

RACHEL HAUCK



*A*  
*March Bride*

A Year of Weddings Novella

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A soft-focus photograph of a bride in a white dress holding a large bouquet of white, round flowers with green leaves. The image serves as the background for the book cover.

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A YEAR OF WEDDINGS NOVELLA

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**ZONDERVAN**

*A March Bride*

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*Interior design: James A. Phinney*

*To Susie May*

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**Thank you to the HarperCollins Christian Fiction team for inviting me into the Year of Weddings novella collection. I had great fun writing Susanna and King Nathaniel's wedding.**

**I appreciate the efforts of my editor, Becky Philpott, whose taste in story mirrors my own.**

**Thank you to Sandy Moffett for information on private jets. Any mistakes are mine.**

**A shout-out to Susan May Warren and Beth Vogt for sounding out my crazy story ideas. You keep me grounded with your friendship.**

**Much love to my husband who allows me all kinds of space to be who God's called me to be. And who found a video game to play while I write on deadline. Way to take one for the team, babe!**

**To all the readers who take the time to read my stories. I really, really appreciate you all! Thank you!**

**KING NATHANIEL II AND AMERICAN**

**SUSANNA TRUITT ENGAGED!**

**KING NATHANIEL: "I'M MARRYING THE LOVE OF MY LIFE"**

**BRIGHTON KINGDOM**

*The Liberty Press*

**2 JUNE**

**King Nathaniel will achieve what few of his ancestors have been able to: the right to marry the love of his life, American Susanna Truitt.**

**Less than a day after he convinced Parliament to amend the Marriage Act of 1792 forbidding marriage between foreigners and royals in line to the throne, he winged his way to St. Simons Island, Georgia, and proposed.**

**Was it romantic?**

**According to Truitt, "Very. He strung white lights from this old, old oak tree, got down on one knee, and even produced fake snow." Truitt blushed as she glanced at King Nathaniel. "I told him I wouldn't fall in love again until it snowed in Georgia."**

**"She never stipulated it must be real snow," the king said, his arm around his bride-to-be as they sat in the Crown Room of the King's Office, fielding questions from select reporters.**

**The king never intended to fall in love eighteen months ago while on holiday in southern Georgia. But “God,” he said, “had other things in mind.”**

**Truitt, a landscape architect, designed the king’s American cottage garden. While she presented garden ideas, romance bloomed.**

**“I’d just ended a long relationship where I thought marriage was the end game,” Truitt said. “But instead of proposing, my boyfriend broke up with me. That very same day, a year-and-a-half ago, I met Nathaniel under this ancient tree, Lovers’ Oak.”**

**The king proposed under the same tree. The newly engaged couple plan a March wedding.**

**“Susanna needs time to adjust to Brighton as well as royal life.”**

**“It’s very different from slinging barbecue in my mama and daddy’s Rib Shack,” Truitt said, going on to say that joining the royal family is daunting and that the notion of being “a royal” has not completely sunk in.**

**From Stratton Palace, Dowager Queen Campbell declared she was “thrilled” for her son. “True love comes along so rarely these days.”**

**Prince Stephen, the king’s younger brother, issued a statement from his rugby club. “Susanna is quite the sport. She’s good fun and a solid match for Nathaniel. I’m profoundly jealous. But happy for my brother.”**

**Truitt will be the first foreigner to marry a Brighton ruler since Princess Paulette of Lorraine, the wife of Crown Prince Kenneth, nearly destroyed our military forces by urging her husband and father-in-law to aid her uncle, King Louis XVI, during the French Revolution.**

**What’s the word on the street of this “American invasion”?**

**“I don’t care who he marries,” uttered a customer at a Cathedral City Starbucks.**

**Others exude more enthusiasm. One university student said, “My friends and I think it’s grand. She’s a lucky girl. We wish them joy.”**

**Wedding plans are just beginning as Truitt transitions from America to Brighton Kingdom. Designers are frothing to be the Chosen One for the future queen’s wedding gown.**

**But who knows what this American will choose for her dress or her wedding venue? Traditionally, all Stratton House royals have married at Watchman Abbey, where the king’s coronation was held this past January.**

**“We don’t know what Susanna will do,” said Penny Pitworth, a royal reporter for B-TV. “She may not want to marry in Brighton at all.”**

**Hold your collective gasps. The king and future queen of Brighton may not marry on our sapphire isle at all but on her home isle of St. Simons in Georgia.**

**“Either way,” Pitworth said, “we’ve a royal wedding upcoming and all of Brighton should rejoice.”**

**And so we shall.**



**F**or the first time in her life, Susanna Truitt was uncomfortable in a garden. As a landscape architect, she viewed gardens as her sweet spot, her place of rest and peace, but standing among the esteemed guests of Lord and Lady Chadweth's seventeenth-century ivy-covered stone and glass atrium, she felt the arrow of doubt spear her heart.

Three weeks before her wedding, and anxiety rumbled in her soul.

She cut a glance toward her fiancé, King Nathaniel II of Brighton Kingdom, as he laughed with his old university mates.

What in the world was she doing here? Surely Nathaniel had changed his mind about marrying her.

Susanna breathed out, collected her fears, and shoved them aside as she tipped her face toward the bright rays of sun slicing through the glass pane ceiling. After a long Brighton winter, she was homesick for Georgia.

"You know you did, mate . . . We were there, eyewitnesses . . ."

Susanna tuned in to the conversation around her.

"No, no, you've got it all wrong, Nigel." Nathaniel's protest launched a jovial debate among his friends, an aristocratic group of eight who seemed to look to Nigel as their leader.

Susanna smiled, rocking from one high-heeled foot to the other, exhaling. She had no idea what they were going on about, but

lately Nathaniel seemed to have many things in his life that excluded her.

Which led to her feeling a bit like an outsider, even among her garden “friends”—the potted palms, hydrangeas, lilies, and royal maples.

“So, Susanna, how is every little thing?” This from Winnie, Nigel’s girlfriend.

“Every little thing is just fine.” It was the bigger things that concerned her.

*He’s changed his mind.* Of course. It would be on par for her love life. Adam had changed his mind. Why not Nathaniel?

“I can’t imagine all you’re going through for this wedding.” Winnie chortled. “It’s the wedding of the century.”

“So they say.” Susanna’s legs wobbled a bit as she pushed her smile wider.

First lesson in being a royal? Smile. Be cordial. And stand a lot. Who knew royal life included so much standing? And handshaking. Lots and lots of handshaking.

And pulling out the hand sanitizer was considered ill form.

Susanna had rallied the King’s Office to let her wear sneakers or flip-flops for long receiving lines, but the protocol officers flatly refused.

“Tell me, are you nervous?” Winnie pressed her hand on Susanna’s arm. A move, she’d learned, that was acceptable for family and close friends, but not others. “I’d be a nervous wreck. The *Liberty Press* is reporting a telly audience of over a billion.”

Susanna’s smile faltered as a fresh wave of nerves washed ashore. “Well, then, we’re going to need a bigger cake.”

Winnie stared at her, then tee-hee'd. "You're quite droll, Susanna. I like that in a woman."

With that, Winnie returned to reminiscing with the men and Susanna was back to feeling alone and aching for home. For warmth. For unobstructed sunlight.

Aching for her own folks with whom to reminisce. She'd not been to Georgia since her best friend Gracie's wedding last October. She'd finally said yes to her boyfriend, Ethan.

But even then, it wasn't really like being home. Nathaniel couldn't get away, so Susanna traveled with a security officer and stayed in a hotel.

She returned to Brighton, a North Sea island gem, and enjoyed a lovely, mild October only to have November descend with gray days and an early snow.

For four long months, Susanna hibernated in palaces and castles, enduring the Brighton winter while being schooled on Brighton law, customs, traditions, and how to be the wife of a king.

So today as the sun crested the first pure blue, cloudless sky of March, she felt ready to burst with longing for south Georgia's heat and balmy breezes.

She missed the wind in the live oaks and the jaunty sway of Spanish moss, the fragrance of Daddy's barbecue sauce simmering on the Rib Shack's stove tops, the feel of a surfboard under her arm, and above all, the ability to move about town without a gaggle of photographers on her heels.

She longed to hear Daddy's "Hello, kitten" and Mama's "Susanna Jean, need you to pull a shift at the Shack." She missed hearing her baby sister, Avery's, exuberance about . . . *everything*.

"Susanna—" Nigel leaned toward her. "Surely Nathaniel told you the story of the skiing bear." Nigel's laugh bent him backward and

he seemed more like a frivolous playboy than the CEO of his own shipping company.

“A skiing bear?” She glanced at Nathaniel, who smiled, shaking his head and sipping from his champagne flute. He didn’t care much for champagne, but he held a glass out of respect for his host and hostess. “No, he didn’t.”

“It’s an old story, love.” He peeked at her, then away, down the wide aisle of the warm, bright atrium, toward the open doors. A fresh breeze sauntered in and rustled a few maple branches, spraying the atrium with the saline fragrance of the bay. “I’d nearly forgotten all about it.”

“Forgotten it?” Nigel’s tone contained no reserve. “Please, Nathaniel, it was the most extraordinary thing I’ve ever seen. I can’t remember when I laughed so hard, I’ll tell you that, old chap.”

There, she caught a hint of Nathaniel’s laugh. Something he’d not done much of lately.

Susanna regarded him for a moment, trying to figure what bothered him. What bothered her.

As their wedding drew near, her man looked . . . sad.

*He’s changed his mind and he’s afraid to tell me!*

Her heart crashed and her lungs strained for a pure breath. It took every ounce of her will not to run out of the atrium.

“Susanna, you should’ve seen him.” Nigel’s story reeled in the rest of the circle—Winnie, Blythe and Morton, Lord Michael Dean and his wife, Lady Ruthie, and her sister, Lady Becky. “The lot of us went skiing on a spring holiday from university. Michael, Mortie, you were there, remember?”

Skiing on spring break? A luxury in Susanna’s world. She’d spent every spring and summer break from the University of Georgia at her parents’ barbecue place, waiting tables and running



the back of the house just to earn enough of her living expenses for the following semester.

And if she ran out of money before the semester's end, she cut Friday classes, drove home, and worked nonstop all weekend.

"... on our last day we determined to take in as much skiing as possible." Nigel geared up from storyteller to entertainer. "We'd spent all day on the slopes, you see. Our boy Nathaniel here was the most determined to ski the day away, like a man facing a life sentence or some such."

"He was set upon graduation to enter the Royal Fusiliers as an infantryman like all the crown princes before him," Michael said.

Susanna knew about his military days. Nathaniel was quite proud of serving his country. He'd even briefly served during the war with the Royal Fusiliers Intelligence Corps.

"So this holiday was his last as a free man."

"I was born a crown prince," Nathaniel said to his glass more than to his friends. "I've never been a free man."

Susanna leaned to see his expression. What happened to the man of confidence and security who'd come to embrace his divine destiny?

He'd been at great peace over his calling as a king. So why the snarky comment?

When his gaze met hers, she smiled, searching for the teasing glint he reserved just for her beneath his blue eyes.

He nodded to her and she waited for *that* tug to appear on the side of his lips when he wanted to kiss her in public but couldn't.

However, his eyes did not twinkle, nor did his lips twist.

She could live with his dull eyes and sober expression, but she could not live without his look of love. The one that sparked a

warm twinge of lover's passion. The one that made her tremble with longing when he kissed her.

For well over a month now, she'd missed his tender glances and wooing warm words. Yes, he'd been busy, traveling, distracted and distant with his kingly duties. But when they were alone, he remained distant. Lost in a world she could not enter.

Their typically lively and deep conversations were now of mundane things like a late winter snow or the unusual prediction of sun and refreshing temperatures in early March.

Nathaniel no longer spoke about their dreams, hopes, and plans.

"So there he is, love. Susanna, are you getting this?" Nigel nudged her again, catching an eye from Nathaniel. "Pardon, I see your fiancé didn't take kindly to me calling you love or my elbow in your ribs. Anyway—"

"If you're going to tell the story, Nigel, tell it," Nathaniel said, gruff and irritated.

"Mate, you can't deny me the luxury of milking this fabulous story."

"Go on," Susanna said, reaching out to set her champagne flute on a tray carried by a black-tie server. "I'd like to hear this."

"So there we are, having a grand time. Nathaniel is flying down this slope, I mean *flying*." Nigel crouched down into a skiing position. "It's a fantastic hill and a fantastic run. There he is at jet speed when a bear—a big, blasted black bear—ambles out of the woods right onto the run."

"Hungry. Just out of hibernation." Nathaniel came a bit more alive. Nigel's storytelling had a way of turning off the silence and chasing away the blues. Even in Nathaniel. "He looked square at me like I'm his lunch, heaven sent."

**“The lot of us are right behind him, pulling up, skiing off to the side,” Michael said.**

**“In the meantime”—Morton’s laugh was low and cool, the sound of a stuffy blueblood—“we’re watching our friend and crown prince ski to his death.”**

**“You should’ve seen it from my vantage point,” Nathaniel said. “I’ve nowhere to go but into the trees, square into the beast, or off the side of the mountain.”**

**“And people tell me surfing is dangerous,” Susanna said, laughing, finally feeling a bit more at ease, realizing it wasn’t the garden making her uncomfortable but Nathaniel’s surly silence toward her.**

*He regrets his proposal. What else could it be? Enough. She’d confront him the moment they were alone.*

**Theirs had not been the easiest of engagements. Not only were they blending lives and hearts, getting to know one another as a couple, but they were blending cultures and expectations, all before the eyes of the world.**

**Most of the adjusting fell on her shoulders because she wasn’t merely marrying a man, but a king. She wasn’t getting to know just a new family but one with deep roots in ancient European history.**

**She wasn’t just learning the ins and outs of her new country, but a whole different way of life.**

**And the press . . . nothing can prepare one for the press. Behind Duchess Kate in the United Kingdom, Susanna was now the most photographed woman in the world. She found it exhausting.**

**“We’re yelling for him to stop, but he keeps plowing down the hill,” Nigel said.**

**“I couldn’t stop, ole chap.”**

**“Then we start debating,” Nigel went on. “ ‘Who’s going to tell the king? And shall we say his son died bravely, doing what he loved?’ ”**

**“Fine lot, that, having me dead before seeing my great plan of escape.” Nathaniel broke out of his somberness with a heartfelt laugh.**

**“What’s all the hilarity? I wasn’t invited?” The raven-haired beauty, Lady Genevieve Hawthorne, boldly inserted herself into the group as a spark of jealousy ignited a prickly heat in Susanna.**

**“Ginny, love, where’ve you been?” Blythe leaned forward to air-kiss Lady Genevieve’s cheeks.**

**“Bowling out of another engagement.”**

**Lady Genevieve was everything a crown prince-turned-king would want in a wife. A former Miss Brighton *and* Olympic lacrosse champion, she was stunning, sexy, and intelligent. Worse yet, she had once vied for Nathaniel’s heart.**

**He’d refused her, choosing Susanna instead. But perhaps now, as the wedding neared and he had a chance to watch Susanna function in royal situations like this hoity-toity garden party, he wished he’d made a better choice.**

**Susanna flipped her gaze up at Nathaniel. Was he staring at Ginny with any longing or affection?**

**No, he was staring down at *her*. Susanna finally felt a bit of warmth in his expression. He smiled and her knees went weak.**

**“We’re telling the story of the skiing bear,” Nigel said.**

**“Oh my word.” Lady Genevieve rolled her eyes. How did she make even *that* look alluring? “What a grand time we all had.” She ha-ha’d like she ate diamonds for breakfast and flossed with spun gold. “Of course I knew you’d escape, darling. Naturally.” Lady Genevieve fell against Nathaniel, caressing his arm. Then she shot**

Susanna a sly glance. "Susanna, darling, gorgeous dress. Love the orange flowers and vintage vibe. A Molly Turnwalt design or I'll turn in my fashionista card."

Susanna smoothed her hand over the ivory skirt with its splash of orange blossoms. "From her spring line, yes."

"In college, I only wore Molly Turnwalt." Lady Genevieve laughed with Winnie. "Remember her T-shirts and peg-leg jeans? Oh, to be twenty-two again."

Susanna burned with embarrassment, breathing deep, refusing her soul the sweetness of firing off a sour retort. Lady Genevieve was trying to make Susanna look out of touch and childish.

"Ginny, darling—" Nigel shoved her aside. "I'm telling a story."

"Oh right, Ni, I forgot it's all about you." Lady Genevieve rocked back, folding her arms, pulling a face. "Do go on."

A twittering laugh floated through the group with familiar, longtime-friend glances. Susanna hated feeling like a wallflower. She peeked up again at Nathaniel to discover he was watching Ginny, a slight smile on his lips.

Susanna felt sick. Weak. She'd been here before. Two years ago. On the beach at home with her longtime boyfriend, Adam Peters. She had expected him to propose, but instead he toiled with the words to end their relationship.

*"I've found the right ring but not the right girl."* Adam Peters's confession still pierced through her heart at the oddest times.

But she'd been so committed to her plan to marry him that Susanna had refused to see the truth. They were *not* right for each other.

Well, she refused to be so naive this time. If she and Nathaniel had wandered down a dark romantic dead end, then she'd be the one to turn on the light.

However, she'd not give up just yet. She joined the conversation, turning to face Nathaniel. "Since clearly you lived, I suppose you found a way out of this bear collision?" Susanna stepped closer to her fiancé, sending a signal to Lady Genevieve to back off. Susanna was the one wearing Nathaniel's ring.

"Yes, I managed to calculate an escape."

"Escape?" Nigel laughed. "Susanna, he performed a feat only Houdini would attempt. To the right there was a thick stand of trees. An option worse than running into the bear. Trees don't frighten and run off. To the left"—Nigel arched his hand through the air—"was a tumble over the side of the mountain with a straight drop down to the rocks."

"I had no choice but to ski into the bear," Nathaniel said.

"You really skied *into* the bear?" Susanna smiled, searching his expression for truth. For hope.

"Not exactly. As I whisked closer and closer, going faster and faster, I started yelling for the bear to move, but he merely stared at me as if I annoyed his sleepy thoughts. I braced for impact when I hit one of nature's moguls and—" Nathaniel whistled, slicing his hand through the air.

"He went airborne," Nigel said.

"You jumped the bear?" Susanna liked the mental image of a young prince soaring through the air, his regal, chiseled features cutting through the icy breeze as he hurdled a sleepy, hungry winter bear.

"Cleared him by a good four feet," Nigel said.

"It was spectacular. You should've seen it." Genevieve's tone carried a subtle reminder. *I'm a part of Nathaniel's inner circle, and you, Susanna, are an interloper.* "We sat around the fire talking of it all night."

