

CHANTOL C. ASPINALL

Becoming
PETER

KINGDOM SERIES — BOOK II

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*Dedicated to my husband, Jaleel.
Your love and unwavering support gives
me the courage to be authentically me.
Thank you. I love you, Brown!*



C H A P T E R O N E

Pica Valley, 1870

Peter felt the chill of the night whip at his skin as he left the house to feed his horse, Preston. Nothing could seize Peter's happiness—not the wild wind raging or the darkness covering the land. Nothing. Not after he bared his soul to Ella, and she did the same.

"I love you, Ella Elise Thomas. We never have to get married, and if you don't feel the same, then that's okay too . . . We can remain friends. I just wanted to be honest. You deserve honesty."

Ella leaned forward and placed a light kiss on his lips.

CHAPTER ONE

"I've waited forever for you to tell me that. I love you, too, Peter Elijah Evans. I can't imagine my life without you."

"You won't have to. Where you go, I go . . . if you'll have me."

He met Ella in the second grade when her family moved to Belle Mount. He was too young to understand love, but he knew he loved her the moment she sat beside him and declared them best friends. Since then, their bond grew, and Ella quickly became the most important person in his world. He admired her strength, wit, intelligence, and integrity. Her beauty was unmatched. There was no one like Ella.

She loves me. His heart soared in his chest. *She loves me.*

Finally, courage graced his lips, and for his bravery, he was blessed with her love. He forbade himself from thinking too far ahead. Ella wasn't the marrying type, and he wanted to respect her decisions.

They left Belle Mount and everything they knew to escape the pressures Ella would face because of traditions. She trusted his plan to protect her in

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Pica Valley without question. Away from Belle Mount traditions, away from Eric Charles, away from danger. Ella was safe.

To have her love is enough, he thought with a smile.

“Peter, Peter! You thought you would steal my wife and get away with it,” said Eric, his voice dripping with hatred.

Peter turned to face Eric, but was immediately struck in the temple with a heavy object. He staggered backward before falling to the ground with a thud. Blood from his open wound streamed down his face and his heavy eyes fought to stay open. Eric crouched before him and gripped the collar of his shirt.

“You should have left her alone. You should have allowed me to marry Ella and make her happy. I would have made her happy,” said Eric.

Ella, I have to save Ella.

Peter tried to crawl away, but Eric stomped on him, knocking the wind out of his lungs.

“I didn’t want to do this, but you just wouldn’t stay out of my way.”

CHAPTER ONE

The world started to dim, but Peter fought the pull of unconsciousness. Dying and leaving Ella to marry against her will was not an option. Dying after their declaration of love was not an option. He had to fight; he had to live. He had to.

Ella.

Ella's face flashed in Peter's mind, and he relived every memory of their friendship and love all over again. The memory fueled him, and he struggled to pull himself off the ground. Eric's manic laughter would not stop him, but the kick to his head did. Suddenly, darkness overtook him.



Peter jolted awake, drenched in cold sweat. His breathing was labored. Six months had passed, and the trauma that Eric caused that night still ran deep. Trying to regain control of his breathing and emotions, Peter sat at the edge of the bed. He fingered the left side of his temple, and the scar reminded him that his dream was real. That night, Eric tried to kill him and take Ella. Thank God for Bill, who arrived just in time and saved them both.

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Neither Ella nor Peter had talked about the incident since it happened; nor had they mentioned their declaration. In frustration, he covered his face. His heart nearly pounded out of his chest. The fear of losing Ella overwhelmed him. He was frustrated at his lack of courage to simply open his mouth and make his declaration known again. However, after six months, did she even feel the same?

Is simply loving Ella enough?

He wanted it to be enough, but he knew it wouldn't be. Not for him. The life he envisioned for the two of them involved an intimacy that friendship could not fulfill. Six months ago, it seemed he and Ella had forever. However, that night forced him to see reality—the harsh reality his mother had tried to show him.

Life is short with no guarantees.

Peter pulled himself out of his bed and left his room in search of Ella. The clattering sounds of utensils falling inside empty bowls gave away Ella's location. Peter followed the sounds of the noisy baker into the kitchen where he stood for a moment admiring her. The brilliant sunlight filtered through the kitchen window, causing her olive-brown skin

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to glow. She was a beauty, with her long, loose, dark curls, her rosy lips, and feminine silhouette. He smiled as he watched her work—her tongue lolling to the side, brows furrowed, and bread batter plastered in her hair.

Their eyes connected, and he swore he saw something change in her gaze as she looked at him. For a moment, he watched as her eyes shifted to his bare chest and her cheeks reddened before she turned away.

“I’m glad you are up. I wanted you to taste this new bread I’m making,” she said.

She kept her eyes glued to her batter. He tried searching her gaze, but she wouldn’t look at him. Finally, he came up behind her, his six-foot height towering over her small frame. He swallowed the lump in his throat as he thought about wrapping her into his arms.

Hold her, he scolded himself.

With his trembling hands mere inches from reaching out and touching her, his courage abandoned him. He dropped his hands into his pockets and Ella spun around and looked at him.

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There was a hint of confusion on her face. Or was it disappointment? He couldn't differentiate.

"Are you feeling okay, Peter?"

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak. Internally, he cursed himself and then turned away from her. This arrangement was beginning to be too much. It wasn't Ella's fault that he was in love with her and too afraid to admit it —again. Maybe it would be easy to move on with another. However, the thought of loving another made his heart ache.

"Peter?" Ella's dainty fingers grazed his back.
"Talk to me."

"I have to head out, Ella. I can't afford to be late working for the King."

He couldn't turn back to look into her hazel eyes. With hurried footsteps, he rushed to his room, got dressed, and made it outside. In his buggy, with his horse Preston awaiting his directions, he took a few deep breaths.

Ella came running out of the house, a brown paper sack in her hand. Peter leaped out of the buggy and met her halfway.

"I didn't want you to forget your lunch," she said as she handed it to him.

C H A P T E R O N E

He couldn't help himself. He leaned forward and gave her a quick peck on the forehead.

"You are very thoughtful, Ella."

There was no mistaking the blush that colored her cheeks. For a moment, he allowed himself to think that Ella felt the same way about him. The moment was brief. She pressed her flat palms on his abdomen and gave him a gentle push.

"You should head to work, mister. I'll cook dinner tonight."

"Is that a threat?"

She slapped his arm. "Even you have to admit that my cooking has improved."

"Whatever you say, Ella Elise Thomas. I look forward to seeing you tonight."



C H A P T E R T W O

Work was the welcomed distraction he needed. All Peter had to do was yank a few potatoes out of the soil and toss them into a collection bin. The work was repetitive and mundane, but it kept his mind off Ella. Not only did it serve as a distraction, but it also paid well. The King's field was expansive and was fertilized to grow almost any vegetation one could think of. Maybe someday he could afford to expand the field he and Ella had.

Peter wiped the sweat droplets trailing from his forehead to the bridge of his nose. He should have grabbed his hat on the way out of the house, but he needed to put some distance between himself and Ella. The thought of Ella produced more thoughts of her, and soon she was all he could think about.

CHAPTER Two

“Are you okay, youngin’?” asked Taylor, an older man who had worked on the King’s field for ten years.

Peter nodded, unwilling to share his personal affairs with a stranger. Well, maybe not a total stranger. He had known the man since he started working for the King. However, two months didn’t make them friends.

“I’m okay. It’s really hot out, and I forgot my hat at home,” said Peter as he shaded his eyes from the sun.

The man smiled his infamous toothless grin.

“Ahhh, lucky for you, I always keep a spare in my buggy. I’ll cover for you so you can go get it.”

Peter hesitated, but it seemed Taylor would not allow his kind gesture to be rejected.

“You go on youngin’. You keep working without a hat, and I promise you, you’ll faint from the heat. Believe me. I’ve seen it happen to many men.”

Convinced, Peter headed in search of Taylor’s buggy. The man gave a general description, but Taylor’s buggy was indistinguishable in the sea of carriages. For a moment, Peter abandoned his search and instead allowed his gaze to take in the

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King's massive field. From the elevated area where he stood, he marveled at the organization of the land. The grounds were divided and planted with expert precision. Peter studied the landscape, taking mental notes of how he could improve the field that he and Ella shared. Their ground was not as expansive, which meant his dream of a King-like field would have to be considerably scaled back, but he was getting excited at the possibility.

The vibrant sunflowers off in the distance caught his eyes, and a smile lit his face as he remembered Ella's first attempt at making him a new shirt. One day, while working in their field, his shirt got snagged and torn. It would not have been a big deal if he'd had a wardrobe filled with other shirts, but he never had that luxury. He kept the torn shirt and pretended he didn't notice the hole where his pocket should be. One week later, he came home from work and found a small, brown sack on his bed. Inside the sack was Ella's labor of love, a brown shirt. The shirt was twice his size, and the sleeves were uneven. Ella placed a single sunflower and a small note in the pocket.

