intimidating looking into the former Lady Melbourne’s eyes.

Charlotte voices her thoughts. ‘She’s very elegant,’ she says, and Victoria nods.

‘She looks eccentric. Like she’s hiding something from you,’ Amalie says.

‘She was the life of every party,’ he tells them. ‘She drew people to her like a moth to a flame. She was the most sagacious woman I’ve ever known.’

She frowns up at him. ‘Sagacious?’

‘Shrewd,’ he says with a slight tilt of his head. ‘She was quite brilliant, but also wise. And kind.’

‘She did a lot of charity work, didn’t she?’ Charlotte asks with a slight frown, and he nods.

‘Yes, it was very important to her. She hated seeing people sad, would do whatever she could to make people smile,’ he says.

It makes sense, she thinks, that his mother would want to bring happiness wherever she could, and that her son would be the same. He could always make her smile; she knows where he learned it from now. ‘She sounds lovely,’ she tells him quietly as they walk back down the stairs and around into another room, Amalie and Charlotte in front of them, and he gives her that same small smile.

‘She was my greatest champion, ma’am,’ he says a little wistfully. ‘She adored us.’

‘She must have been so proud of you, becoming Prime Minister,’ she says, not wanting the conversation to end, desperate to know more about him, about his family. These people who had loved him, who had made him who he was.

‘She was,’ he says. ‘I think she harangued the entire village and half the aristocracy into voting for me,’ he jokes. ‘But I think she would be most proud of my current position,’ he adds slyly, eyeing her, and she bites her lip. ‘She would have adored you, ma’am,’ he says quietly but emphatically, his head low and a knowing smile on his face, and she grins and glances down at her feet as her heart twinges and swells in her chest.

‘You must miss her,’ she says after a moment, and he nods.
‘Very much,’ he says quietly, his face sad for a moment. ‘But I have Emily,’ he says lightly, ‘who is, in many ways, just like our mother, so I certainly don’t go unchecked,’ he adds, and she laughs.

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When they finish the ground floor of the house, he leads them outside and they can see Emma and Harriet sitting on the picnic blanket under the shade of the trees just back from the edge of the Broadwater.

‘Emma told me to ask you to show me the greenhouses,’ she tells him from next to him as Charlotte and Amalie walk forward, still talking about wallpapers, and his lips twist. Of course she did, he thinks.

‘Ah, the glasshouses are a bit of a mess, ma’am,’ he says a little ruefully.

‘I don’t mind,’ she replies, shrugging, and he cringes.

‘Security being what it is, I only told Ian – the gardener – that you were coming yesterday afternoon, and he didn’t really have time to tidy them. He was mortified that the Queen might have to step over a rake, ma’am,’ he jokes, and she smiles. ‘He made me promise I wouldn’t show you on this visit.’ She nods – a little disappointedly he thinks – before looking up at him with a confused smile.

‘He made you?’ she half-laughs, and he shakes his head.

‘Ian has been the gardener here for almost as long as I’ve been alive, ma’am,’ he tells her seriously. ‘Frederick and I used to hide behind the bushes and jump out and scare him. He’d chase us halfway across the estate,’ he says, and her face brightens as she grins. ‘He caught Frederick stealing a rose for his girlfriend once,’ he adds, mock-cringing, and she laughs. ‘I think we’re both still a little afraid of that rake.’

‘I’ll just have to come back then,’ she tells him with a smile.

‘I guess so,’ he says, smiling down at her. ‘But the rest of the gardens are apparently ready for viewing by the Queen,’ he tells her, stopping and turning back towards the house. She grins widely and follows.

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As they make their way back past the house, Charlotte and Amalie now tagging along behind them again, she thinks this house, for all that it’s him, feels a little at odds with the picture of him in her mind.

He was quiet, classically simple, a beacon of calm and strength in the chaos of her life. He was decidedly not ornate – there was nothing loud or flashy or showy or ostentatious about her Lord M. The marble and faux-Classical Greek architecture just didn’t seem to ring true, and she wonders if maybe she just doesn’t know him that well. She thinks he seems more at home at his house in London, with its huge library and dark wood everywhere and white walls and little touches of colour
and creativity that revealed those little sparks of his personality.

But then they walk around the corner of the house, around the back, and oh, the flowers. They’re wild and beautiful and everything she imagines when she thinks of his gardens and more, and she lets out a sigh as she walks down the bright green patches of lawn in between the flowerbeds. There’s lavender and geraniums and daisies and carnations growing in huge bunches in their carefully delineated sections, little yellow flowers and tiny purple flowers and pale pink ones and vines that were growing up the side wall, along with dozens of other beautiful flowers she’s never seen before and wouldn’t have any idea of the name of, and she thinks that this is what heaven will be like: wild and beautiful and barely tamed, all soft pastels and bright yellows and green, so much green.

She turns to smile widely at him and he smiles back, that sweet little smile he does when he’s genuinely happy, and yes, she thinks he seems at home here, her Lord M, relaxed in his jeans and polo shirt, amongst his flowers that were just a little bit wild but so calm and peaceful.

She wonders, as she catches her reflection in a tarnished, gold-edged mirror on the brick wall, what Buckingham Palace says about her.

Very little, she thinks with a jolt. It says more about her title, her crown and her ancestry, than it does about who she is.

She is more than her crown, she tells herself. Harriet and Emma and Amalie and Anna – and him – have been encouraging her to decide for herself what she liked and what she didn’t, showing her new things and different angles and perspectives, helping her to explore the world and everything in it. She was learning who she was, but she didn’t really know, not yet, who she was without her crown, and she feels small – hollow. Breakable. She is old enough to carry the weight of the crown, but she isn’t even sure she knows who’s carrying it. She knows parts, she holds tightly to elements, but she’s beginning to realise that he was right when he told her so long ago that she needed to be both the Queen and Victoria, but also those people separately, and while she’s well on her way to figuring out who the Queen was, she’s still filling in the hollow that made up Victoria.

The thought threatens to make her feel small, but here in the heaven that was his garden, it loses some of its sting.

She walks past the little gardening hut and around a hedge, letting her fingers brush against the waxy leaves, and she smiles as she sees the long-ish white wooden archway covered in little yellow roses. She walks over, under the archway and into its soft shade, reaching up to touch one of the flowers through the wire that crisscrossed over the top of the wood.

‘Not quite the same yellow roses,’ she hears from behind her, and she turns to see him standing a few feet away under the archway with her, smiling a little wryly at her, and she grins at him.

‘It’s beautiful,’ she tells him sincerely, looking around. ‘The whole garden is beautiful.’

‘I’m glad you like it, ma’am.’

‘I don’t know how anyone could not like it,’ she says. ‘It’s like heaven.’

He chuckles. ‘So heaven is an English garden, ma’am?’ he teases, and she nods after a moment.

‘Heaven must have a garden. Flowers make people so happy,’ she reasons, and he shrugs and nods in agreement.

‘Seems like sound logic to me, ma’am,’ he agrees, reaching over to the vine near her, carefully
picking one of the roses and handing it to her with a small, playful smile.

She smiles at him as she takes it. ‘Do you think the owner will mind?’ she teases, and he tilts his head and frowns in mock-thought.

‘I think the owner would be more than happy for the Queen to have one of his roses,’ he says lightly, and her face falls just a little at the use of her title. *The Queen.*

‘What about me?’ she asks a little breathlessly, the question out before she even knows what she’s saying. ‘What about Victoria?’ And his face drops a little before he smiles a little ruefully, she thinks, his eyes never leaving hers.

‘He would give her the whole garden if he could,’ he says quietly, and his eyes are so soft and intent and seem to see into her soul, and she’s suddenly aware that she’s holding her breath. But then he drops his eyes and turns away, and she’s not entirely sure what’s going on or how she feels and she’s so confused. ‘I’m not sure the owner can really take the credit,’ he says lightly, but there’s something strange in his tone, and she’s confused at this weight in her chest and she frowns a little. ‘It’s really all Ian. I rarely get back here anymore for any length of time,’ he tells her and she nods, looking down at the flower in her hands.

‘You’re too busy working for the Queen,’ she says, the barely-disguised sadness filling her voice.

When he says nothing, she forces herself to look up at him. ‘I’m busy as the Principal Private Secretary to Her Majesty, the Queen, yes,’ he says when she meets his eyes, and she looks back down at her rose. ‘But I also enjoy spending time with my family and friends in London,’ he says quietly, and when she looks up, he’s looking at her, his gaze piercing, and she understands what he’s saying.

She doesn’t want to understand, she wants him to say it out loud, to say that he’s friends with *Victoria* and not just the Queen, but something tells her that he won’t, that he keeps that linguistic boundary there for a reason. The logical side of her knows he should; that it’s important that while they’re friends, he’s still her Private Secretary – an *employee*, he’d said once – and those lines needed to be there.

She also thinks that his sense of chivalry, that noble streak in him, dictates that he will never call her by her name. She will always be *Your Majesty*, or *ma’am* to him, and something in her wants to cry.

She twirls the little yellow rose in her fingers. ‘Thank you for my flower,’ she says, in lieu of saying anything else.

‘You’re welcome, ma’am,’ he says quietly.

*Ma’am.*
Chapter 67

Chapter Summary

If time is money, then I'll spend it all for you
I will buy you flowers with the minutes we outgrew
I'll turn hours into gardens, planted just for us to take
I'll be reckless with my days, building castles in your name

- Next to Me, Sleeping at Last

Chapter Notes

Part 2 of 4.

She hasn’t been to Brocket Hall in years, she thinks. Not since Augustus. She’s not sure anyone has, except maybe Caro. She’d almost forgotten how beautiful it was, the River Lea flowing into the Broadwater with its gorgeous old bridge, all surrounded by the wide green lawns potted with patches of dark-leaved trees. She lets out a sigh and leans back on her hands as she watches Harriet and Charlotte try to skim rocks on the water.

‘Hello,’ a voice says from beside her, and she watches as Amalie sits next to her.

‘Hello,’ she says. ‘Enjoying the estate?’

‘I need to get one,’ Amalie announces, and Emma chuckles. ‘Or marry someone who has one.’

‘That second option might be cheaper,’ Emma says, and Amalie nods. ‘And probably easier for you,’ she adds, eyeing her, and Amalie smiles a little shyly. She was all long legs and beautiful dark skin and curly hair, and Emma wonders briefly why she’s still single. ‘Did you like the house?’

‘Oh, yes. A bit over the top, but I assume it’s listed,’ she says, and Emma nods. ‘So there’s not much anyone can do about that.’

‘The dining hall is the worst of it,’ Emma agrees. ‘Upstairs is much more tame.’

‘Ah, yeah. We only really looked at some of the paintings in the hall upstairs.’

They sit in silence for a moment before Emma frowns a little. ‘What happened to the others?’

‘They’re in the gardens at the back of the house, last I saw,’ she says, and Emma nods. ‘She loves gardens – flowers.’

‘Yes, she does,’ Emma agrees.

‘How long have you known her? The Queen?’ she asks after a moment’s silence.
‘Not all that long. I worked for the King for a short time, and only met her when she became Queen.’

‘I really like her,’ she says, and Emma nods.

‘She’s lovely. So young. I have to resist the urge to mother her,’ she admits, and Amalie hums in agreement.

‘She’s four years younger than me and I almost feel like she’s a younger sister,’ Amalie admits, and Emma smiles to herself. She knows Harriet feels the same, and she’s pleased that the young Queen has such good friends. ‘I hope that’s okay. I’d never tell her that,’ she adds.

‘I think it’s fine,’ Emma says with a smile.

‘You’ve known William forever,’ she says after a pause, and Emma nods.

‘Since we were children,’ she replies.

‘Okay. He’s not seeing anyone, is he?’ she asks a bit haltingly, and she can’t help but blink. Amalie? William? Oh…

‘Not that I know of,’ she says carefully.

But the younger woman must realise what it appeared she was asking, and her mouth drops open. ‘Oh, not for me,’ Amalie says quickly, and Emma smiles. ‘I mean, he’s hot, and lovely, and this is magnificent, but…no.’

Emma laughs. ‘Okay.’

‘I just…’ She trails off, turning to look at Emma, her brow furrowed in a thoughtful frown, before looking down at her hands. ‘Look at this,’ she says, pressing a few buttons on her phone screen and handing it to her, and Emma looks down at the high resolution, zoomed-in picture.

It’s William and the Queen under the rose archway and…oh.

Even from the side, they’re inches apart and it’s written all over their faces, in their body language. No one who saw these would be in doubt of their feelings, just how much the Queen felt for her Lord M, and just how much that love was reflected back to her. Just how deep those feelings flowed.

‘There’s more,’ Amalie says, and Emma scrolls through the photos, each one as telling as the one before it. She looks up, the shame of intruding on something private stirring in her stomach. ‘I think I should store these on a password-protected hard drive at home and not in my cloud storage,’ Amalie says after a moment. ‘Because if those got out…’ she says, shaking her head. She turns to look at Emma, and her face is wary.

‘Yes,’ she replies quietly. ‘I think that might be wise.’

Her mind is spinning. She’s known for a long time, known the depth of his feeling for his Queen, suspected that she felt the same way, but she’s not seen it yet. She scrolls back to that first photo, that most telling photo, where he is standing barely inches away from her and she’s looking up at him with her eyes wide and almost hopeful, a little yellow rose in her hands, and Emma wonders what happened, what was said just before that moment and right after.

She thinks she’s going to start preparing for the fallout. She knows how this is going to end. She knows William Lamb far too well to assume anything else about how this would all play out – with pieces of their hearts strewn across the palace floors. She suspects she’s going to be one of those on
clean-up duty – on both sides.

‘I was taking photos of the garden with my DSLR, and I thought it would be cute,’ Amalie says dryly. ‘A candid photo of them. She loves candid.’ She lets out a small huff and looks away.

‘I’m sure the Queen would love them,’ Emma says. ‘But you can’t give them to her,’ she adds, shaking her head, her voice firm, and Amalie looks at her.

‘I wasn’t going to,’ she says, shaking her head, and Emma nods.

They’re silent for a moment before Amalie speaks again. ‘I didn’t mean to…pry. I was so far away I didn’t really realise until after I’d taken them…’ She trails off, and Emma gives her a small, understanding smile.

‘I know.’

Amalie’s silent for a few moments before she speaks again. ‘They’re not…’

‘No,’ Emma says quietly, before letting out a small sigh. If Amalie was going to be as close to the Queen as it appeared she was, and around for any length of time, she would need to know just what she was getting herself into. ‘And the answer, I suspect, will always be no, no matter what.’

She hears Amalie draw in a breath and let it out slowly. ‘Oh.’

‘Best we prepare for it.’

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He’d meant today to be fun, as light a day as he could make it given what was up ahead, and here he was, cursing himself, cursing his words and his stupid heart for betraying him again.

To be fair, there’s very little he can do when she looks at him like that.

He wonders a little wildly where it came from, her question, that delineation between Victoria and the Queen he’s only heard her make once before, and never as such a challenge.

But he’d told her the truth. Well, part of it. He’d give her the world if he could – the Queen, and Victoria. God knows he loves them both, both parts of this incredible, beautiful woman he serves. He’s not entirely sure he should have been so honest.

They’re down at the picnic blanket now, having just finished lunch, and Emma is eyeing him, and he’s not quite sure why. He can ask her later, he thinks – for now, he’s trying to subtly watch the Queen. He watches as she laughs and smiles, and then as her face just every now and then slips into something more pensive, and she withdraws back into her shell for a few moments. It’s just a few seconds here and there, but he wonders what’s on her mind.

She’s comfortable now in groups, although she still gravitates back to him and Emma, and more so since his return. He wonders, not for the first time, what difference the following week will make. He knows for sure that the meeting that is scheduled to take place in less than twenty-four hours is there in her mind somewhere; he feels the weight of it too. He’s been working hard since Thursday afternoon to keep her mind off it, but he can’t be there every moment, and so he’s already spoken to
Harriet, Emma and Charlotte, and they seem to be doing a good job so far.

Until he’d come along and railroaded their attempts somehow, he thinks, and he mentally kicks himself.

He looks up and she’s looking down at the blanket in front of her, the smile slipping off her face, and he wills her to look at him, glancing around at Harriet and Charlotte who don’t seem to have noticed.

It only takes a few moments and her eyes have flicked to his only a few feet away, and he gives her a small, understanding smile. She smiles back and he nods, a barely imperceptible thing, and her smile widens just a little and he’s satisfied, so he looks away.

‘I’m fairly certain I saw some wild daisies on the other side of the river,’ Harriet declares, and he looks between her and Victoria. ‘I’m going to make daisy chains.’

He sees her frown just a little. ‘How do you make daisy chains?’

‘I’ll show you,’ she replies, and so they both stand and head off with Amalie in tow.

‘I’m going to go for a walk,’ Emma announces. ‘I haven’t seen the gardens in years,’ she tells him deliberately, and he has the good sense to look down in shame.

‘They’re not much different,’ he calls after her, and she waves her hand at him.

‘And I’m going to sit here and enjoy the quiet,’ Charlotte says from beside him. ‘I don’t get quiet often, with two children.’

He smiles. ‘No, I’m sure you don’t,’ he agrees.

‘Thank you for having me,’ she says after a minute, and he shakes his head.

‘It’s great to have you here,’ he says. ‘I was hoping she’d invite you, to be honest.’ She looks at him curiously. ‘I think it would be good for her to get to know you,’ he says carefully, and she nods.

‘Her circle is very limited.’

‘And is still somewhat lacking in variety.’

‘But when she trusts, she gives everything,’ Charlotte comments a little wondrously, and he smiles.

‘Yes,’ he agrees. ‘The list is not long, but once you’ve earned it, that’s it.’

‘I don’t get the impression that this happens easily,’ she says and he shakes his head.

‘No. It’s taken a long time to get to this point,’ he says heavily, waving around in the general direction of everyone.

‘You were the first,’ she observes after a moment, and he shakes his head.

‘Emma,’ he supplies, and Charlotte nods once in acknowledgement.

‘Can I ask how you managed it?’ she asks quietly, and he frowns thoughtfully. He still has no idea what he did to earn her implicit trust almost from day one; he remembers everything from those first few days at Kensington and Buckingham Palaces, and try as he might, he cannot think of what he said, what he did…
He remembers her, his terrified new Queen at her Accession Council meeting, so small and young and panicking and that’s it, he thinks, as he closes his eyes. He’d never forget the first time he saw her: he’d met her wide, utterly terrified eyes across the room, this unknown quantity who had appeared seemingly out of nowhere to lead the monarchy into the twenty-first century. She’d been quite clearly panicking, and his heart had acted before he’d really realised what he was doing.

The fire in her eyes just a few days later had surprised him; it doesn’t anymore. He lives for it now.

He feels the corners of his mouth curl ever so slightly. ‘I smiled,’ he says honestly, and Charlotte looks at him for a moment before nodding.

‘You were kind.’

‘Yes,’ he agrees, and he realises she’s right. She responds to kindness, his beautiful Queen, because she’s had so little of it. ‘Yes,’ he says again.

They don’t talk about it, he and Charlotte, the need to protect her, to shelter her from those who would figure that out and abuse that power until she’s strong enough – experienced enough – to protect herself. He knows Charlotte sees it; he knows she chooses who she meets as carefully as he does for now, and he’s so, so grateful for Emma’s help and his beautiful Queen’s wisdom and perception – and bravery – in her choice of Lady Chamberlain.

She doesn’t need them all the time – she has a natural gift for discernment, honed over the past two years of meeting new people – but she’s still young and desperate for approval.

‘It’s an interesting career move, PM to Private Secretary,’ she comments, and he lets out a huff.

‘Yes,’ he agrees. ‘But it’s been worth it,’ he says honestly.

‘I can see that,’ Charlotte says, and he wonders a little concernedly just what else she can see.

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‘And you just thread it through like that,’ Harriet says, and Victoria pulls the stem of one daisy gently through the little hole in the stem of another she’d created with her fingernail. ‘And repeat.’

‘So easy,’ she says.

‘Yep!’

‘Until you rip one,’ Amalie says, frowning down at a daisy before tucking it behind her ear.

‘Beautiful,’ Victoria tells her, and Amalie does a mock mini-bow, hampered a little by the fact that they’re sitting on the grass, and Victoria grins.

‘I’m sure that guy I saw on your Instagram yesterday thinks so,’ Harriet says teasingly, and Victoria’s eyes widen. Amalie just shakes her head, a half-smile on her face.

‘Cousin,’ she says with a smile.

‘Dammit,’ Harriet mutters.
'So close, yet so far,' Amalie says. ‘Besides, he’s twenty-five. I like my men actually men.’

Victoria stares at her. ‘What do you mean?’ she asks.

‘Most men don’t mature until they’re at least twenty-eight,’ Harriet tells her. ‘They’re barely tolerable until then. Most aren’t worth looking at until they’re thirty.’

‘Preach,’ Amalie says, and Victoria blinks.

‘Well, I guess that explains why Henry Grey is so annoying,’ she says tentatively, and Harriet laughs.

‘Goodness, yes,’ she agrees. ‘Too busy trying too hard,’ and Victoria nods. ‘Even George was vaguely irritating when I first met him, even though he’s almost ten years older. I dumped him once for being a prat,’ she says.

And as Victoria stares at her friends she realises that oh, she knows nothing. Her mother talks about her getting married, about a husband – and she doesn’t know the first thing about men. She knows that they want her to marry Albert, but he’s the same age as her, so if Harriet and Amalie were right, he wouldn’t be even remotely decent for another four and a half years. Well, at least she had time, she reasons. If she even likes Albert.

The thought of marrying Albert, of choosing Albert, makes something in her stomach tighten and her heart ache just a little.

‘My last date thought it was cool that I was a photographer – until he asked me what I really wanted to do with my life,’ Amalie says dryly, and Harriet’s eyes widen.

‘Ohhh, that’s rough.’

Well, at least her job is unquestionable: she’ll be Queen forever. Everyone will know that.

‘What about you, ma’am?’ Harriet asks, her eyes playful. ‘Henry Grey aside, I saw that photo with John Gladstone. He’s cute.’

Victoria can feel her face flush bright red, and she stares down at the daisies in her hands. Something squirms low in her stomach again, stronger this time, and she resists the urge to do anything other than stay as neutral as possible. ‘No,’ she says rather emphatically. ‘Too…boyish,’ she says.

