# Destined To Be Royal

Pre-view

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AKBarrBooks

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Destined To Be Royal

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*Dedicated to those who were told or ever felt they were not enough.*

*&*

*To the readers who support me...*
*Thank you!*

# Chapter One

"FIGHT! FIGHT! FIGHT!" several students shouted in the hall at West Oak Academy.

"Kick her butt, Becka!" yelled a junior guy in the corner.

My heart pounded as I stared into Becka Taylor's hazel eyes. I tried not to panic, but I couldn't stop trembling. One of the most popular girls in school was about to fight me. Over what? Not paying attention to where I was walking? Yes, I had accidentally knocked her into my best friend Janean, who was carrying her science fair project—a giant lava lamp filled with pink dye.

Why was I distracted? Well, because Becka's boyfriend, Quinn (a great guy I might have a slight crush on), had winked at me as he was leaving. *Oh, yeah, that's why.*

"I'm going to kill you!" Becka screamed as she tried to wipe the oozing dye out of her once-bouncy, long hair.

I glanced at Janean, who was shouting at some of Becka's friends as her project spilled onto the floor.

"Becka—" I raised my hands and stepped back until I hit the lockers. "I'm so sorry. I—"

Becka raised her fist. Before I could blink, pain shot through my face, and the room spun as I hit the hard, cold, dirty floor.



*RRRIINNGG!!!*

I winced under my covers. A dull ache pounded in my temple as my alarm blared through my bedroom. Moaning, I reached over and— "AAAAHHH!"

I tumbled out of my twin-size bed and onto the rug. "Ouch."

Sitting up, I blew the loose strands of my long, dark hair off my face and rubbed my head. *Dang!* I forgot to wrap my hair last night. Pulling my faded-purple sheets from around my waist, I shivered as I hit the off button on my phone.

Looking out my small window, I saw the February frost and a hint of sunlight through the cloudy sky. Sighing, I stood up, walked three feet across the hall to the bathroom, and knocked.

I opened the creaky door and noticed the ugly yellow wallpaper with blue flowers had peeled even more along the edges of the walls. *Ugh*. I turned on the sink and let the water run. After flushing the toilet, I tried not to stub my toes between the tub and the sink. Once the water was warm, I washed my hands, splashed my face a few times, and then peered at my reflection in the oval mirror hanging over the sink. My hair was tangled, and my almond-shaped eyes were puffy. With a delicate touch, I traced the small gash on my lip and winced.

The events of last night's science fair came rushing back to the forefront of my mind.

*I could hear Janean yelling at Becka. My head throbbed, and pain shot from my left cheek down to my chin.*

*"Zaria! Are you okay?" Caleb, a guy from my Spanish class, asked.*

*"I think so." I tried to get up and teetered.*

*"Here." He offered his hand.*

*I looked into his kind eyes.*

*Caleb smiled. "Let me help you."*

*"Thanks, Caleb."*

*Turning around, I spotted Principal Devi and a few other teachers heading our way. Grabbing Caleb's arm, I ducked behind him. I couldn't be caught fighting—if I got expelled, I'd lose my scholarship.*

*"Caleb," I whispered, pulling his firm body through the crowd of students, heading toward the exit. "Could you do me a huge favor and drive me home?"*

*"Yeah, sure."*

*"Thanks, I owe you."*

*"It's no problem. Come on." He opened the door for me.*

*The entire drive home, all I could think about was how I couldn't believe Becka had actually punched me. She had always threatened it but never actually made physical contact before.*

Thank God it's Saturday. I hope Becka will have calmed down by Monday, though, knowing my luck...

Bad luck seemed to follow me wherever I went. It had been that way since I was born. My mother died the day after from complications, and because of that, I never knew who my father was—no one in my mother's family did either. Apparently, she had a secret love affair, but how much could they have loved each other if he never came for me? He had to have known about me—unless he blamed me for her death, too. I'd blamed myself for years.

For the past seven years, I'd lived with my mother's younger sister, Aliza—she was the only family I had left. I always felt guilty for taking over her life. She dropped everything to raise me and did the best she could, but at twenty-nine, she still didn't have the life she wanted. I owed her everything.

A knock on the door jarred me from my thoughts.

"Zaria!" Aliza pounded on the door. "How long are you going to be in there? You're going to be late!"

"Okay, okay, I'll be right out!"

I brushed my teeth, showered, and got ready for work in under ten minutes. My aunt helped me get a job as a waitress at *La Russiq*, where she bartended. The job was hard, but the tips were great. Every moment I wasn't studying, I worked to help with the bills.

I glanced at myself in the mirror attached to my closet door—black pants, a belt, a vest, and an off-white shirt. Plain. *Such was my life.* Peeking at the time, I braided my hair into one long French braid, dabbed some shea butter over my bruised lip, and grabbed a red tie off my dresser. I closed my bedroom door and walked down the short hall into the kitchen.

Aunt Aliza's boyfriend, Ezra, sat at our small wooden table, eating my honey-frosted cereal. I had known Ezra my whole life, but he and my aunt didn't start dating until a year ago. I'm glad they're finally together. He's much nicer than her last boyfriend.

Leaning over, I felt the table's weak leg wobble as I snatched the yellow-and-blue box with the big cat on the front to pour myself a bowl. We really needed to get a new table.

I frowned. "Ezra, if you're going to eat my cereal, the least you can do is replace it."

"What?" He shrugged his shoulders. "I left you some." He took another big bite of my cereal.

I shook the box over my bowl, and three pieces fell out. Scowling, I shoved the box at him.

"Replace it, Ezra!"

"Okay, okay." He raised his hands, grinning. "I'm sorry."

