



## PROLOGUE

The morning had dawned dreary and gray, with a mist that hung over the streets of the capital. It was, the media correspondents all agreed, appropriate weather for a funeral.

They stood behind a velvet rope to one side of the palace doors, swapping cigarettes and breath mints, hurriedly checking their lipstick in their phone screens. Then the palace's main gates swung open to admit the first guests.

So many of them had come, from every last corner of the world. Emperors and sultans, archdukes and dowager queens, even a cardinal sent by the pope himself. There were members of Congress and aristocrats, from the highest-ranking dukes through the simple life peers—all of them here to honor His Majesty George IV, the late King of America.

Clad in somber black dresses and dark suits, they filed through the doors and into the massive throne room. There was no other space in the capital that could accommodate three thousand guests.

A series of rifles fired a military salute over the river, and the funeral procession turned onto the final avenue toward the palace. Silence fell, as dense as the lingering mists. Media crews stood up a bit straighter, cameramen fumbling to adjust their lenses.

No one spoke as a cluster of figures appeared through the haze: eight young men of the Revere Guard, the elite corps of

officers who protected the Crown, providing the Sovereign's Final Escort. Between them they bore a coffin draped in the red, blue, and gold of the American flag.

Most of the Guards stared resolutely forward. But one young man—tall, with light brown hair and shadowed blue-gray eyes—kept glancing back over his shoulder. Perhaps he was getting tired. The funeral procession had crisscrossed the streets of the capital all morning. As the crow flies, the distance measured less than two miles, yet the winding route had taken several hours to complete. It had been designed that way on purpose, so that as many citizens as possible might get one last moment with their former king.

It was still hard to believe that King George was really gone. He had only been fifty when he died, after a sudden and tragic battle with lung cancer.

A few paces behind the coffin walked twenty-two-year-old Princess Beatrice—no, the people reminded themselves, she was a princess no longer. Upon the death of her father she had become Her Majesty Beatrice Georgina Fredericka Louise, Queen of America. The title would take some getting used to. America had never been ruled by a queen, until now.

When the procession reached the palace gates, Beatrice dropped into a curtsy before her father's casket. A chorus of insect-like clicks rose up from the cameras as the photographers hurried to capture the iconic image: of the new, young queen, curtsying for the very last time.



## BEATRICE

### *Six weeks later*

Beatrice had never heard the palace so silent.

Normally its halls echoed with noise: butlers giving orders to footmen; tour guides lecturing groups of students; ambassadors or ministers chasing after the Lord Chamberlain, begging for an audience with the king.

Today everything was still. Dust sheets hung over the furniture, emitting a ghostly glow in the half-light. Even the crowds that usually thronged the main gates had melted away, leaving the palace stranded, an island in a sea of empty sidewalks and trampled grass.

Behind her, Beatrice heard her mom getting out of the car. Sam and Jeff had elected to stay at the country house another night. When they were younger, the three siblings used to go there together—in a dark SUV, watching movies on its drop-down TV—but Beatrice could no longer ride in the same car as her sister. The monarch and the first in line for the throne weren't permitted to travel together, for security reasons.

She'd only made it halfway across the entrance hall when her heel snagged on an antique carpet. She stumbled—and a firm hand reached out to steady her.

Beatrice looked up into the cool gray eyes of her Revere Guard, Connor Markham.

“You okay, Bee?”

She knew she should reprimand him for using her nickname instead of her title, especially in public, where anyone might overhear. But Beatrice couldn't think properly with Connor's hand on hers. After all these weeks of distance, the feel of his touch sparked wildly through her veins.

Voices echoed down the hallway. Connor frowned but took a swift step back, just as two footmen turned the corner, accompanied by a man with grim features and salt-and-pepper hair: Robert Standish, who'd worked as Lord Chamberlain for Beatrice's father, and now for her.

He swept a formal bow. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty. We weren't expecting you until tomorrow."

Beatrice tried not to flinch at the title. She still wasn't used to *Your Majesty* being directed at her.

The footmen began moving from room to room, whipping away dust sheets and tossing them in a pile. The palace sprang to life as ornate side tables and delicate brass lamps were hurriedly uncovered.

"I decided to come back early. I just . . ." Beatrice trailed off before saying *I just needed to get away*. This past month at Sulgrave, the Washingtons' country estate, was supposed to have been a getaway. But even surrounded by family, she'd felt alone. And exhausted.

Each night Beatrice tried to stay awake as long as she could, because once she fell asleep the dreams would come. Horrible, twisted dreams where she had to watch her father die, over and over again, and know that it was her fault.

She had caused her dad's death. If she hadn't shouted at him that night—hadn't threatened to marry her Revere Guard and renounce her position as queen—then King George might still be alive.

Beatrice bit back a sigh. She knew better than to let herself think like this. If she did, her mind would sink like a stone,

deeper and deeper into a well of grief without ever touching bottom.

“Your Majesty.” Robert glanced down at the tablet he carried with him at all times. “There are a few things I’d like to discuss. Should we head up to your office?”

It took a moment for Beatrice to realize that he meant her father’s office. Which belonged to her now.