I'll get better.

C H A P T E R Two

She never got better, but not from a lack of trying. Even though it frustrated her, she worked diligently attempting to make another shirt for him, two pairs of pants for each of them, and once — a hat. Ella's determination reminded him of his mother, Paula. Paula came from humble beginnings, but she tried every day to provide all he needed. For that, he was forever grateful.

Peter was about to return to the leveled ground when he made a misstep and took a tumble. There was no controlling how gravity dashed his body as he rolled and kept rolling. All Peter could do was brace himself for impact; it was hard when it came. Once the dust cloud dissipated, and he was able to catch his breath, he realized he had tumbled into forbidden territory; the King's private property. In haste, he pulled his aching and bruised body off the ground but slowed when he thought he heard a wretched sob.

There was no mistaking the despair in the cry. Peter looked up at the mound he would have to trek to return to the field, but when the wail sounded again, he decided to follow it. Hidden behind a thick bush of flowers was a small, neglected, wooden shed. Peter knocked, but he didn't enter.

C H A P T E R T w o

“Are you all right in there?” he asked.

Silence replaced the wails.

“Are you all right?” Peter repeated.

“Go away,” came a tearful female voice on the other side.

With his back to the shed, he slid down and sat near the door.

“I cannot do that until I know that you are all right. My name is Peter Elijah Evans. I am one of the King’s farmhands. May I ask your name?”

Peter waited, but he was rewarded only with silence. He wasn’t discouraged because he thought about what Ella would do. Her determination would glue her to the same spot where he found himself. She would make sure that the person in despair was safe, and Peter would stay and do the same. Peter continued the one-sided conversation.

“I’m not originally from Pica Valley. My mother was, but she moved to Belle Mount. I was born in Belle Mount and spent most of my life there. I just moved to Pica Valley. How about you?” asked Peter.

Silence.

Well, at least she isn’t crying, he thought.

C H A P T E R T w o

Peter continued, the pebble-filled sand beneath him absorbing his weight. “I’m not sure if you are just having a bad day or week, but whatever you are going through . . . it can get better. Believe me, I have had my share of bad days, weeks and years, but I’m still here. That’s the thing about life. There are bumps and mishaps along the way, but somehow, everything falls into place. Exactly as they are supposed to.”

Silence.

“Eventually,” Peter added.

Shuffling came from behind the door, and then it swung open. Peter stood and turned to see a strawberry blonde. Her skin was pale in contrast to her vibrant hair, but she was beautiful and poised. Sadness clouded her light eyes.

“I’m Catherine. Nice to meet you, Peter.” She paused as if contemplating her words with caution. “Thank you for making sure I was all right. I will not forget your kindness.”

“Certainly. I must get back to my duties. Take good care of yourself,” he said then turned to leave.

“Wait, Peter. Could I ask you a personal question?”

C H A P T E R T w o

Her question stopped him, and with his unwavering attention, he nodded to her.

“Where do you think a woman’s place is?” she asked.

“Anywhere she wants it to be.”

Peter watched as her eyes expanded and hoped he hadn’t offended her with his truth. He knew two women who defied traditions: his mother and Ella. Neither of them allowed traditions or others to dictate their place in the world. They made their own way and carved their own path.

“I’m sorry if that wasn’t the answer you were looking for, but that is my truth, Catherine.”

“I take no offense. I was hoping someone else felt the same way. Thank you, Peter.”

Peter wished her a good day then walked away, feeling the weight of her gaze on his back. He didn’t turn around to confirm, but he couldn’t shake the feeling of being watched.



C H A P T E R T H R E E

The workday ended, and Peter could feel every muscle of his body aching with tension. He didn't mind because his aching muscles would provide another distraction from his love-sick mind. The thought of returning home to Ella was both a blessing and a curse — a blessing because her presence alone was enough to warm his heart, but a curse because they would never be more than friends. As he was reminded of his disappointing reality, he approached the buggy and Preston nickered his greeting.

"Hello to you, too, boy," said Peter as he stroked Preston's black mane.

The horse nuzzled up to Peter, causing him to laugh.

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“I love you too, Preston. Are you ready to go home to Ella?”

Preston neighed.

“Me too. Let’s get going.”

Peter tossed his rigid body into the wooden buggy, then directed Preston off of the King’s property and onto the main road. While they traveled, Peter fought to stay awake, but his heavy eyelids made it hard for him to concentrate on the road ahead. The working hours on the King’s field plus the hour-long ride home wore him down. However, he wouldn’t complain. This was the opportunity he needed, and he didn’t plan to give it up.

As he forced himself to stay awake and make it home to Ella in one piece, his mind drifted to the conversation he had with his mother on her last visit a week ago. The two were sitting in his room as Ella busied herself in the kitchen baking bread, allowing them some time to bond.

“Peter, I am so proud of you, and I have a feeling that there is so much more in store for you. I can feel it in my bones and my soul. Don’t give up on your dreams, son. Promise me.”

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"I promise, Mom."

So much more in store? thought Peter.

He didn't have a particular dream in mind or a specific goal he wanted to attain. If he were being honest, the only goal he ever had was to get Ella to see him as more than a friend. Just when he thought that was shaping into reality, the moment was snatched away, never to be revisited.

Maybe it was time to focus on a realistic goal. He thought of his strengths and the possibility of being more than Peter, the poor bastard from Belle Mount. *Was his mother right? Was there more in store for him? Who was he to argue with his mother's wisdom and intuition?*

Relief and excitement flooded his heart as he and Preston rounded the corner and Bill's grocery store came into view. He was only five minutes away from home.

"We are going to take a small detour, Preston," he said to the creature as he stopped at Bill's.

Peter hopped out of the buggy and entered the store. Bill rushed to him and greeted him warmly. Every time Peter saw Bill, the man always seemed to be in a good mood. Peter's eyes roamed the

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store and noticed the newly renovated wooden shelves dedicated to displaying Ella's loaves of bread. By 5:00 in the evening, the shelves were empty. Pride filled his heart thinking of Ella's resilience and determination.

"What can I do for you, Peter?" asked Bill, a friendly smile stretching his lips.

Bill's question pulled Peter back to the present.

"I was wondering if you have any flowers. I wanted to buy some for Ella."

Bill's smile got wider, and his expression changed to a knowing look.

"Flowers for the lovely Miss Ella. Right this way, Peter," said Bill as he ushered Peter to the back of the store.

"At this hour, I don't have many options left but—" started Bill when Peter interrupted him.

"The sunflowers. I'll take the sunflowers with the vase," said Peter.

Bill chuckled. "A young man who knows what he wants. Excellent selection."

Bill handed Peter the flowers, and the two returned to the front.

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“How much do I owe you, Bill?”

Bill shook his head. “Nothing. Take it.”

“Bill, I couldn’t.” Peter used his free hand to reach into his pocket and remove his entire day’s pay. He waited for Bill to tell him the cost.

“You can and you will. Anything for you and Ella. The two of you have been such a blessing to me. Now go home and give Ella those flowers. She deserves them.”

“Thanks, Bill . . . for everything.”

Peter left the store, secured the flowers, then headed straight home with Preston. When he pulled up to the house, he noticed Ella’s parents’ buggy in the front. *Maybe Mr. Thomas is here visiting with Ella*, he thought as he dismounted and secured Preston. Ella rushed out to greet him.

“Thank God you are home, Peter. My family is here, and they are driving me crazy!” She sighed as she pulled him into her embrace.

“Your entire family?” he questioned as he returned her hug, relishing her closeness.

“Yes, all of them. My mother, father . . . even stupid Joseph and David are here.” She looked up

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at him with eyes wet from unshed tears. “Father promised that he would not bring Mother here. Peter, he promised and now she is going to force me to return home. I belong here with you.”

I belong here with you. He replayed her words in his mind. “What did you say?” he asked, a boldness coming over him. In that moment, he felt empowered to make his declaration again—seize the moment.

Ella blinked. Her grip was tight on his biceps.

“Peter, I belong here with you,” said Ella.

Relief flooded through Peter. He was too much in his head to see that what they had was secure. Nothing could break their bond. He ran his hand through her hair, the scent of vanilla danced its way into his nostrils.

“I love you, Ella,” he said without hesitation and watched as a goofy smile lit her face.

“I know you do. I love you too, Peter.”

“Peter, Peter, is that you?” asked Mary as she exited the house with a wide smile on her face.

Ella continued to hold him, and Peter could feel her tension and fear as her mother got closer.

C H A P T E R T H R E E

“Ella, it’s going to be all right,” said Peter.

Ella shook her head; her eyes never left his.

Mary stood in front of them, her hands pressed against her heart. “I just want to say that I am not here to start any trouble. I just want to be in my daughter’s life again. It has been so hard, and I want to say I am sorry, Ella, and I am sorry, Peter. I hope you two can forgive me for how awful I acted.”

Silence.

