



What if a fake dating distraction
becomes something more?

HER *Royal* HAPPINESS

LOLA KEELEY



Chapter 1

HER ROYAL HIGHNESS, PRINCESS ALICE was prepared for any reaction when she spoke in public, but a small girl bursting into tears wasn't one of them. The whole room seemed to freeze, adults and children alike, as one tiny person started to sob. Each shuddering sound echoed against the mostly bare walls of the school gymnasium.

On sheer instinct, Alice stepped back from the podium decorated with children's artwork and made her way across the low staging area to comfort the child. She hunkered down in front of her and laid a calming hand on the girl's shoulder, with the very lightest of touches. Her hand, evenly tanned from a recent sailing trip, was still pale in comparison to the dark-brown hair and brown complexion of the little one. Alice brushed her own short blonde fringe out of her eyes.

"Hello there." She kept her voice low and friendly, a chat just between the two of them.

"H-hello."

"Is everything okay? Did I say something that upset you?"

The girl shook her head.

"My name's Alice. What's yours?"

Wiping her tears, the girl gave Alice a long, appraising look through wet eyelashes. "Libby. My name is Libby."

"Excuse me—" said a voice over Alice's shoulder, but she dismissed the person with a wave of her hand. It was a moment of the utmost delicacy, one she'd experienced more than a few times with her young niece and nephew. More adults were not what the situation required.

“Now Libby, I’m sorry you’re feeling upset. Do you want to talk about it?”

“Well...” Libby looked up at whoever stood behind Alice, considering her options it would seem. “I’m quite stressed, actually.”

Stressed? Stressed? The girl couldn’t be more than seven years old. She barely came up to Alice’s crouching height, although admittedly Alice was a tall specimen by anyone’s standards.

“What has you stressed, Libby?” Alice kept her expression warm but serious. Letting a smile creep in would be unforgivable. Everything was very serious at seven. Not to mention Alice’s unapproachable reputation. Smile at a few children and people would start to wonder what she was plotting.

“I’m supposed to be playing my violin now. After your speech. But you just kept talking and talking and I worried I was going to be late. Or that I wouldn’t get to play at all. I practiced really hard. Every day!”

It took all of Alice’s reserve and stiff upper lip not to dissolve into laughter. Kids could be so dramatic, but there was no doubt that this sweet little girl also meant every word. How refreshing it must be, to simply express one’s feelings so openly. She rather envied her.

“Your Royal Highness, we’re so sorry.” The prim and proper head teacher who had greeted Alice on arrival came bustling out of the front row. She reminded Alice of every teacher she’d had at boarding school—all blind devotion to the rules with a large dash of self-importance. The moment’s peace was shattered, the reality of the situation seeping back in like cold puddle water through a leaky boot.

“No, don’t apologise for her,” that voice from behind came again, only then did the woman stepped into Alice’s sightline. Average in height, subtly curvy, and frankly, a bit bloody gorgeous. The family resemblance was apparent, though this woman had a much lighter complexion and hazel-coloured eyes. She was sharply dressed too, not quite runway style but everything about her well-tailored skirt and blouse suggested an eye for fashion, and it was all tastefully offset by minimal jewellery and a silk scarf artfully knotted at her throat. Alice returned to standing, bracing herself for a protective mother.

“It’s really no trouble,” Alice said, extending a hand to shake in her practiced, brisk way. The woman didn’t take it. “Libby was quite right,

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I was rather waffling on a bit. One can just get so excited about music programmes like this. Such a gift for all the children involved.”

“Ms Marteau, if you could remind your daughter that we don’t speak out of turn at this school, no matter how things are done where you teach.” The head teacher was bristling beside Alice, almost vibrating with the need to take control of the scene.

Alice didn’t mind the disruption. It broke up the monotony of event after event, all so similar in their formality and people stiff with nerves. Despite her very best efforts to put people at their ease, they only heard ‘Her Royal Highness Princess Alice, fourth in line to the Crown of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Duchess of Dumbartonshire and Wessex, daughter of Queen Caroline.’ Alice was fairly sure most people still left off her father, the queen’s late husband and former England rugby captain Cameron Hardcourt. It was one of the few things that upset her on a regular basis.

None of which mattered, in the grand scheme of things. Yes, it brought a chance to raise money for charities and bring media attention to important causes, but more and more Alice found herself craving the anonymity that so many, more average, people seemed to enjoy. She was certainly getting a taste of it from this Ms Marteau, who seemed unimpressed by Alice’s title, her station in life, or her attempts to calm an upset child.

“I don’t teach. I’m a Special Education Needs consultant. Libby has been raised to speak up if there’s a problem,” Ms Marteau replied to the head teacher. “And you assured me that the children wouldn’t be put under additional pressure to perform for the event today. She says she’s stressed. That shouldn’t be the case.”

“Perhaps now that I’ve said my piece, the children can play their music? I’m sure they’ve practiced very hard.” Alice found herself trying to win the woman’s approval. Why it mattered, Alice had no idea. Any other time she would be halfway out of the door by now. “Would that be okay, Libby? If we grown-ups went to sit down and you could play your violin?”

Libby nodded, a little smile flickering across her lips. This was a kid used to bending the world to her will. It was hard not to like that about her.

“Only if you’re sure, Libs. You don’t have to do things just because someone with a fancy title is here.” The easy rapport between mother and

daughter was evident in the way Ms Marteau didn't have to bend to make eye contact, her hand on Libby's back for constant reassurance.

