

# THE KING'S DECREE



TORINA  
KINGSLEY

The background features four large, hollow, serif letters arranged vertically: 'H' at the top, 'R' below it, 'O' below that, and 'H' at the bottom. The title 'The King's Decree' is centered over the 'R' and 'O' letters.

*The King's Decree*

By Torina Kingsley



**To anyone who has ever felt like they  
didn't belong—you do!**

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# *Chapter One*

## *Devina*

Once upon a time, there lived a princess named Devina.

Well...maybe “lived” isn’t the best term.

It’s not that she was a zombie, or some other undead creature roaming the countryside and terrorizing villagers. She didn’t sleep in a coffin either, like vampires do. In fact, her bed was very comfortable. No, she was human. She just never felt very lively.

For most of her life, the princess was known as a cheerful, energetic girl. She was the king and queen’s only child and their

pride and joy. She often played with other children in the village and loved to make people laugh.

Then, on the eve of her 15th birthday, she was cursed. That's what it felt like, anyway. The next day was to be full of gifts, food, and celebration, but she felt no excitement. In fact, she barely felt anything at all. It was as if all of her emotions had disappeared, leaving her with a terrible emptiness inside.

Every day became a struggle to get out of bed. Everything that used to bring her joy—playing, laughing, dancing, painting—suddenly didn't.

How do I know all this, you ask?

Because I am that princess.

I wish I knew what happened to me to make me feel this way. I wonder, sometimes, if I did something wrong and am being punished. I also wonder if I didn't

do anything to deserve this; maybe Fate simply dealt me a cruel hand. Mostly, I wonder if anyone else feels this way. Does anyone else understand how it feels to feel...nothing?

Tonight, on the eve of my 16th birthday, I lie on my bed, staring at the beautiful tapestry on my ceiling. I've looked at it so many times that I've memorized every pattern and swirl. Nothing in it—not the prancing unicorns, or dancing satyrs, or colorful fields of flowers—is new to me. That's how life feels, too—like I've seen it all already and have tired of it.

I roll onto my side. Maybe I should try to paint something today. Maybe returning to an old hobby would make me feel better. But I can't bring myself to move.

I guess I'll stay in bed.

A sharp knock sounds on my bedchamber door. I raise an eyebrow at the

interruption. I am mostly left alone these days, which I am grateful for. I don't remember the last time I had a visitor.

"Yes?" I say, my own voice unfamiliar to my ears.

"It's Esme, Your Highness!"

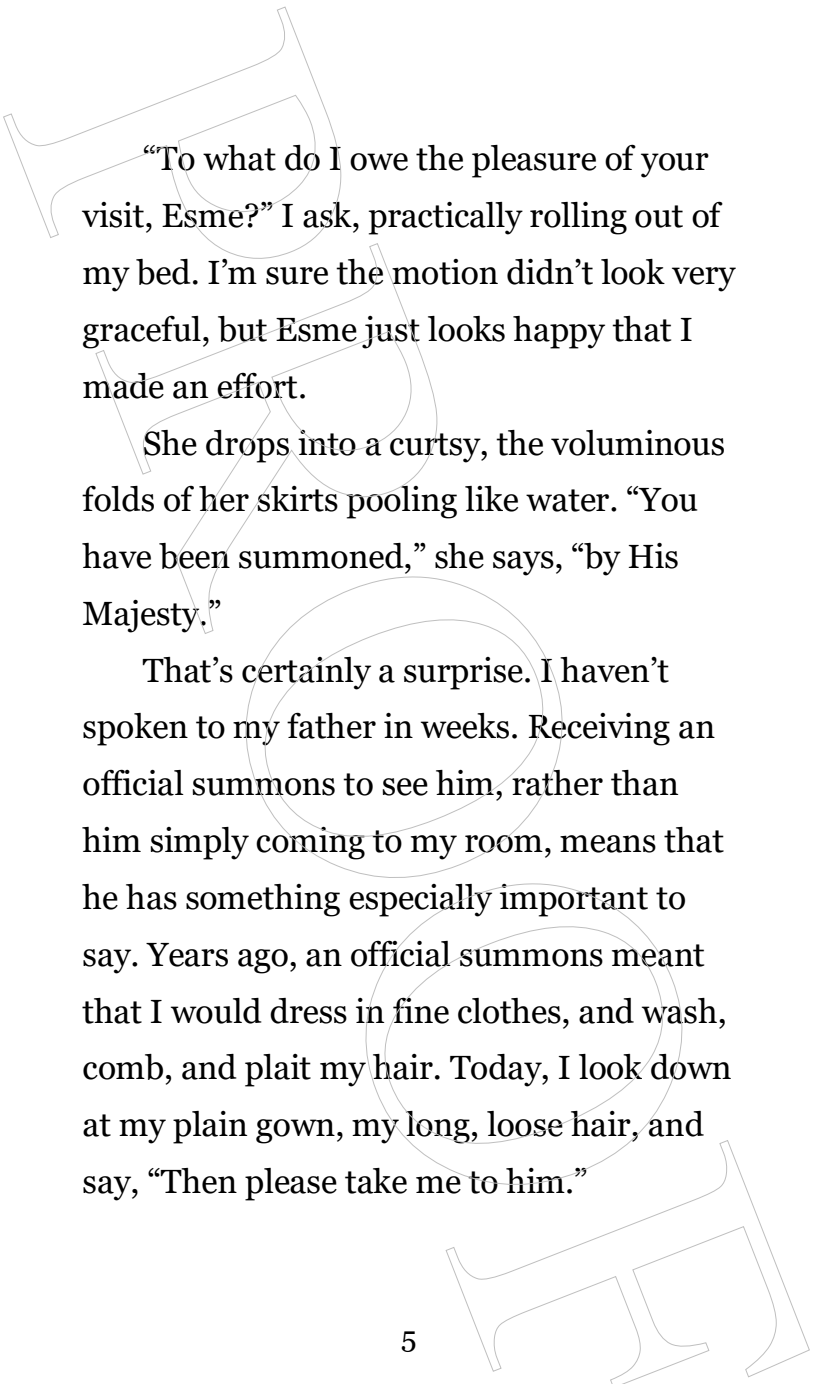
I sigh. Esme is one of my father's overly-cheerful attendants. She's probably here to ask if I've gone outside today. She's convinced the sun will cure whatever ails me. All it does is hurt my eyes.

"Come in," I call reluctantly.

She flings open the door and springs inside. Immediately, she crosses to the window and opens the curtains, making me squint as the sunlight blazes into my dark room.

"You need more sunlight, Your Highness!" she says, beaming at me.

Inwardly, I groan. I know she means well.

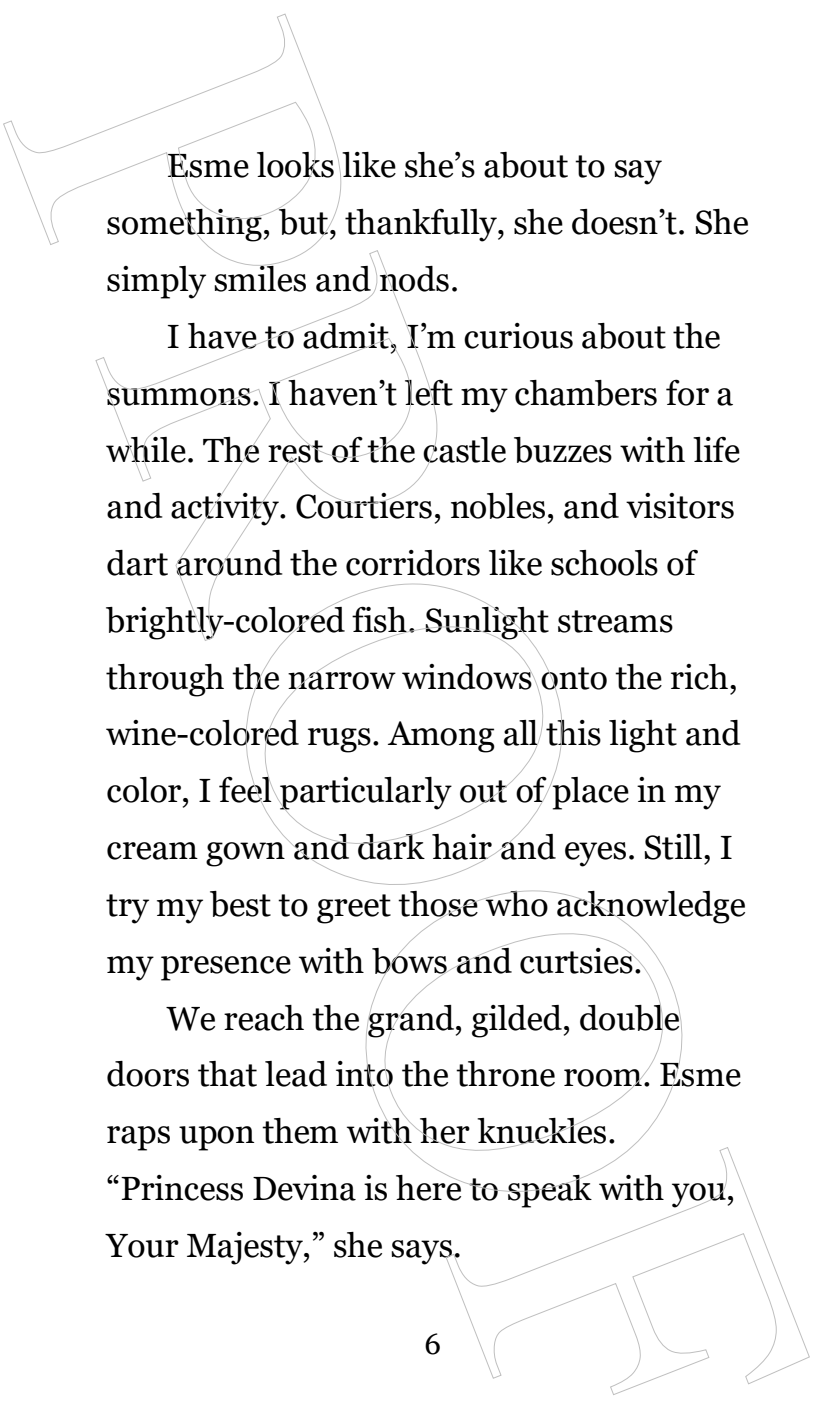


“To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit, Esme?” I ask, practically rolling out of my bed. I’m sure the motion didn’t look very graceful, but Esme just looks happy that I made an effort.

She drops into a curtsy, the voluminous folds of her skirts pooling like water. “You have been summoned,” she says, “by His Majesty.”

That’s certainly a surprise. I haven’t spoken to my father in weeks. Receiving an official summons to see him, rather than him simply coming to my room, means that he has something especially important to say. Years ago, an official summons meant that I would dress in fine clothes, and wash, comb, and plait my hair. Today, I look down at my plain gown, my long, loose hair, and say, “Then please take me to him.”





Esme looks like she's about to say something, but, thankfully, she doesn't. She simply smiles and nods.

I have to admit, I'm curious about the summons. I haven't left my chambers for a while. The rest of the castle buzzes with life and activity. Courtiers, nobles, and visitors dart around the corridors like schools of brightly-colored fish. Sunlight streams through the narrow windows onto the rich, wine-colored rugs. Among all this light and color, I feel particularly out of place in my cream gown and dark hair and eyes. Still, I try my best to greet those who acknowledge my presence with bows and curtsies.

We reach the grand, gilded, double doors that lead into the throne room. Esme raps upon them with her knuckles.

"Princess Devina is here to speak with you, Your Majesty," she says.

“Come in!” my father’s deep voice bellows.

Esme opens the door, and I slip inside.

The whole castle is glorious, but the throne room truly shines. The floor is white marble and reflects the sunlight, or, at night, the glow of candles from chandeliers and candelabra. A plum rug speckled with golden stars runs the length of the room, up to the huge golden thrones. My father and mother sit side by side, their hands clasped, smiling gently at me. I tell my lips to smile back, but they don’t. I can’t remember the last time I smiled. I wonder if they still know how.

“Your majesties,” I murmur, dipping into a curtsy.

“Oh, do get up, sweetheart,” my mother says. Her eyes are as dark as mine but they glimmer along with the smile on her face. In fact, she and my father both look more

pleased to see me than usual. What is this about?

“Devina!” my father booms. He gets up from the throne and crosses over to me. He holds me at arms’ length, surveying me. “You look well.”

“You don’t have to lie,” I say gently.

“No, truly, you do!” He kisses me on the cheek, his long beard scratchy against my face, and I almost feel a flicker of something—warmth? Love? Then, just as quickly, it is gone.

“Thank you, father.” I awkwardly smooth the front of my skirts with my hands, now wishing I had brought myself to wash and change. I wish they would get to the point so that I could go hide in my room and try to forget this sudden wave of self-consciousness I feel.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why we’ve summoned you,” my father says, crossing

back to stand beside the throne. I nod silently.

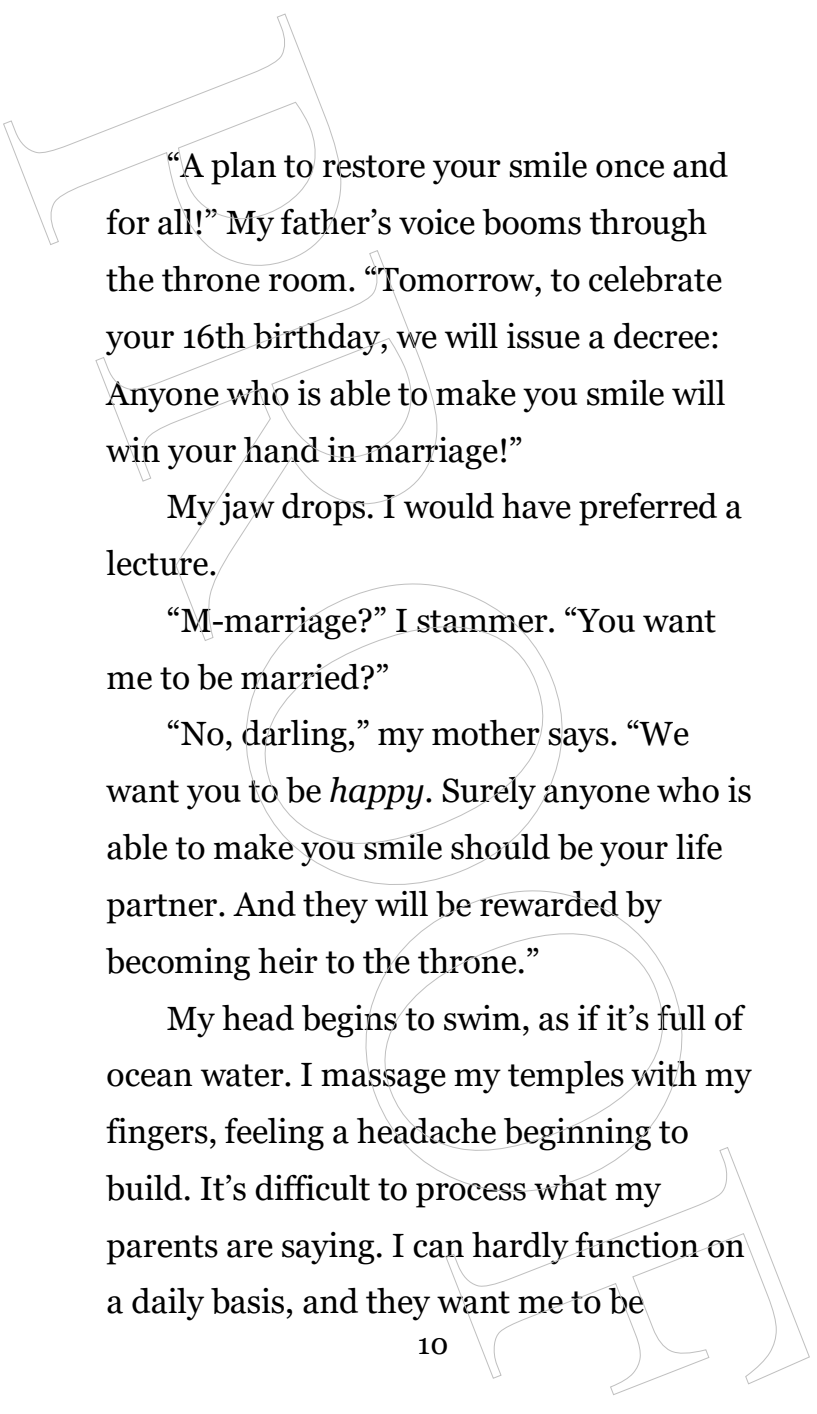
“We have exciting news,” my mother says. She grins even wider.

My father nods in agreement. “Our dear Devina,” he says, smiling at me again. They’re doing an awful lot of smiling. “For the past year, you have been struck with a terrible ailment. I cannot begin to imagine how you’ve been feeling. Your mother and I feel nearly powerless to assist you.”

I look down at my feet. I can’t help but feel guilty for feeling the way that I do. Surely, it’s selfish to be so fortunate in life and yet not feel any happiness or gratitude. Are my parents going to lecture me?

“That is why, our dear Devina,” my father continues, “we have hatched a plan.”

