



MARY MECHAM

RAPUNZEL'S
GAMBIT

ALL THAT GLITTERS



CHAPTER 1



A chorus of boos from the crowd reverberated in my ears as Father stood to speak to our kingdom's subjects. I spotted several clutching over-ripe tomatoes and braced myself for what would inevitably happen as soon as the speech was over.

"A blight has plagued this land for too long," he began.

"You're the blight!" one man shouted, shaking a fist in the air.

Additional angry shouts rose from the crowd to agree, but they were indistinguishable over the low rumble of mutinous muttering. The sentiment was obvious enough that I felt no desire to try and decipher the exact wording. I fixed my attention on the back of Father's head, as if riveted by the silver sheen of his short, cropped hair that formed a horseshoe shape under his gold embossed crown.

"This dragon from the west has been burning our crops, feeding on our sheep and cattle and, if we do not take care, it will come for us, too!" Father continued. "I'm aware of your struggles. I know people have been going hungry."

“Lower the taxes and we won’t be hungry!” a woman shouted spitefully. One of the knights guarding the platform put his hand on his sword and took a threatening step forward.

“It is the *dragon’s* fault that the tax rate is so high,” Father went on. “If it weren’t for its constant raids, everyone would have more. And I have a plan to solve the problem.”

I heard a few in the audience shushing others as the noise level decreased slightly, everyone eager to hear what aid would be given to offset their losses. Such hopes were quickly dashed, however, as I knew they would be. Father never had any intention of depleting our kingdom’s coffers for anyone’s benefit but his own.

“Therefore,” Father waited for total silence before he continued, “I will offer my daughter’s hand in marriage to the first prince or man of noble birth who can kill this menace!”

What?! I felt countless eyes shift over to fix on where I sat, frozen in shock, on the raised dais. A murmur of interest rippled through the crowd, but it all sounded like the buzzing of bees as my mind raced to process what had just happened. I couldn’t believe that Father would offer to auction me off to some unknown man, as if I were some paltry trinket to be won at a tournament. Was this his way of getting back at me for the many pranks I’d played on him and his friends in the past?

For the people’s benefit, I schooled my facial expression into one of acceptance, as if I had always known I would be sold off this way. I shivered, partly because I was always cold, and partly at the prospect of how my future, and the futures of so many men, had changed so drastically in a matter of minutes.

“What about *until* it’s killed?” A haggard-looking elderly man cried out. “I don’t want to marry a princess; I want to feed my family!”

“Stop the taxes!” his friend shouted, and everyone broke into an uproar again, so loud that guards stepped in front of my father, shielding him from the irate civilians. Ripe tomatoes would be the least of his worries at this rate.

Father held up his hands to placate the crowd. “I’ll look into lowering the tax rate,” he vowed. “But in order to continue the imports of food, we wouldn’t be able to lower it significantly without supplies being disrupted, and that means killing the dragon. None of us want any children to starve.”

I resisted snorting. Of course Father would lead with weaponizing children’s safety and security against their terrified parents. I knew enough of the kingdom’s finances to confidently say that there were other avenues we could pursue if we wanted to lower the taxes. No one had to go hungry. The villagers were correct; Father’s greed was the true blight on our land.

“We must beware the dragon,” Father warned them. “If it tires of taking our oxen and sheep, he could come for our children next!”

Several couples looked at each other in fear, but I wanted to groan in embarrassment. This was yet another scare tactic, and a very effective one that distracted from the real issue at hand. Dragon attacks only ever occurred when one was challenged by a dragon hunter. Otherwise, they might occasionally steal livestock, but as far as I knew, none ever swooped down to snatch infants from their cradles. It was only stories about knights and princes who sought out dragons who met terrible ends.

“Who is brave enough to challenge the dragon and win

my daughter's hand? If the people want to be ruled by one of their own, this is your chance. The future of Rookwyn depends on you!"

