Chapter 2: A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes

The sun had just begun to set when Gabriel saw it. He didn’t usually sneak a peek at the Beaumont’s mail when he went to retrieve it, but this envelope seemed particularly fancy. They were always getting letters from some important family every few days or so for some political reason that Gabriel could never keep up with; but this letter had a specific wax seal on it that was easily recognizable by the entire village: the royal insignia.

 He wasn’t quite sure what the Beaumont’s had done to garner royal attention, but that didn’t stop him from imagining the possibilities. He was really hoping that the law was finally coming for one of them whether it was for tax fraud or just having the worst attitude in the kingdom. Unfortunately, a letter that had negative implications probably wouldn’t look so lavish. A boy could dream.

 He found Lady Jacqueline Beaumont writing in a leather-bound journal in her study, probably recording some nasty revelation in her endlessly dreadful memoirs. Gabriel didn’t want to think about what that journal could possibly contain; probably hundreds of complaints about him that he didn’t have the creativity to imagine.

 “Lady Beaumont,” he began, “the mail is here.”

 “Then put it in the mail slot where it goes instead of bragging to me about your ability to perform menial tasks,” she snapped at him without looking up. Gabriel figured that it was just a reflex for her at this point.

 “It’s just that there’s a particularly fancy envelope that you might want to see-”

 “Well, what I want to *hear* is the sound of you dropping the mail in the mail slot and leaving before I have to continue listening to your prattling on.” She hadn’t even looked up from her journal to acknowledge the young man, let alone what he had to say. That was how it usually went around here.

 Though he hated every moment he spent with her, he knew her well enough to know that her desire for political power far outweighed her dislike of her stepson, so he knew what he had to say.

 “Ma’am, the royal insignia is on it.”

 Lady Jacqueline immediately turned around to look at Gabriel, her gaze falling to his hands where he was holding a large, golden trimmed envelope. There it was: the unmistakable royal insignia that wax sealed the envelope closed. The lady of the house stood up faster than Gabriel had ever seen her move in those expensive gowns of hers and snatched the letter from her servant boy’s grasp.

 “Get your grubby hands off of that,” she snarled at him as she grabbed the letter, waving it around in the air as if to dissipate the commoner dust that contaminated her new treasure. Gabriel watched as his stepmother took the letter to her desk, barely having time to give Gabriel a scowl. She grabbed the letter opener from the desk drawer and got to work carefully cutting around the wax so as to open the letter without damaging the insignia. It was obvious to Gabriel that she was going to keep it to show off to her noble peers.

 Once she delicately opened the royal letter, her eyes scanned its contents and her lips puckered in an attempt to better comprehend it. Her eyes widened.

 “Boys!” She yelled in a voice that resonated throughout the entire manor. “We’ve got some work to do!”

...

 “A royal ball?”

 For a prince who only ever really spoke when spoken to, Prince Damien seemed to have a lot to say about this.

 “Yes,” the King spoke. His eyes were as fiery as ever, but his expression was bitterly cold. “It’s time for you to finally take responsibility for yourself.”

 Prince Damien was absolutely infuriated with his father, as always, but this time it wasn’t passive aggressive. “I hardly think that’s appropriate.”

 “How is it anything but?” His Royal Majesty scoffed; eyes boring into his son. “Enlighten me.”

 Prince Damien paused in thought. It was true that he was to be King someday and would have to face this bitter truth eventually. He was already in his early twenties, so it was a normal time for a prince to get married. A prince who wasn’t him, that is.

 The prince had never met anyone in his life who he felt an attraction to. He just didn’t think that way. Especially because any time he thought about love or romance, all he could think about was the responsibility of the royal family that he had to uphold, and the smug look on his father’s face if he properly upheld it.

 “I’m a grown man. I could find a suitable wife if I tried,” the Prince declared.

 “Which you don’t,” the King nearly interrupted.

 “Can’t say you’re wrong there.”

 “Enough of this, foolish boy,” Prince Damien could tell his father was angry when he began to speak like he was from the last century. “I will make you a proper king whether you like it or not.”