I glanced at his faded haircut and trimmed facial hair. If he could get a haircut, he could replace my food.

He leaned his athletic frame closer, narrowing his warm eyes as he stared at my face. "What happened to you?"

"N-nothing." I looked away, grabbing my coat and bag. "I need some fresh air. Tell Aunt Aliza I'm gone. See you later."



Walking toward the bus stop, I realized nothing was fresh about the air as the smell of sewer, trash, and vehicle exhaust filled my nostrils. I suppressed the urge to gag as I hiked up the hill.

Living with my aunt was great. She was witty, thoughtful, outgoing, and artistic, but living in this swamp was not okay. We needed to move out of our tiny apartment. If I had to hear her and Ezra saying sweet nothings and giggling one more time, among other things, I might consider cutting off my ears.

We lived on the third floor of a shabby two-bedroom apartment building. Our rooms were next to each other, the bathroom was literally three feet away, and the kitchen and living room might as well have been the same room. It wasn't my aunt's fault that the city charged too much for a place with no space. I was sure we could have afforded a house anywhere else in the state.

We lived in *Reignsville*, Ohio. It was an okay town if you could afford it. The most affluent people lived in one part of town, while people like my aunt and me lived on the other side—the not-so-well-off.

Standing at the back of a crowded bus, trying not to bump into anyone, I imagined what it would be like to have a traditional family and the means to afford a comfortable lifestyle without living paycheck to paycheck.

I stepped off the bus and pulled my scarf tighter around my neck. Shivering, I walked the rest of the way to work. I turned the corner and spotted the large *La Russiq* sign. The red-and-gold lights and the heart-shaped landscape surrounding the building were lovely. A few people were already standing outside. *La Russiq*

was one of the busiest restaurants in town, and it took weeks to get a reservation.

I walked through the back entrance and noticed the clock in the kitchen flashing a few minutes past twelve. *Dang it!* I didn't need Frank on my butt today.

"Zaria! You are late!" Frank glared at me. Maybe if he reached my eye level, he would seem more intimidating. Maybe.

"I'm only five minutes late, Frank."

"It's François!" he snapped.

When he became the manager at *La Russiq*, he wanted us to call him François, but none of the waitstaff ever did unless they wanted to get on his good side.

"If you do not take your job seriously, then perhaps—"

I put on my best apologetic face. "I'm sorry, François, it won't happen again." There was no point in getting on his bad side. I needed to ask for more hours and needed him to be in a good mood.

He smirked. "It had better not. Now go help Quinn with the VIP room! Marisol called in sick." He snapped his balding head toward the back room and barked out orders before I could say another word.

The VIP room? I wasn't prepared for that. Taking a deep breath, I ran my hands down my sides. I wasn't nervous about who was in the room—I wasn't celebrity-shy or anything—but working with Quinn after what happened yesterday was so embarrassing. I didn't know what it was about Quinn that piqued my interest, but I knew they weren't the same feelings I had for my other best friend, Xavier. Still, there was something about Quinn that enticed me. After a few more deep breaths, I walked into the VIP area.

Dozens of crystal chandeliers glistened as sunlight streamed through the large windows. Each circular table held a cream tablecloth, long off-white napkins, a perfect white-and-gold table

setting of decorative plates and drinking glasses, a bouquet of fresh roses, and two long candles.

By late afternoon, my anxiety about working with Quinn had been replaced with exhaustion. Saturdays could get hectic, but today was busier than usual. I was already a few hours into my shift and ready to drop when Quinn approached me.

"Hey, Zaria." He smiled. "You're doing a great job! Keep it up and keep that smile going." That small compliment kept me smiling for hours.

It was just a few minutes after five when I noticed Aliza walking into the kitchen. Even though we were related and shared some similarities, she was an inch taller than me and wore her long, thick, dark hair in twist-outs or slicked back into puffs. Tonight, she was wearing the latter. She was also a little curvier around the hips than I was, and her eyes and skin tone were a different shade of brown than mine.

Aliza smiled. "Hey, Zaria."

"Hey, I thought you were off tonight."

She frowned. "I was, but Joe called out sick."

"Wow, so did Marisol. I hope they're okay."

"I'm sure they are." She winked.

It took me a moment, then my mouth dropped. "No way, Joe and Marisol? They're together."

She grinned. "Yep, tonight's their anniversary. Frank wouldn't give them the night off—" Her eyes narrowed as she grabbed my face. "Zaria! What happened to your lip?!"

"Oh, yeah." I forgot I was supposed to be avoiding her. "It's nothing."

She didn't look like she believed me. My aunt and I were close; we told each other everything, but if I admitted that Becka had punched me in the face—well, let's just say I wouldn't be able to afford her bail.

I picked up a few baskets and filled them with homemade rolls topped with melted butter and garlic. *Yum!* My mouth watered, and my stomach growled.

An expression I was all too familiar with crossed my aunt's face—guilt. She pulled a twenty-dollar bill from her pocket.

"Here, take a break and get something to eat."

I waved my hand. "I'm fine."

"No, Zaria. Eat something before you pass out."

"Aliza!" John yelled. "I need help at the bar!"

"Be right there!" Aliza turned back to me. "Get something to eat. I'll see you later."



When I returned from my break thirty minutes later, the sun had set, and the candles on the tables were already lit. The soft music gave the room a peaceful, romantic feel.

My mind drifted to an evening with Quinn—his dark-brown hair slicked to the side, his strong build filling out his button-down shirt. I imagined us at the corner table, holding hands as I gazed into his chestnut eyes. He leaned in and whispered in my ear. When he sat back, I found myself staring into Xavier's chocolate eyes, and a shiver ran through me.

