



HEIR APPARENTLY

A Novel By

AVÉ

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To MILLICENT KELLY
for supporting and
believing in me
when no one else would.

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Chapter 1

RRRRRRRRRIIIIIINNNNNGGGGG!!!

The mallet on top of the old-fashioned alarm clock sitting on the nightstand violently attacked the two bells flanking it, filling the room with the most putrid sound. A hand peeked out from under the thick, white duvet, silenced the alarm, and retreated. A young man reluctantly peeled his head off the comfortable pillow, flung his legs off of the side of the bed, and sat rubbing his eyes. Slowly, he began to doze off when another putrid sound assaulted his eardrums, only this time it was less mechanical and more annoying.

“Victooooor! Victor, wake up! Breakfast ends in twenty minutes,” a voice yelled from the intercom speaker across the room. Victor groaned and shuffled to his bathroom to start his day. A quick washcloth to his face, soap to his body, and toothpaste to his mouth was all that was needed to wake him completely. He then went to his closet and put on a white button up shirt, black slim pants, black loafers, and a black belt with a silver buckle. He left his closet and walked over to his dresser where he slid on his favorite silver watch that his grandmother bought him for Christmas last year. Lastly, he clipped a sterling silver necklace with a cross around his neck and placed a white fedora on his head. After a quick look in the full-length mirror on the other side of the room, he nodded with a smile of approval and headed to the dining room.

He walked down the long corridor with centuries-old paintings crowding the walls. He addressed every maid, cleaner, and guard that he passed by name. Most members of the royal family

never bothered learning the names of the “help” other than himself and his grandmother, which earned him great respect and loyalty from those around him.

Finally, he entered the private dining room, ready to eat. The antique wooden table was decorated with two vases of flowers and the china, silverware, and glassware of his ancestors. Around the table sat the members of his immediate family. At the head of the table sat the newest member of the family, his stepfather, Christopher Duke of Spiti or affectionately known as “The Duke.” He was formerly known as Special Agent Christopher Schaeffer, a handsome 35-year-old agent with the National Investigation Bureau. Adjacent to him was his mischievous little brother, Prince Seth - a tall, stocky 19-year-old with a deep disdain for obedience. Across from him was the eldest of the three children, Princess Jacqueline “Jackie” — a tall, intelligent 24-year-old beauty who loved “gracing the cover” of the trendiest magazines. And finally, at the other head of the table sat Princess Mary, aged 51 years and the heir apparent to the throne of The Kingdom of Iakos.

“You’re late,” Mary reprimanded, without even looking up. Though everyone else at the table had an almost empty plate of food in front of them, Mary had a black folder and official papers spread out across her placemat.

“Good morning to you too,” Victor snapped back pulling out the seat next to Seth.

“Oh no!” Mary said, “Breakfast is over.”

“What?”

“I called you down thirty minutes ago. I sent your plate back. We must go,” Mary said as she began sliding her papers into a pile and placing them into the leather folder.

“Why would you do that?” Victor replied, trying in vain to remain respectful.

“Because I called you and you didn’t come. You could have gotten dressed after.”

“Whatever,” Victor mumbled.

Mary stood, “I have a busy day before Chris and I go off to the coast for the week. The Queen has summoned us so you will not make me late. Let’s go!”

Victor looked at Mary, lost. “Us? Grandmother summoned us?”

“Yes. You and me. What about that simple word are you missing?”

“Wow, mum! Are you two starting already?” Jackie interjected, as she got up with her plate and glass and placed it on the cart by the window for the cleaners to take away.

“Did she summon us as her daughter and grandson? Or did she summon us, her two heirs?”

“What does it matter?” Mary hissed, giving her new husband a kiss goodbye that lasted a little too long.

“Ewww, that’s my cue to leave,” Seth cringed, clearing his spot as well.

“The car is in the courtyard already. Let’s go!” Mary said, marching out of the room and up the corridor. Victor kissed Seth and Jackie on the cheek and then followed Mary, power walking like a suburban mother. He really wasn’t looking forward to this car ride.

It usually takes about 40 minutes by motorcade to get from the Rousel Palace in the country province of Spiti, to the State Palace located in the exact center of the capital city, Parados. By chopper, it’s about 15-20 minutes but the helicopter is reserved mainly for the Crown.

Victor got in the large black SUV to find Mary already inside typing on her iPhone. She leaned forward keeping her eyes locked on her phone and ordered, “State Palace” to the driver. He nodded and repeated the destination into his wrist. Then, the five-car motorcade began to move. The first car was a local police car that usually lights up once they are off the grounds. Next were three identical black SUVs: one with security, one with Victor and Mary, and the third doubling as a decoy for security purposes and a spare just in case one of the other SUVs stops working. Lastly, another patrol police car that ensures no one can drive up from behind and hit anyone.

They drove for miles quietly until Victor tried to break the silence. “Mother?”

“What?” She replied. Completely turned off by her lack of interest in his conversation, he gave up and pulled out his phone to play a game. “What?” Mary repeated.

“I just wanted to know why we are being summoned?”

“Victor, your guess is as good as mine.”

“Right.” Victor put on his headphones and isolated himself.

