



Underlined

SNEAK PEEK

YOUR NEXT BOOK BINGE STARTS HERE

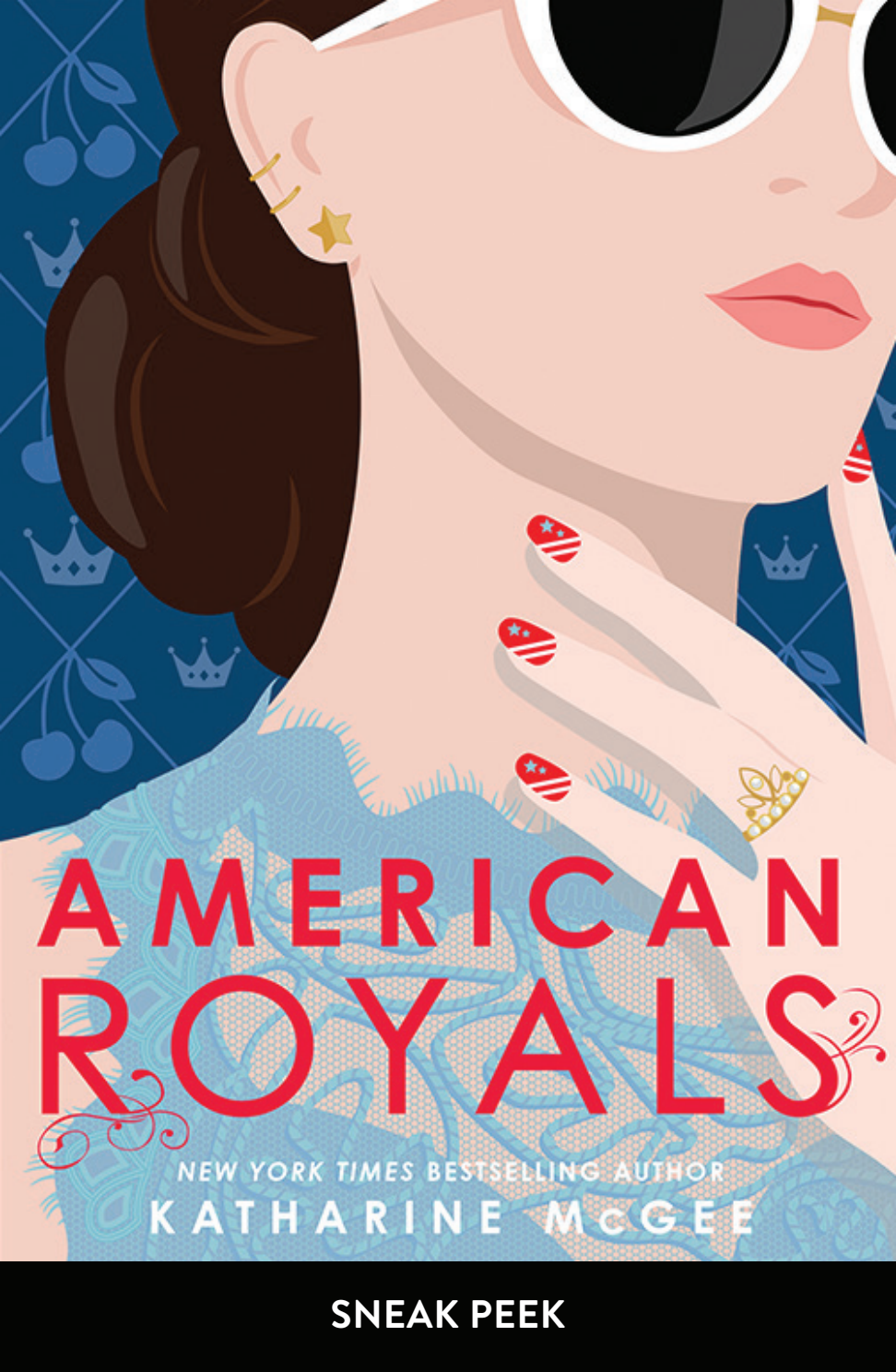
American Royals.....3

The Babysitters Coven38

Dear Martin72

Gravemaids103

Blood Heir156



AMERICAN ROYALS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KATHARINE MCGEE

SNEAK PEEK

This is a work of fiction. All incidents and dialogue, and all characters with the exception of some well-known historical and public figures, are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Where real-life historical or public figures appear, the situations, incidents, and dialogues concerning those persons are fictional and are not intended to depict actual events or to change the fictional nature of the work. In all other respects, any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

Text copyright © 2019 by Katharine McGee and Alloy Entertainment

Jacket art copyright © 2019 by Carolina Melis

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Random House Children's Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

Random House and the colophon are registered trademarks of
Penguin Random House LLC.

Visit us on the Web! GetUnderlined.com

Educators and librarians, for a variety of teaching tools, visit us at
RHTeachersLibrarians.com



Produced by Alloy Entertainment
alloyentertainment.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: McGee, Katharine, author.

Title: American royals / Katharine McGee.

Description: First edition. | New York: Random House, [2019]

Summary: In an alternate America, princesses Beatrice and Samantha Washington and the two girls wooing their brother, Prince Jefferson, become embroiled in high drama in the most glorious court in the world.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018060242 | ISBN 978-1-9848-3017-3 (hardcover) |

ISBN 978-1-9848-3019-7 (hardcover library binding) |

ISBN 978-0-593-12391-1 (international) | ISBN 978-1-9848-3018-0 (ebook)

Subjects: | CYAC: Princesses—Fiction. | Princes—Fiction. |

Courts and courtiers—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.M43513 Ame 2019 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

Interior design by Jaclyn Whalen

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

Random House Children's Books supports the First Amendment and
celebrates the right to read.

FREE SAMPLE COPY—NOT FOR RESALE

AMERICAN ROYALS

KATHARINE MCGEE

Random House  New York

KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK....

PROLOGUE

You already know the story of the American Revolution, and the birth of the American monarchy.

You might know it from the picture books you read as a child. From your elementary school performances—when you longed to play the role of King George I or Queen Martha, and instead were cast as a cherry tree. You know it from songs and movies and history textbooks, from that summer you visited the capital and went on the official Washington Palace tour.

You've heard the story so many times that you could tell it yourself: how, after the Battle of Yorktown, Colonel Lewis Nicola fell to his knees before General George Washington, and begged him on behalf of the entire nation to become America's first king.

Of course, the general said yes.

Historians love to debate whether, in another world, things might have gone differently. What if General Washington had refused to be king, and asked to be an elected representative instead? A prime minister—or perhaps he would have made up an entirely new name for that office, like *president*. Maybe, inspired by America's example, other nations—France and Russia and Prussia, Austria-Hungary and China and Greece—would eventually abolish their own monarchies, giving rise to a new democratic age.

But we all know that never happened. And you didn't come here for a made-up story. You came here for the story of what happens next. What America looks like two hundred and fifty years later, when the descendants of George I are still on the throne.

It is a story of soaring ballrooms and backstairs corridors. Of secrets and scandal, of love and heartbreak. It is the story of the most famous family in the world, who play out their family dramas on the greatest stage of all.

This is the story of the American royals.



BEATRICE

Present Day

Beatrice could trace her ancestry back to the tenth century.

It was really only through Queen Martha's side, though most people refrained from mentioning that. After all, King George I had been nothing but an upstart planter from Virginia until he married well and then fought even better. He fought so well that he helped win America's independence, and was rewarded by its people with a crown.

But through Martha, at least, Beatrice could trace her lineage for more than forty generations. Among her forebears were kings and queens and archdukes, scholars and soldiers, even a canonized saint. *We have much to learn by looking back*, her father always reminded her. *Never forget where you come from.*

It was hard to forget your ancestors when you carried their names with you as Beatrice did: Beatrice Georgina Fredericka Louise of the House of Washington, Princess Royal of America.

Beatrice's father, His Majesty King George IV, shot her a glance. She reflexively sat up straighter, to listen as the High Constable reviewed the plans for tomorrow's Queen's Ball. Her hands were clasped over her demure pencil skirt, her legs crossed at the ankle. Because as her etiquette teacher had drilled into her—by hitting her wrist with a ruler each time she slipped up—a lady never crossed her legs at the thigh.

And the rules were especially stringent for Beatrice, because she was not only a princess: she was also the first woman who would ever inherit the American throne. The first woman who would be queen in her own right: not a queen consort, married to a king, but a true queen regnant.

If she'd been born twenty years earlier, the succession would have jumped over her and skipped to Jeff. But her grandfather had famously abolished that centuries-old law, dictating that in all subsequent generations, the throne would pass to the oldest child, not the oldest boy.

Beatrice let her gaze drift over the conference table before her. It was littered with papers and scattered cups of coffee that had long since gone cold. Today's was the last Cabinet session until January, which meant it had been filled with year-end reports and long spreadsheets of analysis.

The Cabinet meetings always took place here in the Star Chamber, named for the gilded stars painted on its blue walls, and the famous star-shaped oculus overhead. Winter sunlight poured through it to dapple invitingly over the table. Not that Beatrice would get to enjoy it. She rarely had time to go outside, except on the days she rose before dawn to join her father on his run through the capital, flanked by their security officers.

For a brief and uncharacteristic moment, she wondered what her siblings were doing right now, if they were back yet from their whirlwind trip through East Asia. Samantha and Jeff—twins, and three years younger than Beatrice—were a dangerous pair. They were lively and spontaneous, full of bad ideas, and, unlike most teenagers, had the power to actually *carry out* those ideas, much to their parents' regret. Now, six months after they'd finished high school, it was clear that neither of them knew what to do with themselves—except celebrate the fact that they were eighteen and could legally drink.

No one ever expected anything of the twins. All the

expectation—in the family and, really, in the *world*—was focused like a white-hot spotlight on Beatrice.

At last the High Constable finished his report. The king gave a gracious nod and stood. “Thank you, Jacob. If there is no further business, that concludes today’s meeting.”

Everyone rose to their feet and began to shuffle out of the room, chatting about tomorrow’s ball or their holiday plans. They seemed to have temporarily set aside their political rivalries—the king kept his Cabinet evenly divided between the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans—though Beatrice felt certain those rivalries would be back in full force come the new year.

Her personal security detail, Connor, glanced up from where he stood outside the door, next to the king’s protection officer. Both men were members of the Revere Guard, the elite corps of officers who devoted their lives to the service of the Crown.

“Beatrice, could you stay for a minute?” her dad asked.

Beatrice paused in the doorway. “Of course.”

The king sat back down, and she followed suit. “Thank you again for helping with the nominations,” he told her. They both glanced at the paper before him, where a list of names was printed in alphabetical order.

Beatrice smiled. “I’m glad you accepted them.”

Tomorrow was the palace’s annual holiday party, the Queen’s Ball, so named because at the very first Christmas ball, Queen Martha had urged George I to ennoble dozens of Americans who’d aided the Revolution. The tradition had persisted ever since. Each year at the ball, the king knighted Americans for their service to the country, thereby making them lords or ladies. And for the first time, he had let Beatrice suggest the candidates for knighthood.

Before she could ask what he wanted, a tap sounded at

the door. The king gave an audible sigh of relief as Beatrice's mom swept into the room.

Queen Adelaide came from nobility on both sides of her family. Before her marriage to the king, she'd been set to inherit the Duchy of Canaveral *and* the Duchy of Savannah. The Double Duchess, people had called her.

Adelaide had grown up in Atlanta, and had never lost her ethereal Southern charm. Even now her gestures were touched with elegance: the tilt of her head as she smiled at her daughter, the turn of her wrist as she settled into the walnut chair to Beatrice's right. Caramel highlights gleamed in her rich brown hair, which she curled each morning with hot rollers and wore encircled by a headband.

The way they were sitting—a parent to either side of Beatrice, boxing her in—gave her the distinct sense that she was being ambushed.

“Hey, Mom,” she said in a slightly puzzled tone. The queen wasn't usually part of their political discussions.

“Beatrice, your mother and I were hoping to discuss your future,” the king began.

The princess blinked, disconcerted. She was always thinking about the future.

“On a more personal level,” her mom clarified. “We were wondering if there was anyone . . . special in your life right now.”

Beatrice startled. She'd expected this talk sooner or later, had done her best to mentally prepare herself for it. She just hadn't assumed it would be quite so *soon*.

“No, there isn't,” she assured them. Her parents nodded distractedly; they both knew she wasn't dating anyone. The entire *country* knew it.

The king cleared his throat. “Your mother and I were hoping that you might start searching for a partner. For that person you'll spend your life with.”

His words seemed to echo, amplified, around the Star Chamber.

Beatrice had almost no romantic experience to speak of—not that the various foreign princes near her age hadn’t tried. The only one to make it to a second date had been Prince Nikolaos of Greece. His parents had urged him to do an exchange program at Harvard one semester, clearly hoping that he and the American princess would fall madly in love. Beatrice went out with him for a while to please their families, but nothing had come of it—even though, as a younger son of a royal family, Nikolaos was one of the few men actually *eligible* to go out with Beatrice. The future monarch could only marry someone of noble or aristocratic blood.

Beatrice had always known that she couldn’t date the wrong person—couldn’t even kiss the wrong person, the way everyone else at college seemed to. After all, no one wanted to see their future monarch walk-of-shaming home from a college party.

No, it was much safer if the heir to the throne had no sexual past for the press to rake through: no baggage from past boyfriends, no exes who might sell intimate secrets in a tell-all memoir. There could be no ups and downs in Beatrice’s relationships. Once she publicly dated someone, that was it: they would have to be happy, and stable, and committed.

It had been enough to make her steer clear of dating almost entirely.

For years the press had applauded Beatrice for being careful with her reputation. But ever since she’d turned twenty-one, she’d noticed a shift in the way they discussed her love life. Instead of dedicated and virtuous, the reporters had begun to call her lonely and pitiable—or worse, frigid. If she never dated anyone, they complained, how was she supposed to get married, and start the all-important business of providing the *next* heir to the throne?

“Don’t you think I’m a little young to worry about this?” Beatrice asked, relieved at how calm she sounded. But then, she had long ago been trained to keep her emotions hidden from public display.

“I was your age when your father and I got married. And I was pregnant with you the following year,” the queen reminded her. A truly terrifying thought.

“That was twenty years ago!” Beatrice protested. “No one expects me to—I mean—things are different now.”

“We’re not saying you should run to the altar tomorrow. All we’re asking is that you start to think about it. This won’t be an easy decision, and we want to help.”

“Help?”

“There are several young men whom we’d love for you to meet. We’ve invited them all to the ball tomorrow night.” The queen unclasped her pebbled-leather handbag and pulled out a folder, colored plastic tabs peeking from its edge. She handed it to her daughter.

Each tab was labeled with a name. Lord José Ramirez, future Duke of Texas. Lord Marshall Davis, future Duke of Orange. Lord Theodore Eaton, future Duke of Boston.

“You’re trying to *set me up*?”

“We’re just giving you some options. Introducing you to young men who might be a good fit.”

Beatrice flipped numbly through the pages. They were filled with information: family trees, photos, high school transcripts, even the guys’ heights and weights.

“Did you use your security clearance to get all this?”

“What? No.” The king looked shocked at the suggestion that he would abuse his privileges with the NSA. “The young men and their families all volunteered this information. They know what they’re signing on for.”

“So you’ve already talked to them,” Beatrice said woodenly.

“And tomorrow night at the Queen’s Ball you want me to interview these . . . potential *husbands*?”

Her mother’s brows shot up in protest. “*Interview* makes it sound so impersonal! All we’re asking is that you have a conversation with them, get to know them a little. Who knows? One of them might surprise you.”

“Maybe it *is* like an interview,” the king admitted. “Beatrice, when you do choose someone, he won’t just be your husband. He will also be America’s first king consort. And being married to the reigning monarch is a full-time job.”

“A job that never stops,” the queen chimed in.

Through the window, down in the Marble Courtyard, Beatrice heard a burst of laughter and gossip, and a single voice struggling valiantly to rise above the din. Probably a high school tour going past, on the last day before holiday break. These teenagers weren’t that much younger than she was, yet Beatrice felt irrevocably distant from them.

She used her thumb to pull back the pages of the folder and let them fan back down. Only a dozen young men were included.

“This folder is pretty thin,” she said softly.

Of course, Beatrice had always known that she would be fishing from a tiny pond, that her romantic options were incredibly narrow. It wasn’t as bad as it had been a hundred years ago, when the marriage of the king was a matter of public policy rather than a matter of the heart. At least she wouldn’t have to get married to seal a political treaty.

But it still seemed a lot to hope, that she might fall in love with someone on this very short list.

“Your father and I were very thorough. We combed through all the sons and grandsons of the nobility before we compiled these names,” her mother said gently.

The king nodded. “There are some good options here,

Beatrice. Everyone in this folder is smart, and thoughtful, and from a good family—the type of men who will support you, without letting their egos get in the way.”

From a good family. Beatrice knew precisely what that meant. They were the sons and grandsons of high-ranking American noblemen, if only because the foreign princes around her age—Nikolaos, or Charles of Schleswig-Holstein, or the Grand Duke Pieter—had all already struck out.

Beatrice glanced back and forth between her parents. “What if my future husband isn’t on this list? What if I don’t want to marry *any* of them?”

“You haven’t even met them yet,” her father cut in. “Besides, your mother and I were set up by our parents, and look how that turned out.” He met the queen’s eyes with a fond smile.

Beatrice nodded, a bit reassured. She knew that her dad had picked her mom just like this, from a short list of pre-approved options. They had met only a dozen times before their wedding day. And their arranged marriage had ended up blossoming into a genuine love match.

She tried to consider the possibility that her parents were right: that she could fall in love with one of the young men listed in this terrifyingly slim folder.

It didn’t seem likely.

She hadn’t yet met these noblemen, but she could already guess what they were like: the same type of spoiled, self-absorbed young men who’d been circling her for years. The type of guys she’d been carefully turning down at Harvard, each time they asked her to a final club party or fraternity date night. The type of guys who looked at her and saw not a person, but a crown.

Sometimes, Beatrice thought traitorously, that was how her parents saw her too.

The king braced his palms on the conference table. Against

the tanned skin of his hands glinted a pair of rings: the simple gold of his wedding band and, next to it, the heavy signet ring marked with the Great Seal of America. His two marriages, to the queen and to his country.

“Our hope for you has always been that you might find someone you love, who can also handle the requirements that come with this life,” he told her. “Someone who is the right fit for you *and* America.”

Beatrice heard the unspoken subtext: that if she couldn’t find someone who checked both boxes, then America needed to come first. It was more important that she marry someone who could do this job, and do it well, than that she follow her heart.

And truthfully, Beatrice had given up on her heart a long time ago. Her life didn’t belong to her, her choices were never fully her own—she had known this since she was a child.

Her grandfather King Edward III had said as much to her on his deathbed. The memory would be forever etched in her mind: the sterile smell of the hospital, the yellow fluorescent lighting, the peremptory way her grandfather had dismissed everyone else from the room. “I need to say a few things to Beatrice,” he’d declared, in that frightening growl he used just for her.

The dying king had taken Beatrice’s small hands in his frail ones. “Long ago, monarchies existed so that the people could serve the monarch. Now the monarch must serve the people. Remember that it is an honor and a privilege to be a Washington and devote your life to this nation.”

Beatrice gave a solemn nod. She knew it was her duty to put the people first; everyone had been telling her that since she was born. The words *In service to God and country* had literally been painted on the walls of her nursery.

“From this point onward you are two people at once: Beatrice the girl, and Beatrice, heir to the Crown. When they

want different things,” her grandfather said gravely, “the Crown must win. Always. Swear it to me.” His fingers closed around hers with a surprising amount of strength.

“I swear,” Beatrice had whispered. She didn’t remember consciously choosing to say those words; it was as if some greater force, perhaps the spirit of America itself, had taken temporary hold of her and snatched them from her chest.

Beatrice lived by that sacred oath. She had always known that this decision was looming in her future. But the suddenness of it all—the fact that her parents expected her to start picking a *husband* tomorrow, and from such an abbreviated list—made her breath catch.

“You know that this life isn’t an easy one,” the king said gently. “That it often looks so different from the outside than it really is on the inside. Beatrice, it’s crucial that you find the right partner to share it with. Someone to help you through the challenges and share in the successes. Your mother and I are a team. I couldn’t have done any of it without her.”

Beatrice swallowed against a tightness in her throat. Well, if she needed to get married for the country’s sake, she might as well *try* to pick one of her parents’ choices.

“Should we look through the candidates before I meet them tomorrow?” she said at last, and opened the folder to its first page.

2

NINA

Nina Gonzalez clattered up the stairs at the back of the lecture hall, headed toward her usual seat in the mezzanine. Below her stretched hundreds of red auditorium chairs, each affixed with a wooden desk. Almost every seat was occupied. This was Intro to World History, a required class for all freshmen at King's College: King Edward I had decreed as much when he founded the university back in 1828.

She rolled up the sleeves of her flannel shirt, and a tattoo flashed on her wrist, its angular lines inscribed on her burnished sienna skin. It was the Chinese character for *friendship*. Samantha had insisted that they get the tattoo together, to commemorate their eighteenth birthdays. Of course, Sam couldn't very well be seen with a tattoo, so hers was somewhere decidedly more private.

"You're coming tonight, right?" Nina's friend Rachel Greenbaum leaned over from the next chair.

"Tonight?" Nina reached up to tuck her dark hair behind one ear. A cute boy at the end of the row was glancing her way, but she ignored him. He looked too much like the one she was still trying to get over.

"We're meeting in the common room to watch the coverage of the Queen's Ball. I made cherry tarts using the official recipe, the one from the Washington cookbook. I even

bought cherries from the palace gift shop, to make it authentic,” Rachel said eagerly.

“That sounds delicious.” Those cherry tarts were famous worldwide: the palace had served them at every garden party or reception for generations. Nina wondered what Rachel would say if she found out how much the Washingtons secretly hated those tarts.

Honestly, it would have been more authentic if she’d cooked barbecue instead. Or breakfast tacos. Both of which the royal family ate with shocking frequency.

“So you’re coming, right?” Rachel pressed.

Nina did her best to look regretful. “I can’t. I actually have a shift tonight.” She worked at the university library shelving books, as part of the work-study program that funded her scholarship. But even if she hadn’t been busy, Nina had no desire to watch the coverage of the Queen’s Ball. She’d attended that ball several years in a row, and it was pretty much the same every time.

“I didn’t know the library was *open* on Friday nights.”

“Maybe you should come with me. Some of the seniors still have finals; you might meet an older guy,” Nina teased.

“Only you would daydream about a library meet-cute.” Rachel shook her head, then let out a wistful sigh. “I wonder what Princess Beatrice will wear tonight. Do you remember the gown she wore last year, with the illusion neckline? It was so elegant.”

Nina didn’t want to talk about the royal family, especially not with Rachel, who was a little too obsessed with them. She’d once told Nina that she’d named her pet goldfish Jefferson—all ten of them in succession. But a deep-seated loyalty to Samantha made Nina speak up. “What about Samantha? She always looks beautiful too.”

Rachel made a vague noise of disagreement, ignoring the question. It was an all-too-typical reaction. The nation adored

Beatrice, their future sovereign—or at least most people adored her, except the sexist, reactionary groups that still protested the Act of Succession to the Crown. Those people hated Beatrice, simply for having the temerity to be a woman who would inherit a throne that had always belonged to men. They were a minority, but they were still vicious and vocal, always trolling online photos of Beatrice, booing her at political rallies.

But if most of the nation loved Beatrice, they positively swooned over Jefferson, with what sometimes felt like a single collective sigh. He was the only boy, and the world seemed willing to forgive him anything, even if Nina wasn't.

As for Samantha . . . at best people were entertained by her. At worst, which was relatively often, they actively disapproved of her. The problem was that they didn't *know* Sam. Not the way Nina did.

She was saved from answering by Professor Urquhart, who started up to the podium with ponderous steps. There was a flurry of activity as all seven hundred students broke off their murmured conversations and arranged their laptops before them. Nina—who was probably the last person still taking notes by hand, in a spiral notebook—poised her pencil on a fresh page and glanced up expectantly. Dust motes hung suspended in the bars of sunlight that sliced through the windows.

“As we've covered all semester, political alliances through the turn of the century were typically bilateral and easily broken—which is why so many of them were sealed through marriage,” Professor Urquhart began. “Things changed with the formation of the League of Kings: a treaty among multiple nations, meant to assure collective security and peace. The League was founded in 1895 at the Concord of Paris, hosted by—”

Louis, Nina silently finished. That was the easiest part of

French history: their kings were consistently named Louis, all the way up to the current Louis XXIII. Honestly, the French were even worse about *Louis* than the Washingtons were about *George*.

She copied the professor's words into her spiral notebook, wishing that she could stop thinking about the Washingtons. College was supposed to be her fresh start, a chance to figure out who she really was, free from the influence of the royal family.

Nina had been Princess Samantha's best friend since they were children. They had met twelve years ago, when Nina's mother, Isabella, interviewed at the palace. The former king—Edward III, Samantha's grandfather—had just passed away, and the new king needed a chamberlain. Isabella had been working in the Chamber of Commerce, and somehow, miraculously, her boss recommended her to His Majesty. For there was no “applying” to jobs in the palace. The palace made a list of candidates, and if you were one of the lucky few, *they* reached out to *you*.

The afternoon of the interview, Nina's mom Julie was out of town and Nina's usual babysitter canceled at the last minute, leaving Nina's mamá Isabella no choice but to bring Nina with her. “Stay right here,” she admonished, leading her daughter to a bench in the downstairs corridor.

Nina had found it surprising that her mamá was interviewing in the actual *palace*, but as she would later learn, Washington Palace wasn't just the royal family's home in the capital. It was also the administrative center of the Crown. By far the majority of the palace's six hundred rooms were offices or public spaces. The private apartments on the second floor were all marked by oval door handles, rather than the round ones downstairs.

Nina tucked her feet beneath her and quietly opened the book she'd brought.

“What are you reading?”

A face topped by a mountain of chestnut hair peered around the corner. Nina instantly recognized Princess Samantha—though she didn’t look much like a princess in her zebra-print leggings and sequined dress. Her fingernails were painted in a rainbow, each one a different primary color.

“Um . . .” Nina hid the cover in her lap. The book was about a princess, albeit a fantasy one, but it still felt strange to confess that to a *real* princess.

“My little brother and I are reading a dragon series right now,” Samantha declared, and tipped her head to one side. “Have you seen him? I can’t find him.”

Nina shook her head. “I thought you were twins,” she couldn’t resist saying.

“Yes, but I’m four minutes older, which makes Jeff my little brother,” Samantha replied with irrefutable logic. “Want to help me look for him?”

The princess was a storm of kinetic energy, skipping down the halls, constantly opening doors or peering behind furniture in search of her twin. The entire time she kept up a steady stream of chatter, her own greatest-hits tour of the palace.

“This room is haunted by the ghost of Queen Thérèse. I know it’s her because the ghost speaks French,” she declared ominously, pointing at the shuttered downstairs parlor. Or “I used to roller-skate down these halls, till my dad caught me and said I can’t. Beatrice did it too, but it never matters what Beatrice does.” Samantha didn’t sound resentful, just pensive. “She’s going to be queen someday.”

“And what are you going to be?” Nina asked, curious.

Samantha grinned. “Everything else.”

She led Nina from one unbelievable place to another, through storerooms of pressed linen napkins and kitchens that soared larger than ballrooms, where the chef gave them

sugar cookies out of a painted blue jar. The princess bit into her cookie, but Nina tucked hers into her pocket. It was too pretty to eat.

As they looped back toward the bench, Nina was startled to see her mamá walking down the hallway, chatting easily with the king. Their eyes lit on Nina, and she instinctively froze.

The king smiled, a genial, boyish smile that made his eyes twinkle. “And who have we here?”

Nina had never met a king before, yet some unbidden instinct—perhaps all the times she’d seen him on television—prompted her to bob into a curtsy.

“This is my daughter, Nina,” Isabella murmured.

Samantha trotted over to her father and tugged at his hand. “Dad, can Nina come over again soon?” she pleaded.

The king turned his warm eyes on Nina’s mamá. “Samantha is right. I hope you’ll bring Nina here in the afternoons. After all, it’s not like we have a short workday.”

Isabella blinked. “Your Majesty?”

“The girls clearly get along, and I know your wife has a busy schedule, too. Why should Nina stay home with a babysitter when she could be here?”

Nina was too young to understand Isabella’s hesitation. “Please, mamá?” she’d chimed in, brimming with eagerness. Isabella had relented with a sigh.

And just like that, Nina was interwoven into the lives of the royal twins.

They became an instant threesome: the prince, the princess, and the chamberlain’s daughter. Back then Nina hadn’t even known to feel self-conscious about the differences between her life and Samantha’s. For even though they were twins, and *royalty*, Jeff and Sam never made Nina feel like an outsider. If anything, they were all equally excluded from the glamorous and inaccessible world of the adults—even from

Beatrice, who at age ten was already enrolled in private tutoring on top of her middle school courses.

Sam and Jeff were always the instigators of their plans, with Nina trying and failing to keep them in line. They would escape the twins' nanny and set out on some escapade: to swim in the heated indoor pool, or to find the rumored safe rooms and bomb shelters that were supposedly hidden throughout the palace. One time Samantha convinced them to hide beneath a tablecloth and eavesdrop on a private meeting between the king and the Austrian ambassador. They were caught after just two minutes, when Jeff tugged on the tablecloth and knocked over a pitcher of water, but by then Samantha had already squirted honey into the ambassador's shoe. "If you don't want honey in your shoes, don't kick them off under the table," she'd said later, her eyes gleaming with mischief.

