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KATHARINE MCGEE



A PREQUEL NOVELLA

INHERITANCE

AMERICAN ROYALS

ALSO BY KATHARINE McGEE

American Royals

American Royals II: Majesty

American Royals III: Rivals

A PREQUEL NOVELLA

INHERITANCE

AMERICAN ROYALS

KATHARINE MCGEE

Random House  New York

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Produced by Alloy Entertainment

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

Ebook ISBN 9780593567845

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PROLOGUE

Royals: they're just like us.

You don't actually believe such an absurdity, do you? It's just a myth that tabloids use to sell magazines—accompanied by photos of the Washington twins shooting pool at a dive bar, or of Princess Louise of France blowing on the polish of her fresh manicure. Surely you realize that those photos are staged.

In so many ways, royals are *not* like us. They grow up in palaces with lofty ceilings and sweeping staircases; they are constantly bowed and curtsied to. They inherit titles and tiaras.

But then, they also flirt and fight and act on impulse; they have dreams and hidden fears. Maybe they are like us after all. Maybe they are astonishingly, achingly human.

And nothing is more deeply human than a night filled with secrets.

You know the kind of night I'm talking about. A night when everything changes, when your entire world seems to balance on a razor-thin edge before veering in some new and unforeseen direction. Situations that you never thought possible might unfold. And some doors might close to you forever. That kind of night will find all of us eventually, royal and commoner alike.

And when the night is over and the sun comes up, everything has changed.

That's when the real story begins.

1

BEATRICE

Princess Beatrice scanned the ballroom, looking through the voluminous gowns and crisp tuxedos for one face in particular. But when her father approached, she quickly tore her gaze away and smiled up at him.

“Hey, Bee.” King George IV of America held out a hand. “Dance with me?”

It was a trick her dad often employed at crowded events. He and Beatrice would retreat onto the dance floor: to strategize, or to share something one of them had learned, or simply to get a moment alone. Often this was the only way that King George could actually talk with his oldest daughter and heir. The moment he and Beatrice stepped off the dance floor, people would swarm toward them, jostling eagerly for the king’s attention. Drowning him in a swirl of requests.

Everyone always wanted something from the king. They wanted him to give a commencement address, or be an honorary cohost of their charity gala, or help their family member get an internship in Congress. They wanted a photo or a promise or simply the secondhand glamour of standing in his orbit. At events like this, King George and Queen Adelaide—and tonight, Beatrice and her French counterpart, the Princess Louise—were the zoo animals that people had bought tickets to see. And since this event had cost ten thousand dollars a table, the guests were clearly determined to get their money’s worth.

“It’s such a hassle hosting foreign royalty, isn’t it?” King George said softly. “I’m glad it’s the Madisons this time, and not us.”

“You’re glad we didn’t have to turn the palace into a blue fish tank?” Beatrice joked.

Her dad chuckled. “I *do* feel like a fish, now that you mention it.”

The ballroom at Montpelier—the Madison family’s country estate—had been transformed for tonight’s charity event, which celebrated the new collaboration between the National Portrait Gallery and the Louvre. The theme was *Soirée Bleue*, which, as far as Beatrice could tell, had nothing to do with either museum. It was simply an excuse to decorate Montpelier with seafoam-blue lighting and towering displays of hydrangeas on blue Lucite tables. The guests, all wearing shades of navy or periwinkle or turquoise, floated about the ballroom like a great blue wave. Behind a velvet rope, in a small antechamber, hung the pièce de résistance: the *Mona Lisa*, the crown jewel of the agreement between the two museums. The painting would be on loan in America for six months, touring from one regional museum to another.

Ambrose Madison, the Duke of Virginia—who was America’s current ambassador to France—had supposedly brokered the agreement. He and his family were back from Paris for the weekend to toast this historic moment. Or, really, to soak up praise.

“Have you heard from Sean?” Beatrice asked her father as they made a slow circle of the dance floor. Sean, their family’s head of security, was the only responsible adult at Washington Palace right now. Beatrice still couldn’t believe that her parents had left her siblings, Sam and Jeff, home alone on the night of their high school graduation.

The king glanced down at Beatrice, amused. “I know you’re worried, but the twins will be just fine.”

“You told them they could throw a party!”

“We both know they’ve done it before, when they were the only ones in the palace.” A strangely wistful note entered her dad’s voice as he added, “Let them have their fun now, while they can.”

Beatrice tried to hide her resentment. It must be nice to be Sam and Jeff: to have all the perks of being a Washington, but none of the responsibilities.

Across the ballroom, the Duke of Virginia's son, James, caught Beatrice's gaze and smiled lasciviously. Beatrice quickly looked away, pretending not to see. James had cornered her earlier and talked about himself for half an hour. As if she cared that he'd played lacrosse at prep school, or about his college fraternity, or that he and his younger sister had vacationed at the Spanish royal family's house on Mallorca.

Those sorts of guys—the pompous aristocratic types—had been circling Beatrice with increasing frequency lately. At some point, she knew, she would be expected to *marry* one of them.

But that was a far-off problem, and one that didn't bear thinking about right now.

Her dad tugged Beatrice's arm over her head, and she spun on her toes, the way she used to when she was a little girl and he played Motown on the old record player. "So, what do you think of her?" he asked.

"I haven't actually talked to her yet," Beatrice admitted.

King George followed his daughter's gaze to Louise, the Princess of France. "I was talking about the *Mona Lisa*," he said gently. "Though now I'm curious about why you're avoiding Louise. She's one of the few people here your age."

Louise was five years older than Beatrice, actually, and vastly more intimidating. She gazed about the room with a blasé nonchalance, as if she'd seen and done everything in life and nothing could surprise her anymore.

"I'm not avoiding her. I've just been busy," Beatrice said unconvincingly.

Her father let out a breath. "I've always hoped that you and Louise might become friends. You could help each other navigate the strangeness of your positions."

It was true that Beatrice and Louise had been born to similar situations, both set to become their nation's first queen regnant. Though, unlike Beatrice, Louise was already queen in all but name. King Louis XXIII was ill; she had served as his Regent for several years now.

“Why would I need Louise when I have you, Dad?” Beatrice said lightly. “Louise may rule France, but you’re the one ruling America, and we both know *that’s* the role I’m training for. Which is also a role I won’t have to fill for a very long time.”

“Of course.” George’s eyes flicked downward. “All the same, I think you should make more of an effort with Louise. Two future queens... You might learn a lot from each other.”

As the song ended and her dad took a step back, the inevitable crush of people began streaming toward him. Beatrice retreated, trying not to feel disappointed. It had always been this way for her family: their private moments played out in public, their conversations timed to the length of a song.

Princess Louise still stood across the ballroom, chatting with a few people near the alcove that led to the *Mona Lisa*. She was formidably chic in her gown, which looked demure at first glance—until you realized that the long-sleeved, floor-length lace was actually a sheer overlay, with only a stretchy tube dress beneath. You could see glimpses of Louise’s arms and legs and cleavage through the top layer.

Beatrice thought of her father’s words and took a deep breath, then headed in that direction.

When she reached Louise, the princess’s companions gave sloppy curtsies and scattered. That was what royalty always did: it either attracted people like moths to a flame or sent them running. There was no middle ground.

“Good evening, Your Royal Highness,” Beatrice said cautiously.

“Ah yes, hello.” Louise’s voice was low and musical and distracted. She hadn’t greeted Beatrice by name, let alone by title—which was a shocking breach of etiquette. But Beatrice found that she didn’t mind.

She came to stand next to Louise, staring uncertainly at the portrait. She never really knew what to do around art.

“It’s a beautiful painting,” she murmured.

Louise had a glass of red wine in her hands, blatantly ignoring the placard that said NO DRINKS NEAR THE ARTWORK. She twirled its stem idly in

her fingers, holding it in a way that suggested it might crash to the floor at any moment.

Beatrice was reminded of how she'd felt as a freshman around some of the older girls at Harvard—the ones who strolled into lectures five minutes late, wearing neon leggings and clutching a latte, only to brazenly raise their hands and ask a question. She often wished she could move through the world with such unapologetic confidence.

“Look at her,” Louise said abruptly, lifting her hand. Her wine sloshed perilously close to the brim of her glass, yet she didn't flinch. “What do you suppose she's thinking about?”

Beatrice stared at the woman in the painting: at her delicate veil, her luminous eyes, the vague smile that teased her lips. “I don't know.”

“She's got a secret. Something deliciously off-limits, like a forbidden love.”

For some reason, Beatrice felt the need to argue. “She's pensive, but that doesn't necessarily mean she's hiding something.”

Louise tossed her blond curls. “Of course she's hiding something! Women have always been forced to conceal things. That is just part of being a woman—especially a powerful woman.”

No one ever talked to Beatrice with such bluntness. It was shocking, and a bit invigorating.

“You don't know that the woman in the portrait was powerful.”

“She was wealthy enough to commission this from Leonardo da Vinci. That has to mean she wielded power,” Louise declared. “Ultimately, art is all about power and secrets, isn't it? And money.”

“Sounds a lot like politics.”

Louise seemed amused by that. “It does, doesn't it?”

Beatrice shifted a few steps closer, drawn to Louise as if by magnetism. They'd known each other their whole lives, crossing paths a few times a year—at state visits, or at galas like this one, or at the League of Kings conference twice a decade—but Louise had never paid her more than cursory attention. Beatrice had probably seemed juvenile, full of stories

about college and her charity initiatives. Whereas Louise was Queen of France in all but name.

If she was lonely, if she missed her father's guidance, Louise didn't reveal it. There was something honed and slightly intimidating about her face, the decisive glint in her pale blue eyes. She looked like a woman who *ruled*. And Beatrice didn't know many of those.

"How did the Madisons convince you to lend us the painting?" she asked, curious. It was the first time the *Mona Lisa* had ever been on loan in America, and the National Portrait Gallery was practically salivating.

The Madisons, of course, were gloating as if they had single-handedly saved America from cultural destruction.

"The Madisons? They had nothing to do with it. I just felt like Americans deserved a glimpse of the *Mona Lisa*, too." Louise tilted her head, a smile teasing her lips. "When I was little, I used to ask my parents if this painting could hang in my bedroom. I was always disappointed when they said no."

"You wanted the *Mona Lisa* to hang in your *room*?"

"Why not? Most of the art in the Louvre belongs to my family anyway." Louise cast Beatrice an assessing glance. "They never let me borrow it, though."

"Because it deserves to hang in public view."

Louise barked out a laugh. "My parents couldn't care less about what's on public view. But they insisted on decorating my bedroom with military portraits: of King Louis XIV, Henri IV, François I. The kings who made France *strong*." Louise sighed. Despite her glittering tiara, she looked decidedly unroyal right now, with her hip tilted to one side and her lips pursed. "What my parents didn't realize is that the woman in the *Mona Lisa* is strong, too."

Beatrice was intrigued despite herself. "Because we don't know what she was thinking?"

"Exactly. There's strength in keeping something of yourself back, something that no one else can touch. Especially when the world puts you under a spotlight. Don't you agree?"

“Yes,” Beatrice said softly. She understood all too well.

Louise took a step back, lifting her wineglass in an approximation of a toast. “Now, if you’ll excuse me...”

Beatrice felt a pang of regret that their conversation was over, but she nodded. “Of course.”

She knew she should go back out there too, make sure all the guests felt sufficiently flattered, say hello to the members of Congress she still hadn’t greeted. Yet she lingered another few minutes, enjoying the relative quiet.

“So, this is the famous *Mona Lisa*,” a voice said next to her.

Beatrice’s face lifted into a smile. “Yes. Come all the way from France,” she agreed, and turned to look at Connor Markham.

Here was the person she’d been furtively searching for all night. He was always nearby, yet at the same time out of reach—a silent, stoic figure along the edge of the ballroom, a human statue standing at attention near the door.

She blinked, not used to seeing Connor in the navy blazer and gold lantern pin of the Revere Guards’ dress uniform. At Harvard he’d worn cable-knit sweaters and dark jeans, dressing as if he were just another student. Sometimes Beatrice forgot that he wasn’t. Connor was so easy to talk to that he felt more like a peer than an employee.

As strange as it was, she’d begun to think of him as a friend. A real friend, not like the girls from high school or college who posed with her in photos for bragging rights, but someone Beatrice actually trusted. She didn’t have many true friends. They were surprisingly hard to come by, when you were princess and heir to a throne.

She liked to think that Connor felt the same way—that she was more to him than just a job.

“What do you think?” she asked, gesturing to the *Mona Lisa*.

Connor clasped his hands behind his back and tilted his face up, studying the portrait. His soft blue-gray eyes darkened to a deep pewter, the way they always did when he was lost in thought.

“Honestly? I expected it to be bigger,” Connor admitted, which startled a laugh from Beatrice.

“You spent all those months in Professor Clair’s art history lectures, and the only thing you have to say about the *Mona Lisa* is that it should be bigger? How very Texan of you.”

“In my defense, Professor Clair always talked about scale.” Connor smiled. “People make such a fuss over the *Mona Lisa*, and I don’t really get it. What makes it so much better than, say, that portrait of Lady Eaton we looked at in the MFA?”

A warm glow unfurled in Beatrice’s stomach at the reference to that night. That was when her relationship with Connor had begun to shift: when he’d stopped being so withdrawn and taciturn and had shown her a glimpse of his real self, the part of him that was warm and lighthearted. The part of him that made jokes at the world’s expense, then invited Beatrice to share them.

“The *Mona Lisa* is famous because it’s the *Mona Lisa*,” Beatrice said helplessly. Famous for the sake of being famous—maybe she and this portrait had something in common.

Connor chuckled. “That’s a circular argument, but this time I’ll let it slide.”

Beatrice recalled what Louise had said. “What would you say she’s thinking about?”

Connor’s answer was automatic. “Someone she loves.”

Beatrice blinked, surprised. He kept staring at the painting as he continued. “Look how soft and wistful her smile is; she’s daydreaming about someone.”

“Princess Louise said the same thing. That the woman in the painting had a forbidden lover,” Beatrice replied, and instantly flushed. It felt oddly daring, saying that to Connor. As if she’d been standing on the edge of a cliff and had tossed a pebble over the edge to test the depth.

Connor held himself very still for a moment, something dark and unreadable in his gaze. Then he shrugged.

“Maybe she did,” he said easily, as if those words—*forbidden lover*—had no significance to him at all.

He held out an arm, fully professional once more. Beatrice had the nagging, maddening sense that she'd been holding something precious in her hands only to have it torn from her grasp.

“Now come on, Bee, don't you think you should get back to your adoring fans?”

2

DAPHNE

“Jefferson. There you are.” Daphne tried to ignore the party buzzing around them as she placed a proprietary hand on the prince’s forearm.

It wasn’t fair, she thought darkly. Other people cheated all the time. They cheated on their diets and their high school exams and, yes, even on their boyfriends. And those people didn’t lose everything.

But then, their boyfriends weren’t the Prince of America.

Daphne had worked for *years* to become Jefferson’s girlfriend. She’d been excruciatingly careful about her appearance, her behavior, the way she spoke to paparazzi. She’d done such a convincing job that practically everyone in America thought she and Jefferson belonged together.

And now it would all come crashing down around her because of one mistake.

“Hey, Daphne. Are you having fun?” Jefferson asked halfheartedly. He retreated a step, gently tugging his arm from her grip. Daphne quickly reached up and tucked her hair behind one ear to cover the slight.

“This might be your best party yet,” she said too brightly. “Though you should keep an eye on Praveen and Dev Murthy. They’re currently playing ring of fire with that ceremonial goblet from the bookcase—the engraved one with double handles that was given to your grandfather by the King of Germany.”

Jefferson nodded distractedly. “Actually—I’m going to get a drink. I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Okay,” Daphne replied, over the hammering of her heart.

The prince must have realized how brusque he'd sounded, because he hesitated. "Can I get you something?"

"Thanks, but I'm fine." Her smile came out shaky and flustered, but at least it was a smile.

Things were usually so different. At parties Jefferson stayed near Daphne, and when they got separated, he shot her glances across the room, his eyes dancing with amusement or full of heat. Tonight, though, his eyes slid away, determinedly looking anywhere *except* at her.

Daphne could feel their breakup on the horizon, like the rumbling pressure of a summer storm. It had been brewing for some time now. Jefferson had been acting distant for weeks, long before the colossal lapse in judgment that had led her to sleep with his best friend, Ethan Beckett.

She focused on her breathing, in and out, in and out, as Jefferson crossed the room toward the bar. He kept stopping to greet someone, to let a friend fist-bump him or slap him good-naturedly on the back. She desperately needed to fix their relationship, get things back to the way they had been.

But first she would deal with the ticking time bomb that could ruin everything.

