THE PRINCE & THE

APOCALYPSE

A Novel

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Prologue

y sister, Brooke, once told me that your roommate can become your best friend, but your best friend can't become your roommate. She was talking about college dorms, which is why Naomi and I ignored her and signed up to be roomies for our study abroad trip to England. We've been best friends for three years, and I can't imagine anything will happen in the next ten days to change that.

I am, however, already learning new things about Naomi. Case in point? She's obsessed with the royal family. We've been on the airplane for three hours and she hasn't talked about anything else.

Naomi flips the page in an overpriced magazine she bought at O'Hare and points to a picture of the British royal family. "Don't *ever* tell my mom I said this, but I think Queen Alice is the perfect mother."

"Hmmm," I hum noncommittally.

"Look at her! And look at the kids! How do they look so polished all the time?"

"Money." I close my eyes and tip my head back.

"Does it make me a bad feminist if I want to become a princess instead of a girlboss?"

"I think girlboss is an insult these days."

"Oh, it totally is. Does it make me a hypocrite if I want to eat the rich but *also* become a princess?" She sighs dramatically. "Because it would be fun, just for the fashion alone."

I open my eyes. Apparently ignoring her is the wrong tactic. "I think royalty is a human rights violation," I quip cheerfully.

Naomi's eyes widen. "Wren! You can't say that," she whispers, scandalized. She glances over her shoulder to make sure I wasn't overheard. You'd think I'd just announced my plan to murder the Oueen.

"Think of those poor children, born into a life of public scrutiny. They have no choice in it. Their parents have no choice. Their grandparents have no choice! It's child abuse all the way down," I say.

"Stop talking," she hisses. "Being born a royal is fate. Destiny." She flips the page to a close-up of one of the yellow-haired British princes and shoves it under my nose. He's waving at the camera, a big corny grin plastered on his face. "Does he look unhappy to you?"

"Eh." I take the magazine and muse over the picture. My feelings about the royals aren't strong enough to keep arguing with her, but it's just so funny. Naomi and I have been best friends since her family moved across the street three years ago, but I've never once seen this side of her. At home in Chicago, Naomi is a fellow Type A. She's class valedictorian, president of the Jewish Student Club, and a future TV meteorologist. As soon as our plane left American soil, however, her brain was taken over by Royal Fever. "What's with the scar through his

eyebrow?" I ask. "Did Mummy slice his brow open with the Crown Jewels when he failed to curtsy?"

Naomi's jaw drops and I bite back a laugh. She makes it way too easy.

"I think it gives him a rugged charm." She snatches the magazine back and swoons.

"What about Levi?" I tease. "Are your loyalties so fickle?" She's been pining over one boy at her synagogue for ages.

"I'm allowed to be in love with two people at once," she reasons. "Especially when they live on two separate continents. I never know what fate has in store for me."

"I don't believe in fate or destiny or anything else that wants to steal credit for my hard work," I say. She ignores me, her eyes still on the rich boy with hair the color of straw.

In some ways, I feel like my entire life has been leading up to this study abroad trip. It's been the number one item on my Life Plan since Brooke took the same trip four years ago. But being here isn't *fate*. It's the result of careful decisions and hard work. I spent two years researching transportation and restaurants and museums to create a foolproof itinerary. One of the requirements for the trip was a 3.8 cumulative GPA, so I never let my grades slip. And when my parents said I had to pay for half the cost, I worked at the animal shelter every summer to earn the money.

Fate and destiny can stay in the pages of fairy tales and Greek tragedies and out of my life.

A flight attendant appears at my elbow. "Something to drink?"

Naomi orders a Dr Pepper, her favorite. The plane lurches and my stomach somersaults, bringing a rush of nausea.

The flight attendant gives Naomi her pop and looks at me. "And for you?"

The plane hits another rough patch, and I'm too sick to speak. Naomi comes to my rescue and orders me a ginger ale.

"Are you okay?" she asks. "Did all my royal talk make you queasy?"

I nod once, though I'm sure it's just airplane sickness. "Can you open the window?"

