

## No Tomorrow

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# No Tomorrow

by [p\\_brown](#)

## Summary

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Wille can't remember their break-up.

Simon can't forget their time together.

- ~ -

# Chapter 1

Simon is alone in his office when they come for him.

He's sitting at his desk, absently drumming his fingers to a beat only he can hear while he stares into space. He's been trying to write for most of the afternoon. In truth, he's been doing more procrastinating than writing today, but he's focused now and he can almost feel the words he wants, dancing just out of reach. He closes his eyes and breathes deeply, hoping it will help. The doorbell chimes but he barely registers it, intent on chasing the words that are meant to ride this melody through his imagination. Mikael will answer it. But whoever it is only waits a moment before beginning to pound on the heavy door. The force of it rattles the windows and Simon jumps to his feet, annoyed by the interruption and the impatience of the person who continues hammering without pause.

He tears open his office door just as Mikael appears at the top of the stairs and begins jogging down them. His eyebrows are bunched together in concern and his bright blue eyes land on Simon as he reaches the hall. "Who is it?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out!" Simon throws the lock and yanks the door open. "What the hell do you—"

He's cut off by the taller of the two men standing on the front step. "Are you Simon Eriksson?"

Simon crosses his arms and lifts his chin. "Who are you?"

The man ignores the question, just like Simon ignored his, and repeats himself. "Are you Simon Eriksson?"

Simon quickly looks him up and down, taking note of his posture and the way he's dressed. Then he switches his attention to the other man. He's shorter and more solidly built, and he's dressed almost identically to the first man. Both are wearing suits and stand with their legs slightly spread and arms dangling in a falsely casual way. These are dangerous people, and their manner of dress is familiar. The hair raises on the back of Simon's neck. "What do you want?"

"This is the last time I will ask, sir. Are you Simon Eriksson?"

"Yes! Now who are—" The rest of his sentence is lost in a grunt of surprise when both men step forward and each take one of his arms. They practically lift Simon off the front step and when he resists them, his feet are left scrabbling for purchase on the pavement as they half drag and half carry him to the car waiting at the curb with its engine idling.

"Hey!" Mikael yells after them, his voice vibrating with an edge of panic. "What the fuck are you doing? Where are you taking him?" He runs toward the car but is stopped by the tall man, who hands him a business card. "What is this?" Mikael demands.

“You may call this number for more information. Now please stand back. This is official business.”

The man doesn't wait to see if Mikael complies with his instruction. Instead, he rushes back to the vehicle, slides into the drivers seat, and stomps the accelerator so hard the tires squeal before the car rockets forward. Simon's head snaps back and bounces off the headrest. He fumbles for the door handle, but the stocky man, who is sitting in the back seat next to him, grabs his arm to stop him. “Not a good idea, sir.”

He jerks around to look out the back window. Mikael is standing in the middle of the street with one hand clapped over his mouth in shock and probably no small amount of fear.

“Where are you taking me?” He struggles to keep his voice firm and confident. He doesn't want them to see that he's anxious, but adrenaline is zipping through his bloodstream, making it difficult. He deepens his breathing to control it.

“Sophiahemmet hospital,” the man in the driver's seat says.

“Sophiahemmet hospital?” This is getting weirder by the second, but Simon is beginning to suspect who is behind his abduction. Unease trickles down his spine. “Why?”

Neither man answers him. Simon looks back and forth between them and then huffs in frustration. “This is bullshit.” They remain silent, leaving him to stare out the window at the passing landscape and wonder what the fuck is going on.

## Chapter 2

Wilhelm winces at the beeping sound and moans. He tries to raise his head to find the source of the awful noise but instantly stops when a wave of intense nausea washes through him. “Oh, god.” He opens his eyes but the bright light is like a dagger being driven into his brain and he immediately snaps them shut again. His head hurts unbearably. “Please make it stop,” he whimpers, hoping someone can hear him and help. “Please.”

A hand gently wraps around his wrist and startles Wilhelm into opening his eyes again, which he instantly regrets. He can’t see anything except the piercing, bright white light. He lets his eyelids fall closed again and groans.

The owner of the hand makes a sympathetic noise and then Wilhelm feels something being attached to his index finger. Once it’s in place, the beeping stops and he could cry from relief. “Thank you,” he whispers.

“You’re welcome.” The voice is male, he thinks. He tries to squint his eyes open to get a look at the person, but all he gets is an impression of dark hair before he has to clench his eyes shut against the brightness. “Hang on,” the voice says, and a few seconds later the intensity of the light filtering through Wilhelm’s closed eyelids eases and he can tell the overhead lights have been switched off. He’s not ready to risk opening his eyes again just yet, though, so he remains as he is.

He’s just about to doze off when cool fingertips stroke over his forehead. He automatically presses into the touch and makes a little sound of contentment. “Simon?” He desperately wants Simon to crawl into the bed with him and hold him. He feels wretched and having Simon near will help. It always helps. He wants him to stroke his hair and hum softly to him and make promises about the things they’ll do when Wilhelm feels better. He wants to wrap himself around Simon, bury his nose in his warm neck, and hide there until this awful headache fades.

The hand on his forehead drifts up into his hair and begins to card through it, rubbing gently. Wilhelm makes a pleased sound. “Thank you, *älskling*.”

The hand freezes and someone nearby clears their throat. Wilhelm instantly knows it’s not Simon who is touching him and a bright bolt of panic shoots through him making the pain in his head spike. He opens his eyes and bites back another groan. Even the dim light hurts. This time, he’s able to focus on the person at his bedside, though. The nurse—the nurse who is not Simon, and who Wilhelm has just mistakenly called “love,” pauses in whatever he’s doing to Wilhelm’s hair.

“I—uh—I didn’t—” Wilhelm stumbles over his words and his face is hot with embarrassment.

The nurse speaks over him smoothly, as if nothing unusual has occurred. “I just need to check your bandage, Your Highness.”

Wilhelm closes his eyes and endures it, fighting the anxiety still clawing at his throat. Suddenly, two things occur to him simultaneously. First, if his head is bandaged that likely means he's suffered a head injury, which means his strange lapse can be blamed on him not being in his right mind. But before he can exhale in relief, the second thought crashes into him—what is wrong with him? What happened? The pace of his breathing quickens and his heart pounds. His distress must be evident because the nurse speaks again. "You're okay. Breathe."

"What happened?"

The nurse looks briefly concerned but quickly hides it and speaks reassuringly. "You were in a car accident, Your Highness."

That doesn't make sense. "No, that was Erik. Erik was in a car accident."

"Yes, sir. He was. But that was—" The nurse cuts himself off. "Your car was struck by another vehicle. You hit your head very hard."

Wilhelm reaches up to where he'd felt the nurse's hand earlier and his own fingers brush over what is clearly a rather large bandage.

"You've been having some confusion, but that's to be expected."

The panic, which has been hiding just below the surface since he woke up, roars to life like the monster it is. He clutches at his chest. "Simon. I need Simon. Where is he?"

"Sir—" the nurse begins, but Wilhelm shouts over him. "Where is he? He should be here! Where is Simon? I need him!" Some distant part of him knows that he's being loud and rude and he's certainly not behaving with the decorum expected of royalty, but he doesn't care. Everything hurts and he needs the man he loves.

The nurse backs away until he reaches the door and then turns to fumble it open. "I'll just go... check... to see if he's arrived."

## Chapter 3

The men don't exactly *force* Simon into Sophiahemmet hospital. They don't drag him. They don't put their hands on him again. But it's clear they will resort to that if he resists. Simon wants to defy them, wants to make a scene and make this as difficult for them as he can. It's the damaged sixteen-year-old boy still inside him that feels that way, that wants to yell, to fight, to protest the unfairness of the situation. But he hasn't been that boy for a long time now. The man he is now knows his own worth, knows there's value in being taken seriously, and he chooses dignity. Sara would be proud of him, he thinks, and he smiles just a little at the thought of his sister, who he hasn't seen in weeks that feel like years. He needs to visit her soon.

After an interminable journey up and down hallways, up flights of stairs, and through doorways, they finally reach their destination. The figure standing guard outside the unmarked room turns toward them as they approach. Simon had suspected who he was being taken to see almost from the start, so he isn't surprised to see her. Her smile is tight, but her eyes are fond. He always liked her, and she always seemed to like him. "Hello, Simon."

In other circumstances, he would ask her how she is and be interested in the answer, but right now he's too irritated for niceties. "What the hell, Malin? Kidnapping? He couldn't just ask to see me?"

"Would you have come if he did?"

Simon snorts. "Of course not. But that's not an excuse to *abduct* me!"

"You are right, of course, but we had no choice." She steps away from the door and looks at the two men who brought Simon. "I'm going to brief Mr. Eriksson." They nod and take up position, one on either side of the door.

Simon stares at it. There isn't a window, so he can't see inside, but he knows Wille is in there. It's a hospital, so he's at least unwell, possibly worse. Is he sick? Injured? He struggles against the urge to ask. He imagines Wilhelm lying in a hospital bed, hooked up to monitors, skin pale—paler than normal—and eyes closed. His hands splayed limply on the bed; his bitten fingernails visible for anyone to see, no longer hidden in the curl of his fists. Does he still bite his nails? It's strange not to know.

Wille is on the other side of that door and he might be suffering. Despite everything, Simon's instinct is to go to him, and his hand twitches toward the doorknob without his permission. He catches himself and stops the movement almost before it begins. He taps his fingers on the side of his leg instead and turns to Malin. "Tell me what's going on."

She gestures for him to come with her and walks away. He glances quickly at the door again and then follows her into a small meeting room a few doors down. The room is used as a private space for medical staff to speak with family members. As Malin closes the door behind them, Simon can't help but think about all the terrible news that's been delivered in this room. A sudden chill prickles the hair on his neck and makes him shiver.

Malin is a no-nonsense person and she doesn't draw things out. She tucks the blonde hair that's escaped her ponytail back behind her ears and looks at him soberly before delivering the facts precisely and succinctly. "Prince Wilhelm was in a car accident. Not all of the airbags in the vehicle deployed properly and he struck his head very hard. He did not regain consciousness for quite some time. The swelling in his brain necessitated a surgery to relieve the pressure." Without realizing it, Simon has begun twisting his fingers together in his lap. His stomach clenches painfully and he prepares himself for what she might say next.

"When he still didn't wake up," Malin continues, "they began—" She stops speaking and breaks eye contact in a rare display of emotion. Then she clears her throat and continues. "They began to talk about the possibility that he might not wake up at all, or that if he did, he might not be... himself. He finally woke up early this morning."

When she pauses, Simon can't help himself. He's given up trying to hide or control his concern. "And?" He waves his hand impatiently. "Is he okay?"

She softens slightly at the expression on his face and then turns serious again. "The first thing he said was your name. He's been asking for you ever since. He seems to be stuck in a loop. Each time he dozes off, he forgets about the accident and has to be told about it again when he wakes. The doctors say it's normal and it will pass, but..." She trails off and takes a breath before continuing. "But he also doesn't remember that you're not together."

Simon blinks in shock. "What?"

"He's been asking for you rather forcefully and getting increasingly upset. The doctors are concerned enough to..." She clears her throat again. "They need him to calm down, but each time he wakes up and learns about the accident, all he does is demand to see you."

"Wait. That's why I'm here? What am I supposed to do?" Simon's heart is racing in anticipation of the answer.

"We need you to be with him, Simon. Calm him down. Help him."

Simon grimaces. "Lie to him. You want me to lie to him."

She seems as if she's going to object or explain further, but then she sags a bit and concedes. "Yes."

## Chapter 4

Wilhelm's head droops heavily and he jerks it upright again, wincing a little at the pain triggered by the motion. The room swims strangely for a moment before it settles. Where is Simon? It feels like a lot of time has passed since the nurse left to see if he'd arrived. He can't imagine what would keep Simon from rushing to be with him. There's certainly nothing in the world that could keep him from the man he loves if Simon were the one hospitalized. He's trying not to worry about it. Maybe less time has passed than he thinks.

He looks at the clock on the wall opposite his bed, but he has no idea what time it was when the nurse left. He stares at it anyway and something about it makes him uncomfortable. It takes him a bit to work it out. It's that he can't remember *anything* that happened today.

He remembers the machine next to him beeping and waking him. He remembers the nurse helping him, and everything that's happened since then, but before that? His day is lost in a featureless fog. He can't remember waking up; whether it was in his own bed or Simon's, or if it had been one of the nights that circumstance prevented them being together. He doesn't remember getting in the car that would later be in an accident bad enough to put him in the hospital. He doesn't know where he was going or why. There's nothing.

His heart beats faster and his breathing becomes quick and shallow. The panic that had been nibbling at the edges of his mind bares its teeth and lunges. He closes his eyes and tries to slow his breathing. He counts to four on his inhale and seven on his exhale, over and over. He forces his hands to uncurl from the fists they've clenched into. Bit by bit, his heart slows, his breathing calms, and he pushes the fear back into its cage. Once it feels safe, he begins searching his mind, trying to find the last thing he *does* remember. He's still trying when the door to his room swings open with a click and a soft *swish* of moving air.

*Simon.* His beautiful, familiar face soothes Wilhelm instantly. The remaining tension in his body falls away and he's so eager to be in his arms that unexpected tears prickle at the corners of his eyes and he blinks them back. He tries to speak, but his throat clenches with emotion and the words won't come. All he can do is exhale roughly in relief and hold out a hand to beckon him closer. He needs to touch him; to be touched by him. He needs the comfort only Simon's body can provide.

But Simon doesn't come to him. He remains just inside the door, looking around the room nervously, his eyes flicking over the medical equipment and the wires and tubes snaking over Wilhelm. When he finally makes eye contact with Wilhelm it's like an electric shock zaps him. He jerks and looks away quickly. His gaze bounces around the room, finally settling on the machine that displays all the readings about Wilhelm's pulse and blood pressure and god knows what else.

Wilhelm lets his arm drop back to the mattress and stares at Simon curiously, trying to work out what the matter is.

Simon shifts his weight from one foot to the other, still staring at the monitor. “Are you—um—how are you?”

What is wrong with him? Why is he still all the way over there? Why isn’t he holding Wilhelm and telling him it’s going to be okay? He needs him. He needs Simon’s arms around him. He needs his confidence. He needs to tuck his face into his neck and just breathe him in and feel safe. He needs Simon to stop standing there like he’s paralyzed or afraid and— *oh*. Is that what’s wrong? It must be. They’ve never been to a hospital together that Wilhelm can recall, so he wouldn’t have known before.

He speaks softly. “Simon?” Simon’s soft, brown eyes meet his again. They’re full of nerves still, and something else that Wilhelm can’t identify. “It’s okay. It’s—” He waves a hand at the room. “I know hospitals make some people nervous, but I’m okay.” He snorts a little laugh. “Well, I’m not *okay*, obviously, but I don’t think I’m in imminent danger of, you know...” He trails off, worried he’s making it worse, because Simon’s face is doing things that seem like maybe he is.

Not knowing what else to say, Wilhelm holds his hand out to Simon again and despite his effort to control it, his voice wobbles a little when he speaks. “Will you please hold me?”

## Chapter 5

*“Will you please hold me?”*

Simon wants to turn and run from the room and not stop until he's safe at home, surrounded by his things and the life he's made for himself. He can't do this. He can't be expected to hold and comfort the person who broke his heart so completely that he hadn't been sure it would ever recover. It had been years before he thought there might be enough of his heart remaining to offer it to someone else. He'd left so much of it—too much of it—behind with the boy who'd been the first to claim it.

The constant ache and longing for the missing part of himself had almost been too much to bear. He had, though. He'd borne it. He'd had to. His mother and his sister needed him, and their need and love had kept him tethered. They'd kept him from spinning away, lost in grief and the pain of missing the other half of himself.

He definitely can't do this. He's going to tell Malin they'll have to figure this out for themselves. He's reaching for the door handle behind him when he makes the mistake of looking at Wilhelm again and freezes, caught in his gaze. His brown eyes are worried, scared even, and confused. Tears pool in them as Simon continues staring, rooted to the spot.

“Simon?” Wilhelm whispers his name as he raises his fist with the thumb turned toward his mouth so he can chew on the nail.

The sight of that old, anxious habit breaks Simon's resolve. It makes him look so young and so much like the boy he once knew that Simon's body is moving toward the bed before he even realizes he's made a choice. He exhales slowly. “Okay, Wille. Okay.”

Wilhelm drops his hand and one side of his mouth turns up in the small, crooked smile that Simon remembers. It's the one that means he's feeling insecure or embarrassed. The instinct to comfort him flares so strongly that Simon's breath hitches in his chest from the shock of feeling it again after all this time.

As soon as he's close enough, Wilhelm reaches for him, snagging the fabric of Simon's sleeve first, and then his hand, tugging him impatiently toward him. Before Simon can protest, he slides to the far side of the narrow bed and pulls Simon into it after him.

“Wilhelm, I don't think—*oof*.” His words are cut off when Wilhelm squeezes his waist so tightly it takes his breath.

He lays his head on Simon's chest and sighs contentedly before leaning up and burrowing his face into Simon's neck. When he speaks, his voice is quiet and husky with emotion. “Tell me it's going to be okay.”

Simon inhales deeply and closes his eyes, trying to ground himself and keep from getting lost in the maelstrom of emotions twisting through him at being so close to Wilhelm again. His body is rigid with the effort. He's angry about being put in this situation and afraid of the

consequences. He's anxious about long-buried feelings that are already rising to the surface. But mostly... Wille feels so good in his arms that it scares him. And that's the worst part of all.

"It's going to be okay, Wille."

He forces himself to curve his arm around Wilhelm's shoulders. He doesn't squeeze him or pull him into his body. He just lets his arm rest there awkwardly. He's uncomfortable, but Wilhelm doesn't seem to notice. He tilts his head back so he can see Simon. "I'm glad you're here."

Simon doesn't know what to say that wouldn't be a lie, and for some reason he doesn't want to lie to him. He thinks maybe he couldn't even if he wanted to. So he simply pats Wilhelm's arm where it's slung over his stomach and says, "You need to rest."