Daphne glanced at her best friend, Himari Mariko, who was visible among the crowds in her vivid emerald-green dress. How typically Himari to choose a loud, vibrant color, thereby reminding everyone that she was only a rising senior. The students in Jefferson's year had all come straight from their St. Ursula's or Forsythe graduation dinner, the girls still in the white dresses they had worn beneath their caps and gowns, the boys in coat and tie—though those coats and ties were now scattered haphazardly on the furniture or looped over the scrollwork of antique sconces.

The room was packed with people. Someone had set up beer pong tables near the enormous portrait of the prince's namesake, Lord Thomas Jefferson, which hung on the far wall. There was something deeply amusing about the contrast between the solemnity of Lord Jefferson's portrait and the crowd of drunk teenagers tossing Ping-Pong balls beneath.

Himari looked up, feeling Daphne's gaze, and their eyes locked.

For a moment they stared at each other like a pair of queens before battle: not the delicate scarf-waving queens you saw in medieval tapestries, who sent knights to fight on their behalf, but queens from a fantasy novel, who got down in the trenches and waged war. Queens militant.

It hurt more than Daphne would ever admit. For years, she and Himari had been each other's fiercest champions. They had guarded each other's backs through the treacherous dangers of high school and court functions, had shared secrets that they told to no one else.

Everything had changed last week, when Himari saw Daphne and Ethan together. She'd confronted Daphne about it, threatening to tell Jefferson unless Daphne told him first. To Himari, their friendship wasn't worth whatever social capital she could gain by taking Daphne down. She'd apparently only ever seen Daphne as a means to an end.

Now Himari would eviscerate her unless Daphne found a way to defeat her first.

I have no choice. I have no choice. The words echoed through her head over and over—a litany, a prayer—as she walked to the table of drinks. She reached for a bottle of sauvignon blanc, because Himari was too responsible to drink hard liquor, and poured a splash into a red plastic cup. Then she grabbed a small lipstick tube from her purse and unscrewed the top, though there was no lipstick inside.

Daphne held the tube over the cup, tipping a small amount of white powder into the sauvignon blanc. She'd ground up the sleeping pills herself after checking and rechecking the dosage on various medical websites.

Despite everything that had happened, she had no desire to actually *hurt* Himari. She just wanted to bring her down a peg—to find something she could hold over Himari's head, the way Himari was holding Ethan over hers. And Himari was always so careful and controlled that Daphne knew the only way she'd catch her off guard was to weaken her defenses.

Heart pounding, Daphne held the drink and scanned the room. When she saw Lara Jacobs, she pasted a smile on her face and started forward.

“Lara! Have you seen Himari? Jefferson just opened this bottle for her,” she said brightly. It was easy to pretend that things were normal between

her and Jefferson—that he wasn’t blatantly ignoring her. “I was on my way to the bathroom,” Daphne went on, “but if you wouldn’t mind...”

Lara jumped at the chance to do Daphne a favor. “I can take that to Himari,” she hurried to offer.

Himari wouldn’t turn down a drink if she thought it came from the prince himself. And it was a plausible lie, after all: Jefferson loved playing bartender, opening wines and making cocktails, always using those red plastic cups as if he were a normal teenager and not third in line for the throne.

Daphne watched from across the room as Lara delivered the wine to Himari, who accepted it with obvious pleasure and lifted it to her lips.

It was done.

Whatever frantic energy Daphne’s body had been running on, adrenaline or fear or sheer willpower, rushed out of her at once. She went cold all the way down to her bones—like that time she’d fallen through ice at the Washingtons’ ski house and had to take a thirty-minute steam shower before she stopped shivering. She stared at her hands, half expecting them to be blue with cold, but they looked normal around her pale pink fingernails. The rest of the room felt dizzily distant.

She stumbled back, only to collide with a broad, warm chest. A chest that she knew quite intimately.

“Daphne, are you okay?” Ethan braced his hands on her shoulders to steady her. She could feel the heat of his palms through her silken cap-sleeved top.

Of course it was Ethan. It should have been Jefferson, her *boyfriend*, helping her in a moment of weakness, but then, Jefferson didn’t know her well enough to see that she needed help at all. Jefferson had never seen past the picture-perfect veneer that Daphne showed the world.

Leave me alone! she should have shouted at Ethan. *Haven’t you done enough?* Yet she said nothing.

“Do you need to sit down?” he asked, still touching her. “You look dizzy.”

Daphne retreated a step, forcing Ethan to lower his hands. She smiled in case anyone was watching—because of course someone was watching: this was the palace, and she was dating the prince. There were always eyes on her.

As she and Ethan had discovered to their detriment when they'd hooked up the first time.

The *only* time, Daphne amended. It certainly couldn't happen again.

Yet some irrational, traitorous part of her wanted to grab Ethan's hands and put them back on her shoulders, where they belonged. She wanted to lean into him, let those hands skim lazily downward, over her waist, to lift the hem of her dress and tug it over her head. The way he had that night.

She and Ethan had withdrawn to one side of the room, their body language deceptively friendly. No one who glanced over would think twice about the fact that they were talking; they had known each other for years, ever since the fateful night Daphne had come to a party at the palace and set her sights on Jefferson.

A tiny, stubborn corner of her heart wondered how things would be different if she'd chosen Ethan that night instead. What if she'd let herself chase this feeling—the delicious molten sensation she'd always felt around Ethan—instead of deciding that she would become a princess?

"Everything is fine," Daphne said briskly. "You don't have to worry about me."

She tore her eyes from Ethan's face and looked over at Himari, who was telling a story with uncharacteristically sloppy gestures. Already her eyes were glassy, her cheeks flushed as if she'd had a bottle of wine instead of a single glass.

"Daphne," Ethan said slowly, following her gaze, "what have you done?"

Daphne realized with a sharp sense of relief that she could talk about this with Ethan. She'd suggested the plan to him yesterday, and when he'd refused to help her, she'd pretended to back down—though of course she hadn't abandoned it. She couldn't afford to, not when her entire future was on the line.

Ethan would understand what she'd done. He wouldn't judge her; he was just as hungry and ambitious as she was, and besides, this mess was half his fault. They had *both* betrayed Jefferson when they'd slept together that night.

"She's fine. It's just an over-the-counter sleeping pill, and I gave her a child's dose because she's so tiny," Daphne said urgently.

Ethan shook his head. "I can't believe you. Do you realize how dangerous this is?"

"She's going to be fine. At most she'll say something inappropriate, flirt with someone she never meant to—do something embarrassing that I can use against her. Her pride will be a little bruised, but she'll survive that. I really am watching her," Daphne added plaintively. "I have everything under control."

"If this is what 'under control' looks like to you, I don't want to see things when they're out of control," Ethan countered.

"I *love* Himari! I would never hurt her! Even if she doesn't feel the same way about me," Daphne insisted, her voice breaking.

At that, Ethan softened. "Himari loves you, Daphne. You're her best friend."

"I don't know if that's true anymore."

What did it really mean to be someone's best friend? She and Ethan and Himari had all made monumental mistakes in that department lately.

Despite everything that had happened, Daphne missed her best friend. She missed the Himari who used to sneak off campus with her for frozen yogurt, who drove Daphne to school in her cherry-red car, defiantly parking in the senior lot when they were running late. She missed the Himari who used to curl up with her in sweatpants and watch celebrity awards shows, both of them offering commentary on the actresses' outfits, making each other double over in laughter. That was before Daphne started getting invited to those sorts of events herself—before she became one of the people that fashion bloggers regularly covered, before her face started appearing in the tabloids.

Before Daphne slept with Ethan, and Himari used it as blackmail.

“Daphne, would it really be so bad if you just...stopped?” Ethan ran a hand through his hair, causing it to stick up in unruly spikes. He looked unusually young in that moment, almost boyish. “Himari is going to tell Jeff about us eventually. What if you went to him first, explained what happened? You really want to do all *this*”—he jerked his chin toward Himari—“so that you can marry into the royal family?”

“I wouldn’t expect you to understand.”

Ethan made a halfhearted attempt at a smile. “You know Jeff isn’t the heir. If you were going to be Queen Daphne someday, I might get it, but this? It seems like a lot of trouble to go to, just to become princess.”

“You have a point. Queen Daphne has a nice ring to it.” She strove for a lighthearted tone, but Ethan’s smile faltered.

They were both well aware that a title was one thing Ethan could never give her.

“I just hope you know what you’re doing,” he said at last.

Daphne tossed her curtain of red-gold hair over one shoulder. She tried to seem stately and imperious, but the hand that held tight to her clutch was trembling.

“What are *you* going to do, tell on me? Or can I count on you to help?”

“If I’m not with you, I must be against you?” Ethan said drily.

“Exactly.”

He sighed. “You’re terrifying, Daphne. You know that, right?”

“Terrifyingly brilliant,” Daphne quipped, which elicited a reluctant chuckle.

“Remind me never to get on your bad side.”

“Please. I think you know better than to ever try.”

Ethan’s gaze lingered on her as if he were searching her face for something. Whatever he saw, he finally nodded. “Of course I’m on your side. I’m *always* on your side, no matter what you do.”

The words should have been heartening, but they came out oddly resigned. Defeatist, even.

Daphne realized, in that moment, that Ethan loved her.

He loved her even if he didn't want to, even if it caused him pain. And the most confusing and troubling part was, she just might—

No. There was no reason to think about things that would never happen.

Her and Ethan, together...it was an idea too intoxicating, too dangerous. To give it oxygen would let it balloon into something Daphne couldn't control.

She quickly stifled that thought and stashed it back in a dark corner of her heart where it belonged.

3

NINA

Nina Gonzalez glanced at her reflection in the ladies' room at Washington Palace, listening with distinct amusement to the conversations that frothed up around her.

There were so many reasons that she didn't fit in with this crowd. The superficial reasons: these girls were all in the twirly white dresses they'd worn beneath their graduation robes, designer bracelets sliding up and down their arms, while Nina had shown up in a black spaghetti-strap dress that, she now realized, might actually be a swimsuit cover-up.

Then there were the other, perhaps greater, reasons she wasn't like these teenagers: their titles, their casual references to private jets and ski houses and family estates. All Nina had inherited from her family was her mom's hustle, her mamá's sheer stubbornness, and the love of reading she'd absorbed from them both.

Nina might not belong here, but here she was nonetheless, because she and Princess Samantha had been best friends since they were seven.

The door to one of the stalls swung open, and girls trading lipsticks and gossip all fell silent as Daphne Deighton walked up to the row of sinks. If Nina was invisible to these people, then Daphne was drawn in Technicolor, the focal point of their envy or longing or eagerness to belong.

Flashing her usual polite smile, Daphne glided to the mirror—that was the only word for it; she glided like a ballerina, her heels making dainty little clicks on the floor—and set her gold clutch on the counter, then reached inside it for her lip gloss.

Nina couldn't help noticing that there was something tremulous about Daphne tonight. Something *off*. As if the block of snow she'd been carved from was melting, and now cracks were showing in her perfect surface.

Daphne looked up, and her eyes narrowed. "Can I help you with something?"

She spoke with effortless disdain, as if she had no idea who Nina was. As if she and Nina hadn't crossed paths countless times, hadn't both been on the Washingtons' trip to Telluride over spring break—Daphne as Jeff's guest, Nina as Sam's.

Was Daphne truly so self-absorbed that she didn't remember Nina? Or was she acting this way on purpose, sharpening her politeness like a weapon to put Nina in her place?

"Are you talking to me?" Nina asked innocently.

One of the other girls, hearing their exchange, interrupted. She took in Nina's black cotton dress and pursed her lips. "You don't go to St. Ursula's." It wasn't a question, yet there was a query folded into it: *What are you doing here?*

"You're right. I don't," Nina agreed, breezing past them and out the door.

She found Sam on the dance floor, jumping with copious amounts of energy and a distinct lack of rhythm. When she saw Nina, Samantha squealed and gave her friend an affectionate squeeze. That was Sam, a creature of physical touch. She was always leaning her head on Nina's or Jeff's shoulder, wrapping her arms around their torsos from behind, tapping them on the arm to get their attention. She used to get in trouble for hugging people at royal appearances, until the palace pretty much gave up on sending her to appearances at all.

"This song is the worst," Sam shouted over the music. "We should go revoke Ethan's DJ privileges."

"It looks like Jeff is in charge of music, actually." A delicious shiver traced down Nina's spine as she spoke his name. *What if, what if, what if* whispered in her brain.

What if she were braver? What if she told Jeff how she felt before he jetted off on his world tour, and she went to college, and their paths

inevitably diverged?

“Should we go outside?” Sam suggested.

Nina blinked, jarring herself from her absurd daydreams. She knew better than to dwell on hypotheticals, especially when they were so far removed from reality.

She and Sam headed onto the patio that wrapped around the back of the palace. The gardens unfolded before them, neat rows of hedges intersecting the beds of roses and violets and daylilies. Moonlight danced over the paths, gleamed on the iron railing that circled the gardens like a border of antique lace.

“You didn’t tell me the girls at this party would all be wearing white,” Nina blurted out as she collapsed onto a bench.

Sam glanced down at her white dress in confusion. It wasn’t really her style, with its poufed sleeves and sweetheart neckline, though the lime-green Converse and red plastic wristwatch—which Nina was almost certain Sam had won from an arcade game—definitely were. Nina wondered if Sam had changed out of her heels the moment she got home, or if she’d actually worn a kids’ plastic watch and sneakers to her graduation.

“Sorry, I should have warned you,” Sam agreed. “Though I figured you wouldn’t want to look so cliché. We’re like an army of brides, or ghosts. Ghost brides?”

Sam was pacing back and forth across the terrace with all the pent-up energy of a caged tigress. When she got like this, she became more amplified—not louder, exactly, just...*more*. More vibrant, more awake, more unapologetically *Sam*.

“Sit down,” Nina told her, well aware that she was one of the only people who commanded the Princess of America so brusquely. Sam smiled self-consciously, then sat next to her on the bench.

“Can you believe we graduated this week? It’s the end of an era,” Nina mused.

“Is it?”

Sam drummed her red-painted nails in a pattern that echoed the music from inside.

Nina glanced over. “Graduation is very much the end of an era. You know, one chapter concludes, another begins?”

“For most people, sure. But nothing about my life is really changing, is it? Graduation is just a fake milestone in my case. I’m still...”

“Still the princess?”

“I was going to say still pointless.”

It was rare to hear Sam talk like this. Her position with the monarchy was so much more nebulous than Beatrice’s; there was no defined role for Sam, no set of responsibilities, just a seemingly endless list of what she *couldn’t* do. From what Nina could tell, being a Washington came with constraints alongside the unimaginable privilege.

She nudged Sam’s shoulder with her own. “Cut the pity party, okay? You’re about to go abroad for six months. You can whine when you’re back.”

She was relieved when Sam relaxed into a smile. “I deserved that. It’s just that this party feels like all the other parties Jeff and I have ever thrown. There aren’t even any boys here to crush on. I’ve known everyone in that room since lower school.”

“I don’t know if that precludes you from having a crush on them,” Nina said quietly.

“True! But I’ve already kissed all the ones worth kissing. I’m ready for someone new.” A wicked gleam sparked in Sam’s eyes as she added, “What about you, though? Are *you* interested in anyone here?”

Nina hoped a telltale flush hadn’t risen to her cheeks. “Not really.”

As if on cue, the doors slid open, and there he was, the boy she’d loved in secret for as long as she could remember. Prince Jefferson. He looked as unattainably dreamy as ever in his button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up, his tie long since discarded. He held up a bottle of champagne, eyes dancing. “I wondered where you two had gone.”

Nina couldn’t help smiling at the thought that he’d noticed her absence. She always caught herself smiling around Jeff; he was like a human candle, bringing a warm glow everywhere he went.

“You know it’s bad form to run away from your own party,” he went on, looking at Sam, who laughed.

“You and Ethan chased us off with your atrocious taste in music.”

“Well, I’m not about to put you in charge,” he teased. “We all know that if you take over, the night becomes—”

“Epic?” Sam offered.

“I was going to say *unpredictable*. Like that time you said we should celebrate our birthday at a bar, then you booked a private room at a karaoke lounge.”

Nina jumped in. “Technically speaking, a karaoke lounge *is* a bar.”

“Exactly!” Sam exclaimed, triumphant.

“But Jeff has a point,” Nina went on. “The night did spin out of control once we got there.”

She knew Sam had picked the karaoke lounge because she wanted to stand onstage and perform. To be the focal point of everyone’s attention for once, instead of her usual role as the Washington sibling America largely ignored.

“Karaoke is my nemesis. I lost my voice that night,” Jeff recalled, then lifted the bottle of champagne. “Anyone want to open this?”

“Champagne?” Sam shook her head dramatically. “Who do you think I am? *Daphne*?”

Nina looked over, afraid the reference to Jeff’s girlfriend would shatter their easy camaraderie—or, worse, prompt Jeff to go back inside and ask Daphne to join them. But all he said was, “We’re celebrating. Champagne seemed appropriate.”

