—THE— ROYAL JEWEL PLOT

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To Alice Moloney, my editor, and Clare Wallace, my agent.
I'm so thankful to have you both by my side!

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A. M. HOWELL

Low Reading

CONTENTS

Chapter 1	The Lady Rose	11
Chapter 2	Opal and the Octopus	25
Chapter 3	Master Vickers	35
Chapter 4	Hiding	50
Chapter 5	Feeding Time	58
Chapter 6	The Diary	68
Chapter 7	Vanished	77
Chapter 8	Accusations	83
Chapter 9	The Search	92
Chapter 10	Suspects	103
Chapter 11	investigations	112
Chapter 12	The Jewelled Flamingo	119
Chapter 13	The Golf Shot	130
Chapter 14	Frances's Secret	139
Chapter 15	The King's Rooms	149
Chapter 16	Don's Dive	160

LoveReading

Chapter 17	Town Walls	171
Chapter 18	Zoran Borić	180
Chapter 19	Party Preparations	186
Chapter 20	Cheese Dome	197
Chapter 21	Sneaking Ashore	208
Chapter 22	Town Hospital	220
Chapter 23	The Daily Eagle	228
Chapter 24	Abandoned	239
Chapter 25	Engine Trouble	247
Chapter 26	Conversation with the King	265
Chapter 27	Locked Up	275
Chapter 28	That Night	284
Chapter 29	Ripped Open	292
Chapter 30	Goodbyes	300

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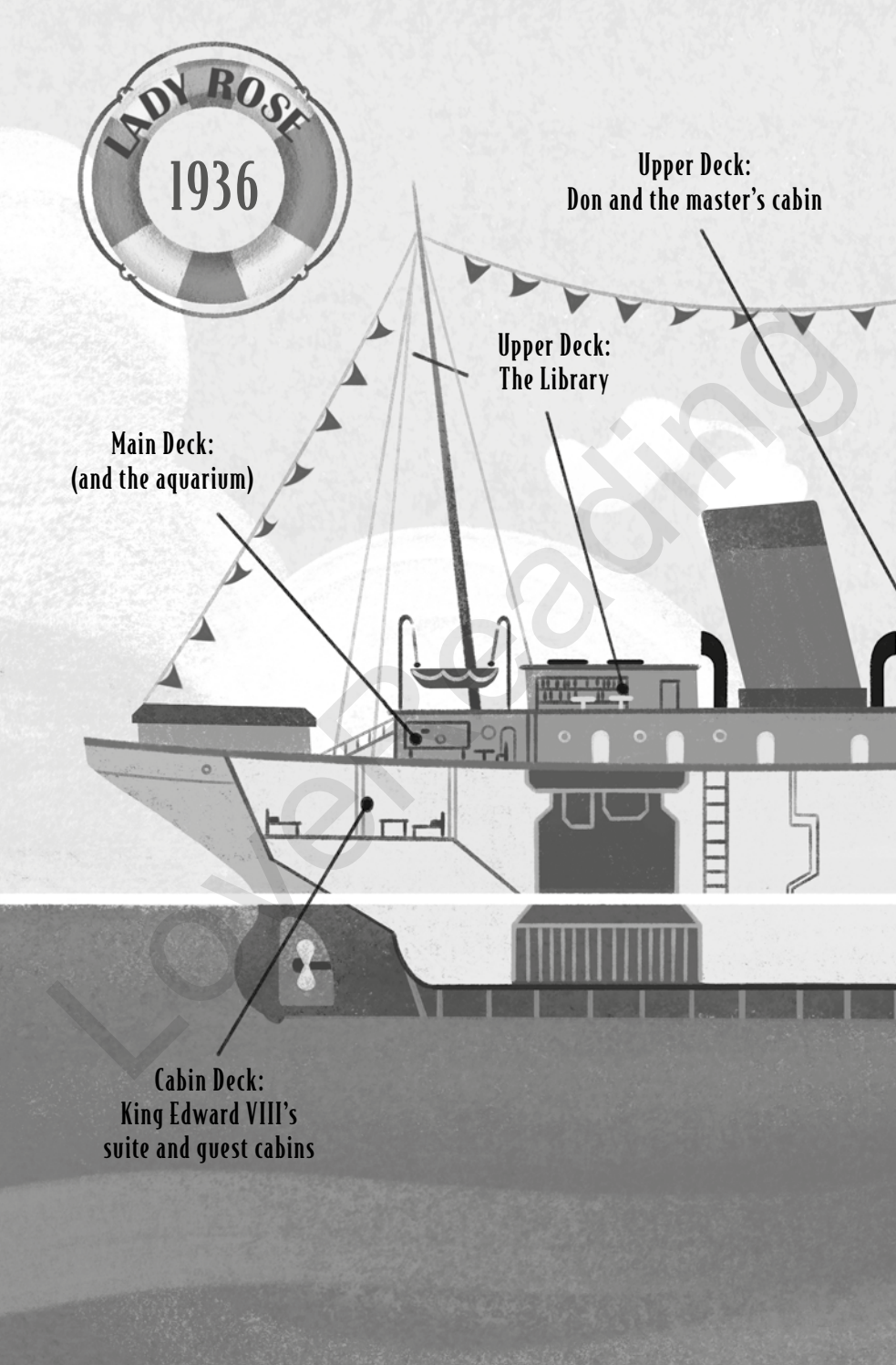

