

ON THE
ROAD TO
Royalty
A NOVEL


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Chapter One



ne look at the dinner table, and I knew I was in serious danger of idol worshiping. All my favorite foods were begging me to bow down to them: thick lasagna, stuffed and covered with tons of white sauce and mozzarella cheese; buttery garlic bread, grilled to perfection; crisp green salad, tossed with Romano cheese dressing and sprinkled with croutons; and my favorite lemon-lime soda with a wedge of lime on the rim of my glass. I breathed in the tantalizing steam of the lasagna. I knew I should be suspicious, like maybe something was up, especially since my dad was home early for once, and my mom smiled at me too broadly as she shoved a huge piece of lasagna onto my plate. Even my little sister, Kim, was surprisingly tolerable for once.

They hit me with the news after I'd stuffed the last bite of lasagna from my plate into my mouth. Dad cleared his throat and leaned back in his chair. "We got a call today from Aunt Cathy and Uncle Boulder. They won't be able to finish out the year taking care of Grandpa Jake like they'd planned. Their new baby is due soon, and they've decided it will be too much for them to handle two-year-old twins, a new baby, *and* Grandpa Jake." Dad looked at me expectantly.

Since Grandma had died nine years ago, Grandpa Jake, who was actually my mom's grandpa, spent a year at each relative's home, beginning in September. That way he wouldn't have to live alone or in a nursing home. Since this was the first week of May, and it wouldn't be our turn for Grandpa Jake to live with us until

September of next year, I was wondering why Dad was bringing this up.

“I guess that means he’ll be staying with Uncle Herbert and Aunt Sally a little earlier, huh?”

My parents exchanged glances. I hated it when they did that because it usually meant something unpleasant was headed my way.

Mom said, “Actually, Lisa, they’re going to Europe for two months; they’ve had it planned for a year.”

“We’ve talked to the other families, and no one’s in a position to take him right now,” Dad said.

“Neither are we,” I reminded him.

“With a little juggling, we can accommodate him better than anyone else in the family. Your mother and I have been through all the possibilities, and like it or not, he’s got to stay with us.” Dad turned his uplifted hands in my direction and shrugged, like the matter was completely out of his control.

I was getting a very bad feeling about this. “What kind of juggling are you talking about?”

“Grandpa can’t climb stairs,” Mom explained, “and since your room is the only one on the main floor . . .” Her voice trailed off.

“What am I supposed to do? Share a room with him?”

“Of course not,” Dad said.

“Sleep on the sofa?”

Mom shook her head. “Lisa,” she said gently, reaching over and putting her hand over mine. “We know how hard this will be for you. But Dad’s going to finish the room in the basement for you as soon as he can; it will be even better than the room you have now. In the meantime, you’ll have to share Kim’s room again.”

“I’ve only had my room for two months. You can’t take it away.”

I started suggesting other relatives who hadn’t had the pleasure of having Grandpa Jake live with them yet and even some who had. Mom and Dad shook their heads. I made one last desperate attempt. “What about Doug and Nila?” Doug was my cousin who

had gotten married a few months earlier.

“They’re newlyweds,” Mom said. “You can’t expect them to take on a responsibility like Grandpa Jake.”

Dad looked uncomfortable, and his face started to turn pink, a sure indication that he was losing his patience with me. “It’s our only choice, Lisa. Try to be reasonable; try to think about Grandpa Jake.”

“We know how much you love your room,” Mom said. “This will be a sacrifice for all of us, not just for you.”

I couldn’t believe this. I looked at Kim who grinned broadly at me. She folded her hands and daintily placed them on the table like she was a prissy princess or something.

“I think it will be *wonderful* to share a room with you again,” Kim said in a fake dramatic voice that she knew I hated. “We’ll be roommates.” She flashed a huge smile at me and I cringed. “I know you’ve missed me.”

Right. The thought of sharing a room again with Kim made me want to stab my fork into the table. We were so different. For one thing, there was a big difference in our ages. She was twelve, and I was almost seventeen. We might as well have been born in different centuries. And another thing, when I was her age, I was much more mature. Just a few days earlier, I had caught her playing with Barbie dolls. I stopped playing with Barbies when I was at least six.

Kim and I were different in our looks, too. Kim had straight, silky, long, blond hair that everyone always wanted to touch because it looked so soft, and her blue eyes and perfectly smooth skin made her look like Alice in Wonderland. My hair was long, too, but unlike Kim’s, it was dark and wavy. The only time my hair was straight and silky was when I blow-dried it into submission. With my light skin, dark hair, and dark brown eyes, I was Alice in Wonderland’s opposite. People nearly always thought I was adopted because my parents both belonged in the Kim-category with blond hair and blue eyes. And because my hair was so different than Kim’s, she always wanted to play with it; it was like an oddity to her or

something. I could live without that.

