

Crown Chasers

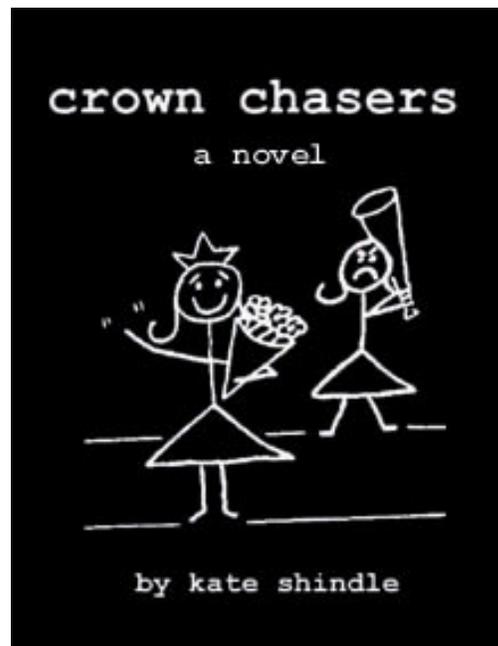
by Kate Shindle

Prologue

The first thing you learn is this: it's not a pageant until somebody calls 911.

It took me about two days to figure that out. In hindsight, it would have been nice if someone had clued me in. It'd be nice if they would hand you a guidebook when you turn in your registration papers, or if the neophytes could be assigned a savvy and impartial "big sister" on the first day of rehearsals. But hey, pageants are nothing if not Darwinian, so you're on your own from the moment you hang up your garment bag. Sabotage is not the norm, but it's not unheard of, either: plenty of stories circulate about some poor contestant opening her suitcase in the dressing room to find a swimsuit slashed, or a zipper cut out of an evening gown, or that an important pair of shoes has vanished. As a result, serious competitors make sure to size things up pretty quickly. Some girls never figure out that you have to watch your back.

They usually win congeniality awards. And not much else.



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It all looks different later, of course. After your follow-spot shuts off for good, after you've gained back the ten pounds, been heckled in schools and parades, been at the receiving end of a few too many longer-than-necessary hugs from men in small towns. And then tried to return to some semblance of the life you started with. The whole thing is a weird dichotomy; it gives you your first glimpse of the big picture while blowing tiny things way out of proportion every step of the way.

Everybody acted sympathetic on that first night. The sympathy was directed at Contestant #14. She had it all—beautiful face, killer body, expensive wardrobe, streak-free fake tan. She spoke well and with genuine humility, and we all knew that she was the one to beat for the title of Miss Local Pageant.

Unfortunately, she slipped and fell into the orchestra pit while twirling her batons to the love theme from “Titanic.” For one shining moment, she was the king of the world. After that, not so much.

In the end, it's really not about who wins or loses. It's about what everyone has to prove, and what they're willing to sacrifice to prove it. For some, it's a few months or years of work. For others, it's their dignity, or their identity. Still others never get to make the choice, because they never realize what game they're playing or what's at stake.

In absentia #14 finished third runner-up, which was a hell of a lot better than where I landed. The winner was #20, a pretty brunette with an alliterative name. She sang “At Last”, and the judges were apparently floored by her ability to be both sharp and flat in the brief span of two minutes.

And then there are those for whom the only reality is a fervent, gnawing drive to capture at any cost a certain artful arrangement of nine hundred thirty-four rhinestones mounted in stainless steel.



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Talent notwithstanding, she knew the ropes. After #14's fall, she had been more convincingly concerned than anyone. She told us not to move #14. She ran to get an ice pack. She called for help on a pay phone, as if her pageant-prohibited cell wasn't sitting in her purse. She swore up and down that she wanted to ride in the ambulance. The Miss Local Pageant director, who saw her six-year winning streak at the Miss State competition flashing before her eyes, eventually restrained her.