“If we must,” Sam groaned.

Jeff held the bottle toward Nina. “You’ll do the honors, won’t you, Nina? You seem like you can open champagne. You’re so good at...you know. British things.”

“Champagne is French,” Nina corrected him, and Sam laughed.

“You know what I mean!” Jeff persisted. “You’re the one who reads Jane Austen and Edith Wharton and goes to art-museum openings. Sam and I are

hot-dogs-and-beer people. We're out of our depth trying to open champagne."

Nina would have fallen even more in love with him for that remark—for remembering that she loved Jane Austen and Edith Wharton—except she wasn't sure it was possible to love him any more than she did.

"Fine," she agreed, and Jeff's fingers brushed hers as he handed her the bottle.

It was heavier than she'd expected, its label inscribed with a curlicued script. Nina unpeeled the gold foil from the top, then gingerly coaxed out the cork. It opened with a festive pop.

"Here you go," she said, but Jeff waved it toward her as he took a seat on the bench.

"You opened it, you go first."

Nina lifted the bottle straight to her lips. It was cold, its bubbles tasting like honey and brioche and uncomplicated joy. She handed it to Sam, who took a sip and then passed it to Jeff.

"This reminds me of when we used to share a milkshake between the three of us," Nina said softly.

"And just like he did with milkshakes, Jeff is having more than his fair share." Sam elbowed her brother. "You can't chug half the bottle!"

He lowered the champagne from his lips with a slightly guilty expression. "You said you didn't like it!"

"I'm full of contradictions, okay? And as you pointed out, we're celebrating."

Nina felt slightly illicit as she took the bottle back from Jeff. Was it weird of her to drink after him? They used to do it without a thought when they were kids, but now Nina second-guessed everything when it came to Jeff.

Her feelings for him were Nina's most closely guarded secret. She clutched them to her chest as if they were precious and infinitely fragile, something that needed to be protected at all costs. She'd never breathed a word to anyone, not even Sam. Especially not Sam.

Nina knew, on a logical level, that her love for Jeff was hopeless. Aside from the fact that he was the Prince of America and her best friend's

brother, he and Nina wouldn't even make *sense* as a couple. Nina was private, while Jeff was outgoing and effervescent; Nina did things methodically, while Jeff was impulsive; Nina was happiest in quiet spaces like libraries, while Jeff was at home in a loud sports stadium, shouting and wearing face paint.

She had never consciously decided to love him; her love for him had just appeared one day, slipping under her skin and entwining itself around her heart so tightly that she couldn't shake it loose—and didn't really want to. She couldn't explain it, and she certainly could never act on it. No matter the what-ifs that kept swirling in her brain.

"Nina. Are you excited about King's College?" Jeff asked, interrupting her thoughts. "I have to admit, I'm jealous you'll be there without us."

"I think you two will have more than enough fun jet-setting around Asia," Nina pointed out. The twins hadn't announced where they would go to school after their gap year, but everyone assumed that they would start at King's College next fall, as nearly every member of the royal family—except Beatrice—had done before.

Jeff shook his head. "Please don't say jet-setting. We're backpacking."

"You can carry a backpack onto your private plane, but it doesn't make you a backpacker," Nina teased.

She was surprisingly excited at the prospect of starting school without Sam and Jeff this fall. As much as she loved her best friend, Nina had always felt torn between the two very different facets of her life: the royal part, where she attended receptions with dukes and duchesses and *curtsied* to people, and the normal part of her life, where she and her parents baked frozen pizzas in the oven and sometimes forgot to clean the house for weeks at a time, until dust bunnies gathered in the corners like a small army and Nina had to hunt down the vacuum to vanquish them all.

It would be refreshing to take a step back from this royal world, which she didn't really belong in anyway. To act like a normal teenager, worry about her classes and whether her roommate was nice and whether she'd had too much to drink at a party, instead of worrying about her unrequited love for a prince.

“We’ll miss you, though.” Sam turned on the bench to give Nina another of her fierce hugs.

Jeff met Nina’s gaze over Sam’s shoulder. “Yeah. We will.”

That was the dangerous thing about him. He had a way of drawing people in, making them feel *seen*. He was so very charismatic, which was why the monarchy kept trotting him out at events where they needed goodwill—visits to elementary schools or sports events or, once, a ballroom-dancing competition on national TV.

But Nina didn’t care about the Jeff whose face was plastered on magazines. She loved the real Jeff, the boy who used to toboggan around the palace with her on placemats; who woke them all up at the ski house by pounding on their door and shouting that the powder waited for no one; who smiled easily, yet somehow made those smiles seem precious because they were his. To other people he might be larger than life, the romantic hero of a storybook, but to Nina he was just the boy she’d grown up with.

That was what made her feelings so dangerous.

She couldn’t let herself forget that he was a prince, because he would never stop being one, and she needed to find a way to make herself stop loving him.

If only she knew how.

4

SAMANTHA

Princess Samantha was already bored of her own party.

She and Jeff had thrown so many of these parties before, to celebrate their birthday, or a school victory in football, or simply the fact that it was a Friday and their parents were out of town. But no matter the occasion, the party never really changed. It was the same claustrophobic set of classmates and peers, the same people coupling and then uncoupling, flirting or feuding or making up rumors. Especially the girls, who acted nice to Sam's face, then whispered to one another that she wasn't pretty enough, skinny enough. Wasn't enough like *them*.

Well, Samantha had never cared all that much about what other girls thought of her. It was much less stressful to hang out with Jeff and his friends than to deal with the judgmental stares and backhanded comments of her female classmates. The only girl Sam had ever really trusted was Nina.

Speaking of Nina, where had she gone? Sam glanced around the party, which spilled out of Ambassador's Hall—the enormous downstairs reception space named for the portrait of Lord Thomas Jefferson—and into the neighboring rooms. Music and shrieks of excitement echoed against the centuries-old walls.

She paused to say hi to Maddie Falco, the goalie on the varsity soccer team and one of the few girls at school Sam genuinely liked. She got roped into a game of beer pong with her friends Rohan and JT; she laughed as the guys tried, and failed, to make a pyramid of plastic cups. She told a loud,

rambling story about how in third grade, she'd planted her emergency tracker inside Jeff's backpack—even then, Sam had hated the thought of anyone watching her movements. Everyone laughed as she recounted that it had taken weeks for palace security to figure out what she'd done. In those days, she and Jeff had been inseparable.

Yet no matter what she did, the vague restlessness refused to go away. It felt like Sam had grown too large for her own skin, like there was a lingering itch somewhere deep in her bones. As Nina had said, high school graduation was supposed to be a major milestone, yet Sam didn't feel changed. She didn't feel anything at all, except disappointed that this party was just as stale and predictable as all the others.

The footmen had set up a folding table along one wall—a plastic table from storage, because no one wanted sticky drink rings on an antique that belonged in the national collection. The table's surface was scattered with half-empty bottles of liquor and soda, a few stray paper napkins, and a porcelain plate of sliced limes, which were nearly gone.

Sam could have called one of the footmen to have it replenished, yet some impulse made her grab the plate and stroll out into the hallway. Her steps quickened as she passed the throne room and reception halls, where the lights were off. She and Jeff used to tell each other that the ghost of Queen Thérèse haunted these rooms at night. Even now, Sam half believed it—the rooms felt cavernous and full of secrets, their vast dark spaces hidden behind velvet ropes. The sounds of the party chased her down the hall, muffled by the thick carpets and heavy oak furniture.

She pushed open the double doors that led to the now-empty kitchens. It was surprisingly cool in here; the rows of gas burners were all off. Cast-iron pans and soup pots were stacked in open shelving above them; knives gleamed in an enormous chopping block. She turned in a slow circle, wondering which of the half-dozen refrigerators might contain limes.

“What are you doing in here?”

Sam looked up, startled, to see a boy about her age. She would have assumed he was one of the kitchen staff, except that he was so blatantly out of uniform in a faded T-shirt, denim jacket, and charcoal narrow-leg pants.

His dark hair curled around his ears, but it was his eyes that drew her in: a brown that glittered with bright flecks of green. Something about him seemed familiar, though Sam couldn't say why.

"I live here," she informed him, stating the obvious. "What are *you* doing in here?"

"I work here."

He crossed his arms over his chest. Sam's eyes drifted to the tattoos tracing his forearms: a set of three birds in flight, a tiger ready to pounce, a name written in a scripted font, though Sam couldn't get close enough to read it.

The silence felt strained. Sam set down the plate and retreated a step. "Okay, well...I just came down here for some limes."

"For your sorority-girl vodka sodas?"

That was it. "Is there a reason you don't like me, or are you this rude to everyone?"

"I never said I don't like you."

"You didn't need to *say* it. Your tone made it abundantly clear."

Sam stared at him in unmistakable challenge, and he let out a breath. "Look, I don't really care about you, but I do have a problem with your family," the stranger told her. "Or at least, what your family stands for."

"You mean America?"

"I was actually talking about elitism." He lifted his hands in a sardonic gesture. "Though, come to think of it, America doesn't exactly stand for a ton of great things either."

"I think we can all agree that there are many things we'd like to change about America's history," Sam exclaimed with such vehemence that he lifted an eyebrow. "But isn't the point of studying the past to celebrate the good and have conversations about the bad? To learn from all the mistakes our ancestors made?"

The guy nodded slowly. "So, that's what you stand for? Fixing the mistakes of the past?"

"That's what the Crown *should* stand for, but I'm not the Crown. My dad is, and then someday my sister. I'm just the spare."

Normally Sam might have added something flippant, like *all I stand for is tequila and dancing on tables*, but something about the boy's gaze made her bite back the words. Instead she sighed. "I guess I'm still figuring out what I stand for."

He studied her for a contemplative moment, then replied, "I'm Liam, by the way."

"Sam."

His eyes glinted with amusement. "I know."

There was a beat of silence, though it felt less hostile than before. Sam cleared her throat, suddenly disconcerted. "I'll just...um, I'll find those limes and get back to the party."

Liam didn't leave. He just stood there, arms crossed, as Sam opened one of the refrigerators at random. It was stacked with neatly labeled containers of sauces and soups, and a single can of diet soda on the shelf—as if someone, maybe Chef Greg, needed to always have it within reach.

"Wrong fridge," Liam cheerfully informed her.

Sam refused to give him the satisfaction of asking for his help. She just moved from one stainless-steel door to the other, glancing over steaks and tubs of yogurt and wheels of cheese until she finally found the fruits and vegetables: peaches and crisp asparagus and deep red strawberries all competing for space. Sam grabbed a mesh bag of limes and glanced around for a knife.

Liam lounged against one of the counters, watching her. But when Sam grabbed a kitchen knife and began hacking at the lime, his expression shifted from sardonic amusement to horror.

"Stop!" he protested, and her knife fell still. He added, in a tone that verged on laughter, "What did that lime ever do to you?"

Sam glanced down at the mangled, pulpy mess on the cutting board. She'd tried slicing the lime in half, but it was tougher than she'd expected, so she'd switched partway through and tried halving it lengthwise. Normally her fruit arrived from the kitchens already sliced. She felt a flush of self-consciousness at her own ineptitude.

"I suppose you think you could do better?"

“*Anyone* could do better, unless your goal was to torture that lime into giving away its secrets.” Liam shook his head. “This is too painful to witness. Just...let me.”

Sam huffed out a breath but stepped aside, watching as he grabbed a fresh lime from the bag and sliced it into neat, even wedges. His motions were quick, yet almost lazy at the same time, as if he could have done this with his eyes closed.

“Why are you here so late?” Sam asked. Clearly, Liam was the last person in the kitchens.

“I don’t mind closing out. Usually I don’t even have to mop floors, just wait for deliveries and drive the garbage truck on my way home. It’s not a bad way to make extra cash. At least I don’t have to wear a stupid apron or, worse, *leggings*.”

That was when recognition struck. “Wait a second. You used to work at the palace gift shop, didn’t you?”

Liam snorted, still chopping limes with almost-frightening speed. “I wondered if you would remember.”

Every now and then, Sam liked to put on oversized sunglasses and stop by the gift shop at the visitors’ center, just to see how long it would take for someone to recognize her. The tourists—eagerly discussing their guided visits or audio tours, scrolling through photos on their phones and posting them to social media—were blissfully oblivious. Often Sam could stand right next to them, browsing a puzzle or postcard with her own face on it, and they didn’t even notice.

Until one of them saw her and squealed, and then she had to hurry out amid a torrent of photos, to escape back into the Washington family’s private part of the palace. Her Revere Guard, Caleb, always rolled his eyes at her escapades, but he technically couldn’t complain as long as she stayed within the palace grounds.

She’d seen Liam behind the register a few times, she recalled now. He would make eye contact with her, then purse his lips against a laugh and turn aside.

“I hated working at the gift shop,” Liam said bluntly. “I mean, whose idea was it to put your cashiers in scratchy tight pants, anyway?”

“They’re breeches,” Sam corrected, and he rolled his eyes.

“Well, I hated the breeches. And the tourists are awful customers. Half of them wandered around for an hour, then didn’t buy anything except a poster of your brother.”

Of course they did. Jeff was the object of half of America’s romantic fantasies.

“Posters of Jeff were really the best-selling item? What about all that gross cherry stuff?”

“Second-most popular,” Liam agreed. “Which I’ll never understand. What’s the appeal of cherry preserves or cherry brandy?”

“Stay away from the cherry brandy! It’s a lot boozier than you’d think,” Sam warned.

“Sadly, I learned that lesson the hard way.” Liam looked up, eyes dancing. His fingers darted perilously close to the blade, though he never cut himself.

Sam hopped up to sit on the counter, her lime-green sneakers dangling against the cabinets. “You should come join our graduation party. Once you’re off the clock, I mean.”

His movements stilled, and he tilted his head, studying her. “This is your graduation party?”

“Um, yeah.”

“But your parents aren’t here. Or your sister.”

Sam stared at him blankly. Was it normal for teenagers to hang out with their families after high school graduation? The idea gave her pause. Spending your graduation night playing beer pong beneath a three-hundred-year-old portrait, wandering around a national monument while your parents were at a charity gala, looking at the *Mona Lisa*—it was probably a strange way to live.

Sam wouldn’t really know, since she’d never lived any other way.

“Thanks for the invite,” Liam went on, “but I’m busy later. I’m heading to a concert.”

“What concert?”

The sounds of the party emanated from down the hall, voices and the beat of music all distinctly louder than they’d been twenty minutes ago. That was how it always went at the twins’ parties: the energy only ever went in one direction—up.

“You wouldn’t know the band. They’re playing at Enclave. A place on the east side,” he added, in answer to Sam’s confused look.

“What kind of music is it?”

“Not your type, Princess.”

He stacked the lime wedges perfectly to one side, then began washing the knife in the sink. Sam leaned back to brace her palms on the cool stone of the countertop.

“You have no idea what type of music I like, and I told you, call me Sam.”

A ghost of a smile flitted around Liam’s face. “I’ve heard the soundtrack to your graduation party all night. This concert...it’s rock. Less mainstream, more alternative, but not fully punk rock, either.”

“I want to go,” Sam blurted out.

Liam looked at her skeptically, so she said it again: “Take me with you. I want to see this not-punk-but-still-alternative-rock concert.”

“I seriously doubt your security would let you come to Enclave.”

“What makes you think we’re telling security?”

A plan was forming in Sam’s mind. She slid off the counter, feeling buoyant and invincible, and looked up at Liam with a smile.

“You said you have to drive the garbage truck on your way home. Does anyone actually check the back of the truck when you leave?”

He made a strangled sound deep in his throat. “You want to sneak out of the palace in the back of a *garbage* truck? What’s going on here? Did someone dare you or something?”

“No, I wasn’t *dared*. I can assure you that I’m perfectly capable of coming up with a plan like this on my own.”

“That much I believe.”

“What are you, scared?” she challenged.

Liam hesitated a moment longer, then let out a breath. “Why not? I’ve always had a thing for breaking the rules.”

“Excellent.” Sam flashed a wild, defiant smile. She didn’t have her purse with her, just her phone, but that didn’t really matter. There was never any need to carry money around when your dad’s face was on it.

Liam stepped into a closet, emerging a moment later with a jangling set of car keys. “Okay, Princess. Let’s jailbreak you out of here.”

5

BEATRICE

Beatrice reached down for the lever that would adjust the passenger seat. Connor glanced over, though he kept both hands firmly on the wheel. “Do you want help reclining that? You can lean back and sleep, if you want.”

“What? No, I’m not tired.” She actually felt wide awake, her muscles sizzling with energy. She slid the seat backward on its track, then kicked off her silver heels and stretched out her legs. Her toes, painted a pale pink, gleamed in the dim lighting. “This was all I wanted to do. My legs felt cramped.”