‘Oh, no,’ Amalie says, looking at her phone screen where she’s obviously googled Gladstone. ‘I agree. He’s definitely a boy.’

‘A cute boy,’ Harriet says. ‘Give it time. He might come good.’

‘We talked about rugby,’ Victoria says, frowning slightly. ‘I know nothing about rugby,’ she says, scrunching up her face a little as Amalie and Harriet let out a laugh, and she laughs with them.

She squashes that squirming thing in her stomach ruthlessly, focusing on the conversation. She didn’t want to think about boys, about husbands. As much as she’s learned about marriage, she’s quite happy just as she is for now, with her friends and her Lord M. Just the way things were.
Chapter 68

Chapter Summary

When all the tears are rolling down your face
And it feels like yours was the only heart to break
When you come back home and all the lights are out
And you getting used to no one else being around

Oh, oh, I'll be there
When you need a little love, I got a little love to share
Yeah, I'm gonna, I'm gonna, I'm gonna come through
You'll never be alone, I'll be there for you

- *I'll Be There*, Jess Glynne

Chapter Notes

Part 3 of 4.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He’s talking to Charlotte’s newly-arrived husband when he sees her coming, and he has to drag his eyes away and down to the river in front of him so he can focus on finishing his sentence.

She’s got her hair half-up and half-down, curled around in a kind of half-ponytail, the daisy chain she’s obviously made resting on her hair where it’s curled, and in her floral knit and trousers, she looks beautiful, he thinks. Just...pretty. Like some fairy queen that lived in the woodlands around his house, and he lets out a huff at how stupid he was being.

‘I see you learned something new today, ma’am,’ he half-jokes, when she comes to stand next to him after greeting Charlotte’s husband, looking out at the river.

‘I did,’ she agrees. ‘What do you think?’

‘Very regal,’ he says on a laugh.

‘I think I like it better than St Edward’s crown,’ she jokes.

‘Certainly lighter, ma’am,’ he agrees.

‘And smaller. The St Edwards crown is bigger than my head,’ she says, and he hears Charlotte let out a laugh next to him.

‘I thought you looked very regal from my view on the television, ma’am,’ Charles Canning says. ‘But I can see how daisies might be preferable for daily use.’

She hums in an agreement, smiling and nodding.
'I might show Charles the gardens, ma’am,’ Charlotte says, taking her husband’s arm as Victoria nods.

‘Enjoy,’ he says, and she lets out a small sigh next to him when they’re gone.

‘Where are Harriet and Amalie, ma’am?’ he asks, looking over her head in the direction she’d come from.

‘They’ve gone exploring,’ she says, and he studies her. ‘I’m a little tired,’ she says after a few seconds of scrutiny, looking back out over the river, and he nods. He wonders what has happened that she’s abandoned her friends and come back to him, but he’s not going to push.

‘Want to go for a walk?’ he says after a few moments, and she smiles and nods. She likes to move, his little Queen. If she moves, she’ll likely start to talk, and he might be able to get to the bottom of what’s on her mind today. That, or he’ll just have to focus on cheering her up.

He leads her down the little path back up towards the house but turns off down another path before they get too far.

‘Do we have to put up photos from every event?’ she asks out of the blue, and he looks at her.

‘No,’ he says after a moment. ‘That’s up to you and Charlotte, ma’am. I imagine she’ll want to post something though,’ he says and she nods. He waits as they walk along in silence.

‘Harriet said something…’ she starts, before stopping. ‘You told me once I live in a gilded cage. You were right. It is a cage. Everyone is free to look in and see what they wish, think what they want, and there is nothing I can do about it,’ she blurts out, and he looks at her. She’s looking down at her feet, her face tight and frustrated. ‘I know it’s part of being Queen, and that I shouldn’t complain.’

Oh, this is what’s been on her mind, and today has obviously done nothing but hurt her further, he thinks, and he curses himself for thinking this visit was a good thing.

‘It’s difficult to have your life on display, ma’am,’ he says carefully, and she looks up at him, something flashing across her eyes, and for all he knows that she’s come to him about this for a reason, he thinks she occasionally forgets that he’s been there too, that he knows what she’s going through to some extent. ‘Especially the sensitive parts.’ Her face crumbles a little and she looks down at the ground in front of her as she stops. ‘It will always hurt, ma’am,’ he tells her, and he can’t lie to her. It had hurt for a while, every time someone said something new about Caro, about Augustus, about his life afterwards. When Byron published that damn book. ‘And no one who does not live it can really understand,’ he tells her. ‘They mean well.’

‘I know,’ she says quietly, nodding.

‘Besides, the world doesn’t see everything,’ he says a little more lightly. ‘No one knows you’re here today, ma’am.’

She lets out a sigh, before nodding. ‘True.’

‘The Queen belongs to the public,’ he reminds her, and he knows exactly why he’s saying this again after so long. ‘But you belong to who you choose.’ As much as you can, he thinks, cursing Conroy and his greed, and he lets out a sigh.

She nods, playing with her fingers, and he waits for whatever it is that’s really bothering her to emerge. ‘What if they don’t find the contract? What if I can’t stop him?’ she asks on a whisper, looking directly at his chest, and he reaches out and places his hands gently on her upper arms.
‘Then you will weather that storm like you have done the previous ones, and like you will all future ones: with your inherent grace and dignity, and with your friends by your side,’ he tells her, and she looks up at him through her eyelashes, eyes wide and glassy and so vulnerable. He wants nothing more than to tell her it will all be okay, that of course they’ll find something, that Conroy will be gone by the end of the week and this will all be nothing but a horrible memory soon enough. But he can’t; he doesn’t know that for certain and he will not lie to her.

At least he knows what’s been bothering her all day. The delineation between the Queen and Victoria, Conroy’s possibly-impending book. Her public life and her private life. She was still learning, his beautiful Queen, still building that tough outer skin. He remembers what that’s like; each time you thought you’d plugged the hole, they found another.

‘Ma’am, trust me. There is no point in worrying. There is nothing you can do now, not until the meeting tomorrow.’

‘I know. I just…’

‘I understand,’ he says, and she looks up at him. ‘Whatever happens, it’s going to be rough,’ he says, when she’s quiet again. ‘Trust me?’ he asks finally, and she looks up him, her eyes wide but scared, and when she nods, he lets his hands drop to his sides.

She turns and they keep walking, and he looks around. ‘We’re almost there, ma’am,’ he tells her a little playfully, and she frowns at him.

‘Almost where?’

‘Augustus’s favourite tree,’ he tells her and she blinks at him, her face transforming into something more surprised and maybe a little pleased, and he’s glad he’d brought her this way. ‘It’s just through the trees up here.’

They detour off the path and walk through the small patch of trees until they come to one particularly tall pine tree on the other side, one with particularly low bottom branches, and he stops in front of it. It’s just as he remembers from his own childhood. From a little over a decade ago.

‘It was quiet, and high up, and it terrified Caro the first time he did it,’ he says. ‘I would climb up after him occasionally.’

‘Wow,’ she says, looking at him and then back at the tree, craning her neck.

‘You can see the whole estate from the top,’ he says, and her mouth drops even further as she looks back at him.

‘He’d climb to the top?’ she asks incredulously, and he nods, smiling.

‘I did all the time, when I was a kid,’ he says, and she blinks at him before craning her neck to look back up at the tree. ‘I haven’t climbed it in years,’ he says, the bittersweet memories tainting his words.

‘I was never allowed to climb trees,’ she says after a few moments, and he blinks. Of course she wasn’t. The heir to the throne wasn’t allowed outside on her own, let alone to climb a tree.

‘Climbing trees was one of the best parts of being a kid, ma’am,’ he tells her. ‘You almost feel like you can fly,’ he adds wistfully, looking up at the branches. The tree had grown a little in the past decade, he thinks. That, or he just remembers it being smaller. No wonder Caro had panicked, he thinks.
When she looks back at him, her eyes meet his, and he knows that look and oh, no. He starts shaking his head, his mind casting around for anything, any excuse to convince her that she cannot. ‘Not in those shoes,’ he says, looking down at the sandals on her feet, the pieces of leather with absolutely no grip.

‘I can take them off,’ she tells him after a moment and his eyes go wide. She’s never climbed a tree before, and she’s going to want to go to the very top, he knows it, and Alex would kill him if he found out – he’d never trust him again, he’d make him sit through one of those security briefings they give the new staff as punishment – and if she fell, oh, if she fell... He loves her, his beautiful Queen, but there is no way she’s climbing this tree today. This was a huge mistake. Huge. He should have known better – of course she was going to want to climb the tree; this was Victoria – but he hadn’t really thought about it, so focused on trying to drag her out of her malaise.

‘Ma’am, it’s not safe,’ he tells her. ‘I broke my arm falling out of a tree.’

‘You can climb up after me, catch me if I need it,’ she tells him, and oh, that’s so much better, he thinks dryly.

He just shakes his head again, almost begging, but when she looks at him with mischief in her eyes, he knows exactly what she’s going to do before she does it. He closes his eyes and drops his head as she unclips her sandals and walks towards the tree. ‘Ma’am, please,’ he almost groans.

‘Oh, Lord M,’ she mutters, looking up at the branches, and he cannot believe she’s going to try to climb a tree with nothing but him to protect her.

He lets out a frustrated grunt and walks to stand next to her. ‘I’m going up before you,’ he tells her, and she grins at him. ‘And we cannot go up far, ma’am,’ he all but declares, the tone of his voice walking a fine line between duty and insubordination, but she just nods. Now she decides to listen to him, he thinks, and he blinks at her, shaking his head as he reaches for the first branch.

He looks down at her from a few branches up; her brow is furrowed a little in concentration as she studies the tree. His reach is easily a foot longer than hers, and he easily pulls himself up the first few branches. But she’s not a whole lot taller than Augustus had been, and she won’t be able to reach the way he has.

He wonders if she’ll figure it out. She’s likely never done anything even remotely like this before.

He watches as she studies the trunk and the branches for a few seconds more before she uses the little knob not far from the base of the tree as a step, pulling herself up the first few branches slowly and carefully, listening to his instructions and letting out a little laugh as she reaches eye level with him.

It takes a few minutes, but she’s stronger than he’d realised – and he’s suddenly very glad he’s started working out again because this could have been an exercise in embarrassment, he thinks – but he estimates they’re about five or six metres up when he stops. She’s on the branch just below him, almost right next to him, clinging to the trunk of the tree and grinning brilliantly up at him, and he shakes his head at her.

‘Be careful not to rip your trousers, ma’am,’ he says. ‘Try explaining that to Peter or Callum.’

‘Stray fence wire?’

‘I don’t have wire fences, ma’am.’

‘Oh. Stray rose bush?’ She looks up at him. ‘Can we go a little bit higher? I can’t see much.’
He eyes her, but she’s coped well enough so far, and he thinks that the way she’s been clinging to
the trunk and the branches that she’ll likely be okay. Famous last words, his mind helpfully supplies,
and he rolls his eyes at himself.

‘Just a few branches. I’m already panicking,’ he tells her, and she grins.

‘You’re loving it, Lord M,’ she tells him, and she’s right. He is. For all his panicking, he hasn’t
climbed a tree in a good decade, and he’d missed it. And despite his fears, that she could fall – or
worse, be caught by her security – he’s thoroughly enjoying sharing this with her. Showing her
something else she’s missed. He hates – loves – that she knows him this well.

He climbs up another few branches, watching her carefully, and stops when he thinks he’s found a
decent viewpoint through the branches. He moves around so he’s behind the trunk, and she’s to the
side, and when she stands on the branch, hugging the trunk with one arm and a branch with another,
her daisy chain still resting on her head despite the climb, she lets out a sigh. He’s right behind her,
one arm holding on to the branch above him, and the other resting against the trunk above her arm,
ready to grab her should anything happen.

‘Having fun, ma’am?’ he asks a little dryly.

The way she grins at him gives him his answer. ‘This is wonderful,’ she says, looking out through
the branches at the Broadwater and the house and the treetops in front of them. The view is as
beautiful as he remembers and he sighs a little. It’s these moments of lightness from what feels like
another lifetime that he realises he misses the most; when the world seems to stop for a little while
and he can just be quiet, with everything stripped away and the too heavy weight of the world resting
on someone else’s shoulders for just a few brief moments.

When he tilts his head slightly he can almost see it her face too – it’s a brief interlude before she
returns to her crown. His heart aches for what she will climb down to, yearns to take it from her,
carry the pain on his own calloused, wearied shoulders, but he cannot. She is strong, his beautiful
Queen, and he will do whatever he can to show her just how deep her strength runs.

‘Thank you,’ she says, smiling at him, and he shakes his head but smiles back. He thinks as he
climbs down before her, only moving his hands down as her feet threaten to step on them, that
perhaps he should be thanking her.

They’re walking back towards the house and the picnic blankets, along the little gravel path, and
she’s laughing at his story of how Frederick used to hide in amongst the trees to avoid their father
when he was in trouble, when they come to an intersection in the path. He continues walking
towards the house but she stops, looking down the pathway lined with tall, thick hedges, the sunlight
just filtering down through the tall trees around it.

‘What’s down there?’ she asks, looking from the pathway to him and back again.

He’s vaguely aware that they’ve been gone a while, spent quite a bit of time alone today, just the two
of them, and while he’s happy to be whatever she needs at the moment, this was not the point of the
picnics.

‘Nothing much,’ he says, shaking his head. ‘More trees, an old statue, a colony of birds that call the
trees home.’

‘What kinds of birds?’

‘Rooks.’
‘Oh. Next time?’ she says, and he nods.

‘Next time,’ he agrees.

Chapter End Notes

*ducks*
Chapter 69

Chapter Summary

It is the calm water
In the middle of an anxious sea
Where heavy clouds part and the sunrise starts
A fire in the deepest part of me
So I let go and in this moment I can breathe

- Joy, Sleeping at Last

Chapter Notes

Part four of four.

Emma is sitting on the blanket alone, reading a book, when he returns. ‘What happened to the Queen?’

‘Photos with Amalie,’ he says, and she nods. ‘Ian rang to see if everything was going well.’

‘He’s checking on you,’ Emma says with a smile.

‘Of course,’ he replies. ‘I told him that the Queen was very impressed by the gardens and was currently finishing taking photos of the flowers for her personal collection.’

‘Oh, well done,’ she says on a laugh, and he smiles.

‘I also informed Her Majesty that there was cake for afternoon tea,’ he says, and Emma grins. ‘So I expect she’ll be back soon enough.’

He yawns and collapses back on to the blanket next to Emma, rubbing his hands over his face. ‘Nap time?’ she asks wryly, and he eyes her.

‘It’s been a long week.’

‘It’s been a long year,’ she mutters.

‘And it’s only going to get longer,’ he adds, and she sighs as he sits back up.

‘I suppose it’s too much to ask for things to be quiet for a while?’ she says, and he eyes her.

‘Lady Chamberlain,’ he reminds her, and she smiles a little smugly.

‘You have to admit, it was a brilliant move.’
'One that prompted some public debate at a time where public debate about the Queen was the last thing anyone needed,’ he points out a little wryly, and she waves him off.

The photos have been playing at the back of her mind since Amalie had shown them to her earlier in the day, and she’s still no closer to a decision on what to do about them. She wants to ask him outright, ask him what exactly was going on, but she’s fairly sure she already knows the answer and she worries a little about the ramifications of such a question.

She’s still quite sure he thinks his adoration is one-sided. In fact, she’d bet that the thought hadn’t even occurred to him that her feelings bent that way. She holds him close, her Lord M, but he’s safe and kind and Emma suspects he thinks it’s more of a comfort, a security where she’s had none for so long. He is her mentor and guide, someone she can trust.

She thinks perhaps that’s what the Queen thinks too. For now. She’s seen the way the Queen looks at her Lord M, in a few unguarded moments.

‘She does seem a little pensive today,’ she ventures, watching him carefully, and he hums. ‘Is it just the meeting?’

‘No,’ he replies after a while. He shakes his head. ‘They raised her to be a Queen, not a woman,’ he mutters, and Emma nods.

‘And you’re the one to show her the difference?’ she points out and his eyes flick to hers, his face hard, but she holds his gaze and he eventually drops it, looking down at the blanket in front of his crossed legs. Maybe that was a little harsh, she admits to herself.

‘I think Harriet and Amalie are doing a fine enough job of that,’ he returns. He’s uneasy, and he should be, she thinks. She just watches him as he stares out at the Broadwater, his fingers ruthlessly pulling at some grass entwined in the threads of the blanket.

There are voices, the sound of laughter carried by the wind, and she turns to see all five of them only metres away.

‘Don’t,’ he says before she can speak. ‘I’m trying,’ he adds quietly, and she puts her hand on his arm.

‘I know,’ she tells him. ‘I just don’t want you to get hurt.’

‘I think it’s all a bit too late for that,’ he replies more bitterly than she’d expected as the subject of the conversation sits down next to him, and she wonders what on earth that means.

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‘Would you mind if I sent your gardener a note to say thank you?’ she asks as they sit on the blanket.

‘I think he’d be delighted, ma’am,’ he replies, picturing the look on Ian’s face. Thelma’s. Goodness. He’d be the golden boy if he wasn’t already.

She munches on a biscuit and watches the others walk around the edge of the Broadwater. ‘Good,’ she says. ‘The garden is wonderful – and he manages it all on his own,’ she half-asks, and he nods. ‘I have three gardeners. He’s amazing.’
‘He is, ma’am,’ he agrees, before smiling. ‘You should see Melbourne Hall,’ he says, and she turns to look at him. ‘Frederick’s home, when he’s here. Those gardens are quite incredible,’ he says, and she blinks.

‘I didn’t realise your family had more than one home,’ she says, and he nods. ‘Oh.’

‘You alone have seven, ma’am,’ he teases, ‘although technically more,’ he adds, and her cheeks pink a little as she grins.

‘I haven’t met Frederick,’ she says, and he shakes his head.

‘He works for you as well, ma’am,’ he half-jokes, and she looks at him in surprise. ‘Well, technically, he works for your government,’ he adds, she huffs at him. ‘He’s a diplomat in Vienna.’

‘Oh. I haven’t been to Vienna,’ she says.

‘You’d like it, I think,’ he tells her, and he knows she would — at least the city with its Concert Hall and the Music House, and Belvedere Palace with all its beautiful artwork. ‘It’s a beautiful city.’

‘I haven’t been to so many places,’ she says on a sigh. ‘I would like to travel.’

‘You can, ma’am,’ he tells her after a moment, frowning slightly at her wistful tone, and she looks back at him with that little furrow in her brow.

‘I thought I had to be invited to countries before visiting.’

He shakes his head a little. ‘Only for formal state visits, ma’am,’ he says. ‘You can travel personally wherever you like.’

He watches as the light dawns in her eyes, and a slightly incredulous smile spreads across her face. ‘Really?’ He smiles as he nods, and she bites her lip and looks out at where the others are walking across the bridge. ‘I can go wherever I like,’ she says, and he lets out a little huff of amusement.

‘Well, almost anywhere. You might like to consider the countries that have invited you first,’ he adds, mock-grimacing and she rolls her eyes a little at his silliness.

‘Could I go to Australia next year?’ she asks. ‘I would like to learn how to surf,’ she adds, her face a mask of innocence, and when he makes a show of rolling his eyes at her, she giggles.

‘We’ll have to put the request through the formal channels, but I’m sure it could be arranged, ma’am.’ He leans forward and grabs a biscuit. ‘You might even add on some time in New Zealand,’ he adds, and her eyes widen. ‘Well, if you’re going to go all that way.’

‘New Zealand,’ she breathes, before nodding and grinning at him. ‘Yes, please.’

He smiles. ‘I’ll talk to Charlotte and we’ll see what we can come up with, ma’am.’

She lets out a happy sigh, and they sit in silence for a while before she speaks again.

‘I think Amalie was right. If I had a beautiful country house and an estate like this, I would never want to return to London.’

He narrows his eyes a little at her. ‘If?’ he asks, and she rolls her eyes and lets out a laugh.

‘I know, I know. It’s just…it’s so peaceful. So quiet. The gardens are beautiful, and the river. I don’t…I feel less like the Queen here – like I can just be me,’ she says quietly, tentatively, and oh,
how his heart swells and breaks at her words. He’d been afraid that she wouldn’t like it, or that it would just be another beautiful property that she’s visited. It’s stupid, he knows – selfish. He has no claim on her affections, or where she bestows them. He wouldn’t blame her if she didn’t love it. His home is no Cliveden House.

But her voice is also so sad, so tired, and he understands. If she’d never been Queen, if she hadn’t been born to wear the crown and hold that most prized title, she wouldn’t be having a meeting tomorrow in the hopes of safeguarding her childhood – the worst parts of her life – from the bitterness and rapacious greed of John Conroy.

Today has not been happy enough, he thinks, so he chooses to focus on the good. ‘I’m glad, ma’am,’ he says as meaningfully as he can – he is glad; so, so glad that she feels safe here – and she gives him a small smile before she rocks her shoulder against his arm before lying back on the rug next to him, and he thinks that maybe he’s won this battle.

‘Although,’ she adds a little while later as she sits up, ‘I agree with Amalie. Your dining room is very…busy,’ she says diplomatically, and he huffs a laugh.

‘Yes,’ he agrees. ‘But I don’t really come to Brocket Hall for the house, ma’am,’ he tells her, and she nods, looking back out over the Broadwater.

‘You come for the freedom.’

He studies her for a moment, and he wonders if this is the next phase, the next stop on her slow journey of self-discovery, and in so much that he’s pleased that she’s exploring all of this, developing her own personality tentatively at times and with some care, he worries a little about where this particular journey ends.

She will never be just Victoria. The venn diagram of her identity would always be just that: a venn diagram, and there had to be some overlap. She cannot be two completely different people; she cannot hide the whole of who she is from the world, and it would be far too difficult to try.

And nor does he want her to, he thinks a little selfishly. She’s lovely, and her people will love her just the way she is. Besides, she’s not that kind of person, at least not yet. She hasn’t learned how to hide herself that well, and he thinks she likely never really will. He doesn’t think she’ll really completely perfect a dual personality.

But he understands what she’s saying now; she appreciates the break from carrying the weight of the crown so constantly. A change of scenery from the constant reminders of the oft-heavy weight of expectation.

