

The princess and me

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Charlli fell in love.
The world decided it was a problem.

Lizsta

There are many people who believe in me. But only one has to live with me and has to deal with all the hours I spent writing and drinking coffee. So I guess he deserves a little bit of credit. Thank you, I love you.

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1 Daydreaming

Prince Louis had been to a gala, and there were plenty of photos to admire. He had gone there with his sisters. As always, my attention was fixed on the prince, but whenever the three royal siblings appeared together in a photo, I admired all of them. The whole family was simply perfect. And then there was that thought. The thought that I could put on a ball gown, have my make-up done flawlessly, wear a beautiful tiara and fit perfectly into that family. My arm elegantly looped through Prince Louis's, while his sisters approvingly looked at me.

'Charlli, Earth to Charlli.'

Prince Louis's voice sounded all wrong. I blinked. Just in time to see a cushion flying my way, too late to dodge it.

'Ouch.' The zip of the cushion hit my nose, and I grimaced as I rubbed the sore spot.

'You were daydreaming again. I said; are you coming to eat? It's getting cold.' My flatmate Stella pouted her lips. A trick she often used on her boyfriend Michael. Somehow he always fell for it.

I threw the cushion back at Stella, who skillfully caught it and tossed it into our old, pink, fake-leather sofa. The white, green, and burgundy-spotted cushions Stella had picked up at a clearance sale clashed horribly with it, but they'd been there so long now that they somehow belonged together.

Pretty much everything in my flat was second-hand or bought in sales. My kitchenware had been collected over the years through supermarket promotions by mom so not a single piece matched another. The chairs around the kitchen table were unique in my flat meaning no two were the same. I'd found them at different flea markets. Each one was lovely on its own, in orange or dark grey, but I hadn't considered that they'd have to fit as a set. The oak buffet cabinet and dining table had belonged to my grandmother. When I moved in after her passing, they'd simply been too heavy to move out. Two windows in the living room let in lots of light on sunny days but were not sufficiently against the many dark days Belgium was known for. Today was one of those days. Stella had created a few pools of candlelight; in second-hand holders, of course that worked perfectly for coziness.

The doorbell rang. Stella dashed past me and pressed the buzzer without looking.

'That could have been a serial killer!' I called after her while setting the table. In my tiny flat, where the kitchen and living room were squashed into one square space, I really didn't need to bother shouting.

'Relax, Charlli. Bet I could take him down in one move. No one dares to mess with me.' She flexed her arm muscles, which made a small difference, and sat down at the table. She took the first pancake from the freshly baked stack and sprinkled a spoonful of brown sugar over it.

Michael walked in. Stella puckered her lips and stayed that way until he kissed her. Only then did he glance at me.

'Charlli.' He sounded a bit grumpy as he sat down and nodded at Stella. 'Have you told her yet?'

Stella shook her head. 'I wanted to wait for you.' She leaned in for a kiss—then another—and finally looked at me. 'Have you ever been to The Manta Islands?'

My heart skipped a beat at the mention of that name, and suddenly I was far too warm. 'Never been. But I did give a school presentation on them in Year Six.' That one presentation that changed everything, the moment I first discovered Prince Louis. I tried to sound casual about it. 'Why?'

'Perfect, then you can be my guide. All I know is that there are lots of islands and it's always sunny. Are you free the first weekend of April?' It sounded as if she were offhandedly asking if I fancied a trip to the Manta Islands—coincidentally one of my biggest dreams? Was she serious? 'Realto Company has been nominated for a major environmental award. I get to accept it at a big garden party on the Manta Islands. I led the project and...' she paused to beam proudly, '...I get two tickets to personally receive the prize if we win.' She bounced in her chair with excitement and looked at me expectantly.

'That's on my gran's ninetieth birthday, and my mum will kill me if I miss it,' Michael added quickly. He didn't look particularly thrilled.

'Oh, sweetheart, we'll go another time. Or to another warm place. I don't mind where, as long as it's with you.' Stella perched on Michael's lap and kissed him lightly.

That gave me a moment to hide my tears. Every one of those

fifty-seven islands was smaller than four square kilometers. I could practically smell the opportunities to bump into my prince. We could tour the royal palaces, go out to a club he frequented, or... 'I can definitely come, right.'

Stella nodded with a smile and turned her focus back to her pancake. Hunger had overtaken lust again. I, however, had lost my appetite completely.

'Tell her that other thing,' Michael urged.

'Other thing? Oh yes, that.' She looked at me. 'Do you know who the king of those islands is?'

The word king gave me goosebumps. All over.

'No, not the king. His three children are the ones handing out the awards—Victoria, Elisabeth and... what's the other one called? The blond one?'

'Louis?'

'Yes!' she snapped her fingers. 'That's him.'

