

# Royal Conspiracies



**SAMPLE**

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## Chapter One—Kidnapped!

The first winds of autumn surged across the small village nestled deeply within the lush valley, cutting a frosty path as sheep huddled together, their bleating lifting on the chilly air. Mixed with the gust, their plaintive cries drifted into the single room of a terracotta cottage occupied by a beautiful, but trifling slave girl of seventeen who was resting uncomfortably on her shabby straw mat.

Quickly, she tucked the worn patchwork blanket beneath her feet. Her aching and tender fingers gingerly pulled the ragged quilt to her shivering chin and then reached to block her ears against the nippy night. Barely a few feet away, near the lone shuttered window, her spinning wheel glowered, impatiently reminding her of awaiting work. She closed her eyes against the thoughts of anticipated long and arduous nights at the wheel, and this after laborious days toiling as a maid for a more illustrious mistress. Near the wheel rested the cloth she had finished weaving moments before. Such were her daily tasks, and her young frame painfully bent beneath the weight of the demands, demands her uncle imposed to assure his comfort in the lavish mansion he occupied across the courtyard. The putting-out system was the industry in her township and she was the chief producer of the lightweight wool needed for the clothing of the middle-class people; yet, every coin she earned was not hers to spend, so she continued to work endless grey days in the same grey smock under the billowy grey sky, counting every minute in every endless day. And when those dull clouds opened, they drenched her in inevitable hopelessness and bitter resignation.

She had long since lost the strength to cry, so she lay shivering in her frayed smock and clutched the quilt. She was increasingly aware that she would have to connive a means of escape, though she lacked even the simplest plan or audacity to execute it. But deep inside, somehow, she knew this was not her destiny.

Across the courtyard, within the luxurious quarters of the mansion, her uncle continued planning new techniques that would make an art out of her exploitation, feeding the sadistic nature he valued so dearly. Meanwhile, Francesca struggled to set her mind on a strategy of flight, for as soon as she became too feeble to provide him the comfortable lifestyle he extorted from her earnings, she would be sold to the first caravan that passed through her village, or to the highest bidder for her services as a maid and cook. She realized that her present mistress, the chancellor's wife, would be the kindest lady she'd ever encounter. No other mistress in the village had her financial resources and she generously paid for Francesca's housekeeping skills because she honestly thought she was helping her earn a better life. If she could only know the truth, that she was providing luxury for her wretched uncle, perhaps she would assist Francesca with a means of escape. But Francesca couldn't possibly tell her the truth. She couldn't even hint that Joaquin was keeping every cent and caging her in this dilapidated shack; the retribution would be dreadful. Therefore, resourcefulness and determination were her only allies and sleep was her only solace. Each night she prayed that surely, the sun would rise with deliverance in its wings.

And the following morning did shine brighter, awakening her with a new strategy of liberation. But this morning would also hold unforeseen troubles, for Uncle Joaquin had a burgeoning campaign of his own. With concerns only for his loss of revenue, he unremorsefully informed her that the chancellor's wife had passed suddenly in the night. Francesca collapsed into tears, trembling not only for fear of her future, but for the loss of the only woman who had ever shown her kindness. But uncle jerked her off her mat and told her she would serve no breakfast today; time was money. As long as she had no daytime job, his coffer would dwindle.

Joaquin admonished her to change into fresh clothing. "You can't go with me looking like a tramp! A mere beggar!"

“Uncle, I have no other dress. I have grown out of it. And my smock is soiled and must be washed.”

“Clean your face and smock. I will return shortly.” He stormed from her room.

Only a few minutes had passed when he reappeared, holding his wife’s stained dress that he had rescued from the trash heap.

“Put this on and secure your smock so that the stain cannot be seen. Hurry!”

Moments later, he pulled her by the arm to the marketplace and stood her on the block in the center of the town square, where he boldly challenged onlookers for their highest bids. She tucked her long black locks behind her ears, nervously watching as the curious townspeople drew near. He reminded all that Francesca was an enviable house servant.

“She is strong and most pleasing to the eye! She has superior skills as a maid. You have all tasted her cooking at the chancellor’s parties. Why, she is a masterful genius in the kitchen! And she possesses the skills of etiquette and propriety her mistress taught her, skills required for serving a lady of high social standing. You should bid on her as a matter of pride; you should be grateful for this opportunity!”

Francesca prayed some rich mistress would rescue her. If not, she planned to distract the wealthy men of the village who had begun gathering around, with heavy pockets and mean dispositions. Francesca determined that if she could create a fracas during a bidding war, a competition among egos, she might find an opportunity to escape, so she watched intently for the scene to unfold. Without much delay, two men shoved to the front of the crowd and started the bidding high enough to challenge the village’s best-situated men, as well as the town’s awfully parsimonious mistresses. Insults were exchanged until the larger of the two pushed in front of the other and a brawl quickly ensued. The ladies

scattered as all the men around Francesca's block joined the fight and her uncle, in the interest of not losing their focus, started pulling them apart. Francesca leapt from the block and ran to the marketplace, bunching her long skirts in her arms. She made her way through the crowd of onlookers gathering around the outer perimeter of the fight and found a hiding place in the market.