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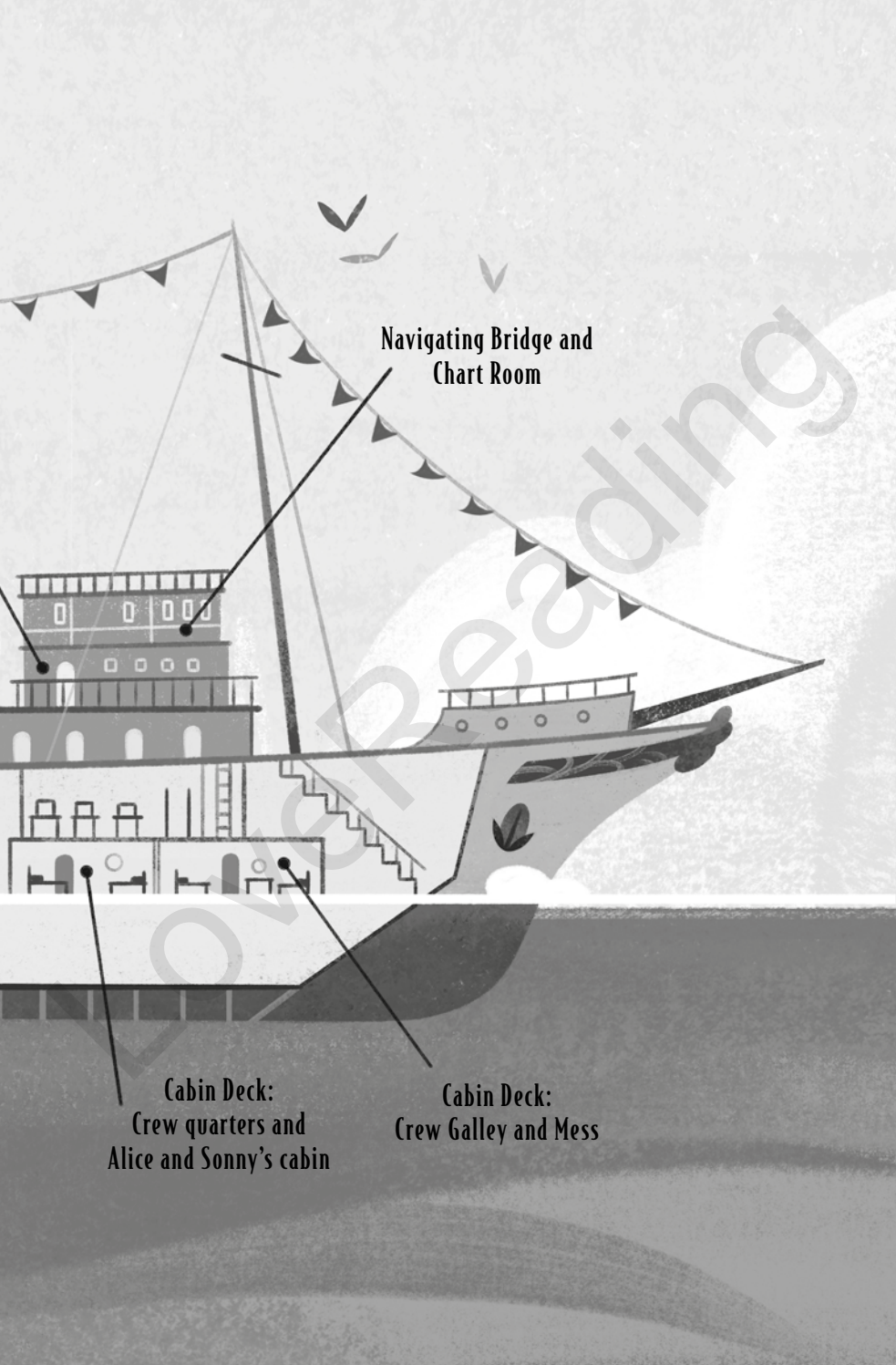