I could barely breathe. Instinctively, I knew this was it. My life was about to change. There would be a Charlli before that meeting — beloved friend, fun sister, good daughter — and a Charlli after that meeting, perfect wife, mother, and princess. A few years after my parents had flat-out refused to let me study on the Manta Islands because it was too expensive, I'd finally get to meet him. After all those years of trying to convince my friends to travel there with me because I'd been too much of a coward to go alone.

While Stella and Michael snuggled up on the sofa, I fled to my room. After carefully closing the door, I flopped onto my bed and unzipped my jeans. My imagination did the rest.

Despite the small effort—or perhaps because of it—I was bursting with energy. My first instinct, as always, was to look up photos and news about Prince Louis. Preferably from birth until now. But somewhere in the back of my mind, a new thought crept in. If I wanted to seem spontaneous when I met him, it might be better not to research him anymore. Maybe even trying to forget some things about him. Good luck with that. My energy still buzzed, so jogging seemed like a good idea. After three attempts—spending over ten minutes trying to get my head through the armhole—I finally managed to put on my sports top. The jogging bottoms were easier; I only fell once.

'I'm going for a run!' I shouted to the couple behind me.

'Have you already run a marathon? You're blushing,' Michael laughed.

I tied my trainers extra tight to hide my embarrassment. How much noise did I make?

'What have you been doing?' Stella asked, looking up from the sofa. 'The TV was on loud, and we still heard weird noises. I was about to check if you were all right.'

'Are you spying on me? I hear you two often enough.' That should be enough to shut down any more questions.

'That was just once,' Stella defended herself. 'My bed's in a completely different position now. And wear a scarf; it's cold outside!'

A soft drizzle fell, the kind that was usually a pain to run in, but today it helped clear my thoughts. Finally, my wedding was coming. Far-fetched, maybe, but true. I was going to marry Prince

Louis — out of love and a little bit of lust, not for the fame. At first, our relationship would be a secret. Meanwhile, I'd stay in Belgium and keep working. We'd fill the time apart with old-fashioned, romantic love letters until the news broke to the public. Perhaps all the media attention would get annoying after a while, but we'd get through it. We'd marry, have children, and live happily ever after. I was ready.

2 Speeches

Above the shreds of clouds I saw a vividly coloured and wondrous sunset. It amazed me that I was the only one on the plane that was glued to the little window. A few rows ahead, a man even had the nerve to close his curtain. Even long after sunset, I kept looking at the sky. Millions of lights sparkled in a fairy-tale pattern. Even the dark patch that formed the sea enchanted me. It was almost a pity that the plane began its descent. Then I thought of Prince Louis, who was somewhere in this country, and warmth spread through me.

We stepped through the revolving doors of the airport, and immediately, despite the late hour, a heavy warmth descended upon us. Before I could take off my cardigan—one arm out, the other still in—Stella zigzagged through the moving crowd towards a man in a black suit who was holding a sign that read "Stella Verhulst." He greeted us with a tap of his cap and took our luggage. The chauffeur led the way to a gleaming BMW—though I had secretly hoped for a limousine—and opened the door. The leather seats creaked under our weight and felt cool against my sticky skin. For a prince or princess, this was daily life.

We drove past a beach where the water of the Atlantic Ocean shimmered under the light of a cloudless sky and a brilliant full moon. 'This is nothing like all those flat blocks back home. It's like a fairy tale,' mused Stella. She leaned over my legs to peer out with

me.

The car stopped on a busy road packed with flats and offices. Our hotel fitted neatly into the row of shiny windows and polished lobbies. Next to the door hung a golden plaque with the hotel's name and four stars beneath it. Our room was small but very chic, every detail luxuriously finished. The window stole all attention. The buildings across the street were lower, giving us a spectacular view of the beach, the sea, and hundreds of twinkling lights. In the distance, the outlines of two other islands traced the horizon. On either side of the hotel stretched a tangle of large and small streets, dotted with little squares where, despite the late hour, crowds of people gathered to enjoy a lovely evening.

'Okay, we can live with this. And we're so close to the beach; we really have to go there.' Stella came to stand beside me and gasped when she saw the view.

I considered our options. 'We have to check out the bar.'

Stella wiggled her nose, a sign she was thinking hard.

'Tomorrow's a big day. It's already past midnight, and we have to be at the event by two. There's hair and make-up before that, and it's quite a drive...'

'One more drink?'

The salon Stella had booked for our makeover was exactly an eleven minute walk. Since we left at ten to ten, she set a brisk pace. The streets were busy, tourists strolled leisurely while businesspeople walked by in a quick pace. When we turned the corner, the sun shone down the street leading to the beach. Tourists outnumbered

the businesspeople now. They wandered lazily or sat at one of the many terraces, enjoying a small breakfast. We zigzagged between the lightly dressed, relaxed people until Stella pulled me into another street. The tourist flow dropped away immediately.