This makes me look up, my brow creased in confusion. “What kind of plan?”



“A plan to restore your smile once and for all!” My father’s voice booms through the throne room. “Tomorrow, to celebrate your 16th birthday, we will issue a decree: Anyone who is able to make you smile will win your hand in marriage!”

My jaw drops. I would have preferred a lecture.

“M-marriage?” I stammer. “You want me to be married?”

“No, darling,” my mother says. “We want you to be *happy*. Surely anyone who is able to make you smile should be your life partner. And they will be rewarded by becoming heir to the throne.”

My head begins to swim, as if it’s full of ocean water. I massage my temples with my fingers, feeling a headache beginning to build. It’s difficult to process what my parents are saying. I can hardly function on a daily basis, and they want me to be

someone's wife? I can scarcely summon any kind of emotion, and they expect someone to make me laugh?

This plan is obviously one born from desperation; they're running out of ideas. But why this?

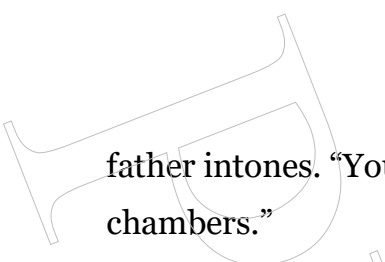
"I...I..." The words aren't coming. I feel like I'm trapped in a nightmare where I scream but no sound comes out.

"We know it sounds far-fetched, sweetheart," my father says. "But we are confident that a prince will be able to bring joy to your heart once again."

My emotions take over. "I don't want some prince to make me happy!" I snap.

My father's expression darkens, and my mother turns away. I sigh. I didn't mean to yell. Sometimes, it just feels as though anger is the only emotion I can still feel.

"Our plan will be announced tomorrow, no matter your thoughts on the subject," my



father intones. “You may return to your chambers.”

“But—”

“*Now, Devina.*”

As Esme escorts me back to my quarters, my feet drag as if made of lead. I feel the people around me staring but am unable to look anyone in the eye. A new sort of dread has settled like a heavy blanket around my shoulders, the weight seeming to increase with each step.

We finally reach my chambers.

“Rest well, Your Highness,” Esme says, her voice filled with tenderness.

I nod and close the door without saying anything, then sink down onto the floor and dissolve into tears.

Happy birthday to me.

## *Chapter Two*

### *Yasmin*

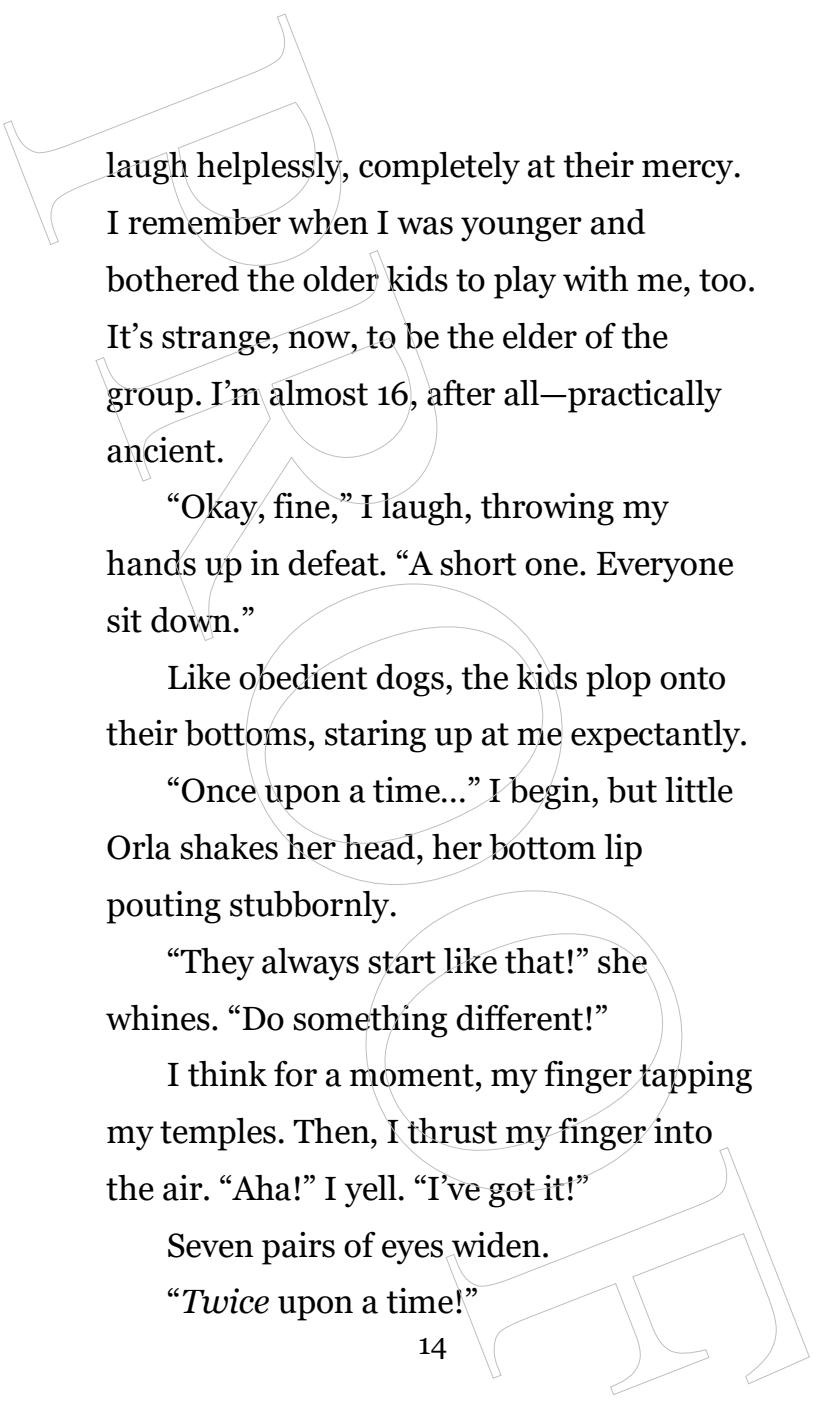
“Yasmin! Tell us a story!”

Little Orla tugs at the hem of my skirt, her round face shining up at me like the moon. She’s always the most eager for my stories.

“Oh, I wish I had time,” I pat her on the head and smile, “but my father is expecting me back home.”

“Just a short one, then!” One of the other children yells. Soon, I’m surrounded by kids clamoring for entertainment, poking me in the ribs, tugging at my clothes. I





laugh helplessly, completely at their mercy. I remember when I was younger and bothered the older kids to play with me, too. It's strange, now, to be the elder of the group. I'm almost 16, after all—practically ancient.

“Okay, fine,” I laugh, throwing my hands up in defeat. “A short one. Everyone sit down.”

Like obedient dogs, the kids plop onto their bottoms, staring up at me expectantly.

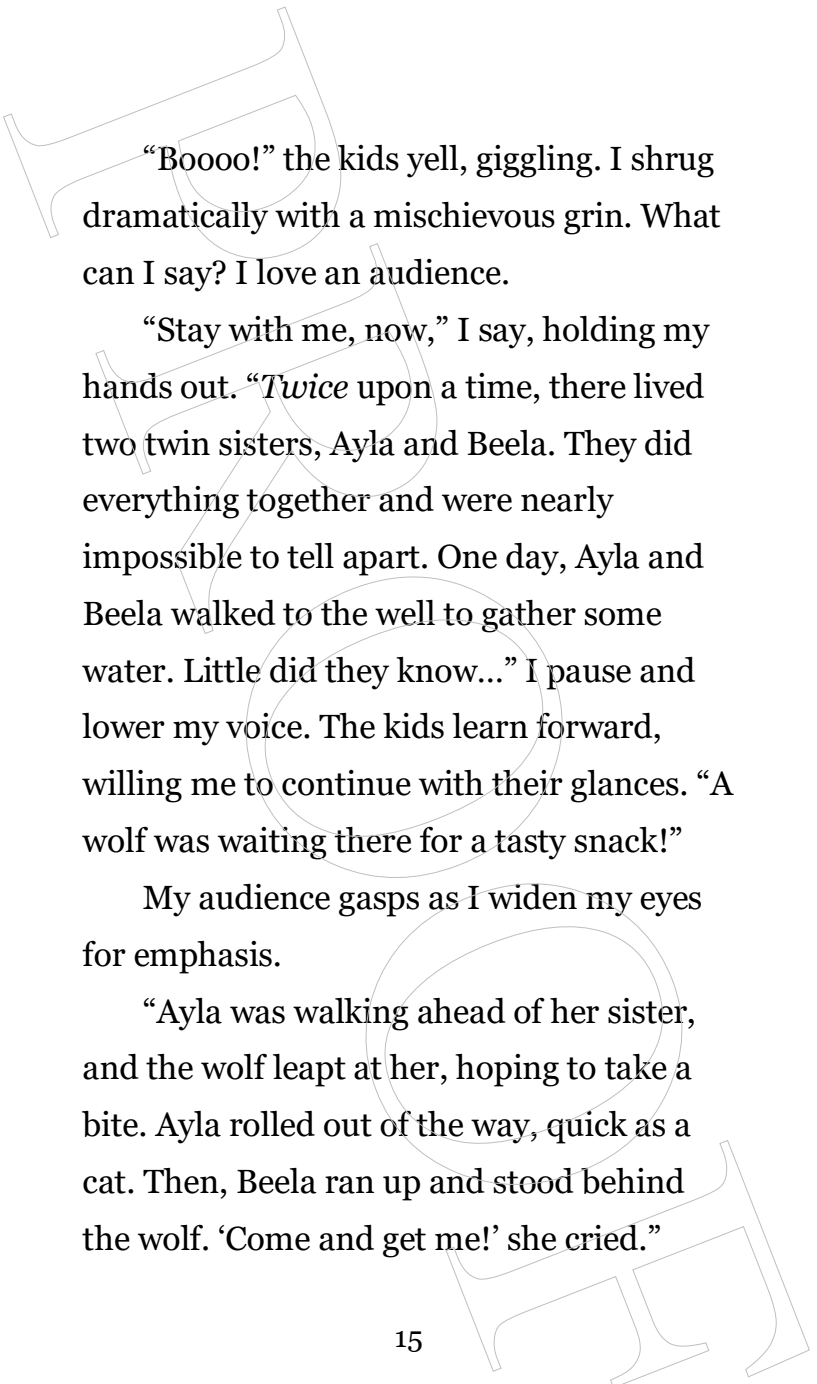
“Once upon a time...” I begin, but little Orla shakes her head, her bottom lip pouting stubbornly.

“They always start like that!” she whines. “Do something different!”

I think for a moment, my finger tapping my temples. Then, I thrust my finger into the air. “Aha!” I yell. “I’ve got it!”

Seven pairs of eyes widen.

“*Twice* upon a time!”



“Boooo!” the kids yell, giggling. I shrug dramatically with a mischievous grin. What can I say? I love an audience.

“Stay with me, now,” I say, holding my hands out. “*Twice* upon a time, there lived two twin sisters, Ayla and Beela. They did everything together and were nearly impossible to tell apart. One day, Ayla and Beela walked to the well to gather some water. Little did they know...” I pause and lower my voice. The kids lean forward, willing me to continue with their glances. “A wolf was waiting there for a tasty snack!”

My audience gasps as I widen my eyes for emphasis.

“Ayla was walking ahead of her sister, and the wolf leapt at her, hoping to take a bite. Ayla rolled out of the way, quick as a cat. Then, Beela ran up and stood behind the wolf. ‘Come and get me!’ she cried.”

“The wolf snarled and jumped at Beela, who darted out of the way and hid behind the well.” I hunch a little, my movements mimicking the canine from my tale. “The wolf stalked up to the well to get her...then whirled around to see the same girl! Confused and scared, the wolf turned back towards the well—to see the smiling girl standing there, too. Back and forth the wolf looked, not realizing these were twin sisters trying to trick him. Finally, the wolf howled in confusion. The sisters took the chance to scoop the wolf up and drop him into the well.”

“When the girls’ parents ran to the well, they saw a dripping creature at the bottom. They pulled him up in the basket and, ashamed and embarrassed, the wolf ran away into the forest. Ayla and Beela were heroes, and they didn’t even mind that when their parents congratulated them,

they called Ayla, Beela and Beela, Ayla. It was just another day for the twins!”

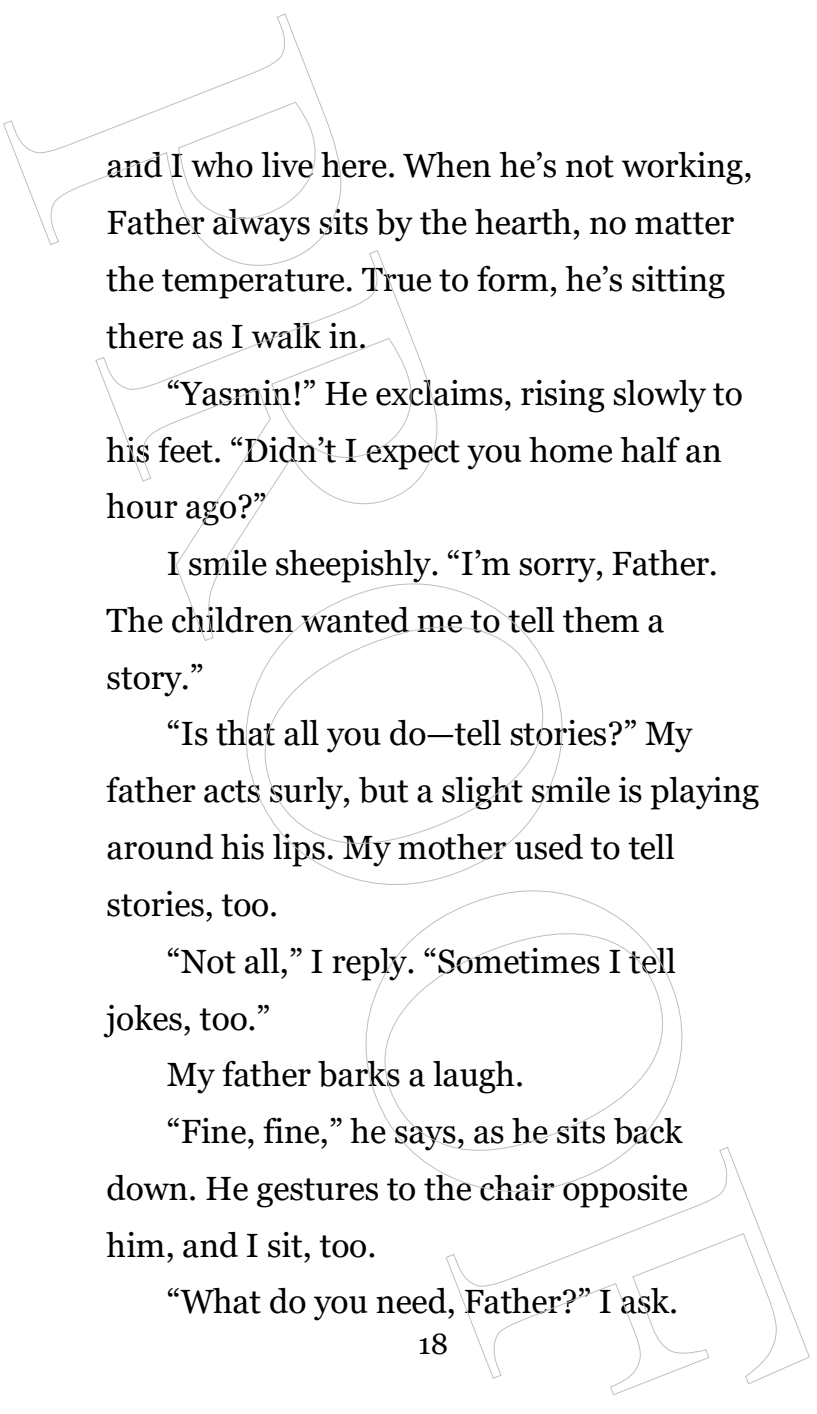
“Hooray!” My obedient audience claps and cheers for me, and I take a low bow with a flourish. But as I stand up, I remember that my father is waiting for me and won’t be pleased that I took a break to entertain the masses.

“And now, I must fly!” I say. Before anyone can complain, I take off running.

I’ve lived in this village my entire life and know its every twist and turn. All around are people laughing and shouting, haggling and yelling, flirting and finagling. Most of them acknowledge me with a wave, which I return as I keep running. I love our humble village and its inhabitants.

Still, a part of me wonders if I’ll ever see anywhere else...

My daydreams are cut short as I arrive at our two-room home. It’s just my father



and I who live here. When he's not working, Father always sits by the hearth, no matter the temperature. True to form, he's sitting there as I walk in.

"Yasmin!" He exclaims, rising slowly to his feet. "Didn't I expect you home half an hour ago?"

I smile sheepishly. "I'm sorry, Father. The children wanted me to tell them a story."

"Is that all you do—tell stories?" My father acts surly, but a slight smile is playing around his lips. My mother used to tell stories, too.

"Not all," I reply. "Sometimes I tell jokes, too."

My father barks a laugh.