Luckily for him, Wilhelm's eyes are already drifting closed again. The concussion and the medication they've given him are dragging him back into unconsciousness. As he goes boneless in Simon's arms he mumbles incoherently into his chest, "You're big—bigger. Than I thought? I don't... how are you bigger?" He trails off into a soft snore.

Simon stares at the ceiling. Seven years is a long time, and they've both grown into men. Eventually Wilhelm will remain conscious long enough to notice. What then?

## Chapter 6

A pleasant shiver rolls down Wilhelm's back as Simon's fingers scratch gently through the hair at the nape of his neck. He hums and wriggles closer, sliding his leg over Simon's and enjoying the answering hum that rumbles through Simon's chest. Wilhelm keeps his eyes closed and smiles sleepily to himself as he presses even closer, rocking himself against Simon's thigh where it's snuggled up under his own leg. He's half hard and the lazy friction of it feels good, but not urgent. The need to do something about it is still distant. For now, it's the closeness he craves. He tilts his head back and fastens his mouth to the pulse point in Simon's neck in a gently sucking kiss. He tastes good and Wilhelm hums again and nips lightly with his teeth.

Simon suddenly stiffens and jerks. He pushes Wilhelm away and lunges out of the bed, stumbling and bumping into the chair next to it before getting his feet under him. As he straightens, he throws Wilhelm a horrified look and backs away another step.

Wilhelm huffs a small laugh. "What is wrong with you?"

Simon eyes bounce around the room and he takes another step away. He looks like a wild animal that's been startled... or trapped.

"No one else is here, *älskling*. It's just us. It's okay. Come back to bed."

Simon sags and rubs both hands over his face. "I have to—I can't—" He turns and hurls himself at the door, yanking it open and nearly tripping in his hurry to get through it. The door is swinging shut again before Wilhelm can react. *What the hell?*

He sits up, preparing to go after him, but as soon as he's upright, the room wobbles and leans to one side. When his cheek presses into the mattress, he realizes it's him that leaning, not the room. The dizziness has the same swirling rush to it as being drunk, but he's not enjoying it. He needs to get up. He needs to find Simon; find out what's wrong. He pushes against the mattress, but only gets halfway up before the dizziness swamps him again and he sinks back down. In a minute. He'll try again in a minute. He just needs to rest for a...

\* \* \*

He swims back to consciousness again in stages, feeling weirdly untethered from his body. He's back in the bed properly, with his head on the pillow and the blankets tucked around him. Someone must have helped him, or moved him while he was asleep. The room is dim and quiet. His mind feels fuzzy in that way that sometimes happens when he isn't completely awake. Had Simon been here earlier? Or did he dream that? When his eyes finally focus on the chair next to his bed, he finds Malin watching him. "How are you feeling, Your Highness?"

"Confused," he croaks. "And thirsty."

Malin stands and pours him a cup of water from the pitcher placed on the table at the foot of the bed. The cup has a straw in it and when she hands it to him, instead of letting go, she cups her hand around his, as if he needs help holding a cup for himself. A burst of irritation blooms in his chest. "I can hold the cup, Malin. Thank you."

She nods and releases her grip, and they both pretend not to notice the way his hand trembles on its own. He takes a few sips of the cool water. It feels so good on his throat that he takes a few more before he holds it out to her so she can put it back on the tray.

"Was Simon here before?"

She nods.

"Where is he now?"

"He'll be back." Malin didn't actually answer his question, but before he can say anything else, she continues. "Your parents will be here soon. Their flight should be arriving any moment."

"Oh, then I guess..." Wilhelm looks at Malin meaningfully, but she just blinks at him, clearly not understanding his look. He rubs his arm and sighs. "I guess you'll have to tell Simon." Her face is still a blank. What is wrong with her? He looks at her more closely. There are purple shadows under her eyes. She's exhausted. "You've been here with me ever since the accident, haven't you?"

Her eyebrows raise. "You remember that you were in an accident?"

"Of course I do. Why wouldn't I? Although..." he looks inward and pokes at his memories. "I don't remember the accident itself."

She smiles. "That's good." She shakes her head. "I mean, that's good that you remember there *was* an accident. You didn't at first."

He doesn't remember... not remembering. And he wants to ask more questions, but his head feels strange again. "My head hurts, Malin. Could you ask them for some pain medication, please?"

"Certainly, Your Highness."

She's almost to the door when he thinks to go back to the prior topic. "Be sure to warn Simon that my parents are coming. Tell him I'll call when it's safe for him to come back." His head is heavy and his eyes are sliding shut. "He hasn't been seen, has he? He's being careful?" He falls asleep before she answers.

## Chapter 7

Simon doesn't pay any attention to what direction he takes when he bursts out of Wilhelm's room. Any direction will do. Any direction that takes him away from Wilhelm and this situation.

He'd let his guard down and relaxed, even dozed a little in the quiet, dimly lit hospital room. Having Wille in his arms again was... it was everything his body and soul had cried out for, for nearly two years after they split up. Time and distance eventually did their work and turned that agony merely to pain, and then to ache, and finally to a sore spot that only occasionally made itself known. But all that long, slow work had been undone in a matter of minutes. Moments, really. Every molecule of his body had surged back to life again at Wille's touch.

He'd lived with the loss of him for so long that he hadn't noticed the light going out of himself. Touching him again, being touched by him, had brought the light blazing back.

The tickle of his hair against Simon's cheek had brought back all the memories in a flood. The smell of his hair was so excruciatingly familiar that his heart constricted and he had to blink back sudden tears of remembered longing.

He knew he should have resisted it, should have gotten out of the bed and put distance between them. He knew letting himself have this would only make things worse. How had he let that happen? He's an idiot. He should have refused to get in the bed with him at all. He should have come up with an excuse, one that wouldn't have alerted Wille to the fact that everything was not as it seemed.

But even now, he can't think what he could've said or done differently, that wouldn't have scared Wilhelm.

He stops suddenly and turns to press his forehead and fists against the wall. *'Jävla helvete!'* he all but shouts.

Someone clears their throat, and when he looks up, a hospital employee is giving him a disapproving look, either for the cursing or the volume of it. Or both. "Shhh!"

Simon nods an apology, turns to lean his back against the wall, and tries to settle himself. He glances up and down the hallway and sighs. He has no idea where he is, where Wilhelm's room is, where the exit might be. He's lost, in more ways than one.

He's about to push off the wall and find someone to ask for directions when Malin appears. "Hello," she says.

Simon gives her a sour look and says nothing. She turns and leans her back against the wall next to him. "Thank you for coming." She stares down at her shoes for a moment and then up at the ceiling. "I'm sorry, but it was necessary."

“No, it wasn’t.”

She looks at him sharply. “What?”

“It wasn’t necessary. You could have told him the truth, that his memory was impaired and that we haven’t been together for years.”

“The doctors didn’t think it was a good idea to agitate him further with his mind in such a fragile state.”

Simon shrugs.

She’s quiet for a moment, then says, “You’re not fooling me, you know.”

He huffs in frustration and turns his head so she can’t see his face anymore. “So, what exactly is going on with his memory? When does he think we are? Still in school?”

“We’re not positive. It’s difficult to get clues from him without alerting him to the fact that something is wrong. We just wait for him to say anything that provides context. We’re slowly putting the pieces together.”

Simon makes a frustrated sound.

“We *think* that he thinks it’s that period of time right after you both finished school, when you were together again but keeping it secret from everyone.”

“Fuck.” Simon scrubs a hand over his face. “So, what? You need to me pretend we’re together until he remembers we’re not?”

“We need him to remain calm so his brain can heal.”

He rolls his eyes at her. “So that’s a *yes*.” His throat clogs with emotion and he has to clear it. His voice is rough when he speaks. “I don’t know if I can do that, Malin.”

“Is there not any part of you that still cares for him?”

Simon looks at her incredulously. “Every part of me still cares for him, Malin. That’s the problem.”

She nods and goes back to staring at her feet. “He fell asleep again after you left the room, and when he woke up he was no longer in the loop of not remembering that there had been an accident. He remembered it. And he seemed to recall that you had been there, but needed confirmation of it. Those are good signs that he’s starting to heal.” She pushes off the wall and stands in front of him. “Thank you for today. The arrival of his parents buys you some time to think. Wilhelm will insist I contact you when they leave and ask you to return. I hope you will.” She reaches out as if she’s going to pat his shoulder, but thinks better of it and drops her hand. She nods again and walks away.

Simon stares blankly after her for several minutes before finally pushing off the wall himself so he can go home. He looks one way and then the other. *Fuck*. He still doesn’t know where

the hell he is.

## Chapter 8

Willhelm had been happy to see his parents, his mother especially, but he'd also been relieved when it was time for them to go. Seeing his mother was a lot of things—comforting and stressful in equal measure, usually—but rarely was it relaxing. He didn't like feeling that way about her. It made him feel like a bad son. But the responsibility they both bore to the throne would always complicate their relationship. She had seemed strange today, though. Awkward. Even a little hesitant. His mother was *never* hesitant.

Now he's worried. He wonders if there is something they aren't telling him. He has a terrible feeling there are things he doesn't understand or remember. He tries to sort out why he feels that way, but his thoughts still feel heavy and difficult. He can't seem to focus on them or order them, and he keeps falling asleep, which is starting to piss him off. But even that gets lost in a new tide of confusion as he gets dragged under into unconsciousness again.

He wakes from yet another doze with no idea how long he was out, what he missed, what he might not remember. He's alone, so there's no one to ask. He pushes himself up into a sitting position and blinks until he feels more alert. After a minute or two, he realizes he's staring at a dry erase board mounted on the wall across from his bed. It has bits of information on it—his name, the duty nurse's name, the name of the doctor in charge of his care, and sets of numbers and abbreviations that he assumes are updates about his condition. There's a tray attached to the bottom with an eraser and several markers.

Wilhelm climbs out of bed carefully and stands next to it until he's certain he's not going to get dizzy and fall over. His head still hurts, but it's a dull pain now, not the razor-edged hell it was before. He takes hold of his IV pole and checks it, and himself, to make sure he's not tangled and that nothing is going to get yanked loose if he moves, then he walks to the board. He erases everything on it, uncaps a marker, and begins to write.

1. *Wilhelm of Sweden*
2. *I was in a car accident.*
3. *I don't remember everything.*
- 4.

He stares at number four and taps the end of the marker against his lips. He sighs in frustration. Making a list of everything he remembers is an exercise in futility. He remembers lots of things. He could fill this board and another thousand like it with all the things he remembers. What he needs to know is what he *doesn't* remember, and that's not a list he can make for himself. He'll need other people to help him. He stares at the board a while longer, lost in thought. When he surfaces, he smiles and puts the marker to use again.

4. *I want to marry Simon.*

He reaches for the eraser, chuckling at himself for being ridiculous enough to write that, just as the door to the room swishes open. His heart lurches in his chest and begins fluttering like a rabbit sensing a predator. He scrambles to erase the board, starting with number four, oh

god, erase, erase, erase! When it's all gone, he drops the marker and eraser back in the tray, but the marker bounces off and rolls away with a clatter. His breathing is too quick and he feels a little dizzy. *Get it together! Jesus!* he berates himself mentally.

By the time he turns around, he's more in control of himself, but his cheeks are hot and he knows he's flushed and a little sweaty.

Malin stands just inside the door. Her posture is stiff—she's on duty—but her eyes are kind. Wilhelm can't tell how much she saw, and he's definitely not going to ask, but he suspects she saw a lot. Maybe all of it. He avoids her gaze.

He begins to walk back to his bed and is brought up short by the painful tug on his IV line. He grimaces and reaches for the pole to bring it with him.

"It's good to see you up," Malin says.

He nods, still not making eye contact, and climbs back in bed. He settles the blankets over his lap and begins twisting his fingers together before stopping himself and forcing them to lie flat and still. He takes a deep breath and finally looks at her. Before he can even open his mouth, she says, "I texted and let him know your parents are gone."

"Is he on his way?"

Her face goes perfectly still. "I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"He didn't reply."

## Chapter 9

Simon has barely put his key in the lock when the front door flings open so suddenly he stumbles forward and Mikael catches him by the shoulders. He looks at Simon closely, his blue eyes wide with concern, and then pulls him into a fierce hug. “Thank god,” he whispers against his hair.

Simon's throat tightens and tears prick in the corners of his eyes. He blinks them back ruthlessly. He's relieved to be home, and he's always emotional when he's worn out like this. His eyes are scratchy with tiredness and his body feels heavy and slow. He wants nothing more than to crawl into bed and go to sleep so he doesn't have to think about any of this. He allows himself to sink into Mikael's embrace for the length of one breath, and then another, before stepping out of his arms. He smiles, but it's forced, and Mikael isn't fooled.

“I called the number on the card that man gave me when they took you, but all they would tell me was that you were safe and not in any kind of trouble.” He reaches for Simon, but then twists his hands together instead. “Sim, the number I called... it went to a division of the Royal Guard. What's happened? Why would they need you so urgently?”

Simon rubs the back of his neck and sighs. “I can't tell you.”

Mikael blinks at him, his mouth dropping open slightly in astonishment. “I—but... I thought we told each other everything.”

“I can't tell you this. I'm sorry.” The hurt in Mikael's eyes makes Simon's stomach cramp. He hates this. He lets go of his neck and wraps his hand around Mikael's shoulder instead, squeezing it and looking at him intently. “But the person you spoke with told you the truth. I'm okay. And I'm not in trouble. You don't need to worry.”

Mikael scoffs and shakes his head. “You're really not going to tell me?”

“I wish I could.”

Silence falls over them as Mikael makes a visible effort to accept what Simon's telling him and not ask more questions. He opens and closes his mouth a few times, changing his mind each time before actually saying anything. Finally, he shrugs and makes a frustrated noise. “I don't know what to say if we can't talk about the fact that the Royal Guard literally kidnapped you and hauled out of here with no explanation.”

“I'm sorry.” Simon is so unbelievably tired. He feels guilty for it, but he just wants this to be over so he can go lie down.

Mikael doesn't get angry frequently or easily, but the tense line of his shoulders broadcasts his current state of aggravation clearly. He steps around Simon and opens the front door. “I'm going for a walk.”

Simon looks at the floor and nods. “Okay. I'm—I'm exhausted. I'm going to bed.”

Mikael's voice is clipped, his tone sharp but carefully controlled. "Fine. I'll see you in the morning." He steps out and pulls the door shut quickly behind him.

Simon heaves a sigh and heads upstairs. He can't be bothered with any of his normal bedtime routine and leaves a trail of discarded clothing on his weary trek to the king-sized bed. He tosses his phone onto the nightstand, and wearing nothing but his briefs, he slides under the duvet and is asleep in minutes.

\* \* \*

The clatter of his phone vibrating wakes him some time later. He jerks awake, startled, and nearly jumps out of the bed before his brain processes what the noise is. He sinks back into his pillow and rubs his eyes so hard he sees pinpricks of light burst like tiny fireworks behind his eyelids. He's still considering whether to look at his phone when it rattles against the bedside table again. He reaches for it and blinks blearily at the notifications. He doesn't recognize the number, but thumbs it anyway and the messages open.

16 282 3635

where are you?

why aren't you here?

Simon frowns at his phone and types a reply.

16 282 3635

who is this?

it's me

I lost my phone in the accident. Malin said I had to get a new number for some reason

He knows why Malin did that, of course. It's a lot easier to explain things, and control Wille, if he doesn't have his phone history and photos to comb through, looking for clues and explanations. His phone buzzes again.

16 282 3635

come back

I need you

Simon groans and presses the end of the phone against his forehead hard enough to hurt. He'd thought about getting a new number after they'd broken up for good. He hadn't done it, though. Some part of him couldn't let go of that final connection, a way for Wille to communicate with him again if he needed him. It was stupid. He should have changed it. But all these years later, the compulsion to take care of Wille is as strong as ever. He lowers his phone and swipes a reply.

16 282 3635

I will come back tomorrow. Go to sleep.

He powers his phone off completely, slides it back onto the table, and buries his face in his pillow.

*Fuck.*

## Chapter 10

Wilhelm pokes at the food on his tray and chews on his bottom lip. Something is wrong. *Lots* of things are wrong, actually—the gaps in his memory and his inability to stay awake, chief among them, but the big thing, the thing that’s troubling him the most, is Simon. Something is wrong with Simon.

He looks at the clock on the wall opposite his bed. It’s one in the afternoon and there’s still no sign of him. He’s not responding to Wilhelm’s texts either. Something is definitely wrong, and the more time that passes, the tighter the coil of anxiety in his stomach winds.

The door to his room opens and, just like every other time it’s opened today, Wilhelm twitches with anticipation and then sags with disappointment when it’s not him. This time it’s a nurse. She inspects his tray and makes a disappointed face when she sees how little he’s eaten. “You need to eat, Your Highness. Your body needs the calories to fuel your recovery.”

He forces himself to smile at her with as much charm as he can muster under the circumstances. “Thank you for taking such good care of me.” Pink spreads over her cheeks as she blinks and returns the smile. And, as he’d hoped she would, she forgets to deliver the rest of her lecture. She scoops up his tray and leaves without another word.

As soon as she’s gone, the smile falls from his face. He scoots down on the bed again, pulls the blankets over himself, and curls up on his side. He tries not to think about Simon, but he may as well try to stop the sun from rising. He’s never stopped feeling like the shy boy that couldn’t stop looking at the object of his affection. He was so obvious about his crush on Simon during their school days. He doesn’t know how everyone didn’t see it right away. Days that should have been filled with focus on his studies were instead full of eagerly waiting for another glimpse of Simon’s beautiful curls, or his laughing eyes, or the quirk of his crooked smile. Each time he caught sight of him, Wilhelm’s heart would thud helplessly in his chest. No matter how many times he saw him, the excited thrill was the same. He’d been gone over Simon right from the beginning. It just took him a little while to recognize it for what it was.

