

One Big Masquerade

Kaiva, the capitol city of Tavalar, was ringing with days gone by. Its buildings were big and stone-built, its streets were cobblestone, and its people never let go of a tradition or custom once it was begun. It was also very modern, bustling with cars and the like, people talking on Bluetooth headsets, and enough cell phone and wireless internet signals to make your head spin. At its heart was a quiet park, which our heroine, Amanda, enjoyed visiting often.

Amanda had been left on the Queen's doorstep as an infant. The Queen had adopted her, and when Queen Claire died, her son Alberto took Amanda in. Amanda convinced Alberto to send her to public school, and all through her school days she told nobody that she was the princess. And this masquerade is what this story is all about.

The evening before her graduation, Amanda went to the park, to a beautiful, secluded clearing. When she got there, she was startled to see someone already sitting there, on the bench that had always been her favourite place to think. The man – because he wasn't a boy, he was just about her age – looked at her, alerted by the scrunch of her shoes on the dirt path.

They struck up a conversation. It seemed that they both frequented the same place, but had somehow never seen each other. Tonight, however, they had both come at the same time to think about their graduation.

In Kaiva, all graduating students attend one mass graduation ceremony, regardless of what school they're from, or even if they're home schooled. It is held in the town square, and afterward many rich families hold big private parties. Individual schools hold prom and

graduation ceremonies in May, but the real grad is in June when Public exams are over, to end the students' school years with a bang.

The man sitting there said his name was Sir Fredrick Redwing, and he was a noble of high standing. Amanda, of course, said her name was Amanda D'Alberto, but created the assumption that she was just a regular girl. After they talked all evening, they swapped e-mail addresses and arranged to sit together at graduation the next day.

Amanda and Alberto pulled up to the town square in their taxi not five minutes before the ceremony. Yes, their taxi; Amanda had a car painted to look like a taxi so her limo driver could take her where she wanted to go and still keep up her guise of normalcy. Amanda stepped out and headed off to find Fredrick as planned. On the way, she met up with Dibbun and Sally, her best friends. She dragged them up the aisle to where she had arranged to meet Fredrick.

When it was all over, Amanda and Fredrick were about to leave and Fredrick cleared his throat and said, "So, um, do you...maybe...would you like to...I mean..."

"Yeah?" prompted Amanda.

Fredrick took a breath and clasped his hands, "Could I treat you to lunch?"

Amanda laughed, "What, your folks aren't throwing some big party?"

Fredrick shook his head. "Not if I had my way. But Mother insisted – and she always gets what she wants. She invited all my dreary aunts and uncles."

"Then -"

"Most of them can't make it until tonight, so I've got all afternoon."

"Well then. Where to?"

They decided on Amanda's favourite place, a rather expensive restaurant called Mario's Pizzeria. Afterwards, they went for a walk. They continued talking as they went to the clearing

where they met the night before. As the afternoon came to a close and suppertime drew nigh, they swapped cell phone numbers and headed their separate ways.

Just after supper, Amanda got a text from Fredrick. It read, “Meet me @ 150 Cherry Tree Crescent.”

Amanda asked him why.

“Trust me,” came back the response.

So she took her taxi to 150 Cherry Tree Crescent, where Fredrick was sitting on the steps.

“What’s up?” said Amanda.

“Well, remember that party I said Mother was throwing? It’s going on in there.” he gestured to the house.

“The one with all the boring aunts and uncles?”

“That’s the one. None of the people I invited could make it. I suspect they’re lying, and I don’t blame them. Who wants to sit around listening to old people tell stories all night?”

“So you tricked me into coming? The girl you met yesterday?”

“I prefer to think of it as ...not telling the whole truth and letting you decide. And...I think you’re nice.”

Inside, in a living room filled with Lords and Ladies, a Lady with a large build grabbed Fredrick’s arm and whispered loudly in his ear, “Who’s that, boy?”

“She’s my new friend, Amanda D’Alberto,” he said, attempting to pull away from his mother’s clutch. “I met her in the park yesterday.”

