

THEY MIGHT SAVE THE TOWN IF IT EVER STOPS RAINING.



The Prince of



THIS IS
A NOVEL
APPARENTLY
YOU HAVE
TO SAY THAT

SASHA QUINN

THE PRINCE OF
OREGON

Sasha Quinn

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To Secret Boyfriend:

For being my prince, for wanting me to follow my dreams and
for bringing my characters and ideas to life

with your gorgeous works of art every time I ask, and even
sometimes when I don't.

**To the Most Dedicated Group I've Ever Known—My Book
Club:**

We're over a year strong and holy crap this novel couldn't
have happened without you.

Your support means everything.

I hope you love this like Land of Stories. Thank you for letting
me be your reader. I hope you'll keep letting me do so.

Special thanks to Synie Ridgeway and Ali Ross for their
editing work!

Proclamation

In the name of Queen Victoria, by the Grace of God, Sovereign Ruler of the United Kingdom, Defender of the Faith, and Protector of the Realm.

WHEREAS the Kingdom of The Whiteloch Isles has emerged as a free and sovereign entity, having pursued its rightful path of self-determination and independence;

AND WHEREAS the ties of friendship, kinship, and shared history bind the United Kingdom and The Whiteloch Isles;

NOW, THEREFORE, in recognition of this new dawn and as a symbol of enduring friendship and goodwill, we, Queen Victoria, do hereby decree:

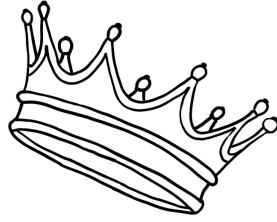
That a parcel of land known as Astoria Oregon, situated in Northern Province on the Western Coast of what is now known as The United States of America, shall be gifted in perpetuity to the The Whiteloch Isles, King Alfred James Grafton Windermere the First and all his dependents there after.

This land shall serve as a testament to our shared history, a place of unity and collaboration, and as a beacon of hope for future generations.

The Whiteloch Isles shall have full sovereignty over said land, with all rights, privileges, and responsibilities thereof.

This decree shall come into effect immediately upon its proclamation and shall be irrevocable.

Given under our hand and the Great Seal of the United Kingdom, at our Palace in London, this the fifth day of May, in the year of our Lord 1845 .



Chapter 1
Flight to Oregon - Edward

“Thank you all for flying with us today; the sooner all passengers take their seats, the sooner we can get wheels up and touch down in Oregon,” the voice over the sound system gave off the distinct air of being annoyed while forced to pretend to be cheerful.

Edward looked up from his first-class window seat to see a rotund gentleman in a green and yellow ball cap checking the number on his ticket against that of the seat on the aisle. “3C, well I’ll be.” He smiled, chuckled to himself, and settled into the seat. “First time in first class here, never sat in an airplane seat so comfy.”

“Mhm, indeed,” Edward nodded at him, not keen to start a conversation this early in a flight so long.

“Donnelly,” the man reached his hand over by way of introduction, “Mike Donnelly, friends call me Mikey, though.”

“I see,” Edward narrowed his eyes, unsure of where to go from here, but took the man’s hand to shake it regardless, “Edward, pleasure.” Of course, being bothered wasn’t a pleasure, but he wasn’t about to start the next 12 hours of his life off on the wrong foot.

Mikey pulled off his cap and rubbed at what was left of his hair, “Yanno, I’m just thrilled to have made a non-stop flight happen!” the man was grasping for straws, looking for something to discuss.

Edward was taken aback, “I made the non-stop flight happen.”

“On the way here I had two separate stops, what a hassle, I half expected to be stuck in Atlanta and then Seattle—but gettin’ to go straight to Portland will take a load off my rear

end, that's for darn sure."

"I don't fly with stops," Edward continued, "Frankly, I'm not sure I know anyone who does."

"Pft," Mr Donnelly let out a breathy laugh, "What are you, a king?"

"Prince, actually," Edward replied.

"I thought those guys all had private planes."

"Common misconception," Edward was eager to correct, "Often we charter, but my father is in, well," he rolled his eyes slightly, "a mood, if you will."

Never too quick on the uptake, Mikey Donnelly stared at the man next to him for another moment, narrowing his eyes as he tried to parse together what Edward wasn't saying clearly, "Your father is a prince?"

"King, actually."

Mikey just laughed, "Ohhh, you're pullin' my leg!" He slapped Edward's leg just as the flight attendant came around to check on the first class passengers prior to take off.

"Excuse me, sir. May I offer you a welcome drink and a hot towel?" the young lady eyed Edward and smiled.

"Free booze? This just keeps gettin' better. Am I gettin' drinks because I'm in first class, or because I'm sitting with a prince?" the man laughed, showing he was in on the joke and didn't believe for one second that the man sitting next to him was a prince. "I'll have a Bloody Mary if you're offerin', and my friend Eddie here, can I call ya Eddie?"

He turned toward Edward, who looked frustrated, "No, you may not. It's Edward and I assure you I am certainly not pulling your leg. I'm going to need a Scotch Whiskey to get me through this." The last part was said to the attendant, "And yes, that towel would be smashing, thank you." But rather than reach for it, he waited for her to reach over Mike and hand it to him.

Once she'd made their drinks and continued down the aisle Mikey, who was now nervous, and felt ashamed for

having been reprimanded, decided to break the silence, “Sorry if I offended you.”

“Quite alright,” Edward sighed, feeling bad for the snap, “I don’t fancy being called Eddie, an occupational hazard of having grown up with two older brothers who coupled the nickname with many other...off color pranks.”

“Ahhh,” Mikey smiled again, showing he understood by offering his own family tree, “Fourth of four boys here!”

“Fourth also,” Edward softened, “but I luckily have one older sister who occasionally lessens the blows.”

Now that the two men seemed to have mended the fence, Mikey tried again, “Say—what’s bringing you to Oregon, anyway? We don’t get many with your fancy pants accent around my neck of the woods, though I suppose Portland probably sees—“

Edward cut him off, but not impolitely. “Astoria is my final destination, actually. Have you been?”

“Been?” Mikey looked thrilled. “Why I live there!”

A sparkle shined in Edward’s eye, “In Astoria?”

“You’re darn tootin’, born and raised. Been over here in Ireland and Scotland a few days to visit my daughter who is studyin’ abroad. Her mother told me if I didn’t go see that girl and do research on our Irish relatives while we had the chance that she’d—say wait a minute, what’s a guy like you comin’ out to the coast for anyway?” He paused his own story, too confused by the juxtaposition of the man sitting next to him, well dressed, with a British accent, apparently a prince, headed to...Astoria?

“Well, I own it.”

Mikey spit out his drink all over the seat in front of him, laughing, “Now I know you’ve been screwin’ with me, buddy.”

Edward jumped to pull away from the splash zone and wiped at his untouched sleeve. “I’m most certainly not screwin’ with you,” the words dripped from Edward’s lips.

“My father...” he sighed, relaxing a bit, “I suppose I’ve misled you slightly, I don’t exactly own it. My father owns it, but he’s offered it to me. I won’t bore you with the gory details of my life and what’s brought me to this low point, but I’m coming to take control of our property.”

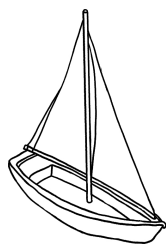
Lips pursed, Mikey nodded along, trying to hide his confusion, “Your father owns Astoria, but isn’t the President of the United States?”

“My Father, Alfred James Grafton Windermere the Second is the King of the Whiteloch Isles, owns Astoria Oregon, not the United States of America and certainly not your President, who, by way of not being a monarch doesn’t own anything in your country save for any personal land he might have acquired prior to taking his post.” Did this man know nothing of his own country’s civics? Edward continued, “Furthermore, I’ve heard the gentlemen in charge have been doing a piss-poor job and my father has put me in charge of overhauling the place and thus making it a profitable property for our family’s future generations.”

“How in the...”

“Yes, it will be quite a lot of work, but I’ve assured my parents that I’m up for the challenge. Once we touch down in Portland I’ll charter a ride to Astoria and—”

“You need a ride to Astoria?”



Chapter 2

City Council Meeting, October 17, 2024 - Emma

“Those are all the action items for today’s meeting, unless any members of the communi—”

“Excuse me?” I raised my hand.

With a sigh that showed his apparent disdain for me, Mayor Vernon Keating pointed his plastic gavel in my direction. “Miss Prescott...”

“Yes, hello,” I gathered the papers in my arms, stood, and moved toward the microphone, “Before the meeting concludes, I would like to request, once again, that the council move forward with the requested repairs to Pier 25.”

“Miss Prescott,” the man rubbed his thumb and forefinger over the bridge of his nose with the deepest of sighs. “As we have told you before—”

“No.”

I couldn’t help myself; I cut him off. No one was surprised. This conversation had been repeating week after week for the last six months when I decided to take the matter into my own hands. “Pier 25 is a cultural landmark and bustling business center important to the past and future of Astorians *and* the tourists who provide the majority of our town’s income. The structural damages to the posts alone are dangerous and if we do not—”

“Miss. Prescott,” he raised his voice causing me to stop and shrink back slightly, “The Council has determined at this time the town does not possess the funds to not only repair the structural damage to the pier, but also to do so in a manner timely enough to insure that the businesses that occupy that pier will not go broke during construction. Are you planning to

use the income from your little bookshop wine bar to bankroll the months of lost income for not only *your father's* business, but his neighbors as well?"

A beat passed. I could feel the eyes of the mere four people who had shown up to watch the City Council meeting in person boring into the back of my neck.

I swallowed the lump in my throat, steeling myself to stand firm and continue speaking, "Mayor Keating, I do not believe that minimizing the importance of fixing not only Pier 25, but many other cultural points in Astoria is in the Council's best interest. I've spoken to many of your constituents and—"

"Is that a threat, Miss Prescott?" He raised an eyebrow, gazing directly at me, daring me to defy him in front of the other Astorians *and* the council sitting behind the raised table.

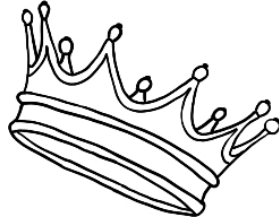
"Well," I thought momentarily. "Maybe it is! I don't mean threat in the physical sense," I added quickly to cover my behind, "but as you know I am currently running to unseat your co-council member Mr Bell in the third district and should I be successful in my venture I will have access to all council records *and* I will be required to fall in line with the wishes of what will then be *my* constituents. And and," I stuttered, cursing myself mentally for not being able to speak extemporaneously *without* tripping over my words, "maybe after that I'LL run for Mayor! Maybe it's time that this town step into the twenty first century and stop acting like we're a backward, BACKWOODS, old remnant of the Oregon Trail!"

The mayor chuckled softly. "Emma," he paused to correct himself, "Miss Prescott. You know as well as I do that the people of the third district have no interest in overturning the status quo. As a matter of fact, the people of Astoria at large have no interest in changing the way things are. We are a happy people with a good life. I'm sorry that you don't see it that way."

"But it's dangerous—"

He cut me off *again*, "Miss Prescott, we have had multiple assessments done by the County Public Works

department, who have assured us that there is nothing to be concerned about and no one is at risk, including your father's fish market.



Chapter 3

The Driftwood Inn & Suites - Edward

“Well, here you are!” Mikey pulled the beat-up old truck he drove up to the front of The Driftwood Inn and Suites. The prince sitting in the front seat could tell that the fatherly man beside him wasn’t ashamed of the state of his vehicle. Odd.

Edward’s eyes scanned the weather-worn building. “It’s...*smaller* than I imagined.” This was the nicest way he could describe the lodging before him. This was nothing like the 5-star hotels he was accustomed to. With a swallow, he placed his hand on the door handle. “Thank you, Mikey, for your hospitality, I shall take my leave and surely see you again given the size of the—.”

“Oh no ya don’t!” Mikey hopped quickly from the driver’s side and ran around to open the door for Edward. It stuck for a moment, causing the man to fight with the handle before it made a popping sound and finally opened, “Your Majesty!” He added a bow as he motioned for Edward to step from the truck, one arm behind his back as though he were a butler in Downton Abbey or the like. Other than state dinners he’d attended as a child with foreign dignitaries, Edward wasn’t sure he could recall a time when anyone had ever bowed to him.

Surprised, but also slightly pleased, Edward hopped out of the truck, “Thank you my good man. To what do I owe this...” He didn’t even know what to call Mikey’s change in demeanor. “You are aware that ‘Your Majesty’ is reserved for...” his voice trailed off. Why would he bother correcting this man? Why tell him that only his parents were entitled to be called Your Majesty when he could enjoy that distinction instead as he introduced himself to the land he would make his?

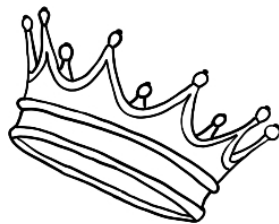
“Never mind that.” He offered a wide grin. “I do so appreciate your service.”

“Should you need anything at all, you just call me or my wife Maureen. We are at your service, Your Highness,” he bowed again. “If you need a ride, don’t you be botherin’ with a cab. We got two cars between us and are here to make your transition to life in Astoria just that much easier! Besides, the cab companies in this town...uhhh,” he waved a hand like he was swatting at a fly, “Let’s just say you’re better off with me.”

“Certainly, yes. Well, I’m sure you’re just as tired as I am after our jump over the pond; I could use a solid night’s sleep. But, could you tell me where one might find a good cup of tea and breakfast in the morning? I know I’ll be famished upon waking.”

“I am all but certain that Moonbeam Mugs serves tea, and of course the best breakfast in town! My blushing bride of 25 years, Maureen, works the counter there in the first half of the day. Say no more! I’ll be here to pick you up for breakfast in the morning and we’ll make sure you get the proper Astorian welcome!”

“Well, then.” Edward was delighted with how things had been going so far, and it seemed they’d continue down the yellow brick road. “That sounds lovely. I’ll see you then.”



Mikey Returns - Edward

The next morning, Mikey Donnelly arrived at The Driftwood Inn & Suites promptly at 7:30 wearing his only suit. Granted, it was a little tight around the middle, a holdover from his oldest daughter’s wedding six years ago, but it sure did make him feel dapper.

When he entered the hotel, he was greeted by a young man in his early twenties who looked like he could barely keep his

eyes open:

“Welcome to the,” *yawn*, “Driftwood—how can we make sure your stay is...”

“Look alive there boy,” Mikey smacked his hand on the counter with a laugh, “don’t you go fallin’ asleep on the job or you might not have a job when you wake up.”

The older man found himself hilarious. The younger one behind the desk wasn’t as amused. Either that, or he didn’t understand the joke. Maybe both.

“Sorry, sir,” the front desk clerk apologized, quickly typing in the password to unlock his computer, “are you checking in?” He eyed the ill-fitting suit that Mikey was sporting but opted not to ask. A nap would be more useful than further conversation with this man, at least in his eyes. If he could get the guy checked in quickly, he could doze back off...

“I’m lookin’ for Prince Edward, he’s stayin’ in this here hotel,” Mikey added a nod for good measure, making himself look confident and serious, at least in his own eyes.

Mikey watched as the young man’s eyes narrowed, confusion causing his brain to glitch out from the combination of being overtired and hearing the word prince outside of a fairytale, “Huh?”

“Prince Edward...” Mikey said slowly, “is staying...”

“...in this hotel?” an eyebrow raised on the boy’s face.

“Now you’re gettin’ it. Can I have his room number please?”

“Sir, are you trying to tell me there’s a prince staying here?” He started to type away on the keyboard, “Nothin’ listed under prince. So uhhhhh...maybe you’ve got the wrong locale.”

“Can you check the last name Windermere?”

More typing. Then he shook his head again, “Nope.”

“Grafton?” Mikey tried.

The kid nodded, “Yep, room 403.”

If Mikey had thought about it for even a moment, he might've been concerned that anyone could just walk in and be given the Prince of Whiteloch's room number without so much as proof that he knew him, let alone had permission to see him. But no, the thought didn't cross his mind. Instead he just gave a thumbs up to the boy and said, "Could you ring up ahead and let him know I'm comin' and to unlock the door?"

Without waiting to see if it would be done, Mikey made his way to the elevator down the hall and up to the fourth floor. The elevator gave a quiet ding when the doors opened and let him out on the hotel's top floor.

moments later Mikey was knocking on room 403.

Nothing.

He knocked again. Once more, and a fourth time.

As he raised his hand one last time, fear in his heart for his new friend, the door opened beneath his fist, "Your Majesty, thank goodness! I was worried when you didn't answer that somethin—"

"Michael... Mikey," Edward rubbed at his face, struggling at first to remember the man's chosen nickname as he looked at him through one open eye, the light of the hallway stinging something fierce, "What the devil are you doing here at this hour?"

Mikey was confused, "Didn't you say yesterday you'd like a ride to breakfast this mornin'?"

Edward searched his memory. "That's not exactly what I said, but certainly you can't mean for us to eat right now? It's not even 8 in the morning."

"With all due respect Your Highness, considering you're not even dressed by the time we get down to the cafe it'll be well past 8 am and into the morning rush. Don't you wanna make sure you get the best they've got to offer before it sells out?"

The idea of breakfast selling out was a new one to Edward. He yawned into his palm, brow furrowing as he thought about the kind of places that might run out of

breakfast food.

Mikey knew in his heart there was no way they'd sell out. The cafe his wife Maureen worked at used to be a bustling stop on the way to work for many and the perfect breakfast nook for tourists and passersby alike, but in recent years their customer base had slowed considerably. People started making coffee at home to save money, and tourists found elsewhere for their morning pick me up. Moonbeam Mugs, you see, was near the edge of Pier 25 which no longer looked like a welcoming location.

"Yes, of course," Edward looked at Mikey through narrowed eyes. "Mikey, how did you know what room I was in?" As Edward's brain began to awaken, his wheels started turning just enough to make him curious about the safety of his lodgings.

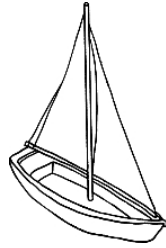
Mikey shrugged, "Front desk kid downstairs told me."

"Good lord," Edward shook his head. "We'll have to do something about the security in this place. What if some bad actor looking to take over comes in the night to send me to sleep with the fishes?"

"Can'tcha swim?" Mikey asked.

Edward hoped beyond hope that Mikey was making a joke and forced out a laugh. "Of course my good fellow. Now," a yawn came without warning, "Alright, you've convinced me, I'll get dressed and try out this cafe belonging to your wife."

"Well, it don't belong to Maureen." Mikey corrected, "but they sure will be glad to see you. I'm sure once people here a prince has been eatin' there they'll come back to dine in droves!"



Chapter 4
Moonbeam Mugs - Emma

The rain might've stopped a lesser woman, but not this Oregonian. Just like I had for weeks on end now, I pulled on my rain boots, shoved a beanie down over the mass of curls atop my head and headed out to flier for City Council.

If I learned one thing since I'd decided to run for City Council it's that people's minds aren't easily changed. Astoria has had the same stodgy old Boomers on the Council since before I could remember and people aren't easily persuaded. Worse than that, most people barely cared to pay attention. Flier-ing by myself usually meant ending up with soaked socks, but it did win me a couple of supporters once they could see how serious I was about fixing the systemic issues plaguing our little port town.

On mornings such as these, dreary, typical Astorian mornings—I liked to head to the center of town before opening my book shop bar. I stood at the corner near Moonbeam Mugs, a popular cafe for locals, handing out fliers to encourage people to vote for me in the upcoming November election:

“Protect our pier!” I said to one person who kept walking without taking the now wet paper.

“Vote Emma Prescott into City Council next month.”

It pained me to have to talk to so many people. Still no one was going to get it done but me, that much had been made clear. Sure, sometimes friends would come out and help me, but not if it meant risking running mascara. Just as I stepped up to an elderly couple walking my way I heard a familiar voice call out to no one in particular followed by ...was that a kazoo?

A high pitched *doo doo doo dooooo* rang through the air.

“Make way for the prince!”

When I looked up, I saw none other than Mikey Donnelly, one of the fishermen who worked with my father, blowing into the small end of a small plastic kazoo. He was holding the door of Moonbeam Mugs open for someone in a suit. Prince...?

Huh?

I took a few steps closer to the door, knowing businesses didn't like anyone “soliciting” too close to where their customers entered (*not to mention this wasn't traditional soliciting, it was to save our freakin' town*). Still, I had to see what in the world this man was on about. Surely Maureen would look the other way this time.

“Make way for the prince!” He called again. Mikey was holding a large golf sized umbrella over top someone I'd never seen before. Everyone in the tiny one-room cafe looked up. “Please welcome to your esteemed establishment Prince Edward Grafton Windermere the third, Duke of Finnsgate.”

...What the...?

If you'd told me when I woke up this morning that I would see a prince out getting coffee at Moonbeam Mugs I would've pulled the covers back over my head and asked why you were in my bedroom. But the well-dressed man with Mikey Donnelly **did** look like he could be a prince...I guess? How does one identify a prince in this day and age? It's not like they came with guards and horse drawn carriages any longer. Would one actually have a crown?

Wait, no. None of the young royals on magazine covers or social media wore crowns anymore, except occasionally Princess Kate. God, she was gorgeous. I blinked to push the thought from my mind, refocusing on the matter at hand.

The man, frankly, looked like any other modestly attractive guy. Medium brown hair, pale-ish skin, but not so pale that he looked sickly, stood tall and honestly he did have

great posture. The sight of his perfect stance made me correct my own, pushing my shoulders back to not look like Quasimodo.

I took a few steps closer and I was able to see how well-tailored his suit was—wow. He looked like Prince Harry when he went on press tours...could this be legit?

Once we were all inside—and by ‘we all’ I mean not just me, the *prince*, and Mikey, but also the crowd that had formed outside upon hearing the kazoo—Mikey shooed away the two teenagers sitting at the coveted window booth seat.

The kids looked at him like he was as dumb as a box of rocks, but they did move. The “prince” slid into the booth and waved at the gathered people, acting as though they were his subjects, or at least fans.

“Thank you, thank you.” Everyone but him was dripping from the rain. How had he managed to stay *that* dry?

Ugh.

I shook the droplets off my body and watched the ongoing spectacle.

“MAUREEN!” Mikey shouted toward his wife who had just peeked out from behind the counter wiping her hands on her apron, “Can we please get your famous double whipped cappuccino for Prince Edward and a menu so he may choose from the finest fare in town?”

“English Breakfast Tea with a dash of cream will be just fine, actually. Hold the sugar, I’m feeling a touch bloated after such a long flight.”

Funny, he didn’t look bloated at all.

He did have the accent down, it sounded British, truthfully, which made absolutely no sense. Why would the prince of somewhere Finns-whatever land have a British accent? He wasn’t about to pretend he was Prince William and Harry’s long-lost illegitimate brother or something, was he? How rich.

Maureen appeared at his table side with a menu as well

as both the coffee *and* tea that had been ordered. She set them down with a bow, “Anything we can do for Your Highness, please don’t hesitate to ask!”

Now, listen. I have known Maureen Donnelly my entire life. Not only has her husband always provided my father’s fish market with wares, but she’s been working the front counter at the only cafe in town since her kids were old enough to go to school. I’ve seen her navigate scenarios ranging from yelling at the hooligans who take too many sugar packets to bringing a home cooked meal to someone in town who’s just had surgery, but never in all my 28 years have I seen her *bow* to anyone, man or woman!

“Thank you kindly, Lady Donnelly,” the prince whose name I couldn’t remember from Mikey’s shouting smiled at her, holding the closed menu in his hand, not bothering to open it, “Would you be so kind as to provide me with a plate of kippers, a side of baked beans with grilled tomato, and perhaps a pains au chocolat? I’m truly famished after my journey.”

He said “tomato” in the most obnoxiously fancy way possible: *toe-mahhh-toe*. Eye roll.

“My deepest and most sorrowful apologies and regrets Your Highness, but um, what is kippers?” Mikey asked, his brow furrowed in confusion.

“Oh! Of course, a simple herring on toast.”

Herring...on toast, and baked beans? What the heck kind of breakfast was that? What happened to bacon and eggs? A bagel with cream cheese? Even Lox would make more sense.

I half expected her to laugh him right out of town. Moonbeam Mugs had a strict “no substitutions” policy and I don’t ever remember seeing *herring* on the menu. Or baked beans!

“But of course your royal Prince Majesty,” she curtsied this time and leaned over to whisper something to her husband.

“Right!” Mikey stood up a little straighter, smiled at the

well dressed man in the booth and then boldly excused himself to *everyone*: “The prince has requested a breakfast feast including some of our local herring!”

You know how older people sound when they’re talking to someone who doesn’t speak English well? They slow down considerably and get louder every moment as though they’ve met someone deaf who needs to read their lips. That’s how Mikey was addressing the crowd at large, myself among them.

“I will return from Prescott’s Pacific shortly with enough for anyone who would like to join the prince in this uniquely Astorian experience—anyone? Anyone?”

Uniquely Astor—was this man out of his mind? He was headed to my father’s fish market to get herring for anyone in town who wanted to feast with a fake prince on a meal no local Astorian had so much as heard of in their life, let alone tasted.

“Mikey...” I couldn’t keep my silence any longer. “Dad doesn’t even open the market for another 30 minutes and I...” then I lowered my voice to a whisper, “Who *is* this guy??”

“Emma!” He looked surprised to see me there, “This is Prince Edward, he’s from the Whiteloch Isles and I’m sure that your father would gladly supply the Prince of Astoria with some fish for breakfast.”

I nearly choked on my spit, “The Prince of Astoria?” I repeated, astonished by such a claim, “Is this some kind of skit?”

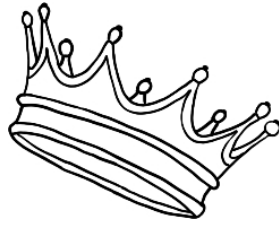
“What? No, he’s the prince.”

“A fever dream caused by a gas leak, then.”

Mikey didn’t even flinch.

“Town mass hysteria,” I crossed my arms over my chest, waiting for him to give *some* kind of reaction.

“You’ll have to excuse me,” was all Mikey said to me at first, “I’ve got to speak with your father about that herring,” and then without so much as a half answer to any of my questions, Mikey was gone.



Moonbeam Mugs – Edward

Mikey Donnelly left Edward alone in the cafe. If one can be considered alone with fifty strangers staring at them. Luckily for Edward, he'd grown up with the masses watching his every move, making this turn of events reasonably normal for him. Back home, he couldn't blink without getting a write up in the local tabloid.

“Prince Edward sticks his tongue out in first public family photo since King Alfred's Heart Surgery.” Granted, he was 7, but it didn't go over well. And never let up from there. Somehow, he'd become the one the tabloids focused on when looking for a negative royal story. His sister Charlotte was the *débutante* everyone knew and loved, and Alexander was the heir and the most eligible bachelor in Whiteloch until his now wife Gabriella snatched him up.

Not Edward. He was the butt of royal jokes and the one dragged through the mud. Maybe he deserved some of it, but they really put him through the wringer. His parents had sent him away from Whiteloch for school to get him out of the spotlight after he was caught egging his grandmother's castle at thirteen in a misguided attempt to impress the other kids in the area.

But years of schooling in the Côte d'Azur region of France had done little to remove him from the front cover of trash magazines. In fact, free access to the beaches in the South of France had only bolstered a playboy persona as he entered his late teen years, a persona that followed him through college. With an allowance that took him around the world for spring break and beyond, he found himself again in trouble, caught with a few too many girls on his father's yacht.

That conduct was what had brought him to this pint-sized cafe on the northernmost coast of Oregon. His “bad behavior,”

as his mother liked to call it. Years of ending up in “scandals” when his brothers and sisters were attending charity events and helping the people of Whiteloch had landed him in hot water.

“You have to straighten up your life,” his father had said sternly from the bow of his yacht.

“What is wrong with my life? No other 30-year-old’s parents would be giving them grief over being seen with a few non-royals at a beach party when King Juan was caught ELEPHANT HUNTING...” Edward didn’t usually raise his voice in general, let alone at his parents, but they were acting like he’d killed someone rather than gotten a little too drunk and been photographed with a few buttons loose on his shirt.

“Other 30-year-olds would have a job,” his mother looked up from feeding her newest grandchild, the infant cooing up at her lovingly, “A wife, children even.” Children, always children. This woman had seven grandchildren already, but that never stopped her from pushing for more.

“Or at least do something for the betterment of the kingdom as your brothers have. You’ve got to participate. Even England makes their young royals work for their paycheck— if you can call those outings work.” His father could have been confused for any other millionaire in the Riviera, gold rings on his thick fingers, strong drink in hand with a single outrageously sized ice cube in the middle, and skin too tan for his natural complexion as he laid out, worshipping the sun some more.

“There’s nothing left to do,” Edward exasperatedly fell onto a lounge chair, “Al and James have taken all the good posts,” now he was pouting. Even he’d admit that third years old and pouting wasn’t a good look.

“What about Astoria, Alfred?” His mother, Queen Gweneth, turned to his father as though a light bulb had just gone off in her head. “He could go take care of that for us! He’s so charming they...” her voice trailed off letting her husband mentally pick up where she’d left off without saying it outright in front of her son. What she was thinking was that those backwoods, almost Americans, might just trip over

themselves to accept her too-handsome-to-be-believed son as one of their own.

“He’d be,” she cleared her throat and nearly whispered —“sweet, and certainly less threatening.”

“Hmmm,” King Alfred stroked his chin in the most cliché of thinking poses, “Now there’s an idea. Edward, son, how do you feel about going to America?”

Truthfully, Edward loved the idea of going to America. And why not? Land of Opportunity! He certainly had cousins there. Perhaps he’d go to this Oregon place and change the course of his life. He’d turn around this failing town his father owned, make the whole of the Whiteloch Isles proud of him and return a hero! Then he could go back to living his life without them breathing down his neck.

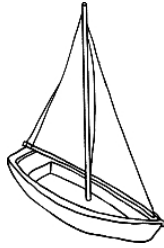
Back in Moonbeam Mugs there were elderly women, men dressed in flannel, and even children staring at him from all sides. This was his moment, his chance.

“Hello, good people of Astoria!” He added by way of greeting them, “Thank you so much for your kind and hospitable welcome. I look forward to speaking with many of you as I take the helm here in the coming week.” At this point, standing from the diner booth felt right as he scanned the room, getting a feel for the type of people watching him. They looked stunned, a little disheveled, and frankly—wet. Edward’s gut reaction was to scrunch up his face, pulling back from the plebeians before him. Still, he forced himself to continue smiling instead, “My father, King Alfred, has told me of the grand history of trade and commerce this land possesses and has entrusted me to help you all return it to its former glory!”

People all around him broke out into cheers.

All except for a woman toward the middle of the pack who looked stunned. She pulled a beanie from her head and a mop of curls flopped around the incredulous look on her face, “You’ve got to be kidding me,” Edward heard her mumble before she pushed through the crowd and made her way out the door.

Maureen Donnelly stepped forward, standing in for her missing fisherman husband who'd gone to fetch herring, "On behalf of everyone here at Moonbeam Mugs, I just wanna say we are just so excited! We didn't even know we had a prince; let alone a-*king*," she emphasized, looking around at her fellow Astorians. "Our port has been dry for so long: we could use someone with good sense to turn it around!"



Chapter 5
Outside Moonbeam Mugs – Emma

I was halfway to Read Between the Vines when I got a bee in my bonnet and decided to turn around and head back toward Moonbeam Mugs. Who did this guy think he was anyway, and what was Mikey Donnelly doing with him? The man was acting like he was under some witch's curse, or had been inducted into a cult. I couldn't decide, as I stormed back, which would be worse.

As I approached the cafe, the *Prince of Astoria* and his subjects seemed to be all done with their royal breakfast meet and greet.

“Mikey,” I stepped inside and walked directly up to the man who'd been my father's friend since before I was born. “What on Earth is happening here? You left without answering my questio—”

“Thank you, Lady Donnelly for such a delightful meal. I do hope to have the opportunity to dine with you again,” the prince said as he took Maureen Donnelly's hand and kissed the top of it. Dine with her again? He'd been *served* by her, not dined *with* her.

“*Lady Donnelly?*” I raised an eyebrow at Mikey, “Since when is Maureen—”

“Emma, you've got to meet Edward, you're just gonna love the prince!” was Mikey's reply. He seemed completely unphased by his wife being referred to as a LADY.

“Edward,” I nodded, finally clocking this charlatan's name. “You know he's probably a grifter, not a prince, right?”

“What?!” Mikey's eyes grew wide, “How can you say such a thing? He's our ruler. He's the prince. He *owns*

Astoria.”

“He owns Astoria,” I repeated, nodding my head. “Sure, Mikey,” now I knew the man had lost his mind.

“I’m serious. He’s come to save us. He’s a savior!”

“The second coming of Christ?”

“No, more like the guy who’s gonna take on Keating and fix the issues with the pier and everything else we’ve been dealing with. You two should—“

“*I* am the one who’s taking on Keating, Mikey. *I am* the one who’s been dealing with him and this for months—years! All my hard work and this guy just gets to show up and take over on the back of a lie in the eleven o’clock hour?”

Edward walked over to join us, waving at each person who left the cafe, “Pleasure,” he told one. “It was delicious, wasn’t it?” was how he sent someone else on their way. “Don’t forget it’s your *fanciest* umbrella,” he reminded another.

“Fanciest umbrella?” I swear if my eyebrow raised one more time this morning it would get stuck, “Why do they need a fancy umbrella?”

“For the Umbrella Parade, of course,” the man Mikey called Prince Edward seemed unbothered by my question, “Mikey, don’t be rude, introduce me to your friend here,” a smirk played across his lips.

“Of course Your Royal Highness,” Mikey grinned, “This here is Emma Prescott, daughter of Rick, the man kind enough to get us that herring for your breakfast this morning. Pillar of the community, upstanding family the Prescott’s are!” It was as though he was introducing us to The Crown at my society debut. I’d never heard him talk like this before...he was definitely under a spell.

“Enchantée.” Edward reached for my hand this time, but I pulled back before he could give me the Lady Donnelly treatment.

“Thanks, nice to meet you too,” though the tone of my voice told another story. I couldn’t help it. “What’s an

Umbrella Parade?” I picked back up where he’d so casually thrown that phrase out there, not bothering to explain it.

Edward shrugged, “Honestly, I’m truly surprised that a town like this with so much rain doesn’t have its own Umbrella Parade. That said, the Umbrella Parade takes place when all the children and their families are on the way to Trick or Treat and they bring their fanciest and most colorful umbrellas to the center of town. Everyone walks together through town and then off they go to their various neighborhoods to collect candy. We’ve been doing it in Whiteloch for...” he paused. “Well, honestly I have no idea how long it’s been going on. A hundred years?”

“I see,” I nodded, lips pressed firmly together as I soaked in the information, “And Whiteloch is...?”

“The...island...I’m from?” He seemed shocked I’d not heard of it. Man, this guy could really act.

“Riiiiight,” what else could I say? This was all ridiculous. “I’m definitely no geography whiz, so you’ll forgive me for not having heard of your island.”

“Prince Edward? Your Highness?” a little girl walked up and tugged on Edward’s pant leg, “Can I use my pink umbrella for the parade even though I’m going to be a witch and it doesn’t match my costume?”

This kid was cute, too cute to be sucked into this snake oil salesman’s cult so early in her life. Where was her mother to protect her?!

Edward crouched down, hands on his thighs to get closer to her height, an endearing move for sure—trickster, “You can use whatever umbrella makes you feel the fanciest. But if you need a witchy umbrella, just say the word and Mikey here will get you one.”

“You will??” the girl couldn’t have been more than seven and now she had stars in her eyes over this fake prince.

“I will?” Mikey looked confused. “I mean, uh, yes of course Your Majesty.”

Once the girl ran off I shook my head, “You really

shouldn't go getting kids' hopes up. Where's Mikey going to get her a witch umbrella by Halloween??"

"Can't we just purchase one at the umbrella store?"

Now I had to laugh, "The umbrella store. Okay, Edward—can I call you Edward?"

"I prefer Prince Edward, but I suppose a lovely lady—"

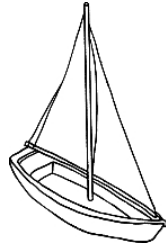
"Great," I gave him a thumbs up, "News flash bucko, we don't *have* an umbrella store in Astoria. In fact, I've never even heard of an umbrella store. Look. I don't know what game you think you're playing with everyone, but you can't just get people's hopes up, take their money and skip town."

Edward fiddled with the cuff link on his sleeve, "I assure you, Miss, I have no need for anyone's money, nor do I intend to skip town anytime soon. From what I hear this place could use a complete overhaul. It sounds to me like the people in charge of this town have done a decidedly unsatisfactory job of keeping things in order."

"The people in charge—" I stopped, eyes wide. "Oh, um, yeah, that's true. They have."

But how did this slick stranger know that?

"See?!" Mikey pointed at Edward, "Emma, I toldja the prince was gonna set things right for us."



Chapter 6

Prescott's Pacific – Emma

I left my bookshop in the trusty hands of Sarabeth, my best friend and only full-time employee, so that I could visit my Dad at his fish market.

Prescott's Pacific was located on Pier 25. The very same pier I'd been fighting with Mayor Keating over for months. Dad, like the rest of the businesses located there, was struggling to stay afloat, financially and literally.

The pier was in bad shape, but the City Council refused to do a darn thing about it. It looked terrible—dangerously bad—which is precisely why tourism had slowed in that area of town. That didn't stop my Dad from showing up to work day in and day out, though. Just like he had every day since he took the place over from my grandfather 22 years before, he woke up at the butt crack of dawn and walked the mile and a half from the house he owned to the water's edge.

The thing about Prescott's Pacific was that it was a staple in Astoria, and it had been for generations. Only now that everything had fallen into disrepair did our family business start to falter.

When I got to the shore end of the pier, I could see Dad standing just outside the store's entrance, dumping ice into a few buckets lined up on the ground—fresh fish, of course.

“Heyyy honey,” he called to me with a wave when he saw me coming his way. Dad, though in his seventies, was still sharp as a tack, “Got the catch of the day here if you're hungry!”

“Hey Dad,” I greeted him with a customary kiss on the cheek. Years of doing my homework in this place had me accustomed to the smell he emitted, “I think I'm full right now

to be honest.”

Wiping at his brow with the back of a gloved hand he asked, “Well if you didn’t come here to eat, then what do I owe this mid-day visit? You never come this way while the shops are open...”

“Dad...” I didn’t exactly know how to start this. “Did you talk to Mikey this morning?”

“Donnelly?” He asked, as though there were another—which there wasn’t, at least not in our lives.

“Yeah.”

“Sure did. Came in here like a bat outta hell around nine am looking for a few pounds of herring. Strangest request the man’s ever given me, but it isn’t our most popular fish, so I had enough around,” Dad laughed, more amused than I was with the strangeness of the situation.

I bit my lip, debating how to continue, “Did he uh, tell you about his new friend?”

“The prince?”

So he had. Dad continued his work as usual, unbothered by the mention of a royal soaring into town.

“Yeah, I just think he ought to be a bit more careful,” was how I chose to go on. “This guy doesn’t feel trustworthy. What if he takes Mikey for all he’s worth. What if this is the newest in a string of scams targeted at small town folk? What if we’re living in the real life version of *The Music Man* and he’s gonna dupe everyone into—”

“Playing 76 trombones in a big parade? Honestly, sweetheart, it’s not that serious,” He shrugged, motioning for me to follow him as he dragged the now filled buckets back inside.

“Here, let me help,” I offered, grabbing one handle in each hand, “And yes it is that serious, Dad. People don’t just show up claiming that they’re a freakin’ prince. Sorry, but that’s just weird.”

“Maybe he’ll be good for Astoria,” Dad offered as we

pushed through the door of Prescott's. The place was an open air kind of market. Covered by the roof of the pier buildings, but not entirely inside, leaving us to the elements all year round. Which in late October meant cold and misty. Sure, we were out of the direct path of rain, but I wasn't about to remove my jacket.

"How could someone who's literally living off of Mikey Donnelly be good for Astoria, what purpose will he serve?"

"I'm not sure what you mean by living off of, but Mikey tells me the prince has money. Maybe he'll fix things.. Someone's got to."

The stung, given that Dad knew how hard I'd been trying to do just that.

"Well, he certainly didn't pay for his breakfast, or the herring you gave them, and how do we know he has money?" I held up a hand, stopping him from arguing this point with me, "AND, Dad, he says he *owns* Astoria. Owns it."

"Maybe he does."

WHAT. I didn't want to scream at my Dad, but I wanted to SCREAM AT MY DAD. Had this con man already reached and recruited my own father?

"Dad," I said sharply, grabbing his shoulders to make him look me directly in the eye, "This man does not own Astoria."

"What if he does?"

"How? Dad, we're in Oregon. The United States of America is not a monarchy. Isn't the whole idea behind this country that we're free?"

"Are we?"

"Are we what?" I narrowed my eyes at him, "Free? I certainly hope so!"

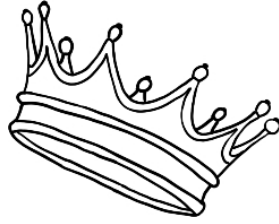
"*In America*," he emphasized each word. "Mikey said that we're not actually American. That Astoria was never officially purchased with the rest of Oregon. I guess there was some hoopla, but in the end we belonged to England, really."

I burst out into laughter, “Dad, don’t you think if we were some long lost commonwealth of British descent that we’d be taught that in school?”

He just shrugged, “Maybe, maybe not. You’ve said yourself how poor the school system is here. Maybe the teachers don’t even know. Maybe that’s somethin’ you oughta fix when you get on the City Council.”

“Okayyyy...” I paused, taking a deep breath, “Let’s pretend that’s true for a moment. Even if Astoria was, or *is*, owned by The United Kingdom, what does that have to do with Edward of Finnsgate, or Whiteloch, or wherever it is he’s actually from—WHY DOES HE HAVE TWO TITLES?” My outburst was louder than I’d intended. “Sorry,” I calmed myself with a hand on my forehead.

“Emma,” Dad reached over and pet my arm by way of trying to soothe me, “Mikey says that one of the British queens, can’t remember which he said, gave Astoria to the prince’s father, grandfather, something. I don’t know. Honestly I was only half listening when he came in here raving about it. But it sounds like we may not be as American as we thought.”



Chapter 7

Breakfast with Mikey – Edward

After a full day of shaking hands and kissing babies by way of introduction to Astoria, Edward knew it was time to hit the ground running. They settled in for breakfast at Moonbeam Mugs again; this time, Mikey convinced him to try a local favorite: biscuits and gravy with a side of coffee.

When the waitress set the plate in front of him, Edward refrained from making a face, “Thank you so much,” he smiled politely at the girl serving them, who lingered just a bit too long at their table, her eyes glued to the prince. This, Edward knew, was exactly what his mother had assumed would happen.

“Lucy,” Mikey snapped his fingers, but not to be rude, just to bring her out of her trance, “We’re good here, thank you.”

“Oh, of course!” She excused herself and ran back to her post.

“Dig in, Your Majesty!” Mikey exclaimed, cutting into his food and shoveling a large bite into his mouth.

Edward, though hungry, started with the coffee. Yes, of course he’d had coffee before, as he told Mikey on the drive over, but that didn’t mean tea wasn’t the staple breakfast beverage of Whiteloch, “We aren’t big on the beans,” he said with a nervous chuckle, bringing the hot brown liquid to his lips.

“Yeahhhh,” Mikey drew out the word, cutting into a sausage, “But you’re in the Pacific Northwest now. Coffee is what we do, Your Highness.”

The unlikely duo of a portly, mid 50s fisherman and a fit, 30 year old prince from a small European Principality sat silently for a few moments as they noshed on the food before

them. Finally, a few bites into the meal he decided wasn't all that bad, Edward wiped his mouth rather delicately and cleared his throat, "As much as I've loved the tour of Astoria's best, I think today I must get down to business. I can't very well fix the problems with your town sitting here, now, can I?"

Mikey, for his part, wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand, as though he forgot there was a napkin within reach, "Of course, Prince, what did you have in mind?"

"Well..." Now that Edward thought about it, he wasn't exactly sure. He laid awake the night before, thinking about how quickly this had all come together. Barely a week ago, he was on his father's yacht off the coast of St Tropez, and now he was sitting in a cafe in Astoria, Oregon, looking out a picture window at the pouring rain. Nothing about this felt right or normal. What he should have done was demand his father send word ahead about his arrival. Why hadn't he done that? Why hadn't he asked his parents for help with a plan? Or at least done a little research on the place. That would've been altogether too smart.

Instead, as flippant as ever, he boarded an aircraft without a real strategy in place. He expected if he were honest with himself, to land in Oregon and find that the people of Astoria had been waiting for their prince to come and overturn the lackluster local government. That he would ride in on his white horse and they'd throw confetti, hold a parade, even! But, that certainly hadn't been the case. While the people of Astoria *did* welcome him with open arms, it was more as a visitor—a foreign dignitary brought to their soggy soil for a jaunt. Women stared, men wanted to shake his hand, children asked questions, but none seemed to realize he was there to... rule. To take over in the name of his father, the *king*.

After far too long stuck in his head, Edward answered, "Perhaps I should speak to whoever is in charge. Lord Mayor?"

"Lord?" Mikey's coffee almost came out of his nose with a snort, "He'd sure love to hear you call him that. I'll take you to city hall, but don't call him lord, Your Majesty. That man is already far too big for his britches. That family's been running

Astoria into the ground for generations.”

Edward raised an eyebrow, his last sip of coffee just passing his lips, “How’s that?”

Mikey shrugged, “I suppose it’s all the little things being left undone that brings a place like Astoria down in the end. I’m sure neither Vernon Keating nor any of the rotund men who came before him really meant to screw things up for us. But here we are...certainly screwed up.”

“I see,” the prince cleared his throat, “Well, I’m here to fix that, of course. My family is dedicated to ensuring that Astoria is returned to its former glory.”

Mikey laughed again, “I don’t know if you can call it glory, but we were formerly somethin’ better than this.”

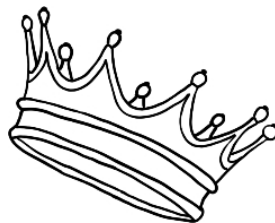
With that, Edward waved over the same young lady who’d been helping them prior, reached into his wallet and handed her a hundred dollars.

“Oh—let me get you some change, Your Royal Majesty.” She started to walk away, but Edward stopped her.

“Please, keep the change,” he said as he stood from the table, “I’m sure we’ll come again. Thank you for your hospitality.” The man might have had a playboy reputation back home, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t raised with proper manners.

Mikey looked impressed, “Thank you for breakfast, Your Highness.”

“Least I could do considering how much you’ve done for me already. Now. Would you be so kind as to give me a ride to City Hall? I need to speak with the mayor.”



The Mayor’s Office – Edward

Mikey pulled his car up to the front entrance outside City

Hall, getting Edward as close to the door as he could, “Here you go, sir.” He jumped out into the rain, just as he’d done previously, and held the door open with a bow.

Edward slid from his seat on the passenger’s side of the old truck and stepped out, “You know, Mikey,” a small smile crossed his face, “you don’t have to do that. I might be of royal blood, but I’ve opened car doors for myself several times in my life. Honestly, more times than not at this point.”

Mikey shut the door behind him and pointed to the ground they stood on, “I’ll come pick you up right here in this spot in...say, an hour? You think that’ll be enough?”

“You—you’re not coming?” He’d known the man for less than three calendar days, but he’d become somewhat of an Astorian security blanket for the prince, being his only friend in the area.

“Wife’s got a whole list of errands for me to run now that I’m back home. She loves ya, don’t get me wrong, but she’s a bit sore at me for takin’ so much time to show you around yesterday and not helpin’ with the duties of the house,” Mikey shrugged, “Happy wife, happy life! Remember that!”

Edward nodded, “I see, no, of course.” He knew he couldn’t expect this man to drop everything and attend to his every whim. Besides, what help would Mikey Donnelly be speaking to the Lord Mayor? Sorry, mayor.

“You go on in and get things straightened out with the officials and don’t you worry. I’ll be back to pick you up. You won’t be stranded!” He called out as he climbed back into his vehicle and drove off with a wave.

Then Edward was alone in Astoria for the first time. Save for the time spent in his hotel room, of course. He stared at the building in front of him. It looked like a prison.

“I can do this,” he mumbled to himself, taking slow steps toward the door. He forced himself to stand up straighter, fuller. He was a prince, after all. And not just any prince. Prince of *this* land. They owed him answers and respect.

Inside, he approached the desk, behind which sat an

angular-looking woman who appeared too tall for the chair they'd given her, "Sign in," she said, shoving a clipboard across the desk toward him.

"Oh—I," he blinked, surprised by this, but rather than argue, he wrote his name on the paper, and in the slot marking who he was there to see he simply wrote: Mayor.

"You got an appointment with the mayor?" The woman's face got even sharper when she raised an eyebrow at him.

"Well, no, but I do need to speak to him."

She shook her head, "No can do. You need to make an appointment. Mayor Keating is out for the day. Town business."

"I see. Who is available to speak to me among his deputies, Miss.?" Edward leaned over to read the nameplate on her desk, "Ms. Davis."

"Uhhh," she clicked around on the computer for a moment, checking the calendar to see who was available, or at least in the office for the day, "Looks like the Town Commissioner, Mr. Williams is in today." She then picked up her telephone, held the receiver to her ear, and then stopped herself. "Wait," she pressed a finger into the switch hook, "What should I tell him this is about?"

Edward smoothed his shirt nervously, "You may tell him that Prince Edward Grafton Windermere the third, Duke of Finnsgate, is here to speak with him about the future of Astoria and Astorians as it pertains to Whiteloch."

Silence hung in there for longer than usual. The woman on the other side of the desk stared at him with her mouth slightly agape and finally croaked out, "What?"

"I am Prince Edward—"

"No, I heard ya," she stopped him from giving his whole title again, "Is this some kind of joke? The future of Astorians as it pertains to Whatloch?"

"Whiteloch," he corrected, "The Whiteloch Isles, where my father is king; I arrived in Astoria just two days ago, but,

as of yet have not met with any town officials.”

She replaced the phone receiver into the cradle, “I’m gonna level with you young man. I have no idea who you should speak to. We’ve never had a—are you a real prince, or is that some kind of...” She didn’t know what to say. She wanted to ask if it was a joke, but the person standing there staring at her looked extremely serious.

As luck would have it, at that moment, a man in a dripping wet trench coat walked in from the showers outside, “Morning Geri,” he said to the woman Edward had thus far only known as Ms Davis.

“Uhh, yeah, how about him?” she motioned from Edward to the man walking by, “Mr. Brown is the deputy Mayor. Perhaps he can help you.”

The man in the trench, now known as Mr. Brown, stopped and tilted a head at Edward, looking him up and down, “How can I help you?”

“Seems this gentleman is here to claim this land for the king,” Geri Davis said.

“Pardon?” The man chuckled.

“Uh, ahem,” Edward cleared his throat, feeling warmth rise in his cheeks, “Not exactly. This land already belongs to my father, the king, we don’t really need to claim it when it’s already—“

“A hostile takeover?” Mr Brown was still smiling like he too thought this was some kind of joke.

Edward did not find that funny, “Hostile—why no!”

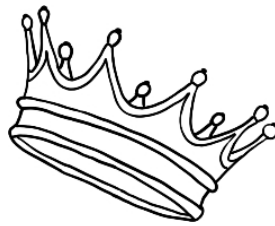
“Who put you up to this? Was it Benny?”

“I assure you I don’t know anyone named Benny. Frankly, I don’t really know anyone in this town except for Mr Donnelly and his wife Maureen, but...”

“Ahhh yeah,” the man in the trench laughed again, “This is Mikey Donnelly’s sense of humor. You an acting student?”

Now Edward was frustrated more than embarrassed, “Sir,

I'm neither a product of Mister Donnelly's sense of humor, nor an acting student of any kind. I am the Prince of Whiteloch and I've come to speak with the mayor. Now," he cleared his throat once again and motioned to the lady behind the desk, "Ms. Davis here has informed me that your mayor is out of the office on town business today, but I do need to speak to *someone* in this office, and if that someone isn't going to be you, I'll thank you to point me in the right direction! Immediately."



A Run in with the Law – Edward

Perhaps making demands out the gate wasn't Edward's brightest move. Mr Brown scratched at his jawline, no longer laughing. Edward's outburst had made him pause.

"Well?" Edward wasn't in the mood to wait any longer.

"Young man, if you're insinuating that you are somehow Prince of Oregon—"

"Astoria, well, Whiteloch, not the whole of the state of Oregon," Edward corrected, making it sound like man was insane for suggesting such a thing as though that were such a far cry from what he was actually saying.

What Edward hadn't done, however, was notice the way that Mr Brown had already motioned to Ms Davis before he slowly replied, each word taking longer than it should have, "I...see...you're a real prince, of course," his tone placating Edward's claims. Ms Davis turned back to her computer, clickity clacking away. Edward assumed that she had gone back to work.

"Yes, exactly," Edward nodded, choosing this moment to speak slowly as well. Perhaps, he thought, they'd be more likely to understand what he was saying if he did so. "I am the Prince of Whiteloch. My father, King Alfred is your sovereign; he sent me here to..."

Just then, the same door they'd all come through pushed open and two men stepped inside.

"Morning, officers," Mr. Brown greeted two men in a horrible khaki brown color.

"Mooornin," one of the men tipped his hat as they approached, "What seems to be the trouble here?"

"The trouble," Edward started in right away, "is that no one will tell me who I need to speak to while the mayor is out for the day."

"Uh-huh," the man nodded and Edward clocked the *sheriff*-badge on his chest, "And you are...?"

Edward took a deep breath, closing his eyes for a moment before diving in once again, "Prince Edward Gra—"

The younger man in uniform cut him off with a laugh, "Prince! I thought they were yankin' our chain when they said some dude was in here raving about being a prince!"

Edward pulled his head back, "Officers, this is no laughing matter. I'm glad you've arrived because I could use your help —"

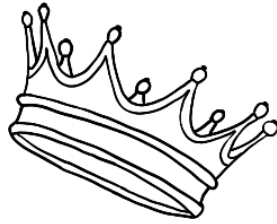
"Son," the older man gently grabbed his arm, motioning for the younger man to go around to his other side, "I think we should take you to dry out."

Edward looked at the sheriff's hand on his arm incredulously and then down at his clothes, "I appreciate your concern, but I'm not that wet now that I've been inside a few minu—"

At the local jail.

"It ain't that kinda dry," the sheriff's deputy said, shutting the door to the cell they'd quite literally thrown Edward into.

He was, in a word, shocked, "Don't I at least get a phone call?!"



Chapter 8
The Jailhouse – Edward

Edward could hear Mikey coming. He was ranting and raving from the moment he entered the building and continued as he pushed past the front desk and the sheriff's deputy.

“You don't understand,” Mikey's voice carried almost too well, “You can't just throw a prince in jail! He owns the whole damn town. You think he's gonna let you keep your job after this?”

The sheriff followed on Mikey's heels as he approached the cell where they were holding Edward, “Now Mikey, you've gotta cut this out or I'll have to throw you in there with him. He was drunk and threatening people down at City Hall.”

Edward's mouth dropped open in complete shock as he stuck his face against the bars, “I most certainly was *not*.”

“George,” Mikey addressed the sheriff, “I picked him up from his hotel this morning, took him to breakfast at Mugs, and then dropped him off at City Hall myself. Even if the man had been drinking since 6 am, he would've sobered up in all that time. I swear on my three girls that he didn't have a lick of alcohol the whole time he was with me,” Mikey held one hand up and crossed his heart with the other, “You have my word, now let the prince out of here before his father sends some people over, and we're all in trouble.”

Edward couldn't tell if Mikey was seriously concerned that his father might cause problems for the town if they found out he was in jail, or if he was just trying to help get him out by any means.

For his part, Edward knew his father would do exactly the opposite if he found out his son had been thrown in jail. By the age of 30, Edward had done a fair number of stupid things, but

landing himself in jail was a new low. Being that his parents had entrusted him with this assignment, he knew they'd be none too pleased to see where he was currently standing which was precisely why he had absolutely no intention of telling them. Not today, not ever.

“Mikey,” the sheriff held up both hands, trying to calm the man in front of him. “You can’t just come into my jail and offer up threats by proxy. The boy was causing a ruckus whether you think he was drunk or not.”

With a deep sigh, Mikey lowered the tone of his voice, “I’m sorry, the kid’s just got no one else to look out for him here. Besides, he does own this town.”

“You both keep saying that,” Sheriff Thatcher shook his head slowly. “I don’t really care if he does own the town or not. He can’t go on like that. If I release him to your care, do you promise to keep him under control?”

