

The Rejected Princess

Katie Clark

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

The Rejected Princess

COPYRIGHT 2018 by Katie Clark

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with.

Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

Watershed Books, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

Watershed Books praise and splash logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History

First Watershed Edition, 2018

Paperback Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0020-5

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0018-2

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To my loves, always.

Also by Katie Clark

Enslaved Series

Vanquished
Redeemer
Deliverance

Beguiled Series

Shadowed Eden
Whispering Tower (coming)

1

Princess Roanna of Chester's Wake had only been to the dungeon once in her life, but that one trip had scared her enough that she never wanted to return. Now, ten years later, Roanna worked in the palace libraries side by side with Prince Benjamin of Lox, her lifelong friend and cohort in crime all those years ago, as they sorted socks, coats, and blankets to take to the Rejected in the orphanages.

"I just want to look around the dungeon for a little while." Ben's voice pulled her gaze toward him.

Roanna hated the dark and dank dungeon, which reeked of bodily fluids. The place gave her chills. Thunder boomed overhead, and Roanna gasped. Pressing her eyes closed, she took a deep breath to calm herself. Perhaps she was being silly.

Ben quirked an eyebrow at her and grinned. He leaned against the library wall and turned to the windows as rain dumped loads of water into the western gardens of her family's palace at Chester's Wake. Ben was taller than her, and his dusty-blond hair was parted messily to the right side. He was handsome, as so many hopeful girls had told him before. Not that he seemed to care about that.

Roanna finished tying a ribbon on the package she'd put together. She set it to the side and grabbed more supplies. Ben had been with her that fateful day in the dungeon ten years ago—the new cook's assistant

had dragged them there after catching them stealing cookies from her platter. She'd said it was to teach them a lesson they'd not soon forget. The assistant was fired that very day, and Roanna swore off even the thought of a life of crime.

Now, the idea of returning to the scene of their punishment all those years ago did not appeal. Why would he want to explore the dungeons, anyway? Perhaps he was bored with sorting the donations. It could be why his mind drifted.

"I can hardly wait to see the reaction on the children's faces when they open their packages," she said instead. She arranged a few items on her lap. The gifts were for the children who'd been cast out for having been discovered to have anomalies. Sometimes they were simply considered unprofitable to society—but usually they were considered dangerous.

"We could play a game when we finish here," she went on. She finished her package and moved to the couch in the center, which was a strange spot to arrange the donations, but the perfect place for her to hide out. Roanna hated reading, which meant no one would look for her in the library. She needed refuge, as her parents wished for her to help entertain the Dawsonian ambassador and his entourage. She didn't want to spend time with the Fourth Prince of Dawson's Edge. Especially when he was twice her age and had proposed marriage three times this week.

In response to her suggestion about the game, Ben pushed away from the window's ledge. He took long strides across the room, knelt at her knees, and grabbed her hands.

Roanna watched in amusement, but his eyes held no mirth.

"Princess Roanna Hamilton, the thought of playing a game makes me want to leap from a twelve-story building," he said it in all seriousness, his brown eyes as deep as the muddy waters of the Edge River.

Yes, he was handsome.

Roanna burst into laughter to hide her emotions. She shoved him away as a grin broke across his face. "Have it your way." She walked toward the door to the library, attempting to be smooth. But inside, her stomach tightened. She didn't want to explore the dungeon, and she still didn't understand why it was so important to him. "Really, I don't know why I bother with you," she teased. "I could be spending time with the ambassador, you know. At least he has the good sense to propose marriage and his undying love."

She meant it teasingly, but Ben tensed. His jaw flexed, and her heart melted like a puddle of Cook's famous chocolate mousse. Why had she said that? Now things would feel strange between them. He would think she...expected something from him.

She swallowed her nerves as her hand slid from the doorknob, and she gripped her fingers together. "What, exactly, will we be looking for in the dungeon?"