Peter eased himself out of Ella’s vice-like grip and extended his hand to Mary for a handshake. Mary ignored his hand and instead wrapped him in a cold, callous embrace. Regardless of how Mary felt about him, he was glad that she had finally come around to support Ella. His mother was all he had, and he couldn’t imagine not having her support. Mary released him, then took careful steps towards her daughter. Ella’s hesitant eyes met Peter’s, and with a nod, he assured her that it would be all right.

“Baby, I’m so sorry for trying to push you into a life you didn’t want. From now on, I will listen to you and respect your choices. Please forgive me, Ella,” said Mary. Her arms were extended in anticipation of Ella’s hug.

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When Ella wouldn't budge, Peter signaled for her to hug her mother. Mary turned back to look at Peter who quickly averted his gaze to a distant object down the dirt road. Mary returned her focus to Ella.

"Ella, please," begged Mary. Her voice cracked. "I'm sorry, my love. I'm so sorry. Please forgive me."

Ella took a rigid step forward, stepping into her mother's embrace. That was the Ella Peter knew and loved. She was not one to hold a grudge. Ella ended the contact and returned to Peter's side.

"I'm not leaving, Mother. So, if you came to apologize hoping I would come home, you've wasted your time."

Mary's hands returned to her heart. "No, no. Never. As I said, I'm not here to cause any trouble or push you into doing anything you don't want to do, Ella. I trust your judgment. I just wanted to apologize."

"Okay, good. Shall we return inside?" asked Ella.

"I was hoping Peter would give me a little tour of the place. I just wanted to make sure my daughter was safe here in Pica Valley," said Mary as her eyes surveyed the land.

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Peter could tell that Mary was unimpressed, but she tried to guard her truth.

"Mother, I'm safe here. You don't need a tour."

"Ella, it's all right. I have no problem showing Mrs. Thomas around," said Peter.

He watched Ella's face harden into a scowl as she contemplated what she should do. He reached for her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. Within seconds, her expression softened, and she smiled at him. That brilliant smile made his heart flutter in his chest. *The flowers*, he remembered.

"I bought you something, Ella," said Peter.

Her smile grew brighter. "For me? What is it?"

Peter reached into the buggy and removed the vase and sunflowers he had secured to the bottom. Before he could turn to hand them to Ella, he heard her squeal with excitement. She had already seen her surprise.

"They are beautiful, thank you." She accepted them and then started to laugh. "Do you remember when I tried making you a shirt after the one you had torn? That was so bad . . . I never got better at sewing." Ella laughed again, this time snorting.

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Peter laughed. "I remember."

Mary cleared her throat, demanding that the attention be returned to her. "That is very sweet of you, Peter. How about you find the perfect place to put them, Ella, and go entertain your father and brothers while Peter shows me around."

After a brief hesitation, Ella obliged. When she had disappeared into the house, Peter turned to Mary, proud to show off what they had done with the land.

"Where would you like to begin, Mrs. Thomas?" Mary's pleasant face melted into a harsh stare. Her expression intimidated Peter, but he pretended that he was not bothered.

"Perhaps we should start with the farm in the back. I'm sure you'll like it. Ella and I have worked hard on it," he said.

"How about we start with you leaving my daughter alone and allowing her to return home."

Peter stilled and studied her hard face.

"Mrs. Thomas, I don't understand. You said you wanted to respect Ella's choice. I'm not forcing her to stay here."

CHAPTER THREE

Mary held her head, as if it had suddenly grown too much for her neck to handle. “That’s the problem. You don’t have to force Ella to stay here with you. It is as if you and Ella are joined at the hip. I lost her once before, and I will not let that happen again.”

“Mrs. Thomas—”

“Peter, I’m begging you.” Tears rolled from Mary’s eyes. “I’m begging. Please make Ella come home to us. She needs to come home to her family. Please.”

“Mrs. Thomas, I can’t force Ella to do anything. I’m not sure what you expect me to do.”

“You love my daughter, right?”

Peter nodded. “I love Ella . . . very much.”

“A mother knows, Peter. But this is not the life her father and I planned for her. Ella deserves to live a better life than this. She is living in a damn shack in the middle of nowhere.” Mary slapped her hand over her mouth, surprised at her own vulgarity.

After taking a deep breath, Mary continued.

“Please make Ella come home to us, Peter. If you love her like you claim, you will let her go

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once and for all. Let my baby go so that she can live the life she deserves. I promise, I will not force her to marry.”

A numbness washed over Peter, and the thought of losing Ella made him sick.

“I . . . I can’t . . .,” began Peter, but he became too choked up to speak.

Mary held him, and he could hear the intense desperation in her voice.

“You can, Peter. I know you can. Let Ella go. Ella doesn’t love you, Peter. I’m sorry to tell you the harsh truth, but she loves her freedom. She wants her freedom and not you. Someday, I pray that you will meet a wonderful young lady to marry. You will fall in love with a young lady of your kind, but it isn’t Ella. It never was Ella, and I don’t want you to cheat yourself out of love and a family.”

Mary tiptoed in her heeled shoes and held his tear-stained cheeks.

“Send my baby home, Peter. I’m begging you.”



C H A P T E R F O U R

Thursday, Peter woke up with a headache. He was sure his eyes were red from the tears he couldn't force away. Mary's words echoed in his head, and he wrestled with them. Sure, he didn't come from much, but he was honest and hardworking . . . that had to count for something. *Would that be enough for Ella? Not just for now, but beyond?* He wasn't sure, but he was certain that Ella deserved happiness and the best life had to offer. A life he couldn't afford to give her. Not now and maybe not ever.

Ella doesn't love you, Peter. Mary's words continued to torment him, and he couldn't push them aside. *Ella never said words she didn't mean,* he tried telling himself, but Mary's words overpowered

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any reasoning. *She wants her freedom and not you.* Peter gripped the sides of his head and willed himself to stop thinking. However, when that didn't work and his mind continued to race, like a wounded animal, Peter limped from his bed, intending to leave the house before Ella woke up. He pulled on his plain work pants and reached for a shirt, grabbing the shirt Ella had made. His fingers traced the uneven stitching, and he smiled.

No matter what happens, Ella will always have my heart, he declared silently.

He pulled the shirt on, not caring if he would look ridiculous at work. Who cared how he looked while working in the field? Certainly not the men he worked with. Most of them barely said two words to him as they labored together. After a few deep breaths to calm his nerves, he was able to button the shirt. Trying not to make the same mistake twice, he plopped his hat on his head and then went to leave.

The front door was in his line of sight, but Ella's shuffling in the kitchen as she sweetly hummed distracted him. He couldn't face her and decided to leave without saying goodbye. However, the shattering of glass followed by Ella's yelp caused

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him to rush to her aid. Glass shards from a broken cup surrounded Ella, and a small puddle of blood started forming from the wound on her bare right foot.

“I’m trapped,” she said, smiling even though she was clearly hurt. “I’m looking for a clear path to leap to.”

“You’re hurt,” said Peter as he walked over to her. Glass crunched under his boots.

He hoisted her up and placed her on the kitchen counter while he went to find a clean cloth for her wound. When he returned, Ella was attempting to sweep away the broken glass; her blood smeared the wooden floors.

“Ella.”

She turned her questioning eyes towards him. “Yes, Peter?”

“Why didn’t you just stay where I set you? You are just going to hurt yourself even more. I can do that.”

“Well, it’s my mess so—”

Peter hoisted her up again, interrupting her thoughts, and returned her to the kitchen counter.

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“Stay there,” he said.

Peter dropped to the balls of his feet and held up her right foot to inspect the sole. *Thank God,* there were no shards stuck in the skin, but blood continued to gush out. He took the cloth and wrapped her foot. Then he held the left foot up and inspected it.

“Excuse me, mister, it was only the right foot that got cut,” said Ella with a teasing smile pulling on her lips.

“I’m checking to make sure,” said Peter before he lowered her foot and stared up at her. “What were you doing anyway?”

She gestured to the sink filled with plates and soapy water in a bucket. “As you can see, I woke up early to do the dishes we left last night after my family visited.”

Peter stood, then reached for the broom to start sweeping up the broken glass. Ella continued.

“Thanks for being hospitable to my folks. I know my parents and I haven’t always seen eye to eye on all things, but I’m glad they are at least trying. Maybe someday we can have a big family

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dinner with my family and Miss Paula. That would be nice, right?”

Peter gripped the broom tighter as a knot formed in his chest.

“Peter, did you hear me? Wouldn’t it be nice to have both our families over here for dinner? I could bake and you could—”

Peter forced back tears, but he had enough sense not to look in Ella’s direction as the words left his lips.

“Maybe it’s time you returned home, Ella.”

Ella giggled. “Good one, Peter. All right . . . like I was saying, maybe we should have everyone over at the end of the month. Could that work?”

“I’m not joking. I’m serious, Ella. You reconciled with your family. Why are you torturing yourself more by living in this dump with me?”