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The Daily Eagle

MONDAY 24TH AUGUST 1936

RUMOURS OF ROYAL VOYAGE!

The British press may be silent on the matter, but surely even they cannot have failed to hear the rumours that the king of England is soon to take a Mediterranean cruise on board the luxurious steam yacht, the *Lady Rose*, with his American friend, Mrs Wallis Simpson.

The king is said to have recently gifted a flamingo brooch encrusted with rubies, sapphires and diamonds to Mrs Simpson, and rumour has it that this is not the only precious gem on board the yacht. The race is on to see which lucky newspaper will be the first to snap a picture of Mrs Simpson wearing the brooch on the royal holiday.

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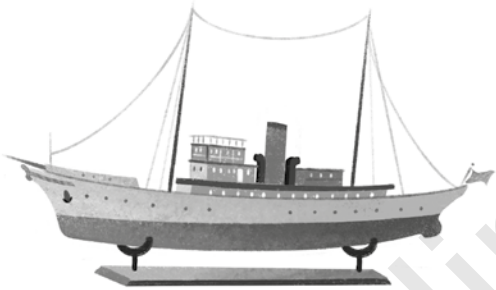
Chapter 1



THE LADY ROSE

Alice glanced at her watch in dismay. They were going to be late for the king's arrival! Tightening her grip on her suitcase as she hurried along the hot, dusty street, her head was full of the summer storms, landslides and train delays that had hindered their journey from England to the small port of Šibenik on the Yugoslavian coast. A journey that should have taken two days had instead taken four.

On any occasion that would have been irritating, but they had been expected on the *Lady Rose* (the steam yacht she and her brother, Sonny, had recently inherited from

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their grandfather) two days ago. Now they were late and the king of England, who had paid handsomely to holiday on the yacht, was due to arrive at any minute. *She, twelve-year-old Alice Townsend from Suffolk, England, was going on the king's voyage!* Even thinking these words seemed fantastical, like a story in a thrilling paperback novel. Though the king certainly wouldn't be impressed at having to wait for them.

Swallowing her excitement, Alice took in the throngs of locals dressed in bright cotton skirts and Sunday-best suits emerging from the town's narrow side streets, as they too headed towards the port. Many of them stared at their party of four and she wasn't at all surprised.

There was Father at the front, his beige suit jacket as crumpled as his brow as he strode alongside a station porter pushing their luggage trolley.

He was closely followed by Dorothy, her brother's governess and former guardian, with her frilled sun parasol and satchel of school books bumping against her side.

Then there was Sonny, her brother, just a few steps ahead as he carefully carried his pet mouse Rocket's cage. The brim of his sun hat shielded his eyes from the sun's glare and a canvas bag of mouse bedding slung across his shoulder gusted in the breeze, wood shavings scattering

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from it like breadcrumbs. A gaggle of local children laughed and scurried after him, picking them up.

Alice giggled at the unfolding scene as she walked behind, and a woman wearing an embroidered shawl smiled at her, her gaze curious and lingering. Perhaps she was wondering at Alice's brown hair, which had kinked into rebellious waves in the heat, her dusty sandals, her ink-spotted fingers and her straw hat that now resembled a squashed mushroom after Alice had accidently sat on it during one of their long train journeys.