“No,” she replied, a little forcefully. She wasn’t ready to face that room—and all the memories trapped inside it. “Why don’t we talk in here?” she added, gesturing to one of the sitting rooms.

“Very well.” Robert followed her inside and pulled the double doors shut behind them, leaving Connor in the hall.

As she perched on a striped green sofa, Beatrice darted a glance at the three bay windows that overlooked the front drive. It was a nervous habit she’d picked up after her father’s death: to study the windows of each room she walked into. As if the natural lighting might help her feel slightly less suffocated.

Or as if she was looking for an escape route.

“Your Majesty, your schedule for the upcoming week.” Robert held out a sheet of paper, embossed with the royal crest.

“Thank you, Lord Standish,” Beatrice said, and paused. She’d always addressed him by his full title, ever since she’d met him as a teenager, but now . . . “May I call you Robert?”

“I would be honored,” he said obsequiously.

“In that case, you must start calling me Beatrice.”

The chamberlain gave a throaty gasp. “Oh, no, Your Majesty. I would never presume to do such a thing. And I would suggest,” he added, “that you never make an offer like that again, certainly not to anyone in a service position. It simply isn’t appropriate.”

Beatrice hated that she felt like a chastened schoolgirl, like

she was seven years old again and her etiquette master had snapped a ruler over her knuckles as punishment for a sloppy curtsy. She forced herself to study the paper in her lap, only to look up in confusion.

“Where’s the rest of my schedule?”

The only events listed were low-stress public appearances—a nature walk outside the capital with a conservation group, a meet-and-greet with the local Girl Scouts—the sort of goodwill-generating events that Beatrice used to do as heir to the throne. “I should have an audience with each of the party leaders in Congress,” she went on. “And why isn’t a Cabinet meeting scheduled for Thursday?”

“There’s no need to dive into all of that right away,” Robert said silkily. “You’ve been out of the public eye since the funeral. Right now, what the people need from you is reassurance.”

Beatrice fought off a sense of disquiet. The monarch was meant to govern, not run around shaking hands like some kind of mascot for America. That was what the *heir* to the throne was for.

But what could she say? Everything she knew about this role she had learned from her father. Now he was gone, and the only person left to advise her was Robert, his right-hand man.

The chamberlain shook his head. “Besides, I’m sure you’ll want to spend the next few months planning the wedding.”

Beatrice tried to speak, but her throat seemed to have glued itself shut.

She was still engaged to Theodore Eaton, the son of the Duke of Boston. But in the past month, each time she’d started to think of Teddy, her mind had violently shied away. *I’ll figure it out when I’m back*, she’d promised herself. *There’s nothing I can do about it now.*

It had been easy to let herself forget about Teddy at Sulgrave.

None of her family members had spoken of him. They hadn't spoken much at *all*, each of them wrapped up in their own private grief.

"I'd prefer not to focus on the wedding just yet," she said at last, unable to hide the strain in her voice.

"Your Majesty, if we start planning now, we can hold the ceremony in June," the chamberlain argued. "Then, after your honeymoon, you can spend the rest of the summer on the newlyweds' royal tour."

*Might as well say it all at once*, Beatrice thought, and braced herself. "We're not getting married."

"What do you mean, Your Majesty?" Robert asked, his lips pursed in confusion. "Did something . . . happen between you and His Lordship?" Beatrice drew in a shaky breath, and he lifted his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "Please, forgive me if I'm overstepping. To do my job effectively, I need to know the truth."

Connor was still standing out there in the hallway. Beatrice could picture him: frozen in the Revere Guard stance, his feet planted firmly, a hand near his holstered weapon. She wondered, with a bolt of panic, if he could hear them through the closed wooden doors.

She opened her mouth, ready to tell Robert about Connor. It shouldn't be hard; she'd had this very conversation with her father—had marched into his study and informed him that she was in love with her Revere Guard—the night of her engagement party to Teddy. So why couldn't she say the same thing now?

*I need to know the truth*, Robert had insisted. Except . . . what *was* the truth?

Beatrice didn't know anymore. Her feelings for Connor were tangled up in her feelings about everything *else*, desire and regret and grief all painfully intertwined.

"I'd agreed to get married while my father was still alive,



because he wanted to walk me down the aisle,” she managed. “But now that I’m queen, there’s no need to rush.”

Robert shook his head. “Your Majesty, it’s *because* you are queen that I suggest you get married as soon as possible. You are the living symbol of America, and its future. And given the current situation . . .”

“The current situation?”

“This is a period of transition and uncertainty. The nation hasn’t recovered from your father’s death as easily as we might have hoped.” There was no inflection, no emotion in Robert’s tone. “The stock market has taken a hit. Congress is at a stalemate. Several of the foreign ambassadors have handed in their resignations. Just a few,” he added, at the expression on her face. “But a wedding would be such a unifying occasion, for everyone in the country.”

Beatrice heard the subtext beneath his words. She was now the Queen of America—and America was afraid.

She was too young, too untried. And most of all, she was a woman. Attempting to govern a country that had only ever been led by men.

If there was instability in America right now, *Beatrice* was the cause of it.

Before she could respond, the room’s double doors swung open. “Beatrice! There you are.”