**“Say, Nig, didn’t Hampsted film it with his camera?” Morton snapped his fingers, remembering. “He was always sticking that thing in our faces.”**

**“By George, I believe he did.” Nigel stretched, searching over their heads. “He’s round here somewhere with his new wife. Ah, there he is . . . Hammie.”**

**Nigel and Lord Michael scurried off to hound Hammie about his home movie while the distinguished Henry Montgomery, Brighton’s former prime minister, approached Nathaniel.**

**“Pardon, Your Majesty, might I have a word?” He bowed slightly, then smiled at Susanna. “You are looking lovely as ever, Susanna.”**

**“Thank you, Henry.”**

**“Excuse me, darling.” Nathaniel turned to Susanna. “I’ll return momentarily.”**

**Susanna watched him walk off with Henry, their heads bent together. What could Henry want in private at a garden party honoring the king and his future bride?**

**The unease in Susanna’s heart surfaced and burned. Did Henry want to discuss something about Brighton? About Nathaniel? Or maybe his upcoming marriage?**

**Perhaps it had to do with Nathaniel’s mother. In public, Henry was the former prime minister. In private, he was Nathaniel’s stepfather, married to his mum, the Dowager Queen Campbell. They wed last July after the one-year anniversary of King Leopold V’s death.**

**Susanna scanned the atrium garden for Campbell, who was unmistakable in a bright yellow spring dress with a matching coat, shoes, and hat. Once she had taken off her mourning clothes, nothing but bright colors would do. The press was starting to notice, calling her Colorful Campbell.**

**“So,” Lady Genevieve began, interrupting Susanna’s thoughts. “Your wedding dress. We’re all dying to see it.” She wrinkled her nose. First at Susanna, then Winnie, Blythe, and Lady Ruthie. “Aren’t we? I don’t suppose I could get a sneak peek?”**

**Susanna marveled at the woman’s boldness. Asking to see her gown like they were best friends. They hardly knew each other, and Susanna trusted her about as much as sticking her hand into a dark hole in the ground. Never knew what might bite back.**

**“I’m afraid not.” Susanna gazed past Lady Genevieve’s slender shoulder, eyes fixed on Nathaniel’s back, his dark suit accenting his wide shoulders. “The designer and I are bound by an agreement of mutual exclusivity.”**

**“Really? Merry Collins made you sign an exclusivity?”**

**“I offered, if you must know. I wasn’t going to require something of her I was not willing to take on myself.”**

**Genevieve arched her brow. “She must love you.”**

**“We have a mutual respect,” Susanna said, irritated by this conversation. Irritated by the fact Nathaniel seemed to be in some sort of deep discussion with Henry—indicated by his pinched brow and squinting eyes. What was going on? This was supposed to be a party. A joyous celebration of their upcoming wedding.**

**Instead, Susanna felt a certain dread.**

**Nathaniel shoved back his jacket as he anchored his hands in his pockets. A sure sign he was frustrated. Annoyed. His signature move—hands in his pockets—was considered ill form in Parliament and at state events, so he’d broken the habit. Except in moments like now.**

**He nodded once. Then glanced back at Susanna.**

**Something was definitely wrong.**

**“... do you think you’ll work, Susanna?”**



She switched her gaze to Winnie. "Work? Yes, as time allows. I've been consulting with AGH Partners, landscaping a new garden in tribute to King Leo."

"Fantastic. Good for you. I always think the wife of the king should have a job, you know, hold on to her own identity."

Hold on to her own identity? Winnie had no idea of what she spoke. Susanna had *long* given up on such an idea. She'd all but lost her identity the moment she said yes to Nathaniel and moved four thousand miles away to Brighton.

The only thing that remained of her was her American heritage. Which the press loved to point out.

A woman with a large pink hat stopped to talk to Lady Genevieve, but kept one eye on Susanna as they whispered and laughed.

Never mind. Nathaniel was coming her way, so Susanna excused herself.

"Nathaniel, what's going on?"

His gaze communicated a raw, vivid fear. As if he were about to do something he didn't want to but must.

Yep, she felt his cold glance all the way to her bone marrow. He was dumping her. Adam had the same look on his face that stormy afternoon on the beach.

"I've something to tell you." He hooked his hand around her elbow and steered her toward the open French doors.

"You're scaring me." She walked with him, her strength draining.

"Your Majesty!" The party director hurried toward them with determined strides, waving her clipboard in the air. "We're ready for the formal pictures now."

**“Thank you, Mrs. Janis.” Nathaniel sighed, looking down at Susanna. “We’ll talk after this.”**

**No, no, she couldn’t take it anymore. “We’ll talk right now. What is going on with you?”**

**“Susanna, please—” He smiled at Mrs. Janis, who waited with a frozen smile. “Let’s get the photograph. The Chadweths went to a great deal of effort to have this party for us.”**

**“What’s the point of this party or a photograph if you’re breaking up with me?”**

**“We’ll be right over here, Your Majesty.” Mrs. Janis backed up, pointing to the corner of the atrium where marble fountains spewed crystal water from angel wings.**

**“Just say it.” She became forthright when she was nervous. With Adam, she used their twelve-year history to launch an argument, but she only had eighteen months with Nathaniel. Ten of which they spent apart. “You regret proposing to me.”**

**“I what?” Nathaniel reared back. “What are you talking about, Susanna?”**

**“Well, do you? You’re distracted and distant. You’ve stopped talking to me about your life. You hardly smile or laugh when we’re together.”**

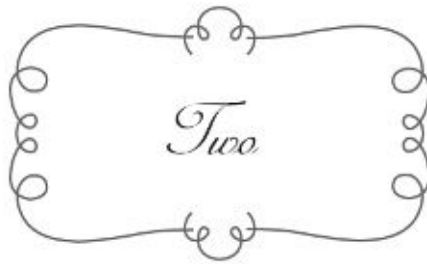
**“I realize that government business has gotten in the way a bit, yes.”**

**“This is not about government business. Look, I’ve been dumped before, Nathaniel. I’m aware of the signs.”**

**“Susanna, I am not Adam Peters.”**

**“Then what?” She grabbed his arm. “Do you think it’s not going to work with me as your wife? Are you sorry—”**

**“No, Susanna, no.” He grabbed her shoulders as he peered down at her with blue sincerity, his chest rising and falling with each deep breath. “Quite the opposite. I fear *you* will regret saying yes to me.”**



**N**athaniel tried to relax the tension from his bones as he walked Susanna up the broad, grand staircase to her Parrsons House suite.

They had put off talking after their small confrontation at the Chadweths'. It wasn't the place or time. Since then, they'd barely had a moment to themselves. They'd departed the garden party for a dinner at the American ambassador's home with only enough time to change wardrobes. It had been a long Friday.

"Are you coming in?" Susanna stood in the doorway, waiting.

Nathaniel tried to discern from her tone and posture whether his answer should be yes or no. "Actually, that'd be lovely."

She led the way in, slipping off her jacket, passing through the suite's teakwood foyer to the living room.

The clock on the fireplace mantel chimed eleven bells.

For three more weeks, this would be her home. Then she'd move to Nathaniel's palace apartment and this suite would become their private living quarters for Christmas and holidays when they traveled to the family's country estate.

Already Susanna's influence was changing this place, changing the palace—his former bachelor pad—in small, gentle ways. Above all, she was changing his bachelor heart.

He could *not* lose her. Must not. Yet he felt as if he'd been holding his breath for so long he had to let go and let life deal him

the hand it must. He had to tell her the truth. After that, she might very well want to leave.

Could he blame her? She'd given so much already. This one final request could push her to the royal edge.

Slipping out of his tuxedo jacket, Nathaniel gestured toward the tea cart that Rollins, the Parrsons House butler, had set out for them.

"Would you like some tea?"

"A small cup. Thank you." Susanna sank slowly to the cocoa-colored sofa she'd recently selected as part of the apartment's remodel. It was one of the only expensive pieces she had authorized, saying that the apartment suited her just fine without spending a lot of money to remake a room that already looked "splendid."

Her simplicity was just one of her many qualities that endeared her to him. And one more reason why he was so desperate not to lose her. She kept him grounded in everyday reality.

Pouring her tea, Nathaniel added the dollop of cream she'd come to love. "Here you go, love." He handed over her cup. "Rollins left some biscuits too."

"I couldn't eat another thing." She patted her stomach, settling back against the couch. "Ambassador Riddle went all out, didn't he? I can't believe he brought over Michael Baggio."

"He's always been a classy chap."

Tyler Riddle and his wife, Kate, had hosted a fine evening of food and wine, topped off with a very special guest: the American standard singer Michael Baggio, whom Susanna adored.

And he openly adored her back, aiming his musical charms right at her.

But why not? She looked stunning in a midnight blue gown, her long blonde hair flowing over her shoulders in wide curls.

Nathaniel tried to give her space throughout the evening, grateful for the distraction of the other guests and his need to circulate. Yet he let her know he was there for her and in no way did he regret asking her into his life.

For his own sake more than hers, he held her hand at Mr. Baggio's miniconcert. The blasted singer stirred his jealousies.

Halfway through Baggio's first number, "The Way You Look Tonight," Nathaniel caught an emotional mist in Susanna's eyes and he knew. She was homesick.

Well, perhaps that was the gist of it all. She needed to be free to fly if her heart so dictated. He had grasped too tight, suffocating his precious bird. Perhaps he needed to let go and be willing for her to fly away.

And if the bit of news he carried in his chest caused her to doubt her decision to marry *him*, then so be it.

Nathaniel poured his own tea, snatched up a chocolate biscuit, and settled in the wing chair adjacent to Susanna, noting that his thoughts were far more courageous than his heart. He wasn't willing to let her go. Not in the least.

He took one bite of his biscuit and tossed it to his plate. He wasn't hungry. And he had no taste for tea.

"Susanna—"

"Nathaniel, I've decided it's okay if you don't want to marry me." Her blue eyes were steady on him. Wide. Without guile.

He set his tea on the table and rose to his feet. "How can you say such a thing? What makes you think I regret proposing? You do realize I went to Parliament with an Order of Council for the right

to marry you. It's the first time a king offered his own bill or amendment in over a hundred years."

"That doesn't mean you haven't changed your mind since then."

She said that with such calm and clarity. "Perhaps it's *you* who has changed her mind." Nathaniel stood behind his chair, hands propped on the curved wings. "Do you regret saying yes to me?"

"Do you regret proposing to me? You've been so . . . weird lately."

"I know, love, I know." He exhaled, returning to his seat.

"And what was that smile you gave Lady Genevieve this afternoon? I thought you wanted to keep her at arm's length after how she tried to manipulate you into marrying her."

"You've heard the saying, 'Keep your friends close but your enemies closer'?"

"You think you need her on your side?"

"I think I need her not to fight against me. Can we not talk about Ginny?" He pressed his hand over his heart. "There's something I've been avoiding discussing with you."

"Like what?" The rosy hue faded from her cheeks.

"Susanna." He stood again, too restless to remain seated. "There was a writ passed in Parliament last week, sponsored by the Liberal-Labor Party coalition, who you know recently took control in Parliament. As it were, they are also a small but loud voice against the monarchy."

"What kind of writ?"

"An addendum to the Marriage Act. Brighton parliamentary procedure allows for a writ to be attached to any law or act by a majority vote in the House of Senate and Commons within a year of the law's ratification."

Nathaniel paced over to the window and stood in the room's shadows, peering into the rich, dark, velveteen night. Parrsons was situated on top of the cliffs surrounding the northeastern bay, and on a clear night the lights shining down from the heavens seemed to be within a man's reach.

"Nathaniel?" Susanna's warm hands smoothed over his shoulders.

He turned around and drew her to him, embracing her, kissing her cheek, working down her long, slender neck to her shoulder, holding on to her for dear life. "I love you so much."

When he found her lips, she rose up on her toes, looping her arms about his neck, returning his affection, matching his ardor.

"Talk to me, Goose," she said, her lips still brushing against his.

"Goose?"

*Top Gun.*

"Tom Cruise. Anthony Green."

"Very good, Your Majesty."

"If I'm Goose, does that make me *your* wingman?" He lifted his head, grinning, squinting down at her. "I believe you're to be *my* wingman."

She grabbed a fistful of his starched shirt. "Tell me what's going on."

"You have to give up your American citizenship."

"What?" She released him, stepping back. "That's the writ? Susanna Truitt has to give up her American citizenship? Or does this apply to all people wanting to become citizens of Brighton? Brighton no longer welcomes dual citizenship?"

"You've been a good student of Brighton law and history." He watched her, trying to read her changing expression.



**“Of course—I want to be a good Brightonian. A good wife to the king. But, Nathaniel, I also want to remain an American.” She fidgeted, gathering her hair in her hands, piling it on her head, then letting it fall loose again. “I mean, it’s all I have left of who I am. I thought it was one of the things you love about me.”**

**“Indeed, I do love who you are in every way, and if it were up to me, your American citizenship would not be an issue. But I’m not an autocrat. I’ve a parliament to deal with and they’ve come up with their own constraints. The writ applies only to the Royal Marriage Act. Not to all Brightonians. The proponents argue that the spouse of the monarch cannot have divided loyalties. All laws, all treaties, all acts of war are in the reigning monarch’s name. In this case, mine. If for some wild reason Brighton should find herself on the opposite side of a conflict with America—”**

**“They think I’d be a traitor to Brighton?”**

**“Yes.”**

**“But I wouldn’t. And taking my citizenship doesn’t guarantee my loyalty . . . if I were so inclined to be a traitor.”**

**“Agreed. But we can’t know what the future will bring. Surely you see their point, Suz. They want to protect Brighton and her people. They want to protect the royal house.”**

**“Protect them from me?” She laughed, mocking. “Little ole Susanna Jean from St. Simons Island? The American government doesn’t even know who I am besides a social security number and a tax bracket.”**

**“Maybe before, but they certainly know who you are now.”**

**“So what? I have no real authority.”**

**“But you have access to people with the real authority. You have access to me. You are an influencer in the world now, Susanna, whether you’ve grasped that or not.”**

**“Influencer? I’m fodder for fashion magazines, tabloids, and hate blogs.” She backed up, a dark shadow flickering across her face. “But to me, I’m just your wife-to-be. A landscape architect, Rib Shack waitress from Georgia.”**

**“Surely you understand your station is far more than ‘just a,’ Susanna. You’re marrying a king. Don’t play naive. You understood what it meant when you agreed to marry me. You’re on the world’s stage now. Every major American television station has crews and broadcasters setting up shop outside of Watchman Abbey, ready and waiting to report on our wedding. We’ve had hundreds of requests from magazines, newspapers, and broadcast stations in the States and the world for interviews with you. Just you. Not me a’tall. What you say and do will influence nations.”**

**“Okay, okay, maybe I kind of knew that when I moved here.” She twisted her hands together. “But now you’re putting skin on it. Giving it eyes and ears . . . and a little beanie cap on its newborn head.”**

**“Sweetheart”—he reached for her, smiling—“remember what you told me that day on the grounds of Christ Church? We’d only known each other for a few days, but you so wisely said I was born for a purpose, to have influence in ways most people only dream about. You said of yourself, ‘I’m Susanna Truitt, born on St. Simons, for some purpose. I’m not an accident.’ Don’t let this writ get in the way of what God is doing. With you. With us. The only way my opponents win is if we let this writ come between us.”**

**“So it’s done? No way to stop them? At all?” She tempered her voice and Nathaniel detected a small sprinkle of hope.**

**“What do you think I’ve been doing the past two months?”**

**“That’s why you’ve been distant? Distracted? Why didn’t you tell me?”**

**“Because you had enough on your docket, love. If I succeeded, then no harm. If they succeeded, then I’d tell you. That’s why Henry pulled me aside at the garden party. The writ was ratified late last night.” He regarded her for a moment, waiting for some kind of reaction, his own small fears blipping over the plains of his heart. “I’m sorry.”**

**“Don’t you have to sign all the laws?”**

**“Indeed, but this writ is under the parliamentary jurisdiction on a law I already signed.”**

**Listening to his own explanation, he felt his heart begin to crumble. Why in the world would any woman give up her freedom and privacy to marry him?**

**His past romantic rejection ghosted through his thoughts. Lady Adel Gardner’s humiliating public refusal ten years ago of Nathaniel’s very public proposal during his father’s birthday party found a fresh breath every now and then, and taunted him.**

*“Good heavens, no!” she said into a microphone. “If I marry you, my life will never be my own!”*

**Yeah, he’d walked into that one deaf, dumb, blind, and stupid. Not long graduated from university, he was fumbling to find the “next phase” of his life. So why not marry the lovely and fun Adel?**

**But she rang the death knell on that plan. And Nathaniel swore off romance afterward, eager to avoid repeating the mistake with another woman. Then he met Susanna under Lovers’ Oak and all his fears vanished.**

**“Then it is done. I have no say. If I marry you, I cannot be an American citizen.”**

**“Actually, *before* you marry me, you cannot be an American citizen. Otherwise, I’m in default of the law.”**

**“You’re the king. You can’t be arrested or tried.”**

So, she'd studied much of their laws. "No, but it will fire up my political opponents. And yours." His heart burned in his chest.

"I have to take the Brighton citizenship oath before our wedding?" She bristled, the light in her eyes laser-thin, her lips drawn and tight. "As if I didn't have enough to do. I wasn't planning on taking it until this summer."

"We just have to bump it up, is all. Is it all that much of an inconvenience, love?"

"Yes, it is." They stood inches from one another, but were miles apart. "You fought for me? Tell me you did."

"I fought for you, for our children and their children. But I must admit I see the wisdom of the writ. Not that I doubt your loyalties, but for future generations. It just seems wise that the ruling monarch be married to someone who doesn't have loyalties to another nation. I understand the limitations of the human heart. One can only be pushed so far."

"Nathaniel, just because I give up my American citizenship doesn't mean I no longer love my country. Doesn't mean I couldn't turn into a traitor. Not that I would, mind you." She backed away, turning into the room. "I don't know what to say. I've moved to a new country, spent nearly ten months learning your culture and traditions, the social strata, not to mention the royal life."

"And you've done splendidly, Suz. Marrying me is no ordinary melding of two lives."

"Two lives?" Susanna whirled back around. "There's no two here. Only one life. Mine. I'm the one who was required to do all the changing. I have to fit into *your* life. And gladly, Nathaniel. I love you. But this writ is making me deny the one last thing I have of myself, of what's wholly mine, of what I bring to this marriage as an American. It's as if those in Parliament want to crush me. I'm

sorry, but it just seems to fly in the face of why you petitioned Parliament for the Marriage Act amendment in the first place.”

“Exactly my argument when I debated the writ sponsors. But surely you see their reason. The wife of the sovereign must be true to her country in word if not in deed. Yes, you can remain American in your heart, but to the world you are solely Brightonian.”

“This is insulting.” She paced around the room. “They all but accuse me of being a spy or committing treason.”

“No, Susanna, sweetheart, they are really trying to prevent me from expanding my authority by having ties to America. This is more about me than you.” He cut her off as she rounded the room again, gently slipping his arm about her waist. “We’re a small North Sea nation with rich resources. We’ve been threatened in the past. We are well aware it could happen again. Especially on the world’s current stage. While we value and treasure our allies, especially America, members of the royal house must be devoted and committed to Brighton alone. My own loyalty cannot be compromised because of my wife’s nationality. Love, I reasoned at length with the new prime minister, with the leaders of the House of Senators and the House of Commons, trying to win a way for you to be both American and Brightonian, but they passed the citizenship requirement.”

“And what if I refuse to accept it?”

He swallowed hard, the sudden jerk of his heartbeat stomping on his next breath. “Then we . . . Are you saying you refuse?”

“I’m asking, what happens if I do?”

Their gazes locked. Anxiety pulsed in Nathaniel’s ears. He was going to lose her. Nothing short of abdicating his throne could keep her.

Was he willing to give up his throne and kingdom, his five-hundred-year heritage and destiny, for her love? Could he do what he was asking her to do?

“Susanna, I’ve not thought that far, if you must know.” *Oh, liar.* He’d thought of nothing else. But he needed more time to consider his own response.

Across the room, the ring of her phone pierced the air. She broke away from his arm. “It’s Mama’s ring tone. We’ve been trying to connect all week but keep missing each other. I need to answer this.”

“Of course.” A break in the tension was a relief.

Nathaniel fell against the windowsill, watching the only woman who ever made his heart resound with love answer her phone and greet her mum with a soft, sweet Southern twang.

He loved the way her words bent and swayed, putting him in mind of Spanish moss swinging from craggy live oak branches on a balmy Georgia evening.