“Hmm. No title. Don’t get too friendly, Fredrick.”

“Mother!” Fred finally succeeded in yanking himself away, and then turned back to Amanda. “I’m sorry. This is my mother, Lady Adelaide Courtright Redwing, and my father,” he

gestured to the smaller man sitting next to her, “Sir Francis Redwing. Mother and Father, this is Amanda D’Alberto.” Amanda curtsied, which felt weird with jeans on, and then shook their hands.

Lady Redwing grunted, which Amanda took to mean, “Well, at least she has manners.”

The evening wore on. Amanda taught Fredrick how to look like he was listening to all the stories without actually paying attention.

As she waved goodbye and climbed into her taxi, she couldn’t help looking forward to the next time she saw him.

They became close friends. When September came, they found that they were in the same university, and in most of the same classes. The shared schooling brought them even closer.

In January, on her birthday, Fred asked her to come to his house to do some homework. When she arrived, he took her in to the games room, instead of the library, where they usually did homework. “It’s a bit messy in here…” he said, and turned on the lights.

“SURPRISE!” Dibbun, Sally, and a bunch of Amanda’s friends jumped out at her. Fred smiled, pleased with himself.

“Fred, I think -” said Amanda. The atmosphere tightened as the room waited for her to finish, “I love you.”

“Kiss!” chanted Dibbun. The others joined in, a few at a time. “Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!” Soon, everyone was shouting.

Amanda was blushing like a beet and reached up to kiss Fredrick on the cheek, but he turned his head and put his lips on hers. She closed her eyes for a moment, but realized what was happening (because Dibbun lead the onlookers in a big “Awww!”) and jerked her head aside, her face ablaze but smiling.

One of the more mature guests said, “Well, let’s get this party started!” and turned on the music.

While most people were dancing, Sally came over to Amanda. “Was that your first kiss? What was it like?”

“No, no.” Amanda insisted, “That wasn’t a real kiss.”

“Looked pretty real to me,” said Dibbun.

“Well?” Sally prodded.

“It was…” She was about to say how wonderful it was, but instead she said, “Too short to say.”

Fred came over just as Sally and Dibbun went to dance. “So, where’s the giant stash of presents you’ve been hiding?” Amanda joked.

“What, the kiss wasn’t enough?” said Fredrick, pretending to be hurt.

“No, of course it was,” said Amanda. Fred smiled, stopped the music, and made a loud whistle with two fingers. Everyone looked at him. He reached behind the stereo and pulled out an envelope with Amanda’s presents – four tickets to the Valentine’s Day showing of *The Phantom of the Opera*. Amanda declared she would take Sally, Dibbun, and Fred, of course.

“Double date, hey? So I guess we’re officially ‘going out’ then?” Fred said to Amanda as they slow danced only minutes later. Amanda paused, very briefly, and nodded. A smile spread across her face. Fred grinned back and they continued twirling around the room.

After everyone had left, and Fred showed Amanda out, he headed back upstairs, but there was his mother and his second cousin coming out of the den.

“Fredrick, meet Kayla, your future wife.”

Fred was suddenly thrown off of cloud nine and spiralling down into a black hole.

“WHAT?” he exclaimed, “But what about -”

“You can’t seriously be considering that *peasant* girl, Amanda what’s-her-name?”

Fredrick was about to say that he was, but his mother said, “I’ll leave you two together to get to know each other,” and headed off down the hall.

“We can play along for now,” said Kayla, obviously as opposed to the idea as he was, “They won’t make us get married until we’re done university.”

“I hope not. But when our parents aren’t around, life goes on as normal. Deal?”

“Deal.”

Fred showed her out, trudged up to his room, flopped on his bed, and opened FaceSpace, his favourite social networking site, on his laptop. Amanda had changed her relationship status. He smiled, but it was posted on his profile, just waiting for his mother to find it. His smile faded as he asked Amanda to take it down.

“What?” said Amanda. She was perplexed.

“Listen, I’ll talk to you in school tomorrow.”

“But I thought we . . . are.”