As they made their way through the countryside, they sat in silence. The hands on Victor’s watch danced gracefully from diamond to diamond. As the minute hand came almost full circle, the foliage and endless timber became asphalt and concrete. They made their way through the streets as Victor watched the array of lives he rarely got to see. All of them fantasize about being a primary member of the royal family — the fortune, power, fame, and palaces — but they never get to see the seclusion, the constant security, and heaviest of all, the limitations. Duty always prevails in this family and Victor knew all too well of the sacrifices this family has made in the name of “duty”. Heads turned and watched the motorcade run lights and make up its own road laws with their faces lit up with excitement. If only they knew that the grass on this side was greener because it was artificial.

Finally, they slowed as they approached the center of the capital city: the largest residence in the island country emerged — a long white palace with a grand black and gold gate spanning the perimeter of the almost 1000 acres of sculpted gardens and parks, tree-lined walkways, and helipad at the center of a circular maze garden at the rear of the palace.

The motorcade stopped at the gate, a military guard whispered to the security guard in the first SUV and — viola — entrance to the home of the Crown. They drove along the road that circles the palace and came to the private entrance secluded by large trees and a camouflaged doorway that matched the two-story windows lining each floor of the 4-floor building, not including the tower. Victor and Mary stepped out of the SUV and shuffled quickly through the doors held open by two bowing military men. The first corridor Prince Victor and Princess Mary entered was lined with large portraits of former Iakon monarchs.

After a few more turns they arrived at two tall, burgundy-stained wooden doors with gold trimming and handles, and two guards standing in front. They both bowed, “Your Royal Highnesses!” and opened both doors revealing the internal residential foyer. The walls were painted a pale peach, which complemented the perfectly buffed white marble floor. Their shoes sang of their presence louder than anywhere else in the palace.

Golden light fixtures were mounted along the walls both downstairs and upstairs. And of course, the hall was complete with two marble staircases covered with a burgundy carpet, held down by golden stair rods. The stairs semi-circled to meet and form a landing above another door, which led to the private dining room. Along the stairs stood a gold painted banister with a regal design featuring crowns, crosses, and national symbols. And finally, an enormous chandelier hung from the second floor, almost reaching the first, and featured well over 100 dangling glass pieces.

Victor stood with his hands behind his back, confused. “Why are we just standing here?”

“Her Majesty told me to wait here for her,” Mary replied. “So that’s what we’re going to do.”

“Well, where is she?”

“Did I give birth to you without a patience bone or something?” Mary spat, unwarranted.

“No, but maybe the doctor could have rubbed off some anatomy knowledge onto you so you wouldn’t say things like ‘patience bone,’” Victor retorted, his calm voice dripping with sarcasm.

“How dare you speak to me in that manner?”

“Oh, and in what manner would you like me to speak to you? Oh wait, you wouldn’t! You want me to stand here and take your attacks with no reply, whatsoever.”

“No, you disrespectful child,” Mary snarled, articulating every word clearly. She advanced toward him, with her posture never faltering. “You will speak to me with respect!”

“Then, respectfully, learn how to give it for once,” Victor spat back. Neither of their voices was raised, but the tension in the air rose exponentially. Victor tried not to make a habit of going tit-for-tat with his mother because he was raised to always respect his elders, especially in the Royal Family. But ever since his mother remarried, she loved crossing lines with Victor, so much so that even when she wasn’t, the line appeared obliterated.

Mother and son stood at the same height, in a staring contest that mirrored a game of Say Uncle. Finally, a voice filled the room, echoing from the walls and floor. “Alright you two, stop this now!” Victor turned to the stairs to find Queen Margaret I slowly making her way down the stairs. Her white knuckles clutched the

banister. She wore a pale yellow half-calf dress and a matching woolen coat and hat.

Victor shuffled to the stairs and leapt up them to meet her. He offered his arm for her to hold as she descended. Margaret sweetly rejected the offer with an extended hand and a slight head shake. Victor nodded and followed alongside her to make sure she was safe until they reached the floor. At the bottom, Margaret continued, “What has gotten into you both? You bicker like children rather than mother-and-son.”

“Well, he’s always disrespecting me and I’m tired of it,” Mary whined.

Margaret gently, but authoritatively extended her hand to stop Mary. “You are not a child, Mary. Don’t give me that *he started it* defense like a toddler.” Mary fixed to respond but immediately stopped herself. Back and forth would work with Victor, but would never work with *her* mother. Victor smirked slightly externally and laughed hysterically internally. Without looking to him, Margaret continued, “And you, Victor, need to stop talking back to your mother. I know she pushes your buttons — ”

“I do not!” Mary retorted, echoing across the foyer.

“But sometimes a simple ‘Yes ma’am’ is enough to stop a tantrum.” Margaret and Victor chuckled. Mary grunted, turned, and began to storm out of the residential suite. “Mary, you go ahead to the gardens. We’ll catch up with you so we can talk,” Margaret called out, then turned to her grandson. “I’m so sorry, Victor. Sometimes she acts like she hasn’t aged past 5 years, but she means well.”