He’d never felt that way about a boy before, and all that excitement had been laced with a heavy dose of fear for a while. He shudders as he remembers how close he came to letting his anxiety keep him from exploring his feelings. Even now, just remembering it makes his stomach clench with dread and flutter with exhilaration at the same time.

Whenever he thinks about their first kiss, though, it’s not the thrill and the terror of it he thinks of first. It’s Simon’s courage. The sheer audacity it took for him to kiss Wilhelm, a prince, and a boy he couldn’t be sure even liked other boys that way. No one was braver than his Simon. No one. *He* was the prince that fairytales are made of—fearless and kind and so, so handsome. Even now, the thought of him makes Wilhelm’s pulse race—the warmth of his skin, the press of his lips. Wilhelm smiles and pushes his hot face into his pillow, embarrassed by his romantic thoughts, even though no one is there to see. Will he ever stop feeling like a giddy schoolboy with a crush?

Sleep tugs at him again and he gives into it, drifting into dreams that are part memory and part fantasy, and all starring the gorgeous man that is more of a prince than he will ever be.

## Chapter 11

Simon stands in the hall outside Wille's room and breathes deeply to settle himself. He'd hoped to have some sort of plan by now, some idea how he was going to handle things with Wille, but he has nothing except a stomach tied in knots and a head full of worries.

He'd woken up that morning, made himself a cup of strong, dark coffee, and taken it to the back patio so he could sit in the sun and think. There had been no sign of Mikael, which hadn't surprised him. He would return when he was ready. Simon had turned his mind to the problem of Wilhelm. He thought seriously about calling Malin and telling her he would not return to the hospital, that they would have to figure this out without him, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. The person in that hospital bed is the *boy* Simon had known in school. The *man* he'd grown into is trapped in the parts of himself he's forgotten. And it's that boy that Simon can't bring himself to walk away from—the boy he'd loved, and who had loved him, the boy who is now confused and frightened.

He pushes open the door to the hospital room, hoping for the best, and he's barely taken two steps into the room when Wille flies into his arms. Simon stumbles backward into the closing door and hugs Wille back, trying to keep them both upright. Wille's entire body is shaking. Simon tries to push him away a little so he can see his face, but Wilhelm won't let him. He presses into Simon's neck and squeezes him tighter.

"Hey," Simon whispers. "Hey."

Wilhelm shakes his head and stays burrowed against him. Simon recognizes this behavior. He remembers Wille's younger self, the one that was overwhelmed with anxiety sometimes. He used to tell Simon that he made him feel safe, that he knew he could say anything to Simon, and hearing it had made Simon feel ten feet tall. He liked being the one Wille could count on to care about *him*, not about how things looked or what was proper. Just about him—the boy that was more fragile than people expected, but stronger than they knew.

Simon runs his fingers up and down Wille's spine and murmurs, "It's okay," into his hair. "You're okay." He continues soothing him until the shaking subsides.

Wille kisses Simon's neck and then presses a soft kiss to his mouth. He hovers there, so close that his lips brush Simon's when he speaks. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too." It's not a lie. But the length of the time spent missing one another remains unspoken. Wilhelm's missed him for a day, but Simon missed Wille every day, for years.

Wille kisses him again and then pulls him into another hug. "I'm scared, Simon."

"Why are you scared?"

Instead of answering, Wille pulls him back to the bed and arranges them so he can lay his head on Simon's chest. Simon holds him close and waits. He knows better than to push

Wilhelm to talk about what's bothering him.

Finally, Wilhelm leans up on his elbow so they can see one another properly. "There are things I don't remember. I've, um, figured that out. I know that."

Simon nods. "Yes."

"But no one will help me figure out where the gaps in my memory are."

Simon nods again. "They're afraid it will upset you and that will make it more difficult for your brain to heal."

"So, what I don't remember—the things I can't remember are... upsetting?"

Simon bites his lip and closes his eyes. He doesn't know what to say. What's the right thing to do? And why is *he* responsible for handling this? *Fuck*. He opens his eyes again and meets Wille's worried gaze. "Do you trust me?"

Wilhelm doesn't hesitate. "Of course."

"Let it be for now. Don't try to figure it out. Just rest. Let your body heal."

Wilhelm blinks at him for several seconds, and Simon is certain he's going to argue and insist that Simon start telling him things, but he only says, "Okay."

"Really?"

Wilhelm nods.

"Okay, then." Simon relaxes.

"But," Wilhelm says as he squeezes Simon's bicep and grins, "it seems one of the things I've forgotten is you putting on quite a bit of muscle. I'd like to see it, please."

A surprised laugh bursts from Simon. "No."

Wilhelm pouts. "But what if helps me remember?"

"Somehow I doubt me stripping for you is going to jog your memory."

"You don't know. It might."

"Behave yourself."

Wilhelm tries to roll on top of Simon, but Simon slithers out of the bed and steps back. "Wilhelm!" He's trying for a firm tone, but he can't help laughing at the aggrieved look on Wilhelm's face.

"Fine. I'll behave. Come back." He makes grabby hands at Simon.

"Mmm, no. I don't think so." Simon sits in the chair next to his bed.

Wilhelm swings his legs over the side of the bed, preparing to do god knows what in retaliation, when the door opens and a group of doctors file into the room.

## Chapter 12

Wilhelm quickly scoots back up the bed and under the blankets, smoothing them over his lap and trying to display as much decorum as possible, given that he is the least formally dressed person in the room. His eyes flit nervously between the cluster of physicians standing at the end of his bed and Simon in the chair next to him. Do they know who Simon is to Wilhelm? They can't possibly. Malin is the only one who knows, and she would never betray that confidence. But has *anyone* explained Simon's presence, or is it up to Wilhelm to do it right now? He clears his throat in preparation to say something—he has absolutely no bloody idea *what*—but the doctor in charge speaks before he can.

“Your highness,” she says, “do you wish your friend to step out while we discuss your condition?”

“Um, no, he—my friend—he—“ Wilhelm clamps his lips shut in frustration and takes a deep breath. *He* is in charge here. He's royalty. He must stop speaking like a nervous child. He straightens his shoulders and tries again, this time with complete confidence that he is utterly faking. “He can stay.”

Malin's blonde head catches his attention at the back of the group and he waves her forward. “As can she, of course.” He's still trying his best to sound like he's in command here, but he's relieved the two people he trusts the most are in the room with him.

“Very well,” the doctor says as she consults her tablet. “The latest round of testing is encouraging. The swelling has come down. It's not as reduced as we'd like yet, but the healing has definitely begun. We expect you'll soon be recovered physically from the impact if things continue in this positive direction.”

“Physically,” Wilhelm repeats. “What about my memory?” He clears his throat again and clenches the blanket as he tries to quell his embarrassment over not being able to remember things, like it's a failure on his part somehow.

“Resolution of the amnesia is harder to predict. Recovery of your memories may continue to coincide with the reduction in swelling. I'm told you've remembered the accident itself now?”

Wilhelm nods. “I remember what others have told me about it, but...” He lets his focus turn inward and tries to call up an actual memory of being in the car at the moment of impact. He has a vague recollection of being flung and a spinning sensation, but that's all. “But my memory of the crash itself is still fuzzy. I remember how it felt—like I was being thrown—but that's all.”

“Your ability to retain new memories has returned, which is significant. I believe the amnesia will subside as your brain heals, but I'm afraid I cannot quantify the timeline for you.”

“When will I be released? Can I go home now?”

“I’m afraid not, Your Highness. The swelling is still notable enough that you should remain under close observation. Let us see what tomorrow brings, okay?”

He does his best to hide his disappointment and nods his acceptance of his fate.

“Rest, Your Highness. Rest and remain calm. Do your best to relax and avoid stressful thoughts. Do not push yourself to remember things. Your brain needs this peace in order to heal. Do you understand?” The doctor lifts her gaze to make sure her instructions are attended to by Simon and Malin as well.

All three of them nod.

“Excellent,” she says. “We shall see what tomorrow brings.” She and the other physicians depart in a flurry of white coats.

Malin studies him for a few moments. “Is there anything you require right now?”

Wilhelm smiles, letting his affection for her show. “I require you to go home and get some sleep.”

“I’m fine, Your Highness.”

“It’s not a request.”

She arches a brow.

“I will be fine. There are others who can guard my door, and Simon is here. He won’t let anything happen to me.”

Simon, who had been staring at the floor, lifts his head quickly, as if surprised. He glances at Wilhelm and then at Malin. “Yes. I mean, no. I won’t.” He huffs a frustrated breath. “I mean, yes, I’m here and, no, I won’t let anything happen to Wilhelm.”

The look that passes between Malin and Simon is an entire unspoken conversation, and Wilhelm instinctively knows they’re bumping up against something he doesn’t remember. “If I’m going to remain calm and not ask a lot of questions, you two need to not look at each other like that.” They jerk their gazes away from one another quickly. “I will be fine, Malin. Go home and rest. You’re too tired.”

She relents and agrees. “I will be back in the morning.”

“In the afternoon.”

She squints at him irritably. “In the afternoon.”

After the door closes behind her, Wilhelm quirks a smile at Simon. “It’s just you and me for a while, so,” he slides to the edge of the bed again, swinging his legs over the side, “where were we?”

## Chapter 13

Simon stares at Wilhelm, who is sitting on the edge of his hospital bed and grinning at him like they're back in his old room at school and he's excited about getting some privacy. There's something vulnerable about his pale, bare feet dangling an inch or two above the floor. His feet used to get so cold sometimes, and Wille would try to warm them on Simon, making him squeak and gasp at the icy shock of them against his warm skin.

His gaze travels slowly up Wilhelm's legs and gets stuck on the inside of his thighs, where the hospital gown has ridden up and exposed the smooth skin. It's the part of his body where he has the fewest freckles. Only a handful of them show against his creamy skin, like little constellations. Simon still knows them by heart. He's suddenly hit with a vivid memory of what that skin felt like beneath his palms and under his tongue. His mouth goes dry and he swallows audibly.

Wilhelm's legs fall open wider and Simon jerks his eyes away as heat crawls up the back of his neck and blooms on his cheeks. When he meets Wille's eyes he finds smug amusement. Wille's bottom lip is trapped between his teeth and his eyes are sparkling with heat and mischief.

Simon blushes harder and Wille laughs. "Why so shy, Simme? I like it when you look." His voice drops to a husk as he shifts his hips. "You know how much I like that."

Simon stands and reaches for the blanket folded at the foot of the bed. He spreads it over Wilhelm's lap, but before he can back away, Wilhelm slides his fingers around his wrist and holds him in place. He ducks his head, trying to get Simon to look into his eyes. "Simon?"

He continues dodging Wilhelm's gaze and mumbles, "Don't want you to be cold."

Wilhelm tugs him closer still, until he's standing between the legs that are so distracting to him. He lets go of his wrist and skims both hands over Simon's hips and down the sides of legs, before leaning forward and resting his forehead on Simon's stomach. "I wish I knew what was wrong. You feel very far away from me."

There are two different Wilhelms clashing in Simon's head: the one that broke his heart years ago, the one that chose secrets and duty over love; and this one, the one that hasn't made that choice yet, the one that still chooses Simon and thinks they can have it both ways. His chest tightens and his throat clenches. He needs a moment to think, a moment away from Wille to put himself together again. There's no way he can hide his feelings from Wilhelm right now.

He combs his fingers through Wille's hair and reassures him. "I'm right here. I'm just... worried." He stops himself from saying more than that. He's trying so hard not to lie to Wilhelm. Eventually, his memories will return and, despite everything, Simon doesn't want him to feel betrayed when that happens.

Wilhelm tips his head back so he can see Simon's face. "Your eyes are worried. I can see that. But they're sad, too." He cups his cheek and Simon has to close his eyes so Wilhelm won't

see more things that will upset him.

He darts his head forward, kissing Wille on the head quickly, and steps back, desperate for a distraction. “I think we need ice cream. I’m going to go find us some.”

He slips out the door before Wilhelm can protest, and stands in the corridor for a moment. He pulls an old baseball hat out of his pocket and jams it on his head. Then he shoves his hands in his pockets and lowers his gaze so that the brim of the hat obscures some of his face. He’s been lucky so far. No one has recognized him. The hat isn’t magic, though. The stubble from days without shaving, the bags under his eyes, and his average person clothing probably do more to disguise him than anything. Plus, no one expects a global superstar to get on the elevator with them, alone, in the middle of the day, at a hospital. But just because it’s worked so far, doesn’t mean it will keep working, so he keeps his eyes down, hunches lower inside his hoodie, and hopes for the best. The last thing they need is the press to get wind of Simon Eriksson being at the Crown Prince’s bedside in his time of need.

## Chapter 14

Wilhelm shifts in his hospital bed and chews on his thumbnail, staring at the closed door, mind focused on the man that just walked out. Simon's behavior is increasingly unsettling and Wilhelm's stomach twists as he considers plausible reasons for it.

It's almost as if...

His hand falls to his lap and his eyes widen.

Are they broken up? Is that the weirdness he senses?

No.

That can't be. He can't imagine either of them choosing to be apart from the other.

Except.

*Oh, god.* His body goes rigid, and he jerks upright. Has he been outed? Is that what happened? Does the country—the world—know that the Crown Prince of Sweden likes to suck cock? And suck one perfect cock in particular?

*Oh god. Oh god.*

Wilhelm slams his body backward and slides down in the bed, clutching the blankets in both hands, heart galloping in his chest, sweat breaking out along his hairline.

He can't breathe. He presses a hand against the squeezing sensation in his chest.

Pushing himself to a sitting position again, he begins automatically cycling through one of the calming exercises he's learned over the years. He inhales for a count of four, holds for a count of seven, exhales for a count of eight, and then begins again, grateful that the amnesia didn't take this knowledge from him, too.

The breathing exercise isn't working, though. His chest is still hiccuping with jerky breaths and his nerve endings are all vibrating with the adrenaline coursing through his body. He needs to know if he's right, if that's why Simon is being so weird. He looks around the room, eyes jerking from one thing to another, looking for anything that would give him a news source. They'd taken his phone from him after he'd texted Simon, explaining that the light from the screen was bad for his concussion. There weren't any newspapers or magazines anywhere in the room either.

Finally, his gaze lands on the television mounted high in the far corner of the room. *Yes. That will do.*

He looks around for the remote but doesn't spy it in any of the most likely locations. It's not on the bedside table or any other flat surface he can see from his current position. He tosses

off the blankets and stands so he can search the area behind the bed. He finds it tucked onto a little ledge back behind there, almost as if someone had hidden it.

Pointing it at the television and clicking the power button gets him nothing, though. He fusses with it for a minute, checking the battery compartment and trying different buttons with no success. He walks closer to the tv itself, continuing to press the power button. Once he's close enough, the problem becomes evident. The television is unplugged. The outlet and cord are well out of reach, though.

"Fuck." Wilhelm's voice is a quiet hiss that seems loud in the silent hospital room.

He grabs the chair that's been parked next to his bed, drags it until it's in position under the television, and climbs up on it, grateful that they removed his IV earlier in the day. This would be much more difficult if it still tethered him to the awkward metal pole.

He's able to reach the cord easily, but when he stretches a hand toward the outlet, he can't quite reach it. He pushes up on his toes and it's still not enough, so, growling in frustration, he bounces, trying to get an additional inch of height, and stabbing the prongs of the electrical cord toward the outlet holes on the upward bounces. The metal clacks and clatters, skittering over the plastic, almost connecting but not. He hears the door to the room click open behind him, followed by someone gasping, but he ignores it, growling and bouncing harder.

Too hard.

Things happen quickly, but strangely also in slow motion. His feet stutter and slide on the smooth plastic upholstery of the chair and his center of gravity tips backward. He jerks against it in the other direction, and, for a split second, it seems he'll remain upright, but he overbalances again and tips farther backward, past the point of recovery.

He twists around, instinctively trying to adjust his trajectory so he will land on his front rather than risk hitting his head with a backward fall, but he doesn't land on the floor at all. Strong arms catch him around the waist and reel him in. Instead of landing on the hard linoleum, he lands sprawled on top of Simon, whose brown eyes go wide as the impact punches the air out of his lungs.

Even as he struggles to re-inflate his lungs, Simon runs his hands and eyes over Wilhelm's body, checking him for injury.

A happy warmth floods Wilhelm at his visible concern.

Simon's chest heaves underneath Wilhelm as air finally expands his lungs again. He inhales deeply a few times, still running his palms over every part of Wilhelm he can reach. Finally, satisfied he's not hurt, he shoves Wilhelm off him so hard it's startling and Wilhelm comes close to falling backward and hitting his head anyway. He stares at Simon, mouth dropped open in shock.

Simon climbs quickly to his feet and glares down at him, eyes crackling with anger and fists clenched at his sides. "Are you insane? What the fuck did you think you were doing, Wille?"



## Chapter 15

Wilhelm's mouth is still hanging open—probably not attractively—as he stares up at a red-faced, furious Simon standing above him. Climbing up on the chair and bouncing around like that had been stupid and he should regret it, but he's always found an angry Simon intensely sexy and right now it's difficult to focus on anything else. The way his dark eyes snap with electricity, the way his voice deepens, the way the muscles in his jaw twitch. Wilhelm's body goes hot and he swallows as he sits up, hoping to disguise the fact that he's getting hard under the flimsy hospital gown.

Simon growls—*growls*, for the love of god. “Are you going to answer me?”

“Um.” Wilhelm blinks a few times, waiting for his brain to reboot and recall what the question had been, but Simon's t-shirt got pushed up when he shoved Wilhelm off him and now a patch of smooth, brown skin is visible over his hip. Wilhelm's brain is too full of the urge to press his mouth to it for any other thoughts. “What?” he finally mumbles.

Simon grabs him and hauls him to his feet. The frustration in his eyes disappears and is replaced with concern. He runs his hands over Wilhelm's head again, fingers carding through his hair and back to cup his skull, checking for an injury he might have missed the first time. “Are you okay?”

