Chapter 1

Archie's life began, as did those many others, as the product of the inventive mind of Slavoljub Eduard Penkala, a Slovakian born engineer who patented his design in a far off factory, full of rubber and additives where his newly minted, pristine rubber body rolled off the conveyor belt, naked, into cool, crinkly plastic packaging and through various means involving ships, suspicious customs officials and lorries, arrived in a retail pharmacy in a cold climate where, bar coded and priced like a mere commodity, he sat, looking his very best, waiting for his useful life to begin.

He did not wait in vain. Soon, a slim white gloved hand gently took him up and examined his well crafted design: smooth rounded shoulders: a well proportioned neck with a snug fitting rubber and metal stopper and his greatest feature, his blue ribbed surface that was, contrary to the perceptions of the ill informed, smooth to the touch and owing to his recent birth, as unblemished as a baby's bum.

Like a ripe melon ready to be gathered from the vine, Archie was chosen. His buyer, a discerning person who instantly recognised all Archie's many qualities said, 'You'll do,' and took him to the checkout.

He went with her willingly, joy in his heart and expectation at his life of adventure and service ahead, admittedly transported in a rather unfortunate flower-bedecked basket and still naked, but appreciated at last.

As the woman carried him home Archie had time to look about him. Admittedly his view was restricted to the other contents of the basket and the rather cold, gloomy grey sky above him but Archie, at least initially, found it all fascinating. Ignoring the gloom which foreshadowed imminent use and only reinforced the knowledge of his purpose in life, which was to serve and provide warmth and comfort, and soon, judging by the outside temperature, he took in his travelling companions.

A well used black leather zippered purse lay across him where the woman had dropped it after paying for him at the checkout. Zip, click, thud, it had landed upon him and lay at an odd angle with a suffering look upon its face. Archie, ever a sharing character didn't mind, 'room for all,' he thought.

To his surprise, the purse was silent, its eyes tightly closed as they bounced along. Archie was loath to disturb the purse as a slight greenness had appeared at its edges and frown lines upon its face. As Archie later learnt from other items in the household, the purse suffered with motion sickness and spoke to no-one on its journeys to the shops.

'What an unfortunate complaint for such a mobile item,' was Archie's summation. Whilst disappointed that the purse was not to be a fount of knowledge about his new home, Archie sympathised with its condition and refrained from any attempt at conversation. He looked away, leaving the purse, which was, worryingly opening its mouth, beginning to heave a little in the middle and about to spill its contents, to itself.

A small, soft brown paper parcel tied with string that had been lying in the bottom of the basket when Archie arrived, jostled for space with a white sliced loaf that was holding itself aloof in an attempt to prevent crushing of its insubstantial shape by the purse and Archie.

'It's mostly air,' thought Archie, 'rather a cheap brand as well.' Despite its recent purchase the loaf lacked something. 'Oh yes,' thought Archie, 'aroma.' The white bread
was however twittering away like a bird about its excitement at being purchased and
taken out into the wide, wide world.

'Oh dear,' Archie thought, 'they eat bread, don't they'?

With this worrying thought Archie, trying to maintain his enjoyment and not have it
dampened by the life expectancy of others, turned to the small brown paper parcel which,
and Archie couldn't quite believe it, looked him over with an appraising eye.

'Hello,' he said to the parcel.

'Hello yourself,' said the parcel with a smile, 'I'm Terri.'

'It's nice to meet you Terri, what's inside your parcel'?

The parcel rolled its eyes, giving off an air of superiority and some exasperation.
Archie couldn't understand its reaction. His had been a perfectly rational question given
he couldn't see the parcel's contents. It had no smell, bulges or protrusions, nothing to
indicate what its contents were. Anyway, wasn't enquiring into the nature of things an
accepted conversation opener? Archie felt a small rebuff, a slight dampening of his
mood.

In an irritated voice that Archie found unnecessarily harsh, the parcel shot at him,
'Terri? Terry towelling? Half a yard she bought.'

A light went on for Archie, a brilliant shining light that shone and gleamed in his
imagination. Even great explorers discovering new continents knew no greater joy than
Archie at that moment.

What struck him most strongly was the forethought, the planning, the consideration of
the woman. Terry towelling. Archie was in heaven. He had come to the right home. A
look of complete contentment came over him and he closed his eyes, considering
essential factors such as fabric weight, its possible Egyptian cotton component, the
softness. He came back to reality with a jolt as the parcel said,

'Don't get all excited, she picked me up in the remnant bin, cheap.'

Clothing his embarrassing nakedness concerned Archie but he put it aside. No owner
of any worth would leave him in such a state. Archie was sure of that but apparently there
was to be no glorious cover for him, just a cheap terry towelling job of doubtful quality.

As his journey progressed Archie's optimism remained. Despite his experience in the
shopping basket, which ultimately included a distasteful and smelly spill by the purse all
over him (stale and mashed toffees, dirty coins of the realm and a used tissue), Archie
arrived at the gates of his new home with his innocence only slightly dented.

Gates? Archie saw them above him as his new owner trotted past their wrought iron
magnificence into a large courtyard.

'Where am I?' he wondered. He must have spoken his confusion rather than thinking it
for the basket, which had until that time been silent, spoke in unexpectedly husky tones,
developed over too many years of being the receptacle for empty whiskey (only the Irish
would do) bottles, secretly carried out and disposed of by one of the woman's
disreputable servants in street bins.

Drops of whiskey remaining after the bottles' concentrated draining by the servant's
husband, had spilled into the basket's lining, intoxicating it on a regular basis until it had
lowered the basket's formerly tenor voice to a husky baritone.

The basket didn't mind, finding the newer voice sexy and effective in seducing the
purse to a bit of slap and tickle but to the basket's frustration, only after the purse had
recovered from its frequent bouts of motion sickness.
At the sound of the basket's voice the purse gave a loud burp but made no further
movement.
'The palace of course,' the basket said.
Stunned is the only way to describe Archie's reception of this news. It silenced and
awed him. The trotting and swaying of the basket, which had so upset the purse's
equilibrium, slowed and stopped. A large door opened and the woman passed into a long
corridor, brightly lit with naked fluorescent fittings, their aluminium frames naked to the
world.
Archie shuddered. He'd had the same experience at the factory, which although it had
been his birthplace and was special to his memory, it was nevertheless a noisy, brutal
environment of concrete, steel, grimy frosted glass and naked fluorescent fittings which
Archie had suffered under as he'd moved along the conveyor belt. The lights had been
unrelenting, penetrating, forcing his newly created, tender eyes to squint and ache from
their harsh and burning glare.
Any repetition of that dreadful experience would lower Archie's spirits greatly but the
harsh light diminished as the woman entered a softly lit but rather cramped elevator
which ascended smoothly to a higher floor. The doors opened and as the woman stepped
out Archie saw a gilded ceiling, light streaming in through tall Georgian windows and
heard the woman's shoes, which until then had planted themselves on the pavement
outside and the floor of the corridor below with a regular, and, he regretted the thought as
soon as it came to mind, unpleasant thud, were now tapping along smooth parquet.
The woman's steps went on an on, the light from the windows casting bright shadows
on the ceiling which was so far above that Archie, who's eyesight was not good, could
not distinguish its detail. At last the woman stopped and handed the basket to a boy
wearing a very smart jacket,
'Here Jennings, take this to my room. I'll be up in a moment.'
'Yes, Ma'am.'
Archie watched in horror as the white sliced loaf was lifted from the basket by a
young male and seemingly trembling, hand and, oblivious to its fate, woke as the boy
carried it out the door. Archie could hear it twittering as the door closed,
'Well, who are you then'? But the door closed and the only sound in the room was the
woman shuffling papers on a small desk and then the telephone began to ring.
'Yes'? she said, 'Put him through.' A pause. 'Hello dear, how are you'? Silence. 'No, we won't be doing that.' Silence with some teeth grinding. 'No, no, we don't do that. I don't care if it's the modern approach.' Her voice was taking on an icy quality. 'That's ridiculous, all that money for nothing. Utter waste.'

The sound of a key in a lock. 'I'm very busy at the moment dear, with my boxes, perhaps you could speak to me about this at another time.' The telephone was replaced in its cradle with a solid thwack.

'Silly boy,' the woman said.

The door opened yet again.

'What a busy place,' Archie thought. 'Rather like a railway station but without the trains.'

In his travels Archie had heard about trains and longed to see a steam engine. He'd heard accounts from other hot water bottles that were on their way to China and Russia where steam engines still proliferated.

'They're living things,' they'd said with glazed eyes. His thoughts were interrupted by the woman's voice which had become rather querulous and short.

'Ah, there you are. I've bought a new hot water bottle for my granddaughter.'

Archie would have leapt in the air at hearing himself spoken of but he was still pinned down by the purse.

'And some towelling for a cover. Take it upstairs to have it run up will you? She's off on her travels soon. You can't count on the heating everywhere, she'll need it.'

Archie was struck by this news even as a hand reached into the basket and, recoiling from the mess made by the purse and its contents, lifted him and the brown paper parcel out and carried them away. The journey was a delight to Archie as he, calming himself, contemplated the news that he was to be given to a young person who was soon to travel and he was at last, at last! to have his nakedness remedied by a hot water bottle cover.

Oh, he was thrilled; there was so much to look forward to.

Of course he began to speculate on the possibilities of the cover. The quality and cut were so important. For a hot water bottle to look the part, the cover had to fit snugly but not cling, have a neat, secure closing and... Archie's self-interested and excited speculation as to the cut and fit of the hot water bottle cover to be created to clothe his embarrassing nakedness was interrupted by a young girl's decidedly Cockney voice that raved, yes raved, he thought, as she carried him and the brown paper parcel up flights of narrower stairs and along more corridors,

'Bloody old woman, bosses everyone about. Do this, do that. Bloody sick of it. Weeks of 'come here,' 'go away,' 'get this,' 'get me that,' 'how much did this cost'? I've had it. Sick to bloody death. She pinches pennies like nothing I've ever seen and then puts on a King's ransom in jewels just to go down to lunch. Yesterday it was that diamond brooch that looks like a boulder.

'The day before yesterday she put on that pink diamond thing. Huge it is and I know about pink diamonds, rare, from Africa and Australia and places like that. Worth bloody millions and she sticks it on an old dress she's worn a hundred times and wears it to lunch with the old bloke. Unbelievable. And, look at this bloody hot water bottle, cheap, cheap, cheap. And god knows what the towelling'll be like.'

Archie couldn't believe his ears. Cheap? Him? He was nothing of the sort. His manufacture had been of the finest. He was a hot water bottle to treasure; a friend made
to last a lifetime. He knew for instance that when he was filled with the contents of a
steaming kettle, oh the bliss of that hot, comforting water entering his body, he wouldn't
smell like some inferior model of hot water bottle made in a factory in somewhere
indescribable out of heaven knows what. He was quality, pure rubber. This young person
was entirely wrong.

Archie craned his neck to get a better look at his judge. A mop of thick cropped, not
very clean hair, stuck up from her head in a number of colours, a purple streak stood next
to a magenta one with glowing white rings around the ears, heavily sprayed with a most
pungent preparation.

'Most peculiar,' he thought, 'and not at all flattering with her rather doughy features.
Obviously she eats too many chips; there's too much saturated fat in her diet'.

As a result, Archie observed, her white skin had a greasy consistency that sweated
slightly around the jowls. As he took in the girl's damp jowls, he saw multiple piercings
in her ears with studs and rings attached.

'Too much time in metal work at school,' Archie decided peering closer, 'The fittings
do have a homemade quality. She looks like one of those punks.'

What was most startling was the girl's clothing which was at odds with her hair and
numerous metal fittings; her attire consisted of a smart fitted skirt, crisp white shirt and
buttoned waistcoat. She also wore clean, polished black shoes and sheer black tights.

By this time Terri was wriggling inside the brown paper parcel. Archie could feel her
increasingly agitated movements as she shouted in Archie's ear,

'Well, I never. What does that little chippy know about anything? I may have come out
of the remnant bin but I came off a roll of good stuff in the beginning. It's not my fault I
was the last bit left. Not my fault at all. How unkind to speak of things she doesn't know,
hasn't even seen yet, like that. She's got no consideration for anyone's feelings.'

'I agree,' said Archie. 'She's certainly very snappy but maybe her piercings hurt, they
are in the most extraordinary places. Look at that one in the little flap of skin guarding the
opening to her ear. Who would want a great piece of metal stuck in there? It must be very
hard to wash her ears. Or... my goodness, maybe she doesn't.'

Archie recoiled from the thought as yet another door opened in his strange journey and
they entered a large sunny workroom filled with cloth, sewing machines, people and
many garments fitted to identical dummies.

'Yes, Jade, what can I do for you'? Archie looked up at the woman who had spoken
quietly but soothingly, easing his jangled nerves. She was not yet middle aged, small,
neat and beautifully dressed.

'She...'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Er, Her Majesty wants a cover run up for this,' she said handing over Archie and
Terri.

'Thank you Jade, you may go, but let me remind you again to remember your
manners.'

'Yes madam.'

The girl went.

'I fear Her Majesty's democratic principles are rather misplaced where that girl's
concerned,' the lovely woman said.
Archie could only agree but his attention soon returned to the woman who took him in hand. Like any gentleman visiting his tailor Archie enjoyed the next couple of hours. The experience of being measured, fitted and tweaked thrilled him. The seamstress was skilled and quick, running her tape measure over him before comparing him to a paper pattern she took from a long drawer on a far wall.

'This may do,' she said, 'But I think we'll change the closing at the back. Some nice buttons perhaps.'

'Buttons?' Archie was apprehensive about buttons. People so often chose the wrong ones and what about his new owner, would she approve of the seamstress' choice? Archie didn't know and continued to fret as the seamstress ran an experienced finger through the contents of a round and beautifully decorated tin. It was the unmistakable sound of a button search. She turned many buttons over and rejected them before choosing one she liked. Then she searched looking for its mates which took some time. All the while Archie attempted to see her choice. Finally four were chosen and laid aside. To his surprise they were white and medium sized and he had to say it, dull.

'Never mind,' he thought, 'They could have been gaudy.'

But Archie was more than surprised and delighted when Terri was removed from the brown paper and revealed to be a perfectly respectable and gorgeous deep rich red and navy stripe.

Archie found her charming and said so,

'Terri, what a beautiful arrangement of royal colours you are.'

More than slightly pleased Terri ran a hand over herself with a slight tear in her eye,

'It's so nice of you to say so...Archie. May I call you Archie'?

'Of course...after all we're going to be together for some time.'

This interesting circumstance hadn't previously occurred to Archie. Until now Terri had been a source of concern to him because she may have been less than....Archie was ashamed of the thought ...attractive, or in some way inferior. With the revelation of her very pleasing and he had to say it, regal appearance and show of emotion, Archie fell for her, in the classic sense, hook, line and sinker. For the first time in his life he was in love!

Archie didn't know if he believed in love at first sight but when it came to the seamstress fitting Terri to his body and doing up the newly sewn buttons at her back, he did believe in love at first touch. Oh, the softness of her, the moulding of her to him! She fitted as though she were part of him and Archie, proven to be an emotional softie, swooned as she put her arms around him.

It seemed a miracle that Terri should return his feelings but she did with tender eyes and lips that parted softly, inviting him to taste their softness.

'There you are' the seamstress said, 'You too look lovely together.'

In the rapture of their first embrace Archie and Terri hardly heard. Fighting his instincts which were incompatible with the presence of others, Archie held his treasure to him and longed for privacy, the night, the moon and stars, everything that symbolised love.

Their time came soon enough as the women turned off the sewing machines, lowered the blinds on the windows and turned out the light. The seamstress went away, leaving Terri and Archie alone, wrapped in each other's arms.
Chapter 2

The following days were bliss for Archie and Terri. They spent the time alone, carefully stored by the seamstress in a fragrant lavender lined drawer, undisturbed. Archie felt as though he were floating in a Chagall painting against a moonlit sky with Terri in his arms.

Not once were they intruded upon as they explored their new love and each other. Time passed, their happiness grew and Archie, new as he was to this unexpected state of togetherness, was nevertheless sure Terri was the one for him. She made him laugh and moved him to a tenderness he didn't think possible. Trust created their bond. Terri was not a sentimental soul as she'd demonstrated on their first meeting, but Archie asked her why she had been so short with his hopes during their journey in the basket.

Terri lapsed into an uncharacteristic silence and with some embarrassment told Archie,

'I've always been sensitive about my looks, stripes aren't for everyone and when I was in the remnant bin the Liberty prints and girly things gave me a hard time. There was a taffeta piece that was very snarly. She sniped at me. It worked on my confidence so that when I saw you I daren't hope ....' Archie pulled her even closer to him and kissed her soft neck,

'Silly little thing.'

The life of a hot water bottle may be one of service but Archie entered into it with a glad heart, joyful in the knowledge Terri would be with him.

As so the days of their honeymoon wore on until at last it was over. The drawer opened and the seamstress lifted them out. Archie and Terri heard her say,

'Take this to the small sitting room and leave it on the side table. And Jade, arrange it nicely.'

'Yeah, all right.'

'Jade, it's yes madam.'

The metal in the girl's ears rattled as she tensed every muscle in her face. 'This bitch,' she thought 'is driving me crazy. I'll give her yes madam!' She turned to the seamstress and opened her mouth but shut it just as quickly. She saw a face and attitude that was not to be trifled with, one she suspected that could deal with her in no uncertain terms.

Jade remembered that look; her juvenile counsellor at school had it. Every time Jade had told her lie or sworn at her, and it had been often, the counsellor would slightly tilt her head and look over the top of her glasses, holding Jade's gaze until it fell and she reformed her thoughts and shut up. No sense in lying to someone who sees right through you or swearing at someone who has the skin of a rhino.

The seamstress was just the same.

Jade collected herself,

'Yes madam,' she said and went out with Archie and Terri. As the door closed behind her Jade couldn't hold it in any longer,

'Bitch, bitch, bitch, bloooody bitch!' She felt better then and delivered Archie and Terri to the sitting room without further complaint. After all, today was liberation day for her. Soon there'd be no more waiting on the old girl, she'd be off.

As they entered the room they heard a familiar voice.
'Ah, Jade, thank you, leave it on the bureau. You may go.'

Archie and Terri recognised their purchaser immediately. She was in a better mood today and taking tea by the sound of it as cups clinked on saucers. Archie thought he could smell delicious hot crumpets and honey.

'Well my dear you're off on your travels; so exciting for you.'

'Yes grandmother,' a girl's voice said, 'I'm looking forward to it.'

'I bet.' This voice was new to Archie and Terri, a man, older, the voice short and a bit gruff. 'Nothing more than an excuse to drink and whore about.'

'Really, dear...'"

'Well it is, isn't it? They go off these gap years,' said in derisive tones 'and spend months travelling to parts of the world they can't recognise or remember later on because they spend all their time in pubs and nightclubs writing themselves off and then sleeping the day away with people they don't know.'

'I hope so,' thought the girl. Her hopes were quickly dashed by her grandmother,

'Well...There are arrangements to be made. We'd better discuss those, security and so forth.'

'Oh God,' thought the girl, 'But I'll get something I want.'

Archie and Terri were unwilling but nevertheless fascinated eavesdroppers in the next hour. The girl and her grandparents were at loggerheads over the arrangements for her gap year, that much was clear. What was not clear was who would win the tussle.

Archie for one could feel the tension in the room and the frustration growing in the girl's grandmother. Obviously she was not accustomed to being denied, let alone argued with. The girl however made no concessions to the status quo, her grandmother's reason or her grandfather's anger. That was increasing by the minute and threatening to bring on a stroke. Archie could, with difficulty, see his face if he craned his neck and looked around the edge of a very large ormolu clock.

As he watched the grandfather went from puce to purple and back again. His voice rose to a shout when he said,

'Listen to me little girl, you can do as we say or you can stay at home,'

Silence descended. Terri poked Archie in the ribs and whispered to him,

'That's shut her up.'

Archie nodded and waited for the girl's response which came in a more conciliatory tone and was addressed to her grandmother,

'Gran, please. It's my only chance to be myself, to be out in the world like other people.'

It was her grandfather who responded,

'Like drunks and sluts you mean.'

The grandmother clasped her hands tightly in her lap and pursed her lips. Ignoring her husband's blunt assessment of the public at large, she nevertheless didn't like anything about the girl's demand. Yes, it was a demand and it seemed she was implacable. To give in on this one point would ensure she accepted the security and constraints that she wished to impose on what was otherwise a young person's freedom.

She was surprised that it had come down to this and felt inadequate to make a decision straight away. If she did it would be to say no and her otherwise beloved granddaughter would be out of sorts with her and do who knows what. If she said yes her husband would have apoplexy.
The girl's demand was unusual, unexpected and to her mind, quite undesirable. As she had done with prime ministers and presidents, she played the diplomatic card, always best wrapped in a veneer of truth,

'You've surprised us dear. I had no idea you were thinking along those lines. There are a number of things to be considered and I will have to consult the Master of the Household.'

Looking at her watch she said, 'I suggest we speak again tomorrow. I have to attend to something else now. Tomorrow we can discuss it more fully.'

She stood up. The tea was over. The girl also rose, realising she could argue no further.

'Thank you grandmother, grandfather. Until tomorrow then.' She kissed both of them goodbye and took her leave.

'Would you ring the bell dear?' her husband said, 'I think we need a whisky and soda.'

'I agree.' She rang the bell and sat down. To her husband's annoyance it was Jade who answered the bell.

'Yes Ma'am.'

'Oh...Jade...a tray of drinks, whisky and soda please.' As the girl went to clear the tea things, the grandmother held up a hand, 'Send Jennings in to collect those, just bring the drinks.'

Jade left and began to smile as she went out the door,

'So she gave them the news then. Good on her. We'll see what's what now.'

At the tea table a worried wife said to her fuming husband,

'She wants to take her with her for the gap year? Jade? Why? How do they even know each other?'

'Like attracts like my love,' her husband said in a calmer voice. 'My question is, how do we say no?'

'I don't know.'

'What a piece of work that little strumpet is.'

Archie and Terri, forgotten by everyone on the side cabinet, looked at each other as a deep voice boomed out this less than flattering assessment of the just departed Jade. It wasn't until the clock began to stamp one of its feet that they realised it had spoken and continued in same vein,

'I've heard a lot of things in this room, but that ... where on earth do those two get the gall?'

Terri tapped the clock gently on the back and it turned, looking at her with angry blue enamel eyes,

'I said, where do they get the gall? That Jade is very lucky to be here and all she does is scheme, complain and abuse the trust given to her. Imagine, she thinks she can accompany the princess on her gap year! What presumption! And, did you see that smirk as she left?'

'Do you know how they know each other?'

The clock sighed,

'Yes I do; I hear the maids when they dust. The whole downstairs knows, the only one who doesn't is Her Majesty. Poor thing, if she knew she'd be even more worried than she is.'

'What's happened?' Terri asked.
'The granddaughter, Crystal, what a preposterous name for a royal, well she met Jade at a reception. Jade was serving and tipped a drink over Crystal. The maids suspect on purpose, just so she could get close to her.

'When they went out to clean up the mess and it was a mess, the dress was feathers or something, Crystal was upset so Jade offered her a smoke to calm her nerves. The smoke was weed and Crystal enjoyed it. She's developed quite a taste for it since and Jade gets it for her, making a tidy living into the bargain. The princess can't get it herself because of the security detail. They know about the young ones drinking and trying drugs and past experience has taught them to keep her on a short leash. Jade can give it to her because they meet here in the private wing without Crystal's security officer.'

'But how does Jade get away with it?' Terri was riveted by this conversation.

'Her Majesty, bless her, is committed to helping the underprivileged. She does it quietly. Jade ticked all the boxes on that score - a poor home, dysfunctional family, little education, juvenile offences. She had it all. Her Majesty offers a number of places a year to help them out. Jade hasn't been here long but Her Majesty has taken an interest in her and uses her as a personal page. As a result no-one's been willing to tell her.'

'But ... if she's pushing drugs shouldn't she know?' Archie wasn't sure of his ground here but felt it should be said.

The clock said,

'Yes, but who's going to do it?'

The three of them were startled to hear Crystal's grandfather say in a raised voice,

'Tell her no. Just say no. They're up to no good, I can tell.'

The clock looked at Archie and Terri,

'I think he knows.'

'But dear, if we do that she'll just go anyway. She has some money ...'

'Thanks to that good for nothing ...'

'Don't speak ill of the dead dear. Everything we do and say comes back you know.'

By this time Her Majesty's husband was ready to explode. Archie could see the veins in his temples bulging and a white knuckled fist clenching the arm of his chair,

'It is not the time go all Zen on me Victoria. Crystal is a young girl ready for anything. She has no idea of what's right or wrong. Sending her away with that creature is, forgive me, stupid!'

'I think we'd better leave it for today. We're too upset to discuss it any further.'

'All right, but put her off. Don't do anything hasty.'

'I won't. I think I'll have a talk to Constance. She's always helpful with staff matters.'

'Good, but don't give in, we'll regret it.'

'Perhaps,' she thought, 'But it might not necessarily follow.'

She'd talk to Constance. Her seamstress was her confidante and friend and certainly not prone to emotional explosions as her husband was. In the morning she would send for her; it would be so comforting to have her advice.

Archie and Terri spent a chaste night with the clock.
Chapter 3

'Constance, I need your advice.'
'Of course, Ma'am.'
The seamstress wasn't surprised by her mistress's summons, given the gossip that was raging through the Palace; reverberating as though it had been related to the populace at large by the town crier.

It had been impossible for staff in the vicinity of the sitting room to ignore the shouting yesterday and a smug Jade had been more than happy to share with anyone what she had heard through the door. The gossip mill was well fed overnight and during the morning as an anxious grandmother waited for her friend.

Archie and Terri were, with the clock, awake and alert when Constance arrived, as they had been for many hours, deprived as they were of their privacy by the brooding presence of the clock. It had ticked loudly during the night, waking often to chime and then snuffle and curse,

'Obviously having nightmares,' was Terri's comment.

Archie cuddled her close to him, content with her presence and warmth as the cold night gave way to a frosty morning. They listened intently as the seamstress settled down to a tete a tete with her mistress.

'Given the efficiency of our bush telegraph I assume you know what happened yesterday?'

Constance and her mistress were old friends; there was no need for her to pretend any innocence of the facts,

'Yes I do. A most extraordinary request from Crystal.'

'What am I to do about it? She's such an unpredictable child, headstrong, stubborn. If I refuse her...' The sentence drifted off as Constance lifted a slender hand and said,

'You mustn't, it would be folly. The child wants to create a confrontation. She thrives on it. As for Jade, she'll fan the flames.'

'I know. I am not quite as ill informed about Jade as people think. I know about the grass...Is that what they call it?'

'Yes Ma'am.'

'You may wonder why I haven't had the Master dismiss her.'

'Let's leave that aside for the moment. We can save that option for later. The thing to do now is change Crystal's view of Jade.'

'How?'

'The first thing is to cut off her access to her product. The second, as the young people say, is to make it uncool to be seen with her.'

'Uncool?'

Constance smiled slightly,

'Yes, it's death to young people's relationships if one party is uncool.'

'I see. How do we achieve this wonderful result?'

'With the help of Jade herself and a young, good looking protection officer.'

'For Crystal?'

'No Ma'am, for Jade.'

'As they say in the novels, please tell me more.'
Crystal's subsequent interview with her grandmother was a model of inter-generational love and understanding. Crystal got her way, and a hot water bottle with a pretty cover. Her grandmother smiled, effortlessly implementing Constance's suggestions, as Crystal beamed and agreed with her conditions for her gap year security.

There was not a quibble from Crystal about the composition of her party for the gap year. Jade was to attend her and her present security detail was to be bolstered with the addition of a Constable Jeffrey Davis. Crystal didn't care about Davis, the security was inevitable: they were all fat old farts; all they did was stand about and look grim.

She didn't give a toss about them, with Jade she'd lead them a merry dance. She went away smiling, clutching Archie and Terri to her chest.

In her bedroom Crystal flung Archie and Terri onto a chair where they landed with a thump and were quickly covered with a coat and a knitted hat. After that she went out to tell Jade everything, slamming the door after her.

'Archie? Are you all right?' Terri said with concern as she landed on him and heard him gulp as the air went out of him.

'Yes, but are you putting on weight my love?'
She bit his ear which prompted him to say,
'She's gone out and we seem to be alone...'
'Shit up stupid, don't waste time.'

Jade received Crystal's news in triumph. What fun she was going to have - travelling the world, all expenses paid. The girl was easy, she'd keep her doped up - there wouldn't be much to do. Jade would do whatever she wanted. Only three weeks until they were to leave. She could hardly wait.

When Crystal returned to dress for dinner Archie and Terri were asleep. Terri woke first to the sound of a match striking and the unmistakable sweet smell of a reefer.

'So she has a supply,' she thought, 'I wonder how long that will last.'
The next day Constable Davis, well briefed by his superiors, took up his new duties at the Palace. He kept himself aloof from the staff but followed everything with his eyes, everything, including Jade.

She became aware of him when she went to Crystal's apartment after breakfast. He was outside the door and informed her that Crystal was with the Master of Ceremonies discussing the trip. She would be available later.

Jade paid him little attention other than noting the trace of a tattoo where his shirt collar met his neck. Tall and no more than about twenty six, he stood immobile as Jade cast him a cursory glance. Later however she was to take him in at length as she left the Palace for the day on her way to her local, a rough pub with an even rougher clientele. He was coming out of a side door in a leather jacket and jeans, a helmet under his arm.

She was more than a little appreciative as he straddled a big Yamaha bike and gunned the engine. When he roared off past her she watched until he went out the gates and turned into the road. 'Nice,' she thought, 'very tasty.'

When Jade reported for duty the following morning Crystal was already gone, off to Scotland for two weeks, at her grandmother's request. She was to attend a number of events before her time away. Crystal wasn't suspicious of this sudden absence, they'd be off soon enough.

Jade however was a little short of the readies, missing the money she usually made from Crystal. When she went to the pub that night she was a bit skint and looked around for a likely drinks provider. To her surprise Jeff Davis was sitting with a friend of her's, Black Jack, some hard muscle showing under Jeff's black T shirt and very tight jeans. 'Oh my God,' she thought, 'what a hunk.'

She went over and sat down. Jeff ignored her. Jade became a very unhappy girl, her pride dented and ego bruised by Jeff's failure to acknowledge her, even though she knew he'd been eyeing her off just yesterday.

As the night wore on her indignation grew. She wanted to get him alone, tell him off, get the better of him in some way. But this was only a pretence; her motivation was much simpler, she was obsessed with having him.

She imagined his power consuming her. She undressed him with her eyes, stared at the upright snake tattoo on his neck until her eyes hurt, salivated and felt herself grow wet, while he continued to treat her as a vacant space at the table.

After midnight, well oiled with various stimulants, she got up to go and sit on his lap in her best drunken sexual need mode. As she got off her chair, Jeff left. He just got up, waved to the group and walked away through the crowded tables. She watched him throw his leather jacket over his shoulder, pick up his helmet from the barman and go out the door.

Furious, Jade vented her outrage on everyone. It wasn't a pretty sight. Slurring and drooling she climbed with great difficulty up onto the table in her thick laced up boots, knocking drinks, empty glasses and bottles over the other drinkers, all the while shouting at everyone in language that even her friends found offensive. When she managed to stand upright on the table she pulled her skirt up and her knickers down, bent over and mooned the room. She was about to drop her knickers altogether when the pub's bouncers picked her up and threw her out onto the street.
Jeff, sitting astride his bike opposite the pub entrance, watched her land on the wet pavement, still hurling abuse at the bouncers. As he was about to go over and pick her up beginning what was to be a semblance of a relationship, the Police arrived. Jade attempted to stand up but slipped and fell heavily into the gutter. A plastic bag containing a large quantity of cannabis popped out of her jacket pocket and dropped at one of the constable's feet. As the constable bent down and picked it up Jeff's plan fell flat. Jade was put into the police patrol car and driven away.

'Shit,' said Jeff, 'Shit, shit, shit.'

When he reported to his superiors later that night the consensus was that no further contact between Jeff and Jade would occur. The scandal, and it was one, would break very soon, the tabloids' diligent and well paid sources being what they were. On no account was the security branch to be implicated.

As for the Palace, they were in damage control already. It had been decided at very high levels but without reference to her employer, that Jade would resign, take her lumps in court where her previous 'troubled' history wouldn't help but the Palace's role in trying to rehabilitate her would be played up. 'They'd done all they could, given the girl a very great opportunity, etc.'

As for Jade's business relationship with Crystal, that would be denied. If Jade talked she wouldn't be believed. Crystal would leave for her gap year as planned but a heavy public service component in a third world country would now be included. Arrangements would be made over the next couple of days.
Chapter 5

Archie and Terri, oblivious to all the fuss, were in Scotland with Crystal, who was saying to Jessie, her maid,

'No, I don't want a bloody hot water bottle.'
Then the lights went off.
'What is going on?' Crystal asked Jessie, 'Where are the lights?'
'I don't know miss, I'll get some candles.'

Jessie groped her way to the bedroom door, kicking a chair on the way and letting out a yelp. The door opened; Crystal could hear footsteps as Jessie went away. She was left alone in her large bed in complete darkness; no light came in from the corridor.

It became increasingly cold as the heat from Crystal's electric blanket dissipated and Jessie didn't return. She also began to feel a little afraid. She hadn't been left in the dark before. At home at the Palace blackouts were unheard of and even here in Scotland she hadn't been subjected to the inconvenience of a lack of power. What about her Mac, it wouldn't recharge, or her Kindle. What about her iPod? They were all plugged in at the desk but no lights glowed.

The afternoon had been dark when they arrived with snow predicted. No-one else was staying in the castle, which she a bit found strange as she had been told she was to go out on engagements with her aunt and uncle, but the family often came and went at odd hours, so she'd gone straight to her room, had a bath and dinner in bed.

Now it was deep night and the interior of the castle, which was never well heated, had taken on a chill. When Jessie, came to collect the dinner tray the lights had gone out and the forage for candles had begun.

'Is anyone out there?' she shouted in the direction of the bedroom door, unwilling to get out of the warm bed.

Silence reigned.

'I don't suppose she wants to talk to us,' Archie said.

'No,' said Terri, 'Way beneath her dignity, I'm sure.'

Archie and Terri were on the lamp table beside Crystal's bed, next to her iPhone which sprang to life, casting a blue glow and began to play Rebecca Black's *Friday*. Archie and Terri put their fingers in their ears but the whining, techno sound still penetrated.

'Please God, answer the phone,' was Archie's plea. Crystal groped at the table, knocked over the lamp and grabbed the phone. The noise stopped,

'Yeah,' she said and then with a rustle of pillows and blankets as though she'd stood up in bed,

'Oh, grandmother, good evening.' Archie and Terri could sense Crystal's deep concentration as she listened intently to what her grandmother was saying. When the call ended she said,

'Goodnight grandmother,' and after a short interval, 'I am so not doing that.'

Jessie came in carrying lit candles and a steaming kettle.

'There miss, some light. Apparently the snow has been quite heavy and brought down the powerlines in the valley. We expect it will be fixed by morning. I've brought some hot water. Would you like me to fill your new hot water bottle now?' A small smile lightened the maid's face, 'So comforting on a cold night.'
Crystal gave out a humph as Jessie picked up Archie and Terri and took them to the bathroom. Their life of service began.

Jessie stood Archie up, undid his gleaming stopper and began to fill him gently with hot, steaming water from the kettle. It was an extremely pleasurable experience but tickled. Archie gave out a giggle which set Terri off. The filling continued until Archie was half full and tears of laughter were streaming down his cheeks. Terri was holding her sides,

'I had no idea it would feel so good,' said Archie.
The maid put his stopper back in and screwed it up.
'There, you are a nice hot water bottle and that cover...the old lady does have an eye for colour.'

Archie and Terri were delighted as she carried them to Crystal's bed and lifted the covers, placing them delicately on the smooth sheets.
'There miss, put your feet on that. I've turned off the electric blanket.'
Crystal felt around with her feet and found them where they lay, casting a gentle warmth and removing the chill.
'It helps,' she said, 'God I hope the power comes on soon.'
'Good night miss.'
Hot water bottle and cover settled down to their first night of duty in a bed. It would have been wonderful, if only Crystal didn't snore.
The news of Jade's arrest and subsequent remand in custody pending a bail hearing was received in various ways. The reactions also varied.

In her sitting room Her Majesty was briefed in private by the head of the Royal Protection Branch.
'Ma'am, the girl was carrying a traffickable quantity of marihuana. There was a second bag, found inside her jacket, about half a pound in all. The quantity moves the matter into the serious category. She is, I'm afraid, in very serious danger of a prison term.'
'I see. I assume there is nothing we can do to... assist?'
The head of security was an old hand. He'd seen many royal scandals and handled everything to do with staff misbehaviour for a number of years. There were degrees of misbehaviour and degrees of help that could be offered.
In his view Jade was a lost cause. She should never have been in the Palace, let alone been employed so close to the Queen. Being charged with possession of such a quantity of drugs made her, in the eyes of the law, a drug dealer. To be involved in that was regal suicide. The issue of her dealings with the granddaughter was a time bomb he hoped to diffuse. As a result he chose his words with care,
'The Palace is assisting. Your solicitors have seen to it that she saw a Legal Aid solicitor before giving an interview so she was properly advised as to her rights. The Master of the Household has provided the solicitors with a letter as to the girl's period of employment here and the very great opportunity she had to rehabilitate herself. Your own role in offering such employment to a number of persons, some of whom have gone on to improve themselves, has been included. There is no more we can do. The law must take its course.'

Her Majesty stood up and said,
'Thank you for your help. I will tell my granddaughter that Jade will not be accompanying her on her gap year, unless you wish to speak to her yourself?"
'No need for that Ma'am, I'm sure your granddaughter would rather hear it from you.'
They shook hands. The interview was over.

Her Majesty regretted the girl had been arrested and did not relish the conversation with Crystal. As for Constance's plan, how could they have foreseen the girl's behaviour?

Upstairs in her workroom Constance read that morning's edition of a particularly lurid tabloid. The story was in large type on page one with a photograph of Jade standing behind her Majesty at a Palace reception. She was only grateful there had been no-one on the street with a mobile phone to take pictures.

'Well, they're certainly selling some newspapers with this one,' she thought. 'I certainly didn't want the girl to be arrested. All I wanted was her to choose to stay here and be romanced by young Davis rather than go with Crystal. He would have seen to that, if he'd had the chance. Very bad luck her being arrested before he could redeem the situation. Very bad luck indeed.'

Jeff, on a train to Scotland with another protection officer could only say, 'That's a lot of hash. She must have had quite a little business going.'

Crystal read it all online, power having been restored, her notebook charged and internet access restored.

'That is so uncool. Stupid bitch getting caught with the stuff. Uncool.'

Two days later Archie and Terri were resting in Crystal's bathroom after another night of duty in her bed. Although power had been restored the maid put them into the bed each night and Crystal hadn't objected. They noticed though that during the night she was restless and woke a number of times. When she did she flopped about trying to get back to sleep.

Archie and Terri discussed her sleep habits, which made their lives quite uncomfortable, lots of foot flopping and kicks as well as her smoking a joint before she went to sleep,

'She seems to go off quickly after she smokes it but a couple of hours later she's awake and tossing and turning.'

'Like a drunk,' said Terri, 'She passes out and then the effects wear off.'

'It's not good,' said Archie.

Their conversation was interrupted by the maid they now knew as Jessie and a man, a young man in a cream turtle neck sweater and leather jacket, coming into the bedroom.

'This is Miss Crystal's room Constable. What are you looking for?'

'Drugs,' Jeff said, taking in the room's layout and furnishings.

The maid was taken aback,

'No...'

'Surely you can smell it...that sweet smell that wasn't here before she arrived?'

The maid, who knew absolutely nothing about drug use, sniffed,

'There is a smell, I assumed it was some strange perfume or incense she was using.'

'It smells like burnt sage, you've smelt that in the kitchen haven't you?'

The maid, now shocked said,

'Well I never, these young people today.'

Jeff was amused but matter of fact,

'She'll have a supply which we will remove for her own good. You're looking for a small click seal plastic bag with green stuff in it. Can you check her bathroom, sponge bag, things like that?"
The maid went into the bathroom while Jeff used his considerable skills to search the room. He'd done this many times before. Crystal would flush her butts and ash down the toilet, that was standard. The cigarette papers she used to roll the joints would be either in a bedside drawer looking innocuous, as left by some former guest perhaps, or with the stuff. Jeff opened all the beside drawers,

'Not there,' he said to himself, 'So she's a bit careful. Clever girl.'

He could hear the maid opening cupboards and drawers before she came back in and said,

'I can't see anything.'

Jeff had checked under the desk for a bag stuck to its underside and then into the depths of a deep chinoiserie jar on a small side table,

'That's fine, it's in here.' He put his hand into the jar and pulled out some crumpled paper. Inside was a small green plastic bag and a packet of cigarette papers.

'Not very original but you wouldn't be likely to look in there would you?'

'No sir, not until spring cleaning at least.'

'Thanks for the help. Please don't say anything to anyone about this. You can't discuss this downstairs or at home. Is that clear?'

He looked very serious despite his youth. The maid nodded,

'Yes sir. Can I go now?'

'Yes, thanks again.'

Jeff went back to the security detail's office and placed a call to his superior,

'Yeah I have it, only one bag. She had enough for a couple of days.' He listened as he was instructed to burn the bag and on Crystal's activities for the next few days. The final laughing instruction was,

'Wear your long johns.'

'Very amusing,' Jeff said as he hung up the phone, 'A five day trek in the Highlands at this time of year. She must be so looking forward to that.' A fire was burning in the office grate. He threw the bag in and watched the flames consume it. 'She won't be happy when she finds it gone.'

Crystal was talking to a friend on speakerphone as she threw things into a backpack,

'Trekking and camping with a bunch of kids.' Laughing was the response. 'Shut up Annabel, it's going to be absolutely bloody.'

'I wonder if we're going along.' Terri asked Archie. 'No doubt,' he said. 'It's said to be very cold in a tent.'

'Oh Archie, you will cuddle me won't you?'

Archie grinned, 'All the time.'

Crystal finished her call and decided she needed a little relaxation. She put her hand into the blue and white jar and swore as it came out empty,

'What the fuck...?'

Archie and Terri looked at each other with wide eyes as Crystal continued to swear, all the while looking in the chinoiserie vase, behind it, under the table, on the floor, under the bed and in her luggage, to no avail.