Something brushed my hand, and I flinched. I blinked as Quinn tried to hand me a basket of bread.

"Zaria, where have you been? Give the bread to the table at the end and fill their water glasses. Oh, and the man in the blue suit asked for coffee."

I tilted my head to the side. A group of people I didn't recognize was seated in the far corner. I gave Quinn a shy nod and headed to the back table. I refilled their water glasses, trying my best to smile even though my lip was still a little swollen.

When I reached the man in the dark blue suit—which likely cost more than a few months' rent—I scanned his face, noting how handsome and familiar he looked. He had to be in his late thirties or early forties. His short, curly, dark hair looked as soft as his eyes, yet I couldn't place him.

He regarded me as I poured his coffee. His gaze dropped, and he pointed at my necklace.

"Excuse me, miss."

He had an accent I couldn't place. He could have been from anywhere, given his tanned skin, though I got a Mediterranean vibe. I really needed to learn more about other cultures.

"Yes, sir?"

"May I ask—" He hesitated. "Where did you get that lovely pendant?" Even though his voice was calm and his lips bore a smile, his eyes showed pain.

I touched my necklace and smiled. "It belonged to my mother."

"Y-your mother?" he repeated. Something flashed in his eyes. "Well, it is lovely." He stared at me.

A bit confused, I smiled at the man as Quinn approached me with a tray of drinks.

"Zaria, I'll be back. Can you cover my tables, please?"

"Sure," I replied, hoping he didn't notice my eagerness.

"Your name is Zaria?" the man asked.

"Yes, sir."

The color in his face vanished.

My heart raced as I reached over the table, picked up a pitcher of water, and poured a glass.

"Here, drink this." I watched him drink half the glass. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." He cleared his throat. "Thank you." He tugged at his collar, undoing his top button.

I glanced around the table, noticing the spotless tableware and unused silverware.

"Maybe you should eat something. We have a wonderful house salad." I looked over at his ashen skin. "Or perhaps the soup is a better choice."

I pulled out my order pad as a woman in an elegant, long blue dress, with a sheer cape covering her arms and head, approached the table. The man stood and pulled out a chair for her. As she sat, her wavy hair fell perfectly over her shoulders. Her necklace featured a rose charm set with diamonds—definitely costing more than our rent and probably everything we owned.

"Excuse me, I asked for sliced lemons and a cup of tea."

I froze, unable to stop staring into her stunning eyes.

"Miss?"

"Oh! Yes—sorry. Lemons. Right away. I'll be right back to take your dinner order."

Frank strolled up to me as I filled a small crystal bowl with lemon wedges.

"Zaria, did I see you talking with His Royal Highness?" he asked with a twinkle in his light eyes and a grin on his face.

"Royal what?"

Frank shook his head. "Sometimes, I wonder about you, Zaria. The man in the blue suit is the Crown Prince of *Avarion*."

My brow furrowed. "*Avarion*? Is that in Europe or Africa?" I needed a map in my life.

He waved his hand. "Who cares! What was he like? The prince?"

I shrugged and caressed my chain between my fingers as I thought about what he had said about my necklace. It was exquisite—a heart-shaped design with diamonds along the sides. In its center were a diamond, a rose-gold star, and a crescent. It was the most expensive thing I owned. One time, I had offered it to Aliza to pawn it for rent, but she said she would never ask me to do that—it was all I had from my mother.

"He seemed nice."

Frank rolled his eyes and took the bowl of lemons from my hands.

"I got this." He glanced at my mouth. His nose wrinkled as his upper lip lifted. "And go put something on that lip!" he said as Quinn walked into the kitchen.

I met Quinn's gaze, and humiliation surged through me. Yep, tonight was going to be a long one.

# Chapter Two

I DON'T KNOW IF I was being paranoid or if I'd read too many mystery novels. Not only were my toothbrush and hairbrush missing, but I swore someone was following me. Ever since work, I had felt tingly every time I left the house, and strange goosebumps had appeared along my arms. I tried to put it out of my mind, as I had more important things to worry about—like the fact that I was avoiding Becka.

So far, I'd lucked out on Monday and Tuesday. After Becka had knocked me out, Janean attacked her, and they both got suspended for fighting. But today was Wednesday.

Janean tapped my shoulder and whispered, "Watch your six."

I turned and groaned. We were in the lunchroom when Becka entered, looking fabulous. Her hair had new pink highlights, making her look cooler than she already was. She sat down next to Quinn.

I turned away as she whispered in his ear.

I stabbed my fork into my food as Lacy approached our table.

"Here you go, Janean," Lacy said, handing Janean a pink-and-cream envelope with a pink bow.

I tilted my head and read the front:

> ***You are invited to Lacy's Eighteenth Birthday Bash! Spring Break weekend in Porta Rico!***

I sat back and stared into my rice casserole. Even if she had invited me, there was no way I could afford to go. I always missed out on trips like that. Attending a private school where most of my classmates came from wealthy families was dreadful. It was bad enough that the school had only twelve Black students.

"Can Zaria come?" Janean asked, but I already knew the answer. Some kids at West Oak Academy didn't like me hanging out with them—it was like they might catch being poor or something.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Zaria, I can only invite a certain *number* of people," Lacy said with a fake pout.

"I understand." I put on a phony smile to match her own.

"Well, I can't come." Janean handed Lacy back her invitation. "I'm hanging out with Zaria during the break."

Lacy's mouth parted in shock. I knew she was surprised—there were people, like Becka, who would kill to get invited to her parties. Lacy was popular because her father was a major producer, and she knew many A-list celebrities.

"By the way," Janean said, picking up a grape. "Puerto Rico is spelled wrong. You want a grape, Zaria?"

Lacy gave me a disgusted glare and walked off.