‘Yes,’ he says quietly. ‘Everyone needs a break every now and then. Even me,’ he says a little teasingly, and she smiles happily at him.
Chapter 70

Chapter Summary

Don't go holding your breath
You know that I'm not done yet
There's still a fight in me left
Don't go shouting out loud
That you're claiming the crown
I'm down but not out

- Silhouette, Birdy

Chapter Notes

There's a reference to a newspaper article that was originally mentioned in Chapter 6, in case context is required. And, of course, there's the Coronation Ball (Chapter 12) and the photos making the internet (Chapter 19), and then Lord M's resignation can be found in Chapter 25.

When he arrives at her office Monday morning, coffees in hand, she’s sitting at her desk, working on her laptop with her headphones on and he thinks that maybe she’s okay. When she pulls the headphones off at his arrival, he can hear the music blaring out from where he’s standing six feet away, and when her eyes meet his as he hands her the coffee, they’re wide and a little red-rimmed and she drops his gaze immediately and oh, no, she’s not okay at all.

‘Good morning, ma’am,’ he says, and she gives him a small, distracted smile as she presses something on her phone and the headphones fall silent.

‘Good morning, Lord M,’ she replies, the coffee cup going straight to her lips. All her calm from yesterday was gone and he resists the urge to let out a sigh. It was perhaps a little too ambitious to hope that she wouldn’t panic.

‘Sleep well, ma’am?’ he asks, knowing full well the answer: she’s been awake half the night worrying, trying to solve the problem, to come up with some kind of solution, all the while knowing that there’s nothing at all that she can do. He knows the feeling.

‘Not really,’ she says, not looking up at him.

‘Mr Harper is signing in,’ he tells her, and her eyes flick to his. ‘He’ll be here in a minute.’

She nods, biting her lip and looking back down at her desk.

He understands why she worries; he feels the weight of it too. He knows what Harper will find – he knows enough to be entirely sure that what Conroy has done is breach of contract, but he doesn’t
think there’ll be enough to make it stick to him. She has hundreds of staff, and he suspects that it’ll all be just circumstantial. Unless he was stupid enough to use Palace phones or emails, or unless someone in the press is willing to give him up – and that’s never happening – they won’t officially catch him.

But it doesn’t really matter. And no matter what Harper says, Conroy is going. He’s going to make sure of it.

She just hasn’t got the experience here, doesn’t really know how to bluff her way through things just yet, to take what she’s got and turn it into something useful. Whatever Harper says, she can use it to remove Conroy. She has it all already, the power and the knowledge to achieve her goal, but she needs to go through this and work it out for herself. Everything is still a little black and white for his beautiful Queen, but she’ll get there, he knows. And he’s more than happy to help her learn.

He’s not really worried about that. He worries about what Conroy will do when he’s gone, even if they find that first contract. She’s strong, his beautiful Queen, but she’s a woman, human, and she breaks easily. And there would be so little, so painfully little he could do to protect her.

Late at night when he’s lying in bed staring at the ceiling and all he can feel is her tiny frame in his arms, sobbing against his chest, her hands clinging to his shirt, his mind supplies him with all the ways he could remove John Conroy from the earth. Each is as violent and vicious as the next, and the thought of visiting pain upon that worm of a man fills him with a darkness, an anger that he clings to for a few hard moments before he surrenders it to rationality.

If he kills Conroy, he’ll go to jail for the rest of his life, and he’ll never see her again. She’ll lose him.

He thinks at his darkest that it’s almost, almost worth the trade-off. She would be safe. But there would be others, men and women who came along whose sole reason for befriending the Queen was to see what they could get out of it, and then he wouldn’t be around to help protect her.

He doesn’t think she would see the trade-off as worth it, either. And he doesn’t particularly relish the idea of jail. That, and he doesn’t think he could really do it. He’s no killer.

He thinks.

During daylight hours, he almost laughs at his own stupidity.

But oh, he thinks the Spanish Inquisition had some toys that he would so love to use on Conroy. He dared hurt his Queen – he’d spent years doing it, and he would pay.

He turns when he hears footsteps; it’s Emma. ‘Ma’am, Mr Harper is here. Shall I show him in?’

She sucks in a breath and nods quickly. ‘Yes, thank you.’

He turns to look at her and he thinks she’s going to be sick. ‘Ma’am,’ he says gently, and she looks up at him, before taking a deep breath and letting it out quickly.

‘I’m okay,’ she tells him, and he nods.

‘Of course, ma’am,’ he replies, and she looks up at him, eyes narrowed slightly, but he just looks innocently back at her and she shakes her head and rolls her eyes a little at him, and he’s pleased he’s managed to distract her for a few brief seconds.

‘Your Majesty!’ Harper says, taking her hand and pressing a kiss to the back of it, which he’s pleased to see still elicits a small smile.
‘Mr Harper.’

‘My sincerest apologies for the time that this has taken, ma’am,’ he says as they walk over to the table. ‘There was just so much to sift through. You are very popular, ma’am,’ he tells her, nodding, and she smiles.

‘I’m not sure whether that’s a good thing or not,’ she half-mumbles.

‘Oh, the vast majority seems quite enamoured of you, ma’am, and quite rightly,’ he tells her, and her eyebrows peak in amusement. ‘It’s just a select few,’ he adds a little indignantly. ‘But that’s why we’re here.’

‘Yes,’ she says, her voice quavering just a little. ‘The first contract?’ she asks.

Harper smiles triumphantly and holds up a folder, and everything in him sags in relief. He closes his eyes for a moment, sending up a silent thanks to whoever was listening for answering his desperate prayers.

‘It took some digging, ma’am – it was the last thing we found, actually, but it would seem that your father’s lawyers were vigilant – and quite thorough,’ Harper tells her with a smile. ‘And Sir John, it would seem, was not.’

This was it; the only real obstacle in her path, the thing that scared her the most. The Mrs Melbourne rubbish had come to nothing – she still had him, her Lord M, and she had won that round, wounded but successful. But this threatened to derail her entirely, and there would have been so little she could do about it. This was horrible – the worst kind of revenge on a woman who was slowly picking herself up and out of the hole they had tried so hard and for so long to bury her in.

He watches as she lets out a shaky breath, and then she turns her head to look at him and there are tears in her eyes and oh, he can’t hug her in front of Harper. He can’t do anything at all. Harper already knows too much.

He just gives her a small, knowing, relieved smile, one that grows slightly bigger when she smiles back at him, biting her lip and eventually dabbing at her eyes. She lets out a huff as she rolls her eyes at her own display of emotion.

‘My apologies, Mr Harper,’ she says, taking in a breath and letting it out slowly.

‘Not at all, ma’am,’ he says kindly. ‘I’m so pleased for you, ma’am. I must admit I let out quite a loud cheer when we found it last week. Gave one of the new clerks quite the fright.’

She smiles at him, taking a tremulous breath before letting it out in a rush. ‘Thank you,’ she says, and Harper nods.

‘These are my favourite kinds of meetings, ma’am,’ he tells her matter-of-factly but with a smile. ‘So I thank you.’

He places the folder on the desk in front of him. ‘Now, as for the rest of it, I have good news and bad news,’ Harper says, looking directly at her over his glasses, resting his joined hands on the desk in front of him, and she nods. ‘The good news is that we believe that some of what was published in the press recently, specifically in the Daily Mail, would constitute a breach of contract if the source was an employee of Buckingham Palace,’ he declares and she nods, her face turning serious as she focused on Harper’s words. ‘The bad news is that we didn’t really find anything concrete that would prove the identity of the person or persons responsible.’ She lets out a long breath and leans back in her chair, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. ‘Any case we would make against any
individual would be entirely circumstantial at this point, but it’s fairly clear that it was an employee of the palace, or that someone on your staff was involved.’

‘Why do you say that?’ she asks, frowning slightly.

‘Three things specifically,’ Harper says, pulling out a folder from the briefcase beside him. ‘Firstly, the photos at the Coronation Ball. I assume that standard Palace procedure was followed for security?’ he asks, looking over at Melbourne, who nods.

‘All phones and electronic recording or camera devices were checked in at the cloakroom,’ he explains to her again when she looks at him. ‘Security scanned everyone as they arrived. It would have been difficult to smuggle a phone in.’

‘Which means, ma’am, that it was likely someone who wasn’t screened. I assume, Lord Melbourne, that you had your phone with you the entire night?’

Her head flicks around to him, and he nods. ‘All the senior staff did, and most of the Lord Chamberlain’s higher-level staff.’

Her mouth drops open a little as she realises. ‘Sir John would have been allowed to have his phone, so no one would have thought twice if he’d taken a photo,’ she almost breathes, and he nods, shrugging. Technically they could have asked him to surrender it, but he hadn’t thought of it at the time, too wrapped up in her and in his own head. He’d spent a lot of time kicking himself over that.

Wellington had been right; he’d gone soft, and a lot earlier than he’d thought.

‘Not a smoking gun, but it certainly narrows down the most plausible possibilities,’ Harper says. ‘Unless you can find someone who actually saw him take the photos,’ he adds, trailing off, and her head flicks to him again.

‘Already tried, ma’am,’ Melbourne tells her with a quick shake of his head. ‘The Earl tore his staff apart when the photos appeared online. We could try again, but I doubt we’d have much success.’

‘Probably not,’ Harper agrees. ‘It’s likely that whoever took the photos did so surreptitiously for that very reason. And not a lot of point if you think you have your suspect.’

She frowns, but nods.

‘Secondly, as we’ve already discussed, the timing of the news of Lord Melbourne’s resignation,’ Harper says. ‘Given that the news broke about seventy hours after your private discussion and yet the resignation was not official – in writing – for a good week after that, and considering that the press would have needed time to write the story, it would have to have been someone on either your staff or on Lord Melbourne’s staff, or potentially the Prime Minister, or someone who was told by one of these people within fifty-five to sixty hours of Lord Melbourne’s meeting with you, ma’am – assuming they went straight to the press with the information.’

She nods a little awkwardly. ‘The Duke has assured me that he did not speak to the press and that he did not share the information with anyone prior to the article’s publication, and I believe him,’ she says, fixing her eyes on Harper, who nods.

‘Thirdly, there was an article quite early on in your reign, ma’am. I’m not sure if you ever saw it,’ he says, pulling out a piece of paper and handing it to her. ‘It makes comment about your tutors prior to your ascension, and casts some rather unkind and, frankly, ridiculous aspersions on your mental health,’ Harper adds, his distaste clear.

He watches as she looks down at the page, reading the headline, before she looks up at him, eyes
wide. ‘I remember this,’ she tells him, and he leans forward to read over her shoulder. ‘I’d forgotten about it. It was so long ago,’ she says, moving the paper closer to him so he can see, and he lets out a hum.

‘It was the first vaguely unkind thing they wrote about you, ma’am,’ he says, and she nods.

‘It’s oddly specific in its detail when compared to the other articles from around this time,’ Harper tells them. ‘From what I understand, Sir John and the Duchess were in charge of your education?’

‘And Lehzen, but mostly Mama and Sir John,’ she agrees. ‘I did have tutors at one point, but only three.’

‘Were they required to report to anyone in regards to your education or results?’

She shakes her head. ‘I don’t think so. Lehzen said that it didn’t matter because my future was already predetermined.’

Harper nods. ‘The list of people, assuming it was all one person, grows smaller, ma’am.’

‘I should have guessed then,’ she says a little more quietly, glancing back down at the article before looking up at him, and he shakes his head and shrugs.

‘It was rubbish, ma’am, and so vague and non-specific, and you had no reason to suspect anything larger at that point.’

He sees Harper nodding as he speaks. ‘This alone, ma’am, isn’t really much. But combine it with everything else, and I can see how you came to the conclusion that you did, ma’am,’ Harper adds. ‘But unfortunately, despite the fact that all the evidence points to an individual inside the palace, and likely someone who has known you for some time, ma’am, and even with the addition of Sir John’s motive in trying to force the removal of Lord Melbourne, it’s not unreasonable to suggest that there were any number of others who had access to this information and would benefit financially from selling information to the press,’ Harper explains. ‘We checked official phone records and emails, and everything seemed above board. If he did communicate with the press, he did so through private channels, and we don’t have access to any of those records, as you know.’

Melbourne nods. He’d have been a little surprised if Sir John had been that stupid. The man was a worm, but not a completely brainless one.

‘So you wouldn’t recommend that I sue Sir John?’ she asks, and Harper lets out a small sigh.

‘It’s far from an open-and-shut case, ma’am. I would be a little surprised if we won,’ Harper says ruefully. ‘And you would need to consider the difficulty of a trial,’ he adds, and Melbourne was hoping he’d say this. She needs to understand how hard this would be – how potentially painful, and with so little chance that they would succeed. ‘It would not be a pleasant experience, especially given what we know of Sir John. But this is all entirely up to you, ma’am.’

She purses her lips and nods, before turning to look at him. ‘I have to tell Mama,’ she says, her voice hard. ‘If I can’t dismiss him, then she must.’

He tilts his head in acknowledgement of her point, before looking back her and smirking a little. ‘Who said anything about dismissing him, ma’am?’ he says lightly, and that furrow in her brow shifts into something like confusion. ‘I was under the impression that Sir John was keen to retire to his estate in Ireland.’
Chapter 71

Chapter Summary

Oh God I’m so tired
Of being afraid
What would it feel like
To put this baggage down?
If I’m being honest
I’m not sure I’d know how
I want to take shelter but I’m ready, ready to fight
And somewhere in the middle I feel a little paralyzed-
But maybe I’m stronger than I realize

Six, Sleeping at Last

Chapter Notes

A huge shout-out to my wonderful, generous, finger-waving beta (who wishes to remain anonymous), without whom you wouldn’t be reading these chapters. <3

Early October

‘Tell me about Couper.’

Wellington snorts. ‘He could have played Nicholson in Bridge on the River Kwai without a script.’

He blinks. ‘Right.’

‘I assume the timing of your phone call is significant.’

‘Assume away,’ he replies a little smugly, before hanging up.

***

He doesn’t like shutting the door to her office when he’s in there (he makes a point of not, because nothing would make people speculate more) but he also doesn’t want to risk anyone overhearing them – least of all Conroy. It would be all too easy for him to slink down the hall, stand outside the door and learn of their plans – like some kind of cartoon villain, his mind supplies – and he’s not
going to risk it.

But it’s raining lightly, that drizzly, persistent autumn rain that saturates everything, and they can’t just go for their usual walk.

‘Ma’am, I know it’s wet,’ he starts, and she’s nodding before he’s even finished his sentence.

‘Yes,’ she says when he pauses, and he can’t help but smile a little as she stands and shuts the lid of her laptop, not even looking up at him as she packs up what she needs.

‘I’ll grab an umbrella.’

She’s just put her stuff down on the table inside the little white rotunda and turned to look at him when he speaks. ‘Sir John has replied to Emma’s email, confirming his appointment at 9am on Wednesday morning, ma’am,’ he tells her.

The way her eyes go wide and she swallows as she nods makes him think that perhaps she was hoping it would be harder than this – that Conroy would somehow delay things, and that she could put it off. If he’s right, that’s not great news. They have less than forty-eight hours to prepare for this, and he’s beginning to wonder if scheduling it for so soon was actually not that great of an idea. She’d been keen to tackle him this afternoon in all her anger, but he’d persuaded her that she really needed some kind of plan and just a little bit more time to put everything into place.

But he hadn’t wanted her to think about this for too long, for it to become so huge in her head that she can’t see daylight, so he’d suggested Wednesday morning and she’d agreed, and Emma had fired off her email.

He hadn’t really expected a reply so quickly – it had only been a few short hours.

‘Okay,’ she says, nodding. ‘Then we have some work to do,’ she declares, and he smiles.

It doesn’t take long for her to ask; he’d been waiting, knowing she’d think of it eventually. He assumes that in these things she takes him for granted, and in this particular case, he’s happy for her to do just that. ‘You’ll be there,’ she says quickly at the end of a sentence about something else entirely, looking at him with that little furrow in her brow, and he nods after a moment.

‘If you would like me to be,’ he says slowly, studying her a little.

She nods, before glancing down at her hands. ‘I would prefer not to face him alone.’

‘Moral support,’ he supplies, and she nods after a moment. ‘I can do that, ma’am.’

He wouldn’t leave her alone with John Conroy for all the money in the world for this particular meeting, but he won’t tell her that. She needs to do this for herself, and as much as he knows she fears this, the almost-monster that Conroy has become in her mind, he is entirely sure she is strong enough to defeat him.

‘I’m afraid,’ she admits a few moments later, her voice not that same terrified thing it was but something a little harder, a little more aware, and he’s so proud of her bravery. She’s learning that it’s okay not to be perfect, to take ownership of her emotions. She’s got a long way to go, he knows, but she’s come so far, and the pride he feels in his beautiful, strong Queen sits sweetly in his stomach.

‘Of course,’ he replies. ‘These battles will always be the hardest, ma’am.’

He doesn’t tell her he knows she can do it; he doesn’t doubt that she can, and he won’t have her
think anything else. But it would appear that she’s thought about this.

‘I…I’m not really afraid of Sir John,’ she says, that little furrow in her brow returning. ‘I’m afraid that I’ll say the wrong thing, that he’ll see through me and…laugh,’ she says, and he feels that little flare of anger at what Princess Alexandrina must have lived through. ‘I’m afraid I’ll fail,’ she says, her voice weakening.

‘I know, ma’am,’ he says, nodding a little, and she looks at him where he sits on the other side of the stone table. ‘But I also know how strong you are.’

She gives him a small smile, the phrase so familiar from his lips now, and he gives her a small smile in return.

***

‘Two copies, printed and ready to go, ma’am,’ Mr Harper tells her, holding up a yellow envelope.

‘Thank you, Mr Harper,’ she says, giving the older man a grateful smile. ‘I know I asked a lot of you to have these ready in time.’

‘Not at all, ma’am,’ he tells her, shaking his head. ‘It was my absolute pleasure, given the circumstances,’ he adds, looking over the top of his glasses at her, and she smiles at his earnestness. ‘Whilst I’m sure you have more than enough to think about, ma’am, it is important that Sir John signs all the places where there are those little tabs,’ he adds a little gingerly, and she nods firmly. ‘It would be unfortunate to have to ask him to sign another one.’

She feels her chest tighten a little at the thought. ‘Yes, I think I’d rather get it right the first time.’

‘If I may, ma’am?’ he asks, pulling out one of the contracts, and she nods. ‘All the conditions you requested have been noted here,’ he explains, pointing to a list on one of the pages, ‘including the one-off addition to the pension payment.’

She can hear the distaste in his voice, and she sighs. ‘I do find it galling that I am required to pay a man to not breach a contract he willingly signed,’ she announces, and Mr Harper grimaces and nods. ‘Bring back the good old days where you could just send him to the Tower for treason, ma’am,’ he says decisively, and she can’t help a small smile. She thinks she would enjoy the look on Sir John’s face were he to be banished to the White Tower, where so many had languished before their deaths by beheading so long ago. ‘But unfortunately, ma’am, sometimes the carrot is more effective than the stick.’

She sighs and nods. ‘That’s what Lord M said,’ she says. The conversation had been a little awkward, and he’d all but refused to talk about it after he’d suggested it, saying that it was only something he thought she might consider and that he would not give her any advice about it at all, and then telling her to speak to Mr Harper or Mr Anson, her Keeper of the Privy Purse. She’d been a little outraged at his suggestion – the idea that she would pay Sir John to go was ridiculous. The thought of giving Sir John a penny more than she had to…

But he’d been right, as usual – Mr Anson and Mr Harper had both agreed.

‘And as I said on the phone, I believe he’s right in this case, ma’am. As much as it does seem
counterintuitive, and rather infuriating, sometimes an…incentive is wise, especially in these circumstances.’

Incentive, she thinks bitterly. She would give Sir John incentive.

***

It’s raining so hard that she can only really make out the distinction between the sky and the tops of the trees in the garden; everything is just a blur of varying greys. She wonders idly if the weather knows what’s coming.

She reaches for the trousers she’d chosen the previous day, squashing the almost petulant desire to pull out one of the soft cashmere jumpers that she loves so much.

Wear something powerful, Harriet had said, after her myriad of suggestions. Something that makes you look older.

Soft jumpers don’t make her look powerful.

She looks at her reflection in the full-length mirror, and she focuses on the objective. Her hair is in a bun away from her face and the navy suit and white buttoned shirt she’d chosen makes her look mature, she thinks. Not a little girl pretending to be grown up.

She takes a photo and texts it to Harriet.

She is the Queen of England today, she thinks, as she watches her reflection lift her chin and stare firmly back at her. There is no room for Victoria – certainly no room for Drina. The Queen will win this fight. She feels herself shut down just a little more, that cold hardness, that blank nothing slipping just a little more into place.

She feels the corner of her mouth curl into a satisfied smile as she glances down at Harriet’s reply. Perfect. Kill it.

***

He’s never really been one for succumbing to nerves – not the stomach-churning, tingling-all-over, distracted anxiety that he’s feeling right now, and oh, he hasn’t felt anything remotely like this in as long as he can remember. He almost rolls his eyes at himself.

He’s never doubted her. He knows she can do this. He’s sure the paperwork is water-tight – Harper has an excellent reputation, and he gets the sense that this slight on the Queen has become a little personal for him too.

And yet, here he stands, his stomach twisting and his chest tingling uncomfortably, working through the breathing techniques he’d taught her only a few short weeks after he’d first met her.

He knows why he’s nervous. He can still feel her fist half-heartedly hitting his chest, her anger
softened by her anguish as she’d once again cried in his arms because of Conroy.

Everything is planned down to the most minute detail. She has responses for everything they imagine Conroy might possibly throw up in his defence, back up after back up for every challenge he might lay at her feet, and she knows exactly what to say and how to say it. They’ve rehearsed line after line, talked through everything she’s feeling – even brought Emma in for her perspective. They have contingencies for everything they could think of.

And yet, he knows that this is far beyond a done deal. There are still variables, things they don’t know, things Conroy could have up his sleeve – what else, he can’t possibly think of, but that doesn’t mean that Conroy doesn’t have something ready to hold over her head that they haven’t allowed for.

There’s too much at stake.

His stomach is in knots, his chest tight, his jaw tense because he cares so much. Too much.

Far, far too much.

But pacing up and down the length of his office in some kind of half-hearted attempt to actually achieve something this morning is not going to help at all, so he grabs what he needs and heads out the door.