“I’m not sure that she does, sometimes,” Victor replied, as they walked into the corridors. They turned the corner and made their way through the rear entrance and into the vast State Palace gardens. As they walked, they caught up on their lives. Victor shared with his grandmother the loneliness that had been seeping into him, especially lately. He also shared the growing tension at the Rousel Palace, since the wedding. Margaret reciprocated with her frustrations and pressures with life as the monarch. These conversations were a common occurrence for them as they shared a bond that seemed unbreakable.

They caught up with Mary on a bench in the circular maze garden. She sat still sulking until she noticed the Queen and

prince advancing toward her. She reluctantly stood and turned her body toward them without looking in their direction. As they arrived, Victor helped Margaret to sit on the stone bench and took a seat at her right side. Mary heavily flopped on the left side of the Queen as Victor began to chuckle at the immaturity. Margaret popped both Mary and Victor on the leg and they both sat up straight.

“I need someone to give a speech in my name at an elementary school next week,” Margaret spoke coldly.

“I will go,” Mary quickly replied. “I’ll clear my schedule and give the speech for you.”

“Thank you.”

“So, Grandma, why did you summon us?” Victor finally asked.

Margaret paused for a moment and then began, “I have some rather distressing news to share with you.”

“Are you ok?” Mary leaned in, her tone having dramatically changed to one of concern.

“Well, my dear, I’ve been having these horrible headaches for some time now, along with some nausea and vomiting. And, of course, you’ve seen how movement has become...difficult. About a month ago, I summoned the doctor who came here to the palace to examine me. He was concerned. So, they completed further tests and the conclusion... was not so good.”

“Mummy, stop beating around the bush. What is going on?”

There was a long pause, as Margaret simply stared across the garden for a few moments. Finally, she spoke, “It’s cancer.”

Mary gasped, literally clutching her pearls, while Victor sat stunned. “What kind?” Victor spoke, swallowing hard.

“Brain cancer. A grade IV glioblastoma.”

Mary’s mind reeled, with tears building up in her eyes, which were fixed on the Queen. “So, what are the doctors doing about it? Surgery?”

“It’s inoperable,” Margaret replied, slowly.

Mary jumped to her feet. “What? How can they say that? You’re the Queen; they can’t just do nothing.”

“Mummy, there are other possible treatments,” Victor stuttered. He rested his elbows on his knees with his head slouched

forward. “Chemo. Radiation. Maybe we can find a good clinical trial.”

“Exactly and sit up,” Margaret said tapping Victor’s knee. Victor sat up straight as she continued. “I will begin chemo and radiation treatments today. I would like it if someone came to stay with me here at State Palace.”

“Grandma, I think you should take some time at Rousel Palace to get away from the city and rest.”

“No!” Margaret spoke. “The Crown doesn’t neglect duty.”

“But you’re not neglecting duty,” Victor continued. “You’re resting and healing so that you can continue to do your duty.”

“And I just got married,” Mary rebutted.

“Mum, what does that have to do with anything?” Victor spat back.

“Newlyweds need their home to themselves. Mother will be perfectly fine right here.”

“Are you kidding me? First,” Victor began standing up, “it is a palace. You can fit our entire extended family in that place and still have rooms to spare. Two, your mother just told you that she has cancer and you’re thinking about how it will affect your marriage? You can’t be that selfish.”

“Victor, that’s your mother —” Margaret warned.

Victor turned to Margaret. “And you’re *her* mother. Why can’t she act like it?”

“And why can’t you speak to me with respect?” Mary bellowed, grabbing Victor by the arm and turning him to face her. Victor violently ripped his arm away.

“Stop!” Margaret demanded, after which she grabbed her forehead and leaned forward. Victor sat back next to her and rubbed her back.

“Are you okay?” Victor whispered.

“I just need help. I guess I’ll call Rose.”

“No, I’ll come and stay with you,” Victor reassured her. “The Duchess doesn’t have to come from 5 hours away when you have me.”

“Thank you!”

“When is your first treatment, Mother?”

“Today, 1700 hours.”

“Well I can’t stay that long. Christopher and I are going to the coast and I have to get back to finish packing. Victor, can you stay?”

“Sure, mum. Go! I’ll take care of *your* mother.”

Mary rolled her eyes at Victor. “Call me and tell me how it goes, Mother.”

“Sure,” Margaret gave a quick half-smile without looking at her. Mary kissed her cheek, offered a small curtsy backed away a few steps and shuffled off to the Palace.

Victor watched her leave and then looked to the Queen. “Can I get you anything?”

“Yes, some ice cream.” They both chuckled.

“Sure,” Victor replied. “I’ll go to the kitchen.”

“Thank you! And bring it to my room. I need to rest.” Victor helped her back to her apartments in the residential suite of the palace. Then, he made his way to the palace kitchen.

Chapter 2

Victor entered the palace kitchen, one of the only ordinary, temperately decorated rooms of the palace. The kitchen had a tan colored tile floor and a gray metal ceiling. Large metal vents and cabinets hung over the long lapis blue island with gold trimming at the center of the room. The island had a tan granite top with stove burners on the end closer to the entrance and sinks on the far end. On the back wall sat large metal doors that gave way to a large walk-in refrigerator and freezer.