Their eyes met. For a single moment she felt the familiar quickening in her heart. Ben and his family—the King and Queen of Lox—were visiting Chester's Wake to help negotiate a peace treaty between Roanna's kingdom and their mysterious and superstitious neighbors on the southern border, Dawson's Edge. The ambassador had arrived a week ago, and they had been haggling mercilessly over their negotiation points.

Ben was betrothed to the First Princess of

Dawson's Edge. The fact that Dawson's Edge had yet to produce a living princess did nothing to dissuade his parents' resolve to keep the peace between the kingdoms. They'd made a promise to link kingdoms, and they intended to keep that promise. The people of Lox were ever lovers of peace. Ben would marry into Dawson's Edge, and she would marry someone equally royal—it just wouldn't be him.

He gripped her pinky finger before she could reach the doorknob again. An ornery grin spread across his face. "Race you."

She jerked her hand away. "You have a match."

Without another word, she yanked open the door and bolted into the corridor. Her body collided with a solid, warm mass.

"Roanna Charlotte Jolene Hamilton!" Mother's voice wrapped around her like shackles. Father stood beside Mother, his face full of horror. That only left the Dawsonian ambassador...

Roanna looked up into his grinning, only slightly wrinkled face. He was nearly twice her age, but his olive-colored skin reminded her of her own. His dark hair glistened under the glowing hallway lights. His brown eyes sparkled and a smile danced on his lips.

So, he wasn't repulsed by a princess who barreled through the palace halls like a sportsman. Rats.

"My apologies," she muttered, backing away.

The ambassador took her hand and kissed it. "You are forgiven, Princess."

"We were looking for you," Mother said, saving Roanna from the embarrassing devotion emanating from the ambassador's eyes. "What were you doing in the library?"

Unfortunately, she asked at the exact moment Ben

stepped into the hall.

"We were preparing the monthly donations for the Rejected," Roanna explained.

"Ah, Prince of Lox," the ambassador said. "A pleasure to see you again." But his smile had dropped.

"The pleasure is mine alone." Ben bowed then turned to Mother and Father. "Your Highnesses," he said with another bow. "If you'll excuse me, I shall leave you to finish your walk."

Father nodded, and Ben strode away.

Roanna threw a glance at Father. His brow wrinkled as he watched Ben leave, but he held himself in check. He loved Ben, but he and Mother worried incessantly over the amount of time Ben and Roanna spent together. "Why spend time with a prince you cannot marry?" Or so Father said. He loved to remind her how the peace of many kingdoms rested on their shoulders. "It is never a flippant thing to consider war," he loved to say.

War. It was what might start between Chester's Wake and Dawson's Edge if this peace treaty didn't hold. With each passing year, Dawson's Edge encroached further on Chester's Wake's borders. The border villages were crying for relief.

And war would likely start between Dawson's Edge and Lox if Lox broke the marriage agreement they'd made eighteen years ago.

Awkwardness surrounded her in Ben's absence. Time for action.

Roanna took the ambassador's arm before he offered it, and he beamed. "Shall we walk?" she asked.

They headed in the opposite direction Ben had gone. Roanna sighed inwardly. It looked as though she had found the dungeon, after all.

2

The ambassador leaned closer to Roanna as they walked, speaking in her ear. "You must call me Roland."

A shiver broke out across her neck, but she held it at bay. She would examine the strange feeling later. She'd learned as a child that royals never showed their feelings unless it proved beneficial to do so. But what did the shiver mean? Surely she didn't enjoy the ambassador's attention. But she wasn't quite repulsed by him either.

"You will remember," Mother said, oblivious to Roland's flirting, "that the ambassador is King Dawson's brother."

King Bartholomew Dawson, descendant of the original Dawson who split from Chester's Wake.

"Of course I remember." Roanna smiled sweetly. "Shall I address you as Your Highness or Ambassador?"

Roland gave a mock bow. "Alas, you needn't worry over my title. I am but a fourth son. I serve my king proudly." His eyebrows raised then, and he spoke to her. "You say you were preparing donations for the Rejected? I'm quite intrigued by your interest in that area."