People often wondered why Janean was friends with me. Her dad was extremely wealthy, and some students wanted to be part of her inner circle, but I was the only one she kept close. She was friendly with everyone, but I was the one she hung out with.

I pushed my food away. I was tired of feeling less because I didn't have what my classmates did: parents and money.

"I can't wait to graduate. I'm so done with this school."

"Me too. I'm getting as far away as possible," Janean said, opening her art book.

She always talked about going to college in another country. Janean even had me fill out a few applications at different universities abroad—she had also signed me up for the foreign exchange program three years ago—but I knew I could never afford to live overseas.

I peeked at her sketches for the prom dress she'd been working on since the beginning of senior year.

"Janean! That looks amazing!" I pointed to the long black dress. I loved the one-sleeve design and the beautiful neckline. "I thought you wanted a sparkling pink dress with a long satin wraparound skirt."

"Oh, I do. My dress is done. This one is yours."

My jaw dropped, and I looked at the beautiful dress once more. "Janean—"

"Before you get all mushy on me, I had to. I couldn't let my best friend go to prom in a *TS* original. Consider it a birthday present."

My chest swelled with gratitude. That was where I was going to get my dress—the thrift store, aka the *TS*, was all I could afford. I wrapped my arms around her, squeezing tight.

"AHHH!" she shrieked.

"Thank you, thank you, THANK YOU! You are the best!" I didn't know what I would do without Janean. She was the sister I never had, and I couldn't imagine life without her.

"Don't mention it." She waved a hand as if it wasn't a big deal, but it was—she saved me from being the worst-dressed at the West Oak prom. I had no problem wearing thrift-store clothes, but a beautiful, well-designed dress would be wonderful.

"You will rock this dress with your new curves. I'm jealous."

She was right. My body had filled out—I had been thin for so long, mostly because I had missed meals.

"Stop it." I nudged her. "You look great."

Janean winked. "I do, don't I?" she quipped, flipping her long black hair while batting her dark-brown eyes. She was mimicking Becka, which she could do perfectly.

When Becka, Janean, and I were ten, we were all friends. We met at a summer musical program run by Ms. Whitmore, a close friend of my nana's, and bonded over our love of music. When I learned they were going to attend Langston Academy, a private middle school where my nana taught music, I begged my nana to let me attend with Janean and Becka. She worked hard to get me enrolled, and the principal agreed to admit me at a discounted rate. I was so happy. The three of us stayed close until one day Becka stopped hanging out with me. She never said why, but part of me always felt her mom didn't like me. Janean remained my friend, and we became inseparable. By freshman year, Becka had ignored us completely, as if we had never existed.

"Well, Janean Prisha Butras, if becoming a fashion designer doesn't work out, maybe acting will be your niche."

"Please, my grandmother is so old-fashioned. If she has her way, she'll try to marry me off to some—"

Suddenly, a whiff of vanilla and coconut filled my nostrils, and I cringed.

I twisted in my seat to find Becka glaring at me.

"Don't think I forgot about Friday."

"Becka, it was an accident," I reminded her.

"Yeah, right," she sneered. "Just keep your eyes off Quinn. He's mine."

My blood ran hot. Was I that obvious?

Janean rolled her eyes. "Oh, please. Becka, if anyone should be upset here, it's me! Your gigantic head ruined my project! And by the way, you two broke up."

"Bite me, Janean!"

I grabbed Janean's wrist, keeping her from attacking Becka—she couldn't afford another suspension this year.

"Anyway, Quinn is way out of your league." Becka flipped her shiny hair over her shoulder. "Plus, he'll always be mine. So, keep your crazy eyes off him, or I'll have your face rearranged." She leaned closer. "Permanently."

It felt like everyone's eyes were on me.

I met Quinn's gaze, and out of all the embarrassing moments in my life—and there were a few—this had to be in the top ten. I was sure I would die of embarrassment one day.



When I arrived at the apartment, all I wanted to do was bury myself under my purple sheets and never resurface. Not only did the entire school know about my slight crush, but so did Quinn!

"UGH!" I plopped down on my mattress, but it didn't have the effect I'd hoped for.

I don't know why I liked Quinn so much. We barely talked to each other, even though we shared classes and worked together. He would say nice things to me, but we never had genuine conversations. Not in the way Xavier and I did—we could talk for hours about everything. Xavier was smart, driven, and compassionate.

After a few hours of sulking, I went into the kitchen. Between the empty cabinets and the refrigerator, I groaned in sympathy with my stomach. I hadn't eaten all day. Ezra hadn't replaced my cereal, and I hadn't finished my lunch.

Oh my God, lunch. UGH! How could I ever look Quinn in the eyes again?

I breathed deeply. Spinning out of control would not work. No, I needed food. Preferably, chocolate to get me through the shame. I grabbed my bag and pulled out my black pocketbook with musical notes on the front. *Dang it!* I collapsed onto the sofa.

I only had five dollars, and two of those dollars were in coins. Tears slid down my face. I wouldn't get paid for another week, and we were already behind on a few bills. Wiping my face with my hand, I stood up. I had enough for a pack of noodles and a candy bar. I would have to make sure I ate lunch tomorrow.

Some days, school food was all I had for the week. If I worked on weekends, I would grab a few rolls and anything I could sneak out. I would eat there every shift, but Frank was strict about not letting us take any food home—even though we tossed most of it.

I took off my school uniform and threw on old jeans and a faded purple sweater. Zipping my coat, I put on my headphones—they didn't work, but they kept people from talking to me.

Some days, going to school and acting like everything was okay was hard. The money I had coming in wasn't much, and Aliza used it to help pay the rent. The only good thing was that I was on a scholarship.