"Well, it is quite important to learn to honour one's obligations." Alice found herself speaking before her brain could catch up, relaying the lessons from her parents and grandparents without thinking. "And there's such a thing as a sense of duty. If we make a promise to an audience or our friends, it is always best to keep it. If we possibly can."

"Easy to say when you don't have to work for a living," Ms Marteau replied without missing a beat, hands on her hips. Alice felt a little dowdy next to her, and that usually only happened around the actors and models she crossed paths with. The odd foreign princess too, since a lot of those hewed much closer to the Disney versions than she ever had. Still, the one thing they all had in common was a lifetime of learning to be utterly diplomatic, even in the face of rudeness. "No offence, of course. I'm sure it's very important that all those ribbons get cut. I just don't think the experience is relevant to my daughter. I'm not a big believer in royalty, so please excuse me."

"I'm sorry, but we're not the tooth fairy. I'm afraid we exist whether you believe in us or not."

"Well, I hold out hope that one day this country will see sense just like France did, and become a republic." Alice noticed a faint accent on the way she said France, correctly rolling the 'r'.

"Oh well, as long as you don't mean to offend." Alice could give as good as she got in passive-aggression. She glanced around and saw at least one camera phone pointing their way. Best to control the situation. "Shall we sit down? We seem to be making a bit of a scene." Alice found her placid temper fraying around the edges.

Ms Marteau looked as if she was ready to argue about that too, but Libby tugged at her wrist, gaining her full attention in an instant.

"I do want to play, Mummy. It'll be really good, promise."

"I know it will be, *chérie*," her mother said.

"Wonderful, now let's all turn our attention to the children where it belongs." Alice opened her arms to the other adults, ushering them across to the waiting seats. One perk of the title was that people deferred to her physical presence, and a few years barking orders at pilots in the Royal Air

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Force hadn't hurt on that front. Most situations could be resolved with a clear head and a determined bearing; everything else was just detail.

As they found their seats on the front row of hastily assembled chairs, the children took up position with their instruments. It was rather adorable, Alice had to admit. She'd seen every configuration of these events while opening schools, community centres, hospitals, and a thousand other buildings besides. She'd lost count somewhere in her mid-twenties and had never bothered to get an exact figure since. Someone would know. The palace staff specialised in arcane trivia.

"Actually... I apologise, I didn't mean to be so rude just then. I'm Sara, Sara Marteau, by the way." Sara had been left to sit next to Alice, for lack of other spaces.

Alice turned in surprise. "I'm Alice, although I suppose that was announced at the start."

"It was, but it's still a nice touch dropping the 'princess' part, though." Sara smiled at her for the first time. "It's very 'one of the people' to do such a thing. Anyway, my daughter is sensitive. I try not to jump in at every turn, but it's the job of my life to protect her."

A teacher had stepped in to organise and calm the children, although it seemed closer to herding cats than conducting a symphony.

"She seems very bright. And a musician already? You must be very proud."

"I am. She's the best thing that ever happened to me. Do you have children?"

Alice shook her head. How unusual to speak to someone who didn't already know the intimate details of her life. Then the music began, and well, Alice had to admit it wasn't the worst concert she'd sat through. At least nobody had a recorder. Or was called Ed. The short repertoire was jaunty and upbeat, and Alice found herself watching Libby most of all. Gone was the stressed little girl from before, and for three songs she was utterly lost in the music, eyes closed and swaying as she played with considerable skill for her age.

When the music concluded, the small crowd clapped with enthusiasm but stopped short of an ovation. A typical British audience that way. Sara proved the exception, leaping to her feet and thundering her hands together as tears welled in her eyes.

Alice caught her herself staring, but as soon as she averted her eyes, she met Josephine's knowing glance from over by the doors. Damn. That just earned her at least a week of mild teasing. All for some overprotective mother that Alice would never see again, and for whom this entire bizarre experience would just be another story to tell after yoga class or bumping into a friend at the supermarket.

"I think this is my cue to go," Alice said, standing up next to Sara. "Let the children enjoy all the attention."

"Thank you. And you don't seem so bad, you know. For the representative of an ancient, undemocratic institution."

Alice blinked once. Twice. "You really do just say what you think, don't you?"

"I do. Saves a lot of time and dishonesty."

"Well, I doubt I can convince you otherwise on the value of the monarchy in the time I have between this and my next appointment, but I think I deserve a fair shot at it all the same." Where had that come from? Alice fussed with the sleeves of her blazer, straightening the cuffs. "If you would indulge me, Ms Marteau, I have an invitation for you. And your daughter."

"What are we being invited to?" Libby said, violin case in hand. The heavy looking thing was as long as Libby was tall.

"In the summer we have garden parties. Well, my mother does. At Buckingham Palace. On the grounds. And we get to invite all sorts of people from the charities that we're patrons of, and people who make a difference in their community. That sort of thing. If I got my private secretary, Josephine, to come and take some details, I could arrange for you both to come. See it all up close and maybe that will change your view on us a little. Or make it even worse. Always an option."

Sara tilted her head slightly as she watched Alice speaking, appearing to listen intently. For all her protest that she was no teacher, she certainly had the bearing of one. Perhaps a Special Education Needs whatever was something similar enough.

"My daughter interrupts your speech, I insult you in the heat of the moment, and your response is to invite us to lunch?"

"Well, yes. I suppose it is." Alice could feel her face warming beneath the minimal make-up she always wore. Great, blushing was now adding

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insult to injury. “I can assure you this is not something I do every day, but I know I prefer to see something up close before sitting in judgement on it.”