"Fine, fine," he says, as he sits back down. He gestures to the chair opposite him, and I sit, too.

"What do you need, Father?" I ask.



“I’m glad you asked,” he says. He looks at me, his old eyes foggy as if clouds drift across them. “It’s getting harder for me to work, my child. I’m growing too old to work in the fields.”

I suck in a breath, realizing where this is going. Maybe if I beat him to the punch, it won’t sting as badly. “You want me to work in the fields, Father?”

He snorts. “You? The too-tall and skinny beanpole? You wouldn’t last a day out there, my dear. No, not the fields. But I do want to put you to work. You’ll do well in the castle kitchens.”

My heart leaps. The castle? It towers over our village on a hill to the north, a constant, grand presence. When I was a child, I often dreamt that the castle came to life, a gargantuan creature that stomped around the countryside. I’ve always wanted to know what it looks like inside.

Then, my heart sinks like a stone in a well. Working in the castle will mean less time to spend with my friends. Less time to run around the village I love so dearly. Less time to spend with Father.

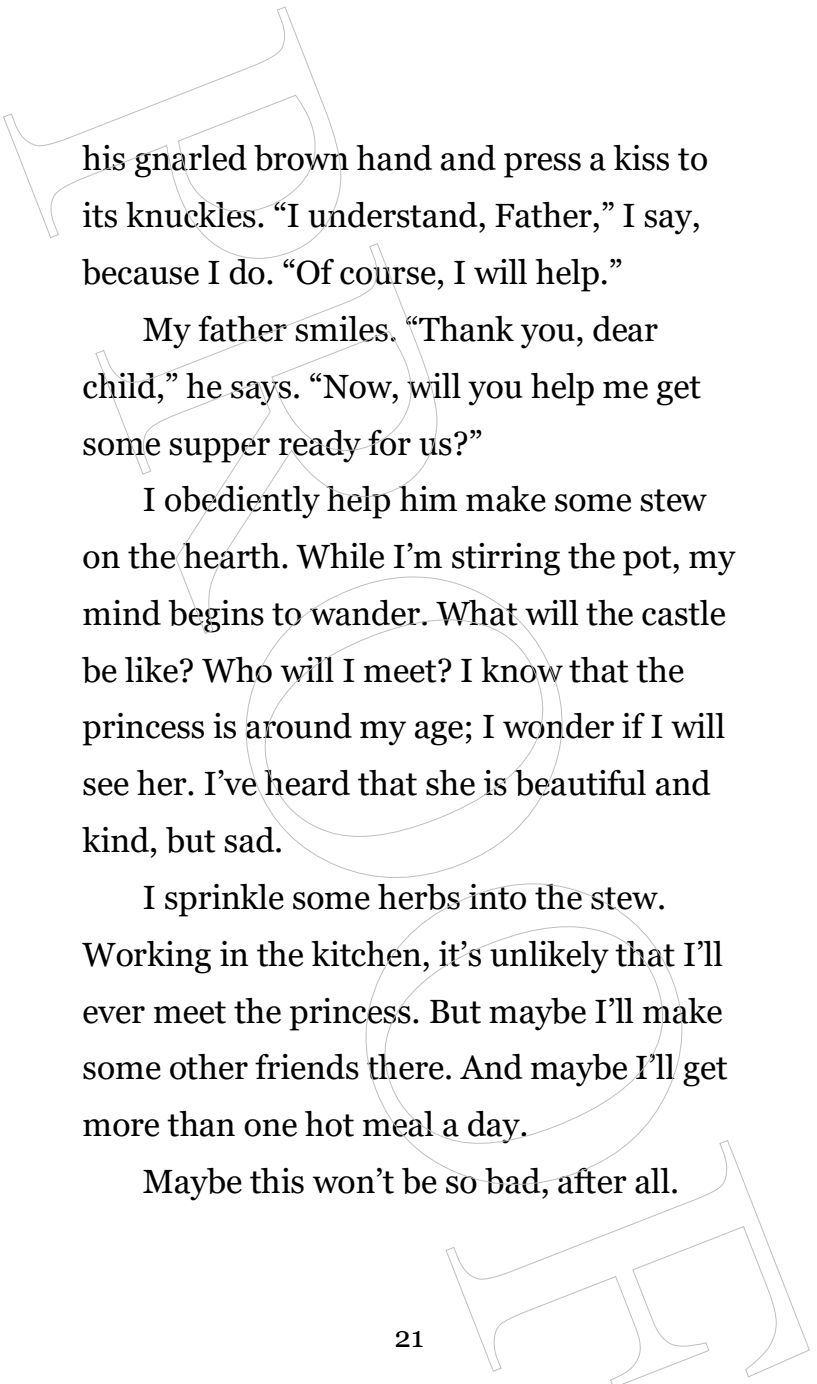
I lick my suddenly dry lips. “Are you sure, Father?” I ask. “Perhaps there’s something else I could do in the village?”

He shakes his head. “It’s already been settled, Yasmin. You will begin tomorrow at dawn.”

I frown. “And I don’t get a say in this?”

My father’s sighs. “You are a young woman now, Yasmin,” he says. “And you must do what you can to help us survive. You will get most of your meals at the castle and will bring home more money for us than I can. Please, Yasmin. I need your help.”

I look at my father, really look at him, and see the old man he is becoming. I take



his gnarled brown hand and press a kiss to its knuckles. “I understand, Father,” I say, because I do. “Of course, I will help.”

My father smiles. “Thank you, dear child,” he says. “Now, will you help me get some supper ready for us?”

I obediently help him make some stew on the hearth. While I’m stirring the pot, my mind begins to wander. What will the castle be like? Who will I meet? I know that the princess is around my age; I wonder if I will see her. I’ve heard that she is beautiful and kind, but sad.

I sprinkle some herbs into the stew. Working in the kitchen, it’s unlikely that I’ll ever meet the princess. But maybe I’ll make some other friends there. And maybe I’ll get more than one hot meal a day.

Maybe this won’t be so bad, after all.



## *Chapter Three*

### *Devina*

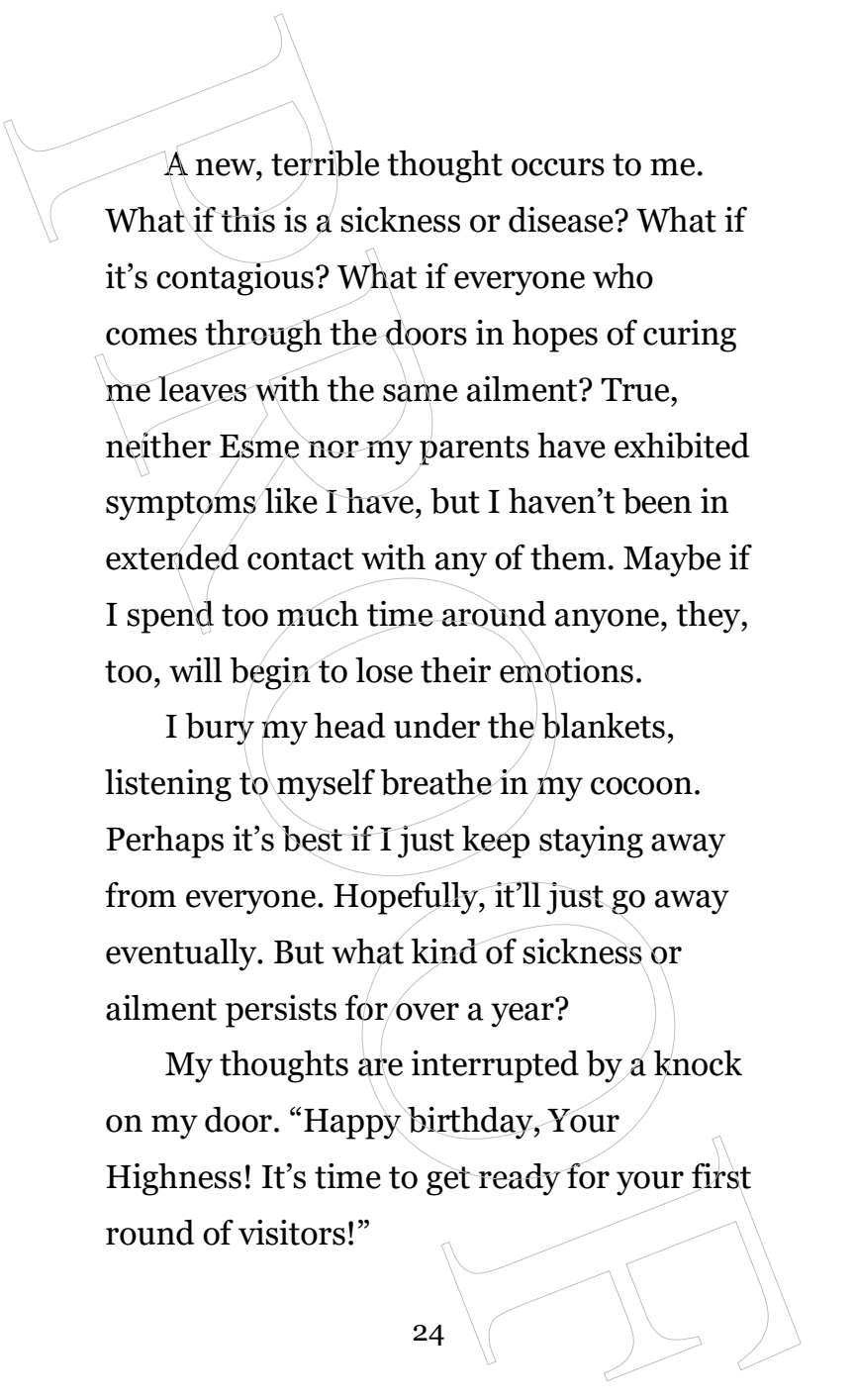
*Get up, Devina, I tell myself. It's time to get up.*

I don't move.

How long have I been in bed? It's hard to tell. I still have the curtains drawn so I can't judge the passage of time by the sun. I suspect that I slept through the night, as my body tends to wake me up at the same time every day. But how long have I lain here since? Has it been four hours, five hours, eight hours? I have no idea.

I roll onto my side so that I can survey a new corner of the room, rather than the ceiling tapestry. My wardrobe is on this side, along with a basin of water for washing. I become suddenly aware of how grimy my skin is, how matted my hair must be. I would be embarrassed if I were able to access that emotion, but it's far away, as if on the very bottom of a riverbed. All I feel is a pale indifference.

*I'm sure I'll be washed before the princes arrive.* Esme will undoubtedly skip through my doors, armed with a sponge and sweet-smelling soaps. I'll be dressed in one of my finest gowns, like a paper doll, and presented to whoever deigns to try to make me smile. Since the prize for success is my hand in marriage and the future throne, I'm sure there will be many of them. I just hope that none of them stick around for long.



A new, terrible thought occurs to me. What if this is a sickness or disease? What if it's contagious? What if everyone who comes through the doors in hopes of curing me leaves with the same ailment? True, neither Esme nor my parents have exhibited symptoms like I have, but I haven't been in extended contact with any of them. Maybe if I spend too much time around anyone, they, too, will begin to lose their emotions.

I bury my head under the blankets, listening to myself breathe in my cocoon. Perhaps it's best if I just keep staying away from everyone. Hopefully, it'll just go away eventually. But what kind of sickness or ailment persists for over a year?

My thoughts are interrupted by a knock on my door. "Happy birthday, Your Highness! It's time to get ready for your first round of visitors!"

I throw a pillow over my face in response.

Esme enters anyway. My parents must have told her to disregard any protests I may offer. “It’s a beautiful day, Princess!” She trills like an overenthusiastic bird. I remove the pillow and watch warily as she goes to my wardrobe and flings open the doors. “Which gown would you like to wear today to receive your guests?”

I let out a sigh. “I don’t care,” I say, truthfully.

Esme tuts. “Nonsense!” She cries. “Do come here and select one, Your Highness, or I’ll be forced to put you in the pink frilly one that you *so* adore...”

“I’m up, I’m up!” I spring out of bed. There are few sights I loathe more than myself in that frilly pink dress.

After some time, I am bathed, washed, combed, and perfumed, smelling of vanilla

and lilacs. I reluctantly selected a pale blue gown and silver slippers, my dark hair held back from my face with a silver circlet.

“Oh, Your Highness, you look enchanting!” Esme cries, pleased with herself.

I frown at myself in the looking glass. I certainly look far better than I feel.

“Have you eaten anything today, Your Highness?” Esme asks. “You’ll need plenty of energy for all the guests who will arrive today.”

I shake my head. I barely remember to eat anymore.

“I’ll get you something,” Esme says.

But before she can, I ask, “Actually, may I go to the kitchens myself?”

Esme narrows her eyes. “You? The princess? At the kitchens?”

I shrug. “I went by there often when I was a child.” Truthfully, I’m trying to stall.

The sooner I arrive at the throne room, the sooner I'll have to deal with strangers trying to make me laugh.

"You're not a child anymore, Your Highness," Esme reminds me.

"You're right," I say. "I'm 16 today. Now that I'm an adult, I can make my own decisions. So I will go to the kitchens and then report to the throne room."

Esme's lips curl in distaste, but she knows better than to argue. "Very well," she says. "But take care not to dawdle."

I dawdle as much as I can.

The kitchens are in the south end of the castle and it should only take me five minutes to get there. Today it takes me fifteen. I don't stop to talk to anyone, but I look out the windows, admire paintings and tapestries on the wall, and stare at stalwart suits of armor. When I was little, the castle felt infinite, all labyrinthine twists and turns

and endless hallways. It feels significantly smaller, now. I know all its secrets. Still, taking the time to really look at some of its adornments makes me wonder if there's anything I've missed.

When I arrive at the kitchens, the kindly head cook, Maeta, immediately pulls me into an embrace. "I haven't seen you in so long, Your Highness!" she gushes. "And today is your birthday! I should bake you a cake!"

Maeta oversaw many of my childhood shenanigans. The fact that she still is so fond of me is a miracle, given how much trouble I used to cause. "No cake necessary, Maeta," I tell her. "Could I just have some soup and bread?"

Her eyes narrow. "That's all? For a birthday feast? I won't have it! Sit down, Your Highness, and let me make you something extravagant."

I could argue, but I decide against it. The change of scenery is a refreshing feeling.

Maeta and her helpers, about five or six familiar faces, get to work. I sit at a counter and obediently sip some lemonade. As they whirl around the kitchen, I realize that one of the kitchen staff is new. She's young, about my age, but very tall and lanky. She looks around, unsure of what to do; Maeta whispers to her encouragingly, pointing out where tools and ingredients are located. Our eyes meet as she crosses the room, heading where Maeta directed her. She smiles at me and curtsies.

"I've always wanted to meet you, Your Highness."

I raise a brow. "Why's that?"

She shrugs. "I know everyone in the village. I wanted to meet someone new who's my age. You're 16 today, yes?"



I nod.

“I turned 16 a few months ago,” she says. “I feel elderly. Soon we’ll be needing canes and wondering where all our teeth are.”

“I think I still have all of mine,” I offer.

The girl grins. “Give it another year, Your Highness.”

“Yasmin!” Maeta pokes the girl in the side. “Back to work, darling. Her Highness surely can’t stay here all day.”

*I would if I could*, I think. The girl—Yasmin—catches my eye again, winks, and goes back to work. Then, I’m lost in the fabulous aromas swirling throughout the room. Maeta is surely making something special. I don’t have an appetite, but I’ll eat what I can to show my gratitude.

“Your Highness!”

I immediately recognize Esme’s voice before I see her. I cringe, hoping that if I

ignore her, she'll leave. Maeta has just placed in front of me a beautiful chicken breast dressed with rosemary, garlic, and other delights. Crispy roast potatoes and some kind of berry trifle complete the feast. Despite my lack of appetite, my mouth waters.

“Your Highness, it's past time for you to be in the throne room! The first guest has arrived!”

“Esme, let the girl eat,” Maeta snaps, placing her fists on her ample hips. “She's going to need her strength to entertain the masses, isn't she?”

“Our first guest is a prince, and doesn't want to be kept waiting,” Esme says, wringing her hands.

I take a bite of chicken. It's perfectly seasoned, and I'm immediately ravenous. I shovel more into my mouth as if I'm a

prisoner who hasn't eaten in weeks. "Just a few minutes, Esme," I beg. "Please?"

She softens. "Eat with haste, your highness," she says. I do my best.

"Do you like the trifle?" Yasmin is back, wiping her hands on a towel. Her grin is a little lopsided, lending her a permanently mischievous expression. She almost glows with natural zest for life. I used to be like that.

"It's delicious," I say truthfully.

"Made it myself," she beams. "First day in the kitchens, too. Who knew I was a culinary genius?" She flourishes her comment with a dramatic bow.

*I like her*, I decide. Maeta's back is turned and I almost giggle when I imagine her face if she saw Yasmin's theatrics. I open my mouth to ask her a question, but Esme appears in front of me, her eyes huge. "We must go, Your Highness!" she exclaims.