He heard Ella’s footsteps as she hopped off the counter then darted towards him before forcing him to face her. He couldn’t stare into her beautiful hazel eyes—not now, not at this moment.

“Peter, what are you talking about? Wait . . . did I do something to offend you? If I did—”

CHAPTER FOUR

“I’m just tired of living like this . . . and for what, Ella? You’ve already proven your point to your parents.”

Tears escaped her eyes as her delicate face contorted. It was a mix of confusion and anger. She punched his forearm, and he knew she had reserved her true strength when he felt the feeble impact.

“Peter, you aren’t serious. Did Mother put you up to this? Peter, answer me.” She stomped her right foot, forgetting she had injured it. Ella hollered in pain and nearly crumbled to the floor, but Peter reached out and supported her.

“I think you should sit down, Ella,” said Peter as he tried to guide her to the countertop.

Ella shrugged him off. “No. Explain yourself. Why are you saying these things? Peter, talk to me.”

He shook his head. The vulnerability in her eyes made him ache to reach out and comfort her with a hug. However, he didn’t. Instead, he remained stoic and unwavering; all the while Mary’s harsh words clouded his judgment and common sense.

Ella doesn’t love you, Peter.

“Look around here, Ella. Is this the kind of life you want to live? Maybe it will do for now because

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you are getting the freedom you always wanted, but one day, you will wake up and hate it here. One day, you will realize that I am a nobody and hate me. Go home. Go home and be with your family.”

With his head and heart clouded with uncertainty, he hoped Ella would chase away his doubt and prove her mother wrong. He hoped she would say something . . . anything to heal his insecurities. He hoped. Ella dried her eyes with her shirt sleeve and tilted her defiant chin.

“I’m staying here. If you want to go home, then I won’t stop you. You go, Peter.”

She wants her freedom and not you.

“I’m taking you home on Saturday, Ella,” he said and then left the house.



C H A P T E R F I V E

Peter's mind was clouded with hurt, and it tortured him as he worked. The lead farmhand had to pull him back to reality three times, forcing him to focus. However, he couldn't concentrate.

You will fall in love with a young lady of your kind, but it isn't Ella. It never was Ella and I don't want you to cheat yourself out of love and a family.

He shook his head, trying to rid his mind of Mary's words. In his heart, it was always Ella. There was no one else he could share himself with so completely, so openly. *There will never be another.* More than anything he wanted Ella's love, but not if it came from obligation. His brain started turning, reminding him of his low potential as a suitor. What could he offer Ella that she would be proud of? He

C H A P T E R F I V E

didn't come from much; a fatherless child with an unmarried and non-traditional mother. Belle Mount looked at his family like the low-class citizens that they were. All his life, he never thought much of his unfortunate situation until now.

A tap on his left shoulder caused Peter to bury his emotions. With reluctance, he gazed over his shoulder, expecting to face off with an angry lead farmhand. But his gaze didn't land on the frustrated mug of the lead. Instead, he was staring into the light eyes of Catherine. Since their first chance meeting, Catherine made it a routine to meet with him every day in a secluded area near the King's field. She always had questions—for some, he didn't know the answers. Regardless, he was honest.

She wore a white dress with gold accessories, and her long hair cascaded down her shoulders and back. He turned to her and, after surveying the field, realized that the workers were bowing their heads. *The King is walking the fields.* Regardless of his fervent search, he could not spot the King.

"Are you looking for someone, Peter?" she asked with a smile.

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“I assume the King is walking the fields . . . hence the men have bowed their heads. I don’t want to disrespect the King as he passes.”

As he was about to follow suit and bow his head, Catherine stopped him.

“The King is in his study, and he wants to speak with you. Follow me.”

Peter hesitated. His legs felt like lead and unable to carry him forward. If the King wanted to speak with him then he was sure to be fired for his distraction on the field. Catherine pulled him forward, forcing him to follow her lead. While she spoke, he constructed his plea to the King. He needed this job, and he would express that to the King. So distracted by his thoughts, Peter did not realize that heads bowed low whenever Catherine entered a room. Finally, they arrived at the door to the King’s study, and Peter swallowed his nerves.

“The King will see you now,” said Catherine as she led him in.

With cautious steps, Peter followed Catherine into the dark and intimidating office. The large room had floor-to-ceiling bookshelves stocked with more books in one place than Peter had ever seen

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in his lifetime. The walls were covered with deep burgundy and accessorized with gold. The room was designed for royalty. A large man draped in a navy blue robe with golden trims stood from his large desk at the end of the room. There was no crown covering his long, red locks, but the authority he emitted spoke of who he was without a word. This was Pica Valley's King, Theodore George Bruce. Peter had never met the man face-to-face, but he had heard many stories of his bravery from the men he worked with. Out of respect, Peter stopped and bowed his head low.

"King Bruce," said Peter.

"Stand young man so that I may examine you. My daughter Catherine has told me about you," said Theodore in a heavy booming voice.

Daughter? Peter made eye contact with Catherine before attempting to bow, but again, she stopped him.

"No need to bow before me, Peter," said Catherine.

"The young man has common sense and decency." The King erupted into a coughing fit, which caused Catherine to rush and close the heavy

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double doors to the study. When the coughing stopped, the King continued. “Catherine, you must get used to the customary greeting. It is a sign of respect, young lady.”

“Yes, Father.”

The King turned his piercing eyes to stare at Peter, and Peter felt as though the ruler was staring into his soul, trying to uncover all of his secrets. He felt the urge to beg for his job before accusations of his distractions in the field could be brought up, but he didn’t initiate the conversation. Certainly, he would defend himself if given the chance, but he would not confess to accusations not yet mentioned.

“Please take a seat, Peter Evans of Belle Mount.”

He was just a lowly farmhand on the field, so it was surprising for the King to know his name and where he was from. *Well, he is the King. He probably has information about everyone that works for him.*

“Thank you, sir,” said Peter as he planted himself in the plush chair before the King.

Catherine walked up and took the seat beside him. Silence engulfed the room for a moment, but the King’s gaze was unwavering. The heat of

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Catherine's stare was also on Peter, and the fierce attention made him uncomfortable.

"Do you know why I sent for you, son?" asked the King as he leaned back in his chair.

"No, sir." *Lies. It's because I was distracted. You are going to fire me.*

The King shifted his gaze to his daughter, and Peter saw a small smile stretch on his thin lips, softening his hard expression. "I trust my daughter's judgment, and she has a question for you. Catherine?"

With his thick brows knitted in confusion, Peter turned his attention to Catherine.

"I will be Queen one day—"

"Soon," interrupted the King.

Catherine squirmed slightly in her chair as if the news of her impending title caused her discomfort. However, she continued.

"I will be Queen one day and I need people around me who I can trust. People who will tell me the truth and look out for my best interests. People like you, Peter. I want to appoint you as my courtier."

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The term was unfamiliar to Peter, and the King seemed to pick up on his unresolved confusion and so offered a simple explanation.

“You would serve as one of Catherine’s advisors —a junior advisor here in the palace. As I said, I trust my daughter’s wisdom and if she deems you worthy of the title then—” the King erupted into another fit of coughing.

Catherine rushed to get him a fresh cup of water. She handed it to him, but he refused.

“Father, drink,” she demanded.

He reached for the full glass of water and took a sip, quieting his cough.

“Thank you,” he grumbled.

“What do you say, Peter?” asked Catherine when she returned to her previous seat.

Words evaded Peter as the opportunity to change his entire life dangled before him. He couldn’t wait to go home and tell Ella the good news. Suddenly, he remembered their interaction in the morning and doubted she would even want to talk to him when he returned home in the evening.

C H A P T E R F I V E

Catherine touched his arm, returning him to the present conversation. “Peter, are you all right?”

“Yes, I am just surprised at the offer. I don’t have any official training or special skills. I am good with my hands, and I’m comfortable in any field. But to serve as your advisor in the palace . . . I don’t think I would even know what to do.”

Catherine smiled. It was bright and genuine. Peter noticed that her hand remained on his forearm.

“I need you to be the Peter that was patient and kind to me and made sure that I was all right on my worst day. I just need you to be yourself. Can you do that?”

“I can,” said Peter.

The King cleared his throat, and it was then Catherine removed her hand from Peter’s arm. A small blush crept to her cheeks, and Peter didn’t miss that.

“If you agree,” said the King, “you would be moved into the palace on Saturday.”

Saturday. Good. He would be able to make sure Ella got home safely to her parents. The thought caused him pain, but it was for the best.

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“Peter, say yes,” said Catherine with expectancy shining in her light-colored eyes.

“Catherine . . . Princess Catherine, I am honored. Could I ask for one day to think this offer over?”

“Sensible young man,” chimed in the King.

Catherine nodded. “Certainly.”



Peter returned home to an empty house. There was no sign of Ella anywhere. Her clothes, shoes, and other belongings were gone. There was a paper folded on her bed, and his name was written in cursive on the front. With trembling hands, he opened the note.

