

The Not So Fairy Tale Princess

William Dawson

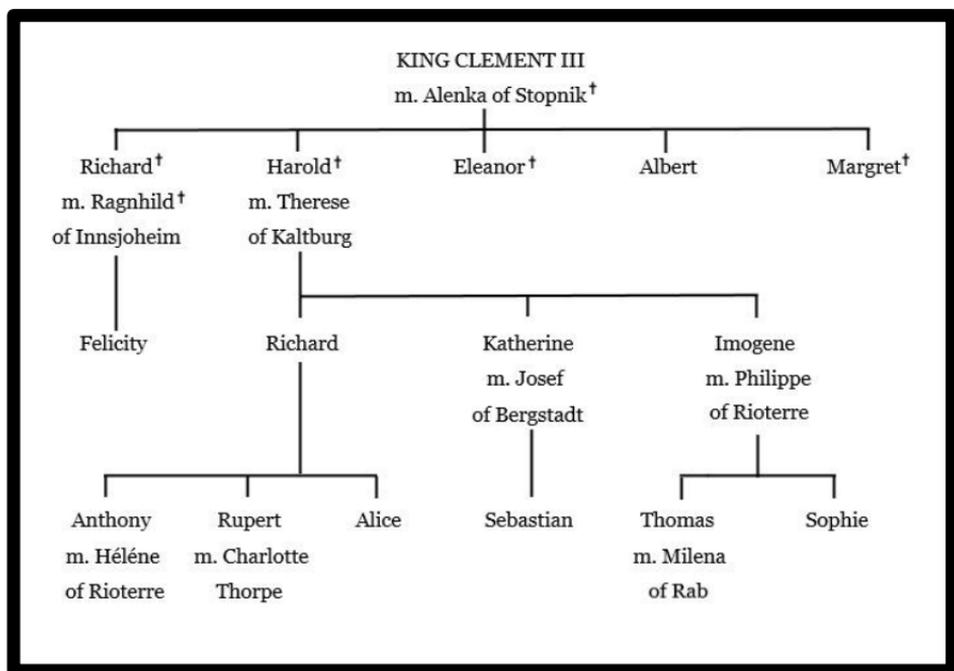
Book One of Three



Continental Map – Post-Timble Peace Conference (1910)



Map of Borgovia – Post-Timble Peace Conference (1910)



*House of Legsby Family Tree
(† - dead by 1903)*

Chapter One

Crucible

23 Dec: ... So, today Flick took us riding in Dunkelwald Park, and Flick and her ladies-in-waiting had a race to that funny little folly with the weathervane shaped like a cherub going to the toilet. And I wanted to race too, but Nanny said 'No', even though I'm a better rider than *both* the Countess of Kirkwhelpington and Lady Hornbeam. So I had a bit of a sulk, which I don't think anybody noticed. And then Flick tried to jump this fallen pine tree all covered in frost. But her mare stumbled, and Flick tumbled into last autumn's leaves. And we were all shouting, and screaming, afraid that Flick had broken her neck. But Flick just lay there laughing for a while. Then she summoned her Mistress of Ceremonies and said, 'Daphne – when the Heir Apparent of Locklands and her horse have both fallen, which of them should get up first?' We all thought this was very funny – except for Daphne, who later called us all 'sycophants', which at first confused me because I thought she'd said 'sick elephants'...Tomorrow we travel to Oberbrücke to meet with the rebels in the hope that Flick can stop the Eschenbach Empire from breaking up, which I'm sure she will do, because Flick can do anything. When I grow up, I want to be like Flick.

– Princess Sophie, Aged 11³/₄, *Diary – Year 1903*
(Unpublished), pp230-1

I was a scrawny, raggedly-edged thirteen-year-old, growing up among the miners and railway-workers of the Dreieckigland

Enclave, when I first met Sophie; she was the ninth in line to the throne of Locklands. Our lives should have never overlapped. I should have grown up to become a minor clerk working for the Trans-Imperial Railway Company; Sophie should have married a prince or a duke, and vanished into the footnotes of history. But fate has a perverse sense of humour, and due to a rather unfortunate moment of inattention on the part of my father, our lives *did* end up colliding; and the rest, as they say, is history.

Or at least a subject for national gossip.

If this was a fairy tale, the poor boy would have immediately fallen in love with the princess, and the princess would have immediately fallen in love with the poor boy; an evil step-mother or king or witch or talking earthworm or giggling cucumber (I've yet to iron out the details of this hypothetical story) would then have done everything they could to keep the poor boy and the princess apart; but true love would have prevailed and the poor boy and the princess would have gone on to live happily ever after.

This isn't a fairy story.

