

A high-contrast, black and white silhouette of a man and a woman in profile, facing each other and kissing. The background is a bright, out-of-focus light source, creating a dramatic rim-light effect on their profiles. The overall mood is romantic and intimate.

ONCE UPON AN
ASSASSIN'S KISS

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Once Upon An Assassin's Kiss

By Melissa McTernan

Ethan:

The blade was cold against his throat, and for the briefest of moments, Ethan wished the assassin would dig it in deeper. He kept his eyes closed; the edge of the knife against his suddenly racing pulse was a promise, an escape. One he'd been unable to find on his own. But Ethan didn't want to die, not really, not like this anyway. Half naked in his own bed, a bit hungover and utterly unarmed. It was humiliating.

He flicked his eyes open.

"Don't move," the woman pinning him to the bed hissed. Her thighs were warm around his waist, the sensation at such odds with the deadly press of the weapon into his flesh that Ethan's mind stuttered. Who was she and how had she gotten in here? What good were royal guards if they never seemed to be where you needed them?

"Wouldn't dream of it." Ethan swallowed hard and the knife's edge scraped against his stubble. Maybe if she didn't kill him she could give him a shave. He nearly laughed. He really had become a macabre son of a bitch in the years since he lost Miranda.

An attempt on one's life should rouse a man to action and yet all Ethan felt was weariness. And a bit intrigued by the woman straddling him.

"What's with the smile? No smile." Her voice was low and rough like she was trying to disguise it which only made Ethan's smile grow.

The woman leaned in closer, her breath tickling his cheek. "I'm not afraid to gut you, little prince," she purred.

“And yet you haven’t.” He let his smile bloom into a full grin, ignoring the flutter of his heart at the nickname. One he hadn’t heard in so long. “So what’s your game?”

The woman wore a mask and the room was dark, but Ethan could see her eyes widen slightly. “I’m here to kidnap you.” She sat up straighter and the movement caused her thighs to squeeze him tighter. She was dressed entirely in black, her clothes like a second skin. He could see every curve, every dip. He wondered what was behind the mask.

“Kidnap me?”

Her lips curved into a dangerous smirk. “Man-nap. Whatever you’d like to call it, I’m taking you.” The knife hung at her side now, and she still straddled him like it was the most natural thing in the world, like she belonged there. He could easily flip her over and disarm her. And yet...

“And then what will you do with me?” he asked casually, like this woman hadn’t threatened his life. What did it matter to him? His life was not his own anyway. Let her take it.

She canted her hips just slightly, maybe on purpose, maybe not, but now her ass rested against his rapidly stiffening cock. “Well, first I will demand an exorbitant amount of money from your parents for your return.”

“Of course. That only makes sense.”

She smiled again and something about those lips, the slight gap between her front teeth was so familiar, but no. He was seeing ghosts again.

“And after you extort money from the king and queen of Khisfire, what will you do with me then?”

She shifted her hips again, teasing him. “I’m sure I’ll think of something.”

“You do seem very resourceful.” He shouldn’t be talking to her like this. He should dispatch her of her weapon and send her on her way, but there

was something about her. Something that made him want to keep her here a minute longer. “How did you get in here anyway?”

“That’s a secret. Sorry, little prince.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Why? You are the charming prince are you not? Or am I in the wrong ostentatious bedroom?”

Ostentatious? He glanced up at the velvet canopy over his four-post bed. It was big enough for at least five grown people and layered with down comforters and silk sheets. Okay, maybe a little ostentatious. But he liked to be comfortable while he thrashed around haunted by nightmares of the past.

He sat up, putting himself face to face with his would-be kidnapper. A small gasp escaped her lips as he shifted positions. “*I am* a prince. One of the many reasons you shouldn’t be here. And I am bigger than you.”

She laughed. Big and loud and directly in his face. It reverberated in his bones, an echo from the past. Who was this woman? He reached up to grab her mask, and her knife was at his throat before he could touch it.

“I’m not scared of you,” she said.

“Perhaps not,” he said, digging his hands into the sheets to keep from grabbing her hips and rocking her forward. He wanted her pressed against him, knife at his throat or not. As long as she was here, she kept the shadows at bay. Even with the threat of death, she’d breathed life back into him, if only for the moment. “But what is your plan? How do you intend to haul me out of my bedroom and through the palace with no one noticing? As you mentioned, I am the prince and all. People will notice.”

She scoffed and her reckless disregard for who he was made him harder than her firm little body in his lap. Forgetting who he was had always been his biggest fantasy.

“I’m going to blindfold you and take you out my secret way.”

“What makes you think I will come willingly?”

Her smile grew, that gap between her teeth teasing him again. Plenty of people had imperfect teeth, he reminded himself. His imperfectly-toothed person wasn't coming back.

“I know you'll come.”

They were sitting so close now—her legs wrapped around his waist, her center pressing enticingly into his cock—he could see the eyes behind her mask. They mocked him too, dark in the dark room but he could imagine how green they might look in the light.

He shook his head. This was insane. He was the fucking prince of Khis-fire and there was no way this little woman with her little knife was going to take him anywhere. Even if he wanted her to. He had a duty to his family, to his country.

Or so he'd been told from the time he was born. *Smile, Ethan. Wave to the people, Ethan. You must present a pleasant face for the kingdom. Don't slouch. Don't run. Don't think, don't play, don't argue. Smile, Ethan, everyone is watching.*

He shook himself free of the memory. “This ends now. Your little visit has been amusing so I won't call the guards but you have to leave.”

She pressed her knife harder against his throat and he grabbed her wrists, stilling her hand.

“Tell me you want to marry her and I'll go.”

He froze—her gaze on him, her pulse beating furiously beneath his fingers as he held tight to her wrists. “What does my marriage have to do with any of this?”

The woman shrugged, even with a blade at his throat, even with her arms captured, she shrugged like it was obvious.

“Come with me and you can put it off. Me and my associates get the money we need and you avoid marrying that insipid princess from east

wherever the fuck for a bit longer.”

Why was his heart racing at her suggestion? Why was he considering it at all? Why was he still holding her wrists even though she'd lowered the knife?