Returning the woman's smile, Alice hurried after her brother, perspiration trickling down her back. She breathed in the sweet-smelling air and looked up at the clamour of red rooftops climbing a steepish hill. The excitement at finally arriving at the port was making the troubles they'd faced on their journey quickly fade.

Pressing on through the gathering crowds, they finally emerged onto the quayside. "Look. There she is. The *Lady Rose*," Alice said to Sonny breathlessly. Her heart skipped as she gazed at the yacht named after their mother, who had died when they were both small.

The boat's long white hull sat low in the sparkling emerald water, her clipper bow curving elegantly upwards. Two raked masts reached high into the sky and a squat

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funnel sat above the wooden deckhouse, puffing lazy breaths of smoke into the air. It was quite the most beautiful vessel Alice had ever seen. To think that her mother had travelled on it as a girl!

Alice thought of her most precious possessions nestling in her suitcase, the two silk gloves made by their mother, which had helped reunite her and Sonny little more than a month ago. They had been told that a few items belonging to their mother were still on board the *Lady Rose* and she felt a burst of anticipation at what they might find. Jewellery perhaps? Or, even better, a diary about a voyage her mother had taken on the yacht, like the adventures book Alice kept? Whatever these things were, she was excited to be among them.

A member of the yacht's crew, dressed in a smart white uniform, waved and strode towards them. He stepped over the locally woven carpets that covered the quayside like a patchwork blanket and past a man giving them a sharp sweep with a dustpan and brush. He was tending to the carpets as if they were expensive rugs in a grand country house and Alice saw no detail had been overlooked in preparing for the king's arrival.

Sonny placed Rocket's cage at his feet and mopped his brow with an already damp handkerchief. "Almost there,"

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he said fondly to his mouse, who had disappeared under a pile of wood shavings and shredded paper on their final train journey to Šibenik. He was probably as exhausted as they all were.

Despite her tiredness, Alice felt fizzy, as if she were full of bubbles. "I can't believe this is happening, can you?"

Sonny tilted his head. "I don't know. Taking a cruise with the king of England along the coast of Yugoslavia seems quite normal after everything else that's happened this past month."

Alice grinned. Sonny was right. July had been a whirlwind of discoveries as she'd voyaged across the Atlantic on the *Queen Mary* with her father, who was second in command on the ship. Having left England believing she was an only child, Alice had arrived in New York four days later having discovered that Sonny, the friend she had made on board while foiling a plot to sabotage the vessel, was in fact her fourteen-year-old brother. The knowledge that they had been kept apart by their jealous grandfather was delicate, like the wings of newly hatched butterfly. It still made Alice's head thrum when she thought about it.

"You must be the Townsend family, the new owners of the *Lady Rose*?" the man in uniform asked as he stood

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before them. His face was rake-thin and bronzed, his smile creasing the skin at the corners of his eyes.

They were the owners of the Lady Rose*!* Alice recalled her feelings of disbelief upon learning she and Sonny had inherited the yacht from their American grandfather. While his vast fortune had been lost in the Great Depression, he'd kept the yacht. Their father assumed this was because of its emotional connection to their mother.

"Yes. I do apologize for our lateness. You received our telegram from Switzerland?" their father replied, pulling their passports and identification documents from his jacket pocket, and handing them over for inspection.

The man nodded as he examined their papers. "I'm sorry to hear about the difficulties you had on your journey. I'm Andrew Pepper, the first officer. I was instructed by Master Vickers to greet you – he's captain of the vessel. He's terribly busy making the final preparations for the king's arrival but will see you as soon as the yacht is under way."

There was a cheer from the crowd further along the promenade and cries of, "*Viveo Kralj! Viveo Kralj!*"

"Goodness. I wasn't expecting to see quite so many people here. What are they saying?" asked Dorothy, the fringes of her parasol dancing in the breeze.

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Mr Pepper frowned. "They are saying 'God save the king'. His majesty has travelled across Europe to Yugoslavia under an alias to try and maintain his privacy, but the foreign press have blown his cover, hence the crowds here to celebrate his arrival."