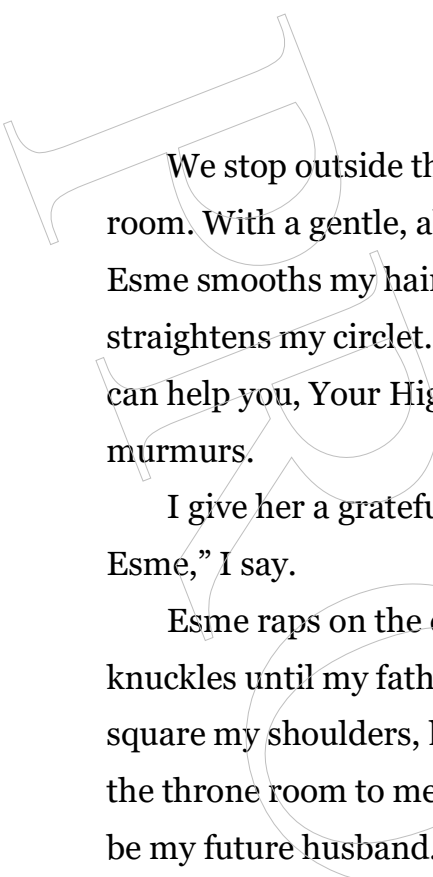
I regretfully push the plate and saucer of trifle away. “Thank you,” I say with as much earnestness I can muster. “I didn’t realize I needed that.”

Maeta and her staff smile. “Come back whenever you need to, Your Highness,” Maeta says. “You’re always welcome here.”

“I hope to see you again, Your Highness.” Yasmin aims that crooked grin at me.

“I hope so, too,” I reply, and am surprised that I mean it. I haven’t looked forward to seeing anyone for a long time.

Esme takes my hand and nearly drags me out the door. We march down the corridors without saying anything. My heart is fluttering like a caged bird in my ribs. I’m nervous and didn’t even realize it. Who will these princes be? What will they say? Will they want to make me laugh and marry me or just to be heir to the throne?



We stop outside the doors to the throne room. With a gentle, almost maternal touch, Esme smooths my hair from my brow and straightens my circlet. “I pray that someone can help you, Your Highness,” she murmurs.

I give her a grateful look. “Thank you, Esme,” I say.

Esme raps on the door with her knuckles until my father responds. Then, I square my shoulders, lift my chin, and enter the throne room to meet the man who could be my future husband.



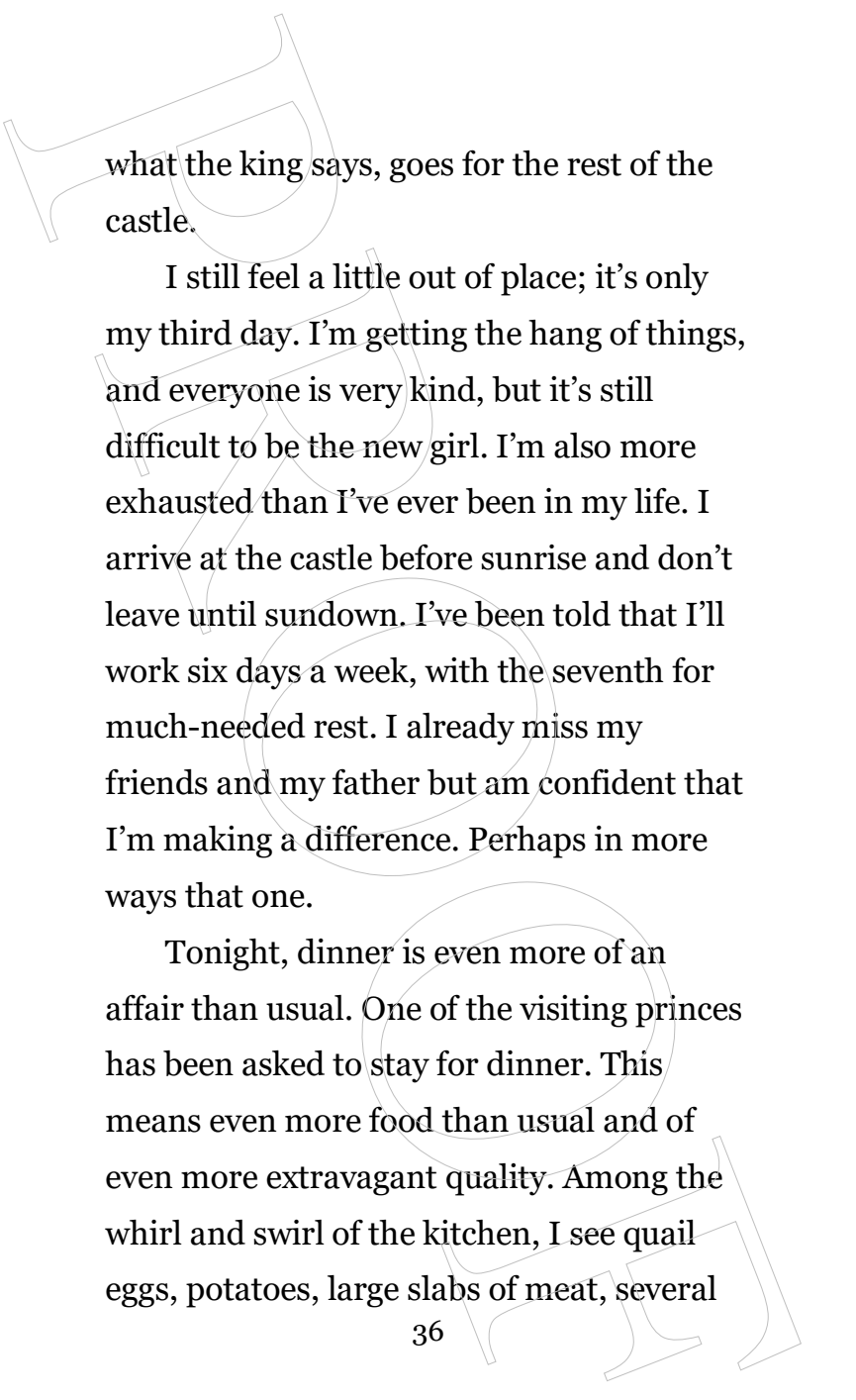
## *Chapter Four*

*Yasmin*

*Working in the kitchens, I think, isn't so bad.*

Then it's time for dinner.

The kitchens are suddenly filled with noise and sound, heat and sweat, bodies in motion and booming voices. It's the largest meal of the day in the castle, the complete opposite of what I'm used to. I'm accustomed to eating more for breakfast than any other time, but the king, it is said, prefers a sizable supper. And, of course,



what the king says, goes for the rest of the castle.

I still feel a little out of place; it's only my third day. I'm getting the hang of things, and everyone is very kind, but it's still difficult to be the new girl. I'm also more exhausted than I've ever been in my life. I arrive at the castle before sunrise and don't leave until sundown. I've been told that I'll work six days a week, with the seventh for much-needed rest. I already miss my friends and my father but am confident that I'm making a difference. Perhaps in more ways than one.

Tonight, dinner is even more of an affair than usual. One of the visiting princes has been asked to stay for dinner. This means even more food than usual and of even more extravagant quality. Among the whirl and swirl of the kitchen, I see quail eggs, potatoes, large slabs of meat, several

different soups, a variety of cheeses, fish, and vividly-hued fruit. My eyes grow round as dinner plates at the sight of so much food. Are they really going to eat all of that?

“Yasmin!” Maeta shouts above the din of pots and plates clattering. “I need you to go to the cellar.”

I perform an elaborate salute. “Yes, ma’am!” I reply. Maeta has been nothing but kind to me, and I appreciate her gentle guidance. Somehow, she is both tender and tough, always willing to offer praise but also unafraid to keep the staff in line.

“Don’t mock me, girl,” she says, swatting gently at my arm. “We need more flour and more salted butter. Do you know where you’re going?”

“I think so,” I say. I followed someone to the cellar last night, after all. The castle is like a maze, but I’ve always had a good sense of direction.



“Don’t dilly-dally,” Maeta says, and I respond with a wave as I dash out of the kitchens.

Perhaps my sense of direction isn’t as good as I thought. Within a matter of minutes, I’m hopelessly lost. I stand with my hands on my hips, looking searchingly in either direction. *I definitely came from there*, I think, chewing on my bottom lip. So that at least rules out one way. I should probably just keep walking.

I start to get nervous when I’ve been walking for at least ten minutes. I’m in a part of the castle I’ve never seen before. The lighting is poor here, more cavernous. The rugs on the floor are ragged, and the stone walls are unadorned. Few people must come here.

That’s why I’m shocked when, suddenly, I hear a noise.

I whirl around, my pulse beating rapidly. “Who’s there?” I ask. I have no reason to be afraid; it’s probably just a rat—harmless but bothersome creatures. Still, being lost and alone in an unknown place would make anyone nervous.

Unsurprisingly, there’s no response. Rats can’t talk, after all.

“Calm down, Yasmin,” I mutter to myself. “You’re supposed to be the brave one.” I shake my head, roll my shoulders back, and prepare to walk back down the corridor.

“Yasmin?”

My spine stiffens at the sound of my own name, then relaxes. Someone from the kitchen must have come looking for me. I hope once I’ve explained what happened, I won’t be in too much trouble.

“Don’t tell Maeta I got lost,” I beg as I turn around. “I want her to think I’m—”

The princess stares at me, tears running down her round face.

*Well.* This is unexpected.

At first, I freeze in surprise at the sight of the princess, but then I register that she's crying. Instinctively, I move to embrace her like I would with one of the village children, but then I stop myself. It wouldn't be appropriate for the new kitchen girl to hug the princess.

"Are you—alright, Your Highness?" I ask instead, bringing my arms awkwardly back to my sides.

"Devina," she whispers. "Call me Devina."

"Um, okay," I say, smiling reassuringly at her. "Devina it is, Your Highness. I mean..." I roll my eyes at myself. "Devina. Right."

The princess—Devina—nods. Her arms are wrapped around her, as if protecting

herself from an unknown attacker. Tears still roll down her face, but she wipes them impatiently away with the back of her hand. She's dressed just as beautifully as she was when I saw her two days ago, but in a green gown today instead of blue. I wonder what it's like to have more than one dress.

Instead of asking about her wardrobe, I say, "What are you doing down here?"

She sniffles for a moment. "Hiding," she says.

"From who?"

"From everyone."

"Do you want me to go?" I ask, leaving out the fact that I have no idea where I am.

She hesitates, then shakes her head. "Please don't," she says. Then, she sits down on the moth-eaten carpet, hugging her knees to her chest. After a moment, I sit beside her. I'm definitely going to be in

trouble when I return to the kitchens, but I push the thought from my head.

I wonder what's wrong, and, most of all, how to ask without being intrusive. I'm tempted to just ask—to blurt out the first thing that pops into my head. I'm a direct person like that. But I also know that my impulsive tendencies have gotten me in trouble in the past, and the last thing I need is to upset the princess further. My father is depending on me. I need this job.

Luckily, before I can think of anything to say, she speaks. “What are *you* doing down here?” she asks.

I run a hand through my hair, embarrassed. “I was on my way to the cellar,” I confess, “but I got lost. Not my finest moment.”

“You're not too far,” she says. “I can take you there. In a few minutes.”

“Thank you, Pr—Devina,” I say. I grin at her, and watch her lips quiver, as if trying to return the gesture. In the end, she just nods.

We sit in silence for several minutes. Outwardly, I pick at some loose threads in my skirt. Inwardly, my mind is galloping like a racehorse. I don’t know how to make conversation with a weeping princess. After a moment, though, I realize that we don’t have to speak at all.

My suspicion proves correct when she sniffles, blinks further tears away, and looks sideways at me. “Thank you,” she says.

“For what?” I ask.

“Just sitting with me. Not pestering me, not trying to make me laugh, not trying to do anything. Just being here.”

“You’re welcome,” I say. “When my mother passed away, I hated when people tried to cheer me up. I just wanted to be sad for a while, in silence.”

She nods and rolls her eyes. “Do you know about all the princes coming to the castle?”

I wince. “I imagine it’s not going particularly well?”

Devina stands up and brushes the dirt off her voluminous skirts, then helps me to my feet. “The cellar is this way,” she says, and begins walking in the opposite direction I was going. *Oops*. I follow. “I’ve heard the same joke at least five times now,” she continues. “You know the one about the rabbit and the snake?”

I snort. “Of course, I do. It wasn’t even funny the first time.”

“Exactly!” she says.

“What else do they do to try to get you to laugh?”

The princess shakes her head.

“Everything. Jokes, singing, stories, silly voices, funny faces. The prince who’s here

today brought *puppets*, and threatened to bring them to dinner, too. That's when I ran and hid."

I shudder. I wouldn't want to eat dinner with puppets, either.

"Do you think any of them will succeed?" I ask.

She grows quiet and doesn't answer. I don't push the subject. We walk in silence until our surroundings begin to look vaguely familiar, and, finally, we arrive at the cellar. I quickly grab some flour and butter, hoping that Maeta still needs them and didn't send someone else.

"Thank you for walking me here," I say to Devina. "And I'm sorry that you're probably going to hear that rabbit joke at least a thousand more times."

There it is—the tiniest flicker of a smile on her lips—distant and faint, like something I can see far beneath the surface



of cloudy water. “I hope they come up with some better material.”

“I hope so, too, for your sanity.”

“Can I walk with you back to the kitchens?”

I’m surprised that she wants to. “Of course. Maybe Maeta won’t be as angry with me if you’re there.”

We make our way back to the kitchens, chatting about terrible jokes. My father has a few classic ones, and I tell them to the princess with gusto. Instead of laughing, we both groan at the awful punchlines. Devina tells me one that’s so bad, it’s almost funny, and I’m still chuckling when I nearly stroll head-first into Maeta.

“What took you so long?” she cries as she snatches the butter and flour out of my arms. When she sees I’m with Devina, though, she softens immediately and curtsies. “Begging your pardon, Your

Highness,” she says. “I didn’t realize she was with you.”

“Yasmin has been a great help to me this evening,” Devina says. “I very much appreciate her company, and I’m sure she’s a wonderful addition to the kitchen staff.”

I can’t help it—I briefly take Devina’s hand in mine and squeeze it. “Thank you,” I say.

To my surprise, she squeezes my hand back before she withdraws hers. “I’d better get back,” she says, and hurries away before I can say goodbye.

When I turn around, Maeta is staring at me with a peculiar expression. “What?” I ask.

Maeta tilts her head. “She almost looked...happy.”



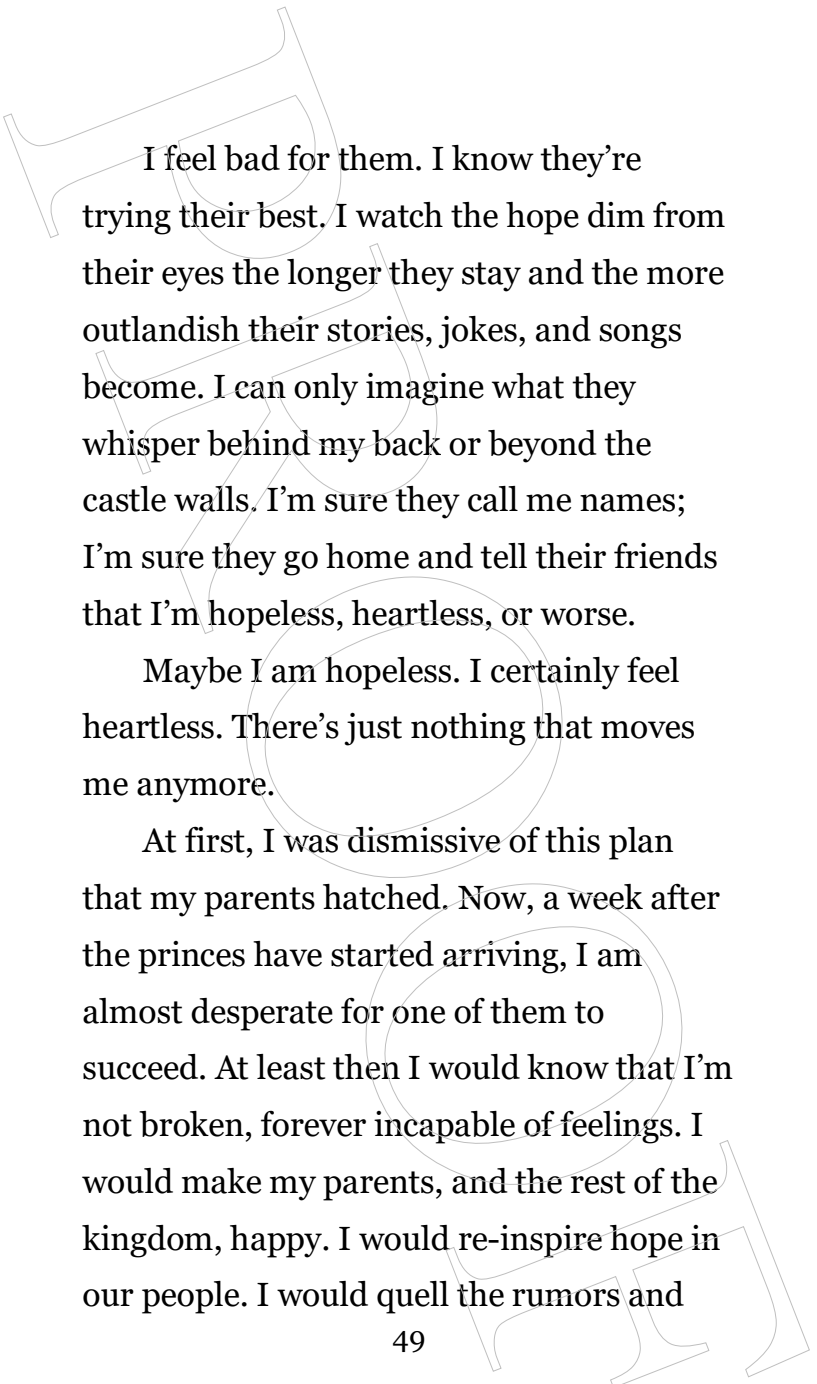
## *Chapter Five*

### *Devina*

Every day, the princes come to the castle.

