



# PRINCESS

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For my mum, Bibi,  
who chose England for my Girls' Rights

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## Chapter 1

# Voyage to a Lost Kingdom

1886

The gust of wind swoops down and blows my hair up all around my face.

My vision is hindered by my unruly, dark curls and fear fills me as I realize I must let go of the ship's railing. Thick, long black hair and stormy sea voyages do not go hand in hand. Not when the SS *Verona* is still in European waters, with their temperamental windy weather. I release my tight hold of the metal bar just as another gust of wind forcefully pushes me forward. Shrieking, I stagger, convinced that I shall be thrown overboard and killed at the age of only nine.

“Mama!” I yell.

A firm grip grasps my hand. The fingers are longer than mine and soft, but it is not Mama's hand. It is my eldest sister who takes hold of me.





“Steady there, Soph,” Bamba says with a hint of amusement. “It’s just a bit of wind and water.”

I cling to Bamba and call out to my younger brother. He is only six years old and probably as frightened as me. “Eddie!”

“He’s fine,” Bamba assures me. “Catherine’s got his hand. Look!”

I turn my head to see Eddie standing close to my second-eldest sister.

“Honestly, why did you come out on to the deck if you’re scared of the sea?” Bamba grumbles. “You should have stayed with Mama.”

I say nothing. There is no way Eddie and I would willingly remain locked up in Mama’s cabin with her. No, we are far better off following Bamba, Catherine and my two older brothers, Victor and Freddie, around the ship.

We are all aboard the SS *Verona*, a steamship that set sail for India from England. Our journey will last just under four weeks and we will make a few stops along the way. We have already stopped at Gibraltar. There was nothing exciting there to write about in my journal. It was just a blob of land in the middle of the sea. I am looking forward to the stopover in Egypt. Freddie says that is where the pyramids are located, and we will be allowed



to visit the ancient site for a few hours before we are on our way again. I cannot wait. I am going to climb on the Sphinx with Eddie and ride a camel in the desert. It is going to be a wonderful adventure.

Bamba, Catherine and Freddie are also enjoying this trip. The only one who is behaving like Mama is Victor, my papa's heir. He has been sullen throughout the voyage. He says he hates this ship and our trip. Just like Mama.

"Dinner time, children." Our Indian nanny, the ayah Maju, steps out on to the deck and visibly shivers. She is dressed in a white sari and cardigan, quite inappropriate clothes for the weather. She wears it as a uniform. There are many other ayahs in white saris travelling on the ship with whole families. Strangely enough, some children are even making the journey with only their ayahs for company. I wonder what it feels like not to have a papa or mama to look after you. Papa employed Maju for this trip. I think it is because he does not think Mama can cope with all six of us children together. He would never admit it though. Instead, he insists that Maju is with us so that she may teach us Punjabi, one of the Indian languages. Although he cannot speak it very well himself, Papa seems mortified that none of his children know his country's language.

Mama is not keen on us learning Punjabi at all and,





unknown to Papa, has forbidden the ayah to teach us. Maju's day consists of following us around the ship.

"You coming?" Maju calls impatiently.

Bamba strides forward, dragging me with her. "Maju, will you tell me more of your stories about India after dinner?"

Maju smiles and nods. She and Bamba have become friends. Maju loves to talk and Bamba is like a dry sponge, soaking up anything and everything about India. Sometimes I think Bamba is more excited about visiting India than Papa is.

In the dining room, the red-coated Indian stewards usher us to the front of the queue. All the Indian crew, who are known as lascars, have been awestruck by us since we set foot on this ship. Their smiles are wide when they see us children and they almost bow to the floor whenever they glimpse Papa.

The head steward leads us towards the captain's table. As members of royalty, we are granted the best seats. Papa is already seated in the second-best chair, right next to the first position of the captain. They are both surrounded by the other rich passengers, who seem fascinated by Papa. They probably think he is a 'colourful, charismatic maharaja'. These are not my words. Bamba says that's how people describe him. She also says he used to be one of



Queen Victoria's favourite people, and that he tried to please her when he was a young boy by converting from his birth religion of Sikhism to Christianity.