There is a peculiar trap faced by intelligent women who venture into this strange little subculture, and that is the assumption that somehow, you're above it all. That things others might find challenging are going to be a snap for you. That you have the ability to maintain perspective and objectivity, trade ruthlessly on your physical attributes while certain that your participation is all about intellect, and always to place the experience into a carefully considered cultural context.

You don't realize until you're in it how far behind you are in your mastery of this peculiar world, or how driven you can be to catch up. Or how your priorities might change without you even noticing. Given the choice, you would without hesitation wager thousands of dollars that you would be the one who'd resolutely place the greater good, the big picture, the welfare of another human ahead of your need for, say, a manicure. You would laugh as you made that bet, at the absurdity of the scenario, at the person who so underestimated your commitment to the world around you.

You might be wrong, though. You might discover that you're not entirely the person you think you are. Maybe Contestant #20 was discovering who she really was that night.

#20 settled for laying the batons next to #14 as she was carried out on a gurney, shedding a well-timed tear while the photographer from Free City Paper snapped away.

I might have bought her act. An hour earlier, though, I'd been in the wings, trying to soothe my nerves with a Wheat Thin. As #20 innocently did crunches on the edge of the stage, she was surreptitiously spreading Vaseline on the floor with her upstage hand.

Part One – The Small Dance

Chapter One: Before ----

I am in a taxi, and I am about to throw up.

I'm not sure what to blame it on. It may be the driver's, let's say, "technique." It may be the impact of a pungent curry odor on a stomach full of nothing but black coffee. Most likely, though, it's the destination. I am on my way to the Miss State Pageant; I am, in fact, a contestant in said pageant, and it's freaking me out.

I roll down the window in my mom's tried-and-true remedy for car sickness and stretch my neck to gulp fresh air. Outside it's drizzly, which relieves a bit of the late-June mugginess. My knees press uncomfortably against the seat in front of me. I am not what you might call petite. I am nearly six feet tall, with significant shoulders and red hair. Not auburn, or strawberry blonde, or anything else particularly glamorous. Just red. I have a ton of freckles.

My name is Abigail Adams. My parents swear they weren't thinking of suffragettes or first ladies in the delivery room, and because I've now known them for twenty-one years, I believe it. I am a girl who didn't get asked to the prom.

And I didn't not get asked in the supermodel way. I wasn't tall and skinny and absent a lot because I was on the cover of Teen Vogue. I was tall and sturdy and boys didn't like me. I was friends with the teachers, and of course it is frowned upon to go to prom with your sexually ambiguous 23-year old calculus teacher—which was an option, by the way—so I went with my neighbor. No one was fooled. In short, I've never been much of a girl. I don't know how to pick someone up at a bar. I don't giggle.

I chose Midwestern University after winning a journalism scholarship. After my sophomore year, though, I switched my major to English. Bye bye, free education; hello, student loans. Mid U is expensive, and I definitely don't come from money. I grew up in Paramus, New Jersey. My dad is a New York City cop; my mom is a special ed teacher. On weekends and during the summer, she tucks away her Italian pride to drive a Town Car for a local limo service. My work-study job in the campus mailroom can be tedious, but there's enough downtime to do a ton of reading. I've always been a big reader. I'm obsessed with Ayn Rand to the point that the family bulldog is named John Galt. I am aware that this probably means I'm an unbearable snob.

My stomach momentarily settled, I lean back against the cracked vinyl upholstery. It's been a long morning already. The site of the Miss State Pageant is only forty minutes from our campus, but since I don't have a car, I've had to take the three-hour version of the trip. I left my apartment at 8 a.m. I rode a train, another train, and a public bus, which led me to this cab. I've been dragging two huge rolling duffel bags the whole time. This is even less fun because I'm wearing a dress and high heels.