He focuses on his anger as he walks down the hallway, on channelling his nerves into a cold, steelish rage, the kind he saves for special occasions like this, but it’s difficult – he can’t seem to get a reign on his emotions, his stomach refusing to remain settled when he squashes it down, the nervous tingle in his chest returning unbidden when he stops focusing on subduing it.

It will not do for her to see him so anxious.

He can’t let her down today. Not today, of all days.

By the time he reaches her office, his mind running through their conversations over the past 40-odd hours – the way she’d crafted and rehearsed her responses, the way she’d thought of things he hadn’t and threw out new ideas to counter them, the way she’d smiled triumphantly at him when she’d finally remembered them all, the way she’d just rolled her eyes and grabbed the sleeve of his jacket between her fingers and pulled him towards the dining room late last night – he realises he’s mostly calmed and he definitely does roll his eyes at himself this time.

He cares far too much. But now – today – he finds that he doesn’t mind at all.

***

He stands at her office door and watches. He’s seen her nervous before, so terrified he’d had to remind her to breathe before her anxiety developed into some kind of full-blown panic attack. He’s seen her pace her office as she waited for something, knows all her tells – the way she rubs her thumb in her hand, bites her lip, her eyes blow wide, that little furrow in her brow develops. She’s none of that this morning, he thinks. She’s just white as a sheet, scratching her thumbnail along the skin of her other thumb absent-mindedly, a heightened version of what she does when she’s anxious and distracted. She’s going to end up with a graze there if she doesn’t stop soon.
His mind tells him she looks easily five years older in the navy-blue suit and brown heeled boots she’s chosen, and oh, she’s so equal to this, his beautiful Queen. She always looks regal when she dresses up a bit – she’s always beautiful to him – but today her clothing says confidence. Strength. Power.

If only her face said it as well, he thinks, but they have a few minutes for that.

He lets out a quiet breath. ‘Good morning, ma’am,’ he says, walking through the door, and her head flies up, her wide blue eyes meeting his, and he just holds her gaze.

‘Good morning, Lord M,’ she says on a sigh, looking around as she drops her hands to her sides. She meets his eyes again after a moment, and he raises his eyebrows at her. ‘I’m glad you’re here,’ she says eventually, her voice short and clipped and a little louder than usual.

He says nothing, just watching as she turns and walks towards her desk, her hands clasping together again, her thumbnail absentely stroking the skin of her other thumb, and his face falls a little. ‘Ma’am,’ he says quietly, stepping towards her, and she turns to face him. He looks from her eyes to her hands, and when she follows his gaze, she lets out a huff, dropping her hands to her sides and looking away. She lets out a heavy gusting sigh, her hands clenched into fists at her sides, and he purses his lips together.

She’s all over the place. She needs to calm. Conroy would likely be as familiar with her tells as he is; she has to have enough control that she doesn’t slip back into any of them and lose her fight before she’s even had a chance to really start it.

So he reaches down, and with a quiet May I?, gently takes her hand in his, glancing at her face before turning her hand around and lightly stroking his thumb over the reddened skin where she’s been scratching.

‘I know,’ she says quickly to his unspoken advice, and his eyes meet hers before she looks away again, her eyes looking around and seeing nothing. So he just holds her small, soft hand in his, his thumb gently rubbing against her palm, waiting for her to stop, to calm, to focus on what’s in front of her.

It takes a good few seconds before she’s looking down at where her hand rests in his larger one, and he speaks when she lets out a long breath. ‘Are you ready, ma’am?’

She looks up, her wide eyes screaming at him and what he wouldn’t do to take this from her. But he can’t. She has to do this. She has to learn her own strength and conquer her own demons – to take control of her own life and do these things for herself. He will not be around forever, and nor should she rely on him so much. She is so strong, his beautiful Queen; she just has to discover the depths of her courage for herself.

She looks down at where their hands are still joined, and she covers his thumb with her own. When she looks back up at him, her turbulent eyes have calmed, replaced by just the tiniest spark of that fire he loves. That fire that he knows will win her this, his beautiful Queen.

‘Yes.’
Chapter 72

Chapter Summary

I won't let my demons win
My only rival is within
I will fight through thick and thin
My only rival is within

Kingdoms rise and kingdoms end
My only rival is within
This is where it all begins
My only rival is within

- Rival, Ruelle

Chapter Notes

#GoodbyeJohnConroy2k18

Note: This chapter is over 6K long - easily twice as long as the longest chapters in this story so far - so you might want to make some tea and find a comfy chair. Enjoy.

More Important Note: There is some very, very small anxiety-related self-harm in this chapter. It's quick and there's not a lot of description, but let me know if that's a thing for you and I'll see if I can edit it out or something. My sincerest apologies for not having this here when the chapter was originally posted.

She feels a strange sort of detached calm.

She thinks she’s going to be sick.

She can’t, her mind supplies from somewhere. She would have to change her clothes then and she has no idea what else she would wear.

She glances over to where Lord M is standing in front of the lounge to her right, facing her, just in her peripheral vision, but far enough away that it’s clear that she’s on her own.

His eyes are kind but he’s tense; she can tell by the way his mouth is just a little more of a line than usual, the way his eyes speak kindness – but also worry – to her, and it does nothing to quell the noise in her head that’s threatening to overwhelm her.

Breathe, she thinks.

Breathe.
The voices in her head almost scream, threaten to scream, and she pushes them down with a breath and his words in her mind, knowing he’s there, and – for all his worry about her – willing her to succeed. She can do this. She will not fall apart, flounder alone in the tumultuous seas of her emotions. She will not ask him to rescue her. This is her challenge, and he is right there beside her, giving her his strength with his warm eyes and quiet intensity. He is there – she is not alone – and that will be enough.

She can hear soft footfalls outside and oh, she’s definitely going to be sick.

She glances at Lord M who gives her a short nod of encouragement and she can do this.

_Breathe._

Sir John strides into the room like he owns it, and she’s pleased to see that he stops rather suddenly, a good six or seven feet away from her near the door, his eyes flicking between her and Lord M until his eyes fix on her.

She feels herself shrink under his gaze and the voices in her head return but their chanting is distant and indistinct and no. She will control this. She’d known this was coming, and she is prepared. She won’t let him do this to her any longer. She forces her head up, her chin high and sucks in a quiet breath. _I can do this._

‘You wanted to see me, ma’am,’ he says, and she nods once.

‘Yes. Thank you for coming, Sir John.’ She speaks quickly, not lingering on her words, forcing her voice to be even.

He just stares at her, his eyebrows rising slightly, waiting for her to speak.

_Breathe._

She can hear Lord M’s warm, gentle voice in the back of her mind, that question that has haunted her for weeks now.

_Who is he to you?_

He’s the man who makes her feel small.

She tilts her head back a little before she speaks, willing herself to be tall. ‘How are your children, Sir John?’

She can see that he’s thrown by the query, and something in her cheers a little in triumph. ‘They are well, thank you, ma’am,’ he replies slowly.

‘Have you seen them recently?’

He shifts on his feet a little, his hands doing that odd little splaying thing he does when he’s not sure of what to say, and she can feel herself growing taller by the second. ‘Not recently, no. I’ve been rather busy, ma’am,’ he replies.

‘That’s a shame. Mama tells me you are now a grandfather.’

His eyes narrow infinitesimally. ‘Yes, ma’am,’ he says after a beat.

‘Congratulations.’
‘Thank you, ma’am,’ he replies, bowing his head a little.

She frowns a little. ‘Surely you wish to spend time with your new grandchild, Sir John.’

His eyes narrow a little at her. ‘They live in Ireland, ma’am.’ She knows this, and he knows she knows this. ‘I am hoping to visit soon.’

‘Only visit, Sir John? I would have thought you would be considering retirement to your home there,’ she says, her voice as steely as she can make it.

His head turns slightly as he eyes her. ‘Retirement, ma’am?’ he grates out.

‘Yes, after your recent windfall,’ she says, tilting her head to the side slightly. ‘From the photos you sold to the Daily Mail?’ she adds. His face flattens – her words have surprised him, she can tell – and she feels her jaw clench.

‘I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about, ma’am.’

‘The bracelet you gifted my mother for her birthday is quite beautiful. Very expensive. I would have thought it beyond someone on your salary, Sir John. It must have been quite the sum you received.’

To his credit, he doesn’t miss a beat. ‘You seem very certain, ma’am, for such a serious accusation,’ he says slowly – snidely, she notes – but his unpleasant tone only makes something inside of her cheer. It’s working. She’s getting under his skin.

‘Yes, it is rather serious,’ she agrees. ‘My lawyers tell me that act alone constitutes a breach of the confidentiality clause in the Palace contract – the one all my staff are required to sign. The one that you signed, Sir John, at the time of my ascension, and again very recently.’

‘I see. And do you have evidence, ma’am, of my supposed wrong-doing?’ he asks, his voice turning to ice, and she can feel herself begin to shrink again. She knows that tone, has known it all her life, for as long as she can remember – that tone that asked questions that he already knew the answers to, answers she would be forced to give, knowing he would wield them as weapons against her. She feels the anger burn in her chest as she fights his words, fights to keep her head above the surface.

‘Why does he make you so angry, ma’am?’

She looks up at him. ‘Oh, he just…’ Her lip curls up in anger and she can’t finish the sentence. She knows why, but she can’t articulate it, can’t seem to find the words to describe what it is that makes her burn with anger now, that makes her shake with a fury she can barely control when he stands over her and looks down at her and— ‘He makes me feel so…small,’ she admits, her voice so quiet and tentative to her own ears, and he nods. ‘I shouldn’t let him,’ she growls out.

‘Don’t judge yourself harshly, ma’am,’ he says. ‘Sir John spent years trying to make you feel exactly what you’re feeling now. You were vulnerable, and he exploited and manipulated you because he could.’

‘I’m not a child anymore,’ she replies firmly, shaking her head. ‘I haven’t been for a long time.’

‘No,’ he says, his lips curling into a smile. ‘You most certainly have not.’
She lifts her chin and mock-frowns. ‘Perhaps,’ she says, shrugging a little. ‘But I suppose, Sir John, it all really depends on just how much you got for the photos, and just how much of that you wish to spend on legal fees. I suspect that your resources will run out far sooner than mine.’

He’s breathing more quickly now, that familiar look of distaste on his face now mixed with anger, and something inside of her cheers at the success of this punch that she’s landed. She’s practiced, rehearsed her lines, carefully crafted with him what to say and how to say it, and she has to work hard to resist the urge to glance over at him, her Lord M, to see his reaction to the blow she’d just delivered. He’d be proud of her, she thinks, and the thought gives her strength to speak those next crucial words. ‘If you were, however, to resign – effective immediately, of course – I would consider putting the past behind us. There wouldn’t really be any need for a messy legal case that could drag on for months, or even years.’

She deliberately looks down at the document sitting alone on the table just to his left, waiting a beat before she looks up to see him follow her gaze to the paperwork before looking back at her. She sees it, the shift on his face, the way he considers her offer, and her heart starts beating rapidly in her chest.

This might just work. He might just believe her.

_Breathe._

‘My resignation would distress the Duchess very much after twenty years of devoted service,’ he tells her, as if he cares.

_Who is he to you?_

He’s her mother’s Private Secretary and only friend.

She knows that this, beyond anything, will hurt her mother. She knows.

_She lets out an angry noise. 'I should just force Mama to fire him. Then we wouldn't have to go through this whole charade.'_

_He purses his lips. 'I seem to recall a similar situation recently where a member of the Royal Family was forced to give up her Private Secretary and she’d had him for barely eighteen months, let alone twenty years.'_

_His face is playful but his gaze knowing, and she wants to shout that she and her mother are nothing alike, but she doesn’t. He’s right._

_He must see it in her face, because when he speaks again, his voice is soft but serious. 'Ma’am, you are not your mother. But your strength must come from somewhere.'_

It will not distress him anywhere near as much as it will distress her mother, she thinks with bitterness, but she says nothing, his words ringing in her ears: _Resist the urge to fling your own barbs, ma’am. He will fling right back._

_‘I will take care of my mother. She is not your concern, Sir John. Not anymore.’_

_Breathe._
'I have a contract. I would expect that upon the finalisation of any decision I would at the very least receive my entitlements.'

*Who is he to you?*

He’s the man who has spent decades serving his own interests above all else.

‘The conditions of your contract are confirmed in the document of resignation and will be met in full, including a one-off addition to your final pension payment,’ she tells him, nodding at the paperwork in front of him. ‘I choose honour, not greed,’ she adds, careful to keep her voice as even as she can.

*Sign the document*, a voice in her mind screams. *Just sign it.*

She watches as he purses his lips, his eyes narrowing briefly, his head rising again. He’s not going to sign, she thinks, and she can feel the panic rise in her chest, and it’s that same tension, that tightness that comes so slowly that she barely realises it’s there until she can’t breathe.

*Breathe.*

But then his face smooths into something more aloof, his mouth curling in distaste, and everything in her braces for impact. It’s instinct, after twenty years, and she’s wearied, so wearied by it all. But she has to be strong. This is the largest part of the fight, but certainly not the worst. There is far more coming, she knows. She has to save her strength, keep the walls up and tightly closed. No cracks.

‘I suppose it is time I considered my own reputation. It will be helpful to be less…*tarnished* by your…*mistakes*.’

*Who is he to you?*

He’s the man who has spent years trying to fit her into a box of his own design.

*Ignore him. Don’t listen to him. Don’t take the bait.*

*Breathe.*

‘You must do as you see fit, Sir John,’ she says calmly.

He lets out a theatrical sigh as he picks up the document in front of him, and she blinks as the voices all clamour for attention in her mind, all screaming at her. She draws in a small, shallow breath.

*Stay calm. You’re almost there. Stay calm.*

‘I would like to have this reviewed by my own legal counsel,’ he says after a few seconds, and she shakes her head.

‘The letter has been drafted by my lawyers,’ she tells him. ‘The offer is available to you for the duration of your time in this room. If you choose to leave the room without signing the letter of resignation, the offer will be immediately rescinded and the document rendered invalid.’

He studies her for a moment, his eyes narrowed, and she can feel her chest constricting.

*Just sign it.*

‘I’m not entirely sure this is appropriate,’ he announces.

*Breathe.*
‘You’re a lawyer, Sir John. Surely there’s nothing in this short, simple letter of resignation that is confusing for you? I had no trouble understanding it myself,’ she adds. ‘And unlike some, my lawyers insist on integrity.’

‘I’m sure it’s very easy to understand when you have a lawyer for a lapdog, eager to explain it to you,’ he fires back, his eyes darting to where Lord M is standing and she feels the rage spike in her chest. How dare he?

She can’t help but glance at Lord M. His face is a picture of calm, almost amusement, and she blinks.

‘After all this time and everything we’ve been through, do you still think I have ever cared about what John Conroy says about me?’ he asks not unkindly, and watches her lips curl into a small smile.

‘No. But I do.’

‘Please don’t, ma’am,’ he says quietly, shaking his head. ‘It’s not worth it. There’s nothing he could say about me that would elicit even the barest emotion.’

‘He shouldn’t be allowed to speak such things.’

‘No one who cares will ever hear them. And no one will care.’

She watches as Sir John reads over the front page of the letter as she works to remain calm. She wonders what he will do now. There had always been a risk that he would refuse, that he would call her bluff and reject the offer. It would have been more painful for both of them in the long run, expensive and horrible as their feud no doubt played out in the press, but he was spiteful. She wouldn’t put it past him.

But both she and Lord M had bet that he wouldn’t choose to be that spiteful. As much as he would love to hurt her, to whittle away at her for years and bring them both down, he wasn’t going to do it at the expense of his own comfort and financial situation. They all know he didn’t get that much for the photos.

‘I’m not entirely convinced this is in my best interests,’ he announces after a few moments.

She lets out a breath. She had practiced this on her own, without Lord M. She couldn’t. He would have tried to talk her out of it, come up with some other way. She feels a twinge in her stomach at her deception, but this is the easiest way. She had learned something from Sir John in her time under his thumb: how to go for the jugular.

Breathe.

‘You should know, Sir John, that if you do not sign this letter of resignation today, I will immediately remove my mother’s household to Kensington Palace and cease any and all financial assistance,’ she announces, her voice almost, almost steady.

His face contorts into something like shock and then anger, and then back to something like disbelief. It’s not hard to keep her eyes trained forward; she finds she doesn’t really want to see Lord M’s expression.
The thought of leaving her mother destitute does not sit well with her, but she’s almost positive it won’t come to that. *Greed over spite*, she tells herself.

‘You would do this to your mother?’ he practically spits, and she forces her face into something she hopes looks blank. Strong. Deadly serious.

‘I will do whatever it takes to protect the Crown, Sir John,’ she says, her voice hard. She has a duty to her people, to her ancestors. To those who will wear the crown after she is gone. She cannot allow small men like Conroy taint it with their deception and greed any more than she already has.

He just stares at her, his face contorting into an expression of distaste as he looks over at Lord M and back to her. He must believe her, because he eventually picks up a copy of the letter from the table. She resists glancing at Lord M; she wonders what he’s thinking. If he’ll forgive her for not telling him of her plans when they’d so carefully crafted and rehearsed her lines.

The wait as Sir John reads the document is torturous.

She can hear her clock ticking behind her, the noise growing louder and louder in her head with each passing second, and surely it doesn’t take this long to read a document that’s not quite four pages long. She can feel her chest tightening again.

*Breathe.*

She finally risks a glance at Lord M out of the corner of her eye; he’s looking back at her.

No, he’s looking down… She drops her hands to her sides, the sudden sharp sting telling her she’s finally worn through the skin just above her thumbnail. She blinks a few times, slowly, forcing herself to be calm. She can’t win this if she isn’t calm.

She has to breathe.

Finally, after what seems like eternity, Sir John flips to the final page, and surely he’s finished now, surely he’ll sign it now, now that he’s reached the end of it. He’s said his unkind things, flung his barbs, tried to pull her down, and now surely, he’ll sign it and leave and she’ll be free of him… Surely…

She touches the pad of her finger to the raw, stinging skin above her thumbnail.

He flips the back page over so that he’s looking at the front again and surely he’s done…

But then he’s looking back at her, his eyes narrow and his lips curled up into that familiar snide smirk that she knows so well, too well, after too many years at Kensington, and she can hear the blood rushing in her ears as the vice around her chest tightens again and she can’t breathe and no…

He laughs.

He *laughs.*

Her world spins.

‘Your mother and I had such high hopes for you, Drina,’ he tells her with a disappointed sigh, shaking his head as he places the paper back down on the table and the voices in her head are screaming again and oh, she’s going to be sick.

*He’s not going to sign it. He’s not going to sign it.*
His face contorts into that smile she hates, that smile that tells her he’s won, that he’s going to deliver the final blow and beat her *again* and she tries to brace for impact but she can’t, she’s too weak, she can’t…

‘Oh, Drina. What your lapdog has failed to teach you is that in order to successfully bluff someone, you need to be at least *somewhat* believable,’ he says, his voice snide, all pretence of any kind of respect gone. He smiles and shakes his head. ‘And to think you actually thought you knew what you were doing,’ he adds. He takes a step away from the table and puts his hands in his pockets and she can’t move, she can’t think, the voices are screaming and she can’t do it, she’s lost, he’s beat her again…

The sudden, sharp, wet sting of pain is enough to make her blink.

She looks down, watching her hands uncurl, her thumbnail dark with blood and her thumbs both smeared in a thin, sticky red.

She feels her chest cave in slightly as she lets out a breath.

She’s done this.

She’s done this to herself.

She’s let him win this, this battle she’s been locked in for months, fought so hard and for so long to prepare. She’s given in, let the voices in her head control her when it all became too hard.

She looks over at Lord M, his eyes widening slightly when he sees her hand and flicking back up to hers, and he’s frowning at her and shaking his head and then he’s giving her a smile she’s never seen before, a smile that’s almost something like *heartbreak*.

She looks back down at her bloodied thumb, the skin red and angry, the throbbing, stinging wound enough to bring silence to the voices that were all clamouring for attention in her head.

This is no longer about whether she *can* do this. She *has* to do this.

She is the Queen of England.

She is no longer a child. She is a *woman*. She will not allow herself to be ruled by him any longer.

She swallows as she looks back across at Sir John, the smile gone as he looks from her hand to her face.

*Breathe.*

‘The prerogative power that I think I enjoy the most as Queen is the power to grant honours, including knighthoods and baronetcies, each entirely at my discretion,’ she says slowly, her voice almost distant to her ears and weaker than she’d like, but steady. ‘I don’t yet know how I would feel at revoking one, but I am willing to find out.’

She watches as his face contorts and flattens at her words. ‘I see. And what reason would you give the public for such an act?’

‘I think the public will understand when the press report that I have successfully sued for breach of contract. I believe they would agree that someone who betrays the confidence of the Queen for money does not deserve such an honour.’
‘The Queen alone does not have the power to remove hereditary titles,’ he announces, his voice bland, but the heightening colour in his cheeks betrays him. Something small cheers inside of her, and she feels a rush of adrenaline surge from her chest down into her arms.

‘Peerages are a challenge, yes, but you are not a peer, Sir John.’ She narrows her eyes, her voice as steely as she can make it. ‘You hold only baronetcy, something that I can quite easily revoke with an official writ, Sir John. Or will that be Mr Conroy?’

His lips curl into a snarl and she feels the pull of a smile.

‘If there’s one thing he cares about, it’s money,’ she tells him.

*His mouth quirks into a thoughtful half-frown, his eyes narrowing. ‘I suspect there might be one thing he would care for only a fraction more, ma’am.’ She frowns in confusion. ‘Public disgrace.’*

‘If you wish to call my bluff, Sir John, you are more than welcome. My legal team are prepared to lodge the court documents this afternoon,’ she says, and his eyes widen slightly. She’s trying to keep her face as even as she can, not to betray any emotion, but she’s struggling to keep the small – rather vicious, she suspects – smile from her face.

She has no idea how long they stand there, locked in a silent battle of wills, waiting to see who will crack first.

It will not be her.

She will not give in to him. She’ll fight forever if she has to, do whatever it takes to win this, to beat this, to take back her crown and her mother and everything he’s taken from her.

She feels her jaw clench and she fights down the anger that’s stirring in her chest.