Maharaja means 'great king' in the Indian language.

My papa is the Maharaja Duleep Singh of Punjab.

Of course, he does not rule his kingdom.

Queen Victoria's British Empire rules it on his behalf.

The steward holds a chair out for Bamba on the table adjacent to the captain's. We may be princes and princesses, but we are still children and therefore not allowed to sit at the first table.

I glance around for Mama, but she is nowhere to be seen. She has probably asked for her dinner to be delivered to her cabin. Sighing, I take a seat beside Bamba, whilst little Eddie sits to my right, next to Catherine.

"Were you all right on the deck?" he asks me in a worried tone as he lays the crisp, white napkin on his lap.

I smooth the corners of the napkin over his legs. Eddie is always in my shadow and I like to look after him, just as Bamba seems to look after me. It is something that I do now that Mama seems so lost in her own world most of the time. She has been like this ever since she learned about Papa's special lady friend. Her name is Ada and everyone knows that he loves her too, even though he is married to Mama.





Back in England, I once heard Victor tell Bamba that Mama feels betrayed by Papa. I'm not quite sure what to make of it all except that I wish Mama could be happy again, and laugh and sing with me and Eddie like long ago.

The waiters place a bowl of soup in front of each of us. I take my own napkin and place it on my lap. The buzz of conversation at the other tables has dimmed, and now there is only one voice that booms out. It is Papa, ready to give his speech to anyone who will listen.

“I was cheated out of my kingdom, did you know? My father, the Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Lion of Punjab, died a natural death and then the vultures circled. My mother, the Maharani Jindan, a brave and courageous woman, was dragged off screaming as I, a small boy, was tricked into signing my kingdom away. The great Sikh kingdom of Punjab was gobbled up by the invaders.”

There is a small gasp in the dining room.

Bamba tries to hide a smile and whispers. “They don't like being described as invaders, do they?”

She is talking to Victor, who is sitting on her other side. Victor looks like he wants the floor to open and swallow him whole. I have never seen him appear so embarrassed.

If there was a hush in the dining room before, now there is a pin-drop silence. Even the clink of the cutlery on china



has stopped. I look over my shoulder at Papa. He looks incredibly pleased to be the centre of attention. Expanding his chest, he continues his rant.

“I was cheated! Cheated, I tell you. But now I have seen the light. I know the truth. The rose-coloured tint has been removed from my sight. Now I see. Now I know my duty to my people. They wait for me. They yearn for me to return and take back my kingdom from the invaders.”

The second use of the word ‘invaders’ triggers another gasp. It seems to me that people are quite shocked at Papa’s use of language. Satisfied that he has caused a stir, Papa picks up his spoon to eat. It is a cue for everyone else to continue as well, and soon the dining room is filled with the din of talk and silverware against china bowls.

I scoop the soup into my spoon just as Victor slams his own spoon down with a clunk, splattering the white tablecloth with yellow liquid.

“I can’t believe the idiotic parent is at it again,” Victor mutters through gritted teeth. “This is why Mama refuses to join us down here. He just shows us up and then people point and laugh at us.”

“Shh.” Bamba jabs his arm with her finger. “Don’t talk like that.”

“Why shouldn’t I?” he retorts in a low voice. “He’s





uprooted us from home and is dragging us halfway across the world to a country we don't know.”

“England was never our home,” Bamba says furiously, sounding more like Papa with every word. “India is our rightful land and one day you will be the king, the maharaja of that land again.”

“I don't want to reclaim a kingdom that means nothing to me,” Victor snaps, scraping back his chair noisily. “I want to go home to England!”

The screech on the wooden floor causes two old ladies to tut disapprovingly. Victor doesn't notice as he storms out of the dining hall. No doubt he is headed to Mama. She doesn't want to go to India either. She spends all her time fretting about what Queen Victoria and her court will make of Papa's words about the British Empire.

I like Queen Vi. She is my godmother and the Empress of India.