'It's gone. Shit,' she said, imagining the worst, 'Someone's found it and told grandmother. Oh no, that's the last thing I need,' she thought.

'Look, Archie, poor thing, she's starting to cry,' said Terri.

Crystal wasn't crying tears of remorse, they were tears of rage and frustration.
'If she stops me going on my gap year I'll run away,' she shouted to no-one in particular. Her face was red with anger as she waved her fists in the air. It wasn't a pretty sight, a young pretty girl's face contorted with screams. The noise continued as Archie and Terri watched from the bathroom.

Crystal's room was full of objects that, like Archie and Terri, heard and saw everything. Whether they chose to speak to one another was something else. It was painfully obvious that nothing had spoken to them since they arrived and they hoped it wasn't because they'd offended anyone. As Crystal continued to shout and swear the bathroom mirror seemed to jump and said,

'I so hate it when she does that; it scares me to death.'

Archie and Terri, lying on a marble bench under the mirror, were taken aback. It occurred to both of them that perhaps they'd been a little indiscreet when they were alone, that is without the human beings of the house. With some embarrassment Archie said,

'Hello.'

The mirror looked down at them with sore, red eyes,

'Hello. Did you hear that? She is so inconsiderate.'

'Does she do it often?' asked Terri.

'Unfortunately yes: whenever she doesn't get her own way. She's been in this room since she was little and there have been more than enough screaming sessions to last me another century. You two are new, aren't you? You weren't here last time.'

'No,' said Archie, 'her grandmother bought us for her before she came away.'

'Oh, well...' said the mirror without further explanation. It closed its eyes again.

'Excuse me,' said Archie.

The mirror dragged its eyes open with great difficulty,

'Yes?'

'Sorry to bother you but...well, nothing in this room or the bedroom seems to speak.'

The mirror looked impatient, 'Of course not, we don't want to embarrass her; she's entitled to some privacy. We don't look and we don't hear, unless she shouts. Then we try to ignore her.'

'So you didn't see the young policeman earlier?'

'Oh yes, we saw him, good looking young fellow and efficient. It took him no time at all. So glad he found it, the smoke was irritating my eyes. It'll take days for them to clear up.' It looked at Archie with now streaming eyes and before he could say anything else closed them tightly.

Crystal calmed down enough to answer her phone which was screeching Rebecca Black again.

'Hello....Yes grandmother....Yes, I'm packing now...no, I won't forget my woollen underwear it's freezing outside....bracing? Rather more than bracing ....Yes grandmother....No grandmother....Grandmother, can I ask?....Do I really have to do this?....Of course I understand that it's important to contribute but....What about my gap year?'

Crystal listened for some time without speaking. When the call ended the shouting started again,

'Oh fucking hell! Shit, bugger, bugger!'

Crystal had just had the news that as a result of Jade's fall from grace there were to be some changes to her gap year. Minor but important.
'Minor?' she screamed. 'Bloody Jade, bloody, bloody stupid bitch for getting caught...' There was a knock at the door and Jessie came in, 'Excuse me miss, but the young policeman is ready with the car downstairs, you're to leave in ten minutes.' Crystal looked at her as though she could turn her to stone. 'What? Isn't Thompson coming? 'No Miss, it's Constable Davis.' 'God, I know, the new one. Bald and fat I suppose?' 'No Miss, he's...well as I said Miss he's young and, if I were ten years younger...' Crystal was surprised at this news, 'All right, I'm coming but you'll have to finish the packing...I've been busy...on the phone.' She stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind her. The mirror looked out with bleary eyes and said, 'Thank God, we'll have some peace.' It quickly closed them again as the maid came into the bathroom and picked up Crystal's sponge bag and then looked at Archie and Terri, 'She'll need you for the next few days, the snow is supposed to get worse. I do hope they have good tents.' So did Archie and Terri who found themselves stacked into Crystal's backpack with woollen socks, jumpers, thermal underwear, spare hiking boots, a sleeping bag and chocolate, lots of chocolate. Crystal's maid knew her job and her mistress. Stressed, happy or anywhere in between, Crystal loved chocolate.
Chapter 6

The backpack was put into the back of the Range Rover as Crystal came out of the house and seeing the front seat of the Range Rover free jumped in, putting the plugs of her iPod into her ears.

'Are you ready Miss?' a deep voice asked her.

She nodded without looking up and Jeff started the car. They drove away from the house and took one of the estate roads up into the hills. The road was wet with melted snow. Drifts were piled up at the road edge and frost was clothing the trees with white lace. A biting wind whipped around the car which climbed steadily uphill.

Crystal shivered as she looked out the window with thoughts of Siberia pervading her thoughts,

'Where exactly are we going?' she asked without looking around.

Jeff looked over and said to the back of her head, 'About ten miles north. The camp is at the far edge of the estate.'

Crystal looked around and saw his face for the first time, 'What did you say...?' She said as she took in his startling blue eyes and a slight smile at the corners of his beautiful mouth. He was wearing a black jumper and heavy outdoor walking coat.

Jeff pointed to her earplugs and waited. Crystal pulled one out and raised her voice,

'I said...

'I heard you Miss, you couldn't hear me.'

Jeff waited. Crystal was unused to the help pulling her up for bad manners and said in a short voice,

'What did you say?'

'About ten miles north, into the hills. We're meeting the kids at their camp at the old lodge on the edge of the estate. They've been there since yesterday. You'll have dinner, spend the night and continue the trek with them in the morning.'

'Oh, I see.'

'There's a folder in the glovebox with some information on who they are and what the trek's about.'

Crystal ignored this and put her earplug back in. She looked back out the window.

Jeff reached over and pulled the nearest earplug out. Crystal looked at him, outraged that he should touch anything to do with her, but he was unconcerned and said without taking his eyes off the road,

'They're all underprivileged kids from the Midlands. Some of them have been in foster care for years and have never left the city. This is a huge adventure for them and you coming along is the icing on the cake.'

'What do you think you're doing, lecturing me?'

Jeff took in her young, pretty but spoiled face,

'Not lecturing, I'm looking after you, which is my job. If you go in there knowing nothing you'll look stupid. We can't have that, can we?'

Crystal had no idea what to say. Her mouth, which she'd opened to speak, closed. Jeff kept driving as she reached into the glovebox and took out the folder. She started to read. When she finished she was momentarily saddened by the hardships the children had, and continued to, experience. As she did when confronted with anything unpalatable she resorted to comfort. She said to Jeff,
'Would you like some chocolate?'
'Yeah, thanks, why not.'
Crystal reached over to her pack and pulled out a block of Lindt. They shared it for the rest of the journey.

Archie and Terri's experience was less pleasant. The hiking boots had landed on them and pinned them down. Terri in particular was for the first time in her life claustrophobic, the nearness and heaviness of the boots seemed to remove the air and press upon her.
She struggled and shouted to the boots,
'Can you get off? I'm suffocating here.'
The boots were horrified. Sensitive souls, the last thing they wanted to do was cause discomfort to anyone.
'Apolologies,' they said in unison. 'It's difficult for us to move but at the next bump in the road we'll throw ourselves to the right and hopefully relieve the pressure. Please hold on.'
They were as good as their word and Terri heaved a great sigh of relief.
'Thank you,' she said to the boots.
'You're welcome,' they said together.
'Do you two always speak at the same time?' Archie asked.
'Of course, we're a pair. It's like being a Siamese twin. Joined at the hip so to speak even though we're separate. Most disconcerting if one of us is lost.'
The left boot turned to the right and then they said together, 'Do you remember last summer in the Alps, she left you in the hotel room? I was nearly out of my mind for days until you were found.'
The boots continued their conversation which centred on the thoughtlessness of their owner, oblivious of anyone else. As they listened Archie and Terri gained a great deal of information about Crystal.

Crystal was surprised when she relaxed during the journey and started to enjoy the ride as Jeff powered the car through mud, slush and snow. It was quite a trip, up high into the hills on narrow roads, part of the estate she didn't know. There were views down wide valleys to clutches of stone houses with trails of smoke rising in the cold air. She wondered who lived there and what their lives were like.
After some time Jeff said,
'I found your grass and burnt it.'
Crystal almost gagged on the chocolate in her mouth. She put her hand up to cover her lips as she started to cough.
'What?'
'I took it, on orders of course. Your grandmother knows all about Jade and your supply arrangement. The orders came from her. I thought you should know. If you get any more I'm to remove that as well.'
Jeff let Crystal digest this in her own time. From experience he knew she'd go through a number of emotions: rage, fear and betrayal. If he was lucky the last would be acceptance as she realised he meant what he said.
Crystal seemed to slump in the big leather seat, her still chubby frame collapsing into itself as she tried to cocoon herself from this terrible truth.
'Grandmother knew. She knew but hadn't said anything. She knew...'
In her young life Crystal had taken many things for granted, her grandmother's love was one of them. It had been the strength that carried her through the loss of her pleasure seeking parents when she was a small child. Their loss in a small plane crash in the Amazon had left her an orphan. Since then her grandmother had raised her. Despite all her bitchy, teenage behaviour, in her heart Crystal loved her for it. For the first time she realised losing her grandmother's love and regard would leave her in a vacuum of sterile privilege, alone. She didn't want to be alone.

Crystal's trouble was she had been spoiled by being left too much in the care of servants who did her bidding. Even her nanny had been powerless to deny her, only her grandmother had done so but not often enough. Her Grandmother's frequent absences on royal duty took her out of Crystal's day to day life when consistent discipline and guidance would have checked her more precocious impulses and self indulgent urges.

Crystal had not known that experience, until now. In only a day Jeff had controlled her life more than anyone else had.

Jeff concentrated on the road which was becoming narrower and more slippery. They were nearing the camp and would be there in a few minutes. His job was to help Crystal grow up. His interview with her grandmother at the Palace had made that clear,

'My granddaughter is an intelligent child, not yet a woman. Despite being nearly nineteen she is immature. She thinks and acts impulsively. It's time she started to think about others, not just about herself. This smoking of drugs is just a symptom of her selfishness. It has to stop.'

'Yes Ma'am,' Jeff said. Her Majesty was silent, looking away to a far wall. Jeff couldn't speak unless she asked him a question. He waited. Her Majesty turned the force of her clear blue eyes upon him,

'Your job Constable is to keep my granddaughter out of trouble until she learns to control herself. Can you do that, without making her fall in love with you?'

Jeff was surprised by Her Majesty's directness but saw her eyes were crinkling at the edges. He suspected this incredible woman had heard and seen just about everything. He felt very young and inexperienced in her presence; nevertheless he didn't hesitate with his answer because he'd thought about how he could be Crystal's minder while she lived her life.

It was a fraught business: there would have to be care, a measure of steady control, understanding whilst at times frankly denying her wishes. For a relatively young man it was asking a lot. But Jeff wasn't just any young policeman, he was, for reasons best known to himself and his upbringing, mature beyond his years: he was stable having come from a loving family and had survived a few escapades himself, survived and gone to university and unexpectedly for him, was in a relationship with a woman five years older than himself. He'd learnt a great deal about women from the lovely Ursula.

'Yes Ma'am, I can.'

'Tell me constable, how you intend to go about it.'

'By remembering what it was like to be a teenager. I had a few close calls myself but I didn't get into a lot of trouble. Some of my friends did: trouble of all kinds. If I remember how that happened I can help Crystal. And my police training, I know something about the criminal mind.' He smiled at his own irony and received a smile in return.
'That's admirable Constable. However, I am informed that my former page, Jade, poor girl, lost her self control once exposed to you. How do we avoid that particular problem with my granddaughter?'

Jeff was embarrassed. Being some kind of chick magnet was a relatively new experience for him. The Jade incident wasn't one of his finer moments but he did understand why it had happened.

'Ma'am, Jade was a girl without any internal controls. She had no limits. Crystal isn't like that. She has values but chooses, at times, to ignore them. There's a difference. One of the restraints Crystal will have with me is my relationship with a very lovely woman. I'll let her know about it. It puts me off limits.'

Her Majesty studied him and Jeff felt uncomfortable under the scrutiny. She wasn't quite convinced but she was impressed with Jeff. She needed someone around Crystal who knew how she thought and could anticipate her stupidity. She would trust this handsome devil, for he was handsome and she liked handsome men, and see how things went.

'Thank you Constable,' she said as she stood up, 'Keep your superiors informed. I expect to know of anything untoward.'

'Yes Ma'am.' Jeff left the room feeling he had survived one of the biggest tests of his life.
Chapter 7

Five days in the Highlands with children who had no volume control was a form of hell Crystal had never endured before. Decibels went off the scale as, it seemed to Crystal, they screeched and screamed for no apparent reason. It went on and on. It seemed they couldn't speak, they could only shout at the top of their voices. Crystal stuck her iPod into her ears and waited for the day to be over. Tomorrow she could go home.

Until today she'd survived because they went out each morning and walked uphill and back again. The exercise and fresh air tired everyone out so the kids dropped like flies straight after dinner. Peace reigned after about eight o'clock. But on this the last day there was no escape. The snow was considered too deep to take the children out. The noise in the old lodge was unbearable.

'I'd take them out,' Crystal said to herself, 'and lose them somewhere.'

Archie for one despairs. Noise was one thing but he and Terri hadn't been out of the pack at all, lost and ignored in the bottom with smelly socks, muddy jeans, yesterday's and the day before's underwear, all relating to them their stories of Crystal's failure to get on with the kids.

It seemed Crystal was silent and resentful, not joining in with the kids who found her 'uppity' and aloof which was just asking for trouble. Now known as her royal uppittiness, she wore a target on her back. It was only a matter of time until the kids extracted a generous measure of revenge.

The truth was Crystal was suffering withdrawal from the grass and had a bad case of irritability, a persistent headache and wasn't sleeping well. When she had a chance to speak to Jeff, who had been away all morning, she asked him to help. He understood straight away and told her to pack up her stuff: they were going home.

'Why?' she asked.

'Because the withdrawal symptoms will only get worse here. You're better off at home.'

Crystal thought about how it would look for her to leave before the trek was over. She didn't particularly like the kids, but she'd come here to do something and needed, for her grandmother's sake, to see it through. She asked Jeff,

'I think I need to finish this. Could we go out for a while and just get some air?'

When they'd arrived Jeff didn't think a few days could make a difference but they had. She was growing up a little.

He spoke to the other two protection officers on duty and the four of them went out into the falling snow without the tribe of hyperactive children. It was glorious. The wind had dropped and the snow flakes fell slowly to the ground in a steady stream. They started to walk, not uphill this time, but across the valley. There were ruins in the distance and Jeff made for them.

The walk was easy as the snow was hard under their boots. No-one spoke but there was a lightening of everyone's mood and a silent camaraderie born of their escape.

The ruins were a castle, monument to some old lord's aspirations to dominance of the land. They explored it and the fallen walls around. They ate the same ham and crackers as usual and drank icy water but the taste was different: fresh and clean.

On the way home Crystal was happy, feeling something that had eluded her until then, contentment. She was returning home in the morning and was looking forward to it but
when she returned to the lodge she joined a card game. She didn't win but she had fun. It was a first for the trip. When she shared out her supply of chocolate among the kids they suddenly looked guilty.

'What's up?' she asked. One of the smaller ones reached into his pocket and pulled out the rubber plugs he'd removed from her air mattress.

'You might need these tonight,' he said. The others smiled with innocent lips and guilty eyes.

When she was getting ready for bed she felt in the bottom of her pack and found Archie and Terri. She pulled them out.

'Ah, there you are. What did she say, 'so comforting on a cold night?' Now I need some hot water. I'm going to sleep tonight.'

Archie and Terri grinned, Archie more so. He so loved hot water.

On her return home Crystal dragged off her hiking boots, shed her stale clothes and sank into a deep hot bath as Jessie dealt with the contents of the pack.

Inside everything was jostling to get out of the stuffy, smelly interior. Archie and Terri were close to the top, thrown in by Crystal at the lodge as she rolled up her sleeping bag.

Jessie pulled everything out, piling the boots in one basket and washing in another.

'God, this lot smells,' she said. 'You'll need a wash,' she said to Terri as she turned them over and undid her buttons.

'Ooh Archie, what's going on? What's she doing?' Terri struggled as Jessie took her off Archie, wrenching her arms from his neck and dropped her into a wicker basket.

'You,' she said to Archie, 'I'll wash separately.' She dropped Archie onto Crystal's bed where he lay, naked, embarrassed and forlorn.

'Terri,' Archie called, 'Terri...' His cries were in vain. Jessie took the basket containing Terri and the washing and went out the door, leaving him alone on the bed.

Terri was taken downstairs, along a cold stone corridor into the laundry where great machines stood with their metal mouths gaping. Some were rumbling with loads of items, turning to and fro, their contents falling from top to bottom with a thud.

She hadn't seen anything like it before. The open machines looked like sharks ready to eat her alive.

Terri was terrified, looking through the glass door of one machine as it filled with water and then started to turn in slow circles. Its contents opened their mouths and started to scream. Terri closed her eyes,

'I'm going to die,' she said.

Jessie put the basket onto a wide bench and sorted its contents into piles. When she lifted Terri out she put her to one side, alone. Terri didn't know what to think, 'was she to be singled out for some kind of individual, exquisite torture?' Her horror grew as a pile of dark clothes, jeans and t-shirts, went into a machine. Terri could see their arms and legs trying to grab the edges of the machine as Jessie pushed them in and slammed the door. Wide, terrified eyes stared out as the water level rose to their armpits, necks and then, Terri couldn't look. She closed her eyes and waited for the end.

Water began to run out of a tap next to Terri, into a deep, square porcelain sink. Steam rose from the water's surface as Jessie poured in a pale green perfumed liquid and swirled the water with her hand. Terri watched and waited. When the sink was half full Jessie turned off the tap and Terri saw her left hand coming for her.
'Oh God,' she said. Gently, and Terri was surprised at the kindness she felt in Jessie's hands, she was lowered into the water. It was warm, its surface covered in a sweet smelling foam. It was....wonderful. Terri couldn't believe it. She felt her body sink into warm soft bubbles that went pop as Jessie began to wash her all over.

Terri sank into pleasure.

Upstairs Archie continued to suffer, with the loss of Terri and with embarrassment at his own nakedness. Crystal stayed in the bath, music playing on her iPod, oblivious to anything else. Archie was glad, at least she wasn't looking at him, but the contents of the room were. Shocked, Archie realised that a number of the room's objects were staring at him. As he looked around their eyes turned away quickly. The lamp on the bedside table spoke to him with its eyes averted,

'Sorry,' it said 'I didn't mean to stare but when you starting calling out for her you sounded so...well, desperate.'

'I was...I am. I can't do anything. What if she doesn't come back?' The lamp sensed hopelessness in Archie's voice. It said,

'Don't worry, they always come back. She, the maid Jessie, brings them back all soft and fluffy, apparently it's lovely, except for the spin cycle and the dizziness. Is your friend machine washable?'

Archie was terrified,

'Spin cycle?'

It wasn't long before Archie's sufferings increased. He heard Crystal's bath begin to empty, a great gurgling rush of water through massive Victorian plumbing. Too soon she came into the room wrapped in a towel, humming.

Archie was mortified at his nakedness. He was lying prone on the bed, exposed to Crystal and everything else in the room. He closed his eyes and tried to think of something else, something pleasant, but the only other thing that occupied him was Terri, and that was a nightmare: the idea of her subjected to the mangling of machines and her small soft body being spun, whatever that was.

'Why would anyone spin Terri about?' he wondered, his overwrought imagination going into overdrive,

'She'll ...'

'Ah, hot water bottle,' Crystal said picking him up, 'Well done last night, you saved me. I feel so much better today, no headache at all.'

Archie couldn't believe his ears. He said a quiet,

'You're welcome,' but Crystal didn't respond, she just put him down again and began to dress. Archie looked away. It was the lamp that spoke,

'She can't hear you, none of them can.' To itself it said, 'Well, that's not quite right, they can if they want to.'

'Of course, silly of me. I knew that already but she surprised me.'

'She's never done it before, said thank you I mean,' the lamp said.

Archie didn't have time to reply as Jessie came into the room, without Terri, Archie noticed, and took him into the bathroom. She ran the tap in the basin all over Archie and her hands. Archie was in ecstasy at the feel of the warm water on his outside, it had never happened before.

Then she lathered her hands with soap that smelled of roses and washed Archie's now relaxed body. By the time she rinsed him off and ran warm water inside him and emptied
it he was near fainting with pleasure. She dried him with a large soft towel and then hung him upside down from a hook beside the basin.

He hung there, feeling like a salami in a delicatessen, ashamed of the way he'd surrendered to pleasure at a time when heaven knows what was happening to Terri. The rest of the morning and early afternoon were uneventful except for the packing. Jessie packed Crystal's luggage which then stood by the door.

'Was he to be left behind? What about Terri?' Archie worried. The day wore on until at last, in the afternoon, Terri came back! Archie watched Jessie carry her in and then after he'd been unhooked he felt Terri's arms around him as Jessie returned her to him.

They lay on the marble slab and after a time Terri told him what had happened, trying to allay his fears of her being mistreated.

'No,' she said, 'It's wonderful. Everyone enjoys it. The sheets and towels told me the ride in the big washing machines is like being in a rollercoaster, so exciting. Most of them love it, some though have that empty nauseous feeling in the stomach, you know as though you've left it at the top of the hill as you topple over.' Archie was feeling a bit queasy himself but Terri was involved with her story, unaware. She went on,

'I didn't go into the dryer. That's apparently wonderful, everything comes out fluffed up and dry but it does make everything a bit dizzy.' Archie could only imagine.

'I had the best time, I went into the warming cupboard. After she washed me, it was wonderful Archie, such soft warm water,' Archie could only agree with some guilt about the effect of warm water on the outside of one's person,

'She, Jessie, you know, that's her name, put a little metal frame under my shoulders, made just for drying little things like myself...and hung it up in this warm, dark place with Crystal's smalls and I dried. It was like sunbathing but without the light. I came out quite dry. No trouble at all.'

She settled down on his shoulder, content and slightly drowsy,

'I feel so sleepy.' She went to sleep. Exhausted by the day, Archie did too but he was soon woken up as they were picked up and put into an overnight bag which was zipped and carried downstairs and placed in the back of the Range Rover. Sounds were muffled but Archie heard Jeff's voice,

'Ready Miss?'

'Yes,' Crystal said, 'Back home to that great dinner of grandmother's, tiaras and fluffy hair, I can hardly wait.'

Doors closed, the engine started and they drove away.
Chapter 8

No-one was happier to leave Scotland and return to the Palace than Jeff who'd received a number of angry texts from Ursula over the trek's five days. She made it very clear she was not happy about him being away. What Jeff didn't understand about Ursula baffled many a male, how she was with him but wanted to change the most important thing about him, his job.

Crystal who had left the camp with cheery waves and a sigh of relief, was delighted to be back in the land of nightclubs and friends.

Jeff had several days off before their departure on Crystal's gap year but as it drew nearer his feelings were mixed. He hadn't travelled a great deal so the idea of going to New Zealand, their first point of call, and then onwards for about six months, was enticing. However, Jeff had a problem: the lovely Ursula. She was beautiful and talented, but regrettably, high maintenance. She would not take the news of his imminent departure well.

'That's putting it mildly,' he thought, 'She's going to have a meltdown. Me taking off for six months to the other side of the world is not what she's expecting right now.'

Ursula liked him in town, in the flat and particularly in her bed.

'The problem is,' he thought, 'After you live with them for even a short while most women expect commitment, and I think Ursula is one of them. Why are they always ready before we are?'

He shook his head, bewildered, as he walked out of the Palace and into the courtyard where he parked his bike. As he put on his helmet he knew his evening wasn't going to be a happy one. But he did make one decision: he would honour his commitment to Her Majesty. He would not let her down. The trip and his duty looking after Crystal was on.

Crystal was in another kind of misery: a dress fitting with Constance, her grandmother's seamstress. The large workroom was buzzing with activity as the dressmakers finished her grandmother's dress for tomorrow's state dinner. It was for the President of somewhere, one of the countries ending in 'stan.' Crystal could never get them straight and didn't care which one it was. As she stood, for what seemed an interminable period on a plinth in four inch heels, her mind wandered off to six days from now when she would get away.

'Queenstown, adventure capital of the world,' she thought, 'To say nothing of a meat market for hot guys.' She was brought back to the present with a jolt as Constance tugged on the hem of her dress,

'Please stand up straight Miss, we can't do the hem if you slouch.'

Crystal sighed which Constance heard. She asked,

'Have you chosen a tiara yet Miss? I assume you're wearing diamonds.'

'Yes, grandmother took me to the vault this morning. I was allowed to choose from the small ones. It's light at least. Those big ones must give you a headache after a while'

'Yes, weight is a consideration when you have to wear it for several hours. Are you wearing a necklace? I only ask as the neckline of your dress would set one off.'

'No, only earrings but they're cool, apparently they belonged to great great grandmother. They're big, with drops.'

Constance smiled, at least she was taking an interest in something. You couldn't ask for more with a girl like Crystal.
Walking into Ursula's flat Jeff braced himself for a storm as he told Ursula about his new posting to Crystal's protection detail. He got it.

What followed created a small ugly history not to be repeated among the sensitive, save to say Jeff ducked several objects thrown at him and heard himself compared to a number of unsavoury and possibly unsanitary items. He bore it for a respectable time and then left.

'That's well and truly over,' he thought. He was surprised that he didn't really care.

On their return to the Palace Archie and Terri had another new experience. The laundry day had been traumatic for Archie and he did not want a repeat in the near future. Happily he was spared another separation from Terri but both of them were perplexed by the morning's activity in Crystal's bedroom.

A short, rather round person of indeterminate gender arrived with two companions and several large aluminium suitcases. When opened, these revealed a plethora of equipment: brushes, combs, hollow, round plastic cylinders, lotions, unguents and treatments which the functionaries arranged on portable stands next to Crystal's dressing table.

Crystal arrived in a long chenille dressing gown and was greeted by all with bows,

'Does that mean they're men?' Terri asked.

'I assume so,' said Archie, 'Women curtsey, don't they?'

There were several reasons for their confusion: eyeliner, lush dark eyelashes that flapped nearly to their cheeks, foundation makeup and a hint of colour on pouty lips. The earrings were studs on the companions, a large pearl drop on the right ear of their leader who wore tight gold trousers with a long red satin tail coat. A lilac paisley scarf was wrapped around the neck of a pale lemon ruffled shirt, its buttons open to the waist exposing a hairless flat chest. Red nail polish, 'To match the coat?' Terri wondered, completed the look. Except for the shoes.

'How does it walk in those?' Archie wondered.

'Downhill,' said a goggle eyed Terri.

For the next three hours the team worked on Crystal. She was transformed. Her long rather mousy hair shimmered with honey highlights and was arranged in a smooth chignon at the back of her head. A coil of diamonds,

'It's a tiara, my love,' Terri informed Archie, 'And a very pretty floral design,' was placed within the hair and carefully pinned. It took an age. Archie despaired,

'Doesn't it hurt? Sticking those things into her head?'

'I suppose so, but look at the result.'

Archie had to agree, Crystal looked, at last, like a princess. The functionaries had been filing, buffing and painting her nails in pale peach. As the leader said,

'Gorgeous,' and stepped away, fanning itself with a large handkerchief, they went to work on her face. Sandwiches and tea were served by a maid. Another hour passed with an obviously wilting Crystal longing for it to be over.

Finally and with many

'Goodbye darlings,' they repacked the suitcases and left. The room was quiet and Crystal threw herself into an armchair, grabbing a sandwich from the plate.

'I'm exhausted and we haven't started yet.' she said to herself. Jessie arrived with soft drink and cake,

'Sugar is what you need miss. That lot would exhaust anyone.'

A small nod was all Crystal could manage. She still had to get through the evening.
Grandmother's big dinner with tiaras and fluffy hair looked to be as stuffy as Crystal had expected. The whole family of chinless cousins and colourless uncles and aunts were there.

She wore the dress created by Constance which she did like and the heirloom earrings, large diamond drops that swung in her ears and sparkled in the light of the Palace's many chandeliers.

As the family waited to enter the state dining room, Crystal's grandmother, resplendent in a silver on white evening gown, massive necklace, tiara, diamond bracelets and chandelier earrings that made Crystal's look small, surprised her,

'My dear, you look lovely. The tiara is just right. Tonight you're sitting with someone I hope you might like. Let me know what you think later.'

Crystal's idea of someone she might like and her grandmother's had, to date, been so far apart they might as well have been in separate galaxies. A number of alien like creatures had been proffered for her approval and rejected. In light of her previous experience it was unlikely, Crystal thought, that her grandmother would produce anything remotely acceptable now.

As the family and the principal guests entered in a procession the assembled company of two hundred stood, jewels and medals throwing shards of light into the air. As she walked to her seat to the left of the table, several places from her grandmother, Crystal was surprised. Her dinner companion was quite tall, very slim and blonde with green eyes that fixed on hers as she took her seat. His skin was very smooth and pale with no hint of a beard. In short, he was hot.

This was a new experience and an enjoyable one given some measure of baby fat still clung to Crystal, due no doubt to all that chocolate, and the swan within had not yet taken on its final plumage. That was to come, and soon. They sat and the evening was a blur to Crystal, filled as it was with the presence of someone who took the trouble to make her laugh. Her report to her grandmother was favourable.

'Good,' she said. 'We will see him again.'

Of that Crystal was sure. He'd quietly entered her number into his phone between the entree and the main course.
Chapter 9

Crystal jumped into her first serious love affair with her arms open and eyes closed. Her paramour, the son of the New Zealand ambassador, was a non-rugby playing product of a culture which abhors people who do not play or worship rugby.

As a result, Richard, Richard Holland as it said on his place card at the state dinner, was a social pariah in his native land which he had fled at the first opportunity. His aim was to make a life in Europe as a musician. He played the piano seriously and was studying with a good teacher. As a result his father's current posting suited him very well.

Richard's relationship with Crystal developed very quickly after her grandparents departed the day after the dinner on an overseas tour. Then the texts and meetings stepped up until Crystal was spending every waking moment in Richard's company and her night time hours wanting to be. That was where a now apprehensive Jeff came in.

In Her Majesty's absence Jeff had been left to see to Crystal's care and he felt his role as in loco parentis required caution on his part and some restraint of Crystal's activities. She was living it up in numerous nightclubs and at private parties, always with Richard. Jeff and the rest of the detail spent their evenings whisking her into and out of clubs under the eyes of the ever vigilant paparazzi.

Now Crystal asked him to smuggle Richard into the Palace that night, late. She was leaving for New Zealand the following day. She pleaded,

'Please Jeff.' After some wrestling with competing principles Jeff did but said very seriously, Richard was to leave early before the day staff came on duty. Jeff suspected at least one of the staff of was earning a tidy living selling information about Crystal's movements to the press. He couldn't stop it but he could minimise the risk of the press becoming aware of her overnight guest.

In the morning she came downstairs with a glow on her face.

'So that's how it is,' Jeff said. 'Well good for them.' However, he did not stop the extensive background enquiry he had running on Richard.

Archie and Terri were of course at home in the bathroom during the night and had to adopt the attitude of the mirror and shut out what they saw and heard, particularly the young couple romping in the bathtub. Terri's only comment to Archie as they were packed in the morning was,

'He's very pretty.' Archie pinched her. Terri squealed.

Crystal and Richard, now very much a couple, were mature enough to know they could not change Crystal's plans, as much as they wished to do so. They were fixed by elaborate diplomatic arrangements made well in advance. Crystal was to have some time to play in Queenstown and then move onto a place working in a children's orphanage in Botswana. She was to stay there for a minimum of three months as retribution for the Jade affair.

The trouble was the meat market in Queenstown no longer appealed to Crystal: she'd found her man of the moment and wanted him with her. Her problem was Richard dug his heels in at returning to New Zealand even for a short time,

'I just can't, everything they do down there is bloody. I just don't fit in. I'll visit you in Botswana after you settle in.'

Lost in the first rapture of love Crystal could only agree and wish the time gone until she flew to Africa.
On their arrival in New Zealand Jeff turned on his phone and immediately received a number of messages, two of them were from his superior and marked 'high priority.'

He made sure all the luggage was accounted for and loaded in a couple of Range Rovers and waited while Crystal went through a meet and greet with an embassy representative. Finally they were able to leave.

As they drove to their accommodation Jeff read his messages with disbelief.

'It can't be,' was his reaction to the first and 'My God,' to the content of the second. He was entitled to be shocked, but what, if anything, he'd do about both he didn't as yet know.
Chapter 10

Jade was like a bad penny, she'd turn up when you least wanted her. On the other side of the world the Palace's Master of the Household was doing his best not to show his displeasure at her arrival in his study and insistence upon an interview.

He saw her, having only just received the news of her release from custody. He felt a little faint. Jade didn't, she felt elated and wanted what she saw as hers: her job back and the extended trip with Crystal. She might have been less enthusiastic if she'd known about the orphanage in Botswana, but she wasn't as yet privy to that information.

The sad saga of Jade's incarceration and pending trial had come to an abrupt end as her solicitor, so thoughtfully put in place by the Palace's own firm of lawyers, knew his job and took on the task of defending Jade, hoping his efforts would please the Palace. On that score he was to be bitterly disappointed.

Rising to the challenge he heard what Jade had to say, which had a tinge of truth within it, and went about the task of securing her release by having another guilty party arrested.

It seems Jade was, on the night in question (as the Police say ad nauseum), for once an innocent party. She was not carrying drugs; in fact she had exhausted her supply. A member of the group drinking with her was her supplier and was carrying two small packets to sell to Jade but only when an opportunity arose.

Before he could do so he'd recognised Jeff for the special branch officer he was. Being a careful criminal and not wanting to be caught with the stuff on him he'd put it in Jade's jacket. It had been easy, she was so far gone he could have planted anything on her. His intention was to get the money for the drugs later.

As a result of Jade's information and her solicitor's efforts he was arrested, his car and house searched, more drugs seized, Jade released and the charge dropped. Jade did have a problem though; she was not popular at her local which she felt might require a change of residence. For that she needed money and so she wanted her Palace job back.

However, the Master had not run the family firm for twenty years for nothing. He showed Jade her letter of resignation, which he had ensured an independent third party, her solicitor, had witnessed and said her job had already gone to someone else.

'But it's mine,' she screeched. The Master was calm,
'Regrettably not. Good day Miss.'
'I want to see Her Majesty!'
'That will not be possible, she is away on a tour. You can catch the highlights on the evening news.' The Master was a little flippant but he had been provoked.
'I want to see Crystal.'
'Her Royal Highness is not available. She is away.'
Jade mulled on this, 'So she'd left on her gap year. New Zealand.' Jade felt like a change and it might prevent trouble for her if she just got the fare and went.

She left the Master's study without another word. He was surprised but relieved.
'A most unpleasant person,' he said to himself and forgot her.

The second message caused Jeff a great deal of concern. His background check on Richard, Crystal's new boyfriend, had turned over a rock Jeff was sure Richard had buried very deep before he started his relationship with Crystal. But it's very hard to hide anything from MI5, unless perhaps you're Osama Bin Laden. The information was
accurate, Jeff was sure of that but what the hell was going on? He turned it over in his mind as they all tried to sleep off their jet lag before the next day's round of activities. Crystal was to sample all the adventure tourism Queenstown had to occur. She'd need all her strength for that.

Archie and Terri thought it was very comfortable in Crystal's holiday accommodation. Set high above the lake it looked to the Remarkables and back to the head of Lake Wakitipu where Queenstown lay, oozing a frantic youthful energy. The large modern rammed earth Santa Fe style house belonged to the British ambassador to somewhere who liked to ski in Queenstown in the southern winter.

Archie and Terri were unpacked by a girl who worked in the house and left in the bathroom as usual but placed on top of a pile of spare towels and folded bathrobes.

Archie was thrilled with their first overseas journey. Everything about it had been new and exciting, except for the air journey which had been very long. At least they weren't in the hold. Somehow they'd ended up in Crystal's extensive hand luggage and enjoyed the journey in an overhead locker.

'If only we'd been able to see a movie,' Terri said. 'I hear they're wonderful.' Archie could only agree.

Most of the rooms of the ambassador's house were built to enjoy the view of Lake Wakitipu, including the bathroom where a deep oval bath stood in front of wide uninterrupted windows laying bare the view and user equally. It took Crystal a short time to locate the remote control for the blinds which lowered slowly from the ceiling, shielding her from prying eyes as she used the loo. When she went out she left them closed, cutting off Archie and Terri's enjoyment of the activity on the lake, Terri said, 'Well that's done it, nothing to do now but hang about.'

One of the towels opened its wide white eyes and said, 'Who are you then?'

Archie explained. The towel huffed itself up, obviously upset, 'Another lot of blowins. We have more guests in this house than hot dinners. How long are you going to be here then?'

'We don't know,' Terri said.

'Well...,' said the towel, 'That's helpful,' and resumed a silent attitude for the rest of the day.

The prying eyes were up to their usual tricks. With binoculars Jeff had spotted cameras across the lake with huge telephoto lenses aimed at the house and a helicopter had begun to circle overhead soon after their arrival.

'The tabloids are in town,' he said to himself, 'and working hard.'

But voracious tabloid journalists were, for the moment, not Jeff's primary concern. Crystal was booked to do a number of things on her first full day and he was to accompany her as she tried a bungy jump and went jetboating just outside town. Both were standard New Zealand rites of passage for young travellers, along with fly by wire, base jumping, skiing and snowboarding.

Of the day's events Jeff was looking forward to one and dreading the other: he could not cope in any way, shape or form with heights. As a child ferris wheels had terrified him. Sleeping in the top bunk was unthinkable and he considered the London Eye a completely unnecessary exposure to possible death.
Of course he was a rational man and had applied his mind to the problem, but it was still a problem: put him on a high ledge and he was liable to faint. Consequently, standard theme park roller coasters were not on the menu as far as he was concerned. On the other hand, high powered speedboats in a narrow canyon in shallow water?

'Bring it on,' he thought but he asked himself,

'Honestly, why would anyone jump head first off a very high bridge into a rushing river with their feet tied together, hanging from an elastic band?'

According to the protocol laid down for the trip if Crystal was to bungy jump she jumped tandem with one of her protection officers. Unfortunately the other three members of the detail were even less enthusiastic about the jumping off bridges thing than Jeff so earlier that morning they'd drawn straws. Jeff lost. He'd do it and hope he didn't pass out. But the first adventure of the day was jet boating. He'd put himself down for that.

They arrived at the gorge with only a small press pack on their tail but more were already set up with cameras on the riverbank. They checked in and were fitted with lifejackets and helmets. In the boat they sat close together, four abreast. Crystal insisted on sitting on the outside at the left with her day's companion, a New Zealand girl she'd known at school. The girls were excited, chatting as the driver said,

'All set?' and without waiting for an answer from his passengers he gunned the engines; the boat picked up speed as he steered it out into the river. The walls of the canyon were narrow and close as they raced by: red stone with ferns and small trees dripping from their wet sides. The bottom of the river glistened with rocks that surfaced as the boat flew between them. They skidded over rapids and more than once the boat veered sharply without warning, throwing them against the boat's sides and each other as it seemed to pirouette on the spot and then roar off.

Further up the river, the driver started to take the boat close to the canyon walls, skidding it in and then powering off in tight turns and swirls. Crystal was loving it, screaming with the rest until the bottom of the boat caught on something, they heard a scrape and felt the weight of the boat shift to the left. The driver fought with the wheel but it didn't respond. The boat slid, the motors screaming, into a clump of rocks at the base of the canyon wall.

Everyone was thrown to the left as it hit and then bounced away, back into the river's flow. Jeff watched helplessly from his seat in the back row as Crystal was crushed against the side of the boat by the other passengers in her row. She was thrown to the left and disappeared under first her friend and then the other passengers.

As soon as the boat had stopped he climbed over to her, pushing the others off as he went. She was breathing but unconscious. Jeff was glad she'd fainted: the pain must have been unbearable. He held her still body until they got back to the wharf.

Later, as he sat in the ambulance and it travelled slowly to the hospital, he heard the ambulance officer driving radio in,

'Jetboat accident, broken ribs, extensive bruising, possible spinal injuries.'

Jeff called the Palace from the ambulance. The machine kicked in and by the time Crystal was admitted to the hospital's emergency department arrangements were being made: her gap year was over even as it began.

The house erupted as people swarmed through the rooms packing Crystal's possessions. Everything was swooped up and thrown into her luggage.
A girl Archie and Terri hadn't seen before rushed into the bathroom. She seemed to
realise she'd been running and pulled herself up, standing still for a second. Then she took
a deep breath and began to pack Crystal's toiletries.

She worked slowly and methodically, taking her time and working around the room
until one of the security detail shouted through the door,

'Hurry up, girlie, the flight leaves in thirty minutes.'

The girl became frantic and grabbed at everything, tossing bottles, brushes and tubes
into bags and, as she ran out of room, a plastic bag she dragged out of a cupboard. Archie
and Terri watched, waiting to be collected but it didn't happen. The girl gave the room
one last look and went to walk out, her hands full of bags. They waved their arms and
called but of course, she couldn't hear them. The bathroom door closed. Archie and Terri
were left, lying on the pile of towels.

'What happened?' Archie asked.

'I don't know,' Terri said, 'But whatever it is, they're leaving and we've been left
behind. Oh Archie...' Her eyes filled with tears.
Chapter 11

It was the next day before they found out why. Women came to clean and tidy the house, gossiping about Crystal as they went. The news soon spread through the objects in the house. Archie and Terri heard from some towels returned to the bathroom after washing.

The story of the jetboat accident was related with embellishments that bore no relation to the original incident. As told in the house, the driver had been drinking all night and turned up for the morning's work still drunk. He'd lost control of the boat and slammed it into the canyon wall. Crystal was very badly hurt.

Later they got something closer to the truth about Crystal's injuries: she'd been scanned at the local hospital and found to have broken ribs, severe bruising and concussion.

'Luckily for her,' the towel said, 'No spinal injuries but she's been flown to Australia for treatment. The doctors are worried about internal bleeding. That's all I heard except the youngest security guy, you know the really cute one, he's in trouble with the Palace for not looking after her.'

'Jeff not look after her?' Terri couldn't believe it. Nor could Archie. If Crystal had been hurt it wasn't Jeff's fault.

However, Terri and Archie had their own immediate problem, how could they get home? When the clean towels had been stacked on a shelf below them the woman didn't notice there was something that didn't belong to the house: Terri's bright cover. The woman just went about cleaning and tidying the room and then left.