Several knights and noblemen began stepping forward, pledging their swords to the attempt and vowing that they would rid the land of the dragon so it wouldn't steal anymore. Father commended each one in turn, and I rose, still numb with shock, to greet each in the line of men, all of whom were eager to slay the beast and gain power.

Each of those vowing to hunt the dragon whispered words as he brushed his lips to my hand, all saying how they would win my favor, that it was an honor to risk his life for so beautiful a woman, and other comments that washed over me without ever sinking in. Was that the last time they would kiss a woman's hand? Did any of them know what was in store for them? Did they have any idea just how shrewd and intelligent a dragon was?

This was no mere boar that could be hunted with hounds or lances, scared out of its hiding place with noise and arrows. We were discussing a fully grown *dragon*, a beast more intelligent than any human, more powerful than a dozen war stallions, and covered with a scaly armor that, as far as I knew, was impenetrable.

Father hadn't proposed a noble quest; this was a suicide mission.

For the first time in what felt like years, we weren't pelted with overripe fruit as we were escorted off the dais and to the carriage. I'd heard tales of kingdoms in which the royalty were lauded with cheers and accolades everywhere they went, but if such stories were true, they never happened in Rookwyn or the surrounding areas. Our subjects had no reason to love us.

Greed was a pervasive infection that had been solidly entrenched in all the nobility and royalty I knew of. I even saw it in myself, though it disgusted me to know I was sometimes so similar to Father. He used to be kind and even playful at times, but ever since his parents passed away several years ago and he took over ruling the kingdom, his former warmth had evaporated like the morning dew on a summer day.



On the carriage ride home, Father was the one who brought up the topic of my impending engagement. “I’m sure it must have come as a bit of a shock to you,” he began.

“You think?” I spat back.

“Rapunzel,” he scolded while straightening his crown, displaced from the carriage bumping down the road riddled with potholes. “I don’t know why you’re so worked up about it. You’ve done similar things in the past.”

“What’re you talking about? I’ve never pulled anything like the stunt you just did!”

Father shot me a withering stare. “You sent out an official decree on my personal letterhead that all nobility needed to present a poem praising my accomplishments before being allowed entry to the throne room.”

“That wasn’t harmful. That was just funny.”

“You wrote insults on Lord Morvain’s banner celebrating his twenty years of service to the crown.”

“Those were all true statements.”

One of his eyebrows arched up the same way mine did. “Not to mention how many men you’ve kissed just to humiliate me. Everyone has been saying I can’t control my own daughter.”

I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms. “Oh dear,” I drawled. “What an appalling tragedy that is. We can’t have anyone thinking I have my own free will now, can we? Best slap me in chains now so you can control me better. Perhaps it would be best if you lead me around like a dog on a leash. Should I wear a collar?”

“Rapunzel!”

“It’s still different. What you did isn’t some harmless prank; these are *lives* at stake. It’s my future, and it is the lives of all those men. They’ll die trying to defeat a dragon; you know it, and I’ll be forced to marry—”

“Don’t worry,” Father interrupted with a chuckle. “It isn’t like any of them will succeed. And besides, how will we know if they don’t try?”

The weight of his words crashed into me. *It isn’t like any of them will succeed?* Father anticipated them all failing. He expected them to try and to be killed in the attempt, and to what end—to delay some of the anger that they felt toward him? To prove that he was just as despicable a ruler as they believed him to be? To thin out those who might vie for the throne? He was willing to send his subjects on a suicide mission just to pretend like he was doing something to help them.

Father watched me through narrowed eyes. “You’ve forced my hand.”

“So you’re auctioning off mine? Pray tell, how did I force you to send dozens of men to their deaths?”

“You’ve offended so many of the surrounding kingdoms

that I need to do *something* to regain their favor. The dragon's lair is near the border of many kingdoms; this will benefit everyone."

I met his glare with one of my own. "Except those you sent to be slaughtered."

"The lives of a few are a small price to pay if it stops the dragon stealing livestock."

"It's not too small a price if you're the one who's being sacrificed. Livestock isn't the same as human life."