Within moments, her uncle's booming, demanding voice could be heard above the commotion.

"Come to me, little green eyes. Come now! Don't make me find you, because when I do you won't be able to calm my anger!" He cast many furtive glances about the marketplace and then exploded, "You will not rebel against me, you ungrateful child!"

Francesca pulled the bottom of her skirt into the shadows and pressed her back into the roughly hewn blocks next to the last market stand. She peeked under table skirts and watched Uncle Joaquin angrily throw over the stand just two stations away and heatedly storm out of sight. But Francesca sat quietly, rigidly, not trusting her uncle's tricks. And within moments he returned, sneaking silently behind the market tables and looking beneath their skirts that draped to the ground, covering the few possessions the merchants had to sell. He demanded each merchant to vacate the premises. As he neared her, Francesca slipped to the front of the stand and began crawling to the refuge of the nearby church.

Joaquin lifted the table skirt and caught a glimpse of her foot. He sprang over the table and reached for her hair.

"Uncle, no!" she screamed and covered her head with her arms, but her uncle was knocked to the ground, an unexpected blow rendering him stunned and disoriented.

A magnificent black stallion reared and bellowed before her; Francesca didn't debate her next move. She gratefully reached out to her lib-

erator and was immediately gripped by a strong hand and whisked upon the back of the great black horse.

“Hold on!” the rider instructed.

She wrapped her arms tightly around his waist and buried her face into his back. They leapt forward amidst the excited and frenzied shouts of the crowd. She didn’t know her rescuer and she wondered if indeed, she should be grateful for liberation or fearful of impending doom, but she was certain that whether this would be the end of a lifetime’s nightmare or the beginning of a new one, it couldn’t be worse than the life she was leaving behind. One thing she was certain of was that the horse was a bolt of lightning and her uncle was choking down the dust that engulfed him as they sped away. Whoever it was that she was gripping on the back of this saddle, she was grateful to be alive.

She opened her eyes and regarded the landscape but nothing was familiar for she’d never been allowed beyond the village. They rode to the other side of the winding hills beyond the village farms where they were safely concealed from view. A hearty breeze bellowed through the lofty pines that lined the river and Francesca was quickly reminded of her prayer to be carried away by the winds to another place and time. As her miracle unfolded before her, she grew more confident that this was meant to be her salvation, not her destruction, so she tightened her grip and held on as the horse galloped to the edge of a dark forest. They slowed to a walk.

“Hop down! Quickly!” He leapt off the stead and helped her down. A cloth covered the bottom half of his face but his voice seemed distantly familiar. “There’s no time now. You’ll have to trust me. Hurry, your uncle won’t be far behind.”

The courageous champion urged her to an awaiting cart and pushed her into one of the empty barrels. Before the lid was pounded into place, she could smell the grain that lined the bed of the cart. She felt along the

grooved walls inside her barrel until she located the cork and pushed it out. She tried peeking out of the hole but could see only the dark stranger as he struck the horse sharply on the flanks and sent it out of her view. She heard him open the lid of another barrel and jump in. The older man, who drove the cart, pounded down the lid and took the reins of the horses. With a lurch, they were on their way.

When the chilled winds blew through the cracks between the weathered barrel boards, Francesca closed her eyes and prayed for strength and courage. She was falling asleep with the gentle rocking of the wagon, but shortly, they came to an abrupt halt.

“Hold up, old man! Has anyone passed this way? Have you seen a man on a black horse with a woman? Answer me!” Joaquin impatiently demanded.

“A horse went that way, but I paid no attention. Perhaps that’s what you’re looking for. Now I must hurry; I have a delivery to make!” With that, the cart moved forward but Joaquin stopped them again.

“Don’t be insolent, old man!”

He struck him with the club intended for Francesca and then rode in the direction the old man had indicated. When he was gone, her rescuer called out from his barrel, demanding to know the condition of the old man.

“I’m alright. Stay silent. He is a crafty one and if I did a poor job disguising my voice, he may return at any moment.”

They rode silently for a long while and then the old man called out and she could hear a gate creak open before them. The horses clopped over age-worn cobblestones past a magnificent fountain and through a large courtyard, and then the cart rolled to a stop. After the gate closed, the old man lifted the lid and helped the mysterious rider from his barrel. Together, they helped Francesca from hers, into the fresh air. The young man listened intently to the old man’s instructions and departed

into the stables. As the older man took Francesca's hand, a chill shivered her shoulders and she stepped away from him and looked into his face.