The fact that Samantha and Nina's friendship had survived all these years was a testament to the princess's determination. She refused to let them drift apart, even though they went to different schools, even after Nina's mamá left her role as chamberlain and was named Minister of the Treasury. Samantha just kept on inviting Nina to the palace for sleepovers, or to the Washingtons' vacation homes for holiday weekends, or to attend state events as her plus-one.

Nina's parents had mixed feelings about their daughter's friendship with the princess.

Isabella and Julie had met years ago in grad school. By now they were one of Washington's power couples: Isabella working as Minister of the Treasury, Julie the founder of a successful e-commerce business. They didn't argue very often, but Nina's complicated relationship with the Washingtons was something they never managed to agree on.

"We can't let Nina go on that trip," Isabella had protested, after Samantha invited Nina to the royal family's beach house.

“I don’t want her spending too much time with them, especially when we aren’t around.”

Nina’s ears perked up at the sound of their voices, which echoed through the building’s old-fashioned heating pipes. She was in her bedroom on the third floor, beneath the attic. She hadn’t meant to eavesdrop . . . but she’d also never confessed how easily she could hear them when they spoke in the sitting room directly below.

“Why not?” Julie had replied, her voice oddly distorted by the old metal pipes.

“Because I worry about her! The world that the Washingtons inhabit, with all its private planes and court galas and protocol—that isn’t reality. And no matter how often they invite her or how much Princess Samantha likes her, Nina will never really be one of them.” Nina’s mamá sighed. “I don’t want her feeling like a poor relation from some Jane Austen novel.”

Nina shifted closer on her mattress to catch the response.

“The princess has been a good friend to Nina,” her mom protested. “And you should have a little more faith in the way we’ve raised our daughter. If anything, I think Nina will be a positive influence on Samantha, by reminding her what exists outside those palace gates. The princess probably *needs* a normal friend.”

Eventually Nina’s parents had agreed to let her go, with the stipulation that she stay out of the public eye and never be quoted or photographed in press coverage of the royal family. The palace had been happy to agree. They didn’t particularly want the media focusing on Princess Samantha, either.

By the time they were in high school, Nina was used to her best friend’s quirky plans and contagious excitement. *Let’s take Albert out!* Sam would text, naming the lemon-yellow Jeep she’d begged her parents to give her on her sixteenth birthday. She had the car, but she kept failing the parallel-parking

part of her driver's test and still didn't have a license. Which meant that Nina ended up driving that obnoxiously yellow Jeep all through the capital, with Samantha sitting cross-legged in the passenger seat, begging her to swing through McDonald's. After a while Nina didn't even worry about the protection officer glowering at them from the back.

Sam made it far too easy for Nina to forget the myriad differences between them. And Nina loved her, without strings or conditions, the way she would have loved a sister if she'd had one. It was just that her sister happened to be the Princess of America.

But their relationship had subtly shifted over the past six months. Nina had never told Sam what happened the night of the graduation party—and the longer she kept it a secret, the greater the distance it seemed to wedge between them. Then Sam and Jeff went off on their whirlwind post-graduation trip, and Nina was starting her first year of college, and maybe it was all for the best anyway. This was Nina's chance to settle into a more normal life, one without the private planes and court galas and protocol that had so worried Isabella. She could go back to being her ordinary, real-world self.

Nina hadn't told anyone at King's College that Samantha was her best friend. They would probably assume she was a liar—or if they did believe her, they might try to use her for her connections. Nina didn't know which outcome would be worse.

Professor Urquhart clicked off the microphone, marking the conclusion of the lecture. Everyone stood in a shuffle of closing laptops and suppressed gossip. Nina scribbled a few final notes in her spiral before tossing it into her shoulder bag, then followed Rachel down the stairs and out into the courtyard.

A few other girls from their hallway joined them, talking in excited tones about the Queen's Ball viewing party. They

started toward the student center, where everyone usually grabbed lunch after class, but Nina's steps slowed.

A movement near the street had grabbed her attention. A black town car was idling at the curb, purring softly. Propped in the car window was a piece of white computer paper with Nina's name scrawled on it.

She would recognize that handwriting anywhere.

"Nina? Are you coming?" Rachel called out.

"Sorry, I have a meeting with my advisor," Nina fibbed. She waited a few more moments before racing across the lawn toward the car.

In the backseat was Princess Samantha, wearing velour sweatpants and a white T-shirt through which Nina could see her pink bra. Nina hurried to join her, pulling the door shut before anyone could see.

"Nina! I missed you!" Sam threw her arms around her friend in one of her typically effusive hugs.

"I missed you, too," Nina murmured into her friend's shoulder. A million questions burned on her lips.

Finally Samantha broke away, leaning forward to address the driver. "You can just circle campus for a while," she told him. Typical Sam, wanting to be in constant motion even if she wasn't going anywhere.

"Sam—what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be getting ready for tonight?"

Sam lowered her voice conspiratorially. "I'm kidnapping you and dragging you to the Queen's Ball as my plus-one!"

Nina shook her head. "Sorry, I have to work tonight."

"But your parents will be there—I'm sure they'd love to see you!" Sam let out a breath. "Please, Nina? I could really use some backup right now, with my mom and dad."

"Didn't you just get home?" What could they already be angry about?

"The last morning in Thailand, Jeff and I ran away from our protection officers," Sam admitted, looking out the window. They were driving up College Street toward the soaring Gothic architecture of Dandridge Library.

"You ditched your bodyguards? How?"

"We ran away from them," Samantha repeated, unable to suppress her smile. "Literally. Jeff and I turned and sprinted into oncoming traffic, weaving between the cars, then hitched a ride to an ATV rental place. We rode four-wheelers through the jungle. It was incredible."

"That seems risky," Nina pointed out, and Sam laughed.

"You sound *just* like my parents! See, this is why I need you. I was hoping that if you came with me tonight . . ."

"I could keep you in line?" Nina finished for her. As if she'd ever been able to control the princess. No power on earth could keep Samantha from doing something once she'd set her mind to it.

"You know you're the good one!"

"I'm only 'the good one' in comparison to you," Nina countered. "That isn't saying much."

"You should be grateful I set the bar so low," Sam teased. "Look, we can leave the reception early—grab some homemade cookie dough from the kitchens, stay up late watching bad reality TV. It's been ages since we had a slumber party! Please," she said again. "I've really missed you."

It was hard to ignore that kind of plea from your best friend. "I guess . . . I could probably get Jodi to trade shifts with me," Nina conceded, after a beat of hesitation so slight that Samantha probably hadn't even noticed it.

"Thank you!" Sam gave an excited squeal and leaned forward to inform the driver of their new destination. Then she turned to Nina, pulling her slouchy leather bag onto her lap. "By the way, I brought you something from Bangkok." She dug

through her bag, eventually emerging with a packet of pretzel M&M's. The bright blue bag was covered in the gorgeous loops and curlicues of Thai script.

"You remembered." M&M's were Nina's favorite candy. Sam always brought a bag of them home from her foreign trips—she'd read somewhere that the formula was tweaked in each country, and decided that she and Nina would have to taste-test all of them.

"So? How are they?" Sam asked as Nina popped one of the chocolate candies into her mouth.

"Delicious." It was actually a little stale, but that wasn't surprising given how many miles it had traveled, smashed into the side pocket of Samantha's purse.

They turned a corner and the palace swam into view—far too soon for Nina's liking, but after all, King's College was only a couple of miles away. Virginia pines stretched tall and arrogant on either side of the street, which was lined with bureaucratic offices and thronged with people. The palace glowed a blazing white against the blue enamel of the sky. Its reflection danced in the waters of the Potomac, so that there seemed to be two palaces: one substantial, one watery and dreamlike.

Tourists clung to the palace's iron gates, where a row of guards stood at attention, their hands raised in a salute. Above the circle drive Nina saw the fluttering edge of the Royal Standard, the flag indicating that the monarch was officially in residence.

She took a breath, steeling herself. She hadn't wanted to come back to the palace and risk seeing *him*. She still hated him for what happened the night of the graduation party.

But more than that, Nina hated the small part of herself that secretly longed to see him, even after everything he had done.

3

DAPHNE

Daphne Deighton turned the key in her front door and paused. Out of habit she looked back over her shoulder with a smile, though it had been months since the paparazzi gathered on her lawn, the way they used to when she was dating Jefferson.

Across the river she could just see a corner of Washington Palace. The center of the world—or at least the center of hers.

It was beautiful from this angle, afternoon sunlight streaming over its white sandstone bricks and high arched windows. But as Daphne knew, the palace wasn't nearly as orderly as it appeared. Constructed on the original site of Mount Vernon, the home of King George I, it had been renovated time and again as various monarchs attempted to leave their mark on it. Now it was a confusing nest of galleries and stairways and hallways, constantly thronged with people.

Daphne lived with her parents on the edge of Herald Oaks, the neighborhood of stately aristocratic houses east of the palace. Unlike their neighbors' estates, which had been handed down these past two and a half centuries, the Deightons' home was quite new. Just like their nobility.

At least her family had a title, thank *god*, even if it fell a bit low in the hierarchy for Daphne's taste. Her father, Peter, was the second Baronet Margrave. The baronetcy had been awarded to Daphne's grandfather by King Edward III, for a

“personal diplomatic service” to Empress Anna of Russia. No one in the family had ever explained the exact nature of this unspecified service. Naturally, Daphne had drawn her own conclusions.

She closed the door behind her, slinging her leather book bag off one shoulder, and heard her mom’s voice from the dining room. “Daphne? Can you come in here?”

“Of course.” Daphne forced herself to smooth the impatience from her tone.

She’d expected her parents to call a family conclave today, just as they had so many times before: when Jefferson had first asked Daphne out, or when he invited her on vacation with his family, or on the unthinkable day when he broke up with her. Every milestone in her relationship with the prince had been marked by one of these discussions. It was just the way her family operated.

Not that her parents had contributed all that much. Everything Daphne had accomplished with Jefferson, she’d done squarely on her own.

She slid into the dining chair across from her parents and reached nonchalantly for the pitcher of iced tea, to pour herself a glass. She already knew her mother’s next words.

“He got back last night.”

There was no need to clarify which *he* her mother had meant. Prince Jefferson George Alexander Augustus—the youngest of the three royal Washington siblings, and the only boy.

“I’m aware.” As if Daphne hadn’t set a dozen internet alerts for the prince’s name, didn’t constantly check social media for every last shred of information about his status. As if she didn’t know the prince better than anyone else did, probably even his own mother.

“You didn’t go to meet his plane.”

“Next to all the shrieking fangirls? I think not. I’ll see Jefferson tonight at the Queen’s Ball.” Daphne pointedly refused

to call the prince *Jeff*, the way everyone else did. It sounded so decidedly *unroyal*.

"It's been six months," her father reminded her. "Are you sure you're ready?"

"I guess I'll have to be," Daphne replied in a clipped tone. Of course she was ready.

Her mother hastened to intercede. "We're just trying to help, Daphne. Tonight is an important night. After all we've done . . ."

A psychologist might assume that Daphne had inherited her ambitions from her parents, but it would be more accurate to say that her parents' ambitions were magnified and concentrated in her, the way a curved glass lens can focus scattered beams of heat.

Rebecca Deighton's social climbing had begun long before Daphne was born. Becky, as she'd called herself then, left her small town in Nebraska at age nineteen, armed with nothing but stunning good looks and a razor-sharp wit. She signed with a top modeling agency in a matter of weeks. Her face was soon plastered on magazines and billboards, lingerie ads and car commercials. America became infatuated with her.

Eventually, Becky restyled herself as Rebecca and set her sights on a title. After she met Daphne's father, it was only a matter of time before she became Lady Margrave.

And if things went according to plan and Daphne married Jefferson, her parents would surely be elevated above a lowly baronetcy. They might become an earl and countess . . . perhaps even a marquess and marchioness.

"We only want what's best for you," Rebecca added, her eyes on her daughter's.

You mean what's best for you, Daphne was tempted to reply. "I'll be fine," she said instead.

Daphne had known for years that she would marry the

prince. That was the only word for it: *known*. Not *hoped* to marry, or *dreamed* of marrying, or even *felt destined* to marry. Those words involved an element of chance, of uncertainty.

When she was little, Daphne had pitied the girls at her school who were obsessed with the royal family: the ones who copied everything the princesses wore, or had Prince Jefferson's picture plastered on their lockers. What were they doing when they swooned over his poster, pretending that the prince was their boyfriend? Pretending was a game for babies and fools, and Daphne was neither.

Then, in eighth grade, Daphne's class took a field trip to the palace, and she realized why her parents clung so obsessively to their aristocratic status. Because that status was their window into *this*.

As she gazed at the palace in all its inaccessible grandeur—as she heard her classmates whispering how wonderful it must be, to be a princess—Daphne came to the startling realization that they were right. It *was* wonderful to be a princess. Which was why Daphne, unlike the rest of them, would actually become one.

After that field trip, Daphne had resolved that she would date the prince, and like all goals she set for herself, she achieved it. She applied to St. Ursula's, the private all-girls school that the daughters of the royal family had attended since time immemorial. Jefferson's sisters went there. It didn't hurt that Jefferson's school, the all-boys Forsythe Academy, was right next door.

Sure enough, by the end of the year the prince had asked her out, when she was a freshman and he was a sophomore.

It wasn't always easy, managing someone as spontaneous and heedless as Jefferson. But Daphne was everything a princess should be: gracious and accomplished and, of course, beautiful. She charmed the American people and the press.

She even won the approval of the Queen Mother, and Jefferson's grandmother was notoriously impossible to please.

Until the night of Jefferson's high school graduation party, when everything went so horribly wrong. When Himari got hurt, and Daphne went looking for Jefferson—only to find him in bed with another girl.

It was definitely the prince; the light glinted unmistakably on the deep brown of his hair. Daphne tried to breathe. Her vision dissolved into spots. After everything that had happened, after the lengths she'd gone to—

She'd stumbled back, fleeing the room before either of them could see her.

Jefferson called the next morning. Daphne felt a momentary stab of panic that he somehow knew everything—knew the terrible, unthinkable thing she had done. Instead he stammered through a breakup speech that might as well have been written by his PR people. He kept saying how young they both were: how Daphne still wasn't finished with high school, and he didn't know what he was doing next year. That it might be better for both of them if they spent some time apart, but he hoped they could still be friends. Daphne's voice was eerily calm as she told him that she understood.

The moment Jefferson hung up, Daphne called Natasha at the *Daily News* and planted the breakup story herself. She'd learned long ago that the first story was always the most important, because it set the tone for all the others. So she made certain that Natasha reported the breakup as mutual, that Daphne and Jefferson had agreed it was for the best.

At least, the article ever-so-subtly implied, for the time being.

In the six months since the breakup, Jefferson had been out of town, on a royal tour and then on a rambling post-graduation trip with his twin sister. It had given Daphne ample

opportunity to think about their relationship—about what they both had done, and what it had cost her.

Even after everything that had happened, even knowing what she knew, she still wanted to be a princess. And she intended to win Jefferson back.

“We’re just trying to look out for you, Daphne,” Rebecca went on, as gravely as if she’d been discussing a life-threatening medical diagnosis. “Especially now . . .”

Daphne knew what her mother meant. Now that she and Jefferson were broken up and it was open season again, flocks of girls had started trailing after him. *Prince poachers*, the newspapers called them. Privately Daphne liked to think of them as Jeffersluts. No matter the city, they were always the same: wearing short skirts and sky-high heels, waiting for hours at bars or in hotel lobbies just hoping for a glimpse of him. Jefferson—oblivious, as always—flitted happily from place to place like a butterfly, while those girls stalked him with nets at the ready.

The prince poachers weren’t really her competition; none of them were even in the same league as her. Still, each time she saw a photo of Jefferson surrounded by a flock of those girls, Daphne couldn’t help feeling worried. There were just so *many* of them.

Not to mention that girl in Jefferson’s bed, whoever she was. Some masochistic part of Daphne wanted, desperately, to know. After that night, she’d kept expecting the girl to come forward with a sordid tell-all article, but she never did.

Daphne glanced up at the mirror above the sideboard to calm herself.

There was no denying that Daphne was beautiful—beautiful in that rare, dazzling way that seems to justify all successes and excuse a good many failures. She’d inherited Rebecca’s vivid features, her alabaster complexion, and most of all her eyes:

those snapping green eyes with a glint of gold, which seemed to hint at untold secrets. But her hair came from Peter. It was a glorious riot of color, everything from copper to red currant to honeysuckle, and fell in a sumptuous tumble almost to her waist.

She gave a faint smile, reassured as always by the promise of her own reflection.

“Daphne.” Her father cut into her thoughts. “Whatever happens, know that we are on your side. Always.”

Whatever happens. Daphne shot him a look. Did he know what she had done that night?

“I’ll be fine,” she said again, and left it at that.

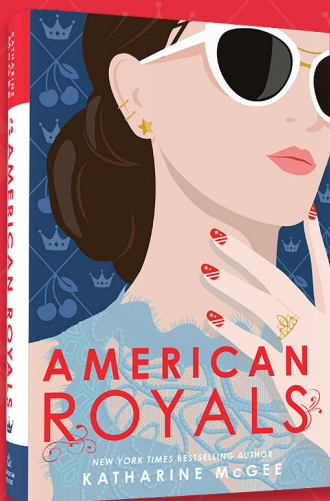
She knew what was expected of her. If a plan didn’t work, she had to make another; if she slipped and fell, she must always fall forward. It could only ever be onward and upward for her.

Her parents had no idea what Daphne was capable of—no idea what she had already done, in pursuit of this crown.



“COMPLETELY
ADDICTIVE.”

—SARA SHEPARD,
#1 New York Times bestselling author of
the *Pretty Little Liars* and *Perfectionists* series



Ready to find out what happens next?

[Click here to order your copy of
American Royals.](#)

[Click here to preorder your copy of
Majesty.](#)



SNEAK PEEK

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Text copyright © 2019 by Katharine Williams

Jacket art copyright © 2019 by Rik Lee

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Delacorte Press, an imprint of Random House Children's Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

Delacorte Press is a registered trademark and the colophon is a trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Visit us on the web! GetUnderlined.com

Educators and librarians, for a variety of teaching tools,
visit us at RHTeachersLibrarians.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Williams, Kate, author.

Title: The babysitters coven / Kate Williams.

Description: First edition. | New York : Delacorte Press, [2019] | Summary: After new student Cassandra Heaven joins seventeen-year-old Esme Pearl's babysitters club, the girls learn that being a babysitter really means a heroic lineage of superpowers, magic rituals, and saving the innocent from evil.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018059287 (print) | LCCN 2019003475 (ebook) |

ISBN 978-0-525-70739-4 (cl) | ISBN 978-0-525-70737-0 (hc) |

ISBN 978-0-525-70738-7 (glb) | ISBN 978-0-593-12380-5 (intl. tr. pbk.)

Subjects: | CYAC: Babysitters—Fiction. | Clubs—Fiction. | Witchcraft—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.W5465 (ebook) | LCC PZ7.1.W5465 Bab 2019 (print) |

DDC [Fic] — dc23

The text of this book is set in 12-point Baskerville MT.

Interior design by Ken Crossland

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

Random House Children's Books supports the First Amendment
and celebrates the right to read.

FREE SAMPLE COPY—NOT FOR RESALE

THE
BABYSITTERS
COVEN



KATE
WILLIAMS

DELACORTE PRESS

KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK....

CHAPTER 1

The devil was an artist. Her medium varied, from crayons to Magic Markers to finger paints, and she had coloring books, construction paper, giant pads of newsprint on a tiny plastic easel. But today she'd ignored it all, in favor of the hallway and a marker. Previously pristine white, the wall was now permanently adorned with black squiggles, dots, shapes, and lines, all drawn at eye level. Well, *her* eye level—a little less than three feet off the ground.

How did I know this art was permanent and not the water-soluble kind? Because Baby Satan—known by some as Kaitlyn—was still holding the Sharpie in her hand. As I surveyed her work—which was impressive in its own way, because she'd done all of this damage in only the time it had taken me to pee—she smiled sweetly up at me, topless underneath a pair of very dirty OshKosh overalls. She held the Sharpie up to her nose and inhaled deeply, a look of intense

contentment on her face. “Give me that,” I said, grabbing it from her. Two years old, and already into graffiti and huffing.

She was on one tonight. It had started with dinner, which was dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets and bunny-shaped mac-n-cheese. She wouldn’t eat any of it, not even when I insisted that the nuggets were actually made from real triceratops. When I got up to go get a paper towel, she managed to transfer most of the mac-n-cheese to her seat and sit on it.

She thought this was hilarious and wiggled around, etching orange cheese stains that would probably never come out into the butt of her overalls. “Squishy!” she squealed with delight, and I was sorry that I’d taught her that word last week. After dinner, we played with blocks, which mainly consisted of me building the tallest stack I could and then cheering as she ran at them, full speed, from across the room to knock them down. It was right after this that I made that fateful decision to use the bathroom. I should have known better.

Now I placed the cap back on the Sharpie and put it on the kitchen counter, far back against the wall and safely out of her reach. “All right!” I said. “It’s bedtime.”

Bedtime started with a bath, complete with fizzy dye pods—two blue and one yellow—to make turquoise “mermaid water.” She drank some of it. Teeth were brushed, sorta, and pajamas were donned. I usually allotted the devil three bedtime stories, which was enough to have her nodding off, her chin coming down to her chest, but tonight her blue eyes were still wide open and alert. Each time I’d finish

a story, she'd climb out of bed, run across the room, and come back with a new stack. "More!" she'd scream, slamming them into my lap with a surprising, and almost impressive, violence.

In this moment, I saw my future stretching out before me.

Kaitlyn never goes to sleep.

Her mom never comes home.

I read bedtime stories until the world ends.

It was times like these that I wished I could tap out and have another babysitter come in and take over. Baby Satan had a million stuffed animals, and my eyes settled on a floppy dog that was nearly life-sized. Couldn't he read a story for once?

His ears twitched, as if he were responding to my mental plea.

I blinked and rubbed my eyes.

Babysitting was making me hallucinate.

I sighed. Kaitlyn was still wide-awake. Not a hint of sleepiness anywhere on her admittedly cute face.

I picked up another book. "Okay," I said. "This one's about a bunny who runs away. It's called *The Runaway Bunny*." She smiled, all cherub cheeks and dimples, and something in me softened. "See what they did with the title there?" I said. "The people who wrote this book must be pretty clever, huh? I bet they were geniuses."

"Smart bunny," she said.

I nodded, reaching over to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. "A very smart bunny. You ready?"

It took seven stories before she finally fell asleep, her

blankie pressed against her cheek. I gave the wall a few half-hearted scrubs, but the thing about permanent markers is that they're permanent, so I admitted defeat and went into the kitchen. After everything I'd had to endure tonight, I deserved a snack. I mean, the number one perk of babysitting is OPP—other people's pantries.

I opened the pantry to what could have stocked a vending machine: potato chips, Chex Mix, Cheez-Its (Kaitlyn's mom, Sharon, had even started buying the white cheddar ones, just for me), pretzels, Doritos, jumbo-sized bags of M&M's, Twizzlers, gummy bears, you name it. None of this had anything to do with the fact that it was almost Halloween—this was just what Sharon ate all year round.

I grabbed what I wanted, found a big bowl, and poured in a layer of Frosted Flakes. I smashed up a few pretzels and added them, then a handful of Corn Chex, some potato chips, and a generous layer of M&M's. Then I sprinkled the whole thing with sugar, poured some milk on it, and stood back to admire my specialty: Babysitter's Crunch, the perfect mixture of salty and sweet. Kellogg's should market this stuff.

It looked so pretty and delicious that I thought for a second about posting it, then remembered that would just announce to the world (or at least my 67 followers) that I was spending yet another night with Tony the Tiger and a human who thought "potty" was a dirty word. I'm not ashamed of babysitting, but I know it's not what most people think of as a "cool job."

I took my crunch and sank into the couch in front of the

TV. OPTVs are also serious babysitting perkage, and Sharon had every channel and subscription imaginable. I finally settled on a reality show where a girl with breast implants, hair extensions, acrylic nails, and a spray tan cried to the camera about how she couldn't stand fake people.

A loud *thunk* sounded from the second floor of the condo, and I bolted up off the couch, my bowl tumbling from my lap and spilling the last of its sugar milk out onto the rug. Nervous reaction aside, I was sure it was nothing—a book falling onto its side or closet junk settling—but it is my babysitterly duty to investigate things that go *thunk* in the nightish. I inched a few steps up the stairs and called Kaitlyn's name, not wanting to wake her if she wasn't already up. I waited a few seconds but didn't get a response, so I tiptoed the rest of the way up to her room. I figured I'd peek in just to make sure she was okay. I mean, I was sure she'd be heard halfway to Egypt if she wasn't, but better safe than sorry.

I grabbed the door handle and turned, but nothing. It wouldn't budge. WTF? How did her door get locked? I turned again, harder this time, but it still didn't move. This wasn't Kaitlyn's MO at all—she loved an audience. If she was going to lock the door from the inside, she would have made sure I was standing right outside, begging her not to do it.

I got down on my knees and peered under the door into the room. I could see the soft cast of Kaitlyn's night-light change from red to purple, but that was it, and the room was silent. As I stood back up, blue and green bathed the toes of my Chelsea boots.

“Kaitlyn,” I said quietly. “Open the door, okay, munchkin?” I tried the handle again. I was starting to get that feeling a babysitter never wants to experience: Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap. Aka panic.

“Kaitlyn?”

I was full-on yelling now, and still getting nothing, not even a peep, from the bedroom. I grabbed the door handle with both hands and jiggled it frantically. Then I was falling into the room, the door swinging open and slamming into the wall. The window was wide open, screen and all; the curtains billowed gently. And the room was empty.

The blood rushing to my head sounded like a freeway in my ears, and the floor tilted under my feet. It was like everything was spinning. I stumbled to the window and stuck my head outside, and froze when I saw Kaitlyn standing on the roof of the porch. At the edge. One story up over the paved driveway.

She was clutching her blankie, tears running down her face.

“Mesme! Mesme!” she yelled when she saw me, and my heart stopped as she started to take a step forward, and wobbled.

“Kaitlyn, don’t move!” I yelled as calmly as I could. “It’s okay. I’m coming to get you! Just stay right there.” I hated heights. I couldn’t even stand on a chair without getting dizzy, but I hauled myself through the window and out onto the roof. Carefully, on my hands and knees, I crawled toward her, telling myself not to look down. The rough

shingles scraped my palms and the tops of my boots, and I could feel the sweat dripping from my pits and rolling down the inside of my arms. I crawled until I was right next to her, then shifted onto my butt and pulled her into my lap. She had snot streaking her face, and she buried it into my neck with a sob.

“The man, Mesme,” she burbled. “He not nice. He not nice at all.” It made me shiver. A man? What was she talking about?

“It’s okay, honey. Don’t be scared, booger,” I said, rubbing the back of her head and using every nickname I’d ever called her. “Pumpkin, you just had a nightmare, that’s all. It’s over now, turtle.” I scooted us back toward the window, straining to see or hear any sign of someone else.

All I heard was the rustling of dry leaves as a gust of wind swept by.

Kaitlyn wouldn’t let me put her down, so I climbed back in through the window with her in my arms, then held her as I peered out again and looked up and down the street. It was empty. I slammed the window shut and locked it, then steeled myself to look in the closet. Nothing but broken toys and dirty laundry. Kaitlyn blubbered into my shoulder, and I rubbed her back and softly rocked side to side, hoping she couldn’t feel how badly I was shaking. The night-light had faded into a warm orange, and I walked over and sat down on her bed.

“What happened, sweetie?” I asked, barely able to get the words out. My brain was screaming at me to call the cops,

but my body wasn't reaching for my phone. My hands kept stroking Kaitlyn's hair, and my butt was staying right where it was planted.

"Not nice," she said again, still talking about the man.

"What'd he look like?" I pressed.

"He got fountain hair and marker eyes."

Great. What the hell did that mean?

"What color was his fountain hair?" I asked.

"Sunshine."

"Okay," I said, rocking her back and forth. "What kind of clothes did he have on?"

She sniffed. "Ruffles. Pretty and sparkly."

Okay, so a man with sunshine fountain hair and marker eyes, in pretty sparkly clothes with ruffles . . . Oh my God, she was describing David Bowie. From *Labyrinth*. I was so relieved, I almost laughed.

"Did he have a pretty bubble too?" I asked. She nodded again. My heart slowed. "Does mama let you watch movies?"

"I like movies," she said.

"I know you do, kitten." My knees seemed like they could hold weight again, so I stood up and turned to put Kaitlyn back to bed. It sounded just like Sharon to let Kaitlyn watch movies that were way too old for her. But hey, I was only seventeen. Who was I to neg on someone's parenting?

"How did you get out on the roof, tiny girl?" I asked.

"I didn't do it, Mesme," she said, and I sighed. I'd heard those exact words just a few hours earlier, when I'd confronted her about her hallway art.

“Okay,” I said. “Just don’t ever not do it again, all right? That was very dangerous.”

I pulled the covers up to her chin and pulled out *Goodnight Moon* again. This was going to be a long night.

It took two more stories after *Goodnight Moon* to get Kaitlyn calmed down, but she finally drifted off to sleep, a stuffed pig tucked under one arm and a sloth under the other. It was just another hiccup in a normal night of babysitting, so as I sopped the remnants of my crunch up off the rug downstairs, I was surprised to see that my hands were trembling.