The idea that Mikey, the man with a mustard stain on his shirt, would have to keep a European Prince under control seemed comical, even to him. “Sure,” he replied anyway, “I’ll keep this super proper British guy who don’t even put sugar in his tea under control.”

“Whitelochian,” Edward corrected, his face still pressed against the cold metal bars. “Common misconception.”

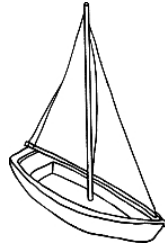
The much younger sheriff’s deputy asked through chewing gum. “If you’re not British, how come you got a British accent?”

If Mikey had been honest with himself, and Prince Edward, he’d been wondering the same thing for days now.

“Hold over from our former occupation,” Edward replied nonchalantly. He’d gotten that question a lot over the years.

“You got a British accent from a job?”

Edward shook his head. “No, no, occupation like—oh, never mind. I sound British because we used to be the same country. Can I please be released now? I promise not to return to City Hall until I have proper documentation, or an invitation. Is that good enough?”



Chapter 9

Read Between the Vines – Emma

“Oh...God,” I heard Sarabeth gasp.

I was under the counter, pulling at wires, trying to make our printer actually, yanno, print. Shocker, I know.

“What? OUCH.” I hit my head trying to look up to see what she was gasping about.

“Emma, Emma,” she kicked me from where she was standing, “the prince is coming!”

I rolled my eyes, “Sarabeth O’Connor. I told you he’s not a real prince; he’s just some dude in a fancy pants suit who’s somehow managed to dupe the whole town into—OUCH.” She kicked me again. Much harder this time.

“HELLOOo, Your Majesty, welcome to *Read Between the Vines*.”

I crept up to a standing position slowly, knowing that if she was kicking *that* hard and speaking *that* loudly, I was bound to find Mikey and Prince Edward at the counter. Right there. Within earshot. Crap.

“Afternoon,” Edward tilted his head in a half nod bow sort of thing at Sarabeth.

Mikey looked astonished by what he’d overheard.

“Emma,” Mikey furrowed his brow and motioned with his head for me to join him at the side of the bar counter, “Could I speak to you for a moment?”

Why did it sound like I was a teenager caught smoking in the school bathroom when in reality I was...AM a grown woman with a thriving business of her own. A whole adult who doesn’t need to answer to anyone. Let alone some elderly

GenX dude who had been conned by some bamboozler in a blazer.

Regardless, I stepped to the area where Mikey had. “How can I help you today Mikey? Did you and prince-y poo come for a drink or a book, maybe both?” The sarcasm was dripping, and he seemed less than amused by my tone.

“Emma...”

“What?! Mikey, let’s get real for a second. What are you even *doing* with this guy? Have you gone to work at all in the last few days? Or are you playing hooky on the back of some empty promises from the king?” I jerked my head in Edward’s direction.

“He’s the *prince*, Emma. Not the king.”

I rolled my eyes, “You know what I meant. And how do you even know he’ll be a good leader. What if he’s a fascist monster that ruins our lives?”

“He owns Astoria,” he said matter of factly, ignoring my second question.

I crossed my arms, “He does not own Astoria. We’re not even sure he’s a real prince, Mikey. In fact, I’m pretty sure he’s *not* one. Where’s his body guard?”

“Right now that’s me. And of course he’s a prince, just look at him,” he jerked a thumb in the direction where Edward was leaning on the counter toward Sarabeth, suave as ever, still in a suit. Did he own anything else?

“What makes you so sure he owns our entire town, Mikey Donnelly?”

“He’s got the deed,” he said matter of fact-ly.

Okay, this was new. I perked up, “He’s got the deed...to Astoria?”

“Mhm, I read it myself.”

“You...read it,” I tilted my head.

“I skimmed it.”

With a deep breath I continued, “You...skimmed it.”

“Okay,” Mikey burst out a little louder than he’d been speaking up to that point, “Okay, I took his word for it, BUT! The story checks out.”

“Checks out with who, and what exactly is the story?”

At that moment, Edward paused his flirtatious conversation with Sarabeth and looked over, making it clear he could hear us the whole time, “Shall I?” He asked Mikey who just waved him in my direction, as if to say *be my guest, Your Majesty*.

“Ahem,” Edward stood up straight, cleared his throat as though a proclamation were coming and straightened the ends of his now unbuttoned suit jacket, “Astoria, this very town right here,” he pointed toward the ground for emphasis, “was originally founded and owned by John Jacob Astor.”

“The billionaire?” Sarabeth asked.

“Millionaire, technically,” Edward went on, “Though I’m sure if you account for inflation and today’s market he would probably be considered—“

“CONTINUE,” I waved my hands around, frustrated by the aside about Astor’s finances. “Are you his long lost great grandson or something? Father’s brother’s cousin’s former roommate?” The quote from *Spaceballs* fell out of my mouth before I could stop it. All three people turned to look at me, “Sorry,” I shrunk back a little, “Go on.”

“Thank you,” he looked a little stunned by all I’d said, but went on as though he were reading from a script, “John Jacob Astor through several strange deals, gave the land at that time known as Fort Astoria to the Pacific Fur Company, one of his many companies, dealings et cetera. They, in turn, sold it to the North West Company. *THEN*,” he emphasized, letting out a deep breath, “thing got a smidge hinky during the war of 1812 and they soold the land here to,” he motioned with a hand as though we were playing a game, and now one of us was allowed to fill in the blank.

No one answered.

“King George. Thus, this waterlogged land was named Fort George.”

“Wooow,” Sarabeth sounded genuinely impressed by this fairytale.

“Okay,” I stopped him, “so if the story you’re telling is true, America doesn’t own Astoria Oregon, but England does?”

“At that point in time, yes.” Edward nodded.

“How, pray tell, does that get us to you literally owning the land we are standing on, Mister Finnsgate?”

“Duke of Finnsgate,” he corrected me, “But as we established previously you can simply call me Edward.”

I wanted to roll my eyes, but refrained, “Edward,” I added with a nod to show I would do just that.

“Whiteloch, where I was born, well—The Whiteloch Isles to you all...”

To *who* all?! I wanted to ask, we’d never heard of such a place.

“was given its independence from England. My great-great grandfather, one of the Queen’s cousins still living on the island, was given control of the land, named king and voila! We were freed from their grasp!” He sounded so excited, as if he were leading the Pledge of Allegiance in fifth grade.

“What does your island gaining independence from England have to do with you becoming the fascist leader of Astoria?”

“Oh, of course, apologies. One correction, right quick—we aren’t fascists. In any event,” He seemed to have gotten carried away with the history lesson, “Queen Victoria gifted a number of small parcels of land to our first king, as mentioned by my great-great grandfather, as a peace treaty. Astoria was one of them. Which means I own Astoria.”

“Oh my god!” At the end of the story, Sarabeth clapped her hands excitedly. “This is so wonderful! Emma, he really does own Astoria.”

“He doesn’t—“ I attempted to correct her; but was cut off.

“I assure you I do. I even own the people here, if you want to get into the legality of it.”

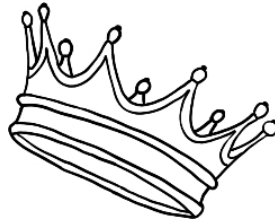
“You own the *PEOPLE*, US?!”

He nodded.

“See? He’s a *FASCIST!* Only a fascist would claim to own people.”

Sarabeth looked thrilled, “Monarchist.”

“Well,” Edward stopped her, “technically, monARCH, but now we’re just splitting hairs.”



Read Between the Vines – Edward

Read Between the Vines was quaint, or at least Edward thought so. A nice place to spend an evening, but a strange convergence of business plans. A wine bar in a bookstore? The more he thought about it, though, the more sense it made. People liked books. People liked wine. Many people liked to read and drink wine at the same time. Smart lady here.

Still, he had yet to see the purpose of Mikey dragging him down there in the early afternoon before the place officially served alcohol—they hadn’t even so much as popped a cork in his honor. The wine wasn’t flowing, only sarcasm from that Emma woman.

Smart she might be, but a tad shrewish if he was being honest.

“Mikey, ol’ chap,” Edward took the man gently by the arm and pulled him aside, “Remind me, if you’d be so kind, why are we here? These ladies look lovely, but I do have quite a lot to do and it seems coming to a wine bar bookstore combination shortly after lunch might not be the most valuable use of my time.”

Mikey motioned to Emma, the owner of the establishment who'd been nothing but a thorn in Edward's side, "Emma knows a lot about the goings on here in Astoria, way more than me. You know I'll help you any way I can, but that girl's had schoolin'. AND she's been trying to right things in town in a way no one has in a long time. Certainly not the mayor or anyone on that damn City Council, scuze my language."

"Nevermind that, Mikey," Edward patted him on the shoulder, "You must know I've heard much worse. In any event, she doesn't seem keen to help."

They looked over at Emma who'd rejoined her employee Sarabeth behind the counter. She'd gone right back to work and was all but ignoring their presence. Or so they thought.

Then she sighed, "Help with what?" She asked, not looking up from the computer she was working at.

"Well, ya see," Mikey started in, "the Prince here could use some of your insider knowledge. Your Dad told me you've been lookin' into permits, repairs and the like for months now. And even I know you're runnin' for City Council. Isn't the election in a few days?"

Sarabeth shook her head. "She's all but given up, Mikey."

"What?! Your Dad was so proud of you; your Mom would've..." Mikey trailed off. "You can't quit when you're so close to the finish line."

"I didn't *quit*, Mikey," Emma stopped typing and looked up at him, "but it's not like I stand a chance. Why put more of my time into a lost cause when I need to figure out how to get the pier fixed before Dad literally falls into the Pacific Ocean? I have a few supporters, and even managed to secure three endorsements at first! One was Pine Ridge Post if you can believe that."

"Local paper, pretty big," Mikey added to catch Edward up on what she was talking about.

"Yeah, would've been freakin' great. They came and interviewed me, took pictures here at the Vine," which she and Sarabeth had affectionately nicknamed Read Between The

Vines.

“So...what happened?” Edward’s eyes narrowed; he seemed genuinely curious, actively listening which came as a surprise to Emma.

“They called one day and let us know they’re freakin’ cowards,” Sarabeth burst out, all but growling at the thought.

Emma motioned for her to calm a little, “Not exactly that, but...”

“Yes, *exactly* that,” Sarabeth went on. “I have it on good authority that Mayor Vermin paid them off not to print it in the end.”

“Your mayor’s name is Vermin? How...does one with such an unsavory name even get elected?” Edward laughed quietly.

“Nah, the man’s name is Vernon,” Mikey corrected, “But these girls here aren’t his biggest fans.”

“And why should we be?” Sarabeth asked. “He’s done nothing good for Astoria literally ever and he’s single-handedly ruining Emma’s chance to turn things around.”

“Listen, we don’t know that he paid off the Post,” Emma started.

“We know,” Sarabeth rolled her eyes as she picked up a rag and started to rage clean their countertop.

“But,” Emma continued, eyeing her friend, “It was suspicious timing and the journalist I was working with did say that higher ups put a hold on any further endorsements in this election cycle.”

Edward felt terrible, she looked genuinely disappointed by this turn of events. “That sounds terrible. I thought that kind of bribery or suppression of free speech wasn’t allowed in America?”

“AHA!!! SO YOU ADMIT IT. WE ARE IN AMERICA!” Emma crossed her arms over her chest. Smug. Thrilled with her “gotcha.”

Edward rolled his eyes at her. “You’re not in America. You’re technically a Whiteloch enclave if you must know, but it’s been made clear that all of you *thought* you were in America. So, how is he getting away with all this? And when can I meet this man who clearly must be removed from office immediately? In fact, why do we even have a mayor? I see no reason to divide power this way now that I’m here.”

“It’s...not gonna be that easy,” Mikey shook his head, “People love ya, Your Highness, but they’re also very stuck in their ways. Vernon Keating has been Mayor of Astoria since...”

“Nineteen ninety eight,” Emma answered. She really did know everything about this guy.

“How is that even LEGAL?” Sarabeth exploded again, “Whatever happened to freakin’ term limits?”

“I’ve wondered that for years. I have no idea how he’s getting away with half the stuff he does. I’ve been doing most of my research at the City Hall Archives, but I never thought to look into the term limits thing,” was Emma’s response. He liked this girl. She had drive, and spunk.

“Well,” Edward stepped forward and slid onto one of the bar stools, invested now, elbows leaned on the counter in a way that would undoubtedly make his grandmother smack him with a scepter, “maybe that’s where we begin. We find out all the funny dealings this man has done and then your townspeople won’t be so bothered when I show them my official papers and how they match up with the town records and toss him out on his rear.”

Emma seemed surprised at the cunningness of this plan, “Yeah, and when exactly are you planning on showing us this famous deed of yours?”

“Deed?” Edward asked.

“Mikey said you had a deed. He saw it, or...something,” Emma knew very well that Mikey hadn’t seen it, and she wanted to catch this man in his lies, “If you show me the deed, I’ll take you to the City Hall Archives and help you oust

Keating.”

“What I have is a proclamation, but there should be plenty of documentation here in Astoria explaining our ownership. Why don’t you take me there and we’ll find it. Will that convince you?”

“You’ve got yourself a deal,” she reached her hand out and they shook on it.

“We’ll go tomorrow.”

“No can do,” Edward shook his head, “Sorry, love. I’ve got the Umbrella Parade.”

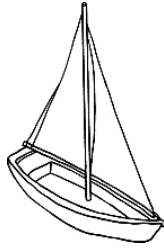
“Ohh!” Sarabeth perked up, happier now than she’d been when they were discussing Vernon Keating’s shady dealings, “I heard about that!”

“You’ve got to be kidding me...fine. We’ll go bright and early Wednesday, 8am when they open. How’s that?”

“What is with you people and waking up before the dawn?!” Edward shook his head, “Never in my life...”

“Edward, dawn is at least an hour before that,” Mikey corrected him.

“It’s an expression my good man. From a fellow like myself who enjoys his sleep,” he sighed, thinking of his parents and how they’d be disappointed to hear he was postponing his responsibilities in favor of a few hours more of sleep, “Fine. Fine. I’ll meet you there at 8 am.”



Chapter 10
The Umbrella Parade – Emma

“Having Halloween on a Tuesday should be considered a crime; who DOES that?” Sarabeth was dressed as a character she called Bookstore Barbie, but the truth was she just looked like Malibu Barbie with an added pair of black frames—no actual lenses in her glasses.

“A crime?” I raised an eyebrow at her. “You’re planning to prosecute who? The calendar?”

“Well, it should be outlawed then. They should always move it to a weekend.”

I turned the closed sign over on the front door, adding a note that we’d return in a few hours, then locked up. We planned to close up shop for a bit, enjoy the unexplained Umbrella Parade Festivities, and then return for the evening rush.

“Emma, where’s your umbrella?” my friend asked, waving her bright pink one at me.

“Ughhhh,” I groaned, unlocking the front door I’d just closed, “It’s not even raining today,” which honestly was a rarity for us, “what could be the point of bringing an umbrella? And also, who is gonna show up for this thing? Astoria has never had so much as a costume contest, let alone the whole town getting together to march through it. You’ve been to City Council meetings with me. How many people from the town actually show up besides us—two, three?”

“But that’s not fun. This is fun. The prince said—”

“I knooooow what the priiiiiince saaaaaid.” I stretched out each word with a mock British accent, jogging quickly behind the counter to grab my umbrella and return to my friend’s side.

“Okay, let’s go parade through town with the five other people who show up.”

We took Sarabeth’s purple Volkswagen Beetle downtown and were surprised to find...no freakin’ parking.

“What is happening here?” Everywhere I looked were people in costumes, carrying closed umbrellas.

It took us a good twenty minutes to find a spot we could squeeze even her tiny car into, barely leaving space for us to get out.

“There’s gotta be hundreds of people here. I didn’t even know Astoria *had* this many people,” Sarabeth grumbled, bumping into me after a gaggle of kids bumped into her. “Owe, sorry!”

“Sorry!” All three kids yelled back at once, running off toward the park with their umbrellas in hand.

“Well, Astoria is home to almost ten thousand people,” I shrugged, realizing that I sounded a bit too much like a Wikipedia article, “but this is wild. I don’t think I’ve ever seen this many people in one place at a time. I mean, except on TV.”

The Astoria Riverwalk, usually a wet wasteland with barely a few people walking their dogs, was packed. Shoulder to shoulder, you could see people in every direction. Kids in costumes, parents holding umbrellas. I saw some of the elderly folks of our town walking hand in hand, umbrellas open in their free hands. It was, dare I say, cute, if you can call a few hundred people packed together on one trail cute.

Sarabeth and I joined the herd and began our walk toward Columbia Field which coincidentally bordered John Astor Elementary. When I read the name, I started to think about what Edward had said. Could he have been telling the truth? But I was pulled from my thoughts by the music playing over the dull hum of the crowd as we reached the park.

“Is that...Monster Mash?” It made me smile, despite myself. Kids were running around the park, holding umbrellas out as they spun around, acting as though they would fly away

like Mary Poppins any moment. The music was coming from the center of Columbia Field where a tiny stage had been erected and even from a ways off, we could see Edward standing at the microphone in a long yellow jacket and bucket hat. Then the music quieted as he tapped at the mic.

“Come one, come all, gather round; we’re going to get started.”

Cheers came from everyone around.

“Thank you all for joining together for the first Annual Astorian Umbrella Parade!”

More cheers...

“My family and the people of the Whiteloch Isles have been participating in a yearly Umbrella Parade on Halloween since 1945. That year, our island was plagued by drought for the first time in generations. My grandmother, Queen Beatrice the Second, God save her, set out on foot to visit the children and townsfolk with an umbrella in hand. She encouraged them not to lose faith or hope in our small nation! As the families gathered with her in our beloved Gallagher Park, each held up their umbrella, and as luck would have it, water poured from the sky!”

As Edward raised his voice on the last line, the people of Astoria who knew nothing of this place called the Whiteloch Isles not one week ago, broke into massive cheers. Had we *ever* had even a *week* without rain? Doubtful. Yet, here they were, thrilled by this lore.

“Come on,” I whispered to Sarabeth, grabbing her arm, “let’s try to get up there.”

As we pushed our way through the crowd, Edward continued his speech.

“In honor of that very day, we walk together every year on Halloween through the center of town, and once each of you reach the neighborhood you call home, scatter to resume your traditional trick-or-treating ritual! To the youngsters of Astoria on this day, I wish you mountains of chocolate, endless ropes of licorice, and perhaps even a full-sized candy bar or two,”

Edward winked at the end.

As we neared the stage, I spotted the mayor standing nearby, arms crossed, watching the spectacle. He looked none too pleased, but hadn't made any moves to approach the stage. Sarabeth and I, however, did just that. Once we reached the base of the makeshift platform, I could see that it was smaller than it felt from afar. It was not exactly expertly built, clearly thrown together at the last minute.

Mikey had headphones on when we got to his side, and I couldn't help but laugh. "Mikey, where did you get all this?"

He pushed the over-sized headphones off his ears and smiled, "Got a cousin in South Clatsop County who's a DJ! Loaned me the lot for the day when he heard about the prince."

"Did you see Creepy Keating is over there?" Sarabeth asked him, motioning with her head in the direction of the mayor.

Mikey didn't seem bothered. "That old windbag should grab an umbrella and enjoy himself just like everyone else."

But, when Edward descended from the stage, Mayor Keating made his move, stepping right up to the group of us.

"That was quiiiiite the spectacle you put on there, mister... I don't believe I've caught your last name; what was it?" He asked Edward.

Edward smiled at him and reached out a hand, "Edward Grafton Windermere, acting sovereign of this land for the time being. And you are?"

"Name's Vernon Keating, and I don't know about any sovereign business, but I will tell you, I heard from the sheriff's deputy over there," he jerked his thumb in some random direction, "that you don't have a permit for this here display."

Edward tilted his head like a confused puppy. "Permit?" He chuckled lightly, "I...don't need a permit,—I'm the prince."

Vernon nodded slowly, “Be that as it may, you’re not above the law. You cannot have all these people gathered in one place without a permit.”

“Vernon,” Mikey stepped in, his tone more familiar, having known the mayor for decades now, “It’s Halloween. Everyone would’ve been out anyway; can’t we just call it Halloween and forget about permits?”

“Michael,” Vernon sounded stern, using Mikey’s full name, “You know as well as I do that no one here is above the law, and a town without systems in place to protect its people cannot run.”

“That’s rich,” I scoffed, “Like you’re protecting the people and businesses of the piers?”

Vernon opened his mouth to jump at me, but Edward held up a hand to stop him, “Alright, fine,” Edward shrugged, looking directly at Mikey, “Pen and paper please?”

Mikey shook his head, “Your Majesty I don’t have a pen with me...or a paper.”

Edward turned to Sarabeth and me, “Ladies? Might one of you have a pen on you?”

Standing there, as I was, in full Halloween garb, I raised an eyebrow at him, “No offense Your Majesty, but the ice caps were melting, I didn’t exactly have time to grab my stationary set.”

It was as though he noticed my costume for the first time, waving his hand in my general direction, “Sorry, what’s going on here anyway?”

“What? I’m a displaced Arctic Fox,” I motioned to my fox ears, tail, and, of course, the ‘my home melted’ sign on my chest.

“How...festive...” Edward didn’t seem amused.

“Here, how about this?” Sarabeth, who’d been rifling through her purse handed over a pen and an old receipt.

“Thank you, dahling,” Edward took them from her and motioned for Mikey to turn around, “Do you mind Ol’ Chap?”

Mikey shook his head and obliged, turning his back toward the prince who, right before our eyes, scribbled something on the receipt while saying, “Alright, here you are. A permit. But promise me you all have already secured the permits for the Wishing Boats.”

On the recipe he’d written:

By Royal Decree, all Umbrella Parades are here by legal on this the thirty first day of October, the year of Our Lord twenty twenty three. Signed, Prince Edward Grafton Windermere the third, Duke of Finnsgate.

Mayor Keating held up both hands near his chest, “Whoa whoa whoa, Mister Windermeyer—“

“Windermere,” Edward corrected, “and it’s Prince, not Mister.”

“Sure thing, Prince Windermere. I don’t know what a wishin’ boat is, but you can’t write your own permit; that’s not how this works. You have to go through the proper channels and apply, pay the fee—”

Edward’s eyes widened; he looked utterly astonished. The man opened his mouth and then closed it, his eyes dashing from Mikey to me to Sarabeth in confusion, “Is he pulling my leg about the wishing boats?” He asked, ignoring Keating’s issue with his on-the-fly-permit.

The three of us stood silent for a moment, unsure of where to go from here.

“Uhhh...” Mikey furrowed his brow.

“No,” Edward gasped.

Finally, it was Sarabeth who broke the awkward silence, “What’s a wishing boat, Your Majesty? I’ve never heard of it, but it sounds wonderful!”

Edward smacked his forehead, almost knocking the yellow plastic bucket hat clear off, “You people don’t have an Umbrella Parade, fine—that I can understand, but no wishing boats either?” He seemed almost...hurt. “How will everyone make their wishes?”

“Your Highness,” Mikey touched his arm, “I’m so sorry, why don’t you tell us... about... the wishing boats...?” It was like everyone was trying to comfort this giant rubber ducky of a man.

With a sigh, Edward regained his impeccable posture and spoke, “On the first Saturday after Halloween, it’s customary for everyone to gather at the water’s edge with a boat either made of wood or paper—truthfully they were all wood originally, but people have gotten cheap in recent years—and on it one places their wish for the holiday season, whatever they want for the remainder of the year! Then together everyone pushes their boats out away from the shore.. You really don’t have a wishing boat celebration?”

I shook my head, “Nope.”

“I suppose then you’re doing to tell me you don’t have a Yuletide Rabbit, either?” He replied sarcastically.

Making a popping sound with my lips I shot finger guns at Edward, “Nailed it. You’re on fire right now with your guesses.”

“This town is seriously lacking in cultural events,” he shook his head in disappointment and looked at Vernon, “Alright Mister Keating, how do I go about getting a proper permit for Saturday? How much can this fee possibly be?” He reached below the yellow plastic covering his pocket and retrieved his wallet, “It’s an emergency and we *will* be celebrating the wishing boats! Mikey,” he turned to the man who’d now become an extension of his right hand, “Do you know someone who can print fliers?”

An Aside
Keating

By the time Vernon Keating returned to his office at City Hall, he was fuming. What the devil was that prince doing in town and with Emma Prescott of all people? He plopped into his desk chair, a tight squeeze, and immediately picked up the phone punching numbers quickly with his fat fingers.

The phone rang once. Twice.

“Hello?” a groggy voice on the other end answered.

“What the hell is that little brat doing in my town?” Vernon roared.

“What?” the voice asked.

“Now isn’t the time for games. Why is a prince of Whiteloch here in Astoria?!” Mayor Keating’s face grew redder. He could feel the ire rising in him the more he had to explain himself.

“Vernon, I’m not really sure what you’re—“

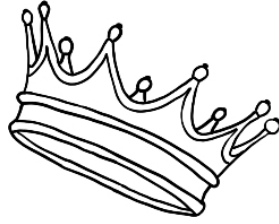
In an attempt not to completely lose his temper, Vernon Keating took three deep breathes, a trick he’d learned to aid in controlling himself in such situations, “Well,” he said with disdain, “it’s Halloween evening here in Astoria, and I was just at a goddamn PARADE hosted by none other than Prince Edward of Whiteloch. Care to explain why this is the first I’m hearing that he was coming here?”

“That boy is harmless,” was his chosen response, his best guess at how to calm down the red faced man on the other end of the line.

“Certainly doesn’t look harmless. He had hordes of people out tonight carrying around colorful umbrellas through the streets of Astoria. *MY* streets. You’ve got to get him out of here before he ruins everything we’ve worked for. Everything my *family* has worked for. Everything *you* built with my grandfather, for us, for future generations. Are you willing to risk that?”

“You don’t need to convince me, Vernon. I hear you. I will

figure this out.”



Chapter 11
City Hall Archives – Edward

The City Hall Archive Library, where Emma requested they meet the following day, looked nothing like Edward had imagined. In his mind, this place would look something like The Royal Cairnwell Library in Whiteloch’s capital city of Crownhaven. It wasn’t as grand as the state buildings of Great Britain, but Cairnwell was a building Whiteloch’s people could be proud of: spires, gorgeous and intricate window designs, large arched doors with brass finishings.

...This? “This place is a dump,” Edward mumbled to himself, standing alone on the front steps near the entrance, umbrella held up over his head to shield him from the pouring rain that seemed never ending in this place.

“You’re tellin’ me,” Emma’s voice startled him from behind.

“Good Christ,” Edward exclaimed, grabbing at his chest, “You should really warn people when you’re going to sneak up on them.”

Emma raised an eyebrow. “Well, then it wouldn’t be sneaking, would it? But I wasn’t sneaking; you were just trash-talking our finest library and got caught.”

“I—”

“Don’t sweat it,” she waved him off and started up the remaining steps, “It’s not great, you know it, I know it, the librarian inside, Mrs. Johanson, even knows it. Maybe that’s something you’ll fix when you’re king,” with a wink she elbowed him in the side playfully, insinuating that despite their newly formed common enemy, she still didn’t believe his story fully.

“Very funny, you know very well there’s no chance that

the third son of any Monarch will become king. And you're sure this Mrs. Johanson woman will simply let us into the archives to snoop around?"

"Edward, you don't tell people you're snooping. You've got to be a little more cunning than that. Also? I had no clue you were the third kid in your family; what are you doing here if you're never going to inherit the throne?" Emma's voice betrayed her disbelief as she held open the door and let him go in first, shaking out her umbrella behind them before entering as well.

"Fourth child, third son, and why I'm the one here is a story for another day."

Emma shrugged it off. Sure, she wanted to know how he planned to talk his way out of this one, but they had way bigger fish to fry for today. "Follow my lead and try to act natural, okay?" Thank goodness he'd left the suit behind for once. Today, Edward was sporting only jeans and a button down. *Only*. Ha, but for him, it was basically casual attire, and Emma could feel the slight shift in his demeanor.

Once they got to the front desk, Emma stepped up first and leaned on the counter. "Hiiii Pearl," she added the kind of smile that Edward had never seen on her face. Up to this moment, all of Edward's interactions with Emma had been the kind that produced tight-lipped, forced smiles, or simply sarcasm. This was, dare he say, sweet?

An older woman, whom Edward assumed was Pearl Johanson, approached the counter, pulling the eyeglasses dangling from a chain around her neck onto her face. "Hello Emma." She had a harsher accent than Edward expected. Not like anyone else he'd met since he arrived in Astoria. More like the people he'd seen on television from places like Boston and New York, though he couldn't precisely place it. Not that it mattered, he told himself mentally.

"What can I do you for today?" the woman asked, eyeing Edward though she was speaking to Emma, "and, say, who's the handsome fella?"

"Pearl," Emma laughed, "this is...Eddie," she looped her

arm through his. “Friend of mine, here to help me do a little research for the upcoming election. Could we get the archive pass, please?”

“Again? Sure thing, sweetheart.” Pearl returned to the tiny desk she’d been sitting at. Her tone conveyed a touch of pity. Emma had been coming to the library to research how to fix the problems in Astoria for weeks on end, but it seemed Pearl knew that, at least so far, it had all been for naught.

“Nice to see you’re gettin’ out and makin’ new...*friends*,” Pearl emphasized the word friends like she didn’t believe that’s what they were and raised an eyebrow in Edward’s direction, “Nice young lady like you shouldn’t be spending all her days in the dusty old basement of this place.”

This is the point where Edward expected Emma to roll her eyes, the way she always did at him, but instead, she grabbed the old woman’s hand and squeezed gently. “Don’t worry Pearl, I’m hardly ever here, I have my bookstore and the election coming up and—”

“Emma...” Pearl Johanson squeezed her hand back, “Don’t you go becoming one of those girls who gets lost in her work, adopts a few too many shelter cats, and neva has a life. You gotta get out there with your, uh, friends and live like you’re in your twenties, which you aaaare. Don’t become an old fuddy-duddy before your time.”

“But I own a wine bar, that’s cool—right? Young people love wine and drinking...”

Pearl shook her head, handing over the laminated pass Emma had previously requested. “I know *plenty* of old fuddy-duddies who drink. All I’m sayin’ is a pretty girl like you should see the sun sometimes.”

Emma’s laugh was a polite one. “Sun!? In Astoria—never heard of it.”

“Don’t you worry, Mrs. Johanson!” Edward took a step closer to Emma and draped an arm over her shoulders, pulling her against his side, “I’m taking this lovely lady to the Wishing Boats on Saturday; no chance she’ll be stuck inside!”

“The Wishing Boats?” Pearl looked confused, but only for a split second. “Oh yeaah...we got an email about that—wait a second!” The old woman returned to her computer and began poking at keys slowly until finally, she clicked on something, and the printer came to life.

Sure, their printer worked.

“Look, here it is! I’d never heard of a Wishing Boat before, but I saw it when I got in this morning. Some prince fellow is apparently asking all the local businesses to put these fliers up in the windows. Guess I’ll post it on our community board.”

Before them was the flyer he and Mikey had worked on the night before, advertising this event to the members of the community:

**COME ONE, COME ALL TO THE FIRST ANNUAL
ASTORIAN WISHING BOATS CELEBRATION!**

Bring a small boat made of paper or wood with your wish for the remainder of the year. Kids and families are welcome and encouraged to attend.

Location: Pier 14

Date/Time: Saturday, November 4th, at sunset.

The image was a caveman like drawing of a few stick people pushing boats out into the harbor. Emma hadn’t seen the final flier yet. It was kinda cute. Not necessarily well done, but they tried. What else could they get in a matter of hours? Certainly not a professional illustrator.

“Mikey draw this?” Emma asked with a quiet laugh.

“I did,” Edward said under his breath, not wanting Pearl to hear.

“I didn’t realize this was the type of event one brought a hot date to.” Pearl finished rereading the flier to herself and winked at Emma, “Your mother, god rest her precious soul, would be so proud of you for puttin’ yourself out there.”

Emma spoke through a tight-lipped smile, not wanting to correct the woman and blow their spot. “Thanks, Pearl.”

“Did *YOU* know,” Pearl pointed at Edward before the pair could escape, “That Emma’s mother, Jane, was our head librarian for many years? Had a Master of Library Science and everything! Probably could’ve gone to the big city and worked at some really neat places if she hadn’t settled here.”

Pearl said it as though being the head librarian was some magical feat. Edward wanted to ask what happened to Emma’s mother, but realized by the way Pearl Johanson memorialized her, this obviously wasn’t the time or place.

“Sounds like a really fantastic lady,” was what he opted for instead, “And Emma here,” he put his arm around her again, “is that type of daughter anyone would be proud of.”

“You’re darn right!” Pearl added.

Emma blushed, not liking all this attention, even if Edward was putting on a show. She knew Pearl Johanson was not.

“Anyway,” she peeled Edward’s arm off her and reached for the archive pass they’d come for to begin with, “We’ve got to get researching, but we’ll see you at the Wishing Boats Saturday?”

Emma surprised even herself saying that. Was she actually planning to go down to the water and make a wish on paper seacraft? Perhaps...perhaps she was.

When the two reached the basement of the archives, Edward glanced around, more stunned down there than he’d been outside the building, “They could use...a cleaning individual on staff.” He ran a finger along one of the bookshelves, bringing it up with a thick layer of dust now stuck to him.

“You’re telling me this isn’t cleaner than the frat house you no doubt lived in?” Emma winked, peeling off her raincoat and placing it over the back of a chair. “Tuck in, prince-y, we’re gonna be here a minute.”

“I should certainly think we’ll be here more than a minute, and you can’t possibly believe that a prince would live in a frat house, can you?” He followed suit and took his jacket off as well.

“Be here a minute is an expression. I thought you were a prince, not a boomer. All jokes aside, what exactly are we looking for again?” Emma asked.

“Well,” Edward took a seat on the edge of the table, “Somewhere here, there must be records of the Windermere slash Whiteloch ownership of Astoria. At the very least, a copy of the proclamation given by Queen Victoria to my family. Certainly, the British Monarch would have alerted the people of this land that they were changing hands, so to speak. Or perhaps my great-grandfather did it. I’m really not sure.”

“Right, and you’ve got the original proclamation with you?”

Edward pulled back, blinking wildly at her, “Certainly not! You can’t possibly think my father would let such a valuable document leave our capital, let alone our country. Here,” he pulled the cell phone out of his pocket and clicked around a bit, “Here’s a digital copy, along with a photo of the original.” He turned the phone to show her.

“May I...?” Emma asked, holding her hand out to take the phone.

“Be my guest,” Edward handed it over. He stood up, beginning to scan the stacks with his eyes as Emma read the proclamation for the first time, “Maybe you’ll actually believe me now,” he added quietly, only half sure she’d even hear him as he walked around, trying to figure out where on Earth they should begin in this place.

“Okay, well,” Emma stood up and handed the phone back to its owner, “literally anyone could make a fake digital document, but for the sake of argument and finding out what’s going on, I’ll be on your side for today and pretend I believe you aren’t a fascist snake oil salesman trying to scam the Gen Xers of the town who don’t know any better.”

“Fascist snake oil—what does that even mean?”

“Never mind,” Emma waved off his confusion with her mixed phrasing and started down an aisle marked **Land Deeds and Property Records**, “This seems promising,” she

motioned to Edward, who was down a completely different aisle full of boxes marked **Maps and Surveys**.

Edward grabbed a large tome off a shelf and started leafing through it, “Perhaps if we found the original record of sale from the North West Company to England that would be a good start.”

“Makes sense to me, but this lands and deeds stuff looks like personal records, like when people or businesses buy a house or whatever, not the whole place.” Emma gave up on the row she’d been in and moved to **Census Records**. “Do you think census records would show the info on who owns the place?”

Edward shrugged, “Honestly, Emma, I’d never considered that this would be an issue. We *do* own Astoria. I’m not sure why we haven’t been collecting taxes all along and, in turn, giving the people of this land the benefits of being a Whiteloch citizen.”

“Would we be Whiteloch citizens all the way over here, though? Or is it more like Canada’s relationship with the UK?”

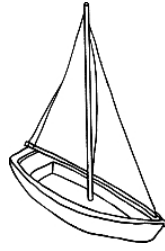
“I really wish my parents had warned me about what I was walking into. I’m beginning to wonder if they know that the locals here aren’t aware of us.”

Emma leaned around one of the shelves to look at him. “Have you called to ask them?”

Edward replied with a sigh, “No. I need to wait until I have something positive to report.”

“I’d say the Umbrella Parade was pretty positive,” she shrugged and returned to what she was looking through.

“Not like that,” he shook his head. “Hey, look at this!” Edward had made his way to the **Local Newspapers** section of the archives where hundreds of volumes were stacked along the shelf, each denoting the year and month they held inside.



The Library Basement – Emma

Edward called me over to the aisle he deemed noteworthy. When I looked up at the shelves there, I saw oversized books for days. Pulling one down, we each held one side. As we flipped through, we saw pages and pages of old newspapers, all telling the history of Astoria from who knows when until now.

“Well, that’s freakin’ awesome,” I gawked. “So, we just gotta find...”

“1845, the year Whiteloch gained independence. It’s when Queen Victoria gave my great-grandfather this land. Surely someone would’ve written about something that monumental?” Edward put back the volume we’d just flipped through and scanned the shelves for more.

I took the other side, a divide-and-conquer kind of situation. We felt invigorated by this step in the right direction.

“Why is there no...1845?!” he finally called out, and I scurried down the row to where he was holding his head in his hands, “I got back to 1846, and that’s it. It ends and goes to other types of anthologies and the like.”

Edward looked crushed, “I don’t get it.”

“Well, what if there’s something in the 1846 papers about it?”

“Considering the transfer of powers happened in November, do you really think they’d still be writing about it all those months later?”

Pulling down a book marked: PINE RIDGE POST - MARCH 1846, I shrugged, “What could it hurt?”

“My nostrils if I breathe in any more of this dust,” he waved a hand in front of his face.

“Listen, if you’re gonna be Oregonian, you’re gonna have to buck up a little. Smack some dirt on it and let’s find your proof of kingship.”

Edward sighed overdramatically at me. “Priiiiince, not king.”

I dropped the large volume on the table we’d been working from and flipped to the front page.

PINE RIDGE POST — INAUGURAL ISSUE.

“Heyyy, that’s cool!” I elbowed him, smiling, in hopes of getting him to perk up a bit. “Apparently, the *Pine Ridge Post* is almost as old as your country’s rule over our motherland.”

Edward rolled his eyes, “Hardy-har-har.”

I stuck a tongue out at him; at least I’d lightened the mood. It was getting seriously stuffy in here, and not just because we were in a library basement. I could feel Edward grow tense. Even his posture was failing the more stressed he became, shoulders inching up around his ears.

Luckily, the first few pages taught us one important fact: The reason that *Pine Ridge Post*’s archives started in March of 1846 was simple—the first printing press in Oregon was newly minted the month before, “Well, that explains why there are no records from 1845 newspapers. Guess they didn’t have any yet.”

“You people are literally hundreds of years behind the times; no wonder you haven’t learned about your king yet,” Edward shook his head and kept reading, “Wait just a moment!” Then the tone of his voice changed from annoyed to elated, “Look at this!”

Before us was an article enshrined in plastic that read:

March 29th, 1846

THE TIDES HAVE CHANGED: FORT ASTORIA’S FUTURE WITH THE WHITELOCH ISLES

My jaw fell slack. Had Edward been telling the truth all along?!

I leaned in closer, accidentally bumping shoulders with the man I now believed really was a prince. It all of a sudden felt wrong to even touch him by mistake, “Sorry,” I mumbled, reading as quickly as I could.

FORT ASTORIA got a right good surprise Wednesday morning when a man rolled through town with a decree from our monarch in England. The gentleman claimed that we here in the fine homestead we’ve come to know and love are no longer subjects of the crown. At least not that one.

MAYOR John Whitaker took the stage yesterday afternoon with the first Duke of Finnsgate to announce the transfer of powers from QUEEN VICTORIA, God Save Her, to King Alfred James Grafton Windermere of The Whiteloch Isles.

It seems the crown saw fit to gift our little parcel of land to the newly crowned King of The Whiteloch Isles as a gesture of goodwill in conjunction with their release from British rule. No longer under the thumb of the United Kingdom, we have been informed that as of NOVEMBER THE FIRST LAST YEAR, our home, formerly known as FORT ASTORIA, has thusly been renamed just Astoria.

Edward Lewis Windermere, Duke of Finnsgate, stood next to Mayor Whitaker and assured the fine people of Astoria that the King has no interest in interrupting the great success our town has built on fishing, shipbuilding, and the like. They intend to give us nothing but support in exchange for our taxes as we venture forth into the future.

“While we may now be Whitelochians,” the mayor is quoted as having said, “We’re Astorians first.” That elicited great cheers from the gathered crowd, “We’re the pioneers of our own destiny, as we’ve always been. Astorians must always keep their eyes on the horizon, sailing forward just as we journeyed forth across the Oregon Trail.”

Now that news has reached our town, Pine Ridge Post has been informed that the town elders will be hosting a dinner and parade for the Duke of Finnsgate in honor of King Alfred. All who wish to participate in the parade should gather on April 4th in Alderbrook Park at noon.

Clem Hitchens, 1846

The two of us sat in silence for a second, soaking in the information new to each of us. For Edward: how the news of Whiteloch's acquisition of Astoria was announced, months late apparently. For me: freakin' all of it.

"So..." my voice trailed off, eyes dashing around the paper, to his face, and back, "You uh, you really are a prince?!" I couldn't hide my astonishment.

"That is exactly what I have been telling you." He said without a hint of disdain in his voice, but he looked proud, "That's it then, right?" The light had returned to his eyes, "We can check this paper out with your mother's friend upstairs, and—what?"

I shook my head, "No can do. They'll never let these papers out of here. Remember what you said about your father's original copy of the proclamation—come to think of it, why didn't they just print that in the post?" I waved that off, "Anyway, Pearl will let us make copies here, but these babies stay inside. But do you really think a newspaper article is going to be enough? Shouldn't your great-great-grandfather or whoever the former Finnsgate was have brought some documentation with him?"

"Pretty sure that's the uncle I was named for. And you're right. There's got to be something more official here. It's not as though he could have just shown up in town with no proof of the proclamation and expected everyone to believe him."

I pressed my lips together, raising an eyebrow at him, "Sure, yeah. No one would ever do that..."

I was being sarcastic, again, but it seemed to be lost on him that he'd done exactly that. Just the same, emboldened by what we'd found, we got to work searching the stacks at

double the pace we'd used before.

But after hours of passing each other in the aisles, finding nothing of use or worth, we both looked dead tired.

"Maybe we should just make our copies of the *Post* and try again tomorrow?" I rubbed at my face, yawning. I didn't even know what time it was, but it felt like we'd been down there since Clem Hitchens wrote his article.

Edward, though tired looking, refused to give up. "You can leave if you need to," he called to me, "I'm gonna finish up."

I frowned and walked back to where his voice was coming from to find him sitting on the floor with boxes all around him.

"Why the long face, Your Majesty?" It was the first time I'd called him that or any kind of princely moniker without sarcasm.

"I just can't understand what is going on here," he waved me over to sit next to him.

Carefully avoiding the papers he had strewn about, I sat on the floor, my knee bumping his. "What don't you understand?"

He pointed at a piece of paper that looked burned. Bits were missing at what appeared to be random intervals, "Did Astoria experience a fire?"

I shook my head, "A fire? In a town as wet as ours?"

"Good point," he replied, "But then why are so many of these pages...literally burnt to a crisp?"

"Don't know," I shrugged, picking up another paper from the floor. "This one, too. What even are they?"

"Maritime and Infrastructure records. Some of them are ship manifests, but look at this one..." He held it out for me to take.

"It just looks like a request to rename—John Astor Elementary. Why would that matter?"

"If you look closely here, the proposed new name is all but erased. Not burned," he pointed to where it looked like it said

King...something, but the rest was rubbed out, “Could’ve been King...Alfred?”

“Yeah, but that never happened. We still have John Astor Elementary...”

“True,” he rubbed his forehead, frustrated again, “I’ll keep looking.”

I pushed up off the floor, genuinely feeling bad for the guy. “Me too...” I mumbled, trying to think of literally anything that would help.

With my head feeling like it was full of mothballs from the hours consuming dust instead of food, I wandered the aisles, my hands scanning where my eyes couldn’t focus. Row after row that I’d already visited, until I came to the back corner and saw **Treaties and Agreements**. I pulled it down off the shelf and sat with the cardboard box between my legs. Rifling through it, I found a document detailing the sale of Astoria from The Pacific Fur Company to The Northwest Company.

This looked promising. I dug further. Behind that were stacks of papers, all chronicling times when Astoria, though owned by England, was technically a part of Canada. You’d think if we were Canadian, our City Council might be a little nicer. But that wasn’t the point of this. We weren’t Canadian or even American, it seemed. We were—White...lochian? I couldn’t begin to process that fact. What would my historian mother think of this news? Thoughts of what she’d be doing if she were here to see or hear about this flooded my mind as I read on. She would’ve been fascinated by it.

I had never read so many old-timey documents in my life, but when I flipped to the next file folder, everything was out of order. Files marked DOCUMENT 12A followed ones marked 15CD. I couldn’t make out their filing system, but it became apparent that it had been rifled through and put back poorly.

“Hey Edward,” I called out, “Can you come here real quick?”

moments later, he appeared where I was, looking down at the mess I’d created, “You’re as bad as I am, Emma,” he said

with a chuckle, “What have you found?”

“Well,” I waved him over, “These are sales records between the Pacific Fur Company and the Northwest Company. Aaaaand, a few land deeds from Canada.”

“Good find,” he grabbed one paper, then another, scanning them, “Anything mentioning Whiteloch?”

I shook my head, “No, that’s the weird thing. Look,” I pointed to the top corner of one page, then another, “See how these are all numbered?”

“Mhm.”

“When I got to them, they were already out of order. Someone’s been in here. What would be the point of numbering them if they had no system of organization? They had to have every number at one point, but some are missing. I just can’t tell how many or which ones.”

“We should lay them all out,” he pushed up off the ground and reached out a hand to help me up.

“That’s what I was thinking,” I took his hand and let him pull me to standing, ending up a little closer to his chest than I’d intended, “Sorry,” I cleared my throat and shuffled off toward the table, carrying the pages in my hand, “Grab the rest of the box?”

“Yes,” Edward nodded, leaning down to pick it up, “Of course.”

It took us almost an hour to lay out every paper from the box in order—at least in what order we could manage with the missing pieces.

“So...” he glanced over the table, pointing from one page to another with his finger, “By my calculation, we’re missing just seven pages. Where the devil could they be? Is your library’s filing system just really that faulty?”

I shook my head, “No way. My *Mom* was the head librarian here. Remember?”

He nodded.

“She never would’ve let this fly if she’d known about it. And I can’t imagine anyone’s changed that system in the years she’s been gone. It’s basically just Pearl here.”

I could see the question in Edward’s eyes. Being a girl with a dead mother always brought two emotions up in people: curiosity and pity. Right now, Edward was expressing both without saying a word, “She died,” I shrugged, “Cancer.”

It was no shrugging matter, but what could I say anymore? I’d lived through years of having to explain to people why I grew up with just a kooky Dad who constantly smelled of fish.

He held up his hands and nodded as if to express *say no more* without uttering a word, “So then someone’s done this purposefully.”

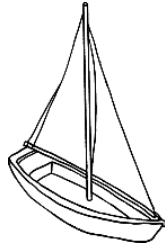
“Keating,” my tone was matter of fact.

“How can you be so sure?” Edward asked.

“Who else would benefit from this kind of cover up? He’s been mayor for longer than it legally makes sense in any American county. Not that we’re American, but everyone thinks we are!”

“But...what does he gain, other than getting to stay mayor for longer? And who the devil wants that?”

“That,” I put my hands down on the desk firmly, “is what we’ve got to figure out.”



Chapter 12

A New Plan – Emma

Thank God for Sarabeth. Edward and I spent the majority of the day in the basement of the City Hall Archive library and while it was a step in the right direction, it didn't provide me even a lick of time to pre-set the bar for that night's patrons.

Sarabeth had been at *Read Between the Vines* since noon, working the bookshop half of the store, and blessedly did all the pre-open work for the bar as well.

When I ran in out of the rain around 5pm, she was already serving a couple of people. I shook the water off my jacket and placed my umbrella in the holder with everyone else's before rushing behind the bar to thank her, "You're literally a god-send."

"And you sound like you've got the black lung," she pulled away from me, hearing the scratchy sound of my voice. "Are you sick?"

"No," I tucked my backpack under the counter and moved to wash my hands. "Edward and I have literally been in the Library basement all day. When I tell you that place is dustier than Pompeii... anyway, uh, I've got news."

"The two of you have realized your undying love for one another and are running off to raise tiny princes and princesses on the island of Whiteloch like the Hallmark movie of my dreams?"

It was like she'd been waiting to lay that one on me.

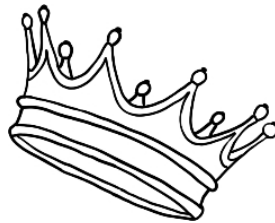
"Uh, no... I just wanted to tell you that Edward really is a prince. Or at least Whiteloch really does exist, and they do own Astoria," I said matter of factly.

“Oh, I know,” was her quick reply.

“I guess technically he could still be a grifter, but he’s got the same name as—what do you mean you know?”

Sarabeth leaned against the counter and asked the couple sitting closest to her if she could get them anything else. When they asked for the check, she moved back to the register, shrugging as she looked at me briefly, “I googled him.”

The realization hit me like a ton of bricks. It was almost *too* obvious. “Why didn’t I think of that?” I asked aloud, more to myself than my best friend who, though ditzy at times, was certainly one-up on me in the intelligence area at the moment.



Lost in Astoria – Edward

Edward spent the evening walking in circles. Not in the literal sense, but that’s how it felt as he found himself circling the same areas of Astoria near his hotel. He was trying to clear his head, but nothing made sense. Why had someone attempted to remove all mention of Whiteloch and his family from Astoria’s history? Furthermore, should he call his father and tell him, or would the king end up thinking he was screwing up again?

It got dark early in this place, especially in the cold month of November. Edward looked down at his rain dampened clothes, knowing he had to get in and out of them. Mikey was getting himself ready for an early start on his boat the following day, so Edward didn’t want to bother him. Rather than call his only Astorian friend, he walked over to Moonbeam Mugs, figuring he’d grab himself a bite to eat and at least dry off.

As fate would have it, he arrived to find a closed sign on the door. Of course, a coffee shop/cafe would close before 8 pm in a town like this. He rolled his eyes to himself, annoyed that he hadn’t thought to ask Mikey for a dinner

recommendation. He stepped under the edge of the building to shield himself from the rain, putting his umbrella down next to himself to free his hands up to grab his cell phone and do what everyone else his age would do in this situation—just search for a place to eat rather than relying on Mikey’s word for everything. Yelp it; that’s what 30 year olds who weren’t silver spoon fed did, right?

He quickly typed out Best Dinner in Astoria Oregon. Page after page of options appeared on the tiny screen in front of him:

Moonbeam Mugs — liars, they closed before dinner time.

Surf’n Sip - Beer and Fish, fine. Not his favorite, but a solid option.

King George Brewery — How dare they? King *George*?! He skipped his one on principle.

Read Between the Vines — Of course.

He forgot that Emma’s bookstore had a bar in that back and served small bites. It wasn’t what he’d had in mind when he set out to find dinner, but at least there would be familiar faces and he could put the wandering alone aside for the night.

Just as he reached down to pick up the umbrella he’d set open beside him, the wind picked up further and carried it off, bouncing off the side of the building he was standing next to and flying off into the dark night sky.

“...Shit,” he mumbled to himself and took a deep breath. *Great*. Just great.

Edward was not having a day befitting a prince of anywhere. He could call Mikey for a ride, but that felt even worse than calling him just for dinner recommendations. He pressed himself against the building a bit more and googled “Astoria Taxi.”

Despite being *IN* Astoria Oregon in the year 2023 with all the technological advances that brought with it, his phone showed him results for taxis in Astoria, Queens—in New York City.

“What the devil would that help here. Don’t cell phone towers know where I am?!” he grumbled, calling out to no one as he stood alone on a barely lit street, and then, forcing himself to remain calm, refined the search to Astoria, OREGON. All caps, to make a point, of course.

“It’ll be about 20 minutes,” the smoker’s voice on the other side of the line replied when he asked for a ride.

“Twenty minutes to get a cab?!” Edward shocked himself by raising his voice. “Sorry, so sorry. No, never mind.” He quickly hung up, embarrassed by his outburst, but the whole walk to Emma’s bar Read Between the Vines was just 12 minutes. Why would he stand here in the downpour longer than that?

With his cell phone firmly back in his pocket, a weak attempt to keep it dry, he ran out into the rain.

Google was wrong—if you were an in shape prince who decided to run the distance between Moonbeam Mugs and Read Between the Vines it was only about 9 minutes.

Edward threw open the door, eager to get dry. The bar was toward the back, past the books, and he could see people gathered at tables, a server he didn’t know bringing them food and drinks, while couples cuddled and groups played board games. A few people choosing to spend the night alone sat on couches or oversized comfy chairs with a book in one hand and wine in the other. Everyone looked comfy, and everyone looked dry.

As he approached one of two empty seats at the bar, he was greeted by Sarabeth’s warm smile. “You look like you could use a drink, Your Highness,” she said motioning to his dripping attire. “What happened to you anyway?”

“Umbrella disaster,” he slid onto the bar stool, “And yes, thank you, a glass of something would be lovely.”

“How about some mulled wine to warm you up while you dry off and then we’ll get you something stronger for, uh, the rest?”

He nodded and reached forward to wrap his hands around

the warm cup, bringing it to his lips for a small sip, making a face that betrayed his distaste for it. He took another sip anyway, eager to warm up. “Is Emma here?” He hadn’t seen her yet. He assumed she worked her own business often, but then again, he had no idea how a place like this worked. Plenty of his boyhood friends had grown up to be restaurateurs, and more than half of them never stepped foot in their own establishments except on special occasions and red-carpet-style events. Still, even if Emma had the funds to be that disconnected, he doubted she would.

“Mhm,” Sarabeth pointed to where Emma stood by an oversized couch situated behind a long, low table. On the couch were two couples and a whole host of wine tasting glasses on the table, “She’s doin’ her thing.”

“People love Pinot because it pairs with...so much,” Emma laughed, pouring a bit into each person’s glass. “We’re talking olives, cheeses, bread, *PIZZA*.”

The group gave a quiet cheer at the mention of pizza.

“But also,” she wiped the side of the bottleneck where a bit had dripped, “meat, gamier kind of stuff. It’s acidic, but easy drinking. Not to mention it’s basically the state wine of Oregon!”

Emma spoke to those customers in a way that told everyone around that they were tourists, but it was sweet—cute even. Edward finished off his hot beverage while he waited for Emma to end the wine tasting extravaganza to his right.

“Hey, Sarabeth?” he asked, waving her over. “Could I try one of those Pinot Noir wines she mentioned were so famous in Oregon?”

“Which one?” Sarabeth pointed to the chalkboard sign above her that read: OUR LOCAL FAVORITE PINOTS!

There were five listed there. “Christ,” he chuckled, “Emma’s favorite, or your favorite. I don’t care. Something strong.”

“Pinot is an accessible drinking wine,” Emma appeared

behind the counter without warning and replied, “It’s not strong, but it’ll go down easy.”

“I’ve literally never heard anyone use the word *accessible* with wine before, but whatever, I’ll take it.”

“This one’s on the house,” she said as she poured him a glass that looked too full to be regulation sized. “How you feelin’ after today?” When Emma had left Edward earlier that evening he looked dejected and now he looked like a drowned rat, though even the rain couldn’t stop that head of hair from looking good. She was ashamed to admit, even inwardly, that the slight swoop it always had made her knees a little weak.

“Considering that I got caught umbrella-less in a monsoon on my way here, I could certainly be better,” he said bitterly.

Emma laughed, “Monsoon? It’s sprinkling.”

“Sprinkling!?” Edward almost spit the wine out mid sip, catching himself, “Do you people ever see sunshine here? After spending a week here, I’m starting to believe seasonal depression isn’t just for Instagram memes.”

“Aren’t you from a British Isle?” Sarabeth asked, “Doesn’t it rain a ton in all those places too?”

The gasp that left Edward’s lips was audible and made a few people in the nearby bar seats turn to look at him. He excused himself to them and then lowered his voice in hopes that they wouldn’t listen as he replied to the girls. “Whiteloch is *not* a British isle, thank you very much. That said, yes, it does rain quite a bit on our island. *However*,” he shrugged, emphasizing the last word a bit dramatically, “I haven’t spent much time there save for holidays, to be honest.”