"Come. Let's get you into a more comfortable situation."

He offered no explanation, but led her into a small cottage near the stables. It was comfortably furnished with an inviting bed and fine lace curtains. The fireplace was lit and welcoming, as if by mistake, as though someone important was expected.

"Please, make yourself comfortable. You'll find gowns in the wardrobe. He will visit you within a few minutes, and dinner will be served. Welcome home, Francesca!"

The old man wiped tears from his eyes and left her in total confusion.

She opened the door and called after the old man, "Home? Where am I? Come back!"

She watched him disappear inside a large building covered in decades of dark green ivy. She slowly closed the door. She pulled a chair with embroidered red cushions before the fireplace and sat pensively until she heard someone approaching.

The knock came softly.

"Francesca, may I enter?"

She arose, opening the door to stormy eyes, lost in a refined but chiseled face.

"Who are you?" she asked. "Where am I? What do you want with me?"

Her rescuer stepped inside, opened the door wide and ushered in two servants carrying trays of food and drink. "Let's eat first, Francesca. I'm famished. You should be, too."

"How is it that you both know my name? You and the kind old man, you both seem so familiar."



Francesca removed a foil from above the fireplace while the young man intently indulged in his soup. Carefully, she approached him.

“You must answer me now.”

With the tip pointed at his chest, he decided to put down the drumstick.

“You haven’t the heart to use that and besides, it isn’t sharp, see?”

Francesca dropped the blade and sobbed.

“You’re mocking me! This is absurd! You speak as though you know me but you haven’t the decency to tell me who you are and what you want!”

“And of course, this is unbearable. It would be for anyone. But you must admit, you are safe from your uncle’s reach. If you would be so kind as to allow me to finish this wonderful meal, I promise I’ll answer all your questions immediately afterward. Won’t you at least join me? It should be clear I’ve no intentions of harming you.”

There was nothing dainty or reticent in the way she attacked her dinner.

“I must apologize. I have had nothing more than bread and eggs for years. Uncle would allow me no meat or potatoes. This is incredibly delicious.”

When she finally pushed away from the table, the young man poured more wine into her goblet and went to the door. He signaled to the servants who returned and cleared the table. Losing all patience, Francesca began pacing the floor when the gentleman finally tossed a couple of small logs into the fireplace.

“Please, make yourself comfortable. We have much to discuss.”

Francesca settled into the softly cushioned chair nearest the fire. Her eyes reflected the dancing flames as she watched him with deep curiosity. He moved with an ease of frame, graceful yet full of manliness.

He fascinated her but confused her; something about his smile and his stormy blue-grey eyes was distantly familiar. But sadness surrounded his composed exterior and she struggled to await the answers to the multitude of questions circling inside her head.

“Francesca, can you look around this room for just a minute?”

“I’ve been looking at this room ever since you brought me here. What do you mean? Please stop talking in riddles! Be plain! I have a right to know why I’m being held here! And who you are!”

He broke into unexpected laughter. In escalating anger, she rushed to the door and out of the room.

“Ollie, ollie, home free!” he whispered.

She stopped a few feet from the door and collapsed in amazing laughter, while tears flowed inexplicably down her cheeks. Suddenly he was there, sitting beside her and wiping the tears from her eyes.

Alexa exploded in a tumult of emotions and words overwhelmed her, tumbling uncontrollably into the cold night air. “I used to hide in that room. Under that bed! He couldn’t find me but I laughed. He caught me! I remember! I remember!”

“Who was ‘he,’ Alexa? Think back. Who was looking for you?”

“A boy. My best friend. Dark hair, stormy eyes. We hid from the guard...” She stopped crying and looked at him. “Stormy grey eyes. It was you?”

He nodded with a smile, not saying a word, and waited with extreme patience as she gathered her thoughts.

“We were childhood friends?”

“You called me Marny, but it’s really Arman. Francesca, you remember!”

“The guard...was he the old man who brought us here? His voice...it’s him, isn’t it?” Excitement replaced rapidly began replacing her tears.

“Ramon, the old man who brought us here, was the captain of your father’s guard. He took you to live with your uncle when you were only five...and I lost my best friend the day you left.”

“And now you’ve rescued me. Oh but my head hurts. It’s all so fuzzy. I can’t think anymore. I need to rest!” She supported her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes.

“Yes, you should.”

Her head sank into his chest, so he promptly carried her back to the cottage, tucked her under the covers, and threw a few more logs onto the fireplace.

“Sleep, princess. The state of your kingdom is upon your young shoulders, but we are here and we won’t desert you. No one will hurt you, ever again.”

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by C.B. Hoffmann

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1. Fiction—Suspense

Cover Design Dan Hoffmann

This book is dedicated to my family, with special acknowledgment to God for the inspiration, and to my son, Dan, my editor and motivator.