Her mom stood in the doorway. She looked elegant even in her travel clothes—slim-cut navy pants and a pale blue sweater—though they fit more loosely than they used to. Grief hung over her shoulders like a weighted cloak.

When Queen Adelaide saw Robert, she hesitated. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

The chamberlain rose to his feet. “Your Majesty, please join us. We were just discussing the wedding.”

Adelaide turned to Beatrice, a new warmth in her voice. “Have you and Teddy set a date?”

“Actually . . . I’m not sure I’m ready to get married.” Beatrice shot her mom a pleading glance. “It feels too fast. Don’t you think we should wait until we’ve had time to grieve?”

“Oh, Beatrice.” Her mom sank onto the couch with a heavy sigh. “We’ll never be done grieving. You know that,” she said softly. “It might sting less with time, but that doesn’t mean we’ll ever stop feeling the loss. We’ll just get a little better at carrying it.”

Across the room, Robert nodded in vigorous agreement. Beatrice tried to ignore him.

“We could all use a source of joy, of *celebration*, right now. Not just America, but our family.” Adelaide’s eyes gleamed with yearning. She had loved her husband with every fiber of her being, and now that he was gone, she seemed to have pinned all that emotion onto Beatrice—as if Beatrice and Teddy’s love story was the only source of hope she had left.

“We need this wedding now more than ever,” Robert chimed in.

Beatrice glanced helplessly from one of them to the other. “I get that, but—I mean—Teddy and I haven’t known each other very long.”

Queen Adelaide shifted. “Beatrice. Are you having second thoughts about marrying Teddy?”

Beatrice looked down at the engagement ring on her left hand. She’d been wearing it all month, out of inertia more than anything. When Teddy had first given it to her, it had felt wrong, but at some point she must have gotten used to it. It proved that you could get used to anything, really, in time.

The ring was beautiful, a solitaire diamond on a white-gold band. It had originally belonged to Queen Thérèse over a hundred years ago, though it had been polished so expertly that any damage was hidden beneath all the sparkle.

A little like Beatrice herself.

She realized that Robert and her mom were both waiting for her reply. “I just . . . I miss Dad.”

“Oh, sweetheart. I know.” A tear escaped her mom’s eye, trailing mascara forlornly down her cheek.

Queen Adelaide *never* wept—at least, not where anyone could see. Even at the funeral she’d locked her emotions behind a pale, resolute stoicism. She’d always told Beatrice that a queen had to shed her tears in private, so that when it came time to face the nation, she could be a source of strength. The sight of that tear was as startling and surreal as if one of the marble statues in the palace gardens had begun to weep.

Beatrice hadn’t been able to cry since her father’s death, either.

She *wanted* to cry. She knew it was unnatural, yet something in her seemed to have irreparably fractured, and her eyes simply didn’t form tears anymore.

Adelaide wrapped an arm around her daughter to pull her close. Beatrice instinctively tipped her head onto her mom’s shoulder, the way she had as a child. Yet it didn’t soothe her like it used to.

Suddenly, all she noticed was how frail her mom’s bones felt beneath her cashmere sweater. Queen Adelaide was trembling with suppressed grief. She seemed fragile—and, for the first time Beatrice could remember, she seemed *old*.

It splintered what was left of Beatrice’s resolve.

She tried, one last time, to imagine being with Connor: telling him that she still loved him, that she wanted to run away from her life and be with him, no matter the consequences. But she simply couldn’t picture it. It was as if the future she’d daydreamed about had died with her father.

Or maybe it had died with the old Beatrice, the one who’d been a princess, not a queen.

“All right,” she said quietly. “I’ll talk to Teddy.”

She could do this, for her family, for her country. She could marry Teddy and give America the fairy-tale romance it so desperately needed.

She could let go of Beatrice the girl, and give herself over to Beatrice the queen.

## 2

### NINA

Nina Gonzalez tensed as she drew a wooden block from the increasingly precarious tower. Everyone at the table held their breath. With excruciating care, she placed the Jenga piece atop the makeshift structure.

Somehow, it held.

“Yes!” Nina lifted her hands, letting out a whoop of victory—just as a pair of blocks slid off the stack and clattered to the table. “Looks like I spoke too soon,” she amended with a laugh.

Rachel Greenbaum, who lived down the hall from Nina, swept the fallen blocks toward her. “Look, you got FIND A HAT *and* CELL BLOCK TANGO!”

They were playing with King’s College’s famous “Party Jenga” set, covered in red Sharpie. It was the same as regular Jenga, except each block was inscribed with a different command—SHOTSKI, KARAOKE, BUTTERFINGERS—and everyone had to follow the rules of whatever blocks they knocked down. When Nina had asked how old the Jenga set was, no one knew.

It was the last weekend of spring break, and Nina’s friends were hanging out in Ogden, the café and lounge area beneath the fine arts building. Because of its location, Ogden mostly attracted the theater kids, which had always surprised Nina, since it served cookies for *free*.

“FIND A HAT is easy. You just wear some object as if it’s a hat,” explained their other friend Leila Taghdisi. Nina obediently folded a paper napkin into a triangle before settling it on her head.