Roanna stared wide-eyed for a moment. So few showed any interest in the Rejected children. Of course, Dawson's Edge did not practice Termination—

the compassionate expiration of any fetus testing positive for strange anomalies. It made sense that Roland would admire her distaste for the entire process.

The Rejected were those who slipped through the cracks of the system—those who tested negative for powerful anomalies or physical defects in vitro, but then were born positive anyway. Roanna had first learned of the Rejected when she was thirteen. At that time Mother and Father had begun her training in being a Lady of the State. She had been drawn immediately to the children no one else wanted, though those with anomalies numbered less and less as they were bred out.

Ambassador Dawson's interest made sense. She nodded. "I want to show them that their lives matter in Chester's Wake. They may have been abandoned by their families, but they have not been forgotten by their rulers."

He lifted his eyebrows higher, and a slow and genuine smile spread across his face. "I couldn't agree more. As you know, we do not practice Termination in Dawson's Edge. Each life is valuable to us."

Father cleared his throat loudly—he didn't fully understand Roanna's compassion toward the Rejected—and started in on a different subject. Roland graciously joined him, and Roanna's mind was allowed to wander. Dawson's Edge refused to take part in Termination. Strange in itself, yes, but one of the main reasons they were considered backward and behind the times.

At least Ben, if he were to ever actually marry into the Dawsonian line, would continue to live in Lox as the future king. If she were to accept the ambassador's

proposal, she'd be forced to move to his strange and dark kingdom.

Mother's reminder of Roland's heritage returned to mind. Roland was of royal blood, and he wanted to marry her.

A chill ran down her back, and this time she couldn't stop the shiver.

Roland paused mid-sentence and turned to her. "Are you cold, Princess?"

Roanna managed a smile and shook her head. "Don't worry for me. I'm perfectly fine."

He returned to his conversation, but Roanna's mind raced. She was the daughter of a king; she understood the way her world worked. Marrying for love was likely not in her future. Rather, marrying to keep the peace would be her fate. Keeping the peace was exactly what she feared in this moment. If Dawson's Edge desired peace and had sent the king's brother as ambassador, and the king's brother wished to marry her, would the marriage not produce the peace both kingdoms sought?

Father and Roland continued their conversation. Mother glided along at Father's arm, her smile firmly in place. They seemed content. Did they intend to marry her off?

Panic filled Roanna. As gently as she could, she slipped her hand from the crook of Roland's arm. "If you'll excuse me, I'm feeling a bit tired. I believe I'll rest in preparation for supper tonight."

Roland frowned, but he nodded. "Of course. I will look forward to seeing you again this evening."

Roanna smiled and hurried away without meeting Mother's curious gaze. How could she admit she didn't want to sacrifice her own future for the sake of

the kingdom's? She knew without a doubt it would be selfish to follow through on her feelings. After all, she would be sending villagers to fight and die because she didn't want to marry a man twice her age. But it was a future she had yet to come to terms with.

"Where's the fire, sis?" Gregory's question stopped her.

She turned toward her brother. Of everyone in the palace, Gregory understood her most.

"I'm running from the Dawsonian ambassador."

"Does he still want to marry you?" Gregory's blue eyes danced with amusement.

Roanna rolled her own. "Unfortunately, yes."

"Would you like to hide in my room? I'll be out entertaining the ambassador's entourage." His voice held no enthusiasm.

Dear Gregory, always her hero. She should be out entertaining, instead of hiding away from the whole group. "No, thank you. I think I'll take a nap. I have a feeling I'll need to reserve my strength to get through supper tonight with my dowry intact."

Gregory chuckled. "Have it your way." She moved to pass him, and he teasingly tugged her hair pin loose. The pin slipped from its place, and dark curls spilled out.

Gregory's eyes widened. "You're growing out your hair?"

