

HER KING



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

## CHAPTER 1



*C. 1850, ALTERNATE ENGLAND*

*K*it sighed restlessly as she surveyed the activity in the ornate gold and silver ballroom from the surprising discomfort of her throne, while trying to subtly shift her position.

Despite the fact that they were wearing costumes that celebrated fictional characters from the past—and thus concealed their identities—there were very few instances when she couldn't make out who everyone was. The slightly pared down orchestra was tucked discreetly into a corner, hidden behind a screen as if to encourage the element of fantasy that the air was being magically filled with music. The groaning board was truly living up to its name this evening and was being refilled as discreetly as possible by the cook's staff. Good, French wine was being circulated through the crowd by servants carrying large trays of pre-filled glasses, and the center of the enormous ballroom was filled with smiling and laughing couples in extravagant costumes who had spent most of their evening dancing.

The ball was going splendidly, and everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves immensely. And she heartily wished she could count herself among them.

But there was no use. The seat—however much it was a symbol of power and majesty—was definitely not made for comfort. It was much too big for her, overall, too—when she sat back in it, her feet didn't touch the ground. Another was being built for her—supposedly—but had yet to arrive. So she was forced to sit on the edge of it, where there was the least amount of padding—such as it was.

Still, she didn't want anyone to notice her distress. Kit was of a mind that it was always best that a queen showed as little weakness as possible.

She couldn't stay there a second longer, though, forcing herself to rise and walk slowly through the crowds on the sidelines of the cavernous room as they parted. The men, in elaborate hats and costumes, bowing their heads, and the women, with their towering and sometimes hilariously decorated wigs and decorations, curtsying low to her. Kit worried that some of them might end up on the floor due to the weight of their head-dresses but refused to allow herself anything but the slightest smile of amusement at that thought.

As she made her way, she passed through several groups of her friends—acquaintances might be the better word—although she didn't acknowledge them with anything more than the same slow nod she gave everyone else, not wanting to encourage them to engage her in conversation, or Heaven forbid—in the case of the men—ask her to dance. So far, she had to admit, though, that hadn't been much of a problem. She wasn't sure why, but few men had approached her for that reason. Most of them had done so in order to seek a favor, rather than to entice her onto the dance floor, and this ball wasn't the first time that had happened. She was still learning how to walk that fine line between being

who she was and wishing to appear at least somewhat approachable.

By the time she made it across the floor—having managed to glide by the buffet and nick a few of the cream buns she particularly liked and secreting them in her handkerchief—all she wanted to do was run out the closest door and disappear into the gardens below.

Shedding her aunt, who had felt that she needed to step in for her mother after she died when Kathryn was quite young, wasn't going to be easy. Lady Bertha Mackelroy, her father's elder sister, was generally innocuous, but she also had an overblown sense of propriety and almost never left her side. Thus, poor Kit had rarely had a moment to herself since her aunt had insinuated herself into her mother's place—with her grateful but understandably distracted father's blessing—gaining both staggeringly better accommodations than she had left as well as a not inconsiderable amount of power.

Luckily, Bertie—the nickname Kit had given her early on, that her aunt actively detested, such that Kit only called her that in her head now—wasn't particularly bright and didn't have a mean bone in her body. But she was almost impressively, single-mindedly focused on—and rigidly stubborn about—raising her niece to be what she considered to be a proper queen, and that meant that she was not even allowed to sleep alone in her own room.

However, at the moment, it appeared that both her aunt and the mature, deadly dull ladies-in-waiting she had selected for Kit were deep in conversation about something, and frankly she didn't care a whit what it was that had gotten them in an uproar this time.

She seized the rare opportunity to disappear, requiring herself to stealthily continue to walk slowly but determinedly towards one of the many sets of French doors out into the garden. Her eyes continually scanned the crowd—not too

furtively, she hoped—for the imposing visage she dreaded seeing, until she was actually able to close them behind her. She could barely believe she had managed to slip her guardians that easily! Doing so usually required much more in the way of forward planning, which meant engaging a lookout—who was usually her maid—to keep an eye out for the gaggle of those women, her aunt in the lead, as they barreled, in the most lady-like of manners, of course, down the hallways of the palace in search of her, as if they thought she was in imminent danger of dying for the lack of their stifling company.