She’d seen a movie. She’d had a nightmare. Maybe she’d started sleepwalking. That had to be it, right? Except . . .

In all the times I’d babysat for Kaitlyn, she’d never gotten out of bed, no matter how much time it had taken for her to go to sleep. Forget climbing out the window—how had she even done that? The whole thing was freaky, and despite a handful of yogurt-covered pretzels I consumed in one swallow, I was still jittery when Sharon got home. Being a babysitter meant that you were supposed to keep your cool in tough situations, no matter what kind of torture your charges dreamed up for you. What you were not supposed to do was immediately panic and forget how to open a door.

I’d been debating how much to tell Sharon, and the second she came in, I decided as little as possible. She seemed upset and distracted, and kept writing and then deleting a text from her phone.

I tried to act casual as I gathered up my stuff. “Has Kaitlyn ever sleepwalked before?” I asked.

Without looking up from her phone, she grabbed a Diet Coke from the fridge and opened it one-handed. “No,” she said, frowning at her screen. “Why?”

“I think she had a bad dream tonight,” I said, feeling out how much I should reveal. “And she got out of bed and seemed really upset and she kept talking about a man who opened the window.”

Sharon looked up and set the phone down on the counter. “Oh dear,” she said, her face equal parts worry and annoyance. “It’s my fault. I’m going to have to stop letting her watch all those movies. It’s the only way to get her to sit still, but she has such an imagination that it’d be no surprise if they’re giving her nightmares. She went back to sleep, though?”

The cobra in my stomach uncoiled—I’d been right. It was the movies, and it had just been a nightmare.

Sharon opened her wallet and thrust some bills into my hand. “Thanks again, Esme,” she said. “You’re a lifesaver. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

I’d worked my ass off, as I always did with Kaitlyn, but I felt weird taking Sharon’s money. Maybe it had been just a nightmare, but maybe it had been . . . I don’t know. There was something tugging at the edge of my mind that wouldn’t let go, something that didn’t respond to reasonable explanations. I couldn’t stop thinking, what if I hadn’t gotten to Kaitlyn in time? I knew I should tell Sharon everything, but I couldn’t get the words to my tongue.

“Esme?”

Sharon’s voice snapped me back to where I was, and she

was still standing there, her arm out with several bills in her hand.

I took the money. “Thanks a lot,” I said, “She’s a great kid.” I shoved the bills into my pocket. “Oh, uh, the wall,” I said, suddenly remembering. “She got a marker and, in the hallway . . .” I looked up, and Sharon had her phone again, the blue light reflecting off her face as her thumbs furiously typed away. Oh well. She’d figure it out as soon as she saw it. And maybe she’d even be proud—after all, it looked like Kaitlyn was halfway to figuring out how to spell her own name.

I walked home alone in the dark because, yes, even though I’d turned seventeen in August, which meant I’d turned sixteen over a year before, I still didn’t drive. Sharon always forgot, and it was easier to just get out of the house and hurry home alone than it was to remind her that I didn’t have a license, and then spend fifteen minutes making small talk in her kitchen while I waited for a ride. Sharon was a single mom—like, really single. As in, it was all she talked about. And while she was a good client who paid well, the last thing on earth I wanted was for her to open up her dating apps and ask for my opinion on her profile pics again. And tonight, I just wanted to get out of there.

I thought I was pretty unflappable as a babysitter. I’d dealt with poop, projectile vomits, siblings that went all UFC on each other, and a klepto kindergartner who stole my phone and my house keys. I should have been able to

take a little sleepwalking in stride. All in a day's work, right? Yet I couldn't get the image of Kaitlyn on the ledge out of my head. It was a nightmare, all right. But mine, not hers. Something happening to the kid you were in charge of was the worst thing a babysitter could imagine. I couldn't even begin to think about what would have happened if Sharon had come home to find Kaitlyn perched on the roof and me watching reality TV while eating junk food out of a mixing bowl. Or worse . . . I stopped thinking and forced myself to take a deep breath. I wasn't letting my mind spiral there. Not tonight, not ever.

Deep down, I know I'm a good babysitter, and it's a job I want to hold on to. Babysitting is about the only thing standing between me and a job that requires me to wear an embroidered polo, and nothing good ever came out of a job with a uniform. David Gibson worked at Target, and Mark Malloy had told everyone at school that he'd once seen David get a boner while restocking the super plus tampons. The boner in question was probably no more than a pleat-front khaki malfunction, but still, gossip like that was exactly why I liked to stay out of sight, locked away in someone's family room, far away from the prying eyes of people my own age.

Other teenagers?

Thanks, but no.

Still, I had to admit that the stakes were way higher with babysitting. If I screwed up, someone small and innocent could get hurt. If David Gibson made a mistake, he accidentally shelved the tampons next to the tennis balls.

My major screwup left me feeling like I'd downed three bottles of cold brew—I jumped every time a leaf rustled, and I double-timed it to put some distance between me and the family of ghosts swinging from an oak tree. God, I swear the Halloween decorations around here get more elaborate every year.

I stopped at a crosswalk and waited for the light to change, with a flower bed full of dismembered limbs to my right, and a psychopathic-killer-themed driveway to my left, complete with bloody boot prints leading into the garage. It was a sign of just how twisted small-town life really was. This was one of those nothing-ever-happens places where fender benders made the paper, but still, if Yankee Candle ever introduced a Moonbeams on Rotting Flesh scent, it would sell out in Spring River. There was no place like suburbia for repressing a dark side, and now it came out earlier every year. This year, I'd started seeing skeletons in July.

The light finally changed, and I stepped into the street. Starting to cross, I couldn't help but think how the night's events were just a few more things to add to my list of stuff I wished I could talk to my mom about. I mean, I could definitely talk to her about it. She just wouldn't say anything in response.

So, I'd do what I always did when something bothered me.

Step one: Shake it off.

Step two: Pretend it hadn't happened.

Step three: Never think about it again.

It had gotten me this far.

CHAPTER 2

When my alarm went off the next morning, I felt like a bag of wet cement.

Which had nothing to do with what had happened the night before.

“Wet cement” was pretty much how I felt every morning, especially Mondays, because high school. Errrrgghh. Gag me with a spoon and tell me it’s dessert. I’ve heard that Rimbaud wrote “A Season in Hell” about high school. Okay, maybe he didn’t. Maybe that was just my interpretation—because it made sense. No one knew about misery and hatred like an assistant principal with an associate’s degree and a God complex. Drown *me* in sand and blood. No, really, *please*.

Life as a Spring River Bog Lemming made me want to run off a cliff. Yes, I said that right. We were the Bog Lemmings. Apparently, by the time they’d gotten to Spring River,

all the good mascots had been taken, which is all you need to know about this town and its pantheons of education.

The best thing about school was that it meant I got to see Janis every day. Janis was my best friend and the best-dressed person I knew IRL. Actually, one of the best-dressed people I'd seen, period. She'd moved to Spring River in seventh grade, and I still remembered what she wore the first day she came to school: bright yellow leggings, a long gray sweater covered with multicolored pom-poms, pom-pom socks, and papier-mâché earrings, and her hair had been pulled into two afro puffs secured with those ponytail holders that had round plastic beads. Janis somehow made them look retro-cool, and not kindergarten. She told me later that her theme for that day had been "gumball machine."

I thought she was the bravest person I'd ever met in my life—who else would show up for their first day at a new school in a themed outfit? We'd been best friends from the minute she'd plopped down next to me at lunch and complimented the vintage Fiorucci stickers on my binder. We lived in a town that considered Fruit of the Loom to be the height of fashion, so Janis was my lifeline. I didn't want to know where I'd be without her in my life—probably wearing things because they were "practical."

Every night we texted each other what the next day's look was going to be. Today Janis was "Denise gets a step-daughter," and I was "Sylvia Plath goes to prom."

I had on a vintage knee skirt and a sequined sweater set, which contrasted nicely with the Jean Seberg *Breathless*

hair and silver nose stud that I considered my signatures. I'd gone for a lipstick that was matte pink, swapped my normal tortoiseshell glasses for rhinestone cat-eyes, and added the pièce de résistance of my themed outfit: pewter bell jar earrings I found at the antiques mall.

If I'd gotten to school early, I could have seen Janis before class, but I did not generally get to school early. I usually got to campus right before—and occasionally right after—the first bell, so most days I didn't see her until lunch. And because of our sucky schedules, that was actually at eleven a.m., which—if you ask me—was too early to brave the mysteries of the Spring River High cafeteria. No matter what the cafeteria menu claimed to be serving (Spinach salad! Chicken parmesan! Steak tacos!), the food in the buffet line always resembled something you could buy at Petco. In my time as a student there, I'd never seen a food that wasn't brown. It was disgusting, but the only other option was to bring your lunch, and that would require planning. And Dad actually going to the grocery store. So brown it was.

Today, the morning was pretty uneventful. I eased through my first three periods as well as one can and headed to the cafeteria, where I found Janis in the lunch line and slipped in behind her. “Denise gets a step-daughter” was right when Lisa Bonet was going boho but wasn't yet full earth mama. Janis had on baggy shibori-dyed pants, leather slippers, a gauzy silver shirt, and an oversized men's blazer. Even without dreads down to her waist, she looked Huxtable as hell.

We inched through the line, collecting our browns, and I

followed Janis to our table, over in the corner farthest away from the main wall of doors, and sat down next to her. We always sat on the same side with our backs up against the wall, like mobsters, because the cafeteria was one place where you definitely never wanted anyone coming up behind you. They could be carrying gravy. Or worse, marinara.

Today's browns were a slice of pepperoni pizza (orange-brown with red-brown spots) and a side of french fries (crispy brown). "So, how was last night?" Janis asked, dabbing her pizza with a paper napkin in a futile attempt to sop up the grease.

Even though we had been texting all night and throughout the morning, I hadn't mentioned anything about what had happened with Kaitlyn, and now that we were together in person, I still felt weird bringing it up. There was something that kept the words from forming on my tongue. Somehow saying it out loud made it more terrifying. And real.

"Fine," I said finally, adding what I could only hope was a normal smile. "The usual." I was wondering how I could change the subject, but I didn't have to: Janis changed it herself.

"There she is!" she said, slapping my arm as if she'd just seen a celebrity.

"Who are you talking about?"

"The new girl," she said, then shot me a look. "You didn't hear about the new girl?"

I shook my head and rolled my eyes. Janis always seemed to forget that she was my one and only friend, and therefore

my one and only source of gossip. “Some guy dropped her off this morning,” she continued. “I saw her get out of his car, which was a real POS, but he was hot AF.”

I raised my eyebrows, interested in the development. Most of the males in Spring River were disgusting AF, so anyone who wasn’t—even if it was someone else’s boyfriend—was worth a mention. This was enough info to pique my interest, so I slowly turned like I was trying to stretch, and there was the new girl, standing right past the cashier, poised with a tray of browns and surveying the complex geography of available seats. The lunchroom was like Spring River’s own sorting hat, but instead of houses, it separated you into castes. Usually you could look at someone and immediately know if they were going to be a plebe or an aristo, but with the new girl, it was hard to tell.

She certainly was pretty enough to fall right in with the ruling class. She looked dewy, like she’d just been dipped in olive oil—in a healthy, glowy way. Her black hair hung pin-straight to the middle of her back, so shiny that you could probably have seen yourself in it if you’d tried hard enough, and she looked like she’d been sucking on a lollipop, or at least had really good Korean lip gloss. She’d also clearly won some genetic lottery, because she was skinny—with *boobs*.

But her clothes looked like they’d been pulled out of a trash can: scuffed Converse that had once been white, *maybe*, and jeans that were distressed in a didn’t-come-this-way-but-are-this-way-because-they’re-old way. She wore a flannel

that was at least three sizes too big over a baby tee that was short enough to reveal a strip of taut stomach.

That strip of stomach was enough to get the guys' attention, which meant she also got the girls' attention—the guys wondering how long it'd take to get a bite out of this piece, the girls wondering how long it would take to make her cry and lock herself in the bathroom. But there was something about the new girl that suggested she wasn't the crying type. And that she bit back.

As she stood there, more and more people noticed her, and a hush rippled through the cafeteria. She had everyone's attention. We waited with collectively bated breath. The most exciting event of the year! Everyone was dying to know! Who would she pick? Would they accept her or reject her—for all the world to see?

But instead of coming to sit at a table, she turned around, dumped her lunch into the trash, tray and all, and walked out.

“Bold,” Janis said, sopping up the last of her ketchup with a pitiful excuse for a fry. “I like it.”

Cassandra Heaven.

By the time the bell rang for next period, I knew her name, because the table of cretins next to us couldn't stop joking about who was going to be the first to spend “seven minutes in Heaven.”

Janis and I got up and cleared our trays as Craig Lugweather said something disgusting about how he was going to “open up those pearly gates and come right on inside.”

Craig Lugweather had been my chem partner the previous year, and had spent all class watching bouncing-boob GIFs on his phone under the table. And when I say “all class,” I don’t mean just one day—I mean all semester. A different boob GIF every day, like he had some sort of Google alert set up that zapped them right to his phone. He did nothing while I tried to mix various -ides and -iums without blowing us up. By the end of the semester, I wished I *had* blown us up. Taking myself out would have been worth it if I’d taken him with me.

As Janis and I headed toward the trash bins, an explosion of laughter erupted at his table, and I couldn’t help but look back. Immediately I wished I hadn’t, because Craig’s hands were formed in an obscene gesture that left nothing to the imagination. He was the Harvey Weinstein of the junior class, and if there was any justice in this world, the Humane Society would have neutered him a long time ago. Just looking at him now made me feel kind of pukey.

I shook my head, and as I turned away, something caught my eye. An almost-full bottle of Hawaiian Punch on his lunch tray wobbled ever so slightly, then tipped over so that it dumped sticky red directly into his lap and interrupted his pantomime.

“Dude, what the?” Craig screamed, immediately punching Dane Kirball in the shoulder.

Dane punched him back. “I didn’t touch it, bro!” he said. “You did that yourself.”

The whole thing made my body feel like it had collided with an electric fence. Because I could swear that somehow I’d done that. Even though I hadn’t. Because I couldn’t. Because that would have been impossible.

Right?

CHAPTER 3

Janis and I walked toward our lockers in silence, and I felt the dread mounting with each step. Lunch with Janis was definitely the highlight of my day. After that it just got suckier and suckier. I dropped off the books I didn't need and made my way to my next class. Driver's ed.

The fact that I still didn't have a driver's license was one of my most epic fails, and it made me want to bury my head in my locker like an adolescent ostrich. Granted, there weren't many places I needed to go where Janis wasn't also going, but someday I was going to have to take the wheel. *Passenger for Life: The Esme Pearl Story* did not sound like a page-turning bio. It would just be page after page of me sending the same text: "Hey, do you think you could pick me up?" Ugh.

Dad had had big plans to teach me how to drive as soon as I'd turned sixteen last year, but after a few months of "next weekend," combined with neither of us rushing to get

me into the driver's seat (aka hanging out, just the two of us), we'd finally decided that driver's ed was the best option. Lower insurance rates too, Dad reasoned, probably more as a way to make him feel better about it.

I'd been too late sophomore year, so all the classes had been full, so I'd tried to sign up for the summer school session, but that had cost extra. That was how I now found myself, lunch congealing in my belly, a junior on my way into a class with a bunch of sophomores and one freshman who looked like he was actually about thirty-five and out on parole.

The driver's ed room was full of driving simulators that had probably been considered pretty high-tech back when the school had first bought them in, oh, I don't know, 1963? In all the instructional videos, the women wore gloves and the men wore hats, and everyone stopped at all the stop signs and used their blinker when changing lanes.

Don't get me wrong. I loved the retro fashion, but I wasn't sure that the era represented a realistic depiction of driving anymore. Shouldn't this class have been getting us prepped for how to deal when a guy in a jacked-up Chevy with truck balls dangling off the back made a right turn from the left lane into a Buffalo Wild Wings parking lot and cut you off in the process? I mean, that was what happened to Dad when he was driving me to school this morning. It made him spill coffee on his cargo slacks, and he was not happy about it.

I took my seat in the back of the room, and zoned, staring out the window at a crow picking at a Burger King bag in the

parking lot. He was really going for it, and I was starting to get into it. Like, I was emotionally invested in whether or not there were any fry crumbs left in that ball of greasy paper, and if so, was—

“Esme Pearl.”

Hearing my name snapped me out of the drama happening outside, and it took a second to realize that I wasn’t just getting called on to answer a question.

Crap. I’d forgotten that today was my day to actually drive. Not in a simulator but in a real, three-dimensional vehicle, outside in the world. I gathered my stuff back up and started to head to the front of the room, and stifled a groan when I saw the three students I’d be sharing said vehicle with.

All three guys, all three football players, all three grinning like they’d somehow rigged this so that they could be together. They probably had, which made me anxious about whatever was coming next. I was sure it wouldn’t be good.

The four of us made our way out to the back of the school, the three of them laughing and talking and me trailing behind, alone and quiet. Our driving instructor led us to the car that was waiting for us in the parking lot.

The car was a Toyota Corolla, shiny beige and one step up from a tuna can on wheels. The instructor was Mr. Dekalb, who was about ninety years old and as deaf as a concrete block. He had gray hairs sprouting out of the pores on his nose, and his eyebrows could have used a good sesh with a weed whacker. He smiled and gave us a speech that was pretty much unintelligible but which I gathered from facial

cues and hand gestures was about safety and respect for the road. Then he consulted the clipboard he was holding, and cleared his throat.

“Miss Pearl,” he said, before being seized by a mucousy cough. “Ladies first.”

He stepped aside and opened the driver’s-side door, then looked at me expectantly.

Oh, hell. His outdated chivalry meant it was my turn to drive.

Mr. Dekalb sat shotgun, and the three guys crammed into the back. Their knees butted up against the front seat, and they made lots of gay jokes about accidentally touching each other’s legs. Since Mr. Dekalb couldn’t hear anything quieter than a honking horn, he had no idea what they were saying, and I tried to ignore them as I adjusted my mirrors and buckled my seat belt.

The gay jokes progressed, or regressed, to dick jokes, and I cleared my throat loudly, but none of them paid me any attention. Mr. Dekalb scribbled something on his clipboard; then he told me to start the car. I turned the key, and the Corolla whined to life just as there was a sound like splitting fabric from the back seat.

The bros dissolved into giggles that quickly turned to gags.

One of them had just ripped a massive fart.

We were hot-boxed by a flatulent cloud of eggs, kimchi,

and old burritos. My eyes were watering, and I gagged, grabbing the steering wheel and leaning forward as if I could somehow get away from it. Next to me, Mr. Dekalb still hadn't heard a thing, but boy, could he smell it.

"Maybe some fresh air?" he said, beginning to press a button on his door, trying to roll his window down, but it wouldn't budge. In the back seat, the boys were punching each other and pretending to vomit. We were all mashing at the window buttons, but none of them opened so much as a crack.

"The child lock, Esme," Mr. Dekalb said. "The child lock . . ." He was holding his hand over his nose.

I had no idea what the child lock was. I pressed something on my armrest, but it just locked the doors. The guys in the back seat were now yelling at me to open the doors or roll down the windows. I kept pressing buttons, on the door, on the steering wheel, on the console, and the windshield wipers flipped on, then the AM radio. Nothing happened, and I was starting to panic.

I dropped my hands from the wheel and sat back to catch my breath, except breathing was the last thing I wanted to do.

That was when it happened.

With a jerk, we were zooming backward. Only, I wasn't touching anything! My stomach lurched as the gas pedal pressed to the floor. The steering wheel was rocking back and forth like it was being controlled by an invisible toddler, and the Corolla cut a wild squiggle through the parking lot, then

jumped the curb and stopped only when it plowed right into a baby birch tree that had been planted with much ceremony by the graduating seniors of last year's environmental club.

For a split second, we all sat there in shocked silence, no one saying anything, nothing but the fuzz of static coming from the radio. I blinked back tears brought on half by noxious butt fumes, half by impending humiliation. What had happened?

I saw a different button. I pressed it. Everyone gasped for breath as the windows rolled down.

That was when the airbags deployed.

No one else ended up behind the wheel in driver's ed that day. Everyone knew that something was up when we were back in the classroom within fifteen minutes of leaving. The three bros couldn't keep their mouth shut for a second, and were barely in the door before they were recounting the tale like they were war heroes just back from the trenches.

I was slinking back to my chair when Mr. Dekalb cleared his throat. "Esme, please come with me," he said, and motioned for me to follow him out the door. Normally those are the last words you want to hear coming out of a teacher's mouth, but in that moment I would have taken any excuse to GTFO of that classroom, where half the eyes were on me, who was hating it, and the other half on my passengers, who were loving it. Every second of it.

Mr. Dekalb didn't say anything as we headed down the

hall to the office. He pushed open the swinging door and let me go first. I stood in the middle of the room, not sure what to do next. He walked past me to the counter.

"I need an accident report, Donna," he said to the school secretary, who was reptilian in features and had hair like a crash helmet.

"Oh jeez, Gary, again?" she said. "Was this one texting too?"

Mr. Dekalb ran his hand through his hair, dislodging a few flakes of dandruff that drifted down to settle with the others on the shoulder of his sweater. "Nope," he said, shaking his head. "Just can't drive worth a hoot." I was about to clear my throat, thinking that maybe he was so old and senile that he'd forgotten that I was standing right there, when he picked up a phone and turned toward me.

"Esme, what's your mother's number?"

"My mom, uh . . ." I stumbled on my words.

"Ah, yes," he said, nodding, because even freakin' Mr. Dekalb knew about Mom. "Your father's, then?"

I recited it, and he dialed as I held my breath. I could hear the phone ringing through the receiver, and he was just about to hang up when Dad answered.

"Hello, Mr. Pearl?" he said. "This is Gary Dekalb, your daughter's driver's ed teacher. I am, unfortunately, calling because there's been an accident." He paused for a second. "No, she's fine, but there has been significant vehicle damage, and property damage as well." I tuned out right after I heard him say, "You see, she ran over a tree. A baby tree."

The next thing I knew, he was holding the phone out to me. I would have preferred to have this conversation never, but no such luck. I took the phone from Mr. Dekalb and held it up to my ear, keeping it an inch away from my skin since I had no idea where this phone had been. Today was shaping up badly enough without a case of ear herpes.

“Hello?” I said.

Dad answered with a sigh. A looong sigh, like a slowly deflating air mattress. Just when I thought he couldn’t possibly have any air left in his lungs, he took a breath and sighed again.

“Esme, I’m not mad,” he said, finally. “I’m just glad no one was hurt.”

“Okay,” I responded, because I wasn’t sure what he wanted me to say.

“And I take half the blame,” he continued.

“Okay.”

“We should have been practicing. If my seventeen-year-old daughter doesn’t know the difference between the brake and the gas pedal, I can’t blame anyone but myself.”

A flame of anger flickered in my chest. Did he really think I was that dumb? But just as quickly, I extinguished it. Because I didn’t have an excuse. I didn’t even really know what had happened. I swear I hadn’t touched anything, but I couldn’t say that, because it would just sound like I was trying to say it wasn’t my fault.

Besides, it sounded nuts, and I knew all about that.

“We’ll have to put the money we were saving to buy you a

car toward the damages,” Dad continued. “And you’ll probably have to contribute some of your babysitting money as well. I hate to do this, but you’ve got to take responsibility for your actions, and the sooner you learn that, the better.”

I told him “Okay” again, we exchanged a few more words, and then he hung up and I handed the phone back. Mr. Dekalb, who displayed a sense of intuition that was totally surprising, wrote me a bathroom pass and excused me from the remainder of class.

I gratefully took it and headed to the girls’ bathroom, where I sat on the toilet fully clothed, my knees tucked up under my chin, and tried to steel myself for my next port of call on this humiliation cruise. It awaited me right after the next bell.



Babysitting's a witch. JOIN THE COVEN.



COMING
SOON

Art © 2019 by Rik Lee



Ready to find out
what happens next?

[Click here to order your copy of
The Babysitters Coven.](#)

[Click here to preorder your copy of
For Better or Cursed.](#)



A NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

"Powerful, wrenching."

—John Green

"Raw and gripping."

—Jason Reynolds



Dear Martin

a novel

"A must-read!"

—Angie Thomas

NIC
STONE

SNEAK PEEK

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Text copyright © 2017 by Andrea Nicole Livingstone

Cover photograph of boy copyright © 2017 by Nigel Livingstone

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Ember, an imprint of Random House Children's Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York. Originally published in hardcover in the United States by Crown Books for Young Readers, New York, in 2017.

Ember and the E colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Visit us on the Web! GetUnderlined.com

Educators and librarians, for a variety of teaching tools,
visit us at RHTeachersLibrarians.com

The Library of Congress has cataloged
the hardcover edition of this work as follows:

Names: Stone, Nic, author.

Title: Dear Martin / Nic Stone.

Description: First edition. | New York : Crown Books for Young Readers, [2017] |

Summary: Writing letters to the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.,
seventeen-year-old college-bound Justyce McAllister struggles to face
the reality of race relations today and how they are shaping him.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016058582 | ISBN 978-1-101-93949-9 (hardcover) |

ISBN 978-1-101-93950-5 (hardcover library edition) |

ISBN 978-1-101-93951-2 (ebook)

Subjects: | CYAC: Race relations—Fiction. | Racism—Fiction. | Racial profiling
in law enforcement—Fiction. | Police brutality—Fiction. | African Americans—
Fiction. | King, Martin Luther, Jr., 1929–1968—Fiction. | Letters—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.S7546 De 2017 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

ISBN 978-1-101-93952-9 (trade pbk.)

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Ember Edition 2018

Random House Children's Books supports the First Amendment
and celebrates the right to read.

FREE SAMPLE COPY—NOT FOR RESALE

Dear Martin



NIC STONE



KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK....

CHAPTER 1

From where he's standing across the street, Justyce can see her: Melo Taylor, ex-girlfriend, slumped over beside her Benz on the damp concrete of the FarmFresh parking lot. She's missing a shoe, and the contents of her purse are scattered around her like the guts of a pulled party popper. He knows she's stone drunk, but this is too much, even for her.

Jus shakes his head, remembering the judgment all over his best friend Manny's face as he left Manny's house not fifteen minutes ago.

The WALK symbol appears.

As he approaches, she opens her eyes, and he waves and pulls his earbuds out just in time to hear her say, "What the hell are you doing here?"

Justyce asks himself the same question as he watches her try—and fail—to shift to her knees. She falls over sideways and hits her face against the car door.

He drops down and reaches for her cheek—which is as

red as the candy-apple paint job. "Damn, Melo, are you okay?"

She pushes his hand away. "What do you care?"

Stung, Justyce takes a deep breath. He cares a lot. Obviously. If he didn't, he wouldn't've walked a mile from Manny's house at three in the morning (Manny's of the opinion that Melo's "the worst thing that ever happened" to Jus, so of course he refused to give his boy a ride). All to keep his drunken disaster of an ex from driving.

He should walk away right now, Justyce should.

But he doesn't.

"Jessa called me," he tells her.

"That skank—"

"Don't be like that, babe. She only called me because she cares about you."

Jessa had planned to take Melo home herself, but Mel threatened to call the cops and say she'd been kidnapped if Jessa didn't drop her at her car.

Melo can be a little dramatic when she's drunk.

"I'm totally unfollowing her," she says (case in point). "In life *and* online. Nosy bitch."

Justyce shakes his head again. "I just came to make sure you get home okay." That's when it hits Justyce that while he might succeed in getting Melo home, he has no idea how he'll get back. He closes his eyes as Manny's words ring through his head: *This Captain Save-A-Ho thing is gonna get you in trouble, dawg.*

He looks Melo over. She's now sitting with her head leaned back against the car door, half-asleep, mouth open.

He sighs. Even drunk, Jus can't deny Melo's the finest girl he's ever laid eyes—not to mention *hands*—on.

She starts to tilt, and Justyce catches her by the shoulders to keep her from falling. She startles, looking at him wide-eyed, and Jus can see everything about her that initially caught his attention. Melo's dad is this Hall of Fame NFL linebacker (biiiiig black dude), but her mom is from Norway. She got Mrs. Taylor's milky Norwegian complexion, wavy hair the color of honey, and amazing green eyes that are kind of purple around the edge, but she has really full lips, a small waist, crazy curvy hips, and probably the nicest butt Jus has ever seen in his life.

That's part of his problem: he gets too tripped up by how beautiful she is. He never would've dreamed a girl as fine as her would be into *him*.

Now he's got the urge to kiss her even though her eyes are red and her hair's a mess and she smells like vodka and cigarettes and weed. But when he goes to push her hair out of her face, she shoves his hand away again. "Don't touch me, Justyce."

She starts shifting her stuff around on the ground—lipstick, Kleenex, tampons, one of those circular thingies with the makeup in one half and a mirror in the other, a flask. "Ugh, where are my keeeeeeeeys?"

Justyce spots them in front of the back tire and snatches them up. "You're not driving, Melo."

"Give 'em." She swipes for the keys but falls into his arms instead. Justyce props her against the car again and gathers the rest of her stuff to put it back in her bag—

which is large enough to hold a week's worth of groceries (what is it with girls and purses the size of duffel bags?). He unlocks the car, tosses the bag on the floor of the backseat, and tries to get Melo up off the ground.

Then everything goes really wrong, really fast.

First, she throws up all over the hoodie Jus is wearing.

Which belongs to Manny. Who specifically said, "Don't come back here with throw-up on my hoodie."