They looked confused, so he added clarification, counting scenarios that kept him away from home on each finger, “Boarding school in France early on, a gap year in Italy, University in Marseilles. I haven’t spent much time getting caught in the rain,” he held up his glass by way of air-cheersing them and took a large gulp.

“Must be nice,” Sarabeth went back to serving a few people at the end of the bar, which gave Emma the opening to

slide in.

“So hey, I was thinking. How do you feel about helping me with next week’s campaign so I can get on the City Council?”

“I thought you gave up on that dream?” Edward asked, referring to a few days before when Sarabeth had ragged on her friend for all but dropping out of the race.

“Well, I have had...whatever, but we need to get to more closed records, right?” she leaned in closer, lowering her voice. “If I get on the City Council, I’ll have access to the non-public documents and maybe we’ll find what we need to prove you’re telling the truth. To prove your family really does own Astoria.”

“Honestly, we’ll all be better off,” Sarabeth added, causing Emma to jump, not knowing her friend was listening.

“Jesus, do you have bat hearing or something?” Emma asked.

“All I’m saying is we’d be better off if someone took over from Keating, and why not Prince Edward,” Sarabeth motioned to him, “He’s handsome, well-dressed, and polite.”

“All the markers of a great ruler!” Emma said, her usual sarcasm slipping out, “Sorry, I mean, you probably will be great. In any event, you can’t be worse than Keating, so I’m willing to throw my support behind you.”

“The baaaar is in hellllllllllll,” Sarabeth wiped a rag along the counter, slowly drawing herself away from them to head to the kitchen briefly.

“With compliments like these, how could one possibly decline?” Edward was still in a palpably grumpy mood.

“Oh, come on,” Emma patted his hand with a smile, “We’re kidding, and we’ve got to at least try, right? There has to be some kind of record of...taxes? Are you all collecting taxes from us? I’ve never seen it on my tax docu—HEY, wait a minute,” Emma’s jaw dropped open, “Do I not have to pay the IRS and I’ve been doing business wrong this whole time because I can just financially freeload off a country in the

European Union—wait are we in the European Union?”

Edward held up two hands, motioning for Emma to calm down. “That is quite enough. I have no idea what you must pay in taxes, as I have less to do with Whiteloch’s tax system than you do with skinning a pig, but yes, we’re in the European Union.”

“Ew,” Sarabeth recoiled at his comparison. “Did you have to go there?”

“*Regardless.* What could I, a Whitelochian Prince, possibly do to convince a town full of people who think they’re American to vote a woman who owns a bookstore bar combo into the City Council?” Edward said to mentally corral both women.

“Hey,” Emma sneered a little, not liking the tone he took when describing her shop, “Be nice.”

“You’re one to talk,” he retorted.

“Fair,” she pointed right at him, caught. “But seriously. SB’s right. You *are* charming. People like looking at you and want to impress you,” she said. She didn’t want to admit that she was one of those people. Wait, did she want to look at him and impress him? The thoughts swirled in her mind as she continued talking so that she couldn’t fall into a thinking trap, “so if you tell them you’re voting for me, maybe they will, too? We could...” her voice trailed off, trying to come up with something—*anything*, “Hand out fliers at the Wishing Boats on Saturday!”

That was her brilliant idea to win everyone over? He didn’t look convinced.

“Host...a fundraiser here?” Edward looked confused.

“With what time?” Sarabeth asked, causing them both to jump slightly at her sudden reappearance.

“You’ve *got* to stop doing that,” Edward said, using a cocktail napkin to wipe up the bit of wine he spilled when she’d surprised them.

“Sorry, all I’m saying is since the election is *Tuesday*, a

fund raiser seems like a moot point. Where would the money go...to driving people to the election?"

"Say—that's not a terrible idea!" Emma looked excited now. "The majority of Astoria's population is elderly, so what if we did find a way to drive them to the polls? Didn't one of the ride share companies do that for the last presidential election?"

"While we're on the topic of ride share, can you explain to me why it's impossible to get a taxi in this town?" Edward pointed to his still wet clothes, "No umbrella and no taxi isn't exactly a winning combination. Astoria isn't *that* small."

"And yet we still live in the stone age," Sarabeth rolled her eyes, "Keating and the City Council have blocked all ride share services at every turn. They claim it takes business away from locals, buuuut..."

"But the locals would be getting more business in places like mine, my Dad's, or even just people staying at a hotel who want to go out to dinner and drinks and not drive drunk going home if they had more options," Emma added.

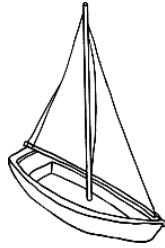
"A lot of us would be a lot less damp, too," Edward finished for the girls.

"Focus!" Emma snapped her fingers a few times, drawing both Sarabeth and Edward back to the matter at hand. "Are you two in? Do you think we can do this?"

"We can certainly *try*," Edward answered, "But I think it's going to take a lot more than just us."

"So we ask around?" Emma offered, not really sounding convinced even at her own suggestion.

"Oh," Edward nodded with a wide grin. "I know a guy."



Chapter 13

Fliering – Emma

“Do YOU think it would make a difference in the election if we offered rides to the elderly?” I asked my Dad the next morning over coffee in his kitchen.

“Who you callin’ elderly?” He asked with a twinkle in his eye that let me know he was joking.

“Dad,” I stuck my tongue out at him and took a sip of the mediocre brew he’d made for us to share, “I’m serious. I’m trying here. If the priiiince,” I said with a roll of my eyes, “really can turn things around for us, I owe it to everyone to try to get in there and find out what’s really going on. And to make sure he really does find his footing here in Astoria.”

My father was moving slower these days, but that didn’t mean he took no for an answer when I told him he didn’t have to make me breakfast. Always keen to feed me, the man who raised me was milling about, gathering supplies to make me eggs and bacon—no complaints from me.

“I suppose,” he said, overhand tossing the eggshells into the garbage, thrilled as he made each shot, “Someone’s gotta pay attention to us old folk. If you did, they’d probably be so thrilled to see your pretty face that they’d vote for you whether they like your platform or not.”

“The bar is low, is what you’re saying.” Maybe I was channeling Sarabeth with that one.

“What I’m saying,” he pulled back as the bacon hit the hot pan with a hiss, “is that you’ll probably feel better if you give it your all. Regardless of the outcome you can say you gave it the good ol’ college try.”

I nodded, “Next question.”

“Shoot.”

“Got an ideas for how we can get a bunch of people to the polls with just Sarabeth, Mikey, and me driving? Am I even legally allowed to drive people to the polls or is that considered coercion or something?”

“That I don’t know,” Dad said slowly, “but I bet the boys down at the dock would help you do a little of the transportation if they knew you were in it to save the pier.”

“Could you talk to them for us?” I sat up straighter. Now we were getting somewhere, “That’s such a good idea, Dad.”

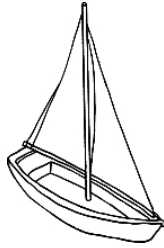
“I coooould,” Dad scratched at the scruff on his cheek before flipping over the eggs in the pan, “But the truth is, it’d probably be better coming from Mikey. Since he works with them more directly, I’d reckon they’ll listen to whatever he says. He’s like a father figure to ‘em.”

“Yeah, Edward is supposed to see Mikey today anyway, maybe he’ll ask him.”

“Edward,” Dad said pointedly, “You and the prince are on a first name basis now?”

Despite myself, I blushed slightly, looking down at the plate he’d just slid across the counter to me. “I mean, yes? Why are you even asking? What does it matter?”

Dad held his hands up in front of himself, surrendering, “Nooo reason at all. It’s none of my business who my daughter goes gallivanting around town with, I suppose.”



Chapter 14

At Pine Ridge Post – Emma

I was on my way to visit the *Pine Ridge Post* office and get to the bottom of what happened to the article of support in my favor when my phone rang.

“Hey girl heyyy,” I answered the call marked Sarabeth.

“You should’ve seen him, Emma! He was bloody brilliant.”

“Who was? And who is this?” I asked aloud into my car, the phone connected to the speakers all around me. I should’ve known it was Edward based on the dreamy accent, but what was he doing with SB’s phone?

“Mikey!” He sounded elated. “And it’s *Edward*, obviously. We just left the dock and headed for the bar to grab a bite. You’ll have more than enough help offering rides to the people of Astoria. It was like a captain speaking to his men. Those fishermen love the ol’ chap.” I could hear a slapping sound through the phone, as though Edward gave Mikey a loud clap on the back.

“It’s the least I could do for Your Highness,” Mikey’s voice was muffled compared to Edward’s.

“Not for me, Mikey. For all of us,” Edward replied to him, and then brought his attention back to me. “When will you be back?”

“Just pulling into the parking lot at the *Post*, why?”

“Plenty of planning to do! We’ll get started and meet you at Vines when you’re finished?”

“Right-o,” I replied, putting on my best fake British accent.

“Ohhh, a proper lady, are we?” Edward joked. “We’ll get fliers printed in the meantime. See you soon.”

The office of *Pine Ridge Post* was practically wallpapered with framed copies of special front page articles, journalistic awards, and photos. I took a few laps around while waiting for my contact there, wondering why an article as important as the one Edward and I found in the archives wasn’t hanging among these historical pieces.

“Emma Prescott?”

“Hi, yes,” I turned around to see a young-ish man in a sweater vest staring back at me through black-rimmed glasses. “Thank you for meeting with me, Jason.”

“Pleasure,” he reached a hand out to shake mine and guided me back to his desk.

The young journalist didn’t have his own office causing him to lower his voice as he sat down and offered me the chair across the desk from him, “Emma, I’m so sorry that we were unable to endorse you publicly. Believe me when I tell you that article getting killed hurt me as much as it did you.”

Knowing I needed to be diplomatic about this, I gave him a forced smile before replying, “Yes, I was sorry, too. And, can you remind me why that was, exactly? We had an interview all lined up, you’d even scheduled a photographer and then... poof.”

Jason and I weren’t friends. We’d never even met before today, “And I get it, stuff changes, but if I remember correctly, you approached me for the piece.” I added at the last second, sounding a bit more strident than I’d intended.

“If I’d had it my way,” he leaned in closer, his voice even quieter than it had been moments before, “We would’ve run the piece, but it was stopped way above my pay grade. Way above.”

“Is that kind of suppression even legal?” I asked.

“Please, Miss Prescott, lower your voice.”

He looked nervous. “Why?” I glanced around. Sure, there were others in the office, but none seemed to be paying attention to us. Still, I quieted down, “I’m serious. Is it legal to suppress an article, especially one about an election?”

“Look,” he pulled his chair in closer to his desk, tapping a pen nervously against his notepad. “I like what you’re trying to do. That’s why I pitched the piece; honestly I don’t know why it got pulled. When I brought the profile on you to my editor he was thrilled. You’re young, new blood in the City Council; it was a great write-up! But...”

He paused.

“...But...?” I encouraged him to continue.

“But people well above him put the kibosh on it.”

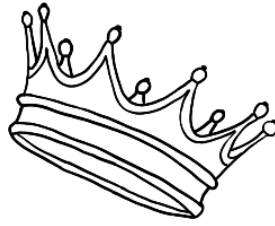
“And you really have *no* idea why? You’re a journalist. You investigate things for a living, and you’re telling me you just let this one go?” I didn’t buy it.

He looked around, seemingly checking that no one was looking or listening, “You didn’t hear it from me, but someone whose name may or may not begin with K may or may not have influencing ownership here at the *Post*.”

I could feel the heat rising in my cheeks, and I wasn’t blushing, “Are you fu—” I pressed my lips into a tight line to quiet myself and leaned forward, whispering back to him, “Are you telling me that Vernon Keating owns this newspaper?”

Jason held his hands up to show innocence, “I can neither confirm nor deny if Mayor Keating is a partial owner here at the *Post*,” then his words sped up as he added the rest, “But if you list me as a source for where you got this information I’ll deny it until the day I die. Miss Prescott, I don’t want to lose my job. This is the only paper in town and I am the sole provider for my mother.”

“Yeah?” I stood up from his desk. “Well, thank you for the non-information, and tell your mother if she needs a ride to the polls on Tuesday, we’re offering.”



After Her Meeting – Edward

The girls were visibly upset, spitting strings of “I KNEW IT!” and “I TOLD YOU SOs” back and forth.

Edward’s eyes bounced back and forth between them like he was watching a tennis match. How could two women who were on the same side of an impending battle sound like they were arguing with one another? His head was spinning by the time he put a hand up to stop them, “Brilliant. Now that we’ve established that you both knew your mayor was a corrupt so-and-so that should be ousted from his post...what will we do about it?”

“I have to get elected,” Emma said with a matter-of-fact nod.

“We have to get moving,” Sarabeth agreed. “Maybe we should see if Janie and Bree are available to work the store for the next few days?”

“Who the devil are Janie and Bree?” Edward asked, having never heard these names before.

“Part-time folks we call on when one of us is out of town or whatever. They’re sweet. College students,” Emma explained. “You’re right. If we’re both here, that’s less hands-on deck.”

“Speaking of deck,” Sarabeth broke in, “we need to come up with an official plan for the fishermen and how we’re going to assign them to each person who needs a lift.”

“We have to get the sign-ups first.”

“The Wishing Boats are tomorrow—are we going to be ready for this?” Edward asked, looking nervous about the whole thing, his eyes stuck on Emma.

“Don’t have a choice,” Emma shrugged. “I say we set up a

table where people can either sign up for a ride or donate to pay for the gas we'll inevitably need for the fishermen's tanks."

Edward waved that off, "I'll pay for their gas. Hell, I'll pay for their time, too." Throwing money at a problem wasn't his best look, but considering how useless he'd felt recently, it was better to do something than nothing.

"But it's my—"

"Emma," Sarabeth grabbed her hand, "let him pay for it," she said through gritted teeth. "He's *helping*."

"Let me help," Edward added. "It's the least I can do for the moment."

"Okay," Emma gave in. "Does anyone know where Mikey is?"

"Out fishing, I'd assume," Sarabeth shrugged. "Why?"

"It's just that he's our bridge to the fishermen; we need him to communicate with them, basically to get them all lined up," Emma said.

"I'll call him," Edward said.

"Wait a second," Emma held up her hand to stop everyone from continuing, "Is it even legal for Edward to contribute that amount of money to my campaign? I haven't really been raising money, so I'm not even sure what the limits are..."

Sarabeth waved her off. "Oh it's fine, trust me."

Emma raised an eyebrow back at her friend. "Trust me? That's what you're going with?"

"There is no limit in the state of Oregon, not that we're beholden to their laws anyway now that we know we're not even freakin' American. Or Oregonian for that matter!"

Edward raised a hand like he was a boy still in school.

"Yes?" Sarabeth pointed at him as though she were the teacher calling on a pupil.

"How do you know what the campaign limits are in

Oregon? That doesn't exactly seem like something that would be common knowledge."

Sarabeth shrugged. "Google."

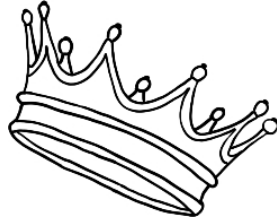
Emma smacked her forehead. "Is that your answer for everything, SB?"

"Yes," Sarabeth said matter-of-factly. "I don't know why you people don't use it more. Google can answer any question."

"Next, I suppose you're gonna say that the world isn't flat?"

Sarabeth smirked, "I've got a bridge to sell you in Brooklyn."

Edward opened his mouth to say something and decided on, "Never mind. I'm gonna go call Mikey."



Chapter 15

The Set Up – Emma

“Alrighty here kids, what’s the game plan?” Mikey asked, stepping up to the tables where I’d been setting up with Sarabeth for the last hour.

“The name of the game is get sign-ups for you guys to drive people to the polls,” I nodded, smiling at him. “I hope they know how much of a help they’re being.”

“You’ll tell ‘em,” Mikey shrugged, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “You girls know where the prince went?”

Sarabeth shook her head. “We assumed he was with you.”

The man shook his head. “Nope. Saw him down at the dock earlier when I was talkin’ to the guys after today’s run, but haven’t seen him since.”

“Huh,” I looked around, wondering where he’d gone. This was his event, after all. Just because I’d bogarted it for my campaign didn’t mean Sarabeth, Mikey, and I could man the whole thing.

“In any event,” Mikey went on, “I’ve gotta go check on the wife before she closes up Moonbeam for the evening. See you ladies in a bit?”

“See ya, Mikey,” we waved him off with a smile.

As dusk approached, the sky started to turn pink, and people appeared in droves.

“Emma Prescott for City Council,” I could hear Sarabeth calling to people from nearby. “Head on over and sign up for a free ride to the polls!” She’d tell each person as they passed her by. A few walked in the direction of the table. Most kept

going right on by.

Typical.

We'd set up a table near the edge of the water, but not so close that it would obstruct the festivities and annoy everyone.

If you'd asked me a month ago if anyone in Astoria, Oregon, would show up for a town-wide wish making celebration, I'd have told you I had a magic lamp to sell ya. Astorians had lost their *joie de vivre* so long ago that it felt like no one did anything but work or look for work anymore. But, after seeing the sea of smiles at the Umbrella Parade, I was almost positive this was going to be a hit. But...where was Edward? Mikey had made it back from Moonbeam just a bit ago, but he hadn't heard from our fearless leader, either.

"Still goin' straight to voicemail," he'd told us.

Whatever, I couldn't waste time wondering where the Prince of Oregon was when I had to focus on getting people signed up.

"Why?" A grumpy voice in Sarabeth's direction shook me from my thoughts. A much older man was standing almost too near her as he repeated his question a little louder, pointing his cane in her direction, "Why? Why should we vote some little girl into the City Council? That's a *man's* job."

Standing her ground, Sarabeth straightened her shoulders and stood tall. "First of all, sir, that's an extremely sexist and patriarchal point of view. Emma is a pillar of the community, just like her parents before her, and there have been plenty of women on the City Council before her! She's gonna make real, positive change for Astoria. Don't you want to see things improve here?"

The man glared at her. "Just because there've been females on the City Council before don't mean it should continue. And Astoria is just fine the way it is. We don't need you left wing girls with your fake news and blue nails ruining the place."

"Excuse me, sir, but—"

He cut Sarabeth off quickly. "You know what I heard

about her?”

I couldn't let this go on. There was no reason my best friend should be berated on my account. “Tell me.” I pointed to myself as I approached them, “What have you heard about me?”

“You the Prescott kid?” He asked, sounding none too pleased to see me.

“Emma Prescott,” I reached out a hand to him, but he didn't reach back so I dropped it. “Please, I'm all ears. Tell me what you've heard and give me the opportunity to defend myself, at least.”

“I heard that since you opened that book hang out or whatever that wine vine place is that all the businesses in town are seein' less customers. Jimmy Peterson had a thriving bar down on the pier, and now he barely gets a few customers a day. You can't just go stealin' business from others!”

This line of thinking shocked me. “Well,” I said to compose myself and not go off on the misguided older man. “First of all, I didn't steal anything from Mr. Peterson as he does not own his customers. They all have free will to frequent whatever businesses they see fit.”

“Don't patronize me, young lady. You know darn well I didn't mean that he owned them folk, but they were regulars there and now they're just seen readin' books and sippin' overpriced wine at your bougie establishment. Astoria don't need it, and we don't need you givin' Mayor Keating a hard time.”

Now I could see where this had come from. “No, of course,” I nodded, knowing this wasn't a battle I was going to win.

Fighting with an older member of the community in the middle of what was meant to be a fun event wasn't a good look and certainly wouldn't win me any supporters. So, instead, I smiled at him, “Mister...?” I tilted my head by way of asking for his name.

“Lawson. James Lawson.”

“Mister Lawson,” I nodded. “I completely understand that you’re not interested in voting me into the City Council in the election this week, but we would still love to offer you a ride to the polls should you need it.”

A small crowd had gathered upon hearing his raised voice and I knew this was an opportunity to raise awareness for our project without having to shout at each passerby. The nosy Nellies of the town were already listening; this was my shot. Or at least *a* shot.

“Come again?” Mr. Lawson asked me.

“My campaign is offering free rides to the polls on Tuesday for anyone who may not have another means of getting there. Voting is a right, not a privilege, and whether someone intends to vote for me or not, I believe their voice should be heard.”

I could hear the mumbles of the crowd around me. I had their attention, so I continued, “However,” I looked out at the people now, rather than focusing my attention solely on the man who was already a lost cause, “Should I be voted in as the City Council member for the 3rd District of Astoria, I will make sure that the concerns of all Astorians are heard and addressed. We’ve all been ignored for too long and everyone’s business is suffering, right, Mister Lawson?”

“Huh?” He looked confused now.

With the growing throng around us, I had to take a chance, no matter how risky. So I wrapped my arm around the old man’s shoulders and used him as my example, “You all heard Mister Lawson here, right?”

I paused for a moment and waited for a few people to murmur their yeses, “Astorian businesses are suffering. You all know my father Rick down at Prescott’s Pacific.” Of course they did. “He and the other pier businesses have been suffering at the hands of Keating at the City Council. They won’t fix things; that much has been made clear. But I will. Or, at least, I promise to try.”

If I’d been in a Hallmark film like the one Sarabeth had

dreamed up for me, this would've been the moment when the crowd cheered and I knew I could take on the world! We'd step forward in glory to the polls and I'd certainly take control of the situation at hand.

But, this wasn't a movie. And there was no momentous cheer.

"What do you plan to do?" was the only discernible sound from the group around us.

Dropping my arm from Mister Lawson's shoulders, I addressed the on lookers once again, "I..." I had to swallow and compose myself to answer a question I hadn't planned for. "Truthfully...I don't know," I sighed, wanting to be honest with the people around me. "The first thing I need to do is get in there and really assess the situation."

"How's that gonna help us regular folk?" Another voice asked.

"Yeah!" someone else shouted, "What are we supposed to do while we wait for you to figure it out."

"Keating and those in power have been keeping information from us. All of us. Why isn't the money there to fix the pier? We pay taxes like every other city, don't we? And more importantly, why aren't the businesses and people of Astoria a priority to them? It's not like they're using that money to fix roads or support our school system."

"YEAH!!" Finally, there was a cheer, but it came from one: Sarabeth O'Connor.

I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing at my good-natured best friend.

"And if there's no money in the town then how come Keating could buy his way into partially owning *Pine Ridge Post*?!" she shouted out. "It's not like owning a whole freakin' newspaper is cheap. AND it means he's swaying you sheeples without your knowledge."

Crap. Now, she'd gone off the rails and insulted them.

"SB," I made a slicing motion across my throat in an

attempt to stop her.

“What?!” she shrugged, “The people deserve the truth, don’t they?”

“What these young ladies are trying to say,” Mikey pushed through the throng and stood between us at that moment, saving me from having to come up with something to say, “is that you’re gonna learn a whole lot more in the coming days, but we need to stick together as Astorians. Now,” he smiled at his neighbors, “Let’s all go make some wishes and we’ll worrying about Keating later, how’s that?”

“Ugh, Mikey, seriously?” Sarabeth looked annoyed. We’d lost the crowd.

“What?” He asked.

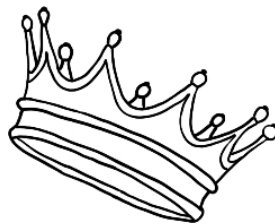
“We *had* this,” she grumbled, walking back to stand behind my table as the swarm dissipated, the people now heading toward the waterfront.

“It was not going well, sugar bean,” he shook his head, “but that doesn’t mean I don’t believe in you, or in Emma, or in gettin’ her elected so we can turn things around with Prince Edward.”

“Where is he, anyway?”

“That I don’t know.”

WHY was that always Mikey’s reply?



The Wishing Boats – Edward

People were lined up at the water’s edge for what felt like miles in either direction, though Edward knew that was an exaggeration—his mind playing tricks on him as he watched them from afar. How many people came to the Whitelochian Wishing Boats events? Now that he thought of it, he’d never really considered the number; he just assumed everyone

showed up with their boats and wishes in tow—right?

From where he stood on the bow of one of the fishing boats, he could see that everyone had indeed brought a little boat with them, some people two. He couldn't hear the crowd over the music playing all around him, but he could see smiles; they all looked excited. It made *him* feel excited.

“You ready, man?” one of the younger fishermen named Jonah asked him.

After Mikey left the dock earlier that afternoon, Edward had stayed to speak to the gentlemen who worked there.

“How much would it cost to play a bit of music from speakers on a few of your boats out in the harbor for the Wishing Boats celebration?” he'd asked once Mikey was out of earshot.

“Wishing Boats?” two guys asked at the same time, pulling at the ropes that tied their vessels to the dockside.

Ever surprised that a town with this much water *didn't* have such a celebration, Edward explained what the Wishing Boats were to the fishermen. Being the salty sea type that spent more time on boats than off—they loved it.

“The kids come out and make boat wishes? That's cute as fuck.”

“Dude,” one guy smacked the other who'd just cursed, “you can't just drop an F-bomb in front of actual royalty.”

Edward laughed quietly under his breath and waved it off, “I assure you it's quite alright. Being a prince does not mean I've not heard or used that kind of language,” he gave the guys a wink to let them know they were more than off the hook on that front, “Now, listen, I'll pay you for your time, but I need one more favor beyond providing the music for the festivities.”

“Lay it on me,” the one who'd sworn said.

“I need to be able to make a speech from one of the boats, but I need to be heard by the people on land, just like the music.”

“No problem, boss,” said the other, “We got a pretty good sound system.”

This is how Edward found himself with a microphone in hand, more nervous than he expected to be as he tapped on it to make sure it was on. The machine made the iconic squeaking sound that even to Edward sounded like it came from an 80s movie rather than this moment in the present day, “Good evening, Astoria!” He called out and was met with wild cheers from everyone on shore, “Thank you all for coming to the first Annual Astorian Wishing Boats Celebration. If you were with us for the Umbrella Parade earlier this week, you know how important traditions and gatherings are to the people of Whiteloch.”

People cheered. People *cheered*—for *him*. He kept his face even, not showing the surprise he was feeling. If only there were a way to bottle this, record this, something to convey it to his parents back home.

Emma and Sarabeth were late getting to the water’s edge, but arrived at the grassy knoll just in time to catch the second string of Edward’s oration.

“When I arrived in your fine town a mere week ago, I had no idea what obstacles you were facing or what barriers I would face in trying to take my place as your rightful ruler.”

The crowd began to mumble at that. Some of the people there had never seen this man before. Some had never heard of him. Others still had heard tell of the “prince” who’d come to Astoria, but most didn’t believe he was *their* prince, even if they did believe he was *a* prince.

“Please,” Edward raised a hand to quiet the people. “If I could have just one more moment of your time, then we’ll all celebrate together.”

Whether it was his fancy British accent or his princely charm didn’t really matter—most of the people talking did quiet down to listen again.

“In Whiteloch, the Wishing Boats set the aspirations for the remainder of our year. As the sun sets over the harbor here

in Astoria, the wishes you've placed aboard each tiny boat will float out to sea. As the moon rises, she'll shine down with all her stars and grant the wishes of only those with the truest of hearts and purest of intentions."

Emma was impressed. He had the good sense to use phrasing like *our year* and *truest of hearts* to draw people in. Of course, looking like he'd just rolled in off a GQ magazine photoshoot probably swayed a lot of them, but he was holding their attention if nothing else.

"In just a moment, we'll place our boats in the water and wish together, but before we do I'd like to point you all in the direction of a small table in the northeast corner of this very park."

The mumbling started again.

He held up a hand to stop them once more, "Please, just one more moment. Once you've made your wish, consider visiting Miss Emma Prescott at the table in the back. There you can learn about her campaign for City Council Woman of the 3rd District of Astoria."

"STAY IN YOUR LANE!" A shout came from the back of the crowd.

"You stay in your lane!" Another anonymous voice replied.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the fishermen of Astoria's harbor here have joined forces with Miss Prescott to offer a ride to the polls to anyone who might find themselves in need on Tuesday of this coming week. Whether you intend to vote for her or not, and I certainly hope you do, a ride will be provided no questions asked."

Back on shore, Emma looked surprised. Prince Edward had taken time away from an event that meant a great deal to him to talk about her...and her campaign. Sure, it would also benefit him in the end; she had to remind herself of that as she stood there with a tiny paper boat in her hands.

Emma had decided to write her wishes, hopes, and dreams, not just for this year but the years beyond on a piece

of paper and looked up how to origami it into a boat. With her wishes tucked inside, she joined everyone around in placing their boats into the water.

“On the count of three, we push!” she was shaken from her daze to hear Edward directing the crowd.

Emma had missed whatever instructions came before that, all caught up in her head.

“Come on, Emma,” Sarabeth grabbed her arm and dragged her down to the water. “You’re not gonna make me miss this chance to wish for my own prince.”

Emma raised an eyebrow at her. “I don’t think that’s how—what do you mean, your own prince?”

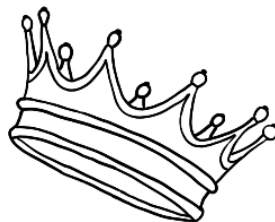
“Do you think Edward has a brother?” she asked in return.

“Uh, yeah,” Emma said leaning down to place her boat in the water. “I think he’s got two; why do you ask?”

“Because if Edward keeps living here, maybe one of them will come visit and we can fall in love and live happily ever after,” Sarabeth said as though it were completely obvious.

“Oh, of course.” Emma tried not to laugh, unable to tell if her friend was serious or not.

When the girls looked up from their boats, they could see Edward leaning down into the water from the actual boat he was standing on. He held onto the edge and carefully placed a wooden boat into the water, pushing it out away from himself. Emma couldn’t help but wonder what his wish might have been.



After the Wishing Boats – Edward

“Prince Edward!” Sarabeth called out, using her whole arm to wave to him as though he were miles away rather than a few feet from the table they were cleaning up. “What an

amazing event,” she took that moment to applaud. Alone. Standing right there with Emma and Mikey, who hadn’t gotten the memo.

Edward approached and smiled, nodding at her, “Thank you so much, Sarabeth. Did you all get to make your wishes, or were you stuck here at the table the whole time?”

“Wouldn’t’a missed it for the world, Your Majesty,” Mikey patted him on the back. “That was a right good speech you gave.”

“Thank you, my good man,” Edward opted for a half hug to his first friend of Astoria this time, wrapping one arm around the man’s shoulders as he asked, “And how did it go here, lots of sign ups?”

“Welllll...” Mikey scratched at his cheek, “I haven’t seen the numbers, but your girls here did get in a minor spat that didn’t do much by way of winning ‘em support with the older crowd.”

Edward sucked air in through his teeth, wincing “What happened?”

Sarabeth blushed, “We...may...have told them that Keating owns the newspaper and is feeding them lies.”

Edward tilted his head, confused. “That doesn’t sound like a bad thing, shouldn’t they know...?”

Mikey moved his hand through the air, encouraging them to continue.

Emma chimed in from where she was collapsing the folding table they’d used, “SB may or may not have called them sheeple.”

“Sheeple?”

“Like, um, sheep...people,” Sarabeth admitted.

Edward whistled, “Ah, yes. I could see how that would go exceedingly well. In my experience people love to be told they’re mindless ruminant mammals. Never mind that, how were the sign up numbers?”

“Not terrible, not great,” Emma answered; she felt like there was no point in sugarcoating the matter. “Looks like the guys will be driving...” She reached into the tote bag where she’d placed the papers and looked at the circled number in the top right corner of the front page, “a whopping ...fifteen people to the polls.” Then she frowned. It was worse than she thought.

Edward sighed a little, trying to keep it quiet so as not to dishearten them. He stepped over to where Emma stood and brushed a hand along her arm to comfort her. “Fifteen more people than we had this morning, right?”

“Doesn’t mean they’re voting for me just because we’re driving them, Edward,” Emma reminded him, pulling the bag up onto her shoulder and hoisting the large folding table into her arms with the side handle, “but thanks for trying to make it sound good.”

“Hey now!” Mikey raised his voice so they’d all look his way, “You kids can’t be losin’ faith already. We barely just started here.”

“Mikey’s right,” Edward nodded. “Fifteen signs ups for rides is fantastic.” It was a lie, but what else could he say? “Besides, that doesn’t mean you didn’t reach people who can drive themselves or already have rides. But sorry—I may have missed a step here. Did you say that Mayor Keating owns the newspaper in which your article was canned?”

Emma nodded, “Partial owner. Sorry, you stepped out to call Mikey when I told SB that part.”

“Well, there goes my next idea.”

“No, tell us!” Sarabeth pleaded, her eyes sad from the somber mood her friends were all in. “Maybe it’s a good one. We could use a good one!”

“I was going to suggest you ask whoever you spoke to at the *Post* to add something to tomorrow or Monday’s paper about our initiative to give Astorians a ride to the polls, but if Keating holds the purse strings at the paper I doubt—“

Emma cut him off, “That’s a GREAT idea.”

“Emma,” Sarabeth entered as the voice of reason this time, “how is that a great idea when we know anything we want written about will get shot down by Keating and his lemmings?”

“What if it’s not something *we* want?” Emma posed the question to the group.

“I don’t rightly follow,” Mikey answered after a long pause from him, Sarabeth, and Prince Edward, “it is something we want. Isn’t it?”

Emma held up both hands, swiping them through the air as though she were placing a marquee, “Royal Rides: Prince Edward’s Gift to Astoria.”

“Ohhhh,” all three replied in unison as she continued.

“Edward can contact the paper. He’s not only new to them; he’s new to Astoria in general. It makes sense that Keating would’ve told the editors to watch out for me. I’ve been driving him crazy for months, but Edward isn’t on their radar yet. Plus, it sounds great! What a piece! I bet it gets picked up in the Associated Press. Or at least, that’s what you should tell them. Newspapers want attention, right?”

“Right,” Sarabeth pointed at her, jumping in with another point, “and no one has even written about Edward being in town yet. None of the papers. How is that possible? I can’t imagine any royal showing up in America and not getting a paparazzi photo on the front cover of a magazine.”

“We don’t exactly have paparazzi here in Astoria,” Mikey chuckled, “but I like this; I like where all y’alls heads are at.”

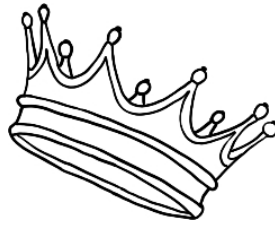
“What say you all to grabbing a drink and firming up this plan?” Edward asked.

“I know a place,” Emma smiled.

“You kids go on ahead, I’ve gotta get home to my wife and daughter, but you catch me up tomorrow,” Mikey waved at the three clear adults he still insisted on calling kids.

“Do you think we’ll ever grow up in his eyes?” Edward asked with a chuckle.

“Noooope.”



At the Bar – Edward

When the group fell through the doors of *Read Between the Vines*, it was busier than either girl had seen it in months, maybe busier than they’d seen since Emma opened the place two years earlier. *Read Between the Vines* had a steady customer base, but this was standing room only.

“Whoa,” Sarabeth stopped at the doorway causing Edward and Emma to bump right into her.

“Oof,” Emma recovered from running into her friend and looked around her bustling bar. “What the heck, are we running a special I don’t know about?”

Edward laughed, “Say, that’s funny.”

Emma squinted her eyes, smiling despite herself. She was pretty sure what she’d said *wasn’t* all that funny, but she’d like him to give her this one, “Uh thanks, but seriously, what’s happening here?”

Rather than wait to find out why the place was packed to the gills, Edward stepped over to a nearby table and politely interrupted, “Say, excuse me,” he smiled at the couple sharing a board of cheese and meat over Monopoly, “Is there something going on here tonight?”

“Huh?” the dude asked.

“Why’s the place so packed,” Sarabeth busted in, asking the same question in plain English.

“Oh,” the girl half of the couple in front of them shrugged, “Don’t know about everyone else, but we were at that Wishing Boats thing, and this was the closest place for a good night out after.”

“Huh,” Emma looked surprised, “Cool. I guess we’re

drinking in the back.”

An uncorked bottle of wine in hand, Emma walked to the table in the stock room where Sarabeth and Edward sat with empty glasses. “So, what’s the plan?” she asked as she poured.

Edward perused the menu he’d grabbed from the front.

“I think Royal Rides is literally the cutest name ever,” Sarabeth picked up her now full glass and held it out to the other two to initiate a cheers. “THAT should be a ride-share company,” she clapped her hands, suddenly excited by the prospect.

“What?” Edward laughed. “Are you suggesting that I open a ride-share company here in Astoria and use my princely title to bolster its business?” He was absolutely following her logic, but it felt ridiculous. “Are we allowed to order food from back here?”

“Honestly,” Emma licked her lips to catch a fallen drip of the wine she was drinking, “it’s not a terrible idea. The City Council won’t let Uber or Lyft into town, but why shouldn’t they approve a small, family-owned business that just happens to be run by our very own Prince Edward?”

Edward rolled his eyes, “Small, family-owned.”

“But you’ll BE the City Council next week anyway, so you can just make them approve it. I wanted you to get them to approve the big ones, but this sounds so much better,” Sarabeth nodded.

“I won’t *be* the City Council, SB,” Emma leaned back, “I’ll just be *on* it. I mean, hopefully. And I can’t just *make* them approve stuff. We have to come to an agreement as a group. I think, in this case, that might be easier said than done.”

“Can’t we just abolish this ridiculous City Council?” Edward asked with a sigh.

Sarabeth took a larger sip, “There’s an idea; say goodbye to all those old jerks.”

“SB, don’t be ageist,” Emma laughed, swallowing more of her wine, “But we need Edward to really be in power for that anyway. Not just in name, but in practice, too.” She looked right at him. “We got sidetracked. So we’re implementing Royal Rides and—“

“And Monday morning I need to call that newspaper man and ask him to print a piece about it?” Edward asked.

“Yep, and hopefully that sways enough of the votes in my direction,” Emma took a large sip at the mention of the election, even though it came out of her own mouth.

“Alright, then back to my question—may I order food? I’m absolutely famished.”

“Sorry,” Emma nodded. “Easily distracted. Yes, you can eat. Just go tell the girls working upfront what you want, and they’ll make it. Or heck, I can make it. It’s on the house. What do you want?”

Edward stood up, shaking his head. “Surely you don’t expect me to freeload off your establishment? I shall go to the bar, order like a proper patron, and pay my way.”

“Suit yourself,” Emma shrugged, not wanting this to be the battle she picked with him.

Edward returned from the front room a few moments later, “I’m truly shocked to find that a bar like yours isn’t serving eggnog this time of year. Travesty.”

“We have mulled wine,” Sarabeth replied.

“Don’t remind me,” Edward scratched at his tongue with his teeth as though trying to remove the taste. “I’m still recovering from the batch you served me the other evening.”

An hour later the group was over a bottle deep, scribbling plans on some receipt paper Sarabeth had stolen from the register.

“We’re in a bookstore, and you ladies can’t find any real bloody paper?” Edward said, picking up the receipt and letting it float back down to the table.

“Oh my Gooood,” Sarabeth drew out the word *God* extra

long, “We sell notebooks.” That made her chuckle, and she stood up to run and grab one for them to use in the rest of their planning.

Emma and Edward sat in silence for a few seconds, and then:

“Why wait ‘til Monday?” Emma asked, leaning on the table between them, “Why not call tomorrow? Hell—we should call him now! What time do you think they go to print?”

“Now?” Edward looked a little nervous, taking a large gulp of his wine. “You want me to call a stranger at 9 pm on a Saturday night?”

“I mean...kinda yeah.”

“Kinda yeah, what?” Sarabeth asked when she returned with an empty notebook.

“It’s a bit odd, but if you think it’s the right idea, I’ll do it...”

“Do WHAT?” Sarabeth asked, demanding to be included in the conversation that had been bouncing back and forth right in front of her.

“Emma thinks I should call the newspaper now and tell them about Royal Rides early,” Edward filled her in.

“Early?” Sarabeth rolled her eyes. “Nothing we’re doing this week is early. If anything we’re like seventeen years behind what we should have been doing for this campaign, but yeah, I say call. What could it hurt? Worst case he won’t print it til Monday but then you’re no worse off than you would’ve been.”

“We. We would’ve been,” Emma corrected her.

“Whatever, we would’ve been,” the wine was definitely starting to hit Sarabeth.

Emma slid her cell phone over to Edward, showing him the phone number. “Just don’t tell him you got his number from me.”

Edward typed the number into his phone and then stood up, pushing his chair back in, “How the devil am I supposed to have gotten it then? Mikey certainly doesn’t know this man.”

Sarabeth shrugged, her lips already purpling from the wine. “You’re a prince, don’t you have access to like... everything?”

Edward scoffed, the door handle already in his hand. “If that were the case, would we even need this plan?”

Emma pointed her glass right at him, but looked at her friend. “Good point,” she nodded, “Where are you going?”

“I’m stepping outside to make this call so he doesn’t hear the two of you giggling behind me.”

“Seriously, Emma, he is *so* cute,” Sarabeth said out of nowhere after Edward shut the door.

“What?” Emma rolled her eyes, “Sarabeth, you can’t seriously be considering throwing yourself at an actual prince. I know you’re into all those romance novels and Hallmark movies, but—“

“Not for me, you goon!” Sarabeth whacked her friend with the notebook they had yet to use. “For *you*. It’s *you* he’s trying to impress right now.”

“Impress me how?”

Sarabeth put on her best British accent, repeating Edward’s words from a few moments before, “*But if you think it’s the right idea, I’ll do it...*”

“That’s nothing. He just wanted to get Astoria back into the monarchical clutches of his family so they can have our taxes instead of them going to—say, where do you think our taxes go, anyway?”

“Monarchical?” Sarabeth asked. “Is that even a word?”

“Actually, yeah,” Emma shrugged. “Anyway, the election is my focus.”

“Sure, Jan,” Sarabeth rolled her eyes. “All I’m saying is, you’ve been alone for a reeeally loooooong time,” the last

three words were drawn out, but extremely loud whisper.

“Jeez, rub it in a little harder, why don’t you.”

“Emma, I’m trying to tell you that this is your chance for a little fun. You can’t spend your whole life trying to save the pier, this town, whatever, and ignore yourself. Haven’t you ever heard of self-care?”

“Sure, I take a bubble bath every now and again,” Emma replied, pouring a bit more wine into each of their glasses.

“None for me,” Sarabeth poured what made it into her glass over into Emma’s.

“What? Cutting yourself off??”

“I gotta go home. I’m freakin’ pooped AND I’m opening tomorrow,” Sarabeth began to gather her things.

“You can’t drive until you sober up. Plus, I know the oooOowner,” Emma said in a sing-songy voice, “Come on, staaay, we can open late tomorrow.”

“Ew, who are you? We are not opening late tomorrow on my watch. And don’t worry, I’m not driving drunk. A friend is gonna give me a ride.”

“A friend?” Emma repeated. “What *friend*?!”

“That,” Sarabeth said slinging her purse over her shoulder, “is really none of your business. Night babes. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Once Emma was alone, she picked up the wine glass, swirling the liquid as she thought about what else she could do to sway the election her way—legally, of course. She was scribbling ideas and then scratching them out, scribbling, scratching, scribbling, scratching over and over when Edward walked back in.

“Where the heck have you—what...is all that?”

He was carrying a paper bag with *EZ MART* written on the front of it.

“Did you go grocery shopping?” Emma asked, thoroughly confused. “Did my food options offend you so much that you

had to go to the gas station market for better?!”

“What offends me,” he huffed, placing the bag on the table in front of her, “is the lack of eggnog on your menu at this festive time of year. What kind of cozy bar, what kind of any bar doesn’t serve eggnog?”

“Can I be honest with you right now,” Emma said, trying her hardest not to laugh, definitely a little wine drunk.

“Yes, of course.”

She leaned closer to him and used Sarabeth’s method of loud whisper to say, “I’ve never had eggnog.”

Prince Edward looked as though he might faint on the spot. “Well, then I guess it’s a right good thing that I went and got these supplies for you,” he began to remove each item from the bag, setting it in front of her. “I intend to make it immediately.”

“Right here in my stock room?” she asked, cheekily.

“Quite right,” Edward nodded, “No. What? Sorry. No, we need a kitchen. A burner at the very bare minimum. And of course a refrigerator.”

“Of course,” she nodded, pushing back from the table. “Come on, kitchen.”

Once Edward was all set up with a mixing bowl, pot, and whisk, Emma positioned herself in a nearby chair, the planning notebook in her lap, “Can we get serious for a second?”

“I have never been more serious in my life,” Edward was focused on the bowl in which he was cracking eggs.

“Ugh,” Emma growled quietly. “this is important. Don’t you want to show your parents that you turned this place around?”

“Yes, but Emma—” Edward motioned to the bowl before him, wiping his hands on the cutesy apron he’d found on a hook and donned for the occasion, “I must do this first.”

She puffed up her cheeks. “If I help you do it faster can we

get back to business?”

He nodded, but it didn't look like he was completely paying attention to her. “Yes, but I need this to thicken. It simply...won't. I could've sworn I remembered the recipe, but...”

Emma stood up and walked over to where Edward was whisking a thin looking yellow liquid, “Is it supposed to look like that?”

“Like what?” He asked.

“I don't know, a banana milkshake?”

Edward frowned, “Yes? No...maybe?” He didn't sound certain. “All I know is it smells right, but it isn't thick enough.”

“Oh,” Emma shrugged and pulled the cell phone out of her pocket, typing quickly as she walked back over to where she'd been sitting. “This says you can use more heavy cream than milk to thicken eggnog.”

“Yes, of course.”

“And apparently more egg yolks than whites,” Emma stated, reopening the notebook where she returned to listing potential ideas. “We could...ask Moonbeam Mugs to. No.” She shook her head at herself, “We could talk to Pearl and see if—no.”

Nothing felt right. Emma ripped the page out and tossed it toward the trashcan, watching the crumpled up paper bounce off the rim. “Wow, I suck.”

“No, you don't,” Edward shook his head. “How many more eggs do you think—“

“Egg yolks,” Emma corrected as she saw him crack an egg, the white of it dripping through his fingers and into the bowl.

He looked down at the superfluous egg white with an adorable frown that made Emma's stomach do a somersault against her will. “Egg yolk, you said?”

She nodded, “Just the yolk to thicken it.”

“Suppose it’s too late now,” he frowned, “I’ll um...”

Emma stood up and walked over to look in the bowl before gently touching his arm. “Seriously, don’t stress; it’s gonna be great.”

“What if it’s not?” Edward said, picking it up to transfer the liquid to the pot he had sitting on the stove.

“Well...” Emma smushed her lips to one side of her face, “since I’ve never had it before, I won’t know the difference?”

“Wooooow.” Edward stirred, waiting for the simmer, “Thank you, Emma, for the vote of confidence here.”

“Oh, come on,” she pushed his arm a little. “Lighten up.”

“I’m extremely light, thank you very much. I’m practically Edison. Now, I just need to let this simmer and thicken. Then we’ll put it in the fridge for a few hours, and voila.”

Emma narrowed her eyes at him, “Are you telling me you went all the way to EZ Mart, and we don’t even get to drink this stuff right now?”

Edward shrugged, wiping his hands on the apron he wore, “I don’t make the rules; I just follow the recipe.”

“I’m getting another snack,” Emma grumbled, moving toward the door that led back to the bar area.

“Wait,” Edward pulled the scallop-edged apron off of himself and hung it back up, “I’ll come with you.”

The bar area was nearly empty when the two emerged from the kitchen.. The two part-time workers Emma had mentioned earlier were beginning to clean up as the last two tables of guests finished their wine and had already started to put away their games.

“Want another drink?” Emma asked Edward, pulling an open bottle from behind the bar.

“Place is a lot quieter without all the people.”

“Captain Obvious over here,” Emma laughed, pouring

each of them a glass, “How’s it going?” she asked Bree.

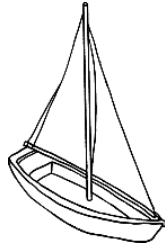
Bree looked around with a shrug. “Not too bad, we’re almost done here. You gonna lock up or are you headed out?”

“Nah, we’ve gotta finish cooking in the back and then—”

“Oh fu—“ Edward pushed off the bar stool he’d plopped onto and ran back toward the kitchen with Emma on his heels. When they got to the stove, the eggnog definitely looked different.

“I’m no expert, but...” Emma’s voice trailed off.

“I’ve made scrambled eggs.”



Chapter 16

Cleaning up the Wishing Boats – Emma

I woke up the next morning to my head pounding.

No, wait, that wasn't my head. That was the door. Someone was pounding on the door. I squinted one eye open, mentally begging the noise to stop. When I pushed myself up to a seated position, everything started to rush back to me.

I wasn't in my bed. I wasn't even in *a* bed. I was still at my bar, asleep, on a couch. As the banging continued the events of the night before returned to the forefront of my memory. But what didn't was an explanation for how I'd fallen asleep *on* someone. When I finally convinced both eyes to open and come into focus, I saw Edward's sleeping, drooling face pressed against the arm of the sofa.

"Oh lord."

Okay, it was my head pounding. How much did we actually drink? What did we do beyond planning for the coming week and making eggnog?

"Miss Prescott?" A loud voice accompanied more banging on the front door, "If you don't open the door, we're going to have to—"

"I'M COMING," I yelled back, despite the pain it caused my head, "Shit," I mumbled, tripping over a coat that had apparently been our blanket last night as I made my way to the door.

Edward, for his part, was still sound asleep, which is exactly what the sheriff saw when he stepped through the door after I opened it. How on Earth had this man slept through all of that?

“Took ya long enough,” deputy Williams mumbled as he stepped in behind Sheriff Thatcher.

How much of that had *I* slept through?

“How, um,” I swallowed hard, keeping down whatever threatened to resurface from the night before. The last thing I needed was to throw up on the sheriff’s shoes two days before my hopeful appointment with the City Council. Not a great start.

“Ma’am, we’re actually here for him,” the sheriff motioned to Edward who was still asleep, softly snoring away.

“Is something wrong, officer?” I narrowed my eyes, holding my temples with my fingers as though that would somehow keep my brains inside my head.

“Sure is, this man is a public menace!” the deputy said, loud enough to force me to close my eyes, wincing.

I would’ve laughed if I hadn’t been in so much pain. “I’m sorry, him?” I pointed at the drooling dignitary. “Is this a prank, or some false report by Mayor Keating?”

“Fraid not,” sheriff Thatcher, “Seems this young man here held an event yesterday and we received multiple calls this morning reporting that none of his uhh,” he looked down at the paper in his hand, “boats were cleaned up.”

Edward was barely starting to shift on the couch.

“My apologies officer, but I’m not following,” I was really regretting the amount of alcohol I’d consumed the night before.

“What the sheriff here is trying to say,” his deputy stepped in front of him, “is that your boyfriend here decided to tell hundreds of people to put boats in the water, but didn’t rightly clean up a lick of it. The whole coastline is covered with paper, plastic, little wooden boats...it’s a mess.”

I felt like my mind was out to sea, my brain sloshing around in my skull, “I see.”

At that moment, the deputy opted to walk over to where Edward was curled up on the couch and kicked at his shoe,

“Wakey wakey eggs and bac-y”

Edward twitched, breathing deeply as he opened one eye and looked around at us like a disheveled cyclops. “Huh?” He turned over, his back now against the couch as he looked up at the ceiling, “My head is full of wool,” he mumbled, pressing the back of his hand against his mouth.

“Edward,” I stepped toward him, my voice quiet for both our sakes. “The sheriff and his deputy are here. They said you left everything after the event? The boats?”

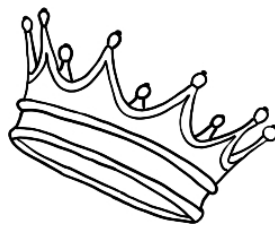
It took Edward a full minute to bring himself to an upright, seated position, now fully working with both eyes. “I don’t understand...? The boats are for wishes.”

The sheriff crossed his arms over his chest, stepping forward, his steel toed boots making loud steps against the wooden floor, “Son, are you admitting to being in violation of the city preservation ordinance?”

Looking baffled by the string of words that just came out of the sheriff’s mouth, Edward shrugged, “Sir, I have no idea what any of that means.”

“You held an event,” the deputy said, “People brought trash. You left your event. You didn’t clean a damn thing up. How much simpler can we make it for you?”

“I...” Edward’s jaw hung slack. “You have to clean up the wishing boats?!”



Cleaning up the Wishing Boats – Edward

Edward felt stupider than ever. Apparently, every year after the people left for home, an event crew paid for by the Royal Family came along and cleaned up after them.

“I feel like a complete and utter plank,” Edward frowned at Emma, reaching his hand into the freezing water to grab yet

another boat. “Honestly, they should make special gloves for this kind of business.”

Emma did the same, gathering wayward paper boats from the shoreline and shoving them into an industrial-sized trash bag. “They probably do?”

All morning, she’d gone back and forth between thinking Edward should’ve known better and wanting to give him the benefit of the doubt. Would she have thought of it? Maybe, but now wasn’t the time to point fingers. It’s not like he did it on purpose.

“Hey, look,” she shrugged. “Honest mistake, right? It’s not like you were littering on purpose.” But as she looked around there was *so* much more to do.

When the sheriff explained the consequences of his actions, Edward was more than happy to pay the multi-thousand dollar fine he’d incurred for ‘Unlawful Littering in a Public Body of Water.’ Still, it was the threat of a misdemeanor that got him up off the couch. Whether he paid the fine or not, without a team in place to clean the mess up before Monday morning, the sheriff would have to cite him.

“Thank Heavens for Mikey,” Edward said as he wistfully looked out toward the water where all the fishermen who volunteered to drive seniors to the polls on Tuesday were also giving up their Sunday to help clean the harbor. “Certainly they wouldn’t have done this for me.”

“You are our leader,” Emma offered.

“Hardly,” Edward rolled his eyes. “As of yet, I’ve done nothing positive for the people of Astoria.”

“Heyyy,” Emma moved closer to where he was cleaning, “That’s not true. You’ve improved morale.”

“Morale doesn’t put food on the table for ordinary citizens.” he said, “That’s a quote from a former Whitelochian Prime Minister. And even though my father was no fan of his, he’s right when you think about it.”

“Well, yeah,” Emma couldn’t argue that, “but you’re gonna do more! You’ve got so many great plans. I mean...”

she paused, looking at Edward with pleading eyes, “You do, right? You’re gonna fix things here after we find those documents... right?”

Edward simply nodded, not sure what else to say. He *didn't* have a plan. He didn't know what Astoria needed, or what he could do about it. He'd heard from Mikey that unemployment was high. He'd heard Emma rant about the pier where her father worked falling apart, but what could he do about those issues other than throw money at them? Then he'd be no better off than he was now, paying a fine and still picking up trash.

“Yeah...”

A pause hung in the air as they stared at one another.

“I mean. I don't know,” he admitted.

“What?” Emma furrowed her brow. “What do you mean you don't know?”

“I don't know anything, Emma. I'm drowning in this mess of rubbish,” he dropped the bag of boats to the floor. “I've been a screw-up my whole life, and if I stood here and told you I came to Astoria with any plan beyond take over and impress my parents with the way my princely charm won you all over then I'd be lying.”

“So?” Emma shrugged. “Can't you plan now? You still have time. I haven't even won the election yet.”

“And when you do, where does that leave me?”

“Primed to take over when we find those papers and show everyone who the rightful ruler of Astoria is,” was Emma's response to his woe-is-me attitude. “Hey, buck up!” She punched him in the shoulder a little harder than she'd intended.

“Ow,” Edward scrunched his face. “What was that for?”

“That was to snap you out of your pity party!”

Edward pulled his head back, an offended look on his face. “Pity party? I'm just—“

“Wallowing in self-pity over your situation,” she finished his sentence without an invitation to do so. “But that’s not what a prince does! We’re gonna win this election on Tuesday. Then we’re gonna find those papers, and in the meantime you’re going to come up with a plan to save Astoria!”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah! Really.”

“And how do you propose I do that?”

Emma looked around, unsure. She didn’t have any more ideas than he had, but she wasn’t going to fall into the same lamentation.

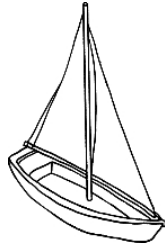
“Edward,” she grabbed his face in her hands, forcing him to look directly at her, “You gotta perk up. There are plenty of ways to formulate a plan. And it all starts with you figuring out if you want to. Do you *want* to help Astoria?”

She let the question hang in the air, her hands falling from his face.

He didn’t know what to say at first. Did he?

“Yes, I do.” He answered, not knowing if it was truly in his heart or not.