He knew why, of course. He wanted out of his life. Out of *this* life. This life, empty of everything except ghosts and nightmares and regrets. Delaying his marriage to Arabella of Delcourt was more tempting than anything this woman could have offered him. He had no desire to marry the princess and he was sure she felt the same for him. In the great tradition of monarchies everywhere, the match was purely political.

And maybe he could have gone along with it like the long line of princes and kings before him if he hadn't known love before and lost it. How could he possibly play husband to Arabella after knowing what it was like to find the other half of his soul? He couldn't pretend. And he couldn't forget Miranda, no matter how hard he'd tried. He'd been dreaming of her before the assassin's blade was at his throat and he'd be dreaming of her until his last breath.

"What do you say, little prince?" The woman in his lap leaned forward and whispered the question in his ear. She'd dropped the fake voice and this voice, her real voice, was so like the one he'd heard in his dreams for the past two years, that he couldn't say no. If she was a ghost, he didn't want her to disappear with the first light. He wanted to follow her, wherever she might lead.

“Let me get dressed first.”

Her smile grew sharp with wicked edges. “If you must. And then we go.”

Ethan sighed in relief. “And then we go.”

Miranda:

It had been easy enough to sneak Ethan through the hidden tunnels of the palace. Miranda knew them well enough after working her entire life within its walls. But it wasn't the dark tunnels or the scurrying creatures that lived in them that made her hands tremble and her knees weak as they walked. It was the proximity to the man she thought she'd left behind forever.

She shoved him into the back of the cart she borrowed from the palace stables and climbed into the seat of the wagon, taking the reins. The distance from Ethan and the night air gave her time to think as they traveled the rutted roads to the rebel stronghold. But the only thoughts in her head were about him. How he looked the same but different. Still beautiful, but with a hard edge she'd never seen in him before. In front of others, Ethan was all smiles and easy charm as he was trained to be, but she got to see his other sides. His intensity and his intelligence, his frustration, and his love. All the emotions he wouldn't dare show his family.

She'd thought for a moment as she sat in his lap, feeling like so many times before, that he'd recognized her. She shouldn't have used her real voice, or that old, teasing nickname, not while they were still in the castle, but she couldn't help herself. It was so easy to slip back into the way they used to be. And in doing so, she'd put them all at risk.

The entire plan was reckless and unnecessarily dangerous, but she hadn't slept a full night since the royal family announced the marriage of their beloved youngest son to the vapid Princess Arabella. They were selling him off like a cow to the slaughter. Or maybe something less gruesome, but Ethan and his counterpart were nothing more than chattel to their families. He would never be king, being the third son made that nearly certain.

This wedding was nothing more than a business deal with their neighbors to the north. The perfect opportunity to open the trade routes that had been closed to them since the last war.

And it should not matter to her at all. Except she'd been in the square when they'd made the announcement. She'd seen his face and the misery written across it. She shouldn't care. Ethan's happiness was no longer her concern. And yet...

She'd found herself in the prince's bedroom with a knife to his throat and his broad chest beneath her, his lips tipped into that smile she knew so well. She'd nearly lost her nerve, but she wasn't lying to him. Her associates did need money and fleecing the monarchy was precisely the sort of thing they lived for. It hadn't taken much to convince them her plan was a good one.

She'd left out the part about being in love with him.

It hadn't seemed relevant at the time.

However, now with Ethan still blindfolded and standing in her small bedroom, it had become very relevant.

"Are you going to untie me?" he asked, that smile dancing around his lips. He'd relaxed again since leaving the palace. She still couldn't believe he'd come with her. The fact that he'd rather be kidnapped than married broke her heart even further.

Her ill-advised plan had somehow worked. Ellie and Isa had already sent word to the king that his son would not be returned until their demands were met.

"Maybe," she said, stalling. She'd tied his hands behind his back and wrapped a scarf around his eyes. Soft morning light filtered in through her only window, casting the room in a golden glow. If she untied him now, he

would know exactly who had kidnapped him. And then what? Her stomach swooped with nerves. This was a horrible idea.

“Am I to get food and water at least?” his voice was teasing like he still wasn’t taking her seriously. It used to thrill her to see this side of him. The playfulness beneath his palace-polished self.

“You’ll get your rations like all our other prisoners.”

“And here I thought I was special.”

Miranda rolled her eyes even though he couldn’t see her. He looked the same as the morning she left him. Tall and princely but never intimidating or cruel like his brothers. Dark hair, dark eyes, dark stubble on the sharp angles of his jaw, but his lips were soft and pink, quick with a smile for her. Only the real ones for her. Not the forced princely smiles that never reached his eyes. The smiles he gave her were genuine and secret and reached something deep inside her. He *was* special and that was why this was such a terrible idea.

But she’d brought him here for a reason. Besides the money. Besides the blow to the monarchy. She’d brought him here for a proper goodbye. One she’d been too much of a coward to give him before. If he was truly to be married, this was her last chance.

She stepped toward him until she stood close enough to reach around and fumble with the knot at his wrists. He sucked in a sharp inhale when her body brushed against his. The rope slipped through her fingers and he was free.

He cleared his throat. “Thank you.” He toyed with the edge of his blindfold. “May I?”

Miranda held her breath, her heart thundering in her chest. She'd already removed her mask and released her hair from beneath her black cap, the red waves covering her shoulders. There was no going back.

“You may,” her voice was hardly a whisper. It was all she could manage as she stood in front of him, waiting.

The scarf slid from his face and he blinked in the sudden light. The shock that transformed his features from playful to confused to utterly wrecked told her he’d had no idea it was her.

He stepped back, crashing into the door behind him. The color seeped from his normally bronze skin.

“Miranda?” Her name was twisted and raw from his lips, ugly and mean. “What the fuck is going on?”

“You didn’t know it was me?”

“Why would I?” He raked his hands through his hair, his gaze still running over her, unable to believe she was real. “I thought you were dead.”

Miranda swallowed hard. Right. That. “I’m not.”

