

CHAPTER ONE

Washington, D.C.

Alexander

THE QUEEN'S BEDROOM, considered well-suited to visiting monarchy by the White House staff, felt as stodgy and antiquated as the name suggested. It had certainly received the title when my grandmother wore the crown, because my own wife was anything save boring. Despite the overtly Victorian femininity of the wall-coverings and lacy bedspread, Clara's presence breathed a vitality into the space. She stirred in her sleep and my breath caught even as I felt a familiar restlessness awakening in me.

Her rich, brown hair fanned over the pillowcase as a serenity passed over her fair features. Her lips began to move silently in her dreams. Propping myself up on my elbow I studied her and wondered who she was talking to. While it might be pointless to be jealous of the time she spent asleep, I

couldn't help it. I couldn't possess her in her dreams. For my irrational side—which too often overrode my sense—it was unbearable.

Maybe that's why I felt the need to wake her so often for nocturnal activities.

The anatomical center of my irrationality twitched in agreement at the thought, and my hand went to it. I stroked myself absently. How early was too early to wake her for morning sex? It was difficult to determine given how cocked up our sleep schedule had been since arriving in Seattle a little over a week ago. Since then we'd visited three more U.S. cities on our goodwill tour. At least the capital was our last stop. Between traveling and our daughter's teething-induced crankiness, Clara was perpetually knackered.

Still, she never said no.

"Are you warming up for something?" she murmured. Her lashes fluttered as she eyed me drowsily.

"I didn't want to wake you." I didn't add that I would have woken her anyway. Although I prided

myself on my self-control, I was glaringly deficient in that avenue where it came to my wife. When I had her alone I needed to be touching her.

Clara's laughter lifted some of the never ceasing weight from my chest. Perhaps my obsession stemmed from the miraculous balm of her presence. She'd always been able to alleviate the burdens I carried with me, even though the pressures in my life had increased exponentially since she came into it. She bound me as she released me. It was the great paradox of our love that we saved each other by chaining ourselves to lives of duty.

"You would have woken me anyway," she accused, stretching her slender arms over her head.

The movement caught my attention and I seized my chance. Rolling on top of her, I snatched her hands and held them. "Is that a complaint, poppet?"

Her body responded with a comforting awareness of my dominance. Clara's legs fell open, softening in welcome and her breathing shifted to

shallow, eager panting as she purred the only words I needed to hear. “Yes, please.”

I accepted her invitation, releasing my grip on her only long enough to pluck free the sash that held the bed curtains to the post. She didn’t protest as I gently tied her wrist to the bed. Moving my knee against her bare cunt as a gage, I decided she was more than content with the idea of a morning play session.

“I’m not certain Americans approve of bondage so early in the morning.” But she stretched her free arm toward the other post even as she spoke.

I couldn’t hold back my arrogance as I smirked down at her. “I don’t play by their rules.”

I cinched her wrists tighter to prove my point and was rewarded with a warm surge of arousal.

“Should the Queen be tied up in her own bedroom?” She loved to rile me up, knowing that it would pay dividends in how rough I’d get. The more saucy she got, the more I needed to dominate her. Like most couples our sex life ran the gamut of slow

and sensual to clawing and primal. Unlike most couples, it ran that gamut daily.

“If she’s in the King’s bed, she should be.”

Sinking back on my heels, I appreciated the sight of my wife tied up and helpless. Thankfully the house was large and Elizabeth was with the nanny down the hall, because I felt inspired to make her scream.

Clara’s breasts spilled from her silky nightgown and I snapped the fragile straps to release them entirely. Moving down her body, I sucked the soft mound, drawing her nipple into my mouth. While I might be impatient to get her beneath me, I never minded taking my time once I had her there. Quiet moans escaped from her and I increased my suction until I was practically biting the soft flesh. Clara arched toward me, her hips beginning to wiggle as she searched for relief. I loved watching my wife come but guiding her toward the edge was arguably even better. Turning this beautiful, intelligent woman into a mass of incoherent desire was only fair since she

reduced me to that primal state every time she walked into a room.

“Don’t you have appointments today?” She pressed her body desperately to mine.

“Not for hours,” I said with a mouthful of her creamy breast. I hadn’t bothered to tell her how early I’d decided to start my day. I had no doubt the time would pass too quickly for both of our likings.

“X!” she demanded through gritted teeth.

I withdrew and raised an eyebrow.

Questioning my authority in the bedroom would only earn her more time on her back. I suspected she knew that. “You’re being impatient.”