“Okay then,” she smiled back at him. “We’ll get you out there to meet the people. You’ll win them over while finding out what they really need, not just smiling for a photo-op at the cafe. I’ll find the missing papers. And you’ll work with the people of Astoria to improve infrastructure, rebuild, and... everything will be great.”



Chapter 17

The Hangover – Emma

“The greasiest toast you have, two eggs, bacon,” I told Maureen from our table at Moonbeam Mugs. There was no way we were going back to the bar to relive the scene of our hangovers after cleaning up the Wishing Boats. Not a lick of food was in our stomachs and we were, in a word, hangry.

“I’ll have the same,” Edward smiled at Mikey’s wife, handing her the menu.

“No herring this morning, Your Majesty?”

Even though it had been many hours and a few doses of Advil since we woke up, the mention of fish made us both a little green, “No, thank you Lady Donnelly,” he shook his head. “The breakfast Emma chose will be smashing.”

Once she’d walked away, I pretended to stick a finger down my throat, mock gagging. “How did you ever eat herring for breakfast?”

“Can we please change the subject before I chunder.”

“Chunder?” I asked, covering my mouth with a hand. “Even that word sounds disgusting.”

“CHANGE. OF. SUBJECT,” he reiterated, sipping on his cup of tea.

I went for my second cup of coffee today.

When the food came, we dug right in like animals who had never seen a meal, “I could literally lick the butter off this toast I’m so hungry,” I stared lovingly at the sourdough in front of me.

Edward, though hungry, was a bit more proper, looking

over at me like I had no manners whatsoever. “Emma, please do not lick your toast in public,” he added with a wry smile.

“Of course, Your Hiiiiighness,” I rolled my eyes at him, taking a bite of the buttery bread corner, “This is divine.”

He’d started by dipping his in the yolky goodness before him. “So,” he said a few moments later, dabbing at his lips with the paper napkins available to us, “how do you propose I go out and *meet the people* as you said? Is there a gathering spot where I might find most of them?”

I licked the crunchy fallen bacon bits off my lips and shrugged. “You could do the classic local government thing and canvas.”

“Your local government officials make paintings for the people?”

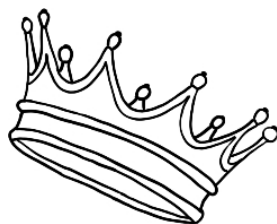
“What?” I asked, my mouth half full of eggy bread. “No, no. Canvassing is like...going door to door and talking to the people. For example, when I did it, I had to go around my district, knock on doors and say ‘Hi, I’m Emma Prescott and I’m running for the City Council seat in the 3rd district blahblahblah’”

“Blahblahblah,” He nodded. “Extremely compelling, should I start there also?”

I waved a slice of bacon at him. “Come on, you know what I mean. Just go up to the people and say ‘Hi, I’m your prince and I’d like your support!’”

Edward pressed his hands together in prayer position, looking me dead in the eyes, “Emma-I-Have-No-Idea-What-Your-Middle-Name-Is-Prescott. Are you literally suggesting that I, the Prince of Whiteloch, knock on people’s doors and introduce myself out of the blue?”

“It’s Jean, and yes.”



Monday Morning Canvassing – Edward

On Monday morning, Edward dressed in his business best: nice slacks, a button down-shirt, a sports coat, and of course, an umbrella. It wasn't raining yet, but he wasn't risking it.

Downstairs, he partook in what the hotel called a *Complimentary Continental Breakfast*. He understood the complimentary part, but the continental left something to be desired. He happily would have paid to have something a touch more edible. Still, he got down what he could and waited for Mikey to pick him up at what he and Emma referred to as “a reasonable time.”

This confused Edward. For days on end, Emma and Mikey had been forcing him out of bed before 8 am and telling him that it was completely normal. Yet, here they were telling him that he could not go canvassing before 10 am. What gives?

“Your Majesty,” Mikey had told him the afternoon before, rubbing his back slightly as if he were explaining to a baby rather than a full grown man, “You can't knock on people's doors that early, it just ain't done.”

Fine.

So there he was, up too early, done with breakfast, and stuck waiting for his ride. Waiting in the lobby was, in a word, boring. There were few people milling about, a woman behind the counter answering the phone whenever it rang and, oh, newspapers!

He approached the stack on the counter. “May I purchase a copy?” He asked the concierge.

“On the house.”

He returned to his uncomfortable lobby seat and flipped through, trying to find the piece about Royal Rides. After a lifetime of being splashed, in color, on the cover of many a magazine, Edward was shocked to find his article today was barely a footnote—a story a mere few paragraphs long, buried in the *Politics* section of the paper.

Then his phone rang, and Mikey's name appeared on the

screen, “Morning ol’ chap.”

“Right outside, Your Majesty,” Mikey said with a tone that gave away a smile that was no doubt plastered on the man’s face, as per usual, “Come on out to the truck whenever you’re ready.”

Edward, never more ready to leave a place than he was to get out of this lobby, stood up, took the copy of the newspaper in hand and headed for the door, “On my way.”

“This is going to be just awesome, Your Highness,” Mikey smiled over at the prince once he was buckled in and the drive began, “The people of Astoria are gonna love ya! They *already* love ya. Once they hear what’s going on, well. Things are really gonna turn around for us.”

“I certainly hope so.”

The neighborhood Mikey dropped Edward off in was one he’d never seen before. It looked like something out of a film—tree lined streets with houses that ranged from well-kept mid-century homes to completely dilapidated shacks. Unsure where to start, Edward forced himself to stand tall and walked to the corner home with a WELCOME sign on the door. That seemed promising.

With as much courage as he could muster, Edward walked up the three small steps and knocked on the door. He stood there, waiting and waiting...nothing. He rubbed his hands together and looked around, waiting a few moments longer. Was this some kind of bloody prank? No one showed up to open the door. *Blast*. He mumbled to himself and walked back down the tiny steps he’d climbed up moments before.

On to the next home.

When he reached the next house, he could at least see a light on inside. That was a more promising start. He knocked, same as before, and waited.

A few moments later a middle aged woman cracked open the door. “Yeah?” She asked in a cranky sounding voice.

“Um, yes, hellooo,” Edward offered her a broad smile and a wave. “Hello, yes, I’m Edward. Prince Edward Grafton

Windermere the Third, Duke of Finnsgate and acting sovereign of this land. I've come to discuss your concerns for Astoria and the failing local government."

Slam.

Without warning, the door was shut hard in his face.

Edward blinked at it, stunned. "I—oh..." he mumbled to himself. "That was a surprise," he said aloud to no one but himself. The only times in his life he'd had doors shut in his face were fights with siblings and jilted lovers. This was new. But there was no time to waste, so he was on to the next.

When the door opened at the next home, it was a boy. He couldn't have been more than ten, with large headphones over his ears and a video game controller in hand.

"Oh, hello young chap!" Edward greeted him, "Might your parents be home?"

The kid stared for a second and then pressed a button on the video game controller, speaking into it. "Hang on a second, there's some weirdo at my door."

"What? I assure you, I am not some weirdo. I am Prince Edward Grafton Windermere the Third, Duke of Finnsgate and acting—" he stopped himself, realizing this probably wasn't helping his case. "Sorry, but is there an adult in the home?"

"Mom's at work til 7," the kid mumbled, "and I'm not supposed to talk to strangers."

"Righto," Edward pointed at him. "Good on you for that one. Stay safe, lad!"

And then he was off. The last thing he needed was for the sheriff to show up because he'd made the wrong impression in this situation.

The whole morning felt like a bust. Door after door slammed in his face. One man nearly drew a shotgun on him. That was the shock of his life.

And now? Now it was raining. Great, just what he needed on top of his brush with death: wet socks. As he rounded the corner to the next neighborhood, he saw a house with a

covered porch. Despite having no faith that the interaction with its owner would improve, Edward thought stepping out of the rain would be nice, even if it was only long enough to have another humbling experience.

Raising his hand to this door, he paused for a second, wanting to enjoy not being pelted with rain just a moment longer. The door opened before he could bring his fist down to actually knock.

Edward gasped and jumped back as a white-haired, grandmotherly-looking lady greeted him. "Hello?" She asked loudly.

"Hello!" Edward straightened himself, trying not to look as terrified as he had been.

"Can I help you?" It sounded like she was yelling.

"Oh, um, yes. Well, no," he stood up straight and widened his smile, "It is I who am here to help you!"

"Are you here to clean the chimney?" she asked.

"What? No. I am Prince Edward Grafton Windermere the Third, Duke of Finnsgate, and I've come to speak to the people of Astoria to see how I might be of service to those who inhabit the land of which I am acting sovereign."

"Speak up, young man," she squinted as though that would help her hear. "You're Finneus of Astoria?"

"Duke of Finnsgate," he corrected.

"Sounds familiar," she nodded. "Why are you so wet?"

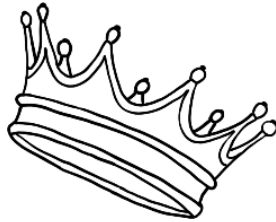
Edward looked down at himself. He didn't think he looked THAT wet. But he could feel a slosh in his socks and drips coming down his hair to his cheek, "I suppose the rain did that," he motioned to the downpour behind him, just past her porch.

"You better come on in and dry off," the woman stepped to the side to make room for him to come in.

Not sure if this was the right idea, Edward paused a moment. Could he really just enter the house of a strange old

woman? Would she shoot him? Poison him to take the crown? Call the police? A string of awful situations flew through Edward's mind.

But it all stopped when she said loudly, "I'll make you a cup of tea."



Inside the House – Edward

Everything in his logical brain was screaming: DON'T ENTER A STRANGER'S HOME!

But Edward was too tired to be logical, certain his toes were covered in blisters. He'd been wandering for hours with no reprieve and no success. This was the first person who'd shown the slightest glimpse of interest or kindness. So...he followed her into the home.

Inside, funnily enough, looked exactly as he had expected. It was like this woman stepped straight off a movie set featuring a small town grandmother. Tchotchkes covered nearly every surface. The place smelled of soup and stale perfume. Most importantly, when she sat him down at the kitchen table to share a cup of tea, he found the tablecloth was one giant lace doily.

"Do you take your tea with sugar?" the old woman had lowered her voice just slightly now that they were inside. She was no longer fully yelling at Edward, nor was she speaking in what one might call an 'inside voice.'

The prince shook his head, "Just a spot of cream if you have it."

She nodded and ambled back to the kitchen.

"But don't go to any trou—" Edward wanted to help her, but she didn't hear him anyway.

"You know," she said as she returned and ever so slowly

handed him a spouted creamer, nicer than he'd seen since he arrived. "If this were a European country, one might call this a State Visit." She slid into the chair across from him.

He chuckled, pouring the milk into his steaming tea, "Quite right, and perhaps you'd host a dinner. My father and mother would be with me and your family would be honored with a Royal Declaration. Please, you must forgive my impolite behavior. I haven't caught your name."

"Edith. Millstone."

"Lady Millstone," Edward bowed his head slightly by way of showing respect. "Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today."

"I'm sure you've been busier than a bee; you said you just arrived as acting sovereign?"

"Busy," Edward scoffed quietly to himself, "Well, today's been busy in the sense that I've been door-to-door, but plain and simply pointless in the sense that no one has wanted to hear me out."

Edith held the tea in her frail hands. "The people of Astoria can be closed minded, but that's not to say they're completely unchangeable. Once upon a time the people of this area were pioneers."

"The Oregon Trail," he lifted his teacup to cheers with her. "May I ask you a question, Lady Mill—"

"Edith, please. I don't know what all this Lady business is about, but I'm just Edith. But yes, go on with your question young man. And I've already forgotten your name, but don't take it personally. I've never had a mind for names."

Edward couldn't help but smile at her honesty. "Edith. What made you trust me enough to engage in conversation, let alone let me into your home?" He didn't want to scare her, but what if he was the grifter that Emma had initially imagined and came to her home with nefarious plans?

"Name sounded familiar. Even though I've forgotten it now," that made her laugh at her own statement. "What's got you out in my neighborhood anyway if you're a Duke?"

“Prince, really. Both, I suppose.”

“You said Duke of...?”

“Finnsate,” Edward reminded Edith.

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

“I’m out canvassing,” he used the word Emma had hoping to lend some credence to his statement. “Trying to put together a plan. Find out what the people of Astoria really need so when I get the proof that I am, in fact, the prince of this place I can push out that Mayor of yours and implement change immediately. But no one has given me the time of day. No one seems to believe me.”

“Place certainly does need help,” Edith reached for the middle of the table, where she had placed a plate of Milano cookies. She bit into one, wagging the remainder at Edward. “What do you mean believe you? Believe that you want to help?”

“Believe that I’m the prince? That I want the best for Astoria? That I’m in charge?”

Edith shook her head, “Finny.”

“Edward,” he corrected.

“Oh yeah? Edith and Edward,” she winked at him in a mock flirtatious manner, “Sounds good together. Anyway, Edward, are you really in charge? Do you believe that?”

“Legally I am.”

“Look, I’m not Keating’s biggest fan. Honestly, I don’t know anyone who is, but for all intents and purposes he is, in fact, in charge.”

“Quite right,” Edward sighed. “Have you any sage advice to a new Astorian?”

“You gotta remind the people of their heritage. A lot of Astorians have been here their whole life. Some for multiple generations. And a lot of us are old.”

He sipped the tea as he listened. “Which is why we started Royal Rides.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I don’t follow.”

“Royal Rides...you didn’t hear about it, I suppose?”

Edith shook her head. Edward launched into his prepared speech, but quickly stopped himself. He and Edith were having a real and honest conversation; why boisterously go into a campaign speech when he wasn’t even running. “My friend Emma is running for City Council. We’re hoping getting her on the council will help uhh...with a lot of things. But in any event, she’s had difficulty garnering support so we’re offering free rides only to the polls for anyone who cannot get there on their own. We cannot give rides to those voting for Emma, as I’m told that’s illegal in America—not that that should matter given this land belongs to Whiteloch, but...” now he was babbling.

Edith’s eye twitched. It was too much, too fast, “Slow down, young man. You mean to tell me you’re gonna give us old ladies a ride to vote?”

He nodded.

She smiled. “That’s real sweet.”

“It was Emma’s idea. She loves this place and wants better for it than what Keating is willing to do.”

“Emma...” Edith pondered for a moment. “What’s her last name?”

“Prescott.”

“Ha,” Edith slapped a hand on the table, “I knew her mother. We served on the Astorian Historical Society together. Jane was president for many years. What a smart cookie she was.”

“So I’ve heard,” Edward offered her a warm smile. “What’s this Astorian Historical Society you were a part of?”

“Just what it sounds like,” she shrugged. “We kept records and documents. There’s even a place down by the pier with old photos on display. Haven’t been down there in a while, though. I haven’t had reason to, truthfully.”

For a fleeting moment, Edward considered asking her if

she knew about Whiteloch, his family, their acquisition of Astoria, and all that jazz. He even opened his mouth, about to let the words out—but he stopped himself. No, now wasn't the time.

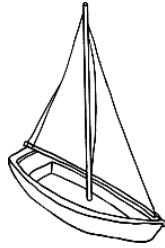
“What?” Edith asked, seeing him on the verge of saying something, “If there's words on the tip of your tongue, just go ahead and spit 'em out.”

“Ahem,” he cleared his throat. “Lady Millsto—Edith. Would you be able to introduce me to your friends? Perhaps we could tell them about the Royal Rides and help my friend Emma get elected. When I tell you this woman has every intention of righting things here in your tow—”

“Say no more,” Edith pressed her hands onto the table to help herself up, “I'll call the Women's Club. Those broads have been wanting to shake things up in this town for years. They're gnawin' at the bit to get rid of Keating.”

As she slowly walked toward the telephone hanging off her wall, Edward raised his voice so she could hear him ask. “Edith? If everyone in town hates Keating—why hasn't anyone done anything before?”

She held the receiver in one hand, cord in the other. “People did. Well...people tried to do something when it was Keating's father in charge. He was no better. I suppose folks got a little complacent. Downtrodden. Figured there was nothing they could do after a few tries,” she shrugged. “Doesn't mean you can't try. Or your friend. Her mother certainly did, God rest her soul.”



Chapter 18

Election Night - Emma

“Stop it,” Sarabeth smacked my hand away from my mouth.

“Ouch.” I had been chewing nervously on my nails, admittedly a bad habit. “I can’t help it,” I grumbled, wringing my hands together to keep from bringing one back to my teeth.

“You can’t look like a raggedy mess when you get elected to City Council,” she crossed her arms over her chest, glaring at me.

“If,” I raised my eyebrows high, shrugging.

“You’ve got to stay positive. WHEN.”

“Sure, fine, when,” I repeated.

“I really wish you’d let me dress you for tonight; you need to make a positive professional impression on your constituents.” Sarabeth motioned to my outfit. “This does not say I’m a woman of the world here to right the wrongs imposed on you by the patriarchy.”

“No?” I asked with a tilt of my head, “Pray tell, what does it say?” I asked, waving my hand in front of my jeans and flannel ensemble.

“It says female lumberjack from the Oregonian Outback.”

“Ouch.”

Read Between the Vines had become an election headquarters of sorts. Monday and Tuesday were our slowest days anyway, but even if they’d been bustling with business, it wasn’t like I could afford to rent out another location for the campaign to wait out election results. If you could call it a

campaign—in reality, it was just me, Sarabeth, Mikey and Maureen, plus a few of the fishermen from earlier whom I was treating to beers on behalf of Royal Rides.

“With the number of geriatric voters these boys brought to the polls today, you should be just fine,” Mikey was trying to encourage me, sipping on his beer, back leaned against the counter so he could see the TV we’d set up in the center of the bar area.

“Who’s to say they voted for me?” I asked.

“They voted for you,” Edward said, making his way from the bookstore to the bar with a bouquet of peonies, pacific rhododendron, and lavender in hand. I blinked as he handed them to me, surprised, to say the least. He must have noticed the confusion, because he added, “An early congratulations.”

“Oh wow...thank you,” I leaned forward to smell them, biting at my lower lip to keep a full-blown grin from crossing my face.

“Oh my God,” I could hear Sarabeth from where she now stood behind the bar, “I so knew it.”

“Knew what?” Edward asked.

Sarabeth turned bright red when she realized he could hear her, “Um, that they voted for Emma. Totally obvious. Those oldies felt like Emma fans.”

“Seriously, SB?” I glared at her, wondering how that was the best line she could come up with.

“When do the numbers come in?” Maureen asked from where she sat next to her husband.

“Should be any time now,” Mikey looked down at his watch, “We took the last folks to the poll when?” He asked one of the fishermen, sipping a beer nearby.

“Mmm,” the man shrugged, “think they said they were closin’ up at 7.”

I positioned myself too close to the television, watching as our local news anchor came back on the screen after a commercial break.

“Next, at nine, tonight’s City Council election results.”

“Here we go,” Mikey pointed at the screen.

“I’m Jessica Williams, and you’re watching the KABC Astoria. We’re back with the results of tonight’s election.”

“Everyone pipe down!” Edward called to the group of men playing Jenga near the back. “We’ve got to hear clearly!”

I wasn’t sure what hearing or not hearing would change. And honestly, I’d be less nervous if I wasn’t able to get the immediate results.

Jessica Williams started with the election in the first district, “City Councilman Jones ran there uncontested and will remain your representative for the next session.”

“Bloody hell,” Edward threw a hand in the air. He let it fall against his leg with a loud smack, “Why on Earth would they waste so much time announcing an election where this absolute muppet ran unopposed.” He was gesticulating like crazy, clearly unable to calm himself down.

I wanted to laugh, smile, anything—it was cute and sweet. He was invested.

“I need a drink,” he motioned to Sarabeth. “Sorry, that was rude,” he corrected himself, walking over to where she was serving people from behind the bar. “May I please have a shot, anything strong.”

From where I stood, I could see SB smiling as she handed him two glasses of red wine, “Here. Give one of these to Em,” she motioned toward me with her head and I pretended not to notice, “She needs it.”

As we drew even nearer to the announcement of my district, Edward made his way back over to the center of the room and handed me the glass Sarabeth had just poured. “M’Lady,” he said jokingly, trying to calm both of us down.

“Oh, thanks,” I took it from him and swished it around slightly, eyes glued to the TV as I let the wine aerate a bit.

“And now for the third district.”

I brought the wine to my lips to take my first sip, but it was too soon. As the liquid touched my tongue, I heard Jessica Williams announce that the election was, “Too close to call.” I spit the drink right back out, not on purpose of course. I was shocked.

“What?!” Yells came from various voices around the room.

“It appears that the third district will move to a runoff election,” anchorwoman Williams continued as I stood there in shock. Was this good? Was this bad? What was happening? I could feel the room spinning around me, and I hadn’t even consumed any alcohol yet today.

“Emma,” Edward touched my arm, pulling me from my thoughts. I turned around to see him smiling at me. That had to mean it was good, “You bloody well pulled it off!”

Without warning, I threw my arms around his neck and planted a kiss on his lips. I don’t know what came over me or why I did it. But there was something about him smiling down at me on a day when I’d accomplished something I never thought possible that took over my body and made my brain go completely haywire. If I’d given myself a moment to think there’s no way I would’ve done such a thing, let alone in a room full of people.

I barely heard the hoots and hollers from the folks around the bar as I stood there on my tip toes and felt him reach an arm around my waist to pull me even closer. Was this really happening? But before I could pull away and recompose myself, I heard the clicking sound of heavy shoes against the wooden floor of my bar.

When I looked left with my arms still firmly held around Edward’s neck, I saw Mayor Keating and my opponent in the election Jeremiah Bell. Slowly pulling myself out of Edward’s arms I set my heels down and stepped back, straightening myself up, the high of the moment before drained from my body at the mere sight of them.

The mayor started the slowest of slow claps, “Well, well, well,” he grinned, looking around the room.

Edward stood half in front of me as though to protect me from the devil of a man who stood before us, “Can we help you?”

“Mister Grafton,” Keating said, purposefully annoying Edward.

Gritting his teeth, Edward grumbled back, “Windermere. And it’s prince.”

Mayor Keating laughed, “Of course, Prince Windermere, my mistake.” But he’d clearly done it purposefully. “We just came by to offer congratulations.”

“Ha,” Sarabeth let out a laugh from where she stood and then quickly covered her mouth. “Sorry,” she swallowed hard and disappeared into the kitchen.

“Oh, uh, thanks.” I finally managed to say, “Same to you, Councilman Bell.” I figured there was no reason to be impolite at a moment like this. The TV was still playing in the background, but now we’d missed all the information that they’d given about what steps came next, “Guess we’re headed to a run off,” I said, pointing at the TV where *RUN OFF ELECTION THIS DECEMBER* was scrolling across the screen.

Jeremiah Bell looked like he was going to say something. He made a move to step closer to me, but Mayor Keating put out a hand to stop him, “We saw the lines of people coming out of those fish trucks all day and assumed your little scheme had paid off. Turns out it just didn’t do the trick. Good try though.”

“Yeah, good try!” Councilman Bell said in a tone that... sounded genuine, like he actually was telling us good try. He was even smiling.

The mayor looked annoyed. “Best idea would be for you to just concede to Mister Bell here right now,” the mayor said with a slight shrug, “No use in wastin’ your time and resources when it’s a done deal.”

Edward scoffed, stepping toward the two men. “It is most certainly NOT a done deal.”

Knowing that I could fight this battle for myself, I reached out a hand to touch Edward's arm and calm him. "It's okay," I said quietly before moving in front of him to address both Mister Bell and the mayor. "Gentlemen, it is *not* a done deal. I intend to fight this out to the end as is my right. I wish you the best of luck, and may the best person for the job win."

"Indeed," Councilman Bell shook my hand, remaining quiet under Keating's glare.

The mayor cleared his throat. The man walked slowly toward me, leaning down just slightly so he could whisper close to my face, "You're going to regret this, Miss Prescott."

He turned on his heels a moment later and started for the door. Jeremiah wasn't as quick on the uptake, still looking at the various people around the bar. When he realized his friend—if you could call the mayor anyone's friend—was walking away, he excused himself quickly. "Well, goodnight then," he nodded and followed Keating toward the door.

It was as though the whole room let out a collective breath once they'd existed.

"What...on EARTH was *that*?" Maureen asked, a hand against her chest as though she were clutching her invisible pearls. She'd been the least involved with the mess we'd discovered and was surprised to see the mayor so blatantly vile. "Did he just threaten you?"

Mikey grabbed his wife's hand to calm her, patting the top of it. "Darlin' don't worry, we won't let him actually do anything to Emma here. He's just a blowhard if you ask me. He'd never actually do anything. In fact," Mikey chuckled, "he never actually *does* anything."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Edward turned to his first friend, "If he's suppressing articles in the news, illegally keeping himself in power longer than term limits allow...what's next? What else has he done that we don't know about?"

Tucking a squiggly strand of hair behind my ear, I stood there quietly, lost in a replay of what he'd said. Why did Keating care so much if I got elected or not? Sure, I'd been the

whiny thorn in his side about fixing things for months now, but that wasn't enough to cause this kind of vitriol. There had to be more to it, but what?

“Em?” I felt Sarabeth's hand on my arm, shaking me from my thoughts.

“Huh? Oh, sorry,” I blinked a few times, coming back down to Earth, “Something is up. I don't know what it is, but there's no reason for him to be so against me.”

“Except that that Bell fellow is clearly a patsy,” one of the fishermen snorted from his table, taking a deep swig of his beer. “The lights were on but nooobody was home.”

“Quite right,” Edward nodded, pointing at the man to show he agreed with his stance. “Jonah is correct; whoever that Jeremiah man is, he's not actually doing anything for your district, because he's not really in charge of it.”

“Okay,” Sarabeth jumped in, “so he's got a guy in that position that will do whatever he tells him, and he knows if Emma gets elected that his reign of terror is over, and she'll expose him for the creep he is and then when Edward takes over, he'll Saint Patrick that bitch and run him out of town like snakes out of Ireland?”

Everyone turned to look at her. My best friend was constantly walking a tightrope line between head in the clouds and absolutely spot on target.

“Edward...” I put my glass down on a nearby table and walked over to where Edward was near Mikey, placing a hand gently on his forearm, “Do you think he has anything to do with the missing papers?”

“What missin' papers?” Mikey asked.

“You didn't tell him?” I asked, looking up at Edward.

He shook his head, “No. Couldn't figure out how to explain it without sounding like a right loon.”

“What missin' papers?” Mikey repeated.

“Mikey,” I turned to him now, “when we went to the archives, we found a bunch of files missing in exactly the time

period that England would've sent official documents here to Astoria to tell the people that power was changing hands. Plenty of records show the sale from John Astor to the Fur company and all that, but nooothing related to Whiteloch."

"And you think Keating had something to do with that?"

"What other explanation is there?" I asked.

Mikey scratched at the scruff on his cheek. "Man's a bad mayor and probably as corrupt as they come, but what benefit does he get outta hidin' that we ain't American? Don't y'all still have mayors in Whiteloch? He could'a still been the mayor. Maybe the papers were just misplaced over time. It's been hundreds of years, kiddo."

Great, now even Mikey was being condescending.

"Mikey," Edward shook his head, "Some of the papers were burned."

"Burned how?"

"Whoever did it made it look like there had been a minor fire and some papers were lightly charred in suspiciously convenient places." I knew I sounded like a conspiracy theorist. Still, I had to say my piece. "I think Keating was rooting around down there and found out that Whiteloch owns Astoria," I motioned to Edward when I said Whiteloch. "And then he futzed with the papers so that no one would ever find out."

"To what end?" Mikey was really pressing my buttons. He was usually on our side with everything. Why was he fighting this of all things.

I threw my hands in the air and let them fall against my legs with a smack, "I don't know, Mikey. A power trip?!" Now I sounded silly even to myself, "Sorry—all I'm saying is we have to fight this, right?"

"Of course, we have to fight this," Sarabeth agreed.

"Whatever the reason is behind these missing documents, getting Emma on the City Council can only bolster our overall efforts," Edward added.

“They’re right, honey; it doesn’t really matter why Vernon did it, or even if he did,” Maureen told her husband.

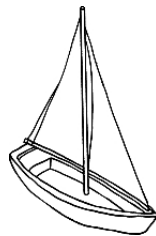
Mikey nodded. “I’m not sayin’ we don’t fight. We’re gonna do whatever we can to get you elected and get Edward ...well, not elected. What the heck do we call it?”

Edward chuckled slightly, “I’m not even sure my good man. When in history has there been a situation such as this? In any event, our first step is to get Emma in office so she has access to all council records.”

“If nothing else, that’ll show us where all the money is going and why they’d been so resistant to fix the pier. Doesn’t that benefit everyone?” My voice was still strident; I hadn’t totally come down from my annoyance at Mikey.

The older man offered me a soft smile, “Of course that benefits everyone, and even if it didn’t, you know me, and the boys love your Dad. We’d wanna help out even if it only meant keepin’ Prescott’s Pacific afloat. Some of us had our first sales there. No one’s gonna let your Dad drown, Emma.”

“Thank you.”



Post Election Breakfast – Emma

No one was in the head space to plan the night of the election. Emotions were high, and we all kept butting heads. So, everyone split and went home for the night, agreeing to meet at Moonbeam Mugs the next morning after a good night’s sleep.

There we sat, Wednesday morning, around a circular table toward the back of the cafe, warm cups of coffee or tea in front of everyone except Mikey, whose place setting also included a large glass of orange juice.

“So,” Sarabeth warmed her hands on the ceramic mug that

held her energy juice, “what’s the plan?”

“That’s what we’re here to figure out.”

“We were so close,” Edward held his first finger and thumb near one another to show how near the miss was.

“And we barely even tried,” Sarabeth added with a grin.

“Ouch,” I pretended to stab myself in the heart over what she’d said. “I tried for literally months, SB.”

“Emma...” she dragged out my name, “you know what I mean. The stuff we put in place at the end was literally thrown together in like five days, right? Imagine what you could do with all this momentum behind you for a month?”

“Quite right,” Edward nodded. “We already have half the votes; we just need to tip the scales a touch further.”

“And how do we do that?” Mikey asked.

With an elbow on the table, I rested my cheek in one hand, trying to think it through. “I mean, we can keep Royal Rides going, but...”

“That won’t be enough,” Sarabeth finished.

“No, I know. We need more.”

“What about a rally?” Mikey asked. “Or some kind of event to get everyone together and hear what you’ve got to say? Seemed to work when Edward spoke at the wishing boats, didn’t it?”

I nodded, “True. I’ve been trying to get my message out by flier-ing and canvasing, but it’s not enough. I can never cover enough ground.”

“Canvasing was the most humbling experience of my life, and I’ve been on the cover of a tabloid,” Edward’s eyes were wide like he’d been completely shell-shocked by his experience going door to door. “I cannot recommend it less. Let’s do anything *but* that.”

“Awww,” I chuckled, the mood lightening for the first time since we sat down. “But you met your new bestie and all those adorable old ladies.”

“Hardy-har-har,” Edward stuck a tongue out at me. “Edith is a gem and we wouldn’t have been able to do this without her, but you’ll never catch me doing that again. But Mikey’s right, why not a rally?”

“No one shows up for stuff like that in this town,” I pointed out.

“Why do you keep being so negative?” Sarabeth snapped at me. “You said the same thing before the Umbrella Parade, and look how that turned out? It was such a good result that Keating was shaking in his boots at the idea of everyone loving Edward. And the wishing boats were—”

“It’s Edward,” I pointed to the prince. “It’s not normal for Astoria and you know it. When in the history of Astoria before Edward showed up have you ever seen that many people gathered somewhere that wasn’t giving away free food?”

“Maybe we give away free food?” Mikey asked.

Sarabeth gasped. “No! A photo-op! A meet and greet with Edward!”

I thought it over for a moment. She was onto something. “Royal Rendezvous?”

“Too close to Royal Rides,” she replied.

“Hm. Sovereign Soiree?”

“There you go!” Sarabeth pointed at me, excited, and then turned to Edward. “You like?”

Edward seemed skeptical. “Are you planning to whore me out to the masses for photos?”

“And autographs,” she added with a nod. “People love that kind of stuff! Anyone from a town of less than ten thousand people would literally trip over themselves for a photo with a prince, whether they believe he’s *their* prince or not.”

“Come on, please?” I looked over at him with pleading eyes. “For me?”

Edward rolled his eyes, but he was smiling through it, “Of course I’ll do it, but what are you going to do with all the

people once they get there? More fliers?”

“That’s not working,” Mikey shook his head. “It ends up creating more litter.”

“Let’s not get another potential misdemeanor.” Edward narrowed his eyes at the memory.

“I could...give a speech when the meet and greet is over and tell everyone my plans and platform?” I offered.

Sarabeth shook her head. “People aren’t going to stick around for that. You’d have to do it *during* the photo op, and then there’s no guarantee anyone’s paying attention.”

“You could challenge that chucklehead to a debate.” Edward laughed at the picture in his head.

“You mean Keating?” Sarabeth asked him.

He shook his head, “The other one.”

“Bell?” I asked.

“Right-o, aren’t you running against him directly? Keating is just the puppet master.”

I nodded, “True.”

“And without the mayor on stage with him feeding him answers, I bet he falls flat on his face,” Edward wiggled his eyebrows deviously, “You’ll talk circles around him, and the people will see you’re the obvious answer to their problems.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be the answer to our problems?” Mikey asked.

“Yes...and no.” Edward sipped his tea, considering how to phrase his answer. “Emma has to get in there first.”

“Why not both?” I shrugged. “We have different roles in this game of chess. The name of the game is getting in there to prove to the people that Edward’s in charge, sure, but I still want to fix the pier.”

“Here’s a question, though,” Edward snapped his fingers as the idea popped into his head. “How do we know that Bell gentleman will show up for the debate at all?”

“I say you shame him into it,” Sarabeth smiled and bit into the croissant she’d ordered.

“How do you mean?” Mikey wasn’t following.

Sarabeth answered before she finished swallowing, so the first few words came out a bit garbled by pastry, “You invite him, advertise it, and say hey look ...I’m gonna be here talking about what I have planned for Astoria. If Jeremiah Bell doesn’t think it’s important to talk to the constituents of his district, then maybe he doesn’t deserve your vote.”

“Hm,” I nodded, “that does sound promising.”

“Where we gonna hold this meet and greet of yours?” Mikey asked.

Sarabeth chimed in first, “We could do it at Vines.”

“Too small,” I shook my head. “We need someplace that’ll get attention. A place where people can line up to meet Edward, we can hold a debate on some kind of stage, and maybe even get a write up in the *Post*.”

“Okay, so what are some options?” Sarabeth shrugged at the way I brushed off her suggestion.

“Well,” I bit at the inside of my cheek, a little flustered by my lack of ideas. “What places in town are even big enough?”

“We could do it at the park where we did the Umbrella Parade,” Edward offered.

“Nah,” Mikey shook his head, “Too cold this time of year. What about the Elks Lodge? They’ve got a big clubhouse type place we could probably rent out.”

“That old boys club?” I scoffed. “I’m sure Keating is a member. Or, at the very least, some friend of his. We can’t risk it.”

“Alright,” he shrugged. “Then I guess that means the Lions Club is out too?”

I nodded.

“Knights of Columbus?”

“No chapter in Astoria.”

“Dang it. Free Masons?”

“Ohhh no,” Edward broke into our back and forth, “Absolutely no Free Masons ever.”

Sarabeth raised an eyebrow at him. “Why not? They’ve got a big—”

“No, no. No. The Free Masons are an insurgent group who came to the capital under my Grandfather Aleric’s regime and attempted to overthrow the government by placing bombs strategically around the city in places where he had intended to visit on Whiteloch’s Day of Deliverance.”

We all sat in silence and stared at him, jaws hanging slack.

“If grandfather Aleric’s right-hand man Japeth Fredrick Longfellow hadn’t discovered the plot by these traitorous dolts, I might not be sitting here with you right now!” As he told the story, his voice rose in volume and pitch.

“Oh.” I finally answered, mouth still hanging open at the pace with which he bolted through this almost unbelievable story. “Aren’t. Um. Aren’t the Free Masons generally a peaceful sort?”

Edward gasped, his hand reaching for his chest in horror, “That’s what they want you to think! They did all of this against my family under the code name OPERATION LIBERTY. LIBERTY! Can you even believe it? And on the Day of Deliverance no less.” He sounded incensed.

“Hey, I kinda like that...can we call our project Operation Liberty?” I asked.

“It does have a nice ring to it.”

Now Edward was the one with his mouth hanging open, “You certainly must be joking. You absolutely cannot be suggesting that we adopt the code name of an operation that intended to murder my grandfather in cold blood!”

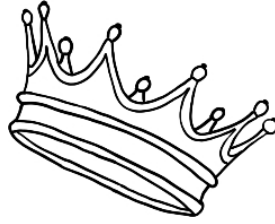
“Okay, but they weren’t successful, and the name *is* pretty bomb,” Sarabeth added.

He pressed his hands against the table, about to stand up, but I pulled him back down. “Ease up, pretty boy. We’ll come up with a different name, sheesh.”

“Thank you.”

“Okay,” I continued, “so the Free Masons are out.”

“What about the Historical Society?” Mikey piped in, “Edward, I personally drove your friend Edith to the polls and she was going on and on about how they had all this unutilized space...maybe we could use it.”



Chapter 19

At The Historical Society – Emma

“Edith really came through in a clutch, huh?” I asked Edward as we walked up to the entrance of the Astorian Historical Society.

The building was located near Columbia Park, along the river. It stood no taller than the structures around it, but the Queen Anne style design of the place made it stick out like a sore thumb. A beautiful sore thumb. Still, no one talked about it. It should have been a stop on middle school field trips, learning about the history and culture of the northernmost point of the Great State of Oregon. But instead, people just drove on by, day after day. Even now, the planters on either side of the entrance were overgrown with weeds like no one had bothered to care for the landscape in a long while.

“Twice now,” Edward pulled the door open and motioned for me to enter first, “Don’t know if Royal Rides would’ve had anyone to drive anywhere without her. Well, besides those initial fifteen sign ups. Her lady’s group,” he shook his head, chuckling to himself, “they were a hoot.”

Edith was right, the place was big, and mostly unused. Inside was a large museum-like entrance with large black and white photographs and newspaper copies in frames lining the walls. Placards hung below each, explaining the visual above. Yet, no one was anywhere to be found.

“She said she’d meet us here,” he shrugged when he saw me looking around the empty space.

I left my umbrella in the holder by the front, not wanting to drip rainwater throughout, and started to walk the circular photo tour around the large room. Key points in Astoria’s history were highlighted—from its founding in 1811 by John

Astor and the Pacific Fur Company to the filming of *The Goonies* in 1985; there was a lot here. But no hide nor hair of Whiteloch or anyone from Edward's family.

"Isn't it weird that there's no mention of you guys anywhere here?" I asked, eyes glued to an old picture of the pier where Prescott's Pacific now lived. In place of it was a Bumble Bee Tuna Cannery, and out front were workers by the dozen, all probably as smelly as my Dad.

"Astoria has a rich history," I heard a voice I didn't recognize behind me and turned to see a white haired woman who couldn't be more than five feet tall. Edith, I assumed. I turned and walked to meet her halfway across the room. Edward came from where he'd been standing and did the same, "Nice to see you, Eddie."

I cringed when Edith referred to Edward as Eddie, having heard him correct many people on that nickname. But Edward made no move to correct the petite senior. Instead, he smiled at her, leaned down, and kissed her wrinkled cheek, "Lovely to see you, Edith." It looked like he was greeting an old friend or his grandmother.

Edward always spoke politely to the people around him—well, except when Keating and Bell showed up at the bar, but this was different. It was soft, almost loving.

"You must be Emma," she turned to me and reached out for a hug.

"Oh," I laughed quietly, immediately enveloped in her arms. "Yes, I am."

"I knew your mother," she looked up at me with large, sad eyes. "Wonderful lady."

Edward mouthed, "Sorry," over Edith's head.

I shrugged it off, used to people talking about my Mom. Jane Prescott was the type of person people remembered. She never made waves, but she always made friends and made a difference. Or so I'm told. My memories of her only involved general day-to-day mothering. She was attentive and loving and showed up for every spelling bee I participated in. But

after her passing, people seemed to want me to know that she was so much more than my mother.

“She ran this place like a tight ship.” Edith laughed at the memory, looking around. “Without her...we hardly do anything.”

“What do you mean?” Edward asked.

“Used to hold events and seminars for the local students. People used to come from all over to learn the history of this place. Did you know we’re the oldest settlement west of the Rocky Mountains? 1811! That’s history worth keepin’ alive. But now, meh...” she let her voice trail off. “No one seems to care about Astoria or our history. Even the other ladies of the society have given up. Truth be told, I haven’t come here much in the last few years either. No reason to.”

“Edith,” Edward touched the old woman’s back gently to get her attention. “Do you have any idea why there’s no mention of my family or Whiteloch’s acquisition of Astoria here?” he motioned around the room.

She looked around, moving her whole body to scan the room rather than just her head. She moved slowly toward the wall, pointing ahead of her as she made her way in that direction. “Well, over here,” Edith pointed toward a section of the wall, “You can see that just about a hundred years ago we had the great 1922 Fire of Astoria.”

Edward and I looked at one another, exchanging looks of confusion over the top of her white head. What did this have to do with Edward’s question about his family? Not wanting to be rude, we stood there and waited to see where she was headed with this.

“Took a loooong while for them to rebuild everything,” she shook her head, letting it hang a little almost reverently. “Two people passed and over two thousand people lost their homes. Accounts recall it being very strange since the fire started on a rainy, snowy day in December...” She let her fingers trail the news article affixed to the wall.

“How did it happen?” I asked, reading while I listened.

Edith looked at me, then Edward, then back to the wall, “No one really knows, but some of these reports suggest foul play.”

“Are you suggesting that any record of my family’s involvement in Astoria burned up in this hundred year old fire?” Edward seemed confused, “Surely there must’ve been something left, some record in a building that wasn’t involved in the fire. Emma and I saw a newspaper article at the Archive Library that chronicled my Great Uncle’s visit here to share the Queen’s Proclamation.”

“I’m not sayin’ I know anything about anything, but missing papers, some burned in odd ways, a fire... I’m just trying to put puzzle pieces together.”

“But Keating wasn’t even alive in 1922, how could he have...”

Edward looked right at me, his eyes wide. “Perhaps it’s not Keating. Perhaps we’ve been wrong all along.”

“But we know he suppressed the article. We *know* he’s playing puppet master with Jeremiah and lord knows who else, and we absolutely know he’s *not* using city funds to fix anything.”

“I think you oughta talk to your father.”

Edward and I stopped and turned to look at Edith when she pipped up.

“My father?” we both asked at the same time, not sure who she was talking to.

“Your father,” she pointed at me. “Rick might have some of your Mom’s old journals. That woman wrote down everything.”

“That’s a pretty good idea,” I nodded after a few moments pondering what she’d said. The thought that my Mom might hold the key to something we were looking for was too much to consider when we had work to do, so I mentally shook it off and smiled at the old lady, “But back to the matter at hand. Thank you so much for letting us see the space. Is it really possible to rent it for an event?”

She shrugged, “Don’t see why not. No one’s been doin’ anything here for years. We’ve got a little space in the back,” she ambled slowly toward a set of double doors and opened them to a room that housed a small theatre of sorts, “Used to do presentations, class trips and the like in here. But it’s unused right now. Might work for the debate you mentioned, Eddie?”

“Quite right,” he poked his head inside the room, “Must hold at least a few hundred?”

“Three fifty,” Edith answered.

“And the meet and greet?” I asked.

“Could be out here,” she turned to where we’d been viewing the photos moments before. “Would be nice for the people of Astoria to be forced to stand in this room, maybe they’ll read about the history of their home while they wait for their turn with the prince here,” she elbowed Edward with a wheezy chuckle.

He smiled back at her, “I doubt there’ll be a line that long.”

“And if there is, I’m sure they’ll all be buried in their phones,” I added.

“You two are a couple’a Gloomy Guses. Think positively!”

“Alright,” Edward stood tall and cleared his throat, “There will be a line out the door to meet me and everyone will have forgotten their cellualars at home and will be forced to read the grand history of sea faring tradesmen that came before them on this land!”

Both Edith and I laughed. “And!” With my finger held in the air, I added, “They’ll be so enraptured that they’ll stay to hear the debate. If he shows up...”

“That’s the spirit!” Edith looked happier with our sensationalized version of the situation, “And if Bell doesn’t show up, all the better. We can just do a presentation on the history of Astoria. Why don’t you tell them about your family during that time?”

“Who would believe me without proof?” Edward asked. “Besides, we’ve got to get Emma talking about her plans to fix Astoria or there’s no chance we’ll gain those last few votes to tip the scales.”

“Too close to call,” Edith shook her head, repeating what we’d all heard on TV a few nights before, “Ain’t that somethin’. Hasn’t been a tied vote for anything in Astoria since the Mayoral race of 1922.”

“...1922?”

“If I remember correctly,” Edith thought for a moment, walking over to one of the infographics hanging on the wall, “Here, look—this guy,” she tapped at a photograph marked **Miller Clarkson, Mayor**. “This is the guy who won out in the end, but it was a tie initially.”

I wanted to say something, but instead just looked over at Edward trying to use some kind of untested telepathy to tell him this was freakin’ weird. It seemed to work, because he nodded like he agreed.

“Say, uh, Edith?”

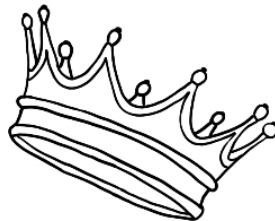
“Hm?” she turned away from the photo to look up at the man she was treating like an adopted grandson.

“Isn’t it a bit strange...”

“What?”

I cleared my throat, pipping in, “That the last time there was a tie was at the same time as the fire. You don’t really believe that could be a coincidence, do you?”

“Never gave it much thought, to be honest, but now that you mention it, that is a little odd.”



After the Meeting – Edward

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Emma asked as they left the dry haven that was the Astorian Historical Society and stepped back out into the rain.

Even though she had her own umbrella in hand, Edward lifted his oversized one over the both of them, “That Edith is a sweet lady, but smells a touch of prunes?”

“What?”

“Sorry,” he cleared his throat, “Go on, what were you thinking?”

Emma pointed back at the door they’d just exited. The wheels had been turning in her head since the old woman told them about the fire of 1922. “If what Edith is saying is true, I bet that Miller guy is the cause of the missing papers. I’m surprised. I was *so* sure Keating was at the center of this, but maybe he really is just an old man on a small town power trip.”

“Doesn’t make him any less of a plonker.”

“A plonker?”

“Jerk.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Emma agreed, “He’s still an absolute jerk face that has been running our town into the ground for literally decades. But two things can be true at the same time. He can be thwarting all my plans to save my family’s generations old business and also...not be responsible for the missing papers and the reason we didn’t know we belonged to Whiteloch. You know... The more I think about it, the more it didn’t even make sense for him to be the cause of that. It’s not like he’s been mayor *that* long. Sure, he’s out-served logical term limits, but your family has been in charge here for over two hundred years. How could he have been the one keeping that information from the people? It HAS to go deeper, or at least longer ago...”

Edward didn’t look convinced, but he nodded just the same, eyes scanning the nearby coastline blurred by the rain, “Quite right.”

The silence between them felt heavy, awkward even.

“Hey, look,” Emma touched his cheek to return his gaze to her, “It doesn’t mean we stop fighting for this. And it doesn’t mean we’re gonna stop looking for answers. It’s just...a setback. We had one theory, now we move in another direction. It’s not really even a setback when we haven’t found that much, yet, right? Just a ...”

Emma’s voice trailed off when she realized she was over-explaining again.

“Feels like all we come up against are brick walls. Maybe I should just call my father and have him come out here with...something. Or someone. Some kind of official proof.”

Emma lowered her voice to match Edward’s change in mood, “Is that what you want to do? Let him rescue you?”

Edward looked down at the girl standing in front of him in complete shock, so much so that his mouth fell open, “Emma,” he seemed hurt that she would say such a thing.

Emma bit her lip. She hadn’t meant it the way it came out. She hadn’t meant to hurt him. But the question was genuine. It hung in the air, his response unspoken.

“No. I—Christ, what a dog’s dinner this turned out to be.” He turned away from her, accidentally moving the umbrella off her head, exposing her to the rain. “Bollocks, sorry.” He moved it back quickly, but the frown still played across his lips. “No. I don’t want to *call Daddy* to rescue me,” he wagged his head a little as he said the last line in a sarcastic, mocking tone, “but this is all getting us nowhere.”

“Yet,” she added.

“What?”

“It’s getting us nowhere yet. But,” she waved her arm toward of the building they were standing outside of, “if that Clark Kent guy or whatever his name is was responsible for the fire, maybe there are records somewhere...else?”

“You realize how ridiculous that sounds, right?”

Now, it was Emma’s turn to look hurt.

“If there were records elsewhere, why would he have

bothered with the fire? If you're implying that this hundred-years-ago mayor person lit a fire in town and burned that many homes simply to erase my family from Astorian history, why on God's green Earth would he risk there being another copy elsewhere?"

She simply shrugged. "I...don't know. I guess I assumed if there was another copy somewhere that he didn't know about it. I don't know, okay? You have no reason to put down every idea when we're just brainstorming."

Edward didn't know what to say, so he let the silence hang.

"I'm going to have Mikey come pick me up," he finally said after what felt like an hour-long staring contest that really couldn't have lasted more than thirty awkward seconds.

Emma furrowed her brow. "You don't want to come back to the bar and plan the event? It's not like we're swimming in time to get this up and running."

"Swimming?" Edward scoffed, "I'm drowning."

She pulled her head back, shocked by the outburst from the usually even-keeled man before her, "Edward, you're not ___"

"I am! I've been here for weeks with no progress. Do you see this?" He pulled his phone out of his pocket and showed her the missed calls that showed lines and lines of Mum, Dad, Mum, Dad, back and forth as he scanned. "They want an update and what do I have to show for the time I've spent here? Nothing, but an extra-large petrol bill for a load of fishermen driving some grannies around."

"Is that what Royal Rides was to you?" She pressed her lips together, clearly bothered by his tone. "Because if that's what it is I'll just pay you back the money for the gas the guys spent. I thought it was a boon for the town. I thought we were providing a service to an underprivileged community. I thought we were showing the people of Astoria that someone gave a crap what happens to them. I thought we were all in this together."

Edward pressed a few fingers to the spot between his eyes. “We...are.” He growled to himself quietly, wanting so badly to walk away but having no real way to tell her: *hey, can you use your own umbrella so I can have a moment?* Instead, he stood there, stewing in his frustration. “I don’t need the money for the petrol. It was just, I’m sorry, okay? I said it without thinking. No, that’s not what Royal Rides was. I just.”

Then he sighed, looking away from Emma. “I need a moment.”

“Fine,” she shrugged and opened her umbrella with a *pop*. She held it up above her head to block her from the ever-increasing rain and stepped away, “See you around. Don’t let our plans get in your way.”

“Emma,” Edward reached for her, but she had made up her mind to get to the car.

Like the rainy land native that she was, Emma expertly closed her umbrella and slid into the driver’s seat of her car in one smooth motion, never exposing herself to the water. Edward stood in the same spot she’d left him in, looking more dejected than ever as he watched her drive off. He told her he was going to have Mikey pick him up, but the truth was he hadn’t asked. So, there he stood.

“Well, bloke, you really botched this one, didn’t you?” Edward said aloud to himself, kicking the puddle of water at his feet.

“What’s the matter, Eddie?”

“Bloody hell,” Edward jumped, turning to see Edith standing behind him, “Oh Edith, I didn’t see you there; please forgive my language.”

The older woman laughed, patting his damp arm, “Oh, kiddo. At my age I’ve heard it all, don’t sweat it. Where’s your girlfriend?”

“Girlfriend?!”

Edith corrected herself when she heard his tone, “I assumed, I guess not. Too bad, eh?”

“Quite right,” Edward caught himself saying. He hadn’t meant to, he hadn’t even known he thought it, but there it was, out in the open. The idea made him laugh a little. “I hadn’t thought of that, but I suppose yes, it is too bad. But she’s gone.”

“Gone where?”

He shrugged, “To her store, I assume. I…” he puffed his cheeks up, trying to figure out how to explain what happened without disappointing Edith, “I said some unkind things and told her I had another ride home.”

Looking around, Edith motioned to the empty parking lot, “Do you?”

Edward shook his head, “That I do not.”

“Mmmph,” Edith sort of grunted, trying not to laugh, “Little pickle you’ve found yourself in, huh?”

Edward scrunched up his face, a smile threatening to break through. In a strange way, the teasing from the old woman changed his mood and made him feel better, even if the joke was at his expense. “What about you, then?” he asked, motioning to the still empty parking lot, “How do you get around without a set of wheels?”

“Bus,” she shrugged.

“Bus?!”

“What?”

Edward looked shocked. “I should think that a lady such as yourself would have a more dignified way of getting around.”

“The bus isn’t so bad, Eddie. Besides, it’s what I got.”

“Isn’t there someone who could give you a lift?”

“No kids, widowed thirteen years,” she shrugged again. “Town won’t allow those new-fangled car apps from the cellular phone. There’s one cab company in town, and they—”

Edward lifted a hand to stop her, “No, please, don’t remind me.”

“So, you’ve been in one of those ashtrays on wheels?”

“Uh, no...never made it into the vehicle as their wait time is out of control.”

“That’s why the whole ride to the polls thing you did was such a blessing. Us old ladies don’t have an easy time getting around.”

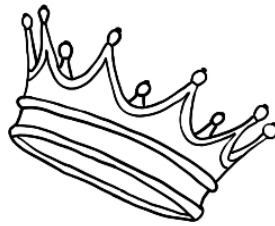
He frowned, sighing. “Right-o. Such a shame.”

“Anyway,” Edith waved it off, “you wanna come ride the bus with me?”

He didn’t. Not really. The idea of taking public transportation made him grimace. But he couldn’t just brush her off.

“Uhhh.”

“Oh, come on, Eddie. Live a little!”



Prince on Tour – Edward

When the bus pulled up to the stop where Edward was waiting with Edith, he was hesitant at first, but helped the old woman by offering her a hand and making sure her climb up the bus’s metal stairs wasn’t a difficult one. Watching her struggle made him wonder why they didn’t have an easier way for someone her age to board. What if he hadn’t been there? Would the driver have gotten out to assist her?

He climbed in after her and watched her swipe her senior citizen card for a discounted rate.

“It’ll be a buck,” the driver said to Edward as he stepped up.

“Oh—of course,” Edward reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. He had American dollars on hand, but nothing smaller than a twenty.

He handed it to the driver, who shook his head and pointed to a sign that said: EXACT FARE ONLY. DRIVERS ARE NOT EQUIPPED WITH CHANGE.

“Well, I suppose it’s a tip for the day then,” Edward said with a nervous smile, hoping the man would still let him ride.

The driver rolled his eyes and waved him on without taking the twenty, “Forget it.”

Edward pressed the matter, “No, please. I insist you take it, it was never my intention to be a stowaway.”

“The machine don’t take twenties,” he grumbled.

“For you, then?” Edward asked, hopeful.

The man snatched the twenty from Edward and shoved it, crumpled, into his uniform breast pocket. Edward walked on and took the seat next to Edith.

She patted his leg with a smile, “You’re a good egg, Eddie.”

“Not trying to cheat this already struggling town out of bus fare,” he said with a tight-lipped half smile, “So, where are we headed?”

“Around,” Edith motioned through the air with her frail hand, not bothering to get specific.

Edward’s eyes widened, “Edith...” he tried to sound concerned, even though a smile threatened to peek through, “Are you kidnapping me?”

She elbows him in the side, “You betcha’. Now, look over here.”

Edith pointed out the window of the bus toward the pier that Edward had come to know a lot about over the last few weeks, “That’s the pier, of course, that your non-girlfriend is so concerned with.”

“Right-o, that’s where her father owns his fish place?”

She nodded, “Prescott’s Pacific. Been on Pier 2 as long as I can remember. Now, this over here,” she pointed again as they drove on, “Is the River Walk.”

These were all things Edward had seen already, so he nodded, “Yes, we passed through here during the Umbrella Parade.”

Edith looked at him like she was going to ask what the Umbrella Parade was but quickly got distracted by the next landmark as the bus turned, continuing their Astorian journey, “That was the Maritime Museum on the right. We’re going downtown now. I’m sure you’ve been to some of the places there, but did you know that Astoria is the oldest settlement west of the Rocky Mountains?”

Edward bit at the inside of his lip to keep himself quiet. Edith had told Emma and him that factoid when they were in the Historical Society not an hour before. He cleared his throat, worried about this woman’s faculties and how much time he was wasting on a bus with her, seeing things he’d heard about already, “Quite an accomplishment,” he smiled, deciding to soak it in and not worry about a few hours of time.