Naomi pulls up the plastic covering, and we both stare in wonder at the clouds below. Only a few more hours until we land at Heathrow. My stomach turns again, this time from four years of anticipation and excitement.

Thanks to my excellent planning, these next ten days are going to be the best of our lives. I've never been so sure of anything.

CHAPTER 1

10 DAYS LATER

DATE: SUNDAY, JUNE 12

LOCATION: LONDON, ENGLAND

ITINERARY

9:00 A.M.: PACK

10:00 A.M.: BREAKFAST AT THE WORLD'S END

3:00 P.M.: FLIGHT HOME :(

miss peanut butter, salsa, and ice cubes. I miss sunshine and my family. I miss my dog.

But most of all, I miss the girl I thought I was ten days ago, before I realized I'm the worst kind of traveler: the kind who just wants to go home. I flew almost four thousand miles for the adventure of a lifetime with my best friend, and all I got was this lousy homesickness.

Once upon a time, I thought the worst thing an American

tourist could be was obvious. Brooke warned me about all the stereotypes: Americans are obnoxious and loud. They wear gym shoes when they shouldn't. They smile too much.

I vowed not to be that person, even if it meant blisters on my feet and a week of nonstop whispering. I'd *prove* how happy I was to be in London by scowling at people on the street.

I had a plan.

But after spending five days facedown in a hotel toilet, that plan is in tatters. I might as well parade down Abbey Road in tacky sneakers and a Stars and Stripes fanny pack, waving my basic bitch flag. I'd consider it if it meant this trip even remotely resembled the one on my detailed ten-page itinerary.

Nine pages down, one left to go. My eyes stray to the last item on the list as I neatly fold a dirty sweater and place it in my suitcase. 3:00 P.M.: Flight home. Frowny face. I had such high hopes when I penciled that doodle in, the final touch to my masterpiece years in the making. Now the face mocks me: one more thing the itinerary got wrong. When that airplane takes off from Heathrow, I'll be mentally dancing in the aisle.

The door to our shared hotel room bangs open and Naomi rushes in. I try to ignore the jealous pang that burns behind my ribs over the fact that she was out without me. She tosses her hotel key on the TV stand and collapses, distressed, across my bed. "The prince is missing."

"Which one?"

"The important one," she says seriously, showing me a *Daily Mail* article on her phone. I glance at the headline: Prince Theo Glaringly absent from Trooping the Colour. With no word from the Palace, we're left to wonder: Is the future king sick, or just playing hooky?

"So he skipped an event." I return my attention to the moun-

tain of clothes in front of me. It shouldn't be this difficult to fit them back into my suitcase. I have acquired nothing on this trip except disenchantment.

Naomi sits up, a protective glint in her eye. "He's supposed to be working at this event—"

"Liberal use of the term 'working."

"Trooping the Colour is *very* important to the monarch," she says with complete seriousness.

"If that's true, they shouldn't have given it such a silly name."

"Trooping the Colour marks the official birthday of the sovereign." $\,$

"I'm sorry—all this fuss is because the prince missed his mom's birthday party?" I pick up Naomi's phone and scroll through the photos included with the article. The event appears to be the height of British pomp and pageantry. There are thousands of guards in silly costumes. Guards on foot and guards on horses. Guards in a house. Guards with a mouse. Guards here and there! Guards everywhere. Musical instruments, funny fuzzy hats as far as the eye can see, and, because why not, a whole bunch of cannons. Real goofy shit.

"He's not on the balcony. The entire royal family is always on the balcony." Naomi takes the phone and points to a picture of a crowded mezzanine occupied by a group of polished children whom I vaguely recognize as the prince's younger siblings. The photo holds an air of importance that I begrudgingly admire.

"Maybe he jumped," I say.

"Not funny."

"If this is the royal equivalent of work, then he's been working since the moment he was born. Before, even! He deserves a day off."

"When the royals take a day off, they release a statement. The Palace's silence speaks volumes. Something's not right."

"I hear you. I acknowledge you. Please don't make me talk about the royals anymore."

She drops her phone with a huff as tension chills the air. It's not common for us to get annoyed with each other, but it's been happening more and more the past few days.

