



Devil to Pay: Chapter 1
Sarah Sammis

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Chapter 1

Chapter 1: Susan

Sometimes world events are set in motion by simple and selfish reasons. They start small and in unlikely places. In one case, the next century would be reshaped by a kiss in a broom closet at a boarding school. Looking back on my life and the decisions we would be forced to make, I have very few regrets. Had things gone as first planned things would have been very different and ultimately, I'm not sure if for the best.

"Freddie, give over! I have to go to class," I giggled.

Freddie and I were year twelve students at Isomata, just weeks away from graduation. We had been dating throughout our time at the school and everyone expected us to take the Jubilee waltz together. Our closest friends had been jokingly calling me Queen Susan for the last year or so.

"Come on, just one more," Freddie said, cupping one of my breasts in his hand and kissing me in the sloppy way that teenagers do.

I pushed him away and wiped my mouth on my sleeve. "I'll see you after class."

"I can't, father's pulling me out of school early. I've passed every thing I need to graduate. He wants me home to help with the jubilee plans."

"What about graduation? Will you be back for the ceremony?" I asked.

Freddie shook his head. "I don't think so. Father says there would be security issues. I've done all the course work I need to graduate."

"But you'll keep your promise... " To celebrate his upcoming

eighteenth birthday the kingdom of Greater Albion would shut down in honor of Prince Freddie's coming of age. The inner circle of the nobility and the wealthiest citizens would be there hoping that one of their debutante daughters would be chosen for the Jubilee dance. I expected to be chosen, not because I wanted to be queen but because I loved Freddie.

Freddie kissed me on the cheek. "I will," he said but he frowned a little. "I will do my best. No matter what happens, I love you." It was the last time I would be ever be this close to my first love.

I checked my email and voice mail daily, sometimes multiple times a day. Freddie never wrote or emailed or even texted me. It was as if he had disappeared completely from my life.

I tried to ignore ache in my heart by keeping busy. I poured myself into my finals and into the graduation plans, volunteering to help with planning and what not. News of the upcoming jubilee filtered into the school and I hoped it meant Freddie was too busy to contact me. When the last day of school arrived and I had still heard nothing, I began to panic.

By graduation day Isomata had nearly shut down for the long summer holiday. The school served as a closed community with its own canteen, bookstore and theater. There were a few surrounding homes but there wasn't much to the economy of the township beyond the day-to-day running of the school. When the school closed for summer holidays the local population dwindled from close to a thousand to maybe a hundred.

At graduation my parents, the Duke and Duchess of Hook, seemed cold and grumpy. They had given me the expected hugs and congratulated me on a job well done but had said little else. As I walked by them to the stage to pick up my diploma, they barely acknowledged me, save for a glowering stare from my father and depressed expression from my mother. Other parents were taking photographs, clapping, and being supportive. My parents would normally have been as well. What was going on?

It wasn't until we were in the car, packed to the brim with my belongings for the long drive home that my father finally spoke. As I watched the school fade behind them I felt her world crashing down.

"We're very disappointed with Susannah. You nearly cost us our title and privileges. Do you realize that?" Howard Dinur, my father, barked.

"Father? What could I have possibly done?" I asked. "I've been at school getting good grades and staying out of trouble."

"I don't like getting angry telephone calls from His Majesty. You do realize that he has spent months of careful negotiation with the King and Queen of Lesser Albion? Your foolishness nearly cost them all of that! You could have started a war if Prince Alfred weren't sensible enough to listen to His Majesty's wishes. How would you have liked to start a war? There are plenty of good Jewish boys to choose from but no you have to flirt with the Crown Prince. What were you thinking?"

So the rumors were true, I lamented. I slumped against the car door and watched the blur of the outside pass by as their car sped through the mountains to our estate at Hookshire. It would be at least three hours until we were home to the Lion's Den near the summit of Hook Mountain.

Hookshire sits just below the tree line in an alpine valley that overlooks some of the most fertile countryside in the region, the soils rich in iron and other volcanic minerals. Hook Mountain had been a long quiet volcano though the southern end of the Rainbow Range was still active. Isomata had a at least one little shake a year. Hook Mountain was the largest naturally occurring feature in the land and gave close competition to the man made mountain of Castle New Haven, the ex-slowship that had brought the founding settlers. These two land marks stood as bookends to the former east/west borders, although more lands had been annexed over the decades to the east of the Rainbow Ridge and now the country stretched from sea to sea across the entire continent.

"You haven't answered my question, young lady," father barked.

"I had no idea. Freddie didn't tell me," I replied.

"Show some respect. It's 'His Royal Highness' or 'Prince Alfred', not 'Freddie.' Don't make that mistake at the Jubilee. We, you especially,

must be on our best behavior. We must welcome our future queen with open arms. Got it? We are lucky as-is to still have an invitation to the Jubilee."

Too stunned by my father's anger to cry, I nodded and replied quietly, "Yes, of course. I understand."

But I didn't understand. Arranged marriages were a thing of ancient Earth. The Jubilee had been set up to allow the future monarch a choice on the theory that a happy leader was a strong leader. The Jubilee even had a provision allowing for the choice of a same sex consort though to date no Crown Prince had taken that option. Why were my parents so up in arms over such archaic ideas?

That night I didn't have any appetite for dinner. I apologized to my parents and fled to my room. I flopped into bed and had a well needed cry. As I lay there, I tried to foresee my future. I wouldn't be queen. I would never fall in love again; it was just too painful. If I were Catholic I would probably become a nun but I didn't have that option. Maybe I could be Freddie's mistress but that didn't appeal to me either. I would just live out the rest of my life alone, a hermit on Hook Mountain, far from the reaches of the royal family.



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