Roanna's cheeks burned, and she hastily shoved the curls back into place and secured them with the pin. She'd managed to keep the length hidden for months. "You must promise not to tell."

A slight frown pulled his lips down. "No, I would never tell. But..." He hesitated. Torn between being a gentleman and a brother? "But why are you hiding it?"

he finally asked.

The rule was a stupid one she'd endured since childhood. Mother insisted she keep her dark hair cropped short. Roanna had longed to grow it for years, and she had finally decided she had a right to do whatever she wanted with her own hair. It had taken a while to figure it out, but she'd learned to disguise it masterfully with hair decorations.

Roanna stepped closer to Gregory. She didn't need a servant overhearing and tattling to Mother. "Mother still insists I keep it short."

"I suppose I thought you'd outgrown that rule," Gregory admitted. "I thought you kept it short because you liked it."

Roanna studied his face, gauging his sincerity. "Mother still brings it up. I don't want her to know."

Now he smiled. "Your secret is safe with me."

Sweet relief.

"Thank you, Gregory."

"You're quite welcome. And while I'm keeping that secret, I will also keep to myself the proposal of the Dawsonian ambassador."

Roanna laughed. Mother and Father had to have heard about it, though she hadn't brought it up once, but she appreciated Gregory's effort. "Thank you."

Gregory was the perfect big brother, and someday he would make an excellent king. He didn't love the idea—he used to whine and carry on about abdicating the throne—but he'd purposed himself to do his best. Roanna wished him well. After all, at least one of them should be happy.

3

Maids buzzed around Roanna's room like bees in a hive. "This ribbon will work," one muttered.

"This bracelet."

"These shoes."

The chatter went on and on.

Roanna moved past her dressing area and into her main bedroom. The bed was simple but elegant. A white wood, polished to a sheen. White comforter, white walls. Pristine was how she liked it. Two small, electric lamps glowed from bedside tables, and other gas lamps were spread around the room.

Bette, her personal maid, popped into the bedroom. "You will adore your gown for tonight, Miss." She smiled.

Roanna nodded and returned the smile. She had resigned herself long ago to letting the maids dress her. Fashion wasn't one of her talents, as she would take comfort over style any day. Mother had decided the maids could be in charge when it came to Roanna's wardrobe.

The only part of her dressing she took care of was the styling of her hair. Occasionally, Bette helped, but she was sworn to secrecy regarding its length.

Roanna slipped out of her shoes and fell onto her bed. Her day dress spread around her in a wave of pale pink flowers. On a quiet day in the palace, she could usually get away with a more comfortable split skirt, but when they had visitors, the palace was

anything but quiet. She rarely cared about the visitors, unless Ben was among them.

Ben.

She sighed. She ought to be focusing on Roland Dawson's proposal and what it could mean for her future. Or perhaps she should consider the strange sensation she'd felt when Roland whispered in her ear. Instead, all she could think about was the longing in her heart when she spent time with Ben. Did she imagine the same longing in his eyes?

They'd taken every chance to be together over the years, but things had never grown romantic. The distance between them was due to the "royals don't show their feelings" line of thought. She and Ben always knew there could be no romance between them. Neither had ever pushed the issue because, until now, there had been no threat. Dawson's Edge had no princess, and Ben was still free.

But what would happen if they never produced a princess? Would Ben be forced to marry into one of their noble families? Perhaps a part of the royals' extended family? It wouldn't be unheard of. After all, Mother had come from within the Loxian nobility when the royal family had no available princess. It was part of the reason Roanna and Ben had become so well acquainted over the years—she and Mother often travelled to Lox in her childhood in order to visit their family.

And as for Roanna? With tensions brewing between Chester's Wake and Dawson's Edge, the stakes were higher. Landowners along the border had been engaging in minor skirmishes for the last year, and the superstitious Dawsonian king believed every rumor of shadows trying to steal his kingdom.

