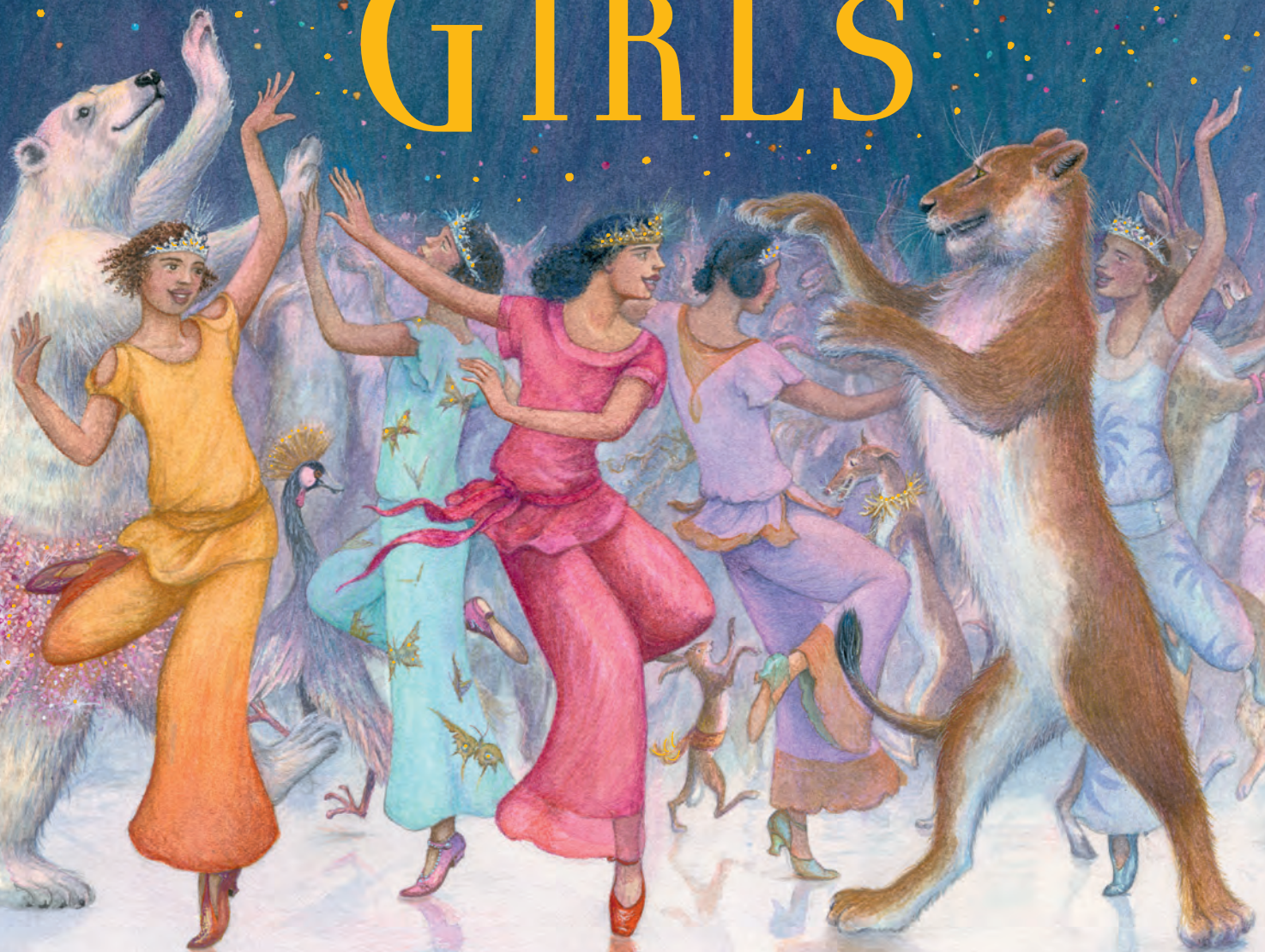


JESSIE BURTON

THE

RESTLESS
GIRLS



ILLUSTRATED BY

ANGELA BARRETT

BLOOMSBURY



BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK

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First published in Great Britain in 2018 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: HB: 978-1-4088-8691-5; eBook: 978-1-4088-8690-8

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Printed and bound in China by C&C Offset Printing Co. Ltd
Shenzhen, Guangdong



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BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY





One

Princess Frida and the Mourning Curtain

Not far from where you're sitting right now, there exists a country called Kalia. It's a beautiful place, well worth visiting if you have the time. The capital is an ancient city named Lago Puera, and sailors and visitors usually enter through its port. They are greeted by the sight of the palace domes, sparkling in the sun, painted like the Kalian sea, whose waves foam silver, whose depths shade the eye with unending blues. The shore shimmers gold, the land opens like an emerald quilt, and the Kalian mountains rise up as giants to greet the sky.