“And for CELL BLOCK TANGO, you have to leave your phone out for the rest of the game so we can all read your texts.” Leila shot Nina an apologetic glance. Her friends all knew how private Nina was about her personal life—and her relationship with the royal family.

But Nina had resolved that this semester she would be *normal*. So, like any normal college student, she pulled out her phone and set it on the table.

Rachel sighed. “I can’t believe our first day of spring quarter is on Monday. I’m nowhere *near* ready for the start of classes.”

“I don’t know, I’m kind of glad to be back.” Nina was actually excited about school again, now that she could walk around campus without being tailed by paparazzi. She still garnered a whisper here or there—still occasionally saw her fellow students looking at her for a beat too long, their brows furrowed in confusion, as if they thought they’d met her but couldn’t remember where.

But it was a massive improvement over the nightmare she’d been living earlier this year, when she was dating Prince Jefferson.

People had remarkably short memories for this sort of thing. And after the earth-shattering, world-altering news of the king’s death, Nina’s brief relationship with Jeff was the last thing on anyone’s mind. The world had clearly forgotten her and moved on, to Nina’s immense relief.

“Not me. I never wanted to leave Virginia Beach,” Leila chimed in. “If we were still there, we’d be out on the sand right now, watching the sunset and eating Nina’s addictive guacamole.”

“It’s my mamá’s recipe. The secret is in the garlic,” Nina explained.

She was so grateful that Rachel had dragged her on that trip. It was nothing like the vacations Nina had gone on as a guest of the Washingtons: the rental house had been run-down, with no air-conditioning, and she’d had to sleep on a sofa in the living room. Yet she’d loved it. Sitting there with the other girls on her hall, drinking cheap beer and telling stories over a beach bonfire, had felt infinitely more satisfying than all the five-star royal travel.

“Sadly, I can’t offer you guacamole.” Jayne, another of their friends, emerged from the café’s kitchen, balancing a tray in her oven mitts. “But these might help.”

The three girls immediately tore into the cookies. “Have I mentioned how glad I am that you work here?” Nina asked.

“Instead of at the library with you?” Jayne and Nina were part of the same work-study program, which required them to get jobs on campus in exchange for the funding of their scholarships.

“Your baking talents would be wasted at the library. These are delicious,” Nina replied through a mouthful of cookie. Her mamá would have scolded her for talking with her mouth full, but she wasn’t at home right now—or at a stuffy royal reception, either.

Jayne set the cookies on the counter before pulling up a chair. She didn’t bother taking off her school-issued apron, which was printed with the mascot of King’s College: a knight in a shining silver helmet. “That’s me, the gourmet chef of slice-and-bake.”

Nina’s phone, still at the center of the table, flashed with a new text. Rachel eagerly snatched at it, then slid the phone over. “So far, your texts are boring.”

It was Nina’s mom. *Are you coming over for dinner sometime soon? I’ll make paella!*

Nina's parents, Julie and Isabella, lived in a redbrick town-home a few miles away. It was a grace-and-favor house: a property that belonged to the royal family and was leased rent-free to those who served them—in this case, Nina's mamá Isabella, who had once worked as the late king's chamberlain and was now Minister of the Treasury. Nina tried not to be bothered by the fact that Sam's family, *Jeff's* family, owned the house she'd grown up in.

In the aftermath of her breakup with Jeff, Nina had spent a lot of time at home. It was just so comforting, eating her parents' cooking and sleeping in her childhood bed. Avoiding the curious glances of her college classmates.

But she had more friends now, had carved out a place for herself. She no longer felt a desperate need to escape.

*Thanks, Mom, but I'll stay on campus for now,* she typed in reply. *Love you!*

Rachel crumbled the remains of her cookie over a napkin. "Next time we should sneak in a bottle of wine, make this a drinking game."

"You know I can't drink on the job," Jayne protested.

"You can't get *caught* drinking on the job. There's a difference," Rachel said cheekily, and everyone laughed.

They kept on playing, the Jenga tower growing increasingly, dangerously high. Rachel knocked over a tile labeled FOREIGN AUDITION, which apparently meant that for the rest of the game, she needed to speak in an accent. Undeterred, she launched into a story about a guy she'd recently met, her accent veering wildly between Eastern European and French.

Nina stretched her arms overhead. She felt tired, but in a lazy, contented way.

"Anyway, he just texted to ask me out," Rachel was saying.

"Accent!" Jayne scolded.

"My apologies," Rachel corrected, in the most atrocious



Cockney voice Nina had ever heard. “So, do you guys think I should say yes?”

She held out her phone, its plastic case covered in cartoon pineapples. The other girls obediently leaned forward to study the profile picture: an artsy black-and-white shot of a guy whose lip was pierced in at least six places.

“He seems pretty different from Logan,” Nina ventured, naming Rachel’s ex-boyfriend.

“Exactly!” Rachel had dropped the accent, but this time no one admonished her. “Different is what I’m *looking* for right now. You should know the feeling, after what happened with you and Jeff.”

Nina stiffened, though some reluctant part of her acknowledged the truth in Rachel’s words.

She’d met the royal twins over a decade ago, when her mamá began working as the king’s chamberlain. She and Princess Samantha had been best friends ever since, as close as sisters.