 “Do your worst, father,” Prince Damien exhaled as though bored. “It’s not as if that declaration has helped you very much in the past, now has it?”

 There were plenty of moments in the past where King Fontaine had tried to set up his son with the best young women the nobility had to offer: gorgeous brides from across the world, brilliant and accomplished women of all shapes and sizes. Prince Damien was not unimpressed by that amount of beauty; it certainly captured his attention. If he were in any other situation, he’d probably dream about a situation like this. But every time he heard a polite laugh at one of his terrible jokes or saw an oddly placed smile not quite real enough to satisfy him, he couldn’t help but hate every second of it.

 King Fontaine looked as if he were intricately plotting the least suspicious way to throw his son off the nearest cliff. “Regardless, there will be a ball. I am being extremely merciful to you, bear in mind. I could just have you set up with the first princess I remember the name of, but instead I’m allowing you to choose your lot. You should be grateful.”

 “I’m positively overwhelmed by your kindness, Your Majesty.” The young prince proceeded to overplay a deep bow. “But I’m afraid I’ll have to decline your generous offer.” The prince turned around to walk out of the throne room, but a pair of guards stepped in front of him, blocking his path.

 “You know better than to walk away from me, boy,” the King said with a power in his voice that matched his title. “In two weeks, you will choose a bride, or I will choose one for you. You will be wed the following week. In three weeks’ time, you will be properly wed and our bloodline will be sealed.”

 Oh, not with the stupid bloodline thing again. His father was always saying that. Bloodline this, bloodline that. Who cares about the bloody bloodline? The prince almost said as much but stopped himself before he inevitably sent himself to the dungeon for the last two weeks of his freedom.

 “Alright, father. You win.” *For now*, he thought to himself. He’d come up with some way to thwart this plan. He always did.

 “Yes, I do,” said the King. “But just to be sure, I’ve employed strict security measures all along the perimeter of the castle. Much of my personnel is instructed to watch you at all times and ensure no funny business from the next in line to the throne.” The King finished this thought with a head nod at the guards, silently dismissing the young prince from his presence.

 “I never asked to be the next in line...” the Prince muttered to himself as he left the throne room.

 “And if I could get rid of you and have another child, I would.” It was something the King said not too rarely, and it seemed to sting just the same each time.

 “I know.”

...

 The Lady Beaumont had enough euphoria in her small body to fill the entire manor as she announced the royal ball to her two sons. Gabriel was also there, but he was pretty sure that everyone else in the room had chosen to ignore that fact.

 The proclamation of the royal ball had left both the Beaumont boys expressionless. It was clear that neither of them was smart enough to understand the implications of this, try as desperately as Lady Jacqueline might.

 “Don’t you dunces understand what this means?” She rolled her eyes. “If the prince is looking for a bride, all the eligible ladies of the entire kingdom’s nobility will be there.”

 This seemed to get the message across to the two airheads. Emil seemed the more excitable of the two, “Finally! My chance to show the ladies what I’m made of,” he said as he waggled his eyebrows in a very disturbing manner.

 “Don’t do that with your face during the ball, dear. You’ll bring shame to the family name with an expression like that,” Lady Jacqueline interjected.

 “You raised a pervert, mother. There’s not much we can do about that now,” Jacque added.

 Lady Jacqueline ignored her eldest son, perfectly aware of Emil’s nature and largely in denial about it. “This means we have a lot of work to do, dearies. I’m going to make sure you boys are the most perfect gentlemen at the palace!” The moment Lady Jacqueline declared this; Emil proceeded to sneeze on the sleeve of his fancy dress shirt. He realized his mistake and looked up at his mother with a nervous expression, a hint of snot running down his nose. “We’ll start immediately,” she said without skipping a beat.