*Breathe.*

‘It would be such a personal and public humiliation were you to lose, Drina,’ he says, his voice carrying a warning tone, and she’s just starting to work through in her mind what’s next, what else they had planned, how she would counter this next blow, when he speaks again. ‘But I have no desire to drag the monarchy through the mud any more than you are already doing,’ he adds, and she blinks.

*Breathe.*

‘I will need a witness,’ he announces, looking at Lord M, and she looks at Lord M who already has his phone in his hand.

‘Alex has offered to be witness to your signature,’ she tells Sir John as Alex walks into the room a few seconds later.

‘Your Head of Security? Really, Drina? Always the drama and histrionics,’ he mutters as he reaches into his jacket pocket. She’s obliquely aware of the hastily-concealed shock on Alex’s face, and of Lord M shaking his head minutely.

‘Do not flatter yourself, Sir John. Alex has a regular meeting scheduled for this time,’ she says
evenly. It’s not entirely untrue; this month’s meeting is standing right in front of him.

She watches as he leans down to where the paperwork was still sitting on the table and signs where Mr Harper had placed the colourful tabs on both documents. She counts them in her head each time he puts pen to paper.

One. Two. Three.

Four.

Five.

Six. Seven. Eight.

Nine.

Ten.

It’s done.

Alex follows suit, taking only a few seconds to sign in the relevant places before nodding once to her and stepping back to wait unobtrusively in the corner.

Sir John slowly puts his pen back in his pocket, folding up his copy of the letter and slipping it inside his jacket. ‘I suppose you are just like your father. Easily seduced by attractive things.’ His eyes flick to Lord M and she feels the rage swell within her. Her lips curl and she sucks in a breath and how dare he?

But she cannot.

Who is he to you?

He’s the man who tried to destroy her reputation, and Lord M along with it.

She instinctively looks over at Lord M. His head is still low, and he’s looking at Sir John, but his expression has morphed into something almost unreadable. She’s seen that look on his face – something very much like it – just once before, a lifetime ago at a similar meeting. He’s angry, and the thought drives the air from her lungs. Why would he be angry? He’d said Conroy was no one to him, that he didn’t care about what he thought, that he was only there with her because she’d asked and he believed in her, and she can feel the panic rise at the realisation that this look on his face is tightly restrained fury.

But then his eyes shift to meet hers and his expression changes very slightly and he’s angry, yes, but there’s something else there, now, and she remembers, something… he’s angry for her. He’s always told her that he doesn’t care about Conroy – he never really has. It was never his own reputation he’d cared about.

It was hers. All of this is for her.

The knowledge that he’s angry for her, that he’s furious with Sir John not for himself, but for what Sir John has done to her, makes that thing curl low and hard in her stomach and her mouth presses into a firm, hard line as she looks back at her target.

She will defeat him, totally and completely, this man who has held her captive for so long - but no longer. She will watch as he leaves the palace and leaves her life forever. Everything he’s said and
done and tried to do and all his scheming and planning will be for nothing.

He’s standing there, a good six feet away, and the realisation washes over her, sudden and surprising: she feels an almost detached sense of pity for this man who has wasted twenty years of his life. The understanding calmly fills her mind: he’s lost everything.

The knowledge that he doesn’t know yet just how much he’s lost, just how far he’s fallen curls inside of her, the predatory satisfaction overwhelming everything else.

For all his scheming and plotting, for all his plans, for all his smarm and arrogance and contempt for her, for all that he would calculvably and willingly hurt her and everyone around her, he has failed. He may have controlled Princess Alexandrina, but he does not – and will never – control Queen Victoria. She should have done this years ago, when she first became Queen. She’s been carrying the shackles of Kensington for too long. No longer. Not one moment longer.

‘Thank you, Sir John,’ she says, watching as Lord M walks over to the table and takes the precious paper out of Sir John’s reach.

‘You may try to act like a Queen, Drina, play at being Queen, but everyone who sees you can see right through it, including your lapdog here, who, no doubt, submits to your every vague whim rather than controlling you the manner you so clearly need to be.’

She almost, almost fires back, almost succumbs, but she can hear his calm, warm voice in her head.

‘Don’t engage. Allow him to say what he wishes.’

‘Why? I’m the Queen. I shouldn’t have to listen to whatever rubbish he might spout.’

_He nods. ‘Absolutely not, ma’am, but in a battle of insults, I fear he’s had far more practice.’_

When she says nothing, he shakes his head. ‘You will regret not choosing me as your Private Secretary,’ he announces.

‘Is that a threat, Sir John?’ she asks, her eyes flicking to Alex who was standing quietly in the corner near the door, his hands clasped in front of him.

‘Merely a prediction – one I am supremely confident in, given your recent and likely future choices,’ he replies, his mouth curling in distaste as he glances at Lord M, and she feels the flare of anger as she watches him turn to leave – a flare that’s almost instantly squashed by the thought of what she gets to say next.

‘Oh, Sir John?’ she calls, and he stops, turning back to face her. ‘I found something last week,’ she says, and he blinks at her. ‘Well, I didn’t find it, Mr Harper did. But I thought it might be of interest to you.’

He just tilts his head as if humouring her, the way he had so rarely humoured silly little Drina, saying nothing. She turns and picks up the envelope that has been waiting on the desk behind her. ‘It’s your old contract, from when you first started working for my father, all those years ago,’ she says. ‘It has the same confidentiality clause that mine does, and I’m told it’s still very much legally sound, should any... stories about a princess make their way into public discourse in future.’
‘Whatever happens, he must sign the letter of resignation before you announce that you’re ruining his retirement plans.’

She nods. She knows, but his tone makes her frown slightly. ‘Why?’

He cringes slightly and glances away momentarily. ‘I suspect Sir John may become very angry, very quickly.’

Lord M had been right.

Sir John’s face falls, his lips curling back in a snarl, and he takes a step towards her. ‘You think you have won this,’ he spits, and she nods.

‘Yes, it would appear that I have.’

‘You speak of protecting the Crown, but you have done nothing other than bring shame on the monarchy. You and your lothario here,’ he snarls, pointing his finger at her and waving it in Lord M’s direction, before turning to face Lord M. ‘You should be ashamed of yourself. She is half your age,’ he spits, and she watches as Lord M’s face retains that calm, serene look that drives her crazy when she’s angry. It must have the same effect on Sir John she thinks because he keeps going. ‘Nothing that was printed in the papers was wrong. History will remember you as the man who seduced a Queen twenty years his junior and destroyed what’s left of the monarchy.’

He turns to Victoria, taking another step towards her. ‘You were bred for a purpose and you are an embarrassment – no better than your father, or your uncles. Your mother is so ashamed – disgusted – to have you for a daughter,’ he snarls, and she sees Lord M move toward her out of the corner of her eye, but Sir John just continues. ‘You are just a very little girl trying desperately to play in the world with the adults, and failing spectacularly, for all the world to watch and laugh,’ he says slowly, deliberately, enunciating each cruel word, and she feels the weight of the insult and is just about to hurl one back at him, to remind him that she was twenty-three, not a girl, hasn’t been a girl in a long time, when she realises that this is what he meant.

‘They’re empty words designed to get under your skin. He knows you well, ma’am. He’ll know just what to say. Shut it down. Close him out. Don’t let him win.

‘You will be mocked and ridiculed in the press for the rest of your reign – an embarrassment to Britain and the Commonwealth, a stain on the once-great monarchy of a once-great empire. History will remember you as the Queen that destroyed the greatest monarchy the world has ever seen.’

She feels Lord M move to stand just to the side and behind her, and she thinks she knows what look is on his face by the way Sir John leans back slightly, his eyes flicking up to Lord M’s.

He’s breathing hard, and she needs him to go. Now. She fights down the almost-panic that had risen in her chest. ‘That may be so, Sir John,’ she says before he can speak again. ‘But I have time. You, however, will have to live with the knowledge that you have failed.’ She’s cold now, hard in the face of his wrath – a wrath that she realises she hasn’t actually truly feared for a long time. ‘I will be a great Queen, and you will watch me succeed from far, far away, knowing that you have no part to
play in any of it.’

‘I am pleased to finally wash my hands of you and your failures,’ he tells her, his tone arrogant, and she realises that she’s done with him, that she has what she wants and doesn’t have to listen to this anymore.

‘Alex,’ she says, and it takes about three seconds for Peter and Callum to appear in her office; she’s pleased they’d arranged for them to wait with Emma. Sir John turns at the noise and takes a step back towards the table as the men move to stand next to him.

‘Alex, would you, Peter and Callum escort Sir John to his office, as per our earlier discussion please?’ she asks, and her Head of Security nods.

‘With pleasure, ma’am.’

‘It won’t be easy, ma’am. He’s had years to sink his claws into you, and he’s good,’ he huffs. ‘He’s very good. But now it’s time to take yourself back.’

She nods, and her face firms. ‘I’m the Queen,’ she says emphatically.

‘You’re so much more than that,’ he says, shaking his head, his voice low.

‘Sir John,’ she says, ‘Thank you for your years of service to my family,’ she starts. She is bigger than him, bigger than his insults, and she will not stoop to meet him in the pit of slime in which he chooses to reside. ‘My security will escort you to your office, where you may collect your personal belongings, before they escort you to the library, where you will be permitted to speak with my mother. You will then return your security pass and all other property belonging to the Crown before you are escorted from the Palace. A car will be available to drive you home, if you wish,’ she tells him, her speech delivered just as they’d rehearsed. ‘You are no longer welcome at any property belonging to the Crown, public or private.’

He stares at her, his face a mask of fury and resentment.

‘And I never want to see you again,’ she adds quietly, shaking her head slightly.

When Sir John doesn’t move, staring right at her, she feels Lord M move just that little bit closer, his jacket brushing against her shoulder blade, and Peter steps forward, placing himself in the gap between her and Sir John. ‘Sir,’ Peter all but growls.

It takes a moment, a moment where she forces herself to hold Sir John’s gaze, to be taller than she ever has been before, a moment where she watches as his eyes narrow and she can see the hatred burn in them. Hatred for her.

It takes another moment for him to turn and walk away in silence.

Lord M’s advice, that question that has played like a mantra in her mind for the last thirty-seven hours returns, and she thinks the answer that she’s wanted to give for so long is finally the truth.

Who is he to you?

He may have been someone to Princess Alexandrina. He is no one to Queen Victoria.
Chapter 73

Chapter Summary

Isn’t it lovely, all alone?
Heart made of glass
My mind of stone
Tear me to pieces
Skin and bone
Hello, welcome home

*Lovely* - Billie Eilish and Khalid

He watches Conroy walk from the room, flanked by Alex and her two faithful security guards, and he’s so proud of her it’s overwhelming and he almost can’t see through it in his mind, and that thing is growling so fiercely in his stomach and in his ears that he has to stop and take a couple of deep breaths to get it under control.

She’s done it.

She’d been *magnificent*.

She’d barely looked at him, her chin high and her focus on the target in front of her, barely faltering under the pressure of a man who had held her so tightly for so long. And oh, hadn’t she won.

He watches as she sags a little, so tired from holding herself up for so long and under such an assault. She turns to face him, her eyes wide, and she’s breathing like she’s just run a marathon, her hands almost shaking with the leftover adrenaline, but there’s something hard in her eyes – power. *Success.* He feels the smile spread across his face – he couldn’t stop it if he tried – and she just looks back at him with her wide eyes. She lets out a little huff of what he thinks is almost incredulous laughter, but he’s not sure if she’s going to laugh or cry, and oh no, she can’t fall apart yet.

She’s climbed her mountain, planted her flag and can claim victory. It had been almost easy for her, he thinks; she’d delivered all the lines they’d rehearsed, held her head high when Sir John had gone low, and dispatched him at the end almost *clinically*.

Never had he thought she would win like this. He had believed in her, yes, knew she could do it – but when it came to it, when Sir John opened his mouth and poured out years of bitterness and anger at his failure, he’d wondered if she’d withstand it. He’d only moved as he’d seen Sir John move, his desire to protect her propelling him forward. He didn’t trust the man in the slightest, worried for what he’d do in his revenge.

But she had borne it all, held her head high, and had proven to them all just how strong she was, his beautiful Queen.

He squashes down on the fire in his belly that is now raging almost out of control as ruthlessly as he can.

But she has a second, smaller mountain left to conquer, and he thinks perhaps that this one is going
to be even harder than she’s anticipating. Sir John had been a challenge, but a relatively straightforward one. They’d known what to expect from him.

How she handles her mother – how her mother handles the news she’s about to receive – he thinks will determine their relationship for the rest of their lives.

Oh, he prays the Duchess sees the truth of the beautiful woman standing in front of her – her beautiful, strong daughter who is Queen – and the lie that is John Conroy.

The memory brings him crashing back down to earth. She needs to deal with her hand.

When she’d turned to him, eyes wide and face pale, and he’d seen what he’d thought was blood on her fingers, he’d felt the earth shift from underneath him. It was all he could do not to fly over to her, to stand between her and Conroy and destroy the man for making her bleed. He’s sure he could; he knows enough people and is owed enough favours that he thinks he could likely ruin him almost entirely if he played his cards right.

But he would ruin everything she’s fought for in the process, every piece of ground she’d made up for herself in her own mind – all those squares of real estate in her head that she’d evicted him from would be for nought. The battle might be won, but she would not have won it.

So he’d settled for a soft, understanding smile – all he could summon in the heat of that moment, when all he could see was her pale face and wide eyes and the blood on her thumbs – and somehow, somehow, combined with the shock of what she’d done to herself, he suspects, it had been enough.

She’d found something, a detached sort of strength, he thinks, and it had propelled her forward. Something had happened in her mind, something he’s not entirely sure of yet, but it had been enough for him to realise that something had shifted. She’d gone into this meeting with the intention of winning, but the victory was never over Sir John. It was always over herself – her fears, her lack of self-esteem, her desperate desire to earn the approval of everyone.

When she’d looked back at Sir John, her hands dropping loosely at her sides, he’d realised that she’d finally won. It was only a matter of time then.

‘I must go and speak to Mama before Sir John does,’ she tells him, her voice hard, but the way she swallows before she speaks tells him she’s barely holding on. She’s breathing deeply, trying to keep the tears at bay, and he doesn’t know how to make her strong again. She has to go now, while she still can.

She can fix her hand afterwards. He doesn’t want to remind her of it now, not while she seems to have forgotten about it. He’s not sure what she’ll do at the sight of the blood again.

‘Yes,’ he says, nodding, his face as serious as he can make it; he can’t give her permission to fall apart just yet. He glances up at the door where Emma is hovering, her face filled with concern. He gives her the tiniest of nods in reply and she smiles. ‘Emma is waiting for you, ma’am.’

She nods, looking around, before letting out a quick, slightly shuddery breath. She nods a little absent-mindedly he thinks, before walking out the door towards Emma, and he prays that she has enough strength left for this.

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She understands what they mean when they say that you’ve reached the end of your rope.

She can see the end of it, she knows how long she has yet to last, and she thinks that she might just be able to hold on just long enough. She had felt the adrenaline coursing through her veins only moments ago – she’d felt like she could take on the world, climb the walls of the palace, run a marathon.

She had done it.

She had defeated him. He was gone.

Now, as she walks the short distance to her library, that queasy feeling in her stomach has returned, and she doesn’t want to do this.

She’s so tired.

She’s desperate to do this, to put the final nail in the coffin that is Sir John’s influence over their lives, but oh, she does not want to tell her mother. She doesn’t want to break her mother’s heart, because that is exactly what she’ll be doing.

She can already hear the hysteria in her mother’s voice.

Something in her hardens at the thought and she reminds herself that her mother has willingly kept Sir John around all these years. That despite it all, despite how cruel and unkind he was to her, her mother always sided with Sir John.

She deserves this just a little, she thinks, and she pushes at the shame she feels at the thought but she can’t banish it entirely, and the queasiness returns. His voice in her head is there, reminding her that her mother only wants the best for her.

She thinks he gives her mother too much credit.

She gets closer to the familiar, brown wooden door and the queasiness returns in full force and she wants to stop, to take a breath, but she knows that if she stops now she’ll never actually get there, and she can’t do that. She has to tell her mother herself. She cannot allow Sir John to control the narrative entirely. She will not. She will not let him win even the smallest victory.

Emma is there with her, will be with her like Lord M was for Sir John, and she can do this. She will not fall apart, not now. She has to finish this. She won’t let Lord M down, or Emma down, by failing now.

‘Can I suggest that Emma assist you when you speak to your Mother, ma’am?’ he says tentatively, and she frowns at him.

‘Why?’

‘I don’t think it will help to have your Private Secretary there when you tell her she’s just lost hers.’

She can do this, with her friends by her side.

She can feel her strength returning, and she squashes her fear down ruthlessly with a long, deep breath as she stands at the library door. She won’t let them down.
She won’t let herself down.

‘Drina, what on earth is going on? Why am I sitting here?’ her mother cries, standing as Victoria enters the room.

‘I’m sorry to make you wait, Mama,’ she says calmly, sitting down on the lounge next to where her mother had been sitting, waiting until her mother sits again.

Breathe.

‘Mama, I have just had a meeting with Sir John,’ she starts.

Her mother’s eyes are filled with distrust, and it hurts. ‘Yes, I know. He told me you had summoned him.’

Summoned, she thinks with derision, letting out a huff. She had not summoned him. She’d requested a meeting and he’d accepted.

She almost, almost opens her mouth to retort, but manages to catch herself just in time. She had to be strong, just like she was strong with Sir John, so she pushes the retort building in her mind aside. ‘I requested his resignation,’ she announces, and her mother stares at her for a moment before drawing back slightly. ‘And he has accepted my proposal.’

‘Why would you… What… Drina,’ she says, her voice filled with shock – horror – and Victoria can feel the tears stinging the back of her eyes, despite everything. ‘You can’t.’

‘It was him, Mama. He told the press all those terrible things about me.’ She can hear the almost begging in her voice. Believe me. Choose me.

The Duchess stares at her, her head slowly shaking. ‘No,’ she says. ‘No. He would not do such a thing, Drina. You are wrong.’

‘He admitted it, Mama!’ she cries. ‘Mr Harper has been looking into it all for months. He betrayed me – betrayed us all!’

Her mother is still shaking her head, but there are tears in her eyes and she suspects that for all her protesting, her mother almost believes her. ‘And so you force him to resign? After all his years of loyal service, there is one mistake, and you force him to leave?’ Her voice is almost hysterical.

‘Mama is going to be very upset.’

‘Yes,’ he says slowly, his tone slightly odd.

She shakes her head and closes her eyes for a moment. She understands exactly how her mother feels.

Hadn’t she been the same, when confronted with Lord M’s departure? Hadn’t she clung desperately to him, refusing to believe that he’d done anything wrong, that he had done anything to take responsibility for? Refusing to give him up? Even if Lord M is a thousand times the man Sir John is – there is no comparison at all – she would be kind to her mother here for that reason alone.

‘Mama, I can no longer trust him. I cannot allow that standard to be set in my staff. I’m sorry.’
‘No longer trust him?’ she cries, standing. ‘He has spent twenty years looking after us, putting us first, taking care of us when no one else would!’ Her mother is shaking, pacing the room, and she’s suddenly glad Emma is standing just a few feet away beside the door. ‘How can you do this to me, Drina? How can you send him away?’ she cries, her voice cracking.

_Breathe._

‘He sold the photos of the Coronation Ball to the press, Mama,’ she starts, before her mother interrupts.

‘Nonsense,’ her mother scoffs. ‘My phone was hacked. Sir John said he would look into it for me,’ she says, and Victoria blinks.

_Phones. Hacked._

‘You took those photos? At the ball?’ she asks, standing.

‘Yes, of course! I wanted photos of my daughter at her Coronation Ball! Sir John agreed that I should be allowed that small luxury!’

She feels her mouth drop open and turns to look at Emma whose face mirrors her own shocked expression. She gives the barest shake of her head, confirming what Victoria already knows: no one knew this. She can feel the blood rushing in her ears and her heart is beating in her chest and _oh_, she is so angry. He has manipulated her mother for years, abused his position, lied to her, _used_ her.

Every word he’s ever said has been in his own self-interest. He has never cared for her, cared for her mother, cared for any of it.

The fury – the _hatred_ for this man – swells in her chest and she feels that queasiness return. She can feel her hands shaking, and she clenches them into fists.

‘Mama, did you tell Alex that your phone had been hacked?’ she asks, her voice a distant thing in her ears.

‘Sir John did. He helped me change my password and fix everything so it wouldn’t happen again.’

_of course he did_, she thinks blankly.

‘He didn’t tell anyone, Mama,’ she says quietly after a few moments, staring at her mother, shaking her head. ‘He lied to you.’

‘What? Drina! How dare you suggest such a thing! Of course he told them. Sir John would not do that.’

She stares blankly at her mother, and there are so many emotions now, so many feelings churning through her and she needs to get out, get away.

_How could her mother be so blind?_

‘Mama, Mr Harper spent _months_ combing through the papers, gathering evidence and trying to figure out who it was. Alex spent _days_ helping him, trying to tighten security even more to protect me. The Earl was forced to question his staff over those photos! And it was _Sir John all along_!’ she cries, her voice slowly rising until she’s shouting.

‘You are just trying to blame him for your mistakes! You, and your Lord M!’ her mother flings back,
waving her arms in Emma’s direction and no. She will not let her mother do this. She has listened to Sir John’s spiteful, hateful words, words meant only to hurt and wound. She will not listen to her mother’s, born of irrational pain and anger.

She blinks at the woman in front of her. She understands that feeling. She knows she would have done the same, had she the target then that her mother has now.

She must be kind. She must be kind.

Breathe.

She forces herself to stand tall. There is nothing she can say now that would make it better.

‘She isn’t going to believe me. She’s only ever listened to him.’

‘Probably not,’ he concedes. ‘But she may, in time.’

‘Mama, Sir John will see you here in a few minutes before he leaves. He will lie to you. You will have to decide who you believe: me or him.’

And with that, she turns on her heel and flees the room.

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She gets down the hall and around a corner before the voices in her head blind her with their silence and she almost walks into a table with a vase full of flowers.

She swipes at her face and Emma is right there in front of her, pressing a tissue into her hand and she lets out a noise that’s somewhere between a laugh and a sob before heaving in a breath.

‘I think you did wonderfully, ma’am,’ Emma says. ‘I don’t think I could have done what you did.’

She smiles at Emma – lovely, calm Emma who is always there for her. She thinks she doesn’t appreciate Emma enough.