Perfect.

Jus takes off the sweatshirt and tosses it in the backseat.

When he tries to pick Melo up again, she slaps him. Hard. "Leave me *alone*, Justyce," she says.

"I can't do that, Mel. There's no way you'll make it home if you try to drive yourself."

He tries to lift her by the armpits and she spits in his face.

He considers walking away again. He could call her parents, stick her keys in his pocket, and bounce. Oak Ridge is probably *the* safest neighborhood in Atlanta. She'd be fine for the twenty-five minutes it would take Mr. Taylor to get here.

But he can't. Despite Manny's assertion that Melo needs to "suffer some consequences for once," leaving her here all vulnerable doesn't seem like the right thing to do. So he picks her up and tosses her over his shoulder.

Melo responds in her usual delicate fashion: she screams and beats him on the back with her fists.

Justyce struggles to get the back door open and is lowering her into the car when he hears the *WHOOOOP* of

a short siren and sees the blue lights. In the few seconds it takes the police car to screech to a stop behind him, Justyce settles Melo into the backseat.

Now she's gone catatonic.

Justyce can hear the approaching footsteps, but he stays focused on getting Melo strapped in. He wants it to be *clear* to the cop that she wasn't gonna drive so she won't be in even worse trouble.

Before he can get his head out of the car, he feels a tug on his shirt and is yanked backward. His head smacks the doorframe just before a hand clamps down on the back of his neck. His upper body slams onto the trunk with so much force, he bites the inside of his cheek, and his mouth fills with blood.

Jus swallows, head spinning, unable to get his bearings. The sting of cold metal around his wrists pulls him back to reality.

Handcuffs.

It hits him: Melo's drunk beyond belief in the backseat of a car she fully intended to drive, yet *Jus* is the one in handcuffs.

The cop shoves him to the ground beside the police cruiser as he asks if Justyce understands his rights. Justyce doesn't remember hearing any rights, but his ears *had* been ringing from the two blows to the head, so maybe he missed them. He swallows more blood.

"Officer, this is a big misundersta—" he starts to say, but he doesn't get to finish because the officer hits him in the face.

“Don’t you say shit to me, you son of a bitch. I knew your punk ass was up to no good when I saw you walking down the road with that goddamn hood on.”

So the hood was a bad idea. Earbuds too. Probably would’ve noticed he was being trailed without them. “But, Officer, I—”

“You keep your mouth *shut*.” The cop squats and gets right in Justyce’s face. “I know your kind: punks like you wander the streets of nice neighborhoods searching for prey. Just couldn’t resist the pretty white girl who’d locked her keys in her car, could ya?”

Except that doesn’t even make sense. If Mel had locked the keys in the car, Jus wouldn’t have been able to get her inside it, would he? Justyce finds the officer’s nameplate; CASTILLO, it reads, though the guy looks like a regular white dude. Mama told him how to handle this type of situation, though he must admit he never expected to actually need the advice: *Be respectful; keep the anger in check; make sure the police can see your hands* (though that’s impossible right now). “Officer Castillo, I mean you no disresp—”

“I told your punk ass to shut the fuck up!”

He wishes he could see Melo. Get her to tell this cop the truth. But the dude is blocking his view.

“Now, if you know what’s good for you, you won’t move or speak. Resistance will only land you in deeper shit. Got it?”

Cigarette breath and flecks of spit hit Justyce’s face as the cop speaks, but Justyce fixes his gaze on the glowing green *F* of the FarmFresh sign.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you, boy.” He grabs Justyce’s chin. “I asked you a question.”

Justyce swallows. Meets the cold blue of Officer Castillo’s eyes. Clears his throat.

“Yes sir,” he says. “I got it.”

August 25

DEAR MARTIN (AKA DR. KING),

First and foremost, please know I mean you no disrespect with the whole "Martin" thing. I studied you and your teachings for a project in tenth grade, so it feels most natural to interact with you as a homie. Hope you don't mind that.

Quick intro: My name is Justyce McAllister. I'm a 17-year-old high school senior and full-scholarship student at Braselton Preparatory Academy in Atlanta, Georgia. I'm ranked fourth in my graduating class of 83, I'm the captain of the debate team, I scored a 1560 and a 34 on my SATs and ACTs respectively, and despite growing up in a "bad" area (not too far from your old stomping grounds), I have a future ahead of me that will likely include an Ivy League education, an eventual law degree, and a career in public policy.

Sadly, during the wee hours of this morning, literally none of that mattered.

Long story short, I tried to do a good deed and wound up on the ground in handcuffs. And despite the fact that my ex-girl was visibly drunk off her ass, excuse my language, I apparently looked so menacing in my prep school hoodie, the cop who cuffed me called for backup.

The craziest part is while I thought everything would be cool as soon as her parents got there, no matter what they told the cops, these dudes would not release me. Mr. Taylor offered to call my mom, but the cops made it clear that since I'm 17, I'm considered an adult when placed under arrest—aka there was nothing Mama could do.

Mr. Taylor wound up calling my friend SJ's mom, Mrs. Friedman—an attorney—and she had to come bark a bunch of legal hoo-ha in the cops' faces before they'd undo the cuffs. By the time they finally let me go, the sun was coming up.

It'd been hours, Martin.

Mrs. F didn't say a whole lot as she drove me to my dorm, but she made me promise to go by the infirmary and get some cold packs for my swollen wrists. I called my mama to tell her what happened, and she said she'll file a complaint first thing in the morning. But I doubt it'll do any good.

Frankly, I'm not real sure what to feel. Never thought I'd be in this kind of situation. There was this kid, Shemar Carson . . . black dude, my age, shot and killed in Nevada by this white cop back in June. The details are hazy since there weren't any witnesses, but what's clear is this cop shot an unarmed kid. Four times. Even fishier, according to the medical examiners, there was a two-hour gap between the estimated time of death and when the cop called it in.

Before The Incident last night, I hadn't really thought much about it. There's a lot of conflicting information, so

it's hard to know what to believe. Shemar's family and friends say he was a good dude, headed to college, active in his youth group . . . but the cop claims he caught Shemar trying to steal a car. A scuffle ensued (allegedly), and according to the police report, Shemar tried to grab the cop's gun, so the cop shot Shemar in self-defense.

I dunno. I've seen some pictures of Shemar Carson, and he did have kind of a thuggish appearance. In a way, I guess I thought I didn't really need to concern myself with this type of thing because compared to him, I don't come across as "threatening," you know? I don't sag my pants or wear my clothes super big. I go to a good school, and have goals and vision and "a great head on my shoulders," as Mama likes to say.

Yeah, I grew up in a rough area, but I know I'm a good dude, Martin. I thought if I made sure to be an upstanding member of society, I'd be exempt from the stuff THOSE black guys deal with, you know? Really hard to swallow that I was wrong.

All I can think now is "How different would things have gone had I not been a black guy?" I know initially the cop could only go by what he saw (which prolly did seem a little sketchy), but I've never had my character challenged like that before.

Last night changed me. I don't wanna walk around all pissed off and looking for problems, but I know I can't continue to pretend nothing's wrong. Yeah, there are no more "colored" water fountains, and it's supposed to be illegal to discriminate, but if I can be forced to sit on the

concrete in too-tight cuffs when I've done nothing wrong, it's clear there's an issue. That things aren't as equal as folks say they are.

I need to pay more attention, Martin. Start really seeing stuff and writing it down. Figure out what to do with it. That's why I'm writing to you. You faced way worse shi—I mean stuff than sitting in handcuffs for a few hours, but you stuck to your guns . . . Well, your lack thereof, actually.

I wanna try to live like you. Do what you would do. See where it gets me.

My wrist is killing me, so I have to stop writing now, but thanks for hearing me out.

Sincerely,
Justyce McAllister

CHAPTER 2

Justyce drops down onto the plush leather sofa in Manny's basement and grabs the game controller from the giant ottoman in front of him.

"You good, dawg?" Manny says, furiously pressing buttons on his vibrating controller as the sound of machine-gun fire fills the room in surround sound. It pushes into Justyce's ears and bounces around in his head; he can feel it pulsating in his chest: BANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANG.

He gulps. "Yeah. I'm good."

"So you playing, or what?"

Manny's avatar switches weapons in quick succession, tossing everything he's got at the enemy troops.

Grenade: *BOOM*.

Glock 26: *POP POP POP.*

Flamethrower: *FWHOOSH*.

Bazooka: *FWUUUUMP . . . BOOOOOOOM.*

So many guns. Just like the one Castillo kept his hand on while treating Jus like a criminal. One wrong move, and Jus might've been the next Shemar Carson.

He shudders. "Hey, you mind if we play something a little less . . . violent?"

Manny pauses the game. Turns to his best friend.

"Sorry." Justyce drops his head. "Can't really handle the gunshots and stuff right now."

Manny reaches out to give Jus's shoulder a supportive squeeze, then pushes a few buttons to switch games. The new Madden. Which doesn't even hit the shelves for another week.

Justyce shakes his head. If only he had his best friend's life. Must be nice having the VP of a major financial corporation for a dad.

The guys choose their respective teams. Manny wins the coin toss and elects to receive. He clears his throat. "You wanna talk about it?"

Justyce sighs.

"You know I'm like . . . *here* if you do, right?" Manny says.

"Yeah, I know, Manny. I appreciate it. Just not real sure what to say."

Manny nods. Puts a spin move on Justyce's defensive lineman and gets the first down. "Wrists feelin' any better?"

Justyce fights the urge to look at his arms. It's hard to see the bruises because his skin is such a deep brown, but even after a week, they're still there.

Sometimes he thinks they'll never fade.

"Yeah, they're all right. Mel gave me this weird ointment from Norway. Smells like Altoid-covered feet, but it's doing the trick." Manny's quarterback throws a deep pass, but it's short. Justyce's free safety intercepts. "We got back together last night."

Manny presses Pause. Turns to his boy.

"Dawg, you are *not* serious right now."

Justyce reaches over and hits the triangle button on Manny's controller. Jus's QB tosses the ball to his running back—who is unguarded since Manny's stare is burning a hole in the side of Jus's face. The virtual player runs it in for the easy touchdown.

The kick is good.

Manny pauses again. "Jus."

"Let it go, man."

"Let it go? That ho is the reason you sat in handcuffs for *three hours*, and you want me to let it go?"

"Stop callin' my girl a ho, Manny."

"Bro, you caught this girl wrist-deep in another dude's pants. Helloooo?"

"It's different this time." Justyce starts the game again.

His team kicks off, but Manny's players don't move because he's still gaping at Justyce like he just confessed to murder. "Hold up," Manny says, stopping the game and tossing his controller out of Jus's reach. "So you mean to tell me that after this girl sat there and *watched* this cop brutalize your ass—"

"She was scared, man."

“Unbelievable, Jus.”

“Whatever.” Justyce stares at the football frozen in mid-air on the massive flat-screen. Girls don’t flock to Justyce like they do to Emmanuel “Manny” Rivers, Bras Prep basketball captain and one of the best-looking guys Jus knows. There’s a lot of stuff Manny has that Justyce doesn’t—two parents with six-figure salaries, a basement apartment, a badass car, crazy confidence . . .

What does Justyce have? The hottest girl in school.

“I don’t expect you to understand, Manny. You run through girls like underwear. Wouldn’t know true love if it kicked you in the nuts.”

“First of all, true love *wouldn’t* kick me in the nuts. Considering how many times Melo has figuratively kicked you in yours—”

“Shut up, man.”

Manny shakes his head. “I hate to break it to you, homie, but you and Melo’s relationship puts the *ick* in *toxic*.”

“That’s some girly shit you just said, dawg.”

“You know my mom’s a psychologist,” Manny says. “You got Codependency Syndrome or something. You should really take a look at that.”

“Thanks, Dr. Phil.”

“I’m serious, Jus. I can’t even look at you right now. This thing you’re doing? This always-running-back-to-Melo thing? It’s a sickness, my friend.”

“Shut up and play the damn game, man.”

Just then Manny’s mom appears at the foot of the stairs.

“Hi, Dr. Rivers,” Justyce says, rising to give her a hug.

"Hey, baby. You doin' all right?"

"Yes ma'am."

"You sleeping over? Dinner will be ready in a few. Chicken cacciatore." She winks.

"Aww, you know that's my favorite," Jus says.

"Dang, Ma, how come you don't never make *my* favorite?"

"Don't *ever*, Emmanuel. And hush."

"Don't be mad cuz your mom likes me more than you, Manny."

"Shut up, fool."

Dr. Rivers's cell phone rings. "This is Tiffany Rivers," she says when she answers, still smiling at the boys.

Doesn't last long. Whoever's on the other end of the phone, it's obvious from her expression they're not bearing good news.

She hangs up and puts her hand over her heart.

"Mom? Everything okay?"

"That was your aunt," she says. "Your cousin's been arrested."

Manny rolls his eyes. "What'd he do this time?"

Dr. Rivers looks from Manny to Justyce and back again. "He's been charged with murder," she says.

Manny's jaw drops.

"They say he killed a police officer."

CHAPTER 3

Justyce has a lot on his mind as he steps into his Societal Evolution class on Tuesday. For one, yesterday a Nevada grand jury didn't return an indictment on the cop who killed Shemar Carson. Since being arrested, Justyce has spent all his free time following the case, and now it's just . . . over.

Speaking of cops and arrests, yesterday Justyce also learned that the cop Manny's cousin confessed to shooting was none other than Tomás Castillo.

What Jus can't get over is that he *knows* Manny's cousin. His name is Quan Banks, and he lives in Justyce's mom's neighborhood. Quan's a year younger than Justyce, and they played together back when the only thing that mattered was staying outside until the streetlights came on. Like Justyce, Quan tested into the Accelerated Learners program in third grade, but when elementary school ended, Quan started running with a not-so-great crowd.

When Quan found out Justyce was headed to Bras Prep, he mentioned a cousin who went there, but Jus never put two and two together. And now Quan's in jail.

Justyce can't stop thinking about it.

Yeah, Castillo was an asshole, but did he really deserve to die? And what about Quan? What if they give him the death penalty?

What if Castillo had killed Jus, though? Would he have even been indicted?

"Come here for a second, Jus," Doc says as Justyce drops his backpack on the floor beside his seat. Dr. Jarius "Doc" Dray is the debate team advisor and Justyce's favorite teacher at Bras Prep. He's the only (half) black guy Jus knows with a PhD, and Jus really looks up to him. "How you holding up, my man?" Doc says.

"Been better, Doc."

Doc nods and narrows his green eyes. "Figured as much," he says. "I wanted to let you know today's discussion might hit a nerve. Feel free to sit it out. You can leave the room if need be."

"All right."

Just then, Manny comes into the room with Jared Christensen at his heels. Justyce isn't real fond of Jared—or any of Manny's other friends for that matter—but he knows they've all been tight since kindergarten, so he tries to keep a lid on it.

"What's up, Doc?" Jared crows as he crosses the room to his seat.

"Oh god, Jared. Sit *down* somewhere." That would be

Sarah-Jane Friedman. Lacrosse captain, future valedictorian, and Justyce's debate partner since sophomore year.

"Aww, SJ, I love you too," Jared says.

SJ glares at him and pretends to shove a finger down her throat as she approaches the seat to Justyce's left. It makes him laugh.

The rest of the class trickles in, and the moment the bell rings, Doc pushes the door shut and claps his hands to begin class:

Doc: Morning, peeps.

Class: [*Multiple grunts, waves, and nods.*]

Doc: Let's get started, shall we? Discussion prompt of the day . . .

[*He makes a few taps on his laptop, and the words all men are created equal appear on the classroom's digital chalkboard.*]

Doc: Who can tell me the origin of this statement?

Jared: United States Declaration of Independence, ratified July Fourth, 1776. [*Smiles smugly and crosses his arms.*]

Doc: Correct, Mr. Christensen. Twelve of the thirteen colonies voted in favor of severing all ties to the British throne. The document known as the Declaration of Independence was written into being, and to this day, one of the most oft-quoted lines of said document is what you see there on the board.

Everyone: [*Nods.*]

Doc: Now, when we use our twenty-first-century minds to examine the quote within its historical context, something about it isn't quite right. Can anyone explain what I mean?

Everyone: [*Crickets.*]

Doc: Oh, come on, y'all. You don't see anything odd about *these* guys in particular making a statement about the inherent "equality" of men?

SJ: Well, these were the same guys who killed off the indigenous peoples and owned slaves.

Doc: Indeed they were.

Jared: But it was different then. Neither slaves nor Indians—

Justyce: Native Americans or American Indians if you can't name the tribe, homie.

Jared: Whatever. Point is, neither were really considered "men."

Doc: That's exactly my point, Mr. Christensen. So here's the question: What does the obvious change in the application of this phrase from 1776 to now tell us about how our society has evolved?

[Extended pause as he adds the question to the digital chalkboard beneath the quote, then the scrape of a chair as he takes his regular seat in the circle.]

Jared: Well, for one, people of African descent are obviously included in the application of the quote now. So are "*Native American Indians.*"

Justyce: [*Clenches jaw.*]

Jared: And women! Women were originally excluded, but now things are more equal for them too.

SJ: [*Snorts.*] Still not equal enough.

Doc: Expound if you will, Ms. Friedman.

SJ: It's simple: women still aren't treated as men's equals.
Especially by men.

Jared: [*Rolls eyes.*]

Doc: Okay. So there's Women's Rights. Any other areas where you guys feel like we haven't quite reached the equality bar?

Everyone: [. . .]

Doc: Feel free to consider current events.

SJ: You would make a terrible lawyer, Doc.

Everyone: [*Nervous laughter.*]

Doc: I *know* y'all know what I'm getting at here.

Manny: I mean, we do. . . . But you really wanna go there,
Doc?

Doc: Hey, this school prides itself on open dialogue. So let's hear it.

Everyone: [. . .]

Doc: I'll come right out with it, then: Do you guys feel we've achieved full "equality" with regard to race?

Everyone: [. . .]

Doc: Come on, guys. This is a safe space. Nothing said here today leaves this room.

Jared: Okay, I'll bite. In my opinion, yes: we *have* reached full equality when it comes to race.

Doc: Expound, please.

Jared: Well, anyone born here is a citizen with full rights. There are people who claim certain “injustices” are race-related, but if you ask me, they’re just being divisive.

Justyce: [*Inhales deeply and rubs his wrists.*]

Jared: America’s a pretty color-blind place now.

SJ: Of course *you* would say that.

Manny: Oh boy.

SJ: It never ceases to amaze me that guys like you have your heads so far up your entitled asses—

Doc: Sarah-Jane.

SJ: Sorry. It’s just—you’re completely oblivious to the struggles of anyone outside your little social group.

Jared: Whatever, SJ.

SJ: I’m serious. What about the economic disparities? What about the fact that proportionally speaking, there are more people of color living in poverty than white people? Have you even *thought* about that?

Jared: Dude, Manny drives a Range Rover.

Manny: What does that have to do with anything?

Jared: No beef, dude. I’m just saying your folks make way more money than mine.

Manny: Okay. They worked really hard to get to where they are, so—

Jared: I’m not saying they didn’t, dude. You just proved my point. Black people have the same opportunities as white

people in this country if they're willing to work hard enough. Manny's parents are a perfect example.

SJ: Seriously? You really think one example proves things are equal? What about Justyce? His mom works sixty hours a week, but she doesn't make a *tenth* of what your dad ma—

Justyce: S, chill with that, man.

SJ: Sorry, Jus. What I'm saying is Manny's parents are an exception. Have you not noticed there are only eight black kids in our whole school?

Jared: Well, maybe if more people were like Manny's parents, that wouldn't be the case.

Justyce: [*Takes another deep breath.*]

SJ: Ah, okay . . . so you're saying people just need to pull themselves up by their bootstraps?

Jared: Exactly.

SJ: In order to do that, they have to be able to afford boots.

Manny: Dang. Point for SJ.

Jared: Whatever. There are people on welfare strutting around in Air Jordans, so there's obviously some footwear money coming from somewhere. And don't get all high and mighty, SJ. Your ancestors owned slaves just like mine did.

SJ: Wrong, numbnuts—

Doc: Ms. Friedman . . .

SJ: Sorry, Doc. As I was saying, *my* great-grandparents immigrated to this country from Poland after narrowly escaping Chelmno.

Jared: *What?*

SJ: It was a Nazi death camp. And you just proved my point again. You'd spew a lot less asininity if you were willing to see beyond the eighteenth hole of your country club golf course.

Doc: Reel it in, SJ.

Jared: Just so you know, Manny's parents have been members of our country club longer than we have.

Manny: Bro!

Jared: Just sayin', dude.

SJ: God. This country is headed to hell in a handbasket with people like *you* at the helm, Jared.

Justyce: [*Chuckles.*]

Jared: Anyway, to those unfamiliar with the US Constitution, thanks to the Fourteenth Amendment, every person in this country has the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—

SJ: Bullshit.

Doc: SJ!

SJ: It's true!

Justyce: You need to chill, S.

SJ: Are you serious?

Justyce: Yeah, I am.

SJ: You of *all* people know I'm right, Jus—

Justyce: Leave me outta this.

SJ: Fine. Bottom line, it's been over *two centuries*, and African Americans are *still* getting a raw deal.

Jared: Coulda fooled me.

SJ: Oh my god. Do you watch the news at *all*? The name Shemar Carson ring a bell, maybe?

Jared: Ah, here we go. Not every white person who kills a black person is guilty of a crime. Pretty sure the courts proved that yesterday.

SJ: All the courts "proved" yesterday was that a white guy can kill an unarmed teenager and get away with it if the kid is black.

Doc: Conjecture, SJ. You know better. You two need to tread carefully here.

Jared: Dude, the kid attacked the cop and tried to take his gun. *And* he had a criminal record.

Justyce: Hold up, man. The attack was *alleged*. There weren't any witnesses—

Jared: I thought you were staying out of it?

Doc: Watch it, Mr. Christensen.

Jared: He said it, not me.

Justyce: [*Grits teeth.*]

SJ: Maybe if you actually followed the case instead of getting your information from social media—

Jared: Doesn't change the fact that the guy'd been arrested before. You don't get arrested if you're not doing anything wrong. Bottom line, he was a criminal.

SJ: The charge on his record—which is public, so you can go look it up—was a misdemeanor possession of marijuana.

Jared: So? Do the crime, do the time.

SJ: Jared, you bought an *ounce* of weed two days ago—

Doc: Don't make me write you up, SJ.

SJ: I saw it with my own eyes, Doc!

Jared: What I do with my money is none of your or anyone else's business.

Justyce: [*Snorts.*] Course it's not. But what Shemar did with his is everyone's, right?

Doc: Y'all better get back on topic before I start handing out detentions.

SJ: My point is I've *seen* you commit the same crime Shemar Carson had on the "criminal record" you mentioned.

Jared: Whatever, SJ.

SJ: I know you'd prefer to ignore this stuff because you *benefit* from it, but walking around pretending inequality doesn't exist won't make it disappear, Jared. You and Manny, who are equal in pretty much every way apart from race, could commit the same crime, but it's almost guaranteed that he would receive a harsher punishment than you.

Manny: Why do I keep getting pulled into this?

Jared: Obviously because you're black, bro.

Everyone: [*Snickers.*]

SJ: Numbers don't lie.

Justyce: [*Rubs his wrists again.*]

Jared: Yeah, yeah. We get it. Your mom's the big-shot attorney. You have *alllllll* the facts.

SJ: Deflect all you want, but you can't deny that you get away with stuff Manny could never get away with.

Manny: I swear I'm changing my name.

Jared: Maybe I get away with it because I'm not dumb enough to get caught.

Justyce: Wow.

SJ: You get away with it because you're white, asshole.

Doc: Sarah-Jaaaaaaane—

Jared: You looked in a mirror lately, SJ? You're just as white as I am.

SJ: Yeah, and I recognize that and how it benefits me.

Jared: Do you? Sounds like you're jumping on the White Is Wrong bandwagon to me.

Justyce: [*Cracks his knuckles and shakes his head.*]

SJ: Whatever, Jared. Bottom line, nobody sees *us* and automatically assumes we're up to no good.

Everyone: [. . .]

SJ: We'll never be seen as criminals before we're seen as people.

Everyone: [. . .]

Justyce: I'm going to the bathroom. [*Gets up and leaves.*]

PRAISE FOR THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

Dear Martin

A WILLIAM C. MORRIS AWARD FINALIST

**“A POWERFUL, WRENCHING,
AND COMPULSIVELY READABLE**
story that lays bare the history, and the present,
of racism in America.”

— **JOHN GREEN**, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Turtles All the Way Down*



Photo © 2017 Nigel Livingstone

READY TO FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

[Click here to order your copy of
Dear Martin.](#)

[Click here to preorder your copy of
Dear Justyce.](#)

BEAUTY IS A SACRIFICE

GRAVEMAIDENS



KELLY COON

SNEAK PEEK

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Text copyright © 2019 by Kelly Coon

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Delacorte Press,
an imprint of Random House Children's Books,
a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

Delacorte Press is a registered trademark and the colophon is a trademark
of Penguin Random House LLC.

Visit us on the web! GetUnderlined.com

Educators and librarians, for a variety of teaching tools,
visit us at RHTeachersLibrarians.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.
ISBN 978-0-525-64782-9 (hc) | ISBN 978-0-525-64785-0 (lib. bdg.) |
ISBN 978-0-525-64783-6 (ebook)

The text of this book is set in 11.5-point Adobe Jenson Pro Light.

Interior design by Ken Crossland
Jacket art and design by Sammy Yuen
Jacket art used under license from Shutterstock

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
First Edition

Random House Children's Books supports the First Amendment
and celebrates the right to read.

FREE SAMPLE COPY—NOT FOR RESALE



GRAVEMAIDENS



KELLY COON

DELACORTE PRESS

KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK....

CHAPTER 1



TODAY, THREE GIRLS would be doomed to die an honored, royal death.

A coil of dread wound itself around my guts at the thought, but I took a deep breath and focused on the little boy standing in front of me. Getting wrapped up in Palace rituals wasn't part of my duties, but healing a child *was*.

Especially when his cure meant food for my family.

"Open your mouth and say 'Ahhh' as if the Boatman were chasing you." I held his face, which was covered in crumbs. Probably the remnants of a thick slice of warm honey-cake. My stomach rumbled, imagining the treat he'd likely enjoyed. Beneath the mess, his tawny cheeks were unusually pale.

"Ahhhhhh!" the boy screamed.

Smiling slightly, his innocence a welcome relief from my dark thoughts, I stuck the end of a spoon into his mouth to

hold down his tongue, angling his head to the morning sunlight to see inside. Behind me, his mother hovered, smoothing her violet tunic and patting her hair, which was fastened into two neat buns above her ears. When she fidgeted, the gold chains looped around her forehead shimmered in the light streaming in from the window.

Despite the circumstances, it was nice to see that the mothers who had all the wealth in the city were no different from the mothers in my neighborhood who had none. When it came to their sick children, their hands twisted nervously in the same way.

The boy's throat was blistered white. I smoothed my hands over his bare back and touched my lips to his forehead to check for fever—an old healer's trick, since lips are more sensitive than hands. He was slightly warm but not worryingly so. The glands in his neck were swollen, as they should be with an infection, but this child would be able to fight it off. His muscles were strong, his reflexes good, his eyes clear. Unlike the children of my neighbors, he was undoubtedly fed daily with the freshest fruits and vegetables, the finest fish and meats. I swallowed my hurt at the inequity.

But it wasn't this child's fault.

"You're going to be just fine." I ruffled his silky hair.

"I am?" He popped his thumb in his mouth and sucked furiously, then withdrew it when his mother looked sideways at him with eyes outlined by thick strokes of kohl. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure!" I took his chin in my palm. "Why do you ask?"

"Because the Boatman comes when you're really sick." His lip trembled, and the thumb went back into his mouth.

I took his other hand in mine. "I'm sorry if I scared you when I mentioned the Boatman. The truth is, he's not so scary at all. He's a helper to the gods. Did you know that?"

The lie rolled effortlessly off my tongue.

He shook his head.

"It's true. The Boatman is just a man who lived long ago." I looked around the common room for something to add a note of truth to my tale. A carved-wood sicklesword, one that was, no doubt, modeled after his guardsman father's, sat atop a braided rug next to an emerald-colored floor cushion. "The Boatman used to be a *guardsman*. But now he's a helper. When you die, you pay the coin for your passage and the Boatman scoops you up, puts you into his rickety boat, and paddles you off to the Netherworld, where there are endless parties and games and honeycake forever and ever."

I squatted down to his eye level. "But he only comes if you're very, very sick—which you are not—or very, very old—which you are not, although you do look much older than you are with these big, strong muscles." I squeezed his little arm.

He giggled around the thumb in his mouth. Then his eyes grew serious. "Will Ummum be there in the Netherworld when I go?" He looked at his mother, who ran her clean, carefully tended fingernails down her arm. From the direction of the sleeping quarters, an infant wailed.

"Yes. Before you go with the Boatman as an old, old, old man"—the smile flickered again—"she will be there waiting for you with the biggest honeycake of all."

My throat constricted as I finished the story, but I forced the sorrow away with every bit of my strength.

I stood and turned to his mother. "Do you have any garlic?"

"Let me check with the servant." She called into the other room. "Hala?"

A girl my sister's age—maybe fifteen years—appeared in the doorway, holding the squalling infant in her arms. She was the child of one of my neighbors. Women of my stature often sent their unmarried daughters to be servants in other people's households to earn coins or food. "My lady?" she said, her eyes on her bare feet.