 In all the excitement, Gabriel managed to sneak behind Lady Jacqueline to see if he could read the invitation word for word. He felt a burst of hope swirl up in his stomach, praying that somehow the letter would indicate that he might be invited as well:

 *To the House of Beaumont,* it read. *We are delighted to announce that on the 27th of this month there will be held a royal ball at the Royal Palace. The Beaumont family has a longstanding reputation as a member of the kingdom’s nobility and is therefore invited to the occasion. At this ball, the Crowned Prince shall choose his bride to reign in a new era among the people of our realm.* And then there it was, plain as day and undeniably written in the royal scribe’s handwriting: *All members of the Beaumont House are welcome.*

 He knew without having to consider it that Lady Jacqueline was planning on withholding that final piece of information from him. He had always known he’d have to look out for himself when it came to her, ever since his father passed.

 “Excuse me--”

 “Oh, what shall I have you wear? We must employ the tailor immediately to make custom suits for you. You must look deceptively handsome so you’ll have your pick of the richest noblewomen at the ball...” Lady Jacqueline’s excitement could not be contained. Gabriel thought her plan sounded unmistakably criminal and he couldn’t help but laugh at the horror of it all. It would be a fairy tale gone rogue when those women discovered that their prince charmings had turned to pigs the moment this charade ended.

 “Are you saying we’re not handsome, mother?” Emil asked, disappointed.

 “Of course not my darling boy, you just might need some enhancements for a party of this caliber,” Lady Jacqueline smiled sweetly, her eyes lingering on the part of his face which most recently was covered in snot.

 “Excuse me, my Lady--”

 “Will we get to ride in a horse-drawn carriage, mother?” Emil asked with childish excitement.

 “Of course, darling. Only the best for my boys,” Lady Jacqueline crooned. Gabriel thought he might barf.

 Despite the constant interruptions and Gabriel’s fight to be heard, he couldn’t help but notice how silent Jacque had been. He wasn’t sure what was going on in that angry little brain of his, but something was definitely bothering him.

 “Lady Jacqueline--”

 “I’ll have to have you boys take double the etiquette lessons, and I don’t want to hear any complaints! You boys will be married and furthering our noble status if it’s the last thing I do! Oh, but I wonder if I’ll be able to handle having all those grandchildren at once? I do despise children...”

 “LADY JACQUELINE!”The words were out of Gabriel’s mouth before he even realized he was shouting. No matter how hard he tried in this moment, he just couldn’t bring himself to back down from the only opportunity he might get at freedom, even if it was only for one night.

 Before the Lady Beaumont was able to explode, Gabriel went forward with his request. “It states on the invitation that all members of the Beaumont family are welcome to the royal ball,” he said, and Lady Jacqueline looked as if she were about to pop a blood vessel. “So I should be attending as well.”

 It was a bold statement, one that he was already regretting as he saw Lady Jacqueline’s face transform from an angry red to downright blue with rage.

 “How dare you,” she began. “How DARE you speak to me like that under this roof?” He thought about mentioning the fact that his father’s money paid for this roof, but he knew it would only fan the flames.

 “I’m only--”

 “YOU are merely a servant boy!” She fumed, “WE are nobility!”

 “My father was Pierre Beaumont! If anyone has a right to the Beaumont family’s name, it’s me!” Gabriel had never felt his emotions bubbling like this before. He’d certainly been mad at his stepfamily in the past, but this was his breaking point. It had been a long time coming.

 He thought Lady Jacqueline would respond by simply sending him to his room to be done with this whole conversation, but he was mistaken. Lady Jacqueline’s vicious laughter erupted from her lungs, “You? The family heir?” she said, gasping for breath between bouts of laughter. “You are the son of Pierre Beaumont and a nobody. A simple commoner. Tell me, boy, what was your mother’s occupation?”

 “She was a seamstress,” Gabriel blushed.

 “And how did they meet, again?” Now Jacque was snickering, joining in on the fun.

 “...She was hired by him to sew a suit.”

 The laughter that erupted from the three of them was disgusting. Not so much for Emil, Gabriel wasn’t sure if he knew what they were talking about. He didn’t pay attention to things well.

 “How romantic!” Jacque howled in laughter. “A cow that screwed the farmer!”

 Gabriel couldn’t stop the tears from welling up in his eyes as he ran from the room and his humiliation. They were right; his mother was a nobody. But she was a nobody that his father loved more than anything. He remembered the way he talked about her. He knew that what they had was something real. It was something that those three monsters could never understand.