She leans back against the wall, resting her head against the cool wallpaper. She was so tired, so bone-achingly tired. She felt thin, worn, like a cloth after being wrung dry.

Of course her mother had not believed her. Of course she had sided with Sir John. She had sided with him against her for twenty years. Today would be no different.

Today should have been different, something in her mind screams, and she can feel the hurt in her mind, a distant, intangible thing, and she thinks she should be crying, but the almost hysterical sobs that had gripped her chest only moments earlier are nowhere to be found.

She doesn’t have the energy left to cry.

‘That’s a lovely suit, ma’am,’ Emma says out of the blue, and Victoria looks down at the navy
material. ‘But perhaps you’d like to attend to the rest of your day in something more comfortable?’ she suggests, a knowing look in her eye, and Victoria nods.

‘Yes. I should change.’

‘There’s nothing else in your calendar for today, ma’am,’ Emma says. ‘Although, Harriet and I are both free this evening if you would like some time away from the Palace.’

She stares at her, her mind processing the words, and oh, Emma thinks of everything. Her schedule being free means she will be at home, alone and likely under the same roof as Mama, and oh she’s entirely sure that’s not a good idea.

‘You can let us know later, ma’am. I’ll be here until the usual time,’ she adds, and Victoria nods.

‘Thank you,’ she says, giving her a small smile, and Emma just nods in her usual way.

She pushes herself off the wall and turns to head towards her room when Emma’s gentle hand on her arm stops her. ‘Not that way, Ma’am,’ she says quickly, and Victoria blinks. Of course. Sir John would come that way.

‘No,’ she agrees. ‘I’ll go the long way.’ So tired.

‘Ma’am,’ Emma says suddenly, and Victoria looks at her. She’s looking at her hand – a hand that had just rubbed at her eyes.

Oh.

She holds it up; she has blood under her thumbnails and on the pad of her thumb, little bits of pale orange-red on her forefingers, and her thumb is red and swollen and oozing angrily. She’d done a good job, then, she thinks a little distantly.

‘I think that probably needs to be dressed, ma’am,’ Emma says carefully, and she nods.

‘Yes. I’d forgotten.’ She had, after it all. It didn’t really hurt much now; just some indistinct warmth, stinging when she curls her thumb. It would probably hurt if she touched it, she thinks.

Emma nods, before giving her a knowing smile. ‘Would you like some company?’ she asks kindly, and Victoria smiles weakly.

‘Yes, please.’
Chapter 74

Chapter Summary

Just close your eyes, the sun is going down
You'll be alright, no one can hurt you now
Come morning light, you and I'll be safe and sound

- Safe and Sound, Taylor Swift feat. The Civil Wars

‘How did it go?’ he asks as he answers Emma’s call on the first ring.
Her long sigh tells him enough. ‘About as well as can be expected.’

He lets out his own sigh in response. ‘It was always going to be rough.’ He wants to ask, but he
doesn’t know quite how, doesn’t really have the words. ‘Is she okay?’ he asks instead.

‘No,’ she replies, her voice heavy. ‘I’ll let her tell you the details.’

‘Details?’

‘She was strong. She did very well. But… well, we learned a few things.’

‘Okay,’ he says. ‘Where is she now?’

‘I just took her back to her rooms.’ He hears Emma suck in a breath. ‘William, what happened to her
hand?’

He lets out a sigh. ‘Her fingernail.’

Emma lets out soft noise of shocked sadness, and he agrees.

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He toys with the idea of sending her a message, seeing if she’s okay for himself, or just wandering
up the hall to see if she’s made it back to her office. She hasn’t done her paperwork for the day – he
hadn’t given it to her – and he wonders if her sense of duty will trump the pain of the day, or if she’ll
relish the distraction, or if she’ll just hide and lick her wounds. He wouldn’t blame her at all if she
chose the latter; he almost hopes she does. She’d fought hard today, on two fronts, and had
conquered. But with any victory comes casualties, the wounds that need to be cared for until they
heal.

He wonders just how deeply today will wound her.

A lot will depend on her mother, and judging by Emma’s voice on the phone, it’s going to be a long
time before she’s whole again, his beautiful Queen.
But with any victory and any wounding comes lessons; she knows what she’s capable of now, more sure of herself emotionally, and even if the wounds take an age to heal, she will still be stronger for it.

He’s just pushing himself out of his seat, decision half-made, when her face appears at his barely-open door. His mind registers that she’s no longer in her suit – she’s changed into a large, soft-looking knit and jeans, her hair down and curled messily around her shoulders and down her back – and he knows why she’s here before his mind can even process the look on her face. His feet are moving and he’s walking around his desk towards her and she’s burying her face in his chest, her arms curling around her face before sliding under his jacket to cling to his shirt at his back, and he can feel her chest heaving with silent almost-sobs as his arms wrap tightly around her.

He’s so, so proud of her, his beautiful, strong Queen.

One hand finds her hair, and he’s stroking her long, soft curls, holding her close as he presses his lips to the crown of her head and mumbles whatever soothing words he can think of, telling her how wonderful she was, how strong, how it’s over, that she’s okay. She’s so perfectly-sized for this, he thinks absently as she slowly calms; she fits just neatly under his chin when she presses her face against him like that, and he can just hold her steady in his arms, giving her what little comfort he can while she works out her pain.

Eventually she’s quiet and still, no longer trembling, with her face still half-pressed against his chest, her arms curled up near her shoulders and her palms almost flat against his chest. He rocks her gently, just tiny movements, and he hears her sigh against his chest.

‘Are you okay?’ he asks after a moment, his voice barely more than a whisper, and she presses herself against him as if she knows he was about to let her go, so he just presses his lips to her hair once more and wraps his arms a little more tightly around her.

‘I’m okay,’ she whispers.

He’s not sure how long they stand like that, but he doesn’t care. He’ll hold her forever if that’s what she needs from him today.

Eventually she moves and he lets her go, and she looks down at her feet. He thinks she’s almost a little embarrassed. ‘I’m sorry,’ she starts, and he shakes his head.

‘Never apologise for needing help, ma’am,’ he replies. She just stares at him for a moment, her eyes red-rimmed and a little puffy, before nodding.

‘Thank you,’ she almost whispers, and gives her a small smile.

‘You’re always welcome, ma’am,’ he tells her gently, and she gives him a weak little smile in return.

He deliberately looks down at her left hand; he can see a skin-coloured bandage around the length of her thumb. She follows his gaze, lifting her hand to show him.

‘Lehzen and Emma insisted I bandage it,’ she tells him, before letting out a small huff at herself, he thinks.

‘I’m pleased,’ he says quietly, giving her a tiny, soft smile when she finally meets his eyes again.

She’s exhausted; he can see it all over her face. He’d known she would be – emotional battles were taxing, let alone the mountain she’d just moved. He also knows she hasn’t slept well since Harper’s meeting a little over forty-eight hours ago, so it’s no wonder she’s weary.
She looks around the room, blinking, and he thinks perhaps she wants something to do – something to distract herself with. He’d assumed she’d want to talk about her conversation with her mother, but apparently not. Well, he’s well prepared to distract. ‘Would you like to see your letters for today?’ he asks, and she blinks at him and nods.

‘Yes, please,’ she says, and he turns around and picks up the folder, handing it to her, and she looks down at it. But she doesn’t move, and it takes him a moment to figure out why.

She doesn’t want to be alone.

He understands. He casts around in his mind for an excuse – any reason to go with her back to her office. It’s probably not practical that she stays here – his desk is a mess, and there really isn’t room for her to sit comfortably at the large, dark wood desk that was very definitely designed with a single person in mind anyway, and—

‘Do you have a pen I could borrow? And a notepad,’ she says, and he blinks at her.

‘Yes,’ he says, turning back to his desk and grabbing one of his nicer pens and rifling through the piles of paper to find one of the many notepads he leaves lying around.

He hands both to her and she takes them with a quiet thank you, and he watches as she turns and curls herself into a little ball in one of the large leather arm chairs in front of his desk.

Well, then.

He resists the urge to laugh, instead smiling to himself and returning to his own seat.

It’s about an hour later, and she’s sitting cross-legged on his chair, her phone on one knee and the notepad on the other, with the folder open on her legs in between, when Sir Robert comes through the door.

‘I just got your email—’ He stops when he sees her, and the shock on his face is almost comical – would be, if he wasn’t still reeling a little from the day’s events himself. ‘Ma’am! My apologies. I didn’t see you there,’ he says haltingly.

She just smiles up at him. ‘Good morning, Sir Robert. Yes, I don’t usually make a habit of working from Lord M’s office, but it was convenient for this morning,’ she tells him, and he’s pleased to hear the strength in her voice. It’s all fake – he knows her well enough to know that – but he’s pleased she’s able to at least dredge it up from somewhere.

‘Ah. Yes. Yes. Well, excellent, ma’am,’ he says, eventually turning back to Melbourne. ‘When you have a moment – later,’ he says, and Melbourne nods. He knows why Sir Robert is here, and he’s pleased that the man has enough tact to stop that particular conversation in its tracks. He’d figured he’d at least inform his deputies of Sir John’s departure himself; he’s sure the gossip generated by the spectacle of Sir John’s three-person escort from the building will do the job for the rest of the staff for now. He’d warned Charlotte and her Keeper of the Privy Purse when Sir John had confirmed his appointment – both of whom had been on the phone already to see how it had gone. The way she’s been tapping away at her phone intermittently for the past hour tells him that Harriet – and likely Anna and Amalie – also now know of her success.

Clearly deciding to leave them to it, Sir Robert gives her an awkward little bow, and she smiles graciously at him, and he leaves.

He watches as she looks down at the paperwork in front of her, the awkward balancing act already failing once, and he can see she’s fading. She’s trying hard, but she’s yawning semi-regularly now.
He knows why she’s here and not in her bed asleep.

He thinks automatically of the two Australian baristas and whether it would be too much of an ask for a mid-morning delivery, but decides against it. She’s the kind of exhausted that coffee will only exacerbate.

She has a rather comfortable lounge in her office. He wonders if he can convince her.

He lets out a theatrical little grunt, and she looks up at him. ‘Ma’am, I left a couple of folders in your office,’ he tells her. ‘I’ll be back soon,’ he says, and she nods. He pauses as he stands. ‘Actually, ma’am, it would probably be easier if you looked at one of them now – it’s a preliminary schedule for Edinburgh.’ He smiles at the way her face lights up just a little, despite her exhaustion. ‘Shall we move to your office?’

‘Yes,’ she says, closing the folder and capping the pen, and they’re in her office a few minutes later. He sits next to her on her lounge, and he pulls open the file, discussing the various receptions and her meeting with the Scottish First Minister for all of five minutes before she yawns widely behind her hand for the third time, and he raises his eyebrows at her. She just looks sheepish, blinking away the wetness in her eyes from her constant yawning, and he purses his lips.

‘Can I suggest a nap, ma’am? It’s been a tough few days,’ he says quietly, and she sighs, looking down at where she’s now fiddling with her fingertips.

‘I’m fine,’ she starts, looking back up at him, her face falling slightly when she sees the gentle disbelief on his face. ‘I don’t really want to see Mama again. Not today,’ she says quietly, and he nods. Her mother would likely not venture this far across the palace, and if she did, at least she had him and Emma for backup if she needed it. In her mind, she was safe here, and he understands why she would be reluctant to give that up.

He looks at her, and then deliberately down at the lounge, and purses his lips thoughtfully. ‘This lounge is rather comfortable,’ he says, and she looks at him like the thought had never occurred to her to sleep on the lounge in her office. If only she knew how often he had done exactly that in all his years in politics. ‘I’ll shut the door and let Emma know,’ he says as nonchalantly as he can. She looks from him to the couch and back up at him, and he can see that she’s tempted, as odd and counter-intuitive it must seem in her mind. The Queen of England doesn’t sleep on a couch in her office at eleven o’clock in the morning.

He sees on her face the moment she makes her decision, and he closes the folder on his lap at her tiny nod.

‘Will you stay?’ she whispers before he can stand, and when she glances up at him, his heart crumbles in his chest. He cannot say no to his beautiful Queen, whose strength has just run out. He’s never seen her this broken before, drawn so far back into herself that the fire in her eyes is almost non-existent.

But the alarm bells in the back of his mind ring a little too insistently.

‘Oh, I’d probably make so much noise that you’d never get to sleep,’ he says a little haltingly.

She lets out a sigh, and he sees her find just a tiny bit of strength from her almost-depleted reserves. ‘I understand.’ She bites her lip momentarily before her jaw clenches slightly. ‘I would rather not be alone,’ she whispers, and he places his hand over hers where she’s folded them together in her lap. She stills under his touch, and he can hear her let out a soft breath.
‘Sleep, ma’am,’ he says quietly, and she nods, not looking up at him. ‘Would it be okay if I stayed until you fell asleep?’ he asks, cursing himself for his own lack of strength. He should not stay with this beautiful Queen who owns entirely all of his heart in her darkened office while she sleeps.

She nods quickly, giving him the briefest, tiniest of smiles. So he stands, placing a cushion down where he’d been sitting at the end of the couch and grabbing the throw rug that sat on one of the other chairs. She watches him before toeing off her shoes and lying down facing outwards, pulling the throw rug he’s handed her over herself.

He can feel her eyes on him the whole time as he moves around the room; it takes him a minute to turn out the main light and turn on the small desk lamp and settle himself at his desk.

‘Goodnight, Lord M,’ she whispers from where her head is lying on the cushion only a few feet away.

He smiles down at her. ‘Sleep well, ma’am.’
Chapter 75

Chapter Summary

So when you're caught in a landslide
I'll be there for you, I'll be there for you
And in the rain, give you sunshine
I'll be there for you, I'll be there for you

- Landslide, Oh Wonder

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry for the delay in updates. I have had some significant health issues in the past month that I'm hoping will resolve themselves soon!

She sleeps for hours.

He’d taken her phone off the hook and made sure her own phone was on silent once he was sure she was asleep, and he’s made a fair amount of noise he thinks, just shuffling paperwork and typing away on his laptop, but she has barely moved from where she’s half-curled up on her couch.

He puts off leaving her for so long that he thinks it’s almost not worth leaving at all.

The thought is enough that he chastises himself and quietly tiptoes out, laptop under his arm, to where Emma is working.

‘She’s asleep,’ he explains, and Emma looks at him in surprise.

‘In her office?’

‘She didn’t want to be alone.’

She lets out an irritated sigh. ‘I don’t blame her,’ she replies. ‘The Duchess didn’t believe her.’

‘Of course not,’ he says. ‘That’s going to take some time.’

‘How long has she been asleep?’

He looks at his watch and blinks. Oh. ‘An hour or so?’ he lies. ‘Not long after we came up here.’

Emma looks at the clock on her computer screen. ‘That’s well over two hours,’ she tells him and he shrugs.

Oops.

He’s tired himself; he hasn’t slept properly in days either. He thinks a nap sounds delightful, as he
struggles to suppress his own yawn. Emma just hums at him.

‘I think I might send for two cups of strong coffee,’ she says, and he nods.

‘Make it three.’

***

They haven’t really debriefed her confrontation with Sir John, but he’s not sure they really need to. It had all worked out mostly as they had planned, and she had been stunning and magnificent, and when he thinks of just how strong she’d been, the way her chin had risen against Sir John’s barbs, the way she hadn’t panicked and screamed back, the way she’d held herself tall and strong almost the whole way through, still makes that thing in his stomach growl in satisfaction hours later.

It scares him a little, just how strong that thing has been – how much it has now grown. But he thinks confrontations like that are going to be rare, and he is well aware of just how deep his love for her runs. And if they can survive that without her seeing, then he thinks he’ll be okay.

He’s also not entirely sure he wants to talk about it either.

He’d been just a little bit blindsided by her attempt to leverage her mother – her money – against Sir John, and it had been sitting at the back of his mind ever since. He wonders if she would have done it if Sir John had called her bluff and had refused to go; if she then would have given her mother the choice. And what a terrible, terrible choice. He knows that choice, knows what it looks like, and he doesn’t think he would ever have forgiven the Duchess if she’d made the wrong one, let alone what she would think.

His heart aches at the thought, at just how badly this could have all turned out, and he’s ridiculously glad that Sir John’s greed had triumphed over his spiteful stubbornness – that he’d been as boringly predictable as they’d hoped.

He’s not in her office when she wakes; he doesn’t hear her come padding softly out to Emma’s desk where he’s standing, holding on to his coffee for dear life and rifling through some folders.

‘That smells good,’ she says from behind him, and turns in surprise to see her eyeing his coffee.

‘Good thing we ordered three, then, ma’am,’ he tells her with a smirk, handing her the little cardboard cup that was still sitting in the tray Emma had brought back only a few minutes earlier. She just smiles a little shyly at him as she takes the warm cup and holds it between her hands. She blinks a little owlishly down at it before looking around, not quite awake. It had been a rough few months, he well knew; one midday nap was not going to be quite enough.

She looks so sweet, her now-wavy hair hanging loose and a little messy around her face and shoulders and down her back, her cheeks still a little pink from sleep, and he can’t help how his heart swells in fondness for his beautiful Queen.

‘Feel better, ma’am?’ he asks quietly, and she looks up at him and nods.

At the sound of footsteps, they both turn to see Emma and Alex walking down the hallway towards Emma’s desk.
‘Good timing, ma’am,’ he mutters to her as they approach, and she shoots him an amused half-smile.

‘Ma’am,’ Alex says, before nodding to him. ‘I thought you’d like to know that Sir John was escorted from the palace grounds at approximately eleven-thirty this morning.’

He watches as she takes in a breath and lets it out slowly, before nodding. ‘Thank you, Alex. Was there much…trouble?’

Alex frowns a little before shaking his head. ‘Sir John did protest the searching of his briefcase, but Peter was most…insistent,’ he says, a small smile flickering across his face, and she smiles a little herself. ‘All access to the palace, physical and digital, has now been revoked.’

‘Good,’ she says a little more firmly, nodding. ‘Thank you for your assistance this morning.’

‘Not at all, ma’am,’ he replies. ‘It was very much our pleasure.’

He can’t help the way the corners of his mouth curl up a little at just how pleased her head of security seems to be at the dismissal of Conroy; he wonders just how many of her staff Conroy had managed to put off-side.

‘Ma’am, we’ve also changed the Duchess’s digital access details, passwords and the like, just in case,’ Alex adds tentatively. ‘I haven’t yet informed the Duchess.’

She nods, and glances down at her coffee. ‘Thank you. I was going to request that be done.’

Alex nods once. ‘If that’s all, I wish you a good afternoon, ma’am,’ he says, nodding to Melbourne and Emma before leaving at her nod.

‘It’s over,’ she says after a few moments, looking up at him, her face pensive, and he nods.

‘It’s over.’

***

He’s not surprised when she invites him to stay for dinner via text message later that afternoon, when he’s returned to his office and Emma has taken over. There’s not even any pretext to it; usually she has some reason, some excuse, something to justify his staying. This message had been simple, to the point, and he hadn’t the heart to refuse her, to suggest perhaps Harriet or Amalie instead. She needs to spend the evening happy, laughing with her friends. Not with him.

Are you busy this evening?

He’d briefly toyed with saying yes, that he had some other prior engagement, but he couldn’t bring himself to type the words.

No.

Would you mind staying for dinner?

She also doesn’t usually ask him quite so directly, either.

If you would like me to.
I would.

There’s that American version of *Much Ado About Nothing* they hadn’t yet got around to watching; perhaps that would be an appropriate distraction. It would make her smile, he thinks.

He knows why she asks.

He feels that conflict within him, that conflict that sits quietly at the back of his mind until she says or does something and it flares up again, reminding him that he is walking that dangerously fine line between employee and friend and something else entirely.

He also thinks Emma won’t be all that surprised to hear of her request either.

‘You’re staying?’ Emma asks as he approaches her desk not long before she’s due to leave, and he blinks.

‘How did you know?’

‘She hasn’t asked me or Harriet,’ she replies. He nods, feeling the twinge of embarrassment – almost shame – that she had chosen him over her friend.

He’d have been very concerned – they all would have been – if she’d not asked any of them for company of some kind. He knows her well, his beautiful Queen; she doesn’t like to be alone for long.

But she’d chosen him, and the thought sits restlessly in his mind.

‘She needs you,’ Emma says quietly, and his eyes flick to hers, that knowing expression he’s so familiar with on her face. ‘I never imagined she’d choose anyone else.’

He looks away as her words reach their mark, those oh so familiar alarm bells ringing quietly but insistently at the back of his mind. He’s holding her too close. He should not allow her to hold on to him so tightly.

But oh, how could he not right now? How could he leave her to face Conroy alone?

‘William,’ Emma says quietly, and his eyes flick up to hers again, her face serious but kind. ‘This was your fight. None of us could have done this. She needed you, and only you.’

He nods after a beat. Maybe Emma was right. This had been an attack on both of them, and who else would she have trusted – would have had the experience – to help her with this?

‘Yeah,’ he says. *Maybe.*

‘Enjoy your evening,’ she says with a small smile, and he nods.

But Conroy was gone now. She was safe.

The thought dredges up that familiar pain, that emotion he’d become so familiar with not that long ago when he’d forced himself to give her up almost entirely. He’s learned his lesson from the last time; he would pull back gently, so slowly that she wouldn’t notice. And he would need to start soon.

He would enjoy tonight with her, his beautiful Queen.
He watches surreptitiously as she pushes her food around her plate. She’s been quiet all evening – well, quieter than usual – and he understands. It had been a hell of a day.

He’s more than happy to just sit quietly as they make their way through the deliciously thick beef casserole with mashed potato and peas her chef had served. He’d wondered briefly when it had arrived if Emma had spoken to Andrew; the meals are always good, but they’re not usually quite this level of comfort food. He wonders again how her staff feel about Sir John – or if, perhaps, they just like their Queen.

‘It was Mama,’ she says out of the blue, and he looks at her with a frown. ‘She took the photos. She said she wanted photos of me at the ball for herself,’ she says a little disbelievingly, and he’s not sure he quite understands her meaning. Surely the Duchess didn’t…

‘The Duchess took the photos?’ he half-asks with a small frown, and she nods.

‘When they made the papers, Sir John told her that her phone had been hacked.’

He closes his eyes for a moment. Well, it was clever, he thinks. No one would have really thought twice about the Duchess of Kent taking photos of her daughter at her Coronation Ball, and they certainly wouldn’t have tried to stop her.