Every day, I turn them away.

I wish I could say that some of them have come close to succeeding, but that would be a lie. I have watched, stone-faced, as prince after prince tries to make me smile or laugh. At first, I tried to smile out of pity, but couldn't even manage that. Now, I just watch them with an icy expression that refuses to melt.



I feel bad for them. I know they're trying their best. I watch the hope dim from their eyes the longer they stay and the more outlandish their stories, jokes, and songs become. I can only imagine what they whisper behind my back or beyond the castle walls. I'm sure they call me names; I'm sure they go home and tell their friends that I'm hopeless, heartless, or worse.

Maybe I am hopeless. I certainly feel heartless. There's just nothing that moves me anymore.

At first, I was dismissive of this plan that my parents hatched. Now, a week after the princes have started arriving, I am almost desperate for one of them to succeed. At least then I would know that I'm not broken, forever incapable of feelings. I would make my parents, and the rest of the kingdom, happy. I would re-inspire hope in our people. I would quell the rumors and

whispers forever. Maybe I would even be genuinely happy.

Instead, I feel even worse than usual. I feel like a failure.

It's no surprise that when today's prince arrives, I can barely muster the energy to curtsy. My sleep has been tormented with nightmares, abstract as a watercolor painting, but still scary enough to haunt me. I wake up every day feeling more drained than when I went to sleep.

"Princess Devina, it is a joy to make your acquaintance," the prince says, flashing unnaturally white teeth in a grin. I wish I could respond in kind, but I simply nod.

"And how do you plan to bring the princess joy?" My father booms. I look back at him, on his throne, and realize that my mother isn't beside him. My frown deepens.

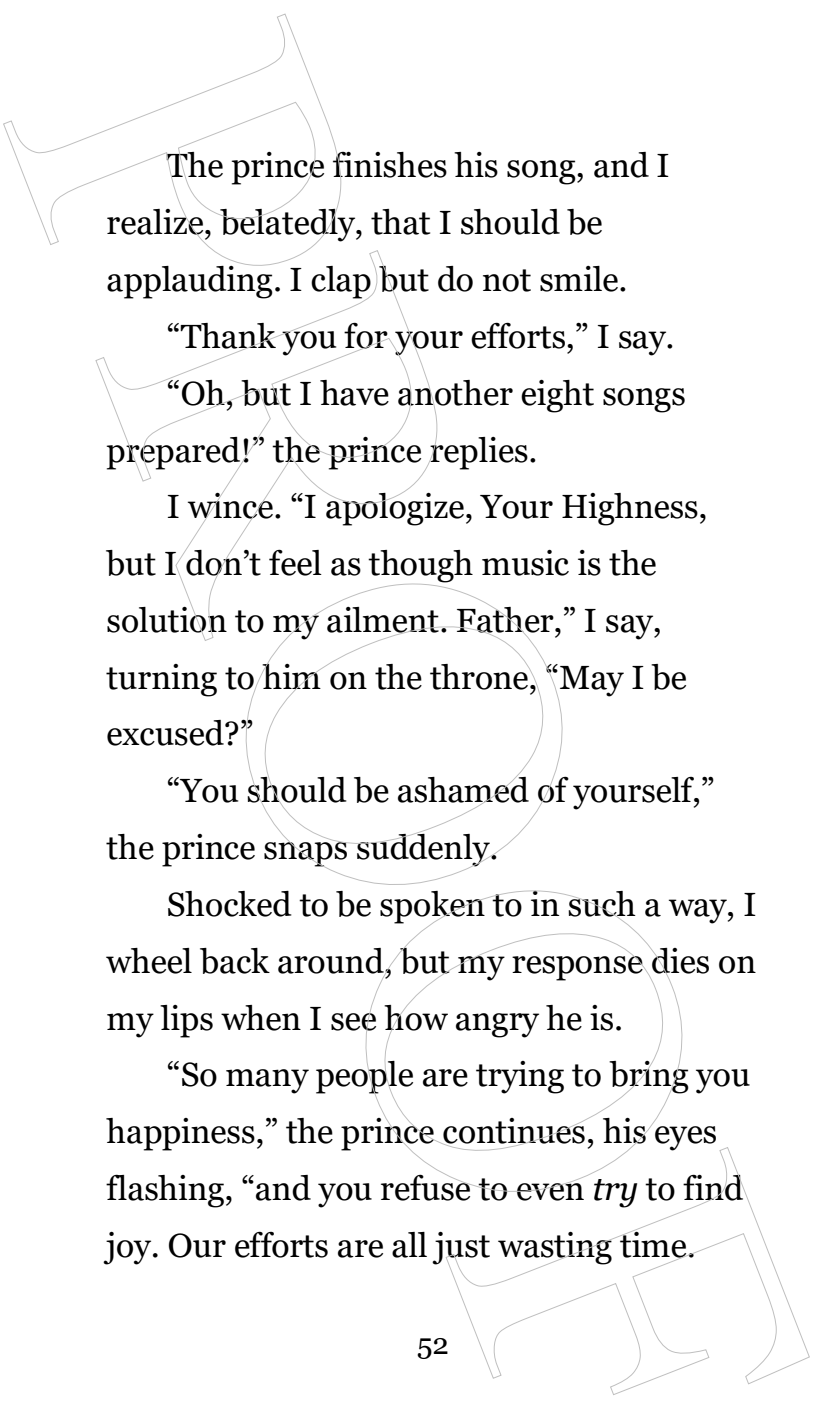
Where could she be? Has she tired of this, too?

“I will play her *music!*” The prince crows, as if he isn’t the fourth person to try this approach.

As he strums his lute, singing something about a maiden fair; my mind won’t stay still enough for me to listen. I wish I could hide back in the cellar again, accompanied only by the scurry of rats and the drip-drop of water. That’s not entirely true, I realize. I was accompanied by the new kitchen helper, Yasmin. I was surprised by how soothing her presence was. She didn’t try to cheer me or force any feelings onto me. She just sat with me, waiting until I was ready to speak.

I remember, too, the soft touch of her hand, and the mischievous warmth of her dark eyes.

I wonder when I’ll get to see her again.



The prince finishes his song, and I realize, belatedly, that I should be applauding. I clap but do not smile.

“Thank you for your efforts,” I say.

“Oh, but I have another eight songs prepared!” the prince replies.

I wince. “I apologize, Your Highness, but I don’t feel as though music is the solution to my ailment. Father,” I say, turning to him on the throne, “May I be excused?”

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” the prince snaps suddenly.

Shocked to be spoken to in such a way, I wheel back around, but my response dies on my lips when I see how angry he is.

“So many people are trying to bring you happiness,” the prince continues, his eyes flashing, “and you refuse to even *try* to find joy. Our efforts are all just wasting time.

You are selfish, Princess Devina, for feeling the way you do. I hope you know that.”

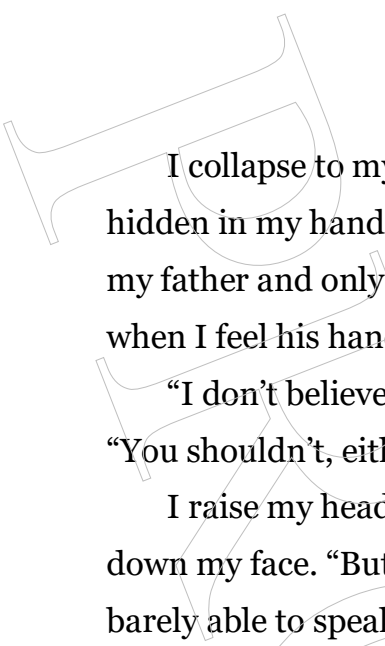
Tears spring to my eyes and threaten to escape down my cheeks. All the breath has gone out of me; I feel like I’ve been punched in the stomach. Somehow, this stranger has managed to articulate my deepest, darkest fear. I am terrified that I am being selfish, being stubborn, being difficult. I lose sleep wondering if everyone hates me, worrying that everyone who tries to help secretly resents me for not trying harder to feel better. Apparently, they do.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, my voice breaking.

“You may leave now,” my father says quietly to the prince. “Thank you for your efforts.”

Without another word, the prince gathers up his instrument and storms out the door.





I collapse to my knees, weeping, my face hidden in my hands. I can't bear to look at my father and only register his presence when I feel his hand on my shoulder.

“I don't believe him,” my father says. “You shouldn't, either.”

I raise my head, tears still streaming down my face. “But he's right,” I sniffle, barely able to speak. “I *am* selfish. I should feel better when everyone is trying so hard.”

Father shakes his head, his eyes soft. “I don't understand what's wrong, I'll admit,” he says, “but I do know that you are a kind and gentle soul. You would never feel this way on purpose. We just haven't found the right person, or the right solution, yet.” He squeezes my shoulder. “Perhaps we should make a visit to the doctor again. It's been several months; maybe he has thought of another remedy.”

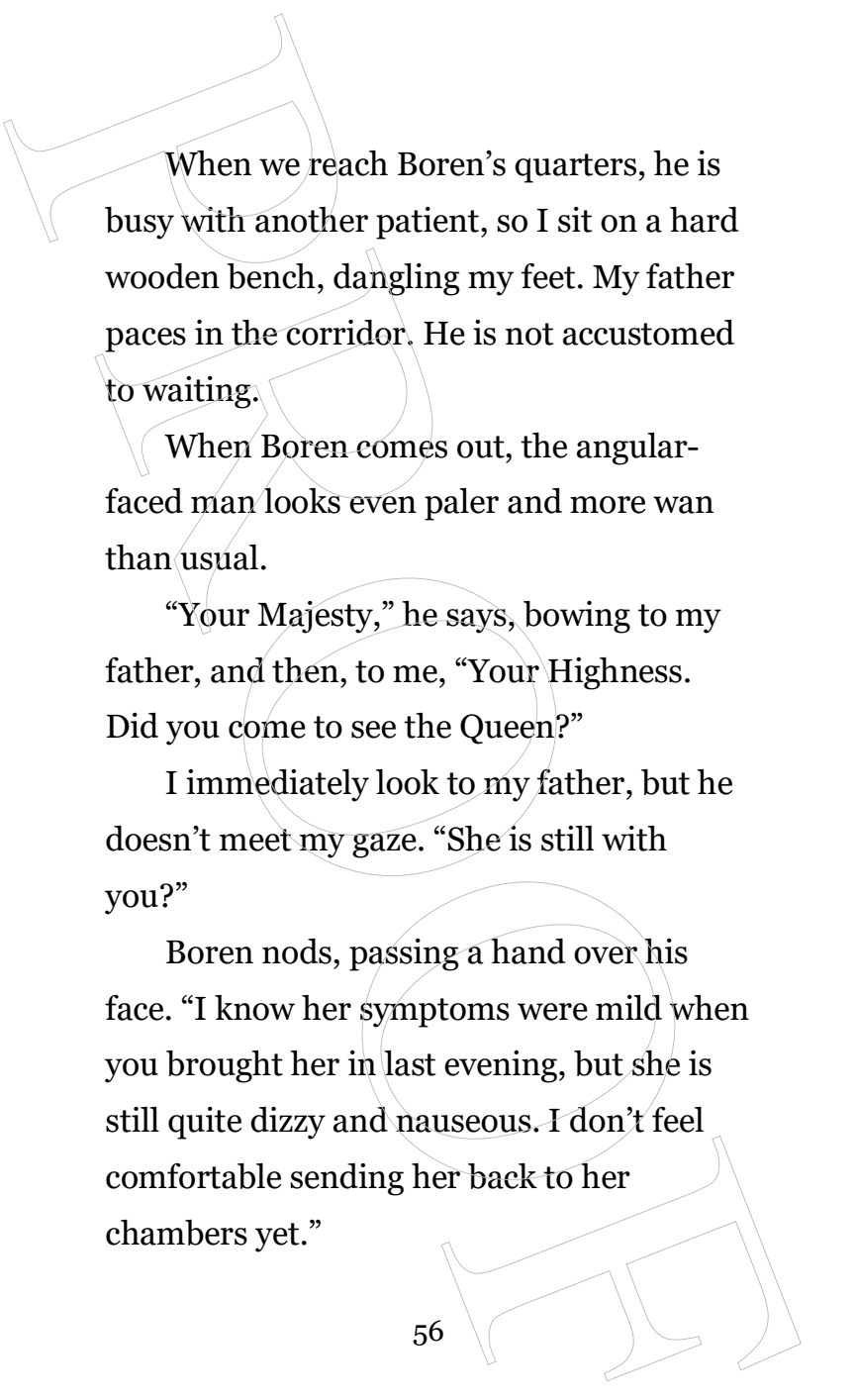
I cringe at the thought of seeing the doctor again. Last time, he suggested I be bled by leeches, in case my ailment was a disease in my blood. My father said it was worth a try, but I refused.

“I know last time was frightening,” Father acknowledges, seeing the look on my face. “But I trust him to make an informed decision. Shall we?” He offers me his arm.

Quietly, I nod, and accept it.

We walk in silence to the east wing of the castle, where Boren, the court doctor, works. Everyone who passes us bows or curtsies and I’m so exhausted that I struggle to return the gesture. The last prince’s words still sting like a bug bite, one that I’m not able to scratch. Fresh waves of tears periodically flow into my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall.

*I am not selfish, I say to myself. I am doing my best, too.*



When we reach Boren's quarters, he is busy with another patient, so I sit on a hard wooden bench, dangling my feet. My father paces in the corridor. He is not accustomed to waiting.

When Boren comes out, the angular-faced man looks even paler and more wan than usual.

"Your Majesty," he says, bowing to my father, and then, to me, "Your Highness. Did you come to see the Queen?"

I immediately look to my father, but he doesn't meet my gaze. "She is still with you?"

Boren nods, passing a hand over his face. "I know her symptoms were mild when you brought her in last evening, but she is still quite dizzy and nauseous. I don't feel comfortable sending her back to her chambers yet."

“Mother is sick?” I ask my father. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

My father sighs, looking tired. “She didn’t want to give you any cause for alarm, or to distract you from your own work, Devina. You need to be focusing on the princes and on finding happiness, not on your mother’s health.”

“Of course, I need to be focusing on my mother’s health!” I snap. I look to Boren. “What’s wrong with her?”

He looks down and shrugs. “I don’t yet have an answer for you, Your Highness, but I’m doing everything in my power to find out.”

My heart pounds as if I just ran the length of the castle. What if I’ve been so focused on myself that I haven’t noticed my mother’s symptoms? Or worse—what if she’s sick and it’s my fault? What if my curse has somehow extended to her?



I can't be here any longer.

Before my father or Boren can react, I take off down the corridors, weaving my way back to my chambers. When I arrive back in my room, I slam the door behind me and fling myself onto my bed, weeping.

If something happens to my mother, I'll never be happy again.



## *Chapter Six*

### *Yasmin*

“Yasmin? Why are you awake?”

My father peers at me suspiciously as I plait my hair into a long braid and slip my feet into sandals. He’s sitting by the fire, where he fell asleep in his favorite chair, as usual. I stoop to kiss him on the cheek.

“I’m going to the castle,” I reply.

“But why? Today’s your day off, isn’t it?” he asks.

I can’t resist a grin. “It is. The princess requested my presence today.”

“The—the princess?” My father gapes at me, and I can’t help but giggle at his expression. “What does she want with you?”

I shrug. “I don’t know exactly,” I say, “but I suspect she wants a friend.”

“But you? A peasant girl? Friends with the princess?”

“Hey!” I cry in mock offense. “I’m an amazing friend, thank you very much. Best of the best. A treat for peasants and princesses alike.”

My father chuckles and pats my hand. “You’re right, my dear. Just be sure not to bore her with one of your long-winded stories.”

I stick my tongue out at him and skip out the door.

Devina has escaped to the kitchens a few times since I first found her hiding in the cellars. Her mother, she tells me, has been sick for over a week now. While

princes are still visiting the castle, the number of them has decreased. It seems that many of them are becoming skeptical that their efforts will reap any rewards. Devina says it feels like a thousand years since she last smiled or felt hope that she would ever smile again.

It makes my heart hurt.

So Maeta serves her food, and I serve her stories, but, most often, I just provide a listening ear. The young princess seems to be shouldering an unseen burden. And yet she doesn't complain—not to me, at least. Mostly, she seems concerned for how her behavior or attitude is affecting the other people in her life.