"Where is the garlic?"

"It's in the bin near the door. Shall I fetch it for you?"

"Why do you suppose I asked for it?" The woman crossed her arms over her chest. Hala dipped her head, her cheeks blazing, and retreated with the infant.

I took a breath, forcing myself to put on the mask of civility I wore daily when dealing with the ill and their families. "To help ease his throat and take away the infection, mix six crushed cloves in a flagon of warm water and bid him gargle with it."

She nodded her agreement. "He won't like it, but if it will help, we will do it."

"Yes, and it will have to be twice a day for three days. By

the end of the third day, if his symptoms persist, send for me again and I will bring a stronger tincture.”

“Okay. Thank you, A-zu.” She turned, as if to go.

“Oh, no, my lady. I am no great A-zu. My abum is the best healer in the city.” *No matter what anyone thinks anymore.* “I am merely his apprentice.”

“Well, then why didn’t he come himself? Why did he send you?” She looked me up and down.

Why didn’t I keep silent?

I stared at my dirty toes, encased in sandals that were two years too small. There was no easy way to answer her question. When my mother had passed away a moon ago, he’d lost his will to tend to himself, let alone anyone else. Not only had I taken on the tasks of running the household and caring for my sister, but I’d also been visiting his patients all over the city. As his healer’s apprentice, it was my duty. Plus, we had to get paid.

“He was called away for an emergency, my lady, but I’d be happy to send him when he is back if you need him.”

I was making a promise I might not be able to keep, but the coins were already in her hand. If she opted not to pay me, there was nothing I could do, and I had to take care of my family.

She blew out an exasperated breath, then looked back at her little boy, who was squatting on the rug, playing with the sicklesword. “Fine,” she murmured. “Take this and be gone.”

She dropped six shekels into my hand, pulling away

quickly, as if I were the one with an illness. I stuffed them into my healing satchel before she could change her mind.

“Thank you, noblewoman. I appreciate your generosity.” I nodded once to the boy and then to Hala, who’d come back with the garlic and the red-faced baby. Right before I closed the door, the woman snatched the garlic from Hala’s hand and yelled at her for not moving faster. I cringed, thinking of my own sister taking a scolding like that, as I headed quickly toward the marketplace. Thankfully, with the healing practice, I hadn’t yet needed to subject her to a wealthy woman’s whims. I shook my head at poor Hala’s fate.

Such was life for those born low and for those like us, cast into poverty after the biggest regrets of our lives.

At least now I had the means to buy grain and could be out of the marketplace before three perfectly healthy girls were called upon to lie in the cold embrace of a dead ruler.



The Libbu, the marketplace that wrapped around the base of the Palace, pulsed as people from all walks of life streamed in and out of the main gates, buying, selling, and trading. Gold and crimson flags snapped in the breeze atop the merchants’ stalls as sellers called out their wares: hand-woven linens, pots of spices, gleaming fish caught fresh from the Garadun and its tributaries that very morning. Young boys carried flapping ducks by their feet. Others tugged roped rams in from the farms. The aroma of sweet simmering spices—cinnamon,

cardamom, cloves—filled my mouth with water as I walked through the gate.

It always felt distinctly alive in the Libbu, despite the fact that we were all supposed to be mourning Lugal Marus's impending death. As the ruler of our city-state, he was due the respect of our grief, and most believed he was due three Sacred Maidens in the Netherworld.

The ritual was supposed to be an honor.

But I knew better.

For a healer's apprentice like me, who knew the rigid terror that accompanies death for many people, it was not a day to be joyous. Three young women were going to *die*. They'd step onto the Boatman's skiff and shove off toward the Netherworld.

I shuddered, though the sun warmed the skin of my exposed shoulders. Those poor girls. They were likely thinking only about living in the Palace, basking in the riches and glory it had to offer. But when the lugal passed, they'd enter the tomb with him as queens, never to emerge on this side of life again.

No thought of those they left behind.

What made the town crier's impending announcement bearable was the knowledge that no one who lived near me in the huts along the wall would be selected, even though the choices were supposed to be based on beauty alone. For the past several generations, the daughters of the rich were always chosen, because their fathers could fill the Palace coffers with silver in exchange for the honor.

I took a deep breath and tried to focus on my mission: purchase food for my family, then get back home before the crowd thickened in the Libbu for the celebrations that would begin after the Maidens were selected.

A jeweler held necklaces of lapis lazuli and topaz under my nose as I drifted by his booth. I turned away, not being able to afford something so grand, and was nearly knocked off my feet by my closest friend in the city.

"There you are!" Iltani grabbed me in a fierce hug, and held me at arm's length. "Let's grab some barley and dates and head out to the fields to see that gorgeous farm boy of yours, Kammani. Get into some trouble. You can run off with him while I distract one of his field hands." Iltani raised her eyebrows and linked her arm through mine as we dodged a man holding a bleating goat over his shoulders.

Heat colored my cheeks as I turned toward her. "He's not *my gorgeous farm boy*."

"Oh, please do not deny it. You're nearly betrothed." As we walked by a stall brimming with ripe fruit, Iltani plucked a green grape from a basket and popped it into her mouth, much to the merchant's annoyance. "And besides, you should be grateful he's still even considering it, since people like this one"—she nodded to the merchant woman, who was staring slack-jawed at us—"want nothing to do with you, despite your abum being the BEST HEALER IN ALU!"

"Iltani, be quiet!"

As I pulled her away, she eyeballed the merchant brazenly, as if daring the woman to say anything about her theft or her

ill-timed comment. The woman didn't. Despite being born into a low social status, Iltani could get away with murder, because she looked more innocent than she was. Bronze freckles, like clay flicked across clean linen, lay across her small, upturned nose. Twin dimples appeared in her cheeks when she grinned, as she was doing now.

"Honestly," I told her, "you don't understand the wealthy like I do. You could be whipped for stealing. Or worse!" We wound our way through the crowd, sidestepping requests to purchase goods I could no longer afford.

"Well, if I were as lovely as Nanaea, I wouldn't have to steal, now, would I?"

"She's here?" My heart leapt. I hadn't woken my sister to say goodbye this morning before I'd left on my rounds. She'd been snuggled in our pallet, one arm flung across her face, the other curled against her chest. I'd pushed her damp, ebony hair off her cheek, considering it, but after the way she'd whimpered in her slumber the previous night, I'd let her sleep.

And then I saw her. She and two of her friends—new ones, since her old friends from the wealthy class wanted nothing to do with us after we'd been cast down—skipped along, trying on gauzy scarves and copper bracelets under the merchants' watchful eyes. It reminded me of how we used to play together, running in and out of the freshly cleaned quilts drying on lines stretched from home to home, draped in our mother's heavy jewels. I thought longingly of those days, free from worry. From heartache. I didn't care about the wealth

they'd stripped from us when we lost our status, although our previous lives had been easier, for certain. Now I only wanted a day I didn't spend shackled by responsibility.

Nanaea, younger than I by only a year, didn't seem to be bothered by any of it in the least, except at night, when the nightmares overtook her. By day, she was still as free as a child. A child trying to live as though she still had the status we once did, wrapping scarves around her shoulders we couldn't afford to buy, trying bracelets on her arms she'd never wear in this lifetime again.

"Of course Nanaea is here. Do you think she'd miss the selection of the Sacred Maidens for anything?" Iltani brushed her hair off her forehead, leaving a smudge of dirt. I wiped it off with the back of my hand, doing my best to ignore the flip-pant way she'd talked about the announcement. No thought as to the terror those girls would experience when they were ensconced inside the black tomb with a dead body, forced to drink poison or be run through with sickleswords. But I didn't blame her. It was a tradition almost everyone considered an honor.

Everyone but me.

I shoved away my somber thoughts as the stout town crier huffed by, a trumpet made from a tree root for amplifying his voice wedged under his arm.

The Sacred Maiden announcement? So soon?

I had to hurry. I turned toward another stall and, out of the corner of my eye, spotted a boy in the town crier's wake,

wearing a stark white tunic with a clay tablet on his hip. A page. The young boy turned his face to the sun, and the breath caught in my lungs.

My brother.

“Kasha!”

He’d been taken from our home to live in the Palace after my father had failed to heal the lugal’s son, who’d fallen from a Palace balcony and died.

It was fair punishment, everyone had said. A son for a son.

But it didn’t *feel* fair. It felt like theft, a crime we couldn’t do anything about. And although we hadn’t been completely restricted from seeing him, as the years had passed, his responsibilities in the Palace, or a diminishing desire, kept him away from us more and more. I missed that little face. I waved to him, trying to get his attention, but he moved through the crowd after the crier, his shoulders thrown back as if he hadn’t been stolen from his family and forced to fall asleep each night without anyone to sing to him. I quickly inspected a basket overflowing with lentils before my emotions took hold.

“Are you all right?” Iltani waved a gnat away from her forehead and squinted in Kasha’s direction. “He didn’t hear you, I think.”

“I’m fine.” I swallowed thickly. “I just need to be about my business and get back home. I don’t want to be here when they call the Sacred Maidens.”

"Well, good luck pulling Nanaea away from this crowd." She raised her eyebrows, then looked over my shoulder. Her smile widened into a grin I knew meant trouble. "Gods of the skies, my friend. Look who's here." She nudged me, and I turned.

Dagan, Farmer's Son, stood thirty handsbreadths away in his family's stall, bartering with a man over a barrel of wheat. He spotted us over the man's shoulder and sent me a brilliant smile. Over the past several years, I'd watched him transform from a scrawny child with ragged black hair to a thick-chested boy who was nearly a man.

I offered him a quick smile, then turned away, my cheeks flushing.

Iltani tugged me back around. "You can't avoid him forever, and why would you even want to? No one else of his stature is going to ask for your hand, and besides, look at him! You could build an entire Palace using the stacked bricks of his abdomen alone." Iltani plucked a stem of yellow chamomile from a cask full of water next to the lentils and tucked it behind her ear.

He was bare to the belt. Sweat clung like honey to the hard clay of his chest. I blushed furiously and forced my eyes elsewhere. The problem wasn't that I didn't care about him, because I certainly did. We'd played together in his barley fields since we were children, tying the grasses into chains and pulling each other around like mules at the plow. His mother had been friends with my abum growing up. Our eventual match was all but guaranteed.

And despite us losing our status, he—one of the wealthiest men in the city because of all the land his family owned—still courted me. I was supposed to feel grateful for the favor. Even Iltani said so.

But I couldn't *focus* on him. I had one mission and one mission only: care for my family. Today, that meant buying food for them and then getting back to the hut to help my abum make preparations for his patients, assuming he could gather himself enough to minister to them. Nanaea stood nearby at a merchant's stall with her two friends, giggling as the man made a dog perform tricks for her.

"Kammani," Dagan called, pushing his hair out of his eyes. "You can't pretend you didn't see me. I know that lovely face of yours all too well."

A smile tugged at the corners of my lips. I couldn't help it.

Iltani elbowed me in the rib cage. "Let's go over there. He has food to sell, does he not?"

"K!" Dagan called. "Come over to me. I've hardly seen you at all this past moon!" He reached up and tied his black hair into a knot with a leather cord.

At my nickname, I turned toward him and caught Iltani's smirk. "Why are you making that face?"

"Oh, I don't know. That blush along your cheekbones is telling me that you've been thinking of Dagan in a way that is not altogether wholesome."

I sighed. "Gods of the skies, Iltani. Silence yourself. Let's just go see what he wants." I did readily admit that seeing him wouldn't be the *worst* thing that could happen to me today,

and Iltani was right. He *was* selling grain. I tucked a wayward strand of hair behind my ear and tried to smooth my worn tunic as we maneuvered to his stall.

He was stowing shekels in a bag on his hip as we reached him, and his eyes lit up like dawn when they met mine. His dark lashes accentuated the amber eyes I knew so well.

He nodded to me, then reached across the stall and took my hand. "Good day to you, Healer's Daughter." He brushed full lips across my knuckles, his beard, just beginning to thicken, tickling my hand.

"Such formality. What's the occasion?" I smiled, mustering all my resolve to pry my eyes away from his light brown skin and thick shoulders, corded and rippled from working long days at the farm.

"Can't even a bumbling fool like me have some manners in front of a beautiful woman? Two of them?" He nodded at Iltani but grinned at me.

"I award you three points for your efforts at flirtation," Iltani saluted. "Now serve us beauties some food. We're starved."

Dagan laughed, and my attention fell to the barrels of barley at his elbow, my stomach rumbling in response. I was about to ask for a fair price on them when Nanaea joined us, the copper from three glittering bracelets on her arm winking in the sun.

Where in the name of Enlil did she get those?

"Hello, Dagan." She flashed him a brilliant smile.

Iltani kicked me in the ankle.

"Nanaea, we're busy here, as you can plainly see." It wasn't that I was *jealous* of her stealing Dagan's attention, but her loveliness was beyond compare. Her hair, eyelashes, and brows were full and shiny, her teeth perfectly straight. Her cheekbones were high, like my father's, and her skin was tinged rose under her copper glow. Men practically broke their necks to stare after her as she went down the street, her hips and breasts curved in a way that made them long for her. I adjusted my healing satchel over my rather straight shape in response.

"Oh! I didn't mean to interrupt, Sister."

But the twinkle in her eye made me strongly suspicious that she did. She leaned across his stall, and her tunic draped open, exposing ample cleavage.

"Ahhh, Nanaea. How are you this fine morning?" Dagan studiously avoided looking down her tunic, staring into a basket of emmer wheat as if the mysteries of life could be found within.

"I'm fine, as always. Thank you for asking." She shot him a grin, smoothing a shiny curl away from her face. It didn't matter that she was dressed in rags. Her beauty needed no adornment.

"Nanaea was just leaving. Weren't you, Nanaea?" Iltani stared hard at my sister.

She blinked, wide-eyed, back at Iltani. "What did I do?"

"Don't play innocent with me," Iltani began, but I interrupted her. I didn't need any of this back-and-forth. I needed food, and I needed it now. My stomach ached with emptiness,

and I was certain Nanaea was starving, too. She hadn't had anything to eat since yesterday afternoon, unless she'd gotten a free meal somewhere.

Dagan, busying his hands, scooped a flagon into a bucket of water, then tipped back his head and drank deeply. I watched his throat move with every swallow, wondering what it would feel like to lay my lips there. Heat rose to my cheeks.

He finished the last of the water and offered the cup to me. I shook my head.

"Are you so afraid to drink after me?" He smirked. "You've eaten mud right out of my hand before, so don't think of yourself too highly."

I smiled, remembering the day he was talking about. He'd dared me to taste the mud on the banks of the Garadun, and after I'd done it, I'd shoved a whole handful into his mouth. We'd both had grit stuck between our teeth for the rest of the day. "I'm not afraid of you. You know that."

His wide smile softened a bit. "It seems as if you are. You've stayed away almost this whole moon." He searched my eyes, his hurt showing plainly.

But how could I explain my absence? That the honor of our presumed betrothal felt a little like he was granting me a favor I hadn't really asked for? That my abum kept me so busy these days I was barely sleeping? That the reminder of those lazy days of just enjoying a basket of figs under the shade of a palm tree with him was like a knife in the gut when the weight of the world was crushing me?

I was spared the difficulty of an answer by a wealthy woman shoving past us to order some emmer, paying no mind that I was there to do the same. Filling a small linen bag with the grain, Dagan handed it to the woman, who dropped a whole mina into his outstretched palm. She turned and strode away but not before looking down her nose at us. I ignored the slight, but Nanaea's face fell. I squeezed her hand as my stomach growled loudly again.

"Dagan, can you give us a fair price on the barley?"

"Yes," Iltani piped up. "And add in a small—very small—sack of emmer, some honey, and maybe some of the watercress? You could toss in a few honeycakes as well." She grinned widely enough to show all her teeth. "For the privilege of serving us." She produced three shekels. Far too little for what she was asking.

Dagan scratched his beard, round eyes going back and forth between Iltani and me. "Of course, but you don't have to *buy* it. Don't be silly. My family is happy to give it to you."

I bristled. "Because we are lowly? And can't take care of our own?" My response came out sharper than I intended, the rich woman's disdain like a nettle under my skin.

Dagan stilled. "No. That's not what I meant."

"Well, what *did* you mean?"

"You are my—my"—he placed a hand over his heart, his face growing earnest—"my friend. And you *have* been forever. I just don't understand why you're upset with me. I'm trying to help."

"I know that. And I'm not upset with you." I sighed heavily.

"I'm . . . tired, I think." And as soon as I said it, the enormity of my exhaustion hit me like a fist. I wasn't just tired. I was *weary*. Too weary even for this conversation. "Dagan, I must apologize, but I have to go about my day. I need to check on my abum. Come, Iltani. Let's move on before the crowd thickens for the Sacred Maidens." I dipped my head away from the hurt in his eyes to find Nanaea studying me quizzically. I knew Dagan's intentions were pure. I didn't need her silent accusations. Nevertheless, it wasn't his job to support me or my family, even if he wanted to help.

Nanaea shook her head, her long curls springing out in every direction. Her hair was as black as my father's. I'd taken on more of my mother's coloring, with warmer brunette hair and golden-brown eyes.

"Who cares if someone gives you a gift? Isn't it nice not to have to toil away day after day for a change? Get back to a little bit of normalcy?" Nanaea asked.

"Is that how you got those bracelets? Someone *gave* them to you? What do you think the merchant will want in return, Sister? Nothing is free."

She knotted her brow in annoyance, then turned away.

She was so naïve sometimes. Then again, she hadn't been the one to instantly have to grow up when hearing my mother's last words.

Suddenly, the town crier's horn pierced through the Palace Libbu. Heads turned toward the sound. Faces all around me grew excited as babble grew in fervor. Merchants quickly

closed up shop, dropping draperies across their stalls and sealing things up tight.

"It's time, Sister!" Nanaea squealed, grabbing my arm. Her two friends ran off and got lost in the crowd. "The Sacred Maidens are going to be chosen!"

I rubbed my aching eyes and sighed heavily.

Iltani nudged me. "At least it will be entertaining."

"Iltani's right. Come on. Have some fun for once in your life. We never get to do anything like this anymore! Don't you remember the beauty of our old life? How fun it used to be to attend festivities?" Nanaea bounced up and down, biting her lip. "The dancers will be there, and maybe even the fire throwers!"

"Fine." I couldn't take this away from her after everything else she'd lost.

"Well, not before you get this." Dagan scooped some barley into a bag, twisted it closed, and shoved it into my healing satchel before I could refuse. Iltani sent me a look that tamped down any argument.

He sealed his barrels of grain and stepped out from the stall. He wore freshly cut sandals and a crisp jade-colored tunic. He tied his money purse onto the belt at his waist, right next to a long, sharp dagger encrusted with emeralds at the hilt. No one would dare steal from him.

"I'll accompany you ladies if you don't mind a stinking donkey like me trailing after." He grinned, his teeth flashing white against his black beard.

"We shall be glad to have you join us," Nanaea murmured,

then she stumbled, *a bit too conveniently*, and Dagan offered his arm. She slipped her hand through his proffered elbow, wrapping her fingers around his muscle.

I let myself turn to stone.

"Sister?" she asked, tossing her hair over her shoulder and smiling back at me. "I think I will watch the bear perform after the announcement, if I may. He's so cute!"

"Do whatever you want, Nanaea. I'm not your mother."

Iltani sucked in her breath.

"I shouldn't have said that," I muttered immediately. But the words had been spoken, the pain inflicted.

Nanaea's eyes clouded over briefly at my words, but she turned away from me toward the crowds ahead of us. Dagan patted her hand, casting one long look over his shoulder at me.

Iltani linked her arm through mine and gave it a supportive squeeze. As Nanaea and Dagan walked away, his back rippling with strength, her shapely hips swinging, I thought that if anyone didn't know them, they might think that *she* was the sister on the verge of being betrothed.

And despite being a healer's apprentice, I didn't have a remedy for the ill feeling in my gut that accompanied the thought.

CHAPTER 2



THE CROWD SWELLED as we navigated around throngs of people, some arrayed in rags, some in jewels, to the center of the Libbu, where all official announcements—news of wars, festivals to come, and trade deals to keep the bands of mercenaries away—were made. Jingling their tambourines, a dance troupe in orange tunics shimmied for shekels in front of the pleasure house, where women draped in sheer fabrics peeked from the second-floor windows.

A gray donkey lumbered beside us, its back bowed with the burden of barrels marked with the crescent-moon insignia of Assata's Tavern, the hub for gossip and news in Alu. Assata and Irra, the owners, were friends of those of us along the wall. They always welcomed my father happily when he visited if someone traded him a bubbly sikaru or two for stitching up a cut.

I often went with him, and the smells of the place—old wood, spilled wine, cinnamon from Assata's cookies—brought me back to being six years old, seated on my father's knee, with Nanaea occupying the other. I remembered the joy I'd felt with my cheek against his chest as my sister and I laughed at his stories. We'd had our first drink of sweet sikaru from his cup, and he'd promised to continue to treat us to more as long as *we* promised not to tell my mother. Nanaea and I still drank the brew with extra honey and a pinch of cloves as he'd taught us, although we could rarely afford the treat these days. I shoved down the memory and wondered where he was. Probably slumped over a little table in the tavern, drunk out of his head.

Guardsmen in silver breastplates and greaves, impenetrable leather covers that strapped around their calves and forearms, carried maces and sickleswords, daggers and whips, to keep the crowds streaming through the Libbu gates in line. A scuffle broke out near the pleasure house, and one man landed a punch to another man's jaw before a guardsman backhanded them both to the ground. I winced, thinking of the broken teeth.

We followed a family with three girls arrayed in rainbow tunics and clattering beads, likely hoping for their names to be called, to stand near the cedar platform. White silks as big as sails stretched from beam to beam, providing shade to the town crier. My brother, Kasha, stood at the corner of the platform, chin up, eyes wary, poised to do the town crier's

bidding, it seemed. He looked so much older. So *official*. My chest swelled with the barest twinge of pride.

Behind the platform, the Palace loomed large and golden, shimmering in the afternoon sun. Smoke rose from the blue temple at the very top of the four-tiered structure, a sign that someone inside was praying.

In a flurry of dust, a caravan of guardsmen and horses paraded down the road that led from the Palace's large central doorway. A luxurious sedan chair covered in flowy white drapery and golden tassels swayed as eight sweating men bore it slowly to the platform. A girl's somber face peeked out from around the curtains and then immediately retreated. It was Nin Arwia, the lugal's daughter and heir to the throne since her younger brother, the malku my father had failed to heal, had perished.

I'd met the nin once, just a few moons before we'd been cast out. We'd spent the afternoon together as my father healed a friend of hers. She'd been a quizzical, cunning girl, as curious about healing as I'd been about Palace life. But after her brother died and we were forced out of our home, watching our furniture and bedding and clothing and jewels taken in chests to the Palace for redistribution, I never talked with her again.

The nin's sedan chair came to rest in front of the platform, the men beneath breathing heavily from the weight they bore. Guardsmen swarmed around it as the curtains were shoved aside and a man leapt gracefully down, his broad silver

breastplate with a carving of Enlil, our winged god, reflecting the sun. He had to be Ensi Uruku, the man in charge during the lugal's illness. His spiked mace swayed on his belt as he ascended the stairs to his sumptuous viewing box, perched high above the platform.

Then the nin disembarked from the sedan chair, looking as delicate as a reed growing on the banks of the river. Her knee-length black hair flowed after her like a banner. As she took in the crowd, she dipped her head, carefully steadying her headdress with one hand. Round pendants of lapis lazuli hung from her ears, and her slender neck was draped with copper necklaces encrusted with jewels, just one of which, I was certain, could have fed my family for an entire moon.

Once she was seated next to Ensi Uruku, the town crier, his big belly straining the fabric of his tunic, attempted to gain control of the crowd with outstretched hands.

Behind him, Kasha, a smug look on his face and scrubbed as clean as I'd ever seen him, shifted the tablet in his arms and came to attention.

I caught Nanaea's eye, nodded toward Kasha, then straightened my shoulders, pulling my features into a look of haughtiness. She snickered and elbowed me softly in the ribs.

Nanaea never held a grudge for very long, and her laughter quelled the nerves in my stomach at the thought of what was about to transpire. I looked around for my abum, then shook my head. He wouldn't have come, not with this many people around to point and whisper at the healer who'd failed the lugal.

When the crowd quieted, the town crier raised the trumpet to project his words to everyone in the Libbu.

"Women and men of Alu, I come to you today to honor a sacred tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation," the crier bellowed, his bushy eyebrows knit across a wide, flat forehead.

Dread wiped the smile from my face as excited murmuring spread across the crowd like wildfire.

The town crier held up his meaty hands. "*Silence!*" Behind him, two startled birds took flight from one of the cedar beams. "I am here at the behest of Ensi Uruku, Lugal Marus's second in command, and Nin Arwia, the lugal's daughter."

From their viewing box, the nin and the ensi stood briefly and raised a hand. Ensi Uruku leaned down and whispered something in her ear, and the wavery smile fell from her face. I leaned to the left, trying to get a better view past the heads of people in front of me as fear gripped my belly. The town crier held out a hand to Kasha. Struggling with the weight of the tablet, my brother handed it to him, then stepped back into place, his chin held high.

"Per Nin Arwia's wishes, and upon her advice, it is my duty to announce the selections for Lugal Marus's three Sacred Maidens. These girls will have the privilege of accompanying the lugal to the afterlife if he should pass. There, these Sacred Maidens will have the great honor of serving him for eternity. Before they go with the lugal, they will move into the Palace to prepare for their final journey."

Cheers and chanting broke out around me. Many women

held their hands up to the sky, praising Enlil with zealous fervor, while others danced, their faces masks of holy gratitude. Nanaea, lit up like a torch in the temple, joined elbows with her friends, who'd managed to find us. The excitement was enough to knock her sideways for at least the next moon.

The horror of it was making my hands shake.

From the platform, the crier raised the tablet with the inscribed names and squinted at the script. The crowd quieted down to whispers and shifting. Everyone wanted to hear. Iltani squeezed my hand with the strength of three men.

"Dear Enlil," I whispered.

"Yes, Enlil. Be merciful," Iltani said. "May the nin have selected girls who have no hope for a better life on this side of the Netherworld." She clutched my hand in hers. On the other side of her, Nanaea held clasped hands to her mouth in prayer.

They *wanted* to be selected.

"No, Iltani." I expected my sister to want the favor, but Iltani had some sense about her. "You don't understand. This isn't some honor." I lowered my voice when a wealthy woman who'd been shouting Enlil's praises looked at me aghast. "Whoever is chosen must cross the river with the Boatman. They'll be sacrificed for some stupid tradition and leave their families behind." An ache welled in my chest at the thought, and I swallowed hard.

She shrugged. "The good news for *you*, then, is that we'll likely be passed over. No one wants a societal castoff, or a

dirty little rat like me. Besides, I'd rather have a couple of rich girls chosen for the sole purpose of getting them out of my hair."

"Itani!" I couldn't believe she could *joke* at a time like this.

"What?" She grinned, and nodded toward the front, where the town crier was raising the trumpet to his mouth.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen of Alu. The names of Lugal Marus's Sacred Maidens!"

The crowd screamed and yelled and sang and danced. One woman near the very front threw herself at the town crier's feet in religious fervor and had to be dragged away by the guardsmen. He silenced the crowd again, and around me voices calmed, hands stilled, breaths slowed. He paused, waiting silently, his eyes taking in the crowd. Reveling in his moment of glory. Every eye in the place was fixed on his mouth, awaiting the words he'd utter next.

My own blood felt as if it were going to bubble up and burst from my skin.

And then the crier's voice cracked the silence in half. "The first Sacred Maiden is—Simti, Fishmonger's Daughter!"

My mouth dropped open in shock. She was *one of ours*! She did her washing along the river on the same day I did. I'd chatted with her many times. The crowd of my neighbors exploded into celebration while the nobility muttered.

Nanaea gasped in awe. "Can you believe it?" she squealed.

"No," I answered breathlessly.

Simti stood near the back of the crowd in a homespun

tunic that could barely conceal her womanly curves. Her eyes were a rich umber, her skin a burnished brown. Her black plaited hair fell to her shoulders. She looked frightened but pleased as she straightened her tunic and walked steadily to the platform to stand next to the town crier. A woman from the Palace court placed a flower crown on her head and golden beaded necklaces about her neck. A smile broke across her face as she waved to the crowd, and I understood their choice. She truly was beautiful. Extraordinarily so. I was still sure there wouldn't be another girl chosen from against the wall, although in my opinion, Nanaea's beauty outshone even Simti's.

Simti took a step to the side as the town crier opened his mouth wide again, this time not even using the trumpet to assist his booming voice. "The second Sacred Maiden is—Huna, Merchant's Daughter!"

Next to us, a group of wealthy women rejoiced, hugging each other, tears streaming from their eyes. A loud cheer came from a group of merchants near the back of the crowd, no doubt celebrating their success.

Huna, a girl with a bulbous nose and frizzy sable hair chopped below her shoulders strode purposefully to the front, a look of pleased shock on her sallow face as she passed through the crowd to stand next to Simti.

Iltani snorted. "Oh gods, she's a real beauty. I'll bet the Palace only chose her because her father is the richest merchant in the city."

"Is that one of the girls you wanted dead?"

"No, but she'll do." Iltani grinned.

She was absolutely terrible when she wanted to be. But her eyes followed Huna as she lowered her head to be draped in necklaces, and the wistful expression in them told me she wanted—at least with some small part of her—to have the honor herself.

