

THE KINGDOM OF STARS

book one



EMILEE KING

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CHAPTER 1

The rising sun greeted Tabitha like an old friend as she emerged from her stone cottage. She leisurely walked across the yard, the woven basket on her arm swaying lightly and the gentle breeze pulling at her wool dress. Tabitha cherished her morning walk; the world around her was utterly beautiful, and she wouldn't miss a single part of it by hurrying along. The long walk was part of her routine, after all.

A family of birds started chirping to each other in the distance. The sound made Tabitha smile as she took in the sprawling field of green grass dotted with splotches of brightly colored wildflowers and their sweet, fresh fragrance that lingered on the breeze. Her cottage was the last on this row, and she loved the view and the extra space, not to mention the easy access to more flowers. Tabitha's personal garden was bursting with different plants and herbs. She adored each type, but certain flowers were best found in the wild—the poppies in particular. The prolific plants were so bountiful here that the place had been named after them: Poppy Peninsula.

Tabitha collected the celebrated poppies as she went, selecting other flowers as well. Soon she had a rainbow of blossoms within her basket. Thinking of her friend Lydia, she picked a few more. Though old enough to be Tabitha's mother, Lydia had come to Tabitha for help when she struggled to find painting supplies, a

consistent problem considering the peninsula's few resources. It had taken Tabitha a lot of trial and error, but eventually, between a mix of berries, water, saturated flower petals, and other odds and ends, she had created a type of paint for Lydia to use. Guessing Lydia was probably running low now, Tabitha intended to be stocked and ready when her friend needed more.

The soft breeze drifted over the braided crown of chestnut hair on her head as she headed north, the opposite direction of the schoolhouse where she taught. She loved to get up early so she could take this detour. The extra exercise did her good, and she relished the chance to quietly enjoy the glorious sights around her.

Soon enough, she had crossed the miles of grassy fields and could see the giant stone wall on the far edge of their community that separated the peninsula from the rest of the continent. Forty feet in height, several feet thick, and made of sad gray stone, the wall had once been a depressing eyesore that interrupted the scenic beauty of the peninsula. But Lydia had taken care of that. Thanks to her incredible skills as a painter, the rough stone was now covered in stunning, realistic murals of a castle, a telescope, and a gathering of people looking at the night sky. Lydia deferred the compliments she received by saying the depictions could be better if she still had her higher-quality art supplies—relics from her old life. Tabitha, however, thought the murals had turned out wonderfully.

When Lydia first started her painting project, some of the soldiers stationed on the wall were very unsettled. The stone cottages had been built miles south from the wall for a reason—most of the soldiers didn't want any unnecessary interaction with the citizens. Over time, however, they had grown used to Lydia's presence and let her do what she wanted. The result was another beautiful spectacle for the residents of Poppy Peninsula to enjoy, should they decide to wander this far.

Not all the guards were unfriendly. Tabitha approached the wall now and waved to one of the men atop it, who was usually stationed near the center of the sprawling stone partition. He wore the traditional guard uniform—dark tunic with plates of armor—but

Tabitha recognized him by the glint of his bald head. Nicholas often joked that he'd lost all his hair because his son, Warren, gave him so much trouble.

Warren was just a little older than Tabitha, and since he had begun training to guard the wall at the young age of nine, she'd watched him grow up from a distance as she forged a friendship with Nicholas. While Nicholas was regimented but kind, Warren was carefree and always looking for fun—unsurprising traits for a child, but maybe not always easiest for the parent trying to keep him safe. Now that Warren was nearing twenty-six years old, he was finally finding his footing in showing responsibility, even as he kept an eye open for amusement, and was often posted near the western tower in the forest.

“Good morning, Nicholas!” she called.

He waved back. “Good morning!”

Sauntering up to the wall, Tabitha pretended to inspect the paint on the stone. It took a few moments, but eventually a thin rope came tumbling down from the top of the wall. Tabitha took a small wrapped package out of her basket and tied the rope around it, gave the rope two quick tugs, and watched as it began its ascent. She smiled to herself as it disappeared over the edge of the wall.

Once she'd started making successful herbal remedies, Tabitha had offered to share them with the soldiers who guarded the wall. Most paid her little mind, but Nicholas had first been charmed by the gifts and then become grateful for and reliant on them. The hours spent on the wall under the sun often led to sunburns or heatstroke despite the near-constant breeze that rustled through the peninsula.

A few moments passed, and then a little parachute the size of her fist appeared over the wall with a small bundle of fabric attached to it. The package floated down easily, drifting here and there in the breeze before landing in Tabitha's outstretched palm. She nestled the bundle carefully in her basket.

While Tabitha provided Nicholas with much-needed remedies, he returned the favor by sending her plants and seeds from the outside

world. Sending them via the tiny parachutes had been Warren's clever idea, and Tabitha suspected it was riskier for Nicholas to send things over the wall than to accept them from her side. It was their little secret, and it made Tabitha's garden the largest and most comprehensive on the peninsula.

Every few years a handful of soldiers would disappear, and new ones would take their places. Sometimes the old group of soldiers would return, and other times they wouldn't—Tabitha assumed some were making the trek to visit home while others had finished their allotted service guarding the wall—but Nicholas hadn't left since Warren had joined him, and Tabitha was grateful to have them both. They provided a nice ray of sunshine among the often gloomy or hostile dispositions of the other soldiers.

With her task now complete, Tabitha started to walk away, but she found herself hesitating, as she did every morning; it was practically part of her routine now. Leaning back on her heels, she turned to the wall and searched for the crack she knew was there. The wall had been impenetrable since it had been built more than twenty years prior, but upon closer inspection, she'd found several deep cracks that went all the way through and gave her a peek at the outside world.

A glimpse was all Tabitha had ever gotten. A glimpse of grass and trees. It wasn't much, but that small peek brought the promise of more. Every time she looked, Tabitha caught herself wondering what it would be like to cross to the other side of the wall. And every time, she would chuckle at herself and move on. Why would she ever want to leave when she was perfectly happy here? Honestly, if the wall happened to fall that very afternoon, she would stay in her stone cottage and not be tempted to leave in the slightest.

Tabitha's feelings on the subject were convenient because there was one overarching law in Poppy Peninsula: Nobody leaves. The surrounding cliffs and soldiers on the wall ensured it, not to mention the hundreds of miles of wilderness between the peninsula and the nearest kingdom, which prevented the inhabitants from reaching out for help.

Still, she found herself looking through the crack nearly every morning . . . just for a glimpse.

This morning, though, it took her longer than usual to find the crack. Fingers skimming along the surface of the stones, she searched for the telling groove. Her first pass didn't find it, and the second didn't either. Confused, Tabitha tried a third time, moving slowly and widening her search area even though she *knew* the crack was right around here—she looked through it every day.

As she searched a third time, she told herself she would give up and come back later if she didn't find it. Her fingers methodically examined every bump and dip, and her eyes searched for the slightest sign of the crevice. She stilled when her fingers finally dipped into the shallow groove, and her gaze landed on something she'd never seen before.

She *had* found the crack, but she could not see all the way through. Something had been shoved inside.

Tabitha hesitated. The crevice was much too small for something to have accidentally blown inside; the odds of that happening were so slim. Someone had purposely shoved something in there. But why? Nicholas probably wouldn't care, but Otto, the commander, would definitely object. He barely tolerated Lydia's murals.