Sara smiled. For the first time since Alice laid eyes on her, Sara dropped her shoulders an inch or two, and let her half-pursed lips relax into an easy grin.

“I don’t meet a lot of princesses. Maybe I haven’t kissed enough frogs.”

“Mummy, that’s for princes.” Libby looked between them as if she was watching a tennis match played with an invisible ball. “And you haven’t kissed anyone for ages. Except me and *Mamie*.”

“Libby!”

“From the mouths of babes, eh? Sorry, but I really must dash. Look out for that invitation.”

Alice turned and made her way towards the exit. In their usual seamless way, her small team activated at the first nod. Protection officer flanking on the right, Josephine staying behind to follow up with the headmistress, and at Alice’s discreet gesture, with Sara.

“All okay, ma’am?” Josephine was the first to speak once they were safely back in the car. The dark blue Bentley pulled away from the school car park with not enough haste for Alice’s liking.

“Always a good sign when the subjects are crying, Josephine.”

“It all worked out, though. I spoke to Ms Marteau and she mentioned your invitation to the garden party.”

Alice made a point of looking out into traffic. “I thought it might smooth things over. Don’t want her talking to the press, or worse ranting on social media about today. Isn’t that the kind of thing you’re always encouraging?”

“It is.”

“You’ll arrange the invitation? Don’t forget the child should come too. Preferably without her violin, though. There was mention of a grandmother? Grannies love me.”

Josephine tapped at her phone screen a few times. “Consider it done, ma’am. Now, should I check social media to make sure nothing comes of that little scene in there?”

“I’m sure that won’t be necessary,” Alice replied. “Who could make a story out of a child crying?”

LOLA KEELEY

DAILY BUGLE, 30TH APRIL
A RIGHT ROYAL UPSET

There were tears in the eyes yesterday at Ryeham Primary School, south London, when a concert given to celebrate the school's groundbreaking new music hall and gymnasium caused some royal embarrassment.

In attendance was the Princess Royal, HRH Princess Alice, to officially open the new space and congratulate the school and community on their fundraising efforts.

But her congratulations went on too long for one tearful child, and despite the princess offering comfort, she was subject to an anti-monarchy rant from a concerned parent. The shouting match made the rounds online, and the viral success means this school concert played to an audience most professional bands could only dream of.

When asked for comment, Buckingham Palace said only that: HRH Princess Alice attended a wonderful concert today, and wishes the children, teachers, and their families every future success.

Chapter 2

“MUMMY!”

Sara closed the front door behind her and leaned back against it with a smile. No matter how engrossed Libby got in something: her homework, her music practice, baking with her grandmother, she always dropped everything to come running when Sara returned home.

“Who’s that shouting in my house?”

“It’s me!” Libby said, well, it was more of an excited shriek as she collided with Sara. They almost matched, Sara in her grey shift dress for a serious day at work, Libby still in her grey pinafore and white polo shirt from a day of school. Most days they’d get home together, Sara collecting her for the bus journey home, but her new job brought longer hours, leaving her mother to kindly step in. “Who else calls you Mummy, silly?”

“Oh, lots of people,” Sara replied, splaying her fingers on top of Libby’s head and gently turning her around. Taller again, she was sure of it. The girl was growing like a weed. A bright, funny little weed. “Now, where’s *Mamie*?”

“She’s here,” Inès said, coming out of the kitchen at the back of the small house, wiping flour from her hands with a well-worn tea towel. “And *mademoiselle* here tells me I’m to be called ‘Granny’ because that’s what all her friends do.”

Sara sensed the generational clash in that familiar complaint and decided she didn’t have the energy to wade into it again.

“Well, I still call you *Maman*. To your face, anyway.”

“Very funny. There’s post for you. *Un café*?”

“Tea?”

Inès sniffed at the rejection of her beloved coffee but retreated into the kitchen all the same.

Taking a seat at their plain, wooden dining table, Sara prodded the stack of envelopes with little enthusiasm. Bills, circulars, people wanting her time and money as always. After a day of arguing with school governors and teachers about funding for her department, there wasn't much energy left in the tank.

"Aren't you going to open them?" Libby said, taking the seat opposite and plopping her elbows on the wooden surface, chin clutched in her hands. Sara felt her smile return at the sight. No one could accuse her of having anything other than an adorable child.

"Post isn't very exciting when you're a grown-up, Libs. Just bills and trying to sell me things I don't need. I'll get to it later."

"I never get any post," Libby said, pout firmly in place.

"Be grateful. Once it starts coming, it never stops. And oh—this one's addressed to both of us."

Libby perked up instantly, scrambling around the table to see.

"Lord Cham...ber...who?"

"Lord Chamberlain," Sara supplied automatically, her attention drawn to the crest next to the postage: CR I with a little crown on top. Caroline Regina the First. Or Queen Caroline to most of her subjects. Royalty. Fantastic.

"What is it?" Her mother returning with a steaming mug of tea picked up on Sara's distraction right away.

"You remember how Libby crying at her concert got all over the internet a couple of weeks ago?"

Inès nodded. "Not how I thought my baby would get famous. You got it taken down, though."

"Well, at the time that princess what's-her-face said she wanted to invite us to some party, to show me that royalty is oh-so-great. I can't believe she meant it."

Libby squealed, grabbing the envelope, and finishing the job of opening it.

"Are we going to a palace? Can we go in a carriage? With horses?"

Sara pinched the bridge of her nose.

"We'll see. I don't even know the date; we might already have plans."

“Mummy!”