Wilhelm closes his eyes and leans into Simon's hands, loving how his fingers feel scratching lightly against his scalp. When he opens his eyes again, Simon is only inches away and Wilhelm falls into him, unable to resist the gravitational pull of his body and the need for him that is always buzzing inside him. He presses a soft, slow kiss to his mouth.

At first, Simon stands frozen, but when Wilhelm tilts his head and nips gently at his lower lip, Simon opens for him and sighs, angling his head too so they can deepen the kiss. Wilhelm steps closer, wrapping one arm around Simon's waist and gripping his hip with the other so he can rub his thumb over that patch of exposed skin. Their tongues slide together and Simon shudders. He tightens his grip on Wilhelm's hair and deepens the kiss even further, practically eating at Wilhelm's mouth and making desperate noises deep in his throat.

Wilhelm's stomach swoops and burns with excitement. Yes. This. Please. This is *his* Simon, pliant in his arms and desperate for more. Being pressed against him like this is like taking a drink of clear, sweet water after a long, lonely trek through the desert. Every cell of his body wakes and lights up with the thirst, the need, for him.

Suddenly, Simon tears his mouth away and steps back, his lips wet and swollen, his eyes wide with an emotion Wilhelm doesn't understand. He yanks Simon forward again until their bodies press together. “No. Stay. Please.”

Simon shakes his head. This time, he backs away until he's out of reach.

All of Wilhelm's earlier frustration returns and fills in the empty places left by Simon's retreat. The more he tries to fight off the confusion and panic, the more the frustration turns

to anger. “What *is* it, Simon? I need you to tell me. Something is really wrong between us. I don’t...” He clears his throat against the emotions trying to claw their way out. “I don’t understand, and it’s freaking me out.”

Simon’s eyes dart around the room, everywhere but at Wilhelm. They land on the ice cream he’d brought back with him and dropped on the table in the rush to catch Wilhelm before he fell. He picks up the paper bowls and shoves one of them at him. “Eat your ice cream before it melts.”

“I don’t want the fucking ice cream, Simon. Talk to me!”

“Just...” Simon clenches his eyes shut and exhales heavily through his nose. “Just give me a minute. Just eat your damn ice cream and give me a minute.”

Wilhelm rolls his eyes and shoves a spoonful of ice cream in his mouth. “Happy?”

“This isn’t easy for me either, you know.”

Wilhelm’s anger evaporates, leaving only gut-churning fear. “Simon,” he whispers, the ice cream turning rancid in his mouth and his heart clenching painfully. “Are we not together?”

Simon doesn’t look at him. “We’re not supposed to talk about things you don’t remember. It may be upsetting. Hurt your recovery.”

“I’m already really fucking upset, Simon.” His voice breaks on Simon’s name. “And you’re making it worse!”

“I know. I just—I don’t know what to do, Wille. I don’t know what the right thing is to do.” Simon finally looks him in the eye and Wilhelm sees worry and confusion, and pain, but also love.

He wants desperately to understand.

He holds out a hand to Simon and speaks quietly. “As far as I know, we’ve never lied to each other.”

Simon nods. He tucks his spoon back into the ice cream and threads his fingers through Wilhelm’s.

“Okay, then. That’s good. Let’s just—” he tugs Simon toward the bed—“sit here and finish our ice cream and figure out what to do.”

Wilhelm climbs back onto the bed and scoots to the far side. The back of it is already raised, making a perfect place to sit. Simon moves to sit in the chair, but Wilhelm pats the empty spot on the bed next to him. “Up here, please. I feel better when you’re close.”

Simon stares at the floor and takes a deep breath, and Wilhelm is certain he’s going to refuse, but then he clambers in next to him. “Okay, Wille.”

## Chapter 16

Simon eats the ice cream as slowly as he can, mind racing as he considers what to say to Wilhelm. He's not going to be able to duck his questions any longer. Wille is too alert now and too aware that something is different—wrong—between them.

The explanation for not telling him things—that it will upset him—is useless now. Wille is already upset and getting more upset by the minute. Simon thinks about what it would be like to know there are things—big things—that you don't remember that everyone around you remembers. It's easy to conclude that it would be awful and alienating and scary. It's the last thing that convinces him he needs to talk to Wille about his memory gaps. The idea of Wille feeling alone and scared pulls at the part of his heart that still belongs to him, even after what he did, even after all this time.

“Simon?”

It's clear Wilhelm's said his name more than once and Simon was too lost in his thoughts to notice. “Sorry. What?”

“I asked if you were okay.”

Simon tries to make his smile reassuring. “Yeah. Just thinking.” He takes Wille's empty ice cream cup from him and sets it on the table along with his own. “Are *you* okay?”

“No,” Wilhelm says simply, his eyes wide and worried.

Simon sighs and looks at his hands, twisting together in his lap. “Of course you aren't.”

“Please look at me.” Wilhelm's voice cracks on the word *please*. When Simon meets his eyes, Wilhelm whispers, “When did we break up?”

Simon clenches his eyes shut. “Wille...”

“It's okay, Simon. At this point, the not knowing is worse than anything. Please just talk to me.”

When Simon looks at him again, Wilhelm is chewing on his thumbnail and that old sign of his anxiety awakens protectiveness in Simon. He pulls the hand away from Wilhelm's mouth, threads their fingers together because it will ground him, and puts their joined hands in his own lap.

“I think...” Simon trails off, still formulating a plan in his head. He's worried he's going to make this all worse accidentally. “I think that diving straight into that will be a lot.” He squeezes Wilhelm's hand. “I think it will be too much, too fast. We should go slower.”

Wilhelm huffs in frustration. “But—”

Simon cuts him off. “Trust me, Wille.”

He growls and clutches at his hair with his free hand, but eventually says, “Fine. How do we start then?”

“Mmm,” Simon thinks quickly for another few seconds. “I suppose we should start with time. I think you’ve lost a lot of it.”

Wilhelm stops breathing so Simon squeezes his hand again, harder this time, and keeps up the pressure until Wilhelm resumes breathing. “It’s been seven years since we were at Hillerska.”

Wilhelm blinks and rears back like someone slapped him. “What! No. It can’t...” He stares at Simon, wide-eyed.

“Mmhm. Yes. Seven years.” Now Simon is the one holding his breath, waiting to see how Wille handles this knowledge.

His voice, when it finally comes, is distracted. He’s clearly caught up in his own thoughts. “That... explains some things.”

“Like what?”

“You’re bigger and you’ve got these now.” He squeezes one of Simon’s biceps. “Which, as previously stated, I’m a fan of.” He smiles briefly, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “I haven’t looked at myself too closely, but I’ve noticed changes. I knew there was time I didn’t remember. I thought a year. Maybe two.” He stops and breathes in and out. “But *seven*. Seven years?”

“Yes. It’s a lot to take in, and you can’t do it all at once. So will you trust me and take it slow? Give your mind time to catch up?”

“I’m not very patient.” Wilhelm practically grunts the words, his brows lowered.

Simon laughs and slumps to thunk his head on Wille’s shoulder. “I’m very much aware.” Wille shrugs, jostling him, and Simon sits up again, but Wille makes a protesting sound, so he settles back into place with his head on Wilhelm’s shoulder. “Let’s talk about little things for a while and see what happens.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe remembering small things will lead to remembering bigger things.”

“Okay.”

“What’s something you remember?”

Wilhelm is quiet for a few minutes. “I remember you singing the day I first saw you and how beautiful your voice was. How beautiful you were.” He slides down in the bed so that it’s his head on Simon’s shoulder now. “Will you sing to me?”

Simon smiles. “Yeah. I can do that.” He thinks for a minute and then closes his eyes and begins singing softly, picking up the song in the middle.

*And if you think I'm corny*

*Then it will not make me sorry*

*It's your right to laugh at me*

*And in turn, that's my opportunity*

*To feel brave*

*'Cause it takes a fool to remain sane*

*Oh, it takes a fool to remain sane*

*Oh, it takes a fool to remain sane*

*Oh, in this world all covered up in shame*

A sharp gasp rings out in the room. Simon’s eyes fly open and he and Wilhelm flinch apart. A nurse stands just inside the door to the room, her hands clapped over her mouth, eyes huge above them. Her fingers tremble as she lowers them. “Oh my god,” she breathes. “You’re Simon Eriksson!”

## Chapter 17

Wilhelm blinks at the nurse that just burst into the room and ruined the moment he was having with Simon and bites back the urge to tell her to get out. Confusion and frustration coil tight in his chest.

In the quiet minutes before her interruption, Simon's voice had transported him back to Hillerska and how he'd felt that first day there—eager to make a good impression, unhappy about his change in circumstances, worried about, well, everything.

Simon's voice had cut through all the noise in his head and grabbed his full attention. It was clear and strong and beautiful, and Simon himself had stirred something in Wilhelm that he didn't understand yet. He'd found himself smiling at Simon—grinning really—and a thrill had skittered down his spine and swooped into his belly when Simon had grinned back.

Wilhelm didn't know if he believed in love at first sight, but something electric and connective had happened between them that day, literally the moment they laid eyes on each other. That, he knew for sure, because it still vibrated through him whenever he looked at Simon.

The memory of that first time seeing him and hearing him sing was so vivid and detailed it relaxed him. He'd sunk into the remembrance, reassured that he could recall it so easily, and content to be cuddled up next to Simon. He could've stayed like that for hours and hours.

So he was especially irritated by the nurse's intrusion into that happy bubble. So irritated, in fact, that he was slow to recognize that it was *Simon* she recognized and called by name and seemed star-struck by. Not him.

What the hell is happening?

The nurse is still standing by the door, her hands clapped to her cheeks now. "It's you! You're Simon Eriksson! I can't believe it. Oh, my god. My friends are never going to believe this. Can I—would you—" She pulls her mobile phone out of her pocket and waves it at him vaguely, her face getting redder by the second.

"Oh. Uh." Simon slides out of the bed and looks at Wilhelm with an unreadable expression before turning his attention to the nurse. "What's your name?"

"Sofie." The woman's voice trembles and she keeps glancing at Simon and then quickly away, as if he's a light too bright to look at directly.

Wilhelm understands feeling that way about him, actually.

Simon smiles at her kindly. "Hi, Sofie. I wish I could do a picture with you right now, but I can't."

Her face drops. "Sure. Of course. That was silly. Please forgive me."

“No, No,” Simon says. “There’s no reason to apologize. I have another idea, though.”

The nurse bites her lip, eyes locked on Simon’s face.

He pulls out his wallet and removes a small blue card. He holds it out to her. “This is my manager’s contact information. I’m going to tell him you will be calling. If you agree not to tell *anyone* you saw me here, I’ll make sure you get tickets and backstage access to my next show here in the city. What do you say?”

Sofie gasps. “Seriously?”

Simon nods.

Her face falls. “I can’t tell anyone I met you?”

“Sorry.”

Her lips begin to form the word *why*, but then her eyes slide to Wilhelm and widen. “Oh. Of course. Your Highness, I would never—*never*—” It’s clear she’s recalling what she walked in on and making a series of assumptions. She snaps her mouth shut and takes a breath. “You can count on my discretion.”

Wilhelm stares at her, but says nothing. He’s too distracted with trying to make sense of everything that’s happening.

Simon ushers her toward the door. “Thank you, Sofie.”

She’s halfway out of the room when she turns and giggles. “Um, I forgot to check the prince’s vitals.”

“Of course.” Simon steps out of the way and they’re all silently awkward for several minutes while she does her job and leaves.

As soon as the door clicks shut, Wilhelm bursts into giggles, bending forward over his legs, and covering his face. He sits up again and controls his laughter long enough to say, “What the fuck, Simon?” He dissolves into giggles again and this time Simon joins him. He sits in the chair next to Wilhelm’s bed and buries his face in his hands while he laughs, too.

“Okay,” Wilhelm finally says once his giggles subside. “Seriously. Are you... famous? A musician? What? What the hell is going on?”

Simon grins and shrugs. “Yes? Both of those.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“How famous are you?”

Simon ducks his head and mumbles, “Pretty famous.”

Wilhelm watches him quietly for a few moments, remembering the beautiful boy with the clear, sweet voice again, thinking about other people getting to have that—to hear him and fall in love with him, even if just a little. He’s weirdly proud of Simon, as if he himself had anything to do with Simon’s talent and what he’s sure was a lot of hard work. But he’s also swamped by a wave of intense possessiveness. He wants somehow to mark Simon as his, to make sure everyone knows he belongs to Wilhelm.

*Mine*, he thinks fiercely. *Always*.

But what he says is, “Tell me about it.”

Simon rolls his eyes. “Really?”

“Unless you’d rather tell me when we broke up and why.”

Simon’s eyes flash at him and then go back to normal. “Fine.”

And he tells Wilhelm all about choosing to study music at university, about performing at open mic nights and word spreading until he had fans and small gigs in dive bars, and then opening gigs for other acts, and then finally a show of his own. He tells him about meeting Mikael and how he asked to be his manager, how they’d started out, neither knowing much of anything, but figuring it out together. “And things just kind of went from there. The shows got bigger. The songs got more popular.”

Wilhelm suspects Simon is underplaying a lot of this and he’s dying to know exactly how well-known he is now, but the name Mikael wipes those thoughts from his mind. Simon spoke of him so fondly, smiling as he did, and Wilhelm’s suddenly terrified to ask the question consuming him.

Are Simon and Mikael together?

## Chapter 18

Simon is curious about the sudden change in Wilhelm. He's stopped making eye contact with Simon and he's fidgeting with the hem of his blanket. He raises one hand toward his mouth but then drops it back to his lap at the last second and resumes plucking at a loose thread on the blanket. Simon can't figure out what's got him anxious, and he's not sure he should ask.

Navigating this new relationship with Wille is proving to be difficult and distracting. It seems like he's spent half his life consumed with the man one way or another—either desperately in love with him, or angry with him, or heartbroken because of him. They've never really been just... friends.

Is that what they are becoming now? Friends? Does he *want* them to be friends? Are either of them even capable of it?

Wilhelm clears his throat and speaks, but he's still not looking at Simon. "I don't know where the lines are with us anymore. I don't know if I have the right to ask you... things." He looks up to the ceiling and back down to his hands, and when Simon says nothing, he finally looks him in the eye again. "It sounds like you and Mikael are close."

*Oh.*

"We are."

Wilhelm nods. "That's—you should have—I'm—" His face turns red with frustration at his stumbling words and he tries again. "It's good that you have someone."

Part of him wants to tell Wilhelm the truth: Mikael is a trusted colleague and close friend. Yes, they had been more for a time, but that had ended that long ago. Their friendship and working relationship survived it, thank god. He depended on Mikael to run so much of his life now. Everything was so complicated. He couldn't do it without him. Mikael even stayed with Simon when things were overwhelming, like when they were planning a new album or gearing up for another tour, which meant Mikael practically lived with him. It was just easier.

Wilhelm's eyes are worried but determined. "So, are you and Mikael... together?" He forces the last word out between clenched teeth.

"No." Simon almost leaves it there, but it feels too much like lying. "We aren't now, but we were once."

Wilhelm flinches at his words.

"I'm not sure where the lines are with us either, Wille." Simon presses his lips together in a sad smile. "I think maybe we're in fresh territory." They're both quiet for a minute. Wilhelm clenches both fists around the blanket and squeezes hard enough to turn his knuckles white.

Simon isn't sure if it's a good idea to continue talking about their history right now, but he can see that existing in this limbo of not knowing is doing bad things to Wille's mental health.

"Wille?" He waits until Wilhelm looks him in the eye. "What's the last thing you remember about us?"

He answers immediately; doesn't have to think about it. "The summer after graduation."

Simon smiles fondly. "When we ran away?"

Wille grins and nods. "Yup."

"That was a good time."

"The best. It was the best time. The happiest I've ever been, I think." Wilhelm's eyes go unfocused and his brow furrows.

Simon is beginning to recognize that as his "trying to remember" face. He puts his hand over Wille's on the blanket and squeezes gently. "Relax. You're not supposed to force the memories. The doctors said it will make it harder."

He makes a frustrated noise. "I think I remember most of that summer. I remember us sneaking out and the train ride." He grins at Simon. "I remember sleeping with you in a private compartment on the train."

Simon snorts. "We didn't sleep."

Wilhelm bites his lips together. "No, we didn't. Not much anyway."

Their eyes catch and hold, shared memories bouncing between them silently. Wilhelm's eyes go dark and Simon's breathing speeds up. He forces himself to look away before the spark between them can burst into flame.

Wille rubs a hand over his face and clears his throat. "I remember Germany. And Switzerland. I remember choosing to continue on to Rome, but then it all goes fuzzy."

Simon takes a deep breath. "Rome is where it all fell apart. It's where they came for us. Where it ended. Where *we* ended."