“I know that one day I’ll forgive you, but I just don’t know when. I wish you well, dear friend.”

He spun the paper over hoping she said more. The other side was blank except for his name. That was it. It was over.



C H A P T E R S I X

Two weeks had passed since he had seen Ella's beautiful face, heard her lovely voice, or basked in her radiant presence. Two weeks and it felt like an entire lifetime had elapsed. Peter felt lost each day. Nothing comforted him no matter what luxury he was surrounded by in the palace. Nothing. Not his new plush bed, not his new, fancy clothes, or even his prestigious title.

Peter pulled himself out of bed, and got dressed, but never left his room. It was only 6:00 in the morning. His official duties did not start until 7:00 a.m.. At that time, he was expected to meet Princess Catherine in her study where the two would join more senior advisors and the King. Following that

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meeting, he would remain as Princess Catherine's companion during her lessons until he retired to bed at eight.

However, he dedicated this time to himself. He sat in front of his chestnut desk and removed a blank sheet of paper and a pencil from the drawer. His writing may not be as fancy as Ella's, but for two weeks, every day, he had written her a letter expressing his feelings. Many times, he thought of sending them to her parents' address, hoping she would read them and return one of her own. But he knew better. Yet, that didn't stop him from writing his truth. With the pencil secure between his index and thumb he began writing.

Dear Ella,

I hope that today finds you well. May the sunlight that illuminates the sky bring an enduring warmth to your heart. You will always be the person I think about when I think of love. My brain knows that friendship was all we had, but my stupid heart was greedy to think we could have

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*more. I can't stop my heart from longing
for a love that was never meant to be. I
love you forever, Ella.*

- Peter

A soft tap came at the door, and he placed the letter in his drawer. He swung the door open, and Catherine walked in, her eyes appeared troubled.

“Do not bow,” she said, her voice demanding.

Peter stood straight, his back rigid.

“In public, yes, but in private, no. Please, treat me like a friend, Peter. Can you do that?”

“I can do that,” said Peter, almost counting his words. “Would you like to sit?” Peter asked before he offered her the seat at his desk.

She ignored his offer and instead sat at the edge of his bed. Her puffy dress made her look awkward and out of place, but she did not complain. They sat silently for a moment and Peter knew that she was using the quiet time to think. As he had learned quickly, Catherine was a deep intellect and was purposeful and intentional when she spoke. She was sixteen like him, but she was already expected to make decisions that would impact a whole

Kingdom. He could not pretend to understand the immense responsibility that was thrust on her in her youth, but he admired her grace under pressure.

God bless Princess Catherine. May her rule be long and prosperous. This was the prayer he said every night on her behalf.

“Today, I will meet with two of three suitors who may very well be King of Pica Valley when I am crowned as Queen. Men I don’t know well. Father says that they are from noble families with political or financial ties to the Kingdom. That does not help.”

Peter watched as she wrung her hands together as the room descended into another moment of silence.

“What do you want, Catherine?”

Catherine contemplated his words. “I want love. I want to marry a man who will love me as his wife, but Father says that is not tradition. Marriage is for the good of the Kingdom, not for love.”

Peter removed another blank sheet of paper and his pencil from the drawer. He wrote in bold at the top of the paper, ***What Catherine Wants in a Husband?***

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“What are you doing?” she asked, as she leaned forward to survey the paper.

“I’m writing down what you want in a husband. What you want is important, Catherine.”

“Is it stupid? You know, to want love?”

“It isn’t stupid to want to marry for love. You want someone to protect your heart. Catherine, that is a beautiful thing. What characteristics do you want in a husband? Tell me your top three.”

As if the characteristics had been at the forefront of her mind, Catherine didn’t miss a beat as she reeled them off, and Peter wrote them down: Honor, Bravery, and Generosity.

“All right, we’ve made a list, but how do I figure out which suitor has all of the characteristics, Peter?”

“We put them to the test.”



Catherine and Peter found themselves in the stable, and Peter stood close to Catherine, helping her mount her horse, Lily, a majestic white-maned creature. According to Catherine, the animal was a gift from her father on her fifteenth birthday. One

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year later, she and Lily were an inseparable duo. Straddling the horse, Catherine's dress bunched around her lower half. She skillfully navigated the horse into a trot, while Peter walked beside them.

Peter thought it was silly for her to wear the puffy dress during horseback riding. It looked uncomfortable, but he held his tongue. He knew if it were Ella, she would have already slipped into a comfortable pair of pants. Pants were Ella's go-to attire during their short stay in Pica Valley. He had to admit, whether Ella wore a pair of cotton-brown pants or a puffy dress, she was beautiful no matter what.

"Peter, did you hear me?" asked Catherine. Her face was scrunched into a concerned expression.

Peter shook his head trying to clear it. "I'm sorry. I didn't hear you."

She directed Lily closer to Peter who could not resist the urge to stroke the animal's mane. Lily neighed, appreciating his attentive touch.

"I just wanted to go back over our plan," said Catherine.

In a low whisper, Peter reiterated the plan, and Catherine smiled.

C H A P T E R S I X

“Thank you for doing this for me.”

“To see you happy, I’d do anything, Princess Catherine.”

She was about to respond when they noticed the King, a few royal guards, and an unfamiliar group of three walking toward them.

“I think that’s one of my suitors, Peter,” said Catherine; her voice cracked.

Peter gave her a reassuring glance, but he could feel her nervous energy. Without thinking, he reached up and squeezed her hand, which was similar to what he would do when Ella was nervous. He half expected Catherine to withdraw her hand from under his, repulsed by the uninvited contact. However, she didn’t. Instead, she placed her other hand atop his, a bright smile on her face as she mouthed her thanks.

Peter ended the contact as the King and the group of three approached them. The royal guards hung back.

“Princess Catherine, please meet the Piersons and their son, Alexander Pierson,” said the King as the Piersons bowed before Catherine.

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Alexander's brown hair flowed around his face as he stepped forward. Peter anticipated that Alexander's boyish good looks would cause Catherine to soften. In his heart, he hoped that after meeting all her potential suitors, she would have met someone who made her heart quicken and slow all at the same time . . . *like Ella does for me.*

"It is an honor to meet you, Princess Catherine," said Alexander, before his brown eyes met Catherine's gaze.

"Pleasure meeting you, Alexander," said Catherine before her gaze drifted to her father.

"All right, Mr. and Mrs. Pierson, I say we allow the two to get to know one another without us hovering. Join me in the palace," said the King.

The Piersons did not protest as the mother-father duo followed the King into the palace. Alexander straightened his back and offered Catherine a sweet smile.

"I believe the King had the right idea. We should spend some time alone to get to know each other," said Alexander as he looked directly at Peter.

Catherine dismounted Lily. "Peter stays. He is my advisor. Where I go, Peter goes."

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Alexander nodded, but he did not look pleased. Catherine continued, unbothered by his reluctance.

“Can you ride?” Catherine asked Alexander.

“Of course. Any respectable man knows how to ride.”

Catherine looked at Peter and tried to hold back her laughter, but a giggle slipped from her lips. Peter knew that Catherine was amused by their plan to test Alexander’s character.

“Am I missing the joke?” asked Alexander, looking back and forth between Catherine and Peter.

“I’m sorry, please continue telling us about your horse-riding abilities,” said Catherine.

With Alexander’s focus redirected to Catherine, he continued, “I’ve been riding since I was a child. I am very skilled.”

“How about we go for a ride together?” asked Catherine.

Alexander’s smile returned. “That is a brilliant idea.” His gaze quickly fell on Peter, but he restrained himself from saying anything.

Catherine offered Alexander a black stallion after he commented that his horse was of a similar

build. Peter knew that Catherine had no interest in marveling at Alexander's horseback riding skill. She wanted to know if he would be someone she could give her heart to. The two mounted their horses, and Peter made up an excuse to leave them alone. With his words of farewell, he noticed that Alexander relaxed and even extended his hand for a handshake. Peter disappeared, running ahead and hiding in the bushes with a devious plan in mind.

The plan was simple: Peter would wait until Alexander and Catherine came closer to his hiding place. He would then rustle the leaves, pretending to be a scary animal. If Alexander was brave, then he would ensure Catherine's safety. Peter readied himself as they approached, summoning the likeness of a ferocious creature. As he wiggled the bushes and made low, rumbling sounds, he watched Alexander's eyes expand in terror.

"Do . . . do you hear that?" stammered Alexander.

"I don't hear anything," said Catherine.

Peter wiggled the bushes with more vigor and made louder rumbling sounds. Peter's trick worked too well, which spooked Lily, causing the creature to buck wildly. Catherine lost her balance and fell

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to the ground. Alexander was quick to dismount his stallion, but instead of helping Catherine, he ran away in the direction they came from. He never looked back. He kept going, disappearing into the palace.