During my last year at Langston Academy, my nana fell ill and passed away, and Aliza and I moved into our apartment across town.

Janean told me her family was sending her to West Oak Academy for high school. At the time, I was sure Janean and I would never see each other as often. I was in a terrible place and cried for weeks. My nana was gone, and there was no way my aunt could afford West Oak—we could barely pay our rent after all the medical bills and the funeral.

A few weeks before school started, Janean brought over a scholarship form for West Oak. Thanks to my nana, I learned to play the piano at three and the guitar at nine. To her dismay, I picked up the drums on my own at eleven. I submitted the application with an audition tape and was awarded the scholarship.

The same tingly chill returned, raising goosebumps along my arms as I walked to the market. I quickened my pace, telling myself

I was paranoid. Yet the feeling that someone was following me kept nagging me. Deciding to listen to my gut, I slowed down and pulled out my phone.

Leaning against a building to my left, I caught a glimpse of a tall, muscular man in an expensive dark suit passing by me, and I let out a small sigh of relief.

*Paranoid much?* Shaking my head, I continued to the store.

Inside, I walked down the aisle past the prepared food—which looked more enticing than it probably was—and froze.

The same man in the suit was looking at a can of beans. A cold prickle of dread told me I might not be as paranoid as I'd thought.

I picked up a pack of ramen and a small bag of hot chips to add some variety to the noodles. While standing in line, I grabbed a king-size chocolate bar. What? I needed it.

"Next," the cashier said.

I set my items on the checkout belt. The clerk, a slim guy in his mid-twenties with dark turquoise hair, raised a pierced eyebrow.

"Hey," I said, feeling the back of my neck warm up. "Don't judge."

He lifted a hand. "I'm not." He tried, but failed, to suppress a chuckle.

I bit my lower lip. How much embarrassment could I take in one day? I paid for my food, grabbed my bag, and headed for the door.

Outside, I bumped into the man in the suit.

"My apologies, miss. You seem to have dropped this."

His accent was captivating, but nothing compared to his smile. He was probably in his late twenties or early thirties. His dark hair was short, and his facial hair was neatly trimmed. His dark sunglasses hid his eyes, and I wondered whether they were the same gorgeous brown as his skin.

He handed me a hundred-dollar bill, and I stiffened. I knew the money wasn't mine, and by the awkward twitch at the corner of his lip, he knew it too.

Since when could a person buy a pack of noodles, a bag of chips, and a chocolate bar without needing a handout? Was I really that pathetic?

"Oh." I took a step back. "That's not mine."

Part of me wanted the money. It could easily last me a couple of weeks, but I couldn't live with myself if I came off as that pitiful.

He kept looking at me strangely.

"Look, I'm not that kind of girl, so if you're looking to—"

He held up his hands and stepped back, glancing around to see if anyone had heard me—I was rather loud.

"I was not. I would never suggest that!" He seemed appalled by the notion.

What did this guy expect me to say? This was an unusual situation. It wasn't as if I'd ever had a strange, foreign, handsome man offer me a hundred bucks before. That wasn't normal—at least not for me.

"Sorry, the money isn't mine. You should use it to buy a coat." As I walked away, I cursed myself for my stupid pride.

I couldn't wait to get out of *Reignsville,* but knowing my luck, I'd probably die here.



I WAS STILL KICKING myself for not taking the money when I unlocked my apartment door. In the kitchen, Aliza and Ezra were cooking and laughing. They looked so happy together. The way he looked at Aliza told me he loved her. I also knew he wanted to marry her, but she wouldn't because of me. The thought pulled at my heartstrings—I shouldn't be her responsibility. I had derailed her life so much. Even though she hadn't given birth to me, she

had always shown me a mother's affection, and I would always love her for doing her best by me. One day, I would pay her back—somehow.

Ezra grinned. "Hey, Zaria." He pulled out a box of my favorite cereal, a small purple bow taped to it. "Sorry I was late."

"Thanks, Ezra."

Aliza met my gaze. "I was wondering where you were. You didn't get my text?"

"Ah—" I pulled out my phone. "Sorry, it's dead."

"You have to keep it charged. I get worried when you're out alone after dark."

Glancing at the microwave clock, I didn't mention it was only six o'clock.

"I know, and I'm sorry, Aunty A. It won't happen again."

She grinned at my old nickname for her. "Better not, Z-Bear."

The buzzer dinged.

"Did you cook?" I asked, taking off my coat and setting my pack of noodles down.

On the way home, a homeless man had asked for money, but since I had none, I gave him my chips and the chocolate bar. While I didn't have much myself, I at least had somewhere to lay my head, and for that, I was grateful.

"That's why I texted you." Her face lit up. "Ezra is making us his awesome spicy salmon croquettes. He even made yours extra crispy, just the way you like them."

I looked at Ezra with so much gratitude. He didn't live with us, so it wasn't his responsibility to take care of me, but he always thought of me, and I appreciated it.

"Guess what? Today I received two promotional gift baskets from some spa company!"

"That's awesome! What's inside?"

"Toothbrushes, body wash, a loofah, a hairbrush, shampoo, and conditioner! Also, a man left me a huge tip, so I bought

groceries. How do macaroni, croquettes, a salad, and brownies with vanilla ice cream sound?"

I couldn't remember the last time we'd eaten so well. An emotion flared inside me. I swallowed the lump in my throat and smiled. "Sounds like heaven. I'll make the brownies."

# Chapter Three

Was it wrong to admit that some days I sat back and thought: Wow, God must hate me? Why, you ask? Well, maybe it was because I killed my mother. It's true. If it weren't for me, she would still be alive. So my punishment was to put up with Becka. The girl was beyond mean.