*Oh Susanna . . .*



**Yes, Mama, I heard you . . .” Susanna collapsed to the sofa, absorbing Mama’s news about Granny. Pneumonia. Can’t travel to Brighton for the wedding.**

**She truly had to give up everything. First the man she loved was telling her she must sacrifice her American citizenship in order to be with him. Now Mama was telling her Granny could not travel? What next?**

**“Gracie’s here too,” Mama said. “She’s got something to tell you.”**

***Please let it be good news.* Susanna listened to the muffled sounds of Mama handing the phone to her matron of honor and best friend since elementary school.**

**“Hey, Suz.”**

**“Hey, Gracie. How’s the baby?”**

**When Gracie and Ethan married in October, they were set to sail around the world until she found out she was pregnant with a honeymoon baby. So they weighed anchor on St. Simons and charted a new course.**

**“Good, sort of . . . I’m on bed rest.”**

**Susanna rocked forward. “Bed rest? What happened?”**

**Gracie detailed her situation as if she were reading from a menu.**

**Complications. Spotting. Contractions. Want to give the baby a fighting chance. Doctor said she couldn’t be on her feet for more**

than an hour a day. “So Marlee, God bless her, is running the salon for me. She’s such a gem.”

“If you can’t be on your feet, then you can’t travel.” It wasn’t a question. It was a cold, stark revelation. Gracie’s news mingled with Mama’s and Nathaniel’s, creating a cold, chilling cocktail of disappointment in her belly.

Here she was about to marry a *king*, and she wasn’t even close to having her *dream* wedding.

Watchman Abbey, while stunningly beautiful, was not the sweet haven of Christ Church where she’d dreamed of having her wedding since she was twelve. She loved the ancient church, and never stepped on the lush grounds without feeling the presence of the Divine.

On top of Granny and Gracie, Susanna had learned in the last two months that her best college buddies, who had all made a pact to attend each other’s weddings, could not come. Not one of the seven. Careers, babies, fear of flying over the Atlantic . . . they had their many reasons for not RSVPing “Attending.”

She mentally scanned the most recent guest list she’d seen. Shoot, most of her family and extended family weren’t coming.

Instead, they all informed Mama they preferred to see Susanna and her king at the St. Simons Island reception at the end of April. Asking the kinfolk to fly all the way to Europe? Too rich for their blood.

Fine, fine, she’d see them in April. But her granny and matron of honor had to be there. They must.

Susanna felt ill. This was wrong. All wrong. And she’d best open her eyes to the signs. She refused to cling to a *plan, again*, that was falling apart. She’d not redo her life with Adam Peters.



**“Suz? You all right?” Nathaniel’s bass voice flowed over her shoulder as he tenderly caressed her.**

**She shook her head, listening to Gracie apologize ten ways to Sunday, tears bubbling in her eyes.**

**“Did you hear me?” Gracie said.**

**“Yes, I heard you.” She pressed her hand under her eyes, pushing back her tears. What good were tears now? Crying would change nothing.**

**“I’m heartsick over this. Ethan and I have been talking for days, trying to figure a way for me to come, wondering if I should just ignore the doctor’s warning and—”**

**“No!” Susanna jumped up. “Don’t even think about it. The baby’s safety is more important than my wedding.”**

**“I—I can’t believe this . . . My best friend is not only getting married but getting married to a real honest-to-goodness king and I’m going to *miss* it.” Susanna heard the muffled sound of Ethan saying something in the background. “Oh right, Suz, Ethan says to tell you he’s arranged with Reverend Smith to broadcast your wedding on a big screen from the Christ Church grounds.” She chuckled. “He worked it all out by himself when he found out most of the parish wanted to watch it together. Everyone is joining in to help with food and setup. Channel 11 is even sending out a news crew.”**

**“I always wanted to get married under the oaks on Christ Church grounds.”**

**“And you’ll be there, Suz, kinda. On a movie screen via a projection TV. Your mama assured me she’ll get one of your aunts or uncles to get your granny there. I even invited your college friends. We’ll be with you, Suz, I promise. If not in body, then in spirit.”**

Homesickness hooked her heart and furrowed deep. "I miss you, Grace."

"Miss you back, Suzy-Q. Big time. It's not the same around here without you. My baby girl needs to know her Auntie Suz!"

"It's a girl?"

"Naw, we couldn't tell on the first ultrasound. I'm just speaking it out loud in case God hasn't made up His mind yet. We'll know on the second ultrasound. Hopefully."

Suddenly, Susanna wanted to go home. Now.

She needed the sunshine soaking through her skin and warming her cold bones. To walk on the beach. Bury her toes in the wet sand. To get lost in the hubbub of the Rib Shack on a Friday night. To curl up with baby sister Avery on a Sunday afternoon for a classic movie marathon.

"Listen, here's your mama. I'll e-mail you soon, okay? But I know you're going to be so busy, Susanna. My girl, a real-life queen."

"No, just a princess. We decided to let Nathaniel's mom be the only queen."

"Then a real-life princess. Frankly, I like princess better, don't you? Feels more Disney."

"Yeah. Disney." This wedding felt nothing like a fairy tale.

"I'm really, really sorry about this, Susanna."

"It's not like you did it on purpose. I understand." She did, but it hurt.

"You're going to be a beautiful bride. We'll all be praying for you and cheering you on. Go get 'em. Show the world how a good ole Georgia redneck does it."

In one sentence, Gracie summed up everything twisting and turning in Susanna's heart.

The life she knew was over. Once she said “I will” to Nathaniel, Susanna Jean Truitt from St. Simons Island, Georgia, USA, would be “dead.”

She’d be a totally new person. Princess Susanna of Brighton Kingdom. Wife of a king. From private citizen to public.

A Brightonian. A European. She was even changing continents.

Susanna turned to Nathaniel, who’d perched on the edge of the wing chair, waiting. She loved him. She did, and her heart beat with that truth.

But was it enough?

“Shug.” Mama was back on the line. “Don’t worry, we’ll have things buttoned down by the time of your wedding so Daddy and I can be there with—”

“What? What do you mean so you and Daddy ‘can be here’? You have two brothers and four sisters who can look in on Granny.”

“Simmer down, Suz. I’m just saying you don’t have to worry about us not making it because Granny’s sick. Grandpa can take care of the little things, and I’ll draw up a schedule so everyone knows when it’s their turn to take care of them.”

No one in the family dared buck a Glo Truitt schedule.

“Mama, g-give Granny my love. Tell her I’m praying for her.” Susanna sank down to the couch cushion, trembling, drained, exhausted.

“Will do, Suzy-Q. She’s devastated to miss this, but we want her well enough to see your children. Now don’t you worry about a thing. Focus on Nate and your wedding. We’ll see you in a few weeks. I hope Gracie’s not being able to come doesn’t dampen things too much.”

“Even so, it can’t be helped, Mama.”

The conversation moved to small talk. The Rib Shack business was picking up nicely as word got out that the owners' daughter was marrying a king.

Avery was focused on the last months of her senior year and final volleyball season. Another athletic scholarship arrived for her. Ohio State. Which she was seriously considering.

Daddy's heart checkup went smooth as a whistle, but Mama fought him on his diet. "Can't be eating no fried catfish and hush puppies for dinner every week."

But Susanna struggled to listen, to engage. She was busy looking at the signs. Was this marriage really going to work?

By the time the call ended, Susanna was confused, tired, and suffering from a full-blown bout of homesickness.

"What's going on at home, Suz?" Nathaniel asked. "Is Granny all right? Grace?"

"No, I mean, yes, technically they are all right. But everything is going wrong." Susanna recapped the call, working to sound rational and reasonable when she felt like weeping.

"Love, I'm sorry."

"It is what it is." The mantel clock chimed midnight. Susanna fixed her gaze on Nathaniel. "I want to go home."

"Agreed." He moved to sit next to her. "How about I adjust our honeymoon plans? We'll travel to St. Simons Island first thing after our wedding. Stay at my, our, cottage. Then we can go to our secret destination." He gave her a wicked smile, sweeping her close to him, kissing her cheek.

The honeymoon plans were his alone, and Susanna made a game of trying to lure the information out of him. Nathaniel played along, pretending she'd guessed correctly, or worse, that he'd let their destination slip from his lips.

*Yes, we're going to Dollywood! How did you guess?*

**In truth, he was a man of steel when it came to keeping secrets.**

**"I want to go home now, Nathaniel."**

**"Now? The wedding is three weeks away. We have engagements on our diaries. The last time we coordinated our schedules, yours was fairly booked. I think you have a final fitting and wedding arrangements to approve."**

**"I don't care." She stood, trembling, shaking from a cold she couldn't define. "I know it makes me sound loony, but I need to go home." Unchecked tears now spilled down her cheeks. "I miss everyone. I miss Granny. She's eighty-five years old. Complications from pneumonia could be devastating. And . . ." She gave him a long, steady glance. "I need to think."**

**"Think? About what?"**

**"What you're asking me to do. Give up my citizenship. I never really thought about it before, but, Nathaniel, I'm literally giving up *everything*. By the time we're married, I won't recognize myself."**

**"I realize that, but there's no need to run off." He stared away from her, his jaw tensing.**

**"I need some time. Some space."**

**"Have your space. Take some time. But flying to America is rather drastic, don't you think?"**

**"I'm not flying to America, Nathaniel. I'm going home."**

**He sighed, long and heavy. "Will you come back?"**

**She pressed her hands beside her temples, her head starting to throb with emotional pressure. "I don't know."**

**"Susanna, we've been on this course for nearly ten months. And now you 'don't know'?" She could see the passion in his voice reflected on his face and in his eyes. "What is it you don't know?"**

**"I don't know what I don't know." Her thoughts and reason deflated like a carnival balloon. "It's all coming down to the wire. This is it. Forever. No one from my side of the family is coming except Daddy, Mama, Avery, and Daddy's sister and her husband." Susanna eyed the tea cart, which also contained an ice bucket of water bottles. She reached for one, twisting off the cap. "Now my granny can't come, nor my best friend. It makes me wonder." The heat of panic crawled across the base of her neck. "Then you bring up my citizenship and I just wonder if all of this isn't some sort of sign. Like I've ignored all the others and God is throwing me one last clue."**

**"You can't be serious. The citizenship writ is a sign *not* to marry me? Gracie and your granny's health issue are signs for us not to wed?"**

**"Well, what would you think if you were me?" She knew in her head that she was not making one bit of sense. But her heart said, "Soldier on, sister."**

**She took a long sip of water, trying to quench the parched place deep in her soul.**

**"This is ludicrous. Look at everything that's gone well, Susanna. Our wedding plans have fallen into place. The people of Brighton are embracing you. I daresay the citizens of the *world* are embracing you."**

**"People hate me too. A friend from home sent me a link to the latest Susanna hate blog."**

**"Blimey, why do they send you those blasted things? Do they think you want to see them?" He paced around the chairs. "I can't believe you're drawing our whole relationship into question. Teach me to fall in love! This is Adel all over again."**

**“Excuse me, but this is *not* Adel all over again.” Susanna intercepted his path to confront him. “Adel never had the challenges I’ve had. She was only concerned about her privacy, and frankly, she’s not done a good job of keeping her life out of the papers anyway. I resent the comparison.”**

**“What would you have me believe? I’ve no choice here, Susanna. If you marry me, you must be a Brighton citizen and a Brighton citizen alone. The only other option is for me to abdicate—”**

**“Never.” Susanna flashed him her palm. “You abdicate and this wedding is off for sure. I won’t be responsible for the crumbling of the House of Stratton.”**

**“Then what are we arguing about?” He pressed his hands on the back of a wing chair. “And by the way, I’m not Adam Peters toying with your heart until something better comes along.”**

**“I know, I know.” Susanna downed the last of her water.**

**“Do you? Because sometimes I believe you’re still that girl on the beach waiting for him to propose.”**

**“Yeah, and sometimes I believe you’re the terrified lad who proposed publicly and got humiliated. And who started to think that no woman would want you because her life will never be her own.”**

**“And? Am I wrong? That’s precisely what you’re saying to me now. That nothing of yourself will remain once you become a Brighton citizen and marry me.”**

**Susanna conceded with an exhale. He was right. So what was bothering her? Really? She’d weighed the cost when she said yes to Nathaniel. She’d understood it meant leaving her life behind and beginning a new one in a new kingdom, with a new name and a new destiny.**

But then the “Not Attending” RSVPs started rolling in and there was one thing after another. Pile on after pile on.

And something dark hovered over her heart.

“I don’t even know what I’m doing here,” she said barely above a whisper as she picked at the water bottle’s paper label. “Nathaniel, what do you want with me? A plain ole common Georgia girl with red clay on her feet and sea salt in her blood.”

“Is that the core of this issue? That you don’t feel worthy? Susanna, you’ve seen me at my worst. You’ve seen my life. How can you question your value to me? I love you, Georgia girl.”

“But don’t you wonder? How can we make it? Marriage is hard enough without mixing cultures and nationalities, not to mention social classes.”

“This? From an American? Your great melting pot nation was built on cultures and nationalities mixing. On tearing down the walls between social classes.” He sighed and pressed his hand to his forehead. “Susanna, I’m beginning to think you really don’t want to marry me. All these excuses—”

She set her water bottle down and crossed to the window. “I just feel homesick, like I’ll never be myself again. I feel lost in the swirl of you, of the royal family, of the wedding. It’s more about you and Brighton than you and me. Every other day I hear a story about how the people are afraid of my influence. How I’ll turn you into an American.” She raised the windowpane, ushering in a fresh, cold blast that shoved aside the stale, tepid air in the room. “I guess that’s what the writ is about, huh?”

“How long have you been feeling this way?”

She shrugged. “I’m not sure I knew until now.”

Her confession of doubt opened door after door of fear, uncertainty, and dread. What if she gave up everything, even her



**citizenship, and the marriage failed?**

**“For now, please, I need to go home. Go back to ground zero, get my bearings, and sort out what I’m feeling.”**

**“All right.” His heavy exhale revealed his hurt. “But you fly on *Royal Air Force One*.” Nathaniel reached for his jacket and headed for the door. “Just tell me you’re coming back, Susanna.” He paused at the door, his blue eyes wet and shining.**

**“I think so.” She twisted the antique diamond ring around her finger. “But I don’t know.”**

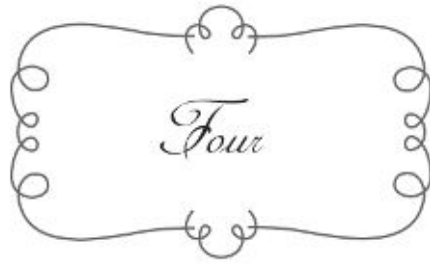
**Nathaniel regarded her for a moment and opened the door. “I’ll have Jonathan make the arrangements.”**

**Susanna knew Jonathan, Nathaniel’s aide and friend, would call within the hour to discuss details, searching for details that went beyond a proposed departure time and which Georgia airport she preferred. He’d want to know what was going on. All without asking outright.**

**“Nathaniel,” she said with almost no volume. “Thank you.”**

**“Thank you?” He shook his head. “I already regret agreeing to this.”**

**The sound of the door slamming as he took his leave echoed in Susanna’s heart the rest of the night.**



**On Monday afternoon Nathaniel muddled through his daily routine of scheduling and correspondence.**

**In truth, he thought of nothing but Susanna. His mood drifted toward an ever-widening, swirling black hole of fear. At any moment, he might collapse within himself, never to be seen again.**

**Like the time he leapt foolishly into the murky, cold waters of Roose Lake his frosh year at university. He sank beneath a quagmire of roots and weeds and barely found his way to the surface. His lungs nearly burst for want of air.**

**She'd been gone three days, and try as he might, he couldn't clear himself of the blasted, dark foreboding creeping through every molecule of his body: *She's not coming back.***

**But she must. She simply must. However, the velvet pouch in his pocket warned him otherwise.**

**Rollins, the Parrsons House butler, had found Susanna's engagement ring on her dressing table the morning of her departure for home.**

**When he brought it to Nathaniel, his heart nearly stopped. Was she actually planning to stay in America?**

*Settle, mate.*

**Susanna had also left behind her favorite shoes, the gold Louboutins she wore to his coronation ball. And pictures. All of her family photos remained in her suite parlor and her bedchamber.**

Surely she would return to Brighton. He inhaled long and slow. And she'd reclaim her ring.

Yet he could not deny her arguments about royal life. It was not easy. Susanna *was* giving up everything to marry him. Was he worth it?

Since the day she arrived in Brighton as the king's fiancée, the media immersed her into her own murky waters of scrutiny, nitpicking, and faultfinding.

Anything to sell papers or draw in viewers. All three Brighton news outlets sent crews snooping around St. Simons Island, searching for the underbelly of Susanna's American life and family.

One talk show tabloid spent a week, a *whole week*, on her relationship and breakup with the American Marine hero Adam Peters. Only half of the story's details were even partially true.

But despite the downsides of being associated with Nathaniel, Susanna was setting the world on fire. All on her own.

A billion viewers were estimated for their wedding. News outlets who'd all but forgotten about Brighton royalty battled the King's Office royal red tape for permits to send broadcast crews for the wedding.

Once Susanna mentioned in an interview that she loved the Scripture, "The joy of the Lord is your strength," every bookshop on the island promptly sold out of their Bibles. News presenters read Nehemiah 8:10 on air, and a children's choir performed a song based on the verse.

Her very presence boosted Brighton's economy. The fashion designers merely mentioned a frock they'd designed for her and online orders crashed their servers. Tourism was up last quarter by 5 percent.

**“Knock, knock.” Nathaniel’s brother stuck his head inside the office doorway.**

**“Stephen, what brings you round this time of day?” His afternoons were consumed with rugby practice. He’d been playing for the national team since his return from Afghanistan where he served with the Royal Air Force.**

**“Came to see you.” Dressed in slacks and a shirt, his black hair flowing loose about his sturdy face, he looked more and more like their Leo-the-Lion dad. Stephen crossed the wide, sunlit office and sat in a chair across from Nathaniel’s desk. “You look horrible.” Tact? Not with his little brother. “Not sleeping, are we? How are things with Susanna? Have you heard from her?”**

**“We’ve spoken once, but otherwise we seem to be missing each other.” Nathaniel drummed the pen in his hand against the desk and stared at the financial report in front of him. Seeing but *not* seeing. “What are you about today? No practice?”**

**“My ankle is still bothering me. I’m taking some time off.”**

**Nathaniel glanced up. “Time off? For a sprain? That doesn’t sound like you. ‘Play through the pain,’ you always say.”**

**“Yeah, well, not this time.” Stephen stared at the floor, then at Nathaniel. “I came to check on you. Is everything all right?”**

**Nathaniel looked toward the tall, narrow window where the sunlight dimmed behind a cloud. “I don’t know.”**

**“How can you not know? You’re getting married in a little more than a fortnight.”**

**“Two weeks and four days.”**

**“Spoken like a man in love,” Stephen said. “I’d be counting the days too if I was marrying someone like Susanna. But here’s my question for you. What are you doing here if she’s there?”**

**“Giving her space. She’s only gone home for a few days to see her granny and her friend Gracie. Besides, I’ve work to do, Stephen.”**

**“What of this business about her American citizenship?”**

**“I see you’ve spoken with Mum, the family crier.”**

**“She said Susanna might not want to give up her citizenship. Pretty bold of Brock Bishop and his party to tack on the writ.”**

**“Yes, but I agree with them. Not because I mistrust Susanna, but for our descendants and the future of the throne.”**

**Stephen whistled, leaning forward on his arms. “She must feel betrayed, Nate. You’re no better than our ancestors who authored the Marriage Act to keep royals from marrying foreigners.”**

**“I disagree.” Nathaniel rocked forward in his chair, resting his elbows on the desk. “Marry whom you will, but the spouse of a Brighton royal *must* be a Brighton-only citizen. It’s not too much to ask for the spouse of a royal in line to the throne.”**

**“But you must see her side. She’s doing all the giving, all the changing.”**

**“I realize that.” Nathaniel sighed and recapped his Parrsons House conversation with Susanna to his brother. “She is overwhelmed.” He moved to the window. The first of spring’s green leaves had started budding on the oaks lining the palace grounds. “Rollins found this. Brought it to me this morning.” Nathaniel pulled the pouch from his pocket, dangling it from his fingers. “Susanna’s engagement ring.”**

**Stephen whistled again. “She left it behind?”**

**“On purpose or not, I don’t know, but Rollins found it on her dressing table.” Nathaniel slipped the ring back into his pocket and**

it burned like a hot coal. "I don't know what I'll do if she doesn't come back."