Peter rushed out and apologized to Catherine before he helped her off the ground. Lily, though spooked, remained beside Catherine, neighing her apology. Standing on her two feet, Catherine burst into belly-splitting laughter. Tears formed in her eyes and trickled down her cheeks. Her laugh was infectious, causing Peter to laugh.

“Alexander doesn’t have one brave bone in his body,” she managed to say.

“I feel awful that you got hurt in this stupid charade, Catherine. I’m sorry.”

She brushed the dust off the hem of her dress. Her laughter had quieted to giggles. “I’m not sorry, Peter, and you shouldn’t be either. I’m not hurt, and because of your brilliance and great acting skills, I won’t have to marry a coward. One down, two to go.”

Later in the afternoon, after the Piersons left the palace, Catherine expressed her trepidation to Peter about meeting the second suitor. The two sat

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side by side in her small study. The light colors and natural sunlight streaming through the room was a contrast to that of her father's study. Peter tried to comfort her, but she still squirmed in her seat. Finally, Catherine stood and began to pace. Back and forth, Peter's eyes followed the nervous young woman. Back and forth.

"Have you ever been in love, Peter?"

The question was unexpected, but Peter did not deny her of his truth. "Yes." Thoughts of Ella clouded his mind, flooding joy into his heart.

"What does it feel like?" she asked, returning to the empty space beside him.

Peter opened his mouth to respond, but he was cut off when the King entered. Following within his shadow was a blond, young man, with piercing blue eyes. Peter saw the young man smile when his eyes landed on Catherine. She was beautiful, but she was much more than a face. She had heart, passion and intelligence. He hoped this young man would pass their test for the sake of Catherine's heart.

"This is Christopher Harald. Christopher, this is my lovely daughter Catherine and her advisor Peter Evans," said the King.

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Christopher used that moment to acknowledge Peter with a hello that appeared genuine. Then he returned his attention to Catherine.

"I will leave you to become acquainted," said the King before leaving the room.

"I will make myself useful and get us all a drink of water," said Peter, and then he left the room.

Peter took more time than was needed because he wanted to allow the two time to connect before he launched the test. As he rounded the corner, he heard Catherine and Christopher laughing. Catherine's laughter was genuine, and he realized she was enjoying the young man's company. Peter walked into the study silently praying that Christopher would pass the test. Peter lowered the silver tray that had three glasses of water. He locked eyes with Catherine as he handed her the first glass. She gave him a single nod to confirm that the test was still on. On purpose, Peter let the other two glasses fall from his hand and spill out on Christopher.

"What the . . . are you an idiot?" shouted Christopher as he stood in annoyance.

"I'm sorry," said Peter.

C H A P T E R S I X

“You’ve ruined my brand-new garment. Stupid. Get out of here so that the Princess and I can get to know each other.”

Catherine stood with her full glass of water. With a swift hand, she tossed the drink in Christopher’s face. “I’ve gotten to know the real you, Sir Harald. You don’t speak to Peter like that. Please leave.”

Christopher’s face burned with shame. “I’m sorry Princess Catherine. Please, I didn’t mean any of it. Allow me to show you that I am not that type of person. Please give me another chance.”

“Leave,” said Catherine.

When Christopher rushed out of the room, Catherine turned to Peter. “Two down, one to go,” she hesitated, but continued, “Maybe Father was right. Love has no place when it comes to Kingdom matters.”

“Catherine, can you do something for me?” asked Peter.

“Anything.”

“Hold on to hope. You deserve to love and to be loved by your husband.”

C H A P T E R S I X

Without warning, Catherine hugged him. “Thank you for your kind words and help. I’m not sure what I’d do without you, Peter.”

Several moments had passed, and Catherine was still holding onto him. Peter cleared his throat, but when that did not cause Catherine to break contact, he stepped back —out of her embrace. With respect, he bowed.

“Good night, Princess Catherine.”

She stumbled over her words while she uneasily tucked a few strands of her hair behind her right ear. “Ahh—yes. Good . . . have a good night, Peter,” she said, then rushed out of the study.



C H A P T E R S E V E N

Peter woke before the rising of the sun on Saturday morning. He didn't immediately jump out of bed. Today, he didn't have to rush. Today, he was relieved of his duties for the Princess and planned to spend his special day with his mother. Thoughts of his mother's cooking caused his mouth to water. Maybe she would bake her famous sweet potato pudding with raisins. She always made his birthdays special.

Seventeen, he thought as he took his time peeling himself from his bed.

He pushed back the thick, velvet curtains that shielded his windows and stood in awe of the expansive view. From the location of his room, he was able to look out at the lands of Pica Valley's

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elites. To own property near the palace must be a hefty cost, one he could not imagine. For his short service working within the royal palace, he was able to accumulate more money than he had ever earned. When his service was no longer needed, he planned to return to his grandfather's home and . . . and—honestly, he hadn't sat down and planned so far ahead. More than likely, he would return to a lonely life.

Peter breathed through the weight of his crushing emotions and sat at his desk, removing a blank sheet and a pencil.

Dear Ella,

*Today is my birthday and it doesn't feel
the same without you.*

There was so much he wanted to write, but he could not find the right words. He ended the letter by saying how much he loved Ella. As he cleared his desk, he heard Catherine calling his name from the opposite side of his closed door. Her voice sounded urgent, and he rushed to answer her. He opened the door, and she stared up at him with tears in her eyes.

“May I come in?”

Peter stepped aside and allowed her to enter.
“You are upset. Talk to me, Catherine.”

He didn’t know what had upset her, but he felt protective of her. Catherine took a seat on the edge of his bed, buried her face in her hands and started to sob. Peter moved closer and sat beside her. He was quiet and allowed her the chance to gather her thoughts. After silently sobbing, she faced him.

“I don’t know how, but Father knows about the tests and he . . . he forbade me.” She squeezed her eyes tight. “Peter, he doesn’t understand me. He doesn’t understand that I don’t want to live the lonely life he does. My heart could not take it. I’m not like him. I’m not as strong.”

“You are plenty strong, Catherine.”

She shook her head, then flew off the bed.
“Everyone keeps saying that. *Catherine, you’re strong. Catherine, you’ll be Queen one day. You have to think of the Kingdom.* Now you, Peter. I’m tired of hearing it because it’s just a polite way of telling me to shut up and stop complaining. Do I not have feelings? What is wrong with wanting love?”

Her face reddened with anger, and her light eyes were intense as they stared into Peter's soul, challenging him. Having been around Ella for as long as he had, he knew better than to offer anything less than his unwavering support. Before words could escape his lips, Catherine continued. Now she was pacing the floor, the click-clacking of her heels created a steady, predictable rhythmic pattern.

"My father said that he and my mother never loved each other. He told me that their marriage was arranged, and although he respected her and she respected him, they never had true love."

This was the first time he had heard Catherine speak about her mother. The woman's portrait hung in the King's study, with her name inscribed in gold. The portrait captured Grace Alice Bruce as a beautiful blond with the same light eyes her daughter possessed. Through unconfirmed whispers from other workers inside the palace, he learned that she died during Catherine's birth. Peter stood but kept his distance.

"Catherine, I am sorry if I offended you. I didn't mean to. I just wanted to remind you of the wonderful quality that you possess. You don't

run. You don't hide from your responsibilities. You handle everything with such grace. I admire your strength."

She stopped, and with vigor, she wiped her wet eyes. "Sometimes I think I should just run away and live my life on my terms. But I can't. I won't disappoint my father. I won't. He depends on me."

She didn't elaborate, and Peter didn't push for more information. He knew that she wouldn't run. She would overcome. Besides, he was there to help her. *God bless, Princess Catherine.*

"Get ready in ten, Catherine. I want to ease your mind."

Peter thought taking her with him while he visited his mother and celebrated his birthday would be a perfect distraction. Catherine had one remaining suitor, and Peter could only hope that he was all Catherine wished for. He wanted her to find love like the love he held in his heart for Ella. The difference was, he hoped it would be returned.

"Where are we going?" she asked, her eyes shining with hope.

"Do you trust me?"

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Catherine walked over to him before she slipped her hand into his. “I trust you, Peter.”



Belle Mount hadn't changed, Peter noticed as they rode into the territory. Princess Catherine sat beside him. They were heavily guarded. While the royal chariot headed for his childhood home, he silently prayed that somehow he would see Ella, even just for a moment. *Who am I kidding?* If he saw Ella he would want to talk to her, enjoy her laughter, and hold her in his arms.

“Peter, did you hear me?” asked Catherine as she squeezed his hand.

“I’m sorry. What did you say?” asked Peter, gently easing his hand to his lap.

“What does love feel like, Peter?”

An image of Ella came to his mind, and his lips pulled into a smile. He couldn’t help the fluttering in his heart or the warmth that crept into his cheeks. Peter exhaled to regain control.

“Unlike anything I’ve ever felt before. Love is comforting, kind, and trusting. Catherine, you will

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know when you are in love. You will be consumed by thoughts of the one you love, hoping and praying that they feel the same.”