It had been almost two weeks since the science fair. She covered my locker with old photos from our last sleepover together as friends in middle school. We had been eating snacks, and one of them contained nuts—my face swelled, and a red rash spread across it. I had crap all over myself from sputtering like an idiot. It was awful!

A slew of curses, in multiple languages, came out of Janean.

I put out my arm, stopping her as she tried to take off toward Becka. "She's not worth it, Janean."

"Zaria, she's making it out—"

"I know, but come on, Janean. We're done with her. And I can't have you fighting my battles. If you get one more suspension, there's no prom, and no graduating."

Janean took a deep breath. "Becka probably tried to kill you. She knew you were allergic to nuts. I bet she added them to the brownies."

I met Becka's gaze. She was smirking so hard her cheeks had to hurt. I knew Janean was right, but I wasn't about to have her expelled for something that had happened years ago.

"Thanks, Janean, but I'm okay with it."

She turned to me with wide eyes. "You are?"

"I am. I've decided I'm being punished."

"How so?"

I shrugged. "God hates me."

Janean rolled her eyes. "Why?"

I lowered my gaze.

Janean knew me so well that I didn't need to answer. She grabbed my arm and pulled me into the nearest stairwell.

"Zaria, for the last time, it is not your fault that you don't have parents. Sometimes things just happen."

"Janean, my grandfather died of a heart attack because he lost his daughter." I was sure that looking at me every day for a year had caused his heart to fail. "My nana was sick for a year and said nothing because she had to work and take care of me." I wiped away a tear. "God hates me because life cannot be this cruel." It wasn't until a year ago that I could celebrate my birthday without feeling guilty.

"Take it from someone whose family pushes religion and different spiritual faiths on my siblings and me on a weekly basis. God doesn't work like that, and I would know."

Janean had a blended cultural family overseas on her mother's side, which she rarely talked about. I once heard her mother speaking Hindi and Arabic, so I guessed somewhere in South Asia—though I was terrible with other cultures. Her father is Black American, so she was born and raised in the States. Her grandparents and parents each practiced a different religion, so

Janean refused to discuss her faith with them. She said she believed in a higher power but never shared which one she connected to.

Janean placed her hands on my shoulders. "I know it sucks, but I promise you are not to blame." She peered into my eyes. "Okay?"

I blinked back tears and whispered, "Thanks, J."

"Now, let's go stuff our faces. And it's on me, so I don't want to hear anything from you about me paying. Just say thanks. Now, let's go. I'm craving fries."

I grinned. I guess God didn't hate me that much because I was blessed with the best sister in the world.



STARING OUT THE WINDOW, watching snow fall on this freezing February night, I contemplated trudging through the blizzard and risking frostbite just to find something to eat when my phone buzzed.

***Xavier:*** *Happy Anniversary!*

A warmth filled my chest as I smiled. Today marked three years since I met Xavier through the foreign exchange program Janean had us participate in. I couldn't afford to go abroad and didn't have room for anyone else to stay with us. So I went to our teacher, Señorita Sanchez, and explained my situation. Unlike the other teachers at West Oak, she didn't look uncomfortable or pity me for my home life. She told me that another student in the program couldn't travel and thought we would be a perfect fit. She was right.

I had been so shy back then. Even though I'd studied Spanish for a couple of years, the moment I tried to speak with Xavier, my mind went blank. He was patient and helped me relax by telling silly jokes and asking me about myself. As I opened up and got

to know him better, the awkwardness faded. We became instant friends and stayed in contact even after the program.

We spoke in Spanish for the first year. He really boosted my confidence in the language and my fluency. I was sad when he left the program and thought that would be the end of our friendship. Why would someone who lived in another country and was headed to college still want to talk to someone in high school? But I was wrong. We continued our friendship—I shared everything about myself with him, and he told me about his friends, family, classes, and his love of anime. He told me about his aloof relationship with his father, and we bonded over not having a mother. Even though I had never met him in person, I trusted him, and he had become one of my best friends.

***Me:*** *Happy Anniversary!*

***Xavier:*** *I cannot believe it has been three years.*

***Me:*** *I know. I was just thinking the same thing.*

***Xavier:*** *What are you doing?*

My fingers lingered over my phone. I didn't want to tell him I was rummaging through the cabinets, searching for food. Today was the twenty-sixth, and I wouldn't get paid until the first. Just three more days.

***Me:*** *Nothing much. I just finished my English paper, and now I'm trying to figure out what I'm eating for dinner.*

***Xavier:*** *Oh, good. You have not eaten yet.*

That's a weird thing to say.

***Me:*** *Nope.*

As I stared into the empty fridge, I knew I wouldn't eat until tomorrow at school. On the days when Janean made it out of the house in time, she would stop to get herself a coffee and me a cinnamon roll or a cup of mixed fruit. I'd have to call her in the morning to make sure she woke up.

There was a knock at the front door as my phone chimed.

I looked through the peephole and saw a woman in a black coat and hat, shivering, holding a bag.

I opened the door. "Yes?"

"Hi!" She smiled and handed me the large white bag.

"Um, hi." My eyes narrowed at her. "What is this?"

She looked confused. "It's your food."

The aroma from the bag made me sway. "I'm sorry, I didn't order anything." I tried to hand the bag back to her.

She looked at her phone. "This is apartment 3A?"

"Yes."

"Is there a Zaria here?"

"Yes. That's me."

"Then the food is yours. It's already paid for."

I realized I didn't have any money for a tip. "I'm sorry, I don't have any cash."

"Oh, I was already given a tip. Have a good evening."

"Yeah, you too. Thanks." I closed the door.