No, this is a story of palace feuds and high society scandal. It's a story of psychopaths and narcissists, of collapsing empires and military coups, and unfinished wars and internecine governments.

But above all, this is a story of the one person who tried to rise above it all.

This is the story of a very un-fairy-tale princess.

But before we can move onto Sophie, I'm afraid that you're going to have to get to know me first. It's not pretty. At thirteen, I'm spiralling out of control. The night before I first

meet Sophie, I'm stood in a kitchen doorway that isn't my own, watching as my brother's friend attempts to break into a coin-operated gas meter. It's my first house-breaking and I'm supposed to be standing watch for the police, but I'm too excited to remain at my post in the yard.

My name is Peter Dray, and I'm sorry to say that at this moment in time, I'm a bit of an idiot.

Grainger's effort to break open the gas meter finally came to an end with a clanging, clunking crash as the gas meter fell off the wall.

'That weren't me,' he said, quickly.

'Well, it will make it easier to get into, I suppose,' replied my brother, Bobby. 'Here, give me the crowbar.'

It was hard for me to see much in the darkness, but against a window whose ill-fitting frame had been stuffed with spare clothes, I made out the shadow of Bobby steadying the meter with his foot and smashing the crowbar down upon it to try and get at the coins within. I wasn't *exactly* taking notes, but let's just say that if somebody had decided to test me on the night afterwards, I'd have probably got full marks. I was that sort of kid.

A dresser, its racks filled with plates, rattled as a train went past.

'Wait –' said Dibs. 'You hear that?'

Bobby raised the crowbar for a second try. 'Crowjobs?' he guessed. 'I'll bleeding kill Pete if he ain't keeping watch.'

'No – something's hissing,' said Dibs.

We all paused to listen.

‘Shit,’ said Bobby. ‘Gas! Grainger, you’ve split the bleeding pipe.’

It’s a good job that I had absolutely no idea what an exploding gas main could do, back when I was thirteen, otherwise the next few paragraphs would probably have consisted of some rather repetitive screaming on my part. Instead, I continued to lurk in the kitchen doorway as there was a bit of a confused scuffle, followed by a plate smashing to the floor, and a terse suggestion from Grainger that we ‘get the money out the meter and run like the clappers.’

‘If the crowbar sparks, we’re all bloody fireworks,’ replied Bobby. ‘We’ll have to take the meter with us.’

‘Grainger, you’re the strongest,’ volunteered Dibs.

I felt that I now had a hang on how to steal coins from a gas meter (basically, don’t knock the gas meter off the wall), so I dodged away towards the gate, as the boys came scrambling out into the back yard. ‘Pete, you dickhead!’ cried Bobby. ‘You’re supposed to be keeping watch.’

‘I am!’ I protested, sticking my head into the alley. ‘All I can see is darkness.’

‘By the time I’m finished with you, that’s all you’ll ever see,’ snarled Bobby. He clobbered me about the ear so hard that my head cracked against the gate pillar. ‘Come on, let’s get over to the rubbish tip, quick, before anyone sees us,’ he told the others. But as they pushed through the gate, into the alleyway, we all received a good object lesson in why house-breakers usually employ reliable look-outs, because at that moment a policeman’s whistle split the darkness. ‘Crowjobs,’ exclaimed Grainger, and he dropped the meter with a clang. ‘Has he seen us?’ asked Dibs, and Bobby said, ‘Run, you dickheads!’ The

thud of heavy boots came smashing towards us through the frozen puddles. ‘How the pissing hell do you expect me to run with me balled foot?’ cried Grainger, but Bobby just gave me a shove and said, ‘This is your bloody fault, Pete.’ I scrambled after Dibs, up the dark avenue of outside toilets, thinking, this isn’t fair, I can’t get arrested on my first housebreaking. I’d been planning to spend my share of the takings watching the barrel jumpers and snake dancers perform on the Variety Stage, not running about like a deranged clown myself.

‘There’s a hole in the wire fencing ahead,’ panted Bobby. ‘We can cut through the goods yard.’

‘And get flattened by some wagon?’ I said.

‘Do you want to be banged up in gaol at the age of thirteen, Pete?’ demanded Bobby. He gave me another shove, so I scrambled through the peeled back wire and sprinted out across the iron rails and tar-stained sleepers. Dibs darted off in a different direction, slipping under the couplings of a waiting coal train. There was no sign of Grainger. I tried to look in all directions at once, aware that a line of goods wagons could suddenly start moving, or a shunting engine could come charging out of the darkness, or a point could snap shut on my ankle – but I only succeeded in losing Bobby. One moment my brother’s shadow was darting between stationary refrigeration vans, the next it had vanished. ‘Bobby?’ I shouted, as the thud of the policeman’s boots grew closer. *‘Bobby!’*

‘Pete – that you?’ a voice replied.