“Libby, come on. How’s that homework looking?” Sara held out her hand and gestured for the invitation to be returned. “Go bring your book down and I’ll sign it.”

Without arguing for a change, Libby went running upstairs. Sara turned to her mother with a shrug. “Just when I thought that little incident was done with.”

“Let me see.” Inès took the invitation, her face lighting up as she read it. “Ms Sara Marteau, her daughter Elisabeth, and Mrs Inès Marteau. How do they know about me?”

“I don’t think I—oh, Libby mentioned you. To the princess. But it’s not as though she sat and wrote the thing herself. They have staff.”

“Lots of staff. It’s a busy job, all they do for charity. You should be more respectful, Sara.” Despite the mild scolding, Inès pulled her daughter into a hug. “Long day?”

“Hmm. I’m making some progress, though. The school finally accepts that if they want to really support children with additional needs, they have to spend some money. Still going to make me fight for every penny, though.”

“You’re doing a good thing. I know people think only teaching matters, but nobody stands up for the kids more than you.”

“Thanks, *Maman*. I think I needed that. So, shall we play princess for the day and take Libby to the palace? They say it’s a once in a lifetime opportunity...”

“Of course we’re going! I’m going to need a new hat.”

“What is it with mums and hats? You don’t need to go to any trouble. It’s just a cup of tea and shaking hands, I’m sure.”

Inès swept up Sara’s cup of tea before she could finish it, retreating towards the kitchen. “Nonsense. Queen Caroline will be there. And that handsome boy of hers, Prince Jamie.”

“James. Prince James.”

“You know who I mean. That wife of his seems very nice, very polite. I don’t know why you dislike them all so much. Even going to Cambridge with all the posh kids, it didn’t change your opinions. This is your country, your royal family, and more than that, it is mine.”

“I was born here, but that doesn’t mean I need to like everything about it. And trust me, Cambridge is not the kind of place that makes you want more of the upper class. It’s practically an immunisation against them. Do you love everything about France? And what about Iran?”

“It’s not as though leaving Tehran for Paris was entirely my choice, hmm? But lucky you, you get the best of both worlds from me. Dinner’s almost ready,” Inès replied, avoiding eye contact. “And *oui*, maybe we are not so fond of royalty either.”

“I’ll go and get changed into something comfortable, clean myself up. I’ll find out what distracted Libby as well. Thank you for dinner. You know you don’t have to do that every day.”

“It keeps me busy. But okay, just until you get used to your new job.”

“You’re the best.” Sara kissed her mother on the temple before jogging upstairs, taking the rest of the post to flick through as she went. Nothing interesting, just as she predicted.

She changed out of her formal work clothes for much more comfortable sweatpants and a long-sleeved T-shirt, both a well-washed navy that felt as natural to wear as her own skin. Content that Libby was happily playing in her own room, Sara detoured to the house’s only bathroom and washed the minimal make-up from her face. Keeping her hair back off her face with a hairband, she wandered into the next room to retrieve her daughter.

Libby seemed to have forgotten the homework retrieval already, but a quick glance at her workbook on the tiny desk showed it had at least been completed. Sara realised the furniture was getting too small for her almost eight-year-old, which meant another weekend sometime soon would be given up to finding and building a taller desk and chair. Would the bed follow suit? Sara put it on her mental to-do list for later. It was a list that never seemed to reduce, no matter how many tasks she completed.

“Hey, little monster. You coming down for dinner?”

“What?” Libby looked up from the comic she had been engrossed in. “Oh, my homework is there. I just started reading.”

“I still need to check my calendar, but Granny thinks we should go to the palace. Are you sure you want to go? These things can be very boring and grown-up. Lots of queuing and fussy little sandwiches.”

“But it’s special, isn’t it? Not everyone gets to go?”

“That’s true,” Sara said.

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“And that princess lady wanted to show us that they’re nice. It would be rude not to give her a chance.”

“Oh, I doubt we’ll see her again. Maybe from a distance. But it will be a nice day out for us all, and something you can tell everyone about at school.”

Libby unfolded herself from the beanbag and put her comic book back in its correct pile. “Will there be horses?”

“At the party? I don’t think so. Maybe we’ll see some outside the palace, though.”

“Because I know we have to wait before I can do lessons—”

“Libby, sweetie. Let’s not have this conversation again.” Sara tried to shield her kid from the realities of living in London on one salary, but there was no wiggle room for an expense like horse-riding lessons with everything else they had to cover. “I promise, if and when it’s possible, I will book lessons.”

“I know.”

“I don’t like saying no or having to wait. But that’s just how it has to be. Now, shall we go down to dinner before Granny has to yell?”

Libby agreed, leading the way to the door. “But Mummy, I think she likes shouting sometimes.”

On the way out of the room, Sara noticed one of the picture frames turned towards the wall. Usually, it sat with pride of place on top of the drawers.

“What’s wrong with this photo?” she said, before Libby could disappear down the narrow staircase. Frozen against the pale blue wall for a moment, Libby almost looked as if she was in mid-air.

“Nothing. I just don’t always like to look at it. I’m only a baby in it, not like me now.”

“But this is your photo with your dad.” Sara didn’t move away from it, refusing to let either of them change the subject. “Has someone been saying something?”

“No! No, but school this week was all about family trees again. We have to do this stupid picture, and I don’t want to.”

At that, Sara relented. She set the photo back in its proper place and crossed the short landing to hug Libby where she stood at the top of the stairs.

"I'm sure you're not the only one in class who has a parent missing, or with gaps on their tree."