“And you’re being infuriating!” Her hands curled over her restraints as if she was testing them.

“Don’t think you’re getting out of those so easily,” I informed her even as I settled between her thighs. Stroking the head of my cock down her swollen seam, I grinned at the amusement she couldn’t quite hide from her answering glare.

Hoisting her legs around my hips, I held her there,

stretching her long body between the bed posts and my groin, and waited.

“Please.” She licked her lips, her eyes going glassy as she asked again. “Please. Please.”

I groaned, unable to resist it when she began to beg, and thrust inside her. Her muscles immediately contracted around my shaft as I drove her toward release. She cried out, splitting apart. I’d taken her over the edge, but once again she’d brought me to my knees.

THE OVAL OFFICE looked far more ceremonial than official with the camera crew shooting in front of the President’s desk. The room itself was decorated in shades of ivory and yellow, but the color palette did little to warm the cool atmosphere. It wasn’t unreasonable for the White House to film my visit, but it didn’t lend itself to natural conversation. Having never met the new commander-in-chief of the

United States, I had to be on my best behavior. I only hoped he would be as well.

“Alexander, welcome.” President Williamson tipped his head in a small greeting as he rose from his chair. It was acknowledgment of our shared power, but not a bow. For that I was grateful. If there was one thing I loved about America, it was that no one routinely felt the need to prostrate themselves in my presence.

Williamson was about the age of my father, but the two had never met. He’d taken office shortly after the assassination that claimed my father’s life. But age is where the similarities ended. Albert had been quintessentially British in his looks and demeanor. At least, in public. Williamson was every bit the American head of state right down to the red power tie. Despite his years, the lines on his face only gave him an air of wisdom that matched his salt and pepper hair, and, like most Americans foisted into the spotlight, he looked more like a movie star than a bedraggled politician. He was the on camera

commander, whose power was limited by the large congress of lawmakers also elected by the people. That was one position we were both in.

“Congratulations on your wedding. I had hoped to share your joy, but circumstances...” He trailed away, allowing my memory to recall the events of my wedding day.

“Of course.” I allowed a tight smile. It was polite to offer his solicitations naturally, but no matter how much time had passed I had never put that day behind me. Williamson had been in attendance for the ceremony. Considering the circumstances, he, along with several other powerful dignitaries, had sent their regrets when invited to my coronation. I couldn’t blame them. If I could have skipped the ritual I would have as well. “We’ve been negligent as well. Clara and I planned to visit much earlier. Life and politics got in the way.”

“Don’t they always.” He gestured to a chair next to his, and I took it. “What is your lovely wife up to?”

“Motherhood,” I said stiffly. Clara would not always be able to avoid the camera, but for the time being I was content to enable her. I still hadn’t warmed to the idea of sharing her with the world.

“I was certain our special relationship would be even more special now that you’re married to an American,” the president said light-heartedly as he adjusted his suit coat before taking his seat.

Annoyance surged through me, and I did my best to hide it. This man and this country had no claim to my wife. I couldn’t exactly tell him that though, especially not during a televised interview. “I think you’ll find that Clara is as American as I am.”

We laughed, but neither of us were amused. Williamson’s predecessor had been known for his ease in awkward situations. It hadn’t been a strong enough quality to get him reelected. Now the atmosphere in the Oval Office had the same wary tension of an impending cock fight. This was what happened when you put two alpha males into a room.

There was no punchline, only a quiet struggle for power.

“I heard she prefers coffee,” the Secretary of State joined in, her tone effusive. At least, Williamson had appointed someone adept at dismantling tension to his cabinet. It was a particularly keen appointment since she handled most of the administration’s foreign policy.

“I’m working on that,” I admitted. The good-natured ribbing had the intended effect and the conversation shifted into an easygoing conversation between the heads of two sovereign nations. About an hour later, during a rousing debate between the merits of American football versus European football, the camera crews began to dismantle their equipment.

“This way please,” an aide showed the crews out of the office, and the atmosphere changed again.

Williamson slumped in his seat, switching off his on-camera persona and becoming another man. “Scotch?”

“Please.”

A moment later, an aide dutifully delivered the drinks to us as a young, nervous man joined us.

“Alexander, allow me to introduce my press secretary Richard May. He’s here to keep us on track for the press conference.”

I rose and shook the man’s hand as he declined the offering of a Scotch. “I do apologize for sticking you back in front of a camera so soon.”

“I was born in front of a camera,” I said flatly. It wasn’t technically true but it may as well have been. I’d never known what it was like to be in public without someone filming me. My only real sanctuary from that fact had been during my time on the war front.