“All these shops here are small businesses, mostly family-owned,” she motioned from one to the next as the bus moved through and took a turn up a hill, “Now we’re gettin’ somewhere—you see that building up there?”

“The old European-looking one?” he asked.

“Queen Anne style, it’s the Flavel House,” she named it like that meant something, “1885, they still got a carriage house, too. The whole place is a museum now,” It was like she had certain information memorized from years of giving tours at the Historical Society and could only repeat the things that had been seared into her memory.

“Exactly forty years after my family took control,” Edward nodded matter-of-factly, wanting to slip in his own information to see if it would trigger something in her mind. It surprised him that someone who had been living in Astoria as long as she had had no memory of Whitelochian control. “Do you think there’s any remnants of Whiteloch’s presence here in the museum there?”

She pondered it for a moment and then shrugged. “I truly don’t know, but I also haven’t been in there in years. You

know what's strange?"

"Hm?"

"It's a well-known fact here in Astoria that the British occupied the place until 1846."

Edward narrowed his eyes. "Well...known fact?"

"As well-known as history can be in a place like this.

"Why would the British have occupied Astoria until 1846 if the Queen gave it to my family in 1845?"

"Eddie," Edith patted his leg. "Do you really think people moved that quickly in the mid-1800s? Oh, look!" The bus turned another corner, "That there is the Oregon Film Museum. Got lots of famous movies that have been filmed up and around here. You should check it out; the young people love it."

"I don't think I've ever seen a movie filmed in this area." She'd somehow distracted him from the matter at hand.

"You'd probably be surprised. Kindergarten Cop?" she asked.

Edward shook his head. "Never heard of it."

"Got Arnold Schwarzenegger in it."

His brows raised up. "The *I'll be back* guy?"

"Mhm," she nodded. "How about Twilight? That one's big with the girls your age."

He rolled his eyes with a smirk, "heard of it, yes."

"Mr. Holland's Opus, think everyone's seen that one."

"Ah, yes. Fantastic film."

"Anyway. These are some of our claims to fame."

"Are you trying to sell me on the value of Astoria through a film history lesson?" Edward asked with a wink as the bus climbed a hill.

"Perhaps," Edith shrugged, "We should get out here," she pulled the cord, signaling for the bus driver to pull over at the

next stop.

Edward looked around, not recognizing the neighborhood, “This isn’t where your home is...”

“Nope,” she pushed herself to standing, grabbing the arm he offered to balance herself.

The two exited the bus with Edward shouting a “Thank you!” to the bus driver at the front. Edith said nothing until they were on the sidewalk.

“Come on,” she motioned ahead of them, “we’re going to the Astoria Column.”

Ahead was a hill Edward wasn’t sure she’d make it up. But the woman was stronger than she looked, ambling her fragile body up. Edward kept a hand near her back, not wanting to offend her by insinuating that she *couldn’t* do it on her own, but that didn’t stop him worrying.

As they climbed, Edith gave Edward a mini history lesson, “This column was built in 1926 and has 164 steps to reach the top—don’t even think about askin’ if I’m goin’ up there. If you’re headed up those stairs, you’re on your own, kiddo.”

The pair chuckled as she continued giving him tidbits of information, “Say, did you know that Clark Gable started his career here?”

“The *Gone with the Wind* guy?” Edward asked.

She nodded. “It was before I was born, but he performed in town here in 1922; my parents saw him on stage! Can you believe that?”

“Wow,” Edward crossed his arms over his chest, “They must’ve had a lot of great stories.”

“Astoria was a rowdy, bustling place in its day. I’m not really sure where things went wrong or how things fell into such disrepair. But,” Edith said, a little out of breath as they reached the top of the hill where The Column stood, “there’s still beauty hidden under all the barnacles.”

Edward took slow steps forward, stunned as he looked out at the view, amazed by what he saw. Below the coastline

stretched as far as the eye could see. It was exquisite. Only as he walked to the cliff's to look out over the scenic expanse did he realize how clear the day had become. When he stood outside the Historical Society with Emma, the rain had dampened the mood, both literally and figuratively. Somewhere along the bus ride, it must have stopped, but Edward was so distracted by Edith that he didn't notice. Yet, as he stood near the Column, he could see...everything: Downtown, his hotel, boats dotting the water, one of them probably holding his friend Mikey trying to catch the fish of the day. Of course the pier was visible as well. Even the area where he knew Moonbeam Mugs and Read Between the Vines were. His mind wandered back to Emma, wondering if she was inside, selling books or pouring wine. Probably not wine as it was barely noon, but he could imagine her in there recommending someone's next read. It made him smile.

Giving him time to himself to enjoy what he saw, Edith had hung back. It also gave the old woman a chance to catch her breath after the long walk. But now she came up to where he was and rested a hand on his back, "Really somethin', huh kiddo?"

He looked down at the petite woman and put an arm over her shoulders with a smile. "You certainly are, Lady Millstone."

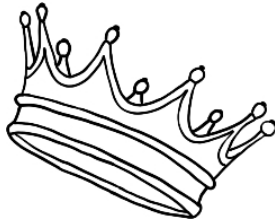
"Psh," she smacked his stomach lightly, a growl in her tone. "Eddie, I told you to call me Edith."

"Well, Edith, you've got a way of turning things around for people. I think this place and its people really do deserve a fighting chance. Thank you for bringing me up here, and for showing me around your town."

"Not my town," she wagged a finger at the much younger man, offering a reminder. "Your town."

"Our town," he smiled.

"Our town."



Chapter 20

Down At the Pier – Edward

Edward made sure that Edith got home safely and then started walking. He didn't know where he was headed, he just wandered. The fact that the rain hadn't picked up again was a surprise, even to a newcomer like him. He enjoyed the clear view as he walked back down the hill from Edith's home toward the shore. He smiled to himself, able to hear Edith's voice in his head—the woman was like an encyclopedia for facts about Astoria. He imagined her hearing him marvel at the lack of rain and replying: “Eddie, did you know that last year we had 28 days of rain in November? It's truly a wonder we're not waterlogged in the brain.”

It made him laugh as he followed the path down toward the shining shoreline and found himself at the edge of the famed Pier 2 that everyone talked about constantly. As he stood on the land edge of said pier, he ruminated on how surprising it was that he'd never been down here after everything. Mikey hadn't shown it to him except for a drive-by in the truck. Edith pointed it out on the bus ride, but even Emma hadn't brought him to the location she loved so much.

With a spring in his step, Edward ambled across the rickety planks, bringing him down the pier to the buildings situated at the end. Along the inner wall, barely covered from the elements, was what looked to be a shrine of some sort. He moved closer to see what all the photos and signs were about. The largest placard read: ASTORIA'S CANNERY WORKERS! Below it, Edward could see photos lined up of fishermen and cannery workers preserved in black and white.

“One of the oldest professions of the Pacific Northwest.”

Edward turned at the sound of the voice behind him. An

older man approached, pointing at the display. “Canning was a huge part of Astorian life. Smell hasn’t improved since these guys moved on, though,” the man chuckled at his own joke.

“It’s quite a storied history you all have here,” Edward said.

“Ahh,” the man pointed right at Edward, realization crossing his face the moment he heard the accent. “You must be the prince.”

Edward smiled, “Indeed, what gave me away? Or has my photo begun to make the rounds here in Oregon as well?”

“Don’t get many accents like yours round these parts,” the man answered reaching his hand toward Edward to officially greet him and introduce himself. “Rick Prescott, heard loots about you recently.”

“Prescott,” Edward shook the man’s hand, pointing behind them to where he now saw the sign for Prescott’s Pacific. “Emma’s father.”

Rick nodded.

“Pleasure.”

“You certainly have caused a stir around here,” he said with a laugh. “Surprised none of those hooligans brought you down here before.”

“They’re the busy sort, I suppose,” Edward shrugged, turning back to the wall, “Sorry, but you said that canning *was* a huge part of Astorian life...”

“Mhm, yep. Canneries left. So we still got the fishing culture, but none of the factories work out of this area anymore.”

“Oh.”

“That’s when this became more of a tourist destination,” Rick pointed at a photo toward the center of the exhibit. “This here is soon after the canneries closed in 1973 and the mayor dedicated the Pier as a landmark for Astoria.”

Edward looked closer at the photo, recognizing the man

cutting the ribbon. “Huh,” his brows knit together as he tried to pinpoint why he looked so familiar.

“Hm?”

“Can’t figure out why I recognize this man,” Edward shrugged. “Must just have one of those faces.”

“This one?” Rick tapped the guy in the photo, and Edward nodded, “You may have seen another photo of him elsewhere. That there’s Miller Clarkson, one of our former mayors. He did the dedication.”

“Ohhh...righto,” Edward snapped his fingers, remembering the photo he and Emma had seen in the Historical Society with Edith. “The guy with the fire.”

“Come again?” Rick asked.

“Apologies, no.” He quickly brushed off the business about the fire, not wanting to confuse the man, “Mayor from the early part of the last century?” Edward offered, and now he sounded like Edith.

“Yep, and you wanna know somethin’ funnier than heck?”

“Boy, do I ever!” Edward replied with a forced kind of chuckle.

“That right there with him, that kid? Our current mayor! Would you believe it? It’s almost like mayor-ing runs in that family. I thought we were American; thought we didn’t do dynasties and all that. Here we find out we’ve got a prince, and the fact that one family was monopolizing the mayorship makes a liiiiittle more sense.”

Edward’s head jerked to look at the man in front of him, and then back to the photo. “Sorry...did you say that your current mayor. Keating...is this boy? He’s this man’s son?”

“Grandson, but yep, that’s him.”

“Maybe that’s why Mr Keating is no fan of mine. Fancied himself the prince of Astoria all this time. Born into a family that ran the place for so long and all that?” Edward was joking, but the more he thought about it, the more it made sense.

“I don’t know a lot about a lot, but I’ll tell you what. My wife Jane, she really believed that Keating would do anything to maintain his family’s hold on this place.”

“Really?” Edward tilted his head, curious.

Rick nodded, “Mhm. Bright lady. She was always readin’ the histories, keepin’ records, updating exhibits, and knew more than anyone I’ve ever met. It was like she’d been brought up here even though she didn’t move to Astoria til her twenties.”

“Came here to be with you and raise Emma?”

Emma’s father shook his head. “Nah, librarian jobs aren’t exactly plentiful. She got one downtown and we met here,” The memory made him smile.

“And the rest is history, as they say,” Edward said, trying not to jump right in with too many questions about the man’s dead wife, but his curiosity had been piqued. “You said she kept a lot of records?”

“Was her job,” Rick shrugged. “I think that’s probably why it didn’t faze me when Mikey and Emma came talkin’ boutcha.”

“How’s that?” Edward was confused.

“The more I thought about it, the more I recognized your name. Well, your family’s name?”

“You knew about my family?”

Rick scratched at his cheek, “Don’t quote me on this, but I’m pretty sure that Jane was doin’ some research into your family’s involvement in Astoria. I could be wrong, but if memory serves, she was looking for something or another for an anniversary event she was putting together, and I’m pretty sure she emailed someone over there across the pond.”

Now Edward was even more confused. “Emma’s mother was emailing someone in Whiteloch?”

“I’m gonna be frank with you, young man...I’m just not sure,” Rick shrugged, “I know she was talkin’ about it, but it’s been so many years now my memory is shot.”

“If she knew about Whiteloch why didn’t anyone else in Astoria?”

Rick stood silently for a moment and then motioned for Edward to follow him, “Come on, son. I’ve got a better idea than us menfolk standin’ around speculating.”

Rick made his way back into Prescott’s Pacific with Edward and moved behind the fish counter to grab his coat and keys from where they hung on the wall, “You up for a walk?”

“All I’ve done today is walk,” Edward said, a total hyperbole since he had also ridden the bus with Edith, but there was no reason to bore Rick with the details of what brought him to the pier.

After his third long walk of the day, Edward found himself standing outside the Prescott family home where Emma grew up. The place was a folk style home, not too ornate, but well kept. Rick motioned for Edward to follow him up the front steps and into the house, “You wait right here,” he said, pointing to the living room. The older man traipsed up the stairs and then Edward was alone. As he glanced around the room, two competing thoughts bounced around in his mind:

Wow, I can’t believe this is the home where Emma grew up; it’s so...ordinary.

But also.

Emma’s mother, Jane, knew about Whiteloch and didn’t tell anyone?!?

The more he ruminated on that second thought, the more upset he became. Was Emma’s mother not one of the good ones? Everyone spoke so highly of her, but—

Edward’s thoughts were jerked back to reality by Rick making his way back down the stairs with a holler. “OOOOkay!”

“Okay?” Edward asked.

Rick plopped a few notebooks down on the coffee table. “One of these is bound to have some information. These were

some of her last. Woman wrote darn near everything somewhere. If she knew, then it's in here. If she didn't? Then I guess my addled old brain just made up that de ja vu feeling."

Edward took one; Rick took another. Both men flipped through. Some pages had to do lists for Jane's job. Some had notes on upcoming events the historical society wished to hold. When he turned the next page, a loose-leaf of paper fell out of the notebook. He barely caught it, put the book down and unfolded what appeared to be the printout of an email.

TO: Clerk@Whiteloch.Isles

CC: VKeating@Astoria.gov

FROM: JPrescott@AstoriaHistoricalSociety.com

SUBJECT: Replacement Documents

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Jane Prescott, and I am the head librarian at the City Hall Archives here in Astoria, Oregon. I also serve as president of the Astorian Historical Society.

It has come to my attention that we are missing key records pertaining to Whiteloch's acquisition of Astoria in the year 1845. Although Astoria has since changed hands again and moved under the jurisdiction of The United States of America we would be ever so grateful if you could provide copies of the original proclamation by Queen Victoria for us to display in the coming years as we celebrate Astoria's 160th Anniversary in 2005. Though we are a few years off, these things take time in a town as small as ours. Should we need to pay for copies of the above documents, please let me know where to remit payment.

Thank you in advance for your help and cooperation,

Jane Prescott

TO: JPrescott@AstoriaHistoricalSociety.com

CC: VKeating@Astoria.gov

FROM: Clerk@Whiteloch.Isles

SUBJECT: RE: Replacement Documents

Dear Ms. Prescott,

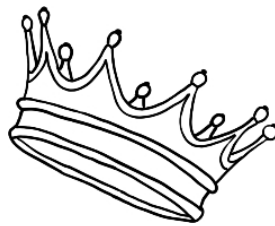
We here at the Clerk's Office of Whiteloch were confused upon receipt of your missive. First and foremost, I assure you that Astoria has not changed hands from Whiteloch to the United States. Although the American government has propositioned the king in an effort to purchase the land a number of times, no agreement has been reached.

With that in mind, we would be happy to provide you with downloadable documents as well as an additional physical copy by mail free of charge. We understand your library has misplaced the initial Proclamation brought to Astoria by the first Duke of Finnsgate. It is disappointing to hear as it was a priceless piece of our shared history. However, if any additional pieces are missing, please let us know.

We await your reply with an address that we may use to mail you the said documents. In the meantime, please let us know how we can assist in the planning of your bicentennial celebration as well as how we may assure the people of Astoria that they are still, indeed, Whitelochian Citizens.

In the name of the King,

George Hoffman



Back at the Prescott's – Edward

Edward stared at the paper in his hands, mouth slack, jaw open as his eyes scanned and rescanned the words.

“Something useful?” Rick asked.

“I should say—Mister Prescott, have you read this?”

Emma's father shook his head. “Son, if I took the time to reach through every journal and paper my late wife left behind, I'd never be doin' anything else.”

Edward handed the paper over, waiting to see the man's

reaction.

Unlike Edward, Rick didn't look all that surprised. He shrugged, "Yep, sounds about right. I told you she's been goin' on about you all."

"Then why didn't you tell people about Whiteloch?" Edward wasn't being accusatory, but he was confused. "If you, if your wife, knew about us..."

Rick grimaced. "Honestly, I was only half listening most of the time when she talked about work. I'm embarrassed to say it now that we're without her, but it's the truth. She had so many events and historical happenings to tell Emma and me about, on and on. I love my wife, son. Don't take this wrong, but how can one man keep up with all that?" He chuckled quietly. "I told you, when Mikey came in and mentioned you, it sounded right. I even told Emma early on that you were probably legitimate. Though, I didn't remember any of this," and with that he handed Edward back the papers.

"Do you think I could make copies of this?"

"If you think it'll be helpful to you, that's fine. But I don't have a copy machine in the house."

"Of course not, no no," Edward smiled. "May I borrow it? I'd like to show Emma."

Rick nodded as Edward stood, "Speaking of Emma..." the man's voice trailed off.

"What are your intentions with my girl, anyway? You can't tell me you're planning to sweep her off her feet and drag her back to your island, are you?"

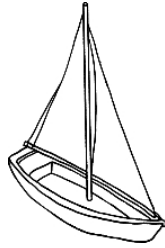
"Mister Prescott," Edward looked down at the man who was still sitting before him. "Do you really think she'd allow that, even if I wanted to?"

Rick laughed. "No, I suppose not. Alright then, take the papers."

Edward smiled. "I'm going to use these for two reasons."

"Oh?"

“I’m absolutely going to use your wife’s research and findings as a way to show that Keating absolutely did have knowledge of us—” Edward hit the page with a smack. “He’s cc’ed right bloody here—excuse my language. But first? I’m going to use this to smooth things over with your daughter.”



Chapter 21

Read Between the Vines – Emma

When Edward walked through the front door of my bookstore, it had been almost 24 hours since I'd seen him, and time had done nothing to soften my annoyance. We stood outside the Historical Society the day before having what I thought was a nice conversation about the potential next steps we should take, the new information we'd received from Edith, and honestly? I thought we were just bouncing around ideas and brainstorming. But he blew off everything I pitched, making it clear he had no interest in the hard work and effort it would take to reach our shared goals.

Or at least, what I thought were our shared goals. Now, I wasn't sure at all.

Luckily, I was helping a customer when he arrived, causing him to make his way to the counter where Sarabeth was instead of directly to me. I could see her greet him out of the corner of my eye. The two said something *sotto voce*, making it impossible for me to hear from where I stood, but they were absolutely looking my way—subtle, guys.

"I'm looking for a gift," the woman had told me. "My office is having a book version of Secret Santa if you can believe that," she chuckled, obviously nervous to ask for assistance.

"That's so cute," I gave her a genuine smile, really loving the idea of a secret book exchange. "Did you get someone with similar taste to yours?"

"Actually," she smacked her forehead to show her frustration, "I did not." She bit her lip and looked at the ground before making eye contact with me again. "Don't

judge me, but I got the cutest guy ever—I’ve had a crush on him as long as I can remember. Do you still call it a crush at this age? Whatever. But I’m not sure what to get a rando straight dude for a book?”

That made me laugh with her. “I’ve got just the ticket.” I motioned for her to follow me over to the history section. I could feel both Edward’s and Sarabeth’s eyes follow me, but I ignored them.

“A history book?” the customer asked, skeptical, “For a Secret Santa gift? Isn’t that a little...I dunno, dry?”

“Truuust me,” I said, grabbing a book on Roman History to hand to her, “this is what you wanna give a guy. If you don’t believe me, google *Roman History Trend* when you get home.”

“Um, okay,” she still sounded unsure, but she was smiling again. “If you really think so.”

“I do. Also, be sure to ask him if he likes podcasts about Rome...or the television series. Better yet, tell him if he likes the book, you two can watch the show together sometime!”

“Oh, suuuure, girl you are way braver than me if you think those words are gonna come out of my mouth.”

Guiding her back toward the counter with a shrug, I replied, “I probably wouldn’t have the guts to do it either, but it’s an idea.” I handed the book to Sarabeth who was working on running the cash register.

“Can we talk?” Edward asked without even saying hello.

The customer I’d been helping gave me a wide-eyed glance. “Does he also like the Roman Empire?” she asked.

Another day, I would’ve blushed. Not today.

Today I was caught between wanting to walk away from him and enjoying the banter with the woman who looked around my age.

“Yeah,” I motioned for Edward to follow me away from the counter, not wanting whatever he was about to lay on me to interrupt sales. “We can talk.”

I stood with my arms crossed, waiting to hear what *the prince* had to say.

“Look,” he said, “I’m sorry for lashing out yesterday. I’d like to say it was uncharacteristic of me to wallow in my self-pity when things don’t go my way, but...”

Raising an eyebrow, I motioned for him to continue, “But...?”

“But my mother would tell you it’s something I’m guilty of a lot. Royal commentators would call it the result of growing up with a silver spoon in my mouth, but that’s no excuse. You didn’t deserve to be the brunt of my frustrations.”

“Do you realize how long I’ve been dealing with all of this and constantly coming up against brick walls?”

“Yes,” he nodded, hanging his head slightly to show shame visibly as he let me voice my upset.

“Hearing you say you feel like you’re drowning in something you’ve been dealing with one sixteenth of the amount of time...” I shook my head, not knowing how to continue. “Well, it just wasn’t great, okay?”

Edward nodded. “I know.”

My arms were still crossed over my chest, a protective measure to keep a barrier between us. And then he reached into the breast pocket of his coat and pulled out some papers. I narrowed my eyes as he handed them to me, “What’s this?” I asked.

“Read it,” he motioned with his head, shoving both hands deep into his pockets as he waited for me to do so.

Immediately, I noticed my mother’s email address. JPrescott...had to be her. I sped through the words on the page, trying to understand the exchange, “Where...did you get this?”

“Your father,” Edward replied.

I looked up from the page, confused, “You spoke to my Dad?”

“Not on purpose,” he quickly added, “I ran into him. We got to talking...one thing led to another and we found this,” he motioned to the paper I was holding. “Emma, I think your mother knew about Whiteloch and was trying to,” he waved his hands around a little, “I don’t know, do something. You read it, you tell me.”

I reread it, eyes scanning each word more slowly this time. “I guess this means you were right.”

“Come again?” Edward asked, confused by my admission.

“Well look,” I pointed to where the mayor had been cc’ed on the email from my mother to whoever she was speaking with in Whiteloch, “He knew about you. Or at least about Whiteloch, likely more. This can’t be the end of the email chain, right?”

“Oh, it goes even deeper than that.”

“How do you mean?” I asked.

Edward cleared his throat. “Remember the mayor who won the tied race in 1922?”

I nodded, “Mhm. Miller, something, something.”

“Clarkson, Miller Clarkson,” he corrected. “Emma,” he reached out and touched my forearm, “you’re never gonna believe who he’s related to.”

Wanting really badly to get this guessing game right, I stopped and thought it through. Who could he have been referring to? “Is he like your long-lost cousin or something? Or, I guess, great uncle? Someone descended from the guy you were named for that game over here back in the 1800s?”

He shook his head slowly. “Keating.”

“What?!” My eyes grew wide as saucers. “The guy who lit the fire that burned half the town to bits is related to Keating?? Are you trying to tell me that being a crappy mayor who doesn’t do anything good for Astoria is genetic!?”

“Shhh,” Edward pressed a finger to my lips to quiet me, but he was smiling at the obvious excitement building in me, “You can’t let everyone in on this, and you can’t let the public

hear you speak like that when you're still running for the City Council..."

"Okay, sorry, but WHAT?"

"I know, I know, it's absolutely bonkers."

"Why didn't my Dad tell me that he had this email? Why didn't my Dad tell me he knew about you?"

"I don't think he knew about me. He certainly didn't know about this." Edward took the paper back and folded it again, replacing it in the pocket he'd retrieved it from moments before. "This was in an old notebook of your mother's. I asked him much of the same questions. It sounds like he uhh...only partially listened when your mum spoke about her job. Poor chap."

"Poor chap?!" My voice raised again.

"Sorry," he motioned for me to quiet once again, "Poor your mother, or whatever. It's not time for us to give them postmortem couples therapy. The fact is, he heard her mention it, and it sounded familiar, but he didn't remember the details. Cut the man some slack; it has been many years. He did say he didn't argue when Mikey came in to tell him about me, so that's something, I suppose?"

I pressed my lips together nodding. "Okay, so...he has more?" I was willing to drop the idea of my Dad ignoring my Mom for the moment since there was literally nothing that could be done about that. He'd be hearing from me later on the matter.

"He kept all her notebooks; we went through a few, found this and off I went, so yes. I'm sure there's more. But, this was sent from her historical society email. Do you think there's more where this came from in her former office?"

I shook my head. "There's no way they preserved the office, Edward. It's not like she was some princess whose work was enshrined for years to come."

"No, but certainly, they didn't destroy her work after her passing. That would be bloody ridiculous."

“Then why did no one pick up the torch and continue after her?” I asked, not really expecting him to have an answer.

Edward shrugged. “I suppose that’s a question for whoever got the job after her. Did Astoria ever have that bicentennial celebration she was speaking of?”

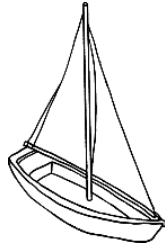
“Yeah, we did, but I have no idea who got the job after her. Or who planned the event. I was just a kid.”

“Someone’s got to have that information,” Edward replied. “What about that old woman with the harsh voice down at the library?”

“Pearl?”

“Yes,” he snapped his fingers at the reminder, “Ms. Johanson, was it? She knew your mother, didn’t she? Perhaps she told her about it?”

“WHY DID NO ONE TELL ME ANYTHING!?” I almost screamed and then smacked a hand over my mouth to quiet myself. “Sorry.” I clenched my jaw and took a deep breath through my nose. “I’m sorry,” I calmed myself down and looked right at Edward. “We’re gonna get to the bottom of this.”



Chapter 22

Back at the Archives – Emma

The next morning, Edward and I returned to the City Hall Archive Library where we'd first found the newspaper article referring to Whiteloch. Pearl Johanson was at the front desk, as she'd been every other time I'd been there.

On the drive over, I'd debated different ways of approaching the woman.

“How about — Hey PEARL, how could you keep vital information about my mother's life's work away from me when I was just a child?!”

Edward looked over at me, his mouth hanging open.

“No?” I asked.

He shook his head.

“How about — Hiiii Pearl,” I changed my tone to be sweeter this time, “could you point me in the direction of the jerk wad who took over my Mom's position here at work after she died tragically in my childhood and then lied to the whole town for twenty years thereafter?”

His brow furrowed. I could only see him from the corner of my gaze, trying to keep my eyes on the road, but I could see he didn't like that one either. “Call me an absolute dolt if you want, but I don't see either of those winning us any votes at the run-off election.”

I growled, my hands clutching the steering wheel tightly.

“Emma,” Edward placed a hand lightly on my leg and then pulled it back when he realized he might distract me from the task at hand, “why don't we just go in and ask who the current Head Librarian is and how long they've had the job?”

“That sounds boring,” I shot back, sticking my tongue out at him as I pulled us into a parking spot, “But I suppose it will get the job done.”

Soon we were back in the library, stepping up to the desk the same way we had the time before, “Hey Pearl,” I said softly with a little wave, “how’s it going?”

She narrowed her eyes at the sound of the greeting and pulled her glasses back into her face, looking up from the oldest computer known to man. “Oh, Emma,” she stood up when she realized who was there and walked over to the counter. “Don’t tell me you’re back to spend another day in the basement.” Then she looked over at Edward. “You must really like this girl if you’re spending another beautiful day covered in dust.”

Edward laughed, “You betcha!”

You betcha? Good lord.

“Anyway,” I patted his arm, “Edward and I were actually hoping to speak to the head librarian who took over after my Mom uh, passed.”

Pearl shook her head. “No can do, sweetheart.”

“And why’s that?” Edward asked, not as chipper as he’d been moments before.

“You see, young man,” Pearl rested a fist against one of her hips, “after Mayor Keating let your Mom go from the position, it never got filled.”

“Let go?” Edward looked over at me, now it was his turn to look confused, like I had kept something from him.

“Mhm,” Pearl nodded. “Your Mom,” she spoke directly to me this time, “was let go from the Head Librarian position ohhh...goodness, maybe a few months before she died. She kept her position at the Historical Society a little longer, but that was always volunteer, so it’s not like he could fire her there.”

“I’m sorry, Pearl...are you telling me that Keating *fired* my mother?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. And then never filled the position.”

“How is that even legal? He can’t just fire someone for no reason,” Edward asked.

“Young man.”

“Edward,” he said so she wouldn’t have to keep calling him young man.

“Edward.” she gave him a close-mouthed smile, “Oregon is an at-will employment state. Don’t nobody need a reason to fire anyone here.”

He pulled back a bit, shocked to hear this. “Well, I don’t bloody well care what Oregon is; Astoria is a Whiteloch principality and we don’t do such things there.”

I grabbed a hold of Edward’s arm, pulling him back in an effort to calm him down. This was a twist, to be honest. When we arrived at the library, we’d both thought I would be the one causing a scene, but here we were with Edward, finding out that the civil employees in charge of Astoria were not following Whiteloch’s laws. And I could see that it bugged him.

When I turned back to Pearl, I expected her to look confused. The man standing with me —just had an outburst about a place she’d probably never heard of. But...she didn’t. She didn’t look confused at all. Instead, the old woman started digging around. Eventually, she found a simple orange Post-It Note with some scribbles on it. She read the note to herself, glancing between it and Edward a few times.

“Are you Edith’s prince friend?”

Edward and I exchanged looks. It seemed his reputation preceded him—so much for passing him off as my friend Eddie like we did last time.

He cleared his throat and straightened his shirt simultaneously, trying to look more presentable, perhaps more princely as he replied to her, “Yes, madam, I am indeed Prince Edward Grafton Windermere the third, Duke of Finnsgate.”

Oh boy, here we go again, back to the full title. Then again...maybe it would get us somewhere with Pearl. Weren't all older women obsessed with the Royal Family? Even if that meant the British one, he was related...kinda, right?

"Uh-huh," Pearl nodded, "She warned me you two might be snoopin' around."

"Snooping? Pearl..."

"C'mere, kiddo," Pearl motioned for us to follow as she made her way out from behind the Librarian's counter to the side where we stood. The extra long lanyard that held her keys clinked against her leg as she walked. The two of us exchanged confused glances and just shrugged mouthing *I don't know* as we followed her around a corner, down a hall, through a door...it felt like we were journeying to Narnia. Finally, she stuck one of the keys in a nondescript door and pushed it open. "Here ya go."

Pearl stepped aside, holding the door open for both of us to go in ahead of her. Inside were just...boxes. Stacks and stacks of boxes. I wasn't sure if we were supposed to be impressed or awed; she'd made such a production of bringing us there. But ...

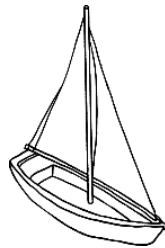
"Uh," I pressed my lips together, trying to think of a polite way to ask her what the heck we were looking at. "Are these... records?" I asked, trying to think of what could be so important.

"These were your mother's."

"All of it?" My eyes widened.

"Mhm."

"Blimey..."



Carrying the Torch – Emma

Possibly the most surprising part was that none of the ladies who worked at the library or volunteered at the historical society with my mother during her lifetime bothered to go through these boxes. To her credit, Pearl had kept them locked away so that no one under Keating's thumb could get to them—but she hadn't opened even one box.

"Forgive my ignorance on the topic," Edward cleared his throat, allowing me to be the first one to open one of the file boxes, "but why was no one given the post after Jane's untimely passing?"

Pearl raised an eyebrow at Edward and shook her head. "Well, first off, it wasn't her death that left the position open. Like I said, Keating let her go before that. We were all confused at the time, but your Mom," she turned to look at me, "was convinced that Keating sacked her as a cover-up."

So much information was flying around that I could barely focus, "Okay, wait. So Mom got fired before she died. That you mentioned. Now you're telling me she thought she was fired to cover up what?"

"And you never answered why the position was never filled," Edward added.

"That's just the thing," Pearl sighed, "No one really knows why. People claim they applied. But none of us here ever saw anyone get interviewed, and certainly none of us were considered for that job. Keating and that lot claimed the reason we weren't considered was lack of education." Then she rolled her eyes.

"Are you saying that the mayor has been claiming for the past however many years since Emma's mother passed that there is no one available in the whole world qualified to be the head librarian of bloody Astoria Oregon's Archives?" Edward sounded incensed.

"That applied, yeah that's what he's been saying. No one qualified applied," she repeated, starting to sound just a touch annoyed.

"Bullshit."

“Edward,” I widened my eyes at him. Not because I cared if the man cursed, but did he have to do it in front of Pearl?

“What? Emma, this man is a liar and a fraud.”

“Well, I know that,” I rolled my eyes. “What do you think I’ve been trying to tell everyone? Why do you think I’ve been trying to get on the City Council.”

“Ms Johanson?”

“Prince Edward?”

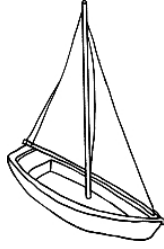
“We’re going to need a bigger boat.”

“What?” Pearl and I looked right at him, varying amounts of confusion crossing our faces.

“Sorry,” Edward blushed, “I’ve always wanted to say that. But what I meant was, we’re going to need some help going through all of this,” he motioned at the boxes around us.

“He’s right,” I said. “There’s no way we’re going to get through all of this before next year if we don’t have all hands on deck.”

“I suppose we could call Edith and the ladies over at AHS,” Pearl replied.



Chapter 23

The Challenge - Emma

“Just walk right up there and tell him that you’re challenging him to a duel!” was what Sarabeth said as I stood on the steps outside the Mayor’s office with her, Mikey, and Edward.

“A duel?” Mikey looked at SB, shaking his head.

“A debate,” I corrected.

“Just don’t get arrested for yellin’ at him like Edward here did the other day.”

I narrowed my eyes and looked at Edward, “You got arrested? Why didn’t I know about this?”

Edward waved it off, shooting Mikey a glare, “Never mind that. It was nothing. We must focus right now. You go in there and you tell that Mister Bell character that if he doesn’t show up to the debate next week, we’re gonna have it without him!”

With a deep breath, I stood up straighter and walked my behind up the steps of the mayor’s office and through the front door, without the three of them. Mikey thought it would be better if I went in alone and we didn’t make a scene.

“Emma Prescott here to see Jeremiah Bell,” I told the woman behind the front desk.

The woman didn’t even look up from whatever it was she was doing to tell me, “Councilman Bell is on council business with the Mayor and won’t be back in the office for a bit. You’re welcome to wait or you can leave a message.”

Crap.

She plopped a pad of sticky notes onto the counter in front

of me with a pen.

“No thanks,” I shook my head. “Thank you anyway, but I’ll come back another time.”

I wandered back outside to my friends to tell them the bad news. But what I saw was Mayor Keating being dropped off on the front steps by a private driver and as luck would have it, the woman was right: Jeremiah Bell *was* with him.

“Is that where all the money goes?” I asked as he neared where I regrouped with my friends.

“Pardon me, Miss Prescott?” He asked.

“She asked if that is where all the money from the city of Astoria has been going.” Edward motioned to the fancy limo he’d just gotten out of with his patsy. “Giving you and your friends rides?”

“I don’t rightly know what you’re insinuating, but I think the accusation that I’m misusing the public’s money to fund my transportation is hilarious coming from someone who claims to be a prince. Isn’t that all monarchs do? Use the money of their people to fund a lavish lifestyle?” He clicked his tongue and shook his head, “I am the mayor of this town and as such when I am out on city business I have every right to utilize city resources.”

We all stood silent for a moment. The Mayor...had a point. When I looked over at Sarabeth, her jaw was hanging open and she mouthed at me ‘*Oh my god.*’ Yeah, that man was beyond jerky, but he did have a point. *Crap again.*

But that wasn’t the point, not by a long shot.

“Frankly, Mayor Keating, I think you’re trying to shift focus away from the matter at hand. So what if Edward and his family tax the people of the Whiteloch Isles to fund a lifestyle most people can’t imagine even in their dreams? Two wrongs don’t make a right!” Sarabeth looked so proud of herself when she finished reprimanding the mayor at Edward’s expense.

Mikey smacked his forehead. I rubbed both hands over my face. Edward glared at her.

This wasn't going well.

I had to redirect the conversation before we talked ourselves out of supporting Edward as the obvious alternative to Keating running Astoria.

"You children better get a move on. You too, Michael," the mayor finally said, waving us off as he climbed the stairs toward the building that housed his office.

"No," I stood firm, hands ringing in front of me, "I came here to inform you, Mister Bell, sir, that we will be having a debate next week."

Now the mayor just laughed. One of those deep belly laughs that seems to echo in the space around you, even outside in the open. He patted Jeremiah on the back and shook his head. "Jeremiah here won't be able to make it to your little shindig. He's busy that day."

"We didn't even say what day—" I grabbed Sarabeth's arm to quiet her. She'd said enough.

"My point exactly," he grinned at her and continued up the steps.

"No." I wanted to stomp my foot. It was a toddler's reaction, but I felt it in my soul. Still, I didn't. I tried to channel my Mom and stood tall instead. "We won't be taking no for an answer today. We are having a debate next Wednesday, Mister Bell. It's being held at the Astorian Historical Society, and I look forward to hearing all about your plans for Astoria."

"Mister Bell," Keating repeated, slowing his words considerably as though we weren't smart enough to understand him when he spoke at a regular speed, "won't be available."

"That's fine," I shrugged, no longer willing to play this man's games, "if he's unavailable, I'll have the stage to myself. Frankly, I don't relish the idea of having to do all the speaking myself. Still, I'm sure the people of Astoria will side with me when they find that their current councilman for the third district can't be bothered to come to tell them about what

he plans to do over the next session.”

“Mister Be—”

“Can’t Jeremiah speak for himself?! Good lord, Vernon!”
Mikey finally broke in.

I suspected that he couldn’t (and also that that was the entire reason why Mayor Keating had put him in that position) to begin with. But, to my surprise, Jeremiah Bell did speak up:

“Vernon, don’t you think we should show up for these kinds of community events?” Then he turned to look at me, “I’ll be there.”

Vernon Keating chuckled, a smirk playing on his lips as he narrowed his eyes at me, “You’re gonna regret this. You shouldn’t even be running, let alone debating someone who is tried and true in this position.”

“Me? I’m gonna regret it?” I scoffed, crossing my arms over my chest in an instinctively protective way, “When the people of Astoria find ou—” but before I could get the words out of my mouth, Edward squeezed my arm more tightly than he had before.

“What Emma has planned for this fair city; they’re going to change allegiances, if they haven’t already!”

I sucked in a breath, realizing that he’d stopped me from outing what we knew. But why?

Instead of addressing me, Vernon Keating looked right past me to Mikey. He locked his eyes on the fisherman. “Michael, are you not going to talk some sense into these children? It would behoove you to control the situation.”

Mikey jerked his head back, surprised to be addressed at all in the situation, let alone asked to take control. “Vernon, I ___”

“We are *not* children,” Sarabeth growled.

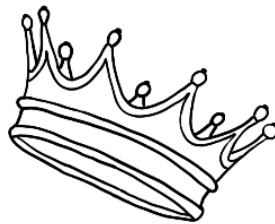
“And Mikey isn’t responsible for us, either,” Edward added, “though Mikey has been like my right hand since I arrived here in Astoria, I’ll thank you to keep him out of this.” It was apparent by his tone that Edward was worried and

protective. Who knows how Vernon would retaliate against the man he'd known longer than any of us had been alive if things didn't go his way? Would he lose his job the way my Mom had?

Wait...was that what happened? Did my Mom lose her job because Vernon Keating saw that she was in contact with someone in the Whiteloch clerk's office and risked exposing him for...whatever was going on?

I swallowed hard and took a step back, touching Sarabeth's arm the way Edward had me a moment before. "Come on, SB. We're done here."

Jeremiah Bell, never too quick on the uptake, didn't seem to catch wind of the mood change and tipped an imaginary hat at me. "Ms. Prescott, I'll see you for the debate!"



A New New Plan – Edward

Once the two men were gone, the group of four stood staring at one another, soaking in everything that just happened.

"I think he fired my Mom for what she found out about Whiteloch. For communicating with them." Emma finally said.

"What makes you think that?" Mikey asked.

"Actually," Emma sighed, "it was hearing him talk to you that made it all click in my mind. Did you hear how he threatened you? That wasn't just smack talk, Mikey. He can ruin lives. Clearly."

Edward rubbed his hands together. "We need to gather enough information to expose him on the stage. Live in front of everyone. And—" He held up a finger, showing that he had an additional idea, "We need media coverage."

“How are we going to get media coverage for a small town City Council debate?” Sarabeth asked, skeptical.

“Yeah, it’s not exactly a hot topic.”

Edward looked around, the wheels turning in his mind. “Why don’t I drop by my cousin’s for a visit and ask him what he thinks? He’s always in the news!”

“Your cousin?” Emma asked.

Edward nodded. “Yes, he’s a bit of a black sheep in the family. Honestly, it makes me look great whenever he pops up and does something the Windsors hate, *but* he’s a nice bloke overall and would probably have some good advice for us on how to deal with the press.”

Emma raised an eyebrow at Edward. “You can’t possibly be talking about...Prince...Harry, can you?”

“Quite right.”

Sarabeth’s jaw fell open. “You know ...you’re related to Prince Harry?” the woman had stars in her eyes as she looked at Edward with renewed interest.

“...And you’re just gonna...pop over and ask him what to do?” Emma asked, her eyes narrowed.

“We’re long overdue for a visit anyway. No plans tomorrow, right? I’ll grab his address from my mother and drop by.” Edward seemed convinced this plan was foolproof.

Emma cleared her throat. “Ahem, Edward. I don’t know Prince Harry’s address or anything, but I’m almost positive he and his family live in Southern California. How are you planning to get there? You don’t even have a car. Mikey has work and that kind of a tri—”

“I’m sure there are car services available for hire, in fact, didn’t we just see the Mayor get out of one—”

“You’re going to take a car service from Astoria to Hollywood?” Even Sarabeth couldn’t curb the tone of voice that seemed to say, *Are you nuts?*

Edward shrugged, cutting her off, “Is it more like

Edinburgh to London? I could hop on a train?”

“Uhhh, it’s more like...London to *ROME*. You’ll be gone for all our meet and greet planning!” Emma’s face dropped.

“Good God, woman. How big *is* this country, anyway?”

“Huge,” Mikey said, patting Edward on the back, “Simply huge, my boy. If you wanna talk to his family member of yours, why don’t you just drop him a line on the telephone?”

“Drop him a line on the telephone?” Emma was so thrown by this whole conversation that the sarcasm just dripped from her lips. “Mikey, honestly, what era are you in? Edward, just FaceTime him or something.”

“Now you listen,” he pointed right at her, “in my day we drank from a hose and respected our elders.”

“Is that some kind of Gen X grandstanding?” Emma asked. They often forgot that despite how much help Mikey had been, he was somewhere between their age and the age of Emma’s father, not exactly a peer.

Mikey grumbled. “I’m just sayin’, maybe if you kids weren’t so quick to judge us folks in the middle, you’d grab those extra votes. You ain’t gonna beat Jeremiah without a little honey.”

“Mikey’s got a point,” Sarabeth jumped in. “If you wanna win over the people he’s managed to get the votes from, you’re gonna have to be nice to them.”

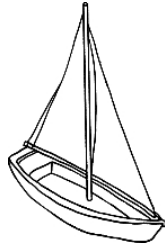
Edward wanted to roll his eyes but didn’t. Instead, he just replied with, “I see your point, but I think Royal Rides has proven it’s less that people want to vote for that absolute waste of skin, and more that they either don’t know what’s going on or don’t have a way to get there.”

“Which is why we need media coverage for the debate,” Emma agreed.

“And why Edward needs to call Prince Harry,” Sarabeth grinned.

“SB, babydoll...” Emma patted her friend’s shoulder with mock sympathy, “rumor has it Prince Harry is taken; you

might wanna let that flame burn out.”



Chapter 24

How Much Does Dad Know? – Emma

“Dad,” I grumbled through clenched teeth, “How is it that I’ve gone basically two decades not knowing my mother was fired from her job at the Archive Library?”

My father, Benedict Arnold, scratched at his cheek, comfortable in his oversized chair. “Well, sweetheart, I mostly forgot that until you reminded me just now.”

“Dad,” I raised my voice and then quickly lowered it, not wanting Edward to see me lose my cool. “Dad. What do you mean you forgot?”

“Emma, darlin’, it just wasn’t at the forefront of my mind when I was busy losing my wife, becoming a widow and a single father with one cast of the fishin’ line.”

Ouch.

Edward made a *yeeesh* kind of sound, tugging at his collar. I’d gone too far.

I gulped. “Sorry, it’s just...”

But there was no excuse. “Okay, I’m just sorry,” I finished the apology. But Dad, can you please try to remember if there’s anything else important? Anything that might help us?”

“Your mama was a bit of a conspiracy theorist, to be honest,” Dad licked his bottom lip, smiling at what must’ve been a fond memory of my mother. He got lost in thought for a moment, staring out the window.

“I’m loving these little tidbits of info, Dad, but what does that have to do with Keating, Mom being fired, and all that?”

Dad shrugged. “Just mean she always had some idea of

what was goin' on. I rarely took any of them that seriously. Did I ever tell you that that woman," he chuckled, "love of my life though she was, legitimately believed that Vernon Keating's grandfather started the great fire of 1922."

Edward just about choked on his own spit, coughing out a, "Pardon?"

My eyes grew wide, turning to look at Edward, who basically had the same look on his face. Then I looked back at my father, "Are you talking about Miller Clarkson?"

"Uhhh," my solitary remaining parental unit looked like he had no idea who that was, "I'm not sure, sounds a bit familiar."

Edward seemed to have figured out the pattern of this conversation, because rather than ask another pointed question, he simply said, "Mister Prescott, could you tell us more about your wife and her theories?" It sounded like the prince was just trying to get ol' Daddio talking, rather than trying to force his memory with specifics. Not a bad idea, to be honest. Maybe he was more fit to lead a town than I'd thought. He had a way of understanding people at the very least.

"Jane was a conundrum," Dad chuckled at the thought of my Mom. "She was a facts based person most of the time, but then she'd come up with these wild theories that most of us just thought were crazier than a soup sandwich. Then again," he stopped looking so amused for a moment and rubbed the back of his neck. "Now that you're here," he motioned to Edward, "some of it doesn't sound so crazy after all."

My old man's face dropped. "She was convinced that the Mayor was involved in some kind of scheme where he was keeping information from the people of Astoria about a whole host of things," he shook his head. We could see the wheels turning. "I can't remember what all it was, but she *knew*," he emphasized the word, "that Keating was taking money from the town, or something like that. Said something about hinky finances. We all thought it was hogwash, because frankly," now Dad was laughing again, but not as fully, "aren't all

government men corrupt and keeping things from their underlings?”

“Dad...” I shook my head, “It shouldn’t be like that. And honestly, I think Mom was right,” I motioned to Edward. “At the very least he’s been keeping information about Edward’s family and their involvement in Astoria a secret.”

“Not to put too fine a point on it, but your wife may have been right about the money as well. Not to say that we *need* more money in Whiteloch, but we are technically entitled to taxes. I suppose maybe father’s been getting them all along, and that’s why he hasn’t bothered to look into the mismanagement until now?”

“Yikes,” I scrunched up my face, not liking the sound of what Edward was suggesting, “Are you saying that your father cares so little for Astoria that he was willing to overlook everything going on here as long as he got his tax checks? Not really instilling confidence in me that he’s going to be a better ruler than Keating is.”

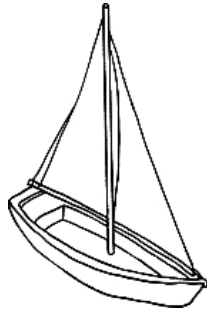
Edward didn’t bother to argue my point. He just looked at Dad and said, “Maybe you’re right, Mister Prescott. Maybe all government employees are corrupt. At the end of the day, we’ve still got to get Emma into office if we’re going to expose him and get the town fixed up, especially your pier. When we were there the other day I saw how badly it’s fallen into disrepair. Surely there’s no way my father or mother know about that or they’d have had it fixed.”

“I don’t really understand why you’ve got to be in a position of power to expose Keating. Your Mom wasn’t, and she was certain she could show him to be a wolf in sheep’s clothing through spreading the truth. She just wanted proof.”

“I’m not following, Dad. How can we expose him if I don’t get in there and get that proof?”

“What if you just go through the work your Mom already did and start from there? When she died, I donated the majority of her work to the Historical Society,” he shrugged. “Don’t know if they kept it or trashed it or what, but that was what she wanted. The stuff here,” he motioned to the box that

he and Edward had gone through the other day, still sitting in the living room, “I just kept out of sentimentality. Call your old man sappy if you want, but I loved that librarian.”



Historical Society – Emma

“You should cut your Dad some slack,” Edward told me as he held open the door to the Historical Society building for me to enter first. In all my years on this planet, I’d entered the building maybe three times; now, I’d been there more times than that in the last few weeks.

“I know,” I nodded, “I’m just trying to figure this all out, but it’s hard finding out that your Mom had a whole life that you didn’t know about, sorta...?”

“What if you look at it differently,” he bumped my shoulder, smiling down at me. “Can’t you see that you’ve basically taken up her torch? Are you or are you not an extension of a lovely librarian who cared a great deal for her adopted home?”

“I guess.” I couldn’t help it: a tiny smile surfaced, and I bumped him back. Shoulder to shoulder was how Edith found us when she arrived in the entry hall.

“You two again,” she winked. “C’mon, I’ll show you where we kept all the stuff your father donated.”

Three hours had passed. “I’m starving,” I grumbled. “I know we can’t leave, but I swear if I thought my legs would work properly, I’d run over to Moonbeams and get us some bagels or something. Freakin’ anything.”

Edward reached into his pocket, pulled something out and tossed it in my direction.

I screeched and ducked so it wouldn't hit me.

“What the?” He asked.

“What'd you throw at me?!”

“Mints,” he shrugged. “It's all I've got.”

I fished the metal container out from under the table where it slid and shrugged, “I guess it's better than nothing.” I popped one in my mouth, enjoying the cooling sensation as I started to dig through the next box.

“Hey, Edward?” I held up an overflowing file folder that read **Financials**.

“Bingo.”

He moved through the stacks of boxes over to where I'd laid the folder open on top of my make-shift-cardboard-desk.

“All we need,” I said, flipping paper after paper over, “is something that shows Keating's shady dealings. If we can prove that he stole even one red cent from Astoria, we can show that on stage at the debate and seal the deal.”

“Who's this guy?” Edward pointed to the name on an email: Frank Jordan.

“No clue,” I shrugged, “but his email address says Treasurer's office, sooo..” I scanned the email for anything damning against the mayor. I read it aloud to Edward. “Mr. Jordan, this is Jane Prescott at the Astoria City Archive Library. It has come to my attention that Astoria has been paying taxes to a European Principality named the Whiteloch Isles through a social contract in place since the mid-1800s. Imagine my surprise! As head librarian, I would imagine this to be the kind of information I would learn during onboarding, but that seems to have slipped someone's mind during my training. That said, I am curious to find out how much of our taxes go to these Monarchs each year and what we get in return for our feudal dues. If such an obligation has been paid for the last hundred and fifty years, I'd be interested to hear from them about why we can't get our potholes fixed or a bus that arrives on schedule.”

“Snarky,” Edward looked surprised. “Didn’t see that coming. You really are her daughter.”

I smacked his arm and kept reading, this time to myself. Mom signed off the email politely, and below it was a curt reply from Frank Jordan:

Ms Prescott, I am not at liberty to share Astorian financial records, even with other city employees. I have cc’ed Mayor Keating here to assist further. Should he wish to override this policy he is welcome to let me know.

Stapled to the back of that email was paper on city letterhead. “Edward, this one is to my Mom from Keating...”

I handed it to him to read:

Ms Prescott,

This letter serves as formal notice that your employment with the City of Astoria has been terminated, effective as of November 6th. This decision was made owing to your flagrant disregard for department policy and unsatisfactory performance.

Please note that your final paycheck will be provided to you via mail. All government issued IDs, keys, and access FOBs are to be returned no later than 6 pm Pacific Daylight Time on your final day in office.

Health insurance will remain effective until December 31st of this year, at which point you will be responsible for finding other means of coverage.

We advise you to contact the Human Resources Department for any questions regarding your final employment benefits and any other post-employment procedures.

We appreciate your contributions to the City Archive Library of Astoria and wish you success in your future endeavors.

Sincerely,

Vernon S. Keating

Mayor, Astoria Oregon

“That asshole!”

Edward took both papers from my hands and held them next to one another, “Emma, look at the dates on these. Your mum was terminated not but one week after the exchange she had here with Frank Jordan.”

“You think that’s why she stapled them together? Maybe she knew...”

He nodded. “We’ve gotta find that man.”

“And do what? A shakedown!?”

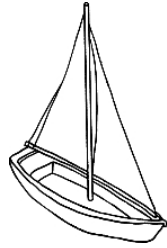
“What?” Edward looked at me like I was nuts, “No...I thought we’d just find him and be straightforward.”

I tilted my head a little, eyes wide as I stared at him. “You want me to walk up to some strange finance bro who is probably in his 80s now, tell him we know he turned in my Mom for something that probably isn’t actually against the policy, got her fired, and is probably a criminal right along with Keating?!”

Edward’s brow furrowed. “I didn’t see it exactly like that. What if we just knock on his door and say we’re doing some research and would like to know what these emails were in reference to.”

“And if he slams the door in our face?”

Edward shrugged. “Then we know he’s guilty.”



Chapter 25

Who is Frank Jordan? – Emma

We didn't want to stop digging, but we knew it was time to get food or drop, so we said goodbye to Edith, asked if we could come another day to find more, and made our way to Moonbeam Mugs for a bite.

“So, how are we gonna find this guy?” I asked, biting into a BLT.

“The town isn't that big; surely you know someone knows him?”

I raised an eyebrow, sipping my iced coffee. “Who do I know who knows people who were already that far into their career when my mother was alive?”

Edward was enjoying a platter of fish and chips, shrugging as he popped a fry into his mouth. “Ohhh, I dunno...Mikey, Edith, Pearl, your father. All of them are old enough to possibly know who this guy is. Especially Pearl, right?”

“Huh,” I nodded in agreement, “I guess we could just ask her.”

“You kids know the Yellow Pages still work, right?”

The voice came from behind the counter. The whole place was nearly empty, so it wasn't hard to recognize it had come from Maureen Donnelly who was clearly eavesdropping.

“They do?” I was actually surprised to hear this. “I haven't seen one in ages.”

“Baby girl, they've got a website, just like everyone else. People still gotta be able to look one another up.”

So we did just that. We looked him up.

Exactly four men named Frank Jordan are living in the greater Clatsop County area. One technically lives in the area, but when we called the number, his Mom told us he was away at Oregon State University—way too young. Another screamed at us that the commies were coming to take us and hung up.

“I suppose technically that could be him, but I’m really hoping it wasn’t...”

Edward laughed at my non-joke and took my cell phone as he looked over the last two entries. “This one is near where Edith lives, right?” He pointed at an address on the screen. “Why don’t we just go there in person?”

“An ambush?”

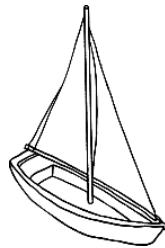
He shrugged, “Kind of, yes. Isn’t he less likely to lie if he’s looking you in the eye? Emma, I’ve seen a photo of your mother. You’re not identical, but the resemblance is there. Maybe your mere presence will make him so riddled with guilt that he’ll spill the beans?”

I pulled back. “You think I look like my Mom?”

“Emma, you’re a literal half and half split of your mother and your father. Now come on. Finish up your BTL and let’s get going.”

“BLT,” I corrected him.

“I’ve heard it both ways.”



Finding Frank Jordan – Emma

“I have to tell you something.” Edward looked over at me as we parked in front of the house of the next Frank Jordan.

“Yeah?” I asked, unbuckling my seatbelt.

“Never in all the years I’ve been alive have I knocked on

more doors of unknown individuals than the time I've spent in Astoria."

That made me laugh. "Honestly, before I decided to run for City Council, the last time I rang anyone's doorbell was during trick or treating as a kid. I think it's more circumstantial than Astorian."

Edward didn't look like he believed me.

"Alright, here goes nothin'," I said, reaching out to ring the bell. Moments of nothing passed and we exchanged glances, unsure if anyone was even going to answer.

Then we heard the sound of footsteps down the stairs inside the home and got hopeful. A young woman answered the door; she looked to be around our age. "Can I help you?"

"Hey, hi," I made a small wave.

"Hellooo," Edward added in a sing-song tone.

I cleared my throat. "Is this the home of Frank Jordan?"

The woman looked at us suspiciously, "Who's asking?"

"The pri—" I grabbed Edward's arm to stop him the minute he launched into his introduction AGAIN.