“Sorry, that seat was too far forward. Usually no one sits up here.”

“Their loss.”

The night was dark around them, the narrow two-lane road winding steadily through the rural Virginia forest. They hadn’t yet come across another car. Beatrice had waited until they were a few minutes past Montpelier before asking Connor to pull over so that she could walk around to the front seat. They weren’t breaking any rules, technically speaking; nowhere in her security binders was it explicitly mandated that royalty must ride in the back of the car. It was just assumed. Probably because no one in the royal family had ever been friends with their Revere Guard.

She looked forward to the occasions when she got to sit with Connor in the front seat. It had been easier at Harvard, where she and Connor were always together, walking to class or studying in the library or ordering ramen from Tatsuya. But ever since she’d graduated, occasions like this—

shuttling from one event to the next in small enclosed spaces—were the only times she and Connor got to be alone.

“I’m surprised you wanted to drive back so late,” he remarked.

Beatrice wrinkled her nose, a gesture she would never have allowed herself to make in public. “Stay overnight with the Madisons? No thanks.”

When the reception had concluded, the Duke and Duchess of Virginia had urged the Washingtons to please stay the night—there were so many guest rooms at Montpelier, and it would be their honor to host a royal visit. Her parents had been too polite to refuse, but Beatrice had insisted that she needed to get home. “It’s only an hour and a half’s drive,” she’d told her parents, who’d exchanged glances. “An hour and a half on dark, winding country roads,” King George had argued.

But Beatrice hadn’t been eager to spend more time with the Madisons’ spoiled, selfish daughter, Gabriella. When they’d talked earlier, Gabriella had droned on about her plans to design a line of couture sweatpants, about a ski trip to Verbier that Beatrice had *seriously* missed out on, and about the most amazing little salon she’d found in Paris. Had Beatrice ever thought of redoing her eyebrows? Because she could *really* use a visit to Valérie, Gabriella had said somberly.

Gabriella’s brother was even worse. James had spent all night looking at Beatrice as if she were a particularly rare and juicy steak he’d like to devour.

“I have an early engagement tomorrow morning,” Beatrice had insisted. At that, her father had acquiesced, as she knew he would. Duty always came first.

She leaned forward to play with the radio, though most of what came up was static. “We aren’t getting the Washington stations here,” she observed, and laughed. “Where *are* we?”

Their headlights pierced the darkness a short distance ahead of them, but the surrounding forest was an ink-dark shadow. The road kept winding up and down, gently skirting the edge of a hill or river and then curving back in the other direction.

“If you think this is rural, you should see where I grew up,” Connor remarked. “People used to walk around the Walmart, drinking wine from a Pringles can, and call it a wild Friday night.”

Beatrice gave a very unladylike snort. “I have to say, that *does* sound wild.”

“In that case, you and my grandparents would get along.” Connor glanced over and smiled.

Beatrice couldn't take the suspense anymore. She shifted, pulling up the skirts of her gown so she could tuck one bare foot beneath her. “So? What did you think of tonight?”

“Two out of four.”

“You're definitely giving a point for food,” she guessed. “I saw you devouring those honey-butter chicken biscuits during the cocktail hour.”

“It's not my fault I was standing by the door to the kitchens!” Connor protested. “Besides, I had to eat enough for both of us. I'm guessing you didn't even try one.”

“Sadly, no,” she admitted. Her etiquette master had been adamant that Beatrice could never eat while standing up, especially something like a biscuit that would crumble or leave her fingers greasy. The only exception, of course, was a bite of cherry pie during a garden party, because it was patriotic—and even then she was allowed only a single, careful bite on the edge of a fork.

“Okay, so food for sure,” she went on. “And music?”

This was always one of Beatrice's favorite parts of a royal event: the part afterward, when she and Connor compared notes. He was an astute observer, and he usually saw or heard things that Beatrice missed while she was busy trying to work the room. By now they used a system of their own invention, where they judged the merits of an event based on four distinct categories.

“I'd give this one food and theme, actually. I really liked the *Mona Lisa*.”

“You said it was underwhelming!”

Connor shrugged. “You were right; that painting is more complicated than it seems. There are layers to it. Secrets that you don't notice at first.”

Beatrice looked over, curious, but he was staring responsibly at the road. All she saw was his profile: the square line of his jaw and his muscled shoulders.

“I’m glad I changed your mind,” she said. “Though I’m still surprised you gave this one a point for theme. I thought you hated all the *Soirée Bleue* decorations.”

Connor chuckled. “Those were absurd, weren’t they? It felt like I was underwater.”

“That’s exactly how *I* described it!”

“The Madisons seem...”

“Over-the-top?” Beatrice prompted.

“I was going to say snobby. I’ve been to a lot of pretentious evenings with you, Bee. One of the hazards of the job,” he said ruefully. “But this one just about takes the cake.”

“You’re not the one who had to actually *talk* to the Madisons,” Beatrice reminded him. “James was unbelievably pompous.”

“What did you expect? He’s a future duke. You’ve met a lot of those by now, and as far as I can tell, they’re all pompous.”

There was a glow on the right-hand side of the road as they drove past a convenience store. A neon sign over the door read OPEN, and a painted-wood caterpillar out front advertised APPLES FOR SALE!, though Beatrice was quite sure apple season wouldn’t start for months. Most likely the caterpillar had been out there since last fall.

“I had to deal with the Madisons, too,” Connor told her as the store disappeared behind them.

Beatrice blinked. “What?”

“Their daughter practically accosted me near the end of the night.”

“Gabriella? She...” The words came out blocky and strange; Beatrice swallowed. “She hit on you?”

“She offered to give me a ‘private tour’ of her family’s estate. What a line. How often do you think she uses it?”

Beatrice’s stomach clenched at the thought of Connor slipping upstairs with Gabriella. Not that it was any of her business.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, staring down at her hands. Her diamond bracelet glittered as its facets caught and reflected the moonlight. “I mean, if you wanted to stay the night, um, we could have, well...”

“Please. I’m not interested in ‘going on a tour’ with Gabriella,” Connor cut in.

They were verging on dangerous ground. Beatrice had never dared to ask about Connor’s dating life. But it felt easier here in the car, on these winding roads—as if she and Connor had retreated into a bubble of their own creation, warm and dark and safe.

Perhaps that was why Beatrice said, “Because you have a girlfriend?”

The noise Connor made at that was so bizarre, somewhere between a laugh and a scoff, that the strange tension between them seemed to dissipate.

“What?” she demanded.

“Um, Bee, when exactly would I have time for this mythical girlfriend? I’m always with *you*.”

Beatrice was unreasonably pleased by that remark. Still, she strove to sound nonchalant—the way Sam would—as she replied, “I don’t know what you do when you’re off the clock.”

“Sleep, mostly.” His mouth curled a little at the corners. “Keeping an eye on you is exhausting.”

An image of Connor in bed, presumably shirtless, flashed through Beatrice’s mind. It struck her that they both slept in the same building—a sprawling building with many rooms and staircases, but still. To get from her bed to his, she would just have to go down a series of hallways and up a flight of stairs to the third-floor staff dormitories. Only a few minutes’ walk, yet they might as well have lived on different planets.

A sudden bang reverberated through the car, and they swerved a little on the road before Connor regained control of the wheel.

“No, no, *no*.” He quickly pulled over and killed the ignition. The headlights blared into the darkness for a moment, then went out.

“What happened?” Beatrice whispered. For a panicked instant, she’d thought the noise was a gunshot.

“I think we got a flat.” Connor glanced out at the trees and fence posts with a sigh. “We’ll be fine. I just need to put on the spare.”

“Okay,” Beatrice said faintly as he threw open the door and disappeared around the back of the car.

She tapped at her phone, but the words NO SERVICE glared at her from the top left corner. They really *were* in the middle of nowhere.

It was so dark and so very quiet, the only sounds the gentle hum of insects and the wind rustling the leaves. It felt almost like they’d traveled back in time, to before the Revolution, before the Washingtons—to a world without electric lighting, where the only illumination came from the stars.

Beatrice looked up and was almost relieved to see the glowing speck of an airplane crossing the sky, breaking the spell.

She slid back into her strappy sandals, then opened her door and stepped out onto the grass. Her heels sank into the damp earth.

Connor was leaning over the trunk of the car, twisting the latch of the spare-tire well. When he cursed under his breath, Beatrice leaned forward nervously to see what had happened.

The spare-tire well was empty.

“I’m sorry, Bee.”

“Connor, this isn’t your fault,” she protested, but he shook his head.

“It is, actually. I’m supposed to do a routine vehicle check every time we hit the road; it’s part of our protocol. But tonight...”

But tonight he’d been too focused on Beatrice, she silently finished. On helping her get out of Montpelier and back on the road toward home.

“I won’t let you take the blame over this,” Beatrice assured him, trying to convince herself as much as Connor. What if Sean put him on probation or, worse, transferred him to another assignment?

Phone clutched in her hand, she began waving it in the air like those people in the commercials, trying desperately to catch a signal.

“I already tried calling for backup. My phone doesn’t have service either.” Connor reached for a red plastic box tucked to one side of the trunk and began sifting through its contents: a flashlight, a pair of leather gloves,

a whistle. When he found a folded metal contraption, he knelt along the side of the car and shifted it beneath the car's frame.

“What are you doing?”

“There's a tire-patching kit in the emergency box. I should be able to get us back on the road, at least long enough to reach the nearest gas station.”

Connor shrugged out of his blazer and tossed it to Beatrice, who snatched it from midair. She watched as he rolled up the sleeves of his button-down, her eyes drifting to his bare forearms. His shirt was open at the neck, revealing a maddening glimpse of black ink: the edge of his tattoo.

“You should put the jacket on. It's cold out.” Connor began cranking the side of the car slowly upward.

“I...thanks.”

The blazer was too big for her. The sleeves hung past her fingertips, reminding her of when Samantha used to sneak into her closet as a child and try on all of Beatrice's clothes. She cuffed the sleeves and nestled deeper into the blazer, which still felt warm from Connor's body. It smelled like him, too, something spicy and clean and indefinably boyish.

When the car had risen a few inches, he bent down to examine the tire. Beatrice knew at once that something very bad had happened: she could see it from the set of Connor's shoulders.

“Did we hit a nail?” she asked, hazarding a guess.

“I could fix a nail with some sealant. This”—he gestured to the jagged hole in their tire, the size of a golf ball—“looks like we drove over a piece of scrap metal. I can't patch this.”

He stood with a groan, lifting a forearm to wipe at his brow. There were a few spots of grease on his wrists and the sleeves of his once-crisp button-down.

“It sounds like we should get help,” Beatrice said slowly.

Connor nodded. “I'll go check out that convenience store. Stay in the backseat with your head down. Or, better yet—would you be okay getting into the trunk?”

“You can’t be serious.” Beatrice tilted her chin to glare up at him. “I’m going with you.”

“Out of the question.”

“You’d rather I stay in this car *alone* than come with you?”

“I can’t take you into a closed building where we haven’t done a security sweep.”

Beatrice held his blazer closed at her throat with one hand. Sometimes Connor brought out an obstinate, almost childish side of her, a side that few people ever saw. “I’m going, and you can’t stop me.”

“I assure you that I can.”

“But you won’t.”

She turned and started marching back in the direction they’d come. Her heels were a bit unsteady on the asphalt, the skirts of her pale pink gown floating around her legs as she walked.

“Bee—this could be dangerous.”

Connor’s tone had dropped, become gruff and pleading. She halted in her steps and stared back at him, wisps of hair falling from her updo to frame her face.

“What if none of this was an accident?” he whispered.

She paused. “You mean, someone took the spare tire from our car, then put a piece of metal on the road so that we would run over it?”

“Yes, exactly.” Connor’s blue-gray eyes gleamed somberly.

“Seems unlikely.” Beatrice threw up a hand, indicating their surroundings—the sounds of night, crickets and wind and small rustles in the underbrush. “There’s no one here, Connor.”

There was nothing ominous about the darkness; it felt tranquil, even exciting.

Standing here with Connor, alone, Beatrice felt the way she used to as a child at the beach house—when she got out of the car and sprinted along the shore, bare feet splashing in the surf. It was a feeling of liberation, of an unnamed excitement.

The night seemed to crackle with possibility.

“If there *is* a threat, which I seriously doubt, then the safest place for me is with you. You’ll protect me if something happens, won’t you?” she asked, as if she wasn’t already sure of the answer.

“You know I will. I’d do anything for you, Bee.”

Those last words shot through her like an arrow, made her muscles go taut and gooey all at once.

“Then it’s settled.” Beatrice started walking before she could dwell on this feeling.

Connor’s hand drifted to where his gun was holstered, but he trotted to keep up with her. “I can’t believe I agreed to this.”

Despite the circumstances, Beatrice couldn’t help the smile that stole over her features. This was starting to feel like an adventure.

6

SAMANTHA

“Do you normally drive to concerts in the palace garbage truck?” Sam kicked her feet onto the dashboard as she leaned back in the passenger seat. She’d insisted on moving up here the moment they’d dropped off the trash at the dump.

“Of course not.” Liam cast her a sidelong glance. “Normally I drive my badass Italian motorcycle.”

“You have a motorcycle?” she exclaimed, and he snorted.

“If I had a motorcycle, do you think I would be driving this thing across town?” His mouth curled in amusement. “I usually take the bus, but given that tonight is a special occasion, we’re driving the garbage chariot all the way to Enclave. No complaining,” he added.

Sam threw up her hands in surrender. “I’m not complaining! I just always thought that if a cute boy helped me ditch my security, it might involve fewer banana peels and egg cartons.”

She realized, a beat too late, that she’d called Liam *cute*. As if his already massive ego needed any more inflating.

“This plan may not be glamorous, but at least it’s effective.” He grinned. “Next time you sneak out of the palace, ask someone who actually owns a motorcycle. Or maybe you can ride off on a horse from the stables.”

Samantha groaned. “Ugh. That sounds like one of the bad TV movies they’re always making about me and Beatrice.”

“The movie version is all horseback and sunsets, while the real version is a backseat full of trash? That sounds right.” Liam grinned. “Sorry to

disappoint.”

“Actually, this isn’t the first time I’ve hidden in trash. Once, when I was little, I crawled into the dumpsters during a game of hide-and-seek.”

“Seriously?”

“I wanted to win! My friend Nina always beat us. Jeff and I never did figure out where she was hiding,” Sam realized. “And it bothered me. I have a bit of a competitive streak, you know.”

“What a surprise,” Liam said sarcastically. Sam ignored him.

“So I went into the side yard and hid in the dumpster. Except that once I’d crawled into it, I couldn’t get back out. The sides were too steep.”

Liam looked surprised. “How long were you in there?”

“A few hours. Eventually someone brought out a bag of trash and found me.” Sam realized now that it had probably been someone with Liam’s job.

They pulled from the main road into a quieter side alley. Sam felt the city’s clamor receding behind a veil, replaced by the low rumbling of music, the neon of bar signs. Yellow-and-blue graffiti was scrawled over the nearest entrance to the metro. The streets felt suddenly too narrow for the massive truck, though Liam seemed unfazed.

“You know, that’s the kind of story that will never make it into your biography, though it really should,” he observed.

“I doubt I’ll have an official biography.” Sam tried to sound flippant, as if she didn’t particularly care. Royal biographies were for important family members—for the heirs, for future rulers. If history remembered her at all, it would be as Beatrice’s sister, not for her own sake.

“Maybe that’s for the best,” Liam quipped. “If tonight’s any indication, your biography wouldn’t exactly fit on the shelves with *The Royal Gardens: A Photographic Tour*.” He pulled the truck into a spot and twisted the key in the ignition. “We’re here, by the way.”

Sam glanced up; they were parallel parked alongside a building with an unmarked red door. “Are we allowed to park here?” she asked dubiously.

He swung open the door. “I figured you were handling that. You have a universal parking pass, right?”

“Um...”

“Can’t you hang a tiara in the window so the cops ignore us?”

“Very funny,” she deadpanned.

Liam pointed to a sign on the street that read NO PARKING 7 AM—7 PM. “Look, we’re fine. Now come on—the side entrance is this way.”

“Side entrance?”

“I figured you’d want to watch the show from backstage,” he said slowly. “Unless you want to do the whole VIP thing, get a table in the mezzanine, look down on everyone?”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “I want to watch the show wherever you and your friends are. That’s why I came.”

“Not a good idea. I don’t mind breaking the rules, but I also don’t want to be responsible for compromising your safety.” Liam shrugged out of his denim jacket and tossed it to her. He seemed to consider her, then grabbed a baseball cap from the glove compartment for good measure. “Here, put these on. No one would wear a white dress like that at Enclave.”

Sam couldn’t argue. There was no denying that the dress was a bit fussy.

He led her to the back of the building, where a guy with intimidating muscles stood at the door. “She’s with me, Talal.”