“We are, just – I’ll tell you in person.” Fredrick logged off, and Amanda sat at her desk, very puzzled. It had been he who had turned the kiss from a simple crowd-pleaser into something more, and it had been he who voiced the fact they were going out, now he didn’t want her to say so? She spent a troubled night. He said they were. Now he said they weren’t but they were and he couldn’t say why? She had thought she knew him, but did she really? She hoped he would make it clear the next day, but he had lost her trust.

He avoided her all day in school. She got more confused every hour, and couldn't pay attention. He couldn't pay attention either, but unknown to her, he was trying to figure out how he could tell her he was engaged to someone else, yet still loved her at the same time.

They hung out after school, but Fredrick was quiet, distant, and altogether out of character. This carried on for almost a week, and by the end of it they didn't even get together for homework. Amanda went from distressed to just plain sad. They had gone from kissing to not talking in one night, and seemingly without reason.

On Friday, he figured it out. He came up behind her and laid his hand on her shoulder. She spun around, startled and about to pour her heart out when she saw it was him. He interrupted to tell her he loved her, and then explained the whole situation. Amanda understood – it wasn't as complicated as Fred seemed to think. It was just the kind of thing she would expect from Lady Redwing.

Things were back to normal, until June, when they were undoubtedly in love. One day, just before exams, Fred and Amanda had been cramming all afternoon, Fred ran downstairs to get them a snack but five minutes later, he came back in the room, without any snacks. He sat down heavily in the chair next to hers, put his elbows on the desk, and buried his head in his hands. He moaned, "*Now* what am I going to do? Mother says I'm never allowed to see you again." He turned his head momentarily to look at her.

"That's not good," said Amanda, "But you're letting her run your life again. You've got to step up!"

He groaned, "Not likely."

A seed of an idea came to Amanda. "She can't help it if we're in the same classes. Or," the seed began to sprout, "If I just 'happen' across you and Kayla."

“Yeah,” Fredrick looked up. “But she doesn’t know you’re here. The problem at hand is how to get you out of here without her finding out.”

Amanda thought a moment. “There’s a drainpipe right outside your bedroom window. I can slide down that.”

“Just like a fairytale. You’d think we belong in a storybook or something.”

“It’s not a storybook. It’s just life.”

* * *

Their contact over the next little while was limited to what few minutes they could grab in between classes and immediately after school. They had thought to hang out as normal but have Kayla join them, but after the first time they decided against.

“It’s too risky,” Fredrick said. “If Mother finds out…” He trailed off.

“I’ll just have to love you from a distance, I guess.” Amanda sighed. She knew it was just that he couldn’t disobey. So their contact dwindled, although as they missed each other more, it was then they realized how much they were truly in love.

One night, Amanda couldn’t take it anymore. She went to his house with her guitar and threw pebbles at his window until he came to it. Then she started to play and sing “Bad Day”.

“Shhhhh!” he said, “If Mother hears you she’ll kill me!”

“Well then, let’s go somewhere else.” Fredrick smiled and climbed out the window and down the drainpipe. They walked to the park and to their clearing. Fred borrowed Amanda’s guitar and sang a song he had written for her. It was silly, and deliberately off key. He compared her to some pretty weird stuff. She was “As hot as a sidewalk in July,” for example. After two verses, she just had to laugh. It was like a switch. Fred played and sang to his full ability –

which, in Amanda's opinion, was very good. He played a sweet verse, comparing her to much more normal things – sunshine, the sea, heaven.

Amanda wrapped her arms around him as the music faded off into the night. He put his arm around her and they stayed there for what seemed like a happy eternity.

“Aren't the stars beautiful?” said Amanda finally.

“Not as beautiful as you.” said Fredrick.

“Oh, you're so sweet!” said Amanda, “and I think it's really cool you wrote a song just for me.”

“I have more verses if you'd like,” he picked up the guitar and started singing out of tune again. Amanda groaned, but smiled at the hilarity of the lyrics.

“You're as unique as sardines in stew...”

Sneaking out became a regular gig. At first, Amanda would come and get him every so often, but it evolved into a weekly thing. Every Friday night they met in the clearing at the park, sometimes going to other places, but usually they stayed there and just talked about the week.