## Chapter 19

### Seven Years Ago

*Wilhelm floats toward consciousness in bits and pieces, surfacing from the depths of sleep briefly before dipping under again. Each time he bobs to the surface, another bit of happiness registers and goes with him when he dozes again: the rise and fall of Simon's chest under his hand, the way their feet tangle together, the comfortable curve of Simon's ass where it presses back against him, the faint citrus smell of his hair where it brushes his nose, the soft skin of his neck against his lips, the rising sun peeking through the curtains and casting narrow beams of warmth across their bare skin.*

*Later in the morning, he wakes to the scratch of Simon's stubble low on his stomach, then between his thighs. He takes Wilhelm into the heat of his mouth and brings him to the edge twice before letting him tumble over it. Wilhelm fists the sheets with both hands, arching and gasping Simon's name, shuddering with the force of his orgasm... and promptly passes out again.*

*The next time he wakes, he slides under the sheets to return the favor, hooking Simon's legs over his shoulders and using his mouth to explore every inch of him until Simon writhes and begs. "Please, Wille, please. God... please..."*

*"I've got you, älskling," he rasps before holding Simon down and giving him exactly what he needs.*

*After, he rests his head on Simon's belly while they catch their breath. Simon pets him, stroking his shoulders and gently scratching his head, and Wilhelm dozes again.*

*Simon tugs gently on his hair. "Don't go back to sleep."*

*Wilhelm wraps both arms around Simon and cuddles into him like he's a pillow, feeling lazy and unbelievably happy. "Why not?"*

*Simon's stomach bounces with a laugh. "Don't you want to see some of the city?"*

*"I have everything I want right here."*

*Simon groans. "Did you really just say that?"*

*Wilhelm leans up on his elbow so he can look at him. "What? It's true."*

*"Oh, my god." Simon pushes his face away playfully. "Such a romantic."*

*"You love it."*

*"Whatever. Get your royal ass up. We're going out. You may have seen all there is to see in the world already, but I've never been to Italy and I want to see more than this bed."*

*Wilhelm flops onto his back and groans. "Fine."*

*Simon scoots around so he can lay the length of his body on top of Wilhelm's, pressing them together from their toes to their foreheads while he peppers Wilhelm's face with kisses. "We can start with breakfast at caffè di marzio."*

*"Do we have to listen to the old man go on about how the tourists are discovering Trastevere and soon the prices of everything will go up?"*

*He lifts his chin toward Simon and Simon kisses his mouth before answering. "I think it's part of the price for sitting on the piazza while we eat."*

*"Fine," Wilhelm grumbles.*

*"And then," Simon continues, "I want to go to the Colosseum." Another kiss. "And the Pantheon." Another kiss. "Oh, and I want to tour the catacombs." His dark eyes sparkle with excitement. "And then we can come back here and climb Janiculum Hill to watch the sunset."*

*Wilhelm chuckles. "That's a lot for one day. We should choose only one thing in Rome if you want to be back here in time for sunset."*

*"Fine." Simon pushes his bottom lip out.*

*Wilhelm stretches up to kiss his adorable pout. He intends it to be a brief kiss, but once he has that bottom lip between his own, he can't help sucking on it a little, and when Simon groans into his mouth and deepens the kiss, they lose themselves for a few minutes.*

*Eventually, Simon breaks away and sits up, straddling Wilhelm's hips. "We need to get up."*

*Wilhelm rolls his hips upward, pressing himself against Simon, silently proving he's up, and grins. Simon rolls his eyes and climbs off him and off the bed. Before he can walk away, Wilhelm grabs his hand. He doesn't want to dampen the mood, but he needs to say this. "The more we go into tourist areas, the more likely it is someone will recognize me." What remains unspoken is the fact that their adventure can't last. It's only a matter of time before the palace finds them.*

*Simon shrugs, refusing to dwell on it. "We're being careful, and it's been fine so far. It'll be okay." He tightens his grip on Wilhelm and throws his weight backward, heaving him upright. "Come on. Let's see if we can both fit in the shower."*

## Chapter 20

Simon watches Wilhelm's face carefully as he blinks and returns from whatever memories he'd been revisiting.

"The last thing I remember clearly is the morning we went into the city. You were excited to see the ruins and catacombs." Wilhelm smiles at him fondly, but as they look at each other, the smile slides off his face and anxiety creases his forehead. "It fades after that, though. It's like trying to remember a dream days later."

Simon presses a soothing hand to Wilhelm's forehead. "Stop trying to force it."

"I want to remember. I want to know what happened."

"I know." He trails his hand down Wille's arm and squeezes his hand. "Do you want me to tell you?"

Wilhelm nods mutely, eyes worried.

"I was excited to see as much of Rome as I could. I'd never been there. You knew we needed to be cautious about being recognized, though. I should have listened to you." His throat tightens with emotion and he swallows hard to break through the clench. "I still sometimes wonder how things would have turned out if I had."

### Seven Years Ago

*Something strange happens to Simon when they crest the rise leading to the second level of the Colosseum and he sees the arena laid out before him for the first time. It's eerie and somehow forlorn, this place that should bustle with people but has long been abandoned. An inexplicable wave of sadness crashes into him, followed closely by the bizarre expectation that people in togas and sandals will appear any moment to fill the seats. It's like part of him has traveled through time to the ancient past, but the other part of him is still here, surrounded by tourists in their modern clothing, talking and laughing. The hair on the back of his neck tingles and stands up, and he shudders with a chill despite the heat and humidity. His heart is beating fast, and he stumbles back a step, overwhelmed by the oddness of the what's happening to him. Wille puts an arm around him instinctively.*

*"Are you okay?" he asks quietly as he rubs Simon's hip with his thumb.*

*Simon turns and blinks at him. His mouth is open, but no words are coming. He doesn't know how to explain what just happened to him.*

*Wille smiles and presses a quick kiss to Simon's head. "Did you have a weird moment of expecting to see ancient Romans filling the arena?"*

*Simon gasps. "Yes!"*

*“It happened to me the first time, too.” He grins and gives Simon’s hip a last squeeze before letting go. The stream of tourists entering the arena parts around them and flows past. He nods at them. “I don’t think it happens to most people, though.”*

*“What is it?”*

*Wille shrugs. “There’s a name for it, but I can’t ever remember it.” They stand there quietly for a long time, looking at the ruins of this place that had seen so much excitement and so much suffering. When Wille speaks again, his voice is still quiet. “Are you ready to see the rest of it?”*

*Simon nods, the strange feeling still swirling inside him.*

*They tour the rest of the ruins, and the oddness dissipates and is replaced with fascination and a desire to learn everything he can about this place, how it was built and what happened here. Wilhelm was right about choosing only one thing to do in the city today. They spend hours at the Colosseum and have to rush to get home in time for sunset.*

*A late day shower has suffused the air of Trastevere with a clean, earthy smell. The cobblestones are damp and slippery under their feet. Raindrops drip from trees and cling to the potted flowers that line the street, sparkling in the sun that has reemerged from behind the clouds. It’s the golden hour and everything is beautiful, including the prince walking next to him.*

*Simon’s gaze catches on a plaque mounted outside a large stone building with an imposing iron gate. His Italian is spotty, but one word jumps out at him: ambasciata. “Wille,” he breathes. “This is an embassy.”*

*“It is. Most of these buildings are embassies. Don’t worry, Sweden’s is on the other side of the river.”*

*Simon thinks about that for a few seconds. “But what if one of our diplomats is visiting one of these diplomats and sees us?”*

*“That’s unlikely, but just to be safe...” He grins and takes off running, forcing Simon to sprint after him.*

*When they reach the last building on the block, Wilhelm stops and spins, surprising Simon, who crashes into him. Wilhelm grabs Simon’s arms, pulls him around the corner of the border wall, and pushes him up against the rough brick. He pauses long enough to make eye contact—his are shining merrily—before taking Simon’s mouth in a kiss. It’s not much of one. They’re both laughing and too out of breath. Wilhelm pulls back and cups Simon’s cheek, his eyes darkening and turning serious. “I love you, Simme.”*

*Simon’s heart thuds in surprise, and something in his stomach flutters. It’s not the first time Wilhelm has said that to him, but they don’t say it often, so it still feels new and a little shocking each time. “Ti amo.” Simon uses a bit more of his limited Italian to respond before kissing Wilhelm again. This time it’s slow and sweet and perfect. He sinks into it, pulling Wille’s hips against his own and humming his happiness.*

*“Come on,” Wilhelm says, breaking their kiss. “Don’t want to miss the sunset.”*

*They get to the top of Janiculum just in time. An orange glow bathes the city laid out below them. They sit close together on a low wall and watch the glow fade and turn purple with twilight. Wille’s hand rests on Simon’s thigh, his fingers tracing patterns. They don’t speak. When the first stars appear in the night sky, they finally stand and stretch and head back to their room.*

## Chapter 21

Wilhelm wishes he could remember that sunset on Janiculum Hill. Simon's description of it makes him ache to be there again, living every moment of it. He imagines the two of them tucked close together on the hilltop, awash in a golden sunset and in love for the first time in their lives. He can feel the moment in his chest, squeezing and thumping alongside his heart, making his stomach flutter, as if his other organs can remember how it felt, even if his brain can't.

He wants to tell Simon to stop, to let the story end there, with them alone together on that hill and perfectly happy. He nearly tells Simon he's changed his mind, and he doesn't want to know. Whatever is coming next is going to hurt. But it's the unknown that's worse. So he takes a breath and braces himself. "And then what happened?"

Simon mirrors him and takes a deep breath of his own. His gaze slides away, and he stares unseeingly at a spot on the bed while he speaks. "We got to have that last night together. We went back to our room and stayed up late, talking and being together. It was..." He pauses and seems to consider his next word before continuing. "Perfect."

Wilhelm closes his eyes, desperate to remember, desperate to recall this memory that moved Simon to say such a thing. His mind feeds him images—Simon's brown eyes, deep and liquid with love and want, the skin on his neck and chest glowing as if lit from within, their fingers threaded together and resting between them. He sees himself raise Simon's hand to kiss it, and then the memory breaks and dissolves. He chases the trailing ends of it, but can't catch them. It's gone.

He opens his eyes, but now Simon's are closed, and his head is turned away. "The next morning, we went to sit on the piazza for breakfast like usual and the royal guard was waiting. They were just standing by the fountain, waiting for us to come out. You grabbed my hand and for a moment, I thought we were going to make a run for it. The guards did, too, and they rushed us, grabbing us and forcing us into a car."

Simon blinks open his eyes and goes back to staring at a spot on the bed, not making eye contact with Wilhelm. "They took us directly to the airport and put us on a private plane home. At first, they tried to separate us, but you shouted at them and refused. We never let go of each other the entire trip home. No one spoke to us. I was—I was worried. Worried about what was going to happen. You didn't seem worried, though. I think you were more angry."

"When we arrived, they tried to separate us again. They said they would take me home and you back to the palace. You fought with them about it. You were very upset." Simon stops and swallows hard before continuing. "Then your mother got out of the car they were trying to put you in and everything changed. She pulled you away and spoke to you privately for a few minutes. After that, you came to me, and you were shaking, and you hugged me so hard I couldn't breathe. It is *going to be okay*, you said. You told me to let them take me home and that you would call me after you spoke with your mother. You said you didn't care what the

world thought anymore, that the only thing that mattered was being together. You kissed me in front of all of them and then you got in the car with her and drove away.”

Simon’s voice wobbles, and he pauses for several seconds, his jaw clenching. When he speaks again, his voice is clear and strong, but detached, as if he is suddenly talking about the weather or what he’d had for lunch. “I didn’t hear from you again for two days.”

The words hit Wilhelm like a punch to the gut. For a moment, he thinks he might actually be sick, and he clenches his molars together against the nausea. “What?” His voice is a rasp, barely more than a whisper.

Simon’s back is straight, and he’s shifted back in his chair, putting distance between them. “I didn’t hear from you for two days. You didn’t return any of my texts or calls. Nothing. There was nothing. I... I was alone and there was nothing from you. For two days.”

Wilhelm’s throat is so tight he can’t speak. He stares at Simon, trying to prepare himself for the rest of this story.

His silence finally gets Simon to look at him. Wilhelm’s face must surely show everything he’s feeling, every bit of his despair and fear, but Simon’s face remains impassive. It’s still as if he’s discussing something inconsequential rather than the absolute ruin of everything between them. Wilhelm forces one word out. “Why?”

## Chapter 22

Simon is lost.

The maelstrom of emotions conjured by memories of how he and Wilhelm ended grows until it sweeps him up. Tears prickle in the corners of his eyes and his throat closes. His control is slipping.

He pushes to his feet and walks as far away as he can, which isn't far in the small room crammed with medical equipment, and turns his back to Wilhelm while he gathers himself.

It's been years. Years. It shouldn't still be this difficult to talk about it. He hasn't even let himself think of it in so long. But it's like it's all happening again, now.

He clenches his hands into fists at his side and then forces them open again. He takes a deep breath and another, and then finishes it, finishes the story of them. Ending. His voice is quiet but steady, none of the emotion swirling through him evident.

"After two days of nothing, you finally texted. You asked if you could come to see me. And I knew. I knew then that it was over, that you were coming to end it, and that nothing I could say or do would change it."

He glances back over his shoulder at Wilhelm. "I wanted to, though. I wanted to change it." He turns and walks back to the bed, suddenly angry. His voice rising. "I wanted to undo whatever those closed-minded fascists had done to you. I convinced myself that if I could just get you alone, if I could just reach you, kiss you, hold you, could find the part of you that belonged to me, I could pull you back."

Wilhelm's eyes shimmer wetly. "All of me belongs to you, Simon. I might not remember some things, but I remember that. All of me belongs to you."

Simon laughs, but it's hard and unpleasant and too loud. Wille's words are pretty, but they aren't the truth. Simon barely had any of him.

"No." His voice is bitter. "You belong to your title, your country, your family, your crown. I only had a small piece of you for a little while."

The sound Wilhelm makes is part gasp and part sob.

Simon can't bear to look at him, so he turns his back again before he continues. "You came. And I was right. It was over." His voice is wobbling, so he stops and breathes until he can control it. "You said that the country needed you to be the crown prince and that your family needed you to be the heir. That the country couldn't handle the scandal of a gay prince in love with a commoner. That the strength and stability of a nation was more important than anything. More important—" He pauses again to fight for control of his voice. "More important than us. You said that you loved me, that you would always love me, but that your

life had been decided from the day you were born and there was nothing you could do about it.”

He turns to face Wilhelm again. “You cried while you told me. Your hands shook. You looked so miserable and anxious. You’d bitten your thumbnail until it bled. Part of me wanted to hold you and tell you it was okay, but the bigger part of me was angry. Angry at you for letting them get to you, letting them convince you it was wrong to be who you are, to love who you loved. When I didn’t go to comfort you, you reached for me, and I—”

His tears are falling freely now. He doesn’t hold them back. “I turned my back and asked you to leave. Then you said my name and I could hear how upset you were and I—I...” Shame washes over him as he remembers what happened next. “I turned around and I shoved you. Hard. And I shouted at you to get the fuck out. When you said my name again, I screamed at you to leave. And... you did.”

Simon inhales a shuddering breath and looks Wilhelm in the eyes again. “You left. And that’s the last time I’d been in the same room with you until a few days ago.”

“Simon.” Wilhelm’s voice is a dry husk, barely audible, and his face is as white as the sheets pooled around him. “Oh god. I can’t—I don’t— What have I done? *What have I done?*”

## Chapter 23

Wilhelm folds in on himself and tips over until he's lying on his side, curled in a ball on the bed. Every muscle in his body is clenched tight, frozen. Even his lungs have stopped. He can't breathe. It feels like someone is squeezing his heart, like his chest is caving inward, like he's shrinking, contracting, compressing into nothing but bone and pain. Everything hurts. The couple of machines he's still hooked up to start to beep and then to blare alarms.

"Wille?" Simon's voice is faint and far away.

They've been apart for years, longer than they were together. A terrible wheezing sound comes out of his throat. He's not getting air. This is the worst panic attack he's ever had. He's trying to breathe, but he can't. He can't breathe!

He reaches for Simon, but the room fills with medical personnel and Simon gets pushed away. Hands are on him, turning him, moving him. Someone silences the screaming machines. Voices shout. He can't follow what they're saying. Someone injects something into his IV and everything goes soft and fuzzy. His body relents, the muscles going lax, and his lungs start working again. His chest rises and falls, he gulps air greedily, and then his breathing slows.

"Simon?" He looks for him in the crowd, but... his vision goes blurry... and his eyes close.

When he wakes, his mind is thick and confused, his thoughts slow. He feels a little drunk, actually. And thirsty. He smacks his lips together and rolls up onto his elbow to look for water, but he's distracted by the person sitting in the chair next to his bed.

Malin stands up, pours him a glass of water, and hands it to him. "How do you feel?"

He drinks the entire glass of water and hands it back to her. "More please." While she pours, he answers her question. "Okay, I think? A little weird. What did they give me?"

"An anti-anxiety medication. It must have been a big dose. You've been asleep for a while."

He glances around the room to make sure Simon isn't there, but he already knows he isn't. Where would he be? Hiding behind the heart monitor? No. He's gone. Wilhelm's afraid to ask, but he has to know. "Simon?"

"He went home to rest and change his clothes."

Wilhelm nods dejectedly. Of course he's gone. It's a miracle he came at all, given how things ended between them, and how long ago they ended. His stomach lurches at the thought, at the idea of all the time that's passed with them not together, but the medication must do its job because his breathing stays steady.

Malin's smile is kind. "He only left once he was sure you were going to be unconscious for a while. I told him I would stay, that it was okay for him to go take care of himself for a bit."

“Oh. Yes. Of course. He needs to take care of himself.” Wilhelm suddenly feels the weight of his selfishness. God. He’s completely upended Simon’s life, and he probably hasn’t even said thank you to him. He promises himself he’ll apologize and thank him properly when he comes back. *If* he comes back.

No. He can’t think about that possibility. He can’t bear it.

He lays back and pulls the blankets up to his chin. “Seven years, Malin,” he whispers. “It’s so long.”

“He said that’s why you got so upset; that he told you what happened between you.”

“It doesn’t seem real. I don’t remember any of it. Were you—can you tell me? Do you know? How did my mother convince me to break up with him?”

“Your highness...” Malin trails off and tucks her hair behind her ears. “I—”

“Please.”

She takes a deep breath and clasps her hands together in her lap. “I honestly don’t know. I wasn’t in the room for any of those conversations.” She looks down at her hands. “But afterward, you were—” She twists her fingers together but looks him in the eye when she continues. “I worried about you afterward, about what you might do. It was like you were a ghost. You did everything you needed to do. You performed all your duties—entertained dignitaries, visited sick children, all the usual things. And you smiled for pictures and joked with the children, but you were different. Your eyes...” She raises a hand toward her own eyes. “You weren’t there. The smiles weren’t real. Whenever you weren’t needed, you stayed in bed, sometimes for days at a time. I worried.”

“When did you stop worrying?”

“I haven’t yet.”