"My Mom used to work with him; she worked under the mayor's office. She died some years back, and I'm pulling together some of her old research. I thought maybe he could help me out?"

She softened when I mentioned my Mom had passed. That was the one and only benefit to losing your mother earlier than others my age—I could use that girl-without-a-Mom card to garner sympathy. Naturally, I only used it in extreme circumstances, but I think she'd approve in this case.

"Oh, of course," she replied, stepping aside to wave us in. "He's just in the kitchen making some tea, let me grab him... Daaad!" She called out behind herself. "We've got guests!"

The place was the antithesis of my Dad's house. Where Dad was a bit on the messy side, probably with hoarder tendencies, this home was pristine. Well kept, no tchotchkes.

The couch wasn't the old-timey florals of Edith's house, nor was it worse for the wear like Dad's. No, this man had a leather couch that looked like he used conditioner on it.

"Please, have a seat," the daughter motioned to the couch.

"Thank you," Edward answered for us both as I looked around.

When the man, Frank Jordan I assumed, appeared in the doorway to his living room, it seemed Edward was right. The guy looked like he'd seen a ghost.

"Jane?" he narrowed his eyes, squinting in my direction.

"Emma," I replied.

"Ah," he nodded his head and came to sit across from Edward and me. "How can I help you?"

We exchanged glances again. How, I thought to myself, does one start a conversation like this? We all sat in silence for what felt like eons but couldn't have been more than a few minutes. It must've gotten to Edward before it became too much for me because he spoke up first, "Mister Jordan," his voice was soft, slower than usual, "I'm not going to beat around the bush. We found some pretty damning evidence that suggests the current mayor has been part of a cover-up for two decades or more and that you..."

"Yes?" the man encouraged Edward to continue, not about to just give it up.

"That you were working in the City Finance Department when my Mom worked for the city as well and that she was fired from her job for merely asking you to provide some key documents pertaining to The Whiteloch Isles and the taxes we were...are?...were supposed to be paying the king there." It felt like word vomit, the information flying out of my mouth without control from my brain, or what was left of it.

"It is my understanding that your Mom passed on, so what is it you hope to gain by coming here today to berate an old man?"

"We were actually hoping that you would be willing to

help us,” Edward scooped forward on the couch, sitting toward the edge now.

“...with?”

“Exposing the mayor,” I said.

Frank Jordan seemed to choke on his spit. He started to cough out of nowhere, “Excuse me?”

“We want to show Keating for who he is and what he’s done. Live on stage.”

“And,” Edward continued, “I am going to go out on a limb and say you probably know even more than we do, given that you were the money man.” My partner in this mock shakedown crossed his arms over his chest, an attempt to look tough that, if I’m being honest, did nothing more than accentuate his arm muscles beneath the tight sleeves of his button down. Always a button-down with this one.

“What is it that you think I know, or think I can do for you?”

“I think you were helping the mayor hide the fact that we’ve actually been under Whiteloch’s rule for hundreds of years. Why did you do it?” I asked.

“The Mayor,” Mister Jordan cleared his throat, “could be very persuasive.”

“So you’re not denying it?” Edward asked.

Frank shook his head, “I know who you are. It’s not as though no one is aware you’re in town. You’ve made quite a splash.”

Edward smiled at that.

“Okay,” I said, “Then what...was his reason?”

The man shrugged. “Money. You kids will learn that in this world, if there’s anything untoward going on, it’ll always come down to money.”

“That much is obvious or it wouldn’t have led us here to you. You turned my Mom in for asking for financial records, right? Did he pay you off? Did you know he was going to fire

her when you added him to that email or did you just want to cover your own ass?" My voice had gotten harsh, and I could feel Edward's eyes on me.

He rested a hand on my leg, as usual, in an attempt to quietly calm me. "Emma just wants to get to the bottom of what happened with her mother, and beyond that, we need to get Mayor Keating out of control of Whitelo—sorry, Astoria."

"And what makes you think I'm not working with Keating? If you really believe all you've said, then why come here? Why even ask me for help? Aren't you just setting yourself up to get caught?"

"There's nothing to get caught about when it's all true. We're not hiding anything, we're trying to expose the truth," was my explanation.

"Alright, and what do you hope to gain?" His eyes were fixed on me now. "You've fallen for some foreign dignitary and you're gonna do his dirty work, put him in power, and what? Become the first lady of Astoria?"

"I'll thank you not to speak to her that way." Edward made a move like he might stand. "We came here to ask for help, but if you're—"

"You came here to give me a piece of your mind," Frank raised his voice, causing both of us to shrink back down. "You think you can just come to people's homes and chastise them? Then you want them to help you?"

The young woman who'd answered the door must have heard the raise in her father's voice, because she stepped into the room. "Dad, you're getting worked up."

He looked up at her and nodded somberly, "I'm going to take my tea and go upstairs to lie down."

She reached for his arm to help him stand and Frank Jordan made his way toward the stairs. "You kids better watch yourselves. That's all I'm gonna say."

"Was that a threat?" Edward asked me quietly when he'd left the room.

I kept blinking, unable to process the way things had just gone down. I didn't think meeting this stranger would be a piece of cake, but I didn't think it would end with him leaving in a huff either. Maybe I should've expected that. Nothing about this had been easy. How many times did I have to tell Sarabeth that our life wasn't a Hallmark Movie before she'd actually believe me?

"Sorry about him." Frank's daughter said once he was up the stairs, "He's uh-hh," she shrugged, unable to think of an appropriate word, "Grouchy?"

"Grinchy," Edward offered, motioning to the meager Christmas decorations around their home.

Both she and I laughed but quietly, almost awkward and forced. A painful silence hung in the air between the three of us before I decided to go out on a limb. "Hey, listen...you're not interested in helping, are you?"

"How do you mean?" she asked, not totally shutting us down.

"Well," I sighed, more dramatically than I had intended to, "your Dad used to work with my Mom—sorta."

"What does sorta mean in this context?" She asked.

Edward answered for me when he felt me pause, "Both in government, different departments." He said simply, not making it flowery like I no doubt would have.

"Exactly," I pointed at him to confirm what he'd said. "Look. I don't want to sound like I'm accusing your father of something, but it looks like he might've been part of a cover up scheme with the mayor. Maybe he was forced? Maybe he was paid off? I have no idea, but my Mom started snooping around for answers and was immediately fired."

"And my dad was involved in her firing. How?"

Edward puffed up his cheeks. "Well, that is what we came to find out. The last emails between them before being fired were her asking to find out about the tax money being paid to my father."

“Tax money...being...who is your father?”

Oh boy, here we go.

“I’m so sorry,” I held out a hand to stop Edward before he could launch into the whole torrid story. “We never caught your name.”

“True, incredibly rude of us,” Edward added. I wanted to smack my forehead. Half the time, this man was absolutely wonderful with interpersonal relations; the other half, he was a himbo.

“AnnMarie,” she smiled softly, not ready to let go of the previous question. “Now what’s this about your father and taxes and my father getting your mother fired? I’m not following.”

I took a deep breath and launched in. “Okay, so...long story short apparently Astoria is actually owned by a small European monarchy off the coast of England called the Whiteloch Isles. It appears that England gifted us to them during their liberation in the 1800s and ever since we have been...not...American? Or I suppose we were never American.” God, I was word vomiting again. “Anyway, Edward here is the prince of Whiteloch and came to see why the place was being so mismanaged by Keating who upon meeting him pretended he had no idea about Edward or Whiteloch, but then we found some articles that suggested otherwise, including some pieces about Keating’s grandfather who I guess was also mayor about 75 years ago and honestly I think he was probably involved in the great fire of 1922 here in town. But what brought us here is the fact that my Mom asked your Dad for financial records of the taxes being sent to Whiteloch and what they do for us in return, aaaaand...he cc’ed Keating and got her fired.”

AnnMarie looked like her head was spinning. She blinked at us a bunch of times, trying to soak in the mile-a-minute explanation I’d just given.

“Uhhh...”

Edward cleared his throat. “What Emma is trying to say is

that we're hoping to prove that your father wasn't a part of the scheme so much as he was at Keating's mercy and forced to do his dirty dealings."

Ohhh...that was so smart. Edward turned an accusation into a softball in our court to help us.

I picked up the torch and added. "If you could get your Dad to expose Keating with us, he would probably feel really good about being out from under his thumb."

"He's been retired for years now..."

"But his conscience would be clear."

She looked like she was actually considering it, looking at Edward, searching his face for some kind of proof that he was really royal, "You're actually a ...Prince?"

He nodded. "Prince Edward Grafton Windermere the third, Duke of Finnsgate," he said the whole title, and she softened, the same way everyone did when he laid it on that thick.

"And you're *sure* my Dad was involved?"

I nodded, "We have the emails to prove at least that. We just need more. And if he could come to the rally on Wednesday...Edward here is holding a meet and greet, and then I'll be debating my opponent for City Council."

"What do you want him to do there?"

Edward rested his elbows on his knees. "Ultimately, we would take one of two things..."

"Or both," I piped in.

"Or both," he repeated, "If your father has any emails or documents showing that Mayor Keating *did*, in fact, know about Astoria being owned by Whiteloch, or records of the payments he's been making to our government, that would work. We'd take them and show them publicly. Or he could come on stage with Emma and out the mayor's shady business practices. Governmental dealings, whatever you want to call it."

"Or both," I added again.

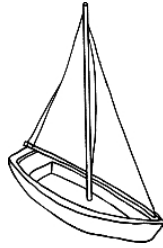
“Yes,” Edward nodded, “Or he could bring the documents on stage himself and read them out to the public to...”

“How do you know such documents exist?”

Edward reached into his pocket and pulled out the emails we’d been mulling over for the last day, showing my Mom’s correspondence with AnnMarie’s Dad. He unfolded them and handed them over, “Be sure to make note of where your father includes Keating in the exchange and then Emma’s mother, Jane, is fired but days later.”

She took the papers, slowly taking in the material in front of her. She’d been right to ask questions. Who were we? Just two strangers who showed up on her Dad’s doorstep with wild claims. But here it was, her Dad’s own words, his email address, in black and white. There was no denying what she was reading.

“Okay,” AnnMarie nodded. “I’ll do it.”



Chapter 26

Debate Prep – Emma

“Would you please introduce yourselves?” Sarabeth asked from behind the counter.

We put together a mock debate to help prepare me for the next day when I would be up on stage in front of however many Astorians came out to meet Edward. I’d have to speak clearly about my plans for our future and to say I was nervous was a grave understatement.

“Hi,” I added a wave for effect; Mikey had told us to go all out, hold nothing back, and act like this was the real deal, “My name is Emma Prescott; I’m a small business owner and local here in Astoria. Born and raised, woo!” I pumped my fist in the air like a cheer and then thought better of it, cringing at my behavior. “Can I start over?”

Sarabeth nodded. “Yes, but then we must move on Miss Prescott.”

Jeez.

“Miss Prescott?!”

“Mikey said to act professional!”

“Grrr...Okay, hiii,” I waved a hand again, “I’m Emma Prescott, some of you may know me from growing up with me here in Astoria, and others of you are familiar faces over at Read Between the Vines, my bookstore wine bar. I am running for City Council in the third district and hope to make changes that better Astoria and Astorians for generations to come.”

“So sweet,” Sarabeth touched her heart. “And you sir?” she asked, turning toward Edward who was playing the part of my opponent in this exercise.

“Hello there,” Edward’s accent was gone. In place of his British sounding cadence was a plain, almost southern sounding lilt that wasn’t exactly that of the people in our area, but it did throw me off. “You all know me, I’m Jeremiah Bell—your long time loyal and dedicated City Council member for the third district. I’m here today to uphold the ideals and principles that make Astoria an amazing place to live as it’s always been.”

Yikes.

“Way to lay it on thick,” I glared at him.

“Emma, please, take this seriously,” Sarabeth smacked the counter. “Come on, you know how much you hated debate class in high school? This is that on steroids. FOCUS! Now, each of you will have a maximum of one minute to answer each question. We’ll begin with the challenger and then you, Mister Bell.”

Edward nodded in agreement.

“First question,” Sarabeth started right in, “How do you plan to address the housing crisis and overall homelessness in Astoria?”

“Jumping right into the deep end,” I said with a huff. “Okay, well, first of all we need to assess what has been the cause of the crisis. Is it an influx of new Astorians, or is it the loss of jobs causing people who already lived here not to be able to make mortgages and the like? Or maybe it’s both? I need to get into the city records, and once we have a look at the cause, we can come up with a solid plan to move forward and get more people homed.”

“Homed?” Mikey asked from his spot in the back, beer in hand. “Sounds like you’re finding a home for a stray puppy.”

“Ugh,” I balled up my fists and then tried again. “Once we see what the root cause of the issue is, we can work toward rectifying the homelessness issue plaguing our town.”

“Better,” Mikey nodded.

“Mister Bell,” Sarabeth turned to Edward now, “What is your opinion on our school system and how do you plan to

improve it?”

Edward stood up straight, leaning forward across the table he was using as his makeshift podium, speaking now as Jeremiah. “Needless to say, I am extremely proud of the teachers and staff of the Astorian School System. They work tirelessly to provide the next generation with the education needed to go out and make something of themselves in this world. That said, Astoria’s kids deserve the best and we on the City Council always strive to allocate more city financing to them each year, ensuring that everything from in-class materials to after-school programs are properly funded.”

I shot him a look: what the heck...Edward shrugged, and Sarabeth continued.

“Next question goes to Ms. Prescott. What strategies do you have for fostering economic growth and supporting small businesses?”

“Well,” I said to give myself a moment to pause and think, “As a small business owner here in Astoria myself, I am acutely familiar with the trials and tribulations that my fellow small business owners deal with. My father and grandfather before him were also business owners here in Astoria. It’s a long-standing tradition in our family—”

“Moderator—” Edward busted in, “She’s grandstanding, not answering the question.”

My mouth dropped open. What the heck was this man doing? *Trying* to throw me off my game?

“I’m allowed to give context for my answer, am I not?”

Edward shrugged. “I’m just trying to do what he might do.”

“What Keating would do,” Sarabeth corrected. “Jeremiah Bell doesn’t have two brain cells to rub together, but I could totally see Keating interrupting you on his behalf.”

“Is he allowed to do that?” Mikey asked.

Sarabeth shrugged. “No clue, but when has what he’s allowed to do ever been a line for him?”

“Good point,” Mikey nodded.

“Whatever, why can’t I tell people my family is full of long standing Astorian business owners to set up my answer?”

“No real reason,” Edward shrugged, “Except that you have one minute and need to get to it.”

“Fine,” I gritted my teeth. “As the youngest in a line of Astorian small business owners, the plight of those dealing with failing businesses in the area isn’t lost on me. Our city has lost a massive amount of tourism dollars due almost entirely to the pier and other structures falling into disrepair. It is a priority of mine to reallocate city funding toward these repairs and show people the destination Astoria was and will be again. We’ve got to bring those consumer dollars back to town.”

“Wonderful,” Sarabeth finally smiled at me. “That was a good one! Mister Bell, you’re next.”

He nodded. She continued.

“Can you speak to your plans for community healthcare access?”

“We are proud of the health care services our city currently offers. Our focus has always been on ensuring that our residents receive the help they need. We continue to support our local providers and are committed to making health care accessible and affordable for all. Going forward, we will keep monitoring our health care system’s performance and make adjustments as necessary to maintain the high standard of care our community expects and deserves.”

“Seriously?” I snapped my head toward him. “What kind of answer was that?”

“One someone who doesn’t rock the boat would give.”

“And you think Bell could come up with that?”

“Probably not,” Edward said, “but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be prepared.”

“I need a break,” I shot back, moving away from the table that had been my fake podium and toward the back room

where I kept my desk.

I figured that Sarabeth would come after me and I could vent, but somehow my best friend, in her infinite wisdom, allowed Edward to follow me instead. There were a couple of minutes of solitary silence in my office before the knock on the door frame. I hadn't shut it completely and could see him peeking in.

"Hey," he was half in, half out the door, trying to look like he wasn't imposing but clearly wanted to come in.

"Hey."

"May I?" he asked, too polite for the situation or this stage in our...whatever we were.

I motioned to the seat across from myself, but Edward moved closer and sat on the desk instead, his knees close enough that I could have rested an elbow on one if I'd wanted. I thought about it for a moment and then leaned back instead, slumping down in my chair.

"Emma," he looked down at me and I saw his hand lift as though he were going to reach out and touch me, but then it fell back down to his knee, and he just...didn't. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know if I can do this," was my simple answer. "I'm not a public speaker. I'm not a public *figure* like you. I don't have the answers to these questions. I don't know how it all just flows off your tongue like that. I know what I want to do *for* Astoria, but I guess I didn't plan as well as I thought."

"Emma..." he said my name in a completely different tone this time around. "First of all, this was just practice."

"For something that is happening *tomorrow*. I probably should've practiced sooner."

"We've been a bit busy; don't you think?"

"Too busy to prepare for the job I'm hoping to get?"

He rolled his eyes, "You're prepared to do the work, that much I know. And you cannot compare yourself to the way I or others like me speak off the cuff. We were raised for it. I've

been watching my father make these speeches my whole life. Not to mention all the people of Parliament. Occupational hazard of a royal childhood.”

I smushed my lips to the side of my mouth, “I suppose, but it doesn’t make it feel any less crappy.”

“Listen.” There was a brief moment of silence and then he put his hand facing up on top of his knee, welcoming me to put my hand on top of it—so I did. He wrapped his fingers around my hand and squeezed lightly, “Tomorrow is going to be great. Don’t let your fears get your mind all in a twist. You are an extremely passionate woman with intelligence and drive coming out your ears.”

I furrowed my brow, narrowing just one of my eyes at him to show my skepticism. “I guess.”

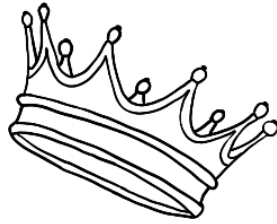
“Besides,” he snapped, the idea coming to him like flipping on a light switch, “when AnnMarie gets there with Frank, everyone will see that you’ve been right all along!” His voice perked up.

“If.”

“When.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine, when.”

“Atta girl,” Edward grinned and I averted my eyes to hide the slight blush rising in my cheeks.



Chapter 27

Debate Day – Edward

“We should’ve hired an event planner,” I grumbled, pacing back and forth in the makeshift backstage area we’d created for the debate.

Edward tilted his head. “Really? I think Sarabeth is doing a brilliant job. If you don’t think so, you shouldn’t let her hear you say it; she’s really worked quite hard—”

“Oh, I know,” I shot back. “And yeah, she’s great. But my best friend being the person keeping everyone in check means that she isn’t here to shake the nerves out of me when I feel like puking.”

Edward grimaced. “That uhh,” he cleared his throat, “doesn’t sound like something I can help with, seeing as shaking a young lady such as yourself would probably get me canceled.”

I rolled my eyes.

“But,” he stepped closer to me, face to face, staring downward as I looked up to make eye contact, “I can offer a hand...”

I could feel his hand reach out for mine, but instead of taking hold of it, he just let the back of his brush against mine. It was subtle and yet electric. The look in his eyes made me feel like he might kiss me. I couldn’t tell if that would make things better or worse. Would kissing me for the first time since I’d kissed him on election night make me calm down or faint?

It didn’t matter because that hadn’t been in the cards.

What was, was Edith walking up just at that moment. “Not your girlfriend,” she mumbled, shaking her head. “You kids

almost ready to go on?”

Edward took a large step back. “I’m not going on. I’ve done my part for today,” he said with a smile.

“And the meet and greet was a huge success!” Edith added. “I haven’t seen that many people around here in...Lord knows how long. Emma—you ready to get out there and give Bell what for?”

“Ma’am,” a deep voice came from behind her. Keating. Jeremiah Bell was trailing behind him. Great, just what I needed.

Edith turned on her heels to see who was speaking to her.

“Are you suggesting violence?” the mayor laughed.

Edith rolled her eyes. “Mayor Keating,” her voice had a distinctly annoyed drawl as she spoke to him, not at all like when she spoke to Edward who was quickly becoming her pseudo grandson, “You know very well that’s an expression.”

He chuckled. “I’m just pullin’ your leg.”

“Excellent, just what my hip replacement needs.”

Then nothing. No one said a damn thing. The most awkward of silences hung in the air as everyone on each side stared back and forth at one another.

Finally, Edward spoke up, “Say there, Mayor Keating—I’ve been meaning to ask if we could set up a meeting. Especially once Miss Prescott here wins the election—”

“Whoa whoa, now my boy, don’t go gettin’ ahead of yourself. If you want to set up a meeting at my office, you have to go through proper procedure juuuust like anyone else. There’s no skippin’ the line. And,” Keating raised both eyebrows. “We don’t know that Miss Prescott here is gonna be winning this one. Jeremiah has been faithfully serving the people of the third district, and they have no reason to vote him out.”

“Then why’d we tie?” I finally asked, unable to keep my mouth shut.

Jeremiah looked to Keating for a reason, like he had no idea what to say without approval from the boss.

Keating narrowed his eyes at me, his hands meeting over his large belly, fingertips tapping one another. “Well, Miss Prescott. I don’t rightly know. Perhaps we need to look into the validity of the votes from the initial election?”

Edward gasped. “You can’t possibly be suggesting that *she* is involved in voter fraud when you, sir, have been hiding my entire country’s existence from the people of Astoria for as long as you’ve been mayor and your—”

I grabbed ahold of Edward’s arm and pulled him back, not wanting him to let the cat out of the bag about what we knew about Keating’s grandfather, the fire, or the emails with my Mom.

Vernon Keating just shrugged. “I’m not suggesting anything, and as far as your...” he snorted quietly, looking Edward up and down like he was disgusted that he was even there, “country goes. I don’t even know what you’re talkin’ about.”

I could feel Edward’s pulse quicken through my tight grip on his wrist, and of course, I understood. It wasn’t as though I didn’t want to scream at the man standing face to face with us, tell him everything I knew, and that me being a tiny thorn in his side for the last few months was just the beginning of the end for him. But...I didn’t. No, I kept my lips pressed tightly together and turned my gaze on Jeremiah Bell instead, choosing to focus my energy on the debate rather than a verbal altercation with someone who had no interest in respecting the law anyway.

“Mister Bell, I really wish you the best out there.”

Then I turned and simply walked away, not worrying about who was left standing there. I couldn’t stay another minute and risk crumbling before the debate even began. I could hear the clack of Edward’s heels as he came after me in his fancy pants shoes.

“Why’d you stop me?” He whispered when we were out

of earshot.

“If AnnMarie comes through I want to see the shock on his face when we expose him in front of everyone. From the stage.” My teeth were clenched as I said the last words, thinking of the vindication that would be for my Mom.

“When.” Edward repeated his usual line.

I met Jeremiah Bell on the stage not ten minutes after speaking to him and Keating. Katie Creedmore from the Channel 9 news moderated our debate, pitching questions back and forth between us. He answered one. I answered one.

It wasn't nearly the bloodbath that Edward had provided in our mock debate the day before, but no one would've called it a victory. At one point, I lost myself staring at the back door, willing AnnMarie to come through it, when I heard:

“Miss Prescott?” it was Katie Creedmore asking for my attention.

“Sorry,” I bit down on my lip, hearing the disapproving mumbles from the crowd. Daydreaming mid-debate probably didn't win me any supporters. But still, my platform was solid:

“As a born and bred Astorian with a small business in town—a third generation small business owner here, mind you — my eyes are set on the future of our great city. I am calling for economic growth through heritage preservation and environmental conservation. We show the world what Astoria has to offer, both historically and naturally. By providing support to the small businesses along the pier and in other culturally relevant places in town, we can bring the tourists back and boost the economy for everyone.”

Jeremiah, however, spewed out words that couldn't possibly have come from him. I'd never heard anyone running for office in Astoria speak the way he did standing next to me on the stage.

“The great city of Astoria is a cultural hub for the Pacific Northwest that is well respected by people far and wide. We've maintained the respect of those in the greater Clatsop County and beyond by being a beacon of morality,

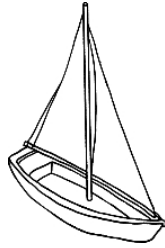
consistency, and hope. We are the lighthouse standing tall in the storm. In my tenure as your City Council member, we have faced challenges, but more importantly, we have seized opportunities! We've worked tirelessly to bolster our local economy, supporting our cherished small businesses and fostering an environment where innovation and enterprise can flourish."

What?! I wanted to scream that not a word of what he was saying was true. But I couldn't interrupt.

"We've made strides in preserving the unique heritage that makes Astoria the jewel of the Pacific Northwest, ensuring that our children and their children can enjoy the same beauty and history that have defined our lives. Thank you for your continued support, and let us step into the future with confidence and hope, for Astoria is more than a city – it's a community, a family, and there's no place I'd rather be."

The applause was wild. People loved this guy. And I once again fixed my eyes on the back door, scanning the crowd for the moment when AnnMarie would appear with her father or something from him to help us make our case.

But when never came. We'd gotten our hopes up for nothing.



Chapter 28

After the Debate – Emma

The thing about applause at the end of a debate is that it's almost impossible to tell who it is for. Okay, not almost impossible—totally impossible. I stood completely still, just off-center stage across from Jeremiah Bell, who I'd always considered a complete dummy but who by all accounts had beaten the pants of me in the battle.

When I stepped off the stage, I was still in a trance. I hated every bit of what had just happened. I'd gotten my hopes up about AnnMarie, thought I could win this, and ended up sounding like a silly little girl next to a man with years of experience already serving the people we were speaking to.

Ugh.

“Good job, kiddo.” it was my Dad. I'd seen him out in the audience, and he must've made his way backstage when he saw me begin to falter up there.

“Thanks, Dad,” I frowned though.

“Oh come on now,” he touched my cheek, squeezing it gently, “Don't be doin' that. Don't let that get to you. You did great.”

“I...did not do great,” I shook my head, facing the ground.

“I could absolutely *kill* that woman,” I heard Edward grumble as he walked up to where we were standing. “Emma, how are you?”

I turned away from Dad and shrugged at the prince, “I'm...fine? Disappointed. I guess that's it.”

“Disappointed is an understatement. She gave us her word that she would bring her father or some kind of proof here

today and she just—”

“Edward,” I shook my head. “People...aren’t...” I didn’t know what to call it.

“Just aren’t all that reliable,” Dad finished for me.

All I could do was nod.

“Listen,” Edward’s hand rested on my forearm, “It doesn’t matter. You already got it too close to call; all you have to do is push it over the edge, and there were enough people here who want to see change brought to Astoria. I know they do.”

“How do you know?” I looked up at him, trying to hold back the tears brimming in my eyes. They weren’t sad tears, more like frustrated tears. Disappointed tears. They threatened to pour out from the sides of my down-turned eyes, but I held back.

“I took a lot of pictures and signed many of autographs today. You should’ve heard them at the meet and greet. They’re excited about change; they want to see better for the future of Astoria.”

“I guess we’ll see.” I wanted to go back to thinking positively, but it felt like a lost cause.

“And hey,” Dad patted my back like I was still his little girl, “Just because today didn’t go the way you imagined, doesn’t mean you can’t keep the torch burning and continue your mother’s research. She’d be so proud to see you finishing what she started. Getting on the City Council is only a small part of that.”

“A part that would make it easier, though,” I puffed up my cheeks and sighed dramatically.

“But that doesn’t mean that we can’t do it the hard way,” Edward grinned, looking almost goofy as he tried to cheer me up.

It did make me laugh, “Way to sell it, prince.”

“Since when do you call me prince?” Edward asked, eyebrow raised.

“Since you had a line around the block of people waiting for your autograph,” I gave him a light shove, winking.

No, it wasn't over. The problems weren't solved. But there was no point in wallowing; Edward was right about that.

“You're right,” I said finally, “We can still win this thing. We have another few days. What about one last big push to get people on our side?”

“Oh...my gosh,” Sarabeth still had the stage-manager style headset on when she popped over to where we were standing. “I have the most fun idea *ever!*”

“Do you now?” Dad asked, looking around, “Should Mikey be here to hear this before you volunteer more of his guys to another drive around town?”

Sarabeth waved that off. “There's no driving around, but now that you mention it, maybe we should include some of the cuter fishermen...”

Edward raised an eyebrow. “You haven't even described this ‘most fun idea ever,’ and I'm already starting to wonder if we have the same idea of *fun.*”

“Win a date with the prince!” she beamed.

“Um,” I pressed my lips together, trying not to laugh, “What?”

“Win a—” Edward looked shocked. “Absolutely not. What on Earth...how would that...why?!”

“Oh my god, DON'T YOU WANT TO HELP HER WIN?” Sarabeth looked at him like he'd kicked her puppy. “It would be like the biggest fundraiser ever. People donate for a chance to win a date with you. All those girls who came out to get autographs were swooning like crazy.”

“How, pray tell, is this going to win me votes?” I crossed my arms over my chest and waited for the explanation.

“By...raising...awareness?” Sarabeth's words slowed as she answered me.

I scrunched up my face, shaking my head, “Where did this

idea come from, anyway?”

“Well,” she cleared her throat, “I was watching a movie last night and—”

“Oh boy, here we go,” Edward tossed his arms in the air, letting them fall against his legs with a smack. “You’re telling me you watched a crazy love story film with a prince, and some girl wins a date, and they live happily ever after?”

“You’ve seen it?” she tilted her head like a curious puppy, totally not picking up on his vibe.

“No,” Edward narrowed his eyes, “but seeing as I have lived every day of the last thirty-plus years as a prince, you can imagine how many times I’ve heard this trope or been asked to participate in such events, and Sarabeth I think the world of you but this...”

“Is that a no, then?”

I pulled my friend in for a side hug and shook my head, “That’s a no, honey. But I really appreciate you wanting to think of amazing ideas. You have to know this event went off without a hitch because of you. Your event management skills are off the charts. I am starting to feel bad for keeping you at Read Between the Vines, because you should probably be a wedding planner or something. And honestly...if we were living in the Hallmark version of this story, then you’d probably be right. If this was a movie, we could just auction Edward off to raise money for my campaign and then he’d meet the love of his life while I’m busy winning the election and live happily ever after as the ruler of our fine land. While I, uhh, fix the pier?” I laughed half-heartedly at my messy movie ending.

The words stung a little even as I said them.

“No, Emma, you—” I could feel what she was about to say, so I pinched her on the part of her arm that was out of sight to Edward and my father, “Ouch,” she jumped but didn’t continue.

My Dad was standing amidst all of this, looking very confused. “I’ve gotta be honest. It sounds like you kids are

speaking another language. I love you, but I don't know how Mikey puts up with it all," he said with a laugh. "Do you need anything else from me, sweetie?" He asked directly to me.

"...a cosmic appearance from my mother's ghost to tell me what to do next and where she put the proof we need to expose Keating for the lying snake he is and burn the whole thing to the ground to rebuild properly?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, isn't someone burning the place to the ground what started this whole mess?" Mikey asked, having walked up just to hear my part of the conversation and none of the rest.

"There you are, Mikey," Dad smiled at him. "I was just telling the kids that they're speaking gibberish, and I'ma need you here to translate their young people talk."

Mikey laughed. "To be honest, Rick, I barely understand it myself. But anyway, what's this about burning things to the ground?"

Edward waved it off. "Ignore Emma, we're not burning anything down ol' chap. We're just deciding what to do the next few days to ensure it doesn't end in another tie."

"Okay..." Mikey nodded. "What kinda stuff do people running for City Council even do in these situations?"

Sarabeth shrugged. "Other than the auctioning a date type stuff, I have no idea. That's what everyone does in the movies, but I know what you're all gonna say—"

We all cut her off, but she chanted with us, "Sarabeth, this isn't a movie."

"Okay, I heard you, sheesh. What's a way for Emma to get out and meet the people that doesn't involve her just handing out fliers on the street corner like a sad sack the way she did for months?"

"Ouch," I frowned at her. "Not nice."

"Not false," she replied.

"Fair," I shrugged. "Um, I guess we could invite people to come to the store and...I can have a table where I sit and hear

their grievances? People love to be heard, and maybe it'll convince them that I'm listening and plan to implement change in those directions?"

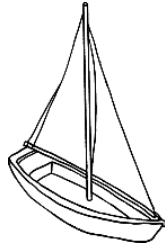
"What IF," Edward snapped his fingers, "we do the table at the store like you said, but I provide everyone free coffee from Moonbeam Mugs? It could basically be catered...snacks from your bar, people can buy their own alcohol because that's dangerous, don't ask me how I know that's a bad idea. Still, Maureen and the ladies at Moonbeam can come over with coffee carafes a few times a day...people love that kind of stuff, don't they?"

"You'd do that?" I narrowed my eyes, my mouth hanging open just slightly in surprise.

"Emma, he paid for Royal Rides; why would this be any different?" Sarabeth asked.

"I don't know. That was for the people of...his town," I shrugged. "I guess I chalked that up to being a city expense from the Whitelochian government or something. This is for me. Just me."

"And I'm here to help you. Just you right now."



Chapter 29

Setting Up – Emma

“I’m starting to think this is my calling,” Sarabeth smiled at me after taking one last look around Read Between the Vines which was redressed to fit our event. If you could call it an event. With one day left until the election, now was the time for me to connect with the people of Astoria. Whether it was someone I knew, or didn’t, I had to show them I was the right person for the job.

“You outdid yourself,” I grinned right back at her, “I think you really could do this if it’s something that brings you joy. Not to say I wouldn’t miss you working here with me.”

“Psh,” she waved that off, “when you’re a princess, you can hire a whole staff.”

“SB,” I rolled my eyes at my best friend, “I am running for City Council, not princess.”

“Yeah, okay, keep acting like you don’t see him stealing glances at you.”

I sat down on a nearby bar stool and crossed my arms over my chest. “Sar, he literally hasn’t made a move since the *one* time we kissed a month ago. I think if Edward was even remotely interest—”

“If Edward was even remotely interested in what?” He asked, seeming to appear out of nowhere.

“My God,” I grabbed at my chest, over-dramatically showing that he’d startled me, “You should really warn people ___“

“If I warned people, it wouldn’t be sneaking, now, would it?” Edward repeated a line I’d said to him when he first

arrived in town.

“Hardy-har-har,” I forced out a fake laugh.

“What were you wondering if I’d be remotely interested in?” He asked again.

I didn’t mean to betray my nervousness, but I just know it showed on my face because Sarabeth quickly came to my rescue, “If you’d be interested in helping us promote today!” *Nice save*. She was already running back behind the counter as she answered.

“Of course, I’m interested in helping promote—isn’t that what we’ve been, oh...what is that?”

When she walked out from behind the counter, Sarabeth was holding a huge sign in the shape of an arrow, like the ones you see someone holding for the Subway Sandwich shop on the side of the road. This one read: **FREE COFFEE THIS WAY!**

“Where do you want that hung?” he asked her.

Sarabeth shook her head, “Oh, Edward, no, this isn’t that kind of sign. You gotta hold this one and point people in this direction! So that they can come get coffee and talk to Emma.”

Edward puffed up his cheeks and looked around the empty store, searching for another soul, perhaps, or a place to run to, “*I have to do it?*” He pointed at himself when he realized there was no one else she could have been referring to.

I took the lead on this one when Sarabeth looked at me instead of answering. I turned on my best puppy dog eyes and blinked a few times in his direction. “Well, no. You don’t *have* to...but...” I shrugged, making myself look extra pathetic in that moment. Not that it had been hard recently.

Then he sighed. “No, of course I’ll do it. I see that there’s no one else,” he motioned around us, reiterating the emptiness.

“Way to be a team player!” Sarabeth cheered and pushed the sign into his arms, “Just head on out to the corner and try to get as many people as you can to pass through these doors. Maureen and Lucy brought coffee just a bit ago. If we run out,

they said they have your card on file to charge for more and they can be over lickety-split.”

“That’s me, run-of-the-mill team player,” he gave a thumbs up, his arms wrapped around the sign. “On the plus side, it isn’t raining!”

“I’ll bring you out some coffee in a bit?” Sarabeth asked him.

Edward nodded and then gave a small wave, heading for the door, “Cheerio.”

“Told you.”

“What?” I asked.

“He’s so totally into you.”

“He’s got a funny way of showing it.”

“Psh, no,” she started moving around the room, checking to make sure everything was in place. “It’s CLASSIC bad boy turned lover behavior. I’ve seen it a million times.”

“Is it now?” I asked, allowing my voice to betray my skepticism.

“Mhm,” she brought her fingers to her lips and kissed them as though she were a TV chef who’d tasted something delicious, “I couldn’t have written it better myself. Haven’t you read any of the articles about his torrid past and bad reputation?”

I raised an eyebrow, shaking my head wordlessly.

“Emma, are you even living in this century? Does your computer even have Google? You’ve *got* to Google the guys you’re dating, if nothing else then for safety.”

“First of all, we’re not dating. Second of all, I don’t think the Prince of Whiteloch, of Astoria, of whatever is going to risk causing me harm if he’s already had bad press. So why would I need to Google him?”

“First of all,” she mimicked me snidely. “You should be dating. Second of all, to find out about his past. Did you know that he dated Isabella Montclair?”

“That hotel heiress?” I asked.

Sarabeth nodded. “Yep. For a whole summer, which if my research is correct and we *know* it is, was like...a long time for him. But she left him for Alexi Ivanov.”

I stared at her blankly and finally shook my head after waiting a beat for an answer, “And he is...?”

“Russian born. Plays soccer. Or football, whatever they call it over there.”

“And you know this because...?”

“Google.” She stated plainly.

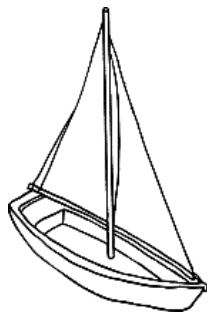
“Right.”

“Anywaaaaayyy,” she drew the words out dramatically, waving her hand around her face like she was swatting my ineptitude away like a fly, “All I’m saying is he jumped around from heiress to heiress, model to model, blah blah blah, and now that he’s ready to settle down, he doesn’t want to do anything to screw it up and scare you away. Honestly, Em? You’re like a deer in the headlights half the time, especially when it comes to men.”

“I kissed him!” I huffed.

“Time to do it again and land the crown.”

I smacked my forehead, “You really are somethin’.”



Coffee with the Constituents – Emma

The doors opened, and a whopping nobody was there to enter. I sat alone for the first thirty minutes, until some rando wandered in off the street, asking for the free coffee and nothing else. Over the next half an hour, a few others

wandered in. High school students, who ditched second period and wanted to see *what kind of coffee* we were giving out—really? Beggars can't be choosers; girls in too-short shirts and too-long pants!

Ugh.

“Sarabeeeth,” I called out to my best friend.

“What?!” She popped her head around the corner from the other room. “You better be dying; because you sound like a cat in heat. What’s the matter?”

“No one is coming,” I pouted.

“Emma,” she rested her fists on her hips, “It’s early, we barely just started.”

I motioned around the empty room, “We’ve been open an hour.”

“And it’s a Monday,” she shrugged.

“So?”

“People have jobs, Emma. Why am I all of a sudden the voice of reason?”

“People *don’t* have jobs, SB. Isn’t that part of why I’m running?”

“You’ve got a point there.”

I sighed. “Maybe I should go check on Edward. Maybe he...got lost, or is pointing people in the wrong direction?”

She nodded. “I’ll go with you.”

I grabbed my coat and pulled it on over the PRESCOTT FOR COUNCIL shirt I was sporting for the day, but it was pouring rain when we got to the door.

“Oh shit,” I gasped turning around to get the umbrella. “Do you think he has one?” I instinctively grabbed a second umbrella for us to give to Edward.

Outside was worse than we thought. No wonder no one was coming in. It was an actual storm. Rain, wind, I wouldn’t

be surprised if it was hailing in other parts of town.

“This is going to ruin my event,” Sarabeth sneered from behind her scarf, trying to keep her face warm.

The two of us got to the end of the block where we’d asked Edward to stand and saw the poor man standing there soaked. He was holding the sign, looking like a drowned rat.

“Does his coat even have a hood?” Sarabeth asked me in a pitying tone.

“Doesn’t look like it...hey, Edward!” I called out as we got closer.

He turned to look in our direction, completely miserable. “Ladies,” he said, giving us a pathetic looking thumbs up, “How’s it going in there?”

“About as well as out here,” I shouted over the plunk of the rain all around us. “Why don’t you come inside?”

Edward shook his head, “No thank you, but...” he pointed down to my hand, “Is that an extra?”

“This?” I held up the umbrella I’d brought out for him and handed it over. “Yeah, I brought it to give you if you didn’t have one, but looking at this rain, I think you should just come inside. No one’s out here anyway.”

“The rain is bound to stop and I promised to get people to this event; we can’t give up now.”

“Edward,” Sarabeth shook her head. “I also want this event to be a success. Heck, I put it together, but this is insane,” she motioned around us.

He crossed his arms over his chest like an obstinate child.

I sighed, shaking my head. “Come inside and warm up. Then, once you’ve had a cup of coffee, you can come back out re-energized to do whatever... this ...is all over again?”

Edward sighed, visibly giving in.

“Maybe we should ask Mikey to bring you a change of clothes? You’re soaked,” I offered him a towel from the kitchen to dry his face.

He took it to his hair, rubbing it around until brown strands stuck up in nearly every direction. It was cuter than I wanted to admit.

“I’ll call him,” Sarabeth said, without waiting for Edward to agree.

“I don’t nee—”

“You do,” she held up a hand to stop him. “This is my event and I won’t have you standing out there looking waterlogged. It’s not helping Emma’s cause.”

She sounded so harsh. “Jeez, SB, cut the guy a break.”

She waved us off, though, and stepped out of sight to call Mikey.

“Sorry,” I shrugged, pushing a cup of coffee across the counter to him and sitting next to him on a bar stool, “She’s taking this really seriously.”

“As she should,” he grabbed the cup and wrapped his hands around it for warmth. “And she’s right. We all must put our best foot forward.”

It was like this man stepped out of another universe or a storybook and landed in our very real, very not picturesque town. He sat there, dripping all over my floor, but somehow managed to stay charming.

“Did you learn that in finishing school?” I asked, sticking out my tongue to lighten the mood.

“Actually, yes,” he winked back at me, catching the vibe. And then turned a bit more serious. “Is it true I’ve been pointless today?”

“What?” I asked.

“No one has come in for coffee?”

I shrugged. “A few people came in, but you can’t blame yourself. Blame the rain. Blame the town. Blame Keating and his whole damn family line for ruining a place that could have been a powerhouse port town! A leader in the area, but noooo...we’re falling apart at the seams.”

That took a turn I hadn't expected, and my verbose reply clearly took him by surprise. It showed on his face, and he cleared his throat. "Ahem, well. We can still keep on with our plan. I want you to win."

"And you want to run this town," I bumped shoulders with him, smiling again.

"Well," Edward shrugged, "yes, in a way. But is that so wrong? Does it make me a bad person for wanting to fix things here in Astoria and show my parents I'm not just some 30-year-old ne'er do well who floats around on the Adriatic Sea all summer and has no plan or path, no job, not even a port in which to dock the boat that is my life?"

I pressed my lips together, frowning slightly. "Do princes really need a job? I'm not trying to negate your point; I'm seriously curious. Do you *have* to have a job?"

"Define job," he shrugged. "We all do something for the monarchy. It may not be what you would call traditional work, but yes, my brothers do participate in government with my father. My sisters do charity work, et cetera."

"I see."

"But," he scratched at his head, tossing his wet bangs aside, revealing his blue eyes, "I've been...inefficient as a working member of the royal family."

"Ouch," I grimaced.

"Tell me about it," he sighed.

"Alright, so we keep on moving forward, and we both get what we need, right?"

"Right-o," he said through a forced smile.

"Okay," Sarabeth reappeared with two thumbs up, "he's on his way."

But Mikey was not on his way. About twenty minutes later, a man did appear at the store, but it was one of the younger fishermen we'd worked with on Royal Rides.

"Hey man," he gave Edward an up-nod, "heard you

needed some dry duds?”

Edward motioned to himself and the guy winced. “Oh, yep. I know that look.”

He handed over a plastic bag and Edward slid off the barstool, disappearing into the unisex bathroom near the bar.

“So uhh...” the fisherman shrugged, his hands deep in his pockets as he looked around, “Not too bad of a place here.”

“Weren’t you here the other night for the election?” Sarabeth asked.

“Oh, uh yeah.” The poor guy had clearly been trying to come up with anything to say, filler, but she blew up his game. “Anyway, I guess I can go. Mikey just asked me to bring the prince something dry to wear.”

“How’d you get into his room to get his clothes without the key—does Mikey have a key to Edward’s hotel room?” I thought that would be weird.

“I didn’t?” The guy looked confused by what I was asking.

And when Edward returned from the improvised changing room, I knew why.

The man who stood before us bore almost no resemblance to Prince Edward Grafton Windermere the Third, Duke of Finnsgate. No. What we saw instead was a Pacific Northwest fisherman with hipster leanings.

Edward reentered the conversation in a pair of jeans that fit surprisingly well, a bright red flannel, and a jean jacket with fleece lining. His wet hair now covered with a green beanie, he looked like he stepped off a Christmas tree farm.

I pressed my lips together tightly to hide the absolutely gargantuan grin.

“Oh,” Sarabeth looked surprised, her head tilting instinctively like a puppy. “Actually—it works better than I expected.”

“What does?” Edward hooked his thumbs in the lapels of the jacket.

“This look on you,” she motioned up and down along his new attire. “I like it. Great. You should definitely go back out there once the rain stops.”

“Is she always a drill sergeant?” the fisherman asked Edward.

He nodded his head. “Today, yes. Thank you so much for bringing me these, Jonah.”

I hadn’t known his name before, but he and Edward seemed friendly enough. Must’ve been all that time Edward spent hanging around Mikey.

“Not a problem, my man.”

“Are we all just standing around, or are we getting back to it?” Sarabeth asked, motioning to a few people now milling around the bookstore.

We all shrugged.

“Okay, I can see I have to delegate. Emma, behind the bar until someone comes who wants coffee and to ask you questions about the campaign. Edward and Jonah, outside with the sign. It sounds like the rain has stopped, and it’s about to be everyone’s lunch hour. It’s the perfect time to lure people in.”

“Me?” Jonah asked, pointing at himself, confused.

“Yes, of course you,” Sarabeth replied before she flittered off to help the customers. This poor guy agreed to bring Edward some clothes and now had been volunteered for the job of human billboard.

“I have no idea,” I mouthed to them both, taking my position behind the bar as she’d instructed.

“Okay,” the guys exchanged looks and Edward shrugged, “Guess that means we’re headed back outside.”

Things didn’t pick up right away. Sure, the bookstore got more than its regular amount of business as we inched toward Christmas, but people weren’t keen to stop and talk to

someone running for City Council.

But then, a switch flipped. About an hour after we'd all been given our Sarabeth assignments, Astorians started wandering in, asking for coffee.

“Oh, hello!” I was almost too excited when the first person asked what the event was all about. “I’m on the ballot for City Council in the third district. The election is tomorrow, and I wanted to give the people of Astoria a chance to ask me any questions that might help them decide who to vote for.”

I finished my statement with a smile that was forced from me, but hopefully just looked kind.

The woman softened. She looked tired. “Honestly, I just didn’t want to wait in line for coffee at Moonbeams during the lunch rush. I’m on my break. I work over at the toy store on tenth and the customers are crazy this time of year.”

I chuckled, trying to lighten the mood for her. “Well, no worries. Have a seat, and maybe we can chat a bit while I pour you a cup. How do you take your coffee?”

“One sugar and a little cream?”

“How about I let you add it yourself?” I winked, knowing how specific I was about my coffee. It me think this might be a way to endear her to me without being pushy about my platform.

“That would be great,” she slid onto one of the bar seats and put her purse down. “I guess you’re running for City Council to get out of working here?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Actually, I own this place.”

She looked surprised, “Oh wow...why would you want to give this up?” She looked around us, really taking the place in for the first time since she got there.

“I don’t plan to. The City Council is primarily made up of people from the community who do additional jobs that just... want to make a difference. Or, well,” I frowned, “it’s supposed to be.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, reaching out for the cup

of joe I pushed in her direction across the counter that stood between us.

Leaning against it, I let out an extra deep sigh. “I’ve been lobbying the City Council to do something about Pier 2 for... gosh, almost a year now. They claim the funds aren’t there, but...” I just shook my head.

“That place is a dump,” she whispered, looking like she was afraid to be heard by anyone else around. “They really should do something about it. It’s turning into an eye-sore.”

“I know!” I made my reply more dramatic on purpose. “They’re literally going to fall into the sea if we’re not careful. Those businesses are suffering. Anyway, that’s one of the main things I want to fix.”

She sipped her now creamed and sugared drink. “Makes sense to me.”

“Among other things, of course. I’m just hoping that by answering people’s questions, they’ll be encouraged to vote for me. I know I can make a difference.”

“Can I be honest with you?” she asked, looking sheepish.

“Of course.”

“I didn’t even know there was an election tomorrow.”

I sighed, “Yeahhh...it’s a run-off.”

“What do you mean?”

“Me and the guy I’m running against tied. Or it was too close to call, or whatever,” I rolled my eyes. “Back in November at the real election.”

“Okay,” she motioned to me, energized by what I’d said. “So I’m not crazy. I really thought all elections took place in November.”

“Welllll, it’s complicated,” I moved around the counter to come sit next to her. “Most elections, not all, take place in November. And yeah, you’re right; this one did. But like I said, it was too close to call between me and the current person.”

“So why don’t we hear about these things?”

“My guess?” I asked.

She nodded, encouraging me to continue.

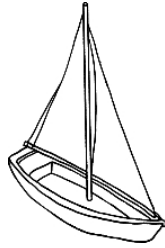
“I think the mayor is scared of what I’ll do if I’m elected. So he’s not publicizing it past the people who want to keep things the way they are. Like the ride share ban?” I rolled my eyes.

“Oh my GOD. It’s the *worst*,” the woman exclaimed.

“I *know*,” I replied, happy to be connecting with someone about the issues in our town. And when I looked up from my cup of coffee, I could see that even more people were making their way to the area where we sat.

“Coffee?” One guy, who looked like the hipster version of Jonah the fisherman, asked.

“Yes!” I hopped off the bar stool, left my coffee where it was, and made my way behind the counter. “How many do we need?” I did a quick mental count and finished with, “Four... teen, fifteen? Wow! Hi everyone. I’m Emma Prescott and I’m running for City Council!”



Chapter 30

After Coffee – Emma

After that initial rush of people coming in for coffee, there was another and then another. I can't say that I was prepared, but I did hope the enthusiasm behind my statements swayed at least some of the votes in my direction.

Much like Christine, who I learned was the girl from the toy store's name, most people who came in didn't even know there had been a *too-close-to-call* or that run-off election was happening the next day. Not that I could blame them. Unless they'd been watching local access news the night of the election, how *would* they have known? It's not like the City Council election specifically for our district was a hot topic around the water cooler. But once lunchtime passed, it felt like the flow slowed and I went to find Sarabeth, who was passing herself from customer to customer in the bookstore like the perfect hostess at a high society social gathering.

"If you need anything, you just holler for me, okay? Okay." All smiles on that one.

"That was crazy," was the first thing I said to her when we approached one another. "I lost count of how many people came back there. Fingers crossed this is working."

I made the crossed-finger motion and smiled at her.

"Should I call Maureen for more coffee?" SB asked me, sticking to her role for the day.

"Maybe," I shrugged. "It was lunchtime so maybe that was the reason behind the rush?"

"Better not be!" She furrowed her brow, "We need to keep a steady flock of people coming in here to talk to you. Statistically, less than fifty percent of people will convert into

voters for your cause after an event like this, so we really need a good chunk to come through.”

“How...do you know that?” I asked.

“Google,” she stated firmly. That was *always* her answer.

“Should we go check on Edward and Jonah?” I asked, not wanting to dig further into her Google Analytics.

“Probably,” she started for the coat rack where we kept our belongings, grabbed mine first to hand it over, and then her own, slipping it over her arms. “How soaked do you think they are?”

“You said it sounded like the rain was stopping when you sent them out there!”

“I did,” she shrugged the jacket over her shoulders, “but this is Oregon, Emma. Do you really think it *stayed* dry?”

I smacked my forehead, suddenly feeling bad for the guys we’d sent out into the squall. “Not nice.”

Sarabeth didn’t seem bothered. She gave off the air of a woman on a mission. She’d been assigned a job to do and she wasn’t about to let it falter. No, not on her watch. I was starting to believe that assigning my best friend the job of stage manager, essentially, was the greatest idea of my life.

When we got outside to just near enough to the corner, what we saw was unexpected. Luckily for the guys and us, the rain had *not* picked back up as we made our way toward them—an almost unheard-of occurrence in Northwest Oregon the first week of December.

“Am I...seeing what I think I’m seeing?” I leaned closer to ask her even though there was no way the men we’d sent out to hold the sign could hear us from where we were standing.

“I’m...not even sure I’m awake,” Sarabeth laughed as we looked over to the corner to see Jonah and Edward tossing the **COFFEE THIS WAY** sign back and forth between them. In the boredom of standing out there, it looked like the two men had come up with some signography—spins, turns, twists and

tosses. It was, in a word, amazing.

“Doth mine eyes deceive me, or does it look like you two are having fun,” I tried to hold back the smile that threatened to betray my amusement as I greeted the guys.

Clearly, we caught them by surprise, because the moment I spoke, the sign fell to the ground between them, “Emma,” Edward grumbled, “we’ve *had* this talk about sneaking up on people.”

I looked around, motioning to the open air all around us, “Sneaking...how...I...we’re outside in a public place!”

“You guys are really good at that!” Sarabeth said, ignoring the conversation we were already in the middle of.

“Yeah,” I added, “where’d you learn to do that?” I asked Edward specifically, ignoring Jonah for the moment.

He shrugged, “I’m a prince.”

I slowly raised an eyebrow at him. “How is that an answer to my question.”

“The skills translate,” he said, readjusting the sign in his hands.

“The skills translate?!” I asked, incredulous.

“From princing to sign throwing?” Sarabeth asked, equally confused.

“Totally,” Jonah grinned, apparently picking up what Edward was putting down in a way we weren’t. He gave the prince a high five and took the sign out of his hands to spin it again.

“We’ve created monsters,” Sarabeth laughed. “But honestly, I’m not mad about it.”

A Bright Idea - Edward

Even though Edward started the day sad and soaked by the constantly pouring rain of Astoria, by nightfall, he had perked up considerably. Spending the day with Jonah, Sarabeth, and, of course, Emma, was about all he could hope for.

Sure, he'd had friends in his life, but this felt different. None of these people acted differently because he came from a royal bloodline. No one in Astoria snapped his photo. No one called out to him as his car drove by. In fact, most of them didn't even believe who he was. Emma certainly hadn't without empirical proof. It was—dare he say it—refreshing?

The quad cleared the scattered coffee cups while the part-time employees Sarabeth had called in for the day served the patrons at the bar.

“Hey,” Edward whispered to Jonah, “You think I could sneak Emma out of here without SB noticing?”

Jonah looked in the direction of the two women giggling by a stack of books, “Uhhh...probably. I could also try to distract her if you really think you gotta sneak her out. But honestly, man, in my experience, women want their friends to date princes so,” he snorted laughing, “you're probably golden.”

Edward also laughed, despite himself. “That's honestly what I don't want.”

“What is?”

“For her to want to date me because I'm a prince,” Edward replied.

Jonah shook his head. “Nah, I know her Dad. She ain't the type. Wasn't raised that way. Besides, don't you think if she were after your crown, she'd be flaunting the goods a little more to get your attention?”

Edward had to think on this one. “She did kiss me at the election.”

The prince's newest friend rolled his eyes at him, not mincing words, “You can't seriously consider that throwing herself at you, can you?”

“No,” Edward shook his head, “that's not what I mean. I don't know. I've just been...keeping...everyone at arm's length for so long.”

“I get it, I probably would too,” he sounded sincere, and it

made Edward relax into the comfort of their conversation. “I can’t imagine what it’s like to be into a girl and wonder if she’s into you or if she’s just a gold digging wannabe princess who is trying to overthrow your mother’s position as queen by marrying you.”

Edward’s eyebrow popped up, a look of confusion crossing his face. “Alright, well, that’s a bit extreme, especially considering how many people ahead of me in the line of succession would have to die for that to happen. BUT, yes, you understand the concept behind my concerns.”

“Okay, enough of this...whatever it is we’re doing,” Jonah waved a hand in front of his face.

“Having a ...heart to heart?” Edward offered.

Both men laughed at the awkwardness of their newfound friendship reaching this point in what felt like such a short time. Sure, they’d first met at the Wishing Boats but hadn’t really connected in this way.