“This is great,” I said, a little more sharply than I intended. “I get to share a room with a Barbie doll lover.” Kim’s fake-happy dramatics quickly fled and she got a funny look on her face, like she was going to start crying. I felt a twinge of guilt for what I’d said because Kim didn’t know that I had seen her playing with the Barbies. Her bedroom door had been open a crack when I went to call her to dinner, so I spied on her a second before I knocked. When I did knock, she jumped straight up off her bed like she’d been shot and stuffed the dolls under her pillow before asking what I wanted.

So obviously, Barbies were a subject that Kim didn’t want publicized, but even so, I thought Dad totally overreacted. His face was no longer pink—which indicated minor irritation—but was now bright red, which meant I was in trouble. His voice always lowered a few notches when he was mad, and it was low and level when he said, “Lisa, Grandpa will be here Saturday morning, and I expect your things to be cleared out by then. All of it. I’ll help you move the heavy stuff.”

“I can’t believe this. I don’t even have a say in what goes on in this family.” Before my parents could start spouting off scriptures about how we should love everyone and share what we have with the less fortunate, I jumped up and ran to my room, making sure to slam the door. Then I stood there and looked around my room.

Three months before, Dad had decided to expand his at-home business and moved to a nice office complex downtown. He now had ten people working for him in his graphics company. One of the benefits of his expansion and move was that I got his old office for my bedroom. And it was finally exactly how I wanted it, with lots of bright colors and fun stuff, too, like the neon green cordless telephone, the hot pink inflatable chair in the corner, and the purple desk and matching chair. My dresser and night stand were white, which might have been boring except I had them covered with all kinds of accessories and stickers in vibrant colors of purple, yellow, orange, pink, blue, and green. I loved bright colors, and

I loved putting them together. I loved my room; I didn't want to give it up.

But it wasn't merely how my room looked that I loved. I loved the privacy. For twelve years, I'd shared a room with Kim who always had to be in the middle of everything. With her busy-body ways, she knew more about what I was doing than I did sometimes. And now I was going to be stuck with her in the same bedroom again. Dad's track record in starting and finishing home projects wasn't good, so who knew how long I'd have to wait for a room of my own again. Even if Grandpa Jake left in four months to stay with Uncle Herbert and Aunt Sally as planned, that would be September, and summer would be over. My best friends, Angela and Patrice, and I had been counting on slumber parties at my house for the summer. Slumber parties without Kim breathing down our necks.

Aunt Cathy and Uncle Boulder couldn't have chosen a worse time to have a baby—right when Grandpa Jake was staying with them. And why they would want more kids was beyond me. Their twin boys were as wild and destructive as kangaroos stuck in a small room of breakable objects. Apparently, Uncle Boulder was competing with his brother to see who could have the most sons. At least that's what Aunt Cathy, in her giggly, irritating voice, told Mom one day when we were shopping. I was hoping their new baby was a girl.

My phone rang, jarring me to movement. I had my own private line and phone number which came with the bedroom, and that was another thing I loved. The caller ID showed that it was Angela, and I quickly picked up the phone. For all I knew, my parents were huddling at that very moment to discuss sentencing me to life without phone privileges for my behavior. So I needed to talk while I could.

“Good news,” Angela gushed without even saying hello. “Patrice and I ran into Mike and Carlos after school, and we told them that you were, you know, sort of interested in Jared.”

“You what?” My heart began thumping so hard I could feel

it in my ears. My eyes automatically riveted to the framed photo of Jared Nichols on my nightstand that Angela snapped one day after school when we were all goofing around in the parking lot. In the picture he was leaning against his car, arms folded, smiling provocatively. He was wearing a blue shirt, and his light brown hair was cut short and highlighted. Some guys looked silly with their hair highlighted, but not Jared. It made his eyes look more intensely blue. Jared didn't know I had the picture. In fact, only Angela and Patrice knew about it. Jared Nichols was another reason I didn't want to share a room with Kim; I didn't want her asking questions about him. Or about anyone else for that matter.

"So what did they say?" I asked, partly irritated at Angela and Patrice's boldness for telling Jared's friends my deepest darkest secret, and partly excited at the same time. "I can't believe you told them. I'm so embarrassed."

"You'll thank us someday. And they're going to tell him, so expect a phone call. We gave them your number. Your *private* number." Angela teased me a minute longer before her mom told her to get off the phone. She hung up before I could tell her the bad news about me getting evicted from my room, which was okay because I'd probably start crying or something.

I grudgingly started to pack up my room although it was only Thursday and Grandpa wouldn't be here until Saturday. I knew I might as well get the dreaded job over with. As I started clearing stuff off the top of my dresser I thought about Jared, wondering if he'd call and what I'd say if he did call. Most importantly, I wondered what it meant if he didn't call. I honestly didn't expect that he would, but there was a ribbon of hope swirling in the part of my mind where I kept my most secret thoughts.