He felt Catherine’s intense eyes on him, but he avoided her gaze and instead focused on the passing scenery. He didn’t want her to notice the raw emotion on his face.

“Were your parents ever in love?” she asked.

He shook his head; his face was still turned away from Catherine. “My mother never talks about my father, and I’ve never even met the man. Maybe they once were. Maybe they never were. I don’t know.”

Peter didn’t even know his father’s name because his mother was so tight-lipped about the situation. All she ever told him was that after she got pregnant, she didn’t marry, and her father kicked her out of the house. Grandfather Teddy forcing his unmarried, pregnant eighteen-year-old daughter out of the house ruined what little relationship they already had. They never spoke again, and when Teddy died, his mother was surprised he had left her the house. Peter liked to think that perhaps it was his way of trying to make amends.

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“I’m sorry if I offended you,” said Catherine, her voice soft.

Peter met her eyes then. “You did not.”

Her lips curled into a small smile. “Okay, good, because I couldn’t bear you being upset with me. I mean, I wouldn’t want to upset you with my questions.”

Peter returned her smile, hoping it reassured her. Catherine asked a lot of questions because she had a curious mind. He was happy to answer any of her questions. Soon, a comfortable silence descended, and Peter returned his focus to the passing roads, surveying every face, hoping to see Ella’s. He directed the guards to pass by her family’s home to increase his chances of seeing her. Maybe she would be outside reading or carelessly running about. Maybe she would see him and realize that he meant more to her than just a friend, more than her ticket to freedom. Maybe she would choose him freely.

He shook his head, hating himself for his selfish thoughts. Ella deserved better. He had to let her go . . . *just maybe not today*, he thought as the chariot passed Ella’s gate. The house was locked, and it

appeared as though no one was home. Disappointed that his thoughts couldn't conjure up Ella's beautiful face, Peter slumped into his seat as he rode to his mother's house. Then a thought hit him. *Maybe Ella is spending time with Mom on the farm. His girls, together in one place like old times.* Peter perked up instantly and wished the driver would go faster.

They arrived at his mother's home and Peter started to leap out of the chariot, but the guards stopped him. He had to sit and wait until they made sure it was safe. The protocol was more to protect the future Queen of Pica Valley and not her lowly advisor. However, he sat with eager anticipation, waiting. *Hurry up. Hurry up.*

The front door to the house opened, and Peter's heart leaped, but it was only his mother who walked out. Secured in her hands was a cloth sack. She held it like it was the most precious thing to her. Her face was laced with uneasiness as she observed the fleet of armed guards surrounding her house. Her frenzied eyes met Peter's and Peter then jumped out of the chariot, refusing to wait any longer.

"Mom," said Peter as he held his mother in a warm embrace.

CHAPTER SEVEN

She patted his back, unable to envelop him fully with her warm, maternal hug.

“Happy birthday, son. I baked you a sweet potato pudding with raisins. I have missed you so much.”

She handed him the pudding, then stood back to look at him with tears and pride in her brown eyes. Her hand came up, and she gave his cheek a gentle squeeze. “You look so handsome. How is the royal family treating you?”

“Mom, I can’t complain,” he said. His gaze searched for Ella.

“She isn’t here,” said Paula, and Peter’s heart deflated with those words. “I’m sorry, son.”

Catherine was allowed to exit the chariot then, and she hurried to their side. Paula started to bow, but Catherine stopped her.

“You are Peter’s mother. I’m so happy to meet you.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” said Paula.

Peter observed his mother’s unease as her eyes continued to shift to the armed guards who stood watching the entire interaction.

C H A P T E R S E V E N

“Well, I don’t want to keep you too long. Peter, my dear son, I am so glad you came. Happy Birthday.” Paula kissed his cheek. Her words held no room for negotiation.

Feeling rushed, he returned his mother’s hug, confused. Peter did not argue. He suspected that his mother was alarmed by the crowd in her front yard. They said goodbye before Peter watched his mother scurry into the house and close the door. When they returned to the chariot, Catherine was the first to speak.

“Why didn’t you tell me it was your birthday, Peter? I would have gotten you something.”

Peter shrugged. “It isn’t a big deal.”



C H A P T E R E I G H T

As Peter came out of his room after a night of restless sleep, he stumbled over a box positioned outside his door. Surprised, he looked around to see if someone was waiting to announce that it was a mistake, but the hallway was empty. Peter picked up the box; it was light in his hands. He walked over to his desk before opening it. Buried inside was a fine, royal blue velvet robe. He held up the robe, admiring the garment, knowing instantly that it must have been mistakenly placed at his door. A letter fell out.

C H A P T E R E I G H T

Dear Peter,

I wish you had told me that your birthday was yesterday so that I could have planned something for your special day. Please accept this robe and another day of relief from your duties. I have already spoken with Father, and he has agreed. Thank you for all you do. I'll miss you today.

- Love, Catherine.

The robe perhaps cost more than all of Peter's clothes combined. Though the sentiment was touching, he did not feel right accepting such a lavish gift from Catherine. He planned to return it to Catherine with a heartfelt apology. However, he would take her up on the offer for another day of relief. He already knew what he wanted to do with the day: revisit his mom.

Alone in his old buggy with Preston leading the way, Peter journeyed to his mom's house. With any hope, he would catch her before she left to sell her ground produce in the market. If she had already left, he would take the trip to the market. Regardless, he needed to talk to her about what happened yesterday. He knew his mother loved

CHAPTER EIGHT

him and was proud of him, but he felt his mother didn't want him around during his last visit.

Maybe she was terrified of the crowd he had brought to her humble home. He remembered how her eyes were filled with unease as she looked at the armed guards. *Yes, that must be it. Mom was just a bit nervous about the Princess's protective detail.* He lived in the royal palace, and he still wasn't used to the twenty-four-seven detail that loomed when he was in the company of the Princess. His mom had never stepped foot in the palace, so of course, it made sense that she would be nervous.

When Peter got to his mom's house, he dismounted from the buggy, and tied Preston so the creature didn't roam far. After several knocks on the front door and no answer, he decided to let himself in with the spare key he thoughtfully threw in his pocket.

"Mom," he called out, returning the keys to his pocket.

Silence.

Thinking she might have been working on the farm, he started for the back when he heard

C H A P T E R E I G H T

vomiting. He rushed to his mother's room, failing to knock, he pushed open the door.

"Mom."

The room was empty.

The sound of vomiting reached his ears again, and he knew he wasn't hallucinating. The sound seemed to be coming from his old room. He rushed in, thinking his mother needed help. He threw the door open and saw a pale Ella, her hair wild, and she was hurling into a bucket at the side of his bed. With haste, he made it to her side.

"Ella, I'm here," he said as he gathered her hair.

After she emptied her stomach, she wiped her mouth with the back of her sleeve before letting her head collapse on the pillow. She was thin and appeared tired; the dark circles around her eyes amplified her exhaustion.

"Ella," he said when her eyes fluttered for a moment, then closed.

She didn't acknowledge him, and Peter was worried by her brief, blank stare before she closed her eyes.

"Ella, wake up. Ella."

CHAPTER EIGHT

She flinched slightly, but she kept her eyes closed. Peter nudged her shoulder, but that still didn't force her eyes open. Ella moaned, which brought Peter's eyes to her cracked lips. When his hand made contact with her skin, it was damp with perspiration, and she was roasting with a fever. Panic set in his heart, and he had to do something to help her. He scooped her off the bed. She felt limp in his arms.

"Hold on, Ella. Do you hear me? Hold on."

As he moved to the front of the house, his mother walked in with a basket of herbs. She dropped the basket when their eyes connected.

"Peter, put Ella down."

"When were you going to tell me? Mom, Ella is sick and you kept that from me."

Tears welled up in his mother's eyes, but anger overwhelmed him.

"Son, she begged me not to tell you. She has been staying with me since you forced her back. I couldn't break her trust. Please understand."

Peter pushed past his mother, his grip on Ella tightening.

C H A P T E R E I G H T

“Wait. Where are you going with Ella?” asked Paula.

“I’m going to get her the help she needs.”

“Peter . . . Peter,” called his mother, but he refused to listen and continued walking.

He placed Ella in the buggy and then jumped in beside her. One glance in her direction and it felt as though his heart would rip out of his chest.

“Ella, please hold on. I’m going to get you help. Don’t leave me,” he said as he watched her limp body slump further in the seat.



Peter entered the medical bay on the lower level of the palace. Though his face remained stoic, he felt as though he couldn’t get enough air to inflate his lungs. His weak legs somehow kept him upright. Goosebumps littered his skin. *Stay strong*, he encouraged himself. Inch by inch, he moved toward the far end of the dimly lit room, where he knew Ella was lying on a cot. His breath caught in his throat as he stared down at her body. The doctor had told him that she passed late in

CHAPTER EIGHT

the night when he left to accompany the Princess outside the palace.