 He remembered the way his father missed her when the two of them had to stop visiting her. Gabriel never really understood why until he got a little older. It was clear that their relationship was taboo and that she probably couldn’t afford to take care of him on her own. Gabriel knew his father wasn’t the type of man to let his son and the love of his life suffer in silence, so he supported them in secret. He was found out by one of his noble peers, and their relationship came to a swift and decisive close for the sake of his father’s reputation. He took Gabriel with him despite the blow to his noble status because he knew his lover couldn’t afford to take care of him on her own.

 Gabriel had always known his mother wasn’t from this stuffy, high-strung society of nobles. From what he could remember, she stood out among them because she glowed with natural wisdom and beauty. She didn’t need titles to be everything Gabriel’s father wanted, she just had to be herself. Gabriel lived by that philosophy, too, which made living with his stepfamily particularly repulsive.

 Gabriel didn’t stop running until he reached the trail into town. He knew an isolated cluster of trees just off the main path where he could cry in private away from that awful house for a while.

 Just as he was getting comfortable being curled up in a pitiful ball, he heard a horse trotting somewhere on the trail, and it seemed to be getting closer. It was odd that anyone would be coming to this part of town so late in the evening, and it was even odder that he could hear incomprehensible cursing accompanying the horse’s canter. Mere moments later, the sound became uncomfortably close, and he heard a loud cry just before he was forced to hurtle himself out of the horse’s deadly path.

...

 Prince Damien did not take orders from anyone, let alone his despicable father. Sure, his father happened to be the King, but that never meant much to the disobedient prince. He enjoyed breaking the rules, making life all that much more difficult for his selfish and power-hungry old man.

 The prince found himself in the castle library, perusing an impossibly wide breadth of information for something that could aid him in his great escape. He had to circumvent the guards somehow, and he figured the best way to do that was with knowledge.

 It was a difficult library to peruse, mostly since the space was usually eerie and vacant except for a castle scribe prowling around every now and then. The prince’s presence was obviously suspicious since he only came into the library on occasions when it was necessary and never otherwise. He was sure there would be many questions he would have to deal with if he were to be seen, so he snuck between bookcases and hid under tables whenever he saw any sort of moving shadow.

 Eventually he made his way over to the magic collection; a forbidden section of the library hidden behind a large retractable bookshelf. He learned of this room’s existence by sneaking into his father’s study during his meetings and perusing some of the old castle blueprints the king had left lying around. He had always known his father to be a mysterious man, and so he had a feeling there were things about this castle that the king was hiding from him. It turned out that his hunch had been right.

 Magic, as it was known to the public, was relatively taboo in the kingdom. It was considered a trouble-making pseudo-science that was dangerous to those who used it or encountered it in the wild. There was a whole political debate about it, the prince was sure, but his Highness did not really care one way or the other about it. He just wanted out of this damned castle.

 The prince had only ever been permitted to leave the castle under extremely strict supervision by the royal advisor, a member of the court, or His Majesty’s highest-ranking servants. He was basically assigned some old geezer as a babysitter every time he wanted to see what life outside his lavish prison was like. It was not a great look when trying to make friends his own age, that was for sure.

 On those rare occasions when the prince did manage to escape the castle walls, he never made it far. If he strayed from the unpopulated parts of the kingdom he would immediately be recognized by a civilian, who would freak out and draw insane amounts of attention to his presence. He was unmistakably himself; a deep scar over his left eye and his dark red hair made sure that he was always recognized. There was no escaping his title, no matter how far outside the castle he ran.

 But this time Prince Damien had a plan. A magical one.

...

 Gabriel didn’t feel the pain of his fall until a few seconds after he had recovered from it. He was covered in mud and when he shook his head a couple of leaves and twigs fell from his tangled, curly mess of hair.

 “Ow,” he said, taking note of all his new cuts and bruises. He looked around to see what had caused his tumble and heard distantly the sound of footsteps running towards him. They were getting closer in a hurry.