“Clearly.” Ethan crossed his arms over his chest like maybe he’d rather she was.

“It seemed the easiest way out at the time,” she tried feebly to explain.

His eyes went dark with pain. “Way out? Was I that terrible to be with? You had to fake your own death?” His voice rose with every question. He pushed away from the door and stalked toward her. The room was small. It took only a few steps until he was so close she could see the rapid rise and fall of his chest. “I looked everywhere for you. I mourned for you. I wept. I...I...” he stumbled over his words and Miranda’s heart squeezed in sympathy.

“I had to.”

“Why?” The simplest question and yet the hardest to answer.

Miranda sighed and turned away. She perched on the edge of the bed, staring down at her feet instead of up into Ethan’s tortured gaze. She hadn’t

been fair to him. She knew that but it changed nothing. Regrets were useless.

“My family has worked for yours for generations. My grandmother’s indenture was passed down to my mother who passed it on to me when she died. Hundreds of years we owed.”

Ethan stood frozen to the spot. He didn’t dare speak.

“We had no way to get free. There was no way out for me.” Her voice cracked and she cursed it. She was supposed to be the strong one here. The one with the upper hand for once. She never should have untied him.

“I would have *married* you. Your indenture would have been forgotten.” Every ounce of his frustration was evident in Ethan’s voice.

She did look at him then, her anger bubbling up inside her. “And what would I have been then? The poor servant you fucked and then turned into a princess? What good does that do for anyone?”

“What more would you have me do?” he asked, his eyes filled with all the pain she’d put him through. She nearly wavered, but her whole life had been painful.

“Nothing. They’re your family. But me, I had to do something.”

Ethan glanced around the room, taking it in for the first time. It was spare, with nothing more than a bed and a desk to furnish it. White walls, white blankets. A room more fit for a monk, perhaps, but it was clean and safe, and it was hers.

“Where are we?”

“The old temple grounds.” Her sisters in arms thought it would be amusing to plot their revenge on the same land where the old priests had sacrificed virgins to the gods. They were far from virgins but it was their turn to spill blood.

Ethan had crossed the room to the window and looked out over the ancient buildings. Parts of the temple were in ruin, but the women had restored the residence, building plenty of rooms for recruits. No one had thought to look for them here. Not yet. When he turned back, his eyes were clear and dark.

“I loved you. I would have done anything you’d asked.”

Miranda swallowed the hot ball of emotion in her throat, letting it settle in her chest, threatening to burn her up from the inside. “I needed to do this for myself.”

He nodded once like he understood. “I still wish you had told me you were alive and safe.”

“And if I had, would you have stopped looking for me?”

His lips tipped up in the corner. “No. I would have kept searching forever.”

“I wanted you to have some peace. Without me.”

“Even while you attack my family?” he asked though there was no longer any anger in his voice.

She never meant for him to get hurt, but the systems his family upheld needed to be torn down. If he was a casualty, she couldn’t allow herself to care. “Why did you come with me?” she asked, ignoring his question.

He leaned against the window, his hands curled around the edge of the sill. She had always admired his ability to appear comfortable anywhere, even if he wasn’t. He’d learned to take up space when she’d been taught to be small and silent.

But the explosion she’d set off outside of the Upper Council meeting last week hadn’t been silent. It had delayed the vote. Another vote on laws built to contain women like her. She was never very good at being silent.

He tipped his head back, resting it against the glass. “You know why. I can’t marry her.”

“But you will, when you go back.”

He stiffened and blew out a resigned breath. “I will. It’s my duty.”

“Fuck your duty.” She hadn’t meant to say it but the words erupted from her mouth. Couldn’t he see that his family, this government, the whole damn society they lived in was bad for him too?

His laugh was nearly as sad as his sigh. “And then what, Miranda? I am a prince. I have certain responsibilities.”

It was her turn to laugh. “Like what? Smile and wave at the people? You will never rule, Ethan. Your family uses you to gain allies and distract the people with fancy weddings. They need you to slide your dick into Arabella so they can slide their ships into northern ports.”

He flinched at her coarse words, but his gaze darkened, his eyes glued to hers. “I would have married you. I loved you. But you left to become a... a what? What are you now? A radical? An assassin?”

“Whatever I am now, it’s better than what I would have been with you.”

Shadows crossed his face, pain mixed with anger. “What would you have been with me? Happy? Loved?”

“Kept.” The word crackled between them followed by a heavy silence. Ethan pushed away from the window sill, his shoulders rolling back as he crossed the room in three strides. She thought for a moment he would keep going and walk right out the door. It would ruin everything, but she didn’t know if she had the strength to stop him.

But instead, he dropped to his knees in front of her. “Then what do you want from me?”

She met his gaze and lied. “A proper goodbye.”

Ethan:

Alive. Miranda was alive. The woman he thought he'd lost was right in front of him. She watched him with those green eyes, the ones he never thought he'd look into again. Her hair, the color of copper with streaks of gold, hung over her shoulders. The way the sun played through the strands took him back to the first time he'd laid eyes on her.

She couldn't have been more than ten but she was already working in the laundry with her mother. He'd caught a glimpse of her hair, spilling from beneath her cap, and thought she looked like a little fairy girl. Even then he'd wanted to capture her and keep her for himself, like a firefly in a jar, something to bring a little magic to his regimented days.

His parents sent him away to school to learn to be princely and regal and other such bullshit. All he'd learned was to pretend. When he'd returned he wondered if his little fairy girl was still at the palace, even though of course, neither of them was little anymore. He longed for her brightness and found himself seeking her out, wandering the palace in search of her. Until the day she caught him.

"You're following me." She spun to face him, her green eyes flashing. No bow, no title of respect. Heat flared inside him at her blatant disregard for his status. He didn't know if it was anger or lust.

"I...uh..." He stuttered over his words. Not at all the polished prince he was supposed to be. "Am I not allowed to walk my own halls?" he asked, shoring up his royal indignation, putting his years of schooling to good use.

She closed the distance between them until only the basket of laundry she carried separated them. "Why would the prince be in the servants' hall?" She raised a copper eyebrow.

