

## ***Chapter 15: Zak:***

Over the winter holiday I continued meeting with Philip. The sex got rougher and scarier. I both craved and dreaded having sex with him. Philip grew bolder and began to show up at the estate, coming in through the path from Lover's Lookout. On one day he chided me into doing it in one of the winery's out buildings. It was there that Eric found us, coming back from his daily inspection of the vines.

I heard him before I saw him. He came into the barn screaming. A shovel blade of the shovel smacked down on the back of Philip's head. "If I ever see you within a foot of my son or this property I will kill you. That's what I do to rapists. Got it?"

Philip fell away from me leaving me half naked. Surprised, angered and embarrassed, I tried to dress. I pulled my underwear on just in time to hide my own ejaculation. I half expected him to hit me next. Or worse.

"Zachariah, go back to the manor while I deal with this sick fuck."

"Yes, Eric," I replied. I walked stiffly back to the house.

"What did you call me?" he growled as Philip stumbled away from the estate.

I forced myself to stand tall. I had a few centimeters on Eric when I didn't slouch. "I called you by your name," I said with contempt.

"When you are under my roof you call me father," he commanded.

"I would except you're not my father."

"Who told you that?"

"Alfred just before he told me the truth and gave me the rings."

"So what the fuck are you doing letting that predator do these sick things to you? You should be king right now. Damn it, boy, get your priorities straight."

"That 'predator' is my boyfriend. I love him," I said, but my stomach knotted.

"You don't. You only think you do. He certainly doesn't love you. If he did, you wouldn't be caught in a barn crying while being raped."

I rubbed my hand over my eyes and cheeks. They were wet. "I wasn't crying and I wasn't being raped. Maybe some day I'll make him my consort."

Philip by this time was long gone. Eric, outraged now, grabbed my by the arm, twisting it uncomfortably and dragged me back into the barn. He pointed to the empty barrels where Philip and I had just been. "Take your shirt off. If you marry that man you will be ruining this country in ways that Aurora can only dream of."

He pulled off his belt and I flinched.

"Turn around!" he barked.

Scared, I did. He started to beat me with his belt. I lost track after ten, trying hard to ignore the pain and trying not to lose my balance. Eventually he stopped and handed me my shirt. "You probably shouldn't put that on until the bleeding stops," he said.

Stiffly I took the shirt. I stumbled out of the barn and vomited. The beating destroyed my remaining faith in the man who called himself my father but it didn't change my feelings for Philip.

As I stiffly and painfully trudged to the house I heard my mother scream. "What were you thinking? You could have killed him. Have you lost your mind?" She ran up to me and put her arms around me. "Let's get you inside," she said, the anger gone from her voice.

She sat me down on my bed. "Stay there while I get something to clean you up." I stared at the floor, my body numb from the pain. Mom returned with a pan of warm water, gauze and antiseptic spray. I heard her counting the marks under her breath. She stopped at fifty.

"I don't know what's come over him. He's never raised a hand to anyone," Mom said as she continued to clean the wounds on my back.

"He hates me. He always has. You should just disown me."

"Never. Disowning Jesse wasn't my idea. I like Belinda. We keep in touch in secret. I won't lose another child. Not you."

"Why did you do it? Why did you agree this crazy scheme? I should have never been born."

She handed me a clean shirt. Gingerly I put it on. "Nonsense. As much as I distrust Aurora, would you wish that Princess Amelia had not been born?"

"I feel sorry for her," I said.

"Are you really going to offer the Queen's ring to the man Eric found in the barn?" she asked.

"No. I just said that to piss him off. I guess it worked." I gave a grim smile.

Although I knew I could never ask him to be my consort, I returned to school I continued my relationship with Philip to the point of half moving in with him. Something inside me had snapped and I didn't know how to fix it. I wasn't sure I wanted to either.