I saw the red tail-lamp of a brakevan crawling past. ‘Amy?’ I cried. The policeman was so close, now, I could hear him panting, so I stopped worrying about points and moving wagons, and I chased after the brakevan. My sister’s shadow

reached down from the rear veranda to haul me aboard as the coal train began to pick up speed, thumping steam into the night sky. Behind me, I heard the policeman give several frustrated blasts of his whistle, as, grinning with relief, I bent double and gasped for breath. ‘That were close,’ I panted.

Amy slapped me across the back of the head.

‘Ow!’ I cried. ‘What were that for?’

‘We do *not* need another Bobby in the family,’ snapped Amy. ‘What you been up to, Pete? Here, show me your pockets. You ain’t been stealing from the greengrocers again?’

‘Course I ain’t,’ I replied, reluctantly turning out the pockets of my hand-me-down jacket. ‘That Crowjob just started chasing after us for no good reason. You taking Pa his tea?’

‘Don’t lie to me, Pete,’ said Amy. She pushed me inside the rattling, wooden van, where a cold draught swept through the open doors and windows. ‘Sorry Mr Close,’ she said to the guard. ‘I apologise in advance for me brother. He suffers from a severe medical condition called ‘being a twat’.’ She made me sit on a wooden bench by the stove. ‘Pete, I know you’ve been skipping school, and following Bobby around like a lost puppy, but this is going too far. Pa will throw you out if you get caught shoplifting.’

I got up and moved as far away from Amy as was possible in the tiny van.

‘Yes, very grown-up,’ said Amy. ‘What’s going to happen when I go into service next month, Pete? I won’t be able to watch out for you no more.’

I felt I was already doing a pretty good job of watching out for myself. It was not as if anybody really cared what I got up to. Ma didn’t know what to do with her kids when they passed

the age of seven, whilst Pa spent too much time in his signal box, where the primary method of communication was the block bell. ‘Maybe I’ll get a job at Speichelbach Castle,’ I said. ‘Then I’ll be able to order you maids about.’

‘If I thought the Melmerby family needed a performing monkey, I’d have spoken with my Lady weeks ago,’ said Amy.

‘Ha bloody *ha*,’ I replied.

Perhaps if there was a war, like everybody said there might be, I could lie about my age and join up – then maybe my sister would stop telling me what to do. Curled up in my corner of the van, I turned my back on Amy and started to daydream about flashing my uniform around the school playground, ordering the other kids to salute me, and pointing my gun at Mr Thompson who kept caning me for sloppy handwriting. Amy watched me for a few minutes, as if she expected me to jump the train, before she opened her cloth bag and pulled out some knitting. Through the rear of the van, the colliery wheels and blast furnaces of the Dreieckigland Enclave slipped slowly past. The Enclave was a little splinter of the Kingdom of Locklands, caught within the belly of the Eschenbach Empire. Although all around us the Eschenbach Emperor ruled the land from his palace in Kaltburg, within these few square miles we answered to the King of Locklands. We could be tried in Locklander courts, and vote in Locklander elections – although apparently that privilege didn’t stretch to being allowed to grow up without your sister breathing down your neck all the time.

Mr Close stooped at the van’s ducket window, watching for Distant signals. ‘Dönnershelm Box approaching,’ he announced at last, stepping over to the brake pillar and turning the wheel. ‘Give my regards to your father.’

Buffers clattered up the train, and the tightening brake squealed, as we slowly clanked to a halt. Mr Close jumped down onto the frosted ballast, and started walking up the length of the train, pinning down the brakes of every third truck for the Dönnershelm Bank descent. Amy and I followed. I wondered if Amy would tell Pa about the policeman and I was already busy devising excuses like, 'He were one of those Retzen Crowjobs who go round hitting Locklanders with their rolled up capes for no good reason,' just in case. But when we climbed the signal box's exterior stairs and stepped into the brightly lit interior, Amy just said, 'Brought your tea, Pa,' and Pa grunted an acknowledgement as he pulled off the signals for Mr Close's goods.

'I thought I'd tag along with Amy and engage me old man in some scintillating conversation,' I said, more relieved than I liked that Amy had covered for me.

'Stay out the way, Pete,' replied Pa.