"Emily, Tatum, and I are going to walk to Camden Market to shop for souvenirs," she says.

I'm stung by the period at the end of her sentence. The finality of it. There's not even a hint of invitation lingering in the air.

When I was too sick to leave our room for five days, Naomi had to adjust her plans and find other people to hang out with. The strain between us didn't start until I stopped puking and assumed she'd ditch Emily and Tatum so we could spend the second half of the trip the way we'd planned. Turns out she didn't want to do that; turns out European Naomi doesn't like my itineraries nearly as much as Chicagoan Naomi does. After years of working her ass off to be valedictorian, she wanted to let loose and let off steam, not follow another rigid schedule. Initially she invited me to join them on morning walks through the park or evening trips to the pub, but I kept saying no. First out of hurt, and then out of a stubborn unwillingness to let my itinerary die. I'm great at making plans and backup plans, but I didn't have a plan for when my best friend started choosing other people over me. Soon enough, she stopped asking.

"Have fun. I have to finish packing anyway." *There*. Proof that I'm fine without her invitation.

She rolls her eyes. "Why are you going so slow?" She gathers an armful of clothes and shoves them haphazardly into

my suitcase, holding the top down to zip it shut. "There. All done."

Okay then. I press my lips into a thin line as I pick up a pen from my bedside table and carefully scratch a line through 9:00 A.M.: Pack. "Thanks," I say. I fall quiet as tension bubbles between us. "I'm getting breakfast down by Camden Market!" I announce. Not at all hurt. Not at all sad.

"With who?"

"Just myself."

My fist curls tightly around the edge of my itinerary. This trip has been nothing but disaster after disaster. First, the neverending stomach virus from hell. Then a string of stormy days that canceled Shakespeare in the Squares and ruined our trip to the London Zoo. Even the larcenous British Museum turned out to be a disappointment, but that could have been my fault. I don't have the right disposition for museums; I can only pretend to care about old things for so long. The Rosetta Stone, for example: objectively, a very cool old thing. Props to the French guy who found it! Staring at a midsize boulder with ancient writing on it that you can't even read? Eh. Interesting for fifteen seconds. I couldn't even bring myself to get excited about taking photos of the priceless artifact because there must be millions of the exact same photo floating around in the cloud right now. That's not my thing. I'd have been much happier lying in the grass on the lawn outside the museum and snapping candids of the people around me, capturing small moments that exist and are gone in a breath.

But Brooke said that the World's End had the best breakfast she'd ever eaten, and I'm determined to get one thing on my itinerary exactly, perfectly right. The plan may be in shreds, but it's nothing I can't carefully tape back together.

"Brooke ate breakfast at this pub on her last morning of the program. It's a family tradition." Or it will be once I follow in her footsteps.

Naomi scoots to the edge of my bed and stands up, refusing to look at me. "Well . . . enjoy your plans."

"You can come with me if you want! The full English is supposed to be amazing."

"Do you know what's in a full English breakfast?"

"Fried tomatoes and mushrooms and baked beans and—"

"Blood pudding and sausage," she says. "Wren, you're a vegetarian!"

My sensitive stomach revolts. I press my lips together, the memory of my virus so fresh that *I* want to throw myself off the Buckingham Palace balcony. "I won't eat the meat, obviously."

"Do you even want to eat tomatoes for breakfast?" she asks.

"Of course!" Defensiveness flares in my chest.

"Just like you wanted to ride the London Eye on our first night here?"

"It was—"

"On the itinerary," we say at the same time. In retrospect, the decision to ride London's famous Ferris wheel when I was already feeling nauseous was not my brightest idea. At least my vomit didn't land *on* anyone—except the tail of that bulldog, but he didn't hold it against me. Angus was a total sweetheart when I got off the ride to apologize, though his humans were less kind. I may not have understood all the words they yelled at me, but I felt the venom behind them. No one's ever crocheted "manky git" on a throw pillow, to say the least.

"Not this again. Don't you ever want to change the itinerary?"

Naomi huffs. My inflexibility never bothered her at home, but now it does. Now I can *feel* her roll her eyes every time I consult the schedule.

