

The Princess &
The Pauper

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Prologue

Night skies in L.A. seem to stretch out forever, sending their warmth out to the entire world, rolling above the ocean and reaching the countries on the opposite shore. I imagined the air I was breathing right then drifting into Vineland, a country I knew so much about but had never seen.

I could barely believe I was really standing here on this balcony, looking up at the familiar night sky—the *only* familiar thing around me.

My jeans were gone (with a floor-length black silk dress in their place), my hair was dyed (from ferret brown to shades of glossy gold), and my black plastic watch had been replaced by strands of glittering rubies. I could just imagine my mom’s reaction if she saw them. “My God, Julia. Look at you,” she’d say. “One of those bracelets is worth more than I make in five years.”

Of course, I wasn’t Julia that day—I was someone else.

And it wasn’t even about the dress, the hair, or the bracelet.

I glanced quickly at Markus Ingvaldsson, son of Vineland’s minister of cultural affairs. He stood next to

me on the balcony and looked out toward the Pacific. His hair was messy from the wind and flopped in his face, and the arms of his tuxedo were a tiny bit too short. I looked down at his hands, beautiful hands with long, slim fingers. On his middle finger he wore the signet ring that had been handed down through the generations. *Handed down through the generations.*

The closest I'd ever come to owning something with that much history was when I'd bought a pair of used Roller Blades at a garage sale.

Markus caught my gaze and started to smile, revealing the adorable small dimple on his left cheek.

That was it—I was turning to mush inside all over again. And it was all wrong. Foreign dignitaries' sons were supposed to be stuffy and boring and pretentious. They weren't supposed to have strong arms, and they weren't supposed to have dimples! Because . . . well, because . . .

Because I wasn't supposed to fall for anyone.

According to Mom, not to mention *YM* and all the shows on the *WB*, falling for a guy is exactly what sixteen-year-old girls *are* supposed to do. But when you're trying to maintain your grade point average while figuring out a way to make sure you and your mother don't get evicted, you don't really have a lot of extra time to spend stressing about the new hottie who works at the Circle K. So I had reached my age, sixteen, without ever having had a boyfriend, a serious crush, or even a guy to go to the movies with. And that was just how I'd wanted it.

How I *still* wanted it . . . right?

Markus's smile widened, the dimple got deeper, and I

blinked, then took a step back from him and returned my gaze to the view over the balcony.

I could see the lights of the Palisades and almost make out the dark waves of the Pacific Ocean. I'd waded out in that ocean many times. I'd jogged along the bike path that ran along the beach. I'd lain in the sand and tried to get an even tan, never quite getting it right.

Inside the French doors that led to the ballroom, people were dancing in Armani tuxedos and rich jewel-toned silk gowns to music played by a string quartet. The air smelled like a mix of fresh flowers and expensive perfume. Everyone was perfectly relaxed, perfectly calm. Everyone except for me. How could I be calm? I was in big trouble.

Just a little while ago Markus and I had waltzed together inside that room. The other dancers had cleared the floor to watch us, admiring the graceful way we moved together. And even that was a lie. In my regular life I wasn't graceful at all. I was always running into lockers, tripping over curbs, and spilling coffee down the front of my shirts. But not tonight.

Suddenly I shivered, even though the breeze against my face was warm and soft.

"Are you cold?" Markus asked, moving closer to me.

"No," I said, in a voice I'd practiced in front of my mirror, my cat staring at me in confusion as I struggled to get the slight tinge of an accent just right. "I'm fine."

Markus stepped closer anyway and laid his hand over mine where it rested on the railing. His hand felt huge. I could barely breathe—I felt like fifty genetically altered butterflies were flying around inside my stomach.

Don't mess this up, I told myself, fighting to stay in control and get my heart rate back down. "It's—it's beautiful out here," I managed to choke out, my voice shaking slightly.

"Yes," Markus agreed. "It is."

And then I did it, the stupidest thing I'd ever done in my life: I looked into his eyes.

I knew it was a cliché, I knew it with every fiber of my being, but Markus's deep blue eyes were more amazing than the sky, the Pacific Ocean, and every other beautiful thing and person I'd seen tonight all rolled up into one.

My knees *actually felt weak*.

Markus met my gaze and smiled again, then reached his hand up to touch the side of my face. "And you," he said softly. "You're pretty beautiful yourself."

Okay. I was going to vomit on him and pass out. But then, that probably wouldn't have been too princessy of me.

Of course, princesses probably aren't supposed to blush, either. Unfortunately, I had a feeling that at that moment there wasn't an inch of my skin from my scalp down to my toes that wasn't bright red. Was this night the best night of my life or the worst?

"Markus—" I started to say, then stopped myself.

"Hmm?"

"Nothing." I bit my lip.

"Do you want to go back in?"

"No," I blurted. *Oh God*. I'd said that way too quickly. Was it okay for a princess to sound so overeager?

"Let's just stay out here for a couple more minutes," I added in what I hoped was a more casual tone.

He moved his hand across my face and brushed a few loose strands of hair behind my ear. I gripped the railing tighter.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked. Then his mouth straightened into a line and his brow furrowed. “I know what this is about,” he said, sounding more serious than he had all night.

My breath caught. “You—you do?” I squeaked.

He nodded. “It’s because I was talking to that other woman earlier, isn’t it?”

I stared at him, wide-eyed, torn between a blast of relief that he was still clueless and total confusion about what he was talking about. What woman?

“I assure you, *Fröken Vandelkoff* means nothing to me,” Markus continued.

Fröken who? I gave a slight nod, trying to look as solemn about the whole thing as he did.

And then it was back—Markus’s perfect, crooked grin. “Besides, she’s what, sixty-five? And also, I think she might be a distant cousin.”

I couldn’t help it—I started to giggle. I didn’t care if princesses giggled or not; there was no way to stop.

Markus laughed, too, and then before I knew it, his arms were around me and he was pulling me toward him.

“You’re so . . . different tonight,” he told me, his mouth so close I could feel his breath on my face.

“Mmm,” I agreed, not trusting myself to say anything more. “This whole night has been completely unreal,” I murmured into his chest.

“And is that so bad?” Markus asked gently.

Before I could answer, he leaned down and kissed me. The kind of kiss that ends all kisses. The kind in the movies. (The good movies, not the cheesy ones with Freddie Prinz, Jr.) The kind of kiss that makes you forget about strange hair and old shoes and eviction notices and everything else that doesn't mean anything.

Finally the kiss ended, and we stood staring at each other.

Oh, Markus, I thought. If you only knew who I was or what I've done to you, you would never kiss me again.



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