"Perhaps to check on your work?"

An angry flush rose up her face. “And how are you finding it, Your Highness? Am I washing your undergarments to your liking?”

He nearly choked. How dare she speak to him in such a manner?

“I apologize, Your Highness.” She dipped into a low, mocking bow. “I didn’t mean to offend your delicate sensibilities.” She stood with a smile. “But that is what happens when you lower yourself into the dirt with the rest of us.”

She turned and spun on her heel before he could respond. Her words, her smirk, her low laugh as she walked away, she might as well have slapped him across the face for how shocked he was.

He tried to forget her after that, tried to feign interest in the never-ending line of women his mother chose for him, but Miranda was always there, mocking him from the shadows. The servants of the palace were meant to disappear into the background, but Miranda refused to be colorless. Her body rejected it. Her eyes were too green, her hair a riot of red and gold, and even her cheeks were always tinted pink.

And she was everywhere.

The night of his brother’s engagement ball, Ethan wanted nothing more than to drown himself in drink and stumble off to bed early. His body was restless, his mind a tangled mess.

Miranda was out of the laundry for the evening and instead weaved through the crowd with a drink tray. Ethan tracked her bright hair through the throngs of guests. How did they all seem to ignore her when she was all he could see?

He followed her to the edge of the room, unable to stop himself. She lowered her tray to one of the many tables lining the wall and turned to him with a smirk.

“Your Highness.” She dipped her head.

“Don’t do that.”

She raised her gaze to his. "You don't wish me to show my respect?"

"Not like that. Not until I've earned it."

Her lips twitched. "And how do you intend to do that?" she asked, laughter behind her eyes.

He stepped closer and dipped his head to whisper in her ear. "First by getting you out of this godforsaken ball."

"Oh?"

"And then by proving to you I'm nothing like these fools."

She pulled back, staring up at him, disbelief still painting her features. "Well, then you have your work cut out for you. Because I certainly think you're a fool." She spun on her heel and her laugh floated back to him as she slipped out the nearest door. He followed her, leaving his family and their esteemed guests behind without a second thought.

She didn't protest as he followed her out of the palace and into the night air. They walked in silence past the kitchen gardens and through the servants' gate. Ethan glanced back at the stone walls of the palace before returning his gaze to the woman striding ahead of him. The stars blazed above them and the moon cast a glimmer over the hair that spilled down her back. She'd tossed her cap aside before they'd left the palace, but now her fingers flew over the buttons that lined the front of her drab gray dress like she planned to shuck that too.

"What are we doing?" he asked, a bit breathless from the walk.

Miranda smiled over her shoulder. "I'm getting you out of that godforsaken ball." She tugged the sleeves of her dress down and off her shoulders, her feet still propelling her toward the lake. "And then I'll let you prove you're not like them."

Finally, she stopped. The lake lay downhill from where they stood, still and dark in the moonlight. Although it was summer, the night was cool, a

breeze lifting the ends of Miranda's hair. She pushed her dress over her hips and let it pool around her feet. Ethan tore his gaze away from her plain white shift and the shadow of her body underneath.

She grabbed his arm for support and yanked off one boot and then the other. Her hand on his body was like a brand. He'd feel it for days.

"Are you coming?" she asked, a playful smile tipping her lips up.

"In there?" he asked, glancing toward the black water. He repressed a shudder but Miranda missed nothing.

"Are you afraid, little prince?" she teased.

"Of course not," he said, already tossing aside his coat and vest. He didn't think as he removed everything else except the undergarments Miranda had so boldly teased him about. His skin felt tight and hot under her gaze. Maybe a dip in a cold lake was exactly what he needed.

"I'll respect you more after you race me across."

He blinked and she was running down the hill, her wild laughter chasing the wind. He flung himself down the hill after her, already knowing then that he would follow her anywhere.

"Ethan?" Miranda's voice broke through his memories and brought him back to the present. The present he'd never imagined. How did he ever think he could contain her? How did he ever believe she'd be happy trapped beside him, attending ball after ball, bowing to diplomats, and batting her eyelashes at lords and ladies of the court?

He'd had every intention of marrying her. Of taking her from a life of servitude and making her a princess. He thought that would set her free. But he looked at her now, dressed in black leather, knowing she had at least one

concealed weapon, and beneath the hurt, he felt a glimmer of pride. She'd done it herself. He only wished she'd let him in on her plan.

Instead, she'd left him a note.

Ethan,

I can't stay with you in this world any longer. I'm sorry.

All my love,

~M

And for once he hadn't been able to follow her. Hadn't been able to find her. The other servants were silent after her departure, no one was willing to give him a clue as to where she'd gone. Eventually, her aunt sent word that she had died of fever. And with her, his dreams of the future died. She'd been his escape, his breath of flower-scented air in the stuffy palace. She'd been the one person he'd shown his true self, the parts of him no one else cared enough to see. And then she was gone.

Her gaze roamed over his face, watching, waiting for his response. He'd somehow gotten her back, and he was like a man risen from the tomb. But what did he want? He wanted to touch her one last time. To hear her voice. To just be near her after thinking she was gone for so long. If this was all he got then he would take it. If this was the last time he got to feel like he was truly alive, like someone saw him for who he was, he would damn well take it.

"Alright," he rasped, emotions tightening his voice. "A goodbye it is." He leaned forward and captured her mouth with his, catching Miranda's sharp intake of breath between his teeth. She met him with the same intensity, her fingers immediately tangling in his hair, pulling him closer. She opened her thighs and he settled between them, his knees still digging into the rough wooden floorboards where he knelt in front of her.

He kissed her with all the pent-up pain of the last two years. He kissed her with all his regrets and all his guilt and Miranda gave it right back. Her fingernails raked down his back and he grabbed her by the hips, yanking her closer. He bit her bottom lip and she whimpered.

“God, I missed you,” she whispered and it nearly broke him. Miss didn’t even begin to cover how he’d felt about her. He kissed her harder, stealing her words. Words made this complicated. Words made his head swim with questions and doubts. But Miranda’s body pressed against his made perfect sense.