 Gabriel had never even considered the fact that there could be danger in the woods outside his house at night until that moment. He had been too upset about his predicament to accurately assess the risk of his actions. He didn’t have time to mentally beat himself up about it, however, since he was too overcome with fear for whoever or whatever was chasing him.

 He covered his face with his hands in grim acceptance when a figure emerged from the bush in front of him.

 “Are you alright?”

 It was dark out, so Gabriel couldn’t see much of the man’s face, but what he could see was breathtakingly beautiful. His white-blond hair glowed in the moonlight and his piercing dark eyes bore into Gabriel’s. Suddenly, he felt as if getting murdered in the darkness by this beautiful young man wouldn’t be such a bad way to go after all.

 “Yeah...” He didn’t say much else, still trying to size up the other man’s intentions.

 “I’m so sorry about that, sir. My horse is apparently afraid of the dark and easily spooked.” He held out his hand so that Gabriel could use it to hoist himself up. “She’s a new horse and it was irresponsible of me to take her out. I’m so sorry to have frightened you.”

 Gabriel thought the way the man talked was a little formal, but then again, he did almost run someone down with his rogue horse so being formal was probably the least he could do. “It’s alright,” Gabriel didn’t know what else to say.

 “There’s no reason to be modest, sir. Are you hurt at all?” The beautiful stranger asked.

 “I don’t think so,” Gabriel responded, looking over his arms and legs. “Nothing that a good night’s rest won’t fix.”

 “If you don’t mind me asking, sir, what brings you out by yourself in the middle of the woods at nighttime?” he asked. Gabriel did sort of mind this question. It was pretty rude. This man had almost run him down and now he was all up in Gabriel’s business. Beautiful or not, it was a little aggravating.

 “Nighttime stroll,” Gabriel lied. “What about you?”

 Despite the darkness, Gabriel thought he saw the other man flush a little, “Oh, you know,” he said. “Blow off some steam with a little horse ride.”

 “At night? When your horse is scared of the dark?” Gabriel rose an eyebrow.

 “Well, I didn’t know she was. Like I said, she’s a new horse.” The man nervously laughed, but Gabriel could tell there was some information that wasn’t being shared.

 “Oh? Might I ask your name?” Gabriel thought it was a normal question but judging from the other man’s expression it might not have been the one that he wanted to hear in that moment.

 “I’m nobody,” the man said, then probably realized how suspicious that sounded and continued. “I’m just a farmhand. Nobody important.”

 “I see. Well, I was just wondering who I should bill for my medical treatment,” Gabriel half-smiled, hoping the other man would pick up on the joke. He didn’t.

 “Oh? I thought you said you were unharmed. I can take you to the nearest doctor if you need me to. I can see if there’s some way I can sport the payment-”

 “I was just messing with you,” Gabriel backtracked, holding his hands up. “I’m fine,” he laughed.

 The other man seemed to brighten up at the sound of his laughter and chuckled a little himself. “Ah, so you’re a funny one.”

 Gabriel laughed but a little more nervously this time. “I wouldn’t say that,” he said. “I have pretty poor comedic timing.”

 “It wasn’t that bad,” he smiled, and Gabriel’s heart leapt into his throat. “You just gave me a little fright.”

 “I think you’ve got it backwards,” Gabriel interjected. “I was just almost killed by a spooked horse.” He had meant it to be a joke, but the other man had a guilty gleam in his eye that made Gabriel immediately regret what he said. “It’s alright, no harm was done!”

 “Again, I couldn’t be more sorry. Is there anything I can do for you, mister...I’m sorry I never caught your name?”

 Gabriel almost answered honestly, then remembered that he hadn’t been given a straight answer when he had asked the same question earlier. “I’ll give you my name if you give me yours.” He was feeling a bit more daring than usual. Out in the cold wind of night with this mysterious glowing stranger, Gabriel felt freer than he had in a long time.

 “You’ve got me there,” the man smiled. “I’m sure you’ve got your secrets, so I won’t pry.”

 “What do you mean?” Gabriel asked, trying to assess himself to see what the other man was hinting at.