"Let's hope they continue this trend of selecting the wealthy." Dagan walked behind Iltani, to come stand by me.

Nanaea's eyes followed his every move. "You're only saying that because you're rich, Dagan, and that isn't fair. Every girl should be eligible for the honor." She stuck her hand on her hip.

Dagan met my eyes behind her back, his lips compressed. He shook his head. "I never understood it, myself. We can't know for certain *what* lies beyond the grave." He shrugged. "It could be honor. But it could be emptiness. Or horror. We won't know until we cross the river ourselves."

Wealthy or not, it appeared he was on *my* side.

But he was the only one. In the crowd around me, eyes were clenched tightly in prayer, hopeful smiles plastered across faces. Girls clasped hands with one another in a circle, heads bowed, foreheads pressed together. Fathers danced their daughters around in circles while mothers sang into the air, praising Enlil for whatever was to come.

I strained forward, trying to see past others jostling for a good view themselves. Nudging around a man with a little

girl on his shoulders, I managed to get a quick look at the platform. Simti and Huna, beaming, stood shoulder to shoulder, stooping from time to time to toss roses to the crowd from a dwindling pile at their feet. My little brother walked forward to hand a fresh basket of flowers to Simti, and when he looked up, his eyes landed on mine.

“Kasha!” I held up a hand, but he looked away, his cheeks reddening.

My stomach clenched.

That flush on his cheeks wasn’t from embarrassment that I’d shouted his name.

It was the look he’d worn when my mother found out he’d traded one of her necklaces for a poorly carved toy catapult in the Libbu.

It was *guilt*.

He *knew* something.

The crier held his hand up one more time to quiet the chanting of the crowd. “Fine ladies and gentlemen of Alu. There is one more girl who will have the distinct honor of joining the lugal in the afterlife, should he pass.” The crowd hushed as every face turned toward his booming voice like flowers into the sun. Without thinking, I reached for Dagan’s hand and clenched it with all my might.

“The third and final Sacred Maiden is—Nanaea, Healer’s Daughter!”

A collective gasp rose from the crowd as hundreds of faces turned to look at Nanaea. She stood, transfixed by shock.

But I—I couldn’t breathe.

I felt like a fish at the end of a spear, gasping for air. This was a mistake. It *had* to be a mistake. The crowd swam in front of me, wailing and stomping, some in celebration, some howling in rage, their faces transformed by fury that our disgraced family had been given the honor. My knees gave out, and all of a sudden, I was being held up by a pair of strong arms. Dagan pressed his lips to my ear and said something, but I couldn't hear it. I couldn't understand.

The only thing I could see was my little sister, with her bouncing curls and blooming cheeks, turning to me, her face radiant with joy. She tugged me away from Dagan and pressed me to her warm chest, and I clung to her as if I were drowning in a raging river and she was the only one who could swim. Too soon, she untangled herself from my desperate embrace and floated to the platform to join the two other Sacred Maidens. Someone placed a flower crown atop her head and draped a long necklace around her fair neck. She stood on the platform, shining like a star in the heavens, blowing kisses to the cheering crowd.

When I found my voice, I could not contain it. "*Nanaea!*" I screamed, choking on her name.

But others screamed for her louder.

On the platform, she preened like a bird, twirling as if she were already a queen. She was vibrant. Glowing. Blossoming like a rose in the sun. In her mind, this was her chance for glory, and my neighbors in the crowd weren't helping. They drew near her like little moths to a flame, chanting her name and grasping her outstretched hands. For the briefest

of moments, I allowed myself to admire how freely she could give in to her passions. She accepted moments of beauty when they came.

But I always saw the logic of things. And what Nanaea didn't realize was that, although she might end up a queen in the Netherworld, she'd have to cross to the other side in the arms of the Boatman first.

And there was nothing I could do to stop it.

CHAPTER 3



I SANK TO my knees, the feet of rejoicers kicking up sand around me.

“Kammani!” Dagan’s strong arms pulled me from the ground and against the warmth of his body. I turned to stone as his round, bright eyes searched mine. “It will be all right, sweet. Nanaea will be all right. She *wants* to go—” He grasped for any words that might comfort me, even though he knew just as well as I did that nothing would really calm me. Not now.

It would not be all right. Nothing was all right. She was *my sister*. We’d shared a bed since she was born, both of us breathing as one as we drifted to sleep, her head tucked into the crook of my arm. We’d sat at my ummum’s feet while she’d spun the pottery wheel, each taking a turn dipping our hands into the cool, gritty water. But since Kasha had been taken,

our ummum had passed, and our abum had begun drowning her memory with the sikaru, Nanaea was the only person in my family I really had left.

And now the Palace wanted to take her away from me, too.

Iltani rubbed my back, scowling at Dagan. "This isn't the time, you clot. Clearly, the honor is not so wonderful for K! Her sister is going to *die*. And Kammani's already lost so much!"

My head swam with unshed tears. How was I going to explain this to Abum?

"I know." Dagan's voice rumbled against my ear. "I'm sorry. I wish the lugal hadn't gotten sick. Then none of this would even be happening."

"Well, no one can turn back time, so there's no use thinking that way. If Lugal Marus is going to die, then Nanaea is going with him unless we flee the city." Iltani dipped her head low and was chatting with Dagan about the possibilities of getting out—whom we could bribe, how much it would cost—when something she had said dinged in my brain.

I pushed away from Dagan's embrace. "What did you say, Iltani?"

"I said, I think that surely we could get a guardsman to work with us."

"No! Before that."

"I have no idea."

"You said, 'If Lugal Marus is going to die.'"

"Yes. What of it?"

"Well, what if he lives?" I pushed my hair back from my

eyes, looking wildly around the Libbu. The crowds were celebrating, heading toward the festivities near the gates, where musicians were already performing with songs and harps and tambourines. Nanaea and the other two Sacred Maidens, their eyes alight with the honor, were being carried on their cushions by the guardsmen. As Nanaea rocked unsteadily overhead, she threw back her head and laughed. Then her eyes landed on mine and she blew me a kiss.

Her naïveté sealed my decision.

“Are you all right?” Iltani grabbed my hands, my sorrow reflected in her soft eyes.

“Yes. Yes, I am. Because I know a way to prevent Nanaea from becoming a Sacred Maiden altogether.” I rubbed my hands down the sides of my tunic. “I have to go. I have to go to Assata’s.”

“What are you talking about? For sikaru?” Dagan’s voice was even. Calm. But there was no time for calm.

“No! Not for sikaru. Because *my abum* is probably there, drinking his life away. I have to get him. I have to tell him what’s happened and make him go to the Palace.” I turned toward Assata’s Tavern.

“Kammani! Wait! Your abum is in no condition to go anywhere if he’s been at Assata’s.” Dagan gently tugged at my hand. “And besides, he can’t walk into the Palace and start making requests to save his daughter after everything that happened with the malku.” He shrugged apologetically.

I wriggled my hand free of his and pointed to my temple. “My abum is brilliant. He is the greatest healer this city has

ever seen. Even if we have been cast out, he could heal the lugal—”

“—but that doesn’t matter, because nobody would let your abum near him!” Iltani tried to pull me into a hug, but I shook her off, hope surging through me despite her fears.

“I have to go. There’s no time to lose.”

“Are you even listening to me?”

“No, I’m not.”

I took off for the tavern, and within moments, Iltani was at my side, rolling her eyes, disagreeing with me thoroughly, but as loyal as she could possibly be. I glanced back when Dagan didn’t join us. He stood five steps behind, hands on hips, skepticism written all over his handsome face. Boisterous revelers streamed around him like schools of fish around a river stone.

“They won’t listen to him anymore, my sweet. I’m telling you,” he said. “Iltani is right. And—”

I cut him off with a hand. “Dagan?”

He lifted those amber eyes to mine.

“What kind of sister would I be if I didn’t try?”



As we stepped over the threshold, entering the cool, shadowy interior of Assata’s Tavern, Dagan’s arm brushed against mine. The heat from his body seeped into my fingers, and I flushed from chest to cheek, chiding myself for such a foolish reaction when I desperately needed to find my abum.

Assata was one of the rare shop owners in the Palace Libbu to allow poor customers to drink her sikaru. I suspected it was because of her own humble beginnings, although she never liked to speak of her birth in Kemet, outside Alu. Her noble husband, Irra, had bought her the tavern, and she'd made it blossom into the busiest spot in the city, filled with people day and night.

I eased myself through groups of both rich and poor women and men, to a table near the back, where my father had been sitting day after day since my ummum had died. His stool was there, as were three empty tankards and a bowl with bits of braised lentils coating the bottom, but my father was missing.

Iltani edged past a man wobbly on his feet from sikaru. Behind us, a group roared with laughter as another man fell off his stool in a complete stupor. Assata's and Irra's guffaws were the loudest of the lot. Though different physically—Assata was little, wiry and strong, while Irra was round-cheeked with a big belly and a beard voluminous enough to swallow her whole—they could both shake the roof off the tavern with their laughter.

"Three sikarus, Assata!" Dagan called above the din of the crowd.

"I'll be over there directly, Farmer's Son!" Assata wiped down the bar, still chuckling to herself, then grabbed three tankards from the shelf behind her.

"I don't have coins to pay for a drink," I said quietly. "I barely have the shekels to cover the taxes." Plus, aside from

the sack of barley, I hadn't gotten any food for the evening meal. And I'd probably need several rounds of tinnuru bread, as well, to help Abum soak up the sikaru.

"It's my treat. For both of you."

I clasped my hands together. "I don't need your charity."

"I know that." His eyes tightened at the corners.

"Oh, relax." Iltani snorted. "After the morning we've had, you need it."

One will not hurt. I am not my abum, after all.

We sat on the stools around the table, Dagan situating himself across from me, his knees grazing mine.

The sikaru would definitely calm my nerves, but besides the effect that too much of it had on my abum, accepting the gift bothered me because it was pushing me closer to an acceptance of the betrothal. Like I needed him to take care of me, when I had everything under control.

His mother already considered me a daughter of sorts, having a house full of sons but never a girl of her own. And I'd seen the way Dagan had been looking at me for the past year. His eyes landing softly on mine while we walked to fetch water. Or his hand lingering on my arm when assisting me into his cart. As for how I felt . . . my insides squirmed.

Sitting across from me, so easy in his own skin, he was certainly the most attractive man in Alu, and I'd never find anyone as kind, or as *willing*, as Iltani repeatedly reminded me, but I was already drowning in other responsibilities. The last thing I needed was a marriage and children while also

trying to prevent my sister from skipping happily to her death and my father from drinking himself to his. Never mind the fact that I wanted to be a healer—and a great one, at that—more than anything in the world.

“Do you think she’s seen your abum?” Iltani asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

“This is probably his mess.” I nodded to the tankards at the table, which were promptly swept away by one of Assata’s barmaids. “Do you think he’d go a day without sikaru? And she feels sorry for him and lets him run a tab, which is probably fifty minas at this point.”

“It’s a full talent and thirty more minas on top of that,” Assata intoned as she clunked a tankard of sikaru in front of each of us, her cheeks flushed red under her warm brown skin. “And it doesn’t need to be repaid anytime soon.” She nodded toward my cup, sweeping a black braid away from her forehead with her forearm. “I added honey and cloves to yours.”

“You remembered.”

She winked. “Of course I did.”

“Has he been here?” I took a sip of the sweet, bubbly concoction. It slid crisply down my throat.

“He has indeed. Damn near cleaned me out of the duck. He had three full bowls and then asked for some figs for dessert!”

“That sounds delicious. When you get one for me, fill it to the brim, if you’d be so kind.” Dagan patted his flat belly,

and my eyes wandered to the taut muscles of his abdomen. Heat crept into my face and I looked away, pushing all other thoughts aside so I could concentrate on the real reason I'd come.

"Do you know where he's gone? I need him to present himself to the lugal. I'm not sure if you've heard."

"Nanaea's been chosen. Yes, I heard." Assata stood, her serving tray on one hip, eyes soft on mine. "She's so beautiful—and so is that other girl. I'm not surprised, to be honest."

I nodded, my eyes falling to my hands. "But I need to find my father so he can go heal the lugal and stop this."

Assata raised her eyebrow at the comment. "Why would you want to do that?"

I sighed. She didn't understand. Nobody did. "Never mind. I just want to know where he is."

"He left out the back door and hasn't returned." Her lips pursed as she studied me. "You need some of this duck," she declared, changing the subject with practiced ease. "You look thin."

"It'd be my honor to treat you," Dagan offered.

Iltani kicked me under the table before I could protest.

"Fine." I sighed, my stomach aching with emptiness. Even if I wanted to refuse, I wasn't sure my body would allow it. "My thanks."

"Kammani," Dagan said. "I know you are searching for a solution here, but you know as well as I that your abum can't walk into the Palace and tell the lugal he can heal him." He looked pointedly at Assata. "Don't you agree?"

"Is that your plan, Kammani? Trying to heal the lugal? It's a noble one, because Enlil knows he's been better than my old ruler in Kemet." Assata shifted her serving tray to her other hip.

"Yes, Assata. If I can get him to heal the lugal, then Nanaea will stay with me." I swallowed roughly, fiddling with my cask of sikaru.

"Well, your abum *is* the best healer in the entire city. Everyone knows that, even if they've forgotten temporarily."

"Everyone but the Palace," Dagan said. "If they believed it, they would have sent for him already." He shrugged an apology. "Besides, the Palace *has* their own healer. Wouldn't he have tried everything by now?"

"He has a point." Iltani slurped her sikaru noisily.

I nudged her elbow so it slipped off the table. Mead spilled down the front of her tunic, and she laughed, spewing more from her mouth.

"Their A-zu is probably worthless, considering the lugal is dying," I muttered. "And my abum tries things that others do not! Even with the little malku." I lowered my voice. "He was as good as dead the second he hit the ground, yet my abum did everything he could to heal him for three days. There was nothing else he could have done."

"Sure, but people don't believe that. They think he failed," Dagan said, his tone apologizing for his words.

"Which is a *lie*!" I slammed my hand on the table, sloshing the sikaru from our cups and drawing curious glances from those around me.

Dagan reached across to touch me, thought better of it, and withdrew his hand into his lap. We sat, each of us lost in our own thoughts, sipping our sikarus, trying to work some way out of this mess. Assata left to tend to another table, then came back, lifting our tankards, wiping the spills from the heavy wood.

Dagan brightened and reached across the table. My hand disappeared inside his. “Kammani! Why don’t *you* go?”

Iltani, Assata, and I all looked each other.

“Me?”

“Yes! Who else? Aside from your abum, you’re the best healer in the entire city, and you haven’t been tainted with failure as he has, either.”

Oh. But I have. He just doesn’t know. “Although your faith in me is sweet—”

“—and warranted,” Dagan added, and pursed his lips. He knew what I was about to say.

“I’m not the best person for this job.” I swallowed thickly. “I couldn’t . . . risk it.”

Under the table, Iltani squeezed my hand.

He blew his breath out. He knew he wouldn’t win. We’d spent many turns of the sundial on his farm arguing over things, so he knew I was tenacious when my mind was set.

Then a thought occurred to me as Iltani waved to one of Assata’s tavern maids for a refill, and I sat up just a little bit straighter.

“Assata—can you call for a messenger?”

"I suppose, but why?"

"If my abum can't walk into the Palace and tell them about all the people he has healed since the malku died, then a messenger could just spread the word in the Palace about his triumphs. How he, Shalim the great A-zu, may have made a costly mistake in the past, but he is incredibly skilled *now*. He's healed all of these hundreds of people *since*. Then maybe Ensi Uruku and Nin Arwia would hear the gossip and they'd call him in to help."

Iltani groaned. "This is an even worse plan than the one before. I love you, Kammani, but you are unmoored."

Dagan rubbed his chin. "I disagree. We know he personally wouldn't be believed, but if others were spreading the word about the people he's healed in the last few years, then the Palace may come to their own conclusions and call him back." Dagan nodded, sipping from his tankard. "It's smart. It plays to their arrogance."

Assata snapped her fingers just as Iltani opened her mouth to argue. "If that's your decision, then it appears we have the right person for the job, Kammani girl."

I turned as a boy with black curls, wearing a crisp white tunic and a self-sure grin, weaved around men twice his size.

"Kasha." My chest swelled with love for this boy. Although he'd failed to warn me about Nanaea's being chosen and had stayed away from our home of late, I couldn't help but forgive him. He was my brother.

I enveloped him in a hug, and a heady scent of incense

wafted from his clothing. Cloves, something smoky, and earth. I held him for just a little longer than he liked, and he wiggled out of my embrace.

"Aren't you supposed to be with the town crier? Will you be punished?" I held him at arm's length.

"No." He shrugged. "He gave me some time to myself. I thought I might come in here to see Abum, but he already left."

My heart squeezed as I took in his deep brown eyes and noble nose, the precise image of my abum stamped upon this little face.

"And what is this smell?" I demanded. "You're scented like the perfumer's stall."

"Sit, sit!" Dagan patted the stool next to him.

A bit of arrogance crept into Kasha's eyes as he lifted his chin and sat carefully next to Dagan. "I was bringing the Sacred Maidens their scents, Sister. They were given spices to wear before returning home to pack up their belongings. I had to run and fetch the bottles." He blushed, his skin flaming red. "I spilled some."

"Speaking of the Maidens," I began, "why didn't you stop by our hut to warn me that Nanaea would be chosen? Do you not find it terrible?"

"Because you'd have that scowl on your face, as you do now," Kasha answered, squirming under my gaze. "I knew how you'd feel."

I was certain he did. Nanaea was, after all, his sister, too. And he'd lost more than I. "It's going to be okay, Brother. I have a solution."

My words tumbled from my mouth as I explained his task while Assata flitted away to fetch us bowls of duck. She brought them back in no time, clanking the meals down in front of us. The meat, glistening in a sauce with braised lentils and topped with watercress, steamed into our midst, and we all dove in. I nearly swooned with the richness of the first bite and had to stop myself from devouring it like a wild animal. I hadn't had a meal like that in far too long.

Around bites, I prompted Kasha, who'd taken to chatting with Dagan about one of his little brothers at the farm. "So, what do you think?"

Kasha's eyes grew wary. "I suppose I can try," he mumbled, licking the last bites of duck off his spoon.

"Try? What do you mean, 'try'?" I wiped my mouth on a scrap of linen and folded it neatly next to my bowl.

"No one is going to listen to me, Sister." He settled the spoon carefully back in its bowl, then raised his eyes to mine. "Nobody does."

My heart ached for him then. But I couldn't let it get in my way. Emotions were terrible in that they kept you from what you needed to do most. "Maybe I didn't explain myself well. You don't have to convince anyone of anything. You kind of 'spread the word' about Abum and let them decide to call him on their own."

"No, *you* don't understand. It's meddling with business that doesn't include me. And that kind of thing can get a person whipped. Trust me." His eyes grew wary.

My heart thumped. *Has he learned that personally?* I

swallowed. "Yes, but my darling boy, can't you find a way to do it sneakily? You're one of the best talkers I know! You can do this!"

"Yes, but Kammani, the lugal is going to pass to the Netherworld. There's nothing I can do that will stop it. Besides. If Abum goes there and fails to heal him, he'll be put to death this time. There wouldn't be a third chance." Kasha swallowed thickly. I reached across the table and squeezed his hand.

His words hit me like a brick. I *couldn't* lose my abum. My mentor. The only parent I had left. Not after everything else that I'd lost. I tried to calm myself as I stroked Kasha's fingers. But there was no way my abum couldn't heal the lugal. He was too good. The malku situation had been an accident. And besides, wasn't Nanaea's life worth the risk?

I softened my tone, sensing my little brother's unease, and took both his hands in mine. "Kasha, we have to do *something*. We can't let Nanaea go to her grave without trying. You're smart, and the only one who lives at the Palace. Can't you try?"

Kasha shook his head. "The matter is done, Sister. I'm not going to put myself at risk when Nanaea herself wants the honor."

How was I going to convince this boy? This boy trying to be a man. He didn't have the foresight to realize that this was the only way to save Nanaea. Why wouldn't he see that I needed him to do this for us? Tears pricked my eyes, and I gritted my teeth. "Kasha, please. After everything that's

happened, we are still family. That's what Ummum always said. We stick together no matter what. Why can't you see that?"

"Kammani, hey," Dagan chimed in, stroking my arm gently. "Ease up. Let him go."

"What?" I asked.

And then I looked down at my hands joined with my brother's across the table. I was squeezing his so tightly I could feel the little bones inside. My knuckles were white. I immediately let go but couldn't stop my hands from trembling.

"Sister! What's wrong with you?" Kasha winced, rubbing his fingers.

I stood, knocking over my stool. "I don't know." My head swam, and suddenly everything was too loud. "I'm so sorry." I reached for him, but he pulled away.

"Kammani, let's go. Let's get out of here and get some fresh air, okay?" Iltani's cool hands guided me from the table, and I found myself stumbling toward the door under her arm. Dagan stood, ready to follow me outside. Next to him, Assata placed a hand on his arm and shook her head. Panicked, I pushed myself away from Iltani and out of the dimness of Assata's tavern into the bright sunshine before the tears overtook me.

I stumbled to a bench beneath an olive tree and wilted onto it, my face in my hands.

Promise me—no more tears. Just—strength. You're the only one who can help.

The voice of my dead mother rang in my ears. I had to stay strong for Nanaea and take care of her. As the oldest, it was my responsibility. And besides, even if it weren't, I was the only one left who could.

Taking deep breaths, I forced back my choking tears as Iltani eased herself down beside me. When I looked up, I was collected, although the tears were thick in my throat. I stared across the expanse of the Libbu, where festivities were in full swing. Nanaea, Simti, and the other Maiden were dancing on the platform, surrounded by fire throwers and jugglers. A crowd danced at their feet.

"Kammani, I think your plans are a mess, but I am your friend and I will help you figure something else out."

"I will think of something else. It is not your burden to bear." I reached a hand over and squeezed hers. "I thank you for the offer, though."

"Well, you don't *have* to do it alone, you know. I'm here if you need me." She plucked a branch from the olive tree and stripped it of its leaves. "Kasha will come around. He's already been through so much, so he knows how bad it will feel to lose her." She smiled sadly. "And even if he doesn't, I'm willing to help you." A group of noisy young men already in their cups walked by, crowing at us both.

I turned away. "And I appreciate it. I do. But I'm fine. I'm going to go to the hut and think of what to do." There was a part of me that wanted to just pack my bags and flee the city with Nanaea—my mother had often told me stories of cities along the river filled with happiness, ruled by gracious lugals

and sarratums who ensured equality. But Nanaea would put up a fight if I tried. She'd been practically glowing when she was selected.

"I can join you. I'm headed that way, of course." Her little mud-brick hut was four down from mine.

A twinge shot up my arms, and I glanced down at the white knuckles of my clenched fists. My nails were cutting into my palms. I let go and shook them out. "I'm going to go alone, if you don't mind. I'd appreciate your thanking Dagan for the sikaru and duck for me, though." In my current state, it would be better for me to cool down by myself. Collect my thoughts. Figure something else out so I didn't try to squeeze the life from the next person who opposed me.

"Don't do this. Don't shut me out. It's heartless, my friend," she grumbled as I stood. Nanaea danced on the other side of the Libbu, lost in her glory, completely unaware of the burden I bore. I brushed sand off my frayed tunic but didn't know why I bothered. It was drab, fraying, and nearly a year too short. Who cared if it was covered in dirt?

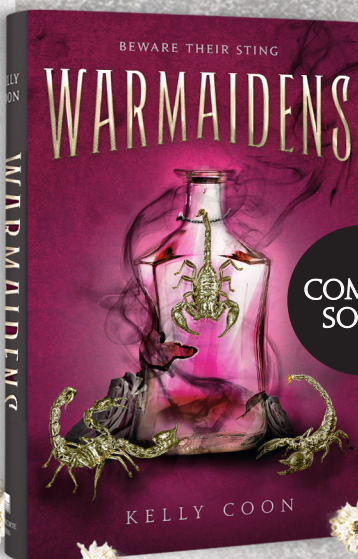
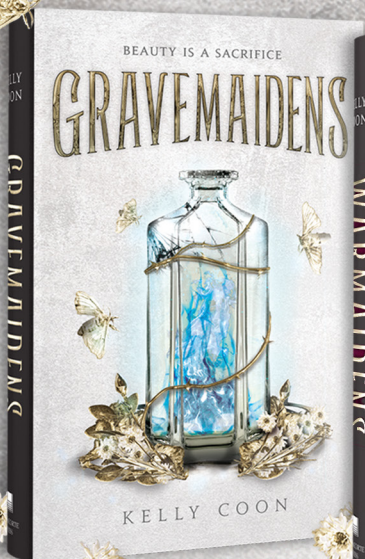
"I'm not heartless." I pinched the bridge of my nose, then dropped my hand. "I'm tired."

"And sad, but you won't let yourself grieve."

"Maybe," I said, looking deeply into her eyes. "But who has time to think about the past when my sister's future is at stake?"

With that, I walked down the pathway toward my hut to find my drunken father and a reason to keep holding on.

BEAUTY IS A SACRIFICE



COMING
SOON

READY TO FIND OUT
WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

[CLICK HERE TO ORDER YOUR COPY OF
GRAVEMAIDS.](#)

[CLICK HERE TO PREORDER YOUR COPY OF
WARMAIDS.](#)



SNEAK PEEK

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Text copyright © 2019 by Amélie Wen Zhao
Jacket art copyright © 2019 by Ruben Ireland
Map illustrations copyright © 2019 by Virginia Allyn

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Delacorte Press, an imprint of Random House Children's Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

Delacorte Press is a registered trademark and the colophon is a trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Visit us on the Web! GetUnderlined.com

Educators and librarians, for a variety of teaching tools,
visit us at RHTeachersLibrarians.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Zhao, Amélie Wen, author.

Title: Blood heir / Amélie Wen Zhao.

Description: First edition. | New York : Delacorte Press, [2019] |

Summary: A fugitive princess with a deadly Affinity and a charismatic crime lord forge an unlikely alliance in order to save themselves, each other, and the kingdom.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018043780 | ISBN 978-0-525-70779-0 (hardback) |

ISBN 978-0-593-11847-4 (intl. tr. pbk.) | ISBN 978-0-525-70781-3 (ebook) |

Subjects: CYAC: Ability—Fiction. | Magic—Fiction. | Fantasy.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.Z5125 B1 2019 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

The text of this book is set in 11.5-point Adobe Caslon.
Interior design by Ken Crossland

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

Random House Children's Books supports the First Amendment
and celebrates the right to read.

FREE SAMPLE COPY—NOT FOR RESALE

BLOOD HEIR

KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK....



1

The prison bore a sharp resemblance to the dungeons of Anastacya's childhood: dark, wet, and made of unyielding stone that leaked grime and misery. There was blood here, too; she could sense it all, tugging at her from the jagged stone steps to the torch-blackened walls, lingering at the edges of her consciousness like an ever-present shadow.

It would take so very little—a flick of her will—for her to control it all.

At the thought, Ana twined her gloved fingers tighter around the worn furs of her hood and turned her attention back to the oblivious guard several paces ahead. His varyshki bull-leather boots clacked in smooth, sharp steps, and if she listened closely enough, she could hear the faint jingle of the goldleaves she'd used to bribe him in his pockets.

She was not a prisoner this time; she was his customer, and that sweet rattle of coins was a constant reminder that he was—for now—on her side.

Still, the torchlight cast his flickering shadow on the walls around them; it was impossible not to see this place as the fabric of her nightmares and hear the whispers that came with.

Monster. Murderer.

Papa would have told her that this was a place filled with demons, where the vilest men were held. Even now, almost a year after his death, Ana found her mouth running dry as she imagined what he would say if he saw her here.

Ana shoved those thoughts away and kept her gaze straight ahead. Monster and murderer she might be, but that had nothing to do with her task at hand.

She was here to clear her name of treason. And it all depended on finding one prisoner.

"I'm telling you, he won't give you nothing." The guard's coarse voice pulled her from the whispers. "Heard he was on a mission to murder someone high-profile when he was caught."

He was talking about the prisoner. *Her* prisoner. Ana straightened, grasping for the lie she had rehearsed over and over again. "He'll tell me where he hid my money."

The guard threw her a sympathetic glance over his shoulder. "You'd best be spending your time somewhere nicer and sunnier, meya dama. More'n a dozen nobles have bribed their way into Ghost Falls to see him, and he's given 'em nothing yet. He's made some powerful enemies, this Quicktongue."

A long, drawn-out wail pierced the end of his sentence, a scream so tortured that the hairs on Ana's neck rose. The guard's hand flitted to the hilt of his sword. The torchlight cut his face, half in flickering orange, half in shadow. "Cells are gettin' full of 'em Affinites."

Ana's steps almost faltered; her breath caught sharply, and she let it out again, slowly, forcing herself to keep pace.

Her disquiet must have shown on her face, for the guard said quickly, "Not to worry, meya dama. We're armed to the

teeth with Deys'voshk, and the Affinites're kept locked in special blackstone cells. We won't go near 'em. Those deimhovs are locked in safe."

Deimhov. Demon.

A sickly feeling stirred in the pit of her stomach, and she dug her gloved fingers into her palm as she cinched her hood tighter over her head. Affinites were usually spoken of in hushed whispers and fearful glances, accompanied by tales of the handful of humans who had Affinities to certain elements. Monsters—who could do great things with their powers. Wield fire. Hurl lightning. Ride wind. Shape flesh. And then there were some, it was rumored, whose powers extended beyond the physical.