"Big brother, snap out of it. Go get her. Don't sit around *hoping* for the outcome you want. It's been three days. I can't believe you're not packing to leave. For pity's sake, you're a king. Act like one. Look at you, pouting like a helpless child."

"Just what do you suggest? I wing my way to St. Simons Island, grab her by the hair, and order her home?" Nathaniel returned to his desk. "You should've seen her face when I told her she had to renounce her American citizenship. She's already put up with leaving her home, her career, family and friends, taking on all the burdens of marrying a royal, but this last request required the only thing she really had left of herself."

"Balderdash. She's plenty left of herself. Her faith. Her love for you, and yours for her. Her talent as a landscape architect, her way with people. Get over there and remind her of those things. For pity's sake, act like a king. Remind her that she's a princess. Remind her that you are worth all she's giving up. Remind her of who she is with or without her American citizenship. Do what needs to be done to win her heart. She loves you, Nate. You need her. I daresay we all need her."

Nathaniel squinted at his brother. "Fine speech, but does she need us? I can't imagine why she'd want to marry me with all the trappings I come with. It can be a privileged life, but also brutal and hurtful. Someone actually e-mailed her a link to a blog dedicated to hating and criticizing her. The blog title is not worth repeating in polite company. And what do you think I've been doing since she moved to Brighton but reminding her of the very things you mentioned?"

Despite his words of protest, Nathaniel had spent the weekend talking himself out of exactly the kind of plan his brother was suggesting. Part of him ached to put his schedule in the rubbish bin and go after her, while the other part convinced himself to leave her be and give her the courtesy of space. She'd come round when she was ready. Right?

"Go get her. Tell her in no uncertain terms. If you ask me, you're not giving her enough credit."

"Really? Then why did she leave?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps she was a bit overwhelmed. What bride isn't? Let alone one becoming a part of our family. But you leaving her be is just confirming all of her fears. I say again, go after her."

"I'm not sure one human heart can love another as much as we are asking of her."

"Blimey, Nathaniel, you're a blasted cynic. Mum wasn't born and raised a royal, but she adjusted to royal life quite well."

"She was the daughter of a lord who groomed her to marry a king. And you know full well she struggled with the press in the beginning. But in her day there was no paparazzi. No blogs. No Twitter. No twenty-four-hour news cycle. There was a barrier between the press and the royal family."

"Nice to see you have your list of excuses memorized. So tell me, are you planning on being a bachelor the rest of your life? Or perhaps taking up Lady Genevieve's offer to marry, produce an heir, then get a divorce?"

"Don't be crass."

"Nathaniel." Stephen stood, towering over his brother. "Do you love her?"

"It hurts to breathe when I think of life without her." Nathaniel rose to his feet, gently pushing his brother back a step. "But I have

**to be realistic. Maybe I should let her go."**

**"You are a coward." Stephen headed for the door. "If you lose her, it won't be because of this citizenship writ or all of the things she has to give up to be your wife. It won't be because you're some magnanimous chap who freed the bird who wanted to fly. It will be because you're afraid." He eased open the door. "And that will mark your reign for the rest of your life."**





**Two days.” Mama passed Susanna in the kitchen, her hair wet from her shower, curling in ringlets about her head. She flashed two fingers. “Then I’m kicking you out.”**

**“Kicking me out? Fine, I’ll live with Aurora in her tent.”**

**Aurora, a former hotshot DC lobbyist, was a multimillionaire who lived on dimes and nickels in a tent in the woods. A kind of spiritual savant, she doled out her millions as she saw the need, along with divine messages from God.**

**Real ones. Bone-chilling ones.**

**She’d been a voice from heaven in Susanna’s life when she first met Nathaniel, then only Crown Prince, visiting the island.**

**“For the life of me, girl . . .” Mama opened the cupboard for a coffee mug, then poured from the big pot Daddy had set to brewing before he headed off to get fresh fish for the day. No fancy machines for them. They still used the old-fashioned percolating kind.**

**“Besides, I came home to see Granny and Gracie.”**

**“Well, you’ve seen them. They’re fine. Why don’t you just go back to Brighton and marry that boy?”**

**“Really, Mama? You think it’s just that simple. That I’ve not thought this through a hundred bazillion ways?” The smooth, uneventful flight over on *Royal One* had given her entirely too much time to think.**

Why did the citizenship request bother her so dang much? And more than that, why did she slip off her engagement ring and leave it behind?

Had her head already decided and her heart was catching up?

Susanna shoved her cereal bowl forward. There was still over half a bowl left, but she'd not really been hungry since she'd left Brighton. Her attempt at having breakfast was merely a reach for some kind of normalcy.

"I just can't help but wonder if maybe I didn't rush into this because I was stinging from losing Adam. Maybe I got swept up in the magic of it all."

"Poppycock. You didn't even know Nate was a prince for two weeks. Y'all were friends. Then he left. Shot out of here when his father died and you didn't see him for five months."

"What'd you do, keep a diary on my love life?"

Mama tapped her temple. "I got more in here than cobwebs and spiders. And never in my life have I seen you 'swept up in the magic' of anything. Not even Disney World." She laughed. "You met Cinderella and like to drove me crazy asking, 'But what's the girl's *real* name, Mama?' "

"Well, she didn't look like Cinderella to me."

"That's what I'm saying, Suz; you're a realist."

"Which is why I'm here now. I'm being a realist. Come on, Mama, in all your life, did you ever see me as a royal princess?"

"No, but when I saw you with Nate, I pretty much knew he was the one. You love him and it's written all over your face every time you hear his name. And the same goes for him. You should see him when you walk into a room. The rest of us are no more than buzzing flies on the wall. He adores you."

**“Love. Adoration. Fine. But they don’t make an enduring marriage.”**

**“Know what your problem is, Susanna?” Mama rapped her knuckles on the island counter. “You’re scared.”**

**“Two minutes ago I was a realist.” She snapped a couple of grapes from the fruit bowl in the center of the island.**

**“A scared realist.” Mama snatched hold of Susanna’s left hand. “What’s this? Susanna Jean, where is your engagement ring?”**

**Shoot, she’d forgotten about her bare left finger. And wasn’t Mama quick on the draw? Susanna had been hiding her left hand since she arrived home, but all this talk of being scared caused her to lower her guard. “I left it in Brighton.” She curled her hands into her lap.**

**“Oh, have mercy—”**

**“Mama, Nathaniel and I both needed to think about what we’re doing. Yes, it’s down to the wire, but there’s also a lot on the line. I left the ring in my suite at Parrsons House in case, for whatever reason, you know, I didn’t go back. Hey, Nathaniel has just as much to think about as me. He could call any second to break off the whole thing. So don’t put this all on me. Besides, I didn’t want to be responsible for a two-hundred-year-old royal family heirloom.”**

**In truth, her ring finger felt cold and empty, and she missed the beautiful antique designed for Queen Anne-Marie. She regretted her impulsive, childish decision.**

**She hoped the ring remained safe in her bedroom where she had left it. And that Nathaniel didn’t find out.**

**“I’d like to wring that boy Adam Peters’s neck for doing this to you. Making you scared to hang on to anything worth-while because it might be ripped from your hands.” Mama’s hand smacked the counter. “Listen to me. You let fear keep you *with***

Adam about ten years too long. Now fear is driving you *from* Nathaniel.” Mama reached for her coffee cup, her eyes glued on Susanna.

That’s the way she did it—she eyed a person until they confessed their deepest, darkest sin.

“Actually, Mama, fear is also making me wise up. This citizenship issue put everything in a fresh light.” Susanna leaned against the counter, watching the sunlight wash the kitchen window. “Let’s say I do this *one* last thing, in a series of *one* last things I’ve had to do to marry Nathaniel. There will be no going back. I’ll forever be a citizen of Brighton Kingdom and never, ever again a native-born American citizen. Should we break up, for whatever reason, I’d have to immigrate back to my own country.”

For a brief moment, she felt justified in her dramatic exit from Brighton. After all, Nathaniel and the Parliament had asked a dramatic thing of her.

But what hit her afresh in the cozy old kitchen where she taught her baby sister to bake chocolate chip cookies was how bold and rash her move was when she slipped off Nathaniel’s ring. Just how true was her commitment? How deep was her love?

“This ain’t the kind of fear that makes one wise up. This is the kind that makes a girl run. You always ran to your *garden* as a kid to hide when you were afraid—which is exactly what you’re doing now.”

“Thank you for that, Professor Glo. I don’t need your pop psychology. Besides, I ran to hide from you and Daddy when you got to fighting like wild animals, throwing dishes and four-letter words at each other.”

Many of Susanna’s girlhood evenings were spent hiding in her secret garden, her closet, hiding from the storms raging *inside* her

house.

“I make no excuse.” Mama sipped her coffee. “We were young and foolish when we got married. Divorce was the best thing that ever happened to us.” Mama smiled. “ ‘Cause then we met Jesus, got healed, and remembered why we loved each other in the first place. But, Suz, you’re grown now. You understand these things. Your teen years were pretty darn good as I recall. Daddy and I both apologized for your childhood. Did all we could to make it up to you. This fear is on you. It’s yours to deal with no matter where or how you came by it. You stayed with Adam because you wanted a safe plan. And we see how well that *didn’t* work for you. Now you’re leaving Nathaniel to hide in your garden—this one just happens to be all of St. Simons. Marrying that boy is probably the *safest* plan you ever came by. Hear me now, Suz. If you let fear clip your wings now, you will never fly again.”

Susanna made a face. “Never fly again? Don’t be so dramatic, Mama.” She moved out from under Mama’s stare and carried her soggy Cheerios to the garbage disposal.

But Mama took hold of her shoulders and turned her around. “Fear is nothing but a big ole fake roar. You let it trip you up and, next thing you know, a mewling kitten will have you hightailing it to the hills. That’s the way fear rolls. Don’t look for it to play fair.”

“Fear also teaches you a lesson,” Susanna retorted. “Get a swat on the behind, you learn to behave. Touch a hot stove, you learn to keep your hands to yourself. Get burned by love, you understand that nothing, not even the truest of intentions, is a sure thing in this life.”

“So this is how you’re going to be? Cynical?”

“I prefer the term ‘realist.’ ”

Mama started to reply, but her old Motorola cell phone buzzed from the counter. "Hold that thought. This might be your granddaddy with an update from the doctors." Mama answered as if it might be granddaddy, but her expression and tone changed as she conversed in low, clipped sentences. "Yes. Certainly. Of course. I see."

"Who is it?" Susanna slipped her arm around Mama's shoulder. "Is it Granddaddy?"

"Shhh." Mama waved her off, shaking her head, pinching up her face as she listened. "You can send it to my e-mail address. Yes, that's the one." Snatching up her purse from the kitchen table, Mama started for the garage. "We can manage from our end, yes."

Susanna trailed after her, unhooking her old bike from the pegs on the garage wall. "Mama, who is it? Is everything all right?"

She nodded, holding up one finger, closing her eyes, moving her lips as if memorizing what she heard on the other end of the call. "Thank you for calling."

"Who was that?"

"Restaurant business." Mama hopped behind the wheel of her truck without a backward glance at Susanna and fired up the engine. With a push of the remote, the door rose, creaking and moaning. Mama shifted into reverse. "See you later, Susanna Jean."

"Yeah, sure, see you later."

Susanna watched her leave, straddling her bike, feeling unsettled about their kitchen conversation. As if there were more to be said.

Was her commitment to Nathaniel true? Strong enough to endure criticism from bloggers and royal watchers? Strong enough to give up everything, including her citizenship? Susanna pedaled down the driveway onto Stevens Road, heading for Frederica.

**What she didn't know, the Lord did. *"If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God."***



**The saline island breeze carried a lingering hint of winter, but the early morning sun promised a clear, warm day.**

**Susanna slowed as she approached the low stone wall surrounding the Christ Church grounds, her heart aching for a touch from the Spirit.**

**What was it about the unseen that made sense of the seen?**

**Settling her bike against the wall, Susanna passed under the ivy-covered entrance—a pitched roof covering over wooden seats—and stepped into the glorious atmosphere of the historic church grounds.**

**Tears flashed in her eyes as she cut across the lush, green lawn, still damp with the morning dew. She breathed in the crisp air, absorbing the sense that the Divine waited for her.**

**She found a sunny but secluded spot at the far corner of the yard, away from the activity of parishioners arriving at the white clapboard church for morning Bible study, and settled down against the trunk of a maple.**

**She waited before speaking, listening to the sounds around her—the distant voices going into the church, the cooing of mourning doves, the rustle of wind in the leaves.**

**"Father," she began, low and slow, addressing her prayer to her one true King, peace descending upon her soul. "Give me wisdom. Help me make sense of my own heart."**

**At the end of her petition, the world fell dramatically silent. No voices. No cooing. No shuffling leaves. Her thoughts remained tangled and knotted.**

*Talk to me, Lord.*

Surely when she was stuck, God had a way out. An answer she never imagined.

Stretching out her legs, Susanna folded her hands over her middle and studied the blue patches of sky through the tree limbs.

The same blue as Nathaniel's eyes. She missed him. Mercy, what must he be thinking of her right now?

A fly buzzed around her ears and she batted it away.

In the distance, she heard the slap of a car door followed by a murmur of voices and the crunch of heels on the brick path.

If she were Nathaniel, she'd be doubting this relationship about now. What groom wouldn't, with a fiancée who was so dramatic and over the top as to leave her engagement ring behind?

*If* he found out about that, and she hoped he wouldn't. She opened her eyes and sat forward. *What was I thinking?*

Fear. Such a rude counselor.

*God, wisdom! Please . . .*

"I like to come out here myself to think and pray."

Susanna glanced right to see Reverend Smith approaching, dressed in khakis and a blue button-down shirt, his graying hair cropped close to his head.

"Reverend! Hey . . ." She started to rise but he dropped down onto the grass next to her.

"Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all." A fresh wash of tears flooded her eyes.

"Beautiful day." He propped his arms on his raised knees. In his midfifties, Reverend Smith had a youthful air, but his demeanor, his sermons, reflected his wise, contemplative life.

"Yes, it is." One more word, and she'd burst. Tears. Gushes. Sobs.



**“Mind if I ask you a question?”**

**She shook her head.**

**“What are you doing here? Aren’t you getting married in two weeks?”**

**She brushed away the slight trickle of tears twisting down her cheeks. “Two weeks and three days.” She peered at him. “I think.”**

**“You think?” He arched his brow. “Have you changed your mind? Because the hospitality ministry is very excited about the live broadcast we’ve planned for your wedding. There’s going to be a pancake breakfast. We expect a big turnout.” His soft laugh made her smile. “What’s going on? Care to tell me?”**

**Susanna yanked at the blades of grass beside her legs and recounted the events of last Friday to her pastor, right down to her argument with Nathaniel and her impulsive decision to leave her ring behind.**

**“Ah, I see. So the details were piling on, and then Nathaniel lit a fire under it all when he told you about your citizenship.”**

**“Pretty much.”**

**“But, my word, Susanna, you’re marrying a king.”**

**“Not as easy as it sounds. It’s no movie, I tell you.”**

**“Nor should it be. There’s a lot of responsibility with marrying any man, let alone a king.” The reverend patted her back.**

**“Yeah, I guess so.” More tears.**

**“Tell me, why is the citizenship issue holding you back?”**

**“Because it means *everything* of me is gone. My nationality, my people, my culture. Is our love really worth it?”**

**“Jesus felt it was.”**

**“I’m not Jesus.”**

He chuckled. "But you're called to be like Him. He gave up His citizenship in heaven to become a citizen of earth. He is wholly God, and wholly man, for the rest of eternity."

"Then Nathaniel should give up his citizenship for me." She was being a brat and knew it, but just for the moment, she wanted to sound out this idea.

"I don't know much about royalty, but I guess he'd have to abdicate his throne to surrender his citizenship."

"Exactly." More grass pulling. "And it's not an option. I can't be responsible for a nation losing their king. I'm no Wallis Simpson."

"Susanna, take a moment and raise your thoughts heavenward. What is God saying to you in this juncture?"

"I don't know. Why do you think I'm sitting here? I feel all jumbled up."

"Because you're trying to understand with your head." He patted his belly. "Listen here, in your spirit to the Holy Spirit. You're familiar with the biblical character Esther."

"Jewish refugee in ancient Babylon. Very beautiful, married the king and became a queen."

"Sound familiar? Could you be a modern-day Esther?"

"I don't see how. My marriage to Nathaniel won't likely save America from her enemies."

"But your marriage to Nathaniel may save other people. You'll have access to leaders the rest of us can only dream about. You are stepping onto the world stage, Susanna. Your very presence influences people. Don't you see what God is doing?"

"Now you sound like Nathaniel." She peered at the reverend. "But how can a redneck girl from Georgia be an influence?"

He smiled. "Maybe you're exactly what the world needs. You're putting limits on yourself that God is not. Want to know how I see you? A woman who makes the whole world her backyard barbecue. You make people feel warm, welcome, invited. You're also a truth speaker. In all the good ways. As you move into the role of Nathaniel's wife, you're going to make royalty more accessible and therefore, in my humble opinion, make God more accessible."

She laughed, a bursting, scoffing sound. "Please, Reverend."

"Do you think you just stumbled into this relationship without any divine intervention? That the Lord was out to lunch when you met and fell in love with Nathaniel? You both overcame great odds to be together. Can you allow yourself to consider the idea that God is promoting you to royalty, like Esther, for such a time as this?"

"But I'm not worthy." She hung her head, letting her hair curtain her face.

"Ah, there's the rub." He bent to see her eyes. "You're making this about your worthiness instead of God's. None of us are worthy. Do you think I'm worthy to be a reverend? To pastor His flock?"

She raised her head, combing back her hair with her fingers. "You're a good man."

"I used to be a very bad man, Susanna. You've not heard my testimony?"

She squinted. "I thought you went to Bible college out of high school. Never did drugs, smoked, or ran with those who did."

"You're right. I went to Bible college, then seminary. Waited until I was married to Bren to have sex. Never dabbled in pornography. But oh, I was jealous and envious of my fellow scholars, a gossip, judgmental. Selfish."

"All right, I get it." She held up her hand. "None of us are righteous."