Without even checking her ID, the bouncer pressed a bright blue stamp onto the inside of Sam’s wrist—*EC*, it said in block letters—and waved her past.

“Okay, who *are* you? Do you know the owner or something?” Sam hissed, following Liam into the club’s dim interior.

They were standing to the right of the stage, where a tangle of cords surrounded a drum and a couple of microphones on stands, instruments at the ready. Out in the club, beyond the edge of the stage, crowds of people in leather and crop tops and jeans were crammed together, jostling eagerly for space. She could feel the weight of the audience’s excitement as if it were the heat of the spotlight.

“Liam!”

Samantha flinched, pulling the baseball cap lower over her brow, but as the stranger rushed over, she realized that he wasn’t even looking her way. “You were supposed to be here twenty minutes ago!”

“Sorry, Jesse. I got held up,” Liam said laconically.

Jesse was covered in even more ink than Liam, tattoo sleeves disappearing beneath his faded vintage T-shirt. His dark blond hair was shaggy and long, bangs constantly falling into his eyes. He glanced at Sam, finally noticing her.

“Sorry, we haven’t met. I’m Jesse.”

Jesse looked at her expectantly, and Sam realized, with a delicious sizzle of surprise, that he was waiting for her to give her name. This never happened.

“Martha,” she heard herself say, the first alias that came to mind. After all, it *was* one of her middle names.

“You didn’t tell me you were bringing a date.” Jesse nudged Liam, then turned back to Sam. “How long have you guys been a thing?”

“We’re not,” Liam hurried to say, just as Sam replied, “About an hour, if you count travel time.”

“An hour, huh?” Biting back a laugh, Jesse gestured toward the crowd. “Well, that’s longer than most of the relationships in this place.” He cast one last glance at Samantha. “Have we met?”

“I think I’d remember you,” Sam said smoothly.

Jesse nodded as if that made perfect sense, then turned back to Liam. “We need you onstage.”

Samantha felt color rising to her cheeks. She waited until Jesse had vanished before hissing, “Are you in the band? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I told you I was going to a concert.”

“Yes, *a* concert! Not *your* concert!”

“We’re just the opening act. The real concert is the next group, the Vandals—they’re amazing.”

“*Liam!*” Jesse called out from onstage. A third guy was already set up behind the drums, tossing a drumstick like a spinning top and then catching it in midair.

“Look, promise me you’ll just stay backstage, okay?” Liam hurried to say. “No one will bother you here, I swear. But I can’t really control what

happens out in the crowd.” He shook his head. “I don’t want to get arrested for treason if you get pickpocketed or recognized or something.”

“I’ll be fine.” Sam gave him a nudge. “Now go!”

She stood backstage while Liam’s band did their sound check and tune-up. When Jesse—who seemed to be the lead singer—finally tapped the microphone so they could introduce themselves, a frenzied roar rose up from the crowd. Enclave wasn’t a big club, and the noise seemed to reverberate on the inside of the walls and bounce back to them magnified.

Sam leaned back against a brick wall, near the door with the bright red EXIT sign that must lead back to the alley.

Their band was good. Sam didn’t normally listen to this type of music, all messy and raw and white-hot with emotion, but she could still tell that they were good. The lyrics, the guitar, the drum threading underneath it all like a heartbeat—like everyone’s heartbeats, like all the pulses here in the entire club—it was addictive; it was exhilarating.

To her right was another door. In the dim light she could see the sign: EXIT TO GENERAL ADMISSION. It taunted her, and Sam had never been able to resist what she wasn’t allowed. Before thinking twice about it, she drifted forward and placed her palm on the door, then pushed it open.

She was standing on the edge of a mosh pit. Bodies were pressed together in sweaty, delirious confusion, everyone jumping and shouting, their fists pumping in the air, their voices hoarse. Sam slipped into the crowd as easily as a droplet of water being absorbed into a vast ocean.

And no one noticed her.

Maybe it was her sloppy low ponytail and baseball cap, or the oversized denim jacket, or maybe everyone was too drunk or excited to notice. Maybe it was simply context—because who would expect to see a princess crushed among a bunch of alternative-rock fans in a cavelike club on the east side? Whatever the reason, no one recognized her. Not a single person looked at her and saw Princess Samantha. They just saw another fan.

Liam was up there onstage, strumming a guitar as he and Jesse sang about love or hate or whatever this song was about, probably both, and Sam was down here at the center of things. The crowd pressed in on her and she

took an elbow in the ribs and someone stepped on her toes, but none of it bothered her. She was having *fun*, enjoying this moment of feeling ordinary, even if she knew it wouldn't last.

Eventually Liam's band finished their set. Anticipation crackled through the room as the main act, the Vandals, began to set up onstage. Samantha was still letting the room's energy carry her along when a hand grabbed her elbow.

"You weren't supposed to come out here!" Liam hissed.

Now a few people did look their way. Miraculously, yet totally logically, they didn't spare Sam a second glance. They had eyes only for Liam, the sexily disheveled singer who'd been onstage a few minutes before. They couldn't have cared less about the girl he was talking to.

"This is fun. I don't want to leave," she spluttered, but he grabbed her wrist and tugged her back through the crowd, which had already forgotten about them as the Vandals launched into their opening song.



"Spend a night alone in this alley, or a year alone abroad?" Liam posited.

"Easy. A night alone," Sam replied. "A year abroad sounds great, but not without someone to share it with."

"A night alone in *this* alley," he repeated, disbelieving, and she laughed.

"This alley seems pretty harmless so far."

They'd been sitting out here for a while now, on the fire escape that overlooked the alley behind Enclave, letting time slip through their fingers like sand. Sam had wanted to stay for the Vandals' show, but Liam insisted that they'd pushed their luck too much already. They'd compromised by staying here, both silently agreeing to hide from reality a little longer.

Liam had unearthed a bag of potato chips backstage—which was almost certainly stolen from one of his bandmates—but Sam didn't complain as they passed the chips back and forth, asking each other silly this-or-that questions. They had started easily enough, with softballs like *crunchy or smooth peanut butter? Skydive or scuba dive?* By now they'd escalated to

increasingly ridiculous questions. *Time machine or magic carpet? Retake the SATs or relive your most awkward moment?*

It was a game played in fits and starts, because they kept pausing to tell jokes or recount anecdotes. Already Sam had recounted the day she'd met Nina (she liked to claim, now, that she'd taken one look and known that Nina was her future best friend, but the truth was Sam had just been lonely) and about the time she'd shaved all the hair off Beatrice's dolls. ("Hairless dolls! Now *that* is the kind of commemorative gear that you should sell at the palace gift shop," Liam had remarked.)

Normally, Sam felt that nights followed a distinct arc. They climbed steadily toward a peak—a moment when the music and energy were perfect, a moment that, if you were lucky, you might recognize as the highlight of the evening. Then the roller coaster would swoop down, careening toward the end of the party and the brutal hangover that awaited you in the morning.

That wasn't happening tonight. Instead of accelerating back toward reality, she was...meandering toward it. Enjoying the view. She wouldn't even *be* hungover tomorrow, because she hadn't had anything to drink since those long-ago sips of champagne with Nina and Jeff. She'd been too caught up in the contagious energy of the mosh pit to even care about getting a beer.

With the part of her brain that was still focused on reality, Sam registered how bizarre this was. She was sitting in an alley behind a crowded dark club, and it smelled like cigarettes and spilled beer, and she didn't care at all because she was enjoying the unexpected spark that had struck between her and this stranger.

"Okay, my turn," she declared. "Ninjas or pirates?"

Liam frowned, considering the question with utter seriousness. "What kind of pirates? Historic Blackbeard-style pirates, or pirates with magic like in *Peter Pan*?"

She rolled her eyes. "You're taking this too seriously."

"This-or-that is a very serious matter because it forces you into self-examination. But since you won't clarify which type of pirate..." He

glanced over hopefully, and Sam shook her head. “Then I guess I’ll have to go with ninjas.”

This was not at all the conversation she’d expected to have with someone in a rock band, but it just went to show that you couldn’t judge people at first glance. Or, rather, that people would keep on surprising you.

Liam took a handful of chips, then passed her the bag. “Beach or mountains?”

That was an easy one. “Mountains, always. You?”

“I guess I’ll find out soon enough. I’ve never seen mountains—not real ones, anyway.” He hesitated. “The guys and I are road-tripping out west in a few weeks, to see if we can make it in LA.”

Sam had suspected that this adventure would only last a night. Still, disappointment curdled in her chest at the realization that she probably wouldn’t see Liam again. A small part of her had hoped he would still be here, still working at the palace and singing at Enclave, when she and Jeff returned from their gap-year tour.

She’d never know what might have happened if they weren’t about to part ways—if they might have built something together that lasted more than a single, momentous evening.

“Oh, you’ll make it. You guys are really good,” she said warmly. “Though I have to say...you shouldn’t be singing backup.”

Liam blinked, surprised. “Jesse’s always been our lead singer. Besides, I’m the one who plays guitar.”

“As if you can’t do both at the same time.” Sam nudged him. “I’m just saying, you’re talented, Liam. Talented enough to do your own thing, if you ever wanted to leave the band and go out on your own.”

“I wouldn’t even know where to begin.” He glanced over and added, “You’re not the only one who’s still figuring out what they stand for.”

They sat with that in companionable silence. Finally Sam checked the time, wondering what was happening back at the palace, and saw that it was almost midnight. Liam must have noticed the movement, because he remarked, “That’s a funny watch. Not at all what I’d expect you to wear.”

“My stylist despises it,” Samantha agreed. “I won it from a claw machine years ago, at an arcade with Jeff and Beatrice—one of those royal visits they stage and choreograph to make us seem like ordinary people. When I pulled this out of its plastic wrapping, Jeff tried to take it. He said that since it was covered in dinosaurs, it was a *boy watch*, and he should have it. So of course I insisted on wearing it. I couldn’t let him think that only boys got to wear the cool stuff.”

“Yeah,” Liam said dubiously, and she rounded on him.

“What, girls aren’t allowed to like fire engines and trains?”

“Not at all.” He threw up his hands in surrender. “But...isn’t part of the problem that you called dinosaurs and trains ‘the cool stuff’? Maybe encouraging girls to play with train sets is only half the solution. Maybe we need to start saying that princesses and tutus are ‘the cool stuff,’ too.”

Sam stared at him skeptically. “That would be nice, except no one actually thinks that.”

He shrugged. “I can’t speak for all princesses, but I’ve met one, and she’s kind of a badass.”

A reluctant smile rose to Samantha’s lips. She didn’t want to like this boy. Really, she hadn’t meant to. But he’d come along with his sarcasm and his irreverence, and she’d jumped at the chance to be as spontaneous as everyone thought she was—to go to a concert in a dark club as if she were any old eighteen-year-old, and not a *Your Highness*.

She turned to see that Liam was studying her. Sam’s breath caught as he lowered his mouth to hers.

Here was yet another thing to like about him: the fact that he wasn’t too intimidated to kiss her. Most guys waited for Sam to make the first move.

She slid an arm around his waist, shifting on the fire escape so that her body nudged closer to his. He lifted a hand and teased his fingers through her hair, trailing them ever so lightly over her scalp in a way that sent electrifying shivers down her skin. She opened her mouth, deepening the kiss.

This was sweeter and somehow more poignant than it should be, kissing a guy she’d just met. Sam would know; she had plenty of experience

kissing guys she'd just met. Some of them were royal—her first kiss had been with Prince Fernando of Brazil at age thirteen. Some were Jeff's classmates—she'd kissed a few in various games of spin the bottle, or that one time when they'd broken into the Crown Jewels vault, spin the scepter. And some were ordinary guys—well, the occasional valet or private ski instructor, since those were the only ordinary guys Sam got much time with. At least she knew better than to try anything with her Revere Guard; she could only guess how awkward things would be afterward.

And with Sam, there was always an afterward. Most of her flings were over before they'd even begun.

When she and Liam finally broke apart, the silence between them felt tranquil, almost sacred. The night had stretched on until it blurred into tomorrow.

“Can I drive you home?” he offered, and Sam knew that this interlude from reality—this night, or dream, or whatever it was—had ended.

She smiled. “In the garbage truck?”

“It has security clearance, so I can get you to the palace's back entrance. If you're lucky, no one will even notice you were gone.”

“Thank you.” She held out a hand, letting him pull her to her feet.

As they headed back to the truck, she caught Liam humming a tune under his breath.

“Is that one of your band's songs?” She didn't remember hearing them play it earlier, but it sounded catchy.

He averted his gaze. “It's nothing. Just a tune that popped into my head earlier tonight.”

“Wait a second. Did you write a *song* about me?” she asked, delighted.

“It's a work in progress, and it's not about you, per se. But, yes, I did start playing with the melody tonight. So you could say it was inspired by your presence. *Loosely* inspired,” he assured her.

“Sing it for me!”

Liam put a hand on the small of her back, steering her gently down the sidewalk. “Nope. I refuse to serenade you like the character from the bad

teen movie you so adamantly insist you're *not* living. Maybe someday, when it's finished, I'll send you a copy."

She nodded. "Maybe I'll hear it on the radio once it's a smash hit. Just promise me you'll sing it yourself—the whole song, not just the chorus."

"We'll see," Liam said gruffly, though she noticed that he was smiling, too. Sam's chest felt suddenly lighter, as if this night had lifted a loneliness she hadn't fully realized she was carrying.

She wondered if she would ever find someone she truly belonged with—someone who called her out on her antics but also joined in those antics. Someone who challenged her, who understood her restlessness because he felt it, too. She hoped that person was out there, and that fate would throw them together.

But in the meantime, it had been nice to do this. To share a connection with someone, even if they both knew that their lives were only colliding briefly before parting ways again.

7

NINA

Nina had lost track of Samantha.

It was hardly the first time. Sam had a habit of drifting off at parties, distracted by a drinking game or a shiny new boy, leaving Nina surrounded by people she only half knew and half liked.

With one very crucial exception, of course.

Nina hadn't talked to Jeff since they'd all split that bottle of champagne outside. When they'd returned to Ambassador's Hall, he had vanished, and soon afterward Nina lost Sam, too. Now she was here, at the center of the dance floor with some of the girls from Sam's class—she kept assuming Sam would show up, but so far she was MIA.

Painstakingly, Nina began threading her way through the overexcited teenagers. The music dimmed once she stepped out into the hall. She should go check Sam's room, make sure her friend wasn't passed out on top of her covers. Nina started toward the main staircase, detouring through the Grand Gallery, a long room lined with portraits of all eleven American kings. Their clothes and poses were different—some on horseback, some buried beneath so many jeweled crowns and rings and scepters that it seemed impossible the kings weren't crushed beneath their weight—but their expressions were the same. Each of the eleven kings looked formidable, and a bit stern.

It was strange, sometimes, to think that these were Sam and Jeff's ancestors: men who'd commanded armies and decided the fate of nations. Nothing at all like the living, laughing Washingtons she actually knew.

That was when she nearly collided with Jeff.

Somehow Nina was unsurprised to see him here. Perhaps because she'd been thinking about him—because she was *always* thinking about him. Her love for him was like a low-level hum at the back of her mind, soft enough to ignore until he was standing in front of her, and then it was all she could process.

As she took a step back, she wobbled a little in her wedges, and Jeff put his hands on her shoulders to steady her. “Hey, Nina. You okay?”

I'm okay now that you're here, she thought. Jeff seemed to realize that he was still holding on to her, and slowly lowered his hands.

“I can't believe you're leaving tomorrow. It won't be the same without you,” Nina blurted out. She flushed self-consciously and added, “I mean, without you and Sam.”

Jeff smiled, that adorable boyish smile that was the tiniest bit lopsided. “Nina Gonzalez, are you saying that you'll miss me?”

She missed him *now*. She and Jeff were still friends, sure, but not in the way they'd been as children, when everything was uncomplicated and easy and full of laughter. Now they only crossed paths through Sam or at parties. Now he was dating Daphne.

Come to think of it, Nina hadn't seen Jeff and Daphne together all night. She tried not to get her hopes up at the realization.

“Of course I'll miss you two,” she replied, dodging his question. “By the way, have you seen Sam recently? I lost track of her.”

“Sam is missing? Why am I not surprised.” Jeff's eyes danced. “Want me to help look for her?”

He fell into step alongside Nina. Through some unspoken agreement, they both moved down the hallway at a slow pace, drawing out their time together.

“You're going to have your hands full on this gap-year trip, trying to keep Sam out of trouble,” Nina teased. “The moment you look away, she'll do something spontaneous and possibly dangerous, like sneak off into a crowded marketplace.”

Jeff scoffed. “Try to keep Sam out of trouble? I’ll be right there in the marketplace with her, bartering for a dumpling.”

“Like that time in Barbados when you traded your sunglasses to Captain Jacob to keep him from ratting you out?”