In anguish, Peter fell to his knees and held Ella's cold hand. His stoicism washed away as tears flooded his eyes. His breathing was rugged and uneven.

"Ella, I'm so sorry. I should have been here. I should have stayed by your side. Ella, I love you more than you could ever know." He turned his face to the ceiling and begged; his eyes were clouded by tears. "Please, God, please bring Ella back to me. I promise I will do things differently. I promise."

A touch to his shoulder pulled Peter out of his nightmare, and he sat up with fear in his eyes as they searched the room for Ella. She was exactly where she was when he fell asleep beside her cot. *She is alive. Thank God.* He touched Ella's face, not registering that someone was standing beside him in the room.

"Peter," said Catherine. There was a look of concern on her face as she waited for him to acknowledge her presence. "May I have a word with you...outside. Please."

C H A P T E R E I G H T

Peter squeezed Ella's hand. "I don't want to leave her, Catherine," he said, still trying to shake the dream.

Catherine swayed, and he realized her discomfort. He stood and offered her his seat.

"Please sit, Catherine."

She gave him a small smile but declined to sit. He realized that when Catherine refused to sit, then whatever she had to say was causing her anxiety.

"Are you all right?" he asked as he returned to his seat.

"When you told me about how love felt . . ." she said and paused as if she were searching for the right words, "you were talking about her? You were talking about Ella?" Catherine's eyes drifted to Ella's sleeping form.

Peter nodded, unsure where the conversation was going. "I've loved Ella for as long as I can remember."

"Does she love you...in the same way?"

No.

"Peter?" demanded Catherine.

"It doesn't matter." With fondness, he rested his gaze on Ella before he slipped his hand into

CHAPTER EIGHT

hers. “This time, I will not let her go . . . as long as she will have me. I know I can’t give her what she deserves in this life, but —.”

Catherine inched closer. “You deserve to be loved, Peter. You deserve more.”

“Thank you for your concern, Catherine. Honestly, I appreciate it, but you wouldn’t understand, and I don’t expect you to.”

Catherine hesitated. “Suppose Ella doesn’t get better.”

Peter looked at Catherine, and it took everything in him to speak without a trace of the raging anger he felt. *Ella will make it. She has to make it.*

“She. Will. Make. It,” said Peter.

Catherine touched his shoulder and Peter shrugged off her attempt to comfort him.

“Peter—I’m . . . I’m sorry. It’s just that I thought—” she stopped and shook her head. “I’m so stupid. I’m sorry,” she said and ran out of the room.

Peter allowed Catherine to flee. Yes, he worked for her, but Ella came first. Ella needed him now and he would be there for her. If that meant losing his job and title, then so be it. He would find a

C H A P T E R E I G H T

way to rebuild whatever was lost. His hand pushed strands of hair away from her delicate face.

The King's doctor had diagnosed Ella with typhoid fever, but after three days in his care, she was already getting better. Her fever had broken a day earlier. However, she kept drifting in and out of consciousness. During short moments of consciousness, she spoke gibberish before falling into a muted state. Each day Peter remained at her bedside, always bringing her fresh cut sunflowers that he placed next to her cot. His eyes lifted from Ella's face, and he shifted his focus to the sunflowers beside her.

"Your sunflowers are waiting for you, Ella," he said, giving her warm hand a gentle squeeze. "I should have never pushed you away, Ella."

"Then, why did you?" asked Ella with a hoarse voice.

Peter's head shot up, and he fell from his chair, landing on bended knees. "Ella. Oh my God, I knew you would. I prayed you would pull through. You scared me."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ella tried to sit at the edge of the bed, but weakness prevented her. Peter didn't hesitate to help her sit upright.

"Why did you push me away, Peter?" she asked. Her hazel stare penetrated his full, brown eyes.

"I was afraid that you didn't love me for me, but for the freedom I helped you to get. I was afraid that I wasn't enough for you and that maybe you deserved better. God knows you deserve every good thing this world has to offer, Ella. But I understand now how foolish and selfish I was. In trying to preserve myself, I ended up hurting you." Peter reached for her hands and held them. He watched as a scowl formed on her face. He hoped she wouldn't reject his apology. "I will settle for friendship, Ella, if that's what you want. If that's all you want. I'm sorry."

Ella yanked her hands away. "You thought I was only with you because of what? Obligation?"

Hot tears formed in his eyes as he admitted his insecurities. "I don't have much to offer you, Ella. Your mother was right." He averted his gaze to the ground.

"You listened to *my mother*? My mother, Peter?"

C H A P T E R E I G H T

He didn't miss Ella's voice cracking. He dared to look up at her and saw tears falling from her eyes. With gentle strokes, he dried them with his hands.

"I'm an idiot. Please forgive me, Ella."

Silence descended as she stared down at him, his hands still on her cheeks, catching newly shed tears.

"You're an idiot for listening to my mother and not me. That was wrong, but you have the best and biggest heart of anyone I know. You are the most noble, brave, intelligent, and resourceful person I have ever met. You have so much to give, Peter. Listen to me and listen to me good. I love you, Peter Elijah Evans. I love you for who you are." Ella's index finger ran along the contours of his jawline and she allowed her fingers to linger. "It's going to take you a whole lifetime to make it right between us, mister."

"As long as you'll have me, then I'll spend a whole lifetime loving you and making it right between us. I love you, Ella Elise Thomas."

Peter stood and the two embraced. He had a surprise for her and hoped she would be pleased with his romantic gesture.

C H A P T E R E I G H T

“I want to make things right. Starting right now.” He removed a small box with a simple gold ring. “Ella Elise Thomas, will you do me the honor and promise yourself to me?”

With eyes sincere and wet with tears, Ella looked at him. “I don’t want to ever lose you again. Don’t push me away, Peter.”

“Never. I’ll never let you go, Ella. I love you.”

“Yes, I’ll marry you,” she said.



S P E C I A L M E S S A G E T O T H E R E A D E R

Thank you for reading *Becoming Peter*, the second book in the Kingdom Series! I created this story feeling Peter's pain and grappling with a question that connects our realities: *Am I enough?* Dealing with insecurities is nothing new to me. Even in moments of great triumph and accomplishment, negative self-talk lingers in the background. While these feelings never truly go away, I've learned to tune them out and counter them with truth, positivity, and light.

Like Peter, we must learn to see ourselves as enough—worthy and valuable. He had to find a way to drown out the negativity from both

S P E C I A L M E S S A G E T O T H E R E A D E R

outside influences and within. I adored how Peter supported Ella's dreams and goals in Book 1: *Call Her Liberty*. With this book, I wanted to delve into Peter's character as he journeys to become who he was destined to be.

I hope you find inspiration in Peter's story and my truth. I wish for you to see yourself as a beautiful, worthy, and valuable person. No matter where you are on your journey of self-discovery, acceptance, and love, I wish you well. I wish you love, sunshine, warmth, and kindness.

The Kingdom Series continues with Book 3 already in the works. Until next time, grace and peace!



Get to Know Chantol

I'm an island girl through and through; a lover of warm weather, clear skies, and beaches. Though I was born in Spanish Town, Jamaica, I spent most of my childhood in Nassau, Bahamas where my sixth-grade teacher helped me to discover my hidden passion for stringing words together on a blank page. Regardless of the challenges and hardships I have faced in life, I have never stopped telling my story through the characters I cultivate in my head. I believe my writing has purpose and meaning and I hope to use my truth and learned experiences to give hope and share love with the world around me. When I'm not crafting another story, I'm working full-time as a registered nurse.

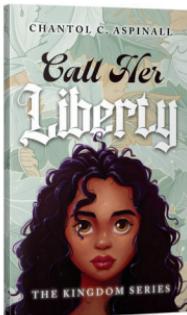
Get a Healthy Dose of Chantol's Library

HIBISCUS BUSH



At the vibrant hibiscus bush, two sisters, Sandra and Jessica, sit seeking healing for the past as they anticipate and accept the grief the future is about to bring.

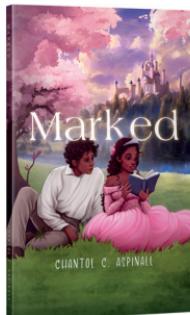
CALL HER LIBERTY - BOOK #1 (THE KINGDOM SERIES)



Two choices; submit or retreat?

Sixteen-year-old Ella envisions a life of freedom; one that's colorful, fun and goes beyond traditions. However, when the pressure of conforming to the Belle Mount way presents, she has two choices, submit or retreat. With the help of her best friend, Peter, Ella will choose freedom, but at what cost?

MARKED



Avery Montgomery, the “cursed” Princess of Clarence, has decided that the marriage treaty between her and the King of Trenton, Christopher Winters, is for the best. She may never catch her husband’s eye or hold his affection, but she knows that, like her, he is willing to do anything for the welfare of his people—even marry a complete stranger. However, after a kidnapping and an unlikely alliance later, Avery begins to question truth from deception. Will she be able to follow her heart and still save her people?