## Chapter 24

Simon sits on the edge of his bed, rubbing the end of a towel through his wet curls and staring at the floor between his bare feet. He's never been this tired, not even at the end of the last world tour. He'd been so exhausted by the end of that one that he'd slept nearly sixteen straight hours after the final performance. He felt like he could break that record easily if he crawled back under the blankets, and it was tempting. So tempting. The two-hour nap he'd taken when he got home hadn't been nearly enough to beat back the weariness that cloaks him.

He lets the towel fall into this lap and flops backward to stare at the ceiling instead. He lies like that for several minutes before he realizes he's crying, tears sliding down his temples and dampening the sheets. He groans and presses the heels of his palms against his eyes so hard he sees stars.

"Stop it," he tells himself.

His emotions are all over the place. Reliving the way things ended with Wille has him stirred up like he hasn't been in... like he hasn't been in seven years. He's angry, pissed that he's had to dredge all this up from where he buried it years ago, and furious that he feels bad about having hurt Wille with the retelling. For fuck's sake, Wille broke up with *him*! He's the one that blew up everything. *He's* the one that chose his family and his crown over Simon. There's nothing for Simon to feel bad about.

And the thing is, he gets it. He does. He didn't at first, of course. It took a lot of time and distance for him to understand that they'd been kids and they'd been up against geopolitical forces that had kept a monarchy running for centuries. They never had a chance. But rehashing all of it has brought back the part of him that remembers the sharp, tearing pain of it, the way he'd wanted to scream and fight and change it, and the ache of the heartsore days and weeks—months—that followed, when he moved through life like a robot, only eating and drinking when someone made him, sleeping as much as he could.

He's sad. He's angry. And, despite everything, he's worried. Worried about Wille.

He drags himself back up to a sitting position. The Wille lying unconscious in that hospital bed doesn't remember any of this, didn't make any of these choices. It's all *just* happened for him. And as much as Simon should walk away, should protect himself, he can't leave Wille to suffer.

But what does he hope to accomplish? Is it right for him to turn himself inside out for a man who will ultimately make the same choices? If he tries to help, will he get sucked into loving him again? It would be easy, so easy, to love him again...

Then what?

He gets up and stalks to his closet, yanking on clothes without noticing what they are, done with following his own thoughts in circles, like a dog chasing its tail. He'd rather *do*

something, even if it turns out to be the wrong something.

He'll make Wille understand that it's for the best, that the past is the past and cannot be undone, that Simon is okay now and Wille will be, too. Eventually. But Simon can't come back anymore after today. It's just too painful for both of them. If they cannot be together—and they can't—it's better to walk away now and learn to live with it, again, than to continue and have things get more confused than they are already.

On his way out, Simon stops in his study to make sure nothing urgent has come up in his absence. There, in the middle of his desk, he finds a note from Mikael.

*The charity performance is less than a month away. The producers need your set list and we need to talk through it and set up rehearsals, etc., ASAP. -M*

Shit. He'd forgotten about the Children's Fund concert. He pulls out his phone and sends a quick text to Mikael.

**Let's get to work on the charity performance tomorrow. See you in the morning?**

He stares at the phone for a few seconds, but there's no response, so he shoves it back in his pocket.

He should be happy that he has a perfect excuse for no longer spending all his time at Wille's bedside.

He isn't.

## Chapter 25

Wilhelm opens his eyes and lurches to a sitting position at the soft whoosh of the door to his room being pushed open, stomach fluttering, heart stopped, desperate to see Simon and dreading it in equal measure. But it's just a nurse, come to take his vitals again. He slumps back against the pillows and submits to the poking and prodding.

As soon as he's alone again, his thoughts settle back on Simon. The pain in his beautiful brown eyes while he told the story of how they ended is all Wille can think about. He did that. He did that to the boy he loved years ago, and now he's done it again to the man that he—that he still loves. Because he does, of course. He loves him with the same fierceness he did all those years ago, because for him, they never ended and the years in between never happened. All the pain that weighs Simon down—none of it happened to Wille. At least not until now. It's all come for him now, even though he can't remember it.

Doesn't *want* to remember it.

He doesn't want to remember it at all. Ever. He doesn't want that life back, can't imagine there's anything in it he wants for himself. He aches to change it, to unwind time, find the place where it happened, and cut it out.

A deep, dark part of him wishes he could share the amnesia with Simon, make him forget Wille didn't choose him, take them both back to that last morning in Trastevere, and rewrite everything that came after. Wille would refuse to be separated from Simon, stand up to his mother and the palace advisors, come out publicly, choose Simon, and keep choosing him. Every day. He imagines proudly introducing the country to the man he loves; forcing the old ways of the monarchy to flex and change, grow to not just include them, but to celebrate them.

He's deep in the fantasy of it—imagining their life together, all of it suffused in the perfect golden light of sunset on Janiculum Hill—when the door to his room swings open again.

His eyes fly open and his heart jumps into his throat and sinks to his stomach at the same time and he feels a little dizzy with the rush of it. “You came back,” he says. At least, he thinks he says it. Simon doesn't react, so he clears his throat and says it again.

Simon stands stiffly just inside the doorway, his chin jutting forward the way it does when he's nervous and trying to hide it. He's brave and beautiful, and Wilhelm wants him.

He lingers there a moment before nodding to himself and coming to sit in the chair next to Wilhelm's bed.

Wilhelm tosses the blankets back and slides over to sit on the edge of the mattress. They're so close their knees bump between them. Wilhelm relishes the contact, but Simon acts as if he's been scalded and scoots back in the chair until they aren't touching. He doesn't look at Wilhelm when he speaks. “How are you?”

“I’m okay.” He snorts a soft, humorless laugh at the complete inaccuracy of his response, though. He’s the least okay he’s ever been in his life.

The corner of Simon’s mouth lifts infinitesimally in acknowledgement. “Listen, Wille…”

Wilhelm wants to clap a hand over Simon’s mouth and prevent the words he knows are coming. He braces himself.

“I’m not coming back anymore after today. It’s—it’s too hard, and I think it’s confusing. For both of us. And I think—”

*No!* flashes through Wilhelm’s mind, followed by immediately by a greedy *Mine!* which should shame him, but he can’t spare a thought for that right now. He throws himself forward, clumsy with fear and need, and kisses Simon with everything he has. It’s a hard kiss, too hard, driven by the need to fuse them together, to make Simon part of him. His teeth scrape painfully against the inside of his own lips and he forces himself to soften his mouth, to let his love be stronger than his fear.

At first, Simon is motionless, and when the muscles of his biceps tense under Wilhelm’s hands, he’s afraid it’s in preparation to push him away. *No. Please.* Wilhelm drops to his knees on the cold floor and pushes between Simon’s legs, pressing closer, as close as he can. *Please.*

Simon plunges his hands into Wilhelm’s hair and opens his mouth, groaning when their tongues meet.

*Oh, god. Thank you.* A tear slips down Wilhelm’s cheek and he kisses Simon like it might be the last time he ever has the chance to do it.

## Chapter 26

Simon loses himself in the frantic need of Wille's kiss and the addictive slide of his tongue. The voice in his head—the one telling him to put a stop to this because it can only end badly—grows faint. It's no match for the way Simon's entire body lights up in response to Wilhelm's hands on him, the heat of his mouth, the smell of his skin. A shiver ripples through him and he breaks the kiss to bury his face in Wille's neck, chasing the scent of cedar and oranges hiding beneath the hospital disinfectants. More than seeing him again, more even than touching him again, it's Wille's smell that breaks through Simon's defenses. It tosses him back in time to lazy mornings spent tangled up in bed together, and the perfect feeling of rightness he's never felt with anyone else.

Wille groans and tugs them to their feet, wrapping his arms around Simon and pressing their chests together tightly, until they can each feel the wild beating of the other's heart. He runs his fingers through Simon's hair and tightens his hand into a fist, pulling Simon's face away from his neck so he can slam their mouths together again. His kiss is possessive, his tongue thrusting and tasting every inch of Simon's mouth. Wilhelm moans and Simon echoes the sound helplessly.

Wille's hands drop to Simon's hips and his fingers dig into the skin there, yanking them closer until there's no space between them, surely leaving bruises. He bites Simon's bottom lip, hard, and just like that, lust sizzles and snaps between them, turning the kiss filthy.

Simon pushes Wille backward until his knees bump the bed. Wilhelm's hands seem to be everywhere at once—in Simon's hair, gripping his shoulders, dragging down his back, fingertips teasing as they swipe the top of his ass before moving up again, leaving a trail of fire.

Simon can't help the way he arches into Wille's touch or the desperate way he wants those hands to drift lower. He rises up on his toes and clings to Wille, practically climbing him, letting his head tip back in a silent request for Wille's mouth on his neck.

"Yes. Yes, *älskling*," Wilhelm groans as his hips punch forward.

But the old endearment is like a bucket of cold water suddenly dumped over him. Simon shoves away from Wilhelm, breaking their connection. His chest heaves. He raises one hand and presses the back of it against his mouth. What is he doing? This isn't... he can't...

Wilhelm takes a step toward him, arms still open from the embrace that ended so unexpectedly, and Simon raises his other hand and holds it up, palm out, to stop Wilhelm's advance. He takes another step backward and Wilhelm lets his arms fall.

"Simon," Wille breathes. "Please."

"Please what, Wille? Please pretend the last seven years didn't happen? Please pretend you never broke my heart? Please pretend things aren't what they are? I know you can't—" He fists his hands in his hair in frustration and breathes deeply, trying to calm his mind, and his

body. “I know you can’t remember what happened between us, but those things—those things happened. We aren’t... us—” He drags in another deep breath. “We aren’t those boys anymore. And I can’t—”

“But I want to be us again!” Wilhelm explodes. “I don’t remember being the person who hurt you and don’t want to be him again. I don’t want to ever remember. I just want—I want—” He blinks back the tears gathering in his eyes. “I just want you, Simon. I don’t care about any of the rest of it.”

“It doesn’t work like that, Wille! You can’t stop being who you are. You’re a prince, for fuck’s sake! *The* prince. You just—you can’t—”

Wilhelm talks over him, voice full of fire and certainty. “I know you don’t believe me, but you will. I’m going to do whatever I have to to convince you to give me another chance, to convince you that you belong with me. Because you do, Simon. You’re mine and, *god*... I’m *yours*. We belong together.”

“No, Wille. We don’t. If we did, we’d still be together.” Simon closes his eyes. He’s got to go. He can’t be here. This is too hard. He turns away and walks quickly to the door before pausing. He doesn’t turn around. He doesn’t trust himself to look back. “Please take care of yourself. I’m sure you’ll get your memories back and everything will be okay. I—” He clamps his mouth shut and grinds his teeth. There’s so much he wants to say, but none of it matters, not really, because the man standing behind him isn’t the one who needs to hear it. It’s the man locked inside him who does. “Goodbye, Wille.”

## Chapter 27

Wilhelm is aware he isn't "behaving with the decorum befitting a member of the royal family," as his mother would say. He's not winning any awards for best patient either, but he doesn't fucking care. He's already chased away two nurses and a doctor, and now it's just Malin who is brave enough to face him as he stalks back and forth in the hospital room like a caged animal.

"Your Highness," she begins. She's standing in front of the door, not blocking it exactly, but she could easily move to do so if he made a break for it. Her face is set in the stoic mask that is her default, but her eyes are soft, and the pity in them makes Wilhelm want to punch something. She would never ask what happened between him and Simon, but she knows. She knows Simon has gone for good, even though Wilhelm hasn't said a word about it. She doesn't miss anything.

"I don't care what the doctors or anyone else says, Malin. I'm leaving."

"Everyone on your medical team has stated that doing so is inadvisable."

"Why?" He throws his hands in the air, his voice rising. "It's not like they're *doing* anything. I'm fine except for a headache and the small matter of not being able to remember about seven years of my life." He lets his arms fall and crosses them over his chest. "They don't know why I still can't remember, and they don't know what to do about it. All they're doing is barging in here every two hours to poke at me and tell me nothing. Unless they're going to show up with a magic memory pill, I don't need to *be* here. They can't help me!"

The anger runs out of him and he sits on the edge of the bed, his shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry, Malin. None of this is your fault. I appreciate everything you've done. I just—" He looks up at her, pleading. "I can't be here any longer. I can't bear it." An idea occurs to him, a new argument, and he stands again. "Maybe home is what I need. Maybe some peace and actually sleeping for more than an hour will help my brain heal." He stops breathing as he waits to see whether the argument will win Malin over.

She purses her lips and stares at him for a few seconds, then nods her head. "I think that is... reasonable."

Wilhelm exhales in relief at the word *reasonable*. "Thank you, Malin."

She holds up a hand. "I'm certain a nurse will be required to monitor you."

"Certainly. Absolutely." He nods his acceptance.

She gives him a doubtful look. "You will cooperate?"

He nods again, but he's already looking around for his clothes and shoes. "Where are my things?"

“The clothes you were wearing the night of the accident were ruined and your personal possessions were taken back to the palace for safe-keeping. We’ll have to have clothing brought for you.”

“*Malin.*” The frustration in his voice is close to a childish whine. He wants to leave. Now. He needs space and privacy to formulate his plan for winning Simon back. The desire to move, to *do* something, is like hundreds of needles pricking under his skin. Time stretching out in front of him feels as nebulous as the time behind him, lost in the murky depths of his mind, his connection to Simon like a thin thread that he can’t tug too forcefully for fear it will snap. He needs to strengthen that connection somehow, needs to gently pull Simon close to him again, earn back his trust.

Malin’s voice breaks into his thoughts. “... okay?”

He blinks at her.

“You didn’t hear what I said, did you?”

He shrugs and shakes his head.

For a flash of a moment, she looks at him fondly. It’s there and gone so quickly he barely has time to note it. It warms him, makes him feel seen and perhaps even a bit cared for by his taciturn protector.

“I said I will go call for someone to courier over clothes for you and let the hospital staff know you will be departing.”

He can’t help smiling at the prospect of leaving.

“I’m sure it will take some time, Your Highness, but I will do what I can to expedite it.”

“Thank you, Malin.” He lurches forward impulsively and hugs her, and immediately regrets it. They don’t hug. That’s not a thing the prince and his head of security do. She stiffens. It’s awkward and mortifying. He flinches backward immediately. “Sorry. I don’t know—I don’t know why I did that.”

She looks at him in a way he can’t quite interpret, her eyes soft again for a moment. She opens her mouth, but then appears to change her mind and closes it again. Her face returns to its customary impassivity. “It’s unnecessary to apologize, Your Highness. You’ve been through a lot.” She opens the door and steps through. “I will return when we have a plan in place.” She’s gone before he can say anything else.

The door falls closed again, and he stands there staring at it, wondering if there’s a Malin shaped gap in his memory along with the Simon shaped one.

## Chapter 28

Simon has been sitting at his desk for hours now. He'd come in here intending to work on the set list and arrangements for his performance at the Children's Fund concert, but that hadn't happened. He hasn't been able to concentrate on the task for more than a few minutes at a time. Instead, he's been alternately staring at the blank notebook in front of him or out the window at the massive shade tree and the squirrels and birds that jockey for position in its branches. He's staring out the window when a soft knock on the doorframe calls his attention to the person standing there.

"How are you?" Mikael steps inside and leans back against the wall with his hands clasped behind his back. His eyes are concerned, but there's also a coolness to them, and he hasn't come to sit in the chair by Simon's desk like he usually does. He's still upset about Simon not explaining any of what's happened, and Simon doesn't know how to make it right between them again.

"I'm..." Simon trails off before the word *fine* can escape and shrugs, unwilling to add lying to his list of offenses with Mikael. "I'm going to be fine."

Mikael quirks an eyebrow at the response, but says nothing, and the awkwardness between them grows. Simon can't stand it. He stands and goes to stand in front of him. "I hate this." Mikael still doesn't respond, so Simon takes hold of both his hands, threading their fingers together. Something flashes in Mikael's eyes and he quickly averts his gaze.

Simon squeezes his hands until Mikael looks at him again. "I cannot tell you what's going on with me without telling you things that aren't mine to tell *anyone*. I—I can't break—" He exhales a frustrated breath. "It's something from my past and it's something—it's a secret I have to keep. I don't like not telling you, and I don't like secrets. And I know that doesn't help. I'm sorry. I would tell you if I could. I wish things were different." He makes a sound that isn't quite a laugh or a sob. "You have no idea how much I wish things were different."

He drops Mikael's hands, but before he can move away, Mikael grabs them again. "I'm sorry, too." He pulls Simon into a hug. "It's okay. I understand. I don't *like* it—" they both chuckle—"but I understand."

Simon's voice is thick. "Thanks." He clears his throat and steps out of Mikael's arms. "I appreciate that. I appreciate *you*. And I hope I can tell you about this someday. It would be good to tell you. I could use a friend." He blinks away the tears blurring his vision before they can fall.

"Is there anyone you can talk to? Someone who already knows about whatever this is, and can help you process things?"

Simon shakes his head automatically, then stops, his eyes going round as it dawns on him. "Yes, actually. There is."

Mikael smiles knowingly. "Ayub?"

“Yes.” Simon grins. “And Rosh.”

“So it’s something from when you were all in school together.”

Simon grimaces. “Mikael…”

He waves a hand. “Never mind. I didn’t say that.” He smiles. “I really do understand. I won’t pry.”

“Thank you.”

“You should call them. I’m going to go take care of some things and give you a bit of privacy. I’ll be back in an hour or two and then we will work on the charity concert thing, yeah?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Be well, my friend.” He kisses Simon’s cheek. “Tell them I say hello.”

“I will.”

As soon as he’s gone, Simon sits back down at his desk and opens a video chat. Ayub joins first, then Rosh a few seconds later. The fact that they both instantly accepted the call puts him dangerously close to tears again.

“Ayyyyy!” Ayub exclaims, his face lighting up with a huge grin.

Rosh doesn’t crack a smile, but her eyes sparkle with their usual mischief. “What’s up, losers?”

Simon laughs and wishes they were back in Bjärstad, piled together on the bed in his boyhood room, sharing secrets and making fun of each other. But this will have to do. He takes a deep breath and begins.

