

# Nico's Princess

By Mira Brooks

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Published by Blushing Books®,

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ABCD Graphics and Design

977 Seminole Trail #233

Charlottesville, VA 22901

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EBook ISBN: 978-1-68259-848-1

Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

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# Dedication

Dedicated to my grandmother Marjorie, and mother Diane  
Who always told me stories, some about the Olden Days...

You taught me to be a strong woman,

And led by example... xo

# Prologue

*Stockholm, Sweden, June 1974*

Queen Charlotte Elizabeth Casivaga sat reading the newspaper in one of her apartments receiving rooms of the grand Stockholm Palace. Two of her great-grandchildren, Princess Myla and Prince Kaern, were relaxing with their books along one of the ornamental window benches. Prince Kaern was the son eldest of Fredrick's oldest daughter, Coralee. They visited every weekend with their great-grandparents and grandparents, when they were in the city, which was frequently, since Fredrick and Coralee were the second and third in line for the throne. Kaern was fourth, and would one day be King.

Many of the royal family recurrently used their state apartments within the palace, just to be close with the aging monarch, and the Queen. However, Myla and Kaern were the oldest great-grandchildren, and took a greater interest in spending quality time with them. At their young age, when they were not at school they had little duties, so the palace was just a getaway. Both were captivated by the tales their Granny would tell them about her extraordinary experiences during her life as Queen. She had met countless celebrities, and members of other Royalty. She had visited every continent in the world, and was even born in America, to a Colonel in the United States Navy, making her a Socialite.

Myla and Kaern had not yet had the opportunity to visit North America, but it was something both planned on doing in the future. Myla was obsessed with fashion, and New York was said to be one of the most fashionable places in the world. Kaern, was dying to visit Disney World in Florida. It had opened a few years ago, and from what he had heard was an amazing place for all ages.

The King, Nicolai, was resting on the sofa with Charlotte, enjoying the quiet company even while his eyes were closed. He had been ill for a while. At 89, he was still sharp as a tack, but his body had been failing him. Charlotte, seven years his junior, was still very much active in their public life, however, their eldest son, Fredrick, was taking on most of the obligations his father was too unwell to do anymore. He was next in line, and happy to assume some of the extra responsibilities. Everyone knew it was best, and Charlotte was happy that after more than 64 years

of marriage, they could now watch the younger generation of their family flourish. Together, they had produced five children: Fredrick, Henry, Lenore, John, and Haven.

Idly, Charlotte rubbed her husband's shoulder with her thumb. His head was nestled on her lap, and most would think he was asleep. However, Nico was far from it. The sun was streaming through the windows brightly. These moments in the early afternoon were their favorite, and Charlotte often asked that no one disturb them, especially when their grandchildren were around. Given their enormous duties, that was a feat, but noon until two was considered more of their down time.

"Granny?" Myla asked, suddenly astounded she never thought to ask the question until now. "How did you and Grandad meet?"

She was really into romance novels lately, and her recent one sparked her curiosity. She was known for her fascination in her great-grandmother's tales of the olden days. Like any teenage girl, her imagination was swirling with how romantic the story sounded. A small town American beauty, meeting her Prince, and sailing to his kingdom to become his Princess. It was reminiscent of *Cinderella*. Although, her great-grandmother's parents had been wealthy, and she was hardly their servant. No, her grandmother had met her prince by chance, and quickly he had become besotted with her. In fact, if she was correct, she remembered hearing her great-grandfather proposed marriage before their first official date. There was no lost slipper, but there was a short courtship and grand wedding.

She knew the history everyone knew, however, now at fourteen, she was curious about the details. What had made her fall in love with him? Had he been the Prince from fairytales, that swept in on his white horse and carried her off into the sunset? Did she have doubts about actually marrying him? What had her life been like before they had met? She was bubbling with excitement.

Kaern, her sixteen-year-old brother, tried to think if he had actually heard the story. Of course, he knew the textbook one that many people learned in school, like Myla, but they had never actually heard it come from the horse's mouth. Being a boy, he considered that he probably had heard it once before, but didn't take a mind to listen to it.