“Ratting *us* out! I wasn’t the only one sneaking a beer,” Jeff protested, but he was grinning. “Come on, Nina, we both know that the only person who’s ever been able to keep me or Sam in line is *you*. We’re going to be in serious trouble without you.”

They had moved past the throne room, its wooden floors gleaming in the light that fell from high mullioned windows, then past the nests of small sitting rooms with their clusters of love seats and armchairs. Each time they reached the entrance to another room, they cast a desultory glance inside for Sam, but there was no sign of her.

“I only *sometimes* keep you in line,” Nina told Jeff, her feet scuffing the fringe on an antique rug. “But I have faith in your Revere Guards. If you and Sam try to do something ridiculous, they’ll find a way to stop you.”

“Still, I’d rather have you.”

The words were innocuous enough. It was something else that gave Nina pause: the subtle significance to his voice, the glow in his eyes as they met hers.

I’d rather have you. For the first time, Nina allowed herself to entertain the wild, ridiculous, delirious thought that Jeff might feel something for her beyond friendship.

He stopped in the middle of the hallway, near an alcove with an old grandfather clock. “Nina...I’m not any good at goodbyes.”

“Then don’t say it!” She’d always hated goodbyes, ever since she was little and her mamá used to disappear on work trips for weeks on end, leaving Nina to stare at the door as it shut behind her. “This isn’t goodbye. It’s just *see you later*.”

Jeff paused. “Does *see you later* mean that everything will be the same when I get back?”

Nina found that her heart had picked up speed, kinetic energy sparking through every nerve ending. “Probably not,” she whispered. “Things

change.”

“But will *you* change? Or will you still be here when I’m home?”

His words hung in the air between them, a declaration and a question at once. The what-ifs clamored more insistently in Nina’s mind: What if she grabbed Jeff’s shirt with both her fists, leaned forward and kissed him?

They were standing so close, but they hadn’t yet crossed the final distance between them. They could still walk away and pretend this had never happened.

Instead, Nina leaned forward and tipped her face up to his.

Jeff’s lips on hers were so very *right*. This was how it felt to finally experience a kiss you had dreamed of for years: you always knew it would be good, and it was still a thousand times better than you ever imagined. As if someone had turned on a bright new spectrum of Technicolor lights and only now did you realize just how vibrant the world could be.

The kiss must have lasted only a few seconds, but when they pulled apart, Nina’s entire universe had shifted on its axis. Her center of gravity now existed where Jeff’s lips had touched hers.

She had kissed Prince Jefferson, and for better or worse, she could never take it back.

He reached for her hand, twining his fingers in hers, which made Nina almost dizzy. “Do you want to go upstairs?”

Yes. No. She wanted to and was terrified to, all at once. There were countless reasons that she shouldn’t: he was her best friend’s brother, and the prince, and what was the state of things between him and Daphne, anyway?

No, Nina started to tell him, but her body had apparently disconnected itself from her mind and was cheerfully ignoring her brain’s commands.

“Yes,” she heard herself say.

Upstairs, they were eager yet strangely shy. “This is my room,” Jeff mumbled, as if Nina didn’t know this was his suite. To be fair, she hadn’t been here in years.

She held her breath as they stepped into his sitting room. It was different than she remembered. Gone were the plastic basketball hoop that had been

mounted on the door and the row of pegs where he used to hang sweatshirts and baseball caps. Everything felt more grown-up now: the navy and red throw pillows, the wooden desk with its leather blotter, the lamps casting a warm golden light over the room.

“We can...um...” Jeff gestured to the couch in the sitting room.

Nina, who always had words at the ready—often *too* many words—found that she was inarticulate. She felt like a shadow self had taken over, a version of Nina that was so much bolder and braver than the reality. *That* Nina grabbed Jeff’s wrist and pulled him through the door into the bedroom. He made a strangled, surprised noise in the back of his throat and stumbled after her.

They fell onto the bed in a heated tangle, both turning onto their sides so that their faces were close together. Nina hardly dared to breathe. She still couldn’t believe that this was happening.

Sprawled next to her like this, Jeff looked different, younger. Nina reached up to trace the curve of his bottom lip, then brushed those lips with her own.

Eventually Nina found that she wanted more. Her mouth was hungry and insistent, deepening their kisses. Her hands couldn’t stay still—they moved from Jeff’s waist to his shoulders to his arms, as if she needed to touch him everywhere at once, to make up for all the years she’d wanted to. She felt feverish, unable to think of anything that wasn’t Jeff.

Jeff must have sensed her new urgency, because he flipped atop her, propping his weight on his elbows. Nina felt the rapid rhythm of his pulse and knew it was echoing through her own body. Her arms snaked up around his shoulders. His shirt had ridden up, and she caught herself toying with the waistband of his boxers, sliding her fingers over his lower back. And all the while his lips were roving over her, dropping kisses on her mouth, her brow, the curve of her neck.

When Jeff’s hand slipped beneath the strap of her dress and began to tug it down over her bare shoulder, she realized that they were going way too fast.

She must have flinched, or stiffened, because Jeff pulled back.

They were both breathing heavily. Jeff's brow was damp with sweat, a dark curl escaping from behind his ear. Nina wanted to reach out and tuck it back, but the ease between them seemed to have evaporated.

"Nina. You okay?" Jeff's eyes were smoky as they met hers.

"I just..." She swallowed. "I need to slow down."

If they kept going like this, she didn't trust herself to stop. And as much as she'd always dreamed of Jeff being her first, she'd never imagined it happening like this, when they were furtively messing around on the night of a party. She loved him too much to let it just *happen* without meaning anything.

She didn't want Jeff for a single night; she wanted him for keeps. She wanted to see pieces of him that he didn't show anyone else, to share secrets with him, to be the reason his eyes lit up with that glow. She wanted more from him than he was able to give her, at least right now.

Though she couldn't exactly blame Jeff for any of this. She was the one who'd dragged him in here and practically thrown him onto the bed, then started playing with the waistband of his pants. Talk about mixed messages.

"Sure. Okay." He shifted away, flopping back onto the pillows, and for a moment Nina almost cried out for him to come back. She felt cold without his weight atop her.

But then Jeff tugged her closer so that she was tucked into his side, her head resting on his chest.

"I can't believe this," he murmured, reaching to lace his fingers in hers.

Nina smiled against his skin. "You never saw this coming?"

"*Definitely* not."

She startled a little at his tone, but then Jeff added, "You were so off-limits, and I never thought you were...I mean, I never thought I would be this lucky."

Nina realized that she'd never considered this from Jeff's perspective. He thought that he couldn't get involved with her for the same reasons she did: because she was his sister's best friend.

In the lazy silence, she lifted her mouth to his again. It was nothing like the frantic, heated kisses from before; this was soft, coaxing, sweet. Their

pulses had slowed, both of them growing drowsy, yet they kept on kissing as if they had all the time in the world.

They didn't, though. The next day Jeff would leave for Asia, and Nina would start working her summer job, and their paths would separate—because Jeff was a prince, and Nina was wholly ordinary.

For once, Nina resolved not to worry about the future. She just focused on the feel of Jeff's lips on hers, letting herself be fully absorbed in the here and now. Even though, deep down, she knew this night would leave her forever changed.

8

DAPHNE

“I’m sure you all saw this already, but Gabriella’s in town,” Stephanie Palmer announced with imperious authority. “She couldn’t make it tonight because her parents are hosting the king and queen. My parents are there too, *obviously*...”

Daphne nodded, only pretending to listen, though normally the topic of Gabriella Madison’s return would have commanded her rapt attention. Gabriella had attended St. Ursula’s until her father was named ambassador to France and their family moved to Paris. Gabriella was just as beautiful and ambitious as Daphne, as well as being many things that Daphne was not—titled, wealthy. *A lady*.

If Gabriella ever came back for good, she would be dangerous indeed.

“You can take a break, you know.” Ethan’s voice was a low growl in Daphne’s ear.

Daphne ground her teeth into a smile and murmured her excuses to the group of girls, who were too absorbed in their gossip to really care.

The moment she and Ethan had stepped aside, she whirled on him. “What?”

“You can take a break,” he said again. “I know you’re keeping an eye on Himari.”

It was true. Daphne hadn’t left this room, this *spot*, since she saw the sleeping pills kick in a few hours ago.

At first Himari had just seemed drunk, her voice loud and slurring as she slung an arm around her friends, swaying perilously on her espadrilles.

Daphne had taken a few videos with her phone, but they weren't especially incriminating. Even under the influence, Himari didn't really act out of line.

Eventually, Himari had retreated to a neighboring sitting room, where she leaned back on an upholstered silk couch, her head tipping back and eyes fluttering closed. A puddle of drool emerged from the corner of her mouth to spill over the blue toile of the cushions. This time Daphne didn't need to take incriminating photos, because the other kids were taking more than enough, turning Himari into the reigning meme of the night. No one made any effort to wake her up. She was just another drunk girl who'd passed out at a party.

Himari had suffered an embarrassing moment. Even if she hadn't done anything truly blackmail-worthy, she'd still made a fool of herself. If nothing else, she would think twice about revealing Daphne's secret, now that she knew what Daphne was capable of.

All Daphne wanted was for this night to be over, so that she and Himari could put the whole ugly episode behind them.

Ethan's eyes darted to where Himari lay on the upholstered silk couch. "I'm just saying, I can take over Himari duty if you want to walk outside or go take a shot or something."

"Take a shot?" Daphne repeated flatly. "When have you ever seen me take a shot?"

"Never, but you could probably use one. You're giving me secondhand anxiety."

"Feel free to leave."

"Daphne, all I'm saying is, you can relax. You're wound so tight you're about to explode."

There was something almost husky in the way he spoke that last sentence, something in the roughness of his voice and the way his gaze lingered knowingly on her. It sent warmth unspooling through her, to settle low and deep in her core.

"Stop *doing* that," she hissed.

"Doing what?" He took a step closer, and his hand brushed ever so lightly against hers.

“Ethan.” Daphne meant it as a warning, but to her mortification, the word came out soft and breathy, full of longing.

It would be so much easier if she could pretend that what had happened between her and Ethan had been a lapse in judgment, that she’d gotten bored or drunk and made a careless, inexplicable mistake. But the gravitational pull between them had always been there.

It had been there the moment they met, at the twins’ party her freshman year, though she had quickly refocused her attention on Jefferson. She’d assumed her attraction to Ethan was just a stray impulse, but she’d felt it again in full force a few weeks later. Daphne was outside school, waiting for one of her parents to pick her up, when Ethan approached her bench.

“Voltaire, huh?” He nodded at the copy of *Candide* that lay open on her lap.

Daphne quickly shut the book, then smoothed her pleated skirt over her legs. The last thing she wanted was for Jefferson’s best friend to tell everyone she was a nerd. “Ethan, right? I’m Daphne. We met a few weeks ago at the palace.”

“I remember.” He settled onto the opposite end of the bench. “I take it you’re in Madame Meynard’s class?”

Daphne flashed him her most dazzling smile. “Don’t tell me you’re in French, too.” Forsythe Academy and St. Ursula’s shared a few teachers, mainly for specialized classes like French or Latin. It made sense, since the campuses were adjacent.

“She’s the best. A total pushover,” Ethan told her. “If you ask to go to the language lab and practice your dialogue, she’ll give you a hall pass, no question. She doesn’t even date it.”

“And then you skip class to go smoke behind the bleachers?”

“Piece of advice, freshman—you go behind the bleachers, you’ll get caught. The teachers are always checking back there.” Ethan grinned. “And you can’t expect me to share the good hiding spots on campus, not the first time we meet.”

“Technically, it’s the second time we’ve met,” Daphne reminded him.

“I don’t know if the first time really counted. You seemed... preoccupied.”

His dark gaze was unwavering, as if he’d somehow guessed why Daphne had really come to the palace that night. She shifted, feeling unsettled.

“Of course I was preoccupied! I dropped that sparkler on the ground and nearly set the palace on fire!”

None of which had been an accident. She’d been trying to get Jefferson’s attention, and it had worked.

“Daphne Deighton, amateur arsonist,” Ethan declared, and she wondered how he’d learned her last name. He must have asked someone about her. The realization spiked through her blood like a drug.

“Well, it would seem that our second meeting is off to a better start than our first.”

Daphne wasn’t sure what had prompted her to say that. Ethan’s lips twitched as if he was fighting a smile, and he shifted, draping an arm over the back of the bench. His hand nearly brushed her shoulder, but didn’t.

“Are you waiting for someone? Can I give you a ride?”

“No thanks,” Daphne said quickly.

No way could she accept a ride, especially not from Jefferson’s best friend. When someone did you a favor—even if it was well intentioned, and she wasn’t wholly sure that Ethan’s was—it shifted the balance of power, created an obligation. And Daphne refused to be in anyone’s debt, ever. She couldn’t afford to be.

Ethan had nudged a bit closer to her on the bench. Or maybe *Daphne* had shifted closer; her copy of *Candide* felt more distant than it used to be.

Daphne was no stranger to male attraction. When guys looked at her this way—which was often—she knew precisely what to do with it, how to use it to her own advantage. Ethan was different. She couldn’t shake the feeling that he saw past the frosted veneer she showed everyone, to the real self she kept hidden beneath.

Now, at the graduation party, Daphne felt the tug between them again. She forgot Himari and Jefferson and her thousand anxieties. She forgot everything except that she was here with Ethan.

The distance she'd maintained between them was melting away. His mouth was so close to hers, close enough for his breaths to become her breaths, as if they were inhaling and exhaling in tandem.

For a moment, Daphne let herself imagine acting on this—this magnetism, this insistent attraction, this *pull*—between her and Ethan. Not just hooking up with him in secret, but truly acting on it. Ending things with Jefferson, exploring what she and Ethan could become.

She held that possibility in her mind as if she were holding a glass paperweight in her palms. And then she quietly let it go.

There could be no giving up, not when she'd already come so far.

Yet her choice stung her, as if she'd sliced her hands on that glass paperweight when it fell. As if the impact resounded an angry thud through the hollow chamber of her heart.

“Daphne,” Ethan told her, “you and I both know—”

But what they both knew, Ethan would never say aloud, because that was when Daphne looked over at the couch and realized Himari was missing.

Reflexively she glanced toward the door where Jefferson's Revere Guard, Matt, had been standing, but he was gone, too.

“Ethan! Where's Himari?” In her panic, Daphne grabbed his arm without caring who might see.

He looked to the empty couch, and his eyes gleamed with concern. “You check the hallways. I'll check around here,” he said swiftly.

For a moment Daphne was helpless to move. She could only watch as Ethan swept through the door that connected to Ambassador's Hall like a general on the warpath, cutting through the crowds of drowsy, drunk teenagers. He checked every last grouping of furniture and cluster of dancing classmates.

She blinked, disoriented, then stumbled out of the room. Past people kissing right there in the middle of the hallway, past antique urns on pedestals. Himari wasn't in any of the state rooms toward the main front staircase; could she have tried to do something outrageous, like break into the armory? It would be just like Himari to go sit on the throne in the Great Hall. Or, Daphne realized, to head upstairs to the royal bedrooms.

Daphne spun on a patent-leather heel and sprinted back the way she'd come, toward the service corridor that led to the back staircase and the kitchens.

When she heard the unearthly sound of a scream, she knew she was too late.

Himari lay crumpled at the foot of the stairs, her head turned at an angle, the emerald ripples of her silk dress dark with blood. It was pooling around her head, though her hair still looked shiny and sleek from her afternoon blowout.

Daphne sank to the floor by her friend. Her mind was screaming, a deadly primal scream that tore through every last nerve in her body, yet somehow her mouth didn't open to make a sound. She felt like a wild animal had ripped her throat and torn out her vocal cords, and now she was as mute as the marble statues she'd just passed.

At least Himari was breathing. Daphne's mind clamped onto that fact, watching the uneven movement of her friend's chest.

Unbelievably, the sounds of the party continued as if no one else had heard Himari scream. It seemed impossible that people could still be dancing when Daphne's best friend—who was, at the same time, her greatest enemy—had just fallen because of Daphne's mistakes.

She glanced up, looking around frantically for a security guard or footman, but the person who came jogging down the hall was Ethan.

"Oh my god," he breathed, reaching into his pocket for his phone. "I'm calling an ambulance. Have you seen Jeff or Sam?"

Daphne blinked. Come to think of it, she hadn't seen either of the twins in over an hour. How typical of them to vanish at their own party. They were always running off, chasing spontaneous impulses, and everyone forgave them because they were Washingtons.

"I'll go find Jefferson," she heard herself say, her voice hoarse.

"Daphne—"

Ethan broke off, but he didn't need to finish the sentence. Their eyes met in a flash of understanding.

He knew exactly how she was feeling, knew the guilt and fear tormenting her. He understood that the price she'd paid for her ambition was too high.

