

SINISTER ROYAL
a middle-grade novel
Book One

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Chapter One

The Memorial

His mother's memorial was all wrong. Twelve-year-old Syrus Royal couldn't understand why his father played lifeless classical music while the black-clad guests meandered from room to room, canapes cradled in one hand, a glass of champagne in the other. Were they at the opera? A ballet? His Louisiana born and bred mother would've wanted everyone dripping in colors, spicy fried chicken piled high in baskets, and Zydeco blasting from every speaker forcing guests to shake their drumsticks in the air like Cajun maracas. If his mother, Jane Thibodeaux Royal, were there, she'd say "Even though I'm gone, Laissez les bons temps rouler!" Let the good times roll!

Syrus sat guard on the stair landing while potential trespassers crossed his threshold. He wouldn't let anyone ascend the stairs, invade his privacy, or see the room where his mother spent the last weeks and days of her life. That was for him. For Syrus.

On the lapel of a heavy black suit, insisted upon by his father, Montgomery Royal, he wore a petite button bearing his initials done with his mother's hand. *S.R.* in brilliant painted colors. Like jewels—emerald greens, sapphire blues, ruby reds, and topaz yellows. Because they were the first colors Syrus ever truly saw, he once thought his mother invented them.

All the guests wore kerchiefs and pins adorned with his mother's art. Before she became sick, she'd wrap gifts for friends and family, finishing them off with a ribbon, a button, or even a dog collar

she hand-painted. Now those vivid trinkets gave some color to the boring black ensembles of every mourner.

Countless times, Syrus visited his mother in her art studio or in their wild English Garden where he'd sit transfixed at her manipulation of color and composition. She was a magician with a paintbrush, starting with nothing—a blank canvas, an old door, a block of wood—turning it into something that looked like it fell out of the sky. She'd put a paintbrush in his young boy hand and coax him into adding a few strokes of color to her already vibrant canvas.

“That’s it, Lovey. Feel the colors. They talk to ya,” she’d say in her Cajun accent. But Syrus didn’t possess her gift. When colors spoke to him, all they said was “sludgy brown.”

If only he could peer out the French doors to their English garden and watch his mother sitting at her easel amongst the orange Chrysanthemums and purple Hydrangeas. How could it be true that he'd never see her again? Not in the garden, not at the stove flipping silver dollar pancakes, and not beside his bed where she shared nighttime tales of her Louisiana kin.

“Aunt Percy swore she was telekinetic and tried to bend spoons with a good, hard stare! And wouldn’t you know, we couldn’t find one straight spoon to serve the cranberries at Thanksgiving! Cousin Ray thought he was a real live chicken, and we’d pray the eggs in the fridge didn’t come right outta his butt!”

These stories made Syrus laugh so hard it made falling asleep a chore, but when he did he dreamt of bent spoons flying through a cranberry sky and Cousin Ray warming eggs on a pile of hay.

As Syrus sat vigil on the stair landing, a passer-by would occasionally stop and look up at him with sadness in their eyes. They’d place their hand over their heart or offer a small smile.

One man—tall and large with broad shoulders—bowed to Syrus, as though Syrus were royalty. Syrus couldn’t quite make out his face as he wore a black wide-brimmed hat that concealed any features. He did notice an ascot featuring one of his mother’s designs snuggling his thick neck. His black shoes shined like the ones Syrus once saw on the men taking tickets on a Swiss train. A black

cape flowed down his back, which was as peculiar as the tight gloves he wore on his hands. Thin black leather molded every crease and wrinkle like a fine layer of dark inky wax had been poured onto them.

Syrus had trouble looking away from those hands.

Monsieur Frisée, The Royal's butler and Syrus' best friend, appeared and broke Syrus' trance. The caped man fled with a sweep of his cape, faster than Syrus thought both necessary and possible given his bulk.

"Mastair Royale," Frisée said with a thick French accent. "Let us make our way to zee keetchen. Chef has prepared you a deelish snack." Frisée led Syrus to the downstairs kitchen, but the entire way, Syrus craned his neck, trying to find the caped man again who was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps he made his way to Syrus' father to pay his respects. His father who sat in the salon like a stunned deer on a country road. All day Montgomery remained in his favorite Moroccan chair, the one his mother insisted they purchase at a flea market in Marrakesh. Pâté on toast points and fennel salad spoiled on a plate beside him. It took the next bereaved guest, placing their hand on his shoulder, to bring his father briefly back to life.

In the kitchen downstairs Chef served Syrus white beans on Pumpernickel toast.

"I know your mother, bless her, would've liked me to use de fancy kitchen upstairs," Chef Neeshka said in her Moldovan accent which reminded Syrus of chocolate and cheese if chocolate and cheese could talk. "But I like it down here. It reminds me of home. Cramped, underground and smelling of borscht."

Syrus had a hard time listening. He was too busy thinking about the mysterious caped man upstairs.

"A man bowed to me." Syrus said, wiping his chin of bean juice. "A guest dressed all in black. Well, except for a scarf painted by mom."

Frisée poured himself a cup of hot mint tea.

“Garçon, are not all ze guests dressed in black?”

“This man was different. I couldn’t see his face, but he wore these tight black gloves and a black cape. Isn’t that strange?”

While sipping, Frisée spilled tea down the front of his crisp white shirt. He and Neeshka exchanged concerned glances.

“Oui, bizarre indeed. I must dash upstairs to see if your fathair needs anything.” Frisée’s long legs lept up the stairs.

“What about your shirt?” Syrus called to him, but Frisée was already gone.

“What was that about?” Syrus asked Neeshka.

Neeshka sat at the table across from Syrus. Her chubby cooking-scarred hands hugged a mug of hot black coffee.

“Frisée wants to make sure your father is okay, pet. Dat is all.”

Syrus lowered his eyes to his near-empty plate.

“You still have a few bites. Are you all right, pet? It’s okay to be sad.”

“I don’t know, Chef. I’m, I don’t know what I am.” Syrus pushed his plate away. The few remaining white beans sat in a beige puddle.

“You don’t have to know. When my father die in Moldova, I did not cry. My family say, ‘Neeshka? Why is your face dry when we are all weeping?’ Grief is peculiar dat way. Unlike cooking, there is no recipe for it.”

“Since she—,” Syrus started to say but couldn’t finish his sentence. “I just wish I could be someone else right now.”

Neeshka took Syrus’ hand and kissed his knuckles as she often did, especially when he was feeling out of sorts.

“Not me. I am happy happy happy dat you are my sweet pet.” Neeshka said. “Now take your plate and rinse it, please. I am your chef, not your maid.” She laughed a throaty laugh that sounded like a village of trolls lived inside her larynx.

While Syrus ran the empty plate under warm water, Frisée returned in a much calmer state. Neeshka’s eyes widened and Frisée shook his head ‘No.’

“No, no, your fathair is très bon. Totalee fine. No needs at zis time.”

Syrus dried the plate and placed it in the cabinet.

“I think I’ll go up to my room. Do you think that’s okay? Will Dad be upset? Not that he’d notice.”

Neeshka, just an inch taller than Syrus, wrapped her arms around him and kissed the top of his head. “You go, Pet. Get some rest.”

When Syrus ascended the stairs from the kitchen below, he noticed that the light outside had dimmed and the guests had thinned out. The caped man, however, stood at the rear French doors gazing over the English garden, one inky black-gloved hand held up against the glass as if waving goodbye.