A few days later new occupants arrived in the house, a family with children. Terri and Archie's bathroom was used by four children who had rowdy bubble baths and left the taps dripping.

'I so hate the drips,' Archie said, 'I can't sleep at night.'

'Me either. Oh Archie...I want to go home.'

Archie did too but how? No-one recognised them as Crystal's. As far as anyone was concerned they were just a hot water bottle and cover. They might be anyone's. The girl who had packed up the room would have found them he was sure, she'd been careful and taking her time but she'd been hurried and harassed and missed them.

Idleness and worry took their toll on Terri's usual good humour, she began to be unreasonable.

'Do something Archie, we can't stay here forever; we belong to Crystal. We have to get back.'

This statement, which was repeated often, was stating the bleeding obvious as far as Archie was concerned. He knew his duty was to serve Crystal but how could he? They were trapped.

Archie feared they would remain in New Zealand, forever: like a still life composition they lay on the shelf with the towels unused, feeling useless.

The atmosphere in the bathroom was becoming strained as the family's stay wore on. Many of the objects in the room suffered, some were broken as they were thrown about during the children's daily baths, Archie and Terri among them.

They had watched in horror as fine things were used as bath toys: delicate porcelain fish, shells and large coral that decorated high shelves were pulled down and thrown
about. The coral shattered in brilliant pieces on the hard tiled floor. Shells were crushed under small feet as the children jumped in and out of the bath. But worse was to come.

One of the larger ones, a boy of about eight, naked and streaming with water, ran over to their until now quiet corner and dragged all the towels off the shelf. Archie and Terri went with them. Everything landed on the wet floor in puddles of foam where smelly sneakers and socks had been dropped.

The boy saw Archie and Terri and said to another,

'Hey, look at this, it'll make a great water pistol.' He then ripped Terri from Archie, her buttons flying off onto the floor landing among shards of broken coral, and threw her into the soggy heap of towels. Archie was dropped into the bath and held down. He felt himself filling with suds and water until his neck overflowed and the boy held him high above his head and squeezed. Water sprayed upwards in a fountain and fell on his companion's head. The children laughed.

From her place on the floor Terri could see Archie's small body mangled by small, unknowingly brutal hands until he was empty and then thrust back into the water, filled and squeezed again.

'I know they're completely unaware of what he's going through, but do they have to be so cruel?' she whispered as Archie's eyes became red and inflamed by the suds. Red welts began to appear around his middle where the boy's small fingers gripped. It was too much for Terri, she closed her eyes and prayed for it to be over.

She was left stranded on the floor when the children finally left the bathroom. She couldn't see Archie, he was still in the water, somewhere. She called but he didn't answer. No-one from the family came back to the bathroom that night.

Morning broke on a scene of chaos, the children's clothes in sodden heaps, toys and objects strewn about the floor. Cold water remained in the bath where some objects floated. A new woman finally came in quite early and began to clear up the mess. Terri woke from a fitful sleep to hear water gurgling down the drain from the bath,

'Archie's in there,' was her only thought.

At last she saw him; the woman held him upside down. Cold clammy water ran from his body into the tub. Without drying him the woman put Archie on the side of the bath where Terri could see him gasping and rubbing his arms to warm himself. He was chilled to the bone.

Before they could speak to each other Terri was scooped up with the wet towels and clothes and thrown into a chute in the wall. She felt herself sliding down and down until she landed hard on a black and white tiled floor. She lay there, chilled and exhausted. It appeared to be a laundry but Terri didn't care, any thoughts of a pleasurable bath in foamy water were far from her mind. She was cold, wet and miserable and pining for Archie.

Terri was thrown into a washing machine with the towels and endured the cycle with resignation. It was so far from her experience at Jessie's hands that it overwhelmed her and for the first time she cried. Wet tears streamed down her cheeks as she was taken out of the machine and dropped into a basket. After being carried outside with the towels she was turned inside out, pegged onto a wire line and left to bake in the sun. She hung there in silence, desolate, willing herself back to Archie and their life at the Palace.
Chapter 12

In the days since her accident Crystal had suffered a good deal with her broken ribs which gave her no rest on the long flight home. Although she had a bed on the plane and was made as comfortable as possible she ached and had sharp stabs of pain when she breathed. The nurse who accompanied her kept up the painkillers but Crystal needed comfort.

'Could I have my hot water bottle?' she asked.

'Of course Miss, I'll try and find it.'

The nurse searched the hand luggage but no hot water bottle was to be found. Crystal hoped it was in one of the larger bags.

'My grandmother gave it to me,' she explained to the nurse. 'It's so warm and has a very pretty cover...' she said as she finally went to sleep, 'Very pretty.'

The nurse placed her hand very gently on Crystal's wrist and took her pulse. She looked at her bruised face and the lines on her forehead even in sleep. Sympathy washed over her,

'And all she wants is her hot water bottle. We'd better find it then.' On the return to the Palace Crystal's luggage was searched but no hot water bottle was found.

If it hadn't been for Crystal's injuries it is likely Archie and Terri would not have been lost. However, her injuries were the reason they were found. The tabloid press covered every moment of the accident, Crystal's admission to hospital in Queenstown, the airlift to Australia and her return home.

It seemed there was no other news on the 24 hour television channels, on the internet and in the print media: everything was Crystal. A hermit living in a cave would have been pressed to avoid knowledge of the accident and its aftermath.

However, when a person spends their time alone cleaning other people's houses, doing their washing, ironing and tidying up they may live in a bubble of constant motion without interaction with current events. It would be very different if such a person worked with others but the very able woman who now cleaned the ambassador's extremely popular Queenstown holiday house worked by herself. As a result she was so occupied very little impinged on her life as she went about the seemingly endless task of keeping the house in order during and after its use by a succession of guests.

When the woman unpegged Terri from the clothes line she was about to drop her into the basket of clean things when she noticed a small, exquisitely embroidered monogram sewn to Terri's inside seam. Its finely woven woollen cloth was crimson. A golden crown and the initials of a living monarch shone in carefully wrought embroidery on the cloth.

The woman's isolation and disinterest was at least penetrated by one simple fact: the hot water bottle cover seemed to have a royal connection. She left Terri on the kitchen table but mulled over the monogram as she folded the remainder of the washing and deposited it in various rooms, drawers and cupboards.

When she was done she sat down and examined Terri very carefully. Her buttons were missing but she was otherwise in pretty good order. She bore deep impressions on her shoulders from the pegs and wasn't particularly fluffy as there had been no wind that day but the woman thought she would do. As to the buttons, the woman went to the laundry and removed the bag from the vacuum cleaner.
After some digging around in the dust and detritus of the floors she found three white buttons,

'One short,' she thought. She dug further. The fourth button was found.

'Your mate's in the bathroom,' she said and retrieved Archie. The sight of Terri in the woman's other hand sent him into a spin. They were back together.

'Well, nearly,' he thought. Back in the kitchen the woman took out a needle and thread and began to sew on Terri's buttons. There were small tears in the fabric where the boy had torn Terri open but the woman deftly darned the holes. Finished, she slipped Archie back into the arms of his beloved and did up the buttons.

Hot water bottle and cover would have hugged and kissed their saviour if they had been able, they were so grateful to her. The only thing that remained was to get home. Would the woman help them? As they wondered the woman turned on the television set to the twenty four hour news channel. Film was playing of Crystal being lifted from an aircraft and into an ambulance for the journey to the Palace.

'That's the girl who was staying here,' the woman said. She turned and looked at Archie and Terri lying on the table, 'Do you belong to her?'

Amazed at being spoken to, Archie and Terri started to speak together,

'Yes, yes we do, we're Crystal's, we were left behind...' Before they could say anymore the woman turned back to the television and pressed the remote. The television went black.

'Well, I suppose I'd better ring up.' She dialled and spoke for some time with a person named Marcus,

'Yes, all right,' she said. 'Yes, it's right here. I'll keep it safe.' She hung up the phone. 'Well I never, a royal hot water bottle. Now I've heard everything.' She shook her head in disbelief.

By the time Crystal returned to the Palace and was carefully installed in her own bed no less a person than Jeff had been charged with the duty of finding Archie and Terri. Given he felt himself to be in disgrace he applied himself to the task willingly. If Crystal wanted the damn thing he'd get it back. Telephone calls, texts and diplomatic cables flew across the ether to New Zealand. On the day the woman was restoring Archie and Terri Jeff was in despair. There had been no news despite all his efforts. The call from the Ambassador's secretary came as Jeff was about to put MI6 on the job.

'I wouldn't have really gone to MI6,' he thought, 'Or would I?' He had some cause to think about the extent of his zeal in the search for Archie and Terri as he prepared to go home for few days off.

Jeff badly needed some time away; he'd been constantly on duty for two weeks and the worry of Crystal's injuries was taking its toll. He'd taken some criticism from his superiors but he'd expected that: twenty twenty rear vision was their specialty.

'He should have prevented the incident,' was what it came down to.

'I could have locked her up in the house I suppose, that would have done it.' His thoughts on the subject were not bitter but close to it. There were things about his job he hated, especially bosses who'd forgotten what it was like to be out there with a determined young woman.

Strangely he'd had no criticism from the Palace. Although Her Majesty had returned from her tour nothing had come from her Private Secretary or the Master of the
Household. Jeff had been on duty in the Palace since Crystal's return but he hadn't been summoned. He wondered why.

'Oh well,' he thought, 'There's plenty of time. I only have to wait.' He went home and slept and slept.

Crystal was mending but the pain of her broken ribs would last for weeks. Her grandmother came to her room as soon as she returned. She gently hugged Crystal and kissed her forehead.

'Oh my dear girl, I'm so relieved.' She looked at her granddaughter with eyes that threatened to overflow. 'She could have been killed,' she thought. Dismissing the thought as silly speculation she sat down beside the bed and said,

'Tell me what happened.'

Crystal related the accident as well as she could remember. It didn't vary from the accounts her grandmother had already received, including an independent report from the New Zealand government. As Crystal finished speaking she thought,

'A pure accident, probably the rock they hit had fallen into the river from above. The driver was very experienced and had taken that route hundreds of times before. He could not have known the hazard was there.'

'Grandmother, please don't let them blame Jeff Davis any more, it wasn't his fault. I wanted to go. It's usually safe, people do it everyday...'

'I know, don't worry, he'll be all right. I'll have a word.'

And she did. Jeff wasn't summoned, the Head of Special Branch was. Her Majesty was not alone. Her Private Secretary and the Master of the Household were also present.

The Head of Special Branch gulped, 'It can't be good if they're here,' he thought. 'She only calls them in when she wants witnesses.'

After a tense five minutes in which Her Majesty remained seated whilst Jeff's superior remained standing, the now shaking man left with sweat dribbling down his neck. Obviously it didn't do to upset Her Majesty. She'd been quite clear and her instructions short,

'The criticism of Constable Davis was to stop, he was not at fault and he was to be told so.'

He didn't argue, all he wanted was to get away. Obviously visits to the Palace were not his thing.

Jade, who'd been grubbing about in various rat holes to get enough money for a fare to New Zealand, saw the news reports and was thrilled by Crystal's return. The footage included Jeff, standing near the stretcher as it was loaded into the ambulance.

'Well,' Jade said to the television, 'We'll see about you mate. Look out, I'm coming.'

Another person who was coming and going, a lot, was Richard Holland who visited Crystal at least once every day. He was considerate, cheering and apparently devoted. On his return to duty in Crystal's apartment Jeff often saw him, arms full of flowers, books, DVDs and small cuddly animals.

'He's laying it on,' Jeff thought with a vehemence he didn't recognise, 'Good and thick.'

As Crystal recovered Richard began to take her out into the garden where they'd sit and he'd amuse her with accounts of parties and who was seeing who. His knowledge of the city's high life was phenomenal and he was very good at telling a story. Obviously Crystal adored him and was anxious to be healed so they could continue their relationship. For the moment Richard was tender and affectionate, nothing more.
Jeff watched Richard, considered and waited. It was some weeks later when he had what he wanted. He reported and was given his orders: to see Richard and deal with him.
Chapter 13

Crystal's illness had created a small problem for Richard: she was in the city, not in Botswana where he thought she was going to be. If she had been in Africa he would have visited her there for a few days or a week and then returned to his usual life. The break would have caused narry a ripple in the pond of self absorption he lived in.

He rearranged his schedule so he could be with her and as the days passed found it a delight to chat to her. Although still young, Crystal had been exposed to many things and had many cultured interests, a fact she kept well hidden from her social circle who were the rich and idle: clubbers, race goers and polo enthusiasts.

So Crystal's relationship with the musical Richard allowed her to display a depth he hadn't expected. They talked of music and gradually, other things. He found it easy to be with her and looked forward to his visits. It was a surprise to him that they had so much in common. It was obvious their relationship would deepen and develop and this pleased him because he intended to marry Crystal as soon as he could.

Their marriage would be a happy one; they'd have children and a life at the pinnacle of society. It was all decided, at least by Richard. All he had to do was get through this difficult period of courtship but Richard was a coper, so he coped. He was disciplined so he brought discipline to bear on his schedule.

Sessions with his teacher, practice and rehearsals for the small concerts he was beginning to give were not affected. It was his time for relaxation that caused him the most difficulty.

In the first weeks he found he had little time to unwind as he was spending that time at the Palace. He was exhausted most days with the effort of establishing a non sexual relationship with Crystal and the exhaustion helped him to sleep but as time passed and he relaxed in Crystal's company he began to long for a return to his usual, after hours, routine.

All of this was watched of course. As a royal Crystal had twenty hour protection. When Jeff started the deep background check on Richard his detail was increased. Richard didn't know it but he enjoyed round the clock protection as well: he was discreetly accompanied by a variety of officers wherever he went and, being sure he'd left his past behind in New Zealand, never suspected.

Watchers watch and they report. Jeff read the daily reports and built up a picture of Richard's life that for a time was not out of synch with what he related to Crystal. When Richard returned to his usual routine Jeff was the first to know. He waited for a few days until a pattern was established, he had the pattern checked by other watchers and then he was sure. Richard was leading a double life.
Chapter 14

Being a royal hot water bottle can, as it did in the case of Archie and Terri, involve unfortunate happenings including being lost for a time in New Zealand due to the failure of the royal's minders to adequately appreciate the importance of said hot water bottle and cover to their royal charge.

In the case of Crystal's hot water bottle and cover, the accident that had injured her and the haste of her removal to Australia led to an unusual failure in the royal support machine. It was regrettable and, given the importance placed on their being found and returned, unlikely to be repeated.

It was now law in the Palace that Crystal's hot water bottle and cover were sacrosanct. Great care would be taken with them in future, as soon as they were back, of course. No effort was to be spared in ensuring they were accounted for on any occasion they were taken from the Palace.

Archie and Terri had no idea they had risen to such a place of importance. During their time of loss they had felt, with some justification, feelings of abandonment but also powerlessness. They were helpless to help themselves which lowered Archie's self-esteem. His duty was to serve and he felt it keenly that he could not. Terri comforted him as well as she could but Archie also felt some guilt over Terri's ill treatment.

However, when the royal rescue team arrives, it comes in style.

A smartly dressed gentleman from the British Embassy in Wellington, New Zealand received Archie and Terri from a courier despatched specifically to collect them from Queenstown. The courier had been flown to the South Island, driven to the house and handed a now carefully wrapped hot water bottle and cover from their saviour, the Ambassador's housekeeper. She received a very nice bunch of exotic flowers for her trouble. Overwhelmed, she watched the courier carry his parcel to a waiting Range Rover which went immediately to the airport and a waiting flight to Wellington.

The diplomatic pouch left the Wellington Embassy each afternoon. Normally a package for the Palace would go into the pouch with the usual mail. However, that was not good enough for Archie and Terri who were placed in a lined box which was then sealed, labelled 'fragile, prioritised for HMQ, to be hand delivered to the Palace.' They travelled in a first class seat next to their minder, a member of Special Branch. Again they missed out on a movie during the flight but they did enjoy the luxury of the box and the privacy it afforded them.

Their mistreatment and separation in the Queenstown house had affected them deeply. The now mended rents in Terri's back were reminders to Archie of their dreadful experience whenever he touched her. How could he prevent her being injured again? As for himself, his bruises had faded and were now an ugly yellow, the last stage before they disappeared. But the memories hadn't yet faded.

Both longed for their normal life with Crystal at the Palace to be restored. Had they known the extent of Jeff's efforts to recover them they would have been embarrassed that he had taken so much trouble, but for the moment they were content to be returning home.

Although he had recovered Archie and Terri Jeff still had a lot on his mind: Richard Holland, who was now spending the odd night at the palace. Crystal was mending fast and spending most days out of bed. She was still holding her broken ribs which remained
painful but she was feeling much better. Well enough, Jeff observed, to resume enjoying Richard in her bed. Richard was extremely gentle and undemanding. His consideration moved Crystal deeply.

Being a careful man Jeff decided to do some investigation of Richard's circumstances personally. He would see for himself and then provide his advice to Her Majesty and Crystal.

His information was Richard would, that evening, be in a particular public place where Jeff could observe the activity that was causing him so much concern. That Richard would take the risk of being recognised in such a situation amazed Jeff, and he was not easily amazed. If he was prepared to expose himself in such a way Jeff felt he should confirm this high risk behaviour himself. Jeff was not looking forward to his evening.

The return of Archie and Terri to the Palace was treated by the household staff as something of an event. Such a fuss had been made about their loss that when their personal courier arrived he was shown directly to the small sitting room where he handed over his charge to a grateful monarch.

The courier's flight had been delayed; it was nearly midnight when Her Majesty carried the box containing Archie and Terri to Crystal's room. Crystal had been up that day, tired herself out and been put to bed before dinner.

'Nevertheless,' her grandmother thought, 'I'll take this to her and leave it for the morning. I won't disturb her if she's asleep.' Her Majesty opened Crystal's bedroom door and went in without a thought.

The scene she encountered in the softly lit room was such that Her Majesty, after placing the box on a chair, immediately withdrew without saying a word. Crystal and Richard could only look at each other in horror before Richard dressed and left, nearly running to the stairs.

In her bed Crystal pulled the covers over her head and screeched as in days of old. Archie and Terri heard it,

'What's happened?' Archie whispered, 'She only does that when she doesn't get her way.'

'I expect she's had some kind of argument but I didn't hear anything did you?' Archie could only shake his head. Their box, which had the advantage of being able to see, gave them a concise account. Terri wanted to laugh but Archie put his finger to his lips,

'She'll hear you.' Archie said,

'No she can't,' and tried without success to hold in great gasps of laughter. Archie wondered if it was really a laughing matter. Hearing Terri snorting with laughter everything in the room woke up and began muttering amongst themselves.

What the box related to them was pretty sensational. He told them Crystal had been lying in bed giggling while Richard danced about the room wearing her nightie. The garment was short and sheer, leaving nothing to the imagination. A full length mirror stood near the window and, as the door opened Richard was twirling in front of it, the nightie flying above his naked hips and legs. Her Majesty must, to put it in the vernacular, have got an eyeful.

Jeff had spent the evening out. As planned he positioned himself where he could see Richard 'relaxing.'
'Some relaxation,' Jeff thought, 'He must be mad,' sure he would know Richard in the dim light as he'd been told what to look for. Still he was surprised when Richard came into view.

His slim build and height were unmistakable. The rest was disguised with such artistry Jeff couldn't help but be impressed. Now a platinum blonde with long layers trailing over bare shoulders, Richard strutted from the back of the stage in four inch heels and a long shimmering clinging frock in gold tissue split to the thigh. The mainly male crowd in the nightclub cheered, clapped and stamped their feet as he started his performance.

Obviously the star of what Jeff could see was a very good drag show, Richard could dance and mimed his Shirley Bassey number with some aplomb. Despite all of the difficulties that were to follow the confirmation of Richard's double life, Jeff couldn't help but enjoy the show.

Afterwards he drove himself home and over a large whisky, no ice, he tried to put together a report he could deliver at the Palace. The problem, as Jeff saw it, was Richard wasn't doing anything illegal, he was just being embarrassing. If the media got hold of the information that Her Majesty's granddaughter was sleeping with a drag queen they'd jump to the conclusion he was gay, promiscuous and spin it so he was a threat to national security. He'd be exploited.

'Nothing like a royal scandal to sell newspapers and television advertising,' Jeff said to himself.

As far as Jeff was concerned if Richard wanted to dress as a woman and perform in a nightclub with a gay clientele that was fine but he had to tell Crystal, she was entitled to know. With that decided he went to sleep and dreamt of Crystal jumping off a high bridge, a silk ribbon dangling from her waist. Jeff tried to catch it as she fell but it kept slipping through his fingers. He woke up in fright just before dawn, his fingers gripping the sheet.

The next morning Jeff's phone rang early, before his alarm which wasn't a good start to the day. Early and late calls at home meant something had happened and as he listened to his superior shouting down the line his suspicions were confirmed: he was wanted at the Palace to see Her Majesty now. Things continued on a downward spiral when her Majesty's private secretary met him at the courtyard door,

'Her Majesty is expecting you, please don't keep her waiting.'

The walk upstairs and along the wide gallery was long. Staff who usually said good morning were silent, only giving Jeff a slight nod if he managed to catch their eye. So there was trouble. Jeff suspected it was to do with Crystal and he was right. Jeff's superior was waiting outside; they went in together. They were not asked to sit down.

'Constable Davis, I am concerned about my granddaughter.'

'Yes Ma'am.' Jeff waited. 'She must know,' he thought, 'She's heard about the drag show.'

'Her Majesty is seeing young Holland, in her room... at night.'

Jeff let out a sigh, 'Yes Ma'am, she is.'

'So you know about it?'

'Yes Ma'am, the relationship started just before Cry... Her Royal Highness left for New Zealand. They began seeing each other again recently.'

Her Majesty stood up and walked to the fireplace where she stirred the fire.
'Constable... Holland...is he...? You have made the usual enquiries?'
'Yes, we have. Are you concerned he is not someone Crystal should be involved with?'
'Yes, I ask because last night he was here and I saw...well it doesn't matter but...' Her Majesty looked Jeff in the eye. 'Is he a transvestite?'
The bluntness of the question made Jeff's superior rock back on his heels as though he'd been struck. He had no idea why she would ask such a question. Jeff couldn't imagine what had happened but Richard must have come to the Palace immediately after the show.

'He wouldn't have come in drag, would he?' Jeff dismissed the awful thought: 'The duty guys would have called me. No, it wasn't that.' He had to answer and he couldn't ask anything more,

'Ma'am, he may well be. He performs in a high class drag show at a club called Le Pierrot. I went there last night. He's known as Desiree on stage and does the full drag queen...well, thing: wig, makeup dress. It would be difficult to identify him if you didn't know.' He paused to see how the news was going down.

'Badly,' he thought. He went on,

'Apparently he left New Zealand because his performances in a place there were embarrassing his family. We think he's only just started to perform in public again.'
'I think I'll sit down,' the Queen said. 'Please gentlemen, sit.'

Jeff could see the wheels turning. She was an amazing woman. Not a shred of emotion showed.

'Does Crystal know?'
'I don't know Ma'am. If she doesn't she must be told.'
'Of course.' She stood and held out her hand.

'I feel it would be best if you remained Constable Davis, I'll send for her now but I think we'll walk in the garden. I need some air.'

A desire to flee came over Jeff as he watched his superior escape. 'Lucky bastard,' he thought.

The garden at the Palace was created as a place of repose, a refuge. 'If only,' Jeff thought as he followed Her Majesty down its stone paths. He felt as though he was about to be grilled on the outdoor barbecue.

She walked quickly, saying nothing for some time. At the end of a long allee she stopped and turned to Jeff,

'Constable, this relationship between my granddaughter and Holland is not going to work out. We could cope with the...the performing, we could put an end to that but overnight I made some further enquiries...' Jeff lifted his eyebrows and wondered, 'I've done a deep check, what else could there be?' The Queen said,

'I telephoned his mother. We've known each other for many years. I needed to know everything.' Jeff closed his mouth tight as it opened to voice his amazement. 'I don't want this information shared with anyone.' Jeff nodded,

'Of course Ma'am.'

'Good. Daisy, Richard's mother, tells me her boy is gifted, the music as you know, but he also has this weakness for dressing up and performing.' She began to walk again, more slowly. Jeff followed. 'He has also decided to marry Crystal. But it seems that although he is fond of her he is not in love. It is my experience that life is hard enough without being married to someone who is only fond of you. It won't do for Crystal.'
Jeff had to look away, he turned to look back to the Palace where he could see Crystal walking toward them.

'How do we tell her?' he asked.

'Not we Constable, me. I will tell her. You on the other hand will have to deal with the consequences: I don't think she'll take it well. There could be some behaviour you will have to deal with.'

Jeff could only agree. He left before Crystal arrived to receive the news that her love affair was over but he did see the aftermath.

So did Archie and Terri. Restored to their home in Crystal's room they couldn't avoid seeing the bitter tears that flowed for days or the sadness she wore for many months. During that time Jessie often filled Archie and tucked he and Terri into Crystal's arms as she lay in bed, disconsolate. She hugged them close, drawing comfort from their warmth.

Terri was often in sympathetic tears. It was a dreadful time as Archie and Terri witnessed the heartbreak of the end of Crystal's first romance.

Luckily, it wasn't to be her last but as is usual in these things Crystal didn't realise she had a long and happy life in front of her. It was the passing of time that would heal her.
Chapter 15

Spring came and went. Summer arrived and the family returned to Scotland. Happily the sun shone and some life returned to Crystal. She began to see some friends and visit other estates for house parties.

Jeff went about his duties unhappy but he couldn't figure out why.

Richard Holland never returned to the Palace. He travelled to Italy and stayed there, pleading he needed relief from the cold. He eventually married a minor European aristocrat he didn't love. They lived separate lives but supported each other publicly. He didn't, to the relief of his long suffering family, perform as Desiree again.

The massive upheaval in Crystal's life caused by the jetboat accident and her failed relationship with Richard Holland also brought changes for Archie and Terri. Being left behind in New Zealand had meant they were subjected to the mistreatment of children. Terri in particular was scarred by the experience. Her buttons had been torn off and holes left in her beautiful form.

When Crystal had unpacked them from their travelling box she noticed the neat darning on Terri's back and that her buttons were somewhat marked, as though they had been knocked about. The buttons had of course been through the Ambassador's vacuum cleaner and then sewn back on. As Crystal inspected her hot water bottle and cover she said to Jessie,

'Poor thing, the cover has been ripped. I think I'll send them up to Constance for a bit of restoration.'

'Restoration?' Archie heard the unfamiliar word and started to worry. He held Terri close as she began to shake, 'What does that mean?'

Fortunately Jessie carried them upstairs together and as she entered the familiar sun filled workroom they remembered their first nights together. Terri relaxed a little until Constance began a close examination of every part of her body.

'You have been in the wars; I wonder what happened,' she said.

'I'll tell you,' Terri said out loud. 'Some rather awful children ripped me off Archie, threw me to the floor and then used him as a water pistol. Then they left him and he nearly froze to death in a cold bath. My buttons were sucked up into a filthy vacuum cleaner bag and had to be pulled out by a woman I consider a saint. That's all.'

But it was to no avail. Constance couldn't hear her. She opened a long shallow drawer and pulled out the remainder of Terri's red and blue fabric.

'There it is. I think we'll have a new back, it's quite damaged. The buttons are ruined as well. I wonder if I should use that new method with the snap closing, velcro, that's what it is. Much safer apparently; it won't come undone.'

Archie and Terri were horrified. As far as they could see the woman intended to rip Terri apart, throw part of her way and replace it with something they'd never heard of. How could they prevent it? They couldn't, they were powerless.

Constance picked Terri up and, with gentle hands, undid her buttons and slipped her away from Archie. Terri was frightened and Archie embarrassed at his nakedness but once again Constance surprised them.

Terri's 'restoration' turned out to be a pleasure, just like having a new dress made and fitted. And the velcro. Constance stitched it to Terri's new back. It fitted together completely: there were no gaps and no lumps from buttons. Terri's buttons had
sometimes come open during the night if Crystal tossed and turned but it seemed the velcro, which also had the advantage of being smooth and gave her an elegant line that Archie couldn't help whistling at, wouldn't. United again with his love he ran his hands down her spine, making her tingle,

'Oh Archie, stop.'
'I can't, you're too beautiful.'

It was late when Constance finished so she laid them gently in the same lavender lined drawer where they had spent their honeymoon and closed it.
'I'll take you downstairs in the morning,' she said.

The lights went out and Archie and Terri were truly alone for the first time in many weeks. Both of them hoped Constance wouldn't come in early in the morning.
Chapter 16

At the end of the summer when she had fully recovered from her injuries, if not her failed love affair, it was decided quite unexpectedly by Crystal, that rather than resume her gap year she would enter university. This show of maturity pleased her grandparents who worked with her to choose a suitable course and college.

Strangely, she did not want to go away and chose to study in one of the city's many fine seats of learning. Her primary reason was loneliness. Crystal had needed a lot of support during her recovery and with the departure of Richard from her life she was feeling more than a little fragile. Coping with a strange city and a course as well wasn't something she wanted to do at the moment.

Security preparations began and more than one sigh of relief was heaved. Jeff for one was finding it easier to cope with all he had to do in a familiar environment. Moving Crystal out of town, or overseas to study for three or four years, was a nightmare.

As it had been for the gap year, the detail would have had to be increased for such a long stay away and it was well known that the guys and girls of Special Branch didn't like being away from their nearest and dearest for that long. Jeff didn't want to be in charge of an unhappy detail. With Crystal choosing to remain in the city everyone was happy.

Just as autumn set in and her starting date loomed Crystal received a telephone call she didn't want. Like the bad penny she was, Jade's hard voice came out of the mobile sounding more coarse and jarring than Crystal remembered.

'Of course I was stoned most of the time,' she frankly admitted to herself. 'No wonder that cockney whine didn't register.'

'Hey Crystal, how's tricks?'

Crystal didn't answer, she wanted to think. If she began a conversation with Jade she didn't know where it would end. Obviously Jade wanted to sell her something. But Crystal had been free of that particular habit for months and, to her surprise, had no wish to resume it. What else could she have to say to Jade? 'Nothing,' she decided and pressed ignore on the phone. She looked through the phone's address book, found Jade's number and blocked it.

'No more calls from that pest,' she thought. Crystal went back to what she was doing and forgot Jade.

But Jade didn't forget her. She was livid that Crystal had hung up. She swore and cursed so loudly there were bangs on the ceiling from the flat above. She didn't care. She wanted to vent, she wanted revenge. She wanted to kill something and continued to shout,

'That fucking bitch...' and further comments of an even more offensive nature.

As usual when she was angry she looked for something to kick, break or batter. This time a chair was the chosen victim. She picked it up and raised it over her head then slammed it through a window.

The glass shattered with a crack and jagged pieces of chair flew out, falling to the pavement many floors below Jade's tower block home. True to Jade's usual luck, a piece hit a passerby who was rendered unconscious. An ambulance and the police were called, the broken window quickly located, Jade was arrested again, etc, etc. Regrettably for her there was no-one else to blame this time. It looked as though her goose was well and truly cooked.
Archie and Terri were the first to notice the tremendous change that had come over Crystal. It had been gradual but in the autumn, when she was due to start university, Archie said to Terri,

'Do you think she's all right?'

'What do you mean Archie?'

'She seems so subdued; she does everything she's told for one thing. She's not as she was before ... well before him.'

'You mean selfish and wilful?'

'Yes.'

Terri considered this. Crystal had had much to deal with in recent months, particularly the abrupt end of her relationship with Richard Holland. Terri felt some diminishing of her spirits was to be expected, especially as it had been difficult to cushion the blow. Crystal had pressed the issue with her grandmother who, in the end, could only tell her the truth: Richard was a transvestite who, although he wanted to marry her because of her status and position, did not and would not love her.

Terri knew that a young woman experiencing a love affair for the first time places extraordinary importance upon romance, which is itself a fantasy. One aspect of the fantasy is being the centre of her lover's universe, the only one, the one that can't be lived without. Richard had done his bit: phone calls, romantic texts, flowers, letters. But his inability and in truth, unwillingness, to make her the epicentre of his world had been readily apparent to outsiders, but not to Crystal who had held nothing back: she'd gone into the affair with her arms open and her eyes closed.

Archie and Terri had talked about it more than once: the way Richard seemed to be performing, playing a role when he was in the room.

'He makes love to her as though she's a part he has to master,' Terri had said. 'He never loses control when he's with her; he is never lost in her. Do you know what I mean Archie?'

Archie did. For him being with Terri was all consuming. When they were able to be alone he could think of nothing but her. He wanted nothing but her. She not only filled his arms and his sight, Terri was the other half of his being. He'd seen how Richard behaved and it was more than obvious to Archie that he was not a man in love, except perhaps with his own reflection, alluding to Richard's prancing in front of Crystal's mirror.

'It's as though he's watching himself from somewhere else to see how it's going,' Archie said.

Terri nodded, that summed it up.

Another person was very worried about Crystal: Jeff. Since New Zealand he'd seen her withdrawing into herself, into the protocol that would sap her will, the events where she could perform like a robot, smile, shake hands, talk to the little kiddies, take the flowers, say a few words, smile, wave and leave.

She even did it at house parties with her friends: she appeared to be involved but part of her was just going through the motions; she was supposed to do these things so she did. But as far as Jeff could see she wasn't having any fun at all. Her attitude seemed to be, 'tell me what to do and I'll do it.'

'Why?' he asked himself. As far as Jeff was concerned Holland wasn't worth it. 'If she goes on like this she'll marry some chinless idiot and have kids whose eyes are too close
together. What the fuck is the matter with her?’ he asked himself. His uncharitable thoughts were interrupted by a phone call,

'Davis,' he answered.

'Jeff, bad news,' the duty officer said

'What's happened?'

'You'd better come to the courtyard and see for yourself.'

He hung up and started downstairs.

Jeff walked out into the small courtyard where a group of his officers and other staff were gathered around one of the black Range Rovers the family used. There was a lot of pointing and gesturing going on and, as he approached, some whispered comments were made which appeared to be directed at him. The group parted as he approached them revealing a black car turned technicolor: the once pristine Range Rover had been graffitied. That would have been bad enough but the artist had, with some skill, drawn Jeff in a number of pornographic poses with a woman he assumed was meant to be Crystal. However, the precisely drawn dagger between her eyes and blood pouring down her face made a positive identification difficult.

Simpson, who had called Jeff, said,

'We found it like this at the start of the day. The paint's very fresh. I'd say it was only done a few hours ago.'

Jeff was feeling sick to his stomach. He said nothing but knew this was personal, directed at him and at Crystal. He looked at the graffiti closely. It was professional stuff; a skilled artist had done this. Someone had taken time and a lot of trouble. He looked for the artist's tag, but if it was there it was well hidden.

'Nevertheless, he thought, 'it might be possible to identify the artist from the style. I think we have a big problem here,' Jeff said to himself. 'A very big problem.'

Personal attacks on the family happened, usually by poison pen in the media and through the post: some hate mail was delivered to the Palace most days. Special Branch followed a protocol to deal with it and anything threatening was followed up. People had been charged in the past. But this was different; someone had got into the courtyard and spent time there, undetected.

' Entirely too close for comfort,' Jeff thought.

The further problem was, who knew he was in charge of Crystal's security and who had a big enough grudge to do this, or have it done? He'd find out, he was sure of that. In the meantime procedure meant Crystal would have to have additional protection and a full review of Palace security would be put in place.

'Christ,' he thought, 'Another bloody cock up,' the jetboat accident still fresh in his mind.

Jeff gave orders to cover the car immediately and send it to the Police lab for fingerprints and forensics. Then he got his team together and read them the riot act. Someone hadn't been doing their job, whether it was one of them or one of the Palace guard he wanted to know.

Then he called his boss and the wheels began to turn very fast. A threat of this kind to the family was taken very seriously. Jeff readied himself for a heavy workload but it didn't come. In a short phone call from his boss Jeff was suspended. He couldn't believe his ears,
'There's been a serious lapse in security,' he was told, 'You were in charge. You take the fall. I'll be in touch.'

Upstairs Archie and Terri heard Crystal say to Jessie,
'They can't do that to Jeff, how is it his fault?'
'I don't know Miss but he's gone, left the Palace.'
'We'll see about that,' Crystal said and left the room with a determination she hadn't shown for weeks. Archie and Terri looked at each other,
'That's our girl,' they said together.

However, Crystal's display of determination was short lived. She arrived at her grandmother's door ready to do battle and left even more deflated than she had been before Jeff was suspended. Why? Cold logic and some surprising good faith prevailed.

Her grandmother reasonably said there was no escaping the fact Special Branch had failed to detect the intruder who had violated Palace security and caused criminal damage. They were only grateful it hadn't been worse. When things like this happened they panicked and engaged in recriminations among themselves. After that there was a process they followed,
'We have to let them do their job,' she said.

Privately Her Majesty sympathised with Jeff's predicament but there was nothing she could do at the moment; Davis would have to take his lumps but if he was as smart as she believed he was, the lumps would dissolve. In the meantime she wanted to comfort Crystal who was crying,
'Please don't worry my darling,' she said, 'I'm sure it will all be sorted out very quickly. We just have to wait.'

Archie and Terri were unwitting observers of the next stage of the drama. All of the staff were being interviewed in turn, downstairs with Her Majesty's private secretary always present.

In a breach of procedure Jessie was cornered by a very severe woman protection officer as she tidied the bathroom one morning. The woman walked in unannounced, taking Jessie by surprise. Her arrival and the conversation she had with Jessie woke all the objects in the room: the woman had a grating, high pitched voice that reminded Terri of fingernails on a blackboard,
'You say you saw nothing that morning.'

'No I didn't. I wasn't gazing out the window, I was in here, preparing Miss Crystal's bath and things for the day. She had breakfast in her room, dressed and left. Then I tidied the room and went to the laundry with the washing.'

The woman knew all this already and had come to interview Jessie on a pretext. What she really wanted to talk to Jessie about was Crystal's relationship with Jade. She had a suspicion there had been more to it than anyone admitted and wanted to find out what had gone on. In truth, she wanted to catch Crystal out in a lie.

She was that type: clawing her way to the bottom of the pile by any available means. She intended to sell any bit of gossip or filth she could unearth to the tabloids and make some serious money, anonymously of course. She'd been at it for some time, tipping the gutter media off about Crystal's movements, just as Jeff had suspected. Jessie saw her for what she was and was on her guard: she would never betray Crystal.

'Her Royal Highness has had a rough patch of late, hasn't she?'
'What do you mean?' Jessie resented the woman and her ugly voice.
'I mean the covering up of her drug use.' The woman was fishing. She watched Jessie as the question bounced off her and hovered in the air between them.

Jessie only hesitated before she spoke because she was angry. The woman took it for weakness and an attempt by Jessie to make up a lie. She pumped herself up for the kill. But she was surprised and deflated when Jessie said in her best icy voice,

'I suggest Constable, is that what you are? I suggest you're quite out of order. If you have any further questions for me you can arrange to ask them through the Master of the Household. Now I'm busy and have no more time for you. Can you find the door? I noticed you had no trouble on the way in.'

The woman went to speak but Jessie held up a hand,

'Please don't make me press the panic button and say you threatened me, it will cause such a fuss.'
Chapter 17

Outside the Palace Jeff was making some progress in his hunt for the graffiti artist. The solution lay there, he was sure. That skilled an artist stood out from the crowd and would choose prominent locations for their work. All Jeff had to do was find it and follow the trail. Then he'd find out who had put him up to it.

'Oh yes,' he said to himself, 'Someone had and out of spite. I wonder how she did it?'

Jessie thought long and hard before she telephoned Jeff but in the end she decided it was important he knew he had a rat in the ranks.

'See a rat, smell a rat,' she said to herself as the woman constable scuttled out of the room: a mere servant had terrified her with the threat of bringing the whole protection detail to the bathroom. If she was found there she wouldn't be able to explain it away. She had no business upstairs, her post that day was in the courtyard, and given the current circumstances if she was found she'd get a grilling from the boss.

'Thank god Davis is gone,' she thought, 'He'd give me a going over for sure.' She returned to her duty, not chastened but sorry for herself, sorry Jessie had got the better of her.

After Jeff spoke to Jessie and she recounted the whole interview with Prentiss as Jeff had told Jessie her name was, he was glad to know who his leaker was but he was also worried that the woman would try again. Even more worrying was where she'd got her information. Only one person could have told her, Jade.

'But when,' he thought. 'Had she spoken to Jade before she went inside?' For Jade was in custody, no bail this time. Her recklessness with the chair, which had caused serious injury to the person it had fallen on and her troubled history, had earned her a place at Her Majesty's pleasure. Prentiss was relatively new, only posted to the Palace at the beginning of the summer. She hadn't gone to New Zealand. But if she hadn't been at the Palace at the same time as Jade, how could she know her?

Jeff decided it was time for a beer at Jade's old haunt. He went in and the place hushed. It didn't worry him, he'd get what he wanted even if they tried to give him the silent treatment. Black Jack owed Jeff due to a previous indiscretion and collection day was overdue. Jeff went to the bar, put his helmet down and ordered a drink. He could see Jack reflected in the mirror, drinking with a group of his fellow entrepreneurs. After a short time Jeff went over and sat at the table,

'Tell them to leave Jack,' Jeff said.

'Who the fu...,' one of the larger ones started to say but Jeff just showed his badge and the man got up and left. The rest of Jack's friends did the same. Jeff looked at Jack who was working himself up into a fit of outrage that soon evaporated as Jeff said,

'I can make this official if you like Jack; we can do this in a small room somewhere else. Your choice.'

Jack, who had a horror of small spaces and cops in general due to him carrying quite a large amount of dope to fulfill an outstanding order gave Jeff a greasy smile,

'No need for that.'

'Good, I want to know who arranged that little number on the car this morning.'