**“No, not one.” He fell silent for a long moment and his confession echoed across her mind. Then, “Susanna, I implore you to keep your ear near His heart. He’ll speak to you. I understand your reserve about giving up your American citizenship. It’s kind of the last thing that is solely yours as you go into this marriage. But may I remind you, you are first the Bride of Christ. You’ve already given up everything of who you are to be married to Him. You are more than an American. You are a citizen in the kingdom of God. A princess in His household. So don’t put limits on yourself based on a natural citizenship when, technically, you’ve already given it up to be a member of a higher world—one that is and is to come. What if you’re called to be a part of ushering in some aspect of God’s kingdom here on earth by being a Brighton royal?”**

**Her heart burned with each of his challenges.**

**“You still think of yourself as the scared little girl hiding from her parents while they brought the house down on each other.”**

**She nodded, her tears unstoppable. Reverend Smith was hitting on all cylinders today.**

**“But God sees a redeemed woman bought by His blood. One with a renewed heart and mind. Susanna, it’s extraordinary. He’s entrusting you to be a Christian example to people around the world. For such a time as this. Are you sure you want to give it all up to remain that scared little girl? Because I see a woman who broke out of her past, reached for the brass ring, got it, and is now letting fear rob her of her destiny.”**

**“I thought I was over all of that.” Susanna fell against him, her head resting on his shoulder, sobbing.**

**“Sometimes pressure brings up the last of the yucky old residue.” He slipped his hand into hers, a soft prayer humming from his chest.**

**She wept for all the hours she'd hidden in her closet, pretending it was her magic garden while Mama and Daddy screamed obscenities at one another.**

**She wept for all the years she waited for Adam Peters, only to find out he wasn't her one true love.**

**She wept for her soul, her heart, her country, and all she was surrendering for the sake of love.**

**"You're saying good-bye to a life you've known up till now." The reverend shoved a worn, soft handkerchief into her hand. "Press on to what lies ahead, to the upward call of Christ, the apostle Paul told us. And forget what lies behind. Something better awaits you."**

**The reverend's final words cut through every cloud of confusion and a blip of joy smacked her heart.**

**Susanna sat up, mopping her face with his white hankie. "I asked the Lord for an answer and He sent me you." She smiled, peering at him. "Thank you, Reverend, thank you."**

**"Did I help?"**

**"Very much." Weird, now that the tears had dried up and the confusion had lifted, she felt so much lighter. Free.**

**Standing, she dusted the grass and leaves from her jeans. "I know what I need to do. I only hope it's not too late."**



**N**athaniel tossed his suitcase in the master suite of the St. Simons Island cottage. This had been the royal family's American getaway since 1902.

"Liam," he said, jogging down the stairs. "Let's head to the Rib Shack, see if we can locate Susanna." His chief security officer fell in step off of his right shoulder.

They'd arrived on the island an hour ago, set up the chief and staffers he'd brought along at the Prince and King Hotel before heading for the family cottage.

Listening to their syncopated footfalls scuff over the gravel drive as they made their way toward the SUV, Nathaniel second-guessed his decision to not ring up Susanna with his plans.

He thought to surprise her, but now he wished he'd told her he was coming.

Oh, how he missed her, ached to hear her voice, to see her face. Back in Brighton, he had often met her for luncheons and they dined every evening together, spending weekends touring Brighton's glorious mountain retreats or walking the winter shores.

He was addicted to her being in his life. Living without her would be unbearable. Susanna brought him gifts he hadn't realized he was lacking: ease, courage, and the joy of feeling comfortable in his own skin.

Liam headed down Frederica toward the Rib Shack as Nathaniel stared out his window, Wednesday's soft evening light flickering past.

Being back on the island made him all the more homesick for Susanna.

He prayed that three days had been enough time for her to think. To perhaps miss him. To decide he was worth her everything.

Nathaniel's thoughts came round as Liam turned into the Rib Shack's sand-and-seashell car park.

As he stepped out into the evening shade of the guarding oaks, he scented the heady fragrance of grilling meat and sweet barbecue.

The sight of the Shack, the fragrant aromas, put him in mind of the summer he came here on holiday, met Susanna, and signed on to work for her mama as she enlisted the aid of anyone and everyone to share her daddy's workload after his heart attack.

Nathaniel warmed with the memories of his days at the Shack. He'd spent several *happy* evenings scrubbing grease vats and Cloroxing toilets as an ad hoc employee. No one knew he was a prince.

He'd do it again to be near Susanna. To be a normal bloke.

Cutting around to the back of the restaurant, Nathaniel took the deck steps two at a time, the warm sea breeze shoving against his back, and drew open the kitchen's screen door.

"Glo?" he called, scanning the kitchen for his future mother-in-law. The place was hopping, with two chefs on the grill and two at the prep table.

Bristol, a lean, ponytailed Shack employee, stood at the service window calling out orders. "Keri, pick up, table ten."

When she turned to garnish a plate of ribs, she caught sight of him standing in the doorway.

“Well, I’ll be.” She curtsied, smiling. “Welcome, Your Majesty.”

“Bristol, it’s a pleasure to see you.” He nodded, returning her smile. He checked the urge to tell her that since she was American, protocol dictated that she didn’t need to curtsy. But she looked rather practiced and polished. He’d not deny her the effort. “Tell me, is Glo about?”

“In the office.” Bristol tipped her head to the kitchen’s back corner. “Y’all hungry? I’ll pull you a plate if you’d like. Liam, you cotton to baby back ribs if I recall.”

“You remembered.” Liam checked with Nathaniel before passing through to the dining room.

The big chap was all but licking his chops at the mention of baby backs.

Nathaniel rapped lightly against the office door frame. “Permission to enter?”

“You made it.” Glo popped up from her chair, reaching for him, wrapping him up in a hug. “How’s my favorite son-in-law?” Stepping back, she held him at arm’s length, her warmth and down-home goodness embracing the weariest places of his being.

“Better now that I’ve seen you.” He eased down to the chair adjacent to her desk. A bit younger than his own mum, Glo was a beauty with a bit of brawn in her soul. He could see Susanna in her features, in her actions. And he admired her.

“Ha! You didn’t fly four thousand miles to see *me*.”

“Well, not expressly, no.” He leaned forward. “Have you seen Susanna? I thought to surprise her, but now I wish I’d rung her.”



**“She headed out on her bicycle this morning, just as your assistant called saying you were on your way. I’ve not seen her since.”**

**“She doesn’t know, though, about the plan?”** The plan he prayed worked. That he’d not set himself up, once again, to be rejected by the woman he loved. Though his “love” for Adel was nothing more than youthful infatuation and lust.

**“She does not. I only told the *necessary* folks, just like you asked.”** Glo shot him a sneaky smirk as she reached down, tugging open a bottom desk drawer. **“Got the specifications from your assistant—”**

**“Jonathan, my aide.”** Of course she *knew* Jonathan, but he was nervous, filling the void with words.

Glo passed him the printed checklist. **“As you can see, I conquered half of them today. The food has been ordered. Still waiting on some of the bigger ticket items.”**

Nathaniel scanned the checked items, excitement blooming in his chest, clouded only by the realization he had yet to speak to his beloved. He passed the list back to Glo. **“Thank you for your help. I know I imposed upon you.”**

**“Pshaw, boy, it’s for my Suz. We’ve not been able to do much for the Brighton wedding. It’s my honor to help with this.”**

**“Spare no expense. I’ll pay whatever to have the turnaround we need.”**

**“Dollars and cents? Now you’re speaking southern Georgian. But Gib and I got most of this. A few folks got so excited about your plan, they offered their services for free.”**

**“No, no, Glo, I insist on paying. Otherwise it is meaningless if it cost me nothing.”**

**"I could say the same thing." She slapped her palm against the desk, then slipped the paper back into the bottom drawer. "We should be good to go by Friday evening. We got tonight and all day tomorrow to tidy up this list."**

**"Whatever remains unaccomplished, remains. It is only important that Susanna is there. Speaking of my true love, where should I look for her? Your home? Might she be at the hospital? How is your mum?"**

**"*Mum* is doing just fine. She went home this morning. She's sitting up, taking food on her own. She'll live to be a hundred, God willing." Glo reached for the desk phone. "Let me see if I can't track her down."**

**While Glo made a few calls, Nathaniel paced the small office stuffed with supplies and old lamps.**

**On a whim, he'd put forth this idea, his only idea, to woo back Susanna.**

**He could not abdicate his throne over the citizenship debacle, but he could meet Susanna on her side of the world and do his level best to prove he loved her and wanted to marry her no matter what her citizenship.**

**Now if only she still wanted him.**

**She didn't seem the kind of woman to run out on her commitments readily. But all bets were off when one was challenged right down to the core of her identity.**

**"Nathaniel!" Avery dashed into the office and roped him in a big hug. No pretense. No inhibitions. Just love. "You're here. I'm sooo excited. Mama, I found the dress in Granny's things."**

**"Good girl." Glo dialed another number. "Did you drop it off at Morgan's? Nathaniel, she's not answering her phone—let me try her granny's."**

**“Yep, and they’re putting the bum’s rush on it.” Avery perched on the edge of the desk, her eyes bright. “Is Colin coming?”**

**Ah yes, his young cousin. The prince who was stealing another Truitt girl’s heart. “He’s on his way with Mum and Stephen as we speak. We’re running out of royal aeroplanes. Susanna has *Royal One*. I flew on *Royal Two* with the accompanying staff. Mum, Stephen, and Colin along with Jonathan had to charter from a private carrier.”**

**Avery twisted up her lips, snapping her fingers. “And to think, the rest of us have to fly coach.”**

**“All right, missy.” Glo poked her in the back, holding the phone receiver to her ear. “You have homework? If not, I could use an extra hand in here tonight. Sue Ellen called in sick. Hello, Marlee, Glo Truitt here. Susanna’s not around the shop, is she? Getting her hair done?” She listened with a grimace, then hung up. “Well, no one’s seen her since this afternoon. She visited her granny around noon. Then popped by Gracie’s a little after two and left there before three. She’s not at Gracie’s salon nor at the house—”**

**“Y’all looking for Suz?” Avery said, popping up from her perch on the edge of the desk. “Mama, I can’t stay. I’ve got a team meeting.” She tugged her phone from her rucksack. “Did y’all try to call her?”**

**“Did you just hear me say she’s not answering her phone?”**

**“Yeah, Mama, you have a different ring tone—Suz, hey, it’s me. Where are you?” Avery grinned at Nathaniel. “When are you coming home? I want to order a large cheese pizza from Sal’s.” Avery’s eyes widened with surprise. “You’re in Savannah? Waiting to take off for Brighton? You realize you love Nathaniel and want to go back to Brighton? Why am I repeating everything you say?”**

**Avery shot Nathaniel a visual plea. *What do I do?***

He motioned for her to keep talking as he retrieved his phone and dialed *Royal One's* satellite phone.

"So," she said, elevating her tone with a bit of merriment. "I bet Nathaniel is excited you're coming back. What? Right, right, you want to surprise him. Cool, way cool." She made a face, shrugging at Nathaniel. "Well, I'm sorry you won't be home for pizza. But hey, the only thing that trumps hot cheese pizza is true love, right?" *Ha-ha*. "Okay, I'll tell Mama you've left. We'll see you in a couple of weeks."

"Here, let me talk to her." Glo took the phone from Avery, whispering to Nathaniel, "If she's fixing to take off . . . you best hurry and do whatever it is you can do to stop that plane. Mercy, I sound like I'm in a movie or something."

Nathaniel was on it, his chest buzzing with untethered emotions, aware of the ramifications. Her plan was ruining his.

But Susanna was returning to Brighton. Of her own accord. He smiled, then stepped out of the office, through the kitchen, and onto the back deck.

Fabian Rainwater, a former pilot for the RAF before joining the king's service, answered the sat phone.

"Fabian?"

"Your Majesty, is everything all right?"

"Listen, please don't react if Susanna is in hearing range. But do not take off."

"I'm in the cockpit now. What reason shall I give her? We're wheels up at eight o'clock."

"I'm here. On St. Simons Island to surprise her."

"I see. Under the radar, I imagine."

"Very much so."

**“It’s not easy being a king in moments like these, is it?” A soft, humorous lilt bent his words. “What reason shall I give her for the delay?”**

**“You’re the pilot, Fabian. Make something up.”**

**“Mechanical?”**

**“Perfect. But one that cannot be solved easily. No waiting round in Savannah overnight. She must return to the island.”**

**“Will do, sir.”**

**“Fabian, you must come along as well. And your copilot.”**

**“For any special reason?”**

**“Indeed. A very special reason.”**

**Nathaniel rang off and tucked his phone in his jeans pocket, his stomach rumbling for the tangy taste of barbecue, his heart churning for her love.**



**Susanna thumped her suitcase back up the back deck of the Rib Shack, exhausted and disheartened and discombobulated, the ordeal of the past few days weighing on her.**

**The citizenship writ in Brighton. Her decision to come home. The lack of communication with Nathaniel. Her morning conversation with Mama. Her encounter with Reverend Smith at Christ Church.**

**Her subsequent decision to return to Brighton.**

**Visiting with Granny one last time before flying home. She was comforted by the light in Granny's eyes and the color on her cheeks.**

**A final stop by Gracie's.**

**Scurrying home to pack and get down to Savannah, meet up with the pilot, and wait for wheels up.**

**The disappointing news that the plane had mechanical problems.**

**Hiring a car to return to St. Simons with the pilots, Fabian and Roark.**

**She had spent the car ride with her forehead pressed to the dark window, hiding her tears.**

**See, this was exactly why she *planned* things. She wore spontaneity like a wet sack. Thin and falling apart. She should've**

never left Brighton. Now it seemed as if she'd hit a brick wall on returning.

*Lord, please, tell Nathaniel I love him.*

She'd tried to call—forget surprising him—but his phone went straight to voice mail. So instead she rang Rollins and asked him to arrange for a car to meet her at the Brighton airport.

Then Susanna instructed her lady's maid, Ansley, to make sure the emerald green Alexander McQueen party dress was ready to go. She would surprise Nathaniel at dinner.

But not tomorrow night after all. Darn plane.

"Well." Mama stepped onto the deck, a dish towel in her hands. "Just where have you been?"

"Believe it or not, trying to get back to Brighton."

Mama snapped the air with her towel, tipped back her head, and raised her hand toward heaven. "Thank You, Lord. Finally."

"I'm not in the mood, Mama." Susanna kicked her suitcase against the deck rail to let a young family pass.

Mama hollered toward the kitchen door. "Bristol, you got customers on the deck." She joined Susanna at a table. "So, you were heading home?"

Home? Brighton *was* home, wasn't it? "I wanted to surprise Nathaniel."

"What happened?" Mama ran her strong, soft hand over Susanna's hair, brushing it away from her neck. Her unexpected tenderness brought Susanna's tears to the surface. "What made you decide to go back?"

"I prayed a prayer." Susanna recapped her conversation with Reverend Smith, leaving out the part where she cried over her childhood. Mama didn't need piled-on guilt.

**“So why aren’t you winging it toward Brighton?”**

**“Mechanical problem. The part won’t arrive until Friday.”**

**“It’s going to be all right, Susanna.”**

**“You don’t know that, Mama.” She vaulted off the picnic table bench. “The more I think about it . . . the longer I’m away from Nathaniel, he’s not going to want me back. What kind of woman slips off her engagement ring because the life of her intended comes with certain requirements? I mean, if he was the head of Apple and I was a peon at Microsoft, I wouldn’t think twice about resigning.”**

**“But he’s not asking you to quit your job, Suz. Like you said, he’s asking you to give up your very identity. You’d no longer be an American citizen with all of our family’s heritage and tradition. You’re moving a long way from the poor Irish farmers who came to this country looking for a better way of life.”**

**“Wait, now you’re saying I did the right thing by leaving?”**

**“No, I’m saying I understand why you panicked. You were right to take time to think about it. Did you overreact? A bit, but you’ve made a lot of very big changes in the last year and a half.” Mama flicked the towel at Susanna’s legs. “I’m proud of you.”**

**“I’m not so proud of myself, but—”**

**“Susanna!” She whirled around to see Aurora emerging from the pines and palmettos that lined the path to the beach. “What in the world?” Aurora called out. “You’re not supposed to be here.” The woman scurried up the deck steps wearing a mismatched outfit of a summer dress over jeans with an oversized men’s sweater that might have been the style in the 1950s.**

**“Came home to think.”**



Aurora, with her white-blond hair and bright red fingernails, circled the picnic bench where Mama sat and glared at Susanna through narrowed eyes.

Her testimony was a simple one-line pitch. "I went crazy and returned to my right mind, and to my God."

"Listen to me." Susanna flinched as Aurora jumped up on the bench, startling Mama. "You belong in a palace." She fired her hand in the air, pointing east, toward the Atlantic and Brighton's shores. "You don't know, Susanna. You don't know . . ."

"What don't I know, Aurora?" The woman wafted so much between the natural and the supernatural that at any given moment she might be speaking from the Spirit or from the craziness of her own soul.

*Let the hearer beware . . .*

"Such a time as this." She wagged her long, skinny finger at Susanna. "Such a time. Such a time."

"That's what Reverend Smith said."

"Then there you have it." Aurora jutted her hand to her waist, standing on the bench like a skinny, worn-out Wonder Woman. "Glo, what's cooking?" She sniffed the air.

"You know what's cooking, Aurora. You hungry?" Mama exchanged a glance with Susanna. She always leaned toward Aurora being crazy. But Susanna knew better. Aurora had declared, "The prince is coming," just days after Susanna met her prince under Lovers' Oak.

She didn't know he was a prince, but somehow Aurora knew.

"I am, Glo." Just like that, Aurora shifted gears, jumped down off the bench, and followed Mama through the kitchen door.

But when she glanced back at Susanna, the glint in her eye ignited a flame in Susanna's spirit.

**“Don’t be afraid,” she said. “Fear is the opposite of faith. And without faith—” She shook her head. “You can’t please Him.”**

**For moments after Aurora went inside, Susanna burned with the fire of truth, leaning against the deck rail, exhaling the embers of doubt and fear.**

**This wasn’t about giving up her citizenship but about giving up *all* of herself. The final call of God was to surrender all of her plans to Him—her identity, who she thought she was and wanted to be.**

**What did it matter what country she belonged to in this world when she was a citizen of God’s glorious kingdom?**

**And how many times in her life had she been willing to surrender her heavenly citizenship for the momentary pleasures of this world?**

**Far too often.**

**Her heart churned with a blend of joy and grief. Joy at what Jesus afforded her. Grief at how little she understood its power. Loving Nathaniel was also about loving her Lord and being true to Him above all else.**

**As she made her way down the sandy path to the beach, Susanna’s heart whispers came to life. “I know You can fix the mess I’ve made, but help my heart to believe,” she prayed. “Tell Nathaniel to call me? Or listen to my gazillion voice mails? Lord, help my weak, frail heart.”**

**Heading north on the beach, into the wind, with the light of the stars and waterfront houses guiding her, she struggled to keep the flame of truth alive.**

**She now added guilt to the battle of doubt and fear. She should’ve never left Brighton.**

**Up ahead, a small light bounced over the sand. Someone was walking her way. A man. He had broad, square shoulders and a**

long, even gait.

She knew that stance. That stride.

*Nathaniel?*

She picked up her pace, and when she caught the glint of his glossy black hair in the bold white light burning from the edge of the Island B&B, she kicked up her heels and began running on the smooth wet sand.

“Nathaniel!” The crashing waves roared against the shore. She saw him quicken his own pace. She fired into his arms the moment she reached him. “Oh my gosh, you’re here. You’re here.”

He caught her up, lifting her off the ground, swinging her around, kissing her cheek. “I’m sorry, love, I’m sorry. I should’ve never let you go.”

“No, no, it was me, babe, all me.”

He buried his face against her neck, and his warm breath sent chills skirting over her skin. “I was scared of losing you. I wanted to tell you.” He set her down. “I promise not to hide things again. Especially in matters of your heart and mine.”

“I promise not to overreact. This is a whole new life for me, Nathaniel, but I’m ready.” She exhaled. “I’m ready.”

“But if you aren’t, we can postpone—”

She rose up on her toes and kissed him, pressing her hands against the sides of his head, weaving her fingers through the silky threads of his hair. “I don’t want to wait. In fact, I was flying home to you—”

His kiss stole her breath and invoked warm waves of passion, each crashing sensation eroding her fears and awakening her love. When he broke the magic of the moment by lifting his lips from hers, she swooned against him.

“It feels like forever since I’ve seen you.”