Miss All Things—short for All Things to All People—is the Superbowl of pageants. For starters, it's the oldest; it's been around since a bunch of Eastern Shore City businessmen decided, like, a hundred years ago that they needed a big

p.r. stunt to compete with neighboring towns. It has been televised for some time, at one point enjoying a massive popularity it has yet to recapture. It has spawned legions of imitators, and is the seed from which has sprouted an entire cottage industry of coaches, trainers, cosmetic surgeons and dentists, clothing and swimwear lines, jewelry, dolls, and many other things people think they need to spend money on. Pageant contestants make a sport of regurgitating the merits of their respective programs, from the modeling contests to the kiddie parades. Ask any of them what she aspires to in her most ambitious moment, though, and she will tell you she wants to be Miss All Things. It's the Holy Grail for girls who wear lots of silk crepe.

To an outsider, my participation in this thing might look absurd. Actually, it's my sister's fault. My gorgeous, popular, athletic younger sister. Cecilia and I have watched the pageant religiously since we graduated from Sesame Street. It's been part of my cultural iconography for as long as I can remember. When I was a kid, the first Saturday in September provided the ultimate watercooler moment. Supermarkets were depleted of snacks. Families planned their entire weekend around that night.

These days, it's the one night when Celia stays home from late-summer parties and we do mud masks and whiten our teeth. Two years ago, she started teasing me about entering. She'd be a more logical choice, of course, except that the one thing she doesn't have going for her is a performable talent. I'm not a great vocalist by any stretch, but listening to her sing is like having all your fingernails pulled out without anesthetic. She became convinced that I was the family's Great White Hope. She hounded and cajoled; finally, she dared me. I capitulated not just to get her off my back, but because she promised me our great-grandmother's star sapphire earrings if I could win a local. Last year, I was roundly defeated in a big, splashy pageant where one contestant put another in the hospital. This year, I looked for one that was more low-key.

Four weeks ago, I was crowned Miss Northern State. There were seven contestants. It was kind of a lucky break for me when the frontrunner choked during her onstage interview and disclosed that she has syphilis in front of an entire Marriott ballroom. Shortly thereafter, I had a ticket to Miss State. I haven't yet embraced my status as a pageant winner. Exactly two of my friends know about this undertaking, and they have been sworn to secrecy. In an effort to preserve what I perceive as my dignity, I have not told any classmates or professors that I've taken up a hobby involving sparkly clothes. Something in me whispers that no matter how well I do in class, this is not news that would go over so well in my Politics of Gender elective.

The cab hits a pothole; my head collides with the ceiling. Uh-oh. Days Inn, dead ahead. My stomach starts to churn again. This time, I'm pretty sure it's not from the bumpy ride, the curry, or the coffee.

I almost tell him to take me back to the bus station, but I steady myself. Entering Miss State is sort of my rebellion against a life of diligent studies. I am aware that I am a total fish out of water in the pageant world. I'm like Sandra Bullock in that movie, except that I'm still waiting to make out with Benjamin Bratt and I can't use a gun quite as well.

The cab pulls up in front of the motel. The driver pops the trunk.

Chapter Two: Monday ----

Thirty seconds after I arrive at the contestant check-in, I realize I'm sort of screwed.



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I have spent the last several weeks convincing myself that I'm going to be the next Miss State. After all, I won a local without even trying very hard. I have practiced interview questions; I have sung more, ah, loudly than ever before. I have bought a new swimsuit from the Victoria's Secret catalog. I have done my pageant-mandated ten hours of volunteer work answering phones at a local youth center. I haven't spent much time thinking about what I'm up against. Only now, as I glance around this room, do I start to get an inkling.

The whole front of this motel is windowed, so everything in here is bathed in the gray light penetrating the rain-streaked glass. It reflects from the accents on carefully and not-so-carefully tailored suits. It is refracted from the rhinestone earrings worn by almost everyone, despite the fact that it's barely noon. It bounces off of sheer-stockinged legs; it twinkles in little spots on carefully manicured nails. Mostly, it illuminates the faces of the young women standing around; or more accurately, the cosmetically edited versions they're making available on this first day. Even more significant is the emotional mask here; it's sort of enforced joviality over terror.