He needed more.

“Take it off. All of it,” he said, suddenly hating all the black leather that encased her, keeping her from him. Ethan felt her smirk against his lips before she pulled away and stood from the bed. He remained kneeling in front of her as she undid the buckles of her jacket and tossed it aside, leaving her in a black shirt beneath a black corset. He tugged at the laces that crisscrossed her stomach, loosening the corset until she tossed that aside too. Miranda pulled the shirt over her head, and Ethan dipped his head to lick a trail from her navel to the delicious space between her breasts. Miranda squirmed in his grasp, breathy giggles escaping her lips. He stood, leaving kisses across her collar bones and along the delicate arch of her neck. Her giggles turned to sighs.

She was just as he remembered her, except firmer, more muscular like she'd been training. Training for what he didn't want to know. Not now. Maybe not ever.

He undid the ties at her waist and slid her pants over her hips. She stepped out of them and stood in front of him, her hands tracing her own skin, unable to settle. Ethan stood back, taking in the sight of her, one he thought he’d never get again.

“What?” Miranda asked, the uncertainty clear in her voice.

Ethan raked his gaze up her body and settled on her emerald eyes. “You look good, Andie.”

Her cheeks flushed at the nickname he’d given her.

“I know,” she said, narrowing her gaze. “What about you?”

He smiled and pulled the thin shirt over his head. He hadn't had time to dress properly which only helped to speed things along now. His blood heated as she took him in, her gaze roving over his chest and arms. He undid his pants and let those drop too.

Miranda's eyes slid to his cock and back up again. “You look good.”

He couldn't help his smirk. “I've missed you too.”

“And what are you going to do about it?” she asked, her teasing unable to hide the emotion behind her eyes.

Ethan took a step toward her. “I'm going to fuck you until we both forget the last two years.”

Miranda let out a breathy sigh and took a step closer. “Yes, do that.” She leaned into him, her body warm against his. “I want to forget.”

Miranda:

Miranda had many reasons for leaving Ethan, but lack of love was never one. God, how she'd loved this man. Even when she knew she shouldn't. Even when she knew it would only end with heartbreak.

She had never expected to fall for the pampered prince. But she'd also never expected him to look at her like she mattered, for him to listen to her thoughts and ideas, for him to love her as much as she loved him.

So, yes, she did want to forget the last two years. She wanted to dive headfirst back into being in love with Ethan. Just one more time. Just for as long as she had him here.

He took her face in his hands and swept his thumb across her cheekbone. And every breathless moment of being loved by this man came roaring back to her. She'd pushed it down, shoved it away, tried everything to forget it, but here it was like she'd never left. And it hurt. It hurt to know she would have to live without it again. But not now. Right now, she had him and he had her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and ran her fingers through his dark hair. He let out a shuddering breath, his eyes never leaving her face as though he was afraid she would disappear again.

They stayed like that, locked in each other's gaze for one thundering heartbeat and then two before they clashed together like ships in a storm. Ethan claimed her mouth in a searing kiss, his fingers digging into her hips as he tugged her closer. There was nothing tender about the way he held her now, or the way his teeth nipped her bottom lip until she opened for him, his tongue thrusting inside. Tenderness was for people with time. And they didn't have the luxury of time.

"Miranda," he groaned as she pressed her body against his. "I've needed this for so long."

"Me too." She jumped up and he easily caught her, his hands grabbing tight to her ass. She wrapped her legs around his hips and he carried her to the bed. His body was warm and firm against her, familiar and yet different after all this time. She'd missed it. She'd missed *him*, more than she would admit to anyone, including herself.

He laid her on the bed and covered her body with his. She kept her legs wrapped around his middle and let the delicious weight of him press her into the mattress. He was here with her. He was here.

Ethan looked down at her, his dark eyes full of things left unsaid. She kissed him, not wanting to hear any of it spoken aloud. She'd left him. Lied to him. Hurt him. But still, she would do it again. It was the only answer that didn't leave her trapped in a life she refused to live. A life that would have suffocated her even more than servitude.

But the way he looked at her made it really fucking tempting.

"I want to taste you," he whispered against the shell of her ear, sending shivers through her body. "Please, it's been so long." He rolled his hips forward, pressing against her aching core.

"Yes. Fuck, yes."

He smiled against her neck, kissing her there before moving down her body. He settled between her thighs, his long lean body stretched out over the edge of her bed. His skin was bronze in the sunlight, reminding her of how many times they'd done this in darkness. In secret. She swallowed the bitter taste of the past and instead focused on Ethan's hands gripping her thighs.

The first touch of his tongue sent Miranda's back bowing off the bed. His low chuckle did nothing to stop the fire he'd started. He licked her again, his tongue swirling around her clit, teasing her. She twined her fingers through his hair, tugging on the dark curls. She'd nearly forgotten how soft they were.

"More," she rasped and Ethan complied, licking and sucking like a man starved. He brought her to the edge and then slowed, sending sparks skidding across Miranda's skin from her core to her toes. He did it again, picking up his pace and then backing off. Miranda whimpered and pulled his hair. "Ethan, please."

"Please what?" He kissed her inner thigh and peered up at her from beneath his dark lashes.

“Make me come.” She held his gaze and his lips tipped up into a smile.

He kept his lips on her thighs, kissing and nibbling her sensitive skin, and used his fingers to rub her clit, giving her the pressure his mouth couldn't. Pleasure built up between her thighs, higher and higher, heat and a deep ache emanating from that one little spot.

“Now,” she gasped and Ethan's mouth was back on her pussy, sucking and licking until the room exploded around them and Miranda was screaming the one name she never thought she would again.

He didn't give her a chance to come down from her high. He patted her hard on the ass. “Get up, roll over,” he demanded. She remembered this too, his taking command in the bedroom. How she'd loved it even though she chafed under the weight of it everywhere else.

She rolled over, her legs still quivering, and got on her hands and knees on the bed. Ethan positioned himself behind her, notching himself at her entrance.

“Tell me you want me to fuck you.” His voice was raw, his body slicked with sweat as he leaned against her.

“I want it.”