Jared had been my secret obsession off and on—mostly on—since the first of the school year when we worked together on a project in Mrs. Jamison's English class. We also had seminary together last year, but I must have been blind because I never really looked at him as dating material. Perhaps that was due to the fact that I was still fifteen, too young to date. What a difference a year

made. Now, Jared and I had math together and sat across from each other, exchanging notes when we were bored or when we wanted to make a comment on the complexities or absurdities of math. I'd been afraid that if he knew that I liked him, he'd ignore me and our friendship would be over. Why did Angela have to be so helpful? On the other hand, if he liked me, life could become much more interesting.

With that happy thought, I started to take down the framed posters from the wall. I had saved my allowance and babysitting money to have them framed, and for some reason, looking at them brought tears to my eyes. I didn't want to cry, especially since I knew that it was stupid to cry over a bedroom. The tears came anyway.

Someone knocked at my door, and when I didn't answer, the door opened and Dad tentatively poked his head through the doorway. He moved beside me, looking uncomfortable as he ran a hand through his thinning blond hair. "I didn't mean to be so hard on you at the table. You can wait and move tomorrow if you want."

I turned away from him so he couldn't see my tears, and shrugged. Dad cleared his throat. "I really am sorry about taking your room away, Lisa. I know it's a sacrifice for you. But I also know Grandpa Jake will appreciate what you're doing. I'm sure he's tired of being shuffled around from relative to relative since Grandma died, hoping he's not imposing and knowing that he is."

Dad sat down on my bed, looking around my room with approval. "You sure have a flair for color. I didn't know so many different colors could look good together. You should leave some of this stuff for Grandpa, brighten up his life a bit."

The thought of Grandpa sitting in my hot pink inflatable chair, or lying in bed with my electric blue comforter pulled up to his silver-whiskered chin made me smile. Dad caught my smile. A relieved look came over his face, like we'd come to a truce. He stood up and kissed me on the forehead. "It's only for a while, Lisa. Let's try to make him feel welcome, okay?"

I lowered my head and nodded. I thought about Grandpa being shuffled around like an Old Maid card that no one wanted to be stuck with at the end of the game. What a horrible way to live. “I know I shouldn’t be so selfish,” I said. “But I had big plans for the summer.” Then, I thought that perhaps Grandpa had plans for the summer, too. Plans that didn’t include being passed on to yet another relative’s home.

“I know you had plans,” Dad said. “And I’ll be honest with you. I’m overwhelmed with my business right now, but maybe I can hire someone to do the work on that room downstairs. That is, if I can find someone who will do a good job and not charge a fortune.”

I should have felt hopeful with those words, but I knew Dad wouldn’t hire anyone. The reason was that Dad could do the work himself, and do a good job, saving money in the process. He looked at me like he knew what I was thinking. “I’m serious, Lisa, we’ll work something out.”

I sighed and allowed him to help me haul my things upstairs to Kim’s room.

Kim had my old side of the room cleared out by the time we started moving all my stuff in there. But her posters still covered nearly every inch of the room, her side *and* mine. Kim collected posters like me, except hers were definitely not cool. I think she got them from the poster reject factory. One of them had the food pyramid, and at the top it said, “Eat your way to good health.” In fact, most of her posters were nutrition-oriented, like maybe she wanted to be a school lunch lady when she grew up. I didn’t like lunch ladies. They were too efficient with their white aprons and hairnets, and the ones at my school would probably rather throw food than smile.

One of Kim’s posters was not food or health related. It had a bunch of kittens in a basket, and it was sort of cute. But it looked totally out of place between the broccoli poster and the “Say yes to fruits” poster. I couldn’t begin to tell you how thrilled I was with my new surroundings.

“I’ll come back after family prayer to work on your phone line,” Dad said after we’d hauled in the last load of my stuff. “I assume you’ll want your private line wired in here for your phone.”

“Definitely,” I said.

We all met downstairs in the living room for family prayer. Mom put down her list of things that needed to be done before Grandpa Jake came. She smiled at me and squeezed my shoulder as she put an arm around me. It was Kim’s turn to pray. She rambled on for at least five minutes about how thankful we were that Grandpa Jake would be staying with us and how thankful she was that we would be sharing a room again. I cleared my throat in protest, causing Kim to add, “And please bless Lisa so that she’ll be nice to Grandpa Jake.”

“That was a very nice prayer,” Mom said when Kim finally finished. “I’m proud of you girls for the sacrifice you’re making.”

When it was almost bedtime, Kim sat on her bed reading a *Sweet Valley Twins* book. I thought those books went out of style in the last century, and I told Kim so. “I like them,” she said. “Good books never go out of style.” She set down her book. “I’m excited for Grandpa to come, aren’t you? I made him a ‘welcome’ poster.”