Then, last year, Nina had started secretly dating Sam’s brother. It had worked so well when it was just the two of them—but once the rest of the world found out, she’d become the target of nationwide abuse.

That was the thing about royalty: it was as polarizing as a magnet. For years Nina had watched people pass judgment on Sam without even knowing her, instantly deciding that they either hated or adored her, that they wanted nothing to do with her, or that they would use her for their own ends.

Once Nina dated Jeff, the same thing had happened to her.

She’d tried to ignore the ugly online comments and paparazzi’s catcalls. She’d told herself that she could handle it all, that Jeff was worth it. Until his ex-girlfriend Daphne had confronted her, revealing that *she* had orchestrated the abuse: she’d planted a photographer outside Nina’s dorm room and sold their relationship to the tabloids.

When Nina tried to talk to Jeff about it, he'd taken Daphne's side.

She'd seen him only once since the breakup, from across the room at his father's funeral. Then the Washingtons had left for Sulgrave, and Nina had finished out her winter quarter and gone to Virginia Beach, trying valiantly to wipe Jeff from her memory. Though it was pretty hard to forget your ex-boyfriend when he was your best friend's brother—and the most famous man in the country.

"I'm sorry, Nina," Rachel went on. "But we both need to branch out from that frat-boy crowd. Just think of all the types of guys we haven't even *begun* to explore! Musicians, upperclassmen . . ." She cast a pleading glance at the other girls, who hurried to chime in.

"Those cute TAs who bike here from the grad quad," Leila offered.

"Or artistic writer guys," Jayne exclaimed. "Like the ones you'll meet in your journalism class!"

"I'm not taking journalism so that I can meet guys," Nina reminded them.

"Of course not," Rachel said easily. "You're taking journalism so that *I* can meet guys."

Nina snorted. "Fine," she conceded. "I'll try to *branch out*, whatever that means."

"I'm just saying you should put yourself back out there, go to a party with us every now and then. Come on, Nina," her friend pleaded. "Your new look is too good to be wasted on the library."

Nina brushed her fingers through the ends of her newly short hair, which now fell to just above her shoulders. Her head felt curiously light without the weight of all those tresses. She'd done it on impulse after the breakup: she had needed, desperately, to change something, and this was as drastic a change as she could make short of getting another tattoo.

Now when Nina looked in the mirror, she found a new and startling version of herself. The bones of her face had become more prominent, her brown eyes gleaming brighter than before. She looked older, stronger.

The Nina who'd spent years pining after Jefferson—who'd contorted herself into someone she didn't recognize, hoping to win acceptance as his girlfriend—was gone. And this new, fiercer Nina knew better than to get her heart broken by anyone. Even a prince.

When her phone buzzed with an incoming call, Nina assumed it was one of her parents, until she looked over and saw Samantha's name. She pulled it quickly into her lap.

Rachel's eyes cut toward her. "Everything okay?"

"Sorry, I need to take this." Nina rose to her feet, shrugging into her denim jacket, and headed out the double doors of the café.

"Sam. How are you?" She immediately winced at the question. Of course Sam wasn't doing well; she was *grieving*.

"Tired. I'm ready to be home." The princess's tone was normal—brave, even—but Nina knew her well enough to hear the emotion behind it. Sam wasn't nearly as tough as she pretended to be.

"When do you get back?" Nina asked, tucking her phone into her shoulder.

"Actually, we're on the road now."

Nina hated how her mind fixed on that *we*. She imagined Jeff sitting next to his twin sister, hearing Sam's half of the conversation.

"Jeff is here, but he's asleep," Sam added, guessing her friend's thoughts. "With headphones on."

"I—right. Okay."

It hurt to think of Jeff: a dull, lingering sort of pain, as if Nina were pressing on a bruise that hadn't yet healed. Things

between them had ended so abruptly. One minute they'd been in the palace ballroom, twined in each other's arms, and then later that night their relationship was just . . . *over*.

Part of Nina wanted to hate him—for allowing Daphne to push them apart, for letting their relationship crumble instead of fighting for it. But she couldn't stay that angry with a boy who'd just lost his father. She wished she felt brave enough to ask Sam how Jeff was doing, except she didn't trust herself to say his name.

There was a rustling on the other end. "Come on, Nina, tell me everything. What's happened with you since—" Sam broke off before saying *since my dad died*. "Since I've seen you," she amended.

They both knew that this wasn't the normal dynamic of their relationship. Normally Sam was the one who kept talking: debating and theorizing and telling stories in her winding, roundabout way, which was always more satisfying than if she'd told them start to finish. But today, Sam needed Nina to be the one who filled the silence.

Nina's heart ached. When someone was hurting like this, there was nothing you could say to make it better. The only thing you could do was hurt alongside them.

Still, she cleared her throat and attempted an upbeat tone. "Did I tell you I chopped off my hair?"

Sam gasped. "How many inches?"

"I'll send you a picture," Nina assured her. "And I just got back from a spring break trip with some friends from my dorm. You would have loved it, Sam. We rowed kayaks down the coast, and found this tiki bar that served half-price frozen drinks . . ."

