Royal Ball Book 1



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DEDICATION TO MY FAMILY AND FRIENDS.

Acknowledgments

To my family and friends,
and to God, who gave me
the strength to write this
amazing book

The Johnson Family

Michael, Gregory
Johnny Jr., Belinda,
Rodney, Jeremiah



Chapter 1:
The Royal Ball

On the night of the winter solstice,
the kingdom shall assemble for the
Grand Royal Ball.

At midnight the palace gates shall
open to welcome lords and ladies,
honored guests of the court.

Music shall play, dancing shall follow,
beneath the sovereign's crest.

All are invited to celebrate in honor
of the crown.



The Royal Ball

Chapter 1

Beneath The Walls

The royal ball had been perfect for exactly forty-seven minutes.

The Prince stood in his dress blues. The Princess stood in ivory and gold. In the center of the Grand Hall hung the pride of the kingdom — The Starlight Portrait, valued at $15,000,000.

Then the lights flickered. One breath of darkness. When the light returned, the portrait was gone. Four empty gold hooks swayed where it had been.

"Seal the doors! No one leaves till sunrise!" the Guard shouted.

By the dessert table, two men did not move toward the exits. Apeman — broad shoulders, scarred knuckles. And Amongus — quiet, sharp-eyed, who noticed what others missed.

While nobles stared at the empty wall, Amongus stared at the floor beneath it. "Look," he whispered. A thin trail of white marble dust led to the great tapestry. A cold draft came from behind it.

Apeman knelt, found the seam in the stone the architects had hidden, and pushed. The wall groaned and gave way. Behind it was a narrow passage. Stone stairs, worn smooth, descended into blackness. On the third step — a fresh footprint, and a white glove with a fleck of gold paint.

From above, the great clock struck 10 P.M. They had until sunrise.

Apeman picked up a lantern. Amongus picked up the glove.

"The ball is up there," Apeman said.

"The picture is down here," Amongus replied.

Together, they stepped beneath the walls.

The Royal Ball

Chapter 2

The Glove and The Gold

The stairs did not creak. That was the first clue.

These stairs were used. Often. While the Grand Hall above had polished marble for show, the passage beneath the walls was worn down the center, smooth as river stone. Someone had been coming and going for years.

Apeman held the lantern low. The light caught three things at once.

First — more footprints. Same shoes as above, now hurrying downward, heel digging deep.

Second — a smear of gold paint on the left wall, at shoulder height, as if something large and framed had brushed against it in a rush.

Third — the glove was not a guard's glove. Amongus turned it inside out. Embroidered on the cuff, in tiny blue thread, was a crest: a swan with a broken crown. The mark of the kitchen staff. Or more precisely, the pastry kitchen.

"The $15 million picture wasn't stolen by a master thief," Amongus said quietly. "It was stolen by someone who knows the back stairs."

A door at the bottom of the stairs was ajar. Warm air poured out, smelling of butter, sugar, and — oil paint?

They pushed it open. It was the old winter kitchen, abandoned after the new ovens were built, now used for storage. Flour sacks stacked to the ceiling. And in the middle of the room, on a flour-dusted table, a space exactly the size of The Starlight Portrait had been cleared.

But the portrait was not there.

Instead, sitting on that clean space was a single, perfect, tiny white cake. And on top of the cake, in gold frosting that matched the stolen paint fleck, were two words:

"FIND ME."

From far above, muffled through stone, they heard the orchestra start again. The Prince was trying to keep the ceremony alive. The clock was

The Royal Ball

Chapter 3

Sugar and Shadows

The dumbwaiter was built for trays, not men, but the rope was still swinging.

Amongus brushed the powdered sugar with his fingertip and tasted it. Almond. Not kitchen sugar — royal icing sugar, the kind the Princess's baker used only for wedding cakes.

"Up," Apeman said, and pulled.

The little wooden box creaked upward, one floor, then two. They followed the shaft's ladder beside it, lantern banging against stone. Far above, they could hear the muffled violins of the ball still playing, as if nothing had been stolen at all.

The dumbwaiter stopped with a soft thud. A hatch opened into darkness. Not the kitchen. Not the hall. The Princess's private dressing tower.

And it was empty — except for a mirror, a chair, and The Starlight Portrait leaning against the vanity, untouched, worth $15,000,000 and glowing faintly in the lantern light.

They had found it.

Then they heard the breathing.

Behind the portrait's huge canvas, crouched on the floor, was a boy in a flour-white apprentice uniform, no older than seventeen. His hands were covered in gold paint, his eyes red. The swan crest on his glove matched his chest.

"I wasn't going to sell it," he whispered, shaking. "The Prince was going to have it locked in the vault forever after tonight. No one would ever see it again. I just wanted one night where everyone could see it up close. Downstairs. For the staff."

Amongus knelt. "So you hid it in the winter kitchen?"

The boy nodded at the dumbwaiter. "I was bringing it back up when the lights flickered. I panicked. I left the cake because — because in the stories, the thief always leaves a clue."