'How should I...?' Jeff stopped him with a look,

'Any more bullshit and we go, got it Jack?' Jack pulled himself back in his chair, trying to remove himself from Jeff's steady gaze,
'A guy, Trig's the tag he goes by, I don't know him myself.'
Jeff bored into him some more with his now steely eyes and leaned closer,
'Who paid him?'
'How should I know? Those blokes just spray and run...'
Jeff didn't give him time to finish. He had Jack up on his feet while the next word died in his mouth. Jack struggled and pulled but Jeff had his upper arm in an iron grip. He put his face close to Jack and whispered,
'I'll break it and make it look like an accident so stop with the 'I don't knows'. You've got three seconds.'
Jeff wrenched Jack's arm up behind his back and pushed, Jack winced,
'All right, I know, God stop it, I said I know.'
Jeff released the arm just enough so the circulation returned,
'Well, who was it?'
'Jade, it was Jade.' Jeff wasn't surprised but he did admire her resourcefulness.
'She must have had some help Jack, being inside and all.'
The look on Jack's face told Jeff everything, he had the link to her in his hands.
'Let's go Jack, you've got a date. I can't thank you enough for agreeing to come and meet my boss.'
According to Jack's version of events the conspiracy to graffiti the car began when Jade phoned Jack from the remand centre, raving about wanting to get at Jeff and Crystal. The graffiti idea had been Jack's which surprised Jeff because it would need someone to get the artist into the locked courtyard and distract the whole security detail while he worked. Crystal wanted the dagger artwork.
Jack had found the artist Trig, who had been rounded up and was giving his inquisitors the silent treatment in another room. Trig created and executed the design, Jack paid him and told Jade she owed him for it. Jack would not say how Trig got into the Palace.
So, three conspirators were identified but, Jeff thought, 'There has to be at least one more.'
When the Police had finished interviewing Jade, the artist and his erstwhile patron, many charges were laid against the three and Jeff went back to work but how the lapse in security happened was unresolved. The officers on duty in the courtyard that night were Prentiss and two male officers. All said they were awake and alert the whole shift. Jeff knew someone had to be lying.
Over the next few days Jeff put together a chart of Prentiss' shifts and the leaks to the media. Some dates corresponded but not all. Then he called in a favour at MI5 and had her discreetly followed. Nothing showed after a week. MI5 begged off claiming more important work. Jeff couldn't argue. He watched Prentiss himself and decided not to act on Jessie's information as yet.
The old advice to keep your friends close and your enemies closer seemed appropriate so he ensured Prentiss was rostered with him every day. He made her his shadow. As a result she was with Crystal much more than previously, she had access to Crystal's rooms and complete information about her movements: information worth a great deal to the wrong kind of newspaper or someone who wanted to get at her. When Jeff went away to attend meetings or complete paperwork he left her outside Crystal's apartment. Jeff waited for Prentiss to slip up.
During the day Crystal's rooms were, to the uninformed, empty. To the cogniscentsi they were occupied by a plethora of objects who were awake and alert. The objects included Archie and Terri of course who had struck up a close friendship with the mirror and their particular marble shelf. The hairbrushes were also very friendly so Archie and Terri spent part of each day chatting and exchanging stories. The mirror in particular was interested in their travels as, it said with regret,

'I've never been anywhere.'

Archie and Terri were less convinced of the delights of travel after their extended stay in New Zealand but they were happy to share their experiences. A new member of the room turned up one morning, a nail file that usually lived on Crystal's dressing table. Jessie had decided it should be in the bathroom and it joined a number of other objects in a small, pretty floral pot that stood on a marble stand next to the basin. The marble stand was near the door, giving all its objects a clear view of the bedroom.

It was a voluble object that began to annoy Archie and Terri with its constant stream of chatter until late one day as they were waiting for Crystal to return from university the nail file hissed out,

'Look at this, it's that woman Prentiss and another one of them. The cheeky buggers, they're going through Crystal's drawers.'

The mirror said to Archie and Terri,

'They're not supposed to be in her room, are they?'

'No,' Terri replied, 'They're not.' Terri and Archie had had more than one private talk about Prentiss since her encounter with Jessie and about Jessie's threat to push the panic button. Every room had one, the bathroom's was on the wall above where Archie and Terri lay. They could see it and Terri whispered to Archie,

'What happens if someone pushes it?'

'They all come running I suppose... You don't....Terri that would be...' He smiled, 'Let's do it.'

Archie and Terri couldn't move any distance but their arms could reach the button, which was big and red. They wiggled and stretched, their fingers reached the bottom of the button which they pushed with all their might.

They saw the button go in but there was no sound. They pushed again, no sound. Puzzled, they waited, but not for long. Jeff burst through the door catching Prentiss with her hands in Crystal's desk. Her companion, Simpson, was rifling through her underwear drawer.

Both of them looked as though the world had ended. Their world had, it had just gone up in silent flames.
Chapter 18

It was Prentiss's taste for rough trade that brought her undone. Liking blokes that slapped her about a bit, she frequented places she shouldn't and went about with people she, as a royal protection officer, wasn't allowed to. Her latest bit of leather clad aggro was a friend of Jade's who had introduced her to Jade at the same pub where the Queen's former page had been arrested for possession.

But Prentiss's Achilles heel had been leading her astray before that fateful day. Before her transfer to the Palace she'd been blackmailing a clerk from the protection office she'd caught with a nose full of cocaine at one of her boyfriend's parties.

Being ever the opportunist she'd used the situation to her advantage and arranged for the now terrified snorter to pass over Crystal's schedule every week. The money she made from leaking it to the press had been welcome but kept hidden. Protection officers living a lifestyle they couldn't afford on their salaries quickly came undone. Despite her many lapses of judgment Prentiss was smart enough to save the money and not splash it around.

Jeff found out all of this during the formal interview. She went to pieces when he pressed her. She told him her boyfriend had arranged the graffiti incident with Black Jack. Jack hadn't told them about Prentiss's boyfriend because he had a reputation for making people disappear if they crossed him. He was arrested as well.

Getting Trig into the courtyard had taken some planning and the enlistment of Simpson, one of his senior officers, in the scheme. Simpson was remaining silent but Prentiss gave Jeff all he needed to have him charged.

The story went that Prentiss slipped a sleeping pill into the third officer's tea. As he slept Simpson let Trig into the courtyard to do the business on the car. When the sleeping beauty woke up, shocked that he'd been asleep on duty, Prentiss told him not to worry, they'd cover for him. Hence the original story that all of them had been awake and alert.

Simpson had agreed to search Crystal's room because he had a taste for the money Prentiss was beginning to pay him. Oh, it's a fatal mistake to be too greedy. Their avarice meant Prentiss and Simpson would spend a long time in a grimy Victorian prison, in protection of course, because cops don't last long in the general prison population. The clerk was arrested, shaken up and confessed everything.

Jeff was nearly exhausted by the failures of his team and the extent of the conspiracy but he kept at it. His final mystery to solve was who'd pushed the panic button? Prentiss said only she and Simpson had been in the bedroom. No-one else had been in the bathroom. Jessie confirmed she hadn't been there. No other member of staff was unaccounted for.

Jeff stood in the bathroom and looked around. Archie and Terri watched and listened as he talked to Jessie. Lying as always on the marble shelf they wanted to help him but couldn't, he wouldn't hear them if they spoke.

'Poor bloke,' Terri said, 'It's driving him crazy not knowing.'

'Well there's nothing we can do about it, he'll just have to keep wondering.'

'Not necessarily,' Terri said, 'We could ...'

Archie looked at Terri, at the button and at Jeff who was clearly dumbfounded.

'All right, but my guess is he'll think it malfunctioned or something.'

Terri smiled, 'At least he won't be worried any more.'
They repeated their wriggle and squirm of the day before and, after about thirty seconds and to Jeff's astonishment, two protection officers ran into the room.

'What do you two want?' he said.

'The alarm, it went off.'

The whole thing was put down to a wiring fault. The electricians were called in, everything was replaced and peace descended on the Palace. But a small part of Jeff wasn't sure. He was convinced he'd seen something move on the shelf, but he had to be wrong, the only thing there was a hot water bottle in a cover. Too much stress he decided.

He took a couple of days off, got on his bike and took himself to the sea. He rented a boat and went out fishing. He didn't catch anything but he didn't care, there'd been too much catching of late.
Chapter 19

When Jeff returned from his restorative sojourn at the seaside, sure he'd been under some strain with the Jade affair and been imagining things, his life protecting Crystal settled into a routine. Both of them were grateful for some normality after the events of recent months. However, 'a normal routine' for Crystal was very different to the average person's experience.

During the week Jeff waited for her in the once again pristine Range Rover until she arrived in the courtyard, ready to be driven to her classes at the university.

She always sat up front with him, another officer in the back. The following car carried two further protection officers. Jeff varied the route as much as he could to avoid security issues and to minimise boredom. Crystal sometimes chatted about her classes or something she was reading and found Jeff a good listener. He'd studied some of the subjects Crystal was taking so they talked about philosophy and political theory.

Gradually the drives took a bit longer as he dallied on the way, engrossed in conversation with her. When he dropped Crystal at the campus two protection officers remained with her, shadowing her through the day, always at a distance that allowed her some freedom to move but they were very careful with her because of the sheer number of people on the campus who were impossible to screen. Jeff took a couple of campus shifts a week and was always there to drive Crystal back to the Palace in the afternoon.

Through her classes she'd made a number of new friends and they were all investigated. Everyone was all right so far. One was a student from Australia; he'd come over really to play rugby for the university but was ostensibly studying history.

'It's always rugby,' Jeff thought, 'Bloody rugby.'

Crystal's new friend became very attentive to her, buying her coffees during breaks, waiting outside her lecture hall and then taking her to lunch. One weekend at the start of the new season she went to watch him play. Jeff was on duty, wearing casual clothes and keeping a discreet distance.

He watched the match with interest. The fellow, Brendan Burke, was a natural at fullback. He had speed and agility and he could kick. At the end of the match he made a point of coming over and speaking to Crystal before he went to the locker room. Her cheeks were flushed and she followed him with her eyes as he trotted off with the rest of the team to shower and change.

Then the dinners and movies started. Jeff sat through a number of things he'd never watch himself, Fast and Furious 84 or the equivalent and when Crystal made the choice, romantic comedies. As the autumn progressed they went out to dinner and nightclubs, partying until the early hours. He drove them around or followed in the Range Rover when Brendan collected Crystal in his gunmetal Aston Martin.

Brendan was the son of a rich grazier who'd diversified the family's pastoral interests into an international foodstuffs conglomerate. The family was socially accepted being very old money and not tainted by any recent scandals. It was only a matter of time until one Saturday Brendan was invited to tea with Her Majesty and Crystal's grandfather and the real scrutiny began.

'I wonder what the old man will make of him,' Jeff thought, for he always respected Crystal's grandfather's assessment of people. The Prince didn't suffer fools and made his views known when he detected a fake.
Jeff was a little disappointed when Brendan seemed to pass the test and he was invited to spend a weekend with the family in the country. It seemed Crystal had a new love but she didn't ask Jeff to bring him into the Palace under the radar which surprised him because they'd been going out for a couple of months.

Another thing that surprised Jeff was the physical change in Crystal: she'd shed all her puppy fat, rather late admittedly, and was turning into a shapely, beautiful young woman. She'd revamped her wardrobe and was more adventurous: the skirts were shorter; the jeans cut lower and tighter. Before she came down in the morning Jeff began to wonder what she'd be wearing.

Routine is a wonderful thing especially when it's enlivened by a love affair but routine is one of those things made to be broken, shattered even. Crystal and Jeff's routine was shattered one morning when she came downstairs and asked the second protection officer to ride in the following car. He looked at Jeff who nodded, closed the doors after Crystal got in and went back to the follow car.

Jeff started the engine and moved off. As he drove out of the gates Crystal said, 'I want to talk to you Jeff.'

He glanced at her, she was looking at him with a frown on her face, 'Fine, what is it?'

'I want you to stop watching me.'

Jeff was startled for a moment, watching Crystal was what he did. What did she mean? How could he stop doing his job? Men are often a little slow on the uptake so Crystal, who, with hindsight was still somewhat in the dark herself, said, 'Brendan doesn't like the way you look at me.'

Jeff pulled the car over, turned off the engine and looked at Crystal with those beautiful blue eyes she'd always admired.

'They're like the kind of pool you want to dive into and have close around you covering and wrapping your skin in a ....' Crystal pulled herself back from her dream as Jeff said, 'Fuck Brendan,' and started the car. He drove to the university and dropped her off without another word and then went back to the Palace.

The atmosphere in the protection office that day was black, due entirely to Jeff's mood, which infected everyone.

The new clerk, a pretty little thing who thought Jeff was rather hot and fancied her chances with him, took a second look that day and decided he was probably too much for her to handle. His whole body was icy; his manner when he gave her something to research, hard and nearly as cold as his face.

'What's up with him?' she wondered as did some of the others. None of the guys had an answer, except the information that Crystal had asked to ride alone with Jeff that morning. She'd done it before, when she wanted Jeff to do something for her, but as far as anyone knew nothing out of the way had happened.

There was some whispered speculation about what Crystal said in the car but it in the absence of anything tangible to feed it the gossip petered out by lunchtime.

As Jeff's day wore on and he considered what Crystal had said and how he'd responded, which at the time had surprised him, he realised what his problem was: he wasn't ready to deal with Crystal's challenge. She'd thrown down the gauntlet at his feet,
do you care about me or not; he could either pick it up or lose something he hadn't as yet 

admitted he wanted.

'Bloody hell,' he said to himself. 'What do I do?'

He spent the rest of the day completing paperwork and then got into the Range Rover 
to pick Crystal up from the campus. They didn't look at each other as she got into the car, 
nor did they speak during the trip home. Thompson, sitting in the back, felt like he was 
intruding on a private fight. When they arrived at the Palace Crystal slammed the door 
after her and went inside, still silent, her face set in a mask. Jeff finally turned and 
watched her walk away.
Chapter 20

Her Majesty was having a very busy year and another overseas tour was due to start the next week. She and her husband would visit several African countries and some islands off the African coast using the royal yacht to island hop and entertain local dignitaries. At the last minute they asked Crystal to join them, her grandmother explaining,

'We feel you would benefit from the trip dear, it's only ten days; part of it is during the break so you won't miss many lectures.'

In her new mood of compliance it didn't occur to Crystal to argue or ask why she was being included so late in the preparations; it wouldn't have done any good in any case. It would be a scramble to get ready but Constance's team went into action immediately preparing the clothes and accessories she'd need for ten days in the paparazzi spotlight.

Jeff received the news just before Crystal did and went into overdrive, working with Her Majesty's detail to co-ordinate the security for the trip. East Africa was considered high risk, anything involving the yacht anywhere near the Somali coast, extremely high risk. But the risks had been weighed and with a two destroyer escort and aircraft surveillance from the mainland it was considered by his betters that the risk of using the yacht was manageable.

He was distracted by the preparations and the daily journeys to and from the campus were as direct and short as he could make them. He and Crystal hardly spoke, which was a pity because she had something to tell him.

Because of the imminent trip her outings with Brendan were fewer and then stopped altogether. Archie and Terri could have told Jeff, who wondered for a moment at the sudden change, why, but of course he didn't ask.

The recent atmosphere of calm had suited Archie and Terri. Although they'd enjoyed their part in exposing Prentiss and Simpson and the excitement it caused, a little peace and quiet was nice.

The period before Crystal's declaration to Jeff had been just so. She came in after university, changed her clothes and went out again, humming. It was a happy time in the bedroom; everyone was enjoying her recovery and new lease on life.

In stark contrast the afternoon of the declaration, as it came to be known in the room, and the days that followed were not.

First there was the breaking of the china by Crystal. She snatched a tea tray from Jessie and flung it against the wall. Then there was the furious telephone call to Brendan who thought he'd been struck by lightning. Crystal accused him of interfering in things that didn't concern him without offering any further explanation. Then there was the ripping up of her diary which she had begun only recently, a daily account of her rather chaste relationship with Brendan.

When she recovered from her tirade she took herself to her grandmother's sitting room and sat. What she was waiting for she didn't know, her grandmother wouldn't return that night; she was away visiting something or other. Worn out with her anger Crystal calmed down and started to think.

'I didn't get the reaction I wanted, that's the trouble. "Fuck Brendan" can mean anything. It doesn't mean he cares about me. It probably means he'll do whatever he wants. I've completely misunderstood him, he's just doing his job, nothing more.'
The tears that followed that night were absorbed by her poor pillow which hated it when she cried and it became soggy. Powerless to help it lay under her streaming face and sighed,

'Oh dear, I'm so glad I'm not young any more.' His better half, which lived on the other side of the bed, agreed,
'So tiring to be young.'

Archie and Terri were more sympathetic but unable to help. They lay on the bathroom shelf and whispered to each other so as not to wake the mirror, but finally fell asleep while Crystal continued to sob into the early hours. In the morning she seemed to pull herself together and went out determined to ignore Jeff but one look at him sitting waiting for her in the car undid all her resolve.

When she'd spoken yesterday she hadn't realised she wanted him to declare himself, say she was his, not Brendan's, now she did. She wanted to tell him how she felt but held back, fearing he didn't want her. It was rather like being hit by a truck: the realisation that she loved him and couldn't have him left her with nowhere to go. She had to just accept it.

Love doesn't just come, it takes you over. We don't choose who we love, we just fall into it. There's no point in resisting, surrender is the only option. Hopeless or not, in love one is. Crystal knew all that in an instant. As a result the next week was a nightmare for her, being near him at least twice a day and unable to penetrate the frosty crust he wore like a coat. She missed the closeness, the intimacy of being with him, but he shut her out very effectively. Jeff just didn't know what to do.

It was Crystal's grandfather who brought things to a head. A no nonsense man who remembered what is was to be in love, he could see what was going on. Whenever he saw Crystal and Jeff in the same room sparks seemed to fly. Their attraction to each other was obvious to him.

'What are they waiting for?' he asked himself.

Finally, the night before they were to fly out and join the yacht he sent for Jeff who was staying in the Palace overnight because of their very early start in the morning. Jeff came in and was offered a seat and given a large whiskey.

'It's Jeff, isn't it?'

'Yes sir.' Jeff was as uncomfortable as he'd ever been. The beauty of the panelled room and its dancing fire were lost on him as he looked at Crystal's grandfather who was undoubtedly annoyed with him.

'What have I done now?' he asked himself.

'I want to tell you a story young man and at the end of it I hope you'll reconsider your position.'

'My position, sir?'

'Yes, in relation to my granddaughter. You love her, don't you?'

Jeff's face drained of colour and he felt a sinking in his stomach. He couldn't speak as Crystal's grandfather said,

'Perhaps some of the whiskey will help.'

Jeff looked at the glass and drank of half of it. He felt it warm him but it didn't really help.
'Did he love Crystal? He'd thought about little else for days. He'd also been thinking about how you marry the very rich granddaughter of the Queen when you're just a young copper. The Prince said,

'Well to my story. When I was a young man I came from a good family but we were not rich. We were connected and I moved in some good circles but the money thing was always an issue. I didn't have enough to offer anyone a comfortable home, particularly someone like my wife. That was my view anyway. When I met my wife I fell for her within minutes but it was out of the question, I was poor, she was rich and would be a queen. She needed someone else; someone of her station. So I did nothing.'

Jeff remained silent, taking in the story, part of which was already public knowledge.

'A number of years passed and I went out with other women but it was just filling in the hours; I felt empty when I was with them and, as I'm able to admit now, lonely.'

He took a sip of his drink and sat down opposite Jeff. He stretched his long legs out to the fire and leant back in his chair.

'My wife finally proposed to me. It was terribly embarrassing at the time but I am so grateful to her now. She knew as I did not that I had to swallow my pride and let her look after the money. It's frightening to think that but for her good sense we might have wasted our lives married to other people. Regret lasts a lifetime Jeff; I hope you don't have to live with it.'

Jeff finished the drink in one gulp and asked,

'Could I have another sir?' He was given a couple more over the next hour as they talked about making a life with a royal.

'At least she won't be queen,' Jeff said at one point.

'No, our son will, God help us.'

When Jeff left with a slap on his back and a firm handshake he'd never been more grateful to anyone in his life. All he had to do now was try and mend his relationship with Crystal while on a public tour to Africa with the Queen, her consort and an entourage of about a hundred people.

'Nothing to it,' he said.

Crystal's grandfather didn't tell him that was exactly why they were taking Crystal on the tour. Surely they could work that much out for themselves.
Chapter 21

Crystal's luggage for the African tour filled a mini van. What was in it she didn't know but she did make sure Archie and Terri were placed in her hand luggage so they travelled with her on the plane. After her New Zealand experience she decided her hot water bottle was to be a packing basic when she travelled.

Just as well, because on the second day of the tour she went riding on an unfamiliar horse that stumbled in a rut and fell. Crystal jumped clear but landed badly, jarring her leg.

One happy result of yet another accident was getting Jeff's attention. He'd been riding with her, keeping his distance and saw her go down and was with her almost as soon as she hit the ground. The thrill of him picking her up in his arms and carrying her back to the house had almost, but not quite, removed the pain in her leg. With her arms around his neck she laid her head on his shoulder and passed out, only waking up an hour later in her own bed. By then Jeff was gone.

The tour continued with Crystal limping a little but game. She was enjoying herself because Africa was wonderful, full of colour and music. She watched in awe as her grandmother got through days that were wearing Crystal out. She fell into bed at night exhausted, waking early to prepare for yet another round of events. The yacht travelled from place to place overnight, allowing them down time to recover in its quiet luxury. The lights of their destroyer escort blinked in the dark night, never far away.

The whole time Crystal waited for Jeff to spend some time with her but he was always busy, arranging cars and people, on the phone and in intense discussion with his team and the African officials. He always seemed worried and distracted. She wanted to ask him what was wrong but he was unavailable to her: always near but very far away.

The sixth day was scheduled as a rest day with no official engagements; they berthed and went to church in what seemed to be a small but lively town where, not far from the church, a market was in full swing. After church her grandmother decided she'd like to walk around. The news wasn't greeted with any joy by the protection officers, the town was near the Somali border and considered high risk.

'I will only be here an hour or so,' she told her principal protection officer. 'Come Crystal, let's see what's going on.'

She put up her sun shade and started to walk toward the market where she and Crystal, security detail in tow, were quickly surrounded by the noisy, bustling crowd of stall holders and shoppers. The place was a delight to Crystal, bursting with ordinary life. She followed her grandmother as she stopped at stalls and talked to people, relaxed and happy without the need for protocol.

However, Jeff was very unhappy at the change of plan and had a hurried conference with his team.

'Don't leave her for a second, I want close protection. If she goes into a shop, I'll go with her, then two of you on the back and one remains outside. Anything suspicious, get her out of there. Send for the car and keep it nearby.' He said to himself, 'I don't like this at all.'

The job of protecting Crystal in Africa was demanding a great deal of Jeff. The tour was high profile and well publicised. The schedule of every public engagement had been available on the internet for weeks. Their every move was followed by the press and
photographed. It wasn't unusual that there had been a number of threats made. He arranged his team and worked with the backup military forces to deal with issues as they arose. They'd avoided trouble with minor adjustments to the schedule and some quick work, bringing in suspects who were detained and questioned in local police stations.

Today the military were low key, trying to blend in as well as they could and keeping a close but not restrictive perimeter. People came and went around Crystal and her grandmother as they walked through the market.

What really worried Jeff were the unmade threats, the ones who didn't announce their intentions. As he followed Crystal and her grandmother into a shop filled with bright fabrics he just wished the shopping excursion was over and they could return to the safety of the yacht.

The shop was little more than some corrugated iron sheets nailed together. All of the shops were close together and seemed to be holding each other up. Bolts of cloth were arranged around a couple of walls on sloping shelves of planks and hand made bricks. A counter of packing cases stood near the door where the shop owner was bowing deeply to his regal guest and shouting to his wife to bring samples of traditional dress for her Majesty and Crystal to see.

Crystal liked one and the owner's wife offered to arrange it on her. They went to the back of the shop where a curtain hung from the ceiling making a basic changing room.

'Mirror,' she said pointing at the curtain.

Crystal nodded and went behind the curtain with the woman. Jeff moved to the back of the shop and watched the curtain move as the woman wound and tucked the dress on Crystal. Her Majesty was talking to the shop owner who was delighted at her interest. One of her Majesty's protection officers stood near the door, another on the opposite side of the shop to Jeff. He was watching the Queen, not the change room.

Jeff kept an eye on the curtain and then the front door. No-one else came in; customers were being turned away until they left. One man insisted on coming in, arguing with Jeff's outside man. He started to shout and a small noisy crowd formed. It distracted Jeff only for a moment. In that time there was a crack, the curtain ceased to move and the shop owner's wife fell to the floor, unconscious.

By the time Jeff took the three steps to where the change room had been Crystal was gone. A sheet of iron had been wrenched off the back of the shop. His two men were lying on the ground outside, blood streaming from their heads where they'd been clubbed. There were footprints in the dust and drag marks where someone had tried to dig their heels in as they'd been carried away. One of Crystal's shoes was lying in one of the marks, its heel broken.

Jeff raised the alarm and everything erupted, soldiers surrounded the market as her Majesty was taken out and driven away in the waiting car. The man who'd been arguing with one of the officers at the door was thrown to the ground and handcuffed.

Soldiers began to search every shop, house and hutch in the immediate area. Crystal wasn't found. A wider land search was started with helicopters from the destroyers. Ribs were sent out from the destroyers with search teams to scour the shore for boats trying to leave the area but nothing was found.

Jeff was icy cold and angry.

'You bastards,' he said.
As he searched for her Crystal kicked at her captors and struggled in their arms as they ran along the back of stalls and shops. A hand was over her mouth and iron like hands held her on either side. Finally they became impatient with her resistance and picked her up off the ground carrying her like a sack of goods. They didn't go far, only about a hundred yards from the shop, towards the stone church Crystal and her grandmother had attended less than an hour ago.

Then a sheet of tin was pulled up off the ground and she was shoved into a hole that dropped sharply to a tunnel. She was pushed in and landed hard, two of her captors following. Then she heard the tin replaced and a car driven a short distance until it seemed to be directly above her. She was in darkness, her injured leg aching.
Chapter 22

The motors of the royal yacht spun into life as her Majesty was brought on board. Her husband waited at the top of the gang plank as she ran into his arms,
'They took her, it was so fast, I can't believe it.'
'Come, let's go inside.' He took his distraught wife to their cabin and called for her doctor which she refused. She wanted a strong cup of tea which was brought and she drank with steady hands. Her control was restored and she waited calmly for the system to return her granddaughter to her.

The yacht was taken two miles offshore, its escort closed in and began a patrol pattern: nothing was getting near the yacht. On shore drastic measures had been taken, everyone: every man, woman and child in the vicinity was rounded up into a group and taken to the area in front of the church.

Hundreds of irate people were pushed and shoved down alleyways to the open space and told to sit down. Extra military personnel came onshore from the destroyers and were put to work searching everyone and every vehicle.

Local police were told to start taking names and checking identities, looking for anyone who was out of place. Further out from the village helicopters were circling, all vehicles were detained and turned back to the town where they were impounded and everyone in them taken to the church. Orders were given that anyone who didn't respond to a command to stop was to be shot. The once lively town was turned into a grim military camp. As far as Jeff was concerned the town's only virtue was its small population; they thought they'd rounded up most of it.

Jeff's injured men were flown out to the nearest hospital where their wounds were treated. Both had nasty scalp lacerations that had bled profusely but were not badly hurt. They reported they'd seen a street vendor approaching the back of the shop, pushing a hand cart. He'd waved and offered them tea. As they told him to move on they were struck from behind.

In her dusty hole Crystal was shoved from behind and dragged from in front, but when she tried to stand her leg collapsed and she screamed in pain.
'It can't be broken,' she thought, 'I didn't fall far enough.'
Her captors pushed and grabbed at her but every movement sent shards of pain through her thigh. She refused to move, pushing their hands away. Someone slapped her in the dark and she stopped resisting. They dragged her through the dark tunnel which soon opened into a dimly lit, brick floored cavern filled with racks and bottles. She looked around in disbelief, she was in a wine cellar!
Her captors pushed her to the floor and tied a filthy rag over her mouth. Her hands and feet were tied and she was left alone as the two men seemed to be having an argument.
One of them kept pointing at Crystal while the other kept pointing to a set of stairs that led out of the cellar. Finally the man who'd been pointing at the stairs pushed his friend in the chest and ran up the stairs. He opened a trapdoor and stepped out. His friend watched Crystal with his lips drawn back from his yellow teeth. Crystal now had time to be frightened.

Obviously the men were arguing over her, perhaps what to do with her. She couldn't walk and they would have to carry her. They were sinewy and strong, carrying her didn't seem to be a problem to her but there seemed to be something else.
The second man came back down the stairs very excited. He spoke to his friend in staccato bursts with much pointing of fingers in several directions. They spoke for some time and then they left, leaving Crystal in the dark as they closed the hatch behind them.

The day wore on, blistering heat started to take its toll on the people sitting without cover on the ground. Bottled water was handed out and every umbrella in the market was put to work providing shade.

After three hours of searching the consensus was Crystal could not have been taken out of the village: she was here somewhere. The military turned their attention to the ground and began questioning people about any old tunnels, mine workings or underground storage.

'There's certainly no sewerage system,' Jeff said; he hated the place.

Many underground places were identified and searched. As evening was setting in a woman started to shout at the man beside her. She slapped his head and berated him so loudly one of the soldiers went over to see what was going on. He called over a local policeman to translate what she was saying.

'She's his wife. She's calling him a camel turd, a worthless piece of shit who's not worth spitting on.'

The abuse went on as the man cowered under the wave of abuse. The woman began to pull at his arm and push him, forcing him to stand up. She spat more words at him which translated as,

'Go on, tell them what you've done you fool of the monkey brains.'

The man was silent as the soldier dragged him away and told the policeman to bring the wife. Jeff was in a huddle with the military commander when the couple were brought to him.

'What's this?' he asked the policeman.

'According to the lady here, it seems this fellow, her husband, has something to say.'

'Ask her what it is,' Jeff said.

The policeman had a long conversation with the woman who spat at her husband and kicked him in the shins. He didn't protect himself; he seemed to be completely under her power. At the end of yet another tirade of abuse the policeman turned to Jeff with a surprised expression,

'He kidnapped the princess, he and his friends. They were going to sell her to the Somalis.'

The military commander took over the interrogation which was moved inside to a small room with no windows and a number of heavily armed soldiers. The man quickly told his story: how he and his friends were poor and needed money to feed their families, there had been famine in the surrounding villages.

They'd seen the royal party go to church and decided without any planning to grab one of them if they could to make some money from the Somalis. Her Majesty going into the market made it easy. Jeff quailed at the spontaneous simplicity of it.

'Can we stop the story and ask him where Cry...her Royal Highness is?'

The translator quizzed the man who replied to his questions with,

'In the cellar.'

'What cellar?' Jeff said, grabbing the man by the throat.

'Under the church,' he told him gasping for breath. They'd dug a tunnel to the cellar to steal the wine. They intended to take Crystal to the cellar and move her to the coast when
it was dark. The force that had descended on the town had made that impossible so they'd left her there.

Jeff and his team ran to the church where the startled priest was sorting food and bottles of water for the people outside.

'How do I get to the cellar?' Jeff shouted at him.

The good father, who was rather intimidated by the group of armed young men in his church, led them out to the small chapter house and pointed to the floor. A polished brass ring glowed on the floor boards.

A frightened Crystal was retrieved and brought upstairs by Jeff. He went to put her down as he called for a stretcher but she wouldn't take her arms from his neck.

She clung to him and would not let go until they were back on the yacht and a navy doctor told her he would have to examine her. She kept her eyes on a white faced Jeff as the doctor found the break in her shin and gave her a large shot of painkiller before he set it.

Afterwards she was put into her own bed and slept. Finally Jeff went and spoke to the Queen and Crystal's grandfather.

Jeff found Crystal's grandfather standing on the deck staring out at the night.

'Jeff, you look terrible,' he said.

'I have to admit sir, I've felt better.'

'Come in,' he said, 'we've been waiting for you.'

He put a strong hand on Jeff's shoulder and led him into Her Majesty's stateroom. Inside he pushed Jeff into a chair and gave him a drink. Her Majesty watched as he took a gulp and then twirled the heavy crystal glass in his hands.

The strain of the day was taking its toll; Jeff was exhausted. Her Majesty saw the exhaustion and a finely honed strength of a kind well beyond his years. He was quiet, determined, loyal and apparently, devoted to Crystal. He hadn't just been doing his job trying to find her, she'd been told he'd been frantic with worry.

His efforts to find Crystal had been relentless. She felt he would have torn the town apart to find her. The initiative to detain the whole population had been his and, despite it being a complete violation of their human rights, had paid off. Not for the first time in her long life Her Majesty grappled with the competing demands of the ends justifying the means. At the moment she was just grateful to have Crystal back.

'Constable ... Jeff,' she said, 'We want to thank you for what you did today.'

'Ma'am, I lost her, I let them take her; you shouldn't be thanking me. I stuffed up.' It was only his bone tiredness that let him speak in such terms to his sovereign.

Her Majesty stood up and Jeff immediately started to get out of the chair but she waved him down.

'I exposed her Jeff, not you. If I had listened to my protection officers' advice we wouldn't have been in danger. It's my fault, entirely my fault.'

'No...' he started to say but Her Majesty silenced him.

'That's the end of it Jeff, except for one thing.'

'Ma'am?'

'I want you to promise me something.'

'Of course.'

'Crystal is in love with you,' he looked embarrassed but Her Majesty noted he didn't deny it. She went on, 'She is and I'm happy for you both. If you promise me to care for
her always I will promise you not to go against security advice ever again. Do we have a
bargain?"

Jeff stood up and took the hand offered to him, 'Yes Ma'am, we do.' Her Majesty
covered his hand with her hers and he managed a very tired smile. 'Go on, she's waiting
for you.'

To everyone's surprise the tour wasn't cancelled. Her Majesty and her husband
continued and attended all the scheduled events. It was written up in the press as the
triumph of a determined monarch, one not cowed by threats.

'That's as may be,' Her Majesty said, as she read yet another account of her apparently
indomitable strength in a conservative newspaper, 'But really they exaggerate; people are
expecting us and we can't disappoint them.'

For another four days the royal yacht went on its serene way, the royal party went
ashore or local people and dignitaries came on board and were entertained. There wasn't
another ripple in the pool of protocol.

Crystal was kept in bed for the break in her leg was a bad one and understandably she
was having nightmares. Jessie was her constant companion, pressing a warm Archie and
Terri into her arms for comfort.

'Well hot water bottle,' she said, 'I need you again. You'd think I'd learn to stay out of
trouble, wouldn't you?'

But Crystal had someone else to warm her. Late on the first night Jeff slipped quietly
into the room and lay down beside Crystal. He wrapped her in his arms and they slept.

Archie and Terri, who were dropped to the floor as Jeff come in that first night, landed
on the carpet with a thump,

'Well,' Terri said to Archie, 'About time.'

They were surprised to hear Jeff say,

'Did you hear that?'

'What?' A sleepy Crystal asked.

'I thought I heard someone say something. I must be more tired that I thought.'

Archie and Terri looked at each other. Jeff couldn't hear them, could he?
Chapter 23

As Crystal recovered aboard the yacht the opportunists responsible for her kidnapping were interrogated on land. The audacity they had displayed in snatching Crystal from under the noses of her protectors was due to their complete ignorance of the security force that surrounded the Queen and her family. It had been the presence of so many soldiers, particularly the special forces travelling with them in case of just such an incident, that had finally put paid to the plan and them leaving Crystal abandoned in the cellar. Special forces were feared.

'Good,' Jeff said when he was told, 'So they should be.'

When questioned the yellow toothed mastermind, who had struck Crystal in the tunnel, said the plan had been hatched over some wine they had stolen only the night before from the church. It seemed, whilst under the influence of the minister's finest red, to be a simple thing to grab the princess from the shop and hide her in the cellar. They were asked, how did they know where she was in the shop? They could see her through holes in the walls. How did they intend to contact the Somalis? None of them would answer that question, being as afraid of the Somalis as they were of special forces, but local police were aware the Somalis came and went with the local fishing fleet. It wouldn't have been difficult for the men to hand Crystal over under cover of darkness.

The whole thing had been a disaster narrowly avoided. The protection team heaved a sigh of relief but there would be aggravation once they were home. The bosses would want blood.

'We'll deal with that later,' Jeff told his team, 'The backup worked and she was found quickly. We'll be doing some work when we get home but in the meantime you'll be on backup for Her Majesty whenever she's on shore. Crystal stays on the yacht. Everything is being stepped up. Special forces will be on board until we fly home. The risk assessment is up to extreme. Don't mess up.'

To apologise for the mass round up of the day before Her Majesty ordered a feast to be provided for the town on the following night. That and some free beer soothed many ruffled feathers, as did a personal message from Crystal thanking everyone for their help in securing her safe return. One local husband did however receive a tongue lashing from his wife for his as yet undiscovered role in the plot.

The driver of the car that hid the entrance to the tunnel was not apprehended but he was shamed in the town by his wife making it well known that he had the brains of a dried up peanut for participating in the impromptu plot. Such are the ways of justice. As for the remainder of the conspirators, they went to trial and spent some very unpleasant time in a rat ridden prison where, had they the brains, the would have reflected upon the advantages of forward planning. In the end though everyone admitted it had been a very near thing.

The remaining four days on the yacht allowed Jeff and Crystal to have some time alone and say the things that needed to be said.

'I only admitted to myself that I loved you when you told me Brendan wanted me to stop watching you.' Jeff told Crystal, 'I didn't give a toss what he wanted.'

Crystal snuggled closer to him, she was doing a lot of snuggling at the moment. Jeff had no objection but asked her,

'What about Brendan? You seemed to be pretty keen on him but...'
'But what?'
'You dumped him.'
'He'd served his purpose.'
'So you were going out with him just to make me jealous?'
'Of course, but it didn't.'
'Yes it did. So I've just been managed, is that it?'
'Well eventually you were. Just the way you managed me on the first day you drove me to the trek in Scotland.' She laughed, 'Fair's fair.'
'So it is,' he said, kissing her, 'So when we're married...'
Crystal sat up, 'So we're going to be married then.'
'Yes, we are, as soon as you can walk.'
'Jeff...'
'What?'
'It's not quite that simple, you see there's a form for these things when a royal marries, and we'll have to follow it.'
'I'm getting an image, you and me and an endless stream of paparazzi,'
'And family, dinners, fittings, rehearsals, you know, just the general stuff. '
'I can hardly wait.'
But Jeff was a practical man and accepted his life had changed forever. The first thing he did when they returned to the Palace was visit his family so they heard about the engagement from him, before the official announcement was made. His parents didn't believe it at first but after some persuading accepted their son was to join the royal family. His mother said,
'There's something you may want. I don't know, but it's very old. It belonged to your great-grandmother. If you two want it, it's yours. But she may not want an old ring.'
She handed him a small blue velvet bag with a silk drawstring. Inside was a very old cabochon emerald surrounded with diamonds on a white gold band.
Crystal loved it and wore it at the announcement where Jeff felt like a prize dog in a show. It was no-one's intention that Jeff should feel that way at his engagement announcement and in truth he quickly got over it as he saw Crystal's years of training kick in. She handled the whole thing like a pro, even though she was still on crutches.
Unlike Jeff who was feeling like a fish out of water. He thought he knew the Palace but it was a very different place when you lived in it as he did now. He was adjusting but things were going very fast.
It had been a whirlwind since their return from Africa when the rumours of an engagement had started. He'd been hard pressed to move outside the Palace, the press were following him everywhere trying to get him to say something. Strangely he had his own security detail who told him to mind his own business about how they operated. It became even weirder when the protocol training started.
'But I've been through that already.'
'Yes Sir, but not the protocol that applies to you in your new status.'
'Status?'
'Sir, you will very soon be a member of the royal family. It is, with respect, a very different role to the one you have been in so far.' Jeff looked skeptical. 'Let me give you an example. Can you tell me the order of precedence as it relates to you?'
Now Jeff was getting impatient, 'You mean...'
'Yes Sir, who goes where and in what order. Who bows, who curtsies and to whom. It is all very important. Let's begin.'

By the end of each day Jeff could do little more than throw himself down on Crystal's bed and watch as she hobbled about, dressing for dinner with her grandparents and his family as well. He knew they dressed, he'd always known, but to have to do it himself was proving to be a chore. Crystal surprised him by reading his mind,

'It gets easier.' She smiled and hopped over to crawl into his arms.

'You know you're very grown up now, when exactly did that happen?'

'About the time I realised you would not pay me any attention at all unless I did.'

'God I'm a brute.'

'At least you're my brute.'

In the end they were nearly late for dinner. Later that evening they settled down to watch a movie and Crystal asked Jessie, who was tidying things away, to fill her hot water bottle.

'This leg's aching. Damn thing. If I hadn't come off the horse it wouldn't have been weak and I could have broken my fall into that bloody tunnel. As it is it was and it broke.'

'Here Miss,' Jessie said, 'Put this just behind your back, it'll warm all the way down then.' She settled Archie and Terri into the small of Crystal's back and to their delight they could just see past her and, they couldn't believe it, they were about to see their first movie. Crystal said,

'Thank you Jessie. Goodnight.'

Terri, oblivious of Jeff's presence, said to Archie,

'Can you move your head a bit Archie, you're blocking half the screen.'

'Well I can a bit but I'm jammed in here.'

Terri gave him a push and Archie yelped as her elbow went into his ribs.

'Easy my love, I'm not made of rubber you know,' Archie said.

As usual his joke defused Terri's bad mood and they both burst out laughing. Giggling, they tried to concentrate on the movie but when they looked out Jeff was standing up in front of Crystal and staring at them.

'Crystal, can I have the hot water bottle please?'

'Why?'

'Because it's talking.'

'Jeff, I know you're tired but...' 

'Just pass it to me please.'

Archie and Terri found themselves in Jeff's hands as he seemed to look them straight in the eyes.

'He really can't, can he?' Terri whispered to Archie.

'I hope not,' Archie whispered back, 'I don't know what happens when they know.'

'Then let me enlighten you,' Jeff said.

'Oh dear,' Archie said, 'It was too much for her.'

'That would be the cover?' Jeff asked him.

'Yes, my cover, my love. Oh dear.' Archie was distraught, Terri was limp in his arms. Crystal looked at Jeff who seemed to be having a conversation with the hot water bottle which, she suddenly realised, was talking back.

'See what I mean,' Jeff said. Crystal stared. 'Now many things are becoming clear.'
'Jeff, what's going on?' Crystal asked as she stared at Archie and Terri lying in his hands. She could see but hardly believe that Archie was, with tiny blue hands, gently patting Terri's face, trying to bring her around.

'Come my love,' they heard him say in a very gentle voice, 'It's all right, it's all right.'
A limp Terri opened what Jeff could only call beautiful green eyes in which tears had started to form. Archie held her close to him and Jeff began to feel guilty.