So whilst Amy put the kettle on the stove, I wandered over to the train register, and opened the desk it lay on. I knew that Pa kept a penknife somewhere, and I thought it might impress Grainger if I went about armed like he did. But all I found inside the desk was a broken pen, some dirty handkerchiefs, and a foreign silver coin with a hole in it. I thought the coin might be worth something, so I slipped it into my pocket as, behind me, the block bell began to ring. 'Another bloody troop train,' said Pa. 'That's the third in as many hours.' But as he worked the bank of levers that ran along the length of the box, the telephone rang. Pa reluctantly picked up the handset. 'Frank – that you?' he said. 'Yes. Yes. They want to give priority to *what?* Frank, it's bloody chaos up here. I've troop trains

coming out me ears, and the twenty-five's already late. Right. Right. Bloody hell. Right. Yes I'll see to it.' He hung up, then turned to Amy and me. 'Right, off with the two of you. I'm busy.'

Amy looked up, metal polish in one hand, emery cloth in the other. 'I was going to give the box a clean,' she said.

'Another day,' replied Pa. 'Out.'

'We should do this again some time,' I declared. 'It's always good to have a heart-to-heart with the old man,' – and Amy shoved me through the door before Pa could react. 'So now it's clever to mock your own father?' she snapped, as she hustled me down the icy steps. 'I don't know what's got into you, Pete, but I'm not surprised that Mr Schutz kicked you off the morning milk round if this is how you talk to your elders.' She jumped down onto a track of footprints, frozen in last night's snow, which led back towards our house on Leopold Road. 'Remember when you used to get good grades at school, Pete? You could've been a railway clerk or something. Now you'll be lucky if the pits take you.'

Signals clunked, and two pilot locomotives moved off past us, along the Fast Down line. 'Better the pit than scrubbing some nob's floors,' I replied, sulkily. In truth, infuriating though she was, I wasn't too keen on the idea of Amy leaving home. She was the one who bought me jellied eels on Bank Holidays, and who mixed me up a cup of black treacle, butter, and linseed tea whenever I had a cold. 'You're just hoping some rich prick will shag you,' I told her, and Amy sighed and said, 'You can be such an arse sometimes, Pete.'

The rumble of an approaching train rolled towards us through the freezing fog.

‘Bobby says that Lady Melmerby once made her maid eat a lump of coal for stealing some bread roll,’ I said. ‘And she fines her gardeners every time she finds a dead leaf on the lawn.’

‘That’s a bit wrong,’ replied Amy.

‘It’s what Bobby says,’ I insisted.

But Amy wasn’t looking at me. ‘No,’ said my sister, pointing at the approaching train. ‘*That’s* a bit wrong.’ The locomotive’s steel smoke-box had emerged from the fog, glowing dimly red in the darkness, and sparks were showering from its chimney. ‘It’s just having a hard climb,’ I replied, as the rails beside us began to hum. ‘Amy, listen to me, I don’t think that Lady Melmerby is a very good –’

And then it hit me what Amy was getting at.

‘Bloody hell,’ I said. ‘That train’s on the same line as the pilots!’ – and all worries about my sister’s move to Speichelbach Castle vanished from my head. I thought, you should do something Pete. You should wave your arms in the air and shout ‘*Danger!*’ But instead I just stood there like a village idiot as the locomotive grew larger and larger, until, bufferbeam headlamps swaying over the track joints, it swept past us, storming towards the Bank. Carriage lights flickered across our horrified faces, and the train vanished into the fog again, leaving a rabbit’s tail of steam from the coach heating-pipe hanging in its wake.

‘We must –’ I said. ‘We must –’

‘Oh God,’ exclaimed Amy. ‘Pa.’

She began a shambling run. Somehow I found myself following her. Whilst Amy scrambled up the signal box steps, I sprinted on down the line, thinking, I should have done something to stop them – what kind of *dickhead* just stands

there and watches? – *please* let the driver see the danger before it's too late. But already a whistle was screaming, and as I pelted passed the first gradient post, I heard a screeching, concussive *bang*.

Ahead of me, the four main-lines began to bend to the right, passing beneath a gantry of signals, before they dived under a succession of road bridges. The first carriage I saw emerge from the fog was the composite brake coach. It stood just beyond the gantry, still upright on the rails, and I felt a glimmer of hope. Perhaps the pilots had seen the approaching danger and begun to accelerate; perhaps the accident wasn't too bad. But within a few strides, I could see the next carriage, poking out from the train at odd angles, and a few strides beyond that the third coach emerged, twisted right off the tracks. By now, people were screaming. Men in morning suits and ladies in bustled dresses staggered out across the neighbouring lines, clothing torn, faces bleeding. A man was shouting, 'Where is she? Where is she?' whilst among the wreckage piled about the derailed locomotives, firelight had begun to flicker. Of the second coach, only a shell remained; the carriage behind it had sliced through the wooden compartments, and was now nestled snugly inside it. Footmen in black and white chequered livery had already dived into the mangle of splintered wood, looking for survivors; but the gas leaking from the carriage lighting had been ignited by fallen coals from the locomotives' fireboxes, and a growing white hole was eating away at the train. I staggered into the crowd of survivors, as, nearby, a man in a tail-coat and top hat fought against the broken panels of the middle carriage, shouting, 'Get her out! Get her out!' Without really thinking, I went to help him. The heat of the flames