"It's not that." Libby rubbed the tip of her nose against the hem of Sara's T-shirt, seeming to draw comfort from the overwashed and faded cotton. "I just don't like when people ask questions. Like why did you and Daddy make a baby if you knew he was going to die? And you weren't married, and he wasn't your boyfriend and—"

"You don't have to explain all of that to anyone."

"Right, but people always ask, and I don't want to tell lies, Mummy."

Sara patted the top of Libby's head. "You don't have to lie, sweetie. Or tell people more than you want to. Your daddy was my very best friend, and he loved you so much. He wanted to be a dad more than anything, so we did what we did, and you came along. That made him so happy."

Somewhere along the line, the story had become easier for Sara to tell. She had loved Jayesh as the best of friends did, and his tumour diagnosis had rocked their last year of university. One minute they'd been planning a post-university trip around India to visit his extended family, and the next life was full of doctors' appointments and too much bad news to handle.

"Okay. It would be nice to have a daddy, though. Or another mummy."

"Maybe one day. A step-mummy." They'd had that conversation more than once. Sara was confident that Libby understood dating women was the only option on the table.

Libby's scoff was a moment of sheer genetic inheritance, as though Inès had levitated through the floorboards to make the sound herself. Maybe they were spending a little too much time together. "How are you going to get me a step-mum if you never even date anyone? Honestly, Mummy. I get asked out more often than you do."

Ouch. The accuracy of the statement didn't make it sting any less. From the mouth of babes indeed, just like Princess Alice had said.

"You two take forever to get ready," Inès said as they returned to the table, Libby taking her usual seat and setting out the waiting plates as Sara detoured to start helping with the last stages of the cooking. "Does it really take so much time to look like you crawled out of the laundry pile?"

"We're here now," Sara said, bumping her mother with her hip as she passed the cooker. "I'm on rice duty, huh?"

"Even you can't ruin my rice, baby girl."

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“No, but I can order a good pizza. That’s what I’d have to do if you weren’t so good to me and Libby.”

Inès made a pleased sound as she stirred the pot on the hob. “What else is a mother for?”

“I’m just sorry we don’t have room here for you permanently. I don’t like you going back home on your own.”

“Shush now, we all need our spaces. I spent long enough throwing your father out of mine, I’m not giving it up yet.” Tasting the chicken straight from the wooden spoon, Inès frowned. Sara made a silent bet with herself, and sure enough her mother picked up the cumin a moment later. She loved the spice in abundance, and Sara missed it when other people did the cooking in her life.

“Well, at least you get to go to the palace. Consider that my latest thank you. In fact, maybe you and Libby go without me. That could be your gift to me.”

Inès tutted, the click of her tongue muted as her lips pursed. “I didn’t raise you to be ungrateful. One afternoon isn’t going to kill you. Besides, there are worse things than catching the attention of a princess. This one is even gay.”

Sara laughed out loud at that. “Only you, *Maman*. Only you could see a dating opportunity from a PR exercise. I bet you anything she doesn’t even remember us. It’ll be a vague smile and a handshake, just like all the other guests.”

“You need some romance in your soul, *ma fille*. You’re too young to have given up on so many things. It can’t be just work and Libby, no matter how much time they both take up.”

Sara lifted the rice pot, transferring the contents to a bowl and nodding at the light, fluffy texture of it. Perfect every time. “Fine, fine. I’ll download a dating app or something. But I’ll set my sights a little more realistic than the world’s first queer princess. Like she’s going around to look for commoners to date. Honestly!”

“According to the papers she’s about as good at dating as you are, so never say never. Come on, let’s go feed this child of yours so she grows up big and strong.”

“On my way,” Sara said, carrying the large bowl of rice out of the kitchen.

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She caught sight of the invitation again, this time laid out neatly by Libby's plate. It did look quite personalised, but then again, they probably had a fancy way of making it look so relaxed and genuine. Some underpaid intern would be stuck with such a meaningless task, no doubt. Oh well, it was something unusual in a life that had become really quite routine. Maybe in ten years they'd still be talking about the day they all went to the palace.

"Ready?" Inès said as she brought the deliciously scented pot of stew to the table.

"I think so," Sara said.

Chapter 3

ALICE NODDED TO THE STEWARD as she entered the private dining room at Buckingham Palace. Although she'd spent half of her life nominally living there, she still felt the weight of history bearing down on her from the walls. The dark oil paintings and heavy tapestries at every turn were familiar but a constant reminder of how much history, money, and expectation came with every step taken within the building and others like it.

“Good morning, Mummy.”

Queen Caroline looked up from her copy of *The Times*. Dressed for a day of engagements, she looked regal as ever in her cerise pink dress, sleeveless in her preferred style, a matching bolero jacket for it waiting draped over the empty chair next to her.

Alice slipped into the other seat opposite, unsurprised when the steward seemed to materialise at her elbow without actually moving across the room.

“And for Her Royal Highness?”

“I ate at St James's, thank you. Though might I trouble you for a cup of tea?”

“Of course. Anything else for Your Majesty?”

“No, thank you, Robin.” Caroline picked up her fine china cup, sipping from it pointedly. “I'm surprised to see you here so early, Alice.”

“I asked when you had a moment today, this was all they could give me. I'm on the train to Manchester shortly.”

Caroline buttered a slice of toast with slow, precise scrapes of a knife. “I heard about your little concert kerfuffle week before last. Making children cry for sport again?”

“You know me, I just love being part of these viral videos.” Alice accepted her teacup gratefully, adding sugar just to draw a tut from her mother’s lips. “It all smoothed over rather well in the moment, I thought. At least until I offended the child’s mother. That was my first real mistake.”