'I'm so sorry,' he said, 'I had no idea...' He sat down and he and Crystal watched as Terri composed herself, hiding her face behind Archie's neck. He said to them both, 'I was amazed when I heard you talking, but I have heard you before.'

'I know,' said Archie, 'We realised that when Crystal, I mean her Royal Highness, was injured in Africa. That first time on the yacht, when you spent the night.'

'Very sweet it was,' said Terri, looking out from under dark lashes, 'You take such wonderful care of her.'

'Yes he does,' Crystal said and hugged Jeff. The four of them started to smile at each other, unsure of what to do next. Terri, being assertive by nature, grasped the nettle so to speak,

'You're probably wondering about us, because we're supposed to be...what is it Archie?'

'Inanimate objects.'

'Yes, inanimate. But we're not, as you can see.'

'Obviously,' Jeff said, 'You're alive, talking and, I assume, in love.'

'It was all unexpected,' Archie said, 'I was so lucky when Crystal's grandmother, bless her, chose Terri for my cover. I needed a cover because I was naked, it's so embarrassing to be naked in public, people, that's you, don't realise, but I never dreamed my cover would be Terri and we would...well, it's wonderful.'

Jeff and Crystal, who were now devoted to each other, not just playing at an infatuation, recognised the hot water bottle and cover's devotion to each other but could not get over the fact they were alive. Archie said,

'We don't know why people don't realise about objects but you all seem to be, excuse me, ignorant of basic facts. We're all alive.'

'All?' Crystal said, 'Everything?'

'Everything,' Terri said, 'The whole room is probably listening by now.' She turned and looked at Archie, 'I mean who could resist?'

Jeff ignored that. The idea that the whole room was watching and listening to everything was a bit too much. It must have shown in his face because Terri said to reassure him,

'We just tune out a lot of the time. Privacy you know. We give it to you and Crystal, may I call you Crystal?'

Crystal nodded, 'Thank you so much. We're so happy for you two and I love your ring. Sorry, as I was saying, everyone in here knows you need your privacy and we give it to each other, as much as we can. It's an art really.'

'I bet,' Jeff said as he remembered a number of intimate moments with Crystal he would rather remained private. Then he remembered the issue of who had pressed the panic button. He put it to them, 'You pressed the alarm, didn't you, when Prentiss and Simpson were here.'
"We did, Terri said, 'And I'm glad, I couldn't see their faces but what you said to them, it was terrific.'
'I don't remember...'
'You said,' piped up Archie, "'Shit always rises to the surface." Graphic, we thought, but accurate. Those two were well, shit, her in particular. Awful woman wasn't she Terri?"
'Absolutely awful,' Terri agreed.
'Who are you talking about?' Crystal asked, completely in the dark.
'Two of my detail I caught searching your bedroom and selling your schedule to the tabloids, who are now spending some time at your grandmother's pleasure. I'll explain it all later. I think we've all had enough for tonight. I'm going to bed.'
'Just before you go,' Archie asked, 'Could you restart the movie? We so want to see it, it'll be our first.'
So Jeff did, after he'd sat Archie and Terri up on the couch and, he hoped, made them comfortable,
'Quite snug, thank you,' Archie said.
They loved Roman Holiday but both of them were in tears at the end.
'So unfair,' Terri said. Archie could only continue to sob.
Chapter 24

The implications of recent events whirled through Jeff's mind as he slept. He was engaged to a Princess and now lived in a Palace. That was all right his unconscious told him; he loved Crystal and they were going to be very happy. Their wedding plans were underway and they were to be married soon. Fine, Jeff’s anxious psyche decided, a winter wedding was romantic and they could have a cosy honeymoon.

He drifted into dreams of Crystal lying in front of a roaring fire and nearly lost the thread of what he was trying to understand. His confused brain finally came to the point: Crystal owned a hot water bottle named Archie who was in love with his cover, Terri. They both talked and the night before Jeff and Crystal had heard them squabbling about one blocking the other's view of a movie.

It was too much, his unconscious gave up and he fell into a deep sleep. When he woke the next morning Jeff sat up and saw Crystal having a conversation with the hot water bottle cover, Terri. Sitting in an armchair on the other side of the room she was listening intently as Terri spoke. The hot water bottle appeared to be asleep.

'Lucky bastard,' he said. Then the reality of accepting a hot water bottle as a living being dawned on him,

'My God,' he thought, 'I'm going mad,' and fell back on the pillow.

As they went down in the Palace lift to go out, for the cast on Crystal's broken leg was to be removed that morning, he said,

'This whole hot water bottle thing is freaking me out, leaving aside the small issue of them being alive, think about it, they say everything is. That means we're surrounded by living objects all the time. We're never alone.'

'I know, but Terri says everything is very discreet and if they had their own place, they'd have some privacy too.'

'Crystal, you're giving me a headache; you mean the hot water bottle...,'

'Archie.'

'I can't believe I'm having this conversation, Archie and Terri?'

She nodded, preoccupied with manoeuvering her crutches as the lift doors opened,

'They want their own place?'

'Just a drawer; with a lavender liner; if we can manage it. They're so sweet but they were very specific about the lavender. I spoke to Jessie before we left, she'll arrange it.'

Jeff's day did improve when, after she was free of the cast and the crutches, Crystal suggested they celebrate and go out to lunch. Jeff hesitated because they were followed everywhere and having a quiet meal alone would be some sort of miracle.

'Not necessarily,' she smirked.

'You're definitely smirking, what have you done?'

In conspiracy with the new head of her protection detail, Thompson, who'd had a promotion when she and Jeff had become engaged, Crystal had arranged a picnic in the Palace grounds. The spot was secluded; not overlooked from the windows. Jeff's only question was,

'Does the talking thing include the trees?'

'I don't know,' she said as she started to kiss him, 'It would be so inconvenient at times like this.'
Archie and Terri's new home in the drawer of a cabinet in Crystal's bedroom, described by Terri as 'perfect,' put Jeff in mind of where he and Crystal would live after their wedding.

He must have been in some kind of fog because he forgot that, in royal circles, all of these things are taken care of, at times without reference to the people who were to live there.

He'd been involved himself in assessing the security of properties for members of the family before they were even put up as possibilities. Often disused places were opened up and renovated. And so it was with their first home. There was no question of them living in his flat which was being packed up, its contents stored or given away, nor did they want to continue living in the Palace. Another question exercising Jeff's mind was,

'What am I going to do with myself?' His job as a royal protection officer was over, he accepted that but he needed an occupation. They'd have royal duties and he'd support Crystal in her role but he needed a basis for his life, a structure, what he could say he'd done himself. Crystal, who was proving to be wise beyond her nineteen years, had already had a long talk with her grandparents about this and when she said to Jeff,

'We should have a place of our own, maybe a little out of town, but close enough so I can still go to university,' she had an option ready.

Claremore was a beautiful old house that had been in mothballs for many years. Loved by a member of the family who had since died, it had been neglected. The large house was nestled in an estate of rough hills and valleys. It wasn't manicured land; its charm lay in its wildness and challenging terrain. When Jeff saw it he wanted to get on a bike and ride every inch of it, which was exactly what Crystal intended. The estate was an outdoor playground he could make something of,

'I think it's called enduro riding, is that right?' she asked him. She joked, 'You could offer days on a dirt bike to deskbound city slickers.'

Jeff didn't want to entertain bored stockbrokers. He wanted to do something useful now. He had an opportunity to give something and remembered the kids they'd spent time with trekking in Scotland, how they'd loved being outdoors, using their bodies and feeling themselves pitted against the elements.

'I've got another idea. What about somewhere for kids, like the ones on the trek, where they could learn to ride a bike and have a holiday. There must be a lot of buildings on a place like this; we could convert one for a lodge. Could we do that?' As so they started planning and the Palace machine approved. Jeff had the beginnings of a new working life, once the pageant that was their wedding was over.

The preparations for the wedding were nearly overwhelming. Long engagements were not done in royal circles so once the announcement was made they had had only four months until the big day. After the house was found and settled only eight weeks remained and Jeff still hadn't found the perfect place for their honeymoon; he was looking though.

During their engagement Crystal and Jeff received many invitations, some of them bizarre. There was one to Jeff alone from the dictator of an African state. Jeff was invited to spend four days sampling the delights of the ladies of the dictator's harem.

'Tempting,' he said.

'No way,' Crystal said.
Another was to them both to spend a weekend at a naturalist nudist camp speed bird watching: the twitchers drove around a reserve in golf carts, naked, trying to photograph the highest number of species in a four hour period.

'I'm getting an image of everyone wearing binoculars,' Jeff said.
'Not doing that,' was his love's decision.

More reasonable invitations came from friends and they accepted some, one to stay on a friend's estate and do nearly nothing; if you exclude enjoying gourmet meals, a short stroll and sleeping in.

'Perfect,' they both said. So Jessie packed and they set off in the Range Rover with Jeff driving. They were alone except for two protection officers and Crystal's maid, Jessie in the back seat and Archie and Terri perched on the top of the open overnight bag,

'Oh Archie,' Terri said, 'Just look at the countryside, isn't it beautiful?'

Jeff and Crystal laughed hearing her, knowing no-one else could but Jessie worried them when she said,

'Did someone say something?'

Crystal distracted her with a discussion of dress fitting appointments and sessions with hairdressers so the moment passed. Later, sipping a pre dinner champagne she said to Jeff,

'Jessie heard her.'
'We should have left them at home.'
'No, I said I wouldn't travel without a hot water bottle and anyway, they're so happy. They've never seen the country.'

'What my life has come to,' Jeff thought, inventing a new term, 'hiding hot water bottle relationships.'

The weekend was relaxing but soon over. They returned to town and the meat grinder that was called their schedule. He said to Crystal as he ran to an appointment with a tailor,

'We go in one side and are ground out the other side. And by the way, that guy's a bit familiar with his tape measure.'

'Go,' she said, dressing for her session with a jeweller to arrange bridesmaids' gifts and then shopping for her trousseau.

'Nightgowns,' she thought, 'For my winter honeymoon. I'll get some with fake fur around the hem to keep my neck warm.' She giggled and started to day dream, Jeff was proving to be a wonderful lover. Just last night he'd...

'Miss,' Jessie said, startling her, 'You're going to be late.'
Crystal dragged herself back, 'I'm nearly ready.'
'There is something I wanted to ask you...'
'What is it Jessie?'
'About the hot water bottle and cover, they make a lot of noise in that drawer; does it disturb you at night?'

Crystal's immediate thought was,
'No, we're pretty preoccupied ourselves,' but then she thought about what Jessie had said.

'Where is this going to end?' she thought. 'Who's next?'
Crystal felt the living object thing was getting out of hand. Now Jessie knew and, it seemed, was able to accept the idea quite easily, saying
'Well, we've all done it as children with the things adults give us: dolls and soft toys, even blankets get names. We treat them as friends, spending time and playing with them, caring what happens to them. They're our companions; good listeners who never complain.

'But when we grow up we forget that and forget them. If we listened to objects more we might learn something. Archie and Terri have made me remember and anyway they're such fun, only this morning Terri was telling me about ....'

And she went on for some time, making Crystal aware of the friendship Jessie had formed with the hot water bottle and cover. Strangely, she now felt the same, they were part of her life as her family and Jeff were; she would be very sorry if they were lost. But she did hope they could limit the number of people in the know. Jessie agreed,

'We don't want them turned into a freak show.'
Chapter 25

On the impending matrimonial front the wedding gifts started to arrive. A number of large rooms had been set up to receive them. Jeff marvelled as tables covered in linen that stretched for hundreds of metres slowly filled with all manner of gifts. Every one was tagged, registered, acknowledged and displayed. The wedding gift team operated like a military machine. It began in the post office that operated under the Palace.

A rail line connected the Palace to the mail network. Trolleys of mail bags and parcels travelled on the well used tracks to the mail room where they were sorted: ordinary mail, personal mail for members of the family, and mail from people who had something to tell the Queen or ask of her came in and was distributed.

After the engagement announcement the cards of congratulations arrived in their thousands. Every one was opened and read. Crystal and Jeff went through hundreds every day before returning them to the staff to be acknowledged with a note of thanks on Palace notepaper.

Jeff and Crystal asked people to donate to charity rather than buy them wedding gifts, but in vain.

When the gifts started to arrive more staff were assigned to receive and sort them. It was a tricky business because it was seen by certain members of the entrepreneurial community as an opportunity to display their wares. All the gifts of questionable taste, including sex toys and equipment that formed the basis of monthly 'sexpros' around the country, including some very inventive leather items, went back, politely declined,

'But,' Jeff pleaded, 'the possibilities…'

'No buts,' Crystal said. 'We say thank you for your thoughtful gift which is greatly appreciated but we cannot accept commercial gifts from manufacturers or distributors.'

Jeff smirked, enjoying this tussle of wills with the protocol machine,

'But, some of them come from individuals, how do you get around that?'

She smiled back,

'We say thank you, blah, blah, blah....however HRH and Mr Davis are unable to accept any gift that may be perceived as endorsing a particular practice, custom, principle or perception,'

'What does that mean?'

'I have no idea but it's worked for the last hundred years so we're sticking to it.'

The gifts from heads of state on behalf of their countries were all accepted but when it came to the jewellery from potentates and billionaires who wanted something Crystal was overwhelmed.

They opened velvet box after velvet box filled with priceless parures of jewels: tiaras, necklaces, earrings, brooches and bracelets, all dripping with diamonds and coloured precious stones: rubies, emeralds, turquoise, sapphires.

'We can't accept all this,' she said to her grandmother, the Queen, who wisely advised her,

'The trouble is how do you refuse? It's seen as a personal insult to the ruler and a national insult to their country if you do. We'll put it all in the vault and you can wear it if and when you visit the country that gave it. Until then forget all about them. The ones from the rich and grasping we send back.'

'It's such a pity: some of them are spectacular,' Crystal said.'
But my dear, you already have lovely things. That ring from Jeff is wonderful, so old. I wonder; where did it come from?'

'His great-grandmother, apparently.'

'Interesting. We must look them up because that's no ordinary ring.'

Everything to do with the wedding preparations was, as the English say, 'going along swimmingly.' The Palace machine was spinning at a prodigious rate, settling the million details that go into a royal wedding in the capital. Everyone was happy about it: courtiers, the government; the press and the public. Only two people were not looking forward to the spectacle of a wedding under the microscope, Crystal and Jeff. Their ideal wedding as Crystal described it would be,

'In Scotland with our families: no press; no carriages; no soldiers on horseback, just us in the chapel.'

'A fond dream,' Jeff said.

'Completely out of the question would be more accurate.'

They didn't fight the inevitable but it made Jeff more determined that ever to make sure they had privacy on their honeymoon. That started to look like a dream as well when he made enquiries about a number of destinations. The government of the country he considered had to be informed, diplomatic cables were exchanged, security forces would be deployed to assess risk. In the end so many people knew he wondered if they'd get as far as the airport without their destination being published. He went on, determined to surprise Crystal with a wonderful honeymoon, alone.

The press was everywhere. The Palace received requests and demands for interviews and photo sessions every day. If they couldn't get into the Palace the reporters waited wherever Jeff and Crystal went. They ignored them as best they could. Jeff concentrated on leaving security to their minders and learning his new role of supporting Crystal.

She wasn't the heir to the throne; she had an uncle who was, but she supported her grandmother whenever she was required to do so. When they went out to a number of events for the first time as a couple Jeff felt he was slacking because he wasn't doing something to protect Crystal from them.

'You have to meet and greet now, not watch the crowd,' Crystal said. 'Go on and shake some hands, they love you. Look at those young girls, they're just about swooning.'

The reason for the swoons were obvious. Jeff was in common parlance a hunk. It was no wonder the girls wanted a piece of him, he had beautiful clear blue eyes and filled out a pair of jeans and a t-shirt like Marlon Brando. Embarrassed, he did his job and worked the crowd. People pressed flowers, cards and gifts into his hands which he quickly passed to two of Crystal's ladies in waiting. Girls grabbed him and kissed him; one even tried to drag him across the crowd barrier. His detail stepped in and he was saved but he felt ridiculous.

One of the protection officers, who Jeff had worked with until recently, made it worse when he said, nearly laughing,

'We've got you sir, not to worry.'

Jeff decided to have him hung, drawn and quartered later. Down the line the crowd began to thin a little where the press had set themselves up to shoot them as they left. Jeff was about to finish and he could see Crystal was nearly at the car when a woman reporter pressed a note into his hand,
'It's important,' she said, looking him in the eye. He looked down at the note and when he lifted his head she was gone. Jeff kept the note as he waved, another new experience for him, and walked back to the car. Inside they both laughed and heaved a sigh of relief.

'What's that?' Crystal asked, 'Fan mail, a girl's phone number?'

He opened it, read the short message and passed it over. Crystal went white as she read it,

'No, it's a tip off,' Jeff said. 'Or so they say.'

During the afternoon the team went to work, following up the information. Angry, Jeff didn't believe it was true but the note said one of the tabloids had a source ready to confess to supplying Crystal with drugs. Crystal was in tears,

'It's so awful for my grandparents. They shouldn't have to deal with this now.'

'Listen to me,' he said, 'this looks like a try on. The only two people who could have talked are in prison and have nothing to gain from telling anyone this. They'll get more time inside if they say anything. There might be money but is it worth it? I'm not sure it is.'

She wiped her wet face with the hankie Jeff gave her,

'I'm frightened Jeff. I know I shouldn't have used drugs but I don't want to be publicly crucified for it.'

'You won't be, if we handle this the right way. I'm going to talk to some people. Have a bath, I'll come back and scrub your back.' He kissed her and she tried to smile. 'Ring for Jessie. Try not to worry.'

Jeff went to Her Majesty's Private Secretary and they had a long talk. The Secretary then knocked on the door to Her Majesty's study and went in. Jeff waited outside, but not for long. Crystal's grandfather came to the door,

'Come in Jeff.' After about half an hour a plan had been made. That evening Crystal and Jeff would give an interview at the Palace with a trusted reporter who would ask Crystal about being young and smoking pot. It was the American cure-all for scandal: bare your soul and cry a little; but Jeff felt it would be effective and deny the tabloids a fully blown expose. The Palace had to face the problem and deal with it, quickly.

'If we don't they'll run it anyway and we'll look as though we're covering it up. She used a small amount for a short time. The girl who sold it to her is in prison; so is her supplier, they wouldn't talk. The other thing is I'm going to have all the phones checked and have Special Branch check for taps. She could have been hacked and they're covering it up with a phony source.'

'We agree Jeff, but is she up to it?' the Queen asked.

'Yes Ma'am, she is. She's made of strong stuff.'

They understood each other.

Crystal took the knocks when the interviewer went slightly off script and needled her about the level of her remorse but she didn't waver and stuck to what they'd decided to say,

'I'm sorry.' No more, no less.

It was Jeff who controlled the content. When it came to the drugs he stepped in and talked about it from a policing point of view, saying that a small quantity for personal use was not against the law. He said he'd indulged himself, before he joined the force. That stopped a few hearts but they moved on and got through it.
Afterwards he had to give Crystal a glass of wine and a hug, but it was over. She came out of it as a privileged, rather spoiled, silly young woman who'd grown up and got lucky: she'd found herself a wonderful man with plenty of common sense. His maturity, although Jeff was only twenty eight, balanced her youth. The fallout seemed to be minimal and the tabloids lost their scoop.

Many things changed at the Palace after the interview, including the family's personal phone numbers. Staff backgrounds and their current activities were checked again and some interesting things turned up. One butler was earning a lucrative sum playing poker online and losing it just as fast betting on the horses. That was considered his business. A woman working in the laundry was building a collection of royal underwear, specialising in bras but she'd take boxers or knickers that she hoped to auction online. She was encouraged to find other work and did, after returning the underwear.

On the night of the interview Jeff worked late with the protection service on the phone hacking; Crystal lay on her bed, cuddling a warm Archie and Terri, who'd watched it on television.

'You were so brave,' Terri said.
'I didn't feel it,' Crystal said, 'if it hadn't been for Jeff I would have passed out.'
They agreed he was a rock but Archie also said,
'No you wouldn't, you would have done what you always do: you cope. Don't forget we've been with you through lots of things that were worse than this. You never felt sorry for yourself or complained. You might have been young and, forgive me, a bit silly at times, but we never doubted you were strong and brave.'
Crystal was so touched she hugged them even harder,
'Careful,' Archie said, 'you'll split my seams.'
'Sorry,' she said, but she was cheered by their support. She decided to be happy and just deal with things as they came. She couldn't change what the media said or printed and anyway Jeff and the Palace staff were quite capable of dealing with them. She said to Archie and Terri, 'How about a movie?'
'Oh yes please, you choose.' Terri said.
So they went into her sitting room and watched Made of Honour until Jeff came in and took Crystal away to bed.

'He's so manly,' Terri said, hoping for a particular response from Archie, which she got. They spent the rest of the night on the couch which they found very soft.

In the morning Jessie overheard them discussing the possibility of a soft lining for their drawer which she went away and asked the Queen's seamstress, Constance, to make. 'Bliss,' they said on their first night in the padded drawer, 'Utter bliss.'
Chapter 26

'Crystalgate' as the press dubbed the affair, was kept alive in the media by something Jeff had said to the interviewer,

'Everyone makes mistakes, particularly when they're young. What's important is to apologise, learn from it and move on.'

As he was following up on his suspicions that Crystal's phone had been hacked, what he'd said was attacked in one of the tabloids in a vicious editorial penned by its hands-on owner. The opinion expressed was the usual: the royal family should set an example; they should be held to a higher standard which Jeff didn't cavil with; but the writer added 'she was only sorry now because she'd been caught, etc. etc.'

Woe betide anyone who upset Jeff. He was not only angry; he felt it was unfair to Crystal who was entitled to one mistake at least. He knew that even the courts give kids at least one break.

'Sanctimonious bastard,' he said as he read it.

Jeff went hunting for the woman journalist and a certain private detective who, past experience told him, could have been involved in hacking into Crystal's phone. Jeff knew the way hacking works. It's very simple: you pay people with access to information to sell it to you. If you want to get an unlisted phone number you pay someone in the phone company. If you want someone's unlisted address you can buy their private phone listing or the local council's ownership records. As Jeff knew, it's all very illegal. The method was well used and a common tool among a less than honourable type of media outlet.

Police used TV footage to identify the woman journalist who'd handed Jeff the note. He didn't know her but she was an experienced employee of one of those brands of paper that used to feature near nude women on page three of the evening edition; now they put them on page one.

She was brought in and questioned. The story about the source didn't hold up under close questioning by one of Jeff's less polite friends in the force and she admitted she'd been given the note to deliver to Jeff by her editor, who she said, did not seem to have a source. The editor had nothing to say when questioned.

'All right,' Jeff said, 'there are other ways.'

He had the private detective leant on; it wasn't hard as the fellow wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed and often came to Police attention for stealing mail from letterboxes and rifling in other people's garbage tins at four in the morning. After an interview in which he assisted police with their enquiries for a number of hours, he finally parted with the information that another member of the nosy for money brigade had been in touch, wanting to use one of his sources, an IT technician at Crystal's mobile phone provider.

From there it was a matter of a warrant to inspect the phone company's access logs and voila, the technician was recorded as accessing, without authority, Crystal's voicemails on the company server. The second private dick was hauled in and crumbled like a badly baked cookie. He had something to trade he said, photographs.

When you run with wolves your biggest fear is that the pack will turn on you; to avoid that you take out insurance. The photographs, the man said, were his insurance. After he'd retrieved them from a safe deposit box in the city he handed them over and made a full statement of all his dealings with the IT technician, the brief from the paper to get dirt on Crystal and how and when he'd taken the photographs.
In conference with his former boss and a number of highly ranked police officers, Jeff was of the view that it was highly unlikely the newspaper's owner or managing editor would admit any impropriety and the thing would die a slow death as any prosecution would be dragged out in court for years. They agreed. The only approach to take was personal.

It was very elegantly done in the end by Jeff's former boss who went up in his estimation. The interview was conducted, by invitation, in the boss's office, specially prepared for the occasion by MI5 who are geniuses with concealed recording equipment. Jeff watched on a monitor in an adjoining room with Crystal's grandfather, who insisted on being present,

'I knew that toe rag at school. I'll enjoy watching him squirm.'

The photographs, large glossies good enough for Hello! magazine, of the tabloid owner's daughter with a nose full of cocaine and more in an open bag beside her in a well known private club, were offered and inspected. Jeff's boss said to her father,

'That looks like a traffickable quantity to me. You get quite a stretch for trafficking.'

'What do you want?' the man asked. He personified the greatest hypocrisy: he criticised and publicly destroyed people but had no awareness of his own failings and those of his family which everyone watching knew had been kept out of the news by his considerable influence.

'Just an editorial, signed by you, saying the paper has taken rather a harsh position in relation to her Royal Highness which you, personally and on behalf of all your media outlets, apologise to her for. Most sincerely, etc. Don't forget that bit.'

'You will then go on to say in your carefully worded editorial that she is, like any other young person, entitled to a few mistakes in her youth. And, it won't hurt to say, and I've written it down for you so you don't forget, "We've all been through it with our children at one time or another".'

'Is that all?'

'Yes; so long as it's in tomorrow's morning edition and on the internet tonight.'

'God that felt good,' Jeff said.

'Absolutely,' Crystal's grandfather agreed.

Jeff told Crystal when he presented her with a brand new phone. Her old phone on which the Queen's former page, Jade, who had been supplying her with grass, had left a voicemail on the phone saying she had a new supply, was to be destroyed. It was only one message but it was enough once the hackers went to work.

'How stupid was I?' Crystal asked.

'One day I'll tell you about my misspent youth and then we'll be even.'

While she was distracted by the hacking of her phone Crystal forgot her grandmother's comment about her engagement ring. But her grandmother hadn't forgotten; she felt she'd seen the ring before. The histories of the jewels in the royal collection were a personal thing with her and the contents of the vault weren't just lifeless baubles; many of them were pieces with significant links to members of the family. They continued to live because she wore them and kept their stories alive.

She was glad Crystal had an old ring from Jeff's family: it made their commitment to each other all the more significant. Jeff's mother, Charlotte, had kept and passed the ring on as an heirloom; a link to past generations as was the Queen's own ring which had been fashioned from old stones her husband's mother had given him.
When she started to delve into her considerable knowledge of the family collection she for some reason remembered her father's great uncle, something of a black sheep who had died young. She tried to remember how.

'Oh yes,' she said, 'I do now. He went out to Australia when it was still very wild, an outpost; a repository for criminals. But that was only after something happened. What was it?'

The family archive was the place to go with that sort of question. Most of it was open to researchers and scholars but there were private papers that were not. It was there she would look. The curator was helpful and dug out a few old diaries of the time. One of them belonged to her long lost relative, kept for only a short period before he left the country for good. It was a very sad story he had written but common enough at the time.

He had wanted to marry a girl who was considered by the then King and Queen to be 'unsuitable'. They forbade the match and he wrote,

'Mother and Father gave their final pronouncement this evening, I cannot marry Charlotte. I will see her tomorrow and end it.'

There was nothing more in the diary but the curator found a bundle of letters written by the then Queen to her mother at around the same time. One of them said,

'Henry is broken hearted over the girl. It seems such a pity as he is so much in love and I hear she is sweet and good, but we have to be firm. A marriage with a commoner is not to be contemplated. I pray he'll see sense.'

The last letter in the bundle cleared up the mystery,

'Dear Mamma, Henry is gone to Australia. Oh, how I shall miss him. His secret engagement has been broken off and the girl's father assures us nothing will be said by them. Henry had given her a ring which he asked her to keep, the old cabochon emerald from his grandmother. It's so sad; so sad.'

The curator was able to tell the Queen what had happened to him,

'He was thrown by his horse and killed, droving cattle I believe. He's buried out there.'

Her Majesty went to the portrait gallery and found the picture she was looking for: there was Crystal's ring on the hand of her ancestor. It had come home.

Over tea with Jeff's mother she related the story which Charlotte hadn't known.

Jeff's mother told the Queen,

'The ring was just kept as was my name. The daughter named Charlotte inherited the ring. I've never worn it, it didn't seem to belong to me, but it does seem to belong to Crystal.'

'Strange isn't it, how things go full circle?' the Queen asked, 'And such an old connection between the families, it's very special.'

'It is,' she agreed, 'Very special.'
Chapter 27

Terri was completely absorbed in Crystal's wedding preparations; everything to do
with it: menus; flowers; stationery; gifts; clothes. However, these were peripheral things
to Terri; it was the dress that occupied her mind more than anything else. Crystal talked
to her about it of course and after Crystal had seen the designer she showed Terri the
early sketches. But it wasn't enough and, as the making of the dress progressed, Terri
became more and more determined to see the fittings, how the dress was made, to have
ever so small a part in its creation.

How she'd do that, living in Crystal's room and only going out when Crystal travelled,
she didn't know. The dress's designer was still a secret and his workroom was across
town. Due to the press's current obsession with getting a photograph of the dress before
the day, Crystal had had to slip out to fittings at all sorts of odd hours, using a number of
subterfuges. Once she even arrived at her designer's studio in a cleaner's van wearing
overalls and a head scarf, carrying a bucket of cleaning liquids, brushes and 'super clean
quick wipe' cloths.

Archie, being male, had little interest in 'the dress' and was having some difficulty in
understanding Terri's increasing need to be involved. But, he said, quite reasonably,
'If you want to go with Crystal just ask her.'

So Terri did and they decided that she could go but she had to remain silent
throughout,

'No talking,' Crystal said, 'I couldn't explain it if you did.'

Terri nodded with enthusiasm and a display of the silence she vowed she'd maintain
during the trip. On the day, the last fitting only days before the wedding, Crystal said to
Jessie,

'I'd like to take Archie and Terri, she so wants to see the dress. Will you fill Archie up
please? I'll say I have back pain or something.'

Jessie wasn't sure it was a good idea but she filled Archie and Crystal went out with
them in her arms.

'Oh I hope Terri won't give herself away,' Jessie said, 'she's prone to saying whatever
comes into her head.'

In the car, in a whisper, Crystal reminded Terri of her promise and Terri nodded.
Archie shared Jessie's reservations and kept a watchful eye on his beloved as Crystal
carried them up to the workroom. Terri saw the dress for the first time on a mannequin in
the centre of the room. On the floor linen cloths were spread underneath it and a number
of assistants hovered waiting to help.

Archie heard Terri's intake of breath and saw her small hands cover her mouth as she
gazed wide eyed at the dress. It is very beautiful Archie thought; pretty, soft and feminine
were the words that came to his mind.

In fact the dress was a masterpiece of restraint, not a meringue in sight, it nevertheless
created a fairy tale aura as Crystal stepped into it and a row of tiny covered buttons on the
back were each done up. The fabric was sheer over a silk slip but in many layers; the top
ivory layer embroidered in trailing tendrils of sweet peas, violets and forget-me-nots. The
bodice, with a low sweetheart neck ended in tiny cap sleeves, all heavily embroidered
with the flowers. The skirt, 'oh, that would swirl,' Terri thought, fell from Crystal's now
tiny waist in soft folds to a short train.
Terri, sitting with Archie on a chair next to Crystal, did try very hard and was good until the moment one of the designer's assistants brought out the tiara and veil and ever so gently fitted it into Crystal's hair. The tiara was her grandmother's, larger than her choice for her first long ago state dinner, an intricate but open floral design that wrapped nearly to the back of her head where the sheer silk veil fell just to the floor, edged in the same embroidery as the dress.

Carried away, partly imagining herself as a bride in silk, lace and flowers, she said in her normal voice,

'You are so beautiful'. The room stopped for just a moment, then the designer and all but one of the assistants carried on making tiny adjustments to the fall of the veil. Crystal closed her eyes and prayed no-one had heard her but one of the assistants went over to the chair and stared at a now frightened Archie and Terri and said,

'The hot water bottle, it talked.'

'Saints preserve us,' Archie said to himself as Terri, realising what she'd done, hid her face in his neck and began to sob, silently at least.

'Oh my God,' Crystal thought. 'We're lost.'

'What will I do?' she asked herself and the universe, who didn't respond. Perhaps it did because she acted instinctively but in the time honoured fashion of many a damsel in distress: she pretended to faint. Down she went in layers of gauzy fabric headed inexorably for the hard, she noticed, linen covered floor. For a fraction of a second no-one knew what to do as they saw her eyes flutter and heard a small cry escape her lips.

The assistant who'd heard Terri turned back to see Crystal crumpling and screamed; all thoughts of the hot water bottle gone as she saw the precious dress about to be crushed. The designer, a tall rangy fellow, reached out and caught Crystal under the arms and took her weight. He could do nothing but lower her to the floor where she lay, apparently unconscious. Thompson, on duty that day, took over and turned Crystal on her side.

'Do you have any smelling salts?' he asked.

After a long career in royal service he was used to people fainting, the public and royals alike. The assistant rushed to a table and brought him some salts, kept on hand for just such occasions and he put it under Crystal's nose. She jerked her head and said in a most unbrideal manner,

'That stinks.'

Thompson took it away and said, 'Can you stand up Miss?'

He helped Crystal to her feet and she said, 'I think I'd like to go home.'

In the car a repentant Terri cuddled Archie and said to Crystal in a small voice,

'I am so sorry.'

Crystal picked them up and gave her a kiss. She whispered,

'Don't worry, we might have got away with it.'

Archie hoped so, the alternative was incomprehensible. They went on as though it hadn't happened. At the designer's studio the assistant, who was sure she'd heard something, was told by the designer in an initially sympathetic voice,

'We've all been under incredible pressure. When this is over you can have some time off.' Returning to his normal, rather imperious tones he shouted, 'Until then check everything on the dress and make sure it's perfect. Perfect!' To himself he said, 'The woman's mad.'
She jumped to his command. In the ensuing days she forgot all about the royal hot water bottle.

One of the big decisions Jeff and Crystal made was about their wedding rings. He was to wear one too and they decided to have them made by the royal jewellers, to match Crystal's engagement ring. Her grandmother had called them in the day she had tea with Jeff's mother and told them the story. Jeff was stunned at the news,

'Ma'am, you mean this ring came from your family to mine and now it's come back?'

'Yes Jeff, strange are the ways of fate. You and Crystal are lucky, although the story is sad, the ring was given in love and has been cherished by your family ever since. You two are able to marry because we're not as hidebound as my family was then. And a good thing too,' she added.

With that in mind they set out to choose a wedding ring that would honour the spectacular emerald's long history. The royal jeweller saw them in his very private shop where they sat at a gilded table with a number of rings in front of them.

'These are just examples of designs that would complement your ring, which is exquisite. The cabochon is greatly under rated these days. Everyone seems to want glitter and sparkle. The cabochon was greatly valued in the past. The cabochon spinel in the front of your grandmother's crown is just an example.'

He paused in his lament at the herd mentality of modern taste and asked, 'Would you like to try a couple?'

Crystal did but none suited.

'I had something in mind,' Jeff said, 'A band of diamonds, very good diamonds.'

As so it was settled; diamonds for Crystal, and

'A narrow plain white gold band for me thanks.'

When Crystal said he needn't have spent so much; he had chosen some wonderful stones; he kissed her and said,

'I got a great deal on the engagement ring so I'm all cashed up and you're welcome.'

The day before their marriage Crystal and Jeff were quite formal with each other for the very last time. They spent some time alone in their sitting room and exchanged their gifts to each other. There were now rooms full of gifts of every kind from handmade hot water bottle covers,

'Terri won't want them anywhere near Archie,' Crystal said, to can openers and teddy bears. 'Not yet,' said Crystal.

Then there were the jewels, even cars, which were displayed outside. None of them meant as much as the relatively simple things they gave each other then.

Jeff gave Crystal diamond earrings, drops which she would wear tomorrow in place of the heirlooms she had already chosen.

'I'll have a tiara for something old,' she told him.

Crystal gave Jeff the traditional gift of cufflinks in white gold with a brand new crest, 'Grandmother and grandfather want to see you about that,' was all she said.

So in a short informal ceremony with his family, her Majesty's Private Secretary and the Master of the Household present, as well as a member of the Privy Council, Jeff was created the Earl of Claremore. He had tried to resist but Her Majesty said,

'No, I have already decided. In this Jeff your wishes are irrelevant. Please trust me I have my reasons.'
Afterwards they had lunch together and then for a short time Her Majesty and her husband saw Crystal and Jeff alone. What she told them was completely unexpected and left them stunned.

'I have a fear he's serious,' she said, 'Silly boy, he's always been silly. If it happens the country will be better off without him. But, and I know it comes as a terrible shock particularly now, if he does it will mean because he has no children and is highly unlikely to have any now, that Crystal will follow me.'

It seemed Her Majesty's son and heir was a closet republican and would refuse the throne when his time came. His theory was the country should be a republic and his decision not to be King would ensure it happened. However, her Majesty told them, it wasn't that simple: the people weren't ready and public sentiment was still in favour of retaining the monarchy. Even the left wing government saw the advantages of tradition, even if only in terms of tourist dollars. And, as her grandmother wisely said,

'The country has to be ready when it happens, not have it forced upon them, that only leads to disaster.'

The Queen and her husband had suspected their son's inclinations for some time and done their best to dissuade him, but in vain. Moves were afoot for him to renounce his place in the line of succession within three months to allow Crystal time to learn the job and have her children before she took up her role. Until this point she had sat quietly, saying nothing. When she spoke she could only say,

'Oh, no.'

The Queen went to her and sat beside her, holding her hands,

'My dear girl, you are too young to remember your mother but she had a strong sense of duty. Knowing she would not be Queen she embarked on a rather frivolous life but I know that if she had had to face what you are now she would have met the challenge. You are very like her and you have another thing in your favour.'

Now in tears Crystal asked her,

'What?'

'You will have a husband who loves you and knows how to support you. It's the only thing that gets you through.' She patted Crystal's hands and stood up.

'Now the only thing is to drop the name you took as a child. Crystal is not the name of a future Queen.'

'But,' Crystal started to say. Her grandmother lifted her hand ever so slightly which silenced her,

'We all know; well Jeff may not, that Crystal is not your real name. It's time to use your given names. You'll have to tomorrow anyway, for the vows. So my dear Alexandra Zoe Louise, let's rejoin our guests.'

It seemed to Crystal that the afternoon would never end. It took on a dream like quality for her; she watched herself go through the motions, talking to their guests and drinking coffee, but she couldn't engage with anyone or anything. Even Jeff seemed distant; quite justifiably she was in shock and felt very alone.

All she wanted was to go back to her room and put herself to bed. She imagined being there under the covers with Archie and Terri, warm, safe and far from the reality of the news her grandmother had just given her.

It was completely unexpected and incomprehensible. Her uncle had always been a bit strange but a republican? She'd had no idea. Although, at the prospect of being Queen
one day with all it entailed, right now embracing republicanism didn't seem like such a bad idea.

Finally Jeff detached himself from a particularly garrulous guest and joined her. He put his arm around her; his kiss on her hair seemed to wake her up, tears began to form in her eyes and she felt her control going.

'We can do this,' he said, holding her. 'Not much longer until they leave. Hang on my love.'

Crystal swallowed hard and gave him a small smile,

'Oh Jeff, why did she have to tell us today?'

'So I had the chance to back out I suppose.' He squeezed her and said,

'But, as the song goes, we're getting married in the morning, no matter what. Look, they're going.'

But the pre-wedding events weren't over yet. They were, with her grandparents, to attend the ballet for a glittering performance, tiaras and all. The hairdresser was already in her room when she hurried back, ready to begin his usual miraculous transformation.

As she sat there and watched him and his assistants work, she marvelled for the first time at his skill and the care he lavished on the temporary masterpiece he was creating. For the first time she didn't resent the time it took, but he was quicker today, due no doubt to his many ministrations in recent months that had improved her hair.

Usually Crystal ignored the lot of them and was glad when they packed up and went. But when it was done and he and his assistants went to creep out Crystal stopped them,

'Thank you so much,' she said, 'I'll look forward to seeing you in the morning.'

She held out her hand and shook each of theirs in turn. The hairdresser bowed, he was genuinely touched: her Royal Highness had never been what he could only describe as gracious to him before. He was grateful but surprised. Crystal knew she'd been rude in the past and said,

'I don't know how I would have managed with all the engagement events and the photo sessions without you. I appreciate what you've done.'

The poor man, for he was one under the androgynous clothes and makeup he wore, gave a small bow and made for the door, tears in his eyes.

'She has changed completely,' he thought.

Before he could reach the door it opened and Jeff, already in a dinner jacket, came in. The four of them nearly swooned, he was that handsome. He smiled as they gawked and minced out the door,

'Are they real?' he asked his bride who, he realised, had grown in a year into a very lovely woman. All the rough edges were gone, as was the baby fat, but she was the same Crystal when she said,

'Yes, and jealous that I get you and they don't. That dinner jacket is gorgeous.'

'The tailor seems to know what he's doing, you should see tomorrow's get up; the guy's a genius.'

'Oh Jeff, I can't wait for our honeymoon.' Then it occurred to her that she still didn't know where they were going. There had been a conspiracy between Jeff, Constance and Jessie to prepare and pack her clothes for a honeymoon destination she was completely ignorant of.

'Where are we going?'
He gave her the smile she'd come to recognise as 'wait and see', so she asked no more, trusting him as she knew she had done ever since they met.

It was nearly midnight before they returned to the Palace after the ballet. The traditional arrangements had been made for Jeff to spend the night in a suite of rooms near Crystal's, but she wouldn't hear of it,

'If you leave me tonight Jeff, I'll scream.'

She was overwhelmed and exhausted for the rumours of her uncle's intention to refuse the throne were already leaking. From where they didn't know but the shouted demands from reporters to confirm them as they left the gala had shaken her again.

Jeff understood and they went to bed as usual. Crystal finally slept but Jeff was still awake. He didn't believe in bad luck but they had enough going on without calling down the fates on their heads. He decided to leave and sleep in his bachelor room but before he did he woke Archie and Terri who agreed with his plan. When she woke to a cup of coffee brought by Jessie, Crystal had Archie and Terri in her arms.

A wedding at 11am seems reasonable, unless you're a royal bride who has to conform to an international broadcast schedule. In Crystal's case she was awake at six thirty to have a bath,

'Don't dawdle,' Jessie said, 'The hairdresser will be here at seven.'