Luckily, Stevens, her little rebel Scottish maid, was on her side, and had been since she'd been engaged almost a decade ago. Her aunt hated her, of course. But she had proven her worth to her sovereign many times over, and her pay was directly commensurate with that fact—although Kit knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that that wasn't a consideration for the only slightly older woman, simply because of the fact that her penny pinching aunt had refused to pay her for the first two years she was there. Aunt Bertha felt that the honor of serving the woman who would eventually be queen—plus room and board in the palace—ought to be compensation enough.

As she made her way into the fragrant gardens, lit, as they were, by strategically placed gas lights that provided a soft glow to the maze-like hedges while creating somewhat menacing shadows out of the statuary.

But she wasn't afraid in the least. Kit had spent a lot of time in the gardens—and the stables—in both the day and night. Both were places her aunt hated, and thus would be loath to look for her. She knew them like the back of her hand, heading towards the back corner where few ventured, taking short cuts and dodging easily away from the other people who had also sought the privacy the garden afforded, none of whom ventured as far afield in it as she did.

When she got there, she sank down on the white, intricately

carved bench and reveled in her success for a moment before getting up again to face one of the decorative walls. Removing her gloves, she used her bare fingers—while cursing herself, as she always did, for the despicable habit of biting her nails, which was no help to her in this situation—to pry a brick out of it and extract the book she kept there.

Aunt Bertie was not a fan of females reading—even queens. She felt it was unseemly for a woman to be too well educated. But the joy of reading was one of the few things that Kit's mother had left her when she was abruptly taken from her, besides a generous collection of jewels and a love for animals. She could remember her mother actually climbing into bed with her, in all of her voluminous skirts—book in hand—to snuggle her close. The details of the story didn't matter in the least—it was the closeness of her busy mother, whom she usually didn't get to see very often during the day, as well as the warmth of her voice to her daughter's little ears, as well as the comforting rumble of it through the chest her ear was pressed against that had mattered to her, even then.

Besides being drilled in matters of governance by one of her father's oldest and wisest advisors—which was one of the few things her distant father did towards her education as he continued to reign without her mother—her aunt had arranged that she be taught other things that she considered to be important—languages, music, both singing and instruments, needlepoint, and, of course, comportment. Kit had been reasonably good at needlepoint, horrible at languages, but was quite proficient at music—in particular, singing, which she enjoyed almost as much as reading.

But if her aunt's opinion was to be believed—and her father did—she failed miserably at comportment. Among many other transgressions, it was her whistling that tended to get her in Dutch with her aunt.

"Most unbecoming of a lady, Kathryn," she'd say as she frowned fiercely.

Kit had learned early to simply go along with such rebukes, then do exactly what she wanted—just making sure that she was out of sight or earshot when she did so.

Anything else she'd learned had been accomplished because of her own intellectual curiosities—how her interests developed—and in spite of her aunt. She'd discovered an affinity for history and biology, which would have turned Bertie's stomach if she'd known about it, as well as the burgeoning sciences of archeology and Egyptology.

Bertha would have considered Kit's interest in hard sciences to be utterly contrary to the ladylike monarch into which she was trying to forcibly mold Kathryn. Ladies didn't speak loudly or too intelligently. They didn't dominate the conversation or express their opinions. They certainly didn't argue with anyone, always deferred to the men around them, who were presumed to always be more intelligent and informed than she.

The fact that she would be a queen at some point did not encourage Bertie to adjust her opinions about how a young lady should act in the least, despite how Kit argued—much to Bertha's displeasure—to the contrary.

The older woman, who seemed much older than she was, but in reality it was only a few years, would be utterly horrified that she was sitting alone in the garden, where any ruffian might assault her—a fear that defied the logic that there were guards in the palace, and the only people that were there had been thoroughly vetted by her aunt prior to being invited.