“I’m surprised she gave you such a telling off. You must have deserved it?”

“I did. And she was simply being protective, as was her right. It was nothing other than what you might have done for James or I.”

“You did look quite excited about the whole encounter. Get the blood pumping, did it? Getting someone to argue with you for a change?”

“Mummy—”

“One is merely stating the facts, Alice. It’s been quite some time since you had a young woman on the radar, and this simply reminded me of the fact.”

Alice scoffed. The last thing she wanted to discuss was her love life.

“It has been some time since we discussed finding you an appropriate match.” Caroline took a bite of her toast, waiting for a response. “Not this girl, of course. But it has put the idea back on the agenda. To think about bringing someone in. It would all be kept under the radar until you were sure about a match.”

Alice stood and began to pace, hands behind her back in that practiced way she’d learned as a small child. She could feel her mother’s appraising glance up and down her pale blue skirt and black blouse, and the instinct to defend the choice rose up in Alice’s throat. Her shoes, as always, were downright sensible. The one benefit of being tall for a woman was that Eugenia, in charge of Alice’s extensive wardrobe, rarely foisted heels on her.

“Into all this?” Alice gestured towards the trappings of the palace around them, stopping by the ornate fireplace. “That would hardly be fair on some unsuspecting girl, would it?”

“Oh, come along, darling. We have given you every support, just like we did James when he started stepping out with Annabel. I know you were let down badly before—”

“I have no wish to talk about Kristina.” Alice regretted snapping at her mother almost as soon as the words left her lips. There was no denying the truth of what she said, though. She really had no wish to discuss that part of her past.

HER ROYAL HAPPINESS

The queen stood then, crossing the few steps it took to reach out and pat Alice on the arm. “Just because she felt unable to cope with the demands, that hardly means no one else will ever be able to. And even the newspapers are starting to feel sorry for you, all alone.”

Alice closed her eyes for a moment, accepting the comfort from her mother by patting her hand in return.

“You say that, but it is still different for people like me. I know the press have been better, that they broadly supported me coming out, but they still have ways of digging at anyone not pale, male, and stale. It would take the hide of a bull elephant not to be affected by all that attention.”

“That is how your father always described it.”

“And why you nicknamed him Nellie.”

They shared a smile at the fond memory. For the first time in years, Alice felt a real temptation to suggest they cancel their day of handshakes and ribbon cutting and curl up in the family room with some old movies.

“I married a commoner, Alice, and we both knew there would be a price. That is why we did all that we could to improve things for you and James, to protect you both. And it has rather paid off, you must admit. You went to quite regular schools, to university. You even served in combat, for goodness sake, against my own wishes. That is progress, by any measure.”

“Perhaps. Anyway, I doubt it will make much impact in the grand scheme of things, but I have invited the woman from the video to one of the garden parties. Josephine thought it was the correct PR move, and I am inclined to agree.” Alice made sure not to meet her mother’s gaze, looking firmly out of the window instead.

“Well, Josephine is usually right in these matters,” Caroline said. “Although one feels a nice bouquet of flowers might have been enough.”

“Better safe than sorry.” Alice felt the need to change the subject. “James and Annabel were talking about schools last time I saw them, and how much intrusion it will bring into their lives. Rupert and Anne will be off to prep school soon, but there’s been no announcement of where they’re enrolled. Before, when Rupert would have been automatically next in line by being the male heir, his schooling would have been rather set in stone. But since the rules changed and Anne is next in line after James, I suppose the right fit for her is the priority?”

“Arrangements were made...” Caroline turned away, back to the table where she took her seat once more. She picked up her toast and took a dainty bite.

“But those are changing? James looks panicked anytime the question comes up.” Alice followed her mother back to the table, taking her seat once more.

“You should speak to your brother.”

“I shall. Whenever our paths next cross. Isn’t he off somewhere?”

Queen Caroline glanced at the printed schedule next to her plate.

“Wales, I believe.”

“I suppose he is prince of it.” Alice did her best not to grin.

“Alice, my dear, have you considered that it is this sense of humour that stops you getting women, rather than the glare of public attention?” The queen made no attempt to hide her own smile. If only the British public and the tabloid hacks could see this side of their monarch; they would hardly recognise her.

Taking her cue, Alice stood to leave. “Have a good day, Mummy. I shall see you at the garden party.”

* * *

“Bloody hell, look at you: dressed like a girl.” James gave Alice a playful shove. He had two inches on her in height, and the same broad shoulders and back that had served their father so well in his rugby career. Despite all that, Alice didn’t flinch, shoving back every bit as hard. It earned them a glare and a soft tut from their mother’s private secretary.

“I could say the same for you. I saw the pictures of you in a kilt. You do know you were in Cardiff and not Glasgow, yes?”

“There speaks someone jealous that I got the better legs. Ready for this year’s old-farty-party?”

“I assume you mean the garden party, you absolute arse? The highlight of the year for some of these people.”

“Don’t be pious, ’Lice.”

“Do not call me that. Not today, where people might hear.”

That, unfortunately, caught her older brother’s attention. An amateur mistake, Alice realised too late.

HER ROYAL HAPPINESS

“People overhear everything we ever say...so someone special in today? Thought you had sworn off the old meat market?”

Alice punched his arm, but it didn't even wrinkle his pale blue shirt.

“Nothing like that. I had a tiny PR situation, so I have to make nice with a teacher and her daughter.”