Tabitha peered closer, trying to figure out what the mysterious item could be, but there wasn't enough light penetrating the crack to make it out.

Maybe one of the children put it here as part of a game, she reasoned with herself. *Nothing more than that*. But still, it seemed unlikely. Most of her students were skittish around the soldiers, and few dared to come close enough for a peek through this crack—even the bravest ones preferred the lower crack on the west side because it was hidden in the forest. She also doubted whether any were brazen enough to blatantly touch the wall, much less shove something into it.

Going slowly, Tabitha tried to gently pry out the object, wanting to free it without breaking it. Whatever it was felt smooth and thin but somewhat fragile against her fingers, like a sturdy leaf, and it left her even more puzzled. Finally, she managed to wiggle it free.

Her smile of triumph immediately transformed into a gasp of shock, and her mind went blank as she stared at the object in her hands. It couldn't be possible.

"Paper," she whispered to herself, as if needing to hear the words out loud, proof that this wasn't some strange dream. "It's a rolled-up piece of paper."

Tabitha could only identify the object as paper from the stories she had heard about life before they came to the peninsula. Here, having paper was a long-lost dream her people hoped to make a reality someday. Lydia's father, Gabriel, had spent decades trying to create paper for them, but in twenty-five years he hadn't managed to create something that didn't eventually fall apart.

And yet here she was, holding a piece in her hand.

Tabitha handled the paper reverently, doing her best not to tear any bit as she carefully unrolled it. A short message had been scrawled across the pale sheet, the words messy and slanted, as if someone had written them in a hurry: "*Prepare yourselves. We are coming.*"

Dread pooled in Tabitha's stomach, and her mind began to whirl. Who could've written this? One of the soldiers? They might have access to paper, but why leave a cryptic message like this? Although they had a history of not being very forthcoming, the soldiers could easily tell the citizens of the peninsula anything they needed to know.

It couldn't have been anyone from the peninsula. They didn't have paper, and any scrap found would be monumental news that would sweep through the community like a tidal wave. Certainly no one here would deface such a precious thing with this disgraceful handwriting.

If not the soldiers and not anyone on the peninsula, then who?

Her stomach flipped. Could it have been someone from outside the wall?

The thought was too much for her to handle. Tabitha stumbled back and away from the wall, as if it were a threat, then stuffed the paper into the pocket of her ivory dress and hurried along.

The long walk to the schoolhouse went by in a blur. Tabitha's mind spun. The paper was lightweight, but her pocket felt impossibly

heavy, getting worse with each step and setting her nerves on edge. When she caught sight of the schoolhouse, Tabitha let out a sigh of relief. She still felt slightly breathless and disheveled, but stepping into a place so dear and familiar helped her relax a little bit.

While all the houses on the peninsula were made of stone, the schoolhouse had been built out of wood. Lydia had done her best to paint it a lively red color, but it had chipped and faded in places due to the wind and rain. Tabitha didn't mind, though. She thought the look added to its charm. The weathered exterior gave the schoolhouse an inviting air, and she believed a place of learning should be one of the most inviting places of all. Not to mention that it had taken her months to make the amount of paint needed to coat the entire schoolhouse, and she didn't know where she'd find the time to repeat that endeavor.

The floor creaked beneath her feet as she walked to the front of her classroom, opening the curtains as she went. Golden light spilled through the open windows, illuminating the three rows of desks, each with a piece of slate and crumbling chalk. Tabitha found comfort in the sight of everything in its place. She took out the flowers she'd gathered on her walk, set them in the pot on her desk, then poured in a bit of water from her canteen. The fresh flowers livened up the room, and this was one of her morning rituals that the students had grown to love. By the time the children started trickling through the door, Tabitha had almost convinced herself that everything was normal.

As always, the children of the peninsula brought a bright energy to the room that no amount of flowers could compete with. Once again, she counted herself grateful to teach the younger class. The older class still had a wonderful group of kids, but Tabitha couldn't help but be partial to her students. She smiled as the buzzing of voices got louder, each of them excited to greet each other and share thoughts and stories from the previous day.

“Good morning, Miss Tabitha!”

“Iris, sit by me!”

“James said he'd play with us tomorrow. You can come play too.”

“My mom’s belly is *really* round! Can you believe there’s a whole baby in there?”

“Oh, hi, Miss Tabitha!”

“I really hope we don’t do math today.”

“Oscar, we do math every day.”

Tabitha let her students chat among themselves for a few minutes as they got settled, then called them to attention. “Everyone, we are going to get started! Let’s put away our outside voices for now and take out our thinking caps.”

It took several moments, but eventually the children settled into the seats and quieted down, watching her expectantly.

“First of all,” Tabitha began, gesturing to the flowers in the vase, “can someone remind me what kind of flowers these are?”

To her delight, every single hand shot up. Iris, as usual, couldn’t contain herself and shouted, “Poppies, of course!”

A chorus of voices followed. “I knew that too!”

“That’s what I was going to say!”

“That’s the easiest one!”

“It’s Poppy Peninsula!”

Tabitha started pacing slowly back and forth, getting into her rhythm. “That’s true. It is an easy one. In the spirit of remembering poppies are the namesake for our home, we’ll save Oscar from starting with math and begin with history.” She smiled at Oscar, a child who seemed to be perpetually sunburned no matter how many salves Tabitha gave his mother, and he gave a toothy grin back. “We have our play to prepare for, after all, but before we get to rehearsals, let’s do a quick review. Can someone tell me how Poppy Peninsula came to be?” When Iris opened her mouth, Tabitha added gently, “By raising their hand?”

From the back row, Daisy sat with wide eyes and raised her hand painfully slowly, as if about to change her mind any second. Tabitha pointed to her.

“It came from the prince,” Daisy answered, almost in a whisper.

Tabitha nodded. Daisy was usually quiet but bright, and Tabitha

wanted to foster that brightness. “That’s right, Daisy, great job! Do you remember why the prince built the peninsula community?”

The girl’s eyes stayed impossibly wide as she shrank back into her chair. Finally, she shook her head.

“I know!” Iris hollered. “Prince Emrys wanted to be king!”

Oscar looked at Iris and nodded. “Yeah, he wanted to be king, but his brother Aldo was already king, right, Iris?”

“Yeah!” Iris went on. “Aldo was king, and Prince Emrys gave all the soldiers secret presents so they would like him instead. Then the soldiers took everyone who supported King Aldo and banished them to the peninsula with him. They built a wall so the prince could have the kingdom for himself.”

Oscar nodded again. “Yeah, the prince banished them to the peninsula. That’s where we are.” Emrys was technically the king now, but the adults of the peninsula enacted a small rebellion by always referring to him as “the prince,” despite the fact that he was never around to hear the slight—a tradition that had caught on with the children too.

“Some of the soldiers stayed here to guard the wall, but I don’t know why they did.” Iris made a face. “It sounds really boring.”

“Maybe they got really good presents from the prince,” Abel mused.

“I might do it for a really good present,” Oscar agreed.

“Anyway, the soldiers came to the wall; then a *lot* of time went by.” Iris paused and thought to herself, momentarily stumped. “Probably like eighty-seven years.” She brightened and threw her arms out in presentation. “And then I was born!”

Tabitha laughed. “True, but not quite that long. It’s been almost twenty-five years.”

Iris’s mouth fell open. “That’s still a lot.”