"They signed up. They all volunteered. I'm not forcing anyone to do anything. Besides, if they *do* succeed, they will be the future queen's consort. A fine deal, if you ask me."

"I *didn't* ask you, and you certainly never asked me my thoughts about you deciding my future for me."

"Your future was decided for you when you were born," he said dismissively.

I sank back into the plush velvet seat of the carriage. What sort of life was he living in which he could discard the lives of his citizens so easily? Did he think that the blood of his extensively trained knights came cheaply? Did he think that, with a snap of his fingers, he could replace an army? He was so consumed by greed and selfishness that he had become impossible to reason with.

The landscape flashed by outside the window, from the blur of fields of crops withered by the brutal sun to the craggy mountains pitted with caves.

No amount of glaring could ever convey the depth of deep-seated resentment and hostility I felt toward my father. We trundled past an orphanage, where children with sunken, hungry faces and who wore heavily patched clothing stared with open mouths at the carriage whisking by.

“Why are you not sending more aid to the people? They’re struggling and you know it.”

Father stroked his bearded chin, staring out the opposite window, away from the orphans. “You’ll see in time, Rapunzel. Peasants often bring about their own misfortunes. They resent paying the required taxes that pay for the military who protect them and the roads that they use, then they spend time griping about it, and because they wasted their time complaining, they consequently have less time to work, have less because of their laziness, and then spend even more time sitting around blaming us for all the shortages they’re experience. It’s a vicious cycle. We mustn’t reward them for their lack of effort.”

I shivered slightly as I frowned at him. Was his disdain for the people always so apparent, or only recently evident as I grew old enough to accept more of the responsibilities of ruling? What had happened to the caring man who used to read me stories when I was a child?

“When was the last time you talked with the people?”

Father raised an eyebrow as if he questioned my sanity. “Just today. You heard me speak to them.”

“No, you talked *at* them. When did you last listen to their concerns and ask for their input?”

Father shook his head, still stroking his pointed beard. “Royalty cannot afford such things. It would be a risk to my personal safety, and peasants only know their small corner of the world. Imagine taking advice from someone who knows nothing of operating a kingdom. They know nothing about tariffs or foreign diplomacy or domestic affairs. They know their trades, and their role to the kingdom is to perform their trade well.”

Father was an intelligent man. He could do complicated arithmetic inside his head and quote lengthy passages of

great works of literature, but he hadn't been a wise or compassionate king. The people truly hated him, but it didn't bother him one bit. It hadn't troubled me when I was young enough not to know better, but it did now.

I fidgeted with my handbag, opening and closing it again so my hands had something to do. "How can we rule the people if we do not truly know their circumstances?"

"I wouldn't expect a young girl to understand the complexities of politics yet. This isn't like one of your little chess games." Father smiled indulgently at me, but a flame of hot anger leapt inside my chest. So, I was just a young girl who couldn't understand anything? Was that why he offered my hand in marriage, because it was the only value he thought I held? I wasn't going to stand for it. If only I could oust him from power and seize control of the kingdom now. I would be a better ruler than Father had been. But even so...he was still my father. I wouldn't initiate a coup against him.

What benefit was there to being a princess if I was going to be auctioned off to some power-hungry knight who saw me as a tool to further his own position? Why would I *want* to rule if my people hated me for my whole life? If I ran away or refused to be married, I was sure to be seen as shirking my duty, or else selfishly putting my own happiness before that of the kingdom. If I stayed and ruled as Father had, I would be hated, just as he was. The only other option was wait for the next forty to fifty years for Father to die so I could take over and rule the way I saw fit, but the notion of eagerly anticipating my own father's death was repugnant.

No matter what, there was no way to win.

Before the carriage had come to a complete halt, I threw open the door and leapt down. The footman squeaked in

alarm as I bypassed the stairs he normally unfastened for me. I stumbled upon landing and nearly dropped my handbag, but hastened to right myself and stalk away.

“Rapunzel!” Father called after me, reproach in his voice.