With a marriage agreement between the countries, Roanna could put an end to the fighting. Roanna had thought the ambassador came only to negotiate a treaty, but was marriage the true reason he had visited? Mother and Father hadn't mentioned it, but they might have kept it from her intentionally.

What if she were to accept? She would have to move to Dawson's Edge and await Ben's own marriage into that royal family. What would Ben think? How would he feel?

Her stomach twisted in knots at the thought of letting anyone into her heart. The knots grew more painful with every passing moment.

"Miss?" Bette's voice interrupted her daydreaming.

Roanna focused. "What is it, Bette?"

"You must dress for supper, Miss." Bette plucked Roanna's day shoes from the foot of the bed, and Roanna looked to the window. Was it so late already?

Rain still pounded against the glass, but the clock on the bedside table read that two hours had passed. "I'll be a minute."

Bette nodded and hurried away, and Roanna reached toward her clock. A small note lay propped against it. She hadn't noticed it before, and she opened the envelope.

I hope I didn't get you into much trouble. And I apologize for not getting you into any mischief. I look forward to seeing you tonight.

He hadn't signed it, but she knew from whom it had come.

Benjamin of Lox.

Roanna's heart picked up speed. He had never sent her a note like this before. Why now? She reread

the message and smiled, almost hearing the teasing in his tone. What mischief did he hope to find in the dungeon? Maybe he would fill her in tonight, though it was unlikely Mother would let her sit anywhere near him at supper.

Bette came into the bedroom carrying a black and gray gown with a silky, sleek black top and a billowing striped skirt. A ruffled swath of fabric accented the right hip. It looked heavy, but Roanna kept the thought to herself. Bette often reminded her there was a reason she wasn't in charge of her own fashion.

"Would you like to dress in here, Miss?" Bette asked.

Roanna studied Bette for a moment. Would she be sending Bette's family to their deaths by refusing to marry into Dawson's Edge? Could she live with herself for being so selfish?

"No. I'm coming." She slipped Ben's note under her clock and followed Bette out. Another maid stood in the dressing area, and she and Bette helped Roanna into the delicate gown.

"Time for your hair, Miss," Bette said with a curt nod of conspiracy.

Roanna turned to the other maid. "Thank you. You may go now."

The maid curtsied and left.

Roanna moved to her vanity seat. She pulled pins from her hair and let the dark locks fall. "Gregory discovered our secret today. He promised not to tell."

"Her Majesty will find out soon enough," Bette warned. She gently worked her fingers through Roanna's dark hair, which now fell to her shoulders. Mother preferred it no longer than chin length.

Roanna watched Bette in the mirror. "Maybe she

will," she said. "But maybe not." What if she did marry a Dawson? Mother would never need to know about Roanna's hair until it was no longer a parent's problem.

Bette worked through Roanna's hair with a wide-tooth comb then moved to the dresser. "I have the perfect clip for this gown."

Roanna turned her head to study her hair. It was growing nicely. Faster than she'd hoped. She ran a hand over the tresses, and a chilling shiver raced through her.

Roanna gasped softly. This was the same strange feeling she'd had when Roland whispered in her ear. What could it mean?

Bette returned and scooped Roanna's hair into its usual fashion, but Roanna couldn't forget the feeling.

"You don't like the clip?" Bette asked.

"What?"

"The clip," Bette repeated. "You don't like it? You're frowning."

Roanna checked her image in the mirror. The dainty clip was a brass turtle. Her dark hair was piled and pinned at the back of her scalp, with only a few short, loose ringlets around her face. The new hair clip glimmered all its own. Bette had positioned it prettily in the side of her hair. "I'm sorry, Bette. It's lovely."

With little of her own fashion sense, it always surprised Roanna when she saw her maid's work in the mirror. "You're an artist."

Bette beamed and curtsied. "Thank you, Miss." She had been Roanna's maid for six years now. Roanna needed her. Depended on her.

"Can I ask you a question?" Roanna asked. "What would you do if I were to marry?" She had never asked