

Royal Wedding

Episode 4

The Maid and the Gardener

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Jasmin

For the third time that day, Jasmin Karim made her way down the back stairs of the east wing of Buckingham Palace to the Red Salon, where the bridal bouquet awaited spritzing. Ms. Jones, the royal florist, had chosen the large room specifically because it was as cool as a refrigerator—the cold would keep the flowers from wilting, she'd explained. The salon was on a different floor than the royal bridal suite, and Jasmin had been scampering up and down between the two rooms all morning.

As the soon-to-be bride's lady's maid, Jasmin was in charge of the bridal wardrobe, including care of the exquisite bouquet of divine-smelling flowers. The arrangement had to be kept well-hydrated right up to the ceremony. Hold the water spritzer bottle about six inches away from the flowers and give them ten good puffs every hour, on the hour, Ms. Jones had instructed.

In truth, Jasmin was glad to have an excuse to get away from the royal suites for a bit. There had been such a palaver that morning between Princess Gracie and Princess Georgie, over hats of all things.

Although, nothing could temper her mood today. Jasmin's lips curved into a silly smile. Prince Richard was marrying his love, Miss Meredith, tomorrow, and it was going to be a glorious day—hat debacles notwithstanding.

Weddings made people crazy. Jasmin had been front and center in all three of her sisters' *nikaahs*, and knew how tempers could run high for months leading up to the ceremonies. The royal wedding was no exception. Even with a slew of wedding planners and event organizers nitpicking every detail, things had gone awry. But everything would go smoothly tomorrow, Jasmin thought, nodding firmly as she strode toward the Red Salon.

Her steps faltered as a horrendous crash echoed through the east wing hallway. At its heels came the high-pitched yips of a couple of very excited dogs.

"What on earth . . . ?" she cried, and charged forward. But in her rush to turn the corner and investigate the source of the sounds, Jasmin tripped on her own sturdy Mary Janes and went sprawling onto the carpet.

"Oomph!" Winded and utterly mortified by her clumsiness, Jasmin blew loose strands of hair out of her face and pushed herself up on all fours. Then she froze, spotting the open doors of the Red Salon. She was positive she'd closed them behind her an hour ago. And the barks were coming from inside!

Alarmed, Jasmin lurched to her feet and rushed—or rather, hobbled—into the room, coming to an abrupt stop just inside the door. She stared in utter devastating, disbelieving horror. The table she'd dragged from the French windows to a side wall, as per Ms. Jones's instructions to keep the flowers out of the path of direct sunlight, had somehow toppled over, smashing the vase containing the bridal bouquet to the floor.

Water, petals, and shards of glass were scattered everywhere and . . . and the corgis were using the bouquet as a chew toy!

“Oh. My. Goodness. Oh my goodness! Who let the dogs out?” she cried, grabbing hold of her head with both hands. What had happened here? Who’d caused such havoc? She looked around wildly for the culprits, but there was no one in the room except for her and the queen’s corgis, now fighting over the bouquet.

“Oh my goodness.” She dashed full tilt to rescue the bouquet, ignoring the sharp pain in her ankle from her earlier stumble. How had the bloody corgis managed this?

“Shoo! Get away from the flowers . . . and the glass. Bad doggies. Bad!” She tried to grab whatever was left of the bouquet, and found herself in a tug-of-war with both snarling mutts. Then, as abruptly as the commotion had started, the corgis tired of the game and released the flowers, sending her flying backward onto the ground. Without so much as a look in her direction, the dogs imperiously trotted out of the room. Jasmin didn’t waste a second; she shut the doors and locked herself inside.