“That's right! Good old 'Lice, visited the kids and made them cry. Annabel played the video for me; we had quite the chuckle.”

That only earned him a roll of her eyes; Alice had endured far worse public events and so had James. “You take the school visits from now on then. Might help you and Annabel hurry up and decide where you're sending the twins. They are going to board, yes?”

Alice hadn't expected a proper reaction; her brother had a much better poker face than she ever had. But his restlessness gave him away instead, as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and back again.

“Thinking of getting a governess,” he said, into the silence Alice had stretched out for him. “Better than some draughty old dungeon full of young earls and the kids of oil barons, surely?”

“A governess? Instead of going off to school? I seem to remember ours was quite 'normal'. Finger-painting and everything. At least until you buggered off to Eton and abandoned me.”

James gave her a warning look, scrubbing a hand over his hair, cropped close these days to pull focus from his receding hairline. “Normal is the problem. This whole country has a mania about the bloody word, and yet no one can agree what 'normal' even means. Never understood that.”

“Jamie—”

“Don't call me that.”

“Consider it payback for 'Lice. Now tell me. What's wrong?”

James glanced over his shoulder again. “Nothing major. Late on a few developmental milestones, or whatever you call them. Plenty of schools are willing to overlook it just to get the royal heirs on the books. And this is just Rupert, to be clear. Annie...well, that makes it worse. Absolute prodigy so far, bless her. Just as well, since she's next in line. But Rupes, he's really struggling. We thought he was just being an obstinate sort of fellow to begin with, but the doctor suggested there might be more to it.”

“I must say, I have noticed the occasional issue. I know he can be fussy over his food, there was that screaming fit at Christmas that you both

tried to hush up. He's not the chattiest soul, certainly not compared to Annie. But does that really add up to some kind of condition? Could it not simply be a difference in personality?" Alice knew she was underplaying it, but she had a residual sensitivity to being labelled that made her reluctant to see one slapped on any member of the next generation, not without considerable thought first.

"Very much the tip of the iceberg, I am sorry to report. You know as well as anyone that we have plenty of help, but the nannies have been tricky to retain so far. These episodes, or 'meltdowns' as Annabel has been calling them, can be set off rather easily it seems. The wrong food, the wrong type of clothes, being taken away from one activity and asked to focus on another...one rather feels like it is impossible to do anything right. We pressed the doctor, but he seems reluctant to come to any conclusions."

"Surely The Firm doctors don't have any experience—are there specialists to call in? People who know this sort of thing?"

James winced as Alice went straight into helper mode. She tried to hold back, but it had always been her role. If she could have solved the issue herself, she would volunteer in an instant, but it was clear this situation was beyond her expertise.

"Rupert is not a new skill to master, or a bit of conversational Italian to pick up. I don't think we need medical help, as such. The key from what I've read is in how we teach and socialise him. What we really need is someone who teaches somewhere not so mainstream, someone who can really assess what he needs. But I don't want rumours following him all his life if it's not anything too serious. The thought of some of those tabloid rags using it to mock him...no, I can't stand the thought of what they might print."

Alice pulled her brother into a quick one-armed hug, about as affectionate as they got as adults. James leaned into it, a sure sign he was stressed.

"What if I got involved? If I spoke to some people through one of our charities, or Josephine found the right people to ask...no one would jump to conclusions surely? Actually, I think I just met someone who's something of an expert in this area. At least I think she is."

"Wait, that teacher woman who shouted at you? The one who doesn't 'believe' in royalty? Doesn't seem like she'd be much inclined to do any favours for our sort."

HER ROYAL HAPPINESS

“Not a teacher, exactly. But she’s some kind of consultant in special needs education. If you were concerned you could run some checks, but she did seem a very dedicated type, despite the calls for bloody revolution and our heads on spikes.” Alice smiled at the over dramatisation of it all. “Just a suggestion. It seems you’re in a bind, and I want to help. If not her, perhaps she would know the right people to speak to.”

James pulled away, scrubbing a large hand over his face. He reminded her so much of their father in that gesture. “I feel like anything we do will be lighting a torch paper under poor Rupert. It might be nothing, but he doesn’t deserve a whole country speculating on his learning abilities.”

“Of course. Goes without saying this will be utterly confidential. Trustworthy sorts only, whether it’s this Sara Marteau or someone else. We will find the solution, and I’ll get Josephine on the case before we make any moves.”

“You’re a good egg. Right, shall we brace ourselves for the unwashed masses? Hope you’ve got some hand sanitiser in your pocket.”

“Jamie!”

“Kidding, kidding!”

They went their separate ways, out to the respective receiving lines that had been handpicked for them to greet first. As Josephine reappeared at her side, Alice leaned in for a quiet word about what she and James had just discussed.

“I’ll see what I can find out, ma’am. You got my notes for your guests?”

“I did, thank you. You’re a lifesaver as always, Jos.” Alice fiddled with her father’s ring on her left hand for a moment before launching back into the social fray.

Their mother emerged from a small crowd of courtiers, radiant as ever, and began to tackle the more substantial line in front; she was always the main event whenever the family gathered.

Alice made her way from person to person with the usual slow stride. She’d learned a long time ago that if she kept a minimal sort of motion as she greeted each one, they didn’t expect her to linger for long. It felt a little crass to be so business-like about it, seeing so many excited faces, but for Alice this was just one major event in a day stuffed full of them. Everyone wanted a piece, and she made sure everybody got some.