But that kind of reasonableness went by the boards when Bertha considered the delicacy of her niece's position. As a princess royal, her behavior must be beyond reproach. Otherwise, what man of acceptably noble birth would be interested in marrying her?

Her aunt also chose, because of her own prejudices, to



ignore the betrothal her mother and father had arranged to a young Scottish man—if things had gone differently for his country, he might well have been its prince royal and perhaps its king—when she was four and he was sixteen. He'd certainly been raised as if he were royal, she knew. Her parents had hoped that uniting the two countries in marriage—and raising a Scot to such a rank as prince royal of the British Empire—might diffuse some of the animosity that was still present between the two kingdoms. But her aunt was still on the lookout for someone she considered to be much more suitable for her niece to marry.

Kit sighed again, using the bookmark to open the book to where she'd left, and settling down with the buns on her lap to spend some time—not a lot, though, or suspicions would be raised and her aunt was likely to call out the army to organize search parties to find her—reading quietly and hopefully, undisturbed.

She was so involved with the story of a brave young woman who had married a count who lived in some foreign land sight unseen, and her trials and tribulations as she tried to fit into her new life that someone was easily able to encroach on her hard won solitude.

Because she was so engrossed in the story, she didn't notice that she wasn't alone any longer until the person who was intruding on her privacy had the gall to clear his throat in order to gain her attention.

Startled, Kit looked up—and up—and then up some more.

The man standing before her was probably the largest person she had ever seen, not that that caused her any concern. He completely obliterated the light that allowed her to read, so she put her bookmark—one that she had made when she was first learning to do needlepoint and still thought it had come out reasonably well—back in her book. For some reason she couldn't fathom, she was also inspired to bundle her treat back

into her handkerchief, as if just eating was some kind of sin at which she didn't want to be caught.

She opened her mouth, likely to take him to task for blocking her light, but before she could say anything, he put his big foot forward and bent back over it while taking his big hat with its large ostrich feather off to sweep it dramatically down in front of him in a grand gesture.

"Your Majesty."

Why those words, which she'd heard so many times before, when said by him made her breath quicken, usually bashful nipples swelling to press themselves against her chemise, as well as the unforgiving material of her corset.

"Pray forgive me for interrupting you," he asked, and she caught an earful of the richness of his Scottish brogue, which she had always found especially pleasant, despite how her aunt cautioned against finding anything Scottish to be in the least acceptable.

"They're heathens and traitorous rebels—every last one of them," she'd said decisively, and more than once.

Kit wondered, in a moment of fancy, whether the man before her was a rebel. How interesting that would be!

Then he straightened up, and she wished he hadn't, since he towered over her so. She felt as if she should more accurately have been dressed as Little Red Riding Hood, but in his dark black clothing, he was already in the correct costume for the part of the Big Bad Wolf.

"May I be terribly forward and introduce myself? I am Baron Winthrop, and I am at your service, Majesty."

She automatically offered him her hand, and instead of merely taking her two fingers and lifting them just slightly, as would have been proper, he captured her entire hand, bending down over it to bring it gently to his mouth. He kissed the back of it with great appreciation, all while keeping his eyes locked with hers until she was forced to look away or appear as inde-

cent as he was, or as if she was encouraging such behavior in him.

When he let go of her hand, she felt somewhat bereft, instantly wishing he was still holding it in that warm, steady grip of his. There was something rough about his palm that she'd never encountered before, and she wanted to know what it was. Pox scars, perhaps? No, they would have been smoother and likely cratered, too.

He spoke again, interrupting her thoughts. "May I say, ma'am, that the many rumors about the depths of your beauty pale in comparison to the reality of seeing it before me." He looked as if he was trying not to smile, the otherwise straight line of his obscenely full lips curled slightly up at the ends.

"Why, my lord, I believe you are trying to flatter me," Kit demurred, taking the book in her hand as she made to leave. "It was very nice to make your acquaintance, Baron Winthrop, but I believe I'll—"

As she stood, he said in a manner that did not invite countermanding but could not quite be considered impolite, "I would ask you to stay with me, Your Majesty, if only for a short while. I have come a very long way to see you tonight."