The salon itself was nothing like I had imagined. From the outside, it blended in among the stately buildings, and unlike in Belgium, not a single flashy sticker of a hair model was plastered on the window. I pushed the door open and immediately felt underdressed in my neat tracksuit. The two ladies under the dryers wore fresh cocktail dresses and heavy make-up. They would have looked more at home at an evening party than in a salon. The women eyed us with raised noses.

'Oops,' Stella whispered at me, biting the inside of her cheek to stop herself from laughing. Colour was finally returning to her face. Perhaps we'd have been better off skipping those rum and colas last night. We both looked a little pale that morning. This makeover had better work wonders.

An hour later, my brown locks flowed in soft waves, the top half held back with a silver brooch I'd bought years ago at a flea market, dreaming it would one day suit a royal event. How insane that I actually got to wear it now! Prince Louis would take one look at me and immediately recognize his future wife. I could already see the engagement headlines. My hair would look just like this.

“Love at first sight. A fairytale couple. Made for each other.”

'Have you seen how much this cost us? Hello, Charlli? You're dreaming!'

I blinked and realised we were already back on the street.

Stella swung her hand so wildly she almost walked into a road sign.

'Watch out!' I yanked her aside. 'Who's dreaming now?'

'Okay, smartypants,' she shrugged as we stepped into the hotel. 'You dream so often I sometimes wonder where your head even is. I've noticed it before. Do you realise you do that?'

The lift doors closed, and I wished we could get out quickly. 'I wouldn't know,' I replied lightly.

The lift slid open, and the race against time began. We did our make-up ourselves because it would simply cost a fortune to have it done professionally. The Lycra undergarment I had to pull up almost to my armpits to smooth out every imperfection was painfully tight; I just hoped I wouldn't need the loo too soon. I should have gone earlier, and now it was all I could think about, damn it. Think as little as possible and drink even less.

The shiny black telephone on the bedside table rang. A neat, measured woman's voice answered, 'Madam, your vehicle has arrived.'

'Thank you, we'll be right down.' The call ended without a goodbye, so I hung up. 'Stella, the taxi iss here!' I tied the straps of my black sandals, which matched perfectly with my equally black bag. Stella burst out of the bathroom in a blue cocktail dress. I grabbed her matching clutch and started stuffing things inside. 'Your wallet won't fit. I'll just put your phone and ID in it.'

'Just do it. We need to go. We absolutely can't be late.'

A black Land Rover awaited us. The chauffeur tipped his cap in greeting. 'Mrs Douglas?'

Stella's face fell at once. 'Typical,' she sighed, casting a

desperate look at me. 'Do you think ours left without us? How are we supposed to get to the garden party?'

I bit my lip, hoping she was wrong. We weren't that late.

'Perhaps my colleague can assist you,' the chauffeur said, pointing to a black limousine behind him.

'Ladies, Realto Company?' The second chauffeur also tipped his cap.

'Hallelujah.' Stella clapped her hands, and I practically floated to the car. With a measured grin, the chauffeur opened the door for us.

'I could get used to this.' The grey leather seats were so soft I nearly drooled, and I lost all composure when I saw the minibar built into the leather. I opened it, only to find it empty. It hardly dampened my spirits, and Stella seemed equally delighted.

'That's typical for business trips. Where we're going, everyone throws money around. It's a whole different world, and I'm really curious what it'll be like, what kind of people we'll meet and...' She suddenly fell silent, staring straight ahead.

I suspected nerves and searched for a way to distract her. 'Let's hear your victory speech.' A pause, then Stella's mouth opened, and a low, strange groan escaped her. Even beneath the make-up, she turned a shade paler. 'You do have a speech, right? Winners always have to speech.'

She looked at me in horror. 'No one ever told me that,' she whispered, barely moving her lips.

'Maybe it's not that kind of event,' I suggested.

'Do you think so? That actually makes sense. Now that you

mention it...,' she squeaked. This was heading for disaster.

'Sir?' I said to the chauffeur, who glanced between the rear-view mirror and the road. 'Do you know the garden party we're going to?'

'Of course, it's very famous and coveted. You're lucky to be invited.'

'There's also an award ceremony. Do you know if any speeches are given?'

The man turned halfway round, resting one hand on the seatback. In the few seconds he ignored the traffic, four motorbikes coming from the right just managed to avoid him. The heavy jeep behind them didn't. It slammed right into our limousine

3 Bright green eyes

The seatbelt cut into me, and my left ankle throbbed painfully. It felt as though someone was pushing down hard on it, trying to snap the bone. The car skidded a few meters further and came to a screeching halt. I quickly unclicked my belt and looked around. 'Stella...' The empty passenger seat beside the driver had taken the worst of the blow, which gave me a sliver of hope. Stella sat bent forward so that only her messy bun was visible. Her back rose and fell rapidly and unevenly.