I didn’t stop. I didn’t care if he wanted to talk to me or explain himself or was simply concerned about the servants realizing we had argued. If he refused to extend me any courtesy, I would do likewise. He didn’t deserve my respect or time when he clearly didn’t value it anyway.

“Rapunzel!” he shouted again. “Don’t forget about the ball tonight!”

There may as well have been a thundercloud hovering over my head as I stormed through the gardens. I glowered at the dragon sculptures that were sprinkled throughout the gardens, maws open wide and ruby eyes glittering in the bright afternoon sun. Dragons. Father blamed all his problems on the one near our kingdom’s border, but the people seemed much less concerned about the creature and rightly so. It never troubled the citizens that I’d heard of, but Father’s gross negligence caused immense suffering.

I kicked morosely at a stone that skittered away down the garden path, then closed the distance to where it lay and kicked it again, even harder. It felt cathartic to transfer my frustration into something else. It bounced against the marble fountain, and I raised my gaze to stare at the obstacle. Yet another dragon-related sculpture, this one a marble block shaped like a dragon spewing flame in the center of the fountain, with water pouring from the dragon’s fanged mouth instead of fire. I stared into its jeweled eyes, which appeared alive as the light reflected off the gemstones. Fat fish swam lazily about in the pool beneath the dragon’s carved claws, unconcerned with

anything as they drifted about in the pool's glimmering depths.

As I lowered my hand to touch the water, they approached, eagerly searching for any tidbits I might have brought them, then retreated when they found none. I circled my hand in the pool. The summer day had warmed the water, and the gentle heat against my skin was soaked into my hand just as desperately as the fish had wanted fed.

A scarlet-crested jay fluttered down and settled on the dragon's sculpted head, piping its eerie melody to the sky. I moved on, dodging behind statues anytime I thought I saw a servant headed my way. Father would never deign to search for me himself, but I had no doubt he would send an endless stream of ladies-in-waiting to track me down before the ball tonight. Ugh, yet another one of the endless parties Father threw to flaunt his wealth to other kingdoms while refusing to aid his own people.

"Princess Rapunzel!" I had been spotted. I glared at the inscription chiseled into the plaque beneath the sculpture; *Never trust a dragon*. I snorted. Father had been aptly nicknamed *The Dragon King* by the people. He was just as greedy, and the inscription was true. I shouldn't ever trust him.

"Princess Rapunzel!" the voice repeated, and I wearily looked around for the speaker. It was Harold. Both he and his father, Lord Morvain, were some of Father's most trusted advisors, and new anger flared in my chest. Did he have any idea about what Father had announced? Had he encouraged it? Harold was still unmarried and close to my age, but it was too much to expect that he would have any sympathy for my plight. He was just like all the royalty and nobility I knew—arrogant and self-absorbed. Harold looked very similar to Lord Morvain, with a hawk-like,

hooked nose, shrewd eyes, and a thin build with wispy hair. One might have thought of them as bookkeepers, but I was more inclined to think of them as snakes—deceptive and cold.

“Harold,” I greeted him frostily, inclining my head a fraction of an inch. Was I like my own father? Surely I had the predisposition to be just as ruthless and cunning as he.

“You have a ball tonight,” he informed me, drawing up close. “Several of the knights planning to challenge the dragon will be in attendance and your father wishes for you to greet each one personally.”

So he knew after all. Did all of Father’s advisors know, and all had neglected to tell me about it? I attended most of the same meetings Father did, from foreign diplomacy to domestic affairs and trade negotiations. How was I the only one unaware? They must have known I would object and therefore discussed in secret when I wasn’t around. I ground my teeth together. Of course they’d discussed my future without me.

“Did you hear me?” he asked, raising his voice a little. “I need to let your father know that you received his message.”

“I heard,” I told him. No matter how much Father wanted to control my life, I still had some freedoms. I coyly pulled my lipstick out of my handbag and coated my lips. “It’s a shame I won’t have any say in whom I’m to marry soon; I have my own preferences. Tell me, Lord Harold, have you ever seen our vegetable gardens?”