He wonders briefly how many photos she took. Not that it mattered; Conroy could do nothing with them now, and he likely would have selected only the best for the press the first time around anyway.

But the Duchess’s phone being hacked would have been an issue for security – surely Alex would have mentioned it, unless…

‘It gets better,’ she says, interrupting his thoughts, and he thinks he knows what she’s about to say. ‘Sir John said he would tell Alex about it.’

‘And, of course, he never did,’ he finishes, and she nods.

Never let it be said that Conroy allowed an opportunity to pass him by, he thinks bitterly.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t work it out sooner,’ she says quietly. ‘Mr Harper even wanted to have a meeting about the leaks when you were gone, and I…’ she trails off.

He wonders how long it will take for her to stop beating herself up over this. He’d thought her over it, her anger directed at Conroy and even in part her mother, as it well should have been, but now it appears that with her targets removed, she’s determined to punish herself again.

‘When Byron published his book, he included emails and texts that referred to me. There were even messages I had sent to Caro, and ones she had sent to me.’ She turns to look at him, eyes wide. ‘Do you think I should blame myself for that? I sent those messages, knowing full well what I was putting in writing.’

She stares at him, her face horrified, before shaking her head almost emphatically before slowing, and he thinks he’s made his point. ‘Byron took advantage of a situation for his own benefit, ma’am. Conroy has done the same thing.’ She stares at him, processing his words, before looking out at the trees.
‘You think I shouldn’t blame myself.’

‘I have always thought you shouldn’t blame yourself, ma’am,’ he replies, and she lets out a sigh. ‘You are the Queen, and there will be people who come and go in your life who wish to take advantage of that – of you – for their own gain. You have merely learned early on to recognise what that looks like,’ he tells her, and she nods. ‘You’ll see it sooner in future,’ he says gently.

‘You saw it straight away,’ she says, and he smirks a little at her.

‘I was a politician, ma’am. According to popular opinion, I’m usually supposed to be the one taking advantage,’ he jokes, and she shakes her head at him.

‘You would never do such a thing,’ she scoffs, her derision at his self-flagellation in full force, as always.

‘I’d like to think not, ma’am,’ he agrees.

She lets out a long sigh. ‘I thought I’d feel better,’ she says, her voice quiet against the rawness he knows she’s feeling. ‘I do feel…free. But not…gleeful,’ she adds, frowning at little.

He shakes his head. ‘These things never feel very good,’ he says. ‘As much as revenge is painted as satisfying, it never really is.’

‘No,’ she agrees. ‘I am glad it’s over.’

He just nods. He feels the same.

‘I had asked Lehzen to have champagne ready to celebrate, but it didn’t feel…right,’ she tells him, frowning. ‘I would have thought it should.’

He frowns momentarily. ‘I never found it particularly enjoyable crowing over someone else’s failure, even if it was also my own success,’ he says after a few moments. ‘But then I was always told I never made the most of those kinds of…opportunities,’ he adds with a small smile.

‘It does seem unkind,’ she replies almost reluctantly, and he understands the conflict in her voice.

‘And there are always people on the periphery who find champagne unpalatable, and even perhaps insensitive,’ he adds thoughtfully, and she stares are him for a beat before looking back down at her plate, her lip curling for a just a moment. When she says nothing, he speaks again. ‘I’ve never really been a huge fan of champagne,’ he declares, and she looks back up at him. ‘I prefer whisky. A sharper taste, perhaps, but quieter. More subtle.’ When he holds her gaze, she narrows her eyes at him a little. ‘Less sugar,’ he adds, and she lets out a vaguely amused breath. ‘A more…mature choice,’ he finishes with, his lips twisting slightly, and she gives him a small half-smile.

When she speaks again a few seconds later, her face firm but vulnerable and her decision made, he can’t help but give her a small, pleased smile.

‘I think I might have to try whisky one day, Lord M.’

‘I think that could be arranged, ma’am.’

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Despite all that she’s slept today – and hadn’t she felt a little silly, waking up after one o’clock in the afternoon when she’d laid down at eleven, and adding the fact that she hasn’t napped since she was a child – she’s still so tired.

It’s an odd kind of feeling; she still feels strung out, stretched tightly. Brittle, like some of the ancient china in the cabinets at Kensington she had been forbidden to touch, lest it shatter into worthless dust at the slightest contact. She’s felt it before, or at least something like it, not all that long ago in reality but what feels like a lifetime ago, when he’d left.

But he is warm and safe next to her now as they lean against the stone railing on the balcony she now almost considers theirs and she pushes the thought out of her mind. She could not have done today without him, her Lord M.

She couldn’t have done any of it. She wouldn’t be standing here, free of Sir John, Queen in her own right and making her own decisions and happy if he hadn’t said yes so long ago.

Part of her, a part that is rational and logical, tells her that he does it because it’s his duty to the crown and the monarchy, and it’s his job as her Private Secretary. He is devoted to his country, has shown that in his time as a politician, and she knows he will always work for its success.

Her heart tells her that he does it for her. She’s not entirely sure which to believe.

Perhaps it’s both, she reasons.

She knows that, objectively, as her Private Secretary, the problems she has with her family are not his to worry about or help her solve. He did not need to stand beside her today, silently lending her his strength. But he did it anyway, listened to the cruel untruths spewed by Sir John, the aspersions on his reputation, those suggestions that he would do terrible things and take advantage of her, and he had withstood it all for her. To protect her.

The thought makes that thing pull low in her stomach, and she feels the pull of a smile.

He didn’t need to stick around through all the rubbish in the press, through everything they said about him. He could have abandoned her much earlier, left her to solve the problem of Sir John’s meddling on her own. She was the Queen, after all. She could have forced her mother to get rid of Sir John at the first sign of trouble…

But then a thought strikes her, and she turns to look at him. ‘There is one thing I don’t understand,’ she says, her voice breaking their comfortable silence, and he turns his head to look at her. ‘If you knew it was Sir John, why didn’t you say something earlier? Why let all of this happen? I would have done something long ago if I’d known.’

He lets out a long breath, and she thinks he doesn’t really like the answer to her question by the way his lips twitch, and how he blinks a few times before speaking. ‘I didn’t think at the time that saying anything earlier would have made much difference to the eventual outcome, ma’am,’ he says quietly, and she looks away. He’s right. She would have had to get rid of Sir John somehow – her mother was not going to do it for her – and whilst they might have stopped it before it quite reached that final headline, they might not have as well. They’d never had any evidence that linked anything directly to Sir John, anyway, and Lord M was not the type to throw around baseless accusations without real evidence, she’d learned. Not like her, she thinks a little bitterly, and hadn’t she learned that lesson the hard way. ‘I suppose…I didn’t initially think it would get quite as far as it did,’ he admits. ‘And I wasn’t sure what the Duchess would do. I know what it’s like for a mother to choose…someone else over her child,’ he says slowly, haltingly, glancing down at the wine glass in his hand, and she stares at him as her mind works through what he’s said, what he means, the pain in his voice, what he’s
tried to do for her, and then the tears burn behind her eyes and she looks away.

Oh.

He would sacrifice himself just to preserve what little relationship she has left with her mother, because he knows that pain. He’s lived that, watched it in his own little boy.

And oh, how her threat to send her mother away must have wounded him; everything he’d done, everything he’d sacrificed, would have been for nothing. She would have done that to him, her Lord M, who has tried so hard to salvage something of her relationship with her mother.

But as the sorrow at her own actions swells, it’s replaced with that familiar burning: fury with her mother.

She is not a child, has worked hard for two years to prove to them all that she’s not the child that Sir John and her mother imagine her as, and yet she wasn’t even strong enough to control her own household. The thought is bitter, twisting painfully in her mind and her chest.

‘I’m sorry,’ she whispers, as she feels the tears sting.

‘What for?’ he asks quickly, and his voice is so concerned and she didn’t think she had tears left to cry over this, but, clearly, she does.

‘I should have told you about sending Mama away,’ she cries, and she can feel his eyes on her as he shifts to face her. She eventually looks up at him, his eyes a dark golden in the low light, as kind and gentle as they were serious. ‘I didn’t think I would have to; I thought that the threat would be enough,’ she explains, words slowly failing her. She would have, she thinks, if Sir John had refused to go. She would have sent them both away in a fit of anger and rage and bitterness.

When he speaks, his voice has that kind of urgency about it that it gets when he’s worried. ‘Ma’am, this was your fight, not mine. My role is simply to assist you when and where you requested.’

Assist, she thinks a little derisively. As if he would ever just be there to assist.

‘I know how much you wish for Mama and I to get along.’

He lets out a little huff and turns back slightly to lean against the balcony. ‘What I want, ma’am, is of no consequence here,’ he says quietly. ‘It’s about what you want.’

‘Lord M,’ she half-protests, but he shakes his head.

‘I just didn’t want you to burn any bridges until you were absolutely sure, ma’am,’ he says a little haltingly, and she thinks his voice is a little raw, as she looks at him looking down at the glass in his hands, and she has no words for this, for these emotions she’s feeling, she can’t express them, and oh…

She can’t help but touch him, tell him somehow what he means to her, and so she slides her arm through his and rests her head against his shoulder as they lean against the stone balcony railing.

‘Thank you,’ she whispers, forcing her voice to be steady, and he squeezes her arm a little in return.

What did she do to deserve him, her Lord M?
Chapter 76

Chapter Summary

It's been a long, a long time coming
But I know a change gonna come

- A Change is Gonna Come, Sam Cooke

Early October

The official announcement and all that had precluded it brings the need for a new Private Secretary for her mother.

He hasn’t raised it – it isn’t his job – but then she hasn’t mentioned anything either, and he wonders if it’s occurred to her that her mother would need someone new. He suspects the Duchess is going to be in no mood to deal with this herself anytime soon. In an ideal world, she would choose someone for her mother – someone she can trust, someone sensible who will manage things carefully and fairly clinically and keep a healthy distance between themselves and the Duchess.

Someone nothing like himself, he thinks a little scornfully.

The events of the past weeks have been illuminating in so many ways, and he’s become painfully aware of the apparent similarities between his relationship with the Queen and Conroy’s with the Duchess. They are more alike than they’d care to admit, his beautiful Queen and her mother. Despite all his beautiful Queen’s strength and fire, she has learned from her mother, and he had seen too late.

She was always going to hold him close, the moment she had decided that she trusted him. She knew no other way.

Along with his own heart, he would always be fighting her, her innate need to keep him close, and the thought, when it had woken him early that morning, had burned in all its painful truth. It was a learned behaviour, her attachment to him, and she would have to unlearn it.

She had to unlearn it. He couldn’t fight on both fronts forever; he wasn’t strong enough. Eventually he would crack, do or say something, reveal his heart and all would be ruined.

He wouldn’t be around forever, and she needed to understand the boundaries that were supposed to exist between the Queen and those in her employ. She couldn’t leave herself so vulnerable to another who might take advantage – the way her mother had.

He wonders briefly what an outside observer would say about him – just how much it would appear that he has taken advantage of her. The thought sits uncomfortably in his stomach. He knows he has absolutely taken advantage of her – of her smiles, her laughter, her love. She has bestowed all of these so freely upon him – he has earned so little – that he worries just what will happen when he finally moves away and another takes his place.

Yet another painful, heart-breaking lesson for him to teach and for her to learn. He wonders just how
many more of these lessons he will be forced to endure.

He would endure them all, he knows, because it’s her. Because he loves her, his beautiful Queen.

***

Her mother needs a Lord M. She just has no idea where she’s going to find one.

She scoffs at the idea; no one was going to be as wonderful as her Lord M. But she owed it to her mother – to herself – to find someone who would be as good to her mother as Lord M was to her.

Does such a person even exist?

Her mother thought Sir John better than Lord M, she thinks, and she lets out a sigh.

She would have to choose for her. For all her bitterness and frustration with her mother, all the years of hurt and pain her mother inflicted, she could not – would not – allow someone like Sir John to control her again. Her mother needs someone she can trust – they can both trust – someone who will walk beside her and support her. Someone who wouldn’t see an opportunity to take advantage of her – of them – for their own gain.

She needs someone honest. She knows she’s similar to her mother in so many ways, but she cannot fathom how her mother spent so many years allowing to Sir John to control and manipulate her. Her heart tells her that her mother was weak, alone and vulnerable after the death of her father, and Sir John took advantage of that, digging his claws into her at every opportunity.

She should have been stronger, her heart cries, and she prays that the same weakness doesn’t flow through her veins.

But Lord M is always telling her how strong she is, showing her just what she can do, standing beside her as she learns more and more about who she is and who she wants to be. Who she wants the Queen to be.

Her mother needs a Lord M. She’s just not sure where she’s supposed to find anyone like her Lord M.

It feels as though God had given him to her; she would never forget his kind face and encouraging smile at the Accession Council so long ago, the way he’d given her just enough strength to get through that meeting without falling apart. The warmth that spread through her when he’d agreed to help her back when she’d felt so small, a tiny boat floundering on a stormy sea.

She’d just…known. She’d only read through the names he’d suggested because she was interested to see who he would put down, not because she wanted any of them. She wonders idly if that list still exists somewhere. Emma would have a copy, she thinks.

They’d told her that she was silly – that he was too scandalous a choice for a Private Secretary to the Queen of England; that he was ridiculously overqualified for the role and that he wouldn’t stay for long; that he’d tire of her, the little girl that was playing at being Queen.

They’d all been wrong. He was still there, walking beside her through everything, her ever-faithful Lord M.
One thing still hadn’t changed in the two years since he’d first smiled at her: she still didn’t know what she’d done to deserve him, her wonderful, wonderful Lord M.

***

With the official announcement – the carefully-worded press release issued quietly by HR late on Wednesday afternoon – also comes the articles in the paper and online. He’d half-hoped that they wouldn’t really notice; that the release would fly under the radar and perhaps make a small column somewhere that no one would really read or care about. He knew it was a foolish hope.

Whilst it certainly hadn’t made the front page, the phrase Private Secretary in association with the Royal family was obviously a red flag right across all news outlets, and so he sighs when he opens his email on Friday morning to a link to an article on The Guardian’s website from Peel.

Private Secretary’s sudden resignation sparks questions

It would seem that the Royal Family’s trouble with Private Secretaries continues. The sudden resignation and departure of Sir John Conroy, Private Secretary for almost a quarter of a century to the Duchess of Kent, mother of the Queen, on Wednesday this week highlights that perhaps all is not well in the Royal Household…

Well, they weren’t wrong, he thinks a little bitterly. All hadn’t been well, and now it was.

Sir John has been contacted for comment.

He’s long since stopped hoping she wouldn’t see these things, so he gathers the folders and her box and heads down the hallway.

‘She’s outside,’ Emma tells him when he appears. ‘She asked if you wouldn’t mind meeting her at the rotunda.’

He looks out the window of Emma’s office and eyes the grey clouds. ‘Can I borrow your umbrella?’

***

‘Mama hasn’t left her rooms since Wednesday morning and is refusing to see anyone,’ she tells him a little pensively when he sits down, and he cringes a little. He’s not surprised. He feels a pang of sympathy for the Duchess – no matter how wrong they were, how much he believes she should never have kept Sir John around for so long at the expense of her daughter, he understands how the Duchess is feeling at least on some level. The destruction of a professional relationship of twenty-odd years was going to hurt, especially one as…close as he suspects Sir John and the Duchess’s was.

‘She even refused to see me when I went down there this morning,’ she adds, and he grimaces a little.

‘Give it time, ma’am,’ he adds gently, and she huffs a little.

‘I did the same thing,’ she admits quietly after a beat, not looking at him. ‘When you left.’
‘Oh,’ he says, in lieu of anything intelligent, as her words twist like a knife in his chest. Learned behaviour.

She glances up at him, biting her lip, before smiling a little ruefully. ‘I suppose I am more like my mother than I’d like to admit.’

‘I think most people are more like their parents than they’d like to think,’ he agrees, pushing his pain aside and focusing on her. ‘I see much of my parents in me. And in my siblings.’ He narrows his eyes a little. ‘Emily is just like Mum,’ he jokes, and she grins.

But as much as her words hurt, they also bring a quiet cheer. She’s so compassionate, his beautiful Queen, even in the face of years of cruelly-inflicted wounds. Maybe there’s hope yet for her mother.

He studies her as she pulls out some paperwork. She still looks tired, his beautiful Queen; the bags under her eyes were a little clearer this morning, and there was something just a little distracted about her. He wonders briefly what else could be playing on her mind and keeping her from rest, before dismissing the thought. It had been a long, difficult year, and she was wearied by it all. He’s glad it’s over, but the recovery was going to take time.

‘She’ll have to come out sometime,’ she declares, interrupting his thoughts. ‘She has to choose a new Private Secretary.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ he agrees, a little surprised that she’s thought of this. ‘You could always use one of my deputies to fill the role temporarily,’ he says, and she nods thoughtfully.

‘Not Sir Robert,’ she says. ‘I think he’s just started to like me again,’ she adds dryly, and he can’t help the laugh that escapes him.

‘Perhaps,’ he says, playing along. ‘But he hasn’t yet suffered the real test yet. Charlotte and I head to Scotland next week,’ he tells her mock-seriously and she frowns a little at him.

‘Yes, I saw that you added that to my calendar this morning,’ she almost grumbles. ‘Why?’

‘Reconnaissance,’ he says conspiratorially, and her face brightens a little in amusement. ‘To ensure everything is organised for your visit, ma’am.’

Her brow remains a little furrowed until she suddenly smirks a little. ‘I’ll have my guillotine prepared,’ she jokes, and he shakes his head at her. ‘I was thinking,’ she starts a few minutes later, ‘that maybe I could choose someone for her.’

He studies her for a moment. She knows that she has no real authority here, that the Duchess could choose whoever she likes and completely ignore her daughter.

‘You could recommend someone, perhaps,’ he hedges, and she nods.

‘I think I will recommend quite strongly,’ she agrees.

It might work; it would depend on how much the Duchess is willing to fight, he thinks. It would have to happen fairly quickly.

‘I’ll ask Emma to do a list,’ she says decisively. ‘I expect you’ll add to it,’ she tells him, her eyes narrowing at him. ‘Don’t tell me you haven’t been thinking about it.’

He raises his eyebrows in innocence and when she shakes her head at him, his face cracks into a smile. ‘You know me too well, ma’am,’ he half-laughs.
‘I know you well enough to know that you always think of these things long before I do,’ she tells him, and he grins.

‘Years of experience, ma’am.’

‘One day I’ll surprise you,’ she declares, and he can’t tell her how his heart swells in his chest at her words. She surprises him all the time, his beautiful Queen, with her heart and her fire and the way she is desperate to be a great Queen – and then he kicks himself for being surprised.

She’s been surprising him from the moment he met her.

‘I have no doubt you will, ma’am.’

***

He stops when he reaches his office door and stares.

Sitting on his desk is a teddy bear the size of his torso wrapped in cellophane, the word Congratulations! emblazoned across its front and holding a very large bunch of shiny silver helium balloons.

He purses his lips and pulls out his phone.

I hope this cost a lot.

It was worth every penny.

‘Do you have some news for us, Melbourne?’ Peel calls from across the hall to the poorly-hidden laughter of the staff who were vaguely attempting to hide at the end of the hall.

He can practically hear Wellington’s laughter from somewhere in the halls of the Palace.

***

‘I asked the Duke at our meeting this afternoon if he would recommend anyone to take Sir John’s place,’ she tells him as he’s leaving that evening. ‘He also recommended George Couper quite strongly. Apparently, they were in the army together.’

He blinks at her before smiling a little resignedly. He wonders if Wellington delivered the bear personally; he wouldn’t put it past him. ‘Yes. Couper was one of Wellington’s not so subtle suggestions to me also, ma’am,’ he admits, and she frowns a little at him. ‘That’s one reason why he’s on the list.’

‘Why is the Duke making such suggestions to you?’ she asks, now completely confused, and he lets out a sigh.

‘The Duke, I think, is perhaps a little more soft-hearted than he lets on, ma’am, particularly when it comes to you,’ he tells her, and she pinks sweetly at his words. ‘He did not take kindly to Sir John’s
interference either.’

‘Oh,’ she says, grimacing a little.

‘He’s been emailing me suggestions for several months now,’ he adds, his lips twisting a little.

‘Is he allowed to do that?’ she asks, her face concerned, and he’s pleased she’s even thinking of this. Their shared history aside, there were the political considerations to think of. He hasn’t missed the irony of the whole situation; that the two most significant political influences on her life – for all he tries to be impartial, he knows he doesn’t entirely succeed – influences that are polar opposites, that have almost torn the two of them apart – are working together yet again because it’s her. The irony amuses him, in a twisted kind of way.

He thinks perhaps the irony wouldn’t amuse the general public.

‘I think they were mostly in jest, ma’am,’ he says kindly. ‘Well, I assume he wasn’t serious when he sent me a link to Kermit the Frog, some television actor who played the equivalent of Private Secretary to Queen Elizabeth, and your Uncle Cumberland,’ he adds, narrowing his eyes in mock-thought. He doesn’t mention that he’d also suggested the currently rather politically-battered Australian Prime Minister, or the F off he’d sent via text in reply.

He thinks he’ll give the bear to Frankie. She would love it; Emily would hate it.

‘Oh,’ she replies, scrunching her nose up before smiling a little.

‘But there were a few worth considering. Couper was the best of the lot in my opinion, as you know, ma’am, which is why I included him in my suggestions.’

‘He’s coming in on Tuesday, after the others,’ she tells him, and he nods in reply. ‘I assume you’ll be free to sit in on the interviews?’ she asks, heading back to her desk as he picks up the last of the folders and moves around towards the door.

‘I think you know the role of a Private Secretary well enough now that you don’t need me, ma’am,’ he tells her with a slight frown.

She turns on her heel to face him and he processes the look on her face a beat too late. ‘Do we always have to argue about this?’ she fires back, no little heat in her voice and on her face, and he blinks at her.

Oh.

‘My apologies, ma’am,’ he says, inclining his head and dropping her gaze to study the desk behind her.

She lets out a quick huff. ‘I do not doubt that I could do this alone,’ she tells him firmly and almost a little petulantly. He can see her shift in his peripheral vision, and his knowledge of her many moods and expressions fills in the rest: her chin is high and her brow furrowed in a confused kind of frown. ‘I just don’t want to.’