“It doesn't bother me,” I tell her as we walk through the palace gardens today. I have never seen so many colors in one place. It's as if a rainbow has shattered and sprinkled its colors all over the ground. I



touch a huge orange flower's petal and marvel at its velvety softness. I wish blossoms like this grew in the village.

Devina looks at me. "It doesn't?"

I shake my head. "Maybe it's because I'm used to my father, who's just a crotchety old man. Not that you're a crotchety old man," I hasten to add as Devina arcs a brow. "Just...you seem sad, not mean or grumpy."

"Sometimes I *am* grumpy," Devina says. "And sometimes I'm mean. Sometimes being cruel or angry feels better than just being sad all the time."

"Are you angry about your mother?" I ask.

She considers the question. "Yes," she says quietly. "I'm mad that Boren doesn't seem to know what's happening. I'm mad that Father pretends like everything is fine. I'm mad that I feel so empty that I can't

cheer my mother up or make her feel better, either.”

I nod in understanding. “I was angry when my mother was sick, too. It felt like Fate was punishing her and I didn’t know why.”

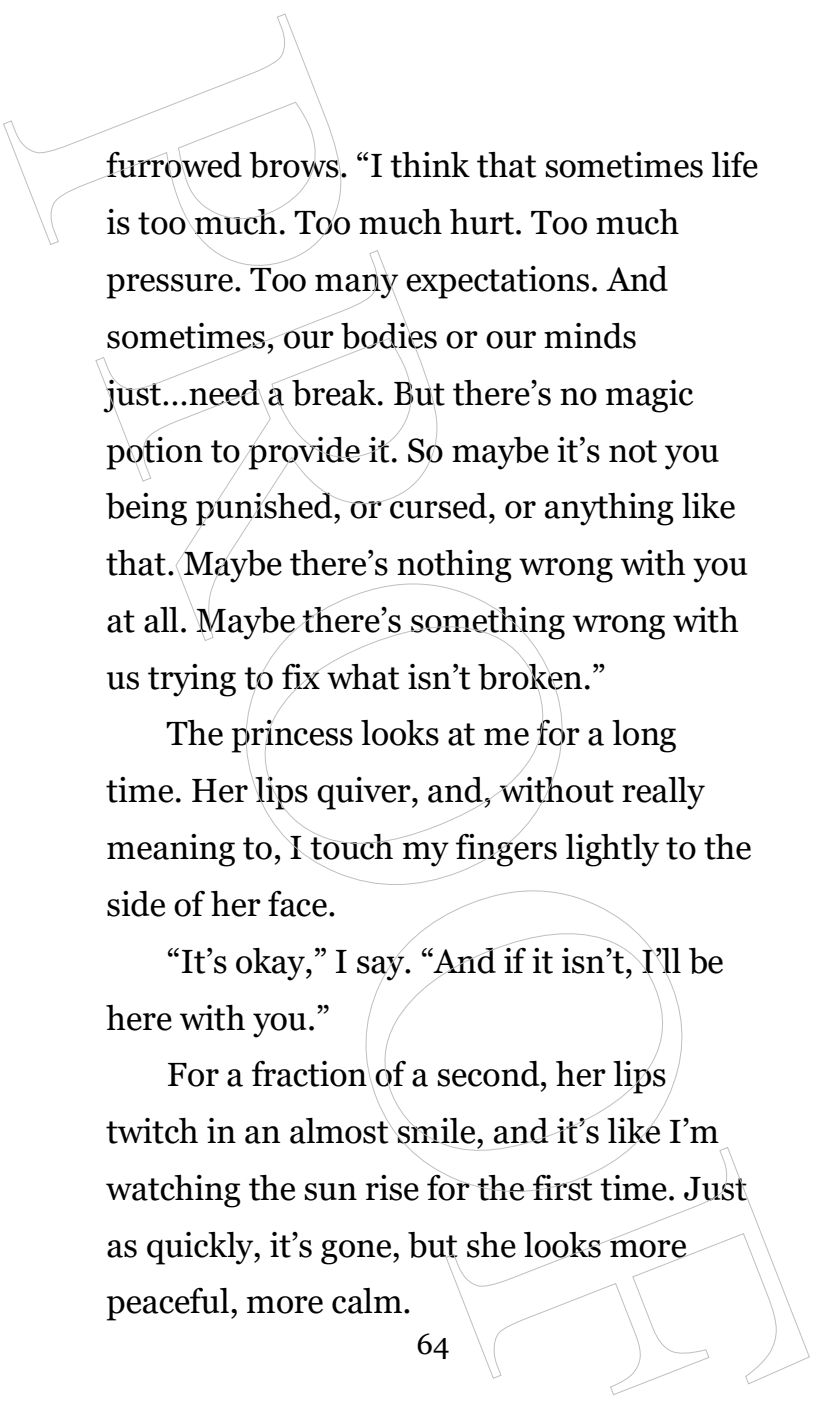
Devina is quiet, then murmurs, “I’m worried Fate is punishing me, too.”

She sits on a marble bench under a willow tree, its long tendrils draping around her like a curtain. I part some of the branches and tentatively sit beside her. A small white flower blooms to my right, and I pluck it tenderly from the ground. Then, I reach my hand up and she doesn’t recoil, so I tuck the blossom behind Devina’s ear.

“It wouldn’t dare,” I say.

A single tear slides down her cheek.

“I think...” The enormity, the complexity of what I want to say is difficult to articulate, and I stare ahead of me with



furrowed brows. “I think that sometimes life is too much. Too much hurt. Too much pressure. Too many expectations. And sometimes, our bodies or our minds just...need a break. But there’s no magic potion to provide it. So maybe it’s not you being punished, or cursed, or anything like that. Maybe there’s nothing wrong with you at all. Maybe there’s something wrong with us trying to fix what isn’t broken.”

The princess looks at me for a long time. Her lips quiver, and, without really meaning to, I touch my fingers lightly to the side of her face.

“It’s okay,” I say. “And if it isn’t, I’ll be here with you.”

For a fraction of a second, her lips twitch in an almost smile, and it’s like I’m watching the sun rise for the first time. Just as quickly, it’s gone, but she looks more peaceful, more calm.

“Thank you, Yasmin,” Devina says.

“That means so much to me.”

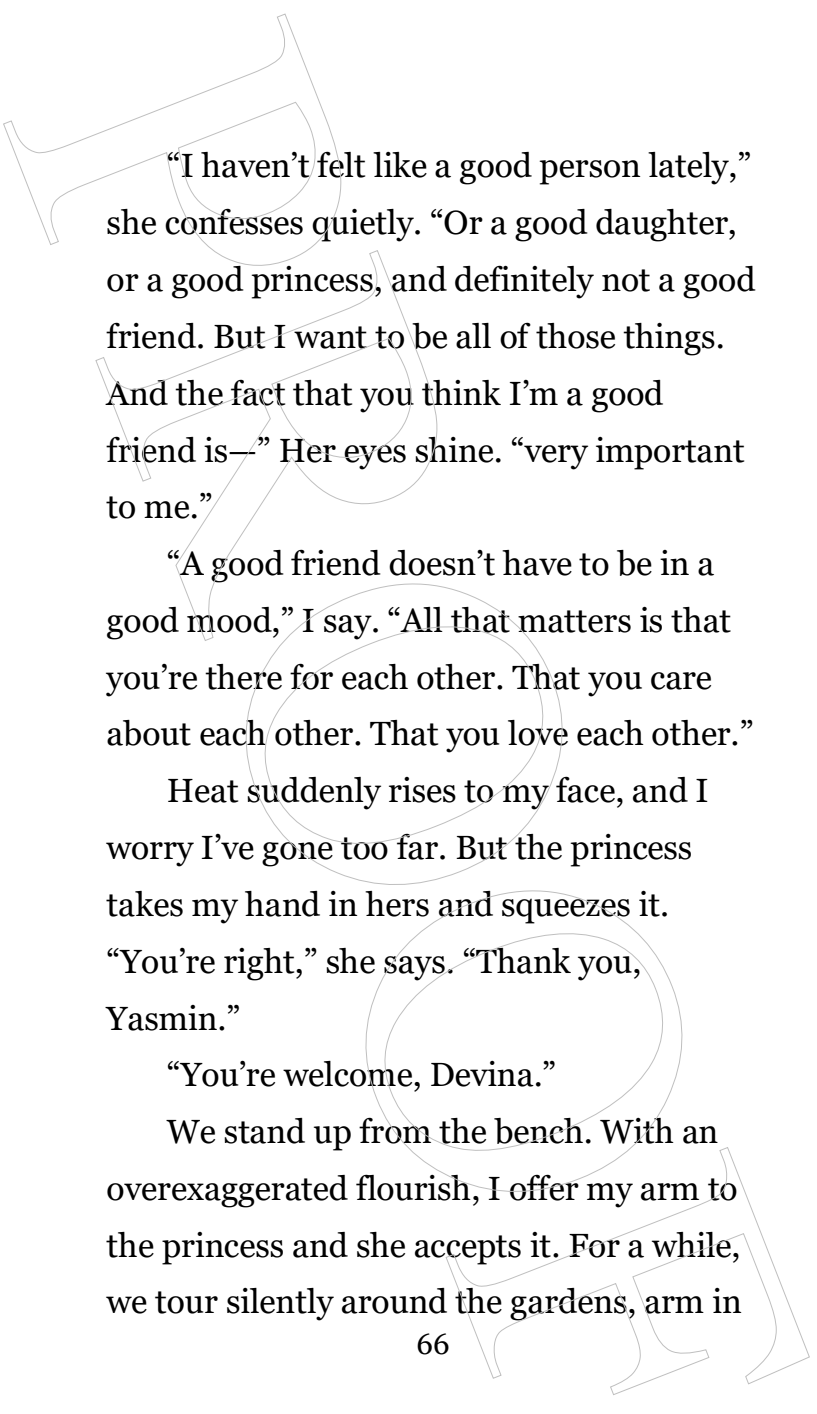
I shrug, suddenly embarrassed. “It’s the least I can do,” I say. “I know you would do the same for me.”

“You do?”

I nod.

I’m caught off guard when she embraces me, her arms flung around my neck, the blossom behind her ear as scented as perfume. I hesitate, then circle her with my own arms, pulling her close. For a long time, we sit in each other’s arms, safe within the larger embrace of the willow tree. Here, like this, together, I feel a warmth in my heart that I’ve never experienced before, and I am grateful.

The princess finally pulls away, tears sparkling on her lashes. She blushes and wipes them away with the back of her hand.



“I haven’t felt like a good person lately,” she confesses quietly. “Or a good daughter, or a good princess, and definitely not a good friend. But I want to be all of those things. And the fact that you think I’m a good friend is—” Her eyes shine. “very important to me.”

“A good friend doesn’t have to be in a good mood,” I say. “All that matters is that you’re there for each other. That you care about each other. That you love each other.”

Heat suddenly rises to my face, and I worry I’ve gone too far. But the princess takes my hand in hers and squeezes it.

“You’re right,” she says. “Thank you, Yasmin.”

“You’re welcome, Devina.”

We stand up from the bench. With an overexaggerated flourish, I offer my arm to the princess and she accepts it. For a while, we tour silently around the gardens, arm in

arm. I feel as if something has changed, but I'm unable to name it. Whatever it is, I feel more comfortable with the princess than ever.

"Tell me about the village," Devina says as we survey a small pond surrounded by blossoms. A tiny frog leaps from a lily pad as we approach, diving into the water.

"The village?" I repeat. "What do you want to know about it?"

The princess shrugs. "I haven't been there for a long time. I should be more knowledgeable of what it's like there. It's the backbone of our kingdom, and someday, I'll be Queen."

I consider the town I've called home for my entire life. "It seems slow-paced," I say, "but everyone is always moving quickly. There's always work to be done. The people are kind and hard-working, except for old

Matten, who just bullies all the kids into doing his chores. One time, I remember...”

I launch into a story about Matten and how the children once smeared peanut butter on the back of his shoes so that the dogs followed him and nipped at his ankles. At the conclusion of the tale I’m shocked into stillness as an astonishing sound comes from Devina’s mouth: laughter. It rings gently, like a bell, the most musical, beautiful sound I’ve ever heard. I stare at her in wonder.

She giggles for a moment, her hand covering her mouth before she stops and peers inquisitively at me. “What?”

“You—laughed,” I croak in disbelief.

She blinks. “Oh. I suppose I did.”

We stare at each other.

“If I tell my father you made me laugh,” Devina says, “You could... You would...”

I gasp and shake my head. “I wasn’t trying to weasel anything out of you, I swear!” I say firmly. The last thing I want is for her to think I was just being nice to her to have a chance at the throne. Besides, I’m just a villager—there’s no way that they would consider me the heir to the kingdom. And there’s no way that I would gain Devina’s hand in...

My thoughts are interrupted as I see Esme, one of the royal courtiers, running towards us. I immediately drop the princess’s arm and step away from her, just in case. Devina’s expression is confused, then hurt, and I open my mouth to explain, but then she sees Esme, too.

“Your Highness,” Esme pants, out of breath. “Your Highness, I need you to come with me.”

Devina’s brows furrow. “What’s wrong?”



Esme wrings her hands. “Your mother...” She begins, but that’s all Devina needs to hear.

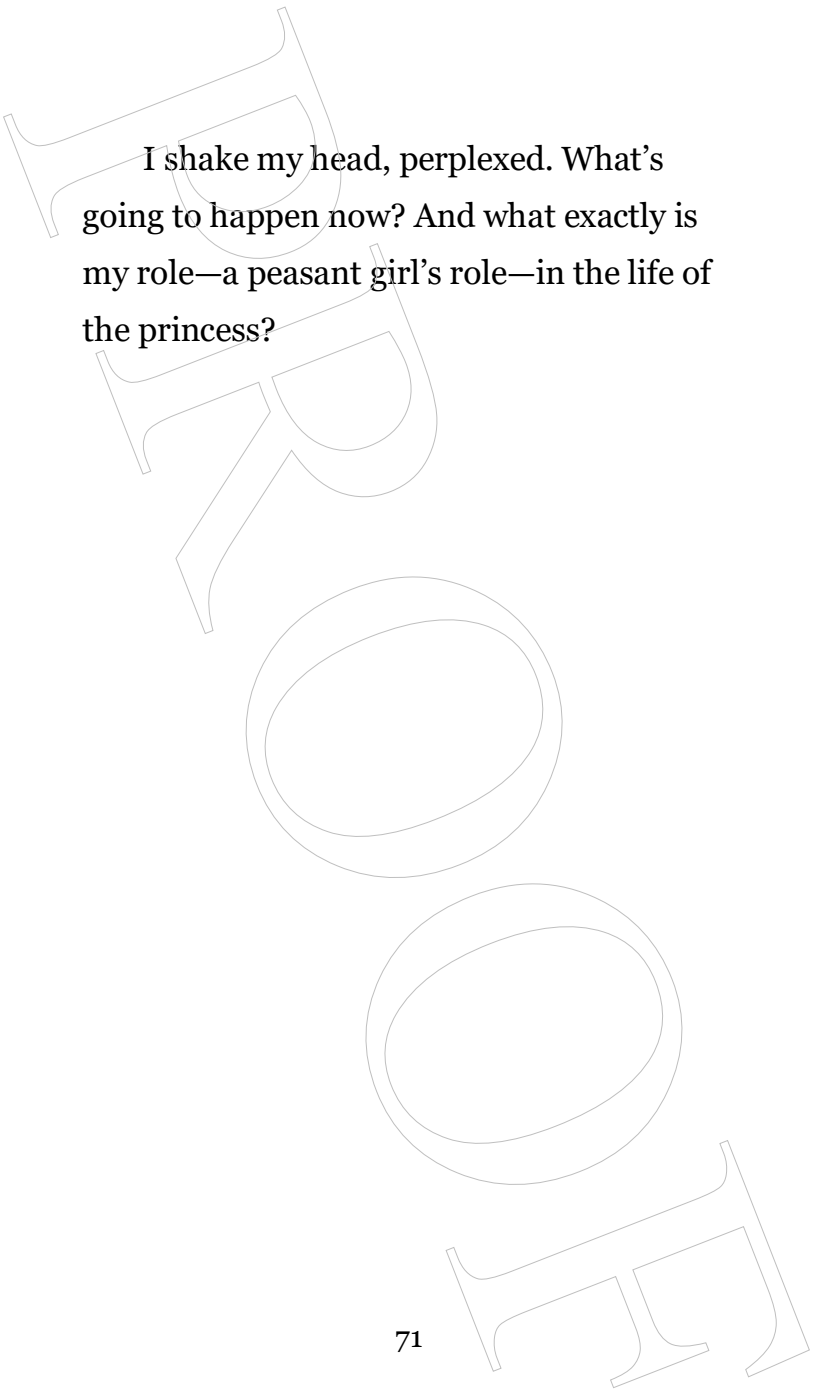
“Let me see her at once,” she says. Esme nods.

Devina turns to me. “I’m sorry,” she whispers, “but I must go to her.”

“Of course,” I say. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

She nods. Esme looks at me in confusion, as if just realizing that I’m also there, but then she and Devina are off towards the castle, leaving me alone in the gardens.