She sank onto a bench as she talked. Various students passed, heading to their dorm rooms or to meet friends for ice cream at the Broken Spoon.

“Nina,” Sam finally asked, with uncharacteristic hesitation, “I was wondering . . . would you come to the Royal Potomac Races with me tomorrow?”

Nina went very still, her heart thudding. Hearing that silence, and knowing exactly what it meant, Sam hurried to explain. “I understand if you can’t be around Jeff. It’s just my first public appearance since—” She broke off, then forged ahead. “Since my dad’s funeral, and it would mean a lot to have you there.”

How could Nina possibly say no to a request like that?

“Of course I’ll be there,” she promised.

And just like that, she thought with weary resignation, she was headed back into her best friend’s world—the world of the American royals—all over again.



## DAPHNE

Daphne Deighton had never really liked the Royal Potomac Races. They were just so *loud*, so unapologetically common. Really, what else could you expect from a free public event?

Thousands of people had gathered along the Potomac, transforming its riverbanks into a brightly colored fairground. Families picnicked on beach towels; girls in sunglasses posed for pictures that they hurried to post online. Long queues had formed behind the scattered bars that sold mint juleps. The bars inevitably ran out of ice after the first few hours, yet people kept on lining up to purchase warm bourbon with a few sodden pieces of mint.

Thankfully, Daphne never ventured to those sections of the river. There was another side to the Royal Potomac Races, one that still enforced a sense of hierarchy, of exclusivity. After all, the truly important people weren't about to watch the races from a dirty picnic blanket.

Near the colorful pennants of the finish line, behind ropes and stiff-lipped security, lay the massive white tents of the private enclosures—capped at the very end by the Royal Enclosure itself, open only to the Washington family and their invited guests.

Unlike the other tents, where low-ranking aristocrats and businesspeople strode around in plastic name tags, no one in

the Royal Enclosure wore a *badge*. It was tacitly assumed that if you were here, you must be someone worth knowing.

And Daphne knew them all. She could trace the torturous maze of the Washington family's relationships, which tangled over the entire globe. She doubted anyone else could tell Crown Princess Elizabeth of the Netherlands (the king's cousin) from Lady Elizabeth of Hesse (an aunt on his mother's side) from Elizabeth the Grand Duchess of Romania (surprisingly, no relation).

That was the difference between Daphne and all the other beautiful girls who'd set their sights on Prince Jefferson over the years. In Daphne's experience, most beautiful girls tried to skate through life relying on nothing but their looks. They lacked brains, or hustle—while Daphne had more than enough of both.

A volley of trumpets sounded, and everyone in the crowd glanced expectantly downriver, to where the pennants of the royal barge snapped against the sky.

Sunlight sparkled on the Potomac, setting its pewter waters afire. Daphne's eyes automatically zeroed in on Jefferson, who stood next to his twin sister, one hand lifted halfheartedly, though he wasn't quite waving. The wind stirred his sleeves, ruffled his dark hair. At the front of the boat, a fragile smile on her face, was Beatrice.

The riverbanks erupted in applause and whistles. People shouted at Beatrice, or, just as often, at Jefferson. Parents hoisted children onto their shoulders so they could catch a glimpse of the new queen.

A song began to play over the loudspeakers, and the cheers quickly died out. For a moment all Daphne heard were the opening notes of the music, above the hiss of wind and the steady rumbling of the barge's motor. Then thousands of voices wove together as everyone began to sing.

*From shore to shore, from sea to sea  
Let our beloved nation ring  
With cries of love and loyalty  
Our hearts we pledge to you, our queen*

Until now, the lyrics had always ended in *our king*; the rhyme of *ring* and *queen* didn't work quite as well.

The barge pulled up to the dock, and the Lord Chamberlain stepped forward to help the royal family disembark. All the courtiers on the lawn quickly fell into bows or curtsies. In their pastel dresses and seersucker suits, they looked like an indolent flock of butterflies.

Daphne didn't rush. She sank down as gracefully as a flower drooping, and held the pose for a long, slow moment. She'd taken ballet as a child, and at times like this she was every inch a dancer.

When she finally stood, Daphne skimmed her hands over the front of her dress, which followed the enclosure's strict rules and hit at precisely knee-length. It fell around her legs like peach sorbet. Atop her glorious red-gold hair she'd pinned a custom-made fascinator, the same delicate shade as her gown. It was so nice to wear color again, after all the weeks she'd spent dressing somberly, observing the official mourning period for the late king.

Though, to be fair, Daphne also looked striking in black. She looked striking in everything.

She made her way to where Jefferson stood, atop the grassy embankment that sloped liltily to the river. When he saw her, the prince nodded in greeting. "Hey, Daphne. Thanks for coming."

She wanted to say *I've missed you*, but it felt too flirtatious, too self-centered, after everything Jefferson had been through. "It's good to see you," she decided.



He stuffed his hands into his pockets. “It feels a little weird to be here, you know?”

Daphne didn’t feel weird at all. If anything, she felt that she and Jefferson were back where they were meant to be: with each other. After all, their lives had been intertwined since Daphne was fourteen.

That was when she’d decided that she would marry him, and become a princess.