Charlotte smiled. Her smile still made her look magnificently attractive. The fine lines on her aged face could not deny that over sixty years had passed, however, when she closed her eyes she remembered it all like yesterday. Even the smell of the sea standing on the deck of her father's massive battleship was clear, as she dredged up the memories she could remember of her life

before she married Nico. She had been about Myla's age, standing on the main deck amongst all the young navy officers, the morning before they left to fight in WWI. Her father was standing on the higher deck, and waved down to her with his fatherly smile. She missed him terribly.

Putting aside her paper, she looked at her great-grandchildren, lowered her reading glasses to the end of her nose, and asked, "Have we never told you the story?"

Both children shook their heads, knowing if they had been told they would most likely remember it. Myla thought she remembered her mother talking about it briefly once, but there wasn't much that came to mind.

"Aw," winking at them both, because she knew her husband was merely resting his eyes and aware of the conversation, she said, "It's so long ago now, I can barely remember." Her face exploded in a massive grin, as one of her husband's eyes shot open. The slight vibration from her chuckle made his head bob a bit.

"Is that so?" he inquired, realizing she was just jesting.

Both children laughed at the stern tone in his voice. "Maybe I'm getting senile," Charlotte teased.

He curtly replied, "No, you're cheeky as ever."

Charlotte winked at the kids again. "Let's see. Well, first I suppose I should tell you that it was 1920, and oddly enough your grandfather and I met at the local bar." Both kids' mouths dropped open a bit. Whatever they were expecting their grandmother to say, it was definitely *not* that.

"Pft... Charlotte, that sounds terrible. We met outside of a bar, actually, near Yale," he yawned, correcting her. "After I saw your Granny on stage singing during their open mic talent show."

Charlotte laughed, she hadn't thought about that night in a long time. When she closed her eyes, she could still feel the bubbles of excitement before she stepped on stage. She could even feel the warm heat from the spotlight as it bathed her in a white glow when she stepped forward and faced a silent crowd. Over a few hundred people could pack Beers Tavern, and on Open Mic night it was difficult to get a seat.

"The Colonel allowed *you* to go to a bar and sing?" Myla exclaimed, remembering her Grandfather's descriptions of his grandfather, she could scarcely believe he'd have approved of his daughter going to a nightclub.

King Nico chuckled as Charlotte pushed him playfully with a cheeky grin. "Not exactly, but my brother, Johnny, helped me sneak in."

Kaern's interest was piqued. He put aside his book, and sat forward waiting for this explanation. "You snuck into clubs, to sing and drink Granny?" he asked, somewhat disbelieving his ears. It sounded too outlandish for the prim and proper lady he knew. His smile was broadening in inquisitive allure at the tale he had yet to hear. He only knew his great-grandmother as the dutiful wife and Queen. A lady at all cost, who could silence a room with a glare.

His mother and grandfather called her the Boss, although most knew Nico very much wore the pants in the relationship. Kaern tried to think back, but he was absolutely certain he had never heard of this eccentric tale before.

"No, the Colonel did *not* know, and I most certainly did not drink. I was underage. Just sing, and my brother was always there to protect me." Charlotte felt defensive as her great-grandson sounded so astonished. It was funny to her that the young ones only saw the old woman when they looked at her, and not the vibrant young lady she had been. Sighing, she supposed that that was the way of things. When you've only known your grandparents to have wrinkles, it was unbelievable they were once very similar in youth. Hell, she still looked in the mirror and wondered what the hell had happened.

Myla tried not to seem so surprised, but she couldn't help it. "Wow! Gran, I knew you had a nice voice, but you really sang in public?"

Charlotte nodded slightly embarrassed. "Yes, I loved it! It was so addictive to stand up on the stage, open my mouth, and let a melody flow out. I wrote my own songs too," she stated proudly, as her husband grinned with his eyes closed. Pushing him slightly, as if offended he'd find humor in that comment, she quickly added, "Of course my parents never approved, and when they found out I got in a lot of trouble!"

Kaern began to laugh, "I bet! The Colonel probably strapped you senseless!"

Nico opened one eye curious to see her reaction to their grandson's assessment of the situation. Looking up at his wife's aging face he saw it contour in laughter. He remembered the occasion well, but decided to allow her to tell the tale.

Charlie shook her head reflectively, with the hint of a smile forming at the corner of her mouth as she explained. "No, not him."