You'd think that for the princesses in this story, who were born in Kalia, who grew up in that palace, who were destined to survey

the waters of the Kalian sea, this would be a happy place to live.

In fact, it was the opposite.

✱

There were twelve of them, and the eldest was called Frida. Frida was very clever, and she had many ambitions, but most persistent was her desire to fly a plane.

Then came Polina, and she could read the stars.

Next was Lorna, the kindest, and thus the wisest, of them all.



After her was Ariosta, a talented painter, who cut off all her hair without permission when she was ten. (She had the same style ten years on: it still suited her.)

Chessa came next, a girl who sang to break your heart in twenty pieces, then put it back together with a jazzy aria.

Then came Bellina, who'd taught herself five languages.

Vita was the seventh daughter, a happy spirit, whose laugh was like a tonic. She was the luckiest, and the quickest at jokes.



Mariella came next, and she loved to do sums, numbers dancing in her mind like obedient bears.

Then there was Delilah, who had such green fingers that even the stubbornest plant grew at her touch.

Next was Flora, always reading a book, a newspaper or the side of a biscuit box.

After her came Emelia, who wanted to be a vet.

And the youngest was Agnes, the most watchful of the sisters. She was going to be a writer when she grew up.

And their parents?

Well. This was the problem, as parents often are.

Queen Laurelia was their mother, dead before this story starts, but in her end is this beginning. Laurelia had been a woman of many words and the driver of a racing car – open top, leather seats, a craving for speed and a fatal crash that was the bitterest unfairness her daughters ever tasted.

When they were very little, the princesses had never understood why it made their mother so happy to speed off down the road, goggles on, hair flying, metal gleaming, the engine roaring to a buzz and then to silence as she disappeared over the hill. Sometimes, at

night, after Laurelia had died, Agnes thought she could feel the vibration of her mother's engine revving in her ribcage. Then she woke up and realised it was Emelia's snores. Agnes discovered that both the imagined and the real worlds could be equally comforting, and that sometimes it was very hard to tell the difference.

Never mind jewels and diadems, the words they'd heard from Laurelia were the princesses' inheritance: her songs down the corridors, her bedtime stories of other worlds. Her words roosted like birds in the girls' imaginations. In the days, weeks and months after Laurelia's death, they took flight from her daughters' mouths and became their own.

Their father was called Alberto, and Alberto was king of Kalia. In the scheme of the story, this is a fact both important and irrelevant, like most things are, depending on the time of day you're looking at them. It was Alberto being king that made his daughters princesses. Now, between you and me, I don't think any of them liked being princesses very much. It might *seem* fun to wear a jewelled crown and have people do everything for you – but it quickly becomes tiresome, to the point that boiling an egg for yourself feels like a holiday.

After Queen Laurelia's death, King Alberto became the sort of person who ate a whole cake without offering anyone else a slice, and who punished his girls for things that weren't their fault at all. The girls weren't alone in this: the world is full of children picking up their parents' crumbs. Alberto and Laurelia had no sons, and I think this was part of the problem, because after Laurelia died, Alberto didn't know what to do with *one* daughter, let alone twelve of them. Laurelia had been the one watching them, nurturing their imaginations, their educations.

And now she was gone.

Growing up, Alberto had never learned a thing about girls; as a prince, all his friends were boys, and then as king, all his advisers were men. Girls in Kalia, whether they were princesses or not, had never been considered very important. Most important were the subjects of horse riding, hawking, killing small animals, sitting on thrones and gathering taxes. When she was alive, Queen Laurelia had done her best to encourage her daughters to look forward to their adulthood, but it's hard when you're just one queen racing your motor against a long line of history trying to squash you down. No one had done such a thing for her when *she*

was a little girl – they hadn't even thought it necessary to teach her how to read.

