

### *Chapter 3: Susan*

We boarded the chartered flight to Kings City. We should have been invited to stay at Castle New Haven. Most guests would be staying there but King George had told my parents that under no uncertain terms were we invited to anything other than the Jubilee dance lest the Freddie and I have a chance to meet.

I fell asleep while watching the details below fade to black as the sun set over the Cambria Strait. The plane shook and I opened my eyes. It was daylight suddenly. Freddie, older and in regalia sat next to me. "Did I wake you?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No. I don't think so." I saw the King's signet, the red ruby, on the ring finger of his right hand. Hopeful, I looked at my left hand but didn't see the queen's emerald signet. He was wearing a wedding band on his left hand. It seemed rather plain given his station.

"Aren't you wearing that on the wrong hand?" I asked, pointing to his signet.

He smiled. "I'm left handed and a bit of a klutz. I feel better having it out of the way a bit."

"You're not left handed, Freddie," I said.

He looked at me, puzzled. "I'm not Freddie. Do you mean my grandfather or my son?"

Then I noticed his eyes. They were brown. They looked like my father's eyes. Freddie's are sky blue.

"Do I marry your grandfather?" I asked.

He smiled. "I'm afraid not."

We hit turbulence again. I opened my eyes and saw that we were coming in for a landing. We had arrived.

"Did you sleep well?" My mother asked.

"Yes, thank you," I replied, my head still filled with the dream. The king had seemed so real and so like Freddie and yet he wasn't. Why had my imagination created him but not given me the pleasure of being Freddie's wife?

We arrived at seven at the Icarus, a luxury hotel in the fashionable center of the city, two blocks from the King James train station. The station made me think of my dream again. My unnamed monarch seemed like a James, somehow, but this station was named for the Kingdom's first monarch. We had a penthouse suite with a view of Castle New Haven. It think it was King George's way or reminding me of what he had taken away from Freddie and me while making sure my parents knew their place in the pecking order.

My mother put her arm around my waist as I stood by the window staring at the different buildings near us. Some were part of the slow ship modules, pieces of the same ship that now served as Castle New Haven. The newer ones were glass and steel and so much different from the black boxy pieces of the ship. A few blocks away I could just make out the houses of parliament. "It's a beautiful night. We should make the most of it," she said.

I smiled, grateful for any sort of diversion. "That sounds like a good idea." Mother and I spent a late night out enjoying window shopping in the prestigious Landing Square district, ending with a horse driven buggy tour of Lion's Gate Park. Father chose to stay at the hotel in case King George had any last minute demands.

"I know things have suddenly gone pear shaped for you but you will recover. There will be someone else out there for you," Mother said as we walked along the boulevard to the hotel.

"But why did King George have to be so heavy handed? Couldn't he just have explained the situation in a civil manner to Freddie and me? He could have given us time to say good bye at least," I replied, watching another horse and buggy clomp down the street towards the park.

"It's unfortunately his prerogative as monarch to be 'heavy handed' as you put it. He's probably afraid you and Alfred would have done something stupid like

elope or perhaps you'd get pregnant and then he'd have a royal bastard on his hands. How would that look to the King and Queen of Lesser Albion?"

I thought of the king's brown eyes. Could he be the son of a bastard prince? Is that what I was wishing for? It didn't make sense in the real world. Elizabeth and Freddie would have children together. One of them would be his heir. Something would have to go terribly wrong for a bastard to take the throne.

"We wouldn't be that stupid. A chance to give him a good luck hug would have been nice," I said, secretly sad that Freddie and I had never given into temptation and done anything more kissing and groping.

"I know but George doesn't know you like I do. He's doing what he thinks is best for his son and for the country."

The day of the Jubilee, I felt at ease. I hadn't had any more dreams like the one on the plane but I knew that life would go on for Freddie and me even though we would have to take separate paths.

I watched as the city changed from the wealthy high rises to industrial warehouses and power stations, finally giving way to pasture lands that had recently started sprouting some well needed housing. Beyond these tract homes the farms and ranches began, spreading north and south to the darkening horizons.

The last five miles or so the limousine climbed up into the mountains. At the top of a granite plateau the trees opened up to the vast complex of Castle New Haven.

Castle New Haven had been designed on Earth and built in orbit around Earth's moon. It had included many redundancies with the hope of forty to sixty per cent survival of the humans, livestock and fauna on the ship. The human population at the time the ship departed the moon's orbit had been just shy of one million. Though the first few years had been full of hardship and death on the slow ship the surviving generations had grown and thrived becoming a hearty and resourceful population. The ship turned castle was large enough to alter weather patterns in the local surrounds and it had its own snow line in winter despite being so close to the equator.

All the oldest families in the peerage could trace their roots to the crew of the slow ship. My family had been the second in command but had never married into the captains' family. We would have to wait a little longer.

The driver brought us across the bridge and through the circle, pulling up to an elaborately decorated walkway near the public entrance to the castle. We followed the other guests along a path defined by red velvet ropes that took them into the castle, through the atrium and ultimately to the Grand Ballroom.

As I followed my parents I felt myself being watched. I looked around but didn't see anyone looking directly at me. Yet just outside of my peripheral vision I

caught a flicker of someone walking beside me. The hair on my arms stood on end and the air smelled vaguely of ozone.