The doors flew open. At every doorway stood a man with a drawn pistol, and someone grabbed my sore shoulder roughly and yanked me out of the car. 'Hands on the car, legs apart!'

'What—'

'Quiet!' A police officer frisked me; his hands missed no spot, and I couldn't help wondering how legal this was.

I stretched my stiff neck to catch a glimpse of Stella and the chauffeur, who were in exactly the same position on the other side of the car. Stella was trembling like a leaf. I tried to catch her eye to reassure her.

'Slowly turn around, both hands in the air.' Following their orders, I turned—like some wanted bank robber, or at least that's how it felt. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the car that had rammed us drive away. 'How is that possible? That is so unfair.'

The officer shot me a puzzled look. 'Stay quiet.' He ducked into the car, came out with Stella's handbag, and rifled through it. 'Stella Verhulst?' He asked while suspiciously studying the photo on her ID card.

'Other side.' At that moment another officer came running by with my handbag. They swapped identity cards and went back to their sides. This time the man nodded. His gaze fell on the invitation, which he examined carefully. He clicked his tongue. 'You're going to be late.'

'And whose fault is that?' Now that the first danger had passed, the thought struck me that I was going to miss my prince. The officers, however, kept me in place.

Three other men stepped out of the limousine and shook their heads. That seemed to relax the officer. He gathered Stella's belongings from the ground and put them back into her bag more neatly than I had done in the hotel room. Stella and the driver came around the car. The driver immediately went to inspect the damage at the front. 'Who's going to pay for this?' he barked, his face dark red, little drops of spit flying through the air.

'An official convoy must never be broken,' an officer replied at once.

The chauffeur spluttered with indignation before he fought back. 'An official convoy must always use sirens and flashing lights. There weren't any here.'

The officer's eyes widened, and he scratched his head. 'This is going to be tricky.' Behind me, a chorus of horns started up, louder and more frequent. In every direction the junction was

jammed with cars and vans as far as I could see. The crash had blocked the entire crossroads.

Stella and I sat down on the footpath as though that might somehow clear the road. The chauffeur and one of the officers buried themselves in paperwork, and the limousine was pushed to the side. A single officer remained in the middle of the junction, waving a glowing baton, and bit by bit the traffic began to move again. Stella reached for her neck with a painful grimace, which I began to massage. Gratefully, her hands dropped into her lap.

I'd missed the man of my life, and Stella was risking her job. How could it all have gone so wrong? What if Stella had internal injuries and I was making them worse by touching her neck? I stopped immediately.

'What's wrong? Are you all right? Are you hurt? Do we need to go to hospital?' She panicked. Her eyes were wide, her hair in wild disarray where it had fallen from the bun.

'We can go on,' the chauffeur called as he approached, rubbing his hands in satisfaction. 'Shall we continue? Is everything all right? I'm terribly sorry, I...'

'We have to go on. I have to get there. Life goes on, honestly. If we miss this... I... what will happen if we... I... I... Charlli?' She turned to me with a crazed look in her eyes.

I drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. 'Shall we?' I offered her my arm towards the battered limousine, ignoring the stabbing pain between my neck and shoulders. 'It's all right, we're just fashionably late. That's how it's supposed to be. We're probably the first to arrive anyway. All fancy people do that.' I took Stella in

my arms. The poor thing was shaking and couldn't speak. Then I buckled her seatbelt and fanned some cool air in her direction for the rest of the journey.

The car slowed, and Stella managed to pull herself together at just the right moment. After a quick make-up check, we were ready. Ahead of us loomed a whole queue of police officers. Every car was stopped, and we had to get out. Stella handed over her handbag without being asked, so I did the same. The man who took mine was the same officer who had frisked me earlier. This time he used a handheld metal detector, and someone checked beneath the car with a mirror. Unlike before, I was allowed to move on straightaway. Apart from a polite nod, he gave no sign of recognition. I was so confused.

'Now for the grand entrance.' The chauffeur held the door for us to get back in. A procession of cars—each larger and more impressive than the last—moved forward at walking pace. We followed an avenue flanked by neatly trimmed grass and towering trees behind it. On the left stood a long, old-fashioned stable filled with luxurious vehicles. Ahead of us, was a small roundabout packed with rose bushes. Beyond it rose a mansion set upon a flowered hill. The royal touch was in the snow-white walls, the golden statues appearing between every few windows, and the two Greek columns flanking a wide central staircase. I pressed my face to the window to take it all in. 'Patience,' said the chauffeur. He pulled on the handbrake, got out, and walked briskly—but with dignified posture—round the car to open our door.

My hand trembled as I placed it in his to step out.