Powers that no mortal being should have. Powers that belonged either to the Deities or to the demons.

The guard was smiling at her, perhaps to be friendly, perhaps wondering what a girl like her, clad in furs and velvet gloves—worn, though clearly once luxurious—was doing in this prison.

He would not be smiling at her if he knew what she was.

Who she was.

Her world sharpened into harsh focus around her, and for the first time since she'd stepped into the prison, she studied the guard. Cyrilian Imperial insignia—the face of a roaring white tiger—carved proudly upon his blackstone-enforced breastplate. Sword at his hip, sharpened so that the edges sliced into thin air, made of the same material as his armor—a half-metallic, half-blackstone alloy impervious to Affinite manipulation. And, finally, her gaze settled on the vial of green-tinged liquid that dangled from his belt buckle, its tip curved like the fang of a snake.

Deys'voshk, or Deities' Water, the only poison known to subdue an Affinity.

She had stepped, once again, into the fabric of her nightmares. Dungeons carved of cold, darker-than-night blackstone, and the bone-white smile of her caretaker as he forced spice-tinged Deys'voshk down her throat to purge the monstrosity she'd been born with—a monstrosity, even in Affinites' terms.

Monster.

Beneath her gloves, her palms were slick with sweat.

"We have a good selection of employment contracts up for sale, meya dama." The guard's voice seemed very far away. "With the amount of money you've offered to see Quicktongue, you'd be better off signing one or two Affinites. They're not here for any serious crimes, if that's your concern. Just foreigners without documents. They make for cheap labor."

Her heart stammered. She'd heard of this corruption. Foreign Affinities lured to Cyrilia with promises of work, only to find themselves at the traffickers' mercy when they arrived. She'd even heard whispers of guards and soldiers across the Empire falling into the pockets of the Affinite brokers, gold-leaves flowing into their pockets like water.

Ana had just never expected to meet one.

She tried to keep her voice steady as she replied, "No, thank you."

She had to get out of this prison as fast as possible.

It was all that she could do to keep planting one foot ahead of the other, to keep her back straight and chin high as she had been taught. As always, in the blind mist of her fear, she

turned her thoughts to her brother—Luka would be brave; he would do this for her.

And she had to do this for him. The dungeons, the guard, the whisperm, and the memories they brought back—she'd endure it all, and endure it a hundred times over, if it meant she could see Luka again.

Her heart ached as she thought of him, but her grief was an endless black hole; it wouldn't do to sink into it now. Not when she was so close to finding the one man who could help her clear her name.

"Ramson Quicktongue," barked the guard, drawing to a stop outside a cell. "Someone here to collect." A jangle of keys; the cell door swung open with a reluctant screech. The guard turned to her, raising his torch, and she saw his eyes pass over her hood again. "He's inside. I'll be here—give me a shout once you're ready to be let back out."

Drawing a sharp breath to summon her courage, Ana threw back her shoulders and stepped into the cell.

The rancid smell of vomit hit her, along with the stench of human excrement and sweat. In the farthest corner of the cell, a figure slumped against the grime-covered wall. His shirt and breeches were torn and bloody, his wrists chafed from the manacles that locked him to the wall. All she could see was matted brown hair until he raised his head, revealing a beard covering half of his face, filthy with bits of food and grime.

This was the criminal mastermind whose name she'd forced from the lips of almost a dozen convicts and crooks? The man on whom she had pinned all her hopes for the past eleven moons?

She froze, however, as his eyes focused on her with sharp

intent. He was young—much younger than she'd expected for a renowned crime lord of the Empire. Surprise twanged in her stomach.

"Quicktongue," she said, testing her voice, and then louder—"Ramson Quicktongue. Is that your real name?"

A corner of the prisoner's mouth curled in a grin. "Depends on how you define 'real.' What's real and what's not tends to get twisted in places like these." His voice was smooth, and he had the faint lilt of a crisp, high-class Cyrilian accent. "What's *your* name, darling?"

The question caught her off guard. It had been nearly a year since she'd exchanged pleasantries with anyone other than May. *Anastacya Mikhailov*, she wanted to say. *My name is Anastacya Mikhailov.*

Except it wasn't. Anastacya Mikhailov was the name of the Crown Princess of Cyrilia, drowned eleven moons past in her attempt to escape execution for murder and treason against the Cyrilian Crown. Anastacya Mikhailov was a ghost and a monster who did not, and should not, exist.

Ana fisted her hands tightly over the clasp of her hood. "My name is none of your concern. How fast can you find someone within the Empire?"

The prisoner laughed. "How much can you pay me?"

"Answer the question."

He tilted his head, his mouth a mocking curve. "Depends on who you're looking for. Several weeks, perhaps. I'll trace my network of wicked spies and twisted crooks to your precious person of concern." He paused and clasped his hands together, his chains jangling loudly with the movement. "*Hypothetically,*

of course. There are limits to even what *I* can do from inside a prison cell.”

Already it felt from their conversation as though she were walking a tightrope, and a single misplaced word could send her plunging. Luka had gone over the basics of negotiation with her; the memory lit like a candle inside the darkness of the cell. “I don’t have several weeks,” Ana said. “And I don’t need *you* to do anything. I just need a name and a location.”

“You drive a hard trade, my love.” Quicktongue grinned, and Ana narrowed her eyes. From the sleazy way he spoke and the glint of glee in his eyes, it was clear he found amusement in her desperation, though he had no idea who she was and why she was here. “Luckily, I don’t. Let’s make a deal, darling. Free me from these shackles, and I’m yours to command. I’ll find your handsome prince or worst enemy within two weeks, be it at the ends of the Aramabi Desert or the skies of the Kemeiran Empire.”

His drawl set Ana’s nerves on edge. She could guess at how these conniving criminals worked. Give them what they wanted and they’d stab you in the back faster than you could blink.

She would not fall into his trap.

Ana reached into the folds of her worn cloak, drawing out a piece of parchment. It was a copy of one of the sketches she’d made in the early days after Papa’s death, when the nightmares woke her in the middle of the night and that face haunted her through every second of her days.

In a swift motion, she unfurled the parchment.

Even in the dimness of the guard’s flickering torchlight outside, she could make out the contours of her sketch: that bald

head and those melancholy, overlarge eyes that made the subject appear almost childlike. “I’m looking for a man. A Cyrilian alchemist. He practiced medicine at the Salskoff Palace some time ago.” She paused, and dared a wager. “Tell me his name, and where to find him, and I’ll free you.”

Quicktongue’s attention had been drawn to the image the second she showed it, like a starved wolf to prey. For a moment, his face was still, unreadable.

And then his eyes widened. “*Him*,” he whispered, and the word bloomed into hope in her heart, like the warmth of the sun dawning upon a long, long night.

At last.

At last.

Eleven moons of solitude, of hiding, of dark nights in the cold boreal forests of Cyrilia and lonely days trawling through town after town—eleven moons, and she’d finally, *finally* found someone who knew the man who had murdered her father.

Ramson Quicktongue, the bartenders and pub crawlers and bounty hunters had whispered to her when they each returned empty-handed from their search for a phantom alchemist. Most powerful crime lord in the Cyrilian underbelly, vastest network. He could track down a noblewoman’s guzhbkyn gerbil on the other side of the Empire within a week.

Perhaps they’d been right.

It was all Ana could do to keep her hands steady; she was so focused on his reaction that she almost forgot to breathe.

Quicktongue’s eyes remained fixed on the portrait, entranced, as he reached for it. “Let me see.”

Her heart drummed wildly as she rushed forward, stumbling slightly in her haste. She held out the sketch, and for a

long moment, Quicktongue leaned forward, his thumb brushing a corner of her drawing.

And then he sprang at her. His hand snapped around her wrist in a viselike grip, the other clapping over her mouth before she had a chance to scream. He gave her a sharp tug forward, twisting her around and holding her close to him. Ana made a muffled sound in her throat as the stench of his unwashed hair hit her. "This doesn't have to end badly." His tone was low when he spoke, his earlier nonchalance replaced by a sense of urgency. "The keys are hanging outside, by the door. Help me get out, and I'll give you whatever information on whomever you want."

She wrenched her face free from his filthy hand. "Let me go," she growled, straining against his hold, but his grip only tightened. Up close, beneath the torchlight, the hard-edged glint of his hazel eyes suddenly took on a wild, almost crazed look.

He was going to hurt her.

Fear spiked in her, and from years of training, a single instinct sliced through her mist of panic.

She could hurt him, too.

Her Affinity stirred, drawn by the warm pulse of his blood, rushing through her and filling her with a sense of power. At her will, every drop of blood in his body could be hers to command.

No, Ana thought. Her Affinity was to be used only as an absolute last resort. As with any Affinite, her power came with tells. The slightest stir of her power turned her irises to crimson and darkened the veins in her forearms—a clear indication of what she was, for those who knew how to look for it. She thought

of the guard outside, of the curve to his vial of Deys'voshk, of the wicked glint of his blackstone sword.

She was so focused on tamping down her Affinity that she didn't see it coming.

Quicktongue's hand darted out and flicked the hood off her head.

Ana stumbled back, but the damage was done. Quicktongue stared at her eyes, the anticipation on his face giving way to triumph. He'd seen the crimson of her irises; he'd *known* to look for it—for the tell to her Affinity. A grin twisted his mouth even as he let go of her and yelled, "Affinite—*help!*"

Before she could fully realize that she had fallen into his trap after all, sharp footsteps sounded behind her.

Ana spun. The guard burst into the cell, his blackstone sword raised, the green tint of Deys'voshk he'd poured over the blade catching the torchlight.

She dodged. Not fast enough.

She felt the sharp bite of the blade on her forearm as she stumbled to the other side of the cell, her breath ragged. The sword had sliced through her glove, the fabric peeling open to reveal a faint trickle of blood.

The world narrowed, for a moment, into those droplets of blood, the slow curve of their path down her wrist, the shimmer of the beads as they caught the torchlight, glinting like rubies.

Blood. She felt her Affinity awakening to the call of her element. Ana ripped off the glove, hissing at the sting of the open air on her wound.

It had started—the veins running up her arm had darkened to a bruised purple, protruding from her flesh in jagged streaks. She knew how this looked; she'd stared at herself in the mirror

for hours on end, eyes swollen from crying and arms bleeding from having tried to scratch out her veins.

A whisper found her in the dark.

Deimhov.

Ana looked up and met the guard's gaze just as he raised his torch.

Horror twisted his features as he backed toward Quicktongue's corner and pointed his sword at her.

Ana swiped a finger across her wound. It came away wet, with a smudge of green-tinted liquid that mingled with her blood.

Deys'voshk. Her heart raced, and memories flickered through her mind: the dungeons, Sadov forcing the bitter liquid down her throat, the weakness and dizziness that followed. And, inevitably, the emptiness where her Affinity had once been, as though she'd lost her sense of sight or smell.

The years she'd spent downing this poison in the hopes of cleansing her Affinity from her body had, instead, resulted in a tolerance to Deys'voshk. Whereas the poison blocked most Affinites' abilities almost instantaneously, Ana had fifteen, sometimes twenty, minutes before it rendered her Affinity useless. In a desperate bid to survive, her body had adapted.

"You move and I'll cut you again," the guard growled, his voice unsteady. "You filthy Affinite."

A jangle of metal, a flash of tangled brown hair. Before either of them could do anything, Quicktongue snapped his chains around the guard's neck.

The guard let out a choked gasp as he clawed at the chains that now dug into his throat. From the shadows behind him, Ramson Quicktongue's smile sliced white.

Bile rose in Ana's throat, and a wave of dizziness hit her as the poison began to work its way through her. She clutched at the wall, sweat beading on her forehead despite the cold.

Quicktongue turned to her, holding the struggling guard close. His expression was now predatory, his earlier nonchalance sharpened to the hunger of a wolf. "Now, let's try this again, darling. The keys should be hanging on a nail outside the cell door—standard protocol before a guard steps into a cell. The set for my chains are the fork-shaped iron ones, fourth down in the row. Unlock me, get us both out of here unscathed, and we can talk about your alchemist."

Ana steadied herself against the tremors in her body, her gaze darting between Quicktongue and the guard. The guard's eyes rolled back into his head, and spittle bubbled at his mouth as he choked for air.

She had known how dangerous Quicktongue was when she had come searching for him. Yet she had never expected him, a prisoner shackled to the stone walls of Ghost Falls, to get this far.

Unchaining him would be a terrible, terrible mistake.

"Come, now." Quicktongue's voice grounded her to the horrifying choice. "We don't have much time. In about two minutes, the next shift will be here. You'll be thrown into one of these cells and sold off in some work contract—and we all know how *that* goes. And I'll still be here." He shrugged and tightened his chains. The guard's cheeks bulged. "If that's the scenario you prefer, then I must say I'm disappointed."

The shadows in the room were swaying, contorting. Ana blinked rapidly, trying to steady her racing pulse against the first stage of the poison. Next would come the chills and the

vomiting. And then the sap in her strength. All the while, her Affinity would be diminishing like a candle burning to the end of its wick.

Think, Ana, she told herself, clenching her teeth. Her eyes darted around the cell.

She could torture the man while she still had her Affinity. She could draw his blood, hurt him, threaten him, and get the location of her alchemist.

Tears pricked at her eyes, and she shut them against the images that threatened to crowd into her mind. Amid all her memories, one burned as brightly as a flame in the chaos. *You are not a monster, sistrika*. It was Luka's voice, steady and firm. *Your Affinity does not define you. What defines you is how you choose to wield it*.

That's right, she thought, drawing a deep breath and trying to anchor herself in her brother's words. She was not a torturer. She was not a monster. She was good, and she would not subject this man—no matter how dark his intentions—to the same horrors she had once been through.

Which left her with one option.

Before she knew it, she had crossed the room and snatched the keys from the wall, and was fumbling at the prisoner's chains. They fell with a click. Quicktongue sprang away from them and darted across the room in the blink of an eye, rubbing his chafed wrists. The guard slumped to the floor, unconscious, his breath wheezing through his half-open mouth.

A fresh wave of nausea rolled over Ana. She clung to the wall. "My alchemist," she said. "We had a deal."

"Ah, him." Quicktongue strode to the cell door and peered outside. "I'm going to be honest with you, love. I have no idea

who that man is. Good-bye.” In the blink of an eye, he was on the other side of the bars. Ana lurched forward, but the cell door swung shut with a clang.

Quicktongue jangled the keys at her. “Don’t take it too personally. I *am* a con man, after all.”

He threw a mock salute, spun on his heels, and disappeared into the darkness.



2

For a moment, Ana only stood, staring at his retreating back, feeling as though the world were disappearing beneath her feet. *Conned by a con man.* A bitter laugh wheezed from her throat. Had she not expected that? Perhaps, after all these months she'd spent learning to survive on her own, she was really only a naïve princess who couldn't survive beyond the walls of the Salskoff Palace.

Her wound throbbed, a trickle of blood and Deys'voshk winding gently down her arm, filling the air with its metallic tang.

Her Affinity stirred.

No, Ana thought suddenly, touching a finger to her wound. The drops of blood seemed to pulse at her fingertips. No, she was not just a naïve princess. Princesses did not have the power to control blood. Princesses did not murder innocent people in broad daylight in the middle of a town square. Princesses were not monsters.

Something snapped within her, and suddenly she was choking on years of built-up ire, churning with nauseating familiarity.

No matter what she did, no matter how good she tried to be, she always ended up as the monster.

The rest of the world dimmed, and then there was only the blood trickling down her arm and onto the floor in slow, singular droplets.

You want me to be the monster? Ana lifted her gaze to the corridor where Ramson had disappeared. *I'll be the monster.*

Reaching into that twisted place within her, Ana stretched her Affinity.

It was like lighting a candle. The shadows that had been pulling at her senses burst into light as her Affinity reached out to the very element that made her monstrous: blood.

It was everywhere: inside every prisoner in the cells surrounding her, splattered and streaked on the filthy walls like paint, from vivid red to faded rust. She could close her eyes and not see, but *feel* it, shaping the world around her and gradually, several corridors down, fading into nothingness beyond her reach. She sensed it coursing through veins, as powerful as rivers and as quiet as streams, or still and stale as death.

Ana stretched her hands, feeling as though she was breathing in deeply for the first time in a long time. All this blood. All this power. All hers to command.

She found the con man easily, the adrenaline pumping through his body lighting him like a blazing torch among flickering candles. She focused her Affinity on his blood and pulled.

A strange sense of exhilaration filled her as the blood obeyed, every drop in Quicktongue's body leaping to her desire. Ana drew a deep breath and realized that she was *smiling*.

Little monster, a voice whispered in her mind—only, this time, it was her own. Perhaps Sadv had been right after all.

Perhaps there was some twisted part of her that was monstrous, no matter how hard she tried to fight it.

A shout rang out in the hallway, followed by a thud, then sounds of scuffling. And then slowly, from the darkness, a foot emerged. Then a leg. And then a filthy torso. She dragged him to her by his blood, savoring the way it leapt at her control, the way he jerked like a marionette under her power.

Outside her cell, Quicktongue writhed on the ground. “Stop,” he panted. A red blotch appeared on his sweat-stained tunic, soaking through the fabric and filth. “Please—whatever you’re doing—”

Ana reached an arm through the cell bars and seized his collar, wrenching him so close that his face thunked against the metal. “*Silence.*” Her voice was a low snarl. “*You* listen to *me*. From now on, you will obey my every word, or this pain that you feel right now”—she tugged at his blood again, drawing a low moan—“will be just the start.” She heard the words as though someone else were speaking through her lips. “Are we clear?”

He was panting, his pupils dilated, his face pale. Ana tamped down any guilt or pity she might have felt.

It was *her* turn to command. *Her* turn to control.

“Now open the door.”

The con man roused himself in starts and stops, shaking visibly. A sheen of sweat coated his face. He fumbled with the lock, and the cell door squeaked open.

Ana stepped out of the cell and turned to him. The world swayed slightly as another bout of dizziness hit her—yet her stomach clenched in twisted pleasure as Quicktongue cringed. Blots of red were spreading on his shirt where vessels in his skin had broken. Tomorrow these would become ugly bruises that

pocked his body like some hideous disease. *The devil's work*, Sadov had called it. *The touch of the deimhov*.

Ana turned away before she could feel revulsion at what she had done. Her hand automatically darted to her hood, pulling it back over her head to hide her eyes. Her hands and forearms felt heavy, streaked with jagged veins engorged with blood. She tucked her ungloved hand inside her cloak, fingers twisting against the cold fabric, feeling exposed without her glove.

The hairs on her neck rose when she realized that the prison had gone completely silent.

Something was wrong.

The moans and whispers of the other prisoners had quieted, like the calm before a storm. And then, several corridors down, a loud clang sounded.

Ana tensed. Her heart started a drumroll in her chest. "We need to get out of here."

"Deities," cursed Quicktongue. He'd pulled himself up from the ground and sat leaning heavily against the wall, panting, the corded muscles of his neck clenching and unclenching. "Who are you?"

The question came out of nowhere; she could think of a thousand ways to answer. Unbidden, memories flipped through her mind like the pages of a dusty book. A white-marble castle in a wintry landscape. A hearth, a flickering fire, and Papa's deep, steady voice. Her brother, golden-haired and emerald-eyed, his laugh as radiant as the sun. Her aunt, doe-eyed and lovely, head bowed in prayer with her dark braid falling over her shoulder—

She pressed the memories back, replacing the wall that she'd

carefully built over the last year. Her life, her past, her crimes—these were her secrets, and the last thing she needed was for this man to see any weaknesses in her.

Before she could respond, Quicktongue leapt. He moved so fast that she'd barely let out a surprised grunt when his hand clamped down over her mouth again and he spun her behind a stone pillar. "Guards," he whispered.

Ana rammed her knee between his legs. Quicktongue doubled over, but past his furious whisper-curses, she heard the sound of footsteps.

Boots thudded down the dungeon hallway, the rhythmic beat of several guards' steps. She could make out the dim light of a far-off torch, growing brighter. Voices echoed in the corridor and, judging by the sound of laughter, the guards were cracking jokes.

Ana loosed a breath. They hadn't been discovered. These guards were only making their rounds.

Quicktongue straightened and leaned into her as he pressed himself against the pillar. Huddled together, their hearts beating the same prayer, they might have been partners in crime, or even allies. Yet the glare in his eyes reminded her that they were anything but.

She tried not to breathe as the guards passed by the pillar. They were so close that she heard the rustle of their rich fur cloaks, the scuff of their boots on the grimy floor.

A sudden realization hit her. The guard. They had left him unconscious in Quicktongue's cell.

By her side, Quicktongue tensed as well, as though he'd reached the same conclusion. He hissed a curse.

A panicked shout rang out, followed by the ominous squeak of the cell door. Ana squeezed her eyes shut, dread blooming cold in her chest. They had discovered the unconscious guard.

“Listen to me.” Quicktongue’s voice was low and urgent. “I’ve studied the plans of this prison—I know the layout as well as I know the goldleaves in my purse. We both know you’re not getting out of here without my help, and I need your Affinity as well. So I’m asking you to trust me for now. Once we’re out of this damned place, we can go back to tearing each other’s throats out. Sound good?”

She hated him—hated the fact that he had fooled her, and the fact that he was right.

“Fine,” she breathed. “But if you even think of using any tricks, just remember what I can do to you. What I *will* do to you.”

Quicktongue was scanning the corridor ahead, his head cocked as he listened. “Fair enough.”

Beyond their pillar, one of the guards stepped into the cell and desperately shook his fallen comrade. The other two foraged farther into the depths of the dungeons with their swords drawn, torches held high. Hunting.

Quicktongue’s beard tickled her ear. “When I say ‘run’ . . .”

The torchlight grew dimmer.

“*Run.*”

Ana dashed from the pillar. She didn’t think she’d ever run this fast before. Cells flew by on either side of her in dark streaks of color. Down at the end of the corridor, so small that she could have blocked it out with a thumb, was the sliver of light from the exit.

She dared a glance back to find Quicktongue tearing toward her.

“Go!” he shouted. “Don’t stop!”

The light was bright ahead of her, the stone ground hard beneath her pounding feet. And before she knew it, she was at the stairs, careening up two at a time, her breaths ragged in her throat.

She emerged into bright, unyielding daylight.

Immediately, her eyes began to water.

Everything was white—from the marble floors to the high walls to the arched ceilings. Sunlight streamed through the narrow, high windows above their heads, magnified by the marble. This, Ana had read, was part of the prison’s design. The prisoners would have stayed in the darkness underground for so long that they would be blinded as soon as they emerged from the dungeons.

And despite all of her careful reading and research, she had no way out of this trap but to wait for her eyes to adjust.

A loud clang sounded behind her. Through her tears, she saw Quicktongue twisting the key to lock the dungeon doors in place. He hurtled up the steps, three at a time, and when he reached the top, he clamped his hands over his eyes with a curse.

Beyond this hall, somewhere that Ana could not locate, shouts echoed. A faint clattering sound thrummed along the marble floors and reverberated off the blindingly white walls—the sound of boots tapping and weapons being drawn.

The alarm had been raised.

Ana looked at Quicktongue. Through the blur of her tears,

she could make out the look of pure panic that flitted across his face—and Ana realized that, despite all his cunning and bravado, Ramson Quicktongue did not have a plan.

Fear sharpened her wits, and the world shifted into focus as the smarting in her eyes faded. Corridors fanned out in all directions from them: three to her left, three to her right, three before her, three behind her, all identical, all white.

Her head pounded with the effects of the Deys'voshk; she couldn't even remember which way she'd come in. This place was a maze, designed to trap prisoners and visitors like quarry on a spider's web.

Ana seized Quicktongue's shirt. "Which way?"

He peered out from a slit between his fingers and groaned. "The back exit," he mumbled.

She drew a breath. Of course, none of her readings of Ghost Falls—which had been sparse enough to come by already—had mentioned a back exit. The front, Ana knew, had three sets of locked and guarded doors, not to mention a courtyard watched by archers who would stick them like shooting-range targets if they even stepped a toe outside. She'd taken it all in quietly as she'd followed the guard inside—back then as a visitor.

Never, in her wildest imagination, had she thought she would be running from the prison with a convicted criminal in tow and a dozen guards on her trail.

Fury spiked in her; she grasped Quicktongue by his filth-stained tunic and shook him. "You got us into this mess," she snarled. "Now *you* get us out. Which way to the back exit?"

"Second door . . . second door to our right."

Ana hauled him into a run after her. Boots pounded along one of the corridors—she couldn't tell which. At any moment, the reinforcements would be there.

They were halfway down the hallway when a shout rang out behind them. "Stop! Stop in the name of the Kolst Emperor Mikhailov!"

The Glorious Emperor Mikhailov. They flung Luka's name around so casually, so authoritatively. As though they knew anything about her brother. As though they had the *right* to command by his name.

Ana turned to face the prison guards. There were five of them, silver Cyrilian tiger emblazoned against white uniforms, their blackstone swords drawn and flashing in the sunlight. They had come fully equipped, with helmets, too; their attire glittered with the telltale gray-hued alloy.

They snarled at her, spreading out like hunters surrounding an untamed beast. There was once a time when they might have knelt in her presence, when they would have raised two fingers to their chests and drawn a circle in a sign of respect. *Kolst Pryntsesssa*, they would have whispered.

That was long past now.

Ana's fingers curled over her hood, pulling it closer. She raised her other hand, wounded and gloveless, at the guards. Blood trickled down her arm in a lover's spiral, vivid crimson against the dusky olive of her skin.

Nausea stirred in the pit of her stomach, and her throat ached with revulsion. Unlike apprenticed or employed Affinites who had honed their abilities for years, Ana had only a basic and crude control over hers. Fighting this many people at

once could easily mean losing control of her Affinity entirely. It had happened before—nearly ten years earlier—and it made her sick to think of it.

An archer knelt into position, the tips of his arrows glistening with Deys'voshk. Ana swallowed. "Cover me," she said to Quicktongue, and her Affinity roared to life.

Show them what you are, my little monster.

Show them.

She let her Affinity free and it coursed through her, singing and screaming and writhing in her veins. Through the haze of her frenzy, she latched on to the outlines of the five guards, their blood racing through their bodies with a combination of adrenaline and fear.

She held those bonds and gave a sharp, violent pull—

Flesh tore. Blood filled the air. Her Affinity snapped.

The physical world rushed back in a torrent of white marble floors and cold sunlight. Somehow she was on all fours, her limbs trembling as she struggled to breathe. The beige-gold veins of the marble floor spun before her eyes, the Deys'voshk running its course through her head. In less than ten minutes, the onset would be complete; her Affinity would be gone.

She leaned forward, her back arching to a fit of coughs. Crimson spattered the white marble floors.

A hand closed on her shoulder. Ana flinched. Quicktongue crouched by her side, his mouth hanging open as he surveyed the scene.

The corridor was eerily empty. Beyond the stairwell, scattered throughout the hallway, were five crumpled shapes. They lay still in pools of their own blood, the dark stains inching over the floor and creeping across her senses.

The touch of the deimhov.

"Incredible," Quicktongue murmured, looking at her with a mixture of awe and delight. "You're a witch."

She ignored the insult and slumped over the polished marble floor, panting. The use of her Affinity had drained her energy, as it always did.

"Stay here," Quicktongue ordered. Then he was gone.

Ana pushed herself onto her knees. She was suddenly too conscious of the bodies around her, cold and still in their deaths. Their blood hung in her awareness, roaring rivers turned to pools of dead water, eerily silent. The white marble gleamed in contrast to the crimson, sunlight spilling bright on the blood as though to say: *Look. Look what you've done.*

Ana curled forward, wrapping her arms around herself to stop her shaking. *I didn't mean to. I lost control. I didn't ask for this Affinity. I never meant to hurt anyone.*

Perhaps monsters never meant to hurt others, either. Perhaps monsters didn't even know they were monsters.

She counted down from ten to give herself time to stop crying and get off the floor. The blood smeared beneath her palms as she stood. She leaned against the wall and drew in deep breaths, her eyes closing to avert the sight before her.

"Witch!"

Ana started. Quicktongue stood before the second corridor to her right, a cord of rope slung over his shoulder. He waved at her and turned down the hallway, disappearing from sight.

How long had he stood there, watching her break down? She stared after him, unease filtering through the tide of her exhaustion.

"Hurry!" His voice drifted back, echoing slightly.

It took every ounce of her willpower to straighten her spine and hobble after him.

The prison was built like a maze. Kapitan Markov had educated Ana on prison designs when she was only a young girl. His face would crease beneath his gray-peppered hair when he smiled at her, and the familiar smell of his shaving cream and armor metal had grown to soothe her.

In his steady baritone, he had told her that Cyrilian prisons were labyrinths that trapped prisoners who tried to escape, so that the panic and uncertainty had them losing their minds by the time they were recaptured. The outer rings of these maze-prisons were heavily guarded, but guards on the inside were more sparse simply because they shot any prisoners who managed to wander into the outer layers.

She could only hope this back exit of Quicktongue's did not promise such a swift death.

Ahead, the con man moved with predatory grace that reminded her of a panther she'd once seen in an exotic animal show in Salskoff. She caught the wink of a stolen dagger in his hands, the sigil of a white tiger flashing on the hilt.

As though he heard her thoughts, he spared her a glance. "Tired?" he whispered. "That's the price you Affinites pay for your abilities, isn't it? Plus our friend back there gave you a pretty dab of Deys'voshk."

A guard rounded the corner, saving her the pain of thinking up a pithy comeback.