I sit heavily on a bench, watching the little frog in the pond struggle his way back onto a lily pad. My mind reflects on everything that just happened, from our embrace, to our conversations, to the melodious sound of Devina’s laughter.



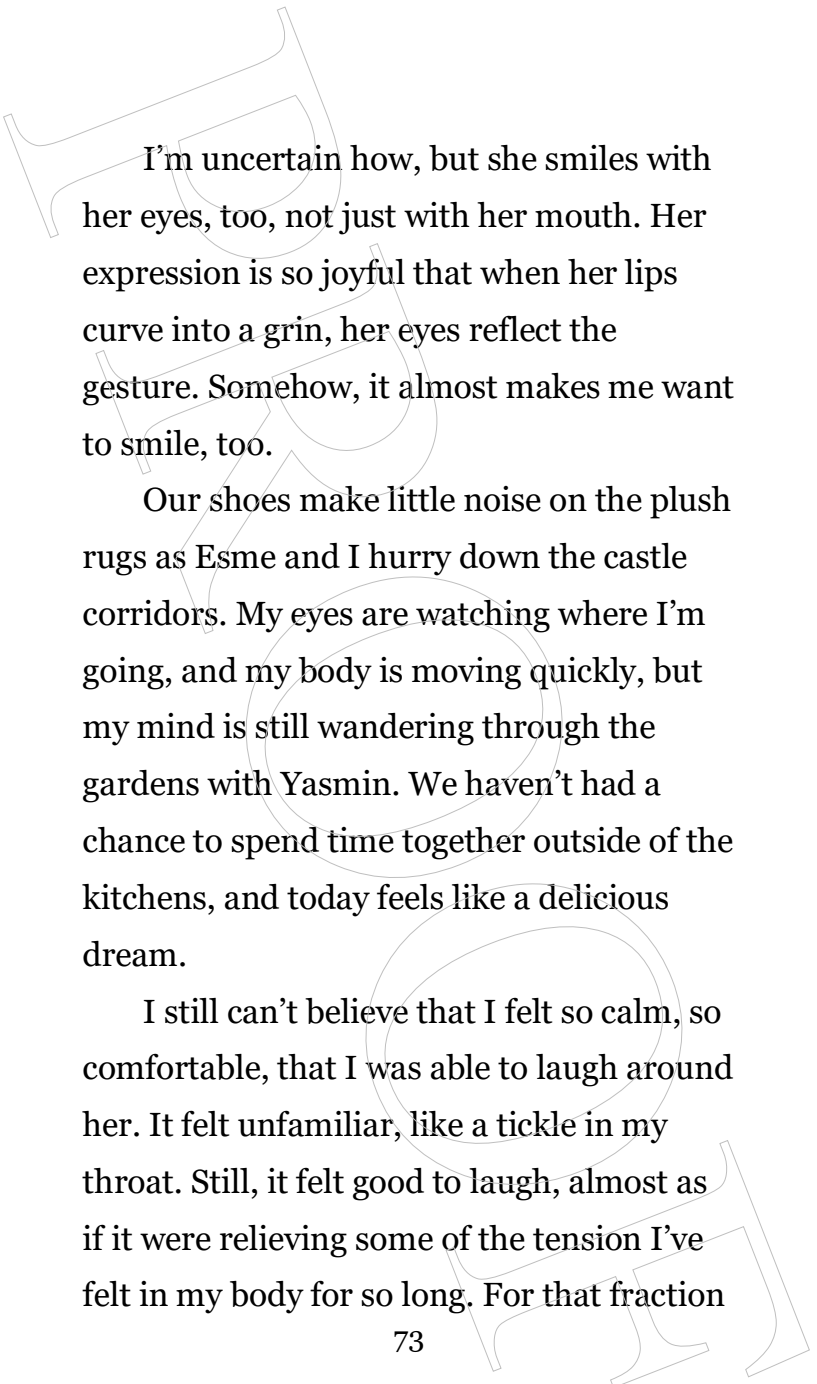
I shake my head, perplexed. What's going to happen now? And what exactly is my role—a peasant girl's role—in the life of the princess?

## *Chapter Seven*

### *Devina*

I should be worried about my mother. I *am* worried about my mother. But as Esme hastens me from the gardens to the doctor's ward, all I can think about is Yasmin's eyes.

Today was the first time I've seen them outside. In the sunlight, her dark eyes were illuminated. Around the irises sparkled rings of gold; in the depths were flecks of dark green, like the leaves on a rose. Sometimes, when she looked sideways at me, they even seemed to glow a warm amber.



I'm uncertain how, but she smiles with her eyes, too, not just with her mouth. Her expression is so joyful that when her lips curve into a grin, her eyes reflect the gesture. Somehow, it almost makes me want to smile, too.

Our shoes make little noise on the plush rugs as Esme and I hurry down the castle corridors. My eyes are watching where I'm going, and my body is moving quickly, but my mind is still wandering through the gardens with Yasmin. We haven't had a chance to spend time together outside of the kitchens, and today feels like a delicious dream.

I still can't believe that I felt so calm, so comfortable, that I was able to laugh around her. It felt unfamiliar, like a tickle in my throat. Still, it felt good to laugh, almost as if it were relieving some of the tension I've felt in my body for so long. For that fraction

of a moment, laughing with Yasmin, I didn't feel hopeless, or despondent, or numb. I felt normal.

*You're not abnormal!* I hear Yasmin suddenly say in my head. *Everyone feels sad sometimes. You're just feeling it for longer than most.*

I'm comforted even just by imagining her voice. If not normal, then, how did I feel?

I realize the answer as we turn the corner and are faced with the door to the doctor's ward.

I felt alive.

"Your Highness," Esme says, tearing me from my reverie. "I've asked Boren to come speak with you."

I nod. Grim reality descends on me again. How could I have expected my happiness to last?

The doctor emerges from the ward and shuts the heavy wooden door behind him. Esme curtsies and retreats to a polite distance.

Boren looks exhausted. Dark purple shadows lay beneath his eyes, and his graying hair is disheveled.

“Is my mother okay?” I ask, impatient.

He hesitates, and I feel all the breath leave my body.

“She is for now,” he says. “But her fever is getting worse and won’t go down. I’m afraid there’s very little I can do except keep her comfortable, Your Highness.”

I need to sit down. I need to sleep. I need to scream. I need to run. A million different impulses pull me in different directions, and all I can do is stand here, motionless.

I wish Yasmin were here. I wish I were anywhere else.

I must look like I'm about to swoon, because Boren takes my arm and looks at me intently. "Highness, are you alright?"

I nod, battling my emotions to keep tears from welling up. "Please just let me see my mother."

He lets me into the ward. Several long beds are set up in the room, separated by white curtains. We walk through these and into a private room, meant only for members of the royal family. Flickering candles mounted on the wall attempt to lend warmth, but the room is still small and dark and musty.

My mother lies in the bed in the center of the room. My father sits in a chair beside her. They both look up when I enter and smile weakly at me.

"Devina," my mother says, her voice soft and raspy. "Come, have a seat. Your father was just leaving."

Father nods and stands. "I have some things to discuss with you, Boren, if you have a moment."

"Of course, Your Majesty," says Boren. My father squeezes my shoulder and then they leave the room.

I take my father's place in the chair and hold my mother's hand. It's colder and clammy than usual. Beyond that, she looks almost normal. I caress the back of her hand with my thumb. Maybe Boren is wrong, and everything is fine. Maybe everything is going to be okay.

"How are you doing?" my mother inquires.

"I think I should be asking that of you," I reply.

She manages a weak laugh. "Oh, I'm fit as a fiddle," she says, a frequent expression of hers. "I'm not in any pain. Just very weak."



“You don’t look weak,” I say, squeezing her hand. “You look strong, like you always do.”

My mother smiles gently. “You must be thinking of yourself, Devina.”

“Me?” I shake my head. “I’m not strong.”

“Of course, you are,” Mother insists. She struggles to sit up in bed, and I sling my arm around her shoulders to help her get comfortable. When she’s settled, I sit back down, a frown creasing my lips.

“You have to be strong,” my mother says, “to feel the weight of the world so heavily and still continue to live in it. I’m proud of you.”

I shrug, uncomfortable with the praise. “I don’t think I’m worthy of pride,” I mumble.

But then, somehow again, I hear Yasmin’s voice in my head. *Accept the*

*compliment! She's right! You're working hard just to get out of bed every day!*

I almost smile, and my mother immediately notices. "What are you thinking about?" she asks.

An unfamiliar sensation floods my face: a blush. I press my hands to my cheeks, baffled. My mother's previously raised brow ascends higher. "Have you met a boy, Devina?"

I shake my head and take a deep breath. "I've met a girl..."

For the next half-hour, at least, I tell my mother all about my new friend. I try not to ramble about her smile, or the way her eyes look in the sun; instead, I talk about her mischievous sense of humor, her stories, her kindness.

"She's a wonderful friend," I say when I realize I've been rambling for a long time. "I'm glad to have met her."

My mother smiles. "I'm glad you have, too. I only wish that I could meet her as well."

I'm taken aback when I realize what she is implying. "Y-you can," I say, staggering to my feet. "You have plenty of time to meet her. She works in the kitchens. I can bring her to you tomorrow."

Mother shakes her head slowly. "I don't know if my tomorrow is guaranteed," she says softly. "Devina, I need you to know how much I love you, and how confident I am that you'll feel better someday..."

"No!" I cry, flinging my arms out. "I-I can find Yasmin right now. She might still be in the gardens. Let me go find her. I'll be right back."

As my mother protests, I bunch my skirts into my hands and run out the door, past Boren and my father, back out into the corridor. Faster and faster I sprint away

from my mother's sickbed, from the grim confirmation that she is unwell, from the knowledge that she may not be alive tomorrow. All that matters to me right now is that I find Yasmin.

I finally reach the gardens, gasping for breath. "Yasmin!" I shout, my hands cupped around my mouth. I look frantically around, the beautiful colors of flowers all blurring together. Suddenly, it all seems too much. The hues are too bright, the scents too strong. The peaceful atmosphere has turned sinister. Panic begins to grow in my chest, spreading through the rest of me. I feel like I'm drowning, like water is filling up my mouth and lungs. I claw at my throat, unable to find relief, and collapse to my knees as I dissolve into helpless tears. Any semblance of control I had is gone.

*Am I dying?* I wonder as I continue to gasp for air. My entire body trembles like a

leaf on a branch, and cold sweat beads at my temples. I feel both too hot and too cold at once. Could I have caught my mother's fever so quickly?

Finally, it begins to pass, and I can breathe again. I gasp for air as if my head has just broken the water's surface. I hug myself tightly, imagining that the arms around me are my mother's, or Yasmin's, bringing me comfort and stillness. I've never experienced anything like this before. Instead of feeling nothing, as I do normally, it is as if I felt everything at once. I shiver. I can only hope I never feel that way again.

“Devina?”

For a moment, I hope that Yasmin has found me, but then I register that the voice was deep and masculine—my father's. I peer over my shoulder, and he rushes towards me.

“Are you alright?” He gathers me into his arms, and I collapse against his chest.

“I think so,” I say. He holds me for a while until I realize that something wet is dripping into my hair.

I turn my face up to look at him, and see that, for the first time in my lifetime, my father is crying.

“Father?” I croak from my suddenly bone-dry mouth. “Is it... Is it Mother?”

He looks at me solemnly, and nods, and my world goes black.

## *Chapter Eight*

*Yasmin*

When a member of the royal family passes away, everyone knows. A herald makes an announcement in the center of town. Then, everyone dresses in mourning blacks for the next two weeks.

It hasn't happened in my lifetime, until now.

When the herald announces that the Queen is dead, I feel my heart sink like a stone in a well. I know how much Devina loved her mother, and how afraid she was

when the queen first fell ill. My whole body aches in sorrow for her.

I still remember, too, what it felt like when my mother died. Like the sun would never rise again. Like the world should just stop its rotation. Like everyone else should be crying all the time, too. Devina must be feeling all that and more. At least the visiting princes, it is said, will stop coming to the castle for a few weeks, out of respect.

The afternoon after the queen's passing, the kitchen crew begins the arduous task of readying the funeral feast. Usually we're a lively bunch, always joking and laughing; today we're quiet and somber.

"She was so young," Maeta sighs as we knead bread. "It just never seems fair."

I nod, halfheartedly massaging the dough.

Suddenly, Maeta looks at me and sighs. "When you're finished with that," she says,



“go to the princess. She may need you more than we do right now.”

My eyes widen, and I almost embrace Maeta in gratitude. “Thank you,” I gush. I had been waiting for an opportunity all day to go see Devina, but we’ve been too busy for me to slip away. I knead with renewed vigor, eager to finish my task.

Finally, I’m done. I take off my apron and throw it on the counter as I run out the door.

It occurs to me, too late, that I don’t know where Devina’s chambers are. No handy map is mounted on the wall, as I learned when I struggled to find the cellars. I could ask someone, but they would laugh in my face if I told them I was looking for the princess. *You? A peasant girl?* They would sneer. *Go back to the kitchens where you belong.*

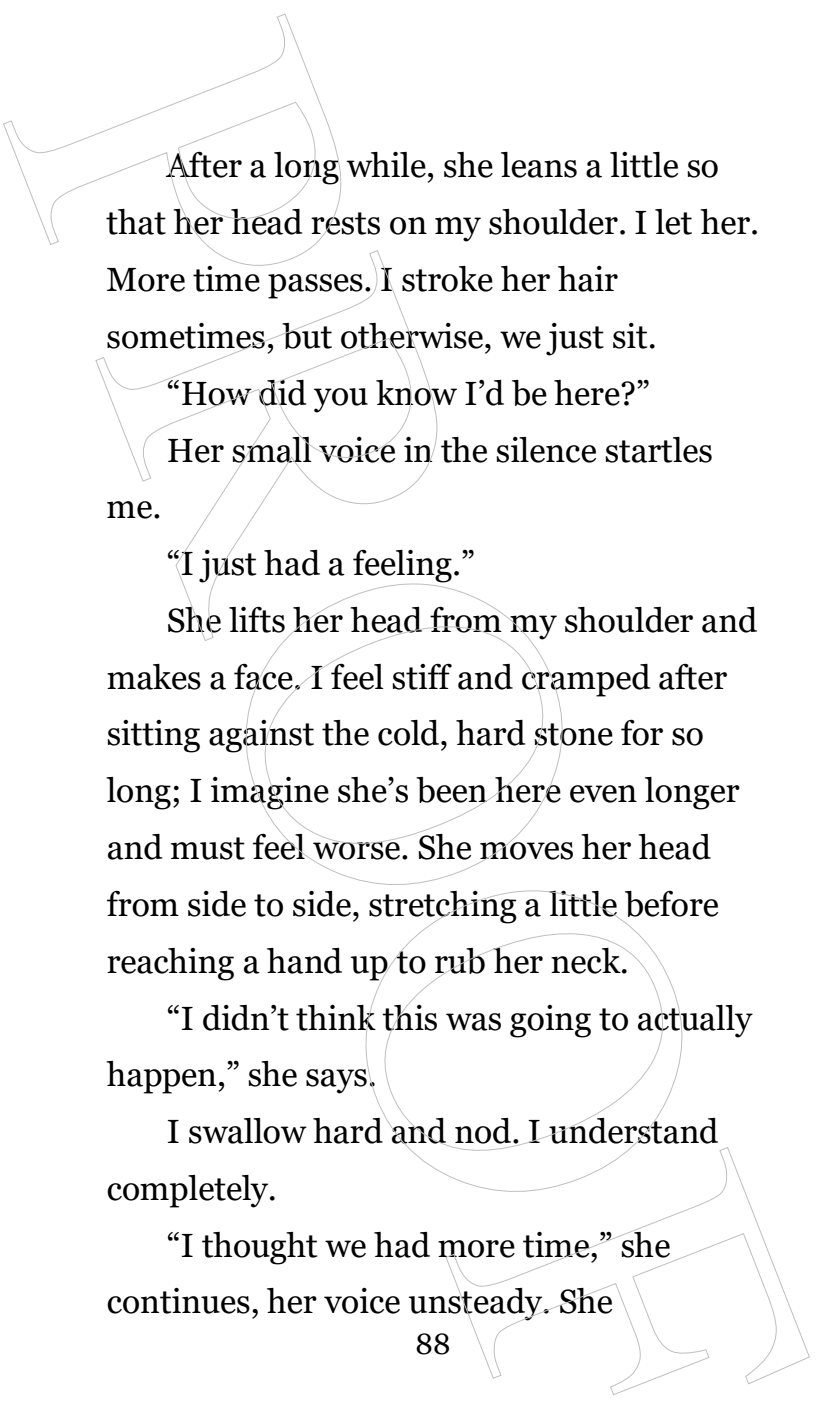
But I'm determined to find her. I'm about to march up to a courtier and ask where Devina's room is when I realize that she might be somewhere else entirely.

I turn on my heel and hurry back towards the kitchens, then further into the castle. Twisting and turning through the darkening corridors, I worry I've lost my way entirely when I see a small, huddled form in the shadows, right where I expected.

I almost smile, even though she looks so sad. I had a feeling she'd be here, where we first met when I couldn't find my way around the castle.

Now, she's the one who's lost.