One September day, Fred's mother came up to him and started rambling about picking a date for the wedding. She forced him to sit with her in the dining room while she planned A LOT about the wedding, not letting him put a word in edgewise. Finally, his cell phone rang, giving him an excuse to get out of there.

Fred took off out of the room to take Amanda's call. “Thank goodness you called,” he said, “Have you got a sixth sense or something?”

“Uh...no, I was just bored and wanted to talk to you.” Amanda said, “What's up?”

“Mother just picked out almost everything about the wedding except Kayla's dress,” he told her.

“You’ve got to stand up to her, Fred. If she’s not stopped at your wedding, she’ll be telling you what to do for the rest of your life!” Amanda urged him.

“Well, I guess I could ... Oh, I meant to tell you.” He changed his tune, “I found a way for us to spend more time together. The Drama department is holding open auditions for a musical. I figured if we tried out together for the leading couple...”

“OK, but I didn’t know you could act.”

“Can I act? Amanda, I’ve got Mother convinced that I love Kayla and don’t even know you exist. Of course I can act! The question is, can you?”

“It’s a secret dream,” Amanda replied. Little did he know that she was sitting in the palace, heir to the throne, and had almost everyone she knew fooled into believing she was an average girl.

Amanda was waiting at the front of a queue of hopefuls going over lines for their parts. Fredrick came along and gave her one of those hugs where she got lifted off the ground. “I did it!” he said. “I stood up to Mother...sort of. I told her the bride should be involved in planning the wedding, and that she would be busy for a long time.”

“It’s a step, anyway,” said Amanda, one corner of her mouth turning up in a half-smile.

“Next,” called an unimpressed voice from inside the audition room. After they auditioned, the director, who the princess could see was hiding how much he liked their performance, said, “Well, we’ll see. Give me your phone numbers. I’ll have you called if you make the cut.” They gave him their numbers, left, and the next hopeful went in.

The next day, they both got called. “A musical is a lot of work,” the director told them. “Especially lead roles. If you’re going to back out, do it now so I can call the next best actor.” Of course neither backed out.

Rehearsals became the main points of Amanda and Fredrick's relationship. They spent time together off stage, and when they were in character together it was magic in the making. At one point, the script told them to kiss. The director told them they could fake it if they wanted, but, from the first time, they smiled and kissed for real.

One day, Fredrick couldn't make it to practice. An understudy had to fill in for him, and the kiss was next. Amanda pursed her lips and leaned around to fake the kiss. The understudy looked almost panicked for a moment, but did his part to make it appear real to the audience.

After the rehearsal, the director's assistant came over to her. "You were a bit off your game today," she said, "What's wrong?"

"Well, that guy's just not Fred, you know what I mean?" said Amanda.

"Yeah. I know what it's like to play a scene totally off another actor. But I also know what it's like to be totally messed up when he got sick on opening night. The guy who filled in was a good actor, sure, and hit all his marks, but I regret relying so heavily on Mike's spin on it. Just realise that it might happen to you."

"OK then," said Amanda. She hoped not.

That Friday night Lady Redwing was out, so since it was snowing they hung out in Fred's house instead of going the park. At one point Fredrick said, "Sorry I couldn't make it to practice the other day, but Mother wouldn't shut up about the wedding. She made me write out the invitation BY HAND so she could have it copied later. Every time I got one written out, she would tell me I had to change something, and I'd have to start over. It took me forever to do even one, because of how many tries it took to make my handwriting 'legible.'" He showed her the invitation from the desk. The background was ugly floral paper, and on a cream-coloured card in

the middle were a few lines of curly handwriting so perfect it was difficult to believe it was actually Fred's.

"I thought she was waiting until you were done your education," said Amanda, "But this says it's this year."

"So did I," replied Fredrick, "But I guess I was wrong."