“Hey, it’s not that many!” Tabitha feigned offense and tried not to laugh. “That’s how old I will be this year!”

Her mock outrage sent the children into a fit of giggles until Iris asked, “Do you remember what it’s like outside the wall, Miss Tabitha?”

She shook her head. "No, I was born here just like you all were." Several of the children beamed at having a connection with their teacher. "Great job on the review! Let's practice your play."

They all cheered and jumped up from their seats, pushing desks out of the way and getting their supplies. When Tabitha had suggested the play as a way to get the children involved in the oral traditions of the peninsula, she'd been surprised at how enthusiastically they'd responded to the idea. They'd spent months working on lines and making costumes, thrilled with the idea of having a project all their own to show the parents when the next Stars and Stories event came around.

As her students all prattled excitedly to each other while setting up, Tabitha floated around the room, helping move a desk when needed or catching a slate before it fell to the floor. Suddenly, her ears honed in on Oscar's conversation.

"I was looking for sticks in the forest, and I went to that one crack in the wall that the soldiers can't really see, and you won't believe what I saw!" he exclaimed all in one breath. "There was a person on the other side of the wall! I saw him!"

Tabitha froze. Suddenly, the nearly weightless paper in her pocket felt like a boulder.

Iris gave him a skeptical look. "Are you sure it wasn't just a soldier? They live in the towers, you know, but my parents say they never set foot on our side of the wall. Ever."

"I'm sure," Oscar insisted. "He wore really funny clothes. They were kind of like ours, but different. They were not the shiny clothes the soldiers wear. And he was looking around the wall like he'd never seen it before, but then he tried to hide in the forest. I really did see him."

"Oscar!" Tabitha's voice was sharper than she meant it to be, and she forced herself to lighten her tone when Oscar gave a frightened look. "I'm sorry to startle you, I just . . . did you say you saw a strange man through one of the cracks?"

"That doesn't make any sense," Iris interjected. "Nobody else

comes here.” Then she paused and looked at Tabitha. “Nobody else has ever come here, have they, Miss Tabitha?”

“What if it was the prince?” Abel asked, horror-struck. “The prince doesn’t like us!”

“It couldn’t have been the prince,” Oscar argued. “His clothes were really plain, and he didn’t have a crown. Why wouldn’t he wear his crown? It doesn’t make sense. If I stole a crown, I would wear it *all* the time.”

Tabitha must’ve looked as shaken as she felt because Daisy’s small voice came from the corner of the room. “Are we safe here, Miss Tabitha?” she asked, the words wobbly.

Straightening up, Tabitha forced a smile and hoped it was convincing. “Of course we are. There’s nothing to worry about. After all, we’ve been safe here for twenty-five years, haven’t we?”

Oscar frowned. “But I *saw*—”

“I know you did, Oscar,” Tabitha replied hastily. “Thank you for sharing. You said the man was still on the other side, and soldiers are guarding the wall, so I’m sure we have nothing to worry about.”

Satisfied that no immediate danger loomed, the children easily fell back into their preparations. Tabitha did her best to stay focused, but she found herself slower to answer questions, frequently retreating into her own thoughts and reaching into her pocket to feel the paper. The message echoed in her mind again and again.

“Prepare yourselves. We are coming.”

THE KINGDOM OF STARS

book one

“If you had the chance to go outside
the wall...would you take it?”

For a quarter of a century, the residents of Poppy Peninsula have been banished and barricaded behind a stone wall, isolated from the Kingdom of Stars and the entire world. Tabitha has happily lived her entire life sheltered in the beautiful peninsula. But when Tabitha finds a mysterious note wedged in a crevice inside the wall, other strange events begin to unfold that threaten the safety and normalcy she holds so dear. Tabitha is thrust into an adventure that will test her courage, her heart, and the fate of everyone she’s ever known.


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THE KINGDOM OF STARS

book two



EMILEE KING

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CHAPTER 1

B *ut as her only child, you are the queen now.* The stranger's words echoed in Tabitha's head, crashing again and again like an ocean wave breaking against the rocks. *I'm here for you, Tabitha.*

I'm here for you.

I'm here for you.

You are the queen now.

Queen.

Tabitha stared at the green-eyed stranger pinning her against a large tree, not quite believing what she was hearing.

He must be out of his mind, she reasoned with herself, the shock rolling over her and numbing her entire body. *He clearly is not well.* But when she studied the man, she found only his imploring green eyes and his arms holding her firmly but gently. It didn't seem like he wanted to hurt her. In fact, he appeared to be perfectly reasonable, if it weren't for him sneaking up on her in the forest in the middle of the night and saying such ludicrous things.

Heart pounding, Tabitha decided the best thing to do would be to ignore the madness of the situation and go straight to the heart of what was important. "How did you get in here?" she finally asked, her voice sounding distant and detached, floating through the breeze like a lost petal plucked from its stem.

Shock, some part of her mind told her. *You're in shock.*

The stranger dodged the question. "That doesn't matter right now. What's important is where I come from: the Kingdom of Stars. Your rightful home. Your rightful crown. I'm here to return you to your throne."

Tabitha shook her head, warding off an impending headache. "I don't have a throne, and I don't want to return to the kingdom. I've never even *been* there." Her breaths became quick and shallow, and she feared she would descend into hyperventilation, which was not good for patients in shock, was it? "The peninsula is my home."

The stranger drew back in surprise, the freckles on his face crinkling as his eyes narrowed. "But I've . . . I've come to rescue you. You're imprisoned here, aren't you?"

She shook her head again. "I don't need to be rescued. I'm happy right where I am." She glanced pointedly at his hands still restraining her. "Now will you release me, please?" The formal words sounded so strange in her ears when all she wanted to do was scream.

"You don't need to be . . . ?" the stranger stammered, staring at her like she was an odd plant he'd never seen before. He released his hold and stepped back. "I don't understand. *You* are the daughter of King Aldo and Queen Evaine, so that makes you the rightful queen. The kingdom needs you. It's time for you to come home, milady."

You are the daughter of King Aldo and Queen Evaine. While what he said was true, Tabitha had never known them by those titles, which had meant nothing on this side of the wall. Despite having led the kingdom, her father had largely looked to James's father, Gordon, for leadership in the peninsula. Gordon's service as the kingdom's captain of the guard gave him both the skills and smarts befitting a leader, not to mention that he had easily won the people's hearts and loyalty. He perfectly bridged the gap between the medley of nobility and peasants who had been thrown into Poppy Peninsula.

Aldo, for his part, had been so devastated by the betrayal of his brother and the suffering of his people that continuing to refer to himself as royalty was too much to bear. He still had the respect of

the people, of course, and they looked to him for counsel as he worked with Gordon on problems and organization in the peninsula, but it wasn't the same.

No, Tabitha's parents were not royalty anymore by the time she was born, so there was no crown or title to give to her. They'd never once mentioned that she would have any kind of claim to the throne, and it had never crossed her mind. They were just two people with a tremendous weight of grief on their shoulders from Emrys's betrayal. Two people who loved each other and her very much and used what little time they had left to show that love.

"You have it wrong," Tabitha told the stranger, trying to keep her voice from wobbling with grief. "There are no queens here, and the peninsula is my home. Now you need to go before someone else sees you."