She took a moment to wipe sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand while her bosom heaved. She stared in horror at the carnage the dogs had left in their wake. Shredded flowers covered the carpet, and the tangled wire skeleton of the bouquet lay sadly in the middle. *Shit.*

She wondered if the disaster would lead to her being drawn and quartered in the Tower of London. *Big, giant dollops of shit.*

Jasmin buried her face in her hands and groaned. This could not be happening. This was supposed to be the best week ever, leading up to the most romantic day ever. This was supposed to be her chance to prove to everyone that she wasn’t here simply because of her father’s position as Superintendent of the Royal Household, but that she deserved her promotion from a regular maid at Windsor Castle to Miss Meredith’s personal lady’s maid. It was by her father’s recommendation that she’d been transferred to the palace to attend to the new bride, and she’d already messed it up. Mrs. Christy, the housekeeper of Windsor Castle and Jasmin’s old boss, had fought against the promotion. She thought Jasmin was a clumsy, inept twit.

Mrs. Christy had been so right.

With a deep breath, Jasmin drew her hands from her face. Maybe it wasn’t all that bad. Maybe . . .

Nope. It was bad. Very bad. She couldn’t believe two itty-bitty balls of fur had done so much damage in less than five minutes.

She sank to her knees on the carpet, rocking her body back and forth and calling on Allah for help. But even prayers didn’t settle her stomach. She pressed her forehead to the carpet and moaned. If she didn’t have to keep her topknot impeccable—not a hair could be out of place as per the housekeeping dress code—she’d have curled into a comma on her side and wept. She was in so much trouble. She flinched as a commotion broke out in an adjoining room. It sounded like Mr. Henry, the assistant to the royal butler, and Ms. LeDoux’s personal bodyguard, that sweet Mr. Mike. Jasmin had unpacked and organized the wardrobe of the glamorous pop star and maid of honor, Katrina LeDoux, the day she’d flown in from America. And even though it wasn’t his job, Mr. Mike had helped her carry the heavy boxes up the stairs.

Jasmin sat up as the shouting escalated. *Please don’t come in here.* Mr. Henry seemed extremely put out about something—again. Normally a stoic man, the wedding and its myriad complications were undoing him. The thought of being caught with the destroyed bouquet and being incinerated in the crossfire of Mr. Henry’s temper left Jasmin cold.

She sprang to her feet and rushed to the en suite bathroom. It was all she could do not to wail at her predicament. She stared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror—she even looked a mess. Hurriedly,

she splashed her face to cool her cheeks, and passed wet hands over her hair to smooth her escaped strands back into place. Slightly better.

While she considered her options—run away or confess?—she filled a tumbler with water and drank deeply to cool her insides, too. She should clean up the room. Destroy the evidence. Yes. Jasmin grabbed several towels from a linen closet and got to work.

In the salon, she set the table upright. Then, hitching her maid's uniform up to her thighs, she squatted and began picking up the bigger shards of glass before mopping and re-mopping the floor. She worked quickly and silently, her heart leaping into her throat whenever someone so much as walked past the room.

What was going to happen to her? Their Royal Highnesses would never forgive her for ruining their perfect day. She would never forgive herself. Oh, why had she ever agreed to take on such responsibility? She should never have let the pep talks from Benji, her best friend and palace colleague, bolster a false sense of confidence in her. She was not meant for stress and—

Wait. Benji.

Jasmin blinked at the sopping mess in her hands. Benji! Of course. He was the answer. But where in the world was he? She sat back on her haunches, frowning. Was he back from his flower-buying trip? He had to be. The wedding was tomorrow. And hadn't he left her a message yesterday and she'd forgotten to call him back? She smacked her forehead, getting to her feet. Then stopped short.

Ugh. She'd promised Papa that she'd quit running to Benji every time she got in trouble. She was an adult now, nearly twenty-two years old. She had to grow up and fight her own battles.

Her father's disappointed face swam before her eyes but was immediately replaced by his expression of horror as she got arrested, handcuffed, and taken to prison by royal decree.

Jasmin shuddered. She had no choice here. And who better to help her with a flower-related emergency than the royal junior gardener who also happened to have a degree in horticulture?

A sprig of hope bloomed inside her as she pulled her phone out. "Benji! I need your help."