'Nothing to fear, miss. No one will bite,' he said with a wink, helping me out gracefully. He repeated the same words to Stella.

She was still rather pale. 'Thank you for the ride, and I'm sor—'

The chauffeur waved away her apology. 'Let the insurance sort it out. When you're ready to leave, ask for Lincoln—the one with the dented car.' He nodded grimly towards his vehicle, tipped his cap, and drove off. I imagined him parking among the other cars, the laughing-stock of the lot.

Stella linked her arm through mine. My attention shifted to the immense staircase towering before us. Once we reached the top, we found a stunning glass hall stretching through the entire building and, a few meters ahead, opening between great Greek columns to reveal a view of a vast forest.

'Can you imagine having to do this every day? Actually, we do this at home every day. Wow, this place is incredible,' puffed Stella once we were at the top. On either side of us stood guards in what I assumed were ceremonial uniforms. The gold tassels embroidered on the shoulders of their green jackets wouldn't be much help in a real battle. Inside the hall, identical guards stood every two meters, each holding a golden staff. I marveled at the Greek columns as we walked through, and just as I noticed the frescoed ceiling, I walked straight into one of the guards.

'That way, madam,' he pointed his finger in the right direction.

The heart of the garden was a huge fountain spraying water several meters high. From it stretched four long channels, dividing

the grounds into a great cross. Elegant wooden bridges arched over them, though they were now closed to the public. The party was taking place in one quarter of the garden; the rest lay empty. White marquees served drinks, and on the right stood a small stage with dozens of neatly arranged chairs. The place teemed with elegantly dressed guests, and I immediately began scanning for my prince, though I couldn't pick him out among the crowd.

'Shall we?' Stella offered her arm so we could steady each other as we descended the steps in our stilettos, hoping not to tumble down. 'Which idiot of an architect thought it was a brilliant idea to put this many stairs here—and on the other side too?' she muttered. 'How hard can it be to level a little hill before you start building? If this place dates back to the Middle Ages, I hope they threw the architect to the lions.' Her breathing stayed uneven.

'Maybe you should take up dancing again,' I suggested once we reached the bottom. In the distance, I spotted Prince Henri, Louis's father—and immediately found it harder to breathe myself. Only then did it truly hit me: I had no idea how to talk to a prince. What if I saw him and couldn't say a word? What if I babbled like a lunatic? What if I started giggling or making strange snorting noises? What if I wandered around for hours without ever meeting him?

'Are you all right? Do we need to go to the hospital after all? You look awfully pale. We can still go, you come first, honestly. If we have to leave right now, we will.' Stella looked at me anxiously.

I knew she wanted to stay, but she also felt obliged to be a good friend. I felt exactly the same. 'I think I'm nervous,' I admitted.

We walked towards the stage set up in front of the fountain, where a man in a tailcoat, speaking with the poshest island accent I'd ever heard, was inviting the guests to take their reserved seats. We were shown to places in the third row on the left, right by the central aisle. 'I'm here for work,' muttered Stella. 'Every muscle in my body's turning to stone, and there's a real chance I'll have to get up on stage in stilettos. I'm allowed to stress. Why are you stressing?'

'We're sitting two rows behind the royal family. That's practically next to them.'

'My boss said only winners sit this close. And I still don't have a speech. Remember? You made me panic, the car crashed, we barely made it on time, and I still have no speech.'

I tore my gaze away from the royal family as they walked down the aisle. Prince Louis was first to reach the stage—the very first time I saw him in real life—but it was Stella who needed my attention. Whispering, I reeled off all the classic clichés of an acceptance speech. Stella mouthed the words silently.

'Ssh,' hissed the man beside me, turning with a look that could kill.

'You ssh yourself,' I shot back, a bit too loudly. Not only did the row in front of us look up, but Princess Elisabeth herself, who had just sat down, looked straight at me. I met her bright green eyes, and the only thought that flashed through my mind was that my children would have to inherit that stunning colour. They were breathtaking.

The moment was broken by Prince Louis, who urged her to pay attention. The royal family sat down, and two men beside the

stage signaled for everyone else to be seated. I was glowing with heat, and all I could see were the backs of Prince Louis's and Princess Elisabeth's heads. The vision of Aunt Elisabeth playing with my children twined itself through my thoughts.

The audience began to applaud, and I joined in a second later.

'Proud, thankful, hope...!' Stella muttered those words like a mantra as she set her handbag on the chair.

'You've got this,' I whispered.

Stella gave a faint smile and stepped onto the stage, where she received a certificate tied with a fancy red ribbon from Princess Victoria. She acted brilliantly. Now I could turn my eyes back to Prince Louis, sitting barely two rows ahead. He nodded approvingly, and my heart swelled with even greater pride. We were here together, and thanks to her, I could marry the man of my dreams. I couldn't have wished for a better friend.