The kids were on the edge of their seats, as they realized that maybe they didn't know everything about their Granny, like they thought. Was she really a former wild child, who defied her family and snuck out at night to sing at pubs?

Myla found it difficult to believe as the sparkle came to her eye. After all, she would have never been able to marry a prince if her behavior was as outrageous as all she was proclaiming. Myla considered her own wild side, and tried to think of her Granny being her age. She had seen pictures of her in her youth, and she had to admit they oddly resembled each other. Maybe it was merely a family tradition? She doubted the excuse would fly with her military-strict father, but she was excited nonetheless.

Charlotte took a deep breath, trying to think about how to start the story. "Well, it was a Friday..."

# Chapter 1

*February, 1920*

*New Haven, Connecticut*

The smoke in Beers Tavern was enough to choke a chimney. As the lights dimmed, everyone took a seat at their tables. Prince Nicolai—Nico—Casivaga and his friends were all seated down front with their Cuban cigars. The campus was alive with the celebratory soldiers returned home from overseas, and many of Yale's elite out on the town for the weekend. Most were in uniform, all excited to be home amongst friends and family, grateful for their return. This group arrived home after being deployed when the war ended, but had been sent to be a presence in Europe as a show of the American military strength. These young men mainly had avoided the true horrors of war, but the fallout was still paralyzing. Many had left boys and returned men.

The lights dimmed as the announcer took the stage. Clad in the typical pant suit, with tie, and slicked hair, the boy looked incredibly young despite his twenty-one years, all pearly white teeth smiling out at the crowd as he made the next introduction. "So, tonight, ladies and gentlemen, we have a real treat for you all." He was fiddling with the microphone stand and trying to lower it to accommodate the next talent. "We have a young lady, who is one of our own. She came out tonight, at my request." The young man smiled, looking off to the side stage, that was draped in shadows.

Cheers began to erupt, as the house filled to the brim with half drunk, rowdy people cat calling and whistling.

"She's been here once or twice before, and always makes open mic night a treat. Alright, without further ado... New Haven, give it up for my little sister, Charlie!"

As the crowd clapped enthusiastically, a silhouette of a woman appeared just beyond the spotlight. When the light bathed over her, the white-cream silky fabric of her dress, with yellow little birds flowing down one side, and her light, curly blonde hair cascading down one shoulder, made almost every man in the place sit forward and gawk. She was breathtaking, and the shy smile decorating her face added to her allure.

Nervously, Charlie took the microphone and adjusted it to best suit her. She didn't have her guitar tonight, which was like a crutch, so instead she held the stand for a few lines of the song.

A warm, blinding light from the spotlight illuminated her, temporarily robbing her of sight. Looking out over the mostly dark audience she closed her eyes, to steady herself. It could be intimidating, standing there before hundreds of pairs of eyes, and it never got easier.

Pushing down her insecurities and the annoying butterflies that kept fluttering about, she braced herself for the sight of the crowd. Then, as the silence ensued, she opened her eyes and allowed the words to flow out of her. "She was a girl, not yet a lady but not a child, he stole her heart, after courting a while. Left for overseas on a boat bound for war, the only mark he left was his kiss on the shore, and the promise of returning to do it once more."

As her tone hit each pitch with the ease, her confidence ignited and she grabbed the mic from the stand to walk about the stage and try and connect with the audience. They exploded in a cheer, somewhat putting themselves in the shoes of the lad leaving his beloved on land, while many of them had headed to War.

It was a haunting song, with a beat that was not as fast as some preferred, but it was one of her favorite song's. Accompanying her, was her brother, Johnny, on the guitar and his friend, Jackson, on the piano.

"He wrote her a letter each week faithfully, she'd reply in kind, he'd tell her about the dreams he had for them, and how each day she came to his mind. He'd sing, Hi, Hi, Hippie, Hi, bring me back to the shore where she stands, Hi, Hi, Hippie, Hiya, the lass with the velvet like hands, Hi, Hi, Hippie, Hi, Ho, my Love, I think of you when I close my eyes, Hi, Hi, Hippie, Hi, Dee, Sweetheart, you're never far from my mind."