Crystal nibbled at a piece of toast as her nails were done and her hairdresser worked his magic. The makeup artist hovered in the background, waiting her turn. Crystal's now long and abundant hair was to be up, but very softly, in a plaited chignon which was woven around the base of the tiara which was then pinned in place. After her makeup was done Crystal placed Jeff's earrings in her ears where they danced and shimmered in the light. All of this was watched by Archie and Terri, perched on the window seat. Terri wanted to whisper to Archie but didn't dare; the scare at the dress fitting had silenced her.

After what seemed an eternity but was only three hours, Crystal was ready to be dressed. The first teams left and the designer arrived bearing the dress. It had been kept in another room for the last two days and pressed that morning. Jessie didn't want a repeat of the incident at the studio so she hovered near Archie and Terri and blocked their view of the proceedings and anyone's view of them until the designer and his assistants left.

Crystal had to admit the dress was beautiful and she was delighted when she saw the complete effect for the first time. The veil was clipped to the back of the tiara and she was nearly ready. She took off her engagement ring and placed it on her right hand.

The last thing she was to wear was a long loose ivory silk velvet cloak and hood edged in fake fur which she hadn't been able to resist. She'd ordered it to wear to and from the church because the weather was so cold they would be very lucky if it didn't snow.

'I don't care if it does,' Crystal said as the cloak fitted around her bare arms, 'I feel like Guinevere in this.'

At last she was ready and asked everyone, except Jessie, if she could have a moment alone. The room cleared and Terri had her first view of Crystal the bride. She had a good cry as Crystal came to them with a tiny gift. She gave them both a kiss and left to join her grandfather who was waiting for her at the foot of the family's staircase.

Archie opened the tiny box impressed with the seal of the royal jeweller and showed its contents to Terri. Inside were two tiny bands of gold the size of a doll's finger. Terri read the note which said,

'With much love from Jeff and Crystal. xoxox'
Jessie, Terri and Archie watched the wedding on television; Terri was in tears, mopping her eyes with a tissue nearly the size of her. A tiny gold ring shone on her finger where Archie had placed it,
'I feel like a bride,' she said.
'You're mine,' Archie said.

When Jeff and Crystal emerged from the church bells pealed, people cheered and cannons were fired in the parks. It was a very popular wedding and the television commentators opined that if Crystal,
'I beg your pardon,' one of them said, 'Her Royal Highness Princess Alexandra, was to be Queen they would make a handsome and noble couple.'
Jeff whispered to Crystal on the cathedral steps,
'Here we go, I wonder how it'll all turn out.'
'Just beautifully,' she said.
Chapter 28

It's a truth that most people survive their wedding reception rather than enjoy it. The reasons are many: the need to be available to a multitude of people at once, formality, time constraints and most importantly for Crystal and Jeff, she was royal. A royal wedding breakfast, which is really a sit down luncheon, is formal, conducted to a strict protocol in the presence of extended family, very few friends and a lot of servants.

When it was over Crystal said to her man,
'Take me away.'

And he did. They left the Palace by helicopter as the early dusk of winter was stealing the light from their special day. The lights of the Palace were below them as they flew away into their new life. Crystal didn't know where they were going; she was content to let things happen in their own time.

The helicopter landed on a runway at one of the city's smaller airports, far from the terminal where they joined the plane that was waiting for them. It headed north, not to the sunny climes Crystal was half hoping for; the plane flew into snow and darkness. After landing it was another hour and a half in the car driven by Jeff with two others following before they reached what appeared to be a gingerbread house in a forest, its lights blazing and smoke rising from the chimney.

'We're here,' he said to a now sleepy Crystal. 'Come inside where it's warm.' As they went in the door Crystal remembered photographs of the living room, all timber and beams with a massive stone fireplace, alight with logs that burned bright red in the soft light.

'This is grandfather's hunting lodge,' she said. 'He restored it years ago. They come here sometimes by themselves but no-one else is allowed to... How did you...?'

'It's a wedding present from your grandparents. We have it for two weeks, if we don't freeze to death before then. I really wasn't expecting so much snow'. He looked at the windows where snow was falling and gathering on the windowsills. 'Do you mind?'

'No, it's perfect. But Jeff what about the security guys?'

'They're staying a couple of miles away in a cottage. They've set up a perimeter and will only come here to deliver food. We'll be alone, really alone, but don't worry I can cook.'

'So can I,' she said with some pride. 'I can do a lot of things you don't know about.'

So for two weeks they were in a private world. They ventured out on skis to take trails that were now thick with snow but mostly they stayed in, as honeymooners do. Crystal loved her husband deeply but she said to him one particularly cold night,

'We could do with Archie and Terri in the bottom of the bed, my feet are like ice.'

'I know,' he said, 'What about some socks?'

Archie and Terri had asked to stay at home in the Palace,

'You two should be alone,' Archie said. 'We'll have a holiday here.'

Jessie took the opportunity for a holiday as well and went to Paris where she had a short fling with a handsome Frenchman. While she was away Archie and Terri remained in their drawer; content.

The room was undisturbed for several days until a stranger came to call: there was a burglary at the Palace. Nothing seemed to be missing but no-one checked Archie and Terri's drawer which was empty.
The hand that took Archie and Terri from their home was a man's: very hairy with bitten nails and broken cuticles. They saw it delve into the drawer and felt it pick them up.

The man's face was close to them and reeked of beer and meat pies. Terri screamed as loudly as her tiny lungs would allow. Archie wriggled and fought, but they were held firm. The man heard and felt nothing.

The objects in the room woke up to Terri's screams; everything became alert and watched as the interloper turned to leave the room with his prize. In the bathroom the mirror and shelf heard Terri scream but could see nothing.

The nail file near the door shouted out,
"It's someone in one of those balaclava things, he has Archie and Terri.'

The mirror didn't hesitate before pressing the panic button on the shelf below it but it was to no avail. The thief escaped because Crystal's apartment was empty with no protection officer or servant near. He left by the back staircase, so recently used by the designer and his assistants and the service courtyard door, ignored by the staff there because he had removed the balaclava on the stairs and was wearing the uniform of a firm of butchers who delivered to the Palace regularly.

When the alarm was raised and a protection officer came to the room nothing was seen to be missing so although the electrician who'd rewired the alarm after a previous scare got an earful of abuse from the head of protection, nothing else happened.

Crystal and Jeff's return was days away; they were still in Scotland, snowed in as it happened and quite happy to be so. Their food was delivered by a protection officer on a skidoo who left as quietly and quickly as he arrived. They had no contact with the outside world and no way of knowing that the dress designer's assistant had a boyfriend who was a butcher and they had a plan to get rich as soon as possible with as little effort as possible.

In the assistant's flat she and her butcher boyfriend inspected Archie and Terri very closely; they undid the velcro on Terri's back and took her off Archie. He'd whispered to her as they were grabbed,
"Please don't say anything my darling, that's what they want, to know.'

A terrified Terri nodded and clung to Archie as the man ran down the corridor and finally drove out the gates with them stuffed under his jacket. As they held her up now and poked at her she had a nearly overwhelming urge to claw at the woman's eyes with her fingers but she didn't, she kept her hands close to her sides where she hoped her tiny ring wouldn't be noticed. Archie was also silent as the boyfriend, not of the most incisive mind, turned him upside down and shook him. There was no response so he threw Archie down on the cheap table frustrated,
"You're bloody mad woman, a talking hot water bottle! You want your head seen to.'

'I heard it I tell you.'

'I'm going to the pub, leave it and come and have a drink. We'll throw it in the canal or something tomorrow.'

After they were gone Archie reminded Terri not to speak in front of them and then he said,
'We're stuck this time my girl, how can we get out?'

The table under them spoke, frightening Terri even more,
'You two are all they've talked about since the royal wedding, hot water bottle this, hot water bottle that. As though you being able to talk was anything special. We talk all the time and they never hear us.'

'I know but I don't know why she heard Terri, it's most unexpected,' Archie said.  
'Unexpected?' the table said in a jeering tone, 'Unexpected? You two have been at the Palace too long, forgotten you're only objects, no matter how high class.'

Archie thought about this, the table was obviously resentful and possibly malicious. It wouldn't do to upset it any further. Archie decided to try and enlist its help,

'Do you have any humans who hear you?'

'Yeah, I do but why do you want to know?'

'I don't think you'd like to be thrown into the canal, would you?'

The table shook its head so Archie pressed his advantage, 

'Who is it?'

His daughter, she only comes on Sundays; she's due tomorrow. She can hear. Mind you she's only a kid but she does have a mobile phone. Maybe she could call the Palace for you and ask them to send a car!' It laughed and laughed but that was exactly what Archie and Terri would ask the daughter to do.

'What a dreadful place this is and what awful people they are,' Archie thought as he lay on the floor of the assistant's flat, collapsed in a heap. Terri was lying on top of him, throw down as he had been during a drunken rant by the butcher. She was now asleep,

'Thank goodness,' Archie thought, worried for her and himself.

The couple had come back from the pub after many hours, legless as the evocative description goes, and proceeded to have a fight about the girlfriend's 'bloody delusion' that the hot water bottle could talk. Archie had been waved around, tossed between the two of them, prodded, poked and sneered at by the now dribbling butcher as he called his girlfriend names and she shouted back with her own less than flattering assessment of his achievements in life,

'A sodding useless bloody butcher, that's all you are.'

After what seemed a very long time to Archie and Terri, he had thrown both of them onto the floor beside the table and gone into the other room from which snoring was soon heard.

'Morning and the daughter can't come soon enough,' Archie thought as he remained awake, wondering how best to approach the child. His fear was if he spoke to her directly she would tell her father and he would keep them. 'No, I can't risk it', he thought, 'there has to be a better way.' By the end of the night he had a plan and spoke to the table early, before Terri and the rest of the room woke up.

'Sure,' the table said, 'But what's in it for me?' it asked.

Archie had nothing to offer but his thanks which seemed to be inadequate. 

'I'll do it,' the table said, 'But I want something for Chloe, his daughter.'

'What?' Archie asked.

'She wants to meet the Queen more than anything. Poor little thing, she has a pretty rough time with these two.' The table became a little sentimental, 'She deserves something.'

Archie agreed to speak to Crystal and ask her when she returned from her honeymoon, if he could get back to the Palace. The table said,

'Leave it to me.'
At about nine o'clock there was a knock at the front door which went unanswered. The knocking became progressively louder until finally a fist pounded on the plywood door. The butcher emerged from the bedroom, still dressed in rumpled clothes and staggered to the source of the noise. He opened it and a small woman and a girl of about ten stood there taking in his unshaven, bleary eyed visage.

'My God Ralph,' the woman said, 'You're still drunk.'
The little girl, who Archie assumed was Chloe, said, 'Hi Dad.'
He mumbled a slurried 'Hello love,' and the little girl gave him a hug.

'How do you expect me to leave her here with you in that state?' she spat at him.
Ralph the butcher wished he had a meat mallet to hand at that moment but said as reasonably as his alcohol soaked brain would allow,

'We'll be right, won't we Chloe?' calling on the child to support the delusion of himself as a responsible parent.

'Don't drag her into it,' the woman said, 'You're drunk and she shouldn't have to put up with that.'

Neither of them noticed that Chloe had already made her own decision and gone to the table where she took off her backpack and sat down. She started to take out a few toys, a book, paper and pencils and her glasses which she put on and settled down to read, ignoring the escalating conflict at the door. She said in a whisper,

'Hello table, how are you today?'
It answered equally quietly, 'I'm fine Chloe. They're really going at it this morning.'
'Yes,' she said, 'I wish they wouldn't....' She stopped speaking as the designer's assistant came out of the bedroom and went to the front door and entered the fray. Her presence and vicious comments to Chloe's mother tipped the balance, giving Ralph the misplaced confidence to slap Chloe's mother as she continued to shout at him. Chloe, the table and Archie heard it, a loud crack followed by a cry,

'Mum!' Chloe called out and ran to her mother who was now crying very hard and saying,

'I'm calling the cops this time Ralph. You've gone too far.' She turned to Chloe and said, 'Get your bag, we're leaving.' As the child went back into the house she said to Chloe's father,

'You can talk to my solicitor in future Ralph, that's if you're not inside.'
Chloe was gathering her things, making ready to go. The table remembered his promise and Archie's. He whispered to the child,

'Chloe, listen to me; pick up the hot water bottle and the cover on the floor, do you see them?' She nodded. 'Take them with you.'
The child looked confused.

'What? Why?'

'Because your father stole them from the Palace. You need to take them back. If you do you'll meet the Queen.'

'Really?'

'Yes, I promise,' the table said. 'Put them into your bag, quickly.' She did and ran to her mother who was already calling the Police on her mobile phone. Inside the child's backpack Archie and Terri heard what happened next.

The Police arrived and Chloe's mother, who had taken up a place on the footpath with a number of curious neighbours, told them her story. The Police arrested Ralph and his
girlfriend for good measure and took them away. An ambulance came and Chloe's mother and Chloe were taken to the hospital. After a few hours, during which she gave the Police a formal statement, she was released and she and Chloe went home. Archie and Terri remained in the backpack undisturbed but only a little closer to getting back to the Palace.

For several days Chloe was unable to fulfill her wish to go the Palace; she was sent away to her grandmother in the country while her mother recovered. She didn't want to go but didn't argue, she was a quiet, usually compliant child and appreciated that her mother needed some time alone. Her mother's left eye was black and swollen shut, her cheek bruised and she was very angry.

'I'm taking you to Grandma's, just for a few days. I have some things to do.'

So Chloe was bundled off and her mother's 'few things' turned out to be initiating a lawsuit in the Family Division with the sole aim of depriving Chloe's father of any opportunity to see Chloe at all. She felt confident, he having been charged with assault.

'Assaulting you in front of the child is a very serious breach of his obligations as a parent,' her lawyer told her. 'You may not be able to deny him all access but it will be supervised and extremely limited.'

'Good,' she said, feeling vindictive, 'Let's get on with it.'

Chloe was unaware of her mother's intentions but she was preoccupied with the royal hot water bottle and cover. Both stubbornly refused to speak to her no matter what she tried.

'I know you can talk,' she said, 'Everything can, if you ask politely. Won't you please talk to me?'

Terri in particular longed to speak to this appealing child but Archie reminded her, 'Don't, if she tells her father, we'll never get home.'

That was the truth as on the night of his drunken binge Ralph had explored the possibilities of profiting from Archie and Terri. He'd said to his girlfriend, 'They'd be worth a fortune if they did talk. Imagine it; we'd make millions selling them around the place.'

Chloe was the complete opposite to her father. She tried everything to entertain and entice them, she took them on walks, showed them her toys, she even blew bubbles for them. Archie and Terri were entranced by her but silent in her presence. After three days her mother collected her. On the drive home Chloe said to her,

'I want to go the Palace.'

'You want to go where?'

'To the Palace; I want to go there.'

'Why?'

Chloe knew she would have to tell her mother about the theft to get her help. Not wanting to betray her father she decided not to speak and said,

'Oh, nothing.'

'But how,' she thought, 'can I get to the Palace myself?' She was an intelligent child and began to work on her problem: as far as she could see it was a matter of buses and bus fares.

At home she consulted her piggy bank and the bus timetable on the internet. She would need to take at least two buses,
'But that's not a problem', she thought. 'If I start when Mum drops me at school it'll take about an hour'. What she'd do when she got there she didn't know but she said to Archie and Terri, who she'd carefully reunited,

'I'm taking you to the Palace today. I do so hope the Queen is at home.'

Not only was the Queen at home but Jeff and Crystal were due to return from their honeymoon that day. Chloe was dropped at school and watched her mother drive off before she went back out the gate and to the bus stop. She had to wait some time before the right bus arrived and she got on. The conductor looked at her, a ten year old on her own, but she just smiled and said,

'I forgot my book; I'm going home to get it.'

The man didn't really care if she was telling him the truth or not. Kids were always wagging school, even ten year olds. He comforted himself with a passing thought on 'what the youth of today were coming to' and went on his way. Chloe continued her journey and after two changes found herself outside the Palace facing a tall, silent guard who didn't react when she tugged on his long coat,

'Excuse me,' she said, but he remained still and silent. She tried again with an explanation of her reason for wanting his help,

'Excuse me, soldier, I have the Queen's hot water bottle. It was stolen and I found it. I've brought it back.'

An eyelid flickered and he took a small look at Chloe. His lips hardly moved as he said,

'Move on kid.'

Chloe was undeterred, determined to get into the Palace and meet the Queen. She walked along the railing until she came to another gate where cars were going in and out. She could just see a courtyard beyond. She repeated the tug and the explanation and this guard said,

'Wait.' He clicked his heels together and turned into his small guard's pavilion where there was a phone. He picked it up, and spoke and then resumed his statue-like position,

'Someone's coming,' he said, his eyes fixed on a far horizon. Chloe waited until one of Her Majesty's protection officers came up to her. He had a kind face,

'Hello, what's your name?'

'It's Chloe and I want to see the Queen.'

'So I've been told. Where's this hot water bottle?' Chloe took Archie and Terri out of her backpack and handed them over.

'Come with me Chloe,' he said, 'I think you're going to get your wish.'

Jeff and Crystal returned from Scotland on the overnight train and arrived at the Palace as her grandmother was having a morning coffee in her sitting room. Jessie was with her.

'Hello, my darlings,' the Queen said. 'Did you enjoy the lodge?'

'Yes grandmother, we did,' Crystal said, 'it was perfect.'

The Queen kissed them both and whispered to Jeff,

'I told you so.'

He smiled, his honeymoon had been one of the simplest royal trips he'd ever organised and he'd learnt the valuable lesson that would stand him in good stead in his new life, have a bolt hole where you can be alone even for a few days, it saves your sanity.

Crystal kissed a blooming Jessie and said,
'Is everything all right?' because as a rule Jessie had little to no contact with Her Majesty who said,

'Jessie has been preparing your room and found the hot water bottle and cover were gone. The alarm went off in your room while you were away but nothing seemed to be missing. No-one thought of the hot water bottle.

'But I think the mystery is about to be solved because we're expecting a visitor. Have a coffee, she'll be here soon; it's a long walk from the gate on short legs.'

When Chloe was brought to the door she was shy for the first time but the Queen went over to her and took her hand,

'Come in child and meet my granddaughter and her husband, you probably saw their wedding on television.'

Chloe had but confronted with the reality of not only the Queen but Crystal and Jeff in the flesh she was rendered speechless, only managing to bob a small curtsey. Jeff went back to the door and took Archie and Terri from the protection officer and gave them to Jessie.

'You too are so much trouble,' he whispered.

Her Majesty sat Chloe down and asked her,

'Now tell us how you found the hot water bottle and its cover. It belongs to the Princess by the way, I gave it to her.'

Chloe looked from one to the other and then blurted out her story of the table's request, her father, his fight with her mother, her lack of success in trying to get the hot water bottle to talk and the guard at the gate.

'I don't want Dad to get into any more trouble, please your Majesty, don't tell the Police.' Her glasses were misting with tears.

'I won't,' the Queen said, who showed no surprise at hearing about the talking table, 'I promise, but you've been a brave girl coming all this way alone. Does your mother know you're here?'

'No, I would have had to tell her about Dad and she would have told the Police.'

Well then, I think we'll telephone her and after we've had some cake and a soft drink I'll have someone take you home. Is that all right?'

Chloe grinned for the first time, 'Oh yes.'

So for an hour Chloe talked about her life and her division between her warring parents, how she loved the country at her grandmother's and wanted more than anything, other than meeting the Queen, to learn to ride a dirt bike.

'Really?' Jeff asked her.

'Yes,' she said, 'I think it would be great.'

Jeff looked at Crystal who nodded and then made Chloe an offer,

'Would you like to come and stay with us and some other kids? We're going to have a lodge to stay in and I'll teach you to ride a bike.'

'Yes I would.' And so Jeff's adventure camp for kids who needed a break from life in the warzone created by their parents had its first customer.

Jessie took Archie and Terri back to Crystal's bedroom and gave them a hug,

'I am so sorry about this; if I hadn't gone away....but, my goodness what's that smell?'

'Mashed banana,' Terri said, 'In the bottom of Chloe's bag, she doesn't seem to know it's there. Can we have a bath please Jessie?'

So they did in Crystal's bathroom sink, a deep, fragrant soak in warm water.
'Oh Archie, we do get into trouble, don't we?' Terri said to her now sleepy love.
Chapter 29

The move to Claremore took time as the house hadn't been lived in for a generation. Everything was out of date: the plumbing and the wiring, which was dangerous. Bats had taken up residence in the roof through a small hole that became a large one so the slates were taken off, the bats evicted and everything cleaned up and restored.

The bats were only one problem they encountered; there was dry rot, falling damp, rising damp and termites. As a consequence, old houses like Claremore are for people with money, patience and imagination. In the case of Claremore, imagination proved to be the essential requirement.

The house resisted their considerable efforts to modernise it, particularly in the layout of the new family kitchen Jeff and Crystal wanted. There was a huge kitchen in the basement, complete with a scullery, servants' hall and an open fireplace but even if it were modified it wouldn't suit the needs of the family Jeff and Crystal hoped to have because it was subterranean and impossible to heat.

The kitchen's stone floors were beautiful, worn to a smooth lustre but freezing. Under floor heating, essential in their cold climate, couldn't be installed without destroying the stone. In any event the kitchen's only access to outside was up a set of steps with no level access to the old garden both of them hoped to restore and spend time going in and out of, from their family kitchen.

Crystal had a vision of it, large to be sure, with an oak table, a fireplace and glass fronted cupboards to display some of the china they'd received as wedding gifts. It also had to have a family sitting area with a TV and a sound system. The pantry would be big with lots of shelves and bins for vegetables. It would be all on one level and open to a stone terrace through glass doors.

All in all Crystal wasn't thinking like a royal who would rely on servants, she was trying to make a family home and wanted a family kitchen where they could live and watch their children while they were inside or out in the garden. But it wasn't so simple. The ground floor rooms of the house were large and many; the reception rooms grand; but none of them seemed to be able to be converted until Crystal said,

'Let's think like the French. They don't define rooms by name; they just use them as it suits them.'

Looked at in that way the present billiard room, which opened into the dining room and contained a full size antique table, began to look like a suitable candidate. It was big enough with french doors on its sunny side which opened to a stone terrace where the men of another age used to go out to smoke.

'But...' Jeff said.

'It's just right. No buts, there's plenty of room to put the billiard table somewhere else.'

They were happy playing with their house until the day Crystal's uncle announced his intention to renounce his claim to the throne on television and Crystal became her grandmother's heir. Her new status had many implications, including a new title for Jeff,

'No, absolutely not,' he said. 'I am not, nor ever will be, a royal highness and a duke.'

Poor man, so simple minded, of course he was.

Archie and Terri had first hand experience of Jeff's transition to a royal highness. He'd been all right about the earldom; admittedly he sometimes failed to respond when people addressed him as 'my Lord' but he'd coped pretty well and didn't see it as a huge change.
He tended to laugh it off and, as they weren't as yet doing many official engagements, the title was only used a little. But, and he seemed to say 'but' a lot these days, being married to the heir to the throne was an entirely different matter. On the day of the announcement Archie and Terri saw a man in a morning suit arrive at the door of the apartment with a sheaf of papers and a couple of hangers on.

'Robert Abercrombie, your Royal Highness,' he said, 'Your Private Secretary. There are a few things to attend to before the investiture this afternoon. The tailor is delivering your uniform and your valet, Smith, will be at your disposal to help you dress.'

Jeff took a deep breath and remembered his marriage vows but as Terri said to Archie, 'He looks as though he doesn't like it.'

They heard Abercrombie say, 'Your new suite is this way, if you'll follow me.'

'Suite?'

'Yes Sir, your study and offices.'

Archie and Terri saw Jeff go and then men carrying suit bags arrived followed by a man they assumed was Jeff's new valet, Smith. He was about fifty, round of body with curls around a happy face. Terri couldn't describe it any other way: the man appeared to be happy. He certainly took to Jeff's wardrobe with gusto; he took everything out and sorted it. Then he moved everything into the next room. Piles were taken away, 'These need a good clean and press,' they heard him say.

Others, including Jeff's bike leathers and jackets he inspected and said, 'Well, most interesting. I'll have to look up how to care for them but Dubbin may do it.'

Others he set aside for mending. He rearranged the contents of all the drawers and filled a large basket with Jeff's shoes which he took away to clean.

When he came back he arranged all the shoes and then opened the bags and laid out a number of military uniforms on the bed.

'Does that mean Jeff's got some sort of rank now? Archie asked Terri. He stopped speaking immediately as Smith said, 'Is there someone there?' Smith listened for a moment, his head cocked to one side and his curls flopping around his ears. Everything in the room was silent; Archie and Terri held their breaths until Smith shook his curly head and went on with his work.

It was a long morning for Jeff: no Crystal, just Abercrombie and his staff who seemed to have his life mapped out for the next two years.

'It is a busy schedule sir but there has been, how can I say it, some neglect of the heir's role in the past and Her Majesty feels that you and Her Royal Highness will be able to remedy the deficit.'

Jeff quailed as he saw the plan to remedy the deficit in the next six months included three overseas tours and at least three other events a day while they were in the country. Many of them he would do alone. He wondered how Crystal would manage to go to university and Abercrombie told him in no uncertain terms, 'Her Royal Highness's studies have been put on hold. She is now a full time working royal. It's a pity but the decision had to be made.'

'Yes,' Jeff thought, 'and what's going to happen to my kids' centre?'
He had to put that aside because Jeff's immediate problem was their investiture that afternoon, Crystal as the heir and he as His Royal Highness the Duke of Beaumont, Earl Claremore, Viscount Teyne.

After lunch with Abercrombie during which he realised that Sir Robert, as he now knew him to be, was a hard task master, but very helpful. Until today Jeff had thought he knew about the royal family and how it worked: how wrong he was. He was a novice at all this and would have to work very hard to do a good job.

When he arrived in their bedroom Crystal was already there with Jessie who was dressing her in a very beautiful pale blue and silver evening dress with a sash and a number of jewelled orders. A delicate pearl and diamond tiara was sitting on the dressing table.

'Wow,' he said, 'you look fabulous.'

'Thank you so much,' she said, giving him a kiss. With a mischievous glint in her eye she pointed to the door to the adjoining room and said,

'Your valet awaits.'

'Thanks, I can hardly wait. What am I wearing?'

'Oh you'll see,' she said.

Crystal and Jessie had a giggle as Jeff entered the lion's den. Smith had transformed the unused bedroom into a gentleman's dressing room. Large wardrobes stood open, filled with his clothes, shoes and many things he didn't recognise. On a stand a navy blue uniform coat with gold epaulettes and jewelled orders waited. High gloss patent shoes stood beside it and a brilliant silver sword with an engraved, jewelled scabbard lay on a side table.

'Good afternoon your Royal Highness, I'm Smith. Your bath is ready.'

'Hi,' Jeff held out his hand which Smith reluctantly shook. Jeff smiled at this round faced man, 'But Smith, I only have showers.'

'In that case sir let me start it for you.'

The next half hour was a revelation.

'Shall I shave you Sir?' he said as Jeff stepped out of the shower and took the warm towel Smith held out to him.

'No thanks, I can do it myself.'

'Very well sir. Your uniform is ready. You are due to begin your walk downstairs with her Royal Highness in 30 minutes.'

Jeff saw his underwear on a stool, 'At least he doesn't want to put that on for me,' he thought, but Smith did everything else from buttoning the elaborate uniform trousers to putting in Jeff's shirt studs. Jeff insisted on doing up his own shoelaces but Smith stopped him.

'If you sit you may crease the trousers. Let me do it Sir.'

When it came to the heavy jacket he fuzzed and adjusted it on Jeff's shoulders before doing up its gold embossed buttons and placing the pale blue sash across Jeff's right shoulder and under his left arm. It was secured under the right shoulder epaulette and a belt secured around his waist. The sword was clipped to the belt.

He handed Jeff his watch and then Jeff saw himself in the long glass in front of him.

'My God,' he said and looked at his valet who was smiling, pretty pleased with the result, 'I didn't know I needed you Smith but I obviously do. Thanks.'
Smith gave him a small bow and said, 'You carry the cap Sir, under your right arm, her Royal Highness will take your left.'
Jeff opened the door and went back to Crystal who gave him a whistle, 'What a hunk.' They laughed and walked downstairs where the ceremony wasn't too long and there was champagne after.
'Not too bad,' Jeff said, 'But Crystal, Smith says I can't sit down.'
'No you can't, you'll crease.'
Chapter 30

The arrival of Smith in Jeff and Crystal's apartment made Archie and Terri nervous; he could obviously hear them so his presence silenced everything. There was no more chat, as there was when Jessie went about her work, everything shut down and sulked until he left, but he was in an out all day, every day; he never seemed to have a day off.

Archie suggested they say something to Jessie who, since her holiday in Paris, was wearing a look of contentment and expectation and becoming more absent minded every day, putting Crystal's things in the wrong drawers and leaving the bath running,

'She's in love,' Terri said.

Archie suspected it was true and wished her well but they needed her help, the presence of Smith was making everything very unhappy. When they explained the problem to Jessie she understood they didn't want him to hear them but said a surprising thing,

'Don't you think he's a sweetie? Those curls...' and wandered off to the laundry with an armful of Crystal's clean clothes.

'Not very helpful,' Terri said.

'We'll have to speak to Crystal,' Archie decided.

Crystal liked Smith and said so. She also agreed it was difficult for the things in the room. Terri asked her,

'Where did he come from?'

'He was my uncle's valet for many years but they didn't really get on. Smith enjoys the ceremonial, the dressing up you know, but my uncle was always trying to go out in an open neck shirt and a jacket. He tried to wear jeans to a reception once. Poor Smith, he was nearly in tears with him at times.'

'So he likes Jeff?'

'He seems to because Jeff is trying so hard to get it right. He knows that people look forward to seeing us and there's an endless fascination with what we wear. The tiaras and uniforms mean something as well; we have to put on the glad rags and jewels; we can't let people down. Jeff's wonderful in that way.'

'But what can we do about Smith?' Archie asked.

'I think we can trust him.' Terri and Archie baulked but she picked them up and gave them a hug, 'I know what you went through when that dreadful man took you, but Smith isn't like that at all. Anyway, I think he and Jessie are having a thing.'

'Really?' Terri said, instantly alive to a romantic tidbit.

'Really,' Crystal said. 'Let's get her to handle Smith. His name's Reggie by the way, Reggie Smith. I'll have a word.'

The next day Jessie introduced them to Reggie Smith, who smiled and said,

'I'm so pleased to meet you. I don't want anything in here to feel constrained because I'm here.'

'So you know...'

'Oh yes,' Reggie said, 'Always have, well since I was a child. You just have to ask nicely. I just didn't know who to ask, I wanted to give you time to get used to me.'

They had a chat and he went away to make Jeff's clothes even more immaculate than they already were.

Terri said to Jessie, who followed him with her eyes as he went away,
'He is cute.'
'Very,' Jessie said.

The enormous change that had occurred in Crystal and Jeff's lives had brought Crystal's studies to an end and Jeff's plan for kids to spend time at Claremore were stalled. Their problem was easy to see: there just weren't enough hours in the day. When they weren't out at a public engagement they were preparing for them or helping the Queen entertain at the Palace. But it worried them both that children like Chloe wouldn't have the opportunity to fulfill a dream as simple as learning to ride a motor bike. Jeff took the problem to his Private Secretary, Sir Robert, who said,

'It's a recurring difficulty we've learnt to solve with a charity. We set one up, your position and prestige raise the money and other people run it with you as patron. You can then be as hands on as your schedule allows. It's not ideal as you probably want to be more heavily involved, but it's better than nothing.'

'How long will it take to set up?' Jeff asked him.

'About a year, including the building work, legal requirements and fund raising.'

Jeff didn't want Chloe to have to wait a year, nor did Crystal, so as soon as they moved into Claremore they sent Chloe an invitation: to spend a weekend with them. Her grandmother and mother were invited but only her grandmother came. It seemed Chloe's mother preferred a week in Ibiza to a weekend in the country. In the end though it was the right thing; Chloe's grandmother lived in the country herself and said to Crystal on the first day,

'If she learns to ride I could get her a bike and she could ride it when she stays with me.'

For her part Chloe was thrilled. Jeff started the weekend with a number of gifts: a set of leathers, gloves, boots and a helmet. Smith had had a wonderful time conspiring with Chloe's grandmother to buy them in Chloe's size, with a little growing room. Chloe, dressed in her biker's gear went out with Jeff for her first lesson. Parked on the gravel in front of the house was a new child size dirt bike. Tears filled Chloe's eyes but they soon cleared as Jeff said,

'It'll only be yours when you can ride it properly. Let's get started.'

She fell off and stalled it but Jeff was patient and she soon mastered the basics of the gears and brakes while staying upright,

'It's wonderful,' she said as they came back for lunch. 'I can't wait to show Gran.'

After Chloe and her Grandmother left on Sunday afternoon with the promise of other weekends at Claremore, Crystal said to Jeff,

'She's such a terrific kid; I hope ours is half as good.'

'Ours?'

'Yes, the one who's due in about eight months.'

'Are you sure?'

'No I'm not sure, but the doctor is.'

Crystal's reaction to her pregnancy was mixed: she did want children; Jeff's children; but she just wasn't ready to be a mother. Having eight months to get used to the idea didn't seem long enough either.

They spent the remainder of their cherished Sunday alone, walking in the grounds. Jeff sensed Crystal's quandary and felt for her - she was carrying the weight of her new role and now the prospect of a child. It wasn't just the fact of the child, who Jeff knew Crystal
would love, it was the reality of trying to chisel out time to be a mother. As a royal motherhood would always be a compromise, the child would spend much of its time with nannies and nurses and be left behind at times when they travelled. Jeff didn't like the idea of handing his child over to someone else but what could they do?

'Nothing,' he decided.

As they walked Crystal had similar thoughts and was very quiet but she held onto him and Jeff often kissed the top of her head, giving her his silent support. For himself he was so pleased at the prospect of being a father, he wanted to shout it out, tell everyone. The weekend with Chloe had given him a wonderful experience of making someone else's child happy.

'What will it be like to have our own?' he thought. 'Wonderful', he said to himself, leaving Crystal to her own thoughts.

Crystal's pregnancy wouldn't be announced for a number of weeks and as she wasn't suffering any morning sickness her condition wasn't detected by anyone, even Jessie. Terri however noticed a change in Crystal and said to Archie,

'She's worried about something; I wonder what it is?'

But there was no chance for quiet chats these days as Jeff and Crystal were preparing for their first overseas tour together. They were going to Italy to promote cultural links between the two countries. The trip was to be three days of non-stop activity. Jeff had to resist reviewing the security arrangements; he had enough to do in seemingly endless briefings about Italy's cultural ties to themselves. Sir Robert drilled him with information. Smith and the tailor fitted him with more suits he thought he didn't need, tails and yet another dinner suit.

'What's wrong with the old dinner suit? I've only worn it a few times,' he asked.

'Nothing sir,' Smith said, 'For here. Italy requires much more style. You'll see the difference.'

Jeff was unconvinced, particularly now when Crystal was unhappy and tense. Finally they flew to Rome and got through the first day and a banquet in the evening. The next morning Crystal began to fray a little at the edges; her smiles were forced and her responses to the many introductions shorter. Jeff started to worry and was glad when they had a short break in the afternoon to rest and change before dinner.

Crystal spent so long in the bathroom Jeff knocked on the door and then went in. She was sitting on the side of bath looking exhausted.

'What is it?' he asked her.

'I'm bleeding. I had cramps this afternoon and now it's started.' He picked her up and carried her to the bed,

'I'll get the doctor.'

But it was no use; Crystal lost their baby that night. Sir Robert announced the rest of the tour was cancelled because her Royal Highness had flu. They flew home the following afternoon and Crystal was put to bed by Jessie with a warm Archie and Terri against her painful and empty womb. Terri was in tears and Crystal said to her,

'It's such a shame; I never even had time to get used to having it.'

The public were never told that Crystal had lost the baby. As a devastated Jeff said to the Queen,

'It's no-one's business but ours.'
For a time a great sadness descended upon everything in Crystal's room; the objects' sympathy for both she and Jeff and the lost baby was deep. Archie and Terri provided what comfort they could and Jeff was a wonder - he put aside his own feelings of loss and cared for Crystal.

Within a week she had picked up her duties and was as busy as ever but she retained a feeling of guilt that she didn't regret the baby's loss sufficiently. It was all nonsense of course and when she at last went to her grandmother she received the benefit of her wisdom,

'Anyone in your position would have felt overwhelmed. Look at what's happened to you in little over a year - you married and have become my heir when you never expected to be. That alone would have sent some people to the asylum. Be a little gentle with yourself.'

So Crystal got on with life and they settled into a routine: they lived in the Palace during the week and used it as their base but on Friday evening they bolted to the country. They loved Claremore and Archie and Terri found their new home most comfortable. Their city drawer had a country cousin and as the sadness lifted Archie and Terri resumed their happy lives among the objects in the room. Some of them they knew, many they did not.

The house was four hundred years old and although much of its fabric had been replaced over the years some of the original remained. The bedroom mantle was original and growing a little hard of hearing. It wasn't awake much but when it was it tended to shout and woke things up when it talked to Archie and Terri who lived on the other side of the large bedroom. But Archie and Terri just shouted back so it could hear and it usually dozed off quite quickly.

They were enjoying their country weekends although the car was more crowded these days. Jessie and Smith didn't mind, they sat very close to each other in the back seat and spent most of the journey gazing at each other. After one trip Jeff said to Crystal,

'What's going to happen with those two? I don't think I can take much more of the adoring silence. Are they...?

'I think so, aren't they lovely together? Do you know, I saw him hold onto a fold of her skirt as we came in; he seemed to be somewhere else.'

'He must be, he put out tails for me to wear to open that school this morning. Please do something, I hate to admit it but during the week I can't do without him.'

But it was Archie and Terri who, with a small deception, encouraged Smith to propose to Jessie. Archie said to him on Saturday morning,

'Jessie's looking lovely today.'

Smith didn't seem to hear so Archie repeated what he'd said and added,

'I heard the gardener outside earlier, you know the younger one, he thinks she'd like pink roses, what do you think?'

'Red,' a dreamy Smith said, 'I'd give her lots of deep red roses.' What he'd said finally dawned upon him and looked at Archie and Terri who were smiling. Terri said,

'Maybe you should do something, that gardener's a bit of a dish, for a gardener I mean.'
Crystal and Jeff had lived at Claremore for some time before Crystal's grandparents were able to spend a weekend with them and see the house for the first time. It was a rare event, a family visit when they could all relax. Crystal fussed, making sure everything was ready but a few days before her grandparents were due to arrive she went into a panic,

'Jeff, Chloe and her grandmother are due to stay on Saturday. We arranged it weeks ago. How could I have forgotten?' She looked stricken, 'Grandmother was looking forward to spending time just with us.'

'Will she really mind?'

'I don't know; I'll make a call.'

But the Queen was happy to spend her weekend with Chloe and it was obvious to everyone as Saturday progressed that they had entered into a conspiracy and weren't sharing their secret. During the afternoon, while Jeff was showing Crystal's grandfather the grounds, the Queen and Chloe disappeared upstairs, with a reluctant Jessie as their guide. Jessie said to the Queen,

'I don't know Ma'am, they might not like it.'

'Take us to them dear girl, I'm sure it will be all right.'

They went into the room where Archie and Terri looked up at their regal visitor and her companion from their place sitting on a sunny couch. The Queen said to them,

'Good afternoon.'

Terri didn't know what to do and hid her face in Archie's shoulder. Archie didn't speak; he looked at Jessie who gave him an 'I don't know look.' The Queen brought Chloe closer to the couch and told her to say hello as well. She did but silence reigned. The tension was heightened by Crystal coming in to see why everyone was in her bedroom,

'Grandmother,' she said, 'is something wrong?'

'Not at all, I'd just like Chloe to meet the hot water bottle and cover.'

Crystal was apprehensive because they had all decided it was best not to have Archie and Terri speak to Chloe,

'But why would you want to do that?' she asked.

'Because my dear, I have one just like it and it has been my dear friend for many years. Chloe has the gift of being able to speak to objects and as she returned these two to you I think they should trust her to keep their confidence.' She picked Archie and Terri up, held them in front of her and said,

'Don't you?'

Archie whispered to Terri who nodded and said,

'We are pleased to meet you both but we have been a little nervous of Chloe because, well you know...' Her voice trailed off and she looked very embarrassed. Archie cleared his throat and said,

'Hello Your Majesty, Chloe, forgive us if we seemed rude.'

'Chloe,' Her Majesty said, 'Will you tell anyone about Archie and Terri?'

'Of course not. I'm so sorry you were frightened at Dad's. He can be stupid but I promise not to say a word, ever.'

In the midst of this conversation Crystal took in what her grandmother had said,

'You mean you talk to your hot water bottle?'
'Oh yes, he and his cover are retired now and I have a new one but it's not special at all. No, if I want a chat, it's the old one for me. He was lent to me when I was on a tour; India it was.

'I had terrible backache and the maharajah's ayah brought it to me in a very beautiful yellow silk padded cover. A glorious colour it was; but it's a bit faded now. He says he belonged to the Maharani.

'Well, we've been friends every since. He insisted on coming home with me. I had to smuggle him out in one of the bags. They probably still think I stole him.'

Crystal couldn't believe what she'd heard but Chloe said,

'You can always tell nice objects from the other sort.'

'How?' Crystal asked.

'They have kind faces like Archie and Terri. The ones who don't always look a bit sour.'

After breakfast on Sunday morning when they were alone in the kitchen Chloe asked Crystal for her help,

'I can't ask Gran to buy me one because she doesn't know about some of them talking and I don't want one that doesn't, but I could do it if you tell me where he came from.'

'You mean Archie, you want a hot water bottle...?'

'And a cover, of course,' Chloe added.

'Like Archie and Terri. Of course I can do that, it'll be easy.'

'Maybe not that easy Crystal.' Chloe became very serious, 'You see I think Archie and Terri came from a special place and if I bought my hot water bottle there it might be special too. Not all of them are you know.'

Crystal agreed with Chloe's view and considered it as Chloe said,

'I'd have to know where Terri came from as well because I'd hate to think my hot water bottle would go through life without someone to love. That would be really sad, don't you think?'

'Yes it would. We'd better talk to the Queen,' Crystal said, 'She bought them.'

'I wonder where,' she thought.

Her Majesty was happy to help and wrote down the addresses Chloe needed. But she also offered to take Chloe to the shops herself, one day after school. When Crystal asked her how she'd do that her Majesty enlightened her as to her shopping methods. It appeared the Queen liked to go out to the shops often and had devised an anonymous persona she adopted to avoid detection.