The metal door opened with a hiss as a 32-year-old man came walking out of the refrigerator carrying a large wrapped fish. Assistant Chef Vincent Grant was a tall, handsome white male and the new chef at the palace. Chef Grant hadn't noticed Victor standing in the entranceway of the kitchen. He walked over to the island and placed the fish on the counter. He reached up to the cabinet above him in search of the right utensil to use.

"Hi!" Victor said, making Vincent jump which sent pots crashing down onto the counter. Chef Grant stood in shock staring at a chuckling Victor.

"Your Royal Highness," Chef Grant spoke, with a bow. "I apologize."

"Why? I startled you," Victor replied as he walked over the island counter.

"Yes, this is true," Chef Grant bashfully replied, picking up the pots and returning them to the shelf.

"How are you today?" Victor flirted, trying not to look at the raw fish head on the table.

"Oh, I'm fine. Just starting Her Majesty's lunch," Chef Grant replied. "Is there anything I can get you? Some sushi perhaps?"

"Oh, my goodness. Yes, please!" Victor realized that he had gotten too excited about the sushi. Chef Grant chuckled as he drew a large knife from the holder. Victor jumped out of his skin, but tried to keep a cool face.

"Are you ok?" Chef Grant replied.

"I'm fine, just bad nerves."

“Well, then I guess it’s payback then,” Chef Grant replied with a wink. Victor fought valiantly to hold back a blush but to no avail.

“So,” Victor began. “Are you new here?”

“No, not really. I’ve been working here for about nine months now.”

Victor chuckled, “That *is* new for this place. It holds onto its inhabitants, usually until death or retirement. So, what’s your name?”

“Chef Nathan Vincent Grant, but *you* can call me Vince, sir.”

“Does everyone call you Vince?”

“No, you can though!” Vince replied with a smile.

“Ok then, Vince. Well, I’m His Royal Highness Prince Victor II of Spiti, but you can just call me, ‘Victor.’”

“No, sir! I can’t,” Vince replied.

“No? Why not?”

“Because it wouldn’t be proper. You’re the prince of the Kingdom of Iakos, second in line for the throne. I couldn’t simply call you Victor.”

Victor snickered and then leaned in, “How about in public I’m ‘His Royal Highness’, but when in private, ‘Victor’. Deal?”

Vince’s smile grew from ear to ear. “Okay.”

“What?” Victor wondered why Vince was smiling so hard. Had he said something wrong?

“It’s nothing,” Vince replied while continuing to fillet the giant fish.

Victor walked around the island and stood in front of Vince, “What?”

Vince put down the knife and turned to Victor, who had now stepped so close that if his orientation were different, Vince would be uncomfortable. “You plan on seeing me in private.” Vince looked right into Victor’s golden brown eyes and for a moment, they both forgot where they were. Chills ran down Victor’s spine and Vince had no sense of the world around them. “Are you always this forward Prince - I mean Victor?”

“Not always,” Victor replied with a wink and a smile. He bit his lip and swayed with a false bashfulness that made him look so precious to Vince, and incredibly feminine. “Actually never, really.”

Just by appearance, one would think that Victor would just be fashionable or even eclectic, but seeing him now screamed the truth. Vince took what breath he could catch and whispered, “So what makes today different?”

After another 30 seconds of silent staring, footsteps on the marble tile snapped them both out of their spell. Victor turned quickly to the maid entering the room with her face buried in her phone, while Vince quickly turned his attention back to the fish. He picked up a pair of culinary tweezers and began deboning the fillet. Victor walked toward the entranceway and stopped, remembering why he came down in the first place. “Um, the Queen would like some ice cream.”

“This early? Lunch hasn’t even been finished.”

“That is what Her Majesty wants,” Victor replied, throwing his hands up in a joking surrender.

“Ok, I will get it for you.” Vince washed his hands and turned to the freezer. He opened the door and entered, yelling back. “Any particular kind, sir?”

“Rum raisin.”

After a moment, he came out with a gallon of rum raisin ice cream and walked over to the china cabinet, where he grabbed a bowl. After filling it, he gave it to Victor and said, “I’ll personally bring your lunch up to the suite with the Queen’s.”

Victor smiled, “That would be very kind. Thank you!”

He turned to exit, but Vince called to him, “Sir?” Victor stopped and turned. “Will you be staying here for long?”

“Yes, I’m not sure how long but yes.”

“Then I’ll see you around,” Vince replied and returned his attention to the fish. Victor bounced through the palace to the Queen’s bedroom in the residential suite, practically skipping with excitement.

He entered the grand bedroom where his grandmother slept every night. It was decorated with white and gold paint, Corinthian square pillars along the walls, and an enormous crystal chandelier hanging from a high, ribbed ceiling. Of course, the room would not be complete without antique gold trimmed wooden furniture. Queen Margaret sat at the edge of her king-sized bed with two doctors in front of her. An older European doctor was giving her what appeared

to be a neurological exam and the other, the Royal Physician, stood back writing details from the exam onto a clipboard.

Victor stood at the doorway holding the freezing bowl of ice cream as worry enveloped him. He'd never seen his grandmother in such a vulnerable state. The prince walked over to her as the doctors both took a moment from what they were doing to bow to Victor with a "Your Royal Highness". Victor smiled at them and then placed the bowl on a tray at the foot of the bed.