That was not a matter of concern for her, but something she couldn't quite put her finger on compelled her to sit back down.

"The gardens are beautiful in the moonlight, but they can in no way compete with you," he complimented, his eyes never leaving her.

Kit was thankful for the shadows at that moment—they would conceal the rising blush that stained her cheeks at his comment. "You are extravagant with your praise, my lord. However, I do not find overblown compliments pleasing in the least. It smacks of toadying, which I detest in the extreme." Again, she was at a point where she wanted to leave, but then he began to speak in an incredibly sensual tone that he didn't seem to be trying to curb in the least, even in consideration of to

whom he was speaking, and it wove a spell around her that kept her rooted right where she was.

"My apologies, Majesty," he apologized, although she got the sense that he might have been more amused by her reaction than concerned in the least. "I have been traveling for quite some time—"

"You mentioned that," she commented sharply, trying unsuccessfully to stifle her own wholly unexpected reaction to him. It was so pronounced that for the second time that evening, she just wanted to run away—which was unusual for her in any case—and that became just another way in which he was managing to unsettle her.

The baron didn't look particularly happy with her interruption, although he neither said nor did anything about it. Instead, he continued as if she hadn't said anything. "—for the mere possibility of meeting you, as I have made a bit of a study of you, and I am glad to have accomplished my goal. Besides being one of the most beautiful women on Earth, you are also known to be well educated and quite wise for your age."

Kit looked up at him, her expression open and direct. "Did I whisper when I mentioned that too many compliments make me wonder what the person who is giving them is up to?"

That earned her a broad smile that single handedly lit up the garden and made her feel more giddy than she ever had in her life. He wasn't at all classically handsome—what she could see of him, anyway, what with the enormous hat and his mask—but that didn't matter in the least when he smiled like that, and she was far from immune to his charms, as much as she wished she was. *Annoying men shouldn't be allowed to be charming*, she decided right then and there.

"Ah, my queen, I but speak the truth. Surely, such honesty should be rewarded, no?"

To her horror, the rake was actually leaning down as if he would kiss her! The nerve!

This time, she did not allow her wayward desires to talk her out of what she wanted to do, rising swiftly and putting much more than an arm's length between them before turning to castigate him in no uncertain terms. "You forget yourself, sir! I am the queen, and you will not impose yourself on me in any way! Beyond that, I am an engaged person, and your behavior is most unseemly. I cannot imagine that my betrothed would not call you out for your boorish behavior if he were here. I am leaving now, and I do not expect to see your face at my court again!"

The baron bowed low again as she left, not that she saw him do it. Then he settled himself down on the small seat she had vacated, watching with an undeniably indulgent look on his face as he watched her do something he never expected to see a queen do—gather her skirts and literally run way from him.

Granted, she slowed herself well before she was likely to encounter anyone else, and he lost sight of her altogether when she rounded a corner, but still. It had afforded him a fairly scandalous look at the slimness of her stocking-clad ankle. After doffing his ridiculous hat, he lit a cheroot, which he had become quite addicted to of late, his eyes still flicking up regularly as if to follow her progress or catch a glimpse of her again, but she was long gone.

When he shifted a little, he cried out in surprise as something dug into his hip. Reaching beneath him as he lifted himself, he pulled out a small package and upon opening the lacy handkerchief, he realized that it contained a book, which only left him that much more impressed with the little queen, as well as what was now two well squashed cream buns—one she'd obviously been nibbling on.

Everything he'd learned about her this evening only made him smile even more broadly.

Yes, he was quite well satisfied.

For now.



*SIX MONTHS LATER...*

"Ma'am, you must sit still, or you're going to end up bald!"

Kit tsked loudly, raising her hands instead to interfere with the brave attempts of her maid to wrestle her mass of red waves and ringlets—which seemed to each be in business for themselves—into some semblance of order. "As usual, you exaggerate, Stevens."

"I never exaggerate, ma'am," her maid corrected brusquely, slapping those pesky hands away with the confidence of having been a longtime servant to the queen from the time she was still a princess royal.