Her method, and she was a little embarrassed to admit it, had been developed after watching the Palace servants. In the end her elderly maid and one of the housekeepers had been her models. Her Majesty had watched the housekeeper leaving the Palace at times carrying her woven basket decorated with flowers and seen how she tended to plod. The reason for the plodding seemed to be the orthopedic shoes she wore.

The maid was a lady who tried to hold herself upright as her Majesty did but she was, in her latter years, suffering with a slight curvature of the spine. As a result she stooped a little. The combination of these characteristics, together with some plain clothes, convinced her Majesty that she could go about among her subjects undetected.

The final touch was to borrow the housekeepers' basket which was rather worn and had a definite smell of Irish whiskey. She always used a cheap vinyl purse that was kept in cash solely for her shopping excursions.
'It does tend to spill though, I don't know why,' she said in concluding her story. The purse had a sad history of motion sickness but her Majesty was as yet unenlightened about it.

'Would you like to come with me Chloe?'

Chloe could hardly contain her excitement at the prospect of a shopping expedition with her Majesty who placed a caveat on their prospects,

'Terri was a piece from a remnant bin. I don't think we'll be able to buy the same fabric but I'm sure we'll find something pretty.'

So on a sunny afternoon a new hot water bottle was purchased by Chloe from the same shop Archie had come from. Her choice was a blue one and she said,

'I'd like to buy it myself, from my pocket money.'

'I think that's very wise but I'll have my seamstress make the cover. Now let's go to the haberdashers.'

The cover was to be very special but they agreed to try the same remnant bin. There were many fabrics to choose from but nearly all were rejected. The final choice was between a pink minky fleece and a very good, but plain, terry towelling.

'Perhaps we should let the hot water bottle decide,' Chloe suggested.

The hot water bottle, who's name turned out to be Rufus, was quietly consulted and shyly nodded to the pink fleece,

'She's so beautiful, don't you think? But please give my apologies to the towelling,'

'No need,' it said in a deep voice, 'I don't think we'd get on.'

Chloe had another wonderful experience with her new hot water bottle, having his cover made by the Queen's seamstress, Constance. She was taken upstairs to Constance's workroom and introduced to everyone. Constance asked her,

'What have you bought for your cover?'

Chloe unwrapped the minky fleece from its brown paper wrapping and handed it to Constance. As yet the fabric hadn't spoken to her but Chloe thought that would be too much to ask with strangers in the room and before the cover met Rufus. Constance set to work laying out her pattern on the fabric and with quick hands she cut it out and gave it to one of the seamstresses. They left the cover to its maker and Constance said,

'Come over here Chloe and meet our embroiderer. This is Sylvia, she creates all the embroidery on her Majesty's clothes.'

'I would love to learn to do that,' Chloe said. 'Could you show me a little?'

Sylvia, who had a granddaughter of seven, smiled and brought up a chair for Chloe,

'Sit here and we'll embroider your name for the cover.'

Chloe concentrated hard as Sylvia drew her name on a piece of cloth with a light pencil and chose some silk. They discussed the colour and decided on a teal blue for the monogram. Chloe worked hard to follow the design in the tiny stitches Sylvia showed her but ran out of time that day to finish it.

'You can take it home with you,' Sylvia said. 'We'll stitch it to the cover when you come back.'

So the work was packed into a small calico drawstring bag with a pair of tiny scissors and spare silk and Chloe finished it at home. When she returned her cover was ready and Chloe could see Rufus was smiling. Chloe thought the cover was very beautiful. A tiny crimson and gold tag was sewn to the side of the bottle - her Majesty's own cipher.
'We put it on so if ever it's lost it can be returned to the Palace.' Constance said. The Princess's was lost once in New Zealand and it was the tag that brought it back. So there you are, except for your monogram.'

Sylvia helped Chloe stitch the monogram to the neck of the cover which whispered, 'That's so pretty, Chloe. You are clever,' in a decidedly Cockney voice.

Chloe whispered back,

'Thank you. What's your name?'

'It's Isobel,' Rufus said, 'Isn't she beautiful?'

Isobel blushed and when they went home Chloe was careful to store them carefully in a drawer by themselves,

'They do like to be alone,' Crystal had said. She hadn't told Chloe why.

Crystal and Jeff enjoyed having Chloe stay with them and it was probably her sweetness and the joy she brought with her despite her troubled parents that helped them decide to have a baby themselves. It would happen in its own time but in the meantime they decided to go out more and having heard about her Majesty's anonymous outings they employed the tactic themselves, with a slight variation.

Crystal had never been on a bike until they moved to Claremore. Jeff took her out on his dirt bike; she loved being close to him as he powered the bike over the estate's roads and small tracks. He was fearless and there were times when she had to close her eyes and bury her face in his back but he always brought them back safely, if covered in mud.

She found she loved it and it gave her an idea. She said to Jeff as they soaked in the bath after one of their rides,

'Couldn't we go out on the bike in town? With the helmets no-one will know us.'

'I don't see why not. The guys won't like it but we'll try it and see how it goes.'

Their first outing was to the movies; they arrived after the lights went down and left during the credits. No problem, but their protection officers did have to follow in the car.

Racing through the traffic closely shadowed by a big black Range Rover with three guys in suits did tend to make them rather conspicuous. A solution was found when one of the guys offered to follow on a bike and radio to the car if they were separated. It wasn't ideal but it gave Jeff and Crystal so much freedom they didn't want to lose it.

After a few outings they had a system going and decided to try something new, going to a cheap and cheerful bistro for a meal. It should have been easy.

Jeff and Crystal were doing well: they'd come on the bike and parked it outside. When they'd walked into the restaurant they were just another young couple out for a meal. They sat down at their table, a booth half way down the room. From long habit Jeff took in their fellow diners and the staff, looking for anyone who might be a problem. Their waiter was a young guy, a student Jeff thought, who was bright and quick as he took their order. The owner was at the bar, serving a few customers who were having a drink while they waited for a table. The kitchen was behind them; its swing door in constant motion as the waiters went in and out. The place was popular, and full. The wooden floors threw the customers' chatter up, creating a cloud of noise that made it hard to hear.

They weren't alone though, two of their protection officers were at a table at the front of the restaurant where they could see the whole room, including their booth by watching in the mirror that ran the length of one wall. Jeff knew them both well but they were new to their detail. The man, Riordan, was about six three, thirty five, very quiet, very
efficient. His female companion was no less experienced but slight and wiry. Kathy Blake had been a royal protection officer for ten years and knew her stuff.

'We might get out,' Jeff thought, 'but not by ourselves.' He looked at Crystal who was enjoying herself, the buzz in the room, the snatches of conversation she could overhear and the plates of food streaming out to other tables.

'I'm starving,' she said, watching a huge plate of seafood pasta glide past her at eye level. She smiled at Jeff and had to lean toward him to say,

'How do you know this place? It's wonderful.'

'We used to come here a lot, before I was transferred to your detail.' Crystal's eyebrows went up,

'We?' she asked and Jeff remembered that he'd never told her about the lovely Ursula, as he'd once told the Queen he would. His promise had been made when she was worried Crystal would fall in love with him. Those fears were long gone.

The truth was events had overtaken his promise; he'd fallen for Crystal early and hard, even though he hadn't admitted it to himself for months. When Ursula had given him an ultimatum, New Zealand as Crystal's protection officer or her, his decision had been a foregone conclusion. Ursula was now so far from his thoughts that it was difficult for him to remember what he'd loved, 'No, not loved,' he thought; 'wanted from her.' Experience was what he'd wanted and got.'

He said to his smiling wife,

'A very lovely woman named Ursula, who I left for you.'

'Oh...' she said, 'I never knew you were going out with someone.'

'We were just about living together and she wanted me to commit but then, you were going to New Zealand and she said choose, so I did.'

'Do you have any other secrets, my lord Duke?'

'Yes he does,' a huge man said as he pushed his way onto the bench beside Jeff, 'Me.'

Jeff felt the knife in his ribs even as the man's weight was settling on the bench.

'Introduce me to the Princess Jeff, remember your manners.'

Jeff had no intention of playing any games,

'What do you want Murdoch?'

'A little chat Jeffie boy, outside.'

'No chance,' Jeff said. He stared at Murdoch, keeping his complete attention as he pressed his boot down on Crystal's foot. He saw the surprise in her eyes but willed her not to speak. He tapped her foot again and she moved her hand to her jacket lying on the seat beside her. She knew what Jeff wanted her to do but she froze as Murdoch said,

'Going somewhere, Crystal? That's your name, isn't it, Crystal?'

'Listen Murdoch,' Jeff said pulling the man's attention back to him, 'Say what you've got to say and then get out.'

Crystal had never heard Jeff speak so coldly, he was controlling the man with his will, determined to dominate him. As she felt Jeff tap her foot again she looked up into the mirror and saw their minders were talking to a waiter, menus in hand, and then listening as he apparently recited the specials.

'Look up,' she pleaded with her eyes but they didn't. Murdoch was speaking to Jeff, hissing in his ear, Crystal could smell his tobacco breath across the table but she wasn't listening, she got her hand into her jacket pocket and pressed her panic button. The Head
of Special Branch had insisted they both have one if they were going to 'mingle', as he put it.

She saw both protection officers look up immediately and take in Murdoch's bulk filling the seat beside Jeff. Riordan got up and slid out the front door like a wraith, leaving Kathy Blake watching in the mirror. Crystal saw her nod her head slightly and thought she knew what would happen next but she was amazed when a man's hand came down from behind Murdoch and slammed across his throat. Murdoch collapsed, his body falling onto Jeff who was pinned against the wall.

There was the clatter of a large knife hitting the bare floorboards and she heard Jeff's muffled voice say,

'You took your time.'

'Sorry Sir, I had to go out to the lane and come in from the back.'

Riordan and Blake pulled Murdoch off Jeff and sat him up in the booth, his head lolling as the owner nearly ran over to see what was going on. People were turning to stare and the conversations halted in mid sentence.

'Just keep everything going as normal,' Jeff said to him, 'Go back to the bar; the Police will be here in a minute and take him away.' The man looked at the mountain of unconscious flesh occupying his cheerful restaurant and then into Jeff's steely blue eyes,

'Go,' Jeff said, 'Someone will talk to you soon.' The owner turned and moved back through the tables. Jeff heard him say,

'I'm afraid the gentleman had a little too much to drink. Please, please, continue with your meals.'

As he spoke the Police arrived, called by Kathy Blake, and took Murdoch out through the kitchen. The roar of conversation reestablished itself and Jeff hoped they'd be able to stay but Riordan handed Crystal her jacket and said,

'I think we'll all go home in the car Ma'am, if you don't mind. We've had enough excitement for one night.'

Jeff could only agree as he wrapped Crystal in a hug and then took her out, dropping some notes on the bar for the owner. 'Thanks, great place.'

At home Archie and Terri were sitting up, watching *Gone with the Wind*,

'We'll need something long,' they'd said to Crystal before she went out, 'You won't be here to change the disc.'

They heard Crystal say,

'Who was that Jeff? Why did he want to hurt you?'

'He was an enforcer for a drug dealer. I arrested him a few years ago. He got a couple of years I think.'

'And Riordan, what was that with the ...?'

'Oh that's pretty good, isn't it? Murdoch's lucky he's not dead, you can kill someone doing that.'

'What do you mean? Can you...?'

He said very calmly, 'Yes, I can, it's all part of the training to keep you safe. And you are.' He kissed her, 'I'm really hungry now. Can we send out for pizza?'

Crystal couldn't believe what Jeff was saying. He was being completely off hand about Murdoch, the knife, nearly being stabbed and Riordan 'luckily' not killing his attacker in a restaurant in front of fifty people.
She stood very still in the middle of their sitting room and became very angry. He wasn't the least bit put out or upset, but she was. She'd had to sit there and watch that gorilla threaten him but now Jeff saw it as some kind of joke,

'Pizza,' she shouted at Jeff, 'Pizza, why...you thoughtless...bastard.'

She got it out in the end and that one word was enough to bring Jeff into her reality, into what she was feeling. He was somewhere else entirely but Crystal was going to make sure he knew how she felt,

'Start talking to me Jeff, now.'

'What?...No, I'm sorry.' He came over and put his arms around her. She was stiff and held her body away even when he put his lips to her hair, 'I'm sorry, I forgot.'

'Forgot what?'

'That it's not a game to you. I also forgot that I frightened you.' She started to cry and he gave her his handkerchief. 'Come and sit down, I'll tell you about it, but why you'd want to know about that scum...'

She stopped him with a look,

'I don't care about him, but I do care about why he'd want to put a knife into you. I assume that's what would have happened.'

Archie and Terri squealed together as Crystal nearly sat on them,

'Oh you two, now I'm sorry. Come here and listen to this foolish man I married tell me why someone was trying to do him a serious injury with a kitchen knife.' She picked up Archie and Terri, who were all ears, and held them on her lap so they could see Jeff.

'Now tell us and don't leave out the part about why he's your secret.'

Jeff was on the spot so he told them everything. He'd been working undercover for months trying to get to Murdoch's boss. He had Murdoch's confidence, 'drinking buddies, you know' and spent time cultivating him for an introduction to the dealer.

But it turned out Murdoch wanted out and was prepared to give Jeff his boss for a free ride with the Police. Jeff had his doubts about that happening but he kept Murdoch on the leash until the dealer was arrested then Jeff came out of his cover and Murdoch had to face the music.

Jeff's superiors accepted Murdoch's evidence against his boss but wouldn't acknowledge his help or recommend a deal to the Prosecutor. Murdoch had killed people and those crimes were unsolved. He certainly wasn't going to confess. They had to settle for convictions for serious assault, not the murders he'd committed.

As Jeff had told Crystal earlier, he thought Murdoch served a few years.

'So, he's my secret. He blames me and I suppose he would have stuck me if he'd got the chance.' He let them digest that before he finished,

'I wasn't able to work undercover again and transferred to Special Branch, then I met you and,' he had the temerity to smile, 'we're going to live happily ever after.'

Crystal threw a cushion at him, which he ducked but it was all right. As Terri whispered to Archie,

'He's so charming.'

'Lucky for him,' Archie whispered back.
Chapter 32

Jeff parked his bike in the courtyard and laughed as Riordan pulled up beside him, 'You ran that last set of lights, you'll get a ticket for sure,' he said.

Riordan smiled back and said, 'No I won't, you will.' Jeff didn't understand so Riordan enlightened him, 'I had Sir Robert register my bike in your name. If you're going to try and lose me out there you'll get the tickets, not me.'

'You bastard.'

Riordan became serious and said, 'Jeff, if I can't stay with you it gets dangerous.' He looked up as the courtyard door opened and an elegant gentleman in a morning suit stepped onto the gravel and hovered, 'Speak of the devil.'

'It's only eight o'clock, what could I have done this early?' Jeff mumbled as he went to meet his Private Secretary.

The next twenty minutes in her Majesty's breakfast room was a mixture of sweet and sour. The Queen kissed him good morning which was sweet of her and indicative of their new strong relationship but then she tried to ground him, which was a bitter pill.

Crystal and Jeff were to stop their private jaunts, the Queen told him. She would hear no argument,

'You could have been killed in that bistro debacle. It wasn't your fault but we can't take that kind of risk. He won't be the only one out there, will he?'

Jeff could only shake his head; it was true; he'd made some enemies.

'Well, I'm sure you understand that your duty to support Crystal and not get yourself stabbed comes before gadding about town.'

Jeff felt like a naughty child but it wasn't over. In a tone he'd come to dread, her Majesty said,

'And, Crystal does not have an heir. You two should get on with that and leave the bike in the shed.'

When Jeff related this extraordinary conversation to Crystal who was still in bed, she ignored the grounding aspect and said,

'I'm up for a little heir making. Even a lot, if that's what it takes. How about you?'

Jeff's intended response was interrupted by Smith clearing his throat at the door,

'Excuse me Sir, your shower is ready.'

Jeff whispered to Crystal,

'I'll get to you later.'

There still remained the question as to how Murdoch had known Jeff and Crystal were in the restaurant. The likelihood of Jeff going there was very small so he must have been tipped off. Special Branch understood people snapping a photo on their phone and then calling a newspaper but conspiring with Murdoch to attack a member of the royal family was quite another, very serious, thing.

The Police had been able to track down nearly all the diners that night but there was no result: no-one had an obvious connection to Murdoch and as the only remaining option of accessing everyone's phone records loomed, one of the restaurant staff went missing: Jeff and Crystal's waiter, the bright student type.

He'd disappeared. It took weeks to track him down; the boy, who was only seventeen, had run away and was tramping around Europe with a haversack and sleeping rough.
When he was found in rural France he was very frightened and easily convinced to tell his story,

'Murdoch was a friend of my mother's old boyfriend. When he got out he came round looking for Mum's boyfriend but he'd moved on. He said he was looking for a way to get at the Duke. He knew I worked at the bistro and he said the Duke used to come in there. I'd never seen him but I've seen them on television.'

'Murdoch seemed to hold a grudge about doing time for something and made me promise that if the Duke came into the restaurant I'd call him because he'd hurt my Mum if I didn't.

'I thought they'll never come in, so I didn't worry. When I recognised them that night I phoned him. I didn't know what else to do.'

Jeff's only comment was, 'That bastard Murdoch.' As for the boy he said, 'If any charges are laid against that kid I'll have some heads. Get the poor little bugger home to his mother.'

Later the same morning Riordan, Sergeant Dave Riordan, also spent some time with Sir Robert. Riordan had been brought in to head Jeff and Crystal's protection because of Jeff's short career as an undercover officer in the Police Force. He'd been very effective but there were always the ones that got away. It was Jeff's loose ends that concerned Sir Robert who were 'out there', waiting for his security to slip, exposing Crystal and Jeff to things Sir Robert didn't want to contemplate.

Dave Riordan hadn't known Sir Robert before his transfer to the Palace but he had heard about him. Sir Robert was a legend in military circles where he'd served in the ranks of special forces, and not as an officer. He'd risen to his current position only in part because of his family connections, all of whom had been horrified when he eschewed the officer class he had been groomed for and entered the army as a private.

Sir Robert had served in the Gulf more than once, the last time gathering intelligence after passing himself off as an arms dealer to a group running a training camp in the desert. His team had come in behind him and dealt with the situation but he had been compromised and unable to return to direct contact with terrorists. The action he saw afterward was in the mountains of Afghanistan with a small team hunting extremists, who were, in army parlance, neutralised. The team then slipped away into the hills to neutralise more threats.

When Sir Robert was concerned about anything Special Branch listened very carefully and had agreed to him briefing Riordan directly. When he called Riordan in Dave waited for the bad news that was sure to follow. Sir Robert came to the point very quickly,

'The tour to the US next week is going to be tricky. We have intelligence that a sleeper group likes their chances of kidnapping them both. The rest of the information is sketchy but we hope to have more soon. I'm sorry Riordan; this makes your job even harder. We'll talk again tomorrow; we're chasing down a lead that may be able to be taken out of the equation. I'll phone you as soon as I know.'

But the lead disappeared and remained untouchable by the considerable forces mounted to track him down. Sir Robert fretted and planned. Riordan decided to take some steps to beef up his detail's vigilance. With Sir Robert's help Dave brought in some heavyweights to work with him on the tour. Jeff and Crystal were told nothing because Crystal was pregnant and it had been announced. On her doctor's orders nothing was to
be said that would put her under more stress than visiting ten states in six days and undertaking fifty wardrobe changes.

For her part Crystal was dreading it. Unlike her last pregnancy she was very ill with morning sickness, so ill Jessie was attempting to wrap her in cotton wool. Truly she was suffering a great deal and as she said to Terri in one of her non-throwing up moments, 'This kid better be worth it.'

Crystal went to war on the morning sickness, determined to have it over before the tour began. She tried everything: her diet was a model of bland low fat, high protein and vitamin B rich foods. When that didn't work she took up yoga and meditated, visualising her stomach as a calm flat sea. Nothing; she had to leave the meditation and run for the bathroom. Ginger tea and sniffing lemons cleared her sinuses but didn't work.

Finally Jeff said on the Sunday morning at Claremore before leaving on the tour, 'Stay there, I'm going to make you some toast with Vegemite and a cup of tea. You have it before you put your feet on the floor. My Mum swore by it.'

'Not Marmite?'

'Nope, it's not the same, besides it tastes like…'

'I get the idea.'

It's hard to believe but it worked. Crystal had the toast and tea, let it go down for a while then got up and did not throw up. It was a miracle. She felt human again for the first time in weeks. So long as she didn't go near raw meat, seafood or anything with a strong smell she was fine.

Still ignorant of the threat that so concerned Sir Robert and Dave Riordan, Crystal and Jeff went back to town ready to cross the Atlantic to meet and greet thousands of Americans eager to catch a tiny glimpse of them.

The schedule with maps of the routes their vehicles would take as well as the times and venues of the events had been in the media for weeks. This is all normal for a royal tour, particularly one with a newly married Princess and her handsome Duke.

The fact that Crystal was pregnant just added to the fascination. Endless articles appeared speculating on the baby's sex, its name or hopefully numerous names, whether Crystal would show a baby bump and what her maternity wardrobe would be.

'As I'm not even showing, they're going to be really disappointed,' she told Jessie who was to be Crystal's wardrobe mistress during the trip. Jessie had spent weeks compiling lists of events, the outfit to be worn at the event, the outfits that Crystal could wear between events, what she could wear while travelling from event to event, what she would wear on planes, trains and in automobiles. The newly married and very much in love Jessie said to her spouse, Reggie,

'Does he have as much to take as Crystal does? I have never packed so much for her before. Even the Africa trip wasn't this big.'

Reggie gave her a kiss and a hug and went back to his own military operation. Jeff had less but his tour wardrobe would still fill a number of travelling trunks.

Sir Robert had his own nightmare to contend with; should he tell Jeff and Crystal of the threats against them? The larger question of the viability of the tour had kept him awake for many nights. As Crystal was eating her toast he took his problems to Her Majesty's Private Secretary who went immediately to his boss.

The Queen heard both of them as they related the latest intelligence Sir Robert had received that morning,
"We're not sure where or when the attack will take place. We do know the names of some of the terrorists involved and we know they're serious. The leader dropped out of sight last week but three of his group has been picked up. Our best outcome would be if the leader lost his nerve and gave up the scheme but we have nothing to indicate that is the case. None of the group who are in custody are talking.

'The Americans have found some bomb making equipment that could be used by a suicide bomber. If the terrorists' plan is to use a human bomb the exposure is extreme unless everyone who comes within a certain perimeter is screened. With our present arrangements screening on that scale is just not possible.'

'What is your recommendation Sir Robert?' For the first time in many years Sir Robert felt his palms begin to sweat as he prepared to give Her Majesty a most unpalatable piece of advice. He looked at his sovereign and said,

'From a security point of view, putting aside any political considerations, my advice is to cancel the tour Ma'am. The risk is now extreme and it is not just to their Royal Highnesses; there is the impact on other persons in the party, local dignitaries and the public.'

'We don't give in to terrorists Sir Robert.'
'I know that Ma'am.'
'When do we have to decide?'
'By six o'clock.'
Her Majesty left the room without a word. She wanted to speak to her husband.

After lunch Sir Robert and the Queen's Private Secretary were shown into her Majesty's sitting room where Jeff, Crystal and her grandparents were waiting. The atmosphere in the room was calm; overlaid with an air of quiet determination. It was Crystal's grandfather who, in the no nonsense manner he was famous for, gave them her Majesty's decision,

'Gentlemen, we all appreciate the risks the trip poses and the very great demands it will place on the security service. However, the tour will proceed, with one change.'
Her Majesty's Private Secretary said,
'Sir?'
'Her Majesty and I will be accompanying their Royal Highnesses.'
Sir Robert suppressed a gasp; 'It's unthinkable,' he thought, 'the whole family exposed!'

The Queen's husband, who had seen more crises than Sir Robert, and dealt with many threats to the family from both within and without, was clear in the message the family intended to convey,

'If they want to blow us up, let them try, but we will show those bastards how decent people behave.'

Her Majesty's Private Secretary was nearly reeling with the diplomatic implications and requirements of a spontaneous state visit. Her Majesty could see his mind whirling,

'I've spoken with the Prime Minister and the President who has extended an invitation to us for the visit. He has his people working on the arrangements.' She smiled, 'He even offered us the use of his car but I think ours will be adequate. There is only one more thing.'

'Ma'am?' Sir Robert asked.
'I want the press to be completely informed of the reason for the change in our plans so the public knows what is going on. We have to show everyone we will not be cowed by hole in the wall thugs who let women and children destroy themselves for their fanatical ideas.

'But gentlemen, my primary concern is to allow people to choose whether or not they want to expose themselves to danger by coming out to see us. The risk is to everyone, not just ourselves. We can't keep this a secret and I think there's no advantage to us in doing so.' She paused, 'You never know, the public may help you find the terrorists. They have to be somewhere; someone has to know something.'

Sir Robert felt himself stand up a little straighter, if that were possible. He was in awe of his sovereign and what she had said gave him an idea. He looked at Jeff and Crystal who were standing behind her Majesty: Jeff nodded; Crystal gave him a small, nervous smile. She said,

'You see Sir Robert, my child shouldn't grow up afraid. We have to defeat these cowards. Our personal war starts now.'

'Yes Ma'am,' he said.

'Thank you gentlemen,' Her Majesty said, 'I won't detain you any longer, there'll be plenty to do before we leave in the morning.'

Outside in the corridor Sir Robert said to his counterpart,

'We need to speak to the head of MI6.'

'I'm already here Sir,' a voice said from behind him. 'Her Majesty asked me to be here after you got the news. Shall we go to your office? I have a few of my team with me.'

In the next two hours the Head of MI6 laid out a plan to put a protective ring around the royal family that any suicide bomber, or any threat for that matter, would have to penetrate for the length of the tour. He told them there would be all the usual security but he also had the co-operation of the American Secret Service and the consent of the President to put MI6 agents on the ground,

'They've already left for the US,' he said. 'As far as anyone is concerned they'll be ordinary citizens: we want them to be able to mingle and speak to people.' He told them the Secret Service would also be providing personnel. The essential element of the plan was to have agents in every crowd the royal party would encounter. They would go in the day before an event and watch and listen. As people gathered they would be assessed; if they posed any risk whatsoever they would be removed, quietly of course. The Americans were already detaining known threats.

'While we're doing that the FBI has some new leads on the group we're after and with the publicity about the reason her Majesty is joining the tour we may have more.'

Sir Robert was white in the face but committed to carrying out her Majesty's wishes, 'Can I suggest something else?'

'Of course.'

So Sir Robert spoke very precisely for the next fifteen minutes, after which the MI6 team left. It was a very long night and Sir Robert didn't sleep until the next day when, on the second of the aircraft carrying the royal family, their retainers, five tons of luggage and a large media contingent to the US, he collapsed with exhaustion.

Archie and Terri watched the whole thing on television; they watched as an incredible movement unfolded and were, with millions of other viewers, witnesses to six days of enormous tension and ultimately, goodwill.
Sir Robert's suggestion to the Head of MI6 that an appeal be made to the Muslim community for their support brought people onto the streets. Hundreds of thousands of previously silent and invisible Muslims who did not condone or support violence came out in cities all over America and in cities throughout the world to stand up and say, 'the violence has to stop'. Television stations carried hour by hour coverage of peaceful demonstrations and gatherings of Muslims wherever the royal party went. Pictures of the royal family mingling with Muslims on the first day served to bring even more people onto the streets which became choked with families, off-duty policemen, firemen, doctors, nurses, working people and school children, who came out and held up banners saying, among other things, 'Blow yourselves up, not our children.' A few hippies even came out for an airing with battered nearly vintage placards saying 'Make Love not War'.

The analysts on television said the display of support for the royal family was unprecedented; the public rejection of violence and the public's embrace of moderate Muslims a turning point in cultural relations between Christian America and Islam. Talk show hosts were on air day and night with people of all religions discussing the use of violence for political or religious causes. At the end of a few days a public consensus seemed to be reached that the royal family had been a rallying point and instigator of a movement for peace that would continue.

As the tour progressed police and intelligence agencies started to receive a great deal of information on the missing terrorists. The net began to close on a group of five men and a girl of fifteen who were found in the city where the royal family were due to appear the next day. The girl was the intended human sacrifice to their group's cause. The information as to their location had come from a relative of one of the men; a man appalled at the use of the girl as a suicide bomber.

When the group was apprehended every detail of their plan was published and analysed. The girl had been groomed since childhood by a fanatical relative to die in his cause. She had never been to an ordinary school or allowed to mingle with other children. The bomber's vest she was to wear to her death had been rigged with a remote control; even had she wanted to she could not have changed her mind. Because of the intense security presence the plan was for girl to get as close to the royal event as possible in as crowded a place as possible and then detonate the bomb.

At the end of the six days the family returned home exhausted and exhilarated; their incredible gamble had paid off. Sir Robert was given two weeks leave which he used to go home and attend to the weeds in his country garden and drink some good wine as he contemplated the ways of people.

Jeff and Crystal went home to Claremore for three days of rest and as Jeff said to Archie and Terri,

'I thought I was pretty tough but Crystal's family make me look like a pussy.'

'Not quite,' thought Terri. In the six days he'd never left Crystal's side; if anyone was going to hurt her Jeff made it plain they would have had to get past him first.

Crystal's grandfather said to his wife in the privacy of their bed,

'Well my love, that went off quite well, don't you think? I mean for a spontaneous event it wasn't bad at all.'
Chapter 33

After the drama of the American tour Jeff forgot her Majesty's edict that he and Crystal weren't to 'mingle' with the public in town and went back to his usual routine of an early morning ride through the nearly empty streets with Dave Riordan as his only escort.

Jeff enjoyed the short time before his day became cluttered with other people; even Crystal was left behind as he spent less than an hour with his own thoughts and no demands. He went where he wanted, often down to the docks, watching the brown river as it continued its timeless journey through the heart of the city. At other times he wanted to roar down quiet tree lined Georgian streets where elderly gentlemen watered window boxes and shook their fists at him as he passed, incensed that he should violate their tranquility.

Their route varied and yet not a lot. Riordan found Jeff had settled into a pattern of routes for different days of the week which only changed if the weather was bad and he might choose to avoid exposing himself along the river or an event was planned and streets were lined with barriers. Jeff had to smile at times as Council workmen laid down crowd barriers on routes he would travel later the same day with Crystal in a large black car, waving to people who had waited for hours to see them.

On those occasions he found his life unreal and when he returned to the Palace to strip off his leathers and shower with his valet Smith hovering in his dressing room, the most surreal of all. It was only when Crystal awoke and came to him that his jangled universe returned to equilibrium: she was his centre, his balance, the reason he was there; he loved his wife and their child. Jeff would put up with anything for them.

Well, nearly anything. When Riordan took him to task about his early morning escapes and the pattern that created a security risk he baulked and dug his heels in. Everyone has patterns in their lives he told Riordan, it can't be avoided. If he had to think of a new route every morning,

'I'll go mad.' he said, 'I can't be looking over my shoulder all the time.'

He wouldn't listen and had time to regret it later because Jeff had attracted a stalker, a very determined stalker; one obsessed with hurting him.

When someone wants to hurt you they do the same things protectors do: they're with you all the time. Jeff's stalker was his shadow: present at all his public appearances; watching as he rode each morning; outside where he slept at night. At Claremore it was easy: the estate was wild nearly to the house; its rough terrain of gullies, caves and deep woods was a haven for things that wanted to be secret yet near.

The regular patrols of the grounds just didn't penetrate those secret places; they remained hidden and the man's small camp went undetected. Being a planner Jeff's stalker wanted to keep his options open: would he strike in the city or the country? He didn't know yet but Jeff and Crystal's lifestyle and routine was now well established and provided him with many opportunities. So he waited.

Sergeant Riordan was a careful man; he was also creative; Jeff's intransigence only inspired him to come up with a solution; one that would allow Jeff a measure of freedom and negate what he sensed was a growing risk. The longer Jeff's routine went on the higher the chances were of some nutter latching onto it.
When Jeff came down the next day Riordan was standing next to a new bike which gleamed in the early sunlight: a big Japanese grunt machine. Jeff fell in love with it on sight. 'Step one,' Riordan thought as Jeff circled its gleaming enamel and his hand reached out and ran along the bike's smooth lines,

'God, where did you get this?' he said.

'It's yours, a gift from Sir Robert if you agree to a couple of things.'

The negotiations were short and in the form of an ultimatum: Jeff would ride the new bike and Riordan would ride Jeff's old one; Jeff would have a new helmet and Dave would wear his old one; Dave would ride in front and choose the route.

'Or?'

'Or we stay home.'

As they rode out the palace gate Riordan set a fast pace and Jeff pushed the bike to keep up with him. The streets Riordan chose were new and to Jeff's delight, full of curves where he wrestled with the power of the new bike to keep it upright. At the end he said to Riordan,

'Fantastic, absolutely bloody fantastic.'

Riordan heaved a sigh of relief. If only he could continue to balance security with Jeff's need for excitement they'd be all right. But the danger was in the riding itself; they took risks but Riordan knew if he rode more sedately Jeff would just take off and he'd be left to follow. His role as decoy would be useless if Jeff resumed the lead.

They went on for a week and it seemed to be working until on the seventh day Jeff watched helplessly as Riordan's bike slipped from under him as he rounded the apex of a sharp corner. Riordan was trapped under the bike, his leg crushed by its weight and his body dragged across the tarmac until the bike landed against the stone gutter and bounced: it went up and came down, hard onto Dave's chest. When Jeff reached him he was already dead, his eyes wide open in amazement.

When the Police forensic experts were finished in the laboratory they reported that ordinary cooking oil had been spilt, or probably worse, spread across the width of the road. It would have been invisible to the naked eye. Travelling at speed it was unlikely Riordan would have even seen it. The same oil was found on a number of streets that led back to the Palace; they would have had to cross it somewhere on the way back.

At the funeral Jeff and Crystal met Riordan's wife, the mother of his three small children who stood bewildered as their father's coffin was lowered into the ground. She accepted Crystal's words of comfort silently. When Jeff took her shaking hand she looked at him with hatred and said,

'It was meant for you, not for him.'

Sir Robert had all of the bikes locked up in a warehouse used by the Palace for storing the paraphernalia that accumulates in a great house over hundreds of years. He needn't have done it because Jeff would not have exposed anyone else to the risk of riding with him. There would be no more early morning escapes.

The publicity was widespread, vicious and as far as Jeff was concerned, justified. He believed he'd been selfish and as a result a very good man had died. He and Crystal set up a trust for his children but it was little enough. The letter of thanks from Riordan's wife was correct and cold. It sent a chill down Jeff's spine when he read it.

'She's grieving,' Crystal said.
'She's a widow Crystal and her kids don't have a father because of me. I can never make it up to her or her kids.'

Crystal was wisely silent; he would have to work through his guilt alone; empty words telling him he wasn't to blame would be useless. By then the stalker's camp at Claremore had been found by their steward; doing a check of deer numbers he'd found it hidden in a steep gully under an overhang of rock. It was recently used but empty. Nothing was found that helped in identifying its occupant.

Special Branch were sure there was a stalker, rather than a just a homeless person camping on the estate because a well worn path led to near the house and a flattened patch of earth testified to where the man had lain watching the terrace outside the kitchen where Jeff and Crystal often ate their breakfast.

It was very well worn; he'd been there often.

The discovery of the stalker's camp at Claremore meant a surveillance team would remain on the estate for the foreseeable future. They were put in place, leaving everything in the camp undisturbed. The hope was the man would return to it when Crystal and Jeff were next at Claremore on Friday.

Surveillance cameras around the Palace were used to identify recurring faces; each was identified and traced without result. However, the presence of the camp led Special Branch to believe, quite reasonably, that they were dealing with a homeless person who may have taken up residence in parkland overlooking the Palace.

Police dogs, given the man's scent from the camp, were used to scour the parks. Nothing was found because Jeff's stalker was not only deranged, he was clever. As the government's stalking consultant from the Fixated Threat Assessment Centre told Jeff and Crystal, this strange combination of attributes was common in stalkers,

'Stallers generally have a higher criminal intelligence than the average which makes them hard to trace if they don't want to be found. Our research shows that most are suffering with a psychotic illness and have pathologically intense fixations.'

'What does that mean?' Crystal asked him.

'These people pursue their delusional preoccupations to the point of obsession, that is to an abnormally intense degree.'

'You mean like trying to kill me and killing Dave Riordan instead?' Jeff said with some bitterness.

'In extreme cases, yes. But I must say this is a new category of stalking in royal terms. Usually people obsessed with the royal family fall into a number of identifiable categories: people who think they're royal; those who want her Majesty to right some wrong or other; that type of thing. Your fellow's fixation is criminally obsessive and a new category.'

Jeff was completely unimpressed with the consultant's forensic fascination with new categories of royal stalkers and began to pace around the room.

'What will happen when you catch him?' Crystal asked, watching her husband's growing frustration.

'Our job is to find the person appropriate treatment but, as this man is most likely responsible for Sergeant Riordan's death, any treatment will probably occur in a facility for the criminally insane.'
'I hope you catch him soon,' Crystal said as she looked at Jeff. He looked preoccupied and that worried her; lately he'd spent a lot of time with his own thoughts. His usually confident self was missing. Crystal wanted it back.

On Friday they travelled to Claremore at the usual time and in the usual way. Crystal went to bed early; the pregnancy was making her tired and she found she needed more sleep. Jeff sat up for a while and then turned out the downstairs lights. As far as his protection detail was concerned he'd gone up to bed but he remained sitting in the family room, watching the kitchen door.

His decision to leave the house by that door just before dawn was reckless at best. He felt he needed to do something; his old training driving him to find the stalker before he had the chance to act on his delusions.

It was cold outside and he shivered in his light sweater as the dewy dawn settled on him. The woods close to the house were dark; the trees damp and still as he walked slowly towards them, taking his time, allowing anyone watching to see him.

It was difficult to see the track the stalker had used so often but Jeff was careful he didn't lose it in the weak light. Half way to the camp he stopped in a small clearing where the trees were large with branches overhanging the track. He quickly climbed one and lay down along a wide branch.

Light fell through the dense foliage and birds began to stir and sing around him. Light steps came toward him and a deer broke cover on the other side of the clearing. Jeff had been holding his breath and slowly released it as heavier footfalls came from behind him, just below the tree.

A man in a dark parka and black beanie was standing below him, very still, sniffing the air like an animal. He had come along the track as Jeff had, from the direction of the house. Jeff now knew the man been at the house and had followed him; just as he'd intended. The man was carrying a bundle of things under his left arm. His right arm was free and holding a knife that glinted as a shaft of sun broke through the trees and fell on the turf.

He looked around and then crouched and put the bundle down onto the ground. His head turned from left to right, slowly taking in every inch of the clearing. Jeff watched him and moved slightly to the left, bringing his legs together so he could drop to the ground. He had made the slightest noise; it was barely audible but the man heard it and turned. He looked up and saw Jeff's clear blue eyes in the growing light. He sprang up and the hand holding the knife went back as he prepared to throw. There was a small sound and a thump as the man's arm stopped in midair and he toppled to the floor of the clearing.

'You can come down now sir,' a voice said to Jeff, 'We got him.'

A number of camouflaged bodies holding rifles drifted out of the undergrowth and gathered around the body. Jeff dropped to the ground. All he said was,

'Thanks,' as one of the soldiers radioed to their officer,

'Target neutralised.'

Crystal was furious as she and Jessie made coffee for the soldiers, who were milling around on the terrace in the sun, smoking and congratulating their sniper on his shot,

'How could you Jeff? You knew he was out there.'

'Yes, I did but I also knew they were out there,' he said, looking at the soldiers. 'They weren't going to let anything happen to me.'
Crystal was frightened and angry but he held her and she understood that it was the only thing he could do for Dave Riordan: put himself out as a decoy, just as Riordan had done for him.

Jeff's stalker was identified as a man with a long history of psychiatric illness and violence. The reason for his fixation on Jeff went with him to his grave.

No-one at Claremore, least of all Crystal and Jeff, underestimated the tragedy of the whole stalker affair: Dave Riordan's death, the shooting of the stalker himself and the fear and despair the man had created were real and left their mark.

Jeff would carry the weight of his protection officer's death all his life but his usual confidence and optimistic outlook began to return, until, on Saturday afternoon, he went down with a chill.

For a man who was never ill it came as a complete shock. He had the shivers, a high temperature and ached in every part of his body. Put to bed he wanted to snarl at the doctor Crystal summoned but he was too weak: his body wouldn't let him.

'It was probably your sojourn in the woods,' his very droll medico told him, 'Dew, light clothing, letting yourself get cold.' He paused and looked away, far off into his world of medical mysteries, 'Yes, the shock would play a part as well.'

Jeff croaked at him, for his voice was going as well, 'That's fine Doc, but how long is this going to last?'

Bright and full of confidence the doctor snapped his bag shut and smiled, 'Several days I should think. You won't really care, you're too sick.' Jeff wanted to grab him by the throat. With an infuriating detachment the doctor said to Crystal, 'Keep him warm, a hot water bottle would be good for his feet which are like blocks of ice; plenty of fluids and light food.' He turned to Jeff, 'Do you like chicken soup? My mother swore by it. See you in a couple of days,' he said and rushed out the door as though he had a plane to catch.

'I don't like him and he can stuff his chicken soup right up his...,' Jeff said to an amused Crystal.

'I think he's a scream,' she tucked him in but looked distracted, 'He might be right about the chicken soup though.' She left Jeff alone to snuffle and shiver while she went to the kitchen to check on the chicken situation.

Jessie came in next with Archie and Terri who were looking happy and full of vim which irritated Jeff even more,

'They're going into the bottom of the bed to warm you up. Lift your feet Sir, thank you,' she said as Jeff felt a delicious warmth begin to thaw his frozen extremities. 'God that's good.' He looked at Jessie who was smiling as well, 'What is it with these people?' he thought, 'Am I the joke of the day?'

'I'll refill Archie in a couple of hours,' she said.

A voice from the bottom of the bed, which Jeff recognised as a muffled version of Archie's usual tenor said,

'My goodness, it's like Siberia down here.'

'Sorry,' Jeff said as he drifted off to sleep, warm at last.