His mind supplies that there is some hurt in the determined tone she puts on, but he can’t bring himself to look at her, his own shame too great. ‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘You’ve taught me too well, Lord M,’ she adds, a note of false laughter to her voice, and his mouth automatically curves in to a small, acknowledging smile. ‘I’m sorry, Lord M.’ she says quietly after several seconds where he blinks around the pain in his chest. ‘I…’ When she trails off, her voice a
little hopeless, he shakes his head.

‘No, ma’am, I apologise. It’s not my place to tell you what to do.’

She lets out an exasperated huff. ‘You don’t tell me what to do. You have never told me what to do.

That’s why…’ She pauses, and his eyes flick up to hers for just a moment – she looks almost confused for the briefest moment – before she lets out a huff. ‘That’s one reason why you’re such a good Private Secretary. I wish sometimes you would,’ she adds resignedly, dropping her fidgeting hands to her sides.

‘Even if it was appropriate, ma’am, I still don’t believe you need me to,’ he replies quietly, shaking his head. He can’t bring himself to look at her still, and there’s this awkward silence until he closes his eyes momentarily and drags them up to meet hers. Her face is tight, a picture of reigned-in distress, her eyes wide and hurt and definitely a little ashamed, he thinks, and he feels it in his chest.

They’ve not really done this before. Even when they’d argued while he’d been gone, it had never been like this, this strained awkwardness.

‘So you will stay?’ she asks, her voice all breathless forced imperiousness, and it hurts that she’s trying to use – trying to use – this tone on him, even if it is in some kind of twisted self-defence.

He would allow her her dignity, if that’s what she wants. ‘If that is what you wish, ma’am.’

‘Yes. Good.’

‘If there’s nothing else, ma’am,’ he starts, and she stares at him, that little furrow in her brow torturing him a little.

‘Yes, of course,’ she says quickly, and he gives her a small nod, forcing a small smile on his face for her benefit, before turning and leaving.

The heated way she’d fired at him plagues his thoughts, irritating him as he sits in his office, staring off into space.

She’s tired, he knows, and it’s partly his fault for keeping her busy and away from her mother and Conroy as much as possible, lest she lose her temper in spectacular fashion as has been her want when something or someone pushes her buttons just a little too hard. She’s worn thin over time, showing the strain of a busy summer and spring schedule, and two years without a break of any substantial period of time. The break in Scotland is long-deserved and much needed, he thinks.

Despite all the anger and frustration, the years of abuse and control, he knows that she loves her mother and genuinely wants the best for her. She wants to make a good choice for the Duchess – and for herself. The spectre of Conroy will never truly leave her; his mark was made too young and for too long for her to ever fully be free of everything the man did, and she’s desperate not to make the mistakes of her parents. She cannot choose another Conroy, and he knows that thought weighs heavily on her mind.

But despite that list of things he knows are factors in her anxiety, it’s more than that, he thinks.

His role has shifted and changed so much from those first weeks; it would no longer be recognisable to anyone with any experience with the job of a Private Secretary to the Queen. He does the work of a Private Secretary, advising her on constitutional and political matters, organising her programme and official functions, drafting speeches, assisting with her correspondence, and generally acting as a liaison between her and everyone else. But he has also become her mentor, a teacher, a trusted
friend, someone she can fall apart in the arms of when it all becomes too much for her to bear. The lines weren’t even really blurred anymore – they barely existed.

In becoming all of that, and with all her youth and inexperience, he held a power over her he’d never intended to hold – never truly recognised he did hold, until one day – today – for just a brief moment, she took it back.

She’s never argued with him like that before because she has almost always responded to everything he’s said as though he was automatically correct and she was the one who needed to learn. But she no longer needed to learn some of these things; she has interviewed many people now, held her own with ambassadors and dignitaries from around the world, foreign leaders and her own countrymen, all without his help.

Of course she didn’t need him to interview Couper and the others. She had just dispatched Conroy, the looming shadow who had sat in the back of her mind for so long, almost clinically, and he had the gall to assume that she was asking because she couldn’t interview someone without him.

The realisation of his arrogance is a bitter, agonising pill to swallow. He has watched her grow and change and blossom more and more, his beautiful Queen, and given little thought to how he would respond to the growth, too wrapped up in hiding his own heart and protecting hers. He was so concerned about hurting her in pulling away that he’d failed to recognise that she didn’t actually need him anywhere near as much as she once had. She kept him close not because she needed to, but because she didn’t know any other way.

Yet in her new-found strength, she was chafing at that tight, self-made bond. She was not her mother; she would never be willing to surrender herself entirely, and now she was beginning to unlearn, to mould and shape herself and those around her into a design of her own making rather than the design learned from her mother.

She wanted him around because she finds a level of security in him, a safety. She is not alone when he is there, and she doesn’t like to be alone, his beautiful Queen. She just doesn’t actually need him quite so much anymore.

He is becoming obsolete, like he knew he would. He just hadn’t anticipated it would begin quite so soon. He also hadn’t really anticipated how much it would actually hurt. He’d known it would, known that stepping back would be like tearing a part of himself in two. He just hadn’t realised quite how much each step backwards and away from her would cost.

It takes her about an hour to message him.

*I’m sorry I spoke so harshly.*

He lets out a sigh. What does he say to that? Apologise for his arrogance? For allowing their roles and their relationship to become so blurred that neither really knew where the other stood?

For allowing her to worm her way into his heart?

*I apologise for my presumption, ma’am.*

*You’re forgiven.*

He lets out a sigh.

Her second message arrives in moments, and he feels the tug of a smile at her silliness.
I am a gracious Queen.

Forgiven, indeed.

Your magnanimity is wholly undeserved but gratefully received, Your Majesty.

I should think so, Lord Melbourne.
Chapter 77

Chapter Summary

Oh, I've been dazed and confused
From the day I met you
Yeah, I lost my head
And I'd do it again
Either I've seen the light
Or I'm losing my mind
There's something 'bout you
That's got me dazed and confused

- *Dazed and Confused*, Ruel

Chapter Notes

So those health issues? Yeah, they didn't get a whole lot better. *sigh* I'm not going to say things are getting better because I don't want to make promises I might not be able to keep!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

‘Yes, this is absolutely the best way to celebrate any achievement,’ Amalie declares from her position on one of the chairs by the fire. ‘Champagne and haute couture.’

Victoria grins as she takes the dress Harriet has just handed her and walks around behind the screen. ‘I completely agree.’

‘William told Emma you were amazing. That you were almost clinical about it,’ Harriet calls as Victoria slowly changes into the long, silvery-grey dress. She doesn’t know what to say to that. She hadn’t really felt *clinical*. Her finger rubs absently against the thin bandage around her thumb. ‘He said that Sir John chucked a tantrum at the end and you just *politely* told him where to go. A *masterclass in despatching self-aggrandising manipulators* were his words.’

She bites her lip, her chest swelling at his words. She knows he’s proud of her, knows he thinks she’s amazing, but it’s another thing to hear what he says about her when she’s not there to hear it. ‘Sir John was rather furious,’ she agrees, emerging from behind the screen and holding the overly-long dress up as she walks carefully towards Harriet in her heels.

‘Well done, ma’am,’ Harriet says with a grin. ‘I would have loved to have seen his face. I don’t suppose you filmed it?’

‘No,’ she replies, and as much as it was so satisfying to watch Sir John turn and walk out of her life forever, knowing that she had done it, something in her never, ever wanted to see footage of that morning. She never actually wanted to think about it again; the pain, the anxiety, the way she’d felt so *tired* afterwards. The things he’d said about Lord M…
She shakes her head as Harriet speaks from where she’s pinning up the bottom of the gown. ‘Pity,’ she says with a smirk. ‘You could have leaked the stills to the press,’ she adds on a laugh.

‘Yes,’ Amalie crows. ‘Oh, please tell me you have a security camera in your office,’ she almost begs, and Victoria half-laughs and shakes her head again.

‘Sorry.’

‘Dammit,’ Amalie says, taking a sip of the champagne. ‘I’m really impressed, ma’am. I struggle to tell off my Uncles at Christmas time when they’ve had too much to drink and become a little mouthy,’ Amalie tells her. ‘I don’t think I could have done that on my own.’

‘Oh, I couldn’t have either,’ Victoria says, and Amalie frowns a little. ‘Lord M was there the whole time,’ she tells her. ‘I couldn’t have done it without him.’ She was strong, she knew, but only because he was there to lend her his strength.

‘Oh,’ Amalie replies, before nodding in understanding. ‘Of course.’

‘I bet that drove Sir John nuts, having William right there,’ Harriet says with a smirk, and Victoria nods.

‘Oh yes,’ she says, looking up and nodding emphatically. ‘Even though Lord M said nothing the whole time – he just stood there – Sir John still said some horrible things.’ He’d just stood there, withstood Sir John’s horrible taunts and barbs, and let it all slide off his back. The things he’d said about Lord M...about Lord M and her...

She shakes her head slightly. It was nothing worse than the rubbish the papers had printed all those months ago – things that Sir John had told them.

‘Well, I knew you could do it,’ Amalie declares as she holds her hand up and Victoria hits her palm against hers in a high-five. ‘He sounds like a waste of good oxygen, and you’re well shot of him, ma’am.’

Victoria almost snorts a laugh. ‘That’s a good description.’

Harriet smiles from where she was kneeling at Victoria’s feet, pulling the last pin from her mouth. ‘There. Perfect,’ she says, standing and stepping back, her eyes narrowing as she scrutinises the dress. ‘Yes, I like it. What do you think?’

She turns and studies herself in the mirror. The dress was high-necked and long and figure-hugging, the silver sequins shimmering prettily in the light. ‘I wish I was taller,’ she announces, looking at the reflections of Amalie and Harriet in the mirror, both towering over her, each a good three or four inches taller even in her heels.

‘Being tall isn’t always great,’ Amalie points out. ‘Guys are intimidated by tall girls.’

Victoria’s eyebrows rise. ‘Oh.’

Harriet nods. ‘George has a good four inches on me, and even he said he was vaguely frightened of speaking to me when he first saw me.’

‘I’d say the three-inch heels didn’t help,’ Amalie adds dryly, waving at where Harriet’s black heels had been discarded in a corner.

‘Yeah, but they made my legs look amazing,’ Harriet replies as Victoria moves to get changed again.
‘Obviously,’ Amalie shoots back. ‘He put a ring on it.’

She can’t help but laugh at her friends, but another part of her was squirming a little uncomfortably, heightened she thinks by the champagne flowing through her veins. No matter how high her heels, her legs would never look as incredible as Harriet’s, and her skin would never be as beautifully dark as Amalie’s. She would never have Anna’s long, stunningly curly dark hair.

She would always be short and pale and…decidedly not beautiful.

She wonders what they think when they look at her. She wasn’t tall and sinewy, with long wavy hair, and she blinks as images float in front of her eyes, unbidden, images published in the press from months ago...

Harriet’s insistent ring tone breaks through her thoughts. ‘Oh, it’s George. I’ll be back in a second, ma’am,’ she calls as Victoria emerges from behind the screen in her pants and knitted jumper.

‘That dress made your eyes sparkle,’ Amalie tells her as she picks up her champagne and takes a sip. ‘Add some heels, some smoky eyes, and bam.’

Victoria can’t help but smile. ‘I did like it.’

‘You don’t need height with your skin and eyes, ma’am,’ Amalie tells her. ‘Wear anything in the blue range, and your eyes just own the picture.’

Victoria feels the pull of a tentative smile. She did like her eyes – now that she’d grown into them. She takes another long sip of her champagne. It was her third glass, but she didn’t care. She wasn’t going anywhere tonight, except to bed, and she deserved to celebrate.

‘So what’s the go with Lord Melbourne?’ Amalie asks, breaking into her thoughts, and Victoria frowns.

‘What do you mean?’

‘You seem pretty tight, ma’am,’ she says, taking another sip of her champagne.

She’s confused. ‘He’s my Private Secretary,’ she says. ‘And we’re friends.’ Amalie nods, but Victoria can tell the answer wasn’t quite what she was looking for. She feels the overwhelming urge to defend him, to defend their friendship, and she’s speaking before she can even really examine why. ‘He was the only one I could trust for so long,’ she explains. ‘He taught me so much about everything – my role as Queen, politics, public speaking, foreign policy.’ She feels the tug of a smile as she remembers long hours in her office or out in the garden and a painting that she still hasn’t had re-hung on her wall, displaced long ago by the need for maps. ‘He believed in me when it felt like no one else did,’ she says after a moment, looking down at her now almost-empty glass. ‘That’s why…’ she trails off, the statement sitting uncomfortably in the front of her mind where it had lain for days, unfinished. ‘I couldn’t have done it without him.’

Amalie nods again. ‘He does seem like a pretty incredible guy. For a politician, anyway.’

‘He is,’ she says, smiling, that strange urge fading back down to wherever it came from, replaced by that warmth she feels low in her stomach when she thinks of how good he is to her, her Lord M. She lifts her glass to her lips to down more of the bubbly drink.

‘Not to downplay anything, but it does seem odd that you have a former Prime Minister as your Secretary,’ Amalie says. ‘What does he actually do?’
'Principal Private Secretary to the Queen of England,' Victoria shoots back, half-laughing and mock-offended, and Amalie holds up her hands in faux-apology. ‘It’s actually a very challenging role. He has to know the constitution, all the rules around the Monarchy and the government, Royal etiquette, the names of everyone and their titles. He helps draft speeches and manages our end of state visits and all my correspondence. And he has to know how to dance,’ she adds, memories of a grand ballroom and too much champagne flooding into her mind. Of a late night and another dimly-lit ballroom and shared secrets.

Amalie blinks. ‘Dance?’

She frowns. Dance. ‘Yes. I had a Coronation Ball. Everyone had to learn. But Lord M already knew.’

‘Oh.’

‘He knows everything,’ she adds, blinking, trying to think of something he didn’t know or hadn’t been able to answer. Even in the rare case where he wasn’t sure of something, he’d always find out for her.

‘And he’s hot,’ Amalie says, and Victoria almost chokes on her champagne. Amalie’s eyes go wide. ‘I’m sorry, ma’am,’ she says quickly. ‘I didn’t mean to be rude,’ she starts, but Victoria waves her off.

‘No, it’s fine,’ she says, a silly grin spreading across her face. An article in a magazine from what feels like a lifetime ago surfaces in her mind for the second time that night; Sexiest Politician indeed. ‘Everyone seems to think so.’

‘He is pretty smokin’, ma’am,’ Amalie tells her, and Victoria feels her cheeks pink. She knows this. But she shrugs, trying to seem disinterested, like she hasn’t noticed, like she hasn’t thought about it, like it’s not even on her radar, and everything in her cringes and tightens and she doesn’t even really know what’s going on. Her head is so jumbled and she doesn’t know what she’s thinking and she probably shouldn’t have downed most of her third glass of champagne that night in less than ten minutes. The last time she’d had too much champagne she’d made a fool of herself in front of him and almost ruined everything. The way he’d looked at her that night…

She blinks. ‘I guess,’ she says haltingly. ‘Yeah.’

‘Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed,’ Amalie says dryly. ‘Please. If I worked with someone that gorgeous who looked at me the way he looks at you, well,’ she says, trailing off and eyeing her knowingly and Victoria lets out an incredulous laugh. Amalie holds her hands up in mock surrender again. ‘Just saying.’

The words stick and swell in her mind and she can’t seem to think them through. She eyes her champagne glass indignantly. Why did it do this to her, make everything feel like it was floating, ideas and thoughts and images sailing by as she struggles to grasp at them, slipping just out of reach?

‘No, you’re right,’ she says, shaking her head a little, and Amalie nods. ‘It’s so strange,’ she blurts out after a moment, and Amalie laughs. ‘He’s like…’

Amalie eyes her. ‘A brother? Father?’ she says with a little incredulous laugh when the sentence remains unfinished for too long, and Victoria shakes her head.

‘No. Oh, no,’ she says emphatically, laughing. While he is a bit older than her, he’s nowhere near old enough to be her father – and that thought makes her cringe – and he’s not a brother. She doesn’t
really know what a brother should feel like, but she definitely thinks it doesn’t feel like this. ‘He’s just...he’s Lord M,’ she says, shrugging.

‘Yeah,’ Amalie says, nodding. ‘He is.’

‘I…’ she trails off. She has no idea how to say it, how to put into words what he means to her, how she cannot be Queen without him and his quiet strength and his wisdom and his kind words and his genuine friendship and the way he cares. She wouldn’t have Amalie and Harriet and Anna without him. She wouldn’t be free of Sir John without him. She wouldn’t be free without him.

She shrugs a little. ‘He’s just...He’s Lord M,’ she repeats helplessly, and she frowns. She should be able to articulate this. She’s done it before, when Amalie was listening from behind her camera down in the gardens only a few months ago.

Her mind is just so fuzzy.

Amalie nods, a little smile on her face, before reaching around and grabbing the champagne bottle and filling Victoria’s glass. She holds up her own glass. ‘A toast,’ she announces, and they turn as Harriet walks back in.

‘Sorry, all good. What are we toasting?’ she asks, grabbing her half-filled glass and raising it.

‘The people we can’t live without,’ Amalie offers, and Victoria nods, holding up her glass.

Yes. She couldn’t live without him, her Lord M. That was one thing she knew for sure, champagne or no champagne.

‘To the people we can’t live without.’

***

He stands in front of a smallish, triangular-roofed building and sucks in a deep breath.

He’d been so sure. It had been clamouring for attention for weeks from where he’d banished it to the back of his mind, constantly eating away at the fear and pain that clung so desperately to those memories until he’d been forced to acquiesce to it, that part of his heart that lived for her delighted, wondrous smiles. The way her face had lit up at his roses had been more than enough for his traitorous heart to latch onto, and really, he should have known better by now than to think he could resist.

So here he stands in front of a small, glass building that he’d sworn never to enter again, a bucket of warm soapy water in one hand and a scrubbing brush in the other.

He knows what it will feel like, scraping away at the filthy, lichen-covered glass. He can already feel it. Raw. Exposed. The years of dirt and growth had hidden this part of his heart from the world – and from himself.

But she had opened it again, his beautiful Queen, that part of his heart that had been locked tightly for so long. He hadn’t expected it, hadn’t prepared, but her light had found its way in before he’d even realised that there were cracks.
‘That’s a lot of glass,’ a gruff voice says from next to him. ‘Are you sure you want to do it by hand?’

He lets out a breath. ‘Yeah.’

‘Alright, then.’

It’s been hours and his shoulders and wrists are aching, but he’s making progress, and it feels _good_.

It’s a relief, really. He’d known it would hurt, that it would feel like excoriating his own wounds, but the thought that it would feel good, like _release_, is not really something he’d entertained, too fearful that it _wouldn’t_.

He stands, looking down at the mostly clean glass of one side of the building before turning and looking around at the rest of the walls. It was going to take forever – easily all weekend, he thinks – but that’s okay. That’s why he’s here.

He turns when he hears the door open to see Ian walk through with a bucket and a scrubbing brush of his own. ‘Thought you could use a hand,’ Ian says gruffly. ‘You’ll be here for a month trying to do it all on your own.’

He gives him a small, warm smile. ‘Thank you,’ he says, and Ian nods, plodding over to the opposing wall.

‘You don’t always have to do everything on your own, William. It’s good to have some help every once in a while,’ Ian says as he sprays one of the panes of glass. He’s been doing things on his own for so long he’d almost forgotten what it was like to have someone to help. ‘Besides, there’s no way you’re leaving without helping me put all that rubbish away,’ Ian adds, waving at the tools and empty pots that he’d tossed outside to make space.

He grins. ‘Of course.’

***

She looks down at the map and then back up at the wide grassed path. ‘Yes, I agree – a good choice of location.’

‘Excellent, ma’am. Have you had a chance to look at the design at all?’ The older man points to the folder in her hands. ‘Your own drawing was excellent, ma’am; I essentially just fleshed that out a little.’

‘Oh, yes, of course,’ she says, pulling out the Head Gardener’s sketch from the folder and smiling. It was almost exactly the same, even down to the colours of the roses, and her heart swells in her chest. ‘Perfect.’

***
It’s been five days and her mother is still refusing to see her – or anyone, for that matter.

Mr Cottenham, one of Lord M’s deputies, is trying to organise her schedule but given that her mother refuses to speak to anyone at all outside of her maid, it’s difficult. They’ve had to cancel four engagements already, and Victoria knows that people will start to talk if she doesn’t start appearing at things soon. She was waiting, dreading the articles that would eventually appear. She knows well enough now what they would say; that her mother was too distraught at the loss of her Private Secretary, that there was a rift in the royal family.

That Lord M was behind it.

Charlotte had mentioned it that morning; that even though Sir John was gone, it wouldn’t stop him from speaking to the press as some kind of royal expert – an authoritative voice, someone who had lived in the Palace for years and knew the family intimately, and the thought makes her sick.

As if he would know anything about her now.

‘Mama,’ she calls through the locked door. ‘Mama, can I come in?’ She can feel Lehzen’s displeasure emanating from where she stands next to her. ‘Mama, it’s been five days. I’m worried about you,’ she calls. She knows her mother can hear her; she’d been able to hear Lehzen and Nancy calling through her door all those months ago.

‘Mama, I’m coming in,’ she declares, stepping out of the way for Lehzen to push the key into the lock. It only takes a moment and the door is open, and Victoria pushes the door open just enough for her to slip through.

Her mother is sitting on a chair by the window, dressed in black, her face blank and empty. She looks like she hasn’t slept at all in those five days, her skin pale and draw, her hair not its usual coiffed perfection. Victoria lets out a breath. She hasn’t seen her mother like this in years, not since… she banishes the thought. Sir John was gone now. They were free of him.

‘Mama,’ she says, squatting down next to where her mother sits.

‘You sent him away, Drina,’ her mother says quietly after what feels like an eternity, her voice flat and dry, not looking at her. Victoria looks down at her mother’s skirt.

‘He wanted to go, Mama,’ she says, smoothing the soft fabric with her palm before looking back up at her mother’s pale face. She says nothing, staring blankly out the window, and Victoria sighs.

Perhaps talking about new Private Secretaries wasn’t going to work today. ‘I’ll come and see you again soon.’

The sound of her footsteps on the wooden floor is the only noise she hears as she leaves.

Chapter End Notes

Note that this glasshouse is a lot smaller than the one in the show. A lot.
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