It was so hypnotic, the way that the crowd had their eyes glued to her. The soft musky cloud of smoke that filtered up around everyone almost looked like she was standing on a deck, looking down into a foggy sea. Her father was a navy colonel, and she could still remember when he took her and Johnny on his ship one morning, before they set sail for Germany. It reminded her of that. Standing on the deck, looking down over the dock where a thousand heads were moving around just above the fogs thick cloak.

As she made her way back to the mic stand the final chorus slipped from her lips. Charlie took another look out over the crowd, and tried to take a mental picture. It had only been a few times performing here, but something about it just made her feel alive. Her mother had given her permission for her to accompany Johnny, although she didn't really understand that Charlie, herself, would be singing in a tavern.

Her father just thought they were out with friends, or he would have never allowed her to go. Proper young ladies didn't do something as scandalous as hang out in a pub with rowdy, drunk, college people, singing on a stage. Especially, a Colts. The Colonel never questioned them about their plans, because he trusted that Johnny would watch out for his baby sister. The only thing he was a stickler about, was curfew.

Charlie had to be home by eleven. Not five after, and so far, she had never had an issue with being back in by that time. Johnny was careful to watch the time, and while he never had to be home by then, he made sure on Friday night, if she accompanied him, he'd see her back safe.

She would never forget her first time at Beers. It was when she got home after finishing her final semester at boarding school, a little over a month ago. February break was a week away, so, many students who were from out of state were gone home already, but the place still had a decent crowd. She was backstage watching, enjoying the entertainment, and that's when he sprung it on her.

She sang at church, and played the guitar. Johnny had taught her, when he learned, but the master soon became the student. It was his encouragement, that made her brave enough to take the mic that first time. The roar of applause made her do it again, and now tonight here she was performing for the fourth time. It was becoming like a drug. The excitement and the roar of the crowd had her swelling with a high unlike she had ever experienced. Although, she wasn't the type to dabble in drugs or alcohol to give her the knowledge.

When the crowd exploded with cat calls and a fury of whistles, she blushed and began to walk out of the light. Johnny was there, the overly protective brother she knew never failed her and, as always, he took her hand, although this time, he was leading her back toward the crowd surprisingly. Taking the mic, he encouraged the crowd to persuade her to sing another song.

"Isn't she amazing?" He was clapping voraciously.

Charlie was giggling at the adoration pouring out for her. The entire building seemed to explode in applause and whistles. She was always so shy, until she got a microphone in her hand. It was a complete oxymoron since she could barely stand up and speak her name in front of a crowd normally. Then, as if by magic, when the music would hit her ears she became this elegant Nightingale, enchanting those around her from the first note.

"What do you say, ladies and gentlemen, do you think we can get her to do one more?"

More cheers and calling ensued.

Johnny pushed the mic to her, and she shyly took it. Nodding she whispered, “Love me or leave me, by Ruth Etting.” Then she stepped back into the spotlight. It was a new song by Etting, who was quickly becoming a house hold name.

Johnny started the song, leading Jackson, and Charlie catapulted the audience into bliss with her throaty rendition. Many whispered behind their hands that Charlie did a better job than the original, and she watched a few couples take to the dance floor to partake.

\* \* \*

Nico had instantly sat up and took notice of the beautiful girl electrifying the stage. She was innocent, soft and yet obviously outgoing and talented. He was instantly transfixed and glued to her. He didn’t even want to blink, in case somehow she evaporated in front of him. Leaning over to his bodyguard, Vlad, he asked him to make an inquiry into this mysterious Charlie. Especially, where she came from, and if she frequently came to this place on Friday's.

“I want to know more about her, starting with her last name, and if I can meet her after the show!” he started, sipping his beer and leaning closer to the stage.

His friend, Jared, laughed. “Last name is the easy part. She's a Colts. Like the daughter of Colonel Crosby Colts. Good luck meeting her. As far as I know, the Colonel doesn't allow her to date. Her brother, Johnny, is also a hard ass. Won’t let anyone near her.”

Nico laughed, more intrigued than before. He watched the mystical creature work the stage in a lady like fashion that really was an oxymoron to the entire performance. If he wasn’t mistaken, he was set to have supper with the Colts family tomorrow evening. He dabbed out his cigar and smiled, “Well, we have to arrange it somehow. Jared, you seem to know a lot about this family. Go tell Johnny I want to meet his sister. See if we can break this streak of No’s and turn them into a yes.”