**“Susanna, two years ago when we stood on this beach, right after Adam broke things off, I told you I could never marry you.” He lifted her chin, and by the way he tipped his head, she could see love reflected in his eyes by the beachside lighting. “The law prevented me. But tonight I tell you I am desperate to marry you. Even if you don’t renounce your American citizenship, I will marry you.”**

**“Nathaniel, your political enemies will have you for lunch.”**

**“And I’ll have them for dessert. I must have you in my life. I’ve no doubt the Lord brought you to me, and I’m going to trust Him for the outcome of our union. If they destroy me, then let Him see to them.”**

**“Funny.” She smoothed her hand over his chest. “But I was flying home to tell you I will do what you and the law ask. This morning Reverend Smith reminded me I’m more than a citizen of the US or Brighton, but a citizen of God’s kingdom.” She stepped out of his embrace, collecting her feelings, gathering them into words. “It’s like . . . wow . . . the largeness I’ve felt in my heart for the past two years, like there was something more, suddenly made sense. I’m not just Susanna Truitt, American girl, or Brighton princess, I’m a daughter of the King of Heaven.”**

**With each declaration of truth, joy carved a new path in her heart.**

**“And I’m a son of that very same kingdom.”**

**“So it doesn’t matter if I’m American or Brightonian as long as I’m following Him. Serving my Lord.”**

**“Susanna, my American love.” He dropped to one knee. “Marry me. Please.” He fumbled for something in his pocket. She smiled when the cool sensation of platinum slid down her finger.**

**“My ring! You found it.” She knelt in front of him.**

**“Rollins brought it to me. I thought I was a goner until Stephen came along and kicked me in the britches.”**

**“Oh, God bless Stephen. Nathaniel, I’ve been so foolish. Please forgive me—”**

**“Forgive me.”**

**“Absolutely, and yes, I’ll marry you. I’ll become a full-blown Brighton citizen. What does it matter as long as we are together?”**

**His kiss was tender and sweet, then ardent and passionate as he enveloped her in his arms and sank down on the beach.**



**When the doorbell rang in the middle of Friday afternoon, Susanna opened the door to find Jonathan, Nathaniel’s aide, standing on the veranda in knee breeches, waistcoat, cravat, and white stockings with gold buckle shoes.**

**“You’ve got to be kidding me.”**

**“Milady.” The man bowed, presenting her with a sealed envelope. “An invitation from the king. I will await your reply.”**

**“When did you get here?” She took the envelope, flipping it over to see the back. It was plain and white, but composed of thick, pressed linen. “We’re meeting for dinner at six. What’s this about?”**

**“Does the lady wish me to read the invitation for her?”**

**Susanna laughed. This was over the top. “No, the lady does not.”**

**“Suz, who’s at the door?” Avery shoved in next to her, pressing her shoulder against the doorjamb. “Jonathan, dude, Halloween isn’t for seven months. But *kicking* costume.”**

**“Whatever do you mean?” He speared her with a long, hard gaze. “I’m delivering a missive for His Royal Highness, King Nathaniel II.”**

**“A missive? Well, la-te-da.” Avery draped her arm over Susanna’s shoulder and tapped the invitation. “What does the missive say?”**

**Susanna turned toward the living room as she tugged the stiff stock card from the envelope. Inside was an elegant invitation engraved in navy script.**

*It would be my honor  
if you would join me  
this evening  
7:00 p.m.*

**Goose bumps ran down her arms and tingled over her scalp as she studied the words, trying to read between the lines. “Jon, what’s he up to?” she said, returning to the door. “Join him for what?”**

**“What answer shall I give His Majesty?” Jonathan remained in character, stiff and unemotional, keeping his eyes fixed on the far corner of the veranda. Yet he was not quite able to hide the twitch on the edge of his lips.**

**“Tell him yes, but just exactly for what will I be joining him?”**

**Jon snapped his fingers at a nearby SUV with tinted windows. Liam popped out wearing his customary dark suit—thank goodness, something that made sense in this scene—carrying a large box tied with an enormous purple bow. He dashed up the steps to hand it to Susanna.**

**“And this is?”**

**“For this evening, milady. Your carriage will be along at six forty precisely.”**

**“Carriage? Six forty? Jon, Nathaniel is ten minutes away. Five if there’s no traffic. I can drive myself.”**

**“Sixty, milady.”**

**She made a face. Something was up. “All right . . . Does he require anything else of me? This isn’t about the citizenship oath, is it?”**

**Jonathan stepped off the veranda with a bow, still very much in the role of royal footman. Inside the house, Avery hovered, begging Susanna to open the box.**

**“Hold your horses.” She set the gift on the kitchen table, thinking, wondering, fingering the silky purple bow. “What do you think this is about?”**

**“Suz, he’s romancing you. Go with it. Don’t overthink it. Heck, you never know how long this kind of stuff will last.”**

**Susanna made a face. “How would you know, Dr. Love?”**

**“Locker room talk.” Avery shoved the box toward Susanna. “Open it!”**

**Susanna grinned, her expectation pinging. “This is kind of fun.” She loosened the ribbon and lifted the box lid. Shoving back a layer of white tissue paper, she sighed, tears springing to her eyes when she saw the pale mauve satin gown. “Oh my, Granny’s wedding dress.” She slipped her fingers through the spaghetti straps and lifted the sixty-four-year-old dress from the box. “Aves.” She drilled her sister with a steely stare. “Where did he get this?”**

**“Me, of course.” Pure. Without guile.**

**“And why did you give him this dress?” Susanna held the gown against her with trembling, adrenaline-charged hands.**

**“I was digging around in Granny’s things and—”**

**“You found the dress and gave it to Nathaniel?” Susanna inspected the lace and sequin flowers and the gold cord appliqué. “It’s been cleaned and pressed.”**

**“Well, you didn’t want to wear it wrinkled, did you?”**

**“Avery Mae.” Susanna reached out to pinch her sister’s arm. “You tell me what’s going on right now.”**

**But the lithe volleyball star ducked out of the way. “You know what? You need to learn to live in the moment.” She scooped a handful of M&M’s from the dish on the kitchen counter. “I’m out of here. Volleyball practice.” She scooped up her gym bag. “Hey, Suz, your gold Louboutins will go great with that dress.”**

**“Yes, but they’re in Brighton. And I’m only hanging out at Nathaniel’s cottage, right?”**

**“Suit yourself.” Avery shrugged, reaching for the doorknob.**

***“Right, Avery?”***

**“Whatever.” The door clapped behind Avery.**

**“Avery!” But she was gone.**

**Susanna turned back to Granny’s gown. It was beautiful. Expectation bloomed into excitement as she dashed upstairs to try it on.**

**She’d discovered Granny’s wedding dress when she was eleven and begged to try it on. When Granny finally relented, Susanna stood in front of the hallway mirror, her lean preteen body lost in the bodice and wide skirt, but her womanly heart was mesmerized.**

**She’d promised herself then and there she’d wear the gown for her wedding.**

**Someday. When true love found her. But once she became engaged to Nathaniel and started taking appointments with Brighton designers, she knew she’d never be able to wear something this simple and vintage to marry a king.**



In her room, she turned on the light and closed the shades. Shimmying out of her jeans and top, she stepped through the crinolines and tulle, drawing the silky skirt over her hips, sensing the history and tradition of her grand-parents' devotion slide along her skin.

The dress fit without her needing to suck in her gut or her breasts flowing over the top. Dashing to the closet, she shoved open the door for a pair of shoes. Maybe Avery had a pair she could wear.

She gasped when she flipped on the light. Oh bother, more tears.

There on the tile floor, neatly posed, were her gold-bedazzled Christian Louboutins. All the way from Brighton.

Susanna grinned, hugging the shoes to her chest. *Thank You, Jesus.* She didn't care how they got there, just that they did. Whatever Nathaniel was planning for this evening, she would embrace it.

Because love was proving itself over and over, and conquering all her fears.



**On** Friday evening precisely at six forty, Susanna stepped onto the veranda, her gold Louboutin shoes resounding against the wide boards.

**She** breathed deeply, filling her lungs with the fragrance of the island. With the fragrance of love.

**For** the first time since she had said yes to Nathaniel, she *felt* like a princess.

**The** breeze dipped a bit lower and swished the hem of Granny's gown, twirling the folds against her legs. She glanced down to see the gold and crystal shoes sparkling in the early evening light.

**Gracie** had insisted on sending a stylist from her salon to do Susanna's makeup and hair. Lexi arrived at three thirty with her bag of magic tricks to fashion Susanna's hair into a loose updo with long golden curls dangling about her neck, and to apply her makeup.

**A** laugh rumbled in her chest. She pressed her hand over her lips, keeping her smile inside, growing wider and warmer.

*I am in love with a king. With Nathaniel of Brighton.*

**She'd** been so overwhelmed with moving to Brighton—adjusting to a new country and culture, developing her young relationship with Nathaniel, and planning a wedding—she'd not considered her own royal reality.

Susanna raised her chin to the breeze as it twisted her curls about her shoulders. Reverend Smith was right. Her new station in life afforded her such great opportunities for good.

*Oh Lord, use me to make Your Son's name famous.*

She had no idea what Nathaniel had planned for this evening—he'd been unavailable all day today. Something about kingdom business. But she'd planned to surrender her heart fully to him tonight.

If love demanded her whole identity and being, then she'd give it. Unreservedly. Fear had no place in the heart of a princess.

The sound of horse hooves resounding against the asphalt drew her attention to the road as a pair of matched white mares with gleaming coats turned down the driveway drawing a glossy black and gold open carriage with red spoke wheels.

Susanna gasped, pressing her hand over her heart, falling against the porch post.

Jonathan, still dressed in his footman costume, rode on the back. He hopped down when the carriage stopped at the veranda steps, bowing and offering his hand. "Your carriage awaits."

"This is too much . . . too much. Jon, where are we going?" She slipped her hand into his as he aided her into the carriage, settling her onto the rich red leather seats.

Jonathan patted the side of the carriage and spoke to the driver. "Be off with you now." He hopped onto the back as the driver chirruped to the horses.

"Burt, hey." Susanna leaned forward, glancing up at the man steering the horses. "How'd you get this gig?" Burt, a longtime family friend and customer of the Rib Shack, was the owner of Glynn Carriages.

But this was no carriage she'd ever seen him drive before. He wore a solemn expression along with a crisp, dark suit, cravat, and top hat.

"Milady." His gaze twinkled down on her as he tipped the brim of his hat.

Susanna sat back, smiling. Nathaniel was winning her all over again, shining his light of love in the hidden recesses of her heart, those private places she felt too guarded to reveal. Even when she was with Adam, she hid those secret rooms from his heart's eye.

But Nathaniel's efforts spoke to her, drew her out of hiding. He made her feel what she'd longed to feel since she first hid in her bedroom closet, turning it into a magical garden as her parents fought the War of the Truitts. Safe. He made her feel truly, entirely safe.

She could spread her arms wide, breathe in life, and know nothing would smash her in the gut.

At the end of Steven's Road, the carriage turned north instead of south toward Nathaniel's Ocean Boulevard cottage.

"Jonathan?" She peered up at the royal aide-turned-footman. "Where are we going?"

He ignored her, eyes fixed straight ahead.

She would see when she arrived. The clop-clop of the horses' hooves paired with the gentle sway of the carriage from side to side rocked her into a sweet peace. If one was going to be a princess, then one must learn to *enjoy* being a princess. She pictured Nathaniel, aching to be in his arms.

Burt called a gentle, deep "Whoa" to the horses as he pulled up to Christ Church.

Susanna angled forward, squinting at the massive glow dripping down from the trees, soaking the grounds in a white, cozy

light. Did she hear an orchestra?

“Milady.” Jonathan appeared at her side, offering his hand.

Raising her skirt, Susanna stepped over the side of the carriage, landing softly on the ground, shards of excitement fueling her pulse.

“What’s going on, Jon?” She held on to his hand, refusing to let him step forward.

“You know, Suz, you ask too many questions.”

She balked at his abrupt break of character. “Wouldn’t you?” she said, squeezing his fingers.

“If you’ll walk with me, and let go of my hand so some of the blood can flow to my heart, you’ll have your answer.” Jonathan twisted his hand from her grasp, making a face.

With a slight push on her elbow, he directed her toward the front door, pausing when they stepped under the garden entrance.

“I’ve been silent about things since you left Brighton, Susanna, because it was not my place to speak. But since I’m on American soil, I’ll act the part of an American. Don’t be a bugger.”

She bristled. “Jon, look, I—” Susanna broke off, laughing. “Okay, I won’t be a bugger.”

He grinned. “I know this is not all easy for you, but you need to know I’ve never seen Nathaniel like this. And I’ve known him a long time. He’s turning his world upside down to please one person. You. He’s crazy in love and using all of his kingly prowess to prove it to you. To prove he’s worth everything he’s asking you to give up. How can he compete with your family? With your American ways? How can he compete with *you*? Giving up your citizenship and what all?” He sighed as if he might regret his outburst. “Just know if you refuse what’s on the other side of this entrance, you’ll break his heart and I’m not sure he’ll ever recover.”

**She drew a long breath, returning Jon's steely gaze. "You're a good friend, Jon. And I've no intention of breaking his heart."**

**"Because I know a good thing when I see it." He smiled. "My apologies for violating protocol and speaking out of turn."**

**"No apology needed when I've been acting like a fool." She kissed his cheek, then stretched to see around the square post of the portico. "Besides, friends speak the truth to friends."**

**"Susanna." Jonathan stepped away from her. "I'm going to leave you now. But wait here." He pointed his finger at her. "Your prince will come."**



**Nathaniel waited for Susanna to arrive in the so-called foyer of this outdoor sanctuary, wearing his grandfather's World War II uniform.**

**All afternoon, he vacillated between calm and panic, white-hot nerves assailing his confidence. He didn't fare well with his last public proclamation of love, but he knew he had to break free of his fear and shame.**

**And in his heart of hearts, he knew Susanna was the one to help him shed his shackles.**

**His heart skipped a beat as the clatter of horses rang in his ears and the black carriage flashed past the trees.**

**Through the shrubbery and swaying Spanish moss, he caught a glimpse of Susanna.**

**It had taken a Herculean effort not to ring her today. But if he heard her voice, he knew he'd want to see her. And if he saw her, he'd spoil his surprise.**

**So he purported to have king's business to attend. Which, in fact, he did, but really, he fussed about with busy work to keep his**

heart from going insane while waiting for this evening to come.

If she said yes to this wild idea, they'd be married by sunset. Man and wife.

Susanna's family, along with his staff, had worked half the night and through the day to create an outdoor cathedral for this spontaneous dream wedding.

Behind him, a hundred or so guests were seated in white wooden chairs while a sixteen-piece orchestra gathered from island residents played "Air" from Bach's Suite no.3.

Nathaniel's heart swelled with each stroke of the violin's bow.

The moment Susanna crested the portico, he had nearly buckled with the power of her beauty. It caused his heart to stumble in ways he never thought possible. Susanna was more than a vision standing there in a pale mauve gown; she was the essence of his soul.

Beautiful, yes, but she was also wise and kind, loving, considerate, devoted, and loyal. The kind of woman a king needed beside him.

His breathing shallowed as Jonathan headed down the brick path to his station by the wedding altar, smiling at Nathaniel and offering him a salute.

That was Nathaniel's cue to move forward to his bride.

The Bach piece peaked on a high note, then gently swooned toward Pachelbel's Canon in D, Susanna's favorite wedding music.

Nathaniel smiled, making his way to her. Her posture and presence, paired with the blue intensity of her eyes and the way her lips parted when she saw him, nearly brought him to his knees. Heaven help him, he was trapped with no way out.

"Hello, love," he said, taking her hands into his.

"Hey, yourself." Low, sweet, an inviting warmth in every syllable.

**“A surprise.” He gestured toward the outdoor sanctuary. “Your dream wedding. If you’ll have me.”**

**“Oh Nathaniel, you didn’t—” Susanna’s voice quivered and her eyes misted. “You didn’t have to do this.”**

**“Susanna Jean Truitt . . .” Nathaniel drew her close. “Will you marry me tonight? I realize the past few months in Brighton have been trying. You’ve done more than your fair share of changing and coming to my side. I stand here now at your side. I love you for who and what you are. Your American heart is more precious to me than anything else. I need you to know I see your heart.”**

**“I know you do. I do . . . Nathaniel, I can’t believe you did this.” Tears pooled in her eyes. Her glistening, pink lower lip trembled in time with the hovering note of the strings. “Of course I’ll marry you. But I didn’t need all of this to know you are by my side. I was just clinging to my old self, my old *plan*.” She made a face and he laughed.**

**“Then this is for me. To prove to you that I adore you, love you, and am devoted to you above my crown and kingdom. You are my heart. I’ve a duty to my family, to my country, but even more, I have a duty to my God to love you as I love myself. This is for me.” He grinned. “I want to marry the American woman who bewitched me under Lovers’ Oak the moment I laid eyes on her.” He squeezed her hands. “This is our day. Just you and me, with our friends and families. Let our Brighton wedding be about the crown and the kingdom, but this, love, is all about us.” He reached for one of her curls, brushing his fingers lightly over her neck. “You take my breath away.”**

**She fell into him, raising her eyes to his. “I’ll marry you, Nathaniel, tonight, here in Brighton, anywhere, anytime.” He brushed away her tears with a light touch of his fingertips. “God’s**



got this, doesn't He? How can I be so narrow to always want things my way?"

"I'll help you overcome your fears if you help me overcome mine." He tipped his head toward the waiting guests. "Let's dry your tears." He reached in his breast pocket for a handkerchief and handed it to her.

She laughed through another surge of tears. "My other grandma's wedding handkerchief." She pressed it to her nose. "I can still smell her perfume."

"Your daddy gave it to me so she could be with us in spirit." He kissed her forehead while drawing a gift from his jacket. A gift he'd moved heaven and earth to have finished and shipped in time for tonight.

"What's this you're wearing?" She brushed her hand over his grandfather's white, fine wool naval jacket and medals.

"Grandfather's World War II uniform. Mum's dad. He was a naval commander and wore this very uniform at his wedding." Nathaniel drew a heart-shaped diamond pendant from his pocket. The flawless stones absorbed the white glow of the lights draped through the shadows of the trees, creating pale orbs against his skin. "I was going to give this to you on our wedding day in Brighton, but it's fitting now. American or not, Susanna, you are my wife, my princess, and . . ." He motioned to the intricate design inside the heart-shaped pendant. "Your cipher. See?" He paused, clearing his throat.

"Nathaniel, it's exquisite." Susanna trembled with her fingers over her lips.

"Your official title is engraved here." Nathaniel turned the piece over. "HRH Crown Princess Susanna of Brighton Kingdom."