They were silent for a moment, both thinking the same thing: what would happen if he went through with it? Their answer was, "A lot of things." Both Fred and Kayla would be stuck married to someone they didn't love, Lady Redwing would remain in control of Fredrick's life, and neither Amanda nor Kayla's boyfriend would be able to be anything more than friends with the people they were in love with. On top of that, the wedding was the same night as the second (and final) performance of the musical, and according to tradition there would be a rehearsal the night before, which was opening night, so Amanda could just forget about him being able to perform with her.

"It's not only my problem, is it?" asked Fredrick.

"No, but it's going to have to be your solution," said Amanda.

That conversation struck something in Fredrick. Many of his thoughts were taken up with those last two sentences, playing like a broken record in his mind. They nagged at him constantly, like his mother after overdue homework, only more. It drove him to the point where he lost sleep, couldn't concentrate on anything – especially school – and didn't want to eat.

Amanda noticed these things in him, and was worried. But one day, things changed. He didn't say why, but he suddenly went back to his old self, only happier, freer, and more passionate. He started – she thought – sneaking out more, so they could hang out all the time like they used to. That particular day, Lady Redwing had just asked Fred to mail the invitations and

he had said to himself, “*It’s now or never. Do you really want to do that to Amanda?*” So he took a deep breath and said, “No. I’m not marrying Kayla.”

His mother was taken aback. “Why not?” she said.

“Because I love Amanda, and I can’t let you run my life anymore. I’m 20 now, legally an adult, so you can’t make me do anything,” he told her.

“Well, I suppose you’re right, but I’d still rather you find someone of your own station than some *peasant* girl,” she said quite disapprovingly. Fred marched out the door and went to find Amanda, but he wasn’t going to tell her just yet. He had a plan.

* * *

Amanda was sitting in the green room on opening night, five minutes before they were supposed to go on. The actors were supposed to get there almost half an hour earlier, and Fred hadn’t shown up yet. “*He’s getting married,*” she thought sadly. A tear slid down her cheek. At that moment, Fredrick, ever so quietly, came in and slipped through the cloud of actors to stand behind her. “Guess what?” he whispered in her ear, “The wedding’s off.” Amanda, startled, spun around. “You heard me. I’m a free man!” Fred said, “Ever since May!” Just then the director’s assistant clapped her hands for attention, and the director began giving them the old pep talk. The couple kissed quickly and followed the others to gather around him.

One summer night, a full moon shone on a happy couple embracing in the clearing they called their own. Amanda looked deep into Fredrick’s eyes and said, “I want to spend the rest of my life with you.” She gave him a longing look and said, “Do you?”

Fredrick turned his head aside, sadly saying, “No.”

Amanda uttered a small gasp and turned around, staring at him over her shoulder with great, sad eyes. Slowly she turned her eyes to the ground at her feet. She stood like this for a

minute, and then turned suddenly to Fredrick, who had been gazing at her. “Fine!” she said defiantly, “Be like that. I can rule my kingdom alone quite fine, thank you.” Tossing her head, she started to stalk away.

“Amanda, wait!” Fredrick called after her. “Your kingdom...you are the princess... Oh I’m so sorry!” he said, dropping to his knees as he reached her.

“Oh, get up, man!” said Amanda, facing him now.

“But I was so rude!” said Fredrick, lifting his head to look in her eyes. The look Amanda gave him said, “Just get up already!” so he got to his feet and began explaining. “It was my mother. I was going to propose today, I really was, I had a ring and everything! But Mother found it and said, ‘Who’s this for boy? That peasant girl?’” (He imitated her voice almost perfectly, adding a tone of great disgust to the word ‘peasant’) “And she made me bring it back. I guess I was thinking like her, thinking maybe marriage should be for profit, not for love. But I was so wrong. I do want to be with you, whatever your rank. And now that I know you’re the princess, she’ll almost force me to marry you.”

“Well let’s go tell her!” Amanda said gleefully.