He curled his lip in disdain. “I have not. I have much more important matters to tend to.”

“That’s too bad. It’s very secluded this time of day,” I told him, lowering both my eyes and my voice. “*Very* secluded.” I took a mint from my bag and pressed it onto

my tongue. “And I don’t need to start getting ready for the ball for another hour or two. Would you like for me to show you the gardens?”

“I—oh!” I could almost see the gears working in his head and his expression shifted from condescending to cautiously hopeful. “Yes, I think I would like to take a stroll in the garden with you.”

CHAPTER 2



Father's profuse swearing was accompanied by the pattering of many footsteps as his servants hurried after him, growing closer to the room where I sat, plucking at my harp and forcing myself not to smirk. The door flew open with an almighty crash. After finishing the last few chords, I slowly rolled my head around, an agreeable smile on my face that didn't match Father's murderous glare.

"Good afternoon, Daddy. What a lovely surprise. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Where is he?" Father thundered. Behind his back, the servants whispered to each other, hands concealing their mouths.

I blinked innocently. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I've just been here practicing my harp, waiting for the ball to begin. Where is whom?"

Father's face was a delightful shade of deepest plum, and the veins on his thick neck throbbed rapidly. "Lord Morvain's son Harold. Where is he?"

I tapped my finger on my chin. "Lord Morvain...Lord

Morvain...isn't he the one who your subjects call the Dark Lord?"

"I swear, Rapunzel, you tell me where he is this instant, or I'll...I'll..."

"You could lock me in a tower," I suggested, eyes narrowed. "Or marry me off to any stranger you choose. Isn't that your plan, anyway?"

Father rolled his eyes so hard that he could have examined his own brain as he let out a long stream of air, cheeks puffed out so he resembled a plum more than ever. Then he forced a strained smile onto his face.

"Dearest, *darling* daughter, if you don't reveal the location of my closest friend's son right now, I swear I will marry you off to the next man who walks through the door and I won't care if it's the chimney sweep."

I put a hand up to my chest and widened my eyes in mock surprise. "You always suspect me when your friends go missing. That hurts."

"Am I ever wrong?"

I raised a solitary eyebrow, glad I could make Father just as angry as he'd made me that morning. "All the time." I went back to strumming my harp. "Did you know that the gardener's shed near the vegetable garden is always untended during the midday meal?" I shot him a wicked expression. "Harold's head is so empty; he might have been hunting for a replacement among the lettuce."

Father turned. "Go, go, go!" Two of the manservants sprinted back down the hall in the direction of the vegetable gardens.

I resumed playing the harp, immensely satisfied by how the gentle music was at such great odds from the venom in my father's gaze. Minutes trickled by as he continued to glower. I smiled adoringly at him. "You're such a wonderful

father to listen and be so supportive of my musical endeavors.”

His eyelid twitched and he didn't respond.

“Shall I play you another song?” I turned a page on my sheet music and narrowed my eyes. “This next number is called *The Vengeance Sonata*. It's one of my favorites.”

I played the melody, relishing how the vein pulsing in Father's temple was growing more pronounced with each minute that trickled by.

“Your Majesty!” The head servant had returned, panting. “We found Lord Morvain's son shoved into the gardener's shed. He was unconscious and seems to have been drugged. He's now in the infirmary being tended to.” The servant shot an uncomfortable look my way.

I put a hand up to my mouth and gasped dramatically. “Scales above, who would do such a terrible thing?”

“Leave us,” Father growled to the servants. Looking quite relieved to vacate the scene, they all scurried away, shutting the door with a snap behind them.

Without breaking eye contact, I idly strummed my harp. “I'm nearly done with this song, then I'll finish getting ready for the ball, just like you want me to.” I flashed him a wicked smile. “I'm eager to meet all the rest of these men you're so anxious to marry me off to. Will a chimney sweep be in attendance?”

He ignored my question. “Give me the rest of it.” He held his hand out expectantly.