We came to the ballroom. The thrones and seats were still empty on the dais. The royal family had not yet made their appearance. Father grabbed me firmly by the arm and whispered in my ear one last stern reminder, "We are here to celebrate the Crown Prince's birthday. You are not to dance with him. Do you understand?"

I nodded.

"Come dear, let's get some refreshments to calm our nerves," Mother said, pulling her by the hand away from the entrance to the back of the room.

I decided to try some of the brightly colored and fruity perfumed punch. The servant who handed me the cup seemed to let his gaze fall on me a little too long. I began to wonder if perhaps I should recognize this man. "Excuse me, have we met?" I volunteered.

The blond haired man with the scruffy chin smiled. "I don't think so. But I'm willing to pretend that we have."

"What's your name?"

"Eric Pugh. And you are the daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Hook."

I blushed and I didn't know why. Clearly this man was beneath my class and yet I was drawn to him. He was similar enough in look Freddie that if I squinted at him I could just pretend...

"Are you flirting with me?"

Oh god, this is when he'll tell me he's gay and I'll have made a huge fool of myself! "Maybe. Would you like me to?"

"I was hoping you were. Let's talk later. Do you think you can get away from your parents for a while?"

Our conversation was interrupted by trumpets announcing the arrival of the royal family. I put down my drink and dashed back to where my parents stood. The King came first, holding his head high, strutting in a cocky fashion. The Queen followed looking gorgeous but frail. Then came the Freddie and I nearly let out a gasp from surprise. He looked like a gray washed out ghost of himself. Though he was dressed in the regalia befitting his coming of age, he looked gaunt and he walked like an old man. What had happened to my jovial boyfriend? No, I reminded herself, Freddie was my ex-boyfriend.

Shortly thereafter the opening of the Jubilee was announced and the dancing began. As the hours dragged, I wearied from dancing with a number of young but boring men from the peerage. Then I saw Eric motioning to me. At last, my heart leapt, maybe I could have some fun!

"Excuse me, I'd like to sit the next one out. I'm a little jet lagged," I said to the next man who offered me his hand. When he had gone on to another lady, I slipped into the crowd and made my way over to the refreshments.

Eric took me by the hand and led me through a secret door behind a tapestry that depicted the slow ship's travels through space. "I didn't know if you would come," he said, his breath hot on my neck in these close quarters.

"There's nothing for me at that ball except for embarrassment and boredom," I replied.

Soon we were in a storage room for the staging area that served both the ballroom and the throne room. Eric leaned in to kiss me but I beat him to it, standing on tip toes to kiss him. My first kiss was a chaste little peck but the ones that followed became more passionate.

"Are you the one that's the source of our melancholy prince's problems? I've heard rumors that he had to be yanked out of school early to protect him from an over zealous girl friend."

I pushed away. "The King owes a favor to the King and Queen of Lesser Ablion. That's why Alfred was called home early from school."

Eric smiled. "Woah. You mean the jubilee is rigged? I've got to call my bookie and change my bet." He pulled out his cell phone and frantically pushed some numbers.

"Hey Herb, I'm changing my bet. One hundred on Princess Elizabeth. So what if I'm daft. It's my money. I'm good for it. Have I ever let you down?" He closed his phone and put it back in his pocket.

"I'm going to make a mint!" Eric kissed me again and scooped me up in a hug.

"You're rumpling my dress," I giggled.

"Isn't that the point?"

"I'd rather you not," I said, lifting my dress and wrapping a leg around him. Eric's eyes boggled.

"That is what you want, isn't it?" I teased, surprised at myself but feeling eager.

He nodded, stunned but aroused. He started working at his buckle. I began to help and soon his trousers and briefs were around his ankles. "Hold on--" he said, reaching clumsily for his trousers while I stared at his erection. After a few failed attempts he finally pulled a condom wrapper from his pocket.

"Are you always this prepared?" I asked.

"A good man is always prepared," he said, putting the condom on.

I pushed my slip out of the way, managed to get my silk hose down and finally my panties. I didn't dare tell him it was my first time, though now I found myself wishing again that Freddie and I had done more than snog and grope.

He pulled me by the hands until I was nearly straddling him. "One last question— how old are you?"

"Eighteen. Why, how old are you?" I replied.

"Twenty-five." He slowly lowered me onto himself. It wasn't as painful as I was expecting. It was more odd than painful. Then reality set in. I was having sex with a complete stranger in a closet during the Jubilee!

We didn't dally. We dressed quickly and quietly. Before Eric led me back to the party he handed me a business card. "This is my cell phone number. It also has my email address. I don't want this to be a one night stand."

I grabbed the card and slipped down my bra, wishing my dress had pockets. "I thought it was the girl who was supposed to give the boy her number," I teased.

"Only an idiot would pass you up!"

I returned to the ball room through the passage and under the tapestry. Walking felt strange with my legs and insides still quivering and my heart racing. I joined my parents just as the Jubilee Waltz was being announced at the stroke of midnight. Warily Freddie came down the dais and through the crowd to another special area set up for the visiting royal family. He hesitated briefly and it seemed to me that it was Elizabeth who took his hand, not him taking hers.

My father was only concerned with the Crown Prince's dance but Mother noticed I was acting oddly. "Is everything okay? Where did you go? A few nice young men were looking to dance with you."

"I just needed a breath of fresh air. I'm sorry I took so long," I replied, my mind replaying the encounter in the closet. Though I was a little embarrassed, I found myself wanting more of him.