Jared’s face turned into disbelief. “But, Nico Johnny won’t—”

Nico cut him off. “Go! I have faith you can coerce them into meeting me.”

Jared stood, knowing he had been dismissed.

Nico never took no for an answer. It was something he just wasn’t used to. He was handsome, rich, first in line to become King of Sweden after his father, King Gustav. He was known to be charming, well mannered, intelligent, and ruthless for those who displeased him.

At twenty-five, he was nearing the end of his University career, but enjoyed attending various elite schools around the world to further his cultural experiences. Everyone who was

around him knew that they were there more as ‘yes’ people. He had a few friends, people he had known forever, like Val, Henric, and Andries. They had followed him to America, when he had decided to do the year and a half abroad. They were of a similar status and social class, so they rarely just obliged their spoiled friend. He went to them for council, when he wanted the truth and not merely an encouraging applause for his actions.

As with many Crown Princes, people flocked to him for the attention, and a chosen few were kept around for the hilarity of it all. Jared, was the only one new that he truly trusted. He had tested him in his typical way. He told him a few fake stories in trust, and waited to see if he repeated the outlandish tales to others. So far, nothing had come back to him or shown up in newspapers that liked to write gossip about Royalty or other public figures. It gave him more credit than some, but still far less than his closest confidants.

Backstage, Jared stood on the side. He was in darkness, and seemed to be nervous about approaching Johnny. He and Johnny were not exactly friends. They had grown up in the same town, and came from affluent families, but ‘friends’ was not exactly the term that could have ever described them. Also, Colonel Colts was a man well known around town for his domineering presence. Jenny, his wife was a socialite that commanded a lot of influence within the wealthy wives of the town.

Jared's mother, Annalese, was constantly kissing Jenny's ass in an attempt to climb socially. Jenny came from old money, whereas Annalese had married into it. In New Haven, there were big differences regarding that particular issue, and as snobbish as it was, it was accepted as the unwritten rule in their small society.

Colonel Colts was one of the highest ranking Navy men in town, and commanded a strong presence. It made Johnny a joke to many of the lads he grew up with. Their fathers were all under his command, and the boys made it very clear to Johnny that *they* would never bow down to the Colonel's son. Also, since Johnny and Charlotte were part of the Colts family, others constantly wanted to discredit them in public, both resenting and envying their birth status.

Unfortunately, it was hard for people who really got to know them to dislike them. Although, Jared had tried rather hard to do so for the mere point of it all. Now of course, since Charlotte had returned from one of her fancy boarding schools, it was even harder to hate her. She had transformed into a beautiful creature, captivating every man's attention she crossed paths with.

Admittedly, even he was not immune to her feminine allure, although he knew that she wouldn't return the affections after the pitiful history they shared.

If he wasn't mistaken, at some charity event, he had humiliated her by instigating a situation that had her trip and spill punch all over the front of herself. Johnny, ever her protector, had dragged him out of the building by the collar, and kicked his ass. Both of them were similar in body structure, athletic, and tall, but Jared had his ass handed to him after misjudging his rivals anger. Witnessing Charlie run off in tears had lit Johnny's switch, which was only extinguished when he broke the culprits nose and blackened two eyes.

Jared remembered it all too well, as he stared out considering that the two might even hear him out and not completely ignore what he needed to say. For the sake of his friendship with Nico, he knew he had to try. So, Jared waited, lighting cigarette to cigarette off one another, from a pack he had in his breast pocket. With the Prince he smoked cigars, but when he was nervous he smoked cigarettes pretty much back to back.

As the song came to an end, he glanced out over the crowd, in awe of what it looked like from this angle. Charlie was walking at a nice pace toward him, once the song was complete. However, he was almost certain she had no clue who was standing just beyond the curtain. Johnny was fast behind her, allowing Jackson to assume the role of announcer.

"Charlie, can I talk to you right quick?" Jared attempted, receiving a stern look from Johnny to back off.

Charlie looked at Jared, with a look of disapproval. She wasn't his biggest fan and it showed on her face when she glanced to see who had asked her the question.

"Back off," Johnny warned.

"Please." Jared stated, sounding more vulnerable than he ever had with either of them.

"What is it! Spit it out because I need to get home before curfew," Charlie spat, crossing her arms over herself defensively.