“Wait!” said Fredrick, “Sit down.” Amanda sat on the bench, and Fredrick knelt before her. “I didn’t really bring the ring back. I just pawned off an old one of Mother’s and gave her the cash.” He produced a ring box from his pocket and opened it. Inside was a gold 3-stone ring. The left stone was light red – garnet, her birthstone – and the one on the right was purple – amethyst, Fredrick’s birthstone – neither too large, and both had minute flaws. But the one in the centre was a large, perfect diamond. On the inside was engraved: Amanda and Fredrick. Alone we’re all right, together we’re perfect.

He said, “Amanda Claire D’Alberto, will you marry me?”

“Oh, Freddy!” said Amanda, throwing her arms around his neck, “You’re so romantic!”

Over the next few months everything was settled. Lady Redwing, of course, kept trying to have her say, but they would not hear of it. In early spring, they were packing Fred’s things and came across an old-ish envelope that said, “*Fredrick*” The yellow tape that held it shut crackled as Fredrick slid his finger gingerly underneath to break the seal. He drew out a piece of fine stationary and read aloud,

“February 14, 1133

My dearest Fredrick,

I cannot believe you have been with me a whole year! You are such a pleasant little boy.

But I have a confession and an apology to make. First of all, I never wanted to marry your father in the first place. I was holding out for the prince,” (“Yuck,” thought Amanda), “Or at least one of his cousins. But his cousins are all married already, and Prince Alberto spends all his time alone, so I had to give in to my parents’ arrangements. Secondly, before you came along I was to have a baby girl, and I was so excited for the little lady I would get to raise. But she was stillborn, and I wept for many days.

I did not want to have another child right away, while Marissa’s death was still so fresh in my mind, but your father did, and what could a shy maid such as myself say to oppose a big, strong man like him?” Here Fredrick had to stop so they could laugh. It was hard to believe his mother actually said that. He continued, “So you were conceived. The doctors couldn’t tell me whether you were a boy or a girl, but I got my hopes up for a little lady to fill the hole Marissa left in me. But you were a boy, and my hopes were deflated.

I never had time to grieve properly for your sister, so I suppose I never really let it go, and I am afraid this has carried through to my care for you. So, when you find this, I am sorry if I was ever too strict or controlling with you, but just remember: I LOVE YOU, always and forever.

Love,

Mother”

That evening, Fredrick showed the letter to his mother. Lady Redwing skimmed the letter. A tear glistened in her eye. Fredrick said quietly, “I found this today. I just want to say I forgive you.”

His mother put her arms around him in a rare hug. Only unlike others he could remember, this one was definitely heartfelt. He wrapped his arms around her as well, and she whispered, “I got over Marissa a long time ago, but by then I had forgotten all about this. I think all that bitterness has become part of who I am. I’ll truly try to be different from now on.”

A couple days later, the cathedral was packed for the elegant royal wedding. Fredrick was waiting at the altar as the bridesmaids and groomsmen paraded in. Amanda’s heart was racing so fast she thought it would tear right out of her dress. As Sally, the maid of honour, and Dibbun, the best man, walked down the aisle, she nervously adjusted her tiara and smoothed out her dress. The ring bearer was sent off down the aisle. The flower girl was ushered into position, and two boys took up her train. Alberto came to her side and took her arm. He lifted the edge of her veil and kissed her cheek, calming her down without a word. “You’re doing the right thing,” he whispered, “And you always knew it.” The organist began playing “Here Comes the Bride” and the procession stepped onto the red carpet.

Minutes later the priest asked, “Do you have the rings?” Each ring sitting on the ring bearer’s cushion was untraditional, but packed with symbolism. They were made of two separate gold bands, but in the middle of each they bent to a right angle and linked around the other so they could shift left and right but never come apart. Amanda’s hands held the hands of her love,

and he took the smaller, daintier ring from the pillow with one hand. As he slipped it onto her finger, and repeated the vows after the priest, Amanda looked into his eyes, his deep, beautiful, brown eyes, and knew that he meant every word. She took the larger ring from the pillow and put it on his finger, and made her promises to him. She had never been more certain of anything she had ever said.

“You may kiss the bride,” finished the priest. Amanda wrapped her arms around her prince’s neck, and he held her face in his hands. As their lips met, Amanda thought, “*Maybe it is a fairytale after all.*”