And with that, she ducked around the stranger and ran into the night, hoping to leave the entire encounter tucked away in the forest where it couldn't reach her. A pain shot up her side as she increased her speed, but she didn't stop running, not until she broke through the trees and slammed the door of her cottage shut behind her, locking it for good measure. Gasping for breath, Tabitha leaned against the door and slowly sank to the floor. She didn't realize she'd been crying until she tasted the saltiness of her tears on her lips.

It all seemed to hit her at once, hurling at her with the force of the wind during the storm: being taken by the soldiers and locked in the tower; the attack on the wall; a stranger somehow breaking into the peninsula, looking for her; and the horrible conversation she'd overheard resulting in Nicholas's arrest.

Nicholas. The thought of him brought on a new wave of misery. He would spend the rest of his days locked in some horrid and dank cell, raging against an injustice that would never be solved. Would Emrys give him a trial, at least? The chance to prove his innocence? Tabitha hoped the guards would let him see his son, Warren, again, who was likely facing the same ghastly fate. What could they have possibly done to warrant such harsh repercussions?

Nothing. She was sure of it. Warren lived his life with an easy grin on his face, and Nicholas had been the only soldier to even recognize her parents' deaths and offer his condolences. They couldn't be capable of *treason*.

Tabitha's blood froze as the full force of that word dawned on her in light of the other impossibility she'd faced this evening.

You are the rightful queen, the stranger had told her. Nobody had said those words to her in all her life—not even her parents—but what if the stranger weren't the only one who thought she still had a claim to the throne? After all, what else could be considered a worse treason in Emrys's eyes?

Had Warren and Nicholas been arrested simply because they were friends with her?

"No, of course not," Tabitha said out loud to herself, trying to find reason again. But doubt and dread swirled in her stomach as guilt crept up her spine.

Oh, she wished James were here, and she reached up to finger the engagement ring that hung around her neck. Despite the very early morning hour, she wanted nothing more than to knock on his door and tell him everything. But with strangers and soldiers lurking about the peninsula, Tabitha never wanted to unlock her door again. Had the stranger followed her home? She had no idea how he'd gotten into the peninsula or how long he'd been here. He could've been watching her for weeks—perhaps he already knew where she lived, where she taught, what her routine was. The thought made her skin crawl. What if she opened the door and found him waiting for her again?

Crouching low, Tabitha felt ridiculous as she crept across the floor to the window, but she couldn't make herself straighten up, as if that would make her vulnerable somehow. Going as quickly as she dared, she risked a peek through her curtains. She couldn't be positive, considering it was still dark outside, but she didn't *think* she saw anyone out there.

Still, she grabbed one of her shawls and wrapped it over her head and shoulders so she could hide underneath it. If the stranger hadn't

figured out where she lived yet, she wasn't going to point the way for him. More than anything, Tabitha hoped she'd convinced him to go back to wherever he'd come from, but that seemed like too lofty of an aspiration.

Tabitha's fingers trembled as she unlocked her back door and stole out into the night, startling at every real and imagined sound. She made her way through the garden she shared with Isabella and dashed to the window of James's room, cringing at the sound of her knock in the stillness.

She knew that James got up early, but not *this* early, so the long delay between her persistent soft knocks and his seeing her in the window made sense. Still, Tabitha hugged her arms around herself and bit her lip, her eyes darting everywhere and making imagined attackers out of shadows.

When James finally opened the door, his blue eyes heavy lidded with sleep, Tabitha abandoned etiquette and slipped inside his house, securing the door behind her.

"Tab?" James whispered as he stepped back at her intrusion. "What's going on?"

With her back pressed against the door, Tabitha let the story stream out of her in whispered torrents: how she couldn't sleep and had gone walking through the forest to see the fallen tree and hopefully clear her mind, only to overhear an argument between Otto and Nicholas. Nicholas had been arrested for treason and would likely never be seen again, condemned to spend the rest of his days in a dark and dreary cell. While still reeling from this, Tabitha had been grabbed and dragged away by a young man she'd never seen before. This stranger had somehow broken into the peninsula and was saying absurd things, like how Tabitha was the rightful queen of the Kingdom of Stars and he'd come to the peninsula to take her back home.

Any trace of sleep in James's eyes disappeared as she spoke, and by the end of her account, when she was breathless and on the verge of crying again, he'd stiffened into an indignant statue, every single one of his muscles tense and his jaw clenched.

“You’re certain you’ve never seen him before?” he asked the moment she finished.

Tabitha nodded and took a deep, gasping breath. “I’m absolutely certain. I didn’t recognize his face, and his clothes were very strange.” She swallowed hard, remembering the stranger’s deep green eyes—she’d never seen that particular shade of eyes before. “He definitely wasn’t from the peninsula, and he wasn’t a soldier either.”

James blew out a harsh breath through his teeth. “Queen. He thinks you’re the queen. As if Emrys didn’t imprison us here to keep that very thing from happening.” He took Tabitha by the shoulders and met her gaze. “Tab, I’m going to do everything I can to keep you safe here. Just promise me you won’t go out into the forest on your own anymore—at least until I can figure out who this lunatic is.”

Tabitha nodded again. She wouldn’t be going anywhere alone for a while.

Moving quickly, James retrieved a blanket and wrapped it around Tabitha’s shoulders, then set her on a chair near the fireplace. He disappeared down the hallway for a few minutes and came back wearing a dark cloak and sturdy shoes.

“Stay here,” he instructed her. “I’m going to search for him.” Before she could protest, he ducked out the door and melted into the shadows.

Tabitha clutched the blanket around her and stared at the dead embers in the fireplace. Her teeth chattered, but she wasn’t cold—she was definitely in shock—and eventually she dozed on and off, jerking awake at every whoosh of the wind.

When the first rays of dawn began peeking through the curtains, Rosemary awoke and began her baking. The noise startled Tabitha awake again, and she told the kind woman that James had let her stay because she hadn’t wanted to stay alone at her house.

“Of course you can stay!” Rosemary exclaimed, needing no further explanation or excuse, which warmed Tabitha’s heart. “This is your second home, Tabitha, and I hope you always feel that way.”

“Thank you, Rosemary, that’s very generous of you.” Tabitha rose

from her chair, folded the blanket, and stretched her muscles. Now fully awake, she was too stressed to sit still and insisted on helping Rosemary in the kitchen, following the woman's baking directions to the letter to avoid messing anything up.

When the two of them had settled into a rhythm, Tabitha found herself glancing at the door again and again, awaiting James's return.

"Rosemary?" she asked, her voice lilting too high. "Can I ask you a question?"

Elbow deep in dough and dusted with flour, Rosemary nodded. "Of course, dear."

It took a few moments for Tabitha to find the words and work up the courage. "Did my parents . . . did it seem like they ever intended to . . . return someday? Return to the Kingdom of Stars?"

Rosemary's hands stopped their rhythmic kneading, and she glanced at Tabitha. "You have never asked me that before. What brought this on?"

Tabitha shrugged. "I've been thinking a lot about them lately, and I realized there are so many questions I never asked them."

A snowstorm of flour flecks fell from Rosemary's hands as she brushed them together, nodding thoughtfully. "I suppose you were so young when they passed, you wouldn't have known what to ask until now." She sighed. "The burden and responsibility of royalty seemed to weigh heavily on them, even more so when we arrived here, and so many were separated from their families, but your parents bore the weight with courage and didn't speak much about it. I do know, though, that they never intended to return. In fact, they seemed very certain that we would never see the kingdom again. They were the greatest advocates of settling here and making this our home."