Daphne was certain, in that instant, that her secret was safe with Ethan. Whatever they were—lovers, friends, each other's greatest mistake—he would never tell anyone what she'd done to Himari.

A heartbeat later she was on her feet, trying to ignore the blood on the staircase as she sprinted up the stairs, taking them two at a time, like she had as a little girl. Behind her she heard Ethan talking to the emergency dispatcher, heard the panicked questions of a security guard who'd finally arrived on the scene.

When she reached the second floor, the sounds were cut off, absorbed by all the centuries-old stone and wood.

The fabric of her dress felt slippery around her legs as she headed to Jefferson's room. A sense of foreboding hung over the shadowed halls, the silence of the corridors echoing the silent scream of panic in her skull. It was as if her body already knew, on some primal level, what she was about to find.

Daphne stepped soundlessly into Jefferson's suite. Through the open doorway to his bedroom, she saw the reason he'd mysteriously vanished from his own party.

He was in bed with another girl.

Daphne could have shouted or thrown a fit, but she just stood there. Maybe her vocal cords were still muted from what had happened to Himari, or maybe she was paralyzed with shock. In the moonlight, the scene took on an eerily distant quality. Daphne found herself staring at Jefferson as abstractly as if he were a figure in a painting, utterly detached from her and her life.

He was closest to the door. It was definitely Jefferson; Daphne knew the curve of his shoulder and the glint of his hair as well as she knew her own body. But she couldn't see the girl, who was on the other side of the bed. A coldly rational voice in her brain urged her to figure it out so that she could use this information, hold it over the girl's head—

A feminine giggle broke into Daphne's thoughts, and she tore herself away before either of them could see.

She fled back down the hallway, feeling nauseous with regret. What was that Bible verse—if you sow wickedness, then you will reap disaster? For the past few years Daphne had sown ambitions and plots and jealousies, and look where it had gotten her.

She'd lost her boyfriend and her best friend in a single night.

Daphne sucked in a breath and began her solitary march down the stairs. She needed to go face it all, because this was her inheritance, wasn't it? Loneliness and falsehoods. Pretending that everything was okay even when her life was coming apart at the seams.

She had made terrible errors in judgment, and it had cost her—cost Himari—dearly.

But while Daphne might be defeated, she wasn't vanquished. Not yet.

She'd come too far and sacrificed too much to give up now. Daphne would just have to lie low for a while, wait until Jefferson came home from his gap-year tour, and then she would win him back.

She knew she could do it. There was nothing that Daphne couldn't do once she'd set her mind to it. Because she was young and cunning and ambitious and beautiful—and because there were no lengths she wouldn't go to, no lines she wouldn't cross, to get what she knew she deserved.

9

BEATRICE

Beatrice pulled Connor's blazer tighter over her shoulders with a sigh. He'd been inside for several minutes now. Despite her protests, he'd been adamant that she remain outside, hidden behind the wooden caterpillar like some kind of outlaw.

The sign was starting to creep her out, with its cheerful eyes and bright orange antennae. It reminded her of the children's book about the caterpillar that kept consuming everything in its path. Sam and Jeff used to giggle at that book, but Beatrice had never found it silly. She knew how it felt to deal with an insatiable force, something so greedy that it never stopped taking and taking, no matter how much you gave it.

That was what it meant to be subject to the Crown.

She crept closer to the door and heard voices inside. "You must have a spare somewhere," Connor was saying. "Can I have the one from your car?"

Beatrice glanced through the glass at the man behind the counter, who was middle-aged, with graying hair and glasses perched on his nose. "You want my personal spare tire?" the man demanded, affronted.

"I'm willing to pay for it, and I'll make sure you have a replacement by tomorrow. This is for a very important person," Connor pressed.

The cashier shook his head. "I'm sorry, but no."

Connor shifted his weight. The man's eyes drifted to the revolver holstered at Connor's waist, and he retreated a step, shaking his head. "I don't want any trouble. Please leave *now*."

Beatrice couldn't just stand there uselessly. She squared her shoulders and pulled open the door.

Fluorescent lights beamed down over aisles of Oreos, candy, cigarettes. A low hum emanated from the corner, where bright blue slushie churned in a machine. And there was Connor, standing at the counter, looking imposing and almost hostile with his arms crossed over his chest.

Both men glanced up at her arrival. Connor glowered at her. The cashier's eyes widened comically behind his glasses. Beatrice saw that his smiley-face name tag read STAN.

No one spoke. The store was as quiet as in the aftermath of an explosion, the only sound her heels clicking over the laminate floor.

Beatrice looked directly at Stan—ignoring Connor, whose face had darkened like a storm cloud—and spoke in her most charming princess voice. “Good evening, Mr....”

Stan blinked and sank into a low bow, twirling his arms in a flourish as if he were a character from an Alexandre Dumas novel. “Your Royal Highness,” he said faintly. “Stan Stevens, at your service.”

“Thank you, Mr. Stevens.” She smiled. “As my Revere Guard may have mentioned, we were driving back to Washington when we punctured a tire. I'm hoping that you can help.”

Stan glanced from Beatrice to Connor. The man had a dazed expression on his face, as if he were in the middle of a dream. Beatrice waited, still smiling cordially. When Stan realized that he should say something, he jumped a little.

“As I was telling your security, I don't carry spare tires here. What I mean is, we're not an auto repair shop,” he babbled. “We don't even have a gas pump out front anymore. We used to, but it was more trouble than it was worth—you know, most of the people who drive this way wait to get gas at the Walmart up in Buckley, just another ten miles up the road....”

Beatrice felt Connor stiffen at the realization that they'd been so close to a Walmart—to civilization, and phone lines, and spare tires.

“I see,” she said pleasantly.

“But...you're welcome to the spare from my car, if you think it'll fit.”

“Oh, Mr. Stevens. That is so very thoughtful of you!” Beatrice clapped, beaming at him, and he reddened a little.

“It’s my pleasure. I’m just happy to help, Your Royal Highness. Can I—can we take a photo?” He stepped out from behind the counter, holding out his phone with a hopeful expression. “I mean, it’s just so impossible that you’re actually here, in *my* store! No one is ever going to believe this story unless there’s proof!”

But Beatrice didn’t want this to *become* a story. Once Stan showed his friends a photo of himself with the princess, it would become a local news item, probably even an internet headline: *Royals: they’re just like us. They get flat tires!*

If palace security learned that Connor had failed to do a vehicle check before taking the princess on a highway, they would never let him drive her anywhere again.

And Connor had to keep driving her. Beatrice *needed* these brief pockets of time alone with him.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t allow that. In fact, I’m going to have to ask you to keep this entire evening between us.” Beatrice felt Connor’s gaze heavy on her, but he didn’t interrupt. “No one can know that we were here tonight,” Beatrice explained.

Stan hesitated, phone still outstretched. “What about an autograph?”

“I’m sorry,” Beatrice said again. “I wish I could say more, but this is a crucial matter of national security. I’m going to prevail upon your sense of chivalry and ask that you keep our visit a secret.”

“Chivalry,” Stan repeated in a slightly puzzled tone.

An idea was forming in Beatrice’s mind, something utterly outlandish, yet it just might work. She glanced back at Connor. “Don’t you think that Mr. Stevens has shown utmost generosity and discretion this evening? I believe he should be made a knight.”

“Absolutely.” Connor pressed his mouth tight together, and Beatrice knew he was swallowing back a laugh.

She cast around the store, wishing she had a sword with her, or even a wooden kitchen spoon. The best she could find was one of the bright red

lollipops from a display by the cash register. She flipped the lollipop around so that she was holding onto the plastic-wrapped candy, the paper wand outstretched.

“Please kneel,” she commanded.

Technically, Beatrice didn’t have the power to knight people; only the monarch did. But there wasn’t any real harm in this. At least she was better than her great-great-uncle Ernest, who’d drunkenly knighted his own horse.

Stan was too stunned to argue. He just sank to one knee before Beatrice, head bowed, right there by the display of vape pens.

“From this day forward, I grant you the honors and dignities of a Knight Defender of the Realm.” She tapped the lollipop’s wand first on one shoulder, then on the other. “Now rise, Sir Stanley Stevens.”

Stan rose slowly, grinning ear to ear. “Thank you, Your Royal Highness—er, milady,” he said hesitantly. “And please, let me get you that tire so you can be on your way.”



“A *crucial matter of national security!*” Connor chuckled, a low rumbling sound deep in his chest, as they pulled off the highway.

“You’re just jealous you didn’t think of it first,” Beatrice teased.

The drive back to the capital had been surprisingly easy once they’d exchanged their shredded tire for Stan’s spare. Beatrice had promised to send him a replacement the next day, as well as an invitation to the next royal garden party—they were always giving out invitations to contest winners, so she knew she could find an excuse to get him on the list. “Just remember, you can’t tell anyone about tonight,” she’d warned, and Stan had nodded with utmost solemnity, assuring her that he would take the secret to his grave.

She and Connor had spent the last forty minutes laughing over the events of the evening as they worked through the mountain of snacks that Stan had insisted on giving them. Beatrice tore open the wrapper of a Reese’s cup and passed it wordlessly to Connor, who popped it into his mouth whole. A

little spark seemed to pass from his skin to hers where their fingers brushed, which Beatrice strove to ignore.

He shook his head, still smiling. There was a tiny smudge of chocolate on his lower lip that Beatrice couldn't look away from. "I can't get over that you knighted him with a lollipop."

"What else was I supposed to use, a golf club?"

"At least a golf club isn't edible!" Connor glanced over, his gaze softening. "Seriously, though, Bee—you were incredible back there."

"You're the one who did all the hard labor. Like using that lever thing to lift our car."

"The car jack?"

"Whatever it's called," Beatrice said quickly, flushing a little. She hated revealing how inept she was at real-life things. "I have no idea how it works. I couldn't have changed a tire or patched a tire or anything like that."

"Well, I couldn't have bargained a fake knighthood for help, so we make a good team," Connor agreed.

"Don't let Stan hear you say that!" she admonished in a mock whisper. "The knighthood is real to him, which is all that matters."

"Not really." An uncharacteristically somber note had entered Connor's voice. "Titled or not, royal or common—those things do matter, Bee."

They don't matter, she wanted to tell him, and also, *Where is this coming from?*

"They shouldn't matter. And they don't matter to *me*, not really. There are a lot of more important things. Like honor, and loyalty, and whether someone is a good person," she said softly.

Connor's right palm lifted from the steering wheel. It seemed to float of its own accord onto the central console, right there at the halfway mark between her space and his.

Beatrice had never seen Connor take a hand off the wheel, except maybe for a sip of water when they were at a stoplight. Certainly she'd never seen him *reach* for her, not like that.

She was suddenly and acutely aware that they were a boy and a girl, alone, close enough to touch. That she could fold his hand in hers, lacing their fingers, skin to skin.

They pulled to a stop a few blocks from the palace, and Connor looked over, something bright and curious in his blue-gray eyes.

Beatrice sucked in a breath. It felt like they were suspended in time here in this enclosed space, tucked away from reality. She held herself still, waiting for something—she wasn't sure what.

“Bee.”

Connor leaned toward her, and she realized with a sharp electric thrill that he was going to kiss her. Her lips parted slightly, her eyes fluttering shut....

She felt him pull away.

Beatrice glanced up to see Connor running a hand through his hair, taking a hard look at her face.

“Sorry. We should be getting you home,” he muttered. “Do you want to get into the backseat?”

Whatever had just happened—or rather, *not* happened—Beatrice didn't dare acknowledge it. She felt Connor tensing, and she didn't want to scare him off.

“It's been a long night,” she agreed, surprised at how normal her voice came out. But as she slipped out of the passenger seat and into the back of the car, she wanted to scream in protest.

She and Connor never got more than these brief, bite-sized moments, and Beatrice couldn't help wondering what would happen if they stopped hiding their friendship. If they could just *hang out*, without worrying about her schedule or their positions or who might see.

She wondered what their relationship might become, if their time actually belonged to them alone.

The guard at the gatehouse waved them through, and Connor pulled into one of the spots near the palace's side door. Beatrice noted with surprise that a truck was behind them, heading for the neighboring spot. Was garbage pickup usually this late?

The truck's passenger door flew open and *Sam* stepped out, tossing her dark hair impatiently over one shoulder. She was wearing a denim jacket that looked too large for her.

"Samantha?"

"Oh—hey, Beatrice." Sam shrugged, seeming unconcerned. A moment later a boy emerged from the driver's seat. He didn't look like one of Jeff's classmates, with his old T-shirt and shaggy haircut, but there was something undeniably charismatic about his green-flecked eyes and wicked smile.

"Where have you been? Why aren't you at your party?" Beatrice's voice came out a little sharper than she'd meant it to, but Sam wasn't listening. She was watching the boy she'd arrived with, who bowed to Beatrice, then turned back to Sam.

"Keep the jacket—it looks good on you," he said laconically. "I'll see you around, I guess."

Samantha nodded. "Don't forget the song."

Beatrice watched as the boy got into the garbage truck and reversed out of the spot. She glanced back at her sister, shocked.

"Did you just *sneak out*?"

"Relax, he's a palace employee. We were safe the entire time," Sam replied. "Now I'm heading back to my party. Are you coming?"

Beatrice had opened her mouth to scold her sister. Leaving the palace without security was the most irresponsible, reckless, stupid thing she could imagine her sister doing—which was saying something, because Sam had done a lot of stupid things. But before she could launch into her tirade, her mind caught up to Sam's words.

Had Sam just asked her to come to the party?

The twins *never* invited her to their parties. On the contrary, they actively planned these things on nights when Beatrice was out of town. She told herself it didn't bother her; they were three years younger, after all. They didn't want their awkward older sister lurking around, making everyone stiffen and hide their drinks because she was heir to the throne and an authority figure.

But it still hurt.

“Wait a second,” Sam went on, eyes widening as she took in Connor’s blazer. It would seem that Sam wasn’t the only one in a boy’s jacket. “Where are Mom and Dad? Why did you come home without them?”

Beatrice slid out of Connor’s jacket. As she handed it back to him, she saw that he’d already retreated behind his aloof professional expression. The distant sounds of the city underscored her movement, the siren of an ambulance cutting through the night air.

“Thank you for letting me borrow this.” She enunciated clearly, for Sam’s benefit, then turned back to her sister. “They stayed the night at Montpelier, but I wanted to come back. I have an early engagement tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow is Saturday,” Sam pointed out.

“Some of us work weekends.”

Beatrice hadn’t meant to snap; the words came out as a defense mechanism. She just didn’t want Sam to get too close. Then her sister might notice that Beatrice’s mind was utterly upside down, still turning over that moment with Connor, wondering if it meant anything.

“Right. Of course.” Sam rolled her eyes. “Forget it.”

“Sam—” Beatrice began, only to break off. The siren now sounded alarmingly close.

A stunned silence fell over them as the ambulance pulled into the palace’s main gates. At least it was late enough that the tourists had departed; a few hours earlier and there would have been a few people out there, taking selfies in front of the scripted iron *W* at the entrance.

Without another thought, Beatrice kicked off her shoes and sprinted around the side of the palace, darting between the yew trees that grew in an uneven line. It was faster this way than going through all the twisted hallways of the building’s interior. She heard footsteps in the grass behind her: Sam and probably Connor were running after her.

When they all reached the front portico, they sucked in a breath.

The lights of the ambulance danced luridly over the stonework, like something from a nightmare carnival. Partygoers clustered near the door, murmuring to one another in terrified, shocked tones. They hardly reacted

when they saw Beatrice. She'd never appeared in public looking so disheveled—barefoot, the hem of her gown covered in grass stains—but for once it didn't matter. Panic seized wildly in her chest. Was Jeff okay?

“Ethan!” She grabbed his arm, relieved to see a familiar face. She didn't know Jeff's other friends very well. “Do you know what happened?”

“It's Himari Mariko,” he said slowly. “She had too much to drink and fell down the staircase.”

Beatrice lifted a hand to her mouth. Behind her, Sam gasped. “Oh my god. Is she...”

“She's breathing, but unconscious,” Ethan replied, answering the question that Sam hadn't dared ask.

Everyone fell silent as a group of EMTs came outside, carrying a stretcher between them. Himari's body looked so small and frail, the vibrant green of her dress disorientingly cheerful against the white medical tape.

“Ethan, have you seen Nina?” Sam was saying. “Or Jeff?”

Before he could answer, Daphne's voice cut in. “They're probably inside.”

“Himari is your best friend, right?” Beatrice asked Daphne. She always saw those two together at royal events, whispering as if they were conspiring about taking over the world.

“She is.” The words were subdued, but there was something unapologetically fierce about Daphne's expression, an unreadable glitter in her bright green eyes.