"Actually, I do." I scribble over the frowny face next to *Flight home* and replace it with a smiling one. "There. Happy?"

She shakes her head with a small sigh. "C'mon, let's get our stuff downstairs and you can walk with us." She heaves her luggage into the crook of her arm and holds the door open for me. I drag my suitcase off the bed and spare one backward glance for my temporary London home. The Grange Beauchamp Hotel in the heart of Bloomsbury sounded so glamorous at the beginning of all of this. *Bloooooooomsbury*. The word rolled off my tongue like a name in a romance novel. Even when we arrived, I was enchanted by the brick building with white curtains and red flowers in the windowsills. Now my eyes rove over the threadbare blankets to the window that refused to open and let in fresh air, and my enchantment is nowhere to be found.

"I'm going to miss this place." Naomi says the words I wish I felt. A painful knot grows in my throat. We walk into the hall and let the door thump closed behind us, sealing four years of disappointment inside.

I'm not going to dwell on it. Or on the fact that if this plan was a bust, the future I envisioned for myself might also be vulnerable. I don't want to make new plans. I wouldn't even know where to start.

Downstairs, we step out of the hotel into watery sunlight. After drizzling most of the night, the clouds have finally cleared and the smell of diesel exhaust fights with musty rain-soaked brick. I'm no stranger to humidity, but no matter which neighborhood I find myself in, the air in London is consistently

thicker and heavier than what I'm used to in Chicago. It sticks to my lungs, coating them in black coal dust.

We ditch our luggage on the curb with Mrs. Kerr, our English teacher and one of the trip chaperones, who warns us to meet back here at the van no later than noon or "we'll leave without you!"

Emily and Tatum join Naomi and me as we board the Tube near our hotel and exit about twenty minutes later, strolling into the colorful and chaotic streets of Camden Market. They peel off at an outdoor souvenir stall sitting between a tattoo parlor and a vintage clothing shop, and I can't quite meet Naomi's gaze.

My fingers itch to grab my camera and photograph the people around me: a mixture of tourists with selfie sticks and locals in black leather and goth makeup. It reminds me of high school, the way the groups move around each other while pretending the others don't exist. Because there's not time to use my DSLR, I settle for my phone. I point the camera at the crowd of people while the market's curious shop signs provide a vibrant background, snapping a dozen quick shots before sliding my phone back into my pocket.

The smell of damp stone mixes with a curry stall tucked across the street and a mouthwatering fish and chips shop. My feet slow and I can't help but gaze through the floor-to-ceiling windows. For the first time in ten days, my stomach pangs with a craving for the hot, salty French fries. I waver, but the last page of my itinerary weighs heavy in my pocket. Today's the only day I can get completely right. If Brooke can do it, so can I.

My boots clack against the brick as I walk down Camden High Street toward my destination: the World's End.

CHAPTER 2

rass letters reading the world's end shine against a red background. It looks exactly the way I envisioned it—except for the glaring Closed for renovations sign in the window. The dates scrawled below indicate it closed this morning.

I sigh and press my forehead against the cool glass, my feet aching from the long walk. I can't believe I'm one day late. When I started this itinerary years ago, it never occurred to me that an iconic landmark that's been around since the 1800s would be closed during my eventual visit. Sure, the World's End opened its doors for Charles Dickens and Radiohead and Brooke Wheeler, but now that I'm here, the curtains are drawn, the doors boarded shut.

What a disaster.

When my sister flew to London, she came home with lifechanging stories about Shakespeare, pub crawls, and Harry Styles look-alikes who called her "love." If I can't even replicate one stupid meal, what makes me think I can match any of her other achievements? Earlier this spring, Brooke made my parents' dreams come true by receiving a full merit scholarship to Northwestern Law. I didn't even know those existed! said absolutely everyone in the comments of my mom's bragging Facebook post.

Not long after she posted, I'd found Mom in her home office and told her that I wanted to be a lawyer like her and Brooke. She'd looked up from her laptop with a beaming smile. "I can see our letterhead now—Wheeler & Daughters! No, Wheeler, Wheeler & Wheeler." Her smile faltered. "Hmmm. Sounds kind of clunky. I'll have to think on it."