"It's good to see you, Dr. Bennett," Victor said, smiling at the first Royal Physician to be of East Asian descent. "How is she doing?"

"Well, sir, I'm not sure how much Her Majesty has told you," Dr. Bennett replied, looking at Margaret's face for approval.

Margaret nodded. "It's all right. You can speak freely with Prince Victor, doctor."

"Thank you, Ma'am," Dr. Bennett affirmed and continued to Victor. "Her Majesty has a grade IV glioblastoma. Unfortunately, it is so large that if we operate, there is a great chance that Her Majesty will lose every important function she needs to carry out her office."

"What about saving her life, Dr. Bennett?" Victor spat, trying to lessen the venom from his voice.

"I'm sorry, sir. We will try chemotherapy and radiation, but I'm afraid at this stage, there's not much else we can do but keep her comfortable."

Victor's mind raced, searching for a solution. With his eyes turned inward, he replied, "What about clinical trials or experimental drugs?"

"None of the drugs that we have is at a safe enough stage to give to Her Majesty and have a promising impact on the condition. I'm sorry that we don't have better news."

Victor turned to the oncologist examining Margaret and asked, "How much longer does she have?"

"There's no way of knowing for sure, sir," Dr. Ryan replied.

"Your best guess then," Victor spoke with his voice breaking.

"Being generous ... a year."

Victor lost his breath. He felt as if he'd been hit by a train and dragged a mile.

"Grandma, does Princess Rose know?"

“No, Victor!” Margaret replied with authority. “She knows I’m sick but no one is to know how bad it is.”

“Grandma!”

“Stop please, Victor. Please don’t stress my nerves anymore. That’s all her being here would do. You know how protective she is of me.”

“Yes, but imagine how horrible it would be if she finds out with an Iakos radio announcement.”

“Oh, stop being dramatic, Victor.”

“Grandma, I’m not! I’m showing you that she needs to be here. The family needs to be here.”

“Fine, Victor! Fine. Call them, but only Rose and John are to know. No one else! The last thing this country needs is panic. If this is going to be the end of my life, I’d like to enjoy it with some shred of privacy.”

“Yes ma’am!” Victor replied. He bowed, took a few steps back and then left the room. He slowly walked to his apartments at the State palace and pulled out his phone. This would be the hardest cell phone call he’d ever had to make. He scrolled through the phonebook and pressed call. After only a few rings, a deep voice answered the phone.

“Hey cousin.”

“Hey Jack! Is your mum around?”

“Yes, she’s in the study. Is everything ok?”

“I need to speak with her.”

“Ok, give me a moment.”

As the phone got quiet, Victor flopped onto his bed and stared at the ceiling. *And the storm begins.*

Chapter 3

“Wake up!”

All the air was knocked out of Victor as a dead weight flopped on top of him as he slept. Victor struggled under the weight, trying to gasp for air. He was entangled in his grayish blue comforter and black silk bed sheets. Once he finally got his bearings, he scrambled to his feet to find his one-year-younger cousin, Jack, stretched across his bed. Jack was the epitome of everything that is “#cool” or “#normal”. The Iakos Chronicle named Prince Jack the sexiest and most eligible bachelor in town, overlooking Prince Victor’s “exotic beauty”. To Victor, however, Jack just looked like he belonged in a boy band, and he lovingly never let his cousin forget it.

“Do you think before you do anything?” Victor asked half-jokingly, half-annoyed, as he checked his body out to make sure there were no injuries.

Jack just laughed and teased Victor. “Jeez man! You’re so sensitive.”

“What are you guys doing here anyway? I thought your mum said that you all would be coming this weekend.”

“Oh no,” Jack replied. “We packed our bags last night right after you called.” Jack walked over to Victor, who had picked up his phone to check the time. “Are you ok?”

“Um, I’m fine. I’m more concerned about Grandmother. I-I’m scared, Jack.”

“Well, how bad is it?” Jack asked, putting his arm around Victor.

“Your mum didn’t tell you?”

“Nope, all I know is that she’s sick. She said I shouldn’t worry myself. But I kind of figured it was more serious than she was leading on.” Victor began toward the bathroom and Jack followed. Victor opened one of the large suitcases and began looking for something to wear.

“Grandmother made me promise not to say anything,” Victor replied. Jack gently tapped Victor’s shoulder with his fist to grab his attention. Victor looked up at him. “What?”

“Is she ‘bad case of pneumonia’ sick or ‘we start preparing for a transition of power’ sick?”

Victor stopped what he was doing. He hadn't realized that if the Queen were to die, his mother would become Queen, making him the crown prince — the heir apparent. He had to think of something to say that wasn't a lie but wouldn't disclose too much about the severity of the Queen's real condition. "She's somewhere in between them for right now." That wasn't the whole truth but it wasn't a lie, because he truly had faith that other treatments could be found from now to her last day. Victor picked out a trendy outfit and some jewelry to match.

"Why is your stuff here?" Jack asked, eyeing Victor's suitcases along the counter and on the floor.

"Because," Victor started with a sigh. "I'm moving here indefinitely to take care of Her Majesty."

"Wow, it's *that* serious then? Wait, why would you be moving here if my mum is going to be here?"