Every girl in Kalia was the same, and the people in charge of them clumped their individual hopes and dreams together like one big ball of moss. It didn't matter how well a girl could play the trumpet, or grow a sunflower, or write a poem, or solve a quadratic equation. *None* of that mattered. The best a girl could hope for was a marriage where the money was good and her husband didn't hog all of life's fun. A girl might as well have been a sunflower or a trumpet herself for all that her feelings were taken into consideration.

In the first week of mourning after Queen Laurelia's death, King Alberto dispensed with the girls' music lessons. He couldn't bear the sound of Chessa singing, he said, because she sounded too much like her mother. Chessa didn't open her mouth for days, not even to speak.

Then, in the second week of mourning, their mathematics tutor was dismissed, because princesses didn't need numbers. Mariella took to lying on her bed, tapping out times tables on her forearm.

By the third week of mourning, their botany classes were taken away from them. No longer were they allowed to take trips to the

majestic Kalian mountains to collect plant samples for the palace laboratory. It wasn't just Delilah who had loved the clear air – all the girls enjoyed the mountains, where birds of extraordinary plumage called to each other from high trees, and the wildest flowers flourished.

Back at the palace, life was a tomb. The bright walls that Queen Laurelia had decorated were now shrouded in black velvet. No electric light was allowed, only candles were permitted – and their flames barely lit the corners of the huge, dark rooms.

The maids and cooks and butlers scurried along the walls, their shadows long and looming, heads down towards carpets that gathered dust because no one could see to clean them.

The sun, the gorgeous spanning sea beyond the windows, the sky such a blue, were shut out. Only melancholy was allowed to illuminate the girls' days.



The telephones – so recently installed, and such a thrill to Laurelia that she could speak to her sisters, who had married kings in other lands – were disconnected. The girls ached for that cheery metallic ring, which had always

excited them, to know which far-off aunt was calling by the touch of her finger.

Now all was silence.

In the fourth week of mourning for the queen, King Alberto took away:

Ariosta's painting supplies

All the girls' novels, poetry, dictionaries, encyclopedias, maps, comics and newspapers

Mariella's chemistry set

Emelia's guide to looking after sick tigers

Agnes's typewriter

Polina's telescope

Delilah's key to the greenhouse (the plants were left untended and began to die) ...

And their mother's gramophone and all her jazz records.

Frida, who I told you was the cleverest, hid her aeroplane manuals in her knicker drawer. But regardless of this personal ingenuity, the girls were more miserable than they had ever been in their lives.

The king explained to the girls that they were now no longer

allowed to go beyond the palace walls.

‘But why?’ asked Frida, surrounded as usual by the others. ‘You can’t keep us locked in.’

‘I’m king and I can,’ Alberto said. He sighed, scratching the top of his balding head through the circle of his crown. ‘I’m doing it because I love you,’ he went on. ‘I couldn’t bear it if anything happened to you. It’s so dangerous outside the palace walls.’

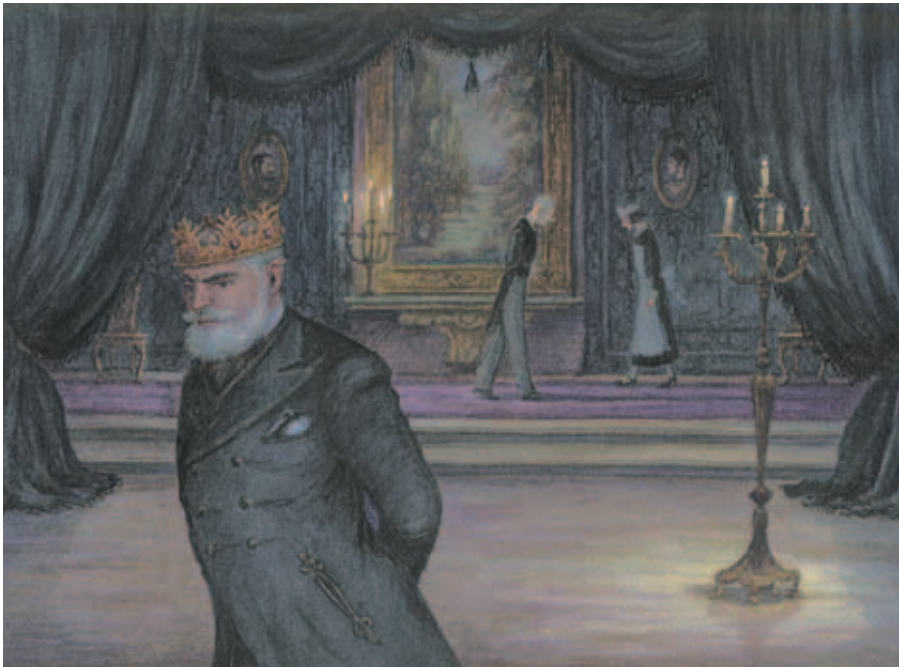
‘It’s dangerous inside them too,’ Frida muttered, as their father hurried off. He almost ran away from them, as if each of his daughters carried within her the spark of his dead wife, and their faces might pin him to the floor with grief.