Without saying anything, I sit down next to her on the floor, our shoulders barely touching. She doesn't move or speak. I don't either. I just hug my knees and wait.



After a long while, she leans a little so that her head rests on my shoulder. I let her. More time passes. I stroke her hair sometimes, but otherwise, we just sit.

“How did you know I’d be here?”

Her small voice in the silence startles me.

“I just had a feeling.”

She lifts her head from my shoulder and makes a face. I feel stiff and cramped after sitting against the cold, hard stone for so long; I imagine she’s been here even longer and must feel worse. She moves her head from side to side, stretching a little before reaching a hand up to rub her neck.

“I didn’t think this was going to actually happen,” she says.

I swallow hard and nod. I understand completely.

“I thought we had more time,” she continues, her voice unsteady. She

massages the palm of her hand with her thumb. “I thought maybe it wasn’t as serious as the doctor had said. I didn’t know.”

“There’s no way you could have known.”

She shakes her head. “I’ve been so focused on myself lately and how *I’m* feeling, or not feeling. What if she’s been ill for a long time? Maybe I could have seen the signs sooner.”

“Probably not,” I counter, as gently as I can. “Even if she had been ill for a while, I’m sure she didn’t want to worry you. She probably hid how she was feeling for as long as she could.”

“Then why can’t I?” Devina suddenly struggles to her feet, and, surprised, I get to my feet as well.

“Why can’t I hide how I’m feeling?” The princess continues, her face contorted in sudden anger. “Why can’t I just put on a

brave face and a smile and suffer through it? Why can't I just pretend to be okay so that no one has to worry?" She slaps the wall with the palm of her hand, then with the other hand, then beats at it with her fists. "Why can't I just feel better?!" she cries. "Why did this happen to her and not me? Why can't... Why..."

She dissolves into tears and turns away from me, hiding her face in her hands.

I take a deep breath, trying not to cry myself. I try to take one of her hands, but she pulls it roughly away from me. I wince, hurt, but try to remind myself not to take it personally. She's feeling too much right now.

"Devina," I whisper after a long time. Her shoulders tense, and she slowly turns around.

"You're still here?" she whispers.

I nod. "I'm not going anywhere, Devina. Not unless you want me to."

She considers it, then shakes her head.

"Well, okay. Then let me tell you a story." I sit back down on the floor and gesture to the empty space next to me. She bites her lip in hesitation and then sits beside me.

This time, she takes my hand, and I let her.

"When my mother died," I say, staring at the wall ahead of me, "I was in the room with her. I broke a chair. One my father had hand-made, hand-carved. I took it in both hands and swung it against the wall. Then I took a vase, one of the only items we had that was worth anything, and I broke that, too. We held onto it in case we needed to sell it for food, and I threw it on the ground as hard as I could. It shattered. Too many pieces to fix."

Devina squeezes my hand the tiniest amount. I squeeze back.

“My father was so angry,” I continue. “He yelled and screamed at me. He apologized later; he was just so emotional, too. But when he was yelling, I didn’t feel anything. I wasn’t apologetic. I wasn’t embarrassed. I wasn’t fearful, or sad. I just—wasn’t anything at all.”

“How long did you feel that way?”  
Devina whispers.

“A few weeks,” I say. “It was like I was hollow. I didn’t laugh, or smile, or tell stories, or play with the other kids. I sat in my bed and stared at the wall or slept. That was it.”

“You felt...how I do?”

I nod. “I think everyone has, Devina, at some point or another. That’s what everyone is missing. We’ve all been there. We’ve all felt empty and alone. For some

reason, you've just been feeling it for a long time. But you can't be the only one! Don't you think that maybe someone else has felt like that for a long time, too?"

She looks uncertain. "Maybe..."

"Maybe the doctor doesn't know anyone else who has. Maybe no one in the castle has felt that way. Or maybe someone has and is too ashamed to admit it. Don't you think that's possible?"

She looks at me searchingly, and then nods, the tiniest bit. "It's possible," she murmurs.

"I felt happy again eventually," I say, taking her other hand in mine, too. "It was long and hard, but I did. And I know that you were feeling awful before this horrible thing even happened, but...you'll feel happy again eventually, too. Someone else must have felt like you and gotten through to the other side. I know it."



Devina swallows. “Will you stay with me until I do?”

I nod. “And beyond.”

It happens before I can process it. The princess leans in and presses her soft lips to my cheek. When she pulls away, blushing, I realize that I must be bright red, too. We look at each other, wide-eyed, and then immediately begin giggling.

“You look like a tomato,” Devina chuckles.

“Yeah, well, you look like a beet,” I retort.

“Beets are purple!” she protests, swatting at me playfully.

“Reddish-purple!” I counter.

Hand in hand, we walk back to the kitchens. Every now and then, Devina looks at me sideways and her eyes seem to smile. I think my heart could burst from happiness.

We stop outside the door to the kitchens, and Devina pulls me into her arms. “Thank you,” she whispers.

“No, thank *you*,” I say.

“For what?”

“For being friends with a peasant girl.”

She pulls away and shakes her head.

“You’re so much more than that.”

“More than a friend, or more than a peasant girl?”

Her lips curl slightly, and my heart dances. “Both,” she says.

Before I can ask what that means, she says, “I need to go speak with my father.”

“Why?”

“Follow me,” she insists. She takes me by the arm, leading me away with more excitement than I expected.

## *Chapter Nine*

*Devina*

I don't know how she does it.

The night after my mother died, I sat up and stared at the stars beyond my window. It didn't seem fair that they got to shine, that the moon still got to rise. I wanted everything to stop. I wanted everything to feel the way I did.

The next day, I couldn't stand staying in my room anymore, so I fled to my usual hiding spot. I don't know how long I had been there when Yasmin arrived. At first, I wanted to send her away—I wanted to keep

my grief locked inside me like a storm in a snowglobe. But then, I realized I wanted her company. That I needed someone to sit with me. That I needed her beside me.

When I fell apart, slamming my hands against the walls, letting my fury and dismay out in huge thunderclaps, she stayed. When I wept like rain, she stayed. She could have sought shelter, but she stayed in the worst of my storm, anyway.

And, most miraculously of all, she made me feel better.

My throat felt dusty, but a laugh came out of it, nevertheless. And my heart, as heavy as it was—as heavy as it still is—felt buoyed by Yasmin’s friendship, by her love.

Just knowing that she wants to be by my side makes me want to keep standing.

I run down the corridors with Yasmin in tow and nearly run headfirst into Esme.

“Esme!” I cry.

She curtsies, looking somber. “Your Highness,” she replies. “Shouldn’t you be back in your chambers? Are you alright?”

“I’m looking for my father,” I tell her. “Do you know where he is?”

“He’s in the throne room,” Esme says, frowning slightly, “but he asked not to be disturbed.”

“Thank you!” Before she can stop me, I take back off running towards the throne room, dragging Yasmin with me.

“Wait here,” I whisper to Yasmin. I can see the confusion in her eyes. “I’ll just be a moment.” I leave her there, just outside the thick, wooden double doors.

When I fling them open, my father looks up from where he sits on his throne. Immediately, my limbs feel heavier, and my heart sinks. Seeing the empty throne beside him transforms my joy into something

darker, full of pain. I bow my head,  
suddenly shy.

“Devina?” My father says, his voice hoarse. I realize I haven’t seen him all day and wonder if he’s just been sitting here, in the dark, alone.

“Father,” I say, walking slowly towards the throne. I curtsy, but he waves a hand.

“Don’t bother with that nonsense,” he says. “That doesn’t matter now.”

He’s right.

“Father,” I ask, “are you...are you alright?”

He smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Of course, I am, my dear,” he says. But when I say nothing in response, his expression darkens, and he shakes his head. “I’m sorry, Devina. I should know better. To be honest, I’m sad. I’m very sad.”

To see my strong father, the king of our nation, confess his true feelings makes tears

spring to my eyes. Somehow, I feel less alone than ever.

“I am, too,” I murmur, and take his big hand in mine. He presses his lips to my knuckles.

“I’m sorry, Devina,” he whispers.

I think he’s talking about Mother, and I open my mouth to reply, but he continues, “I’m sorry that I didn’t understand.”

My brows furrow in confusion.

“Understand what?”

“How you felt,” he said. “I should have listened more to how and what you were feeling. But I was so desperate for you to feel better that I acted rashly. Those foolish princes should never have come here. I’m sure they just made you feel worse.”

I’m taken so aback by this apology that all I can do is stare. When I say nothing, my father smiles grimly. “Too little, too late, I know,” he says, dropping my hand. “But

your mother spoke to me about it before she..." He trails off. "She wanted you to know that we were *both* sorry. That we *both* still love you. And that, even if you cried every day for the rest of our lives, you're still our perfect daughter."

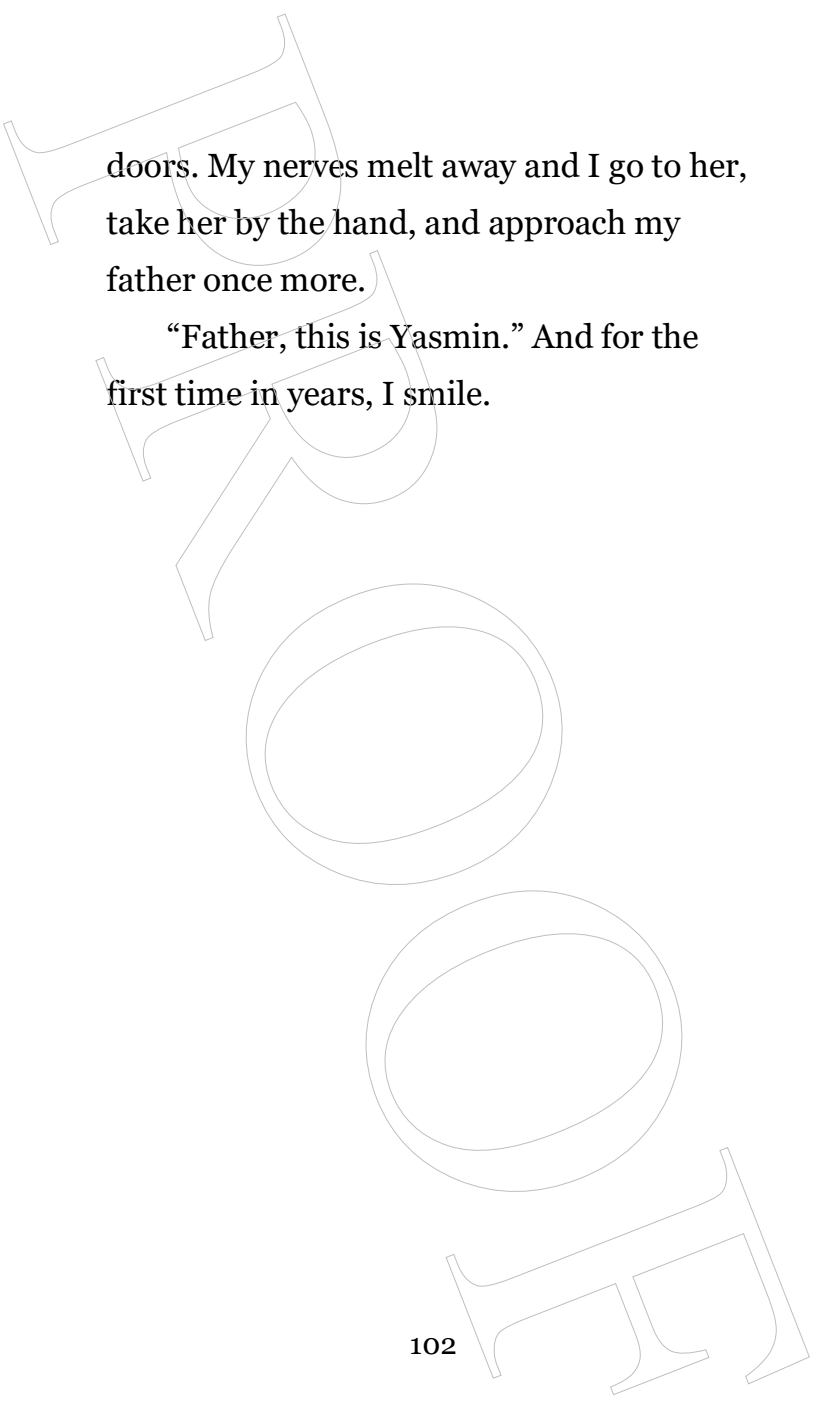
My throat is thick with unshed tears and words I can't articulate. Instead of trying, I simply nod, and say, "Thank you, Father."

He waves a hand again and stands, stretching. "Now," he says, some of the usual bravado returning to his voice, "what is it you came here for, my dear?"

*This is it, Devina*, I say to myself. *This is when you tell him*. But the words are stuck in my throat, and I can't figure out how to get them out.

But then I see her. Yasmin shyly pokes her head around the corner, unsure whether or not she should still be waiting beyond the





doors. My nerves melt away and I go to her,  
take her by the hand, and approach my  
father once more.

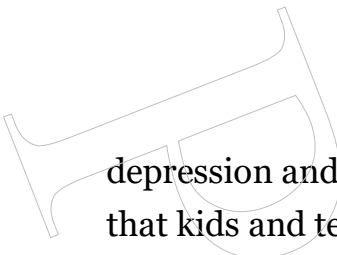
“Father, this is Yasmin.” And for the  
first time in years, I smile.



## *About the Author*

Torina Kingsley has always dreamed of becoming a published writer. By the time high school came around, her mind was swirling with tales ready to be told. She finds inspiration for her stories from viewing things from a different perspective, including her most recent book *The King's Decree*, a chapter book that is a spin on the well-known Russian folktale, *The Princess Who Never Laughed*.

Kingsley believes that a great story needs to be relatable and completely captivating, that it needs to drop the reader into a whole new world. She hopes that her young readers are made to think by her stories. For instance, Kingsley has seen that, although very few children's books reflect characters afflicted with



depression and anxiety, it's something that kids and teens deal with every day, and she wanted to share that in her story.

It is also important to Kingsley that characters, such as the princess in her chapter book, aren't just pale, blond stereotypes, but diverse characters who can fall in love with anyone, not just those who one might expect. As an author of Hispanic heritage, representing a diverse audience in her books is meaningful to her.

When she isn't writing thought-provoking and socially conscious young adult stories, Kingsley teaches music and loves working with her students. She lives with her husband and two rescue dogs in the Chicago area where she enjoys reading and spending time with her family.



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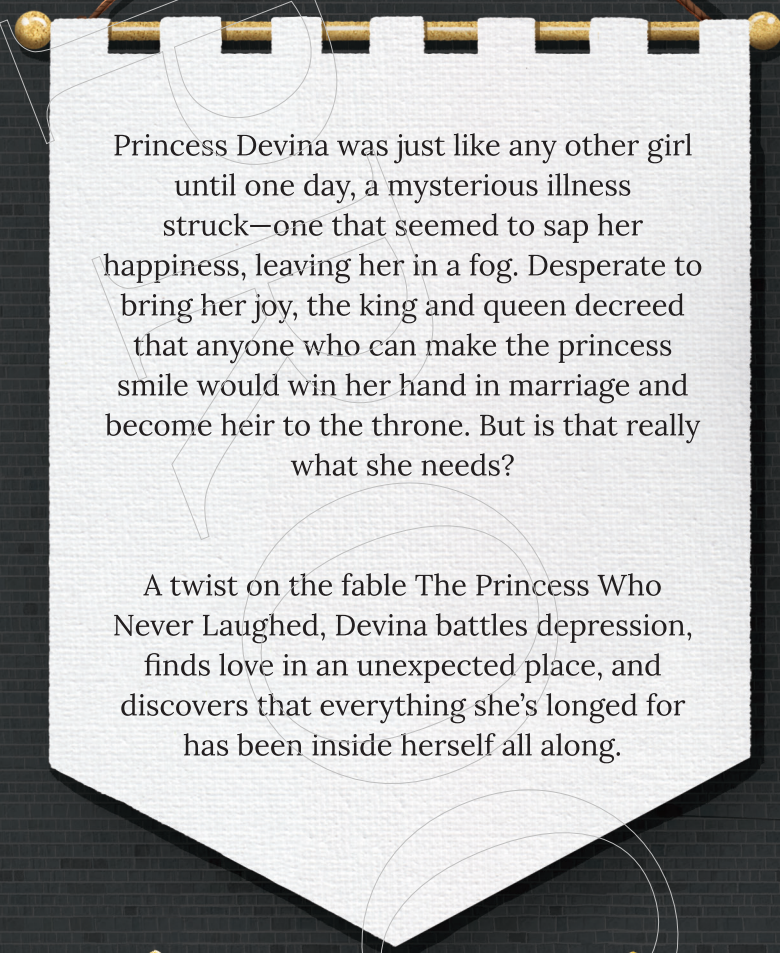
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Princess Devina was just like any other girl until one day, a mysterious illness struck—one that seemed to sap her happiness, leaving her in a fog. Desperate to bring her joy, the king and queen decreed that anyone who can make the princess smile would win her hand in marriage and become heir to the throne. But is that really what she needs?

A twist on the fable *The Princess Who Never Laughed*, Devina battles depression, finds love in an unexpected place, and discovers that everything she's longed for has been inside herself all along.



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