With a smile, I handed over my sheet music. “Is that what you wanted?”

In a fit of rage, he ripped the papers to shreds and scattered the pieces into the air. “The wyrmsleep! Whatever you drugged Harold with! Where is it? Is there more, or did you use it all? Turn out your pockets.”

I watched the bits of paper flutter down. “This dress doesn’t have pockets, Daddy dearest. Besides, wyrmsleep isn’t even deadly. I don’t know what you’re so worked up about.” How I relished using his own words against him.

“Give me your handbag.”

I gestured at where it lay on the table. Father wrenched it open and extracted a simple fan, a comb, my small tin of mints, and the tube of lip stain. Unsatisfied, he spent an additional five minutes scouring the bag for any hidden pockets or concealed seams.

“Take your shoes off,” he ordered.

I slipped them off and wriggled my bare toes as he shook the shoes as if he expected packets of powdered sleep aid to tumble out. I raised an eyebrow. “See? I’m innocent.”

“As innocent as the dragon who keeps stealing all of my oxen,” Father snapped. Then, he closed his eyes and took a long, steadying breath. “Why are you doing this, Rapunzel? This is the third man this year.”

“Why do you keep assuming *I* did it?”

A smile curled Father’s lips. “Because you’re exactly like I am, that’s why—brilliant and scheming.”

“And I’m the person I am today because of what I’ve been modeled all my life. Aren’t you proud?” I matched his steely gaze, my jaw jutted out defiantly.

Father sighed heavily and ignored my question. “I just can’t figure out where you put the rest of the wyrmsleep. Do I need to have a handmaiden come to search the rest of your person?”

A tentative knock echoed around the room.

“Enter,” Father boomed. The head servant was back. “What news, Reginald? How’s Harold?”

“We managed to revive him.” He shuffled his feet. “He

claims the last thing he remembers was...was kissing your daughter, sire.”

I couldn't conceal the smug expression on my face. “Oopsies. Was that me?”

“Thank you, Reginald. Tell Lord Morvain and his son that I will see them shortly and offer a personal apology, as will my *very* penitent daughter.” He said the last few words through gritted teeth.

“Lord Morvain and his son are some of the few allies we have left,” Father said wearily after Reginald left and we were alone again. “Why would you ostracize the few who are still on our side?”

“You ought to be glad I picked him instead of an enemy. At least you know he'll forgive us.”

Father stared at me, and I matched his glare with a challenging one of my own. Finally, he sighed and ran his hand through his silver hair. “Why couldn't I have had a daughter who enjoyed embroidery? The other kingdoms' royalty have started calling you the Feral Princess of Rookwyn.”

“Ooh, the feral princess? I like it. A fitting name for the Dragon King's daughter.”

Father's anger faded as he handed me back my handbag, the corners of his mouth curling upward. “So, tell me, how did you get Harold to take the wyrmsleep?”

I took the handbag and tucked it under my arm. “The benefits of my womanly wiles. Shall I describe my exact actions to you?”

Father closed his eyes. “No. I don't want to think about that. Just...don't do it again.”

“I would never.” I held out my arms, and Father eyed me suspiciously. “What, you're unwilling to hug your only child?”

Slowly, he wrapped his arms around me, but the hug felt perfunctory rather than meaningful.

“You’re impossible, you know that?” he sighed.

“So are you.” I broke away, giving his hands one final squeeze, and headed for the door.

“Rapunzel...” There was warning in Father’s voice.

I rolled my eyes and gave him back his wallet.

“Now the rest.”

“I don’t have anything else.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

He raised his eyebrows and waited.

“Fine!” I slapped his cloak’s jeweled brooch back into his hand and closed his fingers around it. “Happy now?”

“Very. You’re worse than any dragon.”

“I know.” I beamed and turned away, discreetly tucking Father’s signet ring into my handbag as I did so.



Ready to find out what happens once Rapunzel decides to kidnap herself and team up with the dragon plaguing her kingdom! This book is available on Amazon.