He slid in an inch and Miranda moaned. “You want what?”

“I want you to fuck me.”

He thrust into her, shaking the bed, the room, her very core. He stayed buried deep, curling over her, kissing along her shoulder blades. She could feel the press of his forehead against her spine. “I missed you. I missed you so goddamn much.” The words skittered across her back, bringing her as much pain as they did pleasure. He slid out and back in, in long, slow strokes, caressing her from the inside.

“But I know why you left, why you had to.” His voice was low and rough in her ear. She tried to focus on his words, but the feel of his body

moving inside hers was robbing her senses. "I can see it now," he said, still moving his hips at a tortuously slow pace. Miranda hung her head between her shoulders, letting his words wash over her. "You were never meant to be a princess."

He slammed into her and her gasp caught in her throat. "What am I meant to be?" she asked, her voice a breathy rasp.

Ethan ran his hand gently over her hip and then grabbed her tight, thrusting into her hard enough to shift the bed again. "Whatever you want."

Pleasure coiled in her belly with every collision of their bodies but Ethan's words swirled around her head. "And what about you?" she asked, her hands gripping the bed sheets. She pushed back against him so every movement took him deeper.

He gave his answer between grunts. "I'm meant to be with you."

Miranda had no words or breath left to argue. Her body wound tighter and tighter, and her moans and whimpers filled the small room. And still, Ethan dove into her over and over until her whole body trembled and sweat dripped down her face. It was too much. It was all too much. His body, his love, his endless devotion. What was she to do with any of it?

Sensation flooded her shaking limbs. Ethan slowed his pace and braced himself on one hand. He found her clit with his other and rubbed her aching center. "Come with me, Andie," he growled. "Come with me one last time."

And she did. She came apart, shaking and crying, her orgasm tearing through her just before Ethan pulled out and came in hot spurts across her ass, saving her from any unwanted consequences later.

She collapsed on the bed, Ethan tumbling down after her. He pulled her close, ignoring the mess they'd made, and draped his arm over her body. "Fuck," he whispered into her hair.

Miranda closed her eyes against anything else they needed to say. First, she had to piece herself back together. But with her eyes closed and Ethan pressed against her, her mind drifted to the past.

“Don’t go,” Ethan whispered, his breath warm against the back of her neck.

She rolled to face him even though it made it that much harder to deny him. “I have to and you know it.”

He sat up and leaned against the headboard, arms across his bare chest. So this was to be a fight then. “I don’t know that at all, Andie. I want you to stay with me. No one will say a word to you.”

Miranda scooted up to a seat, unable to make her point lying down. “No one will say anything to you. They most certainly will say something to me. And besides, I have a job to do.”

Ethan’s soft lips turned into a scowl. “I’ve told you before, I will tear up your indenture papers myself.”

A frustrated sigh left Miranda’s lips. “You can’t just do that.”

“I damn well can.” Ethan sniffed in princely indignation, slipping into the role his family wanted for him.

God, sometimes he pissed her off. “No, you can’t. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“To whom?”

Miranda clenched her fists to keep from slapping him. “To everyone else your family uses to live their absurd life. To everyone I’ve grown up with and leaned on since my mother died. To every human this palace treats worse than their animals,” she seethed.

Ethan’s eyes widened in the dim room. This wasn’t a new argument but it was the first time Miranda had laid it out for him quite so bluntly.

"I..." Ethan opened his mouth and then closed it again, his brow furrowed in frustration.

Miranda sighed. He was a good man. She knew it to be true. He had treated her with nothing but respect since they started whatever this was. He was kind and gentle. He never spoke harshly to the servants or anyone else beneath his station. But somehow that wasn't enough.

"I've brought it up with my father again and again. Truly, Andie. I am trying. Many other kingdoms have begun to pay their servants wages, but he despises change."

"I know." And what could Ethan do, the king's third son, more for decoration than anything else? His role around the palace was to be charming and welcoming to foreign dignitaries and to someday make a profitable match for the kingdom. He was nearly as trapped as she was.

He reached for her and she let him pull her close, her back to his chest. He stroked her hair away from her face. "I would tell the world about you if you'd let me," he said, his breath fanning across her cheek.

"Not yet."

She could feel his nod as well as his disappointment, but he didn't understand. She didn't want to be a princess any more than she wanted to be a servant and that was assuming the king would allow his son such a ridiculous match. Ethan was his pawn to play with as he chose. Miranda doubted the king would suddenly let the piece move about the board as he pleased.

Ethan traced idle circles across her skin, his fingers following the slope of her breast and the curve of her hip. Miranda softened into him. It would be so easy to stay here with him. To let him keep her safe and warm. To let him fight her battles for her.

But she couldn't. Not now when things were finally changing. When there was hope for her to escape this life and help others do the same.

Ethan was never supposed to be more than a distraction, a little fun amid her dreary tasks. He was never supposed to fall in love with her or make her promises he couldn't keep.

Miranda swallowed the emotion that rose in her throat and instead focused on the hands that still caressed her in the dark. She tipped up her face and let him kiss her, let him take away all the worries swirling through her mind. His hands cupped her breasts and teased the nipples between his fingers. Miranda arched into his touch.

"Maybe you don't have to leave quite yet," he chuckled into her ear.

"Maybe not," she agreed, pushing away thoughts of when she would leave him for good. She slung a leg over his hips, straddling him. He smiled, his eyes dark with desire, but something had shifted between them. A line had been drawn and something in his face told Miranda he wouldn't easily give up on her, on them.

Ethan leaned forward and took a nipple into his mouth, sucking and licking until she forgot what she was worried about, until she forgot she would ever leave. She raised her hips and lowered herself onto his waiting cock and rode the prince until sunrise.

The memory rolled over her, crushing her with frustration and guilt. That night had been one of their last. Soon the resistance was forming and she was eager to join. The people were tired of rulers who did nothing but keep the rich rich and the poor poor. They wanted more and she wanted to join them. She couldn't tell Ethan. It was too complicated, too messy. Her feelings for him were too tied up with her feelings about his family. She had thought it would be impossible for him to understand, but now she wondered what would have happened if she'd given him a chance to try.