“Alright, so what’s your plan, man?”

“More or less,” Edward shrugged, thinking it through for a moment, “I was planning on asking her to go for a walk.”

“Wow, man. I really thought you’d have more game.”

“What does that mean?!”

Jonah shook his head, looking mock disappointed as he pushed Edward. “You’re a prince, man. You’re telling me you haven’t been using that to your advantage with girls since you hit puberty?”

“Of course I have!” Edward said defensively, and, truthfully, a little too loud.

Emma and Sarabeth turned to look their way, only having heard that tiny bit of the conversation.

“You boys okay over there?” Sarabeth called out to them.

“Fine!” The two called back in unison like a pair of middle schoolers who’d been caught in the halls between classes.

“Close call,” Jonah cleared his throat.

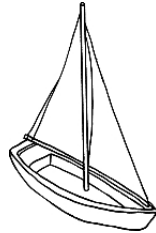
“I was saying,” Edward continued through gritted teeth. “I have, needless to say, used my...station, ahem, to my advantage, if you will. But those women, well, they didn’t mean anything.”

“And this one?” Jonah motioned to Emma, who was giggling behind the bar with her friend.

“Smashing,” Edward said, his eyes transfixed on her.

“Ohhhh boy, yep,” Jonah shook his head, “You got it bad. Alright, go ask her to *go on a walk*,” he repeated in a mocking tone. “I’m sure Sarabeth will be thrilled, but if not, I’ll do my best to distract her.”

“Brilliant, thank you, ole chap.”



Is This a Date? – Emma

“Say, uh, Emma,” Edward said when he stepped behind the bar with the remainder of his beer in hand, which teeechnically was illegal by Oregon law, but now that I knew we weren’t even really a part of Oregon, what did it matter? The more I thought of it, the more I realized I needed to look into the alcohol serving laws of Whiteloch if there were any.

“Yeah?” I replied.

He scratched at the back of his neck, having trouble making eye contact with me. “You interested in going for a walk?”

Once I realized what he was actually asking, a smile spread across my lips, and I leaned over to see if I could peer out the window at the other end of the store to see if it was raining again or not. It was not. Lucky. The smile playing on my lips grew wider. “Yeah,” I nodded. “Let me just grab my coat?”

He didn’t say anything; he just let his eyebrows rise and

fall by way of affirmation.

And then, before I knew it, we'd slipped out of the bar. I told Sarabeth I was running to grab a bite to eat, and maybe we would end up somewhere that food could be ordered, or maybe not. It didn't matter at that moment.

Edward and I walked side by side, but not hand in hand.

"Chilly night," I said, desperate to break the silence and not knowing what else to start with at a time like this.

"Indeed," Edward nodded.

Great.

That got us a grand total of nowhere.

"Warm enough?" he asked me as we continued down the block toward the water.

"Oh yeah," I shrugged, hands tucked deep in the pockets of my coat, "I'm used to it."

To say this was getting awkward was a gross understatement. This prince, who I, against my better judgment, had kissed just under a month ago, had *finally* asked me to hang out alone, not for work purposes and...what? We were just going to walk down the block away from my bar toward the pier and say nothing but remarks on the weather or if we were bundled well enough. No way.

I thought of my mother in that moment and wondered what she would do. She'd been the step-up and get-it-done type. Knowing what I knew about my Dad, I could absolutely see her taking charge in a moment like this. And so, I did just that.

"Come on," I pulled a hand from my pocket and grabbed Edward's, hauling him behind me as I started to run down the street.

"Where are we going?" he asked, his fancy shoes clacking along the cement of the sidewalk. It was the opposite direction of where we'd been heading a moment before, but I had a sneaking suspicion he hadn't actually picked a place for us to go.

“Christmastown!” I giggled when I felt sprinkles starting to come down, “Oh shit.”

“Just what we needed, ahhh!” Edward screamed, “WHEN DOES IT NOT BLOODY RAIN IN THIS TOWN?”

The droplets increased their intensity, falling down around us, completely umbrella-less as we ran down the sidewalk hand in hand, our feet splashing in the newly forming puddles.

“In here,” I yanked his arm, moving him inside the first doorway I spotted with a shop whose sign still read OPEN.

Edward looked around and chuckled. “Rainy Day Resale,” he motioned to the sign, “This is Christmas-town?”

I snorted and then quickly covered my face in my hand. I couldn’t believe I let that sound out of my nose with him standing right next to me as if looking like a drowned rat wasn’t bad enough. “Nooo, this is a thrift store. Christmas-town is down further, but I figured we’d need a place to wait out the cloudburst.”

“Huh,” Edward nodded, sounding pleased with my decision as he stepped further inside, not noticing how much he was dripping on the floor as he glanced around.

“Oh, here!” An elderly gentleman with an over-grown white beard appeared with a rag to sop up the water the prince had left in his wake.

For a moment, Edward was oblivious to the movement around him, the man cleaning up his mess. But when I moved my eyes to the older man, Edward did, too.

“My god, goodman,” Edward moved to him, leaned down, and did his best to help the gentleman fully stand, “I can certainly clean up after my drips.”

“You kids are soaked,” was the reply from the grandfatherly figure.

“True,” I kicked at the ground, my hands back in my pockets for some modicum of warmth. “Say!” I took one hand out and snapped. “I’ve got an idea.”

“I’m all ears,” Edward said from where he was, knees on

the ground in his loaned-by-Jonah pants.

“What do you say we pick out new outfits for one another from this fine establishment?” There was a gleam in my eye; I could *FEEL* it. The idea of getting to dress Edward in whatever I wanted tickled me pink.

One eyebrow crept up on Edward’s forehead, skeptically glancing about the store filled with racks of old clothes, none of which looked a lick like anything worn in this century, at least not without irony.

“Deal,” he reached out a hand to shake mine. For a fleeting moment, I imagined that instead of shaking my hand, he pulled me in against his body and planted a kiss right on my lips, but stuff like that only happened in Sarabeth’s favorite movies.

“Budget?” I asked.

“You must be joking,” he rolled his eyes, holding up a nearby shirt with the price tag reading \$4.32.

“Fair,” I chuckled, “How long do you think you’ll need?”

He scratched at his head, “Thirty minutes?”

“You’re on!” and without warning I ran off toward the back of the store.

“Cheater! We didn’t even count down,” he said, running in the opposite direction.

I half expected the store owner, or whoever the old man was, to yell at us for acting like a couple of juvenile delinquents on a mission to turn the place upside down. Maybe he could feel how tense we’d been, how stressed, how decidedly in our heads about the upcoming election that we really needed this moment to blow off steam.

The truth was, I myself hadn’t even realized it until I was rummaging through wracks of men’s clothing in search of hopefully something more ridiculous than whatever Edward had in mind for me. When I came upon a full suit of green holly leaves and berries, I couldn’t help gasping aloud, “Oh... my god,” I covered my mouth to stifle the laughter, but he’d

clearly heard me.

“What?!” He called from the ladies’ clothing wracks.

“Ahem,” I cleared my throat, doing my best to hide the fashion abomination in my hand, “Absolutely nothing; you mind your own business!”

Edward rolled his eyes, “You better be careful, or I’m gonna—”

“You’re gonna what?” I crossed my arms, eyes motioning toward the Santa-looking figure tending store.

“Going to...find you something absolutely fantastic to replace your wet clothing with.”

“That’s what I thought,” I stuck out my tongue for good measure.

As time was drawing to an end, I just didn’t feel like the suit was the best I’d found, as flashy and ridiculous as it was. Coming upon a sweatshirt that showed an outline drawing of Joe Pesci and Daniel Stern as The Wet Bandits in the movie Home Alone with their title written above them was too good to pass up. I loved that film as a kid; hell—I love it now! And despite it being less flashy, maybe he’d actually wear this piece again and it would be less of a waste.

Or, if I had my druthers, I’d have occasion to steal it from him sometimes.

Regardless of how good the sweatshirt was, I still needed pants and something for him to wear under the hoodie. A shirt? A ridiculous flannel?

“TIME’S UUPPPP!” we heard a voice ring out—turns out the man behind the register had been...timing us?

We looked at him, then at one another, then back at him.

“What?” the man asked, “You think I can’t hear you? The place isn’t that big, young-ins. Besides, gotta keep myself entertained somehow,” he said, tapping on the clock behind him on the wall. “Regardless, it’s time for a costume change.” He motioned for the pair of us to meet in the center aisle.

“On the count of three?” Edward asked as we stood back-to-back, holding clothes to trade momentarily.

“One...” Fake Santa said, “Two...THREE!”

On three, Edward and I turned to face one another, holding up our chosen outfits.

And there he held an oversized hoodie with a picture of a young Macaulay Culkin portraying Kevin McCallister; hands slapped onto his cheeks in the iconic screaming pose.

Standing there, facing a man whose life and upbringing could not have been more different than mine, both with scenes from Home Alone on Christmas clothing, made my jaw drop. “Are you serious?”

“I suppose, then, you’re also a fan of Home Alone?” he asked, a smirk playing on his lips.

“Fan?!” I scoffed, “It’s only the—”

“Best Christmas movie ever,” he joined me for the last part. Each of us taking a step closer.

“I know,” he said with a sweeter, more sincere smile, one more step closer to me, “We should watch it sometime.”

“With popcorn?” I asked.

Edward shook his head, “Ice cream with too many toppings, too much syrup...”

“Of course.”

“And,” he wiggled his eyebrows playfully, “a game plan to take down the bad guys.”

“Alright, you two,” Santa called, ending the stillness of the moment between us, “Get changed, and I’ll ring you up.”

We spilled out of Rainy Day Resale, giggling up a storm. The rain was still coming down, but inside we’d been able to find a few oversized plastic raincoats to fit over our hoodies. That, we assumed, coupled with our umbrellas, would keep us at least semi-dry as we continued our journey.

“Where to, Miss?” Edward asked, jokingly offering me his arm.

I linked mine with his and made a *hmmm* kind of sound, “I don’t suppose I could interest you in some plain cheese pizza?” I asked, making another reference to our shared favorite seasonal film.

“I thought you’d never ask. And pray tell, where does one acquire the best pizza in Astoria?”

Scrunching up my nose, I replied, “Honestly, we only have Crustiano’s.”

Edward burst out laughing, the umbrella falling away momentarily, exposing us to the showers.

“Hey! You’re shirking your umbrella holder responsibilities!” I grabbed his hand where it wrapped around the handle of the umbrella and forced the thing back up over our heads, not keen to get wet again right away. And then, my face went flush as I felt the heat of his hand beneath mine.

“I’m sorry, so sorry, madam,” Edward gushed effusively, taking his turn to throw some sarcasm my way, “but you cannot honestly tell me the only pizza restaurant in this town is called Crustiano’s!”

“I not only *can* tell you that, but I have told you that,” I stuck my tongue out at him. “It’s decent. Wanna go?”

Edward just smiled now, “I do. I want to have a slice of pizza pie with a mountain of cheese on top so melty that the entire McCallister family would be jealous.”

“Oh,” I said as we continued down the sidewalk, “they’ll be jealous alright.”

And then, as conversations do, we reached a lull—walking along in silence for a few moments. Downtown Astoria was much better lit than the area near Rainy Day Resale. Wreaths hung from streetlamps, and twinkling Christmas lights adorned most shop awnings. I silently admired them as we made our way down the street.

“Pretty, aren’t they?” I asked, tilting my head to look up at

the prince I somehow found myself walking arm in arm with.

“Mmm, very,” he replied.

But as we rounded the corner toward the pizza joint, neither of our minds were on globs of gooey cheese. We’d come upon the large tree in the center of town, the whole area lit up by its lights.

“Astoria may get a lot of things wrong, but this,” I waved my hand at the large Noble Fir before us, “this definitely isn’t one of them.”

“Emma,” Edward brushed my cheek with the back of his hand, smirking, “you’re not crying, are you?”

I playfully pushed that hand away from me. “Psh, stop! I’m not crying crying,” I grumbled, feigning annoyance at his poking fun, “It’s just…” and then I got serious for a moment, “It’s a good memory, that’s all.”

Then, to my surprise, Edward wrapped an arm around my shoulders. He’d made this motion many times in the weeks that I’d known the Prince of Whiteloch, but never with this kind of tenderness. My mind shot back to the time at the library when we spoke with Pearl, and he pretended to be some kind of boyfriend figure to pull one over on her. That didn’t have the same feeling as this moment, standing there with the tree. I slipped my arm around his waist and smiled to myself.

“You’re right,” Edward said, the lights bouncing off the bright blue of his eyes, “it’s a great memory.” And somehow, I knew he wasn’t referring to *sometime in the past* the way I’d been. I saw my mother there, bringing the little girl version of me around to see the lighting of the tree, but he must’ve meant us in this moment.

“Edward—”

But before I could muster up the bravery it would’ve taken to bring us to the next level at that moment, a voice rang out across the nighttime street:

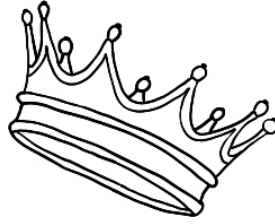
“Eyyyy, love birds!”

Jonah.

I looked up at the sky and sighed. Edward pulled his arm off my shoulder. Moment lost.

“I thought you two went for food?” Sarabeth was with him. “What...are you wearing?” she looked beyond confused.

At first, I had no idea why, and then I remembered what we must look like and laughed. “Got caught in the rain, bout to drag this guy to Crustiano’s. You hungry?”



Chapter 31

The Run Off Election – Edward

The bar looked different than it had on the previous election night. Sarabeth had outdone herself, decking the place to the nines with VOTE FOR EMMA and PRESCOTT FOR CITY COUNCIL signs everywhere. Coupled with the already-cozy Christmas decor that Read Between the Vines was sporting, it was apparent the woman had taken her role as party planner very seriously.

“Eggnog?” Sarabeth asked the next stranger who walked through the door. They gladly accepted, moving back toward the area where people seemed to be congregating.

When Emma exited the back office to see the bar practically overflowing with people, she beamed up at Edward. “You know, I think I actually might win this thing!”

Edward rested a hand on her lower back, returning the smile. “Of course, you’re going to win this. What have I been saying all along?”

Emma scrunched up her face, laughing quietly, “If I’m being honest, I thought you were just pacifying me. Saying that to make me feel better?”

He shook his head, “No, I’m not the kind to just blow smoke.”

“You’re saying there is no part of you that was willing to say whatever it took to keep me happy?” Emma asked, turning her body to face his and gazing up at him. She was more relaxed than she’d been in days and it showed in the way her entire being seemed to let go of the tenseness in her shoulders.

“Well,” Edward’s smile spread further, his feather-light touch brushing her arm, “I’m not going to say that there was

no part of me,” and it really looked for a moment like he was going to make a move. Edward had removed his hand from Emma’s arm and was reaching up; she could feel the heat of his touch on her cheek even before his skin reached hers. And then—

“My man,” Jonah exclaimed.

Of course he did, Emma thought to herself, sighing as she took a large step away from Edward. The pair looked and felt like a middle school duo trying to make it seem like they hadn’t been mere seconds from kissing when a parent walked in the room. But instead of middle schoolers, they were full-grown adults who had already kissed and somehow couldn’t get over the hump of making it something official. And instead of parents, the person interrupting them was a wet-haired, flannel-coated fisherman.

Edward took Jonah’s hand in the typical all-male (all lame as far as Emma was concerned) greeting where they clasped hands instead of shaking and ended up shoulder to shoulder, or chest to chest—she really couldn’t tell. The strangest part was how run-of-the-mill average guy of a move that was. If you’d asked him, Edward would’ve told you that he didn’t even know when or where he learned it. Neither did Jonah. But just the same, both of them deployed it upon seeing another man with whom they felt any kind of kinship.

And these two certainly did have some kind of bond, especially after their sign-tossing duet the day before. Emma wanted to laugh at how cute they were, but instead, she just smiled, touched Edward’s arm and said, “I’ll see you in a bit?”

He nodded at her, a bit dejected that he’d let that moment slip by. Or that Jonah had pushed that moment out the window. Perspective is everything, as they say.

“Did I...” Jonah motioned after Emma, looking right at Edward with a face full of apology for the minor cockblock he’d provided.

“You did,” Edward laughed, patting his friend on the back. “Again. It’s alright, though. I’ll grab a moment after they

announce the winner tonight when everyone is on cloud nine.”

“Makes sense,” Jonah nodded and motioned toward the bar, “I’m gonna grab a drink before the beer I like is sold out. You gotta talk to your girl about stocking more beers.”

Edward raised an eyebrow. “Not my girl yet, but you are aware this is a wine bar, right, my good man?”

Jonah scrunched up his face, motioning to himself as he started to walk away from Edward. “Noooooot really the wine-drinkin’ type.”

They both shrugged and exchanged nods as they separated for the moment. Edward looked around in an attempt to find Emma; he wanted to be standing with her when the final numbers were announced. It was important that he be with her for *this* moment. That he be the one by her side. After all the hard work they’d put into it together, he just knew that it would solidify—

“Your Majesty!” Mikey found him first, still greeting him so formally despite how well they’d gotten to know each other over the time he’d spent in town.

“Mikey,” Edward gave his first Astorian friend a half hug and a smile, “How was fishing today?”

“Eh,” Mikey shrugged, “They’re bitin’. You feelin’ positive for tonight?”

Edward offered a thumbs up, “I think we’ve got this in the bag. We did the work and our plan is good: Emma gets elected to the City Council, we find the missing documents that Keating has been hiding God knows where, we publicly expose him, get him removed with good LEGAL reason, and I officially take over the day to day running of the town with a new team. Voila—it’s nearly foolproof. Have any interest in being on that team?” Edward asked with a wink.

Mikey laughed, like belly laughed, “Ohhh boy. You know... Your Majesty, as lovely as it is to hear you’d like to have me on the team, I do not think I am the government-ing sort. I belong on my boat, bringin’ food into town for the masses day after day. I wouldn’t even know where to begin in

an office. Don't rightly think I could handle it."

Edward gave him an understanding nod. "I'm sad to be turned down, but I understand your reasoning."

"Plenty'a people around better suited for that kinda work than me. You've got Emma on your side; she's a smart cookie with a lot of good ideas. That's why I brought you here to meet her, to begin with."

"An act of kindness for which I am so grateful. You know," a smile threatened to appear on Edward's lips, a gleam in his eyes as he debated telling Mikey his plans for tonight. With Emma. And by tonight, he realized, looking around at everyone crowding around the TV, he really meant momentarily. Crap, where was the woman?

"Know what?" Mikey asked when Edward didn't continue his sentence.

The prince got caught up in his mind, playing out the scene where he intended to find Emma just as the woman on the telly announced that she was the new City Council person for the third district. Before anyone else could congratulate her, he'd swoop in with a kiss that would rival the one she gave him on the last election night. A tight embrace that would beat any they'd had the night before near the tree.

"Sorry," Edward grabbed Mikey by the shoulder. "I planned to make my intentions with Emma...personal intentions, clear —tonight. Right now as a matter of fact, if I could just get my eyes on that woman, I'd—"

Mikey's eyes widened, happily. A slow grin spread across the older man's face. "Are you tellin' me that I'm a bonafide matchmaker?!"

Edward wasn't looking at his friend, but he smiled all the same, offering another shoulder squeeze. "It would appear that you have made a match. Should she, of course, agree to see me in ...that...way. Ex...clusively," his words were slow and stunted as he looked around further.

"Maureen is gonna be over the moon. She's gonna think she married a genius!"

Both of them laughed, but Edward kept scanning the room for Emma. The place wasn't even that big. Where could she have gone?

"Alright, people!" Sarabeth's voice rang out over the hum of the crowd, "Let's quiet down so we can hear the results." Emma appeared at Sarabeth's side with a glass in hand, a champagne flute—empty. Nearby, on the counter, Edward could see a few bottles of champagne in chilling buckets, waiting to be popped celebratorily.

Jessica Williams was on the television screen, sitting in front of the same election green screen she'd used a month prior with the added overlay reading: *Runoff Elections*.

"The numbers are in, and it looks like the third district of Astoria will continue to be served by Councilman Jeremiah Bell."

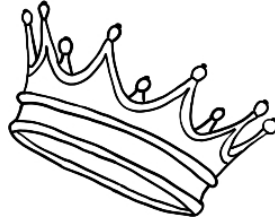
Jaws dropped all over the room. No one gathered in Read Between the Vines that night wanted or could've predicted that Emma would lose.

From where he stood, a good fifteen feet from the woman of his dreams, Edward could see her face drop. The hand that held the champagne glass, ready to be filled, fell against her side. Nothing broke, but the feelings felt shattered. It couldn't have been more than a few seconds, but the time that passed between when Jessica Williams announced that Emma had lost the election and the moment that Edward regained use of his feet felt like ages. He shook off his shock and started moving toward where Emma was standing.

Sarabeth wrapped an arm around Emma's shoulders before Edward could close the gap. She whisked her friend away, and people slowly returned to their drinks and discussions. Edward followed after them, but got a door shut in his face.

He was sure neither of them meant to shut him out. Or at least he hoped they hadn't. Still, a closed door wasn't exactly an invitation to come in and profess his romantic interests, especially in a moment as sore as this one.

So, rather than knock, Edward pulled his hand down from where it hung midair, almost announcing his presence. He let it fall to his side and turned to leave.



Chapter 32

A Call from Home – Edward

Edward was still in bed at 9 am, later in the morning than he had been since his first week in Astoria. There he lay, staring at the ceiling. All he could think about was Emma, the lost election, and his missed opportunity. Sure, the moment when the girl is down on her luck, having just lost the biggest contest of her life, isn't exaaactly romantic. But what had stopped him from making a move before? That's what he couldn't figure out. It had been a month since their first kiss. She was probably disappointed, Sarabeth telling her how she deserved better than the Prince of Procrastination. And then the phone rang. When his brain registered that it was the Whitelochian National Anthem, he knew it was his parents calling—*shit*.

"Hello?" There wasn't even a hint of tired left in his voice: he'd been awake for hours, just lying there. Why was it that even at the age of thirty, they could make him jump to attention as though he was a teenage ne're-do-well?

"Edward, sweetheart?" Sure enough, it was his mother on the other end of the line. "Did we wake you?"

"Huh? Oh, uh, no."

"Edward," now it was his father's booming base voice, sounding a bit further away, "it's time to come home."

"What?!" That caused him to sit straight up.

"Darling..."

"Mum," Edward could feel himself slipping back into his whiny former self, "You can't be seriously asking me to come home when I've just gotten started trying to right things here. You told me to get Astoria in...working order, to make it

profitable; that doesn't happen overnight. You have no idea the issues we've been dealing with here."

His parents didn't clock the 'we.' Or if they did, they thought he meant them as a family.

"Give me the pho—" he could hear his father getting closer to wherever his mother was with the device, and then, of course, Edward could hear him much more clearly after he took it from her and pressed it to his ear. "Edward, son, that's enough nonsense. We tried, but it's time to close up shop, come home, and we'll figure out what to do with that sinkhole of a town later."

"Father, I told you, I'm just getting a foothold—"

"JUST?" His father had already felt exasperated; now he sounded annoyed. "You've been there more than a month and what have you to show for it?"

"Progress?" Edward offered.

"Ask him what progress," he heard his mother off to the side; his dad must have had him on speaker phone; there's no way she heard that well.

"What progress, then?" his father asked.

"Well," he swallowed hard before launching into an explanation he wasn't sure would hold water, "we've learned that the town's mayor was related to a previous mayor, and that one probably burnt up all the records showing we own the place! He's trying to kee—"

"We?" It was his dad.

Edward closed his eyes and rubbed his thumb and middle finger along the bridge of his nose.

"What does he mean we?" his mother prodded.

"I...made...friends," he tried to get the words out without sounding like a fifth-year, "I needed help. I needed companionship. Maybe they happened by accident. I... honestly... I lucked into them and they've been just smashing."

The low grumble from his father's throat told him all he needed to know before words ever could, "Enough of your gallivanting around. You cannot treat a work trip like one of your Swiss ski trips, buying hot cocoa for every ski bunny on the slopes."

"Trust me, Dad, if this were anything like a ski trip, I'd be sending home photos rather than hiding out with my nose to the grindstone trying to prove myself to you two."

"Edward, angel," his mother jumped in again, her voice sounding like her lips were a centimeter from the mouthpiece, "what your father is trying to say is that we cannot afford for Astoria to be a lemon."

"It already is a lemon," Edward heard his father mumble.

"Can't you just give me a bit more time, I—" but Edward was cut off again.

"No," his father had clearly taken the phone yet again. "This trip has cost us more than the town makes us in months on end, maybe in a year. It's ludicrous, and we've already had Mr. Harcourt book you a flight back. The ticket should be in your email."

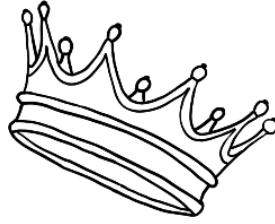
"Please do check it when you wake up, darling." Mom was always softer in her approach.

"What if I told you I don't want to come home?"

Edward's father laughed. "That is not an option. He's booked it for this afternoon. Pack up. Come home. Or we'll cut off the credit cards you've been so frivolously bringing near their limit."

"We'll see you soon, sweetheart. We've booked a car service to come get you and take you to the airport; keep your chin up!"

It felt like the world stopped spinning, and his mother could feel his sadness through the phone line. Why else would she tell him to keep his chin up? His parents said their goodbyes, and he did as well, though it felt like he was in a trance when he did so.



Chapter 33

Ignoring the Problem – Emma

It felt like the sun never rose the next morning. I got a few hours of sleep, but not enough to really call it rest, and when I finally gave up and decided to take the riverwalk to work rather than my car, I assumed there would be sun. Why? That's what I asked myself as I slowly made my way across the wooden planks that made up the pathway along the water. Oregon's coast rarely saw sun at all, let alone this time of year. I suppose I just wanted a way to perk myself up after the loss I'd experienced the night before, and a walkin' on sunshine vibe felt like it might do the trick. So much for that.

I stepped into Read Between the Vines, trying my hardest to pretend that nothing had happened. Remnants of the evening's festivities, if you could call them that, were still strewn about. Sarabeth and I had agreed it wasn't worth our mental or emotional energy to try to clean it up the night before. So instead, I arrived bright and early to try and return my bookstore bar to its former glory before opening time. And by bright and early, this time I meant ten am. I dragged myself through the trash-filled room, back toward my office where I'd spent the night before in shock and sobs. Okay, maybe not sobs, but I did cry. I did shed tears, if you will. And I was shocked.

If you'd asked me a few months ago if I thought I was going to win this election, I'd have said a solid maybe. Maybe? Maybe. I never felt truly confident until Edward landed in town and shook things up. Then it started to become a real possibility in my mind. We'd planned, we'd rode through town with our flag waving high and a battle cry in our hearts. Or...at least we'd tried to tell my fellow Astorians what I planned to do if I won. Not that it mattered. Ultimately,

Keating won again. Just as he had my whole life.

So, I stood there in the center of my bar with a trash bag in hand, looking around. The last thing I wanted to do was clean.

Or at least, that's what I thought was the last thing I wanted to do. Until I heard my dad's voice and turned to see him standing in the doorway, saying, "Hey, baby girl."

I winced, embarrassed that I didn't have better news for him this morning.

"Hey Dad," I gave a small, unenthusiastic wave.

My old man didn't wait for me to come to him. Instead he moved right to where I was standing and wrapped me up in a big bear hug. "I'm so proud of you," he said.

"Why would you be proud of my loss?"

Dad pulled back from the hug and forced my chin up, so I had to look at him. "You kiddin' me? You put your heart and soul into that election, and you nearly won it! That's a right darn good accomplishment, especially for someone who's never run before. Everyone's gotta start somewhere, and I just know your mama would be so proud."

"Yeah?" I asked.

"Yeah," he confirmed. "Especially takin' on Keating, it's like you're pickin' up the torch she lit and runnin' with it. You can't stop now, sugar bean."

I moved back and sat myself down on one of the bar stools, leaning back against the bar itself, "How, Dad? What am I supposed to do now?"

He looked confused, arms crossed over his chest. "You think just because you lost once, just one stinkin' election that you gotta give up your whole scheme—that's the wrong word—your whole dang objective, which now we know was kinda your mama's too. No way, kiddo. You gotta find those missing papers of hers and you gotta get this town set right."

With a shrug, I looked out the window at the pouring rain. "What if it's not for me to do?"

“Whatcha mean?” he asked.

“Edward’s here, maybe it’s his business to fix things. It’s his town, after all, isn’t it?”

Dad raised an eyebrow so high it felt like it would run into his hairline. “You think this is *his* town? Psh.” Then he rolled his eyes.

“I mean...” I let my voice trail off. “It is his town. His family owns it.”

“That very well may be true—”

I cut him off, “It is true, Dad. And weren’t you the one that told me maybe he’s what this town needed? Isn’t that what you said when he got here and I was, albeit wrongly, skeptical of his, uhhh, royal genetics.”

Dad closed the gap between us and took my face in his hands like I was a little girl whose attention he was trying to hold. “Emma Marie Prescott, you listen to me. Just because that man owns this town legally, or whatever the hell they wanna call it, does not mean this is his town. I know I poked and prodded at you when you were so mad about him being here, but I was just tryin’ to get you to lighten up. Honestly, he’s a good guy,” then his hands fell back to his sides, “but that don’t mean he didn’t need your help. Look at all you’ve done as a pair. You’re a good team, but you’ve also grown into a fantastic woman who can accomplish anything she sets her mind to. Even if that’s the *next* election.”

I knew Dad had a point, but I was so grumpy from my loss that I didn’t want to acknowledge it.

“Grrr,” I growled, more at myself than anyone else. “If we’re such a good team, then why did he leave without saying anything after I lost last night?”

This shocked Dad; I could tell by the way he pulled back, his eyes wide. “I, uhh,” he furrowed his brow, the wheels turning as he thought of how to comfort his little girl on something that was outside his wheelhouse. Sure, he could tell me I was a strong, confident woman who could do anything, but he wasn’t exactly the romance advice columnist of the

year. “He did that?” he finally asked.

I nodded. “Yep. Results came down; I made eye contact with him, then didn’t see him again. Still haven’t, actually.”

Dad swallowed so hard I could hear the gulp.

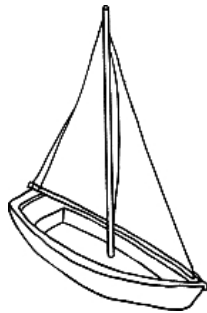
“My thoughts exactly,” I added.

He scratched his temple, thinking it through a moment before trying to give me an answer, “Maybe he doesn’t handle loss well, and he’s tryin’ to give you the space he would’ve wanted?”

“Oof,” I rolled my eyes. “Men need lessons.”

“Lessons?”

“That old book *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* is sounding good right about now.”



The Bad New Bears – Emma

The odd thing was the rest of the day kind of go back to normal. Sarabeth showed up a little after I did to help clean up as promised. Dad said his goodbyes, and we went about the day as if the election hadn’t... happened. It’s not that we were in denial, but... Okay, fine, we were in denial. Or, at least, I didn’t want to think about the crushing blow I’d experienced at the hands of our mayor and his cronies. I didn’t want to think about the fact that it might not have been Keating and Bell who caused this. What if the people of Astoria really weren’t interested in having a Millennial who owns a bookstore bar on their City Council? Maybe they didn’t get my plans? Or worse, maybe they got them but didn’t *want* them.

“Should I turn the Christmas Hits playlist on?” she asked

after just a few minutes of wiping the counters.

“You know what? Yeah!” With soft eyes, I smiled at my dearest friend, so grateful for her support.

Once the music was pumping through the speakers, we danced around the bar with trash bags in hand, tossing beer cans and plastic wrappers in to the beat of *Jingle Bell Rock* and *Wrapped in Red*. In all the craziness of the election, I would’ve forgotten it was the Christmas season at all if not for the way Sarabeth decorated the store. The heart she put into working with me spoke volumes about her talent and her character. It didn’t matter that the bar belonged to me technically; she loved it just the same.

As the day passed, people filled the store more than average; hour by hour, they came through, searching for gifts left and right. We sold more kids’ books this time of year than most other months combined. All in all, I was in a good mood by the time we started serving drinks. That was until Mikey and Jonah showed up.

I rested my forearms against the bar, a suspicious look crossing my face as I greeted two men I hadn’t expected to see. “To what do I owe the honor of seeing you two gentlemen this fine rainy afternoon?”

Neither sat down, which only added to the ominous air about them.

“Edward left.” Mikey finally broke the silence with a matter-of-fact statement.

For a moment, I thought he meant the bar. The night before. Which I knew, and was still annoyed about. “Ugh,” I gritted my teeth, “I know. I thought he’d at least have the decency to say something to me before walking out last night.”

“No,” Jonah shook his head. “*Left* left. Saw it myself; a fancy-looking car came and got him at the Driftwood. I was comin’ to get that sad sack for lunch to try to cheer him up and caught him getting in literally the largest SUV I’ve ever seen a prince get into in my life.”

“How many princes have you seen get into SUVs in your

life?” Mikey asked, smacking the younger man upside the head.

“Ow, I guess none, jeez, or one now,” Jonah rubbed at the now sore spot on his head as I tried to process what I was being told.

“I’m sorry,” I held up a hand to stop them, “Are you telling me that he just freakin’ skipped town like it was... nothing?”

They exchanged looks and then turned back to me. Mikey tried again, “He didn’t want to go. I called him when Jonah told me the news. Emma he’s so sorry.”

“So sorry that he couldn’t even swing by to say something to me in person but instead sent his henchmen to come tell me he was running home to Mommy and Daddy after everything we’ve been through? He’s not even going to *try* to help?”

Jonah opened his mouth to say something, but then I saw it snap shut without a word.

“I...” Mikey tried, too. Neither could come up with anything.

“I knew it,” I shook my head with a sigh, “Oh well, right? We were fine before, and we’ll be fine again. Astoria doesn’t *need* a king or a damn prince, as far as I’m concerned. All he did was turn things upside down and distract us from the serious matters at hand.”

“You don’t really believe that, do you?” Mikey asked me with narrowed eyes.

Before I could answer, I saw Sarabeth coming our way, “Believe what?” she asked, still chipper from the Christmas carols and blissfully unaware of the bad news.

“Edward left,” I said simply, the same way Mikey had told me, but with more bite.

“I’m not following,” Sarabeth admitted.

Jonah cleared his throat. “I went to meet him for lunch, and it seems his parents recalled him back to Whiteloch or something like that. They won’t let him stay here anymore.”

“Um, how old is he? Ew.”

I pointed right at my friend. “My thoughts exactly. Who lets their parents tell them what to do that way?”

“We’re not just gonna all pile on and trash talk the prince when he’s not here, no ma’am.” Mikey crossed his arms, holding firm in his stance.

“It’s not trash talk if it’s true...” I didn’t expect words that harsh to fall from my lips, but standing there with the news still new didn’t have me feeling gracious toward the man I thought I was building a relationship with. Yeah, sure, it was slow, but it was...

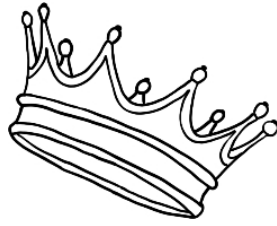
Well, frankly, it was fun—more fun than I’d had in a long time. And maybe that was the most disappointing thing about his sudden disappearance. I’d spent so much of my adult life building a small business, trying to put Astoria back together for my father, and wondering all the while what my dead Mom would think of me and the work I was doing. Pearl was so quick to point out how little time I spent with people my age, save for Sarabeth, of course.

So fine, my life had been boring, lame even. But, now look. The one time I’d even considered letting go and opening up it’s a freakin’ baby prince who can’t stand on his own two feet. So yeah. I was feeling...mean.

“Whatever,” I waved a hand through the air, “It’s over. We all get to go back to normal now. Right? It’s like...a freakin’ reset. Who is ever that lucky?” The words were that of someone trying to sound positive, but the tone was...less than perky.

Sarabeth took that moment to walk over to me and engulf me in a tight hug.

I sighed softly into her shoulder. “Thanks.”



Chapter 34

Back in Whiteloch – Edward

Edward was beyond too tired for this. He'd been flying for nearly ten hours and got off the airplane to what? Certainly not a warm welcome of cider, gingerbread, and hugs from his family members. No. With less than three weeks until Christmas, Edward's parents arranged for him to be picked up and taken straight to the Frostfell Christmas Market.

"You can't be serious," Edward mumbled sleepily into the phone.

On the other end of the line, his mother sounded chipper as ever. "Darling, it'll be a wonderfully triumphant return for you! The people of Whiteloch want to see their prodigal prince! Alive and in person."

"Mum, I was gone for a month."

"Edward," his mother lowered her voice to a more serious tone, "You've barely spent any time in Whiteloch for the last fifteen years. It's time that you focus on country and family. Show the people that you care what happens to them, that you're going to carry on the traditions set forth by—"

"Mum..." Edward gritted his teeth, not wanting to let his anger creep in while talking to the woman who birthed him. "You realize I'm not inheriting the throne, don't you? They only care what Al does."

"That's not *true*, Edward. The people of this country are invested in our entire family; that's what it means to be the ruling monarch of a country."

"You'd think by this point in his life he'd have some sense of that!" Edward heard his father yell from across the room from his mother. Great. Now Dad was involved.

“All I’m saying is the Whitelochian public won’t care if I nap and go to the market later, right?” he asked, whining at his parents to let him go sleep off his jet-lag.

“You need to show your face around here, or they’re going to start thinking bad things about you.”

“You do realize me going to Oregon was *your* idea, right?” Edward scoffed.

“Give me that phone,” then his father clearly had it in hand, “Edward, son. Go to the market. Buy something, spend money on our people rather than the people of Astoria. Make a show of good faith for once and then come back here to the palace for a chat.”

Shit.

A chat was literally the last thing he wanted. The word made it sound light-hearted, fun even. But Edward knew darn well it would be anything *but* fun.

The fact that Edward was still awake by the time he got to the palace was nothing short of a miracle. He’d gone to Frostfell at his parents’ insistence and done the whole royal out-in-public thing. It was nothing like Astoria where people didn’t recognize him unless Mikey pointed him out and he could sneak under the radar. Here in Crownhaven, Whiteloch’s capital city, he couldn’t blink without having someone snap a photo.

He barely made it out of the car that had been sent to pick him up before people were hooting and hollering his name, “Prince Edward! Edward! Can we get a photo? How about an autograph? Edward! Will you be shopping at the market for Christmas presents today?”

It was grating on his nerves and only served to make him miss the peace and quiet of the Astorian seaside. Of *course*, he was Christmas shopping there today—what other reason did anyone have to come to a place this packed with people this close to the holidays? Did these people not realize this was a PR stunt set up by his dear mother? Could they not see that

most people who couldn't take five steps without being hounded wouldn't come to a place this crowded?

But it wasn't like Edward could say any of that. No, no. He had to play the part. Even if he was the wayward one in the family, he had to save face here.

"Yes, hello!" He called out to the throng. "I'm here today to find Christmas gifts for the family," and with a wave, he was off down the aisles of the market, people grabbing and pushing him as he went along.

When it was finally over, and he returned to his childhood home with enough bags to fill the back half of the vehicle, he wasn't sure meeting with his parents would be any better than the women at the market flinging their marriage-eligible daughters at him.

"Evening Morton," he nodded to the butler. "Might you tell me where I can find my father?" Might as well rip the band-aid off rather than prolonging the pain.

"The study, sir."

"Thank you." Edward gave the old man he'd known all his life a pat on the arm and padded down the long, marble-floored hallway toward his father's study. He placed a hand on the knob when he reached the door and stood there silently for what he assumed would be his last moment of peace maybe... ever. Then he mustered up the courage to enter and didn't bother knocking.

"Hello, father."

"Edward, son," King Alfred waved him over from his perch behind an over-sized desk. "How was Frostfell?"

With a shrug, Edward made his way over and plopped down in a chair on the guest side of the desk. "Same as every year. Flowing with hot chocolate, bustling with shoppers, carolers there to entertain the masses." The smile he forced onto his face didn't even come close to looking authentic.

King Alfred furrowed his brow and nodded. "Mhm, yes. Let's get right down to business, shall we?"

Edward waved a hand through the air, motioning for his father to go on.

“Astoria,” the man across from Edward cleared his throat, “seems to be a lost cause. I’ve spoken in depth with Alistair and—”

“Father...”

“What is this...Royal Rides?” The king held up a few papers with the royal seal on them.

With his lips tightly pressed together, Edward cleared his throat. “Father, that’s a...well, it was to give our people in Astoria a ride to the polls. They don’t allow ride share there, if you can believe that,” he forced out a chuckle, hoping it would lighten the mood. “The mayor is so corrupt, you’ll want to toss him out on his rear as soon as you meet him. Anyway, without that, the elders and those without a means of transportation needed a way to—“

A hand came up to stop him. “One might say I’m no businessman, Edward. You know I have advisers to take care of that for me, but—”

Good lord, it was starting already.

“I might be a business; our family might be one, I suppose. But I’ve never run one of these side...things. What are they calling them these days, side hustles? I believe that’s what your brother called it. Be that as it may,” the king’s words were getting slower, slightly louder, and dare Edward say—harsher? “I do believe it is the objective of all businesses to turn some kind of profit.”

“Dad...” Edward said it almost the same way Emma did when addressing her paternal parent.

His Dad shook his head. “Edward. If I wanted to throw money away, I’d do it here where at least there’s a return in goodwill from the people.”

“I have it on good authority that most small businesses aren’t profitable in their first year,” Edward clapped back with a line that, as a kid, might have gotten him a spanking, but in this moment, it earned merely a laugh from good ol Daddio.

“Edward, please,” the king leaned back in his chair. “We are not a charity. If I thought you wanted to be a businessman—do you want to be a businessman?” There was a pause, a light bulb floating above his father’s head in a moment of clarity for the King that kept Edward silent because it simply wasn’t true.

“If it’s a loan to start some sort of venture that you’re after, I’ll tell you—your mother and I would actually be thrilled to loan you—”

“No,” Edward sat forward in his chair. “I was just trying to do what you asked me to over there. To bring the people back to us, but father they don’t even *know* about us. They think they’re American.”

King Alfred sighed. “Maybe they should be. After reviewing these numbers with Alistair, the whole place seems like a lost cause. The Americans have been after me to sell it for years. They just want to complete the state and don’t care if it’s a sinkhole where money goes to die. They’re in so much debt, what’s another few million?”

“No!” this time, it was an exclamation, a shock. “No, you can’t sell it!”

“I certainly can sell it,” Edward’s father retorted. “I own the place. Hell, I own every single one of those people if you want to get down to it.”

“Father,” Edward scrunched up his nose. “You can’t own people; this is the twenty-first century. Even royals don’t do that anymore...”

Now, he sounded just like someone else he knew—and missed.

His father was wholly unfazed. “Edward, these bills are untenable. I need you to focus. You will stay here in Crownhaven and participate in royal events with the family. You will not return to your gallivanting around Europe. You will not spend frivolous amounts of state money. You have to learn to conduct yourself like the prince you are.”

“The prince I am was trying to straighten things out!”

“Trying doesn’t mean doing, and that shows in your lack of proper efforts over there.” Once again Edward could feel King Alfred’s voice start to rise, displeased with his son’s remarks. “Go speak with Alastair Pembly; he’ll find an assignment for you. Just once in your life, your mother and I would like to see you do something good, for God’s sake! Act your age, and act your station.”

And with that, it appeared jolly ol’ Papa could take no more. He stood up from his desk and stormed out the side door of the room.

Bullocks.

Edward sat there, quiet and alone, for a few minutes. Not enough minutes if he was honest. But then the same door his father had left through opened and of course, it was his mother.

She was a well-groomed woman who kept herself in shape and wore a lot of pokey jewelry. This did, of course, mean that her hugs were loving, but angular. Not soft and engulfing like a cuddly old grandma.

“Mother,” he stood out of politeness, smiling as she walked toward him

“*Dahing*,” she said as she wrapped her arms around him, “he doesn’t mean it.”

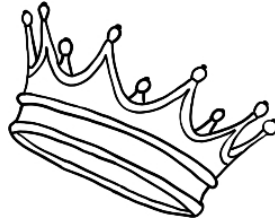
“No?” Edward asked through pursed lips. “Sure did sound like he meant it.”

“Edward,” she held each of his arms in her hands. “Your father and I just want the best life for you. And you haven’t been living up to your full potential; that’s all he meant.”

“Don’t you people get that I was trying to,” he held his hands up to his temples and then pulled them away, making little explosion sounds with his mouth while his fingers imitated his brains exploding from his skull. Then he flopped back into the chair. “Never mind. It’s fine. It’s not worth the argument. I’m here. I hear you. I’ll do what you want me to do and live out my days in this castle serving the people of Whiteloch and the crown. There, is that what you all want to

hear?”

It was at that moment that Edward realized even if his father couldn't own the people of Astoria, he did, in fact, own him.



The Next Morning – Edward

“Your Highness?” the voice on the other side of the door sounded concerned. “I do not want to have to come in without permission, but the lack of response is beginning to worry the staff.”

Edward blinked one eye open and called out, “What?”

Then, the door opened and a young valet was accompanied by Morton the butler. “Oh, you are alive.”

“What?” Edward repeated, stretching in his bed. “I’m sorry, Old Boy,” he said to Morton, squinting at the younger man he didn’t know. “And also...sorry...to you?” he asked, uncertain.

“Your Highness, it is time to rise.”

“Why?” was all Edward could muster.

“Your father and mother have requested the presence of you and your siblings at the Cairnwell Park Annual Tree Lighting Ceremony.”

“Oh for God’s sake,” Edward grabbed the nearest pillow and shoved it down over his head, “Tell them to go without me,” his voice now totally muffled.

“Prince Edward, sir...I do not believe that to be an option, seeing as your father and mother far outrank me in station, being that they...are the king and queen of this country,” Morton replied matter-of-factly.

The poor valet just stood there stunned, saying nothing.

Edward peeked out from under the pillow. “And remind me why a tree lighting ceremony that surely must take place after dark so you can see the lights would require me to rise at this hour of the morning?”

“Sir,” the valet’s shaky voice finally joined the conversation, “It’s just now noon, and the ceremony is due to begin at five, seeing as these days the sun is setting roughly around four-thirty. Your mother hadn’t heard from you yet today and had assumed you were going to speak with Alastair Pembly at the Capital building *before* the family gathered to leave—”

“Jesus Christ!” Edward sat straight up and stared at both men. “Are you bloody telling me that I slept from last night to this afternoon??”

“Well,” Morton shrugged. “I’m not here to tell you what you have or haven’t done, but in a word...”

“Yes,” the valet finished for him. “Is there anything I can get Your Highness by way of breakfast?”

Edward rubbed both hands over his stubble covered face, “Just a coffee.” Then he stopped himself and looked at the young valet, “my apologies. What is your name?”

“A co—“ Morton looked stunned both at his order, and that he’d inquired about the valet. “This is Jamison. I suppose we’ll see you when you’re up and dressed then, shan’t we?”

“One coffee, coming right up,” with that, Jamison rushed out the door to do his prince’s bidding.

The coffee now coursing through his veins was truly the only thing keeping Edward afloat. He made his way downstairs and ran smack into his father’s back. “Shit,” he mumbled.

“Nice of you to grace us with your presence,” his father retorted.

“Jetlag,” was all Edward bothered with.

“I see,” came the reply from his father’s end of the very

stifled conversation.

“Edward!” a higher-pitched, happier voice rang out through the halls and he turned to see his sister Charlotte coming toward him, arms outstretched. “I am *so* glad you’ll be with us this year. The girls are dying to see you, they want to hear all about America.”

“Well, I wasn’t in Am—”

“Charlotte, go tend to your mother,” King Alfred said to his oldest daughter.

“Of course,” Charlotte nodded, ready to comply without question. She squeezed her baby brother’s arm as she slipped away, “We’ll talk later, yes?”

Edward nodded.

“A car is waiting outside to take you to the Capital Building,” his father said gruffly. “I want you to cooperate; do you understand me?”

Edward dipped his head, saying nothing. He simply nodded again, not in the mood to argue.

“Excellent,” the king made a valiant attempt at smoothing things over with his youngest son by patting him on the shoulder and offering a smile, “You’ll turn things around in your life, I know it!” And with that, he left the hall with Morton, leaving Edward alone with the young valet.

“Brilliant,” he gave the guy a thumbs up and dramatically turned on his heels to head for the door. “I suppose this means I’m spending my first waking hours with some old geezer who’ll want to tell me how and where to spend my time.”

The much younger man had his hands firmly clasped behind his back out of respect, his shoulder back, his head bowed, “I’m afraid I don’t know what to say, Your Highness.”

Seeing him standing there so stiffly, Edward realized the error in what he’d just said. Yes, he was going to see Alastair Pembly, he was going to be told where to go, what to do, et cetera...but how could he possibly complain about that when this poor valet lived that life day in and day out without the

perks of being a prince?

He grabbed the other man's shoulder, and with a gentle squeeze, sighed. "I'm sorry, my good man. I shouldn't be so flippant with my words." With a dramatic flair, he turned on his heels and walked backward toward the door, "I am going to see a man about a job, and I'm going to do it with a smile on my face...I think?"

Unlike visiting the City Hall building in Astoria, no one stopped Edward when he entered the Capital Building in Crownhaven—in fact, it was quite the opposite.

"Your highness!" was the first greeting when he approached the front door of the building. A porter pulled the door open and bowed to the prince. Edward smiled at him and slipped inside, walking right up to the front desk.

Whereas in Astoria, he was looked at like a crazy man just for saying his own name, in Whiteloch, he barely opened his mouth before the woman behind the desk here said, "Good afternoon, Prince Edward! To what do we owe the honor of this visit?" Surely, she'd heard that he was in town. After his visit to the market yesterday, everyone knew he was back.

"Hello Julia," Edward had perfected the art of reading the name plates for people working different jobs. He enjoyed watching the smiles spread across their faces, bliss bubbling up at the thought that someone—a prince—noticed them for who they were rather than brushing them off like another menial worker. "I've got an appointment with Pembly."

"Yes, I did hear that," the woman named Julia nodded and picked up her desk phone, pressing a button to turn it into an intercom. "One moment please," she said to Edward before speaking into the device. "Mr. Pembly, yes. Prince Edward is here. Shall I send him back? Wonderful, of course, yes."

Edward couldn't hear the other half of the conversation, but the truth was he was only half listening, caught up again in his own thoughts. Most of which consisted of how much nicer the Crownhaven Capital building was than any of the

governmental buildings in Astoria. Why were they so run down, and why hadn't his father done anything to maintain them or make them something the people could be proud of, like all the state buildings of Whiteloch?

"You can head right back," Julia replaced the receiver into the phone cradle. "If you walk straight down this hall, it's number 15A."

"You're a peach," Edward patted her desk with a smile and a wink.

He didn't have to stick around to know that she was blushing and watching him walk away. This woman would undoubtedly be telling her friends about their interaction.

"Come in," an older voice called after Edward knocked on door 15A.

He did just that, shutting the door behind him. "Afternoon," he said, sliding smoothly into the oversized chair near the man's desk.

"Edwaaard," Alastair sounded a bit too pleased to see him.

Edward, for his part, just nodded.

"So glad you're back in Whiteloch. I cannot imagine the horrors you saw over in Astoria—from everything I've heard; the place is just—well, never mind. I spoke with your father before your glorious return yesterday and I have a wonderful schedule of events set up for you."

"Do you, now?" Edward asked, his voice deadpan, his face betraying his absolute boredom already.

"Your Highness will never believe the number of new businesses opening in Whiteloch in the next month. Blew my mind to hear that they wanted to start at this time of year, but who am I to tell someone what to do with their money? In any event—they all need ribbon cutting ceremonies, and there is just no way your brothers can get there with all their duties. Thank God you're back in town."

Edward pushed himself up, no longer slouching, and looked the man straight in the eye, "You're telling me the

work you've assigned to me is," there was a long pause, "ribbon-cuttings?"

Alastair chuckled, "Store openings are smashing events! Cut the ribbon, kiss the babies, shake hands with star struck women. You were born for it!"

"Was I?" Edward asked with an eyebrow raised, "How do you figure that?"

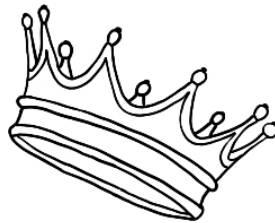
"Edward," Alastair drew out his name, smirking, "Look at that face!" He used both hands to gesture up toward Edward. "The women love that face. The whole country loves that face, hell—I love that face!" he laughed again.

Pressing his lips into a firm line, Edward drew in a deep breath, "I see. And what of Astoria, who will continue the work I started while there?"

It was Alastair's turn to look confused. "Edward, son."

Edward grimaced hearing that turn of phrase.

"I've been managing dealings in Astoria with mayors there since before Vernon was old enough to drink; you leave that place to me."



Calling Astoria – Edward

It was like the old days with the whole royal family together for events. Edward stood on the balcony between his sister and brothers, looking out over the massive crowd that had gathered on this day to hear one of Whiteloch's favorite sons sing Christmas carols with the Children's Choir of Crownhaven, witness this year's tree lighting, and of course, see the king and his children live and in person.

Twelve days before Christmas, every year—this exact same scenario repeated itself like Groundhog Day—except for the last few years Edward hadn't joined. Rather than arriving

in time for this auspicious event, he strolled into town mere days before the actual Christmas holiday.

But, as he stood there today, overlooking the massive fir about to be lit, he had a flashback. A warm feeling flooded his body as the lights went up, and the children began the first notes of Carol of the Bells. In his mind's eye, he saw Emma standing in front of not this Christmas tree but the matching one featured in downtown Astoria.

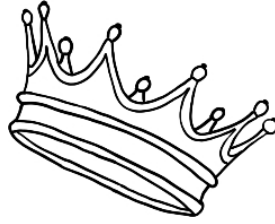
He could see her standing there in the bright yellow raincoat they'd purchased at Rainy Day Resale, tiny rainbow lights flickering on the tree, and that bright smile on her face. If he was sad before, this only served to bring tears to the brim of his eyes, threatening to spill out and all over his cheeks as he heard the children sing. He couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right. The children's voices rang out the classic tune, but what he heard instead was Alastair's voice from earlier: *"I've been managing with dealings in Astoria with mayors there since before Vernon was old enough to drink; you leave that place to me."*

"I...have to go," he mumbled, more to himself than anyone else, but of course, his sister heard him.

"What?" she asked, her face falling at the thought of him leaving now. "It's not even half over yet, mum will be—"

But Edward couldn't wait any longer. He slid between his siblings and out the door leading to the balcony, glad neither his father nor mother had caught on just yet. They would, of course, but maybe he'd be far enough away by that time that it wouldn't matter, and they couldn't stop him. Back inside the building, he crouched in a quiet corner and pulled the cell phone out of his pocket, silently thanking the universe that it was always earlier in Astoria.

"Mikey!" Edward scream whispered into the phone, "I think my father's adviser, Alastair, is working with Keating!"



Chapter 35

Putting it Together – Edward

Mikey was silent.

“Hello?” Edward finally asked into the phone. “Mikey?”

“I’m ...not sure I understand,” the man sounded different, like there was less pep in his step than any day Edward had interacted with him since the moment they met on that airplane.

“Mikey,” Edward repeated his friend’s name yet again. “My father’s closest adviser has to be the one keeping Keating’s dealings a secret,” the words flew out of his mouth. “I knew it was all too fishy. There was no possible way Keating could keep this under wraps alone. How would he have managed to keep the financials a secret from *everyone* here at the palace without a man on the inside?! I don’t know why I didn’t put it together sooner. Probably because I was too far off to see it, but never mind that. I need your help.”

“Mhm...Your Majesty, I’m just a little busy right now. Perhaps we can talk about this another time?”

“What!?” Edward choked on the word. When had Mikey ever...not...wanted to help? He swallowed hard and tried again, “I—of course. But you do see how important this is, don’t you?”

“Well, you know, stuff over here’s important too, and I got mouths to feed, so I think I’ll just be goin’ now.”

And with that, Mikey ended the call.

What the...

Edward stood hunched behind a metal knight, his mouth agape as he stared at the ground. A pang hit his stomach

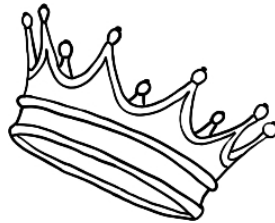
realizing that Mikey had essentially hung up on him. Not rudely, *per se*, but there it was just the same. Who else could he call? Not Emma, surely. Not only did he not have her phone number, but even if he managed to get it, she'd never want to speak to him after the way he left town without—

Then it hit him why Mikey sounded the way he did.