The queue of invitees looked much the same as every other time. The elderly and the well-behaved children, a mix of races and ethnicities that reflected the make-up of the country rather well. Alice murmured platitudes and smiled as broadly as she could, shaking hand after hand and apologising that she wasn't supposed to stop for selfies, even if they did have the phone right there and ready to go.

She recognised Libby right away. That the name had registered was impressive, but for the first time in the long line of people, Alice stopped entirely.

"Well, hello there. Before we start, I really ought to ask: any tears on their way?"

Libby gave a delighted little laugh, music to Alice's ears. She could sense people around them start to notice and put the pieces together. Camera shutters from the official press photographers went into a miniature frenzy.

"No!" Libby gave an energetic curtsey, complete with a sort of bounce as she touched the ground and looked the picture of angelic youth in her light green dress. "No crying today, your uhm, Royal Highness?"

Alice nodded. That was the correct form of address, even if she rarely insisted on it. "Why don't you introduce me to your fellow guests, Libby?"

"This is my *Mamie*," Libby said, gesturing to the older woman next to her, who was in the process of nudging Libby's mother with her elbow.

"Inès Marteau, Your Royal Highness. It is such a pleasure."

"That's a wonderful accent. Do I detect a note of *Français*?" Alice silently thanked her almost eidetic memory for retaining the handful of facts Josephine had popped on a card for just such a moment as this.

"*Oui*, ma'am. I moved to Paris in '79. And you remember my daughter, Sara, if you remember young Libby?"

"Of course. Ms Marteau, how lovely to see you."

Sara raised an eyebrow, but still extended a hand in politeness. Despite her aforementioned disdain for royalty, she had certainly dressed for the occasion. Alice found it difficult to look away from the spotless ecru trouser suit, the emerald blouse beneath it complementing Libby's outfit very well. The same tones could be found in the bold patterns of Inès' dress and her hat was wonderfully dramatic too. Altogether they made a lovely little matriarchy.

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“Thank you for inviting us,” Sara said, her voice low but friendly. She sounded faintly amused by the whole situation. “As you can see, the rest of my family are big fans of your family.”

“How nice of you all to believe in us. Now, I have a lot more handshaking to do, but usually after all this I like to hang around the smaller drinks tent just over there. If Libby had any questions.”

“You don’t have to—”

“Just in case. Must get on. Hello there, thank you for coming today.” Alice moved seamlessly to the next man in line, an elderly veteran with his medals proudly displayed on his pressed and starched uniform. Why had she made that offer? Surely the handshake and free cucumber sandwiches were peace tokens enough? What was it about Alice’s traitorous brain that seemed insistent on keeping this story alive, viral videos and all? Was she setting herself up for another humiliation on social media?

As she glanced back to see Sara looking at her, Alice found herself fervently hoping not.

* * *

Alice continued her rounds with the usual handshakes and small talk, taking a break only when her wrist began to twinge, the legacy of an old hockey injury. As soon as she stepped into the private tent, Josephine appeared with her usual silent magic.

“I did some preliminary research, ma’am. And I hope you don’t mind me taking the liberty, but I did check in with the staff at KP who work with that branch of the family tree, as it were. I thought it best to know exactly what we were dealing with.”

“I am nobody’s idea of an expert, but are we talking something like autism?” Alice looked around as she asked, confident nobody was close enough to overhear. This small enclosure was off-limits to anyone but family and palace permanent staff. “There must be other conditions, other learning difficulties, but what James told me rang a bell.”

“Yes, from what I can gather we should be at least looking at testing for autism, though there are other possibilities. I did overhear a little of your conversation with the Prince of Wales, ma’am, and well, it turns out that one of the country’s foremost experts is the woman you invited today, Sara Marteau. Although she doesn’t have a doctorate yet, she has been working

in some of the south London schools with complex needs, and has written a number of papers that are being held up as the new standard for education throughout England. Ms Marteau is a seriously impressive figure in her field.”

Alice nodded at the information, trying not to get carried away. “But we also have other names?”

“Yes, a few. Not all are as readily available and obviously there’s no personal connection, but we can make it work with any of them.” Josephine consulted her notes, ready to rattle off more screeds of information and qualifications, no doubt. “Though the new school year isn’t far off, so there’s something to be said for Ms Marteau being right under our noses today. Some might say it was a sign.”

“A sign of something, perhaps.” Alice could hear the grumbling in her words and forced herself to shake it off. Of course the universe wanted her to ask a favour of the woman who had made a fool of her and hated everything she stood for. Asking for some sort of favour might only turn Sara even further against them, but for some reason Alice found herself hoping that wouldn’t happen. Something about this Sara woman intrigued her, made Alice want to seek out at least another conversation. “Should we keep my brother appraised on this?”

“I already have. I assumed that was the plan. Forgive me, ma’am.”

“No need to forgive,” Alice said. “Just good anticipation on your part as always, Jos.”

“Would you like me to sound out Ms Marteau before she leaves today? Or get you both in a room together perhaps?” There was something mischievous in the way Josephine raised one immaculate eyebrow.

“No, if we cross paths then so be it. I did tell her where to find me. She really is an expert in her field, then?”

“Her name popped up everywhere I looked, yes. She knows her stuff without a doubt.” Josephine consulted her notes. “And for the record she has never been married, has just the one daughter, and seems to date exclusively women. Not that we’ve had the full background check done yet, of course.”

“Jos—”

“Ma’am. I believe there’s a group of military widows waiting to meet you.” Josephine darted back towards the tents with her usual subtle speed, leaving Alice to shake her head.

Well then. Onward and upward.

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HER ROYAL HAPPINESS

BY LOLA KEELEY

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