Stella received a standing ovation from the audience. As she left the stage, Princess Victoria walked beside her, and they exchanged a few words. When Stella sat back down next to me, her hands were trembling, her face radiant. Bright green eyes followed our brief conversation attentively until once again Prince Louis had to remind Princess Elisabeth to pay attention. Was he jealous of our little moment? I turned my gaze back to Prince Louis. It struck me how easily he got along with his sister. Though both sat calmly and serenely, I could see them communicating through subtle gestures.

The ceremony was coming to an end. My moment was getting closer.

4 Sighing

After a final round of applause for all the winners, the royal family were the first to leave the stage and make their way to the garden party. Everywhere there was a hum of voices. The tension melted away.

'Phew...!' sighed Stella, wiping imaginary sweat from her forehead while reading through the certificate once more. 'My only obligation now is to get this thing safely to my boss so he can brag about it for all eternity.'

'We can do that... I think.' I needed alcohol...and my prince. Not necessarily in that order. 'We've already had a collision today. What else could possibly go wrong?'

'Don't say things like that! Not ever again. That's bad luck.' Stella clutched the certificate so tightly that her knuckles turned white, and I genuinely feared for the life of that elegant piece of paper.

Several people gathered round Stella to admire the certificate and chat, which gave me the perfect opportunity to look around unabashedly. Prince Louis stood about five groups away. He gestured animatedly, utterly absorbed in a story I would have given anything to hear. My brain worked at full speed, searching for a spontaneous and elegant way to reach him.

'Ahem, ladies, His Royal Highness Prince Henri.'

I turned around instantly and half-bowed, hoping to appear polite without actually knowing what to do. The sixty-two-year-old prince, with youthfully sparkling eyes, ignored my awkwardness—which I greatly appreciated—and offered his hand to Stella.

'Congratulations, young lady. My late wife founded this award, and I continue the tradition with love. You should be proud of your achievements.'

'I am, Sire. Though many people worked on this project. I'm merely a small cog in the whole machine.' She blushed and opened her mouth to say more, but someone gently tapped the prince on the shoulder.

'Take good care of it, young lady. Enjoy the rest of the day.' He shook Stella's hand once more and moved on. Left alone again, we burst into uncontrollable giggles.

'Never thought I'd be so impressed by an old man who only had three meagre sentences to say. So stupid. But impressive anyway.' Stella looked down at the certificate as though it were solid gold.

'I think I'll tell everyone back home how he ignored me... and how wonderful I thought it was.'

'What on earth was that ridiculous ballerina curtsy? It was over far too quickly. Now, where is that free champagne.' We grabbed two glasses of champagne and toasted to her great success. The stream of people wanting to speak to Stella gradually dried up, and two glasses later she suggested we leave.

'Shall we stay a bit longer? The champagne is really good.' Panic was already creeping through every inch of my body. Leaving

meant the inevitable end of a relationship that hadn't even begun. I was absolutely certain I would never get such a chance again. So we took a fresh glass of champagne and nibbled on the last cucumber sticks poking out of a porcelain cup. I was about to tell Stella about my new project at the dance school when the scent of sweet apples drifted past my nose.

'Good afternoon, ladies.' We both looked up. Princess Elisabeth stood right behind me.

'Hi,' I managed to mumble faintly. I realised too late that I was holding a piece of cucumber halfway to my mouth just as the princess extended her hand. I accepted it...cucumber and all. 'Oh, fu...my apologies.' I snatched a napkin and immediately began wiping the princess's hand. She stared at the absurd scene with wide eyes, trying—and failing—not to laugh.

'Charlli!' Stella shot me a look of despair while clutching the certificate as though someone might snatch it back at any moment.

I abruptly let go of the royal hand, which lingered awkwardly mid-air. 'Sorry.'

'Charlli—what a lovely name.' The princess laughed. 'I'm Elisabeth.' She extended her hand again. 'I just wanted to apologize for the accident earlier today. Are you both all right?' A deep crease appeared in her brow as she glanced at my shoulder. Following her gaze, I noticed a thick red mark about the width of a seatbelt. The moment I saw it, the spot began to sting uncomfortably.

'I don't understand—how do you...!' Stella stammered in confusion.

But the pieces were falling into place for me. 'You were in

the other car.'

A long, drawn-out 'oohh' escaped Stella.

'Were you in much trouble? I'd just asked my driver something and—'

'That's exactly what happened to us!' Stella exclaimed. That was all she needed to launch into the entire saga of our morning, right up to the moment we'd needed a chauffeur. Even through the smallest, most insignificant details, the princess listened with genuine interest. I tried to chime in with something witty or amusing, and while the two women smiled politely, my jokes landed in utter silence. I pretended that was intentional. I fell quiet and instead took the opportunity to study the princess more closely.

