



## The Princess and the Player (Dynasties: The Montoros)

By Kat Cantrell

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Long the Rowling black sheep, James is notorious for his way with the ladies. Could it be that the soccer star has met his match in Bella? Or will his reputation—and a little surprise—stand in the way of a happy future together?

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## **The Princess and the Player (Dynasties: The Montoros) By Kat Cantrell Bibliography**

- Rank: #2513088 in Books
- Published on: 2015-08-04
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.58" h x .50" w x 4.23" l, .21 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 192 pages

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

*"...this my dear reading romance addicts showed the author's incredible talent for always letting the expected still be unexpected..."* 5/5 STARS from ROMANCE BOOK HAVEN

#### About the Author

KAT CANTRELL read her first Harlequin novel in third grade and has been scribbling in notebooks since she learned to spell. She majored in literature, officially with the intent to teach, but ended up in middle management, until she became a stay-at-home-mom and full-time writer. She was the 2011 Harlequin So You Think You Can Write winner and a 2012 RWA Golden Heart finalist for best unpublished series contemporary manuscript. Kat, her husband and their two boys live in north Texas.

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*Auwck. Auwck.*

Bella Montoro's eyelids flew open at the raucous and unwelcome alarm clock. One of the pair of feral blue-and-gold macaws who lived in the tree outside the window of her Coral Gables mansion had chosen today, of all days, to wake her early.

Miami was full of wild macaws and normally, she loved them. Today, not so much.

Groaning, she smooshed a pillow over her head but the pressure didn't ease her champagne headache and the barrier didn't muffle the happy squawks of her feathered friend. Fine. It was time to drag herself out of bed anyway.

She sat up. A glance through the bay window confirmed which bird it was.

"Good morning, Buttercup," she muttered sarcastically, but with the window closed, the macaw couldn't hear her.

She didn't dare open the window for fear she'd frighten her away. Both Buttercup and her mate, Wesley, were as wild as the day was long, and Bella enjoyed it when they deigned to hang out with her. She watched them groom themselves for as long as she dared since she wouldn't get to see them for a while once she left Miami for the small country of Alma—today's destination.

Bella had always known she was descended from royalty, but a dictator had been ruling her ancestor's country for ages. She'd never expected the political climate to shift. Or for the Montoros to reclaim the throne. But it had happened and though her father was first in line to become king, his divorce rendered him ineligible for the crown due to Alma's strict laws. Then her oldest brother, Rafe, had abdicated his place so he could focus on the new baby he and his fiancée, Emily, were expecting.

Her other brother, Gabriel, had stepped up, adopting his new role with an ease Bella admired. And while she liked the tiny island country of Alma well enough to go back for her brother's coronation as the new king, the promise of bigger and better parties didn't fully make up for having to leave behind the things she loved in Miami.

She was also leaving behind her great-aunt Isabella, who might draw her last breath any day now. Rafe would check in on her of course, and Bella could call. But still. It wasn't the same as having daily access to the woman who always had a kind word and gentle piece of advice, no matter what the occasion. Bella had been named for her father's aunt, and they shared a kinship that transcended age.

Her father owed her for agreeing to this move to Alma. Big time.

Bella watched Buttercup groom her feathers for a moment, and then turned away from the beautiful view of the grounds. She might not see this house again either, and she'd taken for granted how much she loved living here. Now that the day of her departure had arrived, everything had gotten real, really fast. She'd been an American her whole life and while she'd always enjoyed the privileges of being a Montoro, becoming a member of Alma's royal family carried heavy responsibilities with few tangible rewards.

Not that anyone had asked her opinion.

With far too much racket for Bella's taste, her maid, Celia, bustled into the bedroom and frowned at the crumpled, glittery dress on the floor as she stepped over it. "They have plenty more hangers at the store if you've run out, Miss Bella."

Bella grinned at the woman who'd been her friend, confidant and occasional strong shoulder for years, blessing her for sticking to their tried-and-true teasing instead of becoming maudlin over the irreversible changes that had ripped through the Montoro family recently.

"Got hangers," Bella informed her around an involuntary yawn. "Just not the will to use one at three a.m."

Celia sniffed as if displeased, but an indulgent smile tugged at her mouth nonetheless. "Seems like a gal about to get on a plane in a few hours might come home at a decent hour."

"Oh, but it was my last night in Miami!" Bella protested without any real heat and stretched with a moan. "I had lots of people to see. Lots of parties to attend."