“Of course,” May said absently as he shuffled through some questions. “I imagine that most of their questions will be fairly soft. They’ll ask about Clara and your daughter.”

I forced myself to nod. Despite my desire to keep my wife and child out of the spotlight, it was futile. I did my best to keep a firm line when it came

to the press though, especially given how vicious the media had been during our courtship. As much as possible, I wanted Elizabeth to have a normal life. However unlikely the possibility was.

“Then there’s the Edward issue.”

“I hope you’re speaking about an upcoming magazine article.” This time I didn’t bother to hide my annoyance. I’d been warned by my own people that this might be brought up abroad.

“We’ve briefed the corps on the topics that they’re allowed to broach,” the president assured me, “but freedom of the press means we can’t tell them what they can ask.”

I didn’t miss the none-too-subtle dig. “Britain has it as well.”

“Then you know the trouble it can cause.” Williamson spread his hands apologetically, and I nodded.

There had been some negative attention regarding my brother’s engagement in the tabloids. But Edward’s decision to come out of the closet had

been largely met with enthusiasm. For most it signaled that the monarchy was no longer an archaic relic, but there were always dissenters.

“I’m prepared to take the fifth,” I joked, doing my best to sound as if the subject didn’t irk me.

“I think he’ll do just fine.” Williamson winked at May. “Are we ready then?”

May trembled a little as he nodded his head. There wasn’t enough anti-anxiety medicine in the world to counter the stress of his job. It was remarkable that the man was allowed in front of the camera. As we headed toward the briefing room, Williamson lagged behind. I took the signal and followed suit.

“I am sorry that we weren’t at your coronation.” It was a surprisingly sincere apology for a man who had fought to command the room when we first met. “Our security teams felt the risk outweighed the duty, and, speaking man to man, my first concern is always for my wife.”

“It’s understandable.” I could appreciate a man putting his wife first. Where my own safety was concerned, I rarely cared, but I’d surround Clara with an army if she’d allow me. “If it were up to me, Clara wouldn’t have come either.”

Williamson tugged at his necktie, and I realized he was holding something back. After a few seconds, he continued. “Our reports suggest that there might have been a larger plot in the works.”

“Ours as well.” So it wasn’t just the British Secret Service concerned over the assassination. We’d caught the attention of the CIA as well.

“I’m happy to pass along the intelligence we have. I’m sorry to say that most of the information hasn’t panned out.”

“Please,” I said tersely. It wasn’t just their trails that had gone cold, but ours as well. It was tempting to believe that the threat to my family had ended with the murder of Jack Hammond. The problem with accepting that was that someone had seen fit to murder the man, who by all accounts was

responsible for my father's death. If Smith Price, my personal source of information within Hammond's network, hadn't been the one to take Hammond's life, as he claimed, then someone else had been.

"Unless you already have him..." Williamson left the thought hanging in the air. It seemed whatever information he had was unlikely to provide new insight.

"That's the thing about monsters," I told him as we stopped outside the briefing gallery. "You cut off one head, only to discover there's another one."

"That I understand."

Both our countries had faced dark times of late. I could imagine the threats to his family were as significant and omnipresent as my own. Without thinking, I clapped a hand on his shoulder in a show of solidarity—and, perhaps, comfort. Williamson's face showed he understood.

"They're ready for you, sir," an aide advised.

I couldn't quite prevent the grimace that flashed over my face but I replaced it with a smile as I

stepped in front of the rows of reporters. May stayed by my side to direct the chaos as they began to call out to me.

“Miss Bernstein,” May said and a woman shot up from her chair. She didn’t bother adjusting her skirt or flipping her hair, instead her eyes zeroed in on me.

This is going to sting.

“Your Highness, will the crown sanction the marriage of your brother?”

It was no surprise that they were going after Edward. I couldn’t expect one of the most ruthless free presses in the world to ask what type of biscuit I preferred. My father would have took the woman’s head off, but I’d already decided to take a different approach. I’d kill them with charm. Ignoring the rage coursing through me, I smiled. “I already have.”

This incited a barrage of follow-ups from the crowd, but I held up a hand before May could step in. “I’d like to limit topics to policy and my country.”

Not my family.

They were off-limits—all of them. I'd lost too many of the people close to me to share the ones I had left. If I had to give every part of me away to protect my family, I would. There was a moment of squirming silence while the journalists regrouped.

“There’s a vocal minority in Parliament that’s growing in strength, who would like to see the monarchy abolished. How will you respond if support for the initiative gains momentum?” an intrepid man called out.