Rosemary's response lined up with Tabitha's memories, the way her parents only spoke of the Kingdom of Stars to teach her important principles or instill history. They had never once talked of returning or even referred to it as home.

"So they never wanted to . . . fight?" The word sounded clunky and foreign coming out of her mouth. "Take back the crown?"

Rosemary frowned, and a distant look crept into her eyes. “I know Emrys had to have been planning his coup a long while to pull it off, but he kept it a secret from the right people. When the time came, it all happened so fast. Most of it is a blur to me, to be honest with you, dear. But I do remember there being talk of fighting in the beginning. My dear husband, ever the commander, wanted to fight back at first, even if the prince succeeded in banishing us, but your parents convinced him not to. He never brought it up again after that.”

Tabitha mulled over Rosemary’s words as the older woman left to go check on Isabella. Tabitha’s heart stuttered when the back door opened, and then James came trudging through it.

“Any sign of him?” she blurted, rushing to his side.

With a grim shake of his head, James replied, “No. Whoever it was is gone.”

THE KINGDOM OF STARS

book two

— ✨ —

He melted into the background, just another patron at the market, but the moment Tabitha glimpsed his green eyes peeking out from underneath the hood, she gasped. “You!”

Still reeling from the attack on Poppy Peninsula, new mysteries arising, and her feelings for James, Tabitha is tired of change. She wants everything to go back to the way it was when her biggest worries were over her garden and students. But change is intent on finding her, and she soon finds herself harboring a stranger from outside the peninsula and keeping too many secrets. As the safety of the peninsula unravels, Tabitha realizes normal is no longer possible and facing the unknown may be the only path forward.



SKU 6600.2

THE KINGDOM OF STARS

book three



EMILEE KING

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CHAPTER 1

The afternoon sun warmed Tabitha's face as her eyelids fluttered open, and she found herself staring at a clump of tiny flowers sprouting from the ground that were gently tickling her nose. She immediately thought of home—had she fallen asleep in the garden by accident again?

Then her eyes widened with shock. Blinking the rest of her sleepiness away, she gazed in wonder at the blossoms: flowers she had never seen before. The delicate green stems gave way to spirals of light velvety blush petals, each one edged with a darker pink. She gasped when a white butterfly with pale blue-tipped wings perched on one of the petals. In all of her life, she'd never seen a butterfly quite this shade, and she watched, mesmerized, as it slowly flapped its wings three times before taking off into the air again.

Tabitha pushed up on her elbows and turned her head to watch it fly away, wanting to keep her eyes on the remarkable sight as long as possible.

"Are you all right, milady?" a familiar voice asked.

Tabitha glanced over to see Theodore sitting cross-legged on the other side of their little camp, rolling up a blanket and offering her a smile as warm as the sun's rays. In the tree above her, Tabitha could see Alexandra's leg hanging off a branch, swaying back and forth absentmindedly, the rest of her hidden among the leaves. They'd piled

their supplies and bags at the base of the tree, and Tabitha, Arthur, and Theodore had fanned out their beds around the trunk. Arthur was still curled into a ball with a blanket James had packed, snoring softly.

Tabitha glanced back at the flowers, then in the direction that the butterfly had flown. “Did you see that?” she asked. “That butterfly?”

Theodore looked in the same direction with a puzzled expression. “Have you never seen a butterfly before?”

“Not one with those colors!” she gushed. “Perfectly white with an edge of blue—not a sky blue, mind you, but almost a pale, bird’s-egg blue. I’m not sure how to describe it.” She wished she could speak to Lydia about the hue; as a painter, her friend could help Tabitha find a way to replicate the extraordinary blue color.

Theodore’s smile grew, though it quirked to one side as if he were bewildered. “I can’t say I’ve spent much time examining butterflies. Considering your fervor, I’m sad I missed it.”

The thought of Lydia reminded Tabitha of home, and she realized with a start that for the first time in her life, she hadn’t woken up on the peninsula. She was *outside*. There wasn’t a wall dictating how far she could walk or soldiers stationed to ensure that she didn’t step out of line.

Memories from the night before came back to her: fearing Arthur would turn them in, wandering through the tunnels, finding the soldiers waiting for them, and fleeing through a blazing wildfire until they couldn’t go any farther and had to stop to rest.

I did that, she thought in wonder. Last night, it had been like a nightmare she wanted to wake up from, but in the daylight she felt a dawning sense of awe. It had all seemed so impossible—getting out of the peninsula, escaping the soldiers, outrunning the fire—and yet here she was, on the other side of the wall for the first time in her life. She’d achieved what nobody else had been able to do in twenty-five years. *I did all of that and made it through.*

“I know these aren’t the conditions you’re used to,” Theodore started easily, as though they always woke up in the middle of

nowhere, “but I hope you managed to get some sleep.” He stowed the blanket in a bag, then rummaged through another and pulled out a bundle, which he passed to Tabitha. “Here are some leftover rolls and cheese for breakfast.”

Tabitha took the bundle of food gratefully. Her stomach started to grumble at the prospect of eating. “Thank you very much. Have you eaten?”

As if on cue, Theodore’s stomach grumbled along with hers, and they both chuckled. “I confess that I haven’t yet, but I’ll get around to it. I want to ensure that everyone else gets their breakfast first.”

Tabitha shook her head, gesturing at the spot of grass in front of her. “That’s kind of you to wait, but, please, eat with me. You need your strength too.” As she opened the bundle to pull out a roll, she finally took a moment to look around. Theodore had tidied their little campsite; last night they’d been so exhausted they had simply dropped off to sleep, leaving everything scattered around. Only Alexandra had stayed awake, climbing up into a tree to keep watch over their camp. Based on the position of the sun, it seemed they had slept through the morning. “Do you happen to know where my bags are?” Tabitha inquired.

She’d meant to get them herself, but Theodore retrieved them for her, bringing them over before taking a seat. Tabitha looked through her haphazardly packed bags until she found the prize she was looking for: a jar of violet jam.

A sense of calm filled her heart as she opened the jar and spread some of the magenta-colored jam on her roll. When she saw Theodore eyeing her curiously, she offered the jar to him. “Would you like to try some?”

“What is it?” he asked, leaning forward to sniff the offering.

“Violet jam,” she replied. “I have it for breakfast every day. It’s the best way to start the morning. Or afternoon, in this case.”

Theodore chuckled. “I admire the foresight to keep up your routine breakfast even while traveling. Sure, I’ll try some.” He accepted a roll slathered with the jam from Tabitha and took a bite,

then made a sound of appreciation. “Now, that *is* delicious. Do you really have this every morning?”

“I do, actually. I have for years.”

“And you don’t ever get tired of it?” he asked, genuinely intrigued.

Tabitha took another delicious bite and shook her head. “Not even a little bit. I look forward to the consistency. It helps me stay calm.” She’d never admitted that truth out loud, but it left her lips so naturally, and she marveled that not too long ago she had viewed Theodore as an ominous stranger. The idea seemed so odd now. After what they’d been through together, Theodore had quickly become someone she trusted to be selfless and kind, two traits she valued above all others.

“James did mention on more than one occasion that you were a routine person,” Theodore said. A hint of concern touched his voice. “He thought that was one of the reasons you were reluctant to leave the peninsula.”