"I have a friend, he asked me to ask you to meet him," Jared said.

Johnny was already shaking his head no and guiding his sister away. "No one who'd be friends with the likes of you deserves our time," he spat.

"It's Prince Nicolai," Jared called, making them stop, but not turn.

Everyone was aware the Prince was attending Yale this past semester, although Johnny had only caught the odd glimpse of the man. Charlie was taking one class there, an introductory

course that allowed women, on Art History, however, she was still undecided if college was something she wanted to pursue. Laws were changing for women's rights, and Yale was actually offering a few courses that allowed for women to participate in.

Her mother hadn't been the most supportive, however, her father was passionate about education and encouraged her to experiment with a non-traditional college experience. Johnny took the course as well, so that he could make sure no one gave her a hard time. They enjoyed being together, so it made the experience thus far, enjoyable.

“He wants to meet you Charlie.”

Johnny turned, “Well, that’s too bad because we need to be getting home. Maybe another time.”

Charlie felt her whole body go numb. A *Prince* wanted to meet her? She couldn't find any words, as her brother pressed on and she struggled to move with him.

Jared jogged to keep up, fearing how upset Nico would be if he returned to the table without her. "Just think about it Charlie, the Crown Prince of Sweden wants to meet you!" he tossed out, trying to make the honor seem more appealing. "He can talk to any woman on the planet, but he wants to talk to you!"

Johnny pretended to ignore him, and as they reached the back door exit, he took their sweater coats from the hooks where they had left them and passed his sister hers. Opening the door was the longest pause they made, and allowed Jared to finally catch up completely with them. Cool February wind assaulted them. Johnny held the door to allow Charlie to go out in front of him. "Sorry Jared, tell the Prince not even he could make her miss curfew."

Jared's mouth hung open trying to find the words to say as the door slammed shut in his face.

Out on the street, they walked briskly toward their father’s brand new Cadillac. Not many people could afford the luxury, however, this year more families had acquired vehicles than in any years previous. Johnny had learned to drive when he joined the army two years earlier. He had hoped that his father would give in and make the purchase, although he was surprised when it happened so soon.

As they approached, they noticed the similar vehicle parked near their own. It had not been there when they had arrived, and a few men were hanging around it. Johnny braced for some kind of confrontation.



However, a tall blonde haired man pushed out first smiling as if they should recognize him. Charlie stepped behind her brother, nervously. She wasn't sure what the Prince really looked like, but just the aura around this man was offsetting.

"I see Jared foiled my attempt to make your acquaintances," Nico stated offering his hand first to Johnny who shook it politely, and then to Charlie, who instead felt it being lifted to his mouth for a kiss. She blushed. "My name is Nicolai, but I prefer Nico."

Johnny really didn't know what to say or do. He didn't want to piss off a Prince, but they really had to be leaving. "I'm Johnny, and this is my sister Charlotte," he replied with a note of haste in his voice.

"Yes, I was inside while you were both performing. I have to say that you, Miss Colts, are very talented." Nico offered, trying to be charming.

Johnny and Charlie both smiled. "Thank you," she said shyly, feeling the heated blush stain her cheeks.

"Please, allow me to offer you both a ride home," he offered, gesturing to the Cadillac next to theirs. He expected it to be impressive, but when Johnny declined he instantly regretted being so forthcoming.

"Thank you, your Royal Highness, but this one is ours."

Nico seemed surprised, but he quickly tried to turn the conversation to one where it might give him a few minutes to talk to the beautiful songstress alone. "Oh, well since you have a drive, I was wondering if I could speak with your sister for a few minutes, if you don't mind?"

Johnny glanced at his watch which he knew would show they were pushing it too close to chance. "I'm sorry, my father is very strict on curfew, Sir, so we have to be leaving."

Nico frowned, noticeably irritated by the turn of events. "How unfortunate. Perhaps another time then. *Godnatt*." He stated coyly and stepped out of the way to allow them to their vehicle.

Charlie smiled again as they passed him, making only brief eye contact. He was definitely dreamy, she asserted taking note of his soft baby features, as well as his chiseled chin. His eyes were the color of a robin's egg, with the vibrant pale blue sparkle of mischief dancing around the corneas. She tried to stop from giggling, however, his presence was making her anxious.