Jeff was a terrible patient, not because he complained but because he resented being ill. It was new to him; his normally healthy, strong body had let him down,
'Traitor,' he thought, as he lay in bed watching movies with Archie and Terri. They'd moved up the bed and were now settled on Jeff's chest which was sore from a hacking cough he'd developed.

The doctor, who Jeff vowed he'd deal with later, prescribed rest and fluids.

'What about the cough?' Jeff asked him.

'It'll go away in a few days, don't worry.'

Crystal was no help as he battled being idle and sought the comfort of Archie and Terri. She found it hilarious that her 'strongman' as she called him, had finally succumbed to a need for the hot water bottle,

'Well, my chest hurts,' was all he said. After she'd gone he whispered to the hot water bottle and cover,

'Sorry guys, I really appreciate what you're doing for me.'

Terri, who was enjoying Jeff's arms around her, said,

'It's our pleasure,' as Archie gave her a look that said, 'I'll talk to you later.'

Which he did in the privacy of their drawer. Terri had her answer ready,

'I don't complain when Crystal gives you a kiss or a hug, do I? And you like it when she does, don't you? Archie nodded in an embarrassed fashion, 'Then just shut up and give me a cuddle, you're such a silly hot water bottle.'

Jeff was in bed for three days at the end of which he bounced up and went back to work. They returned to town and a backlog of events which Jeff dealt with on his own: he just had extra visits scheduled until he caught up. He was running, trying to find a way to deal with the fact of Dave Riordan's death and its impact on Riordan's young family.

'There has to be a something else I can do,' he thought.

Riordan's widow was constantly on his mind, keeping alive the guilt he felt that her children had lost their father. Strangely it was Smith, his valet, who helped him start to unravel what was becoming a Gordian knot.

'The only thing that helps sir is time.... and a little practicality.'

Jeff watched as Smith adjusted, for the third time, the fall of his jacket and asked,

'Spit it out Smith, you've been chewing on this for days.'

'My suggestion sir, with the greatest respect, is to get their mother a little relief. She must be exhausted coping with her own grief and the children's as well. Do something practical for her; get her some support is all I can say.'

Jeff went to Crystal who went to her grandmother who, surprisingly, sent Jeff to Crystal's grandfather. Their conversation was a revelation to Jeff, as Crystal's grandfather told him,

'I started a group many years ago to help young widows and later, widowers. There were so many widows after the war; young women left with babies and young children to raise alone. The idea is they help each other to find a way through it all, which is absolutely bloody awful, so they can rebuild their lives.

'They did all the work; all I did was give it a push with some patronage. If you let them know, they'll contact Mrs Riordan and offer their support. It's a good thing Jeff and keeps you out of it.'

That was the thing that had worried Jeff the most, that Dave Riordan's widow held him responsible for Riordan's death. No-one had to tell Jeff that, he knew it already.
Much later he learnt that Jennifer Riordan had become part of the group and, after some years, remarried. By then Jeff had done a great deal for many people but it was Jennifer Riordan and her children who stayed in his mind.
Chapter 34

Crystal's pregnancy was in its second trimester and she was spending some time reading and educating herself on the invasion of her person by a vampire like creature that had stopped making her ill but was swelling her slim belly and beginning to move inside her.

A pile of pregnancy books had accumulated on her bedside table which she attempted to plough through at night. As autumn ended and the weather settled into a pattern of frosty chill with flashes of freeze, the absence of their electric blanket had brought Archie and Terri out of the drawer to warm her icy extremities.

'Why do I suddenly have cold feet?' she said out loud.

A small voice from the bottom of the bed replied, 'I don't know but I hope we're helping.'

Crystal lifted the duvet and said to Archie and Terri,

'Yes thanks. Are you all right down there?'

'We're fine, but it's a pity about the electric blanket having to go.'

'Yes, Crystal said with regret, 'But the....'

'Electromagnetic radiation can lead to birth defects,' Jeff finished for her.

'You've been reading my books.'

'Just a couple; I thought, as we're having triplets, I might need to be better informed.'

'Tripplets?' Terri squealed out from the depths.

Crystal reached down and pulled them out, setting them up on her knees. 'Yes, the scan confirmed it today; one of them was hiding.'

'Incredible,' Archie said.

'Triple trouble,' Jeff said but he was happy, if challenged by the task of naming three royal babies. As he'd said to Crystal in the car on the way home,

'They each have, what is it four names?'

'Usually.'

'So we have to come up with twelve names?'

'Hmmm, but we can use some we like and family names.'

'Such as?'

'Well your mother's name. I love Charlotte. And my grandfather's: Henry is so old and has lots of links to the family.'

'What about your mother? She had a great name; I like Adelaide.'

Crystal smiled a wistful smile. 'You know that I don't remember her. I was so little when they died. Grandmother has told me a lot but now I wish I knew more. Her name was Adelaide Victoria Louise...'

And as her grandmother had told her, Adelaide had been very beautiful but also very wilful. She'd grown up fearless: she rode horses men feared and suffered broken bones; hunted before it became politically incorrect and hadn't cared when she suffered concussion; sailed in ocean races and pursued her greatest love - the Amazon where she had died.

Before her early death Adelaide had been her father Henry's favourite child. She had been like him in many ways. He'd taught her to ride and swim, shoot and hunt the stag in Scotland. Unlike her rather wet brother, who had not been missed since his renunciation of the throne, she had loved the outdoors and sought danger. Of course, with her amazing
figure and inky black hair she'd also been a darling of photographers, men about town and fashion designers. Unlike Crystal she had never suffered with puppy fat or mousy hair: she'd been wafer thin from babyhood with startling green eyes.

Her marriage had been a happy one for some time until she'd found out about her husband's penchant for young men.

'Grandmother told me that's when they started to argue and fight. Despite 'his little weakness' as he called it he didn't want to lose her so they went on that last trip to try and sort things out.'

'You mean he preferred boys to her? He must have been mad, she sounds amazing.'

'Maybe he was.'

'What happened in South America?'

'He flew their plane into a mountain.'

'Why?'

'We don't know.'

The sad circumstances of Crystal's parents' last day were short.

Oliver watched as his wife brushed tangles from her hair. They were stubborn and she cursed at times as her hair's dark waves refused to give up its burrs. Lying on their bed as he watched her concentrated efforts he said,

'I could do that for you darling,'

'No thank you,' Adelaide said, not raising her head, 'I can manage.'

'Exquisitely polite as usual, as cold as ice', he thought. Exasperated Oliver threw his legs over the side of the bed and reached for his boots,

'I think I'll go down to the bar.'

'Fine,' she said and caught his eye in the mirror, 'Will you be coming back for dinner?'

'That depends,' she cocked her head and dared him to tell her on what his return depended. He obliged. 'On whom I meet.' He left, closing the door quietly behind him. She put down the brush and saw her knuckles were white. 'He won't be back,' she said to herself.

After Oliver's early morning return they left their hotel and drove to the town's tiny airport. Their twin engine aircraft was waiting. Oliver wanted to take the controls. She tried to joke him into sitting in the right hand seat,

'Let me do it this morning. You were out late and probably had some champagne. It doesn't do to drink and drive.'

He ignored his wife and walked round the aircraft carrying out the pilot's pre-flight check. The porters loaded some light luggage into the plane for their week in the interior. They were flying to friend's estate to observe the wildlife and some birds. Adelaide had started to paint birds and flowers which infuriated Oliver and fuelled an increasingly bitter, ongoing argument,

'We go half way round the world so you can hunt up some orchid or other and I sit about while you paint it before it wilts in the heat.'

'You never used to mind.'

'You never used to mind about my little interests either, until you got that letter.' Adelaide looked at her husband, 'Blackmail is ugly Oliver. How could you have let those photographs be taken?'

'I didn't know.' He pleaded with her, 'Honestly my love I didn't know.'
'Mummy is furious and Daddy is ready to disown you. I don't know what to do. If the papers get hold of them...'
'They won't. I paid. I'm sure he gave me everything.'
'I hope so,' she said doubtful of the honesty of a blackmailer.
The flight to their friend's home in the mountains was through low cloud and increasingly heavy rain. Oliver kept an eye on their altitude but he was feeling ill: he had a monumental hangover which was making him airsick. A small pain had started in his chest as he'd left the bed of a boy he'd found in a bar at two in the morning. It still niggled at him, sending a pain down his left arm.
Adelaide could see he was clammy with sweat. She wiped his face with a handkerchief,
'Do you want me to take over?'
'I rather think I do, I'm going to be sick.'
He retched suddenly as she grabbed the controls. His chest continued to shake as he reached for a bag and was sick.
The small plane had dropped a little in altitude and she corrected it.
'What height should we be darling? Oliver?'
'I'm sorry I have pain in my chest. I feel as though it's being crushed.'
Adelaide reached for him and saw his face was racked with pain. He doubled over in the seat, holding his chest. She didn't see the mountain in front of them as it loomed out of the cloud and rain.
The debris was found by a helicopter several days later.
'There was a fire,' Crystal told Jeff. 'There was very little left. Grandfather went out there and brought them home.'
Chapter 35

The chances of Crystal and Jeff having a multiple birth were small; their chances of having triplets minute. It had come as a complete surprise to them and to the Queen and although it was a thrill to think of three babies at once, the birth of three contemporaneous heirs was not a straight forward event.

The country's laws of succession were still governed by male-preference primogeniture: the first born son, no matter if he were born after an older sister, still inherited. A daughter would only become Queen if she had no brothers living or a brother had not left a living son or an uncle was living or if he was dead, having left a living son.

The inheritance regime was antiquated, laid down in the mists of time when the strongest male in the tribe became leader through trial by combat. Jeff had always found it an interesting and reasonable system: when groups only survived because they dominated others, a physically strong leader able to take them into battle was essential. The German tribal leaders who had taken on the Romans for so many years had been mountains of men, symbols of physical power.

The country had often overlooked potential queens of age and sense in favour of infant males, resulting in disaster. When Jeff read up on it he found that it was only in very recent times that even the socially advanced Scandinavians had changed the law to allow a first born daughter to inherit.

'My God,' Jeff thought, 'I might have three of them.'

The Swedes and Norwegians were enlightened but until recently the Danes had maintained the old system. Jeff read,

"The Danes had suffered a number of military debacles characterised by infighting among the nobles. In 1660 the Danish King seized absolute power by passing new laws that eliminated the special political privileges of the nobility and proclaimed the Crown fully inheritable giving the King defacto absolute power. Prior to this the Danish King was elected from within a few royal families who, through intermarriage were from the same family line. By this process the present Queen Margrethe of Denmark has a direct line to King Gorm the Old in the 900s.

"The introduction of absolutism meant that until 2009 Denmark operated on a system of male-preference primogeniture. A royal daughter could only inherit the throne if she had no brothers living and any deceased brothers had not left living issue. On her birth in 1940 the present Queen, who is the eldest of three daughters of King Christian IX, was not the heir to the throne as her father had brothers living. In 1953 the constitution was amended allowing females to inherit.

"In 2009 the Danish Parliament unanimously voted in favour of a new succession law that was approved in a referendum on 7 June 2009 ensuring that the eldest child of a monarch, regardless of gender would inherit the throne."

Jeff pondered on the facts as they presently stood. The arrival of their triplets meant the first born boy, if there were one, would be Crystal's heir, even if a girl were born first. The children would then be placed in the order of succession in the order of their birth. If they were all girls or all boys the first born child would be the heir. 'The thing's ridiculous,' he thought. 'Look at the Queen, no-one could be stronger or better.'
He put the books away and turned off his computer. It was time to bring the law into the twenty first century: he set out to add fuel to a small fire that had been lit in Parliament for a change in the law.

As a result many new people entered Crystal and Jeff's lives including the royal family's constitutional lawyers, humming and aahing about changing 'a perfectly reasonable law'. Jeff, knowing he supported him completely, set Sir Robert on them.

A very civilized discussion ensued in which the matter progressed to Sir Robert's satisfaction. However, after yet another new person entered their lives a new urgency in changing the succession law became apparent.

Jeff and Crystal had their first appointment with a perinatologist. He was a nice guy, young, apparently brilliant and extremely concerned about their babies. Rob, as he asked them to call him was an obstetrician specialising in the care of high risk pregnancies.

He laid out some facts about having a multiple birth and said to Crystal,

'You have little to no chance of carrying your babies to term. It is likely you won't get past thirty three weeks. As you are now thirteen weeks, there are only twenty to go. In the remaining weeks you will have to put on a considerable amount of weight, about fifty pounds of quality, to ensure your babies have the chance of adequate nourishment. We'll talk about diet and supplements in a moment.'

Jeff took a breath and said with some irony,

'Please go on; so much good news.'

'Because they won't be born at full term your babies may be low birth weight, under five and a half pounds and may need intense inpatient care by a team of specialists.' He smiled, 'We can try to overcome that with diet and rest to reduce the risks of a premature birth.'

'Rest?' Crystal asked. 'You do know that I have a daily schedule that is booked up for months.'

'Not any more. Her Majesty rang me yesterday and asked me about it and we agreed the present schedule poses a significant risk to you and your babies. It will be cut to the bone. If I had my way you'd do one engagement a week but we've compromised on two.'

He looked very serious as he said, 'Your Royal Highness, you have to understand that there's a lot of jostling for resources going on in there. These babies are now growing at a rapid rate, draining your system to sustain themselves. There being three of them means if you use up too much of the energy you absorb in your diet travelling and being on your feet all day as you have been, there is less for them. There are consequences of that.'

He decided to give them the hard facts,

'Many multiple pregnancies end with the death of one or more foetus. We monitor each of them for stress. If one shows signs of decreased development or deceleration in the heartbeat we have to consider intervention.'

Crystal was beginning to feel fragile and it became worse when he told them,

'Twenty percent of triplet pregnancies abort spontaneously at about twenty weeks because of the pressure on the womb.' He stood up and walked over to the front of his desk and perched there,

'I don't want to frighten you but your pregnancy is high risk and your position just makes it worse. If you slow down and look after yourself I hope we can keep your babies in the womb to at least thirty or even better thirty three weeks to give them the best chance of avoiding under development.'
'One more thing, after about 20 weeks, you probably won't be able to work or function normally because of the size of your womb. I suggest you invest in slip on shoes and grab rails for the bath. And remember no hot baths, only tepid.'

They all laughed but agreed Crystal would be leading a greatly reduced public life for the remainder of her pregnancy. The final news was,

'The scan shows you are carrying dizygotic triplets, essentially a set of identical twins from one fertilised egg and a third, developed from a second fertilised egg. The twins share the same DNA while the third is genetically unique.

'You have twin girls and a son. He's the one out on his own and will possibly be the biggest of the three. We have two placentas so that helps with development. We'll discuss the actual birth a bit later on.'

At home Crystal said as Jeff downed a much needed whisky,

'I think we'd better start looking for nannies. We're going to need more than one.'

So the search began for at least two extraordinary individuals to care for their precious babies. It wasn't easy. In the meantime getting dressed was becoming a problem.

'I feel like I'm carrying around a huge pumpkin,' Crystal said to Jessie.

'You are getting big very quickly Ma'am. The dresses from last week just won't fit.'

'Well, what am I going to wear? I have to leave in an hour and my stomach remains naked.'

Jessie went to the bed and held up two beautiful tube dresses in wool jersey,

'Constance sent down some things this morning. She's making you new things as fast as she can.'

'They're beautiful,' Crystal said.

'And stretch, with swing coats to go with them.' Jessie said.

'Bring them on. I'll have the dark pink and the low heels please Jessie. The soles of my feet are hurting again.'

Finding something to wear that kept up with her expanding womb was a challenge for Crystal but nothing compared to the challenge of finding nannies for the babies. Nannies were essential because Crystal and Jeff were working parents. They couldn't and wouldn't even if they'd been able to, take the babies around with them. It just wasn't practical. As for tours, there were times when the three little ones would have to stay at home. The right people to care for and love them in their absence were essential.

They read applications and distinguished CVs, interviewed an assortment of hopefuls and came up empty. They were looking for someone to take charge of a small staff, probably two nursemaids and run everything. After several weeks they didn't like any of them enough to hand over their babies into their care. Crystal and Jeff weren't the only ones with opinions; Smith and Jessie chimed in with their views, gained from peeping around the door,

'Not right Sir', 'No Ma'am, not that one, not kind enough.'

Even Archie and Terri, who sometimes watched from a chair, expressed often incisive views that mirrored Jeff and Crystal's own. It was becoming a problem. They needed their people in place before the babies arrived to have them settle in and help organise two nurseries, one at Claremore and one at the palace. Both had to be functioning before the birth.

'What are we looking for?' Crystal asked Jeff as she watched her dress move up and down as the babies jostled for room,
'They have to be kind but not a push over, efficient because even with help three at once is a challenge, we have to be able get on with them so they have to think like us and they have to love these kids. Where do we find such a paragon?'

It was Henry, Crystal's grandfather, who came to their rescue. He suggested they have an old friend of Crystal's mother come in. It was odd because Crystal thought she knew of most of her mother's friends. But there was no oddness when they met Mrs Foster.

Mary Foster was Adelaide's contemporary and about forty five. She and Crystal's mother had been at school together but Mrs Foster had been a scholarship girl and become a nanny at eighteen. She knew and wanted nothing else but to be their children's nanny. Crystal had the strangest feeling when she met her,

'I feel as though I know you.'

'I visited your mother when you were born and she wanted me to stay. I did for a while when she went back to her duties. You were a very beautiful baby.'

'Then why did I have another nanny when I was little? Why didn't you stay?'

'I went off, foolishly, and got married. It didn't last but by then I had been replaced and your mother, bless her, was gone. I didn't feel I could come back.'

Jeff looked at Crystal who nodded. He said to Mrs Foster,

'We need you straight away Mrs Foster.'

'I know Sir, Her Majesty told me. My bags are upstairs; I moved in this morning.'

In the next month Mary, as she insisted on being called, engaged two assistants, Angelica, a thirty year old dynamo and a surprise, Adam. He was the gentlest man Crystal had ever met and even passed Jeff's vetting. The team went to work.

When Mary Foster and her 'A Team', as they became known in the Palace, set about the task of creating a nursery for three royal babies it quickly became apparent that Jeff and Crystal's current accommodation wasn't up to the task. Mary explained that not only did they need a nursery, they needed adjoining rooms for her and her staff, a kitchen, a large children's bathroom and a playroom.

'They'll be crawling and then up and walking before you know it,' was her terrifying prediction.

Crystal and Jeff also wanted the babies to sleep next to their own bedroom. In the end it was decided that the two bedroom suite that had been their home for over a year was to be vacated for a very large apartment at the other end of the Palace.

The apartment hadn't been used for some time but when the dust sheets came off the beautiful rooms glowed in the sun that flooded in through its many windows onto mellow parquetry. A long gallery ran down one side; 'perfect for tricycles', Jeff said to the portraits of Crystal's ancestors who hung on the panelled walls. The conversion of one room to a kitchen and some new bathrooms was all it needed.

'Will it be ready in time?' Jeff asked the Palace architect.

'Yes Sir. I understand we have fifteen weeks.'

'And counting,' Jeff said.

Mary and Crystal decided on baby furniture and ordered three of everything. The baby clothes they received as gifts made Crystal cry: exquisite hand knitted bootees and little cardigans, tiny hats and mittens. They would all be used and every one was acknowledged with thanks by Crystal herself. She was approaching the twenty week milestone. Rob, the perinatologist, was seeing her every week and monitoring the babies with ultrasound. The scans showed an already crowded womb with three thriving babies.
'All right so far,' he said with a grin.

Archie and Terri were working full time as well because Crystal's body ached: she had muscle, bone and ligament pain from the stretching and pressure of her womb. She moved Archie and Terri from one side of her bump to the other and back again.

She really needed a second hot water bottle. When Chloe arrived for the weekend she brought Crystal a loan, Rufus and Isobel.

'I hope they help,' she said to a grateful Crystal. She said to Archie and Terri who were looking a bit stiff, 'It's not as though you don't know them and you can't be everywhere at once.' They admitted the truth of this and the four settled down to easing Crystal's aches and pains.

At twenty two weeks a relieved but waddling Crystal said to Jeff,

'I'm as big as a house,'

'With a second floor and extensions,'

'You brute,'

'It's a very nice house though, with pretty windows and the extensions aren't too bad if you like mobile homes.'

It was the truth, when one baby was asleep one of the others was awake, kicking, stretching, digging her in the ribs, giving her heartburn and generally making Crystal's life a misery.

'How many weeks?' she asked Rob.

'Eleven if we're lucky.'

'No time off for good behaviour?'

'Not a day.'

The Palace was one thing, happily Claremore was another: their nursery was already in place, built when the house was renovated for them. Mary only wanted minor changes and two extra rooms were prepared for Angelica and Adam. They arrived there each Friday relieved to be at home.

A new addition to their weekend party was Adam, Mary's assistant. At the twenty week mark Rob had suggested Adam stay with Crystal, monitor her blood pressure each day and give her some massage.

'Why Adam?' she asked him.

'He's a highly qualified pediatric nurse, didn't you know?'

'No, Mary found him.'

'He's something of a find; you're very lucky to have him. He could work as the head of any pediatric nursing unit in the country. I wish I had him.'

'Why doesn't he?'

'He can't stand hospitals.'

Adam was also a motor bike fiend and, when Crystal was settled each morning with Jessie on guard, he often rode with Jeff on the estate. Jeff was curious about him as well and said,

'You could make more money working in a hospital, why work for us?'

'The glamour,' he joked but then he told Jeff the real reason,

'I was working with very premmie babies. I lost my tolerance for watching them die.'

'But what if ours come early?'

Adam smiled, full of confidence,
'They won't. Those little buggers are all hunkered down; Rob will probably have to prise them out.'

Jeff appreciated his confidence and when Crystal reached thirty weeks everyone heaved a sigh of relief. Every day after that was a blessing. She had given up all work but would not stay in bed. She moved around as much as possible and practised some quiet yoga to relax.

At thirty three weeks at their Friday appointment Rob asked Crystal to remain in town until the birth. She agreed and went back to the Palace to ponder their miracles,

'Grow,' she said, 'No underweight babies allowed.'

It happened at nine in the morning on the following Sunday when they were having breakfast in their new apartment,

'My waters have broken. Oh Jeff, it's all over the new upholstery.'
'Don't worry about that, where's Adam?'
'Upstairs.'

Jeff pulled on the bell so hard Jessie came running.

'Ring Rob and get Adam please, we're going to have some babies.'

Adam rode in the ambulance with Crystal to the hospital and with the consent of the hospital authorities stayed right through Crystal's natural birth. There was no need for a caesar; their babies caused no trouble at all. As the first was born Rob said to Jeff,

'All that business of changing the succession law was a waste of time.' He said to Crystal as he placed the baby on her chest,

'Here's your son.'

Their twin girls were born at twenty minute intervals. All scraped through the low weight barrier. The boy, to be named Henry for his great-grandfather, tipped the scales at nearly six pounds.

'No wonder he was born first,' Rob said, 'He's such a bruiser he muscled those girls out of the way.'

'Do they have names?' he asked an exhausted Crystal.

'Yes they do. The first will be Adelaide and the second Charlotte.' Suddenly she realised, 'Jeff we don't have all the other names.'

He leant down and kissed her, 'We've been a little busy,' he said.
Chapter 36

Jeff and Crystal's babies were to begin the peripatetic life of a royal at a mere three months of age. From the time they came home and were installed in the beautiful nursery created for them, plans were underway for their first tour.

Jeff and Crystal had to undertake their third, delayed tour of the year to Greece, Rhodes and Malta. Neither Crystal nor Jeff would leave without the babies. The family was to travel on the royal yacht and combine their duties with a short holiday as the ship made its way through the Mediterranean to their first stop in Valetta.

Before then Crystal, already a mother of three and her grandmother's heir was to celebrate her twenty first birthday. On that day the babies were to be christened followed by a family lunch and then Crystal's birthday gala in the evening.

The christening robes were ready: Henry, the eldest, would wear the family's heirloom gown used for generations of royal babies. Adelaide and Charlotte had new, delicately embroidered long muslim dresses with deep hems of fine lace, satin ribbons on puff sleeves and tiny pearl buttons. Constance and Sylvia, the embroideress, had worked on them for months. The names, four for each child, had been chosen and approved by the Queen.

On Crystal's birthday the Queen and Crystal's grandfather travelled to the church with them and after the service the family appeared on the balcony: Her Majesty held her daughter's namesake, whose full title was Her Royal Highness Princess Adelaide Amelie Louise.

'The kid's got a triple A rating already,' Jeff had said when Crystal put the combination together.

'I can't help it, they're family names so shut up,' Crystal said, concentrating hard on the family tree.

Jeff held Charlotte who had been named for his mother. Grandmother Davis was so proud she spent the day wreathed in smiles. Charlotte was anointed with oil and baptised Charlotte Elizabeth Alice Victoria while their son, blissfully asleep, was named for his great-grandfather, Henry David Arthur, grandfather, James Davis and his father: Henry James Jeffrey.

Crystal stood on the balcony in the centre of her now large family and waved to a huge adoring crowd.

'It's incredible,' she said to her grandmother who agreed but had a private thought, 'It seems we're not quite ready for a republic yet.' But she was happy, it seemed the right person had, by chance or fate, become her heir and secured the succession with these three beautiful children, an heir and two spares. She looked at Adelaide and thought of her lost daughter. She kissed the tiny head and whispered to her, 'She would have loved all of you.'

The evening gala was less stiff than usual with dancing, champagne and interesting people. As they lay in bed after the band had stop playing and their guests had gone, Crystal said,

'What a wonderful day.'

Jeff was nearly asleep but jumped up as he remembered something very important.

'I haven't given you your birthday present.'
He went to Terri and Archie's drawer where he'd hidden it from Crystal, who had turned out to be very good at finding his secret hiding places. He reached under the lining where the hot water bottle and cover were sleeping and lifted out a slim velvet box. He put it in Crystal's hands and kissed her,
'Happy birthday.'
When she opened it she found a bracelet with three finely wrought oval cameos surrounded with pearls, hung like charms on a pearl bracelet.
'Oh...they're silhouettes of the babies. They're so tiny, so perfect.'
'And different. Have you noticed that Adelaide's nose tips up a little and the lobes of Charlotte's ears are slightly smaller?'
'No,' she looked closely at the cameos. 'I never would have seen that.'
'Neither would I. The guy who carved them showed me. Henry is of course himself.'
'It's beautiful Jeff. Will you put it on for me?'
There was a light knock at the door and Angelique brought a squirming Adelaide to her mother for feeding. She said,
'It was Charlotte's turn but she wouldn't wait so I gave her a bottle.'
'Thank you,' Jeff said as Crystal settled their daughter to the breast, her newly revealed tipped up nose snuffling as she gulped her milk.

Crystal wore her cameos when they boarded the yacht for the start of their holiday with three nannies, Jessie, Smith, Sir Robert, two ladies in waiting and a team of protection officers in tow, to say nothing of a couple of tons of luggage. There was also a new member of the entourage, Crystal's new equerry, Major Kenneth Bray.
'What does he do exactly?' Jeff asked Sir Robert.
'Basically he makes things go smoothly. He's part of the planning for tours and events and makes sure the right people are introduced. He also pours the drinks on occasion.'
'Do we really need him?'
'Oh yes Sir. It surprises me that her Royal Highness has managed without an equerry so far. He will help us all.' Jeff wasn't convinced but Sir Robert added, 'It is also a great honour to a distinguished member of the armed forces. I'll get you his record; he's seen his share of action.'

One of the young sailors carrying bags to the ship's temporary nursery said to a compatriot,
'I thought little kids didn't need much.'
'You must be single or stupid; babies travel with more stuff than movie stars. Get moving; there's still a pile to come on board.'
Their Mediterranean cruise was to last five days. The royal yacht and its destroyer escort slid through a calm sea, undisturbed. The weather was glorious and it was easy to spend the whole day under the striped awning on the verandah deck, watching the sea and their babies as they slept top to tail in a portable cot.

Mary was delighted with the cruise and its effect on the triplets' health, and said on the first day,
'The sea air is so good for them.'

Jeff and Crystal were also enjoying some nostalgia. They had spent their first nights together on the yacht; Crystal in a cast with a broken leg after being kidnapped in East Africa when Jeff was still her protection officer. Installed in the honeymoon guest cabin,
respectably married with three children, it caused them some amusement to remember their beginning in Crystal's smaller cabin and single bed,

'I didn't mind the plaster,' he said.
'I forgot it was even there.'

On the fifth day Crystal noticed that Charlotte, their youngest child, looked thinner in the face than her identical twin and wasn't, in spite of the sea air, as rosy cheeked as she had been. Their nanny, Mary, said to her,

'I agree with you Ma'am but I don't know why. I'll have the doctor and Adam look at her now.'

The doctor's view was that Charlotte was undernourished.

'How could she be?' Crystal asked. She began to feel the failure may lay with her. She was trying to feed each of the babies twice a day; their remaining feeds were with formula. 'She has the same as Adelaide and Henry. Isn't she getting enough? Could she be ill?'

The doctor said the baby didn't appear to be ill but extra feeds were arranged. The night before they were to arrive in Valetta the yacht was making its way through the still night, on a schedule to arrive on time in the morning. The ship was settling; the only crew moving about were on the bridge and below decks.

Angelica brought Charlotte to Crystal's bedroom for her ten o'clock feed saying she would be back in half an hour. Jeff left the book he was reading and came to see the baby as she lay in Crystal's arms, nuzzling for her nipple. He bent down to touch her and said,

'Sweetheart, that's not Charlotte; it's Adelaide.'

If the babe's chubby rosy cheeks weren't evidence enough Jeff touched her tiny upturned nose, 'That's Adelaide. What the hell's going on?' he said as he went down the corridor to the nursery. As he went in he saw three empty cots. Adam came in from the laundry, his arms full of folded clothes. Mary came out of the bathroom with Henry wrapped in a towel,

'Hello Sir, I was just giving Henry a bath; he has a bit of colic.' She looked at Jeff's stricken face and asked him, 'Is everything all right?'

'Where's Charlotte?'

'With her Royal Highness, Angelica just took her in,' Mary said.

'Look,' he said and pointed to the empty cot. Mary's hand went to her throat. Jeff began to panic, 'She brought Adelaide. Where is Angelica?'

It took a second for them to take in what Jeff had said. Mary pressed a bell on the wall and three protection officers streamed into the room. Jeff tried to be calm as he said,

'Charlotte is missing; Angelica has taken her. Get the Captain and the crew to search the ship. And for God's sake, hurry.' He said to Mary, 'How long has she been gone?'

Mary thought before she answered,

'I was here when Angelica took Char...I mean Adelaide to your cabin. Adam was still here, weren't you?'

'Yes, but as she walked out with the baby I went to the laundry.'

'The bathroom door was open, Mary said, 'I didn't hear anyone come back in.'

'So she's been gone how long?'

'Less than five minutes.' Crystal came into the nursery with Adelaide in her arms. Her face blanched as Jeff told her what had happened and said,

'I'm going on deck.'
What he saw when he reached the companionway left him feeling empty and helpless. Angelica was standing at the stern of the ship, gripping the rail above the churning propellers. She was alone and as he and the protection officers were no more than ten feet from her. As they moved toward her and without a word she threw herself over the ship's rail. The heavy propellers continued to churn, spewing a wide wake behind the ship.

Jeff heard the Captain shout, 'Man overboard. Stop the ship. Radio the destroyer to get ribs in the water.'

Jeff reached for the ship's rail. He was close to collapse. Kenneth Bray caught Jeff before his legs went from under him. He let him down against the ship's side.

'Easy Sir,' he said.

Jeff's mind was reeling with the unthinkable, that Angelica had dropped the baby overboard before she threw herself into the swirling wake of the propellers.

'We have to search...' he said, the futility of it came to him even as the words came from his mouth. Adam and Crystal came onto the deck together. Adam bent over him, 'Let's get you inside,' he said. Jeff tried to push him away but Adam nodded to the equerry and they supported Jeff to a chair in the sitting room. Crystal was beside him, 'What happened? Where's Angelica? Jeff!' She shook him, 'Where's Charlotte?'

With tears in his eyes he said, 'I don't know. She...Angelica threw herself into the propellers. My God, Crystal...'

Crystal slumped to the floor, her arms around Jeff's legs. Bray said to Adam, 'Would she have...?'

Adam's mind began to work. He knew a great deal about women stealing babies; about the irresistible urge to have a child that wasn't theirs; the compulsions that drove them. Charlotte's weight loss was probably due to Angelica keeping her from Crystal by substituting Adelaide, irrationally depriving her of her mother's milk and failing to feed her enough to compensate.

Her tendency to want to look after Charlotte all the time became clear as he remembered her rebuff of his attempts to rotate the babies' care in the last few days. The psychology of her actions was complex but Adam suspected she would not have intentionally harmed the baby.

'I think the baby's still on board; probably hidden somewhere. I don't think she would have hurt her.'

Bray went and spoke to the Captain and the head of the protection detail. Every inch of the ship was to be searched. Jeff put his arms around Crystal; a spark of hope remained. He asked for a brandy and put it to her white lips, 'Just sip a little.' He tried to reassure her with a small smile, 'I'll have the rest.'

They waited in their cabin, Adelaide and Henry tucked into the middle of their bed. Mary waited with them, weeping and tearing a handkerchief to shreds. She blamed herself; she had hired Angelica.

The Captain directed the crew to begin with the five upper decks as it was unlikely the deranged nanny would have penetrated the lower levels without detection. In any event she hadn't had time to go very far before they found her.

The ship was more than four hundred feet long and over fifty wide. Two hundred sailors began to open every door, hatch and hold in the ship. It took them twenty minutes to find the tiny girl, wrapped in a rug, crying softly and sucking her fist, under a bunk in
an empty cabin used to store luggage. Adam brought her back to her parents and then whispered to a shattered Mary,

'I think we'll manage with just the two of us in future.'

The rest of the night passed in peace. The babies stayed with Crystal and Jeff in their cabin. The doctor had declared Charlotte unhurt but hungry so Crystal fed her and thanked God Adam had been right that Angelica would not harm the babe.

She and Jeff had been beyond terror, in a place where the world ends, while Charlotte was missing. Crystal had imagined her tiny body in the sea, lost and, as the search went on, she had despaired, imagining her child mangled by the propellers.

As for Angelica, Crystal had no empathy with her. The woman had caused her pain and struck Jeff where Crystal saw he was most vulnerable: in his love of their children. He had felt and been powerless, overwhelmed with his inability to keep Charlotte safe. It would only be later when the young woman's tragic story was finally known that Crystal would forgive her for the hurt she had done and say,

'No-one should have to go through that.'

As the night wore on Henry and Adelaide slept and when they woke, Adam, who spent the night in a chair, fed them in the room. Charlotte nestled next to her mother and fed at will, barely waking as she sought the nipple. Adam had sent Mary to bed; she was exhausted and feeling guilty. He comforted her and dispelled some of the guilt with a few words,

'You'll have to do the day shift tomorrow.'

She went and slept but was in the room soon after dawn, helping with nappies and the early feeds. Crystal and Jeff had slept at the edges of the bed, their children safe between them. Adam watched and guarded them all. He understood completely that Jeff and Crystal would not part with them that night.

When Jessie took Archie and Terri out of their drawer in the morning everything in the room was talking, albeit very quietly as the triplets slept like cherubs, oblivious to the activity around them. Archie and Terri heard what had happened from Jessie who took them to the dressing room with her as Crystal dressed, ready to fulfil the day's engagements.

A police launch from Malta had joined the ship as it neared the island, alerted by the yacht's captain of the night's tragic events. A team of police went about their work quietly, not interfering in the preparations for the ceremonial entry to Valletta's grand harbour. When they were ready to leave Jeff and Crystal stood together beside the bed and looked at their babies and then at each other. Jeff put his arm around her waist and said to Adam and Mary,

'They'll be fine now. Let's get on with it.' To Adam he said, 'Thank you.'

Crystal gave Mary a kiss and said to her,

'It's over; please don't blame yourself. We all need you now.'

Jessie and Reggie helped Mary bath and dress the triplets that morning as Adam had a well earned rest. Reggie said to his clucky wife,

'Do you think they'd let us do a little? We could do the clothes and help them out at times.'

'Let's ask; they're so beautiful.' She had Henry on the change table in a cotton vest with a nappy ready to wrap around him when his tiny penis reared up and he sent a fountain of
spray right into Reggie's eye. She laughed as the baby gurgled with satisfaction. Reggie said while mopping his wet face with a towel,

'He's all boy that one.'

When Jessie came back from the nursery she was humming and happy; the babies were bathed, dressed, fed and sleeping in their beds. Mary had thanked Jessie and Reggie for their help and before they could ask had said,

'We couldn't have managed without you this morning. You wouldn't have a little time each day would you? Just to give us a hand. When Crystal is away Adam and I will be pressed to feed them if they're all hungry at once.'

Jessie couldn't agree fast enough and added, 'The baths; when we're free we'd love to do the baths.'

Reggie wasn't quite as enthusiastic about the bathing as Jessie, his recent experience with Henry fresh in his mind, but he thought if he was just a bit quicker he could avoid a repeat of that morning's hit in the eye.

Nothing more needed to be said; Mary and Adam had two part time, doting assistants. Archie and Terri were jealous; they loved the babies and would have been in the nursery if they could. But that was impossible; as tiny as they were the babies were still bigger than both of them. But Terri wanted to help and it had occurred to her that something in the nursery must have seen Angelica's obsessive behaviour with Charlotte. She said to the still melodious Jessie,

'Did you speak to any of the objects in the nursery Jessie? They'd know what's been going on.'

'Yes, they would,' Archie agreed but he also thought they may have had no-one to tell, 'Mary and Adam don't know about us do they? The furniture and objects probably couldn't make them hear.'

Jessie stopped what she was doing and saw the wisdom of what Archie was saying. 'I'll go back there now and see what I can find out.'

'Jessie...' Terri called out as she went to the door.

'Let us do it; they might not speak to you. Leave us down there for the day. We'll find out.'

Jeff and Crystal returned in the afternoon after an enthusiastic welcome from the people of Valletta. Crystal was full of milk and said to Jeff,

'Give me a baby to feed, I'm bursting.' He laughed but didn't have to move; Mary brought Charlotte and Adelaide to her.

'You probably have enough for them both by now; let's try one each side.' The girls were tucked under their mother's arms and suckled happily as Adam brought Henry to Jeff with a bottle.

'He'll have to make do with you Sir.' Henry didn't seem to care; he took the bottle from his father greedily. As Jessie helped to burp Adelaide, with Reggie hovering with a linen cloth to catch any spill, she said to them,

'Archie and Terri spent the day in the nursery.'

'Why?' Crystal asked.

'They wanted to find out about Angelica. They have something to tell you.'

Archie and Terri had heard the whole story from the nursery rocker. Archie related what it had told them. On the third day at sea Angelica had started to sit in the chair and talk to Charlotte late at night when Mary and Adam were asleep.
The chair heard that Angelica had become pregnant at fourteen to her uncle. He had raped her and when her parents found out they were not sympathetic. They blamed Angelica because she was bright and outgoing and they said, 'put herself about'. Which Angelica had said wasn't true.

Her parents had been desperate to keep the pregnancy a secret and sent Angelica away to live with an Australian cousin until the baby was born. After the birth the cousin kept the baby and sent Angelica, who was only fifteen, home. She never saw the baby, a little girl, again.

'I can't believe people still do that.' Crystal was appalled. 'She must have been so damaged; her parents betrayed her.'

Jeff thought about the vetting Angelica had been through and said,

'Poor Mary; she could never have known; something like that just doesn't show up. Are we going to replace Angelica?' he asked.

'No,' a chorus of Adam, Jessie and Reggie said. 'We're all going to help Mary.'

The offer of help from Jessie and Reggie was just in time because the next morning Jeff and Crystal decided to show their babies to the people of Malta. There was a flurry of activity to get them dressed and ready for an appearance on the yacht's deck as it pulled out of the harbour. They thanked Malta for its hospitality with their babies in their arms, Mary holding the increasingly healthy Charlotte for them as they waved and the great yacht sailed for Rhodes, home of the Knights Templar, a great medieval bastion of Christianity. They spent two days on the island, entranced by its beauty and antiquity.

They moved on to Athens and moored at the Piraeus. They hosted a large drinks party on board for their expat countrymen and dignitaries from the Greek government and community representatives. What became apparent to Crystal as the tour had gone on was the faultless planning of the onboard events and the apparent ease the crew displayed in serving two hundred strangers in what quickly became quite a small space.

She put it down to a number of things which included her new equerry knowing his job. Kenneth Bray moved quietly and unobtrusively through the crowd, bringing people forward to be introduced, disentangling Jeff from a bore, making sure the table arrangements were perfect, he even worked with the chefs checking menus. Crystal was unable to do these things; she had another job, to represent her grandmother who relied on her own equerry in both her public and private life. Now she knew why. He was the major domo and like the other people who served them, Jessie, Smith, Sir Robert, Mary and Adam, indispensable.

Their stay in Greece was three days and two nights: one to be spent away from the yacht and their babies. Crystal was stoic but she cast a small backward glance at the yacht as they got into the car to drive away. She was sure the children would be fine but Jeff was also nervous about leaving them for nearly eighteen hours. The evening seemed to drag; a great dinner with speeches then their overnight stay in their host's great house in a distant province was torture as they waited for the dawn so they could return to the ship.

But before that they had to attend a seemingly endless display of folk dancing that Crystal would try to show some interest in. Then it was to be a school and a lunch, speeches, hand shaking and goodbyes. Throughout her mind would be, of course, elsewhere. The short time away from her children was a taste of longer separations to come. She didn't enjoy it and she wasn't looking forward to the future.
If they had had one child and wished to have it with them they may have been able to impose upon their host for the extra and considerable accommodation they would need. Three children and two nannies, to say nothing of the nursery paraphernalia that was apparently necessary to their daily well being, made moving the whole entourage for one night a mammoth task.

Crystal thought as she looked at the ceiling of women who were able to and chose to be with their children all the time. She didn't know if she was one of them but one thing she did know: she would do her duty and her children would know from a very young age what that meant. There would be tears later but for now she moved into Jeff's arms and held him.

'We can go back to them tomorrow,' she thought just before she slept.

On the yacht the nursery was quiet, the babies' breathing and the movement of the ship at anchor the only sounds. Archie and Terri watched them sleep from the nursery rocker where they had asked Jessie to leave them until Jeff and Crystal returned.

As Archie said to Terri,

'We'll be here just in case anyone needs us.'

'I'm missing our drawer already.'

'Me too.'

##
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