Her nails were beautifully manicured, painted a deep navy blue that perfectly matched her pale blue suit. Her hair hung loose and elegantly over her shoulders, as if it had taken no effort at all. Yet somehow, I sensed a great deal of care went into her effortless appearance. I inhaled deeply, committing the scent of her sweet apple perfume to memory so I could find it later, if I could afford it.

'And what do you do for a living?' the princess asked suddenly, turning her bright eyes towards me. Had she caught me staring?

'I, uh... reception... hospital. I'm a receptionist.' Even a two-year-old could have expressed himself better. I never had these problems in my dreams. Why was I such a wreck now?

'That must be interesting.' I suspected she'd had this sort of awkward encounter before, because she continued to look at me encouragingly. 'I see so many different people—at all possible

moments, in all possible stages of life.' A hand landed gently on the princess's shoulder, and my brain exploded on the spot. The princess jumped and turned to the culprit, and I followed her movement breathlessly.

'You always scare me like that.'

The man laughed and stepped neatly between his sister and me and immediately held out his hand. 'Louis.'

With a smoothness that astonished even me, I took it. 'Charlli. A pleasure to meet you.' His hand was warm and firm, perhaps a little too firm, as my arm dangled limply. Before I could recover, he released me and offered his hand to Stella. I would have given anything to melt into those strong arms, but my sense of reality held me back.

'These are the unfortunate ladies we collided with earlier,' said the princess, studying us more closely. Louis' eyes landed on my shoulder. I was nearly bursting with excitement.

'How can we convince you not to press charges?' he asked lightly.

'We can take a hit,' I stammered.

'You'd fit right in with the family, then,' he said approvingly. The yes was already on my lips.

'Imagine that,' murmured the princess.

I tried to determine whether he was teasing me or if he genuinely thought it was a possibility. Perhaps she would come to see that Prince Louis ought to dump the blonde bimbo he was currently dating straight away. Prince Louis began listing the fractures Princess Elisabeth had sustained over the years. Only the

broken ankle from a skiing accident sounded familiar; the rest was new information that I greedily absorbed. Stella chimed in about her own broken arm... three times over. The royal twins burst out laughing, which drove Stella straight onto the defensive. 'If you think about it, only one of them was actually my fault. When I was little, I 'borrowed' my big brother's skateboard. Everyone knew it would end badly, except me. One time a car hit me...'

'That seems to be your thing,' Princess Elisabeth interjected.

Unfazed, Stella continued. 'And a few years later, Charlli suddenly grabbed my bike brake while we were riding, and I flew at least three times over.'

Instantly, three pairs of eyes fixated me. 'I've apologized for that so many times! Besides, you got to come with us to a theme park afterwards, which made up for it.'

'Fair enough,' judged the prince.

'Not really. I was going anyway. That is bullshit.'

'Minor detail.'

'Were you the troublemaker at school? The one terrorizing the playground?' asked Princess Elisabeth, her enchanting eyes locked on mine.

The question caught me off guard that I had to think hard about something I should have known instantly. 'Absolutely not,' I declared firmly. 'Mum punished me enough to make sure I'd never forget. Sometimes when I sit down too fast, my bum still tingles.'

The princess laughed, and in response the prince began telling the story of the time the two of them had tried to sneak off their estate and how their mother had almost reacted in exactly the

same way. I'd read about that before, but hearing it from his own lips was far more captivating. They seemed almost normal. Like neighbors rather than foreign royalty. The nice neighbors, not the ones who parked across your spot in the underground garage. I began to relax; conversation flowed more naturally, and I even forgot to flirt with the prince.

Time slipped away. It felt as though I'd known them all my life and I was convinced they felt the same. Until a palace staff member came to inform the prince and princess that they had to leave.

'Already?' The prince looked at his watch in surprise. "It was lovely meeting you both, wasn't it, Elisabeth?"

'Only fate can tell if our paths will cross again.' The two shook our hands—warm, soft, lingering—and departed. I could have sworn I saw a hint of disappointment in the prince's eyes.

'Shall we go? I think the party's wrapping up, and I'm starving.' Stella's stomach growled.

'With all that's happened, I'd almost forgotten we haven't eaten since this morning.' I downed the last of my champagne. Stella looked for the exit but my eyes remained glued to Prince Louis's back as he and his sister disappeared through a side door. Even long after they were gone from sight, I kept hoping he'd peek back around the corner one last time.

'I see everyone's heading up those damned stairs. I'd much rather wander around than climb them again. But if we must...'

Sighing, we began the ascent. Once at the top, we needed a moment to catch our breath, which turned out to be perfect timing,

because a door to our left opened.