By now, not even their eyes felt like the princesses’ own, not even their hands and feet. Their hearts were gloomy; the palace guards watched them everywhere. Everything they saw and touched belonged to their father.

A yearning for their mother spread through the princesses’ bodies like mould. It grew and grew, inside and over them, a creeping, seeping crust of pain swallowing them up – and the only things that might have kept them breathing, might have pushed

back the mould a little bit, might have reminded them that they were still alive, and deserved a chance to *enjoy* this fact, Alberto had taken away. The girls felt as dead as their mother.

Frida's sorrow over this turned to confusion, and finally to clarity and anger. She understood what that motor car had meant to Laurelia – it wasn't the car itself so much as what it had given her: a sense of movement, of direction. 'You see, my darlings,' Frida said to her younger sisters, 'it made her feel *free*. And I'll tell you something else. The time for muttering is done.'



Frida was true to her word, as she always was.

One fateful afternoon, after the princesses had endured yet another morning cooped up like twelve chickens with no promise of an egg, she stormed the corridors looking for their father. Polina and Lorna ran after her, trying to keep up. The other nine sisters scattered behind, a confusion of sad butterflies.

King Alberto was in the throne room as usual, the curtains closed. His advisers were standing in the shadows, unsure of what to do with their increasingly difficult monarch.

‘Your Majesty,’ said Frida, coming towards him. ‘This isn’t fair, and you know it. You cannot tell us how to grieve.’

‘Please go away,’ he said. ‘I can’t bear to look at you.’

‘Father,’ Frida persisted. ‘We know you’re sad, but we’re sad too. Why take away our lessons, our music, our books and our paints? They make us feel as if Mother is still here.’

‘Your mother is not here!’ the king cried. ‘She’s gone! Dead, by her own stupidity – and mine, for ever allowing her to drive that blasted racing car in the first place!’

‘She loved that racing car,’ said Frida.

‘Well, it didn’t love her back,’ the king replied, screwing his

face up like a horrible turnip. ‘I’m having it crushed.’

‘You can’t!’

‘Frida,’ said Alberto, ‘I’m the king. I can do what I want.’

Frida pretended she hadn’t heard. ‘Let me fix it with the help of the palace mechanic,’ she said.

‘You’ll do no such thing!’ King Alberto snapped, losing his patience. ‘No man will marry a girl who fixes cars!’

‘What does Mother’s motor car have to do with getting married?’ asked Frida.

(Frida, you may have noticed, never gave up.)

King Alberto’s round cheeks turned tomato red, and he looked at his other eleven daughters, who had gathered behind Frida as she faced their father.

‘Every one of you is a stick of dynamite!’ he bellowed. ‘You’ll explode me, and this kingdom – BOOM! Your mother was ridiculous about you, and now no one will touch you. Girls aren’t supposed to do even a tiny *bit* of what you got up to. And look at what happened to her. Dead. *Dead!* I won’t have it, I won’t!’ He slammed his hand on the arm of his throne, and his crown knocked slightly sideways.

‘We’re not sticks of dynamite,’ said Frida. ‘We’re simply excellent girls.’

King Alberto ignored her, throwing his hands up in the air. ‘Oh, why, why, *why* were we not blessed with a boy? Just one boy, one incy-wincy little boy, just one! That’s all I ever asked for! I’m getting old, I feel a hundred – I look *two* hundred – and still no heir!’