### ***Mark:***

Zak just wasn't the same after his trip home. I was working on homework in the living room, reading through an analysis of historically significant parliamentary decisions when he stormed in. "Don't worry Mark, I'm going to be out of your hair. You can stay here but I'm moving."

"Moving where?"

"Philip's place. He's the only person who gives a shit about me." I followed him to his room and watched dumbfounded as he packed his bags.

"Zak, what happened? Who's Philip?"

"My boyfriend. He teaches creative writing here and he's a world famous poet."

My stomach churned. "You're dating a professor? That's just not right."

"Don't tell me what to do!" he barked.

He zipped up his last bag but I was blocking the doorway. "There has to be someone better. Why are you suddenly moving out like this?"

He grimaced and dropped his bags. He pulled off his shirt and turned so I could see the horrible marks. "Good lord, who did this to you?"

"Eric... the man who supposedly loves me like a son."

"Why?"

"Why do you think?" He growled.

"Not because you're gay? Surely..."

"Out of my way," he said again, this time pushing me aside.

Except for chance meetings on campus, it was the last I'd see of him for weeks. Then around dead week he stumbled home at midnight. I was in my bedroom, working on a report. I heard the door slam and then a thud.

"Zak?"

He didn't answer. I got up and walked into the living room where I found him half on and half off the couch. His shirt was torn and I could see cigarette burns on his shoulders and upper arms. "What happened?"

"I don't want to talk about it," he said.

"Who did this to you?"

"He didn't mean anything by it. He was just a little drunk."

"Let's get you cleaned up and in bed, huh?" I suggested, half dragging him to his room. I got him to lie down on his bed and I started to undress him.

"Aren't you afraid I'll try to do something?"

"No," I replied. I got his shirt off and found more burns, some scratches and bruises. "You look like a punching bag. This isn't right." But the worst was to come when I helped him out of his jeans. Blood and worse were running down his legs.

"Oh god," I said, reaching for the phone.

"I'm okay. Really," he said in a hoarse voice.

"No you're not. You have to go to hospital." I dialed the emergency number and then had to fight him so he'd stay put for the paramedics to come. Then I had the grim task of calling the Duke and Duchess of Hook.

I couldn't believe their lack of interest in his well being. Eric said that since he didn't want to be his son, then that he was done worrying about him. Susan said

she wished she could help but she was worried what would happen if she left without her husband's permission.

When Zak and I repeated this whole sick thing again the next school term, I left the apartment. I had met a lovely woman named Caroline in an economics class. Her roommate had moved out unexpectedly and she invited me to move in. In a heart beat, I said yes.

***Zak:***

After my second trip to hospital, I came home to an empty apartment. My parents, as expected, didn't call or write or visit while I was there. Mark, didn't either this time. Nor did Philip, but that didn't surprise me too much. He was the one who had put me there in the first place.

I sat on the floor staring at the phone jack and I began to weep. I felt an arm around my shoulder and I jumped. "You're going to pull through this.."

"Mark?" I said, surprised because I hadn't heard him enter. He would have had to walk right by me to get to where he was sitting.

He shook his head. "You can fight this."

I wiped my eyes with my sleeve. The man wasn't Mark, I could see that now. He looked a bit like Mark's father, Christopher. Then I saw the Queen's

signet on his hand, along with a wedding band and a duchy signet that I didn't recognize.

"Are you my future?" I asked.

He shrugged. "In a way but not in the way you think." He took my wrist.

"Your pulse is racing."

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Just checking your vitals as best I can."

"But..."

"Don't worry, I'm a doctor."

"And Queen, apparently," I said pointing to the signet.

He gave me Mark's sweet smile. "In more ways than one but let's not worry about me right now. We need to worry about you, Your Majesty," he said.

"I'm not king."

"I know but you will be. You just have pull through this shitty bit of your life. Don't let Philip or Eric or anyone use you like this any more. No one deserves the shit you've been taking."

His sleeve slipped up and I noticed a long scar going from his wrist almost up to his elbow. "Oh god, you too?" I said but he was gone.