I turned to leave, and my stomach sank as I saw Brooke framed in the doorway. I hadn't heard her approach. "You want to go to law school?" she asked skeptically. "How is that going to be possible when you're planning to major in *photography*?"

"I'm not," I protested weakly. "I'm going to do political science like you." I didn't need Brooke to remind me yet again that pursing photography was impractical, because I already knew; my dream job is the one thing I don't know how to plan for.

"I hope so. No use taking out all those student loans for a career that will never make you any money," she said as my cheeks flamed with embarrassment. She turned her attention to Mom. "Don't print the business cards just yet, Mom. We don't even know if Wren can hack it in college—let alone get into law school." She winked.

She was joking. I *know* she thinks she was joking. But what's that they say about every joke containing a hint of truth?

"We don't know if *you* can hack it in law school either," I said. Brooke laughed, completely unaffected by my comeback, because we all know she's a genius who can and will do whatever she sets her mind to. My future, on the other hand, is not a sure bet. Good grades and a penchant for making plans aren't

all that impressive stacked up next to Brooke's National Merit Scholarship and Mensa IQ.

Brooke probably doesn't remember that conversation, but I think about her comment at least once a week and it still knocks the confidence right out of me. I hate that feeling, which is why I never let myself wallow in it. Avoidance is my tried-and-true method: instead of being sad that my sister has no faith in me, I kick my competitive nature into overdrive and blast my "you suck" playlist at top volume for motivation.

Brooke thinks I can't get into law school? Fine, I'll show her by getting a full ride to Harvard!

Good luck to me, I guess. This trip is the first time I've been out in the world on my own and it's been an utter face-plant from start to finish.

I take a picture of the CLOSED sign to show Naomi later. It looks even more pathetic on my screen, and suddenly I can't help but laugh at the absurdity of it all. Which is what I'm doing when a white guy joins me on the sidewalk in front of the pub. He shoots me a quizzical look before frowning at the door. He's wearing a Yankees hat and sunglasses. *American*?

"What's so funny?" he asks in a British accent. I should have known. His gray suede boots don't give off American boy vibes.

I gesture to the sign on the door. "It's called the World's End and it's closed, which feels like the end of the world. I know it's not, but . . ." I trail off with a shrug and he chuckles low under his breath.

I can finally admit to myself that it's time to give up the itinerary. I've been carrying it around as a reminder of my failure for days, and I'm gripped by the sudden urge to destroy it. "Do you have a lighter?" I ask the boy. I would say his shoulders stiffen, but the truth is they've been rigid the whole time. His posture is ramrod straight as he reaches into the pocket of his jeans and retrieves an expensive-looking lighter with an intricate engraving. My eyes catch on his chunky black ring as he flips the top open and a small flame blazes to life.

I pull out the last page of my worthless itinerary. Here goes nothing. I smooth the worn paper open and hold the corner to the flame. He swears under his breath but doesn't withdraw the lighter. The paper catches, the flame quickly devouring the edges into disappearing ash. "Ow!" I drop the last corner of the paper on the damp cement and shake my fingers. He flicks his lighter shut and stomps on the scraps of my plans.

"You all right?" He speaks with a posh British accent, his vowels longer and slower than many of the people I've encountered in London. Half the time I hear a local speak, I'm convinced their English is a completely different language than mine, the words crowded together like a tumbled chain of dominoes.

"I'm fine. Just hungry."

"What did we burn?"

"My future, I think."

"Oh good. As long as it wasn't anything important," he says dryly.

We stand in silence for a beat and I try to figure out how old he is. He's got the faintest hint of light facial hair dusting his cheeks, and something feels familiar about his profile. He catches me staring and bristles, quickly turning to face the pub again.

"I'm guessing you didn't know it'd be closed either?" My stomach growls loudly. I'm wasting too much time standing here, but even with my plans literally up in flames, I can't quite bring my feet to move.

"I did not," he confirms. Another long beat of silence.

"This will sound dramatic, but I think this might be the worst day of my life." At least when I was lying on the cold bathroom floor, too nauseous to open my eyes, I still hoped the trip would get better. I still believed I could follow the path Brooke and her genius IQ blazed through our family.