The Royal Ball

Chapter 4

Before Sunrise

"We don't carry it up," Amongus said. "We carry it down."

The three of them — Apeman, Amongus, and the boy with gold on his hands — lifted The Starlight Portrait. It was heavier than it looked. Not because of the frame, but because of three hundred years of history inside it.

They eased it into the dumbwaiter shaft. It barely fit. Rope creaked. Wood groaned. Inch by inch, they lowered fifteen million dollars through a space built for soup tureens.

Above, boots thundered. The Captain: "Check the dressing tower!"

Apeman jammed the hatch shut just as the door to the tower burst open. They held their breath in the dark shaft as lantern light swept inches above their heads.

"Empty!" a guard shouted. The footsteps receded.

They lowered the portrait all the way back to the winter kitchen, then through the secret door, up the worn stairs beneath the walls, the same way it had been taken.

1:17 A.M. The tapestry. The stone seam. The Grand Hall was on the other side, still pretending the music could cover the missing wall.

Amongus peeked through. The Prince stood alone by the empty hooks, his ceremonial ribbon uncut. The Princess stood beside him, whispering, "It will be all right."

Apeman nodded once.

Together, they lifted the portrait and set it back onto its four gold hooks. It settled with a soft, definitive click.

Then Amongus stepped out from behind the tapestry and said, loudly enough for the whole hall to hear: "Captain — you can open the doors."

Every head turned. The Starlight Portrait hung exactly where it had been, glowing under the chandeliers as if it had never left.

A gasp, then applause, then confusion. The Prince stared, then saw the boy behind Amongus, his hands still gold, his head bowed.

The Royal Ball

Chapter 5

Sunrise

Sunrise in the Grand Hall looked different than sunset.

At 6:01 A.M., the chandeliers were dimmed for the first time all night. Pale morning light came through the tall stained glass and fell directly onto The Starlight Portrait — now hanging exactly two feet lower than it had the night before.

Two feet lower. By royal order.

The Prince had kept his word. The ribbon had been cut at 2:03 A.M., the alliance sealed, the orchestra sent home. But the Princess had added a condition: the portrait would never go to the vault. It would stay in the hall, at eye level, where anyone — noble or kitchen staff — could stand inches away and see the brushstrokes.

A small crowd had already gathered, despite the early hour. Not nobles. Bakers. Footmen. Maidens. The boy Tomas stood in front of them, no longer in his flour-white uniform, but in a clean dark apprentice coat. His hands were scrubbed clean, but if you looked closely, a little gold still lived under his nails.

The Princess approached Apeman and Amongus by the dessert table. Two empty cake plates sat there.

"You found it before sunrise," she said quietly. "As you promised. How did you know it wasn't a real thief?"

Amongus glanced at Tomas. "The thief left a clean space on a dirty table. A real thief leaves a dirty space on a clean table. And he left a cake. A real thief never leaves dessert."

Apeman chuckled, a low sound like stone shifting. "And the stairs were worn. This castle has more secrets than it has guests. Someone should map them."

The Princess smiled. "Would you two consider staying on as Keepers of the Walls?"

Amongus and Apeman looked at each other. One raised an eyebrow. The other almost smiled.

"We'll think about it," Apeman said.

Outside, the bells of Salina rang seven times — not royal bells, but town bells,

The Royal Ball

Chapter 6

Keepers of the Walls

Three days after the ball, the castle was quiet.

The Starlight Portrait hung low, and a line of people that had never been allowed in the Grand Hall before — dishwashers, gardeners, stable boys — filed past it, whispering. Tomas stood beside it in his new coat: Assistant Keeper of the Gallery.

But Amongus noticed something the Princess didn't.

One hook was empty.

Not the four that held the portrait. A fifth. High in the shadow above the tapestry, where no painting had hung for fifty years. A small, dark iron hook, with fresh scrape marks. And beneath it, on the floor, a single, tiny, folded paper swan.

Apeman picked it up. Inside the paper was written, in the same gold-frosting handwriting as the cake:

"THANK YOU FOR LOWERING IT. NOW I CAN REACH THE OTHER ONE."

Amongus felt the cold draft again. He pushed the tapestry aside. The secret stairs were open — not closed as they had left them.

And from deep below, from somewhere they had not explored, came the faint sound of music. Not the ballroom orchestra. A lullaby. Played on a single violin.

The Prince entered, still in his dress blues, tired. "We thought it was over," he said.

"One theft was to share the art," Amongus said. "This one is to take something else."

Apeman already had the lantern. "What else hangs beneath the walls worth fifteen million?"

Tomas went pale. "Nothing. Above the walls. But beneath... the Queen's private vault. They say the real Starlight Portrait — the original sketch, worth more than the finished one — was sealed down there when she died. No one has been down there in twenty years."