Alice saw her father's frown lines deepen and Sonny threw him an anxious look. Their father had issued them with endless instructions on their long journey, pressing on them that while they were the new owners of the *Lady Rose,* the king had chartered the vessel and wanted privacy. He had sole and private access to the principal rooms on board and the guest suites, meaning they were forbidden from using them and would be bunking down in the crew's quarters. He had also expressed concern that the voyage might be followed by the press and that the king would not be pleased about that.

"I'm sure the king will be happy enough with his privacy once we depart," continued Mr Pepper. "If you look just offshore, you'll see the small British naval destroyer HMS *Glowworm*. The vessel will accompany us for the king's security. His majesty also changed the yacht's itinerary to avoid the busier ports on the route south to Dubrovnik." He paused, rubbed his chin and looked at Alice and Sonny. "The king's private secretary knows that you'll be on board,

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but the master has assured him that you'll remain firmly in the background, so to speak."

"You've nothing to worry about there, Mr Pepper," their father replied, smoothing his moustache, and giving Alice and Sonny a quick glance. "My children are well aware we are not to speak with the royal party."

"We certainly are," said Alice, doing her best to squash her disappointment. The thought of speaking with the king…well…that was almost unimaginable, but she still secretly hoped their paths might cross all the same.

"Please, you must all call me Andrew. And that's excellent to know. It's always good to get off on the right foot so there are no misunderstandings," the first officer said, giving Alice a friendly grin. He turned at the stutter of a car engine along the quay. "I think that must be the king's car. Let's get you on board and I'll send someone to fetch your luggage and tip the porter."

Alice and Sonny hurried across the brushed carpets after their father and Dorothy, the yacht looming closer with every step. Alice felt a little dizzy as she crossed the wooden gangway onto the boat's pristine teak deck and breathed in the smell of warm wood, varnish and the brine of the sea. She curled her toes in her sandals and resisted the urge to dash off and explore at once.

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"Ah, there's Don. He's the master's son and is with us for a few weeks over the summer holidays. He's offered to help you stow your belongings, although for now would you all mind waiting alongside the deckhouse near the stern until the king has boarded?" Andrew asked, saying a swift goodbye. He rushed off to attend to some of the yacht's crew who were standing in a row, lined up like soldiers ready for an inspection.

A boy around Sonny's age in navy knee-length shorts and a white linen shirt stepped forward. He gave them a pleasant smile, his gaze settling on Rocket's cage. "You've brought a pet with you?" he said, pushing his floppy, dark hair from his eyes.

"My mouse. He's called Rocket," said Sonny, grinning back.

"I've a hamster and several rabbits back home in Kent. My mother's looking after them while I stay with my father over the summer," said Don. Alice noticed a flash of something straining his cheeks, as if thinking about home had worried him.

"It looks like the king will be here any minute," Don continued, quickly ushering them all along the side deck towards the stern.

The crowd's chants had reached a peak.

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Alice paused to watch a black car swing up to the edge of the carpet-covered quay. An official wearing a dark suit leaped forward to open the passenger door. Her mind whirred thinking of the details she might record in her adventures book later: the warm breeze ruffling the edges of the carpets, the cries of *"Viveo Kralj!"* as the townspeople greeted the king, and the sun painting a golden path over the pale, stone buildings that climbed the hill.

The king stepped out of the car. He smoothed his light brown hair and gave a brief wave to the crowd, then set off for the gangway. His loosely fitted grey flannel suit, dark tie and pressed handkerchief in his top pocket seemed more suited to a gloomy day in London and, at first glance, Alice thought he did not seem very king-like. But then again, she supposed he was on holiday. A woman stepped out of the car too. Her bobbed dark hair fluttered as she waved a small fan in front of her pale face.

"Who's that with the king?" asked Sonny, placing Rocket's cage in the shade.

"I believe that is Mrs Wallis Simpson, an American friend of his," said Dorothy, leaning over the railing to peer at the couple. "I read about her in the newspapers. She's become quite a close friend of the king's apparently."