**“Princess. Wow, there it is.” She laughed softly through her tears. “And what’s this?” she whispered, touching the delicate key ornament attached to the chain.**

**“The key to my heart.” The full force of his feelings for her burst to the surface and threatened to overpower him. “A sign of my promise to put you first, before the kingdom, before my duties as king, to the best of my weak, human ability. Only the Lord will come before you. It’s the only way I can be any kind of good husband and decent king.” He steadied his heart and slowly moved to clasp the piece around her neck. It couldn’t have a more beautiful home.**

**The sparkle in her eyes rivaled the brilliance of the diamond necklace.**

**When he stood before her again, she hooked her hands over his arms. “I give you everything, babe. My heart, body, soul, *and* citizenship. When I get afraid that life is beyond my control, I will remember this moment and say, ‘See what God can do.’ ”**

**“Let’s not keep the guests waiting any longer.” He offered her his arm.**

**“Not another moment.” Her smile beamed light across the entire church grounds.**

**Nathaniel signaled to Jonathan, who then cued the orchestra to play Pachelbel’s Canon again. Gracie and Avery rose from their front row seats and stood on the bride’s side of the altar wearing pink dresses of some kind.**

**On the groom’s side, Stephen wore his Royal Air Force uniform while Colin sported an Armani suit sent along by the designer himself. With his compliments.**

**As the guests stood and Nathaniel started down the aisle, Susanna drew back. “Wait, wait, wait . . .”**

**His beating heart screeched to a halt.**

**“Is this legal? Babe, we don’t have a license for Georgia.”**

**“See the man on the front row?” Nathaniel’s heart started beating again. “He’s from the county clerk’s office. All we have to do is sign the license and we’re legally married.”**

**“Before we are officially married in Brighton?”**

**“That will be the case, yes.”**

**“Nathaniel, are you sure?”**

**He brushed a sweet, free strand of hair from her eyes. “One hundred percent.”**

**She tiptoed up as if she might kiss him and wrapped her arms about his neck. “I am yours forever, Nate Kenneth.”**

**“And I am forever yours.”**



**In all her born days, Susanna knew she never could have planned or even dreamed of such a night as this. From the moment she slipped on Granny's dress for her "evening" with Nathaniel to the ceremony at Christ Church, everything was perfect.**

**Maybe beyond perfect because she had expected none of it.**

**Granny had rejoiced to see her walk down the aisle in *her* dress. When Susanna arrived at the end of the aisle, she bent to give her a kiss.**

**"I knew I couldn't miss *this* wedding." Granny raised her thin, weak hand to Susanna's cheek. "You look prettier in that gown than I ever did."**

**"And my granddaughter will look prettier than me."**

**Granny kissed her cheek. "He's a good one, that king. Keep hold of him."**

**Now, sitting at their head table for two on the ocean side of the cottage's garden, Susanna leaned against Nathaniel as Mickey, the Rib Shack's Irish singer, serenaded them from a corner spot on the white stone-and-tile veranda.**

**The cottage garden was ablaze with clear lights swinging from the trees along with an array of Japanese lanterns hovering above the long pink-and-burgundy-covered tables with vases of white roses and lilies.**

The breeze hustled past, dancing with the lights and lanterns, leaving behind a sweet, sea foam perfume.

“Happy?” Nathaniel draped his arm around the back of her chair as he whispered in her ear.

“I don’t have words,” she said, cupping his face in her hands. “I feel both proud and humbled. You made me happy. Not to mention Granny and Gracie. No small feat for any man to make three women happy in one night.”

He took her hand in his and brought it to his lips. “Remember when you sat on my veranda steps two years ago and stared out at this cottage’s dead, dry garden? You had no idea you were really gazing into my dead, dry heart. I saw weeds, but you saw possibilities and life. Not for this garden, but for me. You reminded me of who I was and am, and who really called me to be a king. God, not men.”

His sincere confession caressed her heart. “No, my heart was the dead one. Then you found me and said, ‘Design a garden for me.’ Sitting on those same steps, I saw possibility. For a garden, yes, but also for love.” She kissed him. “We made grass angels and you helped me off the ground—”

He laughed. “How could I forget? You tripped and fell into my arms. I never wanted to let you go.”

“I did that on purpose, you know.” She nuzzled her face against his, butterfly kissing his cheek.

“Sure you did.” He brushed his lips over hers. “I remember wanting to kiss you that day, very much.”

From the veranda stage the music changed. Nathaniel shoved back his chair, taking her hand. “May I have this dance?”

Susanna rose, the silk taffeta and tulle petticoat of her dress rustling past their chairs, the heels of her golden shoes striking a

solid sound on the makeshift dance floor.

The guests, sitting at surrounding tables, applauded softly.

Nathaniel drew her into his arms and began an elegant waltz as the melody of the song rose higher and Mickey began to sing.

*He is now to be among you at the calling of your hearts . . .*

“The Wedding Song,” she whispered, a new wash of tears filling her eyes. “How did you *know*?”

“Oh, a little bird named Glo told me.”

Mama, sweet Mama. “A friend of theirs sang it at Daddy and Mama’s remarriage ceremony when I was twelve and so happy. My very divorced parents reconciled, remarried, and were giving me a baby sister.”

*For whenever two or more of you are gathered in His name, there is love . . .*

Susanna closed her eyes and rested against her husband—oh, she loved the sound of the word—as Mickey’s smooth melody confirmed . . . *there is love.*

When the song ended, a soft clanking arose from a table to the left, and Daddy made his way toward the dance floor, tapping his champagne glass with a fork. The sound technician passed him a microphone.

Nathaniel slipped his arms around Susanna, pressing her back to his chest.

“Well,” Daddy said, his voice rattling with emotion, as he smoothed his hand over his waistcoat and lean middle. He looked good. Strong and vibrant and fit from Mama’s strict diet. Susanna could almost erase her memory of him lying in the hospital bed weak from a heart attack at forty-eight. “Most of you have known Glo and me a long time. Therefore, you’ve known our Susanna, too. Queen Campbell and Prince Stephen, Prince Colin, Jonathan, the

staff from Brighton, it's good to have y'all here for this little shindig. I'd like to thank everyone for their hard work in pulling off this surprise wedding." Daddy swerved to face the royals, sitting among the Truitt, Vogt, and Franklin clans. "If y'all wondered what kind of man and king this fella here truly was, let me tell you, you're sitting among his generous, kind heart right now. Not only was this spontaneous wedding his idea, he put boots on the ground to make it happen. Put his money where his mouth is, and y'all know how we like those who do as much as they say. And you know why he did it?" Daddy stepped toward them. "For this beautiful girl here. Our Susanna." His voice quivered, breaking down. "Cause he loves her that much."

Susanna trembled, feeling the love in her daddy's confession. It was watching him grow in his faith and in his love for Mama that repaired most of her childhood fears.

"Suz, you're about the best girl anyone would ever want to know. Well, you and my girl Avery. And I mean that, kitten. Y'all are probably thinking I'm saying that 'cause she's my daughter, and if so, well, you're right."

A merry laugh rippled among the guests and Nathaniel sweetened her temple with a kiss.

"But I know it because I've watched her. She's loyal, almost to a fault. She loves people. Genuinely. But watch out now, 'cause if you take advantage of her she'll give you the dickens for it. She encourages folk. But she won't tickle your ears. She'll tell you the truth in a way you can swallow it. When she was born, Glo and I felt sure God sent us an angel straight from heaven. She never cried 'cept when she was hungry. But then as a little girl, she didn't have it so good. As much as we loved her, Glo and I didn't love each other well and we fought. A lot. Couple of kids we were." Daddy

wiped under his eyes with his finger. "And Susanna,"—he cleared his throat with a deep cough—"would hide out in her closet, pretending it was her secret garden because she didn't know if our anger was ever going to spill over on her. So I guess it's fitting that today her wedding and reception are in a garden." Sniffles rippled up from the tables and through the air. "Suz, you found true love and I pray that your marriage will always be the safest garden you can ever find. Nate, son, see to it that my little girl is always at home in your palace and in your arms, hear me? 'Cause I think a girl's daddy trumps a king any day, and if I hear of you doing anything to hurt my girl, I'll hop on over to Brighton and take you out back for a discussion."

The men hammered the table with their fists and the women hooted. "Go, Gib!"

Nathaniel bowed toward Daddy. "I am duly warned."

"On that note, Nate, King Nathaniel II, welcome to the family, son. It's good to have another man. I've been outnumbered by girls for thirty years."

Queen Campbell rose from her seat. "Move over, Gib, it's my turn."

"Mum!"

The dowager queen stood next to Daddy, smiling, looking regal in her fitted but simple summer suit.

"When Nathaniel was seven or eight years old, one of our maids became quite ill. A chambermaid. So most of her chores had little to do with the family on a day-to-day basis, but when young Prince Nathaniel heard of her plight, he insisted on seeing her."

"You never told me this," Susanna whispered, gazing up at him.

"'Twas nothing, really." Was he blushing? He had just purchased another piece of her heart. As if there were any pieces left.

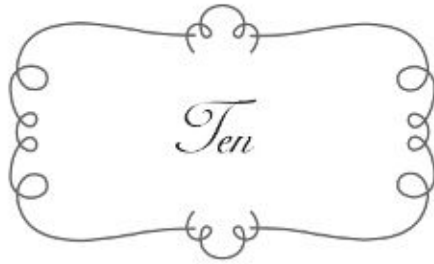


**“He slept on the floor of her room. Demanded a nurse to attend her needs full-time. We couldn’t get him out of her quarters without a huge ruckus, so we let him stay, not really sure if she was contagious or not.” Campbell’s glassy gaze bore down on her son. “I knew then, son, you were born to be a king. Susanna, he’s loved you from the start and I believe you are exactly what he needs. Welcome to *our* family, to the House of Stratton.” She raised her champagne glass. “To King Nathaniel II and his bride, Princess Susanna. Long may they live.”**

**The guests responded in robust chorus. “To King Nathaniel II and Princess Susanna! Long may they live.”**

**The music changed and “Celebrate” hit the airwaves. Susanna boogied over to her college friends, all seven of whom had made it to the wedding, and sang at the top of her lungs, “Celebrate good times, come on.” She glanced back at Nathaniel, who urged her on with a smile and a wink.**

**She’d once heard a profound statement, “There’s no force more powerful than a loved woman,” and tonight, right now, she knew it to be true.**



**A** little after eleven thirty, Susanna collapsed onto the white leather sofa curving in front of the veranda fireplace. She was exhausted, but her happiness ran so deep her bones buzzed.

Nathaniel sat next to her, his face glistening, his WWII jacket removed and his shirt collar open, his dark hair loose and free. "I think I've danced half the night with your loony college mates."

Susanna laughed. "I know. Aren't they great?" She wove her fingers with his, loving the reflection of the hearth's flickering flames in the ocean of his eyes. "I miss them. I forgot how knitted our hearts were."

"We'll have them all to Brighton sometime soon."

"Can you see them hobnobbing with Nigel, Blythe, and Morton, or Lord and Lady Dean?"

"We'll make popcorn and sit back and watch the show."

She leaned in and kissed him. "How'd I get so lucky as to find you?"

"Don't know, but I'm going to count my blessings and believe there's more where they came from. In the meantime, take a look here." Nathaniel tugged Susanna forward so she could see the dance floor where Avery and Colin were entwined.

"You think they're truly falling for each other?" Susanna shivered as midnight drew near with a chilly nip in the March air.

"I've asked him straight out, but his answers are vague."

**“She’s going to college next year on a volleyball scholarship.”**

**“And he has two more years of university. But—” Nathaniel reached behind Susanna for the lap blanket, wrapping it around her shoulders. “Perhaps we started a lovely trend. Truitts and Strattons falling in love.”**

**“Of American girls marrying European princes?” She made a face, laughing. “Good grief, if it were a book, no one would believe it.”**

**“Susanna Jean.” Mama’s voice boomed around the wide stone porch post as she made her way up the steps, her strappy sandals swinging from her fingertips. “Daddy and I are leaving. Got an early delivery in the morning. The out-of-town family and friends are all swinging by the Shack for lunch around one. Grandpa will be able to bring Granny out again. We’d love for y’all to come and carry on this magical wedding one more day. I even got your people coming, Nathaniel.” Mama kissed him on the head.**

**“Well, then—” Nathaniel said, peeking at Susanna.**

**“Thank you for everything.” Susanna reached for her mama’s hand. “I know you helped him pull this off. It was beautiful, Mama.”**

**“One of the most beautiful I’ve ever seen, and I’m not saying it because you’re my daughter.” Mama kissed Susanna, whispered, “I love you,” then shuffled back down the steps, walking around the veranda to the outer gate. “Avery Mae!” she called over her shoulder. “Get the lead out. We’re heading home. Prince Colin, see you tomorrow for lunch.”**

**Susanna yawned, really feeling her exhaustion. She wanted to crawl into bed and relive tonight in her dreams. Meditate on all the special moments.**

**Seeing Nathaniel standing under the oaks in his grand-father’s white uniform, so regal and strong.**

His confession of love.

The romantic Christ Church grounds.

Wearing Granny's gown.

Their vows.

*Sigh . . .* It was all so very lovely.

Standing, Susanna reached for the Louboutins she'd shed twenty minutes ago. "Avery, I'm ready when you are."

Nathaniel cleared his throat. "Where are you going?"

"Home." She glanced down at him. "Avery's my ride . . ." Her heart fluttered, revelation dawning, her body responding with fiery pulses. "Oh—" A deep blush crested her cheeks. "I hadn't even thought . . ."

"I surprised you. I understand." He stood, reaching for her. "But this is our wedding night."

"I-I guess so." She laughed low, shoving the lap blanket from her shoulders. Did someone turn up the heat in that fireplace? "I was all mentally geared for our wedding on the twenty-first. It didn't register that, you know, tonight is—"

"We have the whole cottage to ourselves. No Jon, no servants or staff. Not even Liam." He swept her into his arms and held her against him. "Come with me."

He led her into the house, through the kitchen where the staff, the locals, and the Stratton Palace team talked and laughed, cleaning up.

Walking hand-in-hand up the broad, winding staircase, Susanna made the last mental adjustment she needed to realize that *this* was her wedding night.

Oh, she was staying. She could finally let her heart and desires go. She'd not deny this man. Not deny herself. She'd waited ten long

months for this night, and she wanted to be with him every bit as much as he wanted to be with her. Plans and schedules be darned.

At the top of the staircase, a soft light glowed from the master suite at the end of the hall.

Nathaniel had turned his bedroom into a bridal chamber with dozens of candles, fresh white linens, and a fire flickering in the old stone fireplace. A small bowed gift and a bouquet of roses awaited her on the dressing table.

“Nathaniel, oh my . . . will your surprises never end?” She laughed and shoved him out the door. “Now, get rid of our last guest and the cleanup crew. Give a girl a chance to prepare. Got a dress shirt I can borrow?”

His eyes glinted with passion. “In the closet.”

She rose up on her toes and kissed him. “My heart is beating so fast I can’t breathe.” She pressed his hand over her heart. “Give me a few minutes, and then the rest of the night, I am 100 percent yours.”

As Susanna closed the suite door, Nathaniel raced down the hall and shook the entire cottage. “Everyone out! Out! Good night and good ’morrow.”



Sunlight filled the room when Nathaniel woke up, reaching for his bride. Her side of the bed was warm but empty.

“Suz?” He sat up, listening for the sounds of life.

She popped out of the bathroom. “Morning, sleepy head.”

He grinned. Seeing her wrapped in a towel, her wet hair combed back, his desire for her stirred. “You going somewhere?” He patted the bed next to him. Nothing had prepared his heart for

what he'd feel for this woman once she was completely his and he was hers.

"It's twelve thirty. We all leave tomorrow, so I thought it would be fun to go to the Shack for lunch and hang out with the friends and fam."

He crawled out of bed. "I thought it would be fun to *hang* with my wife."

"You have the rest of your life to *hang* with me." She kissed him, teasing and slow. Then she turned him toward the shower. "Get ready. Let's go see everyone and continue the celebration."

"Married not even twenty-four hours and my wife is bossing me around already." He reached for another kiss, letting her love awaken his sleepy heart.



After his shower, Nathaniel headed downstairs, snatching up the SUV keys from the dining room table. "Suz, love, let's go. I'm dialing Liam. Making sure he's at the Shack with everyone. I'd like him there so he can have fun *and* we have security."

He'd kept this wedding private, away from the watchful eyes of the media, but he didn't want to venture far without Liam. Word was bound to spread over St. Simons sooner or later that a royal wedding had occurred.

Though he felt sure they were safe for one more day, he didn't want to risk it. Two Royal Air Force planes had crossed the Atlantic in less than a week. Surely they'd alerted someone, somewhere.

"Liam, we're on our way to the Shack. Yes, see you there." Nathaniel tucked his phone in his jeans pocket. "Suz, love, you ready?"

**She bounded into the room glowing and beautiful, free and sweet. He hooked her with one arm and kissed her. "Want to walk on the beach later?"**

**"Whatever you desire, Your Majesty."**

**"Whatever I desire?" He nuzzled her neck. "You . . ."**

**Susanna laughed softly and leaned into him for another kiss as he fumbled for the doorknob. As he swung it open wide, a gush of cool, fresh air swirled around them, along with the battering sound of a dozen camera shutters.**

**Photographers flooded the front veranda, the lawn, and down the driveway.**

**"King Nathaniel, is it true you were married last night?"**

**"Your Majesty, if Susanna is still an American citizen, how does this impact your monarchy?"**

**"Susanna, King Nathaniel, look this way, this way . . ."**

**Nathaniel slammed the door shut, grimacing at Susanna, anger boiling in his bones. "I'm sorry, love, but our honeymoon is over."**



## **KING NATHANIEL II IN BREACH OF MARRIAGE ACT; PARLIAMENT TO TAKE ACTION**

**THE KING'S POLITICAL OPPONENTS HEAT UP: "HIS MARRIAGE TO THE AMERICAN DEFIES OUR LAWS"**

**BRIGHTON WEDDING NOT GOOD ENOUGH FOR OUR KING? PEOPLE OUTRAGED AT AMERICAN WEDDING**

**In the Parliament Debate Box, a windowless anterior room outside the Senate and Commons joint chambers, King Nathaniel faced off with Prime Minister Brock Bishop, Susanna standing beside him. "You can't be serious."**

**"Most serious." Brock crossed his arms with a smug glance at his vice minister. "You knew what you were doing, Your Majesty. Why are you surprised Parliament is outraged? Not to mention, you robbed your people of seeing their first reigning king marry in three hundred years."**

**"So you're demanding my throne?" After the paparazzi surprise on St. Simons Island—Nathaniel had yet to discover who leaked the wedding—the Brightonian media exploded with stories, opinions, documentaries, online polls about the American ceremony.**



**Days and days of unrelenting coverage.**

**“Mr. Bishop.” Susanna spoke with reverence and honor. “I was very reluctant to give up my American citizenship, but I’ve come to realize it’s not what defines me. Nor does a Brighton citizenship. Sure, it’s hard to give up something that’s been a part of me before I was born, but I am taking the Brighton Oath of Allegiance tomorrow morning and renouncing my American ties. So what’s the harm here?”**

**“Harm? That our king went behind our back, defied the law, and married a foreigner without her having taken the oath of citizenship. Never mind the renunciation of your civil ties to America.” Brock motioned for his aide to hand him a document. “Many already see this as a compromise with another nation. The influence has started. The Liberal-Labor Party in the House of Senators is demanding you step down from the throne.”**

**“Pardon? *Demanding?*” Nathaniel snatched the document, his blood boiling as he read the word TREASON scrawled across the top of the page. “You are out of your mind, Brock.” He tossed the paper to the floor. “You cannot charge me with treason for defying a writ. Especially when the Marriage Act states I’m allowed to marry whomever I wish.”**

**“As long as His Majesty’s government approves.”**

**“Which it did. Last May.”**

**“Well, your new government placed conditions which you blatantly ignored. Naturally, you’ll remain a member of the royal family after you abdicate, but we are asking you to vacate your throne immediately.”**

**“Brock, you blasted idiot! How does this accomplish your goals to be rid of a monarchy? Stephen will just take my place.” Nathaniel had had enough of the politicking, the media, the**

naysayers, and his government using Susanna to get to him. "My marriage to Susanna on Friday was our business. Between us. When we wed here, in Brighton, we will be within the law."

"I fear it's too little, too late." Brock retrieved the petition for abdication. "We are moving forward with this action. As for your brother, we have plans there as well."

"So you're accomplishing your mission. To rid Brighton of a royal throne."

"I've never denied my sentiments toward the monarchy." He shifted his shoulders, adjusting the set of his jacket on his shoulders. "It's archaic. From another century. It's time has come to an end."

Nathaniel met the prime minister's gaze with his own rock-hard resolve. "Then shall we adjourn to Parliament?"

The morning session was just beginning. By next week, final government business was to be concluded before Parliament's spring recess. Just in time for the wedding.

Brock hesitated with a slight hint of surprise. As if he weren't expecting Nathaniel to take action. "Certainly, Your Majesty."