“Blast,” Edward mumbled to himself, smacking his forehead. In his overwhelming self-pity over screwing things up with Emma the night of the election, and the way his parents spoke to him on the phone that morning, Edward hadn't thought of anyone but himself as he climbed into the SUV the palace had sent for him. Perhaps Mikey hadn't taken the news of his departure, or the fact that he hadn't called since he left, all that well.

“Well, Edward, old boy. You're on your own this time.”

He didn't know how he was going to get this done, or even *what* it was he was going to do, but he knew that nothing would stop him until he got back to Astoria and set things right.



Back at the Tree Lighting – Edward

Rather than cause a scene at the tree lighting ceremony, Edward returned to the balcony to rejoin his family after his call with Mikey ended. Despite how long it felt for him, the rest of them—minus his older sister Charlotte—barely seemed to notice his absence. Dad and Mum were still all smiles as the children's choir ended another classic.

But the next morning, he set out to the Capital building to speak with Alastair Pembly once again. Never in his young life did he imagine he'd visit his father's adviser twice in a month, let alone back-to-back in two days—but this couldn't wait. As he slid into that same fairly uncomfortable chair he'd slouched in the day before, Edward attempted to look...

happier. Chipper? He didn't have a word for it, but he could see in his mind's eye what he wanted to convey to the man across from him.

"Back so soon," Alastair offered a smile. "Am I then to assume you're ready to take on some of the tasks I set forth for you?" The elder pushed a piece of paper toward Edward.

Edward, putting on the best act he could muster, let out an overdramatic sigh, propping his feet up on the corner of Alastair's desk, "I suppose so. Not that I have much choice given the..." he purposely let his voice trail off and moved his hand through the air in a circular motion as though he were attempting to think of a word, "circumstances." He finally decided on. Or made it sound like he finally decided on, seeing as he'd had it in his mind all along.

"Your parents' frustration?" Alastair asked.

The prince shrugged, his hands clasped behind his head as he leaned back. "That and the sale. I thought about fighting it, but I'm just not sure it's even worth my time, let alone so much of the family's resources. They're probably right."

Alastair raised an eyebrow, leaning his forearms against his desk. "Forgive me Your Highness, I'm not quite sure I'm following along."

Edward tilted his head. "What?"

"The sale?"

"Oh," Edward shrugged. "I assumed father told you that he finally decided to sell Astoria to the Americans," he forced out a laugh. "Those Yanks will be thrilled they've finally completed the state, I suppose?"

Alastair's face dropped. The man's eyes were wide, but Edward could see him forcing his wrinkled lips into a smile. "Oh, he finally decided to, uh, pull the trigger as it were?"

"Yeahhh," Edward leaned back, using his best Americanized *yeahhh* sound. "He said it's a sink hole, can you believe it? Gotta get rid of it right quick, it seems. Something like after my brush with the government officials there they're losing more per month than it makes...something like that?"

I'm sure he'll come talk to you. Anyway, without that job for me there, I suppose shaking hands and kissing babies at your ribbon cuttings is as good as it's going to get for me. I get a paycheck for all that business, right?"

The young man didn't believe a word of what he was saying, but if he didn't lay it on thick he knew there was no way Alastair would believe a lick of it.

Alastair moved some papers around, clearing his throat, "yes, of course."

"Great," Edward plastered on a wide, shit eating grin. "Aaaand...my father mentioned something about any of the working members of the family getting a credit card for incidentals?"

"Oh, uh," Alastair looked confused, but didn't press the matter, "Yes, of course, but that won't be ready until after the holidays. Thank you for coming to see me today, Your Highness, but it seems I've forgotten that I have a prior engagement coming up just momentarily. Another business meeting, you see."

"Say no more," Edward held up his hands and then smacked them down on the arms of the chair, pushing himself up to standing. "Believe it or not, I know all about having a packed schedule. I'll see you around, Al!"

We're Screwed – Alastair

Alastair Pembly had been working for the Whitelochian royal family quite literally his entire life. His father got him a job in the palace as valet to the then Prince Alfred, and from there, he hitched his wagon to that rising star. When Alfred was crowned king, it only made sense for him to bring his trusted valet along with him to the capital.

It took less than no time for Alastair to learn that the mayor of a tiny parcel of land out west called Astoria was cooking the books. Sure, Alastair may have started hooking buttons for a prince, but he had a mind for numbers. Rather than alert the king outright, he chose to speak to the man privately, hoping he could nail the crook and surprise the king

with his brilliant work, and thus, garner a promotion or, at the bare minimum, a raise.

Miller Clarkson, however, was a convincing man. Rather than lose his temper over being caught by the newly appointed young adviser, he welcomed him into the fold. “Listen, Al—can I call you Al?” Miller had asked.

Alastair fumbled with his answer, “I—oh, uh, I’d prefer no—”

But Mayor Clarkson cut him off. “Al, just between you and me, there’s a paycheck to be had here. I could use a guy like you, and I’m willin’ ta betcha I pay better than that royal blowhard.”

The unpleasant tone the mayor took made Alastair grimace as he listened. Still, the more he heard, the more he fell right into Miller’s clutches. Before he knew it, instead of turning the old man in to the new king, he was agreeing to be his *man on the inside*.

“I can do so much more with you on my side!”

So, there he sat, all these decades later, in a seat of power in the Whitelochian government, second only to the king with all of his hard work about to slip through his fingers like sand through a sieve. And all because that damned prince couldn’t just be a pretty face. Alastair rubbed his hands over his entire face, rolling his eyes at himself behind closed lids, “What were you thinking, you old fool?” he asked himself in a whisper, “that this would go on forever?”

So far...it kind of had. He worked with Miller Clarkson until he passed on, and shortly thereafter his grandson took on the post, which is how Alastair came to know Vernon Keating.

“Vernon,” he finally croaked into the phone, “We’ve got trouble.”

Vernon Keating snapped back. “More trouble than you letting the prince of Goddamn Whiteloch come over here and stir up the people?”

“The type of trouble that includes your cash cow drying up.”

Keating growled under his breath. “How so?”

“The king plans to sell Astoria to the Americans.”

“Fuck.”

Chapter 36

Keeping Astoria - Alastair and Keating

“We’ve got to do something.”

“Well, no shit,” Keating roared back at Alastair, “How could you let this happen?!”

“ME?!” Alastair raised his voice. “The Prince gets out there to your good-for-nothing-town, and all you had to do was make nice. Alllll you had to do was welcome him there and treat him like the silver-spoon-fed baby he is. But instead, you set him off with whoever those idiots were you said he became friends with.”

“Alastair,” Keating gritted his teeth, “do you remember Jane Prescott?”

The man thought on it and shook his head before remembering they were on the phone, and Keating couldn’t see him. “That name doesn’t even ring a bell.”

“You are getting too old for this job,” Keating replied.

“Are you planning to just sit here and insult me, or to tell me who she is?”

“Was.”

“Huh?”

Keating sighed. “Jane Prescott is dead, but she *was* the woman who last looked into the connection between your country and our good for nothin’ town, as you called it.”

“Right,” it did ring a bell now that Alastair thought about it, “I thought you took care of that?”

“I did.”

“Then why is this relevant?”

“Her daughter is the one he became friends with. Well, her and some others like her. All they do is cause trouble, and your prince decided to take up with them and try to turn the town on its head.”

“Be all of that as it may, Vernon, we’ve got a job to do.”

The king is now dead set on selling Astoria. If you wanna keep your cash cow, we're going to have to make it look like he's making some serious money, and quickly."

"What if...I, ahem, *find* the money to fix that damn pier the Prescott girl is always on about. We can host some kind of event to announce that we're fixin' up the place. And maybe you just tell that king of yours that you were wrong and actually there's a surplus in taxes."

"He might just be stupid enough to fall for that. Do you think those people over there will calm down if you do make this announcement?"

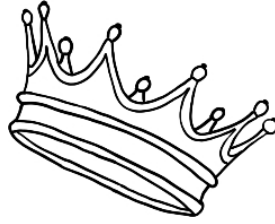
"Likely. It's all that damn Emma girl has asked for all year. She keeps showin' up at my council meetings."

"Say..." Alastair's brow wrinkled with thought. "What if you convinced them that you were going to do well enough by that town that they called and told the prince all the good news. Then perhaps *he* can pass the news on to his father so it's more...organic?"

Vernon snapped his fingers, "Say, that may be your best thought in a long time, Al."

"You know I hate it when you call me Al."

"Alastair," Vernon rolled his eyes. "I'll make a big to-do about shuttin' down the pier for repairs. Tell them we've discovered a tax surplus, and we let the thorns in my side do the rest of the leg work. We don't even really have to fix the damn thing. They just need to get word to that Edward of yours that the place is back on its feet and bringin' money to Whiteloch—right?"



Chapter 37

A Visit from Keating – Emma

“I’ve decided to bury the hatchet with you, Miss Prescott,” the mayor said from his seat at my bar.

Having him in my establishment, at my counter, drinking my wine, was honestly the last thing I wanted on a December afternoon—but against my better judgment, I’d decided to hear him out.

“And why’s that?” I asked dryly.

“Because it turns out you’re right in the end.”

I raised an eyebrow, pressing my tongue against the back of my teeth to keep from saying something I’d regret. “About which thing?”

“The pier, of course!”

“Uh-huh,” I nodded slowly. “And you’re going to...?”

“Well, fix it!” Keating laughed. “I thought you’d be a little more excited. You lost the election, sure, but you’re gettin’ what you’ve been after!”

“Okay, what’s the catch?”

“No catch,” he took a sip of the wine, swirled the glass, then set it down. “I want you up there with me on the stage when I announce it.”

“Come again?” I asked.

“Miss Prescott, we’re hosting an event for the last open weekend of the pier. We’ve found a bit of tax overage and intend to use it exactly the way you suggested. So we’ll have one last hurrah and all be friends in the new year!”

I know if I could see myself I would see a face that looked

like Cruella DeVille's with eyebrows reaching my hairline. I was, in a word, shocked. My head tilted to the side as I crossed my arms over my chest in a defensive move. Defensive for Keating, not me. Now, I am not a violent person, but when I heard those words come out of the man's mouth, I wanted to jump across the counter and grab him by the collar the way that guys did in old movies. I clenched my fists instead and managed to force the words out of my mouth. "You...*found* a tax overage?"

He simply nodded, a sip of wine swishing around in his mouth.

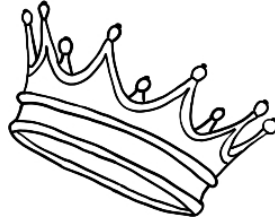
I had no words.

"Mayor Keating...I will not be able to join you in this, no."

The mayor coughed into his hand, wine threatening to spill out of his mouth. "Miss Prescott, I don't understand. This is everything you and your friends have wanted. You don't want to be there when we break ground and show your supporters that we're in agreement now?"

What I wanted to do now was hit my own forehead like a cartoon character. In my head, I could hear the loud smacking sound. But I held it together long enough to say, "Mister Keating, I am thrilled to hear you're going to be fixing the pier. I hope your event goes really well, but I must get back to work now."

The man narrowed his eyes at me and tossed a twenty dollar bill on the table as he stood, "You're making a huge mistake."



Chapter 38

Back to Astoria – Edward

Edward drummed his fingers on his thigh, looking around the packed Edinburgh Airport. It felt oddly familiar; he'd just been there not a few months before, on his way to Astoria that time as well.

“Hello?” he said into his cell phone.

“You make it on the plane?”

Edward sighed. “The first one.”

“I’m still pickin’ you up at the airport?”

Rubbing the back of his head, feeling bad for having to ask for help *again*, Edward let out a deeper breath. “Yeah, if you don’t mind?”

“Nope, not a prob. I’ll be there.”

Overheard at the Donnelly’s – Maureen

“Mikey, you gotta believe me, it wasn’t what I meant to happen...”

Prince Edward had shown up on the Donnelly’s doorstep without so much as a phone call first. Or at least, if he had called, Mikey hadn’t told his wife about it. Last she heard, the royal skipped town without a word and left the whole lot of them in the lurch.

Maureen could hear the princely pleading through the wall. She was standing at the kitchen sink, her hearing impaired by the sound of running water while washing dishes by hand. Their dishwasher hadn’t worked in months. She could feel her husband’s frustration; she didn’t even need to see him to know he had his arms crossed, leaning back in his comfy chair.

“What do you mean how did I get here? From Whiteloch? I flew coach, Mikey, *coach*.”

“Can’t rightly say I’m feelin’ bad for you at this moment, Your Majesty,” was the first thing Maureen heard from her husband in at least five minutes.

“Whewwwww...” Laura, Mikey and Maureen’s youngest daughter pushed through the swing door from the living room to the kitchen and pulled open the door to the refrigerator. “You could cut the tension in there with a knife.”

Maureen paused her scrubbing long enough to look at her teenage daughter who’d just bit down on an apple without bothering to wash it. “What’s he sayin’ to ‘im?”

Lauren shrugged. “Sounds like the prince screwed up pretty bad. Do you know what he did?”

“Far as I can tell, he hopped in a car a week back and disappeared without so much as a word to your Daddy, or Emma.” Maureen shook her head and then got quiet again when she heard the prince’s voice raise:

“Atlanta, Mikey, my layover was in Atlanta. OVERNIGHT. I slept there. Mikey, the place is more depressing than Astoria after a month without sunshine, not to mention it smells.”

Maureen caught her daughter’s eye, and both women chuckled quietly, not wanting to be overheard.

“You think Daddy’s gonna accept the prince’s apology?”

Pressing her lips into a firm line, Maureen rested a soapy fist on her hip. “Truthfully, honey, your Daddy is a stubborn man. Unless Prince Edward has some real good explanation for his behavior, I think my husband’s gonna make him suffer just a little bit longer.”

“From the way he describes Atlanta, it sounds like he thinks he’s suffered enough.”

Overheard at the Bar – Sarabeth

Sarabeth was shocked. *SHOCKED*. To see Edward again so soon. To see Edward again at all, when she thought about it.

It felt like he'd both been gone for eons, and also barely a few minutes, when he walked back into the bar.

She gasped. "Well, look what the cat dragged in!"

Emma turned to spot the prince in the doorway, and her jaw fell to the floor right alongside Sarabeth's. The air seemed to get sucked from the room. Sarabeth looked between her friend and the prince, watching their eyes connect from across the room. She wanted to whistle; or say something cheeky like *Emmaaaa, your prince is baaaack*. Or, at the *very* least, 'I told you so!'.

Sarabeth had believed, nay, KNOWN all along that Edward would return for Emma; she just...didn't know it would be before Christmas.

Prince Edward strode toward the women casually, one hand deep in the pocket of what looked to be a very warm pea coat, the other holding an over-sized bouquet of flowers that Sarabeth herself did not recognize. They were blue, star-shaped, and absolutely stunning. She made a mental note to Google them later *and* find out where he'd gotten them.

"Emma..." he said barely above a whisper as he stopped in front of her.

Sarabeth could feel the electricity between them, but Emma stood firm. She crossed her arms over her chest and looked up at him, not moving from Sarabeth's side. All Sarabeth wanted to do in this moment was shake Emma, scream in her face and tell her to kiss the damn idiot, drag him back to her apartment, have her way with him and make royal babies. But she knew that wasn't Emma's style. Instead, they were at a standstill.

"Yeah?" Emma asked, not swayed by what her friend saw as a beautiful, grand gesture.

Everyone in the place had turned to look in the would-be-couple's direction.

"Emma," Edward repeated in a softer tone and then cleared his throat, reaching out to hand her the bouquet. "Can we...speak privately?"

With what could only be described as a forced sigh, Emma took the flowers, turned on her heels and guided Edward back toward her office.

Sarabeth tried to follow, but the door quickly shut in her face.

“Okaaaay...” Sarabeth said.

“Talk,” she heard Emma’s voice say.

“You’re never going to believe me, but...” and then the sound was lost to her.

“Damn it,” Sarabeth mumbled to herself, leaning up against the door, pressing her ear right against it and wishing that she’d bought that spy kit she’d seen advertised on social media. Maybe the algorithm really *did* know what she needed?!

“You’re telling me that you want me to ...get up on stage, and say what?!” Emma didn’t sound pleased, and as much fun as it was to listen in, Sarabeth felt bad spying on her friend. She resigned herself to force the info out of Emma later and turned to go back to her post, serving the patrons at the bar.

Chapter 39

A Chat with the King - Alastair and the King

“Your Majesty.” Alastair Pembly stood when the king entered his office, just like he had every time King Alfred had entered his office since the two of them took their respective posts.

“Al,” the king smiled at his long-time adviser warmly and slid into the seat where he’d sat for meeting after meeting with Pembly. “Getting ready for my blowout Christmas sale?” the man laughed.

He tried to keep his cool, but the king’s constant jokes about selling Astoria for the last few weeks were getting worrisome. After Alastair’s last conversation with Prince Edward, he was really starting to believe he’d lose the place. But he didn’t want King Alfred to see just how worried he really was, so rather than convey his fears, Alastair laughed right along with his sovereign.

“Oh, Your Majesty, as freeing as it would be to let that land go, we should look it at logically.”

King Alfred sighed over dramatically in a way that, oddly enough, reminded Alastair of his son Edward.

“Yes, yes,” the king nodded, folding his fingers together over his lap, “but the documents you showed me most recently tell the story quite clearly. Astoria is a sinkhole, sucking the life and funds out of this country.”

Alastair drew his head back, shocked to hear such language attributed to something rather benign. Had he gone too far with Vernon Keating’s crooked financial dealings? “Your Majesty, it’s not *that* serious,” he leaned forward and pushed a few documents across the desk at the other man, “In fact, the mayor there has managed to end this year on a surplus; isn’t that delightful?”

Alfred, genuinely shocked by this news, reached out and grabbed the papers with his eyes narrowed, touching his breast pocket in hopes he’d find glasses there. “Really?” he asked.

“Indeed,” Alastair nodded. “There’s enough money for the major repairs needed by the city and to possibly hire some new employees at the city level with profit to show for it at the end. He’s really turned the place around this year. Tourism is skyrocketing, and with the pier back in working order after the aforementioned repairs, next year should be even better!”

Having found his glasses tucked into the collar of his shirt, the king was now perusing the documents handed to him. “I see. This is quite impressive. How the devil did he do it?”

King Alfred had never been a genius with numbers, but this seemed out of the blue even to him.

Seeing how closely Alfred looked at each line, Alastair decided it was time to distract him, as usual. “Have you considered a visit there to see it for yourself?”

“What?”

“Your Majesty has never visited Astoria.”

“No,” the king cleared his throat, “I have not, but what could I possibly do in Oregon?”

Alastair raised both eyebrows, and a simple shrug came next. “Meet your subjects, show them their sovereign is not only real but also cares about them, their well being, their *town*.”

“Mhm,” Alfred seemed to be taking it under consideration, the way he did with everything Alastair had suggested to him in his reign. “I can see how that would prove wise.”

“You could even bring Her Majesty if she’s so inclined to take a trip. Perhaps afterward you two might want to visit America. Your nephew is in Hollywood, I hear. Regardless, when was the last time you saw the States? Spoke with the President?”

“Yes, that is true. We could make a tour of it.”

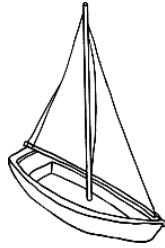
“Exaaaactly,” Alastair nodded.

“I’ll speak to my wife, I’m sure she’ll want to see this place that our son has become so obsessed with.” Alfred didn’t wait another moment before pushing up out of the chair,

leaving the papers behind on Alastair's desk, "Could you have your assistant set up a flight for us?"

"Certainly, Your Highness. Would you want to be there in time to see the event at the pier, and will Prince Edward be going with you?"

Alfred shook his head, "No, he's busy on the tour you've set forth for him. Keep him working. And yes, we would need to be there for their uh, pier repair party."



Chapter 40

A Change of Heart – Emma

I was a woman on a mission, and that was...to somehow make it in and out of Mayor Keating's office without screaming obscenities at him. I had to make nice.

"Emma," he greeted me at the door and motioned for me to step inside. "I was surprised to see you on my calendar for today—change of heart?"

The sound of his voice alone pissed me off. Knowing what I knew did not make this easy, but it was for the good of Astoria.

"Yeah, I guess you could say that." I shrugged and took a seat in the chair he pulled out for me. Why was he being so nice? I couldn't wrap my mind around a reason why he legitimately thought he needed me, *me*, on his side.

"So, uh," I puffed up my cheeks involuntarily and then bit the insides of them to keep myself from doing it again. "How can I be of assistance at this...last hurrah, as you called it?"

Keating took his seat and pulled the chair into his desk until his bulbous stomach was right up against it. "We want the community to know we care. The City Council is not the enemy, Emma. Neither am I. I am not your enemy."

Raising an eyebrow, all I could hear in my mind was *me thinks the lady doth protest too much*, but I kept my lips pressed tightly together and nodded instead. "Mhm..."

"We want you up on the stage. We want to celebrate the attention you've brought to our historic pier and the improvements we as a city are going to make there and elsewhere over the next few months. The idea here," he waved a hand through the air in a grand gesture, "is that the pier is

just shutting down for now and we'll be back and better than ever as a *community*." He put extra emphasis on the last word in a way you'd imagine your boss at a large corporate office calling all the employees *family*. It made me wanna barf.

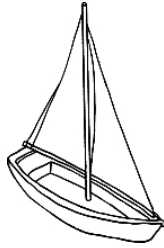
"Great," I finally gave him a thumbs up, "so I show up to your ...groundbreaking, or whatever, and just get up on stage and..."

"Well," he chuckled, "ideally, you'd express gratitude to the Council for fixing your beloved pier. Emma, excuse me, Miss Prescott, you don't want to appear ungrateful, do you?"

This was absolutely too rich for my blood. The man who'd fought me on doing something that was literally his *job* wanted me to thank him for it publicly. I could not believe the audacity of this jerk. But, I had to keep it together, so rather than saying anything negative, I offered him a soft smile. I couldn't lay it on too thick or he wouldn't believe a word I said.

"Got it; I'll be there with bells on!"

"Excellent!"



Chapter 41

Let's Close the Pier Party – Emma

“Are you sure this is going to work?” I whispered into the phone from the fake backstage area Keating and his team had set up.

“Yes, it’s going to work.”

The stage was at the entrance to the pier, and signs all over read: IT’S NOT GOODBYE, IT’S SEE YOU SOON!

Barf.

The whole event wreaked of, ‘Hey, we threw this together last minute, because we discovered we couldn’t get away with our bullshit any longer.’ I wasn’t having it, but it really did feel like the rest of Astoria was. This was the first event in my memory that people showed up for that didn’t involve Edward in some way or another.

Prior to the prince’s arrival in our fair city, people just didn’t gather. The trope a small town in America where everyone knows everyone and is kind to their neighbors just didn’t describe Astoria. No, Astoria was full of people like the old man at the Wishing Boats celebration who accused me of stealing business from others in town when, in reality, all I’d done was diversify the business offerings to our people.

Regardless, I was doing what was required of me for the betterment of everyone there—even the grouchy old folks who didn’t deserve Royal Rides or my attention.

“Miss Prescott?” a woman I barely recognized from City Hall wearing a headset motioned to me.

“Hm?”

“The mayor will be beginning soon. He’ll welcome

everyone and then invite you to the stage to talk about the closure of the pier and you'll be on your way. Once you endorse the pier closing for repairs and the work that he intends to do, you're off the hook for the rest of the day and can just enjoy the festivities."

Festivities. Good lord.

Keating and his lemmings had turned the fact that they were doing the bare minimum at their jobs into a celebratory event.

"Sounds good," I gave her a thumbs up, doing my best to act normal, whatever normal was in a situation like this.

Just as I was about to enter the stage, I heard my name called, but this time in a familiar voice. It was Jonah. I raised an eyebrow involuntarily and blinked at him, "Jonah, what are you doing back here?"

He ran over and sounded out of breath as he swiped his arms back and forth through the air, looking around to make sure no one was within earshot before whispering, "The ... tape," he shook his head, pausing as though he didn't know what to say next.

Needless to say, I was confused. "The tape is..." I tried to urge the huffing fisherman before me to continue.

"I don't really know. Something's wrong with it. You're gonna have to do something else."

"Do something else?!" My mouth fell open as the music began playing behind me on the stage. "What do you mean do something else—I have to—"

But my statement was cut off by the same stage manager-looking lady who'd addressed me before. "Miss Prescott, you're up!"

"Thank you," I waved to the woman to acknowledge that I'd heard her, then turned back to Jonah, speaking to him through gritted teeth. "What am I supposed to do?!"

He just shrugged. SHRUGGED. That's it.

"Great, thank you, super helpful."

But I didn't have time to belabor the point. I had to go on, or we'd lose our chance. So rather than stand backstage with a plaid clad dude who wasn't being very helpful anyway, I turned and made my way through the curtain and onto the stage. I saw Mayor Keating enter from the other side as a boisterous rendition of *Joy to the World* blasted through the sound system.

Let me tell you, this isn't what I wanted to be doing a week before Christmas. This isn't what I wanted to be doing *ever*. The stage was covered with decorations, making it look like a festive holiday celebration—rather than what it was, a hostile takedown. Okay, maybe not hostile, but we were in fact here for a takedown.

As the music began to fade out, Mayor Keating stepped up to the microphone to greet the awaiting crowd. “Good afternoon, Astoria!” He yelled out as though he were a rockstar at a concert. The people around the stage did not respond in kind.

Sure, there were a few cheers, some hollers, but mostly, people just stood there—confused. I looked around, trying to spot my friends and others I knew all around. Dad wasn't out front; he didn't want to leave Prescott's Pacific with so few days left to pack. I assured him it wouldn't be bad if we did it all together, but the stubborn old man couldn't help himself.

“I am so thrilled,” Keating continued, “to be here with you all on this brisk and beautiful day! We've been blessed with sunshine!” He motioned up to the sky. Cloudy, overcast even, but he was right; it wasn't raining...yet.

“Many of you know that Pier 25 has been a point of contention between this young lady and I,” he motioned back to where I was standing, “We haven't always seen eye to eye, and I know that has caused some,” he cleared his throat, “issue for you all.”

I wanted so badly to roll my eyes. Had it caused issues for them, Keating? Had it!?

“But,” he punctuated the word sharply, “I have seen the error of my ways.”

This was a surprise. I did not expect the mayor to apologize on stage in front of everyone who decided to show up today. The crowd must not have expected it either because they started whispering.

“Hey now, settle down! A good man can admit when he’s wrong,” he tried to give a hearty laugh like Santa, but it came out more sinister.

“And Miss Prescott, along with her team.”

Team!?! Jeez, Louise, I hated this guy.

“...have shown me the real worth behind making repairs to this pier,” he motioned behind us to where Pier 25 stood, unmaintained for so many years. “It’s not just the physical pier that needs refurbishing; it’s the heart and soul of Astoria that needs a revival!”

At that statement, people *did* actually cheer and clap. My mouth fell open slightly, but I quickly shut it, remembering that they could all see me.

“With that in mind, I’d like to turn it over to Miss Emma Prescott whom you know from her honorable run for City Council over the last few months. You may not have chosen her to represent you, but she’s here to say a few words about the pier.”

I felt my eyes roll so far back into my head that I could see my brain. He was such a dang blowhard.

Sneakin’ Around – Sarabeth

“Sarabeth.” Edward held onto her shoulders, forcing her to look him straight in the eye. “I need you to let go of any feminist ideals you’ve held in your life and use your womanly wiles to lure that man out of the sound booth. Do you understand me?”

They could hear the music lowering as the mayor began to speak to the crowd.

Sarabeth smirked, rolling her eyes. “Honestly, Your Majesty. What’s more feminist than taking down the man with these?” She batted those extra-long eyelashes at him and

winked.

Edward pulled his head back and laughed. “You really are somethin’, you know that?”

With a smile and a cute Betty Boop style wave, SB made her way from where Edward, Mikey, and Jonah stood to where they’d told her the make-shift sound booth was set up for the pier event. It was in one of the pier lodge rooms.

How on Earth, she wondered upon approaching the door, was she supposed to get into a room like that without being blatantly obvious? They’d given her no advice, no plan—just said to get him out of the room. No how?! Ugh, men always did make the girls do all the work.

After thinking about it for a moment, Sarabeth just... opened the door.

“Oh, my goodness,” she said with a hand held up to her décolletage as the sound attendant turned to see who had entered his space, “I am...so sorry.”

She drew out every word, speaking slowly, and in a slightly higher pitched voice than her natural tone.

“Can I help you?” he asked, pulling his headset off just one ear.

“I didn’t know this was...well, whatever this is,” she motioned to the soundboard, trying to sound dumb. “I was looking for the ladies’ room, which this clearly isn’t.” She added a soft laugh at this end, dipping her head to hide the fact that she wasn’t really blushing.

“Ha,” he replied. “Nope. Sound room,” he motioned to the board.

“Wooooow...you do all the sound stuff?” Sarabeth widened her eyes. “This is so cool,” she stepped closer, not moving too quickly so as not to alarm the man. Of course, having put on an event of her own, she knew exactly what he was doing but couldn’t let on.

“Yeah,” he nodded, motioning with his head for her to step up to the board. “And look,” he pointed to a small screen

where they could see everything going on on the stage. The mayor was at the microphone, and Emma was off to the side behind him. “Neat, huh?”

“Sooo neat,” Sarabeth bit at her lip ever so slightly, holding eye contact with whoever this was the city had hired. She’d never seen him before, which aided in her tricking him into believing this was real.

“Do you wanna see—oh shit, hang on,” a scream came over the walkie-talkie, demanding he shut off the sound system.

Sarabeth, of course, could hear it blaring and tilted her head, trying to remain calm. “What’s all that about?” she said in her ditsiest voice, knowing she had to get him out of there and quickly.

“Uh, I dunno. The mayor’s a real jerk who yells all his requests. He wants me to turn the sound off. Dunno why,” the guy shrugged and did just that.

“Turn on the *music*,” came another scream through the device.

“Wow, he sure does yell a lot. But um, do you think you could...show me where the ladies’ room is? I really need to ___”

“Yeah, of course,” he pulled the headphones off completely so he was no longer wired to the system, “the sound is off like he asked; they can deal with just music for a few seconds. It’s right around the corner.”

“Oh, *thank you*.”

Overheard from the Stage - Emma

As I stepped up to the microphone, nerves hit me harder than I could have imagined. Sure, I did run for City Council, knowing that I’d have to talk to people, but it’s not because I *wanted* to speak in front of crowds. It’s because I wanted to fix the damn pier. Which now, I was about to stall, in a weird way.

Clearing my throat, I reached into my pocket to touch an old-school-spy looking audio player. Why on Earth *this* was

the device that Edward had chosen for his dirty dealings was beyond me, but here we were. Or I was. Alone on the stage because he'd also chosen to give me this win. To allow me to expose Keating after everything, rather than take credit for the work we'd all done together.

“Fellow Astorians,” I lifted my hand to wave to everyone, pausing to swallow hard and gain some level of composure. I could feel my hands shaking; I'm sure they could see it, too. “I wanted to start by thanking Mayor Keating for including me in today's festivities. As many of you know, I have campaigned tirelessly for the repair of Pier 25 for nearly a year at this point. It's an important structure not only to Astorians and Astorian *history* but also to my family...”

People gathered around the stage were getting restless, and bored; I could see it on their faces. “Mayor Keating came to me earlier this week and asked me to be here today because he has seen the drive from all of us to save this monument to our history. Or at least...that's what he told me.”

The crowd began to whisper at that. I pulled the recording device out and held it up. “But I need to play you something that might change all that.”

I knew I had to move fast, so I held it up to the mic and pressed play, not knowing where in the supposed conversation this would begin:

Everyone could hear the mayor's voice clearly through the loudspeaker. “Her daughter is the one he became friends with. Well, her and some others like her. All they do is cause trouble, and your prince decided to take up with them and try to turn the town on its head.”

Then, a voice no one this side of the pond knew, but his British-sounding tone gave away his standing, replied. “Be all of that as it may, Vernon, we've got a job to do. The king is now dead set on selling Astoria. If you wanna keep your cash cow, we're going to have to make it look like he's making some serious money, and quickly.”

Everyone stood silent, listening as the mayor replied to the unknown man, “What if...I, ahem, *find* the money to fix

that damn pier—”

The sound system cut off with a screech, and everything went silent, except for the quiet sound of the voices playing in my hand where only I could hear...

Crap.

Caught – Keating

Vernon Keating knew this was too good to be true. That damn brat had come to his office and agreed to get up on the stage and make nice, but instead, here she was, blasting a conversation between him and Alastair Pembly aloud for the whole town to hear.

What he wanted to do was wring her neck, but instead, he grabbed the walkie-talkie from his secretary, whom he had playing stage manager, and screamed into it, “Whoever is in the goddamn sound booth, you cut that sound RIGHT. NOW.”

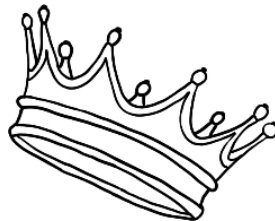
As he spoke into the device, he stomped from where he was standing toward the sound booth in the back.

“Turn on the *music!*”

He heard no reply from the tech manning that station, but just the same, the sound turned off right as he approached the hall leading to their makeshift set up. Instead of a closed door upon which to knock, from afar, he could see Mikey Donnelly and Prince Edward enter the room.

“Oh no you don’t!”

Mayor Keating padded down the hall as quickly as his legs would carry him and followed the two into the room.



The Confrontation – Edward

“Which button turns it back on?!” Edward asked Mikey. His voice was raised, but not unkindly.

Mikey was scanning the soundboard, trying to figure out which of the many buttons in front of them would give Emma back sound. “I don’t know. I don’t think—”

“That’s. Quite. Enough.”

It was Vernon Keating.

Edward and Mikey whipped around to see him standing in the doorway.

Edward took a deep breath, mentally cursing himself for not locking the door.

“You two are not allowed to be in this room.”

“Well,” Mikey shrugged, “No one else was manning the sound, Vernon. As you can see, and we heard you wanted it turned off, so we—”

“Do you think I’m a goddamn idiot, Michael?”

Edward’s mouth dropped open, shocked to hear the mayor speaking to his friend that way. Though honestly, he knew he shouldn’t be surprised after what he’d heard of his conversation with Alastair on the recording he’d made.

“And you,” the mayor looked directly at Edward, “You’re more of a thorn in my side than either of the damn Prescott women ever were, and that’s really saying something.”

The guys felt cornered. They couldn’t exactly run past Vernon to the single exit.

“You can’t get away with this forever, Keating,” Edward finally got up the courage to say to his face.

“Oh, can’t I?” Vernon smirked, a quiet, sinister-sounding laugh escaping his lips. “Says who?”

“Says the recording that I made of you and Alastair Pembly discussing your plans for Astoria and what you’ve been doing all along. PLUS,” Edward emphasized the word, “I’ve got documents showing the fire from 18—”

“What does that prove?” Keating cut him off, while behind him Mikey finally found the switch he’d been looking for out of the corner of his eye.

Mikey wasn't giving Emma back sound like they'd originally planned. Instead, he turned the sound on the lapel mic attached to the mayor's collar.

Edward and Mikey didn't reply to Keating's question fast enough for his liking, so he continued. "What? You found a couple papers that show you that my grandfather started to fire to burn the record of your grandfather. Does that hurt your widdle feelings?" he said in a baby talk voice.

"Whoa now, Vernon, no one was accusin—"

"I was," Edward held up a hand. "Yes, I was accusing his grandfather of starting the fire."

"And so, what?" Keating shrugged. "Say you prove that. What does it matter? He's *dead*. Nothin' about him gives any credence to your claims about me. You think this town is gonna ban against me in favor of you?"

"You and Pembly have been stealing money from not only Whiteloch but also the people of Astoria for...lord knows how long!" Edward didn't even know that Mikey had flipped a switch, allowing all of Astoria—or at least those gathered at the event—to hear their conversation, but he continued anyway. "I came here to try to right things. Emma has been trying to save this entire place and return it to its former glory, which is what *you* should be doing. It's *your* job. But instead, you're siphoning money away and doing what with it?! Funding some lavish life of limousines and God knows what else!"

Keating snorted. "You're one to talk about a lavish lifestyle, *Prince* Edward. You rolled into town like you own the place and—"

"I *DO* OWN THE PLACE," Edward yelled for the first time, shocked by his own voice.

"In name only. My family is the real monarchy in Astoria, and we deserve that tax money more than you people who have done nothing to better the place."

"And you have? Emma's been the real hero all along. She's the one who actually cared. More than you, more than

me. More than anyone here. She's...she's perfect." The last statement was more of a whisper, barely audible.

"I've kept it going," Keating shrugged, unbothered by the idea that he was running his *own* town into the ground. "The money is mine; it was my father's before me. My grandfather's before him, and the money will continue to be mine long after you're chased out of this town."

"On what grounds?!" Edward could not even believe he was having this conversation. At this moment, he also could not believe he'd ever argued with Emma about whether or not this man was at the center of all the misdealings in Astoria.

The mayor snorted, resting his hands on his rotund belly. "I don't need grounds. I've got the whole town wrapped around my little finger," then he held up one hand, a ring on his pinky finger, "Just like my Daddy and granddaddy. The people of this town believe us because we've been here for generations. And the best thing we ever did for them was quietly remove any memory of Whiteloch or the monarchy. This is the twenty-first century; who wants to be ruled by some out-of-touch king?"

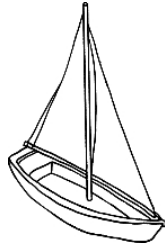
"Can you explain to me how you're any different than a king?" Edward asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I'm elected, of course!"

"Not in the traditional way, Vernon. You're well past the term limits," Mikey slipped into the conversation, wondering how much he could get the man to reveal without really asking him to.

With a simple shrug, Keating said, "I have my ways." And with that, he turned toward the door, ready to leave.

"Oh no, you don't! I am not letting you go out there and continue this rouse for another couple of decades!" Edward exclaimed, pushing past him to exit the room first and quickly at that.



Chapter 42

What Just Happened – Emma

Only moments after the sound system cut out, leaving me standing on the stage completely dumbstruck, it started up again. Except this time, it wasn't projecting sound from the microphone in front of me. Instead, voices came from elsewhere.

I recognized the first voice as none other than my arch nemesis Vernon Keating. "What?" he asked someone with him. "You found a couple papers that show you that my grandfather started to fire to burn the record of your grandfather. Does that hurt your widdle feelings?"

"Whoa now, Vernon, no one was accusin—" That was for sure Mikey.

For a moment, I surely thought I'd lost my mind, that I was hearing things. These were statements I'd heard before, but only in my wildest dreams. However, it seemed like the crowd in front of me could hear it, too. Everyone around the stage was whispering to one another, not wanting to raise their voices over those coming through the speaker. Edward. Keating. Edward. Keating, and then Edward again:

"You and Pembly have been stealing money from not only Whiteloch but also the people of Astoria for...lord knows how long! I came here to try to right things. Emma has been trying to save this entire place and return it to its former glory, which is what *you* should be doing. It's *your* job. But instead, you're siphoning money away and doing what with it?! Funding some lavish life of limousines and God knows what else!"

Now the voices around me were getting louder; I stepped up to the microphone, forgetting for a moment that it was cut

off. “Shhh,” I tried, but the sound didn’t carry, so I held my hands up, attempting to quell the crowd just long enough for us to hear more.

“You’re one to talk about a lavish lifestyle, *Prince* Edward. You rolled into town like you own the place and—”

“I *DO* OWN THE PLACE!”

This went on for a few minutes that felt like hours. I could feel my slack-jawed face hanging there, unable to move from where I stood until I saw Edward running down the aisle from wherever he had been.

“Emma!” He shouted from the back of the crowd, reaching into his breast pocket as he pushed through the throng and made his way to the stage, unfurling a piece of paper. “Emma.” He was out of breath when he reached me, the stage, the microphone.

“Edward,” I touched his arm with my hand to calm him. “I can’t believe that—”

“No!” He shouted, though not directly at me, just in general. “There’s no more time to waste; the people of Astoria deserve to know.”

I could hear, then, that the microphone turned back on, and Edward’s voice was no longer for me alone. He was, as he was moments before, projected into the whole event.

“Edward,” I repeated softly, but he grabbed hold of the microphone, holding the papers up above his head.

“PEOPLE OF ASTORIA!” He shouted louder than was necessary given the level of amplification he had, “I hold in my hand proof that you are in fact citizens of Whiteloch. My father, King Alfred, DOES own this city and—”

He was really doing this. “Edward, you don’t need to do this,” I offered him a soft smile. “We know what’s true.”

“I know you know, but *THEY* need to know,” he motioned out toward the people. He wasn’t getting it. He must not have known that we could hear the whole conversation.

That alone caused me to let out a soft laugh. I reached up

to grab his cheeks, holding his face so he was forced to face me and make eye contact. “We could hear the entire thing. The conversation, with Keating—look...” Then, letting him go, I turned him to where the sheriff and his trusty deputy were hauling Keating away, in handcuffs.

“Oh—I...” Edward looked stunned, “You heard... everything?”

I nodded.

In that fleeting moment, that split second, I could see Edward step toward me. His hand reached up to cradle my cheek, but before he could touch it—

“So did we.”

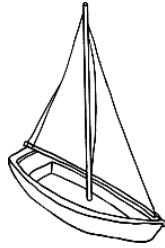
Right then, rather than any kind of reunion with Edward, I was surprised when an older looking man and woman stepped out onto the stage. I’d never seen them before, but based on their clothes and bone structure, I could only assume they were —

“Dad? Mum?” Edward was genuinely shocked; I could hear it in his voice.

The man whom I now knew was King Alfred took strides toward his son. “Edward, I am so sorry I didn’t listen to you.”

Blinking wildly, I looked back and forth between the two men, and then to the woman who was reaching out to hug her son. Were there really monarchs in Astoria. Standing with me...on a fake stage, outside the broken-down pier I’d been trying to get fixed?

Sarabeth was never going to let this one go.



Chapter 43

The King and Queen of Astoria – Emma

“They had you WHAT?!” I couldn’t help but laugh hardily as Sarabeth retold the story of how she got the technician out of the sound booth.

We were all sitting around a few pushed-together tables in the center of Moonbeam Mugs. Maureen had been kind enough to let us take over the place. So, there we sat, me, Sarabeth, Mikey, Jonah, Edward, and...the king and queen of the Whiteloch Isles.

Everyone had a piece to relay to the rest of the group, each person sharing their knowledge, moments no one else had experienced.

“I can’t believe you kids actually did it,” Mikey said, leaning further back in his chair than he should have.

“I can!” Sarabeth furrowed her brow and crossed her arms. “We can do anything!”

“Alright, alright, you know what I mean,” Mikey laughed. “I also cannot believe we are sitting with Their Royal Majesties the same way we would with just any ol’ folk from ‘round here.”

Queen Gweneth winced at how he addressed them. “Well, we wanted to see what this whole, ahem, place was about. Our Edward spoke so highly of Astoria, of all of you, really. We wanted to know what had him so smitten.”

“It’s just one of those places, I guess,” Jonath shrugged.

“Hardly,” Edward shook his head. “Don’t get me wrong, Astoria is beautiful. The day Edith took me up to The Column, really opened my eyes, but it’s the people that make this place

what it is. Without you all, none of this would have happened.

We gushed at each other for what felt like hours, and slowly people began to peel off. The King and Queen, absolutely jetlagged, retired to the home they'd rented for their stay. Jonah, having been awake since the butt crack of dawn when he started fishing, was also yawning overdramatically. Though, I suspected that wasn't the entire reason he wanted to leave, as he offered Sarabeth a ride home.

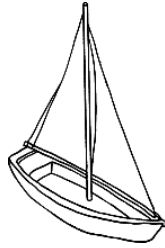
Finally it was just the three of us again: me, Edward, and Mikey.

"Come on, you kids. I gotta lock up and get this old man home," Maureen said as she appeared from the kitchen.

"Oh, right," I pushed back from the table. "I'm sorry we kept you so long, Maureen."

"Nah, you all deserved this. Did an amazing job up there tonight, sweetie," she patted my back, rubbing it maternally before turning toward Edward. "You gonna make sure our girl gets home safely?"

"Wouldn't dream of anything else," he replied, also standing.



Chapter 44

Emma and the Prince – Emma

“So,” Edward said, standing on the street corner outside Moonbeam Mugs.

“So...” I replied.

“Don’t suppose I can interest you in a walk?”

I chuckled. “Will there be rain, new clothes, and a Christmas tree kiss interrupted by one Jonah Conroy?”

Edward laughed, too. “What if I can promise that none of those things will happen? Then might I convince you to join me?”

Scrunching up my nose, I looked up at him. “Nooone of those things?”

“Nope,” he shook his head and held out his arm. “Give me another chance, Emma?”

At that moment, it felt like he was referring to the way he’d disappeared into oblivion without so much as a goodbye. I really hadn’t been thinking about that, but his words brought it to the forefront of my mind. I cleared my throat, and despite myself, took his arm.

We walked in silence for a few moments. It didn’t take long for me to figure out he was guiding us back toward the scene of our almost Christmas tree kiss. The string lights hanging from storefronts were even more beautiful on this clear night just days from Christmas. I looked all around us, everywhere but at him, and he must have noticed.

“Emma,” he gripped my hand lightly. “I know what I did was bloody stupid as hell.”

I tapped on his hand, nodding my head without a word.

“But you’ve just got to give me another chance. You’ve got to forgive me for my idiotic behavior and know that I’m just a misguided boy who thinks the world of you.”

“You’re not that misguided,” I brushed it off, “but it did hurt; I won’t lie about that.”

“I don’t want you to lie about anything, ever. Always be honest with me about your feelings.”

“Always?” I asked, smushing my lips toward the side of my mouth.

“Yes. You can tell me anytime I’m being a right dope. Just smack me upside the head and say *Edward, you damned fool, listen here!*”

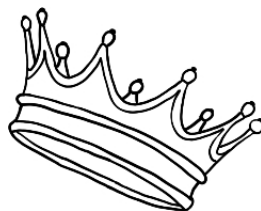
I couldn’t help but laugh. “Even now?”

“What!?” He clearly didn’t think this was one of those foolish moments.

“Just kiss me already!” I smiled up at him, noting that we were bathing in the glow of the lights of the giant Christmas tree again.

“Ohhh,” he smacked his forehead. “I must be a real dunce to not be able to—”

But I didn’t want to wait another moment. Rather than letting him finish the statement, I grabbed his face in my hands the way I had on the stage a few hours before. But this time, I kissed him.



The Prince and Emma – Edward

In any other moment, Edward would have swatted away two freezing cold hands, grabbing his face.

But not here. Not now. And not Emma's.

Instead, the prince looped an arm around her waist and pulled her firmly against him, dipping her back just slightly. If anyone had been watching, they would've seen her foot pop up as she moved her hands from his face to around his neck.

"Emma," he breathed her name when the kiss finally broke.

"Edward?" she said through a small smile.

"I love the sound of my name on your lips."

"Is the Prince of Whiteloch a hopeless romantic?" Emma asked, raising an eyebrow at him as she slid her arms from around his neck, still looking up at him.

"Hmmm..." he drew out the sound. "Not normally, but perhaps you've done a number on me."

"Is that so?" Emma couldn't help her smart remarks. "Well, I suppose I can give you that second chance you asked for as long as you promise to keep this hopeless romantic gig going at least a little longer."

"How does...forever sound?"

Emma rolled her eyes. "Why don't we take it one day at a time?"

"Fine," Edward held his hands up in surrender. "Will you at least tell me what you want for Christmas, and what your favorite color rabbit is?"

Pressing her lips into a firm line, Emma furrowed her brow. She paused for a beat, not knowing how to respond. "Um, I honestly have never given it any thought. Do people normally have a favorite color rabbit?"

Edward took a step back. "Emma," he gestured toward the Christmas tree. "We are mere moments from Christmas and I know for a fact no one has gifted you a Yuletide Rabbit yet, so as your...as the..." he stumbled over his words. "Well goddamnit, I don't know what we are, but we are people who have been kissing and I am going to make sure you have a Yuletide Rabbit to bring you luck and prosperity in the new

year!”

“Edward,” Emma shook her head. “I do not have space in my home for a rabbit cage, nor do I have the time to care for a rabbit, with everything going on—”

“It’s just one rabbit, you can let it live in the garden. That’s what most people do back home.”

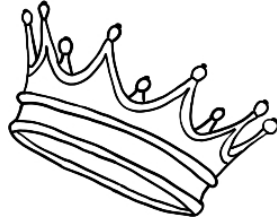
“It is *never* just *one* rabbit, Edward. Why don’t we focus on gifts that aren’t living, at least for the time being?”

With a sigh, Edward shrugged. “Suit yourself, but if next year is another bin fire, don’t say I didn’t try.”

“Okay, okay. I got it.” Emma wiggled her eyebrows. “My favorite color rabbit is purple.”

“Purple?!” He scoffed, growling low under his breath. “You’re not taking this seriously.”

“Sorrriyyy,” Emma wrapped her arms around his middle and pulled her in toward him, “I couldn’t resist. How about we forget about the rabbits and have another kiss instead?”



Chapter 45

A Christmas Eve Goodbye – Edward

Edward stood outside the home where his parents had been staying the few days that they spent in Astoria.

“I can’t believe you’re leaving so soon,” he frowned, wrapping his Mom up in the warmest of hugs. “There’s so much more for you to see here.”

“Oh, darling,” she patted his cheeks, red from the chill, “We’ll be back, but the grandchildren and the people of Whiteloch would never forgive us if we didn’t make it home in time for Christmas festivities. I’m just heartbroken you won’t be joining us.”

“Mom,” Edward scrunched up his face like a little boy, “My heart is here; it’s Christmas.”

Queen Gweneth sighed. “I know. And she’s lovely. Please do bring her home sooner rather than later, would you?”

“Alright, enough of this sad sack situation,” King Alfred came out, waving a hand around behind an attendant who was carrying all their bags. “Son,” he clasped Edward on the shoulder, “I’m incredibly proud of you and the strides you’ve made here. I can’t wait to see what the place looks like after we get you some assistance here.”

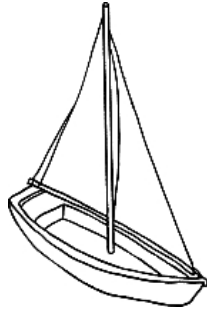
“Thanks, Dad.” Edward honestly couldn’t think of anything to say besides thank you. He wasn’t used to hearing his father praise him this way and it was taking some getting used to.

“And yes,” King Alfred offered his son a smile, “bring that girl back to Whiteloch or your mother and sisters will have a hernia.”

“Just...one hernia?” Edward laughed.

The king nodded, laughing along with his son, “Yep, just one giant hernia that the three of them share. You bring Emma and save me from being the one dealing with it.”

“Okay Dad, I will.”



A New Kind of Christmas Eve – Emma

“Emmmaaa, just open it,” Edward grumbled. “Sarabeth, make her open it.”

Sarabeth looked at me from where she stood, drying wine glasses behind the bar and shrugged. “Why don’t you just open it?”

“Because Christmas is *tomorrow*, not today. Isn’t that bad luck or something?” I asked.

My friend shrugged again. “I honestly have no idea.”

“Why don’t you Google it,” Jonah chuckled. “Come on, Emma, just open it. Lots of people open one gift on Christmas Eve. Stockings, the whole thing.”

“Besides,” Sarabeth added, “we’re literally adults. There’s no rules about when you can and can’t open a gift.”

“Fine,” I threw my arms up and let them fall against my sides with a smack, walking over to where Edward was still holding a box the size of my torso. I reached out, took it over to the bar, and set it down where I could go to work opening it.

When I finally got all the wrapping undone, it revealed a large, stuffed, purple rabbit.

I couldn’t help, but grin widely. This was...

“Incredibly sweet,” I turned to walk back toward him, the

rabbit tucked into my arm as I stepped up on tiptoes and pressed a soft kiss to his lips. “For luck?” I asked.

He leaned down to return the kiss. “And prosperity,” he added, lips still pressed against mine, so the words came out a British-sounding mumble.

“Get a roooooom!” Jonah called out.

“I thought you said we were adults?!” I called back.

“Nope, SB said that,” he laughed.

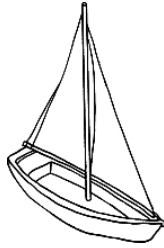
“Well, whatever. This is my bar, and if I want to kiss my prince, I’m gonna do it.”

“Oh...My God,” Sarabeth jumped up and down, clapping. “I just realized it really worked. It *really* happened!”

“What did?” all three of us asked at once.

“Emma got her prince: it’s just like in the movies!”

I didn’t want to admit it, but what she said brought a smile to my face. I looked up at Edward. “I did...didn’t I?”



Chapter 46

Christmas Day – Emma

On Christmas morning, I awoke later than usual. Edward was still snoring softly when I returned from the kitchen with a cup of coffee in hand and sat on the window seat by the front of the house.

I was barely mid-sip when I noticed tiny white flurries falling from the sky—snow. Sure, Oregon was known for its cold and dreary weather, rain all year round—but *snow*?!

“Edward,” I put the cup down and jumped onto the bed, jostling him to try to wake him up. The prince didn’t move or wake, just kept dreaming, “EDWARD!” I raised my voice.

That caused him to jump in his sleep and then wake with a start. “Wha? Huh? Where?”

“Here!” I screeched happily, grinning from ear to ear.

“What?” He asked, starting to really wake up, “What’s here?”

“SNOW!” I bounced off the bed and ran toward my closet. Tossing clothes out that might work for the weather, I finally found the chunkiest sweater I owned and a pair of gloves I rarely wore, “Come ooon, we’ve got to go see it!”

He stirred at my urging. “Do you not get snow in Astoria? Why all the commotion?” but he was getting up to change right along with me just the same.

“It hardly ever snows here! And on *ACTUAL CHRISTMAS?!?*”

The man pulling on jeans in my bedroom just laughed and then nodded, “Alright, let’s go see what tiny fairy sized snowman we can build with the amount of snow built up so

far.”

By the time we made it outside, rain boots where snowshoes should’ve been on our feet, there wasn’t a lot of snow, but enough bits were flying through the air and swirling around us to make the moment feel romantic. Homey. *Christmasy*.

“Hey,” I grabbed his hand to pull him toward me after being snowed on. His hair was dusted with fluffy white snowflakes that I brushed away before stepping as high onto my tip toes as I could to kiss my prince out in the Christmas snow when—

“GET A ROOOOM!” Jonah’s voice called out, accompanied by a snowball hurled right at us.

“WHAT WAS THAT FOR?!” Edward yelled back.

Jonah just laughed. “What? Can’t battle, Your Majesty?”

“Oh, he’s gonna get it.” Edward laughed and let go of my hand to form a snowball and run after his friend.

I watched him jog through the snow, looking around to see if Jonah was alone. Sarabeth wasn’t far behind.

“SB,” I called out to her, forming a snowball between my hands. “Look alive!”

“OH NO!” She spotted me before I threw it and screamed. “DON’T!”

Chuckling, I tossed the ball in my hand instead of at her. “Why not?”

“Because look at my hair,” she motioned around her head where perfect curls framed her face despite the falling snow, “You can’t mess this up before Christmas day photos.”

“Right,” I gave her a thumbs up, laughing. “That makes sense. You’ve been up for hours and curled your hair, and I haven’t even finished my coffee.”

“Actually, I could use another cup.” she replied, “Think we could get those two to come inside and open presents?”

“You brought presents?!” I asked, “Where?”

“Freakin’ duh.” Sarabeth rolled her eyes, “They’re in the car. I’ll go grab them. You get the hooligans in out of the cold.”

“Okay,” I laughed. “Hey, guuuuys,” I called out to them, but got no reply. Naturally, the two men were busy pelting one another with baseball shaped snow, “Guuuuys!” I repeated, “We’re gonna have coffee and open gifts!”

I turned to head back inside, hoping they’d follow along.

But when I turned around to see if they were following, I didn’t see two thirty-something men behind me.

Hopping right across my front yard was...a rabbit. In... winter. “What the—?” I asked myself, “Edward?!” I called out to him.

This time, hearing the concern in my voice, he turned to look back to where I was. “What?”

“I—” I stopped myself from saying anything and shook my head. “No worries, you guys enjoy your game.”

I looked back to where the rabbit had been and watched it hop away into the bushes. When Sarabeth returned, arms full of packages wrapped in reds, greens, and golds, I took some from her to help. “You know...” I let my voice trail off as we brought the gifts inside and set them near the tree.

“Hm?” she asked.

“I think it’s gonna be a pretty good year.”