Alice recalled the *Daily Eagle* newspaper report she'd

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read on one of their long train journeys about Mrs Simpson's bejewelled flamingo brooch. She saw a clutch of press photographers pushing forward trying to photograph the king and his lady friend, but Alice could see no glint of the brooch on Mrs Simpson's high-necked cream blouse. A second and then third car pulled up on the quay.

"The king has brought along quite a number of travelling companions," commented their father, as a serious-looking man in a dark suit, two lady's maids in black-and-white uniforms and a more casually dressed man puffing on a pipe bustled about on the quay checking the piles of leather trunks being loaded aboard the yacht.

"I suppose these are his own staff," suggested Dorothy.

"Imagine having all those people to look after you," said Sonny.

"I'm not sure I'd like that very much," said Don, wrinkling his nose. "Do you think he has people to do up his shoelaces?"

"And clip his nose hairs," said Sonny with a grin.

Alice laughed. Don seemed friendly. If he had been on the yacht for a while, perhaps he could show them round and tell them how everything worked. Their father had said they must make themselves useful while on board and had written to the master suggesting Alice and Sonny help the stewards or deckhands with their daily tasks. Alice felt

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a pinch of nerves at what this might involve, so had spent the past few weeks practising carrying trays of drinks, making up beds with sharply turned corners and even scrubbing toilet pans, much to Sonny's amusement.

"Pardon me," said a young stewardess carrying a tray of drinks. Her light brown skin had a sheen to it and her black hair was pulled into a bun at the nape of her neck. The ice cubes clinked in the tall glasses as she hurried along the side deck towards the gangway where the royal party were soon to board the yacht.

Alice looked at the drinks longingly, her throat parched after their travels, but she was distracted by the sight of the stewardess stopping a short way ahead, the tray in her hands wobbling.

Glancing back at the king and Mrs Simpson, Alice saw they had now crossed the carpets to the gangway.

There was a sudden thud, followed by the splintering of broken glass.

"Oh!" the stewardess gasped, staring at her dropped tray and the mess of glass, liquid, skidding ice cubes and circles of freshly cut lime on the deck.

"Marjory!" exclaimed Don under his breath, hurrying to her side.

"Oh dear," said Father, looking concerned.

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Dorothy clapped a hand to her lips.

"That's not good," said Sonny.

"We must help," said Alice, dashing over to assist, knowing there might be trouble if the king encountered the broken glass.

Their father nodded and he and Dorothy swiftly moved to shield the mess.

Bending down, Alice, Sonny and Don helped Marjory to recover the slithering ice cubes and cut fruit, carefully avoiding the jagged shards of glass.

"I thought Frances was serving the royal party their welcome drinks?" said Don, looking at Marjory quizzically.

Marjory threw a quick and miserable look to the stern. "Frances…got held up with her other duties."

Alice turned to see Marjory was staring at a willowy girl with fair hair standing in the shadows. The girl saw Alice looking and slipped out of sight.

Alice flicked her eyes back to the gangway. The tips of the king's shiny black shoes were just visible as he boarded and greeted the crew.

"My hands were so slippery from the heat I lost my grip on the tray. The master will be so cross," said Marjory desperately, picking up the cut fruit and stuffing it into her apron pocket.

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Don flashed a quick look at the man with dark hair and four gold stripes on his jacket lapels who was speaking animatedly with the king.

"Is that your father?" whispered Alice, as she scooped up a piece of lime.

Don swallowed. "Yes. He's been instructing the crew for days on plans for the king's arrival. My father wanted the welcome drinks served just behind us at the stern so everyone would have a view of the port and the best possible start to their voyage. He won't be happy about this at all." He turned to Marjory. "Maybe you should see if someone can take some fresh drinks to the drawing room? That will give us a chance to clear this up. I'll try and get a message to my father to let him know the new plan."

Marjory gave Don a quick nod. "I'll come back with a bucket and mop," she said, hurrying off.

Still anxious to help, Alice used her handkerchief to mop up some of the sticky residue on the deck.

"Alice, stand up. The king's coming this way," whispered her father, touching her lightly on the head.

Looking up, Alice saw the royal party's shoes thudding along the narrow side deck, growing closer by the second. Stumbling to her feet, she stuffed her sticky handkerchief into her pocket. She was about to come face to face with the king!

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