## Chapter 29

Wilhelm lies curled into himself on the sofa tucked under a large window in his room. The sofa is small and rather hard, built for appearance rather than comfort, but his bed is huge and he'd been lonely and anxious in it, so he'd moved here in the middle of the night, where he could feel the back of the sofa against him. If he closed his eyes, he could pretend it was the pressure of Simon's body behind him, which worked to help lessen his anxiousness, but didn't lead to sleep.

He sighs and changes positions on the sofa again, burrowing deeper under his blanket, trying for the hundredth time to get comfortable. It's useless, though, and the weak gray light spilling from under the curtains tells him he's quickly running out of time to sleep anyway.

He rubs at eyes that burn with tiredness and heaves himself to a sitting position before leaning forward with hands clasped between his knees, letting his head hang down so the weight of it stretches out some of the kinks in his neck. His parents were due to arrive back from Prague late last night, which means his mother will send for him this morning.

Part of him wants to see his mother and hopes he'll find her warm and compassionate, the way she sometimes is with him in private. But he doesn't frequently see that side of his mother anymore. Not since Erik died. More likely it will be the Queen that wants to talk to him, stern and distant. And if she doesn't start out that way, she'll certainly end up there once she hears what he wants to talk about.

He raises his right hand to his mouth and begins biting his thumbnail. He'd spent most of the night alternating between longing for Simon and trying to figure out how to get him back without creating a national furor and guaranteeing they'd all be hounded by the press. His coming out will be headline news in all of Europe. Maybe even overseas. Add to that the fact that he's in love with a commoner? He bites hard enough to tear his nail down to the quick and make it bleed. He hisses and sticks it in his mouth to quell the pain.

And even if he does this—if he comes out formally. Publicly. There's no guarantee it will bring Simon back to him. He has to do it for himself. He has to do it because he wants to live his life, be who he is, and love who he loves, regardless of the consequences. He wants that. In theory. The reality of it, however, is slightly terrifying. And what if he does it, puts them all through that, and then fails to earn Simon's forgiveness? His trust? His love?

He pulls his thumb out of his mouth and examines the spot he'd been gnawing on. It's red and sensitive to the air drying it, but it's stopped bleeding.

Does he want this? Does he want to be out even if it Simon never forgives him? His mind supplies him with a vision of crowds of people yelling at him, some in support, but some in disgust; imagines them carrying signs and chanting things. Would the ones supporting him outnumber the others?

*Fuck.* He throws himself backward on the sofa and clenches his uninjured hand in his hair. His heart is rabbiting in his chest and if he doesn't get himself under control, he's going to

have another panic attack.

He lies there, counting his breaths, imagining his life continuing as it is, and then imagining what it might be like to be free to be his true self. When he finally sits up again, the light seeping in around the curtains has turned bright with sunshine and he's made his choice. He grabs his phone and taps out a message to Simon.

**Do you remember the night after Rosh's match, that first time? When we rode home on the backs of Rosh and Ayub's motorbikes? We threw our arms in the air and you took my hand for a minute. It felt like we were flying. That was the most free I've ever felt. I want to be that free again. I want to be that free always.**

## Chapter 30

“So,” Simon says, before trailing off into silence. He’s just finished unloading onto his best friends, and they probably need time to process everything that’s happened.

“Uh. Yeah.” Ayub’s eyes are so big Simon can see the whites almost all the way around.

Rosh snorts an angry sound, opens her mouth to speak, changes her mind, snorts again, and presses her lips together, clearly biting back the many things she wants to say.

Seeing her this indignant on his behalf makes Simon’s chest squeeze with affection for her, for them both, even if he’s not sure he wants to hear what she has to say. They’ve always had his back and always will. “It’s okay,” he says to her. “You can say it.”

Her words fly out in a semi-shout. “That *motherfucker*.”

Simon and Ayub both burst into laughter at her vehemence. “Hell, Rosh,” Simon says. “Tell me how you really feel.”

“Damn,” Ayub adds. “Not holding back, huh? Alright.”

Rosh shrugs and flicks a *whatever* hand at them, but her lips twist to one side with a repressed smile. Then her expression turns stony. “I mean, he’s hurt you twice already, Simme. Will you let him do it a third time?”

All the humor drains out of Simon immediately at her words. She’s not pulling any punches, not that she ever does. “I’m not going to let him do it a third time.”

She stares at him in that no bullshit way she has that always cuts to the heart of things, and doesn’t say a word.

On the screen, Ayub’s eyes bounce between them, gauging their reactions, ready to be the peacemaker if things take a turn. He’s always been the more measured one.

“I’m not,” Simon insists to her... to them... to himself.

“Dude,” Ayub says softly.

“I’m *not*.”

“Okay, so that’s it then,” Rosh says. “This is over. You helped. You went above and beyond to help someone who doesn’t deserve your help because you are a good person, and now it’s over. Yes?”

Simon nods. “It is. It’s over.”

No one on the chat screen looks like they believe it.

Simon inhales deeply, making an effort to shake off the weird sadness trying to settle over him, and forces himself to smile at his friends. “Now. Tell me what’s been going on with you guys.”

Twenty minutes later, the smile is genuine as he says goodbye to his friends and promises to call again soon. He’s glad Mikael suggested he call them. It was good to see them and good to talk about what’s happened over the last several days. They’re right, of course, and he knew it before he spoke with them. This needs to be the end of it. Wille will never choose love over duty, never choose Simon. He cannot make room in his heart for him again. It only ends with pain and loss.

He ignores the small voice worrying that it’s too late, that Wille’s already bullied the door open and snuck inside.

Shoving that thought away, he opens his notebook again and twiddles a pen between two of his fingers, back to trying to force his mind to focus on the set list for the charity concert and what kind of journey he wants to take the audience on with him.

The next thing he knows, Mikael is gently rapping his knuckles on the doorframe and saying his name in a way that suggests it’s not the first time he’s said it. Simon looks up, startled, and mentally shakes himself out of the fugue state he’d been in. This happened sometimes when a song took hold of him and demanded to be written.

He glances down at the papers strewn over his desk—notebook pages full of words and phrases, crossed out, written again, full of scribbled insertions and lines indicating things being moved to new places, and sheet music full of variations as he tried to get the melody down as fast as it grew in his mind.

He’s nearly lost to it again, but Mikael speaks and Simon’s attention shifts back to him. “New song?” He smiles knowingly at Simon, his blue eyes sparkling.

Simon leans back, only now realizing how much his hands ache and how stiff his body is. “Yeah. I guess so. What time is it?”

“Almost eight. Have you been at it since I left?”

Five hours. He’d been working five hours without a break or even the awareness of the time passing. “Yeah, I guess so.”

Mikael steps forward to peer at the pages and Simon reacts swiftly and without thought. He scoops it all together into a messy stack, protecting it, hiding it.

“Okaaay.” Mikael holds hands up, palms out, and steps back.

“Sorry,” Simon mumbles. “I don’t—”

“You don’t have to explain.” Mikael smiles. “You’ll share it when you’re ready.”

Simon looks down. His eyes catch on one of the lines he’s written, and he thinks maybe he won’t ever be ready to share this particular song.

*I can't surrender*

*because you won't stay*

## Chapter 31

Wille leans back against the inside of the door until the latch clicks softly in the deep silence. He slumps there and gazes around at what is—used to be?—his brother's bedroom.

The last time he remembers being in here, it looked like Erik had left it only minutes before, as if he'd popped out for tea or a meeting or to go for a run. The bedspread had been slightly rumpled. Maybe Erik had sat there while pulling on his shoes. One of his jackets had been draped over the back of a chair. A pair of dress shoes had poked out of the slightly ajar closet door, as if looking for their owner.

After Erik's death, the housekeeping staff had been instructed to clean around his things but not move them, and Wille used to come in here frequently to feel close to the brother he'd loved so much. Sometimes he would sit on the floor and stare at the wrinkled spot on the bed. Other times, he'd lie down on his stomach, one cheek pressed to the carpet, and stare at the shiny toes of his brother's shoes, imagining Erik was about to walk out of the closet, laughing, and ask him why he was lying on the floor. A few times—on really bad days—he'd put his brother's jacket on, pulling it tight around him like a hug, and breathing in the rapidly fading scent of him that wafted from the fabric.

But somewhere in the years that are lost to Wilhelm, that housekeeping order must have been lifted. The jacket and shoes are gone, and the bedspread is now smoothly perfect. Seeing the room like this makes his stomach clench painfully, the loss of Erik echoing through him, sharp despite all the years. He slides to the floor and pulls his knees up to his chest, aching for his brother.

Erik would have teased him for being so tense, and then listened to him pour out his heart. He would have loved Wille no matter what, but would he have approved of Wille *following* what was in his heart? Following it to Simon, loving him, coming out, drawing so much attention? Wilhelm likes to think he would have. He imagines Erik saying, "You only get one life, little man. Live it."

It hardly matters now, though. Erik is gone and Wilhelm is the crown prince. "Little" no more. He will be King someday. *King*. He should be used to the idea by now, but it still seems a strange and far away thought, like something that will happen to someone else. In story books, a king is always a person of ultimate authority, respected, sometimes feared. No one tells a king what to do.

If only his actual life were a fairytale, complete with a guaranteed happy ending.

Suddenly, he knows for certain one thing Erik would tell him if he was here.

He stands, straightens his shoulders, and looks at himself in the mirror next to his brother's bed. He widens his stance, hands fisted at his sides, and lifts his chin.

His brother's voice speaks to him in his imagination. *You'll be a king someday, brother. Be a good one. Be what you want to see in the world.*

He might not be the king yet, but maybe it's time to act like someone who knows he will be.

He takes a last look around the room before leaving, still heartsore but with a new determination. He marches toward his mother's chambers, rehearsing what he will say as he goes.

"I'm done hiding, mother. I won't hide who I am anymore. I won't live a life of regret. I'm coming out and I'm going to do everything I can to win back the man I love. I don't know what you said in the past to make me give him up, but whatever it was won't work this time. People will have to open their minds and—"

From behind him comes the sound of someone gently clearing their throat.

Wilhelm freezes and clenches his eyes shut. Without turning, he quietly says, "Hello, Mother."

The complete stillness behind him isn't a good sign. He turns to face her just as she orders her attendants to leave them. She folds her hands together at her waist.

*Ahhh. So it's to be the Queen today, not Mother. So be it.*

She walks past him, continuing on to her chambers, and he falls into step behind her. Once they're behind the closed door to her office, she makes her case—re-makes it?—for why Wilhelm must remain silent and pretend to be someone he is not. It all boils down to the good of the country. To honor and sacrifice. The words are familiar, and he doesn't know if it's because he's heard them so many times in the past or if he's remembering having this specific conversation with her before.

He holds firm, refuses to bend, and she becomes increasingly frustrated with him, although the only evidence of it is the set of her mouth and the way she clenches her hands together on top of her desk.

None of it sways him. He will come out. He will do his best to win back the love of his life and be happy. His certainty is absolute. He *will* win this battle with her, and then the battle to win Simon. Nothing will stop him.

She stands suddenly, the legs of her chair scraping loudly on the wood floor. "Enough. You are still confused and convalescing. The doctors say your brain needs time and quiet. I am having all electronic devices and screens removed from your chambers. You will remain here and rest until you are well again."

Bright panic flashes through Wilhelm and he shoves to his feet. "You mean you will keep me prisoner!"

His mother goes to the door and opens it, showing him out. "It's a palace, Wilhelm. Don't be dramatic."

## Chapter 32

Simon stops strumming the guitar, leaving only his voice to hold the long last note of “Forever Hill.” The sound of it slowly fades, cracks, and disintegrates from the emotion that built in him over the course of the song. He falls silent and stands with his eyes closed, gasping a quick breath as his body finally forces him to breathe.

He always performs the sad, sweet ballad alone, just him and his acoustic guitar under a spotlight, and he rarely has to fake the sorrow that overcomes him at the end of the song. He’s especially emotional this time, though. Everything that’s happened with Wille pouring out of him. He’s glad the performance was only for a soundcheck.

It used to be there were only two people in the world that knew which hill the song is about. Now there’s only one. Technically, Wille knows about Janiculum Hill. He just doesn’t *remember* it himself. The thought makes Simon’s throat clench. He scrubs his face with both hands. Shit. He needs to get it together before the show tonight. People are donating a lot of money to the Children’s Fund in order to be in the room for this concert. His performance needs to be worthy of it.

A voice calls up to him from behind the engineering board and says they need a few minutes to tweak some things before Simon and the band perform one of his most raucous and danceable hits to check the sound levels at the other end of the spectrum.

He nods and turns to grab his water from the small table nearby. As he does, a flash of hair so blonde it’s nearly white catches his eye in the wings. He squints, trying to find it again in the dim area off-stage.

The person steps forward just far enough for the light to find them.

Malin.

The hair on the back of Simon’s neck prickles. What’s wrong? Why is she here? He’s jogging toward her before he realizes he’s even moved.

A big, angry looking guy from the venue’s security walks up behind Malin and puts a hand on her shoulder.

Simon winces. *Oh, no, man. That’s a bad idea.*

Before he can finish the thought, Malin grabs the man’s hand and spins around in one powerful and graceful movement and does something that brings the security guard to his knees immediately, his mouth dropping open and face tightening with pain.

“Whoa! Whoa!” Simon waves his arms at them. “It’s okay.” He almost reaches for Malin’s arm before he thinks better of it. “It’s okay. He’s just one of the security guards.”

Malin stares down at the man for a moment, her gaze making it clear how little she thinks of his guarding abilities. She lets him go and takes a step back, giving him room to get up and herself room to maneuver if the guy decides he wants a little payback. But he only rises to his feet, rubbing his injured hand. His face is flushed nearly magenta as he straightens his clothes, nods, and retreats to where he came from.

Simon bites back a smile, but quickly turns serious again when Malin looks at him. Her face shows nothing, as always. “What is it?” he demands. “Why are you here? What’s happened? Is he—”

She holds up a hand to silence him. “He’s okay.”

Simon snaps his mouth shut and swallows, trying to ignore the rush of relief her words bring.

“He asked me to give this to you.” She holds out an envelope with his name scrawled on it in Wille’s handwriting.

“A letter?” Simon’s voice rises with confusion. “Why is he sending me a letter?”

Malin blinks at him slowly, rolling her eyes at the last second, just before her eyelids close. “I suspect the letter will explain itself.”

Simon takes it from her, running the fingers of his other hand over the thick, creamy paper. “Do you know what’s in this?”

Malin shrugs in a way that makes it clear she won’t answer that, but then her face softens unexpectedly, and one corner of her mouth quirks in a suggestion of a smile. “Thank you,” she says.

Simon raises his eyebrows, confused.

“For helping him at the hospital. Despite everything.”

He can’t think how to respond to that, but it doesn’t matter because she looks at her watch and continues, all business again. “I will wait by the exit for fifteen minutes. In case you wish to reply.” Then she turns and disappears into the darkness backstage.

Simon uses one hand to shade his eyes against the lights and peers out toward the sound board. Everyone there is still huddled together working through a problem, so he wanders off in search of privacy. He finds a quiet spot behind some of the empty load-in equipment and sinks to the floor. He stares at the front of the envelope before finally opening it and pulling out the folded pages, smoothing them open, and beginning to read.

*Simon -*

*It’s late. I can’t sleep and I’ve been trying to write to you most of the night, but everything keeps coming out wrong. They’ve taken my phone again. They say it’s because I need to rest and recover, but really it’s about controlling me. Saying I’m being held prisoner sounds*

*dramatic, but it's not far from the truth. Thank god for Malin. I know she will get this message to you.*

*I'm so sorry about everything, Simon. Sorry I hurt you. Sorry you were forced to help me. Sorry you had to relive the past because of me. Sorry it turns out I'm not who I want to be.*

*I want to be the man who chose you, who told the truth about himself and didn't care what anyone thought. I want to be the man that knew you were the best thing that ever happened to him and chose you no matter what. I would do anything to go back and change that.*

*You deserve to be chosen, Simon, over and over. Every time.*

*My words look so small and meaningless written on this page. They don't capture how desperately I wish I could change what I did, and the way my chest aches with regret and with missing you. You're the best person I've ever known. You made me better. You still do.*

*I know I can't change anything that happened in the past, but I'm going to do everything I can to be the man I want to be in the future.*

*I don't have the right to ask you for a single thing ever again, but I'm hoping you will help me one last time...*

## Chapter 33

Wilhelm clenches his fingers together to control his fidgeting and tries to disappear into the heavy stage curtain he's lurking behind. He'd hoped to escape notice, but he hadn't counted on there being quite so many people backstage. It makes sense that a concert of this magnitude would require a slew of people behind the scenes, but the sheer number of them is astonishing. He scans the area again and some of the tension bleeds from his shoulders when he realizes everyone is preoccupied with their jobs and no one is paying him any attention. All the activity is making it easier for him to go undetected in the dimness of the backstage area.

The roar of the crowd beyond the stage is deafening. Simon has just finished singing a boisterous song that had everyone dancing and singing along, and the applause and shouting is so loud Wilhelm can feel the vibration of it in his body. It echoes the pounding of his heart, which hasn't yet slowed from the panicked gallop it began as he and Malin conducted their *Mission Impossible*-worthy escape from the palace using actual disguises and hidden passages.

Despite the circumstances, the subterfuge thrilled him—it felt like being a kid again, playing hide and seek with Erik and trespassing in places not meant for him. He hopes he gets the chance to tell Simon about it someday, maybe even show him the passages in person. He imagines the way Simon's face would light up at the idea of exploring them and smiles to himself.

With a bit of luck, no one at the palace will miss him until it's too late.

Simon says something to the crowd that winds them up even further and Wilhelm risks stepping forward enough to see him. He can't resist trying to get a glimpse of the man he loves doing something that brings joy to so many people.

Malin clears her throat in warning, startling him. She's been so still and quiet that he'd forgotten she was even there. He gives her an abashed smile and nods to show he understands her warning. He will not expose himself. Not yet, anyway.