"How long is she planning to stay?" Victor asked.

"I don't know, she didn't say, but she packed 4 suitcases so I'm assuming it will be a long visit."

"Oh, great!" Victor muttered. He quickly checked himself in the mirror and they left the suite. Jack and Victor walked down the hall to the Crown Suite. It was a centuries old tradition that when the heir ascended to the throne, he or she would be living in the Crown Suite, even if the dowager consort was still alive. The Royal House of Rousel was filled with these archaic traditions that tended to over complicate the lives of the Royal Family.

Victor and Jack walked into Margaret's bedroom to find the younger of the two living daughters of the Queen speaking loudly into her cell phone, and Jack's 22-year-old twin sister, Princess Margaret of Makria who the family called "Margie," trying to spoon feed a still able bodied queen.

"Stop it!" Margaret protested, pushing Margie's hand away. "I can still feed myself."

"But you're *not* eating, Grandma."

"Yes, because I must take my medicine before I eat," Margaret argued.

"Well, then where is your medicine," Margie replied, clearly getting frustrated.

"It's in the bathroom," the Queen said, trying to lift herself off the bed. She made her way to her feet, and began to walk toward

the bathroom but she stumbled as she realized that she couldn't feel her left leg very well. Her leg buckled under her weight and she began to fall. Victor and Jack sprinted across the room, reflexively pushed Princess Margie out of the way, and grabbed the Queen just as her knees hit the rug.

"Grandma, are you ok?" Victor asked, checking her knees.

"Yes, Victor. I am fine. Just pass me my walker."

Victor looked around the room from the floor, but couldn't see it in plain sight. "Where is it?" he said.

"It is folded behind that dressing table," Margaret indicated to the antique dresser across the room.

Jack walked over to the dressing table, pulled out the walker from behind it, and opened it in front of Margaret. She lifted herself, putting all her weight on the contraption in front of her as she began shuffling off to the bathroom. Victor followed her keeping about a one-foot distance behind her. After taking care of her during previous illnesses, he had come to learn a lot about the Queen's character as a person rather than a political figurehead or even a loving grandmother. He found many shared traits that reach every branch of the Rousel family tree, including a strong sense of duty, love of family, and protectiveness of the Crown, God, and country.

Once finished, Victor walked Margaret back to the bed, where she sat and took some deep breaths. "Are you ok? Do you need some water or something?" Margie asked.

Margaret shook her head. "I just need to catch my breath dear. I've had a busy morning."

"What do you mean? It's only 10 o'clock," Victor asked the Queen.

Margie jumped in to explain, "Well, she had a secure briefing and wanted to go down for breakfast."

"Go down?" Victor looked at Margie realizing that the Queen still hadn't told the family the severity of it. "You went down to the Breakfast Room?"

Off in the corner, Rose began to yell at someone in her typical dramatic tone. "No, I want to speak to Dr. Ryan in Oncology! Now!" She paused for a second. Victor looked up at the Queen as she punched the bed in frustration.

"Damn it, Rose! Hang up the damned phone!" Margaret exclaimed, making her three grandchildren jump before her. It was a

rare moment for Her Majesty to show this much emotion, let alone outburst or even swear. As Rose immediately obeyed, Jack chuckled loudly taking pride in seeing his mother being reprimanded. Her Majesty continued, “Do you think?”

Victor looked up at Margie who had gone pale, which wasn't that far from her natural complexion. “O-o-oncology?” Margie slowly spoke, her voice cracking. “Who has cancer?”

“Calm down, Margie. Just because she said oncology doesn't mean anyone has cancer.” The whole room paused and turned to Jack, utterly confused.

Margie and Victor let out a slow, “Wooooow!” as Princess Rose began to snicker to herself.

“What? It's true,” Jack continued

“What are you talking about?” Margie teased, speaking slowly to intensify her mocking. “Oncology is the study of tumors.”

“Now, now!” The Queen spoke, authoritatively signaling a ceasefire with one hand. Rose quickly covered her mouth to shield the humor on her face. “Don't tease the boy. He graduated with a degree in physical education, not medicine.” The mood in the room began to lighten at Jack's expense. It was comforting for the family to see she hadn't lost her sense of humor at all. Margaret grabbed a blushing Jack and pulled him into a hug. “I'm sorry, baby, but your sister's right in this rare occasion,” she loudly whispered, equally distributing the teasing.

Margie stopped smirking instantly and whined, “Heeeey!” This, of course, made everyone laugh aloud now, including the Queen, for about another minute, until the comic relief subsided and the weight of the situation set in once again. “Um,” Margie began, “how bad is it really?”

The Queen quietly took a slow, steady breath and considered the most easing way of stating the horrible news. “Well, I have some decisions to make, but I believe God has decided that this spring's birthday celebration will be my last.” Margie began to sob quietly, but she sat up holding her core tightly to hold back the emotion. Margaret tapped her on the leg and spoke softly, “Let it out, dear.” And just like that, the dam burst and the quiet snuffle exploded to a fountain of pain and fear. She laid herself onto the Queen, hugging her tightly. Rose and Jack slowly walked over and rubbed Margie's back. Jack turned back to Victor and their four tear-filled eyes met.