"Hmpf. Lots of money to talk your friends out of, you mean."

Celia was one of the few people who recognized that Bella's involvement in wildlife conservation wasn't just a rich girl's cute hobby. It was Bella's passion and she used her connections. Shamelessly. And it wasn't an accident that she'd been named the top fund-raiser in Florida by two different conservation groups.

"You say that like it's a bad thing." Bella shook her head as Celia selected an outfit from the overflowing closet and held it out with a raised eyebrow. "Not that one. The blue pantsuit for the plane. With the cropped jacket."

Like a well-rehearsed ballet, Bella and Celia danced around each other as they navigated a bedroom that closely resembled a post-hurricane department store. Everyone joked that you could always tell when Bella had whirled through a scene because nothing was in one piece afterward. It was a reference to Bella's birth during the harrowing hours of Hurricane Andrew, before FEMA had started cracking down on evacuations.

Both mother and baby had emerged from the storm without incident, but Bella held the private belief that the experience had branded her soul with hurricane-like qualities she couldn't shake. Not the least of which was a particular talent for causing chaos.

Celia began packing Bella's suitcases while her mistress dressed and they laughed over Bella's account of the previous night's parties, as they'd done many a morning over the years. But this would be the last time for a long time. Maybe forever, depending on what happened in Alma.

Bella kept up the light banter, but she was pretty sure the shadows in Celia's eyes were reflected in her own. As the hour grew near for Bella to leave for the sun-drenched islands of Alma, she couldn't stand it any longer. "I wish you could go with me to Alma!"

And then to her mortification, Bella burst into tears.

Celia folded Bella into her arms and they clung to each other. When Adela, Bella's mom, had finally ditched her cold, unsatisfying marriage the day after Bella's eighteenth birthday, Celia had been the one who stuck around to make sure Bella didn't get into too much trouble. Best of both worlds—she had someone who cared, but who also couldn't tell her what to do. Bella did not like being told what to do.

"There, now. Your brother will look out for you and besides, you'll be having so much fun as the new princess, you won't even notice I'm not there."

"That's not true," Bella sniffed and hugged Celia tighter. "Gabriel will be busy with king stuff and spend all his free time with Serafia now that they're getting married. What if I'm banished to some out of the way place—*alone*?"

She wouldn't put it past her father to lock her up in the palace dungeon or do something else equally archaic since he seemed bent on rediscovering his old-fashioned side. That last photo of her to hit the tabloids? Totally not her fault. How was she supposed to know the paparazzi had hidden in the foliage surrounding Nicole's pool? Everyone else had shed their swimsuits, too, but Bella was the only one they'd targeted, of course.

Rafael Montoro the Third was not amused. Apparently it was problematic that her father's business associates and soon-to-be-king Gabriel's future subjects in Alma could easily access naked photos of Bella.

No one seemed to remember that she was the victim in that scandal.

Celia snorted. "With Gabriel about to take the throne, your father will want the whole family in the public eye, gaining support for your brother. You're the only princess Alma's got, sweetie. They'll love you and so will your fiancé. Your father can't lock you away *and* expect you to marry the man he's picked out."

"Yeah, I've been trying not to think about that." Her head started pounding again and that fourth glass of champagne last night started to feel like a bad idea. But her friends had been determined to send her off in style to her new life as the sister of the king of Alma, so how could she refuse?

Besides, anything that helped her forget the arranged marriage her father was trying to force down her throat was a plus in her book. Fine time for her father to remember he had a daughter—when it was important for the Montoro family to strengthen ties with Alma through marriage. How come Gabriel and Rafe didn't have to marry someone advantageous? Her brothers had chosen their own brides. It wasn't fair. But her father had made it clear she was to get on a plane and meet this man Will Rowling, who was the son of one of Alma's most powerful businessmen.

Maybe she should be thankful no one had thought to match her with Will's father. Seemed as if that might be

more advantageous than marrying the son. She shuddered. *No* marriage sounded like fun, no matter who the guy was.

If Alma turned out to be horrible, she'd just come home. Rafe and Emily were going to make her an aunt soon, and she'd love to hang out in Key West with the baby. Nobody dictated Bella's life but her.

"Mr. Rafael isn't completely unreasonable. After all, he did agree to let you meet Will and see how things go. Just remember why you're doing this," Celia advised.

Bella's guilty conscience reared its ugly head and she eased out of Celia's embrace before the older woman sensed it. "It's my royal obligation to help Gabriel ascend to the throne," she mimicked in her father's deep voice. "The whole family needs to be in Alma to prepare for the coronation."