In three light steps, Quicktongue was at his throat. A flash of metal and the guard dropped, the white-tiger hilt protruding

from his chest. Even through her haze of fatigue, Ana could tell that there was a trained precision to Quicktongue's movements, a science to the way he angled his blade.

Quicktongue sheathed his dagger in a practiced stroke. "Almost there," he said.

It grew dimmer, sconces fixed more and more sparsely along the walls. Marble turned into rough-hewn stone, and once or twice Ana thought it would go completely dark. She kept her Affinity flared like a torch, all the while conscious of its diminishing range as the Deys'voshk steadily took over. Even Quicktongue, whose fast-flowing blood should have been easy for her to track, wove in and out of her awareness like a phantom.

Through the rhythmic clack of their heels, another sound had emerged—faint, but growing louder, like the whisper of wind brushing through the tall frost-larches outside her windows.

The sound of . . . water.

They had to be at the back of the prison, then, where the bodies of dead prisoners were dumped along with sewage and waste. Unlike most Cyrilian prisons, which were built atop rivers for easy disposal, Ghost Falls was built atop a cliff sliced through with a waterfall, earning its name. There was even a twist to the old joke: the prisoners were stuck between a cliff and a waterfall.

A cliff and a waterfall.

Her legs felt watery. "Quicktongue," Ana gasped, and then she was shouting. "Quicktongue!"

He'd disappeared around the corner. Ana pushed herself into a run, the churning water growing louder until even her footsteps were muffled by the rushing sound.

The next hallway ended abruptly in a narrow arched door

made of blackstone. Its cold and eerie lightlessness whispered to her.

Quicktongue knelt before the door, his gray tunic a ghostly blur against the blackstone. In the semidarkness, his hands worked with the precision of the Palace physicists Ana had studied with. Something flashed between his fingers; he made a quick downward motion, and the door jarred open.

The muffled pounding sharpened into a roaring sound that reverberated between the stone walls and low ceiling overhead. Quicktongue pushed the door open, and Ana felt her stomach drop.

Beyond the blackstone door, the corridor ended abruptly, as though someone had taken a butter knife and sliced it off neatly. Two large pillars rooted the end of the hallway into the outcrop of cliffs below. The gray-blue sky of Cyralia stretched for miles over their heads, until it met the expanse of glittering snow-covered landscape. Beneath, ice-white waters foamed and plunged downward. Ana's legs grew weak as the familiar fear of water churned within her, carved into the bones of her memory from an incident a long, long time ago. The merciless waters of a river—a very different one—had nearly killed her not once but twice many years past.

Quicktongue was already in motion. He unslung the thick length of rope he'd been hauling. With fluid ease, he looped one end of the rope around a pillar. His fingers wove some kind of complicated knot.

Deities. Ana pressed herself against the back wall and willed her knees not to buckle. *This* was the back exit Quicktongue had spoken of: the open sewer place where they dumped excrement and dead bodies.

And they were going to jump. "I'm not jumping down there with you," she yelled, edging back into the turn of the corridors, behind the blackstone door.

Quicktongue knelt by the ledge. "Not sure how far you got in your schooling, sweetheart, but here's some wisdom from the streets. Anyone who tries to jump down there will die. The impact will shatter your bones."

The waterfall plunged like a roaring beast, fading into a white mist so thick that she couldn't even see the bottom.

Quicktongue tested his knot. The rope stretched taut. "You coming, Witch?"

Ana was almost convinced he was mad. "You just said anyone who tries to jump down there will die."

Quicktongue straightened. Outlined against the misty blue Cyrilian sky, above the frothing white waters, he looked almost heroic. "I did. But, darling, we're not going to jump." He gestured to the length of rope—most of which lay coiled in a heap between them like a snake. The other end looped around the pillar. "I plan to lower us to the river below. I've done the calculations. It'll work." He grinned and brought his index finger and thumb close to each other. "It'll be a *tiny*, dainty step. Like stepping off a carriage. Except . . . off a ledge."

His eyes glinted with mirth, and she wanted to choke him. Deities, she was going to die. Behind her: guards who would imprison her and sell her into indenturement. Before her: a mad con man who was likely going to leap to his death.

"Well?" Quicktongue listed his head. With his trickster's fingers, he'd already tied the other end of the rope securely around his waist and was wagging the last length of it at her. "We've spent a good five minutes getting here. They've raised

the alarm, so more guards'll be on us like bees on honey. You're wasting my time, darling."

Ana turned her gaze back to the waterfall, watching the frothing white waters pound down at speeds that would shatter bone. And suddenly, she imagined herself caught in those currents as she had been ten years ago, the foam and the waves crushing her chest and twisting her limbs and pressing at her lips and nose.

I can't.

Somewhere back in that labyrinth, above the pounding of the waterfall, shouts sounded. She pushed her Affinity out, but it had weakened to the point that all she felt were the faintest wisps of blood. The wound on her arm gave a particularly nasty throb. A few more minutes and there would be nothing left of her Affinity to fight with.

There was no turning back now.

She wanted to cry, but she knew from her years with Sadov in the dungeons that crying achieved nothing. In the face of fear, one could choose to run, or to rise.

So Ana swallowed her nausea, bit back her tears, and lifted her chin as she marched past the blackstone door. The floor was uneven and wet, and a smell—as though something, or many things, had rotted here—choked her as she ventured out farther. "I didn't come here to die, con man," she snapped as she picked her way over to him. "If you try anything, I'll kill you before the water does. And trust me, you'd beg me to let you drown instead."

Quicktongue was balancing on the edge of the white marble floor, holding on to the rope. His lips quirked as he began to strap her tightly against his chest with the last bit of rope on his end. "Fair enough."

Ana inhaled sharply as the rope cut into her back and waist. Quicktongue gave her a crooked grin. "I know I smell, love, but you'll thank me later when you're still alive."

The wind whipped against her face as she shuffled to the edge, where the ground ended and the nothingness began. Her hair tore loose from its austere knot, dark chestnut strands fluttering against an open blue sky.

Quicktongue gave the rope another tug. "Hold tight," he shouted, and despite herself, Ana wrapped both arms around his filthy tunic, keeping her face as far from his chest as possible without straining her neck.

He swung them off the ledge.

Whatever revulsion she'd felt toward Quicktongue dissolved, and she found herself clinging tightly to him as though her life depended on it.

It did.

They dangled right beneath the ledge of Ghost Falls, spiraling gently. The waterfall roared in her ears, so close that she could reach out and touch it. The length of rope connecting them to the pillar tumbled beneath them in a long loop, disappearing into the white mist.

Slowly, Quicktongue began to lower them. His muscles were taut, veins popping from his neck as he placed one hand below the other.

Ana dared a look down. The sight had her gripping Quicktongue more tightly, swallowing her panic. She might have sent a thousand prayers to her Deities, but none would have mattered. In this instant, there was only her and the con man.

Ana looked up. The mist was so thick that she could barely make out the ledge of the prison anymore. That was a good

thing. “How much longer?” she screamed, barely hearing her own voice over the waterfall.

“Almost!” He was shouting, but his words were hardly audible. “We need to get to the end of this rope, or the fall will kill us.”

Ana squinted up. Something—a movement in the mist—had her instinctively grasping for her Affinity. There it was: the faintest wisp, an echo of her powers, still struggling beneath the Deys’voshk.

She frowned as she sensed something through her bonds, so faint that it almost slipped past her.

A gust of wind slammed into them and Ana closed her eyes, trying to block out the dizzying swinging sensation. When she opened them again, the wind had cleared some of the mist. At the top, over the ledge of Ghost Falls, was the outline of an archer, his bow and arrow angled toward them.

“Look out!” she cried, and the first arrow whizzed over their heads.

The second struck Quicktongue.

He grunted in pain as it grazed his shoulder, slicing open his sleeve and drawing blood. Ana bit back a scream as Quicktongue’s grip slipped against the slick rope. They lurched, spinning wildly, a hand’s breadth from being battered to death by the waterfall. Above, the archer nocked another arrow.

Below, she saw the end of the length of rope, looping up to connect to Quicktongue’s waist. The end of the rope. They had to get to the end of the rope, or they would die.

Ana reached into herself, digging until she was nothing but blood and bone. And she found it, the last remnants of her

Affinity, as faint as a dying candle, still fighting against the Deys'voshk.

Ana stretched out her hand and latched on to the blood of the archer. And pushed.

The archer tensed and swayed for a second, as though a sudden gust of wind had hit him. Ana let her hand fall. Warmth trickled down her lip and she tasted her own blood.

That was it. The Deys'voshk had won; she had no more to give.

But it had been enough to distract the archer and get them to the end of the rope.

Quicktongue let go and reached to his hip. His dagger glinted dull silver. He leaned toward Ana, his eyes narrowed, his expression sharpened to dead, lethal calm. "Don't struggle, don't move. Just hold on to me. Feetfirst, toes pointed."

She had barely processed his words, barely let a taste of fear reach the tip of her tongue.

Quicktongue raised his arm. "First step to becoming a ruffian," he said, "is learning to fall."

His blade flashed. He brought his arm down with ruthless force.

And then they were falling.



3

The river claimed them as soon as they hit it, pulling them under with vengeance in its white-furled fluxes and battering them like leaves in a gale. Ramson let the tides take him. He knew the waters, knew when to let himself go and when to push against it. The river did not yield. It was all about learning to swim with the current.

These waters were different from the wide-open seas of Ramson's childhood. In Bregon, the waters were cobalt blue, the caps flecked with sunlight. He had swum for hours, diving beneath the surface and looking up at the faraway sky in a muted blue world of his own.

In Cyrilia, the rivers were white and frothing and cold. Ramson struggled to keep his eyes open as the current flung him to and fro. The pressure in his chest grew. Water surged at his nose and mouth.

The Affinite girl was still bound to his chest by the rope. He could feel her thrashing against him, kicking and struggling as the current pummeled her.

Ramson severed the cord. The odds of survival were greater without someone weighing you down. He had been thinking

only of himself when he did it, but as he watched the current drag the witch away, he supposed it might have been true for her, too.

Stay still, he wanted to tell her. *The more you struggle, the faster you drown.*

But his own lungs were aching, and that familiar sensation of weakness was creeping into his limbs. He needed to breathe, or risk becoming a part of the current forever.

Ramson kicked out. No sooner had he righted himself than the current pushed him over again. Panic bubbled in his chest.

His head felt light. Water pressed at his nose and his lips, yet part of him remembered that he could not open his mouth. His limbs were becoming heavier. His vision was a whirl of white. It was cold.

Swim, came a voice. He knew instantly whose voice it was—that calm, thin voice that had defined his childhood and haunted him every day thereafter. Here, in the roaring chaos, it sounded so close. *Swim, or we both die.*

Ramson thrust his legs behind him, arching his back. He felt the current give a little. Somewhere above him, somewhere near, there was light.

Swim.

The light grew brighter. He broke through the surface, coughing and gulping in lungful after lungful of fresh, wintry Cyrilian air, feeling the power return to his limbs.

He hauled himself onto the bank, digging his nails into the half-frozen dirt and dragging his feet across snow-covered grass. He was shivering uncontrollably, moving in starts and stops, his arms and legs jerking in awkward movements as he tried to stimulate his blood flow.

The river had borne them quite a distance; Ghost Falls was a faraway speck, barely larger than the size of his palm. His stomach flipped as he took in the height of the cliffs, the waterfall that was no more than a misty stretch ending in the river. No matter his calculations and the meticulous planning he'd done in the darkness of his cell; it had taken a miracle and a hand from the gods for them to have survived.

Not that Ramson believed in the gods anyway.

He turned his back to the prison. A snow-tipped forest stretched before him, illuminated in a haze of dusty gold beneath the late-afternoon sun. And in the distance, ice-capped mountains rose and fell as far as the eye could see.

But Ramson felt only the cold in his bones and saw only the shadows that stretched long and dark beneath the pine trees. This was Cyrilia, the Empire of the North, where autumn nights were colder than any winter day in the other kingdoms. And if he didn't find shelter before the sun set, he would die.

A cough behind him made him spin around, dagger in hand. He felt a faint twinge of surprise as he caught sight of the Affinite struggling up the bank like a dying animal. She was on her hands and knees, her head drooping, her dark locks plastered to her face and dripping water. She would not stand again. Not without his help.

Ramson turned away.

The snow muffled his footsteps as he ventured into the forest, and soon the sounds of the girl spluttering and the river rushing faded into silence. The trees grew thick enough to block out the sun, and the cold pressed into him with every step he took.

He ran through the terrain around Ghost Falls in his mind,

but a growing sensation of doubt began to stall his progress. He'd been brought here in cuffs and a blindfold, the wagon traveling for days before he'd been hauled out and thrown into his cell. As far as Ramson knew, the area around the prison was barren—a wasteland of ice-covered tundra and the Syvern Taiga, the forest that covered half of the Cyrilian Empire.

Somehow his thoughts were drawn back to the witch. It was a shame that their escape had weakened her so much. Whereas she might have been a useful ally with her powerful Affinity, she would only be a hindrance going forward. He doubted she'd even be able to stand, let alone make it out of the woods. But then again, he thought grimly, where would she go?

Something clicked in his mind, and he came to a sharp stop. Of course. How could he have been so stupid? He turned back and half staggered, half ran to where he had left the witch.

The girl had come to Ghost Falls just to see him. Which meant she had to have a way out. A means of transportation.

He found her crouching several feet from the river, her head bent, her arms wrapped around herself and moving stiffly as she tried to rub heat back into her body. She looked up at him with half-lidded eyes as he approached. In just minutes, the bottom of her wet locks had frozen to ice.

Ramson knelt by her side, clasping a hand around her neck and feeling for her pulse. She twitched but made no further move to resist.

"How do you feel?" Injecting concern into his tone, he took her cheeks in his hands. They were ice-cold. "Can you speak?"

She opened her chapped lips. They were tinged with blue. "Y-yes."

“Do you feel dizzy? Drowsy?”

“N-no.” It was clearly a lie, yet as she lifted her chin stubbornly and fixed him with that glare, Ramson couldn’t help but admire her resolve.

“We need to find shelter before sunset.” Ramson darted a glance over the treetops, where the sun hung, obscured by the gray clouds and mist. “Where did you come from? How did you get here?”

“W-walked.”

His heart almost sang at that word. That meant there had to be shelter within walkable distance. He’d made the right choice, coming back for her. “From where? Is there a town nearby?”

A shake of her head. “A d-dacha. I l-live there.”

“How far?”

Her body gave a spasm, and he bundled her closer to him. Their wet clothes might as well have been ice packs, but he knew the body heat would help. Her answer came in a breath that clouded in the air. “Two hours.”

Ramson glanced at the mist-covered sun that hung precariously low over the rim of the trees. For the first time, it looked like hope. He stood, adjusting his icy clothes and testing his muscles. They weren’t cramping yet, which was a good sign. “Can you walk, darling?”

The witch began to rouse herself, climbing to her feet, but almost toppled over at the effort. Ramson caught her by her elbows before she fell. “I’ve got you.” *Earn her trust, reach the shelter.* He hoisted her onto his back, immediately feeling the icy stiffness of her cloak. “Put your hands around my neck. The more skin contact, the less likely you’ll get hypothermia.”

She obliged, and he shifted her weight higher. Already, his

blood was flowing from the strain on his muscles. That was good.

Ramson gritted his teeth. Putting one foot before the other, he began to walk. The muffled hush of the white landscape pressed on them, broken only by the crunch of snow beneath his boots and the occasional snap of a branch as he waded deeper into the forest. The witch gave him directions, her voice uneven as she trembled from cold.

Soon they were in the heart of the woods, surrounded by tall, crowding Syvern pines and frost-larches that cast their shadows over them. A hush had settled in the air. It felt as though the forest was alive and watching, the cold creeping steadily past his clothes, under his skin, into his bones.

The witch had fallen silent, her body still against his. Several times, he had to shake her to keep her conscious.

“Talk to me, darling,” he said at last. “If you fall asleep now, you’ll never wake up.” He felt her perk up a little at that. “What’s your name?”

“Anya,” she said, too quickly for it to be true.

Another lie, but Ramson pretended to nod seriously. “Anya. I’m Ramson, though you already knew that. Where are you from, Anya?”

“Dobrysk.”

He chuckled. “Talkative, aren’t you?” He knew the town of Dobrysk—a small, insignificant dot on the map in southern Cyrilia. Yet—despite her best efforts to mask it—she had the tinge of a northern accent in her speech, along with the faint lilt of the Cyrilian nobility. “What did you do in Dobrysk?”

He sensed her tensing up against him, and for a moment he wished he could take back his question. It had seemed like

a good opportunity, in her half-frozen and semiconscious state, to find out more about her. Draw out her secrets and use them as leverage against her later. That she was an Affinite was his first—and only, for the time being—clue. Surely an Affinity as strong as hers would have merited a place among the Imperial Patrols?

The wheels in his mind turned, and he thought of the command in her tone, the judgmental look in her eyes when he'd first spoken to her, the tilt of her sharp chin. There was definitely noble upbringing in her blood—perhaps she had simply kept her Affinity hidden to protect herself. It wasn't uncommon in Cyrilia, once a child's Affinity manifested, for the ability to be kept hidden or subdued. That was the protection that power and privilege offered the rich. A safety, Ramson thought, that the poor simply could not afford.

Affinites without the means to bribe officials into silence were made to record it in a section of their identification papers. As legal citizens of the Empire, they were allowed to seek employment—yet the branding on their papers marked them as different, as other, as something to be steered clear of and, oftentimes, feared.

Cyrilia sought to control these beings with gods-given abilities with blackstone and Deys'voshk. As foreigners from other kingdoms began coming to Cyrilia, looking for opportunities in the richest empire of the world, merchants had quickly seen the chance to exploit them.

And then the brokers had appeared. They began to lure foreign workers into Cyrilia under false promises of better work and better pay, only to force them into unfavorable contracts and trap them in a distant empire with no way out. In time, the

practice of Affinite trafficking had thrived, in the shadows of the laws.

Nobility or not, this girl was an Affinite, and on the run. And Ramson wanted *nothing* to do with that.

It was simply easier to look the other way.

In any case, this girl had something to hide. And if Ramson had one skill, it was to root out secrets, no matter how deeply buried.

Her stubborn silence was dragging on, so he reverted to a relatively innocuous question: “Does sunwine really taste better down south?”

They went on like that, Ramson talking and eliciting one- or two-word responses from the girl. Despite the chatter he kept up, he could feel his hands and feet turning numb and his muscles growing weary. Darkness had steadily crept in around them, and Ramson had to blink to make out which were the trees and which were the shadows.

Time seemed to go in circles, and he began to wonder whether he was going in circles himself. The unbearable cold was addling his brain; he kept looking over his shoulder, imagining the occasional crackle of a branch or crunch of snow. The Cyrilian Empire housed different dangers than those of his homeland; he’d heard of ice spirits—*syvint’sya*—that rose from the snows, so that lost travelers were discovered years later beneath the permafrost. Icewolves that sprang from thin air and hunted in packs. Ramson had never traveled without a globefire that burned steadily through the night to ward off the creatures of the Syvern Taiga. Now the darkness seemed to press against him.

Ramson stopped. His heart pounded in his ears . . . but

there was something else. He listened, his palms feeling empty without the reassuring warmth of a globe-fire ball resting in them and lighting the way. The dark tended to yield to darker thoughts.

And then he heard it, that *snap-snap-snap* of twigs and the rustle of the underbrush, several dozen paces behind him.

Someone—or something—was following them.

Fear pricked at him. Ramson ducked behind the nearest tree, and after rebalancing the witch on his back, he stilled and strained to listen over the hammering of his own heart.

There. Rustling and crackling approached, as though something large was moving through the trees. Holding his breath, he dared a look from behind the tree and felt his legs turn to cotton.

An enormous dark shape lumbered by, so close that its musty wet-animal scent wafted past him. It paused to sniff the air and let out a deep-throated growl. As it turned its head to scan the periphery, Ramson's heart sank. He recognized the massive body, the pale face, the glinting white eyes. *A moonbear.* The fearsome predator of the northern Empire was but a whisper on hunters' lips, a prayer that they themselves would never meet one.

Ramson's mind kicked into action. The moonbear relied on its eyesight and sense of hearing to hunt, which meant that as long as he remained quiet and out of sight, he had a chance at survival. Yet there was no way he could wait it out; they would freeze to death.

He felt the witch's body slipping on his back. An idea came to mind—one so ugly that he was ashamed of it, but he

considered it all the same. If he threw the girl to the bear and ran, would he make it? She was already unconscious, and it was unlikely she would recover unless they reached somewhere warm soon. A part of him almost let out a half sob, half laugh, as he thought inevitably of the popular Cyrilian joke. He was, literally, caught between the Bear and the Fool.

The moonbear raised its shaggy head, its huge body coming to a standstill. It cocked its ears.

And turned toward them.

Ramson caught the tomb-white flash of its eyes and the slice of its fangs in the night. Despite the shaking in his legs, he crouched into a defensive stance. His dagger appeared in his free hand.

There was no chance in hell he would win a fight like this, cold and cramped and weighed down by an unconscious girl. Yet despite what he was—despite all the lives he had ruined and everything he had done—Ramson knew he could not live with himself if he didn't at least try.

A dozen paces away, the bushes rattled suddenly, as though a startled animal had darted into them. Ramson froze.

The moonbear's attention shifted. Its head, larger than a man's torso, slowly swiveled.

The bushes shook again. Something shot out, heading in the opposite direction. Ramson could hear the creature clumsily snapping twigs and rustling past bushes in its way.

The moonbear gave a low growl. It swung its gigantic body around and lumbered off toward the noise without another glance back.

Ramson waited for the sound of crashing and grunting to

disappear before loosing a breath. He leaned against the tree, shifting the Affinite girl's weight between his shoulders. Night had fallen, their shelter was nowhere in sight.

A twig snapped behind him. Ramson turned, his grip tightening on his dagger. And stared.

There was a silhouette standing next to the tree, outlined against the snow and moon. No, not a silhouette—a child. She raised a hand and beckoned at them.

Ramson followed. If he was going to defend himself, he figured his chances were better with a child barely half his size than with the moonbear.

The trek seemed to take forever and Ramson found himself stumbling more and more as his fatigue became increasingly unbearable. The little girl weaved through the shadows like a spirit of the forest.

Another few dozen steps passed. The snow seemed to grow silver, and the trees became solid outlines again. *Light*, Ramson realized. There was light coming from somewhere close.

Gradually, the forest parted to reveal a small wooden dacha tucked in a ring of trees. Light from one window spilled onto the untouched snow, and Ramson's knees almost buckled with relief.

Ahead of him, the child pushed open the thin wooden door and slipped inside.

A fire crackled in the hearth, and heat enveloped him like a mother's embrace. Ramson groaned as he set the witch down on the floor in front of the fire and proceeded to remove the

ice-cold clothes on his back. His fingers slipped at the buttons, and he could barely summon enough energy to peel off his shirt. He fell to the ground in a half-naked heap, soaking up the warmth of the dry wooden floor.

He never wanted to get up again, never wanted to move another muscle. But eventually, he heard rustlings and small, light footsteps. Ramson opened an eye.

The child was crouched by the witch, her hands fluttering across the Affinite's body like a pair of nervous birds. He observed her dark hair that fell soft over her shoulders, the brilliant turquoise of her eyes—a color that reminded him of warm, southern seas.

A child of one of the Aseatic Kingdoms, Ramson thought, an odd chord of sympathy ringing in him. He'd been around her age—perhaps a few years older—when he'd first arrived on Cyrilian shores, starving, frightened, and utterly lost.

Yet a growing sense of foreboding made his skin crawl the longer he looked at her. As Portmaster of the largest trading post in Cyrilia, he could think of a more sinister reason for a child from a foreign kingdom to be here alone. The Aseatic region, in particular, was known for its large number of migrants looking for work opportunities in other kingdoms—especially the ruthlessly commerce-driven Empire of Cyrilia. Ramson had seen the ghost ships dock at his harbor on moonless nights, watched the figures—men, women, and children—steal through the shadows.

The Affinites would become phantoms in this foreign empire, with no identity, no home, and no one to turn to, their pleas washed away by the drag of waves beneath a cruel moon.

Ramson, too, had turned away.

The child pressed two fingers to the witch's neck. Worry rippled across her features.

Ramson took a deep breath. "Is she alive?" His voice scratched.

The tender concern shaping the child's features vanished in an instant, as though someone had shut a book. She glared at him in a remarkably similar fashion to the witch, her small mouth puckering.

Ramson tried again. "Who are you? How did you find us?"

Her eyes narrowed to slits. Ramson couldn't fathom how this diminutive person could look even fiercer than the witch. "Who are *you*?" she shot back.

"I'm a friend."

"You're lying. Ana and I don't have any other friends. But it's all right," she added smugly. "If you're bad, I'll kill you."

Ramson sighed. What was it with him and meeting murderous females today? "Look," he said. "She's shivering. It's a good sign. We need to get her warmed up slowly." He assessed the room. There was a plank of a bed pushed against the far wall, one corner of it stacked with blankets. The hearth sat across from it, fire crackling merrily in the small room. Next to the door was an old wooden table strewn with parchments and pens. "Get her some blankets and dry clothes, and let's put her by the fire. I think she's just half-asleep. Warm some bathwater for her."

The child assessed him for a few moments more, like a cat deciding whether to attack him or trust him. Eventually, she decided on the latter, and plodded off toward the wash closet in the back of the room. He heard the sound of water splashing.

And that left him with . . . only one task.

Groaning, Ramson forced himself to his knees, to his feet. He bent down and, with back-popping effort, lifted the witch into his arms. He was shaking as he crossed the room in several strides, nudging open the door to the small washroom. A lone candle burned inside, illuminating the damp wooden tub.

Gently, he lowered the girl inside. She murmured something and shivered when he moved away. He frowned as he brushed aside a lock of her dark hair, casting a suspicious glance at the sharp lines of her cheekbones and the bold dash of her mouth against her skin. She resembled the tawny-skinned Southern Cyrilians who dwelled in the Dzhyvekha Mountains on the borders of the Cyrilian Empire and the Nandjian Crown. A minority among the predominantly fair Northern Cyrilians that held most of the power and privilege across the Empire.

And . . . he had the strangest feeling that he'd . . . seen her somewhere before.

He shook his head. The cold was getting to him.

He left her with the Aseatic child and five pails of lukewarm water. He leaned against the locked door, listening to the sounds of splashing and silence. Like water, his thoughts swirled in.

Why had he saved her from the moonbear, even when she was half-frozen and useless and a deadweight to him? The Ramson Quicktongue he knew—the one the entire criminal network was wary of—kept only the strong and the useful by his side; the weak were quickly discarded or sacrificed. Yet in the darkness and loneliness of the snow-covered Cyrilian forest, the cold had changed him, squeezing all logical calculation from him until he was nothing but raw instinct.

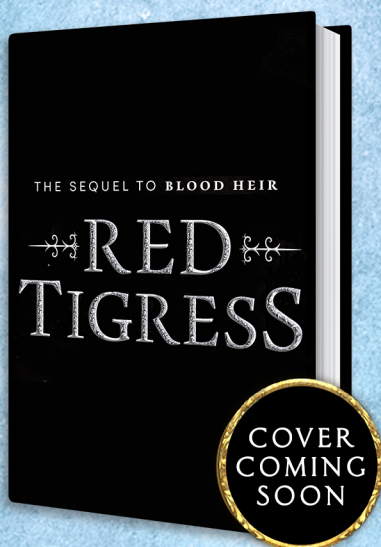
And instinct had guided his actions tonight.

He squeezed his eyes shut. He thought he had snuffed out that small sliver of goodness within him seven years ago. He'd sworn to himself that he would never be one of the weak again, that he would never give more than he took.

He drew in a deep breath. Opened his eyes. The room came back in crystal-clear view.

He had helped the witch this far. He had given. Now it was his time to take.

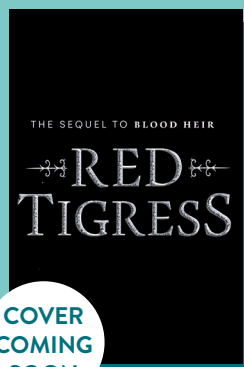
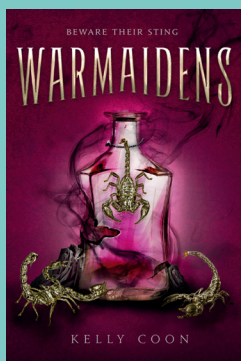
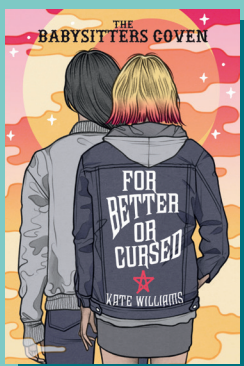
—✂— IT'S TIME —✂—
TO CHOOSE A SIDE



READY TO FIND OUT
WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

[CLICK HERE TO ORDER YOUR COPY OF
BLOOD HEIR.](#)

GET READY TO BINGE BOOK 2, COMING SOON!



Underlined

GET *Underlined*

**A Community of YA Book Nerds
& Aspiring Writers!**

READ

Book recommendations, reading lists, YA news

LIFE

Quizzes, book trailers, author videos

PERKS

Giveaways, merch, sneak peeks

CREATE

Community stories, writing contests and advice

We want to hear YOUR story!

**Create an account to write original stories,
connect with fellow book nerds and authors, build
a personal bookshelf, and get access to content
based on your interests!**

GetUnderlined.com

@GetUnderlined     

Want a chance to be featured? Use #GetUnderlined on social!