Victor's stone face began to crack under the pressure and emotion formed on his face. Jack stood up and went to hug Victor. Victor reflexively retreated a step, rejecting the offer to feel. Jack, knowing his cousin all too well, quickly advanced toward Victor tightly squeezing him into a hug with his arms pinned to his sides. Jack was at least 10 centimeters taller than Victor, but his presence would play tricks on the eye so one wouldn't notice his height until it was in direct relation to one's own. The room was filled with pain, but a comforting love emanated from each family member which greatly appeased the reality.

* * * * *

The week passed without any mention of cancer or death after that morning. Victor, Jack, Rose, and Margie spent the days taking shifts with the Queen, making sure that her spirits were lifted and doctors treated her well. That Friday evening, the Queen had summoned all her descendants and their spouses to the State Palace for dinner. By the time the dinner bell filled the halls, all but Princess Mary and The Duke were on the grounds. Dressed in evening gowns, HRH Princess Rose, Duchess of Makria and her husband, John, Duke of Makria entered the small octagonal private dining room, talking quietly to themselves. After a few minutes, the rambunctious princes, Seth and Victor, entered laughing and teasingly shifting Princess Jackie's tiara. With a fast swipe, Jackie landed a smack on Seth's cheek, who quickly grabbed Jackie by the waist and lifted her sideways.

"Come on, man. Put her down," Victor told Seth. After a few more shakes, he placed a screaming Jackie on her feet. She recoiled to swing again with a mischievous grin on her face. Foreseeing the strike about to land on Seth again, Victor grabbed Jackie and forced her into a hug, pinning her arms down at her sides. After a few moments, he asked, "Are you calm yet?" Jackie let out a playful growl and Victor held on tight. After another few moments, he asked again and this time she nodded. Victor slowly let her go and Seth resumed taunting. Victor lifted a hand, silently commanding Seth to stop. Without protest, he turned and looked for a seat around the circular table.

Just as the three sat down with Victor in between them, in walked Margie and Jack who quietly sat down next to Seth. With three seats remaining, Victor turned to Jackie and whispered, “Has Mother arrived yet?”

“I think so,” Jackie whispered back. “I think Grandmother wanted to speak with her privately.”

“As her mother or the Queen?” Victor inquired. Jackie shrugged and sat back, fixed her tiara that was displaced by the tussle just moments ago. Suddenly, everyone rose to their feet. Victor followed suit, deducing what was happening from past experiences. The Queen slowly entered with the help of a guard. She wore a beautiful black dress with embroidery across the breasts and a simple diamond tiara — her favorite. The family at the table all bowed or curtsied, and sat back down, except Victor. He walked around the table to the Queen’s side and held out his hand. Margaret accepted the offer and held on to him as she descended into the chair.

In walked one of the butlers who announced, “Are we ready for the first course?”

“No! Just water, thank you,” the Queen replied. “We’ll wait for the Duke and Princess.”

“Where are they?” Victor asked taking his seat, just as the couple entered. They bowed and sat at the two remaining seats. Immediately, Victor could tell that something was off. Throughout the first three courses, Mary leaned over to whisper something to the Duke and he’d just rub her arm. As everyone participated in conversation about what’s going on in their lives and politics, Mary and Christopher continued to eat in silence and only converse with each other.

“So, Mary,” Rose passive-aggressively called across the table. “What’s new with you?”

“Rose, stop it!” John warned his wife.

“I’m just saying, she’s been quiet all evening. You don’t have comments to make about anything we talk about? This isn’t like you.”

“Wait a minute! What are you implying there, Rose?” Christopher spat. Suddenly, the room got quiet.

“I’m simply saying *to my sister* that it would be nice for her to join in the conversation rather than carrying her own over there. It’s rude!”

“What if she has nothing to say?” Christopher debated.

“How would we know that when you’re speaking for her? You’re a *big* girl,” she spat, just as John kicked her under the table. She simply kicked back and continued, “Speak for yourself.”

Mary sat up, placed her fork on the table and wiped her mouth. “Uh oh,” Seth commented under his breath.

“What is your problem? Why are you trying to pick a fight with me, spare?” Mary slowly spoke, every word laced with venom and eyes glaring at 100%.

“Excuse me? What did you just call me?” Rose spat back, throwing down her fork like a gauntlet. “I would be careful placing yourself higher than anyone else in the room, considering today’s news.”

“Shut up!” Mary threatened between her teeth.

“Or what?”

Victor looked directly across the table to see a saddened Queen, with her hands in her lap and her plate barely touched. Instantly, he’d decided that if the Queen wasn’t going to stop this, he would. “ENOUGH!” Everyone stopped and looked at him, except the feuding sisters. “How dare you two bicker like this in front of the Queen - your mother — your sick mother. Have either of you looked at her to see how your words are affecting her?”

Mary turned to Victor and pointed her finger at him in an attempt to scold him. “I am your mother! You don’t speak to me like that.”

“Then act like it,” Victor calmly retorted, deadening any rebuttal she could muster. A deafening silence filled the room, with the only sound audible being Seth shoveling food into his mouth.

With perfect timing, the butler entered. “Is everyone ready for dessert?”