“God save the King,” I replied, earning a wave of laughter. The dry response shifted the line of questioning to topics sure to produce amusing sound bites. I did my best to stay clever, and steer things away from the people in my life. When I finally took my leave, Williamson met me at the door.

“All charm and no concrete answers—you were born for politics.”

I supposed it was meant as a compliment. “I was born into politics.”

“I guess you never have had much of a choice,” he mused as we made our way to the residential rooms. “Your destiny was decided for you.”

I thought of Clara and my life before I met her. Every moment of my life propelled me to her, and yet I’d tried to push her away. In the end, we’d decided to fight for one another. That had been a choice—as had my decision to take the throne. It had been a personal decision. Becoming king allowed me to search for those responsible for the attacks on my wife. In the end, there had always been choices—hard ones. “I’ve chosen my destiny.”

“As have I.” Williamson paused to say goodbye before returning to his office. He still had a day of work ahead of him, and I had my whole world ahead of me. I entered the small living suite our hosts had offered us quietly, afraid to wake a sleeping toddler. Instead, a babbling ball of joy toppled toward me as Elizabeth misstepped. In one swift move I scooped my daughter into my arms.

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty!” Penny, the ever-fussing nursemaid we’d brought along rushed over to save me, but I held my little girl. The poor woman couldn’t fathom that a man would want to care for his child. If it killed me, I would show her that I wasn’t simply any man.

Clara looked up from her book and rolled her eyes at the scene developing before her, but she didn’t step in. Later I’d be more than happy to spank her for being mischievous. Her lips curled into a knowing smirk as if she could read my mind.

“Penny, why don’t you take a few minutes for yourself,” I advised her.

“Sir?” She stared at me as if this was a test.

“I’d like to be alone with my family,” I clarified.

She continued to look distraught, but she curtsied and took her leave.

“Is it so hard to believe that I want to hold my daughter?” I grumbled when we were alone.

“I suppose most kings are interested in furthering their bloodline not building blocks.”

Clara’s eyes lingered on the two of us as I settled onto the carpet with Elizabeth, who immediately pulled herself up and began practicing her latest trick: walking.

“Clever girl,” I praised her. “Already walking.”

“She’s nearly fifteen months old,” Clara pointed out, even as she dropped onto the floor beside me. Soon she was as captivated by Elizabeth’s antics as I was. My hand found hers on the carpet. We stayed like that until a familiar form appeared in the doorway. Norris looked as proud as any grandfather as he surveyed my family, but when I lifted my gaze to his, I immediately knew something was wrong.

“I’ll just be a few minutes,” I murmured to Clara, brushing a kiss over her forehead even as it wrinkled in concern. Norris had given us a fair amount of space during our limited family time. We both knew that his sudden appearance meant news out

of England. Getting to my feet, I crossed the room to him, Elizabeth taking dozens of tiny steps to try to catch up with me.

“There’s been a development,” Norris said under his breath. We both glanced toward Clara who was watching us with wary eyes. She didn’t like to be kept out of the loop, a fact which had been a sore point since the day we married. Her contention that we should keep no secrets from each other was valid, but I couldn’t bear to burden her with the knowledge I carried.

I stepped into the hallway and Norris followed.

“Is it about Hammond?” Nearly a year after his murder and we were no closer to the answers that might lead me to our common enemy. Whoever had murdered him hadn’t done so as a favor to me. That was becoming clearer with each stone we turned over.

“No. I’m not even certain what it means.”

“You’re going to have to give me more to go on,” I informed him. It wasn’t like Norris to be

mysterious, which meant that whatever news he had to deliver wasn't good.

“The team combing through your father’s personal effects uncovered something.”

“That would seem to be good news.” When I’d asked for a discreet team to dig further into my father’s personal life, I’d hoped to find links to the people responsible for his death. Whatever secrets he’d kept could be the key to discovering the truth about what happened that day.

“I’m afraid it only raises more questions.”

Norris looked torn and my pulse ratcheted up as adrenaline surged through my blood.

“What did they find?” I forced the question past gritted teeth.

“Not what,” Norris corrected gently. “Who.”

“Who?” I repeated. “They found a person?”

“They found your brother.”

“Edward?” I asked even as sensation of vertigo gripped me.

“No.” Norris paused to allow what he was saying to sink in.

“I have another brother?” My words were so strangled I barely recognized my own voice.

Norris drew a deep breath as if steeling both of us for what came out next. “It seems you do indeed.”