 “Well, it’s just that I couldn’t help but notice all the tears streaming down your face,” the stranger said. “I don’t mean to be rude.”

 This man was the most polite rude person he’d ever met, but he was definitely very rude. “Oh,” Gabriel responded sheepishly, and he couldn’t find any more words after that.

 “Don’t worry, you’re not alone. To be honest I was riding through these woods for a similar reason,” the wind picked up at that moment and blew the man’s hair across his dazzling face, and Gabriel was starstruck. “We all need to get outside to let our emotions out every once and a while.”

 The sudden vulnerability of this stranger excited Gabriel. The fact that someone so beautiful could be struggling just like him made him feel suddenly comforted. For the first time since his father passed, Gabriel didn’t feel alone.

 “So, what’s your sob story?” Gabriel couldn’t help himself from saying it, realizing that maybe he was a much bolder person than he’d allowed himself to be under the supervision of his stepfamily.

 “Oh, nothing very interesting,” the stranger scratched at the nape of his neck nervously. “Family troubles, I suppose.”

 “Me too!” Gabriel couldn’t stop the excitement in his voice. “My family is horrible.”

 The silver-haired man let out a bark of a laugh. “I love your honesty,” he smiled. “I’ve never heard someone just come out and say something like that before.”

 “It’s just that I’ve never had someone to talk to about them before, I guess,” Gabriel blushed and hoped the man couldn’t see it. “They’re terribly obsessed with themselves.”

 “Oh, I hear that,” the beautiful man interjected. “My father is the exact same way.”

 “Really?”

 “Absolutely,” he said, and his eyes lit up like stars as the conversation became a little more passionate. “He’s always on my case about living up to the family name but he’s a total hypocrite.”

 “Exactly!” Gabriel couldn’t help himself. “My stepmother only cares about her social status and how much money she can squeeze out of her two sons.”

 “What a nasty woman,” the stranger said, then backtracked. “I’m sorry, that’s not my place to say.”

 “No, please,” Gabriel laughed. “It’s music to my ears.”

 The stranger smiled at him, and Gabriel thought his heart might give out. “My father also only cares about using me to further his own status and power, so when I hear things like that, I just get angry.”

 “I understand completely,” Gabriel said. “Your father sounds like he’s got his head up his ass.”

 The stranger let out a snort and began laughing aloud. Gabriel thought his remark was a little unruly, but something about this stranger just made him feel like he didn’t have to constantly monitor his phrasing.

 “You’re hilarious,” the stranger could barely say it through his laughter, and Gabriel felt his face flush an even deeper red if that was possible. “It’s so nice to hear someone say something bad about him. I really needed that.”

 “Any time,” Gabriel chuckled. “I’ve got a lot more pent-up rage where that came from.”

 “I’d love to hear more of it sometime,” the stranger said, and Gabriel suddenly felt as if this whole meeting was too good to be true. He almost pinched his arm to see if he was dreaming, then quickly decided that he didn’t want to know whether he was or not. He just wanted his time with this stranger to last as long as it could. “It’s a shame I don’t have your name.”

 “Gabriel,” he couldn’t stop himself. He wanted to see this man again and he didn’t care about the consequences in that moment. He backtracked though before he said his last name. “I think I’ll keep my house a secret though. Don’t want to start any rumors or anything.”

 “Likewise,” the mysterious stranger agreed. There was a moment of awkward silence before the man spoke up again. “Would you like to meet here again, mysterious stranger? I haven’t been able to vent about my family like this ever in my life, and now that I know how good it is, I don’t want to stop.”

 Gabriel felt his heart try to crawl out of his chest as the stranger said this, and he responded before a single thought entered his head. “You took the words right out of my mouth!”

 “I’m Dilan,” he said. “When can we meet again?”

 “Tomorrow night. Same time, same place,” Gabriel said, repeating the strangers name over and over in his head and relishing in it.

 Dilan smiled at him, and Gabriel fought the urge to touch him to make sure he was real.

 As Dilan turned to leave, the two boys took one last moment to revel in each other’s light amid the endless darkness of their respective worlds.

 “I’ll be waiting.”