"This will sound dramatic, but I have to agree," he says.

I glance sideways to see if he's mocking me. He's still standing with perfect posture, his hands clasped behind his back, his eyes glued to the World's End. When the corner of his mouth twitches, I take it as an invitation.

"I'm Wren Wheeler. Eighteen. American," I say. He stares at my outstretched hand, his lips turning up in wry amusement.

"How do you do, Ms. Wheeler?" he says politely.

"What's your name?"

"Geoffrey. Nineteen. British."

"Nice to meet you, Geoffrey."

"Tell me about your rubbish day."

"Oh, you know. I just had the mind-melting realization that I'm the family flop." I shrug. "What about you?"

He squints up at the quickly graying sky. "It's supposed to rain today."

"That's it?"

"Some days that feels like enough, don't you think?"

"Only if you've had a very easy life," I grumble.

He winces as if my comment stung a lot more than I intended it to. "You would not be the first to accuse me of such."

"Sorry, that was rude. I know what you mean. I've been grumpy about the weather since—" The words die in my throat when Geoffrey tenses. I turn to see what has him rattled but don't see anything ominous, just a small group of women taking pictures of the World's End.

"If you'll excuse me, I must go," he says, taking measured steps out of the sunlight and into the shade of the awning above the restaurant door. He glances left and right the way my dog, Wally, does when he's cornered. Awareness prickles up my spine; the women aren't taking pictures of the pub. They're taking pictures of him.

"Who are they? Who are you?" I ask.

He adjusts his baseball hat and my heart stops. It was only a second, but I saw it. A scar slicing his left eyebrow in half. Naomi called it "rugged."

"You're Prince Theo?" I whisper.

When he holds a finger to his lips in silent confirmation, my head spins. Naomi is going to dissolve with jealousy when I tell her I met the missing prince. I glance over my shoulder and see the group waiting to cross the street, still snapping pictures and whispering to each other. They remind me of lionesses advancing on their prey, and that stupid unwanted sympathy I have for this absurdly rich boy flickers in my chest.

"Act casual. They can't be sure it's you," I say quietly.

"Not yet. But they will be in about thirty seconds."

"Then let's go." I grab his hand, and he startles at the sudden contact. I pull him down Camden High Street, away from the pub and the women. We walk as fast as possible without looking suspicious. "Aren't you supposed to have bodyguards or something?" I hiss, dropping his hand.

"I ditched them."

"How?" I thought he was one of the most popular and important people in the country. Like if Taylor Swift had a baby with a Kennedy and that baby grew up to be a teenage heartthrob. It couldn't have been easy for him to slip away from security.

"It's been a hectic couple of days at the palace."

The footsteps get closer. "Prince Theo?" a voice calls out. It sounds friendly enough that I hesitate.

"Wouldn't it be easier to just stop, take a few selfies, sign some autographs, and then leave?"

"Autographs and selfies are prohibited." He lengthens his stride and I jog to catch up.

"Can't you at least say hi?"

"Not today. I can't let anyone find out where I am." His tone is laced with desperation that feels more human than any of the dozens of pictures Naomi has showed me. "Please." His voice cracks.

"Follow me." I turn down a narrow alley between a shop and a yoga studio, and we slip inside a back door into the small, crowded clothing store.

"Ello there! 'ow can I 'elp you?" the woman behind the counter asks.

"Just browsing!" I say with forced ease. I steer the prince to a corner of the shop behind a large rack of sunglasses and pull his baseball hat off. His golden-blond hair tumbles across his forehead. Too noticeable. I stuff a tweed newsboy cap on his head.

"Ow! Go easy on me." He winces.

"Sunglasses." I hold my hand out and he hesitates for a second before carefully placing them in my open palm. We stare at each other for a heartbeat and my stomach lurches. His eyes are bluer than I expected, and for the first time, I understand why Naomi is obsessed with this guy. It's not just that Theo is a prince; it's that he's a prince who looks like he could wreck my plans—and my life—if I'm not careful.