Confused, I walked back into the kitchen as my phone lit up. I set the bag down and opened my unread messages.

***Xavier:*** *I have a surprise for you. It should be there any minute.*

***Xavier:*** *Did you get it yet?*

***Xavier:*** *Zaria?*

My chest swelled.

***Me:*** *You ordered me food?*

***Xavier:*** *Well, I figured the third anniversary deserved something special.*

***Me:*** *Thank you, Xavier. I'm sorry I didn't get you anything.*

***Xavier:*** *Just knowing you are happy is a gift. Enjoy your meal. Talk to you later.*

This was so sweet of him—my love language is food. I opened the bag to find my favorites inside. Grilled salmon in a spicy sauce, vegetable rice, broccoli tossed with garlic, dinner rolls, and a slice of carrot cake. He even included my favorite sparkling water. Tears welled in my eyes. Xavier was the best.



It was the second Saturday in March. It was closing time at *La Russiq*. As I tossed away food—you'd be surprised how many people don't finish their meals or reorder if it wasn't prepared to their liking—I spotted half a basket of rolls on the counter. I glanced around the kitchen. Our sous chef, Montague, was cleaning his station, John was wiping down the bar, and Stacey was sweeping.

My heartbeat quickened as I shoved the rolls into my pocket. They were going to be tossed in the trash—it wasn't really stealing,

right? I searched the counters for leftover salad Kelly had made earlier. It looked amazing, and I hadn't had a real vegetable in days. My stomach growled just at the thought.

"Zaria!" Freezing, I caught my breath as Frank came beside me. I clutched my pocket tight.

"Y-yes, François." My lip twitched as I tried to smile innocently.

He pointed to the VIP room. "Someone would like to have a word with you."

My mouth fell open. Who would want to talk to me? Aliza had already left for the night, and Janean was with her grandmother—either way, neither of them would be in the VIP room.

I glanced at the red curtain, curious about who would want to speak with me. "Who?" I looked at Frank, who seemed upset.

He huffed in irritation. "I don't know. They wanted it closed off. The owner okayed it, so whatever!" He threw his hands up and stomped away, mumbling about not being appreciated or respected.

I rubbed my palms together, ensuring there were no crumbs or butter on them as I made my way toward the back room.

A man in a black suit and an earpiece pulled back the red curtain.

"Thanks," I said shyly and walked into the room.

Standing beside a table was the handsome man from a few weeks ago, outside the market. I looked at him with wide eyes. He sheepishly bowed his head and pulled out a chair for me. As I sat, I was about to ask what this was about when a familiar-looking man sat down across from me.

"Zaria, it is nice to see you again," he said, as if we were the best of friends. Even though he appeared calm and collected, his eyes betrayed a hint of nervousness.

"Um, you too," I replied, a bit confused. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, I need to talk to you about something."

"Okay—" I checked the time on my phone. It was getting late, and Aliza had already tried to call. "But I need to hurry to catch my bus."

"I am happy to give you a ride home."

My brows lifted. "I'm sorry, that's very kind of you, sir, but I don't know you, so..."

He smiled. "Right you are. My name is Ilyas."

"Ilyas, that's a nice name."

"Thank you." He searched my eyes.

My stomach fluttered. "What can I do for you, Ilyas?"

"Yes, well, I wanted to, um—" He looked at me, his gaze drifting to my neckline. "Do you know the story behind your necklace?"

I touched the chain out of habit whenever I thought of my mother, which was almost daily.

"It belonged to my mother," my voice cracked. "I never met her. She died from labor complications or something." I wiped a single tear from my cheek and cleared my throat. "My nana never said how my mother got it... I don't think she knew herself."

He held my gaze, his eyes brimming with emotion. After a moment passed, he was still staring at me in awe.

"Look, it was nice to meet you, Ilyas, but I have to go." I stood, and a few rolls slipped to the floor. Why couldn't I go one day without embarrassing myself? I bent to pick up the rolls, then headed for the exit, faster than I had ever moved.

"I am your father."



My body stiffened. The room felt smaller, and the air somehow thinner.

"Zaria—" He stepped closer to me.

I took a step back. "That's not funny."

I tried to remember how to breathe normally—in and out. Simple, yet it wasn't so easy to do at the moment.

"Believe me, I am not joking," his voice softened. "I am your father."

I took in his sturdy frame, his expensive suit, his dark hair, his familiar eyes, and his skin.

"B-but you're... you're not Black," I said stupidly.

Amusement crossed Ilyas's face, and he chuckled. "Well, actually, I am—"

I saw his lips move, but I couldn't hear any words—the only sound was the rush of blood in my ears. I needed air, so I turned to leave.

"Zaria, wait! Please."

The man outside the room stood in front of me, stopping me in my tracks. I glanced over his shoulder. The restaurant was dark and empty.

"Nura and I met one summer almost nineteen years ago," Ilyas said as he approached. "I was here in the States on holiday. She worked at a hotel in Georgia where I was staying—"

"Hotel d'Oila," we said in unison. I turned around.

"One night, Nura and I hit it off. I extended my stay, and we ended up together for months. On my last night in town, I gave her that necklace." He pointed to my neck. "And promised to return, but—" He exhaled deeply, as if he were pained. "I—I never did. I tried to contact her, but her information had changed. I even hired someone to locate her, but by the time he found her, she had passed away. I never knew she had a child—my child. When I saw you last month, I immediately recognized the necklace. I had a one-of-a-kind pendant designed for her. Then I observed your eyes. You have your grandmother's eyes."

"No, I don't. My grandmother's eyes were wider."

He shook his head. "No, my mother's eyes. Did you know why your mother named you Zaria Nadira?"

I shrugged, shaking my head. Aliza didn't even know why my mother was adamant about my name.