Far from being offended at Stevens' behavior, Kit welcomed the dose of normalcy she represented. She was one of the few people she counted on to tell her the absolute truth—good, bad, or indifferent. Stevens never tried to curry favor, or twist things to soften the blow or in her own favor. She was blunt, sometimes to the point of being curt, but she was never deliberately hurtful. Kit had never once doubted her loyalty, and that wasn't something she could say about very many people around her, unfortunately.

But tonight was a very big night, and she was more than a little nervous, which was generally uncharacteristic for her, at least now. It hadn't been in the beginning—when she'd first become queen after losing her father. There had been many times when she'd felt utterly lost, worried that the job was much more than she could handle. Things were being expected of her, or done in her name, or done to her to the extent that she felt she had no control, as if being queen was taking over her life and there would never be any other—frankly more enjoyable—parts of life for her. The weight of her position would push all of those potentially wonderful things—marriage, children, even friends—away from her by the sheer volume of her duties.

And it had already done so in conjunction with her friendships. As soon as she became queen, several people she had thought were her friends seemed to only be interested in what she could do for them—titles, pardons, favors, etc. As a result, her circle of friends, which had never been very big simply by virtue of who she was, had become drastically—alarming—smaller, something which caused her no small amount of anxiety, especially considering what was happening this evening.

It had been decided—by Cabinet, with her aunt's reluctant acquiescence—that it would be best, if she was going to go through with the marriage, for her intended to come down to meet her before their wedding. Kit wanted to honor her parents' choice for her, and if this young man were in the least agreeable to her, she would likely marry him.

There was no other candidate—not that her aunt hadn't been whispering the names of men she thought were more suitable into her ear since she'd become a woman. She was sure to invite one or two of them to every dance or ball in hopes that her niece would see the light and end the highly inappropriate Scottish match. Kit always felt sorry for the poor bachelors being paraded in front of her like prized hogs at a county fair, but then she remembered that most young women of high society were treated in much the same fashion when they came of marriageable age, and she quickly came to the conclusion that it could not be considered acceptable for either sex.

None of them had passed her muster, though, and she was long since past the point of knuckling under to the older woman just to shut her up. She was the queen now and not at all beyond suggesting rather pointedly that her aunt might like to retire to the country—which was, according to Bertha, worse than death. Bertie was not a fan of the "disgustingly natural" environs much past the outskirts of London.

So this evening, the would-be prince and his entourage, which apparently consisted of only one other person beyond his

servants—his younger sister, surprisingly—would be arriving at the palace so that they might meet each other and decide, once and for all, if they were going to go ahead with the marriage.

Frankly, since he was now in his early thirties, Kit had been quite surprised that he hadn't broken the betrothal and been long since married to someone else by now. There certainly were others he could have married—perhaps not those who were Queens of England, or even queens at all, but the nobility didn't lack for possible—and potentially very advantageous—matches.

Granted, none of those would join their long warring countries, either. Theirs would be a historic pairing, and Kit knew a lot was riding on this evening, besides just whether or not she personally found him tolerable. But tolerable for an evening and tolerable for a lifetime were two very different things, she knew.

There were other, less innocuous, reasons why he'd refused to marry for so long. Becoming a Prince Royal of England would give him great power, money, and political influence, and she had rarely, in her relatively short life, met any man who wouldn't be highly intrigued by those enticing prospects.

But her parents had been a rare love match, and Kit dared to hope for something similar for herself, although she knew the odds were low that she and the man she married would be as compatible as they were. Realistically, the best she could hope for was that she didn't end up hating the man or for that feeling to become mutual.

But she also knew that her husband wouldn't have an easy time of it, either. He would not be the King of England. He would have to walk behind her. No matter his age, rank, or accomplishments up to the point he married her, he would have to bend his knee to her and pledge his fealty—his very life—to her. And Kit was of a mind that not very many men—at least, men she would be attracted to—would be very eager to commit themselves to such a life, as a mere adjunct to his wife.