The Princess appeared in the doorway, holding a heavy iron key she had never

The Royal Ball

Chapter 7

The Queen's Vault

Three days after the ball, the castle was quiet, but the key was humming.

The Princess's iron key vibrated in Apeman's palm, answering something deep below.

They opened the tapestry again. The stairs continued past the winter kitchen, down into rough rock where no map went. The violin lullaby grew louder — a mother humming to a child who would not sleep.

At the bottom: a round iron door, rusted shut twenty years, with a swan-shaped keyhole.

Apeman turned the key. It screamed, then opened.

Inside was not a vault. It was a nursery.

Dust. A small bed. A rocking chair still moving. Hundreds of sketches on the walls — the same little girl at different ages, all drawn by the Queen.

On an easel, covered in velvet, was the original Starlight Portrait — not the $15M oil, but a tiny charcoal sketch of a baby laughing under starlight. The first one. Worth more than the finished one because it was the first.

In the chair sat the castle's oldest maid, playing the violin.

"I left the swan," she said to Tomas. "I needed you to lower the big one so the hook would be free, so you would look up and find my note. The Queen made me promise to guard this sketch until her daughter was old enough."

"What truth?" the Princess whispered.

The maid lifted a second sketch: the Princess as a baby, held by two women — the Queen, and the maid herself. On the back, in the Queen's writing: 'My two mothers for my one daughter. Guard her.'

The paper swan was not from a thief. It was from a mother who waited twenty years.

Tomas set his fresh cake on the little bed. In gold frosting it said: WELCOME HOME.

The Royal Ball

Chapter 8

The Second Invitation

Morning after the vault, the castle tried to be normal. It failed.

Apeman and Amongus were given a small room behind the tapestry — two chairs, a lantern that never went out, a map table. Painted on the door: KEEPERS.

Tomas brought them tea and a letter. Sealed with gold wax, stamped with the Starlight crest. It had appeared on the map table while the door was locked.

Amongus opened it. One line: YOU FOUND THE NURSERY. NOW FIND THE LIBRARY. — A FRIEND

On the back was a tiny drawing of the castle, but with a second castle underneath it, mirrored. A circle marked where no room should exist — directly under the Grand Hall, deeper than the vault.

The Princess entered holding the old maid's violin. The maid is gone, she said. Her bed is empty. But she left this under her pillow. It was a second key — not iron, but brass, and warm.

Tomas whispered, The old servants said the Queen built a library for the stories she couldn't tell upstairs. The stories too true to hang on walls.

Amongus stood. If there's a library beneath the walls, and someone wants us to find it, then someone is still down there, waiting.

Apeman picked up the lantern. It flared brighter, as if it recognized the brass key.

The ball was supposed to be one night, Apeman said.

The book is just starting, Amongus replied.

They locked their Keeper office, took the two keys — iron and brass — and Tomas's newest cake that read DO NOT EAT UNTIL YOU GET BACK, and opened the secret door again.

Behind them, the Starlight Portrait, hanging low where everyone could see it, seemed to watch them go.

The Royal Ball

Chapter 9

The Library Beneath

The brass key was warm because someone had just been holding it.

The Keepers followed the mirrored map. The stairs went down past the nursery, past the vault, past where stone became black glass. The air smelled of old paper and candle wax, not dust.

The iron door at the bottom had no keyhole. It had a book-shaped indentation. The brass key fit inside it sideways, like a bookmark.

It clicked.

The Library Beneath was not a library. It was the Grand Hall — exactly — but upside down. The chandeliers rose from the floor. The tapestry they had come through hung from what should be the ceiling. And the four gold hooks where the Starlight Portrait hung upstairs were here too, but they held not a painting, but a mirror.

In that mirror, Amongus and Apeman did not see themselves. They saw the Grand Hall on the night of the Royal Ball, frozen at the moment the lights flickered. And in the frozen image, standing behind the Prince and Princess, hand on the light switch, was someone they knew.

Tomas.

But not the Tomas who baked cakes. An older Tomas, wearing the Starlight crest on a royal coat.

Apeman turned around, lantern shaking. Behind them in the real library, sitting at a table stacked with every book the Queen had ever forbidden — books about the castle having a second castle — sat Tomas. Older. Tired. Smiling.

"You took your time," Older Tomas said. "I've been waiting twenty years for you to find this room."

Amongus understood first. "You're not a friend. You're the map."

Older Tomas nodded. "The pastry boy you met is me, at seventeen. The night I stole the painting, I saw this library by accident when I ran. The Queen's maid found me and told me: one day, two Keepers would come who would lower the painting so everyone could see. And when they did, the library would open for the boy who would become its Keeper."

He slid a book across the table. On its cover, in gold: THE ROYAL BALL — BY TOMAS, PASTRY AND KEEPER.

"I wrote your story," he said. "Because you lived it. Now you have to write mine."

The mirror behind them flickered. In it, the seventeen-year-old Tomas in the ballroom looked up, directly at them, through time, and whispered: 'Find me before sunrise.'