But that wasn't really why she'd agreed to go. Miami had grown too small to hold both Bella and Drew Honeycutt. Honestly, when you told a guy that you just wanted to have fun and not take a relationship seriously, he was supposed to breathe a sigh of relief.

He was not supposed to fall to one knee and propose after two months of casual dating. And then plaster his second proposal on twenty billboards around the city, along with Bella's picture and a cartoon heart around her face. The third proposal spread across the sky in the form of a "Will you marry me, Bella Montoro?" banner behind a small plane, which flew up and down South Beach for six hours while Bella was at a private cookout on the penthouse terrace of Ramone, the new guy she'd been seeing. A fan of drama Ramone was not. Thanks to Drew, he'd bowed out.

And Bella had really liked Ramone, dang it; the more he drank, the more money he handed over for her wildlife charities.

Drew followed her around, popping up at parties and museum openings like a bad penny, espousing his love for Bella with horrific poetry and calf eyes galore. It would be great if she could tell him off, but Honeycutt Logistics did a lot of business with Montoro Enterprises and she couldn't afford to irritate her father further. Plus, she was 97 percent sure Drew was harmless and worse, he seemed genuinely baffled and brokenhearted over her continual rejection of his proposals.

Each Drew sighting was another kick to the stomach. Another reminder that she was the hurricane baby, destined to whirl through people's lives and leave havoc in her wake. If only she could find a way to *not* break everything into little pieces—even though it was always an accident—she'd feel a lot better. She hated hurting people.

It was probably not a bad plan to disappear from the Miami scene for a while.

Celia managed to get Bella into the car on time and with all her luggage. The gates parted and Bella waved goodbye to Buttercup, Wesley and the house she'd grown up in as the driver picked up speed and they exited the grounds. Sun sparkled across Biscayne Bay and her spirits rose with each mile marker along the highway to the private airstrip where the Montoro Enterprises jet waited to fly her to Alma.

This was an adventure no matter what and she was going to enjoy every second of the sun, sand and royal parties ahead. By the time she'd boarded the plane, buckled her seatbelt and accepted a mimosa from Jan—the same flight attendant who'd given her crayons and coloring books once upon a time—Bella's mood had turned downright cheerful. Cheerful enough to sneak a glance at the picture of Will Rowling her father

had sent her.

He was classically handsome, with nice hair and a pleasant smile. The serious glint in his eye might be a trick of the light. Serious she could do without and besides, this was the guy her *father* had picked. Chances were Will and Bella would get on like oil and water.

But she'd reserve judgment until she met him because first and foremost, Alma was about starting fresh and Will deserved a chance to prove they were meant for each other. If he came out strong with a fun-loving nature and swept her off her feet, she'd be okay with a fabulous love affair and passion to spare.

Though she couldn't deny that one of the big question marks was what kind of guy would agree to an arranged marriage in the twenty-first century. There was probably something really wrong with Will Rowling if he couldn't meet women on his own. She probably had a better chance of her plane flying into an alternate universe than finding her soul mate in Will Rowling.

For the fourth time, someone kicked sand in James Rowling's face and for the fourth time, he ignored it. If he let loose with a string of curses—the way he wanted to—he'd only alert someone to his presence here, and James was trying to be invisible.

Or at least as invisible as one of Alma's most notorious failures could be. Maybe in fifty years he could fade into the woodwork, but every single citizen of Alma—and probably most of the free world—had watched him miss that goal in the World Cup. Anonymity was scarce.

So far, no one had recognized him with Oakleys covering his eyes and a backward ball cap over his hair. The longer he kept it that way, the better. The last thing he wanted was a bunch of questions about why Real Madrid had dropped his contract. It wasn't hard to look that one up...along with pictures of James leaving a bar in Rio with a prostitute...not that she'd mentioned money to *him*. Or worse, questions about whether he planned to stick around his adopted homeland and play for Alma's reserve football team—*soccer* team if the questioner was American. No comment.

A reserve team was for beginners. He would get a new professional league contract, period. If not around here, then maybe back in England, where he'd been born. There was no other alternative. Football was his life.

Peeling his shirt away from his sticky chest, he leaned back into his short-legged beach chair, stuck his legs straight out and closed his eyes, somehow sure the elusive measure of peace he sought would be within reach this time. He almost snorted. When had he turned into an optimist?

## Users Review

**From reader reviews:**

**Harold Martinez:**

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