And therein lay another rub. She had yet to meet a suitable man to whom she found herself in the slightest way attracted. Kit was beginning to think there was something wrong with her. Stevens had a new crush on some groom or footman who caught her eye every other week, it seemed. Kit had never felt a pull towards any man in particular. In fact, even before she became queen, she'd become suspicious of how most people—especially men—acted towards her, feeling that most of them didn't see and weren't interested in her, but rather were attracted to her future position, only seeing advantages for themselves in a marriage to her, rather than liking her for herself. It was one of the most depressing—and unexpected—aspects of who she was.

She had a few close friends she'd kept up with since she was a child and in whom she knew she could place her trust completely. Everyone else was met with a rather cool, jaundiced eye that she had been cultivating since she had realized who and what she was, in self-defense.

Kit hoped she would feel comfortable enough with the duke that she could let her guard down a little, but she was a realist and knew that was unlikely, especially so early on in their relationship. But she would hold out hope that that might one day be possible between them if things progressed as everyone around her—minus her aunt—hoped they would.

There was that pressure, too. Cabinet wanted her to marry as soon as possible and produce the required—preferably male—heir, and she knew all of those old, much more experienced men were holding their breaths to see the results of this evening.

Finally, fully dressed in a beautiful but rather plain satin gown—her only adornment a small tiara and diamond drop earrings—she descended the huge staircase alone. Stevens had worked miracles in subduing her hair into a somewhat severe, prim do that she fussed about not showing off one of her best assets, but Kit was adamant about what she wanted. She

consciously presented a relatively understated picture of royal elegance as she met with her Prime Minister—Lord Rutland.

He bowed to her, complimenting graciously, "You look beautiful, as always, Your Majesty."

"Thank you, Lord Rutland."

Then his eyes narrowed a bit as he scrutinized her more carefully. "Although, if I may say, I am a bit surprised that you're not in a more, uh..." He was trying to choose his words carefully. "That you aren't..." he tried again, then faded off.

"More ostentatious?"

The poor old man looked fairly apoplectic at that, and Kit had to hide a smile. "No, of course not, ma'am! But your choice of clothing and jewelry is a bit more re... su... un," he was trying desperately to avoid using a word that might offend her, "subdued than usual, if you don't mind my saying so, ma'am."

Kit offered him her hand, and he tucked it into his arm as they stood in front of the doors to the twilight drawing room, behind which her betrothed stood. "You're not wrong, my lord. Best not to give away the store on first meeting, hmm?"

The PM looked somewhat perplexed at her answer and opened his mouth as if to say something more to her, but then she heard herself being announced, and the tall, heavy, floor to ceiling doors opened.

Rabid butterflies invaded her stomach at that moment, such as they never had before in her life. Perhaps they were really bats, but something was definitely flapping away in there, such that she thought for a moment she was going to faint and actually stumbled a little.

Lord Rutland looked alarmed and clasped her arm more tightly. "Are you all right, ma'am?" he asked solicitously.

"Yes, thank you, Lord Rutland. I am." Kit stiffened her back and drew a deep breath as the occupants of the great room acknowledged her en masse just before two people were presented to her—one of whom could only be the man she'd

been so nervously anticipating meeting. He was quite a tall and large man, who seemed somehow familiar to her, although that couldn't be possible because they'd never met.

Still, the idea tickled the back of her mind, as puzzles were wont to do to her.

"Your Majesty, may I introduce His Grace, the Duke of St. Johnsbury."

His deeply rumbled, "Your Majesty," made its way out of an impressively large chest that might have strained the seams of his tailcoat, had it been any less well made.

But she knew she was wrong in assuming they hadn't met the moment he swept into a deep, graceful—especially for someone of his size—bow, and before he straightened up and took her automatically offered hand, she had realized *exactly* who he was.

Standing boldly in front of her, offering her a beautiful bouquet of what she thought he said were some of Scotland's native flowers, but she was too distracted to be sure, was the man who was supposed to become her husband. But she now recognized that he was also the scoundrel she had met months earlier—the very one who had made so bold as to try to steal a kiss from her in the garden!