“Actually, may we have the room please?” the Queen asked politely. “I will let you know when we’re ready.” He left with a slight head bow and backed out of the room, closing the door. “Ok,” the Queen began. “It’s time we all have a talk.”

Everyone braced himself or herself for what the matriarch was about to say, all except Mary and Christopher who seemed already braced. “As we are all now aware, my reign is nearing its end and one of you will be taking my place as Sovereign. However,

it has been brought to my attention that there has been some debate within Parliament about who that next person shall be.”

Victor sat up stunned, and confused. “Wait, how is that possible? Mother is the heir apparent.”

“Well, not according to the laws. You see, there is a law that was enacted in 1846 which states that for a primary member of the Royal Family to marry and the marriage be legally recognized, the Sovereign must formally approve it.”

“I thought that that was just tradition,” said Margie.

“Obviously, so did Mary,” the Queen said sipping her glass of water.

“Why is Parliament meddling into the affairs of the Executive Branch?” added John. “They have no say in such matters.”

“Well,” Margaret explained, “parliament voted today to send an Enforcement memo to me to rule the marriage between Mary and Christopher illegal and invalid given that they eloped without consent.”

Victor looked at the Queen and asked the question that no one else at the table dared to ask given her current mood. “They want you to say that my mother and the Duke’s marriage is illegal? So, what does that mean for the Crown? The monarch can’t be illegally married, right?”

“In theory, that’s correct,” Margaret replied.

“What about in practice?” Victor cautiously debated.

“Well, according to the law, either they annul their marriage-”

“Or...” Mary promptly interrupted.

“Or?” Rose challenged.

“Respectfully, we will not do that,” stated Mary.

Christopher leaned onto his forearms. “What’s the other option, ma’am?”

“If you decide to continue in the marriage, then you must abdicate,” the Queen spoke decisively. She started her gaze at Mary, but slowly scanned the table until her eyes locked with Victor’s.

“But if Mother abdicates, then...” Victor couldn’t bring himself to say it.

“...Then, yes. You would become the heir apparent.” Victor fought to catch his breath. His hands became sweaty and his mouth dried. He grabbed the glass of water and began to chug it.

“Ok,” Mary exclaimed. “I’m just going to ask this question since no one else will. How is Victor more qualified to be crowned than I? He’s gay.”

Victor’s siblings and cousins gasped as Victor’s face got hot. Rose looked across the counter shaking her head. “Now *that* was low, even for you.”

“Mary, you know it is not against the law to be gay in this country. In fact, we do not discriminate based on sexual orientation. However, *you* broke the law,” the Queen calmly retorted. “And now you must deal with the consequences. If you want me to continue to fight for you, then you both will start respecting one another. This House must stay united in the face of adversity.”

“I have a question, Grandma,” Jackie softly said.

“Yes, dear.”

“Wouldn’t it be mother’s decision if she wanted to stay married or abdicate?”

“Normally, yes. However, I must decide if the marriage will remain legal. Either, I petition Parliament to change the law, or I must decide to enforce the law and rule the marriage illegal.” There was a long pause as everyone digested the information. “I didn’t want to make this decision, but when you decided to run off and get married; you forced my hand. Either you are single and Queen, or married and a Duchess.”

Seth banged the table with his fist, startling everyone at the table. “I have a solution. Maybe you could annul the marriage for now and still have him live in the house and then when you take the throne, then you can marry the Duke again.”

Victor turned to Seth, “No, Seth. Even if the marriage is willingly annulled, he will be banished, right?”

“No, Victor,” the Queen replied. “That’s only if I rule that the marriage is illegal. Then they would be formally banished, and Mary and Christopher would have to leave the country and renounce their titles.”

“So, there are three choices then,” Jackie said trying to clarify everything. “1 — They can annul the marriage and Mother would remain heir apparent, but never see each other again. 2 —

They can put it in the state's hands and take a chance on Grandma upholding the law. Or 3 — They can put it in the state's hands and have Grandma try to persuade Parliament to change the law in time, while she is fighting for her life.”

“Well, what happens if we chose the third option and Parliament hasn't decided by then, Ma'am?” Christopher said.

“Christopher, that would split the Parliament about 70-30 with the greater against the marriage. Then the public learns of it, which would cause a split in the country. And *that* could be enough to cause civil unrest, possibly even revolution. So, to alleviate confusion and maintain peace in my country-”

“-You would be forced to pick me,” Victor said quietly, finishing her thought. Everyone looked back and forth between the Queen and Prince Victor.

“Yes,” Margaret said, as if she didn't want to say it aloud.

After several minutes of silence, Mary spoke, “So what you're telling me, mummy, is that unless I annul my marriage, then there is a great chance my natural inheritance of this great nation would be taken from me and given to my son?” For the second time in Victor's memory, he saw pain in his mother's eyes. He had always looked forward to becoming king one day, but he didn't necessarily want to take it from his mother. He thought he would inherit it in 30-40 years or something like that.

“It is up to you, Mary. Whether you choose to decide or leave it for me to decide, you don't have a lot of time.”

“Mother, you're not going anywhere yet,” Mary whined in full denial.

“Yes, dear. I will be going home soon and I would like to know that, when it's my time to pass on, my country is firmly in the right hands.”