Miranda sighed, stirring the wisps of hair in front of her face. She was sticky with sweat, but her limbs were so tangled with Ethan's that she couldn't move without disturbing him. She was trying to sneak out from underneath him when a soft knock came at the door.

Damn it.

Ethan groaned as she shoved at him to roll over. He'd always been terrible at waking up. Miranda grabbed his shirt from where it had landed earlier and tugged it on before peeking out the door.

"What?" she hissed at Ellie who was grinning at her from the hallway.

"How's the prince?" she asked, waggling her dark eyebrows.

"He's alive. That's all that should matter to the king." Miranda kept her hand on the door not allowing Ellie to push it open any wider.

"Alive is he? Are you sure? We heard some troubling noises and we thought perhaps you were torturing him for information." Ellie bit down on her bottom lip but couldn't stop the giggles that spilled out.

"Oh fuck off," Miranda said with a scowl. She would never hear the end of this. "What do you want anyway?"

Ellie sobered. "The king doesn't believe us."

"He what?" Miranda forgot herself and let the door swing open, revealing a bare-assed prince face down on her bed.

Ellie clapped a hand over her mouth in delight, her light brown skin pinkening. "It all makes sense now," she whispered between her fingers. "I didn't know he had an ass like that."

"Oh dear God!" Miranda huffed. "Wake up, Ethan."

He grumbled and ran a hand sleepily down his face. "Andie, come back to bed."

"Andie?" Ellie practically shrieked in delight.

“Ethan!” Miranda snapped, putting a hand over Ellie’s eyes. “We have a problem.”

He rolled over, a smile on his face until he saw they had company. “I... uh...terribly sorry.” He reached for his pants, nearly falling off the bed in the process. It was too small for him anyway and he looked absurd sprawled across it. Absurd and beautiful. *Damn it, not now Miranda!*

“What’s the problem?” he asked, tugging on his pants.

Ellie swatted Miranda's hand, grinning at the view. "Your Highness," she cooed, dropping into a curtsy.

“Don’t do that.” Miranda pulled her back up to stand.

“Do you call him ‘Your Highness’ while he fucks you?” she whispered. Loudly.

Ethan choked, coughing to cover it up. Miranda bit back on a grin. “Ellie, shut up. Ethan, your father doesn’t believe we have you. He won’t pay us if he doesn’t think you’re here.”

He ran a hand through his hair, leaving the curls tumbling across his forehead. “I could write him a letter, I suppose.”

"How will he know we didn't forge it?" Ellie asked, stepping closer. Miranda tugged her back and the woman giggled like a schoolgirl. Miranda rolled her eyes. They were literally working to overthrow the monarchy, Ellie was one of their more ruthless members, and here she was tittering in front of the half-naked prince.

“My ring.” Ethan held up his hand, showing off the gold ring engraved with the royal crest. Miranda had never seen him without it. “Take this with the letter.” He pulled it off without hesitating and pressed it into Ellie’s hand, causing the ridiculous woman’s blush to deepen. He grabbed a sheet of paper from the desk, scribbled a quick note, and handed her that too.

“I mentioned a few things that only I would know.”

“Good thinking,” Ellie said with a smile.

“I would imagine he’ll pay handsomely. My father has a lot riding on this wedding. Politically, of course.” Ethan’s expression darkened and Miranda knew the other half of that thought. His father cared only for the political consequences and nothing for the actual life of his son. Ethan had told her once that he and his father were essentially strangers. Sharing blood and a home but nothing more. Ethan was the son he never needed, something the king had said to guests to uproarious laughter on more than one occasion.

"I'll see that this gets to the palace." Ellie smirked at Miranda on her way out. "You'll have to keep the prince entertained for a bit longer, I guess."

Miranda slammed the door behind her, but Ellie's laughter echoed down the hall. She turned and pressed her back against the cool wood and found Ethan staring at her; any amusement was gone from his face.

She braced herself for the words she knew were coming.

“I’m not leaving.”

Ethan:

“You sure as hell are,” Miranda snapped, pushing away from the door and stalking into the room.

A familiar thrill at her strength reared up in him, but he wasn’t going to let her win this time. This time it was his own life on the line and he was done living it on everyone else’s terms. If Miranda could fight then so could he.

“I’m not going back.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “If you’d rather I not stay here then I will leave, but I won’t be returning to the palace.”

Miranda raised her copper brows. “And what will you do, little prince?” She tried for haughty but he could hear the uncertainty in her voice.

“Whatever I damn well please.”

She flinched at his words but stepped closer until they stood nose to nose. “And what about your duty?”

“Fuck my duty,” he said, echoing her earlier words. Her lips tipped into a begrudging smile. “I am nothing to my family but a hand to be played. They allowed me my freedom only until it suited them to take it away.”

“So you were not consulted about your marriage then?”

Ethan huffed. “I was told as though I were a child and not a man.” He gripped her arms and she gasped. “You made me see things I never wished to see. But once I did, I couldn’t ignore them anymore.”

Miranda frowned as though she still doubted his words.

“I have tried for years to convince my father to change, to bring the kingdom into the modern era. I’ve tried to get my brothers on my side. I have argued myself hoarse. I’ve given speeches to the Upper Council.”

A light of recognition flickered in Miranda’s gaze. So she had followed his efforts. She knew what he’d done. Or tried and failed to do. He blew out a frustrated breath.

“There’s nothing more I can do from within. This marriage my family is trying to force upon me is the breaking point, Andie. I am nothing to them.”

“They are fools.”

“Perhaps. But for too damn long, I’ve allowed it. I’ve been their charming prince. I’ve let them dress me up and parade me around like a goddamn show pony.” The anger rose sharply in his chest, surprising both of them.

He'd never spoken about his life like this. Especially not in front of her. When they'd been together he'd wanted her to believe he had the answers, that he could fix things for her, make her life better.

But now, he finally realized how powerless he'd been. How even at the top, he'd been forced to live his life within the rigid confines of his family's expectations. He couldn't do it anymore.