For over two years everything had gone according to Daphne’s plan. She’d thrown herself in Jefferson’s path, and soon enough they were dating. He adored her, and, just as crucially, America adored her—because Daphne had won them over, with her gracious smiles and her soft words and her beauty.

Until Jefferson had abruptly ended things, the morning after his graduation party.

Another girl might have accepted the breakup and moved on. But Daphne wouldn’t admit defeat. She *couldn’t*, not after the lengths she’d gone to for that relationship.

Now, thankfully, the prince was single again. Though he wouldn’t be for long, if Daphne had anything to say about it.

Didn’t Jefferson see how easy things would be if he followed her plan and asked her out again? They could attend King’s College together this fall—he’d taken a gap year, which meant he would enter with Daphne’s class—and then after they graduated he would propose, and they would get married in the palace.

And finally, at long last, Daphne would be the princess she’d been born to be.

“I’m so sorry about your father. I can only imagine what you’re going through.” She reached for his arm in a silent gesture of support. “I’m here if you want to talk.”

Jefferson nodded absently, and Daphne lowered her hand.

“Sorry, I just . . . there are some people I need to say hi to,” he mumbled.

“Of course.” She forced herself to remain still, her expression placid and unconcerned, as the Prince of America walked away from her.

Bracing herself for endless small talk, Daphne bit back a sigh and began to circulate through the crowds. She caught sight of her mother across the lawn, chatting with the owner of a department store chain. How typical. Rebecca Deighton was nothing if not an instinctive judge of people she could use.

Daphne knew she should go over there, flash her perfect smile, and charm yet another person into being on Team Daphne. She glanced back at Jefferson—and froze.

He was talking to Nina.

It was impossible to hear them over the low roar of the party, but that didn’t matter; she could see the pained, pleading look in the prince’s eyes. Was he asking Nina to forgive him for the way he’d treated her . . . or for a second chance?

What if Nina decided to give him one?

Daphne tore her gaze away before anyone caught her staring. She strode blindly into the cool shade of the tent, past delicate tables topped with pyramids of flowers, all the way to the ladies’ room at the back.

She braced her hands on either side of the sink, forcing herself to take slow, shaky breaths. She was curiously unsurprised when, moments later, a pair of footsteps sounded behind her.

“Hello, Mother,” she said heavily.

Daphne watched as Rebecca prowled through the restroom, making sure the row of stalls was completely empty before she turned back to her daughter. “Well?” Rebecca snapped. “He’s talking to *that girl* again. How could you let that happen?”

“I was with him, but—”

“Do you realize how much it cost to *be* here this afternoon?” her mother cut in. At times like this, when she got

upset, the old Nebraska twang slipped back into her voice. As if she'd forgotten that she was Rebecca Deighton, Lady Margrave, and had slipped back into her old persona—Becky Sharpe, lingerie model.

Daphne knew her parents had gained access to the Royal Enclosure the tacky way, by underwriting the regatta itself. And while the higher-ranking, wealthier aristocrats probably hadn't flinched at the amount, the Deightons felt every penny they spent. Acutely.

"I'm aware how much it cost," Daphne said quietly, and she wasn't just talking about the check her family had written. Not even her parents knew everything Daphne had done in her attempts to win Jefferson—and to keep him.

For a moment the two women just stared at each other in the mirror. There was a guarded wariness to their expressions that made them look more like enemies than mother and daughter.

Daphne could almost hear the gears of her mother's mind turning. Rebecca was never hampered by obstacles for long; she didn't think about what was, but what *could* be. Everyone else lived in reality, but Rebecca Deighton occupied a shifting shadow-world of infinite possibility.

"You'll have to get rid of her," her mother concluded, and Daphne nodded reluctantly.

Nina had loved Jefferson, *really* loved him, and that made her a more dangerous opponent than any of the aristocratic girls at court, with their sterile, cookie-cutter beauty. Daphne could outwit and outshine those girls any day. But someone who genuinely didn't care about Jefferson's position—who, in fact, loved him in spite of it—that was a real threat.

"I know you'll think of something." Her mother turned on one heel so fast that her skirts fluttered around her.

As the bathroom door clattered, Daphne began fumbling through her leather clutch. Her hands shaking only a little,

she quickly dabbed concealer beneath her eyes, swooped mascara onto her lashes. She felt like an Amazonian warrior, arming herself before battle.

When she was done, she stared into the mirror—at her high arched brows, her full lips, the vivid green of her thick-lashed eyes—and let out a breath. The sight of her reflection always calmed her.

She was Daphne Deighton, and she had to keep moving relentlessly, ruthlessly, constantly forward—no matter what, or who, stood in her way.

# 4



## SAMANTHA

It was hard for Princess Samantha to enjoy the Royal Potomac Races this year.

Usually she loved them. Not for the reason some people did, because they were a chance to see and be seen: the first event of the spring social calendar, marking the return of galas and parties after a winter of hibernation. No, Sam had always enjoyed the races for their energy. They were so brash, so utterly *American*, with an infectious, carnivalesque sense of excitement.

But this year the colors felt dull, as if her senses were muted under a thick blanket. Even the band sounded strangely out of tune. Or maybe *she* was the one out of tune.