"Oh, and Miss Colts, I hope that time is sooner than later." Nico winked as he reached his group of mates and turned his attention toward them.

Charlie slid into the passenger seat doing her best to keep a cool exterior on her emotions. She warned herself not to look to where he had just disappeared to, and cursed when she did, only to find he was looking back at her with a sly grin plastered on his face. She smiled similarly back at him, as Johnny roared their engine to life and pulled into the street.

"Charlie, I know you're flattered, but the Prince is rumored to be a man who plays games with women. Maybe we shouldn't mention any of this to Father or Mom."

Charlie knew in some ways that Johnny was right, and would be best to just forget she had just met a real live Prince. Yet, her inner girl was screaming that a Prince had seen her perform and wanted to meet her. It didn't hurt that said Prince was drop dead gorgeous either. Not wanting Johnny to know how flattered she was, she just nodded and glanced out the window as streets went by. She had to write about this when she got home in her diary. After all, it would no doubt be a story she would tell her children of one day. Imagine, she thought excitedly, I met a man who will eventually be King someday.

Johnny was surprised at her quietness, but didn't press her to talk. They had an easy friendship between them, where one knew when the other had something to say they would just say it. Neither pressed for information, or nagged. At ten minutes before eleven, they pulled into the long gated driveway of their family mansion. Their father was on the porch with a cigar, looking more like his professional self than normal. Johnny passed the key to a servant, and helped Charlie out on her side. He hated when his father met them at the front door, as if to prove that he was always paying attention to when they returned. At his age, Johnny resented it. Although, since he still lived at home, he really had no right to bring it up.

As they walked up the front entrance way, the Colonel looked at his watch disapprovingly. "Pushing it close tonight son," he stated, making Johnny annoyed.

"We're still home before, Sir," he responded, knowing that the old man couldn't say too much beyond that.

Charlie went up on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. "Goodnight, Daddy," she sighed, hating how Johnny always got so uptight when their father said anything to him.

Crosby gave her a fatherly hug. "Goodnight Pumpkin!" he said before sniffing out his cigar and following them inside. He was all business. "I want you to accompany me to the Country Club tomorrow, John. A few of the men are discussing some ventures I'd like you to be exposed to." Crosby shut and locked the main doors, as he made the decree more than request.

Johnny was supposed to be going to pick up his girlfriend, Sarah, at noon, so the statement gave him pause. "Father, you know Sarah and I go to the Matinee on Saturdays, and then have lunch with her parents." He couldn't hide the irritation in his voice.

"Well, tomorrow you are coming to the Country Club, and we are having a family dinner here. Sarah is welcome." The Colonel wasn't someone who took no for an answer either, and as Charlie made her way up the stairs she heard bits and pieces of the argument before Johnny disappeared into the interior of the office and his father closed the door.

As she passed by her parent's room on the way to her own, she heard Jenny call to her. Obliging she walked in, nervous about being trapped into lying about her night. Jenny would be mortified if she knew that Charlie was singing in a bar, no matter how good she thought she was. She had her face mask on, and her nails were perfectly painted a soft pink. Jenny always retired around ten and read until midnight. Her book was neatly marked with a metal bookmark that Charlie had gifted her this past Christmas. It was engraved, *Jennifer Alice Colts* along the side, and two doves flying off one end.

"How was your evening, Sweetheart?" she inquired, yawning.

"Good, we had fun," Charlie replied vaguely.

"Did you go anywhere exciting?" she asked, never dreaming that *her* daughter would enter Beers Tavern.

"Not really, Mom, just hung out with Johnny and some of his friends." Was it a lie? She really wasn't sure; all Charlie knew was she was keeping the truth clear of the conversation. "I'm pretty tired though, so I think I'll head to bed. Jane said she would stop by tomorrow and go riding with me in the morning." Jane was Charlie's friend from nursery school, and she was home this semester as well from her boarding school. They were trying to make dates to hang out where their schedules didn't clash.

"Alright, honey. Daddy has a few people coming for dinner tomorrow evening so you should get some sleep tonight. Apparently, Prince Nicolai of Sweden is going to be a guest. His Uncle Philip, the Duke of Västergötland, and your father are friends. Since the Prince is doing a few semesters at Yale, he wanted them to meet." Jenny sounded beyond excited. Of course, that was her thing. She loved entertaining nobility.