Miranda shook her head, backing away from him. "What are you saying? You can't possibly think you can just walk away from it all?" Her tone was incredulous but Ethan didn't miss the hope in her eyes.

"Why shouldn't I walk away? All my life I've been told I have a duty to this country, to my people. Isn't it time I started actually helping my people instead of my parents' friends?"

Miranda blinked.

"The system is broken, Andie. You know that. You've been telling me from the beginning. It can't be fixed from the inside." He stepped toward her again and ran a hand down her cheek. She leaned into his touch, giving him the strength to say what he needed to. "You need to burn it down. And I want to help."

The smile that bloomed across Miranda's face was hesitant at first like she couldn't trust herself to feel it.

"I thought I could start by washing everyone's undergarments."

Laughter fizzed out of her, the smile strong and confident across her face. "You wouldn't know the first thing about doing the laundry," she teased.

"True, but I am a very fast learner." He pulled her closer and she rested her head against his chest.

"Are you really going to stay?" Her voice was quieter than he'd ever heard it.

He pressed his lips to the top of her head and breathed in her fresh scent.

“If you’ll have me.”

She sniffed and he felt the warmth of her tears slide down his chest. “I’ll allow it.”

He smiled against her hair and held her in the golden light of her bedroom and for the first time in the last two years, allowed himself to think of the future.

Epilogue:

“Ladies, can we please focus?”

The cackling laughter and boisterous shouting had not died down since she'd shown up at the weekly meeting with Ethan in tow. Or Gavin as he was now known. He grinned at her from his seat beside her. It was the first time he'd been out of hiding since she stole him, not wanting to risk even her fellow rebels knowing about him. Even now only a select few knew who he really was. The rest of the women believed that Miranda truly had kidnapped and killed the prince.

Miranda looked at the face she'd thought she'd never see again and returned his smile. She still wasn't used to the thick beard he'd grown, but she liked the way it tickled her inner thighs. Her cheeks burned at the memory, and Ethan's grin grew wider like he knew exactly what she was thinking.

It had been a month since his kidnapping and subsequent fake death at the hands of the rebels. Ethan had returned to the palace just long enough to ensure his father would make the exchange, gold for his son, and then he'd

snuck back out with Miranda the same way as before. Rumors the prince was dead quickly spread and the kingdom had been in mourning ever since.

The girls were delighted at the street cred it had given them, but they'd had to lay low. Incredibly low. They'd moved to the caves in the mountains surrounding the city and had remained safe for the time being, but the kingdom was on high alert. Toying with the king had gotten them enough gold to fund their efforts for years to come, but he only barely contained his rage behind mock despair. It turned out the prince was worth something to his father after all.

Today they'd agreed to meet to discuss their next moves, except everyone was having trouble focusing on anything other than a new man in their midst. They'd all had their share of lovers slip in and out of their hiding places, but never had a man joined their meetings.

Miranda put her fingers to her lips and blew. Her loud, sharp whistle finally shut everyone up. She rested her hands on the rough table in front of her. They'd only just begun to build the essentials for living up here and the largest cave had been filled with a few chairs and tables. Most of their members sat perched on blankets on the ground.

"He's brought us secrets," she said, wagging her eyebrows. "Secrets we can use to our advantage."

Silence filled the cave as the women looked at one another. Maybe some guessed who was in their midst. They'd all seen the royal family plenty of times over their lives. Many worked in the palace. But if they did, no one called him out. They'd all run from something. If the prince wanted to run too, they'd take him in as one of their own. Miranda's worries about letting him stay slowly slipped away.

"Tell us what you know," Ellie said, breaking the quiet.

Ethan smiled and unrolled a map onto the table. "Gladly."

Later they lay wrapped up together in blankets under the stars, forgoing the darkness of the caves for the night.

“Do you miss your big, comfy bed?” she asked, rolling to face him.

Ethan grimaced as he shifted. He propped himself up, reached beneath the blankets, and plucked a rock out from beneath him. He tossed it into the scrub oaks surrounding them. The soil was mostly sandy and soft, but Ethan always seemed to find the rocks.

Miranda giggled.

Ethan met her gaze with a grim smile. "I'd like to say something terribly romantic about how my bed wasn't comfortable without you in it, but..." he paused and shifted again with a sigh. "But I do miss the damn bed."

Miranda ran a hand down his cheek, tugging a little on his soft beard. “My poor little prince.”

He frowned and she kissed his down-turned lips. He rolled her onto her back and braced himself over her. He deepened the kiss, pressing his hardening cock into her center. "Luckily," he said, breaking the kiss and leaving Miranda breathless. "The positives outweigh the negatives."

She smiled, pressing her lips to his bare chest, working her way up his neck and back to his lips. "Oh, I'm so glad you think so," she quipped, even though she still couldn't fathom how much he'd given up for her.

Her expression must have slipped because his next words reminded her of what he'd already told her so many times over the last month. "I finally feel like my life is worth something, Andie. That's worth all the sleeping in the dirt you can throw at me." He nuzzled into her neck, biting and teasing.

“I plan to throw a lot more at you,” she said, arching into him.

“Good.” His breath skated across her skin, his weight pressing her into the earth and suddenly Miranda was stricken with the enormity of what

they'd done. Of what they still planned to do.

"I don't know how this ends," she whispered, her fears suddenly crowding in with her joy and her rage.

Ethan met her gaze, his eyes dark but earnest in the moonlight. "I do."

Miranda raised her eyebrows, wanting to tease him about being able to predict the future, but the look on his face silenced her tongue.

"It ends with me by your side," he murmured against the shell of her ear, the words echoing in her heart. "Whatever happens. Me and you, together. That's how it ends."

Melissa McTernan is an award-winning author of sweet and steamy romance. She writes light paranormal and fantasy stories with plenty of heat. Her books are perfect for readers who like their contemporary romance with a touch of magic. When she's not writing, she's most likely reading or wrangling her kids as a stay-at-home mom. Melissa lives in upstate New York with her husband, kids, cats, puppy, and full bookshelves. She writes romance to keep her sanity.

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