"You bring the petition and I'll address the assembly." Nathaniel reached around for Susanna. "Care to join us?"

Brock cast a shadow over them through the dark aura of his heart, then left the chamber.

Susanna shuddered. "Oh Nathaniel, how did he ever get to be prime minister?"

"He's head of the Labor Party. They formed a coalition with the Liberal Party for the elections. They secured the most seats in the House of Senators and thus Brock became prime minister."

"Does he hate you?"

**“In his way, yes. But you know, Susanna, I’ve come to learn as king that whenever I meet someone I don’t like or understand, I put a big X on them and remind myself, ‘There’s treasure buried here.’ ”**

**“Nathaniel, that’s brilliant.”**

**“So while Brock puzzles me and feels like my enemy, I remind myself that somewhere in all the supposed venom, there’s treasure.”**

*Lord, help me find the treasure . . .*

**Nathaniel led the way out of the room, reaching back for Susanna’s hand, and took the stairs toward the grand central chamber, bypassing his robing room because he wanted to keep the Houses off-kilter for this debate.**

**At the mezzanine level, he entered through the King’s Door and sat on his red velvet and teak throne overseeing the bright, round room with its atrium ceiling and gleaming paneled walls.**

**He motioned for Susanna to sit in the seat on his left. The Parliament thrones. Handcrafted from Brighton oak three hundred years ago and covered with thick red velvet.**

**“Here?” She pointed to the Queen’s Seat.**

**He chuckled at Susanna’s very overwhelmed expression. “Yes, and don’t worry, love. All is well.”**

**“Too late,” she whispered. “I am worried. What are you going to say?”**

**“The truth. Remind them of a few things.” He wiggled his eyebrows. “I come with a few punches of my own.”**

**Brock had slipped on his speaker robe and white wig and was now taking the podium. “We’ve before this Parliament a decree of treason against King Nathaniel II of Brighton.”**

He recounted the issue and Nathaniel held himself in check, trying not to shake his head in disgust or scoff at the ridiculousness of it all. He would act like a king. Impartial. Even in cases against him.

When Brock finished his diatribe, Nathaniel stood, bareheaded without his crown or his robes. He needed no symbol on his head other than God's delight and the love of his wife.

"Members of this esteemed parliament, I concede I married Susanna while she was an American. Out of love and deference to her. To prove my love was unconditional. She, in return, has offered all we and our law demand. She is ready to surrender her American citizenship and become a Brightonian. With no conditions. But knowing this, what do you do, slap me with a charge of treason? That is a serious charge and, according to our law, one not to be uttered lightly, as I believe it has been done here today." He paused to survey the room and many heads bobbing in agreement. "Let me remind you that if I am deposed for no other reason than that I married an American on American soil, our government will be dissolved. A new one will have to be formed. Your seats, earned by hard work and campaigning, will be gone. You'll have to begin again. In fact, our entire political existence will have to begin again. Because our prime minister has informed me he plans to rid Brighton of its monarchy."

The room rumbled. Men and women shifting in their seats. Leaning toward one another with bold whispers.

Nathaniel went on. "I remind you that our trade and peace accords will be dissolved. Not by my choosing, but by our own laws, if the monarchy is removed. All will be wrestled over and reestablished. Brighton will go on, but who will be our leader? Who will establish a new constitution? Brock Bishop? The man leading us toward chaos?

**“Brighton Kingdom, which has found economic stability in the past year, will have our front door, back door, and every window in the house open to our enemies, known and unknown while you scramble to reform a government.” He tapped the podium. “So as you debate this issue and cast your vote, keep those details in mind. And know that the House of Stratton will continue to stand. With or without me as King of Brighton.**

**“Meanwhile, Susanna will be at the Justice House swearing in as a full, complete, and proud Brightonian citizen. Good day to you all.”**

**As he departed, trembling beneath his suit, Susanna slipped her hand into his. “Brilliant, babe. My heart is swelling with pride.”**

**Then he heard the rumbling and shaking of the assembly floor by shouts and stomping feet.**

**Then at last, the one-chorus royal approval, “Hurrah!”**



## **WEDDING DAY!**

**A ROYAL WEDDING IN BRIGHTON: KING NATHANIEL MARRIES THE LOVE OF HIS LIFE**

**BRIGHTON WARMING UP TO SUSANNA TRUITT: "SHE'S OUR PRINCESS; SHE MAKES THE KING HAPPY"**

**WATCHMAN ABBEY**

**MARCH 21**

**S**usanna stood at the palace window, gazing down onto the street, overflowing with Brighton citizens who were waiting for a glimpse of the bride. Of her.

Butterflies and bees battled in her belly. Joy wrestled with anxiety.

Her swearing in as a Brighton citizen was heralded on the front page of the *Liberty Press* with the headline "America's Loss Is Our Gain. Welcome, Princess Susanna." She clipped that headline and tucked it into her Bible to read on the hard days, in the moments of doubt. Though she'd always be an American at heart, born and bred, she felt a certain newness in her soul about being a Brightonian.

At the light knock on the door, she turned back into the room. Her lady's maid stepped aside for Daddy to enter, looking dapper and smart in his tuxedo with a white cravat and waistcoat.

"Don't you look handsome." He'd even slicked back his hair.

"You're even more beautiful the second time around, kitten." Daddy joined her at the window. "You nervous?"

"A little." They leaned in unison to peer outside. For as far as the eye could see, people filled the streets, gathering under the Brighton banners snapping from every lamppost. A barricade of dark-uniformed police officers held them all in check.

"Shee doggies, that's a lot of people, Suz."

"And we have to drive through *that* to get to the abbey."

"Speaking of, it's time to go. Avery and your mama just left for the church. They'll meet us there." Daddy squeezed her hand. "Come on, this is a piece of cake. You're an old married lady of two weeks now."

She exhaled and made her way toward the door, picking up her bouquet of white roses.

"I'm not sure being married for a hundred years could prepare me for that crowd out there."

"Remember this, Susanna. They are all for you. Cheering you on. Did you see the headlines this week? Seems the press is coming over to your side."

"They've been kind this week." She smiled and took his hand. "Let's get this show on the road."

With Daddy, Susanna maneuvered down the palace steps, her ivory organza and tulle skirt taking up nearly half the width of the staircase. The fitted bodice with the Cinderella neckline was made of organza and handcrafted lace. And she wore the Princess Crown, designed by Cartier in 1860 for the royal family.

Today, all the world would judge her beauty and her fashion sense. Was she ready? She quelled a blip of nerves by calling up a memory from her garden wedding at Christ Church. Then she remembered Gracie and Ethan, Granny and Grandpa, along with parishioners, family, and friends who were gathering on the grounds right now to watch her wedding. Again.

Then she remembered the man waiting for her at the abbey.

He was so worth it all.

In the palace drive, just beyond the doors, a white carriage with red and gold wheels stood waiting. Four footmen dressed in breeches and buckle shoes helped her ascend the carriage steps and settle in beside her father. The moment the carriage left the palace with security officers riding beside the coach on dark, curried mounts, the abbey bells began to ring through the crisp air, pealing a wedding sound through all of Brighton.

The noise of the crowd rose to a fevered pitch.

Susanna waved and smiled, a peace beyond understanding rising in her heart. This was her destiny. What God created her to do and be. And at the end of this life journey with Nathaniel, she'd meet another amazing King face-to-face: Jesus.

Daddy leaned toward her, laughing, shouting, "I think they like you, Suz."

"And I'm starting to love them."

Once they arrived at Abbey Road, she stepped out of the coach with Daddy's aid, pausing for the photographers. She'd given permission to each approved media outlet to send one photographer to walk with her, at a distance, as she made her way down a carpeted path to the abbey's entrance. It was tradition for the bride to walk from the road to the church on a red velvet runner.



Besides, this was Brighton's day as much as hers and Nathaniel's. *Their* day, their *first* wedding, would always be a private, special memory.

Avery met Susanna at the beginning of the walk and helped her lower her veil. When Daddy offered his arm, Avery picked up Susanna's long train and they commenced the slow processional. As they made their way toward the ancient church down the path lined with hornbeam trees and potted hyacinth and hydrangea, the people cheered.

*We love you, Susanna.*

The walk stopped at the abbey's ivy-covered walls where the archbishop met them, looking regal in his intricately embroidered robes. The Royal Brighton Orchestra began to play, filling the abbey with the notes of their own unique wedding song.

"Ready?" Daddy said, holding on to Susanna as much as she was holding on to him.

"Yes, I am. Very much."

Together they followed the archbishop down the long, red-carpeted nave.

Susanna's heart fluttered at the first sight of Nathaniel waiting for her on the altar steps, amazing-looking in his own dark blue naval uniform replete with ribbons and medals, his silky hair clipped and trimmed, shining in the soft light.

When she arrived before him, he bowed ever so slightly and reached for her hand. "You are stunning."

With all the warm confidence of love, she held his hand and followed him up the steps, never looking back, never feeling so comfortable and safe as she did right now. In the garden of her husband's heart.



1. **Susanna has given up everything to marry King Nathaniel. But when he tells her that she has to give up her American citizenship, it pushes her over the edge. Some of my missionary friends feel very proud and possessive of the American heritage and citizenship. Giving it up would be letting go of their last hold on home. How do you feel about this? Would you hesitate to give up your citizenship—your last piece of “you”?**
2. **The reverend reminds Susanna that her citizenship is really in heaven. Not Brighton or America. This revelation is something I try to meditate on. I’m of the kingdom of our Lord and His Christ. What about you? Has this reality impacted you? How does it change the way you live?**
3. **Nathaniel has a romantic wound. The public rejection of Lady Adel. It causes him to hesitate with Susanna. But he faces his fear when he sets up the surprise wedding. Is there a wound in your past that causes you to be afraid of something or someone? Even the Lord?**
4. **Love and marriage require a lot of giving, a lot of commitment. Susanna surrendered everything for love. Love is worth our all. Don’t we see this in Jesus’s birth, death, and resurrection? How He became His own creation because of love. How can we be more like Him? He’s worth giving up everything for love.**

**5. The Bible tells us that love covers a multitude of sin. It also enables us to trust and give, allows us not to cling to our own ways. We see this in the blending of low-country Georgia culture and European royal culture at the wedding reception. How can growing confident in His love for you enable you to love others more?**

## *An Excerpt from A February Bride*

**If wedding dresses could talk, Allie Andrews was fairly certain hers would have a sailor's mouth.**

**Four months later—to the day, actually, after she'd shucked out of her wedding dress in the backseat of the meant-to-be honeymoon car and gunned it down the highway with nothing but a bottled Yoo-hoo and her favorite faded jeans for company—the dress hung on the inside of her closet door, the once small tear in the seam now gaping and taunting her. Every time she opened the closet, that rip reminded her how she'd severed one of the few relationships in her life actually worth keeping.**

**Which was precisely why she had to give it away in the first place.**

**Allie grabbed her favorite purple sweater, the one she often wore to work at her antiques store since the air conditioner in the quirky old building refused to shut off year round, and tugged it over her head. She could use all the cozy comfort she could get today at lunch with Hannah. She'd put it off long enough. After ditching her best friend's brother at the altar, she'd fully expected Hannah to hold a grudge. Hannah's unconditional love expressed through multiple phone calls and text messages had been almost worse than the cold shoulder—harder to face than a much deserved grudge—which was probably why she'd been avoiding this meeting.**

**Besides, Hannah looked so much like her brother.**

Allie's arm brushed against the dress as she adjusted her sweater, and the frothy number swayed on its padded hanger. The swish of the fabric only seemed to whisper more condemnation.

With a groan, she shut the closet door harder than necessary. She should just get rid of the thing, but it wouldn't be worth the wrath of her mother, grandmother, and aunt. Yet even though they all threatened her within an inch of her life if she sold the dress or threw it away, not one of them would store it at her own house. *"It belongs to you now, and will until you wear it. Then you pass it down to your daughter."*

Right. A daughter? Not at this rate.

And zero hope of getting over what she did to Marcus. Even if it was for his own good.

A knock sounded on her apartment door, and Allie dashed to get it, checking her watch. She needed to leave in less than ten minutes if she didn't want to be late, and with a long-time friendship already riding on this lunch, she really shouldn't push it by appearing like she didn't care. She pulled the door open.

Hannah, looking at once like her best friend and a total stranger in a pink cashmere sweater and skinny jeans tucked into boots. She looked great—like she hadn't lost her best friend or spent the past several months comforting a broken-hearted brother at all.

Maybe Allie hadn't mattered all that much to begin with.

"I was just heading out to meet you." Allie cautiously opened the door wider to allow her friend inside, bracing herself for . . . something. And not just the chill of the January air that rushed to meet her despite the heated hallway. "Did I mess up the time?"

She took a step backward, and the heel of her boot caught on the striped rug under her feet. Maybe Hannah had changed her mind and decided to tell her off privately instead. Maybe she'd

realized a polite lunch in public was way more considerate than Allie deserved.

"I couldn't wait another minute to tell you." Hannah shoved her left ring finger in Allie's face and let out an excited squeal. "I'm engaged!" She jumped up and down, her curly dark hair bouncing against her shoulders.

*Engaged.*

The word twisted in Allie's throat and refused to rise to her lips. "That's . . . that's . . ."

What was it? Surprising? Not really. Hannah and Zach had been dating for about six months, but she supposed not everyone had to be together for several years before tying the knot. A long courtship hadn't exactly worked out for her and Marcus . . .

"I know, right?" Hannah pushed past Allie and sank down onto the arm of the overstuffed turquoise chair, exactly as she'd done a million times over the years. As if it were that easy to pick up. Like the past few months hadn't changed everything.

Maybe they hadn't.

Hannah held up her hand again, this time keeping it steady enough for Allie to focus on the significant princess-cut carat adorning her finger. "Zach is perfect. Well, no, he's not. He's pretty much a slob, and we don't like any of the same movies." She snorted a laugh. "But we're perfect together."

Allie slowly sank to the edge of the couch near Hannah. "Right. I understand." Sort of. She'd never felt like anything between Marcus and herself had been perfect. He was perfect, to be sure. As much as any six foot, dark haired, chocolate-eyed, car loving athletic guy could be. The problem had been Allie. She'd been the one to fall short, thanks to her family—and the curse that ran through her blood.

Once upon a time, when gazing into Marcus's eyes and feeling the heady weight of that diamond on her finger, she'd thought she could break the family scourge. Break the effect of the words her mom had whispered when Stepdad #2 had roared off on his Harley, and when Stepdad #4 had slammed the door on his way to the bus stop, and when unofficial Stepdad #5 had plucked his clothes from the front yard and shoved them into a trash bag before calling a taxi.

*"Remember, Allie, this is what Andrews women do. We break hearts before we get ours broken."*

She could still remember the firm set of her mother's lips, the expressionless twist of her eyebrows, the wall of steel in her eyes. It was the same look Grandma had when anyone mentioned her first or second husband, and the same look Aunt Shelly got when she announced she was meeting another man from her online dating profile.

If a leopard couldn't change its spots and a zebra couldn't change its stripes, who was Allie to change her blood?

Since Marcus was way too gentlemanly to break a promise or dodge a bullet, she'd been the one forced to remove him from the line of sight.

A point no one seemed to understand.

Hannah grinned. "Of course you get it. I knew you would, since you've been engaged . . ." Her voice trailed off, and she averted her gaze to the carpet. "I didn't mean to bring that up. Honest."

Her eyes radiated sincere regret, and Allie relaxed slightly. No firing squads. Just good ol' Hannah. "I was thinking George."

Hannah gave her a sharp glance, her brown eyes, as vivid as Marcus's, sparkling suspiciously beneath her furrowed brow. "What are you talking about?"

**“Maybe Bob.”**

**“I don’t get it.” Her voice hitched. “Are these guys you’ve dated since—”**

**“Calm down.” Allie winked. “I’m just trying to name that elephant in the corner. He’s been sitting there since you walked in, so I thought we ought to give him a collar and a home.”**

**Hannah stared at her a minute longer before her lips quivered into a hesitant smile, then morphed into a full-out grin. “Funny. You had me there.” She straightened her shoulders and arranged her features into a deadpan mask. “Clearly, though, he’s a Steve.”**

**“Steve it is.”**

**That hadn’t been so hard. Maybe her years of friendship with Hannah demanded loyalty in spite of the sibling relationship.**

**Not that she would ever ask Hannah to choose—in fact, that was why she had refused all contact with her friend all these months. She didn’t want to put her in an even more awkward position. And Marcus had enough to deal with without her creating family drama for him.**

**But the fact that Hannah was right here in her living room meant maybe they could find their way around this. After all, it wasn’t like she’d have to see Marcus if she and Hannah remained friends. Maybe he wouldn’t even have to know.**

**“Anyway, Steve wasn’t why I came. You’ve made it clear you don’t want to talk about that, and I’ll respect your wishes.” Hannah rose from the chair and began to pace the small living area, pausing every few feet to nervously rearrange a knick-knack on the mantel or straighten the royal purple pillows on the couch Allie had recently recovered. “I came to ask a favor.”**

**“Anything.” The word leapt from Allie’s grateful lips before she could self-edit. She really would do anything to get her**



relationship with Hannah back, to grasp something good and familiar during this dismal season in her life. Maybe she'd brought it on herself, but that didn't make everything any easier to cope with.

Because one fact remained—if she'd run down the aisle instead of to her car that day, she'd have been married for four months right now. She and Marcus would probably be getting ready to go to a celebration dinner, where he'd have sneaked a card under her dinner plate or arranged for the chef to make a heart with cherry tomatoes in her salad. That was Marcus. Considerate. Romantic. Always thinking.

No question, she had done him a favor. They might have made it a few months, but they wouldn't have made it a few years. No one in her family had ever made it past three—and good grief, they'd all given it multiple tries.

"I'm glad you said that." Hannah's voice, and the squeak of a glass vase against the coffee table as her friend absently redesigned the floral arrangement, jerked Allie away from her thoughts. She wondered if Hannah realized that the vase had taken the place of the giant framed engagement photo of her and Marcus snuggled under an oak tree. "Because my favor is sort of big."

Couldn't be as big as Steve.

"You know how I've always wanted a Valentine's Day wedding."

Hannah's eyes gleamed, and Allie could almost see cartoonish, pulsing pink hearts shooting out of her gaze.

"Well, that means we only have about six weeks. Actually, more like five."

"Five weeks. Wow, you're right. That *is* soon." Allie knew better than to assume there was a secret reason, though others surely

would speculate. Marcus would hate those rumors about his sister. He'd always been so protective of the women in his life.

"Really soon. So there's no time to lose." Hannah took a deep breath and twisted her ring on her finger.

"Whatever it is, I'm in." *I owe you.* The words faded from her tongue but still burned an aftertaste. She did owe her friend. Whatever Hannah needed, it was Allie's turn to support *her*. After all, Hannah had reluctantly honored Allie's desperate request to give her time and space after the wedding-that-wasn't, time and space from all things Marcus-related. Hannah had met her several hours after Allie sped away from the church that day to pick up Marcus's car, and their brief conversation had been tear-filled and beyond awkward. But Allie needed the chance to process her decision, and in allowing her that time, Hannah had given her a gift that beat all the premium toasters and coffee makers in the world. Allie'd had to return those to the store, so it was the least she could do to return this favor for Hannah and keep their friendship alive.

Besides, what could be so bad? If Hannah's obvious willingness to bury the hatchet was anything to go by, this opportunity—whatever it may be—could be the catalyst to proving her ability to remain loyal to at least one member of the Hall family. And having Hannah around again would ease that unbearable loneliness that had taken over these past few months. There was no reason they couldn't rekindle their friendship apart from her brother. No reason for her to have to be around him at all, really.

"I want you to be my maid of honor."

Except maybe that reason.



The story continues in *A February Bride* by Betsy St. Amant.



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