The prince and princess stepped out, deep in conversation, walking just a few meters ahead of us toward the far end of the building. I wondered whether I knew them well enough by now to call out, when Prince Louis turned, caught my eye, and winked. In response, the princess turned too, her smile widened. I waved back.

5 Nothing

The moment was over just as quickly, and brother and sister disappeared through another door.

'That was rather optimistic of you. You spoke to them for what, five minutes? Are you sure the prince winked at you? I won't turn around to check, but chances are there's someone behind us laughing at your expense.'

I felt my face turning red and kept walking, stubbornly clinging to the fantasy that he'd waved at me.

'Such beautiful shoes,' Stella sighed, 'I love wearing them, and they're quite comfortable... for a while. Wear them too long and it's hell, and you can't even run away because they're literally under your feet. This feels good.' She stepped into the dented limousine, tossed the certificate onto the seat beside her and slumped back with relief. 'I'm honestly surprised you're still wearing yours. Then again, with that tight dress, I half expected you to have stripped down to your underwear by now.'

In response, I tugged at my dress, though it was surprisingly comfortable.

'Damn, that Louis is handsome and funny. I could hardly breathe when he suddenly stood beside me—and he's not arrogant at all. I truly thought he would be. I'm telling you, if I weren't blissfully happy with Michael, then...'

'Then what?' I teased. I had never been so grateful for Michael's existence. With her long legs and blonde hair, Stella was far more Louis's type than me, with my frizzy brown curls. 'Then you'd swoon even more and probably faint?' We burst out laughing.

'As if you're any better. At one point I thought I'd need a napkin to wipe away your drool.' Stella wriggled as close to me as the seatbelt allowed and made exaggerated kissing noises.

I snorted indignantly. 'That's completely... well, partly true.' It felt oddly good to admit it without sounding ridiculous.

Stella's stilettos dangled next to the certificate in her hands as we got out. With the limousine's departure, our last link to the elegant world we'd briefly inhabited vanished. The adrenaline ebbed away, replaced by fatigue. Once in bed, my aching legs finally relaxed... only for my eyes to fly wide open again. Online, there were already dozens of photos to help channel the chaotic mix of emotions. All three royal siblings looked perfect and graceful, like models posing for a luxury brand. On the second website, there were pictures of us. I shook Stella awake. She squinted against the harsh glow of my phone before letting out a string of excited squeals. Together, we peered at the screen, analyzing every photo. Stella immediately picked one photo for her socials where we were laughing at something off-camera.

'Why don't you choose one of us sitting with the prince and princess?' I suggested.

'How dare you even ask. I have class, Charli. That would be far too pretentious.'

'They're clearly in the background of this one, though.'

'That's just being subtle. Besides, it's already posted. Changing it now would be truly stupid,' she grinned. For a moment there we just watched how her photo was getting comments.

'What do you think? Quick nap before we hit the nightlife?'

Stella rolled her eyes. 'What else were we going to do?'

The blacked out curtains weren't fully closed, letting a blaze of sunlight slip through. I groaned, then dropped my head onto the pillow and felt a dull ache in my neck. The alarm clock read half past six in the morning, so much for our wild night out. As I reached for my phone to check the 186 notifications that had come in overnight, Stella stirred. 'Did we sleep through the night?' Her voice was croaky. 'I can actually live with that. What time is it?' She cracked one eye open and sighed at the sight of daylight.

'Do you really want to know?' I asked darkly. 'Keep your eyes closed and go back to sleep. Hopefully the stiffness wears off soon.' I stretched and massaged the ache in my neck. The red mark on my shoulder had turned black and blue. Stella, too, was rolling her shoulders in slow circles.

Since the best cure for stiffness is movement, we decided to explore the shopping streets of the Manta Islands. We had a lovely time, and yet an immense sadness settled inside me. One I couldn't quite explain. As usual, Stella did most of the talking, which never bothered me until she brought up my love life. She was determined to set me up with some nice man back in Belgium and started prying about my interests. Over the years, I'd become skilled at dodging such topics, and once again I managed to distract her, this time by

pointing out a street musician butchering an Ed Sheeran cover. Stella got completely caught up in it, but her well-meant efforts had made me realise where my sadness came from.

I had met the love of my life. And that was it. We had laughed together, and that's where the story ended. If this were a romantic novel, it would be the worst one ever written. No lingering gaze, no secret note with his number, no bodyguard stopping us on the way back to lead me to a private room where the prince asked me out or to propose, as he always did in my dreams. Nothing. I wanted to rest my head on Stella's shoulder and cry until the emptiness was filled with all my tears. Instead, I bought a dress I hadn't even looked at twice and we walked back across the sunlit cobblestones of the shopping street.

'I can't wait to go out tonight,' Stella beamed.

I tried to match her mood, but inside I could feel a black hole forming, ready to grow. How on earth was I supposed to make it go away?