The thought of James sent anxiety prickling up Tabitha’s neck. He should be here with them—he *would* be, if Tabitha hadn’t made the mistake of telling Nellie about the tunnels. They’d spied Nellie in the western tower with the soldiers, and presumably it was she who had told them that Tabitha and James were attempting an escape. Soldiers had been waiting outside the tunnel to arrest them all but had only managed to capture James. The idea of him locked in a prison cart weighed on Tabitha’s heart.

She swallowed hard. “After my parents passed away,” she said quietly, almost ashamed, “I learned to rely on my routine. It gives me a sense of security and safety. I’m afraid I’m not quite sure what to do without it.”

To her immense relief, Theodore absorbed what she said with a thoughtful expression instead of immediately making light of it. “I think I can understand what you mean,” he finally said. “With the fall of the kingdom, our lives, too, turned upside down in almost every way. It became unsettling. I found myself having periods when the uncertainty would get the best of me, and I had a difficult time

focusing on anything else.”

“What helped you?” Tabitha inquired before quickly adding, “if you don’t mind me asking.”

He smiled at her, lighting up his freckled face. “I don’t mind you asking at all. You’re an incredibly easy person to talk to, milady.”

“Thank you,” Tabitha replied warmly. Nobody had ever told her that before. “I feel the same about you, actually. And, please, I think we’ve been through enough together at this point for you to call me Tabitha.” She didn’t think she’d be able to convince Alexandra to stop calling her “Your Highness,” but she would appreciate it if Theodore dropped the use of any titles. It would help her feel more like herself.

Her words set Theodore’s smile growing. “Very well, if you insist, Tabitha. I do have a few tactics, but they can seem a bit . . . childish,” he admitted, “or silly. At least, Alexandra seems to think so, but then again, I don’t know that she’s ever been rattled a day in her life.” He chuckled fondly. “My sister was born with a sure footing that I’ve never been able to replicate. Like her, you may find my tactics somewhat rudimentary.”

“I’m around children every morning,” Tabitha reminded him, “and I find that in some ways they manage to be the wisest of us all.”

Theodore cocked his head slightly, intrigued. “In what way?”

The corners of Tabitha’s mouth pulled up, unbidden. Outside of her precious conversations with Isabella, when was the last time someone had asked for her thoughts so plainly, so genuinely? Plus, she never missed an opportunity to talk about her students. “They have a humility and a fearlessness that I admire. Even when they’re scared, there’s a lack of . . . self-consciousness, I suppose. The longer I teach them, the more I think I should try to be like them. They live and love and laugh so freely. It’s beautiful to watch.”

As if he wanted to soak in her words, Theodore let a beat of silence pass before replying. “What an incredible thing. They are very fortunate to have you as their teacher.”

They don’t have me anymore, Tabitha thought, and a lump formed in her throat. She missed her students so much, and the idea that she

wouldn't see them tomorrow—or maybe ever—sent her mind racing with panic.

As if sensing her shift in mood, Theodore leaned forward slightly. “So,” he said, his tone a little softer than before, “back to my first tactic. When I feel anxiety taking over, I find it best to ground myself. I use my senses to focus on naming five things I can see, touch, taste, hear, or smell. This helps me think about something other than my fears, and usually I can use my list to my advantage, as an opportunity for either curiosity or gratitude. From what I’ve seen this morning, you may already excel at it.”

“Curiosity or gratitude,” Tabitha repeated, treating his words as though she now sat at a classroom desk. “In what way?”

“Like that butterfly you saw earlier. That inspired quite a bit of joy for you, didn’t it?”

“It did,” Tabitha admitted. She nodded. “Okay, I am willing to try it.” Feeling slightly silly until Theodore smiled at her in encouragement, she took a deep breath and pushed the anxious thoughts from her mind, instead trying to focus on the world around her.

At first, she noticed the pink flowers she’d spied upon waking up—she was excited to take them with her. Birds chirped in the tree above them, and the sound reminded her of wandering the forest at home. From her lap, she could smell the leftover rolls that Rosemary had sent with them, and along with missing the woman, she also felt a rush of gratitude that someone cared about her so much.

“Is it working?” Theodore asked after a peaceful moment.

Tabitha nodded, taking another breath. “I think so. I was thinking about these flowers and how beautiful they are. Had I not left the peninsula, I would have never seen them. It’s a small thing, but I . . . well, it’s no surprise to you, I’m sure, that I really love flowers.”

“There’s no shame in the small things. In fact, I find that they often end up becoming the things that make me the happiest.” He gestured to the wilderness around them. “If you hadn’t left the peninsula, who knows what else you might have missed out on? Maybe losing pieces of your routine will help you find a few things as

well—things you never would have considered or imagined.”

Things I never would have considered or imagined. The words sank into Tabitha as she looked into Theodore’s eyes, which had become so familiar to her after seeming so foreign and frightening. She certainly never would have imagined having a conversation like this when she’d first met him. James had never talked with her like this before—he’d always been helpful and protective, jumping in to save her from her problems at a moment’s notice, but he’d never offered to help her *overcome* her issues before. He’d regarded her need for routine as a quirky character trait on the best days and a troublesome nuisance on the few worst days—something that she would hopefully just get over if he prodded her enough.

Theodore cleared his throat, jolting Tabitha out of her thoughts. “Tell me I haven’t *already* started to get a sunburn, or there isn’t a bug in my hair, or something equally terrible.”

“Um, no, there isn’t. Why?”

“Well, you were staring at me, and I confess it makes a man self-conscious. I was worried you found something not quite right and were too polite to tell me.”

“Oh, no, no,” Tabitha stammered. She must have felt embarrassed, for why else would her heart be hammering so fast? “Not at all. I apologize. I was just thinking . . . I’ve never really met anyone quite like you.”

Theodore smiled in a way that somehow made Tabitha’s heart beat faster. He reached over to the pink flowers and delicately plucked them from the earth, creating an impromptu bouquet, then handed them to her. “I have never met anyone quite like you either,” he replied, holding her gaze. Then something seemed to occur to him, and the light in his expression flickered slightly. He broke his gaze from hers and looked out over the land ahead of them. “Wait until you meet Isaac. I’m confident that you have never met someone quite like him either—he’s the most impressive person I know.”

Tabitha nodded, somewhat confused by the change in conversation, but she didn’t mind. Now that the prospect of escaping the

peninsula was behind them and she had a new bouquet clutched in her hand, she wondered for the first time what else she might find or experience in the outside world. Things had worked out very well with Theodore, and she had already taken a liking to his sister Alexandra in the short time they'd been together. Perhaps Isaac would be another unlikely friend.

Her attention was redirected by Arthur, who unearthed himself from his blanket, groaning, his dark hair sticking out in every direction. "Enough with all this talking," he complained, even though Tabitha and Theodore had been keeping their voices down. "Some people are *trying* to sleep."

"Oh, good," came a voice from the leaves above. "You're all finally awake."

Arthur grumbled, and Tabitha looked up to see Alexandra peering down around the branch, her short red hair framing her face. In the daylight, Tabitha noticed she shared Theodore's dusting of freckles across her cheeks and nose, and that instantly made Tabitha like Alexandra more, though she wasn't sure why.

As if walking on solid ground rather than in a tree, Alexandra nimbly unwound herself from the branch and landed in a graceful crouch next to Tabitha, barely even ruffling her hair. "Good morning, Your Highness." She nodded at her brother, who smiled fondly in return. "Theo." Then she glanced at Arthur with skepticism. "And you. Let's get up and get moving." She beamed brightly at them. "We have a rather exciting adventure ahead of us."

