



Before the ball...

The setting sun melted into the horizon as though the light were leaving the sky and flooding into Della Campbell. It was the perfect stolen moment. Alone on the marble balcony, overlooking the palace gardens, tiara glinting in the fading light. Her satin ball gown matched the lush greens of the royal palms that lightly swayed above rows of hibiscus plants. Far away, she could hear the eerie calls of the howler monkeys in the Rajeuni Forest, and the hushed whispers of the waves as they lapped against the shoreline. This was literally a world away from South London.

This place is unreal, she thought. How'd I get so lucky to be standing here?

From within the palace, the tinkling sounds of steel pan drumming trilled at her on the night air. The royal ball was underway. With a last glance at the beauty surrounding her, Della left the balcony and walked nervously through the palace's red-and-gold bannered corridors towards the ballroom – heels echoing off the marble floor.

At the end of a hallway, she took a steadying breath and pushed open large double doors engraved with the imposing crest of a lion. The rapturous sounds and delicious smells of fried fish, jerk chicken, sweet cornmeal festivals and fruit-dipped molasses cascaded through. She found herself on the upper level of the ballroom, the steel pans ringing above the buzz of animated voices.

“Wow,” she whispered, looking up in awe. The ceilings were unimaginably high, and they were decorated in oil paintings depicting Black angels, Black cherubs, Black kings and Black queens. Della recalled the school trips she’d taken to stately homes and museums back in England. She’d never seen paintings of Black royalty on the walls and ceilings like this.

The ball guests were largely St Anthonique’s Black elite. There were important lords and ladies, and even royalty from surrounding islands present. They wore luxurious gowns, tuxedos and capes, feathers, crowns and tiaras. Everyone was Black, Brown, Beige and beautiful. Caribbean aristocracy was gathered in one room, and the air sizzled with elegance. The white-and-golden walls gleamed. Regal patterns were sculpted into large columns alongside floor to ceiling mirrors. The tables overflowed with food and drink: rice and peas, curry goat, stewed chicken and vegetables, mackerel rundown and rum punch. Silver bowls overflowed with grapes, mangoes, melons, pineapples and guavas. Small yucca trees adorned in blinking fairy lights graced the middle of each table. The scene was mesmerizing.

Della longed to lose herself, to indulge in this once-in-a-lifetime extravagant affair, but a pang of guilt shot through her. She thought about the struggling people of Old Town, just minutes away from the palace – how the country’s wealth was so clearly concentrated in New Town, and how much money the royal ball must have cost. The gentrified tourist hub of New Town kept island visitors enclosed in their bubbles of western familiarity, while the Old Town residents wouldn’t see a dollar from the influx of wealthy tourists to the island.

Della spotted Ollie standing at the bottom of the balcony staircase. He was wearing a fitted brown suit with a gold trim, and his hair had been combed and gelled back behind his ears. He glanced at her, and then away and then back again, eyes wide in surprise, as though he’d just realized it was her. A huge grin swept across his face, and not for the first time her stomach did a small flip at the sight of him looking so suave and dapper in the Caribbean setting. God, he looked good. The moment embarrassed her. This was her best friend! She shouldn’t be thinking about how good he looked...should she? No, she was just glad to see her bestie, she told herself. Him being here helped calm her nerves. That was what all those thoughts were about.

Ollie’s usually white nose had a watermelon pink crescent on the tip, and there was a line of raw pink skin on his forehead. She laughed as she walked down the stairs towards him, knowing how nonchalant he’d been about applying sun cream.

“Del, you look amazing,” Ollie said as she reached the

bottom stair, her gown flowing around her. The compliment brought a flutter to her stomach. Did he mean that or was he just being polite?

“You scrub up pretty well yourself,” she said, grinning back at him.

He held out his arm like a gentleman, and she took it, admiring the brown-and-cream Jordans that he’d somehow managed to get away with wearing. Each person they passed turned and nodded at the handsome pair. She marvelled at how here she wasn’t the odd one out, no longer a minority. She was just another smiling face in the room.

Every time Della caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror, she felt a thrill at her transformation. The emerald-green halter-neck dress she’d chosen was by far the most beautiful thing she’d ever worn. Simple and elegant. She felt like a princess. She was completely tanned all over, almost a mahogany brown now, and her skin was shiny and buffed with cocoa butter. Her hair was in goddess braids with pieces of her natural curls left out to accompany the plaits, and then pinned into a messy updo with little diamantés stuck at intervals and her baby hairs gelled down to frame her face. She’d always wanted goddess braids, but back in London it cost a bomb. Plus, she had no one close who knew how to “handle” her hair. Tonight, she had the hairstyle of her dreams.

She imagined having her hair done like this at the Goldfarrow prom next year and almost laughed out loud. Along with her peers trying to touch her hair like they were at a petting farm, her

dad would probably be called in to discuss whether the do was against the school's policy. She shook her head, dispelling the thought. Goldfarrow felt like a million lives away.

How quickly her life had changed in just a few short days, and a few thousand miles...