Charlie felt herself get almost weak. "The Prince?" she repeated, not fully conscious of her train of thought at the moment.

Jenny's smile broadened. "Yes, he is said to be very charming. Of course Philip is the same. You've met him on several occasions. I think all royal men have just some pedigree charm in their genes."

Flashes of his smile and eyes came to Charlie as she thought of the man her mother was talking about. His smooth voice, and only slight accent made him all the more intriguing to her. Then, like a wash of cool water hit her square in the face, Charlie realized how bad it could be for her that the Prince was coming to dinner. Panic began to build in her chest at him delightfully telling everyone present how the two of them met tonight. He would think nothing of it, since he most likely assumed she had permission to attend the open mic from her parents. She gulped as she envisioned her father's accusatory glare as his face turned the color of a lush red apple. Her mother would be too mortified to speak, and try unsuccessfully to divert the conversation away from the direction in which would be dealt with privately. The Prince would be embarrassed, Johnny would be disowned, and she would be facing a punishment too severe to contemplate. To make matters worse, she'd never have the chance to set foot on a stage again.

"Charlotte, are you alright Sweetheart? You've gone very pale," her mother stated bringing her back from the brink of madness.

Faking a smile, she nodded, "Yes, I'm just so tired."

Jenny watched her stand, worried that it was more than what her daughter was letting on. "Okay, but if you feel ill in the morning then I'll send for Dr. Flynn to come and check you."

Charlie nodded and bolted for the hall.

Johnny was angrily walking by as she came out, and she flagged him over to her room trying not to make things seem odd if someone was watching.

He looked at her strange look of panic, and obeyed, curious what could be so amiss.

"Father is having a dinner party here tomorrow," she stated frantically, as Johnny's own irritation washed over him.

"Yes, I have orders to attend. Sometimes that man makes me crazy! I'm a grown man, for crying out loud, and he acts as if he'd still call me to his office on a whim, and strap me for disobedience."

Charlie could empathize with him, the Colonel still gave her the warning glare she was pushing his patience too far sometimes, and two weeks ago when they got into a fight over her not

wanting to accompany them to the Shepard's party he said, "This really isn't a discussion, Darling, the only choice you have is whether you go sitting comfortably or not."

Charlie had been so shocked she burst into tears and ran upstairs. Growing up, corporal punishment was used as necessary. However, it had been a few years since she had found herself facing such consequences. Now that she was young woman, she hadn't thought her father would resort to such behavior, but that was a misconception obviated after he made that statement.

She shook herself back to the present. "Well, mother just said that this dinner party will have the Prince in attendance! Johnny, we're done for if he mentions our meeting!"

Johnny 's face paled as well. "Shit!" he cursed. "Jared is the only one I can think of who knows him."

Charlie nodded, with a noticeable grimace biting her nails nervously. "I really don't want to think about what Daddy would do if..."

Johnny interrupted her, "I'll figure something out, Chuck," he promised using the pet name he gave her as a kid. Darting back out, he closed her door with a wink, and took off back toward the stairs.

She ran to press her ear to the door to see if her parents would mention his abrupt decision to go out so late. Her father's disapproving voice could be heard in the peaceful quiet. "Johnny this door will be locked permanently at midnight!"

Johnny hurriedly answered, "Great! I'll stay at Jackson's."

Her father didn't respond.

Plunking down on her vibrant pink and white comforter, she felt tears sting the back of her eyes. What if Johnny couldn't find Jared and Nico showed up? Her father's stern face came to her mind, as well as the last time he gave her a spanking. She had been fourteen, and got caught with her friend Mallory trying a cigarette of Johnny's that they found out near the stables. Both girls were frozen with fear as the Colonel approached, looking none too pleased the girls were up to mischief. He had been so mad that she swore his head was going to explode. His deep, authoritative voice bellowed for her to go her room, then he took Mallory home. She waited over an hour, sobbing until he calmly rapped on the door and entered without invite. He had a paddle in his hand and ordered her to come to him. Closing her eyes tightly, she remembered the breathtaking pain and embarrassment she was in for two days. She was desperately praying that Johnny could find Jared or Nico, or this time tomorrow the exact same fate might befall her.