THE KINGDOM OF STARS

book three

— ✨ —

“Her heart lurched in her throat as the loose rocks slipped until they disappeared, just like the stranger had, and the earth fell out from below her.”

The harrowing escape from the peninsula has left Tabitha rattled and scared, but free—free for the first time in her life. With a new world around her, a band of soldiers chasing her, and a kingdom full of questions ahead of her, Tabitha has to watch her step, as each decision she makes will affect the fate of everyone she cares about. But the journey is fraught with danger and uncertainty, both outward and within Tabitha’s heart. As threats close in from all sides, Tabitha battles her fear, faces her truth, and presses onward to the Kingdom of Stars.


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THE KINGDOM OF STARS

book four



EMILEE KING

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CHAPTER 1

Alexandra and I organized the attack on the peninsula. It took Tabitha too long to process Theo's words; they simply didn't make sense. She instinctively shook her head as her mind rejected the meaning.

"No," she whispered, continuing to shake her head even as her eyes filled with tears. "You said you didn't know them. You told me you weren't part of it, that we needed to *avoid* those people."

The anguish in Theo's eyes deepened. "I let you believe they were attacking the peninsula for resources because we couldn't have you talk to them. That might have ruined the whole plan."

Tabitha couldn't believe what she was hearing. "What *plan*?" she cried incredulously.

"It wasn't supposed to be this way," Theo told her. "Everything was supposed to go differently, but that doesn't matter now. The people who attacked the peninsula aren't lunatics hoping to plunder the place—they're a group of rebels who want to dethrone Vincent and restore Aldo and Evaine's bloodline. Alexandra leads them. We were working with Warren to locate the peninsula and launch an attack against the soldiers to free you and bring you back to the kingdom to take your place as queen."

Horror enveloped Tabitha as she realized why Alexandra had seemed so familiar when they'd first met. Tabitha had chalked it up to

Alexandra's red hair being reminiscent of Lydia's, but it went deeper than that: Alexandra was one of the ones shooting arrows at the wall that day. Tabitha had seen her from the window of the tower.

"We weren't there to hurt anyone," Theo insisted, "or take anything from any of you. When we realized we didn't have enough manpower to get through the soldiers, I managed to find the tunnels Warren had told me about and slipped in to find you. I thought that would be the difficult part—I never imagined that you wouldn't *want* to leave. We all believed you were being held captive there against your will, waiting for a chance to come back and be queen. Instead, you were perfectly happy in Poppy Peninsula and horrified that anyone would attack it. I pivoted our plan to stay in your good graces and pretended we were on the same side against the attackers."

A twinge of pain went through Tabitha at the word "pretended."

Theo went on, letting the words spill out of him as though a dam had finally collapsed and a furious wave of water rushed through. "We waited for you to change your mind, but I saw how you reacted when James pushed you on being queen, and I didn't want to lose what ground I had gained with you, so I backed off on it, hoping you would come to your own decision. And you did—sort of. I thought if I could at least get you here, then we could convince you to change your mind. James presented a problem that I wasn't sure how to shake, but then you solved that for us on the way."

"James?" Tabitha's voice cracked as she struggled to keep up with Theo's rushing revelations. "What do you mean?"

He squeezed Tabitha's hands. "You have to understand, Tabitha, that everyone here is suffering so greatly under Vincent's rule. We didn't know what else to do. Isaac has studied politics extensively while having a perspective on the people's lives. He's influential and charismatic—we knew he would be a great leader that could pull this kingdom out of the depths, but he has no claim on the throne. Only you do.

"But having spent your life away from the Kingdom of Stars, we didn't know how much you'd been trained in leadership or royalty

before your parents died, and we wanted to make sure the kingdom was in good hands after the terrible things that Vincent has put us through. So we thought if . . .” He faltered, bracing himself to say the words. “If we convinced you to marry Isaac, he could be king.”

Drawing back, stung, Tabitha pulled her hands out of Theo’s. His face fell even further, but he let her go, the action another admission of his guilt. It all made sense then: why Theo insisted on bringing up Isaac in every conversation, making him sound like the most incredible man in the world; why Theo was so disappointed when he discovered James wanted to marry Tabitha and tried to keep James from coming along on the journey; why they’d kept Tabitha sequestered in the house with Isaac instead of letting her out on her own.

Theo had gone along with all of it. Of the two siblings, it was Alexandra who had seemed disgruntled about the plan on their journey.

“Alexandra too?” she asked.

He shook his head, ashamed. “Alex has been against that part of the plan from the start. She and her rebels believe that you—and only you—have a right to the throne, and she didn’t care for Isaac’s idea. In her mind, if you decided to marry someone, that was your choice, but we convinced her of Isaac’s importance to the kingdom. That’s another reason why we had to keep you separate from the rebels: They’ll only follow you and Alexandra. They call themselves the Queen’s Stars. Isaac was afraid if you spent time with them, you would decide to become queen on your own without him. He wanted you to feel like you needed him so he could win you over.”

So he could win you over.

“Isaac’s notes?” she whispered.

Theo hung his head in shame. “I told him everything I’d learned about you over the journey so he could use it to his advantage in winning you over. He thought you’d want to be queen too, so he had to shift his approach when you arrived. The idea was if you spent enough time together and he unveiled the plights of the kingdom, you would want to help enough that you would marry him just to save

everyone. You didn't really have to want to rule—as long as you took the crown and married him to make him king, that would be enough.”

A lump caught in Tabitha's throat as she thought over the last week, all the flattery and the ways Isaac had tried to win her affection—and were it not for how she felt about Theo, it would have worked. She would have fallen for a lie.

A single tear escaped her eye and trickled down her face. “Why are you telling me this?” Clearly they all hadn't decided to tell her the truth if Theo insisted she meet him in private. “Why tell me the truth now?”

His head snapped up, and she saw a well of tears in his eyes, glimmering like emeralds. “Because I'm in love with you!”

A quiet gasp escaped Tabitha, and she went completely still even as her heart seized with pain.

“I am utterly and helplessly in love with you,” Theo told her, running a hand through his blond hair and messing it all up. “Back in the peninsula, I told myself I was just enamored with you because you were our future queen, but spending so much time with you on the journey, I realized it had nothing to do with your heritage. I fell for *you*—your kindness, your gentleness, your intelligence, your skill, your view on the world. I confess I was ecstatic when you wouldn't accept James's proposal, not for Isaac's sake but for my own. The closer we got to the kingdom, the harder it became to stomach. Telling him those things about you—things that had become so precious to me—knowing they'd be used for a strategy still makes me sick. I hated to do it, and I've hated myself since. I've had to make myself scarce this last week because seeing you with Isaac, knowing you were supposed to marry him, took everything out of me. He's like my brother, Tabitha. I didn't want to betray him, but after today, I couldn't keep up the charade any longer. I had to tell you the truth.”

Through his outpouring of emotion, more tears escaped Tabitha's eyes until she was crying freely, stifling her sobs with her hand. She had finally found someone she loved, someone she thought truly saw her, someone she wanted to spend her life with—and it was all born

out of a lie that she had easily fallen for.