“How very Kim-ish of you,” I said. A little rude, maybe, but I needed to let Kim know right now, right from the start, that this wasn’t a long-term, happy-fest slumber party.

Kim looked hurt. Then out came her daggers. “At least I’m not mean to old people.”

“I’m not mean to old people. I simply don’t like getting my room taken away.”

“That’s because you’re selfish,” Kim said. “All you think about is yourself.”

I threw myself on my bed and smashed the pillow over my head to drown out anything else Kim said. It didn’t work. Her lunch-lady voice came through loud and clear. I pulled my electric-blue comforter and pillow off my bed and headed downstairs. Just because my bed was in Kim’s room didn’t mean I had to sleep

there. I lay down on the thick carpet in my empty bedroom. Then I remembered that Jared might call, so in a state of optimism I marched back upstairs to Kim's room to get my phone. Dad was drilling a hole in the floor next to my nightstand. He turned off the drill when I walked in the room and looked up at me apologetically. "Sorry about the noise; I'll try to get this done as quickly as possible."

"No problem," I said. "I'm not sleeping in here tonight, anyway."

Dad gave me a funny look but didn't question me. He looked tired as he turned away and turned the drill back on.

I suddenly felt bad for being so negative, especially to Dad. He'd gone to a lot of work to help me move my things and put a phone line in. I touched him on the shoulder. He looked up and turned off the drill.

"Thanks for helping me, Dad."

He smiled, and I kissed him on the cheek.

When he turned the whining drill back on, Kim began reading her book out loud, in a very annoying voice. I took my phone back down to my room and plugged it in.

Sometime during the night, I woke up, stiff from sleeping on the floor. I walked to the hall closet to get a foam mat to sleep on, then unrolled it and arranged my bedding on top of it. Now I was more comfortable, but I couldn't sleep. My mind started jumping from one thing to another like when I flipped through channels on TV: Grandpa Jake, Kim, my room, Jared, Angela and Patrice, the grammar test tomorrow. The grammar test! I had completely forgotten about it. Now I'd have to wake up early and study, that is if I could ever get back to sleep.

I stopped my mind-channel-surfing long enough to think more about Grandpa, and I wondered what it was going to be like with him here. He had emphysema, which was why he couldn't walk up and down stairs. Sometimes he started coughing and choking for no reason, which I knew from personal experience wasn't something you wanted to see and hear. It had been several months

since I'd seen him, and I wondered if he'd changed much since then. Whenever Aunt Cathy called us from Idaho, she would tell us that Grandpa was slowly going downhill, whatever that meant. You couldn't always believe Aunt Cathy because she exaggerated a lot of the time.

Then, for some reason my mind switched back to Kim. I thought about Kim and how at the dinner table and during family prayer she seemed excited to have me as a roommate again. I definitely didn't feel the same. It wasn't that Kim was that bad of a person, for a sister, she just wanted us to be best friends.

I turned my pillow around and punched it a couple of times to get it more comfortable. I still couldn't sleep. Much to my irritation, I started thinking about Kim again. It was like something in the back of my mind was trying to get a point across to me, trying to make me see something. And then it came.

Kim *needed* me.

I used to wish I had a big sister sometimes, to talk about private things, or embarrassing things, or to talk for no reason. I'd never really considered the fact that Kim might want that from me. As I lay mulling this over in my mind, I started to feel guilty for how rude I was to her sometimes. But then an opposing thought popped into my mind to remind me of the fact that she was annoying and deserved to be treated that way. No, said the other thought, the one that was trying to get me to change my ways, to do better. You need to be a sister Kim can look up to and confide in. She needs you.

Both sides made perfect sense, but because I was tired of thinking about it right then, I gave in. "Alright, already," I said aloud to the air. "I'll try to be a better sister. Now let me go to sleep." Then, before I realized what I was doing, I was heading back to Kim's room with my comforter, pillow, and phone.

Kim was asleep with her arms raised over her head, her mouth slightly open. In the past, I might have stuck something in that open mouth, like a sock or toothpaste. But since I'd made a promise of sorts to be a better sister, I resisted the temptation and sat and

looked at her in the dark.

Kim looked peaceful when she was asleep, like a golden angel with her hair framing her face, although I'd never in a million years admit that to anyone, especially to her. I resisted the temptation to kiss Kim on the cheek, after all there was such a thing as going too far. I remembered I hadn't said my prayers, so I knelt down at my bed and asked for help to be a better sister. To ask for this kind of help was so unlike me, that all I could do was blame it on the late hour and lack of sleep. Afterwards, I plugged my phone into the new outlet and lay on my bed, resting my hand on the phone, so I could grab it quickly in case Jared called. During the night I kept dreaming that he called, but he never did.