‘But you have twelve heirs,’ Frida said.

Alberto was used to these conversations with Frida. They’d been having them since she could talk, and he too would rarely give up. (In fact, I think that sometimes he rather enjoyed them.) ‘I have twelve girls,’ he said. ‘And what use are you? No woman can inherit my kingdom.’

‘Says who?’ said Frida.

Alberto jumped from the throne as if his eldest daughter had slapped him in the face with a Kalian trout, and a large one at that. ‘It’s the law!’ he cried.

‘Your Majesty,’ said Frida patiently. ‘*You* are the law.’

His advisers shuffled on their feet like a group of perturbed pigeons. King Alberto was silent as he sat back into his throne, stroking his chin. For an agonising, ecstatic moment, he actually

seemed to be considering Frida's point. Agnes felt her heart lift, and the energy between her sisters' bodies shifted with hopeful anticipation. *Good old Frida*, she thought. *Quick as ever*.

But then their father stared down at them in horror, as if he was looking at his dead wife's image, a woman's lost face reflected in twelve young mirrors of fear. 'None of you has the faintest idea what it takes to run a kingdom,' he said.

Frida fell on her knees towards him, her arms open wide. 'Because no one has ever taught us! But we'd learn. And have we not lived with your advisers our whole lives? I could lead a kingdom, I know I could. And if I couldn't, Polina could, and then there's —'

Alberto snorted. '*Polina?* Polina, who spends her life with one eye glued to a telescope?'

'But, Father,' said Polina. 'There is so much in the sky we've yet to learn —'

'No,' interrupted Alberto, pointing at the floor. 'Down *here* is what matters, not twinkling stars.' He readjusted his crown.

'Father,' said Frida, jumping to her feet and pacing back and forth in front of the throne. 'I want you to imagine something for me. Can you do that?' She looked at her father with a doubtful

expression, as if it was unlikely he had any imagination left.

‘Imagine not being able to do anything, except *sit*.’

‘Sounds good to me.’

‘Except sit, and think about getting married. That’s it, nothing else. Married to a man who doesn’t even *exist* yet. And you can’t even sit at a window with a view, because they’re all covered over with black cloth.’

‘It’ll do you good to calm down,’ he said. ‘Respect your mother’s memory.’

‘We will respect her by carrying on as we did when she was alive.’

‘Your Majesty,’ Agnes piped up, encouraged by her sister’s fire, ‘imagine ... imagine that our hearts are lions, needing to jump and play, and feed and drink, and grow.’

Frida laughed with joy. ‘Oh yes, Agnes!’ she said. ‘Our hearts are lions!’

‘Your hearts are *what?*’ spluttered Alberto. ‘You’re not lions! You and your ridiculous ideas, Agnes. Grow up.’

He turned from his youngest daughter back to his eldest. ‘Frida. Be an example to the others, *please*. Think of your marriages,

and accept that no girl, no woman, could ever be smart enough for my job.’

Frida narrowed her eyes. ‘You wish me to be an example to the others?’ she said.

Alberto folded his arms and stared at his defiant daughter. ‘Frida, it’s my dearest wish.’

‘Very well, Your Majesty,’ she said.

The king sighed with relief; but everyone else in the room knew Princess Frida better. There was a beat. The room was silent, waiting to see what she would do next.

Frida walked, head held high, towards the curtain covering one of the windows.

When they realised what she was about to do, the advisers cried in unison for her to stop.

But Frida did not stop.

With one sharp heave, she pulled the curtain back, and a golden vengeance poured into the room.

‘Insolence!’ screamed the king, and in that moment it was hard to tell whether he was blinded by the light of the sun or his daughter.



Frida was moving like a spirit, curtain to curtain, pulling down the black drapes, advisers and maids cringing with their eyes closed, the dust swirling like gold motes around the throne as velvet and taffeta tumbled to the floor. Ariosta rushed to help her, and Bellina followed, then Chessa and Delilah and Mariella, then Polina and Emelia, then Flora and Vita, and finally Lorna and Agnes, twelve princessly pairs of hands making portal after portal of sunshine to flood the room.

No one could stop them,
no one dared go near them,
and thus their father's throne was nothing,
a chair bleached white by the light of grief.