Theo took a step toward her, reaching out as if to wipe the tears from her face, and then saw her expression and stopped. “Please understand, Tabitha,” he implored, “I only ever did this for your parents’ kingdom—only because so many people we know and care about are suffering.”

“But . . .” Tabitha finally found her voice, thick with tears and breaking with grief. “But you lied to me. This entire thing . . . it was all a lie. You’ve all been manipulating me from the very start, and I . . . I fell for it.”

The expression on Theo’s face shattered. He pressed his palms against his eyes for a moment, and they came away wet from tears. “I am so sorry.”

“I trusted you enough to leave my home, my friends, my students—everything I’d ever known. I loved you more than I’ve ever loved anyone else.” Tabitha shook her head. “I don’t even know if what you’re saying *now* is true. How could I ever believe you again?”

“Tabitha, please. It may have started out as a lie, but everything has changed for me now. What I feel for you is real, and I don’t care whether you become queen or not—it’s your life to decide. If you believe anything I’ve told you tonight, believe that.”

Tabitha glared at him through her tears. “And what would happen to you?”

His eyebrows furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“When Isaac tricked me into marrying him and became king—where would that leave you? What happened to you in this plan? Unless you wanted to trick him out of the crown too.”

Theo winced when she said the word “too.” “I have no desire to be king, and I’m not suited for it anyway. This plan didn’t change the fact that I want a quiet life away from the castle.” She could hear the aching pain in his voice as he stared at her, his hands clenching into fists at his sides as if to keep himself from reaching out. Tabitha found herself following suit; she couldn’t afford to reach for a quiet life with him. Not now.

“Then what?” She couldn’t dull the sharp edge to her tone even through her tears. “What was your end of the bargain?”

Ducking his head in shame, he would no longer meet her eyes, and it took him a moment to get the words out. “I would be appointed part of his court in name only. We would . . . we would get the money back that we’d lost so we could take care of our father without worry. I had no aspirations outside of that.”

Money. He’d agreed to all this for money—just like everyone else who had betrayed her parents twenty-five years ago.

“And Alexandra?”

Theo’s voice became even smaller, and his shoulders caved in. “She didn’t want any payment for her part. She said saving the kingdom would be enough of a reward for her.”

That was enough. Tabitha couldn’t bear to hear any more; she felt she could hardly stay upright because of the breaking in her chest. “I need to be alone now,” she choked out. “Please leave.”

“Tabitha—”

“Please. Go.”

Hesitating, Theo almost reached for her, then forced himself to back away. He gave her one last mournful look before he left and shut the door behind him.

The moment she was alone, Tabitha sank to her knees, letting the rest of her tears come with full force. She sobbed into her hand for a few minutes until she could get a handle on herself, and underneath her heartbreak and betrayal, panic crept in. Theo, Alexandra, and Isaac were the first people Tabitha had ever met outside of the peninsula, and she’d gone along with them without knowing they were manipulating her the entire time. The back of her neck prickled; she found her eyes darting around, feeling like she was being watched again but for an entirely different reason.

Swallowing hard, Tabitha wiped the tears from her eyes and took several deep breaths. It would be appropriate for her to look upset, given the soldiers’ raid, but not like she’d just gotten her heart smashed to pieces. Then she realized she was already trying to play a

part—like Isaac and Theo—and she detested the situation they’d put her in.

Her hands trembled slightly as she opened the door and peered outside. The hallway yawned before her, and while it used to elicit wonder and awe, she now felt it was a wide cavern threatening to swallow her and keep her captive. The voices of Alexandra, James, and Isaac echoed down the hall. Theo was nowhere to be seen.

“We can circle back to this,” Alexandra was saying, her voice getting louder as she left the sitting room. “I’m going to check on my father. You should check on your parents as well.”

Tabitha kept herself half hidden behind her door as she watched Alexandra and Isaac go down the hallway to find their parents. After they’d disappeared, Tabitha stole down the hall and found James staring at the fire with a distant expression.

“James,” she whispered, beckoning with her hand. “I need to talk to you.”

His forehead creased in confusion at her expression, the way she was curled in on herself as if she wanted to avoid being seen. “Are you okay?”

“Come with me. Please.”

To her relief, he followed her back to her room, and she quickly shut the door behind them. She had no idea how much time they had before Alexandra and Isaac came back—or maybe checking on their parents was an excuse for them to talk frankly about their plans without cluing in James.

“Tab, what’s going on?” James asked. “You’re acting strange. Is it Otto? I know that was upsetting.”

Tabitha shook her head. “Can you still trust me?”

He hesitated for a second, then nodded. “Of course. What’s this about?”

A fresh wave of tears came into her eyes as she did her best to concisely explain what Theo had told her. As she spoke, James’s confusion melted into horror while hurt flickered in his blue eyes. Tabitha was relieved at his reaction—she felt so unsure about

everything now that part of her had feared James would take Isaac's side.

Several beats of silence passed before he whispered, "This whole time?"

It both hurt Tabitha and brought her relief that she wasn't the only one so fractured. "This whole time." She swallowed hard. "I can't trust anything that they say without wondering how they are trying to manipulate us. I don't feel safe here anymore."

James nodded gravely. "To be honest with you, I never really did. This place is too big. I only stayed because of you and . . ." He trailed off, his mouth twisting into a pained grimace. "It doesn't matter anymore. We need to get out of here." He glanced around. "You grab what you can carry, and I'll find a way out. We have to hurry before they come back."

Dashing around the room that no longer felt like hers, Tabitha grabbed the bag Theo had used to carry the books that afternoon—she wanted more than anything to take them with her, but it would be too heavy to carry them all if she and James wanted to disappear. Regretfully, she took all of them out except a small one and kept her notes from the library tucked inside. Then she stuffed in as many of her plant remedies and ingredients as would fit without crushing them. Slung the bag over her shoulder, she threw her cloak on and pulled the hood over her head.

James needs to stay hidden too. They couldn't risk going to James's room in case someone stopped them on the way. Tabitha pulled the giant sheet off of her bed and joined James at the window. He'd managed to get it open, providing them a gap to climb out of.

"Here." She handed him the bedsheet. "We can fashion some kind of cloak out of this. The important thing is your face stays hidden."

"Good thought." James tied the sheet around his shoulders, leaving extra fabric out to fashion a makeshift hood, then turned to her again. He hesitated before reaching for her hand. "Ready?"

Tabitha took his hand, allowing him to help hoist her through the window, and she jumped the small distance to the ground. She

couldn't help but wince when he landed next to her, even though the sound was muffled in the grass underneath his feet.

She had just been outside hours ago, but somehow the world had entirely changed, the night sky hanging at an angle, the moon too bright, the stars too dim for comfort. Her steps felt wobbly, like the ground underneath her was no longer solid and would cave in any moment.

Glancing over her shoulder, Tabitha gave the house one last look before she followed James into the night.

THE KINGDOM OF STARS

book four



“For better or worse, it would all end tonight.”

After a shocking revelation leaves Tabitha reeling, she finds herself lost in her parents’ kingdom and hunted as a fugitive. Between old allies and new faces, how can she determine who to trust when one mistake could send her to the dungeon forever? Despite the risk, Tabitha knows she can’t keep hiding: Disease rages through the city while the people of the peninsula suffer and a corrupt king looks on. But she is out of time. The kingdom threatens to crumble underneath her feet, and it will take everything Tabitha has—her heart, her knowledge, her bravery, and her friends—to save it.



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