

The King's Equal

By Katherine Paterson

CHAPTER ONE:

Many years ago in a country far away, an old king lay dying. Now the king was very wise and very good, and all the people loved him, so they were sad to know that he would soon leave them. But what made them even sadder was the knowledge that the king's son, Prince Raphael, would become their next ruler.

Prince Raphael was as rich and handsome as a prince should be. His father had assembled scholars from all over the world to teach him, so he was highly educated. The people should have been proud to have Raphael as their next king, but instead they were afraid.

"Look at his eyes," they said, "and see the arrogance of a man who admires only himself."

"Look at his mouth," they said, "and see the sneer of a man who thinks everyone else is stupid."

"Look at his hands," they said, "and see the grasp of a man who thinks everyone else's goods are his for the taking."

The old king, even while he was dying, understood the fears of his people. Just before the end, he called his son and all the councilors of the realm to come to his chamber.

"My son," he said, "with my last words, I want to give you my blessing."

"Well, of course," said Raphael, although he was far more interested in his father's lands and gold than he was in the good king's last words.

"You will become ruler when I die," the old king said, "for that is the ancient law that cannot be changed. But you will not wear my crown until the day you marry a woman who is your equal in beauty and intelligence and wealth."

The prince was angry at his father's words. "That is not a blessing!" he exclaimed. "That is a curse! Where shall I find a princess who is equal to me in every way?" Raphael demanded that the king take back this strange blessing. But the king shook his head, and that very night he breathed his last breath and died.

Prince Raphael was so angry that he refused to mourn his father's death. When the councilors suggested that the flags be lowered and that the people be given time off from their work for the funeral, he was angrier still. "There will be plenty of time for holiday when I am crowned king," he said. "Tell the people to get back to work."

With heavy hearts the councilors announced there would be no period of mourning for the beloved old king. The only comfort they had was that Raphael might never be crowned. For where would such an arrogant man find a woman he would admit was his equal in every way?