The emergency responders secured Himari in the back of the ambulance and drove off. Finally, as the crowd began to head inside, Beatrice looked again from Daphne to Sam. She couldn't help feeling that they both seemed different from usual—and it wasn't just the shock. Wherever Nina was, Beatrice suspected that she might be different too.

This night had changed them all. Events had transpired that had left a mark on each of them, made them grow up in a sharp and sudden way. They were each different women from the girls who'd woken up this morning.

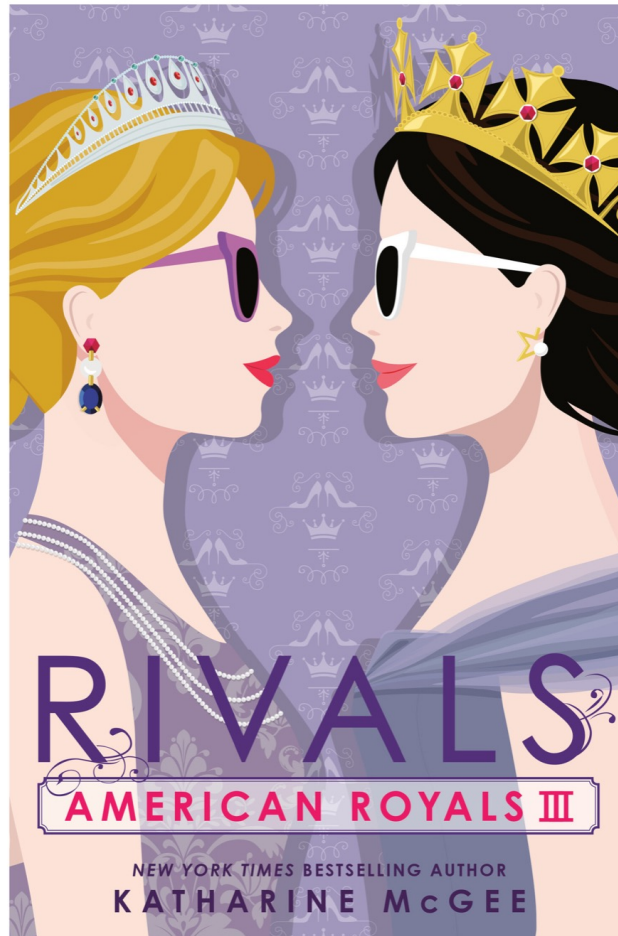
As for Beatrice, a part of her was still back there in the car, in the dark, alone with Connor. He had almost kissed her, hadn't he?

Even more shockingly, she had *wanted* him to kiss her.

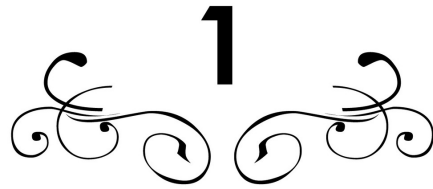
The wise thing to do would be to request a new Guard, send Connor away. Yet she couldn't bear to lose him.

She wanted to kiss her Guard, and she would just have to find a way to live with the knowledge, even though it threw her entire world off-center—even though it changed everything.

What comes next after *American Royals*
and *American Royals II: Majesty*?



Read on for a sneak peek at
American Royals III: Rivals.



BEATRICE

Beatrice pulled her arms overhead in a stretch. She wondered if all brides felt like this when they returned from their honeymoons: flush with a warm, relaxed pleasure.

Except that Beatrice—Her Majesty Beatrice Georgina Fredericka Louise, Queen of America—wasn't a normal bride. Actually, since she hadn't gotten married, she wasn't a bride at all.

She glanced at Theodore Eaton, the man she was supposed to have wed earlier this year. His hair was an even brighter blond after three weeks in the Caribbean sun, his skin burnished to a golden tan. Beatrice knew she looked just as relaxed and well rested.

Not that it would last, with everything that lay ahead.

In the weeks following their non-wedding, Beatrice had remained in the capital, dealing with the aftermath of her decision. She had reviewed infrastructure bills and ambassadorial appointments, and had studied foreign legislation and trade policies in preparation for the upcoming League of Kings conference. It was all the tedious, unglamorous work of being a monarch—the work Beatrice *should* have been doing since her

father died, if she hadn't allowed herself to be sidetracked with planning her wedding.

Porcelain platters were scattered on the table before her and Teddy, laden with the remnants of their scrambled eggs and fruit. Franklin, the golden Lab puppy that she and Teddy had adopted together—not a puppy much longer—nuzzled her leg, whining. Beatrice surreptitiously broke off a piece of toast and passed it to him under the table.

“Glad to be back?” Teddy asked.

Beatrice leaned down to rub Franklin's velvety-soft ears. “Glad to see this guy again,” she said, and sighed. “Though I have to say, I already miss our bungalow.”

Beatrice had never really been on a *vacation* before. She'd traveled all over the world, but always for a diplomatic visit or state business. Even on family trips she'd been too busy skiing, or sailing, or catching up on school assignments to relax. It was a trait she'd inherited from her father. King George IV had never taken a day off work in his life. And now that he was gone, Beatrice wished that he had.

A knock sounded at the door. “Yes?” Beatrice called out.

“Your Majesty,” the footman announced, “the Lady Chamberlain is here to see you.”

Surprised, Beatrice checked her watch: a platinum one that her father had given her on her eighteenth birthday, its hands starred with tiny diamonds. It wasn't like her to be running late. She'd gotten too accustomed to island time—all those mornings when she and Teddy had lingered over breakfast, only to end up falling into bed again afterward.

Beatrice glanced at the footman, struck with an idea. “Why don't you tell Anju to come on in?”

“Into the breakfast room, Your Majesty?”

“Why not?” Beatrice's relationship with her former chamberlain, Robert Standish, had been stiff with formality. But beneath the incessant bowing and *Your Majesty*-ing, Robert hadn't respected her at all. He'd been silently undermining Beatrice's authority, trying to keep her from exerting any real power.

Robert had been far too stuffy and old-fashioned to even *consider* sitting down in the Washington family's private breakfast room, which was precisely why Beatrice had suggested it. She was determined to do things differently this time around.

"Bee." Teddy cleared his throat. "Do you think you could run some of my thoughts past Anju, see if we can get moving on any of them?"

She nodded. "Of course."

America had never had a king consort before. The only real precedents for Teddy's position were the eleven queens consort who'd come before him—most recently, Beatrice's mother, Queen Adelaide.

So Teddy had drawn up some ideas for responsibilities he could take on. He'd been trained as a future duke, after all; he had a great deal of experience in allocating budget, looking out for the good of his people. Beatrice knew he wouldn't be happy doing what queens consort traditionally did—cutting ribbons, arranging tablesapes.

Of course, it wasn't fair that the queens had been limited to domestic roles in the first place. Beatrice's mother was one of the smartest people she knew. And, like Teddy, Adelaide had been trained to rule a duchy someday—*two* duchies, in fact. But once she'd married King George, she'd been relegated to a position that was more ceremonial than political. That was just the way the monarchy worked.

Until now.

Beatrice was determined to change all of that, to show people that a woman could rule as effectively as any man. Still, she didn't want Teddy to feel purposeless. He was too talented to sit around waiting for her to need him. Even if that was, technically, the only item in his job description.

"Thanks. I'll catch up with you later." Teddy stood, dropping a kiss on Beatrice's forehead as the Lady Chamberlain walked in.

After she'd fired Robert Standish, Beatrice had launched a full-scale search for a new chamberlain. She'd interviewed dozens of options before settling on Anju Mahali, who, as the former CEO of a software company, might have been the unlikeliest candidate of them all.

“Are you sure you want to hire her? She knows next to nothing about politics,” Beatrice’s mother had warned.

Honestly, Beatrice thought, the royal family *needed* someone with a fresh perspective. And anything Anju needed to know about politics—not to mention the intricacies of protocol—she could find in Robert’s binders and file folders. He’d certainly left enough of them.

At least Anju had some experience managing public opinion. When Beatrice had called off the wedding of the century, offering no more explanation than a vague security scare, she’d expected a public reaction. There was always a reaction to every last one of her decisions, no matter how insignificant they seemed to Beatrice. She’d met with a congressional leader at his office rather than summoning him to hers—was that a gesture of respect, or of disdain? (In reality, the palace’s air-conditioning had been out that day.) She’d worn a pair of amethyst earrings—surely that was a silent cry for help, since amethysts were known to have healing vibes. (Beatrice had been especially bemused by that claim; she’d worn the earrings because her stylist thought they matched her purple dress.)

The scrutiny had only gotten worse after her controversial decision to postpone the wedding. All summer, people had been speaking out against her, in op-eds and on talk shows and in social-media rants. *It’s not that I’m antifeminist*, they would begin, *but—*

As if that single *but* absolved them of anything they said next. *But she’s so young and inexperienced. But it’s hard to imagine she could ever live up to her father. But she called off her own wedding; don’t you worry that’s a sign of emotional instability?*

For the first time in both their lives, *Samantha’s* approval ratings were higher than Beatrice’s. Sam had just completed a successful royal tour, while Beatrice was the woman who’d left America’s favorite duke at the altar. The magazines that used to rave over “Queen B” now piled criticism on “Runaway B.”

In Beatrice’s opinion, their puns were getting worse.

“Welcome back, Your Majesty,” Anju said with a brisk nod. That was another thing Beatrice liked about her: she didn’t bother curtsying.

“Have you eaten?” Beatrice gestured to the breakfast spread before them. Anju ignored the food but poured herself a coffee and added a heaping scoop of sugar before taking the seat opposite Beatrice.

“As our first order of business, I’d like to review Teddy’s suggestions for ways to shape the role of king consort,” Beatrice began.

Anju hesitated. “With all due respect, Your Majesty, that’s not very time-sensitive. And many of Teddy’s suggestions—that he meet with ambassadors on your behalf, or help manage your briefings by the Trade Commission—would require congressional approval. I think we should focus on the League of Kings conference for now.”

“Right, of course.” Beatrice swallowed against a sudden panic.

The imminent convocation of the League of Kings would be her first great test as a ruler.

The League had been founded in 1895, ending the War of the Three Peters: Tsar Pieter of Russia, King Pedro IV of Spain, and Emperor Peter of Austria. In Europe it was still known as the Cousins’ War, since all three Peters were cousins through the Hapsburg line.

At its inception, the League of Kings had been something entirely new: a multinational treaty, in which all the signatory nations swore to maintain international peace and security. They agreed that every five years they would meet at one of their palaces—no politicians, no press, just the kings and their sons—to discuss issues of global importance.

Now the League of Kings comprised the monarchs of nearly every nation in the world, except a few holdouts in the Pacific who didn’t see the need to sign, like Singapore and Hawaii. Now the attendees were not only kings, but queens and empresses and sultanas, though all efforts to rename the coalition as anything but the League of Kings had sputtered out and died. And now the conferences were held all over the globe, not just in St. Petersburg or Sandringham.

The League of Kings hadn’t met in America since Beatrice’s grandfather was king. But this fall, America would be hosting the conference again, in the very first year of Beatrice’s reign.

The rotation of League of Kings hosts was a contentious and highly delicate act of international diplomacy, more prestigious—at least to the monarchs—than hosting the Olympics. Already the King of Ghana and the Emperor of Japan were fighting over the location of the conference in 2045.

Months ago, at the funeral reception for Beatrice's father, King Frederick of Germany had asked Beatrice if she'd like to withdraw as this year's host. "No one will blame you for stepping out of the lineup. Why don't you let me have everyone to Rumpenheim instead?"

She knew Frederick meant well. At eighty-four, he was the current chairman of the League of Kings, and he'd been something of a mentor to Beatrice ever since she'd lived at Potsdam one summer in college, studying German.

Beatrice shook her head. "Thank you, but I need to see this through. My father was so eager to host this year's conference." She tried to ignore Frederick's look of consternation as she added, "He was planning to bring his climate accord to a vote again. I'd like to finish what he started."

"The climate accord?" Frederick repeated, frowning. "Beatrice, your father tried to pass that proposal for years, but he could never get enough people on board."

"Only because they kept quibbling over the details."

Climate change was one of those issues that the League of Kings agreed upon in theory, but not in practice. Whenever King George had brought it up, the discussion devolved into accusations and finger-pointing. Each monarch insisted that everyone *else* was a grievous offender. Why should they have to devastate their economies fixing other people's mistakes?

"Besides," Frederick had added hastily, "you can't propose new business your first time at the conference. It simply isn't done."

"This isn't my first conference." As her father's successor, Beatrice had attended the League's most recent meeting in China, as well as the previous one in France.

There had been a few raised eyebrows that first time: most monarchs waited for their heirs to graduate from high school, or at the very least middle school, before bringing them to the conference. Twelve-year-old

Beatrice had worked tirelessly and frantically to prove herself. At the heirs' info sessions, she had scribbled notes until her hand cramped, trying not to feel intimidated when she was partnered up with the Prince of Wales, who was almost twice as old as her father.

"It's your first time attending as a *ruler*," Frederick amended. "You're in the driver's seat now, Beatrice."

Like her grandfather, Beatrice would host the League of Kings at Bellevue, the royal family's palace in Orange. The League of Kings never took place at a monarch's main residence, but instead at a summer palace or minor estate. It would have been too risky, gathering so many world leaders in a busy capital city.

Located on a private island, Bellevue was the most secure of the Washingtons' various homes. It had been built by the French, as a wedding gift from King Louis XX when his daughter Thérèse married King Andrew. And, in typically French fashion, it had never been connected to the mainland by a bridge. One had to cross either by boat or by helicopter. When Louis had given the estate to the newlyweds, he'd included a gilded ferryboat, complete with a captain named Gaston.

Thanks to its eighty guest rooms and dozens of outbuildings, Bellevue could accommodate almost everyone on-site. Of course, the coast would still be swarming for miles. People always flooded the area around a League of Kings conference: journalists desperate for a story, activists protesting an issue, royal enthusiasts who hoped a bit of glamour might rub off on them.

Beatrice had only been to Bellevue a handful of times in her life. Her family had never loved going there; it was so grand in scale and splendor that it felt like trading one palace for another. They were much happier at their country house, or the Telluride cabin—somewhere cozy, where they could make pancakes and watch TV as if they were an ordinary family.

And so, while Bellevue's state rooms and gardens were open to the public, the rest of the estate was largely shut up, hidden behind dust cloths and curtains. Until now.

Beatrice tried to remember the last time she'd been at Bellevue, almost two years ago, when Connor Markham had still been her Revere Guard. So much had happened since then: she and Connor had started dating in secret, until Beatrice had lost her father and everything had changed. Or, really, *she* had changed. She'd realized that she and Connor didn't belong together. That she loved Teddy—even if she wasn't ready to marry him.

“I've brought hard copies of everything. Shall we begin with your schedule?” Anju asked, reaching into her briefcase for a stack of binders. Their spines were labeled with phrases like PROTOCOL & CEREMONIES OF NORTH ATLANTIC TRADE ROUTES & TREATIES, OR EVEN YOUNGER SONS OF THE ROYAL HOUSES OF THE WORLD.

Beatrice slid the binders eagerly across the breakfast table. The sight of all those color-coded plastic tabs felt oddly comforting. Studying was something Beatrice had always excelled at.

“Let's get started,” she agreed, turning to the first page.

If Beatrice could fulfill her father's dream and get the climate accord passed, maybe America would start taking her seriously. Maybe the press would actually discuss her accomplishments, instead of her fashion choices or her relationship with Teddy—would stop lamenting that she wasn't the ruler her father had been.

This conference was her chance to start building a legacy as queen.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I was so thrilled when I got the opportunity to write an American Royals prequel! I loved rewinding our story all the way to the beginning. It made me realize just how much has happened over the past few years, largely thanks to the many talented and amazing people who've made it all possible.

I am incredibly grateful to my editors, Caroline Abbey and Tricia Lin, and to my wonderful agent, Joelle Hobeika. Thanks are also due to Michelle Nagler, Mallory Loehr, Emily Parliman, Rebecca Waugh, Brittany Presley, Kaitlyn Robinson, Tom Marquet, Kelly McGauley, Caitlin Whalen, Kate Keating, Elizabeth Ward, Adrienne Waintraub, Emily DuVal, Jasmine Hodge, Emma Benschhoff, Jenn Inzetta, Noreen Herits, Josh Bank, Sara Shandler, Les Morgenstein, Gina Girolamo, Kate Imel, Kendyll Boucher, Romy Golan, Matt Bloomgarden, Josephine McKenna, and Kat Jagai. Carolina Melis and Alison Impey, you've outdone yourselves on the cover yet again. Thank you for always making my books look striking!

Mom, Dad, John Ed, and Lizzy, thank you for always being there for me. Alex, you know none of this would be possible without you and William.

Finally, I would like to thank the readers. It is such an honor for a series to continue this long. Thank you for all the support and love that you have given the American Royals—it truly means the world to me.



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