I drop the glasses into my pocket and switch them out for a different pair. He rests the thick black frames on the bridge

of his nose, transforming his face from roguish heartbreaker to bookish college student.

"That's better. Now lose the jacket," I bark. He bristles against the command and my cheeks redden. I must have broken every royal protocol in existence. "Your Highness," I add stiffly. I don't intend to thread a hint of sarcasm through the words, but it's there, and he hears it. He flicks an eyebrow upward as he shrugs out of his navy windbreaker. I toss a long, heavy wool jacket into his arms.

"It's a little warm—" he starts, but shuts up when I put my hands on my hips.

"Can you pay for this?" I ask.

He winces. "I'm not allowed to carry cash." I pull a few bills out of my backpack and leave them on the table next to the hats. The door at the front of the store opens and one of the women who was following us sticks her head inside. Out on the sidewalk, the group with her has tripled in size, including what looks like at least one member of the press carrying a camera with a long-range lens. A shudder runs up the length of my spine. I press my hands on the prince's shoulders and force him to the floor. I drop next to him on my hands and knees.

"Is it always like this?" I ask.

"It's usually worse," he muses.

"I'm a terrible bodyguard."

He shrugs. "I'm a terrible prince."

"Back door. Let's go." We crawl quickly to the door that will lead us into the alley.

"Hey!" the woman behind the register shouts. "You trying to nick that hat?"

Prince Theo freezes, his hand in midair.

"Go!" I nudge him in the shoulder blades and to my shock, he listens. He jumps to his feet and opens the door.

"We left money up front!" I yell over my shoulder as I follow him into the alley. The prince makes a beeline for the street, but I yank on the sleeve of his coat to pull him away from the crowd and the cameras. We spin and run toward the chainlink fence at the back of the alley. He climbs faster than I do, reaching the top when I'm only halfway up. Footsteps thunder toward us. He stretches his hand out to me, I place my palm in his, and he pulls me to the top. Together, we jump. My left ankle collapses as I hit the ground hard. I gasp and fall, catching myself on my palms.

Shit. We don't have time to waste, so I push up to my feet and ignore the biting pain. "Let's go."

We run as fast as my ankle will allow, weaving in and out of buildings, crashing through back alleys, and eventually spilling onto the crowded streets of Camden Market. Lines of tourists stretch out of restaurant doors and meander through the streets, making it the perfect place to hide. I avert my eyes from a couple making out on a bench, as does everyone who strides past them, giving them privacy in the middle of a busy corner.

"We lost them," I gasp, doubling over to suck in a breath. The air is so sticky, it feels like breathing through a straw.

"Let's go a little farther, just to be safe," he says. I check the time. I should have left for the hotel by now, but I give myself five more minutes to act as Prince Theo's bodyguard so I'll have at least *one* good London story to compete with Brooke's arsenal.

We slow to a casual pace and wander through the crowd. The prince sheds his jacket and drapes it over the back of a bench

in front of a dark shop filled with steampunk corsets and Victorian jackets. I point to a leather-and-chains frock in the window. "Time for another outfit change. Think you can pull it off?" I grin in his direction so he knows I'm joking, but his only response is a straightening of the spine and a pink tinge in his cheeks.

"Paparazzo at ten o'clock," I mutter under my breath. "He hasn't seen us yet." As soon as the words are out of my mouth, the small bald man with a large camera crosses the road to our side of the street. His eyes scan the crowd. Searching for us. I grab the prince's sleeve and drag him against the wall of the goth shop. I press my back against the bricks, pulling the prince toward me to keep his face hidden. "As long as they don't see you, we're okay," I whisper.

"They know what you look like now too," he whispers back, a rush of breath fanning against my ear. Shivers course through my skin, but I don't have time to think about that because the man with the camera is approaching, and the prince is right. His face is hidden, but mine's not. My heart thunders in my chest as the man draws nearer. I have to make sure he doesn't look too closely at us—if he does, there's no telling what kind of mob will form. If that happens, I'm gonna have a hell of a time getting back to the hotel by noon. I feel panicky and claustrophobic, and I can't believe the words that come out of my mouth next.

"Kiss me."

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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