He turns his attention back to the man who is the sole focus of the thousands of people in this stadium and, undoubtedly, of an even larger number watching the live event from their homes. Wilhelm can't imagine ever feeling at ease in front of the world, but Simon is in his element. He strides around the stage, exuding confidence and grinning at the audience in a way that makes them grin back, excited to be here in this moment with him. It's both thrilling and disconcerting to see all these people openly adoring the man he loves. He's proud of him, happy to stand outside the spotlight and worship him along with everyone else, but he's also fighting a possessiveness that has him wanting to march out on the stage and claim Simon as his in front of all of them.

He isn't, though. He isn't *his*. And he might never be again.

The first few notes of the next song rise above the cheers and the crowd goes wild again. It's obviously a popular and recognizable song based on their response. Wilhelm, of course, has never heard it before. Or at least, he doesn't remember hearing it before. He likes it immediately, though, and nods along to the beat, a wide smile creasing his cheeks.

Simon bounces across the stage, playful and captivating, face lit with joy. Every head swivels to follow him. Every eye is locked on him. He's dressed all in white and he would look angelic if he didn't also look like sex incarnate. Snowy denim hugs his lean legs and cups his ass in a way that heats Wilhelm's blood and sets it flowing. He stares until his own pants feel too tight and he has to force his gaze away.

But raising his eyes to take in the rest of what Simon is wearing makes matters worse. His brown skin glows beneath the sheer fabric of a shirt that sparkles with what looks like embroidered olive branches or vines. Simon's nipples are clearly visible beneath it and Wilhelm is struck by a sudden sense memory of how it felt to fasten his mouth to one of them, the way it pebbled into a hard nub under his tongue while Simon shook with desire.

He squeezes his eyes shut and clenches his fists against the wave of aching *want* washing through him. He melts back behind the curtain again and keeps his eyes closed as he breathes and works to slow his heart and calm his body. He falls into something like a meditative state, fully focused on the rise and fall of his chest, on quenching the fire raging in him.

"... a special surprise tonight..."

Wilhelm registers the words a moment before the crowd roars. His eyes fly open and his heart bursts into a gallop again. All the work he's done to calm himself is immediately undone. Simon continues speaking, but Wilhelm doesn't hear any of it over the pounding of his heart.

When Simon turns to look for him in the wings, Wilhelm's body responds without his permission, stepping into the edge of the light so Simon can see him. Their eyes lock and hold, the moment stretching. Simon raises his brows, silently asking if Wilhelm still wants to do this, and when Wilhelm nods, Simon holds an arm out toward him and shouts into the microphone. "Please welcome to the stage your Crown Prince!"

## Chapter 34

Simon's heart lurches in his chest when Wille walks out of the shadows and into the light, like it's trying to throw itself at him. Wille is wearing a navy blue suit that was made for him—literally. It's tapered to emphasize the width of his shoulders and length of his legs, and Simon can't help dragging his eyes over him. He seems taller somehow, and Simon realizes it's because he's standing straight, shoulders back and head held high as he strides across the stage, smiling and waving to the crowd. Simon expected him to be anxious, knows he *must* be, but he's hiding it well. He looks every inch the prince he is, and it's attractive as hell.

Without intending to, Simon holds a hand out to him as Wille reaches center stage, as if to lace his fingers with Wille's and present them as a united front. At the last moment, belly swooping with adrenaline as he recognizes the mistake he's making in front of the world, Simon changes the angle of his arm to a welcoming gesture and takes several steps away toward the wings, ceding the spotlight to the prince.

A flash of disappointment quicksolders through Wilhelm's eyes as he holds Simon's gaze. Had he wanted Simon to stay? Then he smiles and turns to face the audience. "Thank you," he murmurs near the microphone, too low for it to pick up his voice.

Simon bites his lips together, nervous on Wilhelm's behalf. He's not totally sure what Wille is going to say, but he suspects, and the thought of it makes the pulse in his throat flutter with anxiety and something he won't admit is hope.

Wille steps closer to the microphone and puts a trembling hand on it before trying again. "Thank you." His voice is loud enough this time, but the crowd isn't finished applauding and making noise. Wilhelm's smile stretches wider and his cheeks grow pink with embarrassment. "Thank you. Thank you." He repeats it a few more times before the audience quiets enough for him to be heard.

"Believe it or not, this is the first time I've spoken in front of this many people at once, and I'm a little nervous. I hope you will be patient with me."

The crowd applauds and shouts encouragement. He clears his throat and smiles until they settle down again. "I want to thank all of you for your support of The Children's Fund. The money you've so generously donated, and the proceeds from this concert, will support the children who need us the most—children without parents, children who are ill, children who are lost or hungry. The Children's Fund works tirelessly to support them all. And beginning this year, The Children's Fund will also work on behalf of children who need gender identity and sexuality support."

The crowd roars their approval, and Simon joins them. He encourages them to shout louder by lifting his arms high above his head and yelling along with them.

Wille darts a quick look at Simon over his shoulder. He's grinning widely at Simon's reaction, but anxiety shimmers in his eyes as he turns to face the audience again. "And as much as we appreciate your financial generosity, support isn't just about money, of course.

It's how we treat each other. The care we show. The patience and kindness we have for people who are struggling, people who are different. And—" Wilhelm's voice wavers. He drops his head and clears his throat. The silence stretches long enough for people to exchange looks and for Simon to take an unconscious step forward. But then Wille raises his head, and when he speaks again, his voice is clear and strong. "And the example we set for them. For years, I have been scared to be myself. To let you all see the real me. I let others convince me it was best to hide, to not challenge the status quo. And in doing so, I hurt someone I care about very much, someone I hope will forgive me someday."

Simon twitches as surprise surges through him, making his heart pound. He lifts a trembling hand to cover his mouth. *Wille is going to do this. Oh god. He's going to do this.*

The audience drops into a silence that shouldn't be possible with a crowd this size. Their eyes are round with expectation and locked on Wilhelm, breathless with anticipation.

"We can't choose who we're born as. But we can choose how we want to live our lives. I used to think I had to give up the crown to be who I am, but I don't. The crown can change. It will change. I will *make* it change." He smiles nervously at the people before him, eyes ticking from face to face. "I think maybe some of you will help me change it."

Scattered whoops and shouts echo through the arena, but most of the crowd remains silent and gazing at him expectantly. Wille grasps the microphone and leans closer to it. "Coming out is a deeply personal thing, and for most people it's a private thing, but when you live in the public eye, nothing is private."

Wilhelm clears his throat again, fighting the emotions threatening to overcome him—the regret he feels for the mistakes he's made, and the anger he has about never having had a choice about living in the public eye. "For years, I've been hiding, but I will not hide anymore."

Simon stumbles toward Wille's place in the spotlight on autopilot. He doesn't even realize what he's doing until Wille turns to accept the hand Simon is holding out to him and squeezes it before facing the microphone again and speaking his truth to the world.

"I'm gay."

# Chapter 35

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### ***Three months later...***

Wilhelm fights consciousness as it creeps through him. He burrows deeper under the soft duvet and stretches before relaxing into the pocket of warmth trapped under the bedding. Within moments, he's floating in and out on the tide of sleep again, coming awake briefly and falling back into a doze, over and over, as he stubbornly fights waking up. His drifting mind skips and stutters through memories with each cycle, as if someone has put his brain on shuffle and each blink brings a new song.

### ***blink***

*Flashes of headlines that scream **Prince Wilhelm Comes Out** from front pages and magazines and websites.*

### ***blink***

*Breathless talking heads on television going on and on when they figure out that it was, in fact, the teenaged Prince in that leaked sex video all those years ago.*

### ***blink***

*Malin's wrathful face as she holds her phone and promises to make anyone who airs or posts the video regret it from behind bars.*

### ***blink***

*The meeting with his mother and her advisors, and their extremely vocal displeasure with him and his unapproved announcements about the charity... and himself.*

Wilhelm groans and curls into a ball, unhappy with the direction of his slippery thoughts. He holds onto consciousness long enough to redirect his sleepy brain to something more pleasant before sliding into another doze.

### ***blink***

*The moment backstage at the concert, when he apologized to Simon.*

Wilhelm smiles and latches onto this thought, choosing to relive the memory in as much detail as he can.

*The roar of the crowd follows them as they dash off stage, Simon in the lead, holding Wilhelm's hand and squeezing it tightly. They reach the safety of the wings, but he keeps going, pulling them both into a jog, dodging stagehands and dragging Wilhelm along in his wake.*

*Wilhelm huffs a laugh, body still buzzing with adrenaline from what he just did. "Where are we going?"*

*Simon stops so suddenly Wilhelm crashes into him. He flings open a door Wilhelm hadn't noticed and shoves him into what turns out to be a janitor's closet before stepping inside himself and closing the door.*

*Wilhelm's heart thumps and he squeezes Simon's hand. "Simon? What are we doing? What's wrong?"*

*Simon is barely visible in the gloom of the closet. The jewels sewn into his white shirt catch in the light creeping in around the edges of the door. They twinkle like fairy lights. "Wille," he breathes, voice quiet in the hush of the small room. "You did it. I can't believe you did it." He yanks Wilhelm into a hug, but before Wilhelm can get his arms around him in return, Simon shoves him away. "They're all going to figure it out now! Me, you, the video, all of it! You—you're—How can you—" Simon breaks off, overwhelmed, his brown eyes wide and locked on Wilhelm's.*

*Sudden panic claws at Wilhelm's throat. Had Simon not wanted this? Not wanted Wilhelm to stand up, finally? Stand beside him, taking the heat for the video as he should've all those years ago? **Oh, god.** He was dredging this all up again, and it would force Simon to relive it. **Oh, god. Oh, god.** He clutches Simon's arms. "I'm so sorry. I didn't think. Fuck. People are going to put it together and talk about the video again. It's going to come down on you all over again. I'm so sorry." He lets go of Simon and buries his face in his hands, shouting, "Fuck!"*

*Simon laughs, loud and bright, and it bounces around the tight confines of the closet. Wilhelm drops his hands, shocked.*

*"I don't care. Why would I care?"*

*Wilhelm gapes at him.*

*Simon grins. "I'm a rock star, Wille. A boring one. They're always making up stuff about me because the truth is so lame." He shrugs. "Now they finally have something legitimately scandalous to say about me. They're all in heaven."*

*"But what about **you**, Simme?"*

*Simon sees how upset Wilhelm is and grows serious. "I'm not a kid anymore. I'm a grown man with a successful career. I'm famous." He rolls his eyes. "It's ridiculous that I just said that, but I am. I'm famous. And people are going to talk about me regardless. They've been talking about me for years. I learned to ignore it. It's just, you know—part of the job. But that video—we were underage, so they will prosecute anyone who posts or shares it. There's nothing you or I can do now except hold our heads up and wait for people to get tired of talking about it. Some other scandal will come along soon and they'll move on. They always do." He lifts a hand toward Wilhelm, but then lets it fall without touching him. "What about you? Are you ready for the consequences of what you just did? Princes don't get the same pass that musicians do. This is a lot, Wille. Do you know what will happen?"*

*Wilhelm's shoulders drop from where they've risen nearly to his ears. "You're not angry with me." It's a statement. One he's trying to process.*

*"No." Simon's eyes are soft. "I'm proud of you. There are a lot of young queer people that are going to get to grow up in a world where a prince—a fucking prince—is like them. That's amazing."*

*Heat floods Wilhelm's cheeks. He hadn't thought of that. "That's—" He takes a breath and exhales slowly, trying to calm his heart rate. "That's not why I did it, though."*

*Simon tilts his head. "Of course not. Being able to be who you are and live the life you want to live is the most important thing."*

*"Yesss." Wilhelm drags out the word in a way that makes Simon's brow furrow.*

*"But that's not the reason either? Why else would you do it?"*

*"Oh, god." Wilhelm runs a hand through his hair. He hadn't meant to do this now, moments after he'd come out publicly, or here, in a janitor's closet in the dark, but the moment's arrived whether or not he's ready for it. He straightens and looks directly into Simon's eyes. "I'm choosing you."*

*Simon blinks. "Choosing me?"*

*Wilhelm nods and runs the tips of his fingers over the back of Simon's hand tentatively before sliding them around to take hold of him. Simon doesn't resist him, but neither does he grasp back. "I should have chosen you all those years ago, Simon, back in school, when the video was leaked. I should have chosen you then. But I was young and weak and..." He pauses for breath. Why is it suddenly so hard to breathe? "Scared. I was scared. And I left you to deal with it all alone. It was unforgivable. But you—somehow you forgave me and it was—it meant everything. To me." His vision goes blurry and he blinks. "You have the most amazing heart, Simon. You let me inside it twice. And twice I—" His voice cracks and he clears his throat. "And twice I broke it."*

*Simon looks away, and Wilhelm is cold without the warmth of his gaze.*

*"I don't know what happened the second time, and I might never know, but I know how much I love you—"*

*Simon's eyes swivel back to him.*

*"—and I can't imagine I would have left you a second time to save myself. I wasn't a kid anymore. I think maybe... maybe they did or said something to make me believe it was the best thing to do for you."*

*"Wait. What are you saying, Wille?" Simon's eyes are enormous. "Are you saying they threatened to... do something to me?"*

*Wilhelm shakes his head. "No. I don't know. No. I don't think my mother would go that far. I hope she wouldn't. But I can't think of another reason I would've chosen to do it when being apart from you hurts this much. It feels like dying."*

*The pulse in Simon's throat is beating so hard Wilhelm can see it. He runs his thumb over it and cups the back of Simon's neck. "I can't remember leaving you after Trastevere. Even the idea of it, that it happened, makes me feel like I'm going to panic. I think maybe—maybe that's why my memories stop there."*

*Simon's eyes shine with gathering tears. "Wille," he breathes.*

*"I think maybe my brain is... I don't know... self-protecting? Choosing to keep me in a world where I haven't hurt you again and you still love me. I think—I really think I don't want to remember it ever. I'd rather lose all those memories forever. I don't want to be that person again. The person who left you. The person who made such a terrible choice."*

*"Wille," Simon repeats.*

*"I'm sorry, Simon." He swallows hard against the tightness in his throat. "I'm sorry for hurting you, for not standing up for you, for not choosing you, no matter what. For not—" His voice breaks. "For not trusting that the way we loved each other was enough to change the world. Because it was."*

*He smooths his thumb over Simon's cheek, through the track of the tear rolling down it. He can feel a matching wetness on his own face. "I said I was choosing you, but I'm also choosing me. I'm choosing to be the man I wish I was then, and the man I want to be now. The man who chooses you. The man who will keep choosing you, no matter what, for the rest of his life."*

*Simon's chest hitches and he falls forward into Wilhelm, not hugging him so much as allowing himself to be hugged. Wilhelm is happy to comply. He wraps one arm around Simon's waist and runs the other up his back, settling it between his shoulder blades and pressing him close. He whispers into Simon's hair. "Asking you to forgive me is one thing. Asking you to give me another chance is something else. It's too much to ask you to let me into that beautiful heart of yours again, but I am. I'm asking. And you don't have to answer me now. You can—"*

*Simon shudders in his arms and shuts him up with a desperate kiss. It's wild and too hard, making their teeth clack together. The taste of copper fills Wilhelm's mouth. "I shouldn't,"*

*Simon chokes out, his lips still touching Wilhelm's. "I shouldn't still want you like this. Why do I still want you like this?" His tears dampen both their faces.*

*"Shhh." Wilhelm kisses him gently and strokes his cheeks, calming him. "It's okay, älskling. It's okay. You don't have to say anything right now. I will be here. I will wait as long as it takes. I'm not going anywhere. Not ever again. I'll prove it to you. As long as it takes." He kisses Simon's lips gently. "I'd wait forever for you."*

Suddenly, the duvet Wilhelm is buried under with his sleepy memories is whipped away, letting in a shock of cold air and bright sunlight. Then it's flipped back over him, but with a new resident with him in his cozy little burrow. Cool limbs wrap around him as he's hauled in for a full-body hug and a lingering kiss.

Fortunately, Simon hadn't made him wait forever.

He squeezes Simon closer, until they are touching from their foreheads to their toes. He licks Simon's lower lip, tugging it into his own mouth. "Mmm. Morning," he mumbles around it.

Simon tilts his chin to reclaim his lip and chuckles when Wilhelm makes a grumpy noise about it. "Morning, sleepyhead. Will we be leaving the bed today?"

"No?" Wilhelm asks hopefully, running a hand down to squeeze Simon's ass and roll their hips together.

"Don't you want to see some of the city?"

"I have everything I want right here."

Simon goes still in his arms and Wilhelm shivers with déjà vu. The words echo through him.

*I have everything I want right here.*

"Is that—"

Simon pushes up onto his elbows and traces Wilhelm's cheek with one finger before nodding. "Yeah. That's a memory."

They'd returned to the place where Wilhelm's memories ended, slowly blurring before vanishing into a gray fog. Trastevere. The place where his happiest memories existed, and the place where his worst memories were waiting to be rediscovered. He still didn't want those memories back, but they were pushing their way forward regardless of what he wanted. Each time it happened, he felt the same frisson of hope and fear.

"It's going to be okay." Simon kisses him. "No matter what happened in the past, you're the man you want to be *now*. That's all that matters."

Wilhelm's heart lurches in his chest. "I love you so much."

“I know.” He kisses Wilhelm again and laughs when Wilhelm pouts at him for not saying it back. “Come on. I’ve still never seen the Pantheon or toured the catacombs. And I want to be back here in time to climb the hill and watch the sunset.”

Wilhelm thinks about the ring hidden in his luggage, the one he’s planning to put on Simon’s finger in the orange glow atop Janiculum Hill.

When the stars appear in the sky over the hill tonight, he will watch them shine with his fiancé in his arms.

It’s a memory he can’t wait to have.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who left me such lovely, encouraging comments. I appreciated every one more than I can say. And thank you for sticking with me through some long gaps in posting. I hope I made the journey it worth it the end. xx

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