Everywhere she looked, all she saw was the achingly conspicuous space where her father should have been.

Sam remembered how once, when she was little, she'd told her dad that she wanted to grow up and be as strong as the rowers. "But you *are* strong," he'd replied.

"As strong as what?" Sam had never understood why people used adjectives without defined parameters. "Strong as a lion? Stronger than Jeff?"

King George had laughed, leaning down to drop a kiss on the top of her head. "You are as strong as you need to be. And I am prouder of you than you'll ever know."

Sam blinked rapidly at the memory, wrapping her arms

around herself despite the afternoon sun. Then she saw a familiar blond head across the crowds, and her breath caught.

He was as gorgeous as ever in a linen jacket the same shocking blue as his eyes. A matching pocket square, monogrammed with his initials, completed the look. Sam would have teased him for the absurd preppiness of it, if every cell of her body weren't aching at his nearness.

She'd never meant to fall for her sister's fiancé. When she'd met Teddy Eaton, the chemistry between them had been instant and electric. Neither of them had known that he was intended for Beatrice. Sam had tried, after that, to stay away from him . . . but by that point it was too late.

When Teddy saw her heading toward him, an instant of surprise, or maybe even pain, flickered over his features, but he quickly smoothed it over with a smile—the same way Beatrice always did. Sam shivered a little at the thought.

She hadn't heard much from Teddy this past month, but she'd assumed he was keeping his distance out of respect for her grief—that when they saw each other again, everything would fall back into place. Now she couldn't help fearing that his silence meant something else.

"It's so good to see you," she breathed, once she'd finally reached his side. Her voice was hoarse with longing. This was the closest they'd been since her father's funeral.

"Samantha."

At his distant, formal tone, her smile faltered. "What is it?"

"I thought—I mean, I wasn't sure . . ." Teddy studied her face for a long moment; then his shoulders sagged. "Beatrice hasn't told you?"

Dread pooled in her stomach. "Told me what?"

He ran a hand helplessly through his hair; it fell back in the same perfect waves as ever. "Can we go somewhere alone, just the two of us? We need to talk."

At the mention of going somewhere alone, Sam's heart

had lifted, only to seize in fear when she heard *we need to talk*. The four most ominous words in the English language.

"I . . . all right." Sam shot Teddy an anxious glance as she led him around the corner, into a narrow passageway between the Royal Enclosure and Briony, the next tent over. There was no one in sight, just a few humming generators that fed air-conditioning into the tent through fat cords.

"What's going on?" Sam dug her heel anxiously into the mud.

Teddy's expression was shadowed with remorse. "I'm kind of glad the queen didn't tell you. I guess . . . it's best you hear this from me."

Sam felt her muscles quietly tensing, her body caving inward as if readying for a blow.

"We're getting married in June."

"No," she said automatically. It couldn't be. The night of her engagement party, Beatrice had pulled Sam out onto the terrace and confessed that she was calling off the whole thing. She was going to talk about it with their dad, come up with a plan for telling the press.

Except they'd lost him before Beatrice had time to do any of that. And now that she was queen, Beatrice clearly felt obligated to go through with this ill-advised engagement.

"So it meant nothing, when you said that we were in this together? Teddy, you *promised!*" And so had Beatrice.

Sam should have known better than to hold her sister to her word.

Teddy's fists clenched helplessly at his sides, but when he spoke, his voice was oddly formal. "I'm sorry, Samantha. But the queen and I have agreed."

"Stop calling her *the queen!* She has a name!"

He winced. "I owe you an apology. The way I've handled all of this . . . it hasn't been fair to Beatrice, and especially not to you."

There was something so stubbornly honorable about his confession that Sam couldn't help thinking how right she'd been, when she'd told Beatrice—in a fit of pique—that she and Teddy deserved each other.

“It's not fair to you, either!” Sam cried out. “Why are you *doing* this?”

He looked down, fiddling with a button on his blazer. “A lot of people are counting on me.”

Sam remembered what he'd said in Telluride, which felt like a lifetime ago: that the Eatons' fortune had evaporated overnight. Marrying Beatrice, gaining the support of the Crown, would save his duchy from financial ruin. Because it wasn't just about Teddy's family: the Eatons had supported the Boston area—had been its source of financial stability, its largest employer—for over two hundred years.

Teddy, who'd been raised as the future duke, felt obligated to take that responsibility onto his shoulders.

“You shouldn't get married because you think you *owe* it to the people of Boston,” Sam said heatedly.

Teddy looked up to meet her gaze. His eyes were more piercingly blue than normal, as if confusion, or perhaps regret, had deepened their color. “I promise you that I'm not doing this lightly. I have my reasons, and I'm sure your sister does, too.”

“If she really has to rush down the aisle, tell her to pick someone else! There are millions of guys in America. Can't she marry one of *them*?”

Teddy shook his head. “You know it doesn't work like that. Beatrice can't go and propose to someone else. It would make her seem fickle and capricious.”

The truth of it hit Sam like a sickening blow. Teddy was right. If Beatrice broke off her very public engagement and began dating another guy, it would just fuel the attacks of all those people who were already cheering for her to fail.