"I once told your mother that if I ever had a daughter, I wanted to name her Zaria after my deceased sister and Nadira after my late mother."

Everything he said sounded insane, simply crazy! Yet, deep down, a part of me had a little hope that he was telling the truth.

"That doesn't mean anything. My mother could have been with someone else."

"I had a test done."

"What? When? How? What? Who—"

"I had Santiago—" He gestured toward the man from the market. "Collect a few items containing your DNA."

I recalled my missing toothbrush and hairbrush. I ran my fingers through my hair and pulled. This was absurd.

A chill went down my spine. "Wait! You broke into our apartment and stole my things! My DNA! That's, that's, just... disturbing on so many levels."

"I apologize. You are right to be upset. Zaria, I handled it the wrong way and should not have violated your privacy. I did not know what else to do. I had to know whether you were my daughter. You were all I could think about for weeks."

My heart softened a little. "Why not just come to me and, I don't know, just explain and ask me?"

"By the mere chance I was wrong—" He shook his head and took my hand. "There is no excuse, Zaria. I am so sorry and hope you can forgive me. I would hate to lose your trust. I was not thinking rationally."

I didn't know what to think. My stomach chose that moment to let out a loud noise.

"Please sit." He gestured to the table, and we sat back down. "Let me buy you dinner."

"We're closed," I said as my brain tried to make sense of what was happening.

Ilyas signaled to the man at the door, who, like Santiago, was well-built and had a kind smile that reached his dark eyes. Ilyas whispered into his ear, and the man bowed before leaving the room.

He turned back to me. "Tal will find something."

I nodded, not knowing what to say. We stared at each other.

After a few minutes, I finally said, "So, what do I call you? What's your last name? I mean, if you really are my dad, I think I should know your last name, maybe your birthday. Wait... aren't you a prince?" I remembered Frank telling me he was royalty.

He laughed, but I had a lot of questions. He took my hand. I caught my breath as he looked me in the eye.

"I am your father, I promise." He sat back. "My name is Ilyas Asim Jabari Maliq Mansur. I am known as His Royal Highness Prince Ilyas of *Avarion,* but you can call me whatever you like. Zaria, I know this is a lot to process."

My mind spun, but the shock was starting to wear off. "That's for sure." I took a breath. "You said you're from *Avarion*."

"Yes."

"I don't want to sound... I don't know, unintelligent." I shrugged. "But where is that?"

"Do not worry." He smiled. "Many people here have not heard of *Avarion*, which is why I visit the States. *Avarion* is a country near *Sá Nuria* and the Mediterranean Sea."

I must have still looked confused, because he added, "It is about a two-hour flight to either Spain or Egypt."

I regarded his complexion. At first glance, I had assumed he was tanned, but on closer inspection, I was wrong—it was brownish.

"I didn't mean to be rude before. I thought maybe you were... It doesn't matter. I was just surprised. No offense, but when I imagined who my father could be... I never thought of someone

from outside the States. But looking at you, I'll be honest. I don't know what you are." Heat rushed through me—I was the queen of embarrassing moments.

He laughed. "It is no offense, and I understand your curiosity. It is important to learn your family history. We actually have a little bit of everything." He reached into his pocket, pulled out a photo wallet, flipped a page, and handed me a picture. I examined the beautiful Black woman in her forties with stunning brown skin, thick, long, dark hair, and eyes like mine, dressed in an elegant golden gown and headpiece.

"My late mother, Queen Nadira Zahra, was half Egyptian. My grandfather on my father's side was also half Egyptian, but my grandmother was Hispanic. *Avarion* is multicultural. People from various Hispanic, African, and Asian countries live there. But to answer your question, yes, I am Black." He smiled.

I wanted to crawl into a corner and die.

I turned the page and saw a man with dark eyes, curly hair, a firm jaw, and a solemn expression.

"My father, your grandfather, King Maliq."

The following page featured a pretty young girl my age. She had a darker complexion than Ilyas's, and her eyes were darker than her father's, yet she resembled both of her parents. It was incredible how you could have a range of skin tones, from light to dark, in your family when you're Black.

"You said I was named after your sister?"

"Yes, and my mother. That is my older sister, Zaria. She was actually the heir to *Avarion*, but she passed—"

Tal returned, and Santiago helped him place two plates of pasta, a bowl of salad, and a basket of warm rolls in front of me.

"Thank you," I said fondly.

Tal smiled and stepped back to his post with Santiago.

After a few rich, savory bites, I noticed Ilyas wasn't eating.

"You're not hungry?"

"I have already eaten. You go ahead, please."

I looked at the second plate of food, then glanced at Santiago. His face was neutral, but a slight grin tugged at his lips. Turning back to Ilyas, I gave him a *come-on* look.

"He thought you might want seconds."

I didn't know whether to be offended or to laugh.

"Zaria, I missed out on a lot of your life, nearly eighteen years. You are now a young lady. I had Santiago look into you and your aunt."

I put my fork down as my stomach twisted. "Look into us? Like a background check?"

"Again, I apologize for the intrusion. Besides being standard protocol, I was intrigued by how you turned out."

I was still worried about what he had looked into. We had nothing to hide, but he had no right to investigate Aliza.

"I have to say, I am very proud of you. Your grades are excellent—"

I scratched my neck. Breathing was becoming difficult, and I felt warm.

"Zaria, are you all right?" He leaned forward as I grabbed my throat, gasping for air.

"Zaria!" he shouted. "What is wrong?!"

"F-foo—" I pointed to my plate.

Santiago hurried over. "¡Maldita sea!" was the last thing I heard before darkness fell over me.

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*Much Love,*
*A.K. Barr*