All of which is rather intimidating. I mean, I already know that I am among the least experienced of the 17 contestants. #14, now Miss Big City, is here after a year of rehab. Alliterative Pageant Bitch, last year's first runner-up to Miss State, is locking her suitcase in the corner. She's no dummy. She won the first local of the season, run by a reportedly crazy pageant director who nevertheless knows how to prep the hell out of her contestants. Alliterative Bitch won a whole new wardrobe. She's also been living with the Miss Large University director for three months, no doubt chained to the kitchen table each morning until she finishes reading the daily paper.

As I watch her, she straightens up from the task at hand and furtively glances around. No one's looking at her, which gives her the luxury of locking her intense gaze onto people for a breath longer than would otherwise be appropriate. Her dark hair spills smoothly over the shoulders of her pale green suit. However, even the most strategic makeup can't mask the fact that her brown eyes are slightly too beady and wide-set for her to be called traditionally pretty. Like I should talk. I glance at the palm tree wallpaper when it's my turn to be eyeballed.

When I look up, my eyes involuntarily shoot to the woman striding through the front door, talking on a sleek silver cell phone. If it's a bit odd for seventeen girls in ample jewelry to be standing around in a motel lobby with décor reminiscent of 1973 Miami Beach, it pales compared to the anomaly of seeing this person walk into this space.

She doesn't appear to notice us as she heads directly to the front desk. She's in her early forties, stylishly scholarly in a yellow knee-length skirt and white button-down. The sandy blond hair is cut in a choppy bob, and the little rimless glasses rest delicately on a nose with a really cool slight bump. She wouldn't be called classically beautiful, but her features are strong and her aura is attention-grabbing. This is a person of power and significance. This is a person I want to know. What is she doing here?

I watch, transfixed, as she scans the room with the most killer poker face I've ever seen. She is clearly making mental notes, but no trace of approval or disapproval etches its way onto her features. She continues to look, unnoticed by everyone else, for several seconds. When she reaches me, standing alone off to one side of the room, there is an almost palpable snap as my eyes connect with her rich brown ones. I wonder what she sees; part of me wants to run over to her and tell her that it's only my third pageant, that I don't usually dress like this, that

I take women's studies classes and am not sure how I feel about the swimsuit competition either. But, of course, I don't. I stand my ground and look directly back at her. A hint of a smile dances across her lips. I sort of smile back, and then she moves on.

I glance around the room self-consciously, trying to decide if I should talk to someone or something, when the sound of clapping hands grabs my attention. To my surprise, it's the woman at the desk, and she steps forward toward the assembled group. A hush falls over the contestants. All eyes shoot in her direction.

"As the Director of the Miss State Pageant, it is my pleasure to welcome you all here." she says. Wait. What? No way. She can't be the pageant director. Pageant directors are middle-aged moms who want a hobby, or MILF-y ex-contestants trying to dodge their looming midlife crisis. They're not cool chicks who look like lawyers. Are they? "In four days, one of you will be chosen the new Miss State." There is a group sigh. Alliterative Bitch tries to start applause. No one bites. Shut up, ass-kisser.

"At this time, I'm going to turn everything over to the head of our Welcome Committee. She'll give you room assignments and itineraries." She glances around. "It's going to be a long few days, everybody. Pace yourselves." She smiles like she has a secret. "And remember, we're not looking for a porcelain doll. We want someone who represents youth, leadership, and the ability to perform under pressure. So have at it, ladies. May the best girl win." And with that, she sweeps out of the room as swiftly as she arrived, briefcase in hand, without looking back.



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Every fiber of my being wants to run after her and ask a thousand questions. Like, where she came from, why she's running a pageant, and most important, how I can be just like her when I grow up. I don't know how, but I feel like this person is going to have a significant impact on my life. From this moment on, I am going to think of her as a kind of hero.

Order is introduced. The Welcome Committee head has dishwater blond hair with bangs sprayed into a wave, wears a black-and-white-striped sweater, and is efficient but edgy. When she reads off our room assignments, I only care about one thing. I pray fervently not to be assigned to Alliterative Bitch. My prayer is answered. Thanks, God! #14 gets that honor. I wonder about the arsenal of weapons nestled in that suitcase she was locking earlier.