burned against my face, and lit scraps of horsehair from the seating danced in the air around us. ‘Massingbird, is it her?’ shouted an elderly woman, and a footman added, ‘Have you found her, my lord? Have you found her?’ The lady Lord Massingbird was trying to rescue had somehow got wedged beneath a carriage bogie. ‘If we lift, can you pull?’ he shouted at me as he searched for something to use as a lever. I grabbed the lady beneath the armpits. Her face was covered in blood, her eyes were closed, and her rose dress was so ravaged that I could see her corset. It was impossible to tell if she was alive or dead, but I braced my feet against the broken seating and heaved. The elderly lady tried to help me. We choked on billowing smoke, twisting the woman roughly one way, then the next, careless of doing her further injury with the fire so close – but blood was smearing across my hands, and more blood was trickling up my forearms, and the lady’s eyelids weren’t even flickering. ‘It’s no good,’ I shouted. ‘I think she’s gone.’

‘She can’t be,’ the elderly lady cried. ‘The p-peace conference – she can’t be – oh God, *your highness, your highness* – don’t do this to us – please, don’t do this to us – *please...*’

It was morning before the fog lifted.

Bobby, Dibs and I stood on the roof of the Royal Picture House, looking down at the graveyard of carriage skeletons, still smouldering in the frosty light.

‘So what happened next?’ asked Dibs.

‘He’s just making it up now,’ grumbled Bobby.

‘Honest to God, I’m not,’ I replied. ‘I really did help pull Princess Felicity from the wreckage – though I didn’t realise it

were her until some nob started shouting ‘Your Highness! Your Highness!’. Look –’ I pointed down from our icy perch. ‘That’s the coach she were in, there, where the breakdown cranes are now, and when we finally got her free, we carried her over to where those soldiers are standing, by that bridge arch, there, and the royal physician came, and he tried to resuscitate her, b-but there were nothing he could do because – because she were a-already...’ I tailed off, remembering the smell of smoke and burning flesh. Then in a quieter voice I added, ‘It were bad, Bobby. There were this army captain who went climbing through the wreckage, shooting people he thought was too injured to be rescued – and one lady begged him not to, but he killed her anyway, because he knew that the flames would be worse.’

Bobby snapped an icicle off the parapet. ‘I still can’t believe you jumped on a train in front of that Crowjob, Pete,’ my brother grumbled. ‘All the bastard has to do is track down the guard, and ask him your name, and then the whole bleeding police force will be banging on Ma’s door, demanding your arrest.’ He pointed the icicle at me. ‘If you tell them about the rest of us, Pete, I’ll break your legs.’

I gave up trying to make Bobby understand, and sat down on the parapet.

Across the frosted rooftop, a pale face was hovering in an open attic window.

‘There’s a girl staring at us,’ I whispered.

‘If she’s pretty, she’s mine,’ said Dibs.

To be honest, the girl looked more living-dead than pretty. She was a year or two younger than me, with curling dark ringlets that failed to conceal the bruise covering the right side

of her forehead. Her green patterned, knee-length frock was peppered with cinder marks, the sash at her waist had come undone, and she was shivering uncontrollably. God knows how she'd got up there. She was clearly not the kind of person you usually saw walking about the Dreieckigland Enclave, and since my experience of dealing with girls had hitherto consisted mainly of shouting 'You're a slag' at Lizzy Porter after she snogged both Tom Duckett and Rick Trumper behind the laundry, I waited for the others to make the first move.

'Was you in the accident?' Dibs shouted.

The girl blinked at us. She was holding a porcelain teacup in her hand, as if we'd just interrupted her breakfast.

'She's simple,' declared Bobby.

But Bobby didn't understand what it had been like last night, with the flames towering over you, and the broken-doll bodies thrown across the tracks – so when Dibs slipped along the parapet, and started to climb the roof, I followed him. It had begun to snow again – a hesitant, teasing snow that made the slates slippery. 'There ain't nothing to be scared of, lass,' Dibs called. 'They've put the fire out. You can come down now.'

'T-there was an accident?' said the girl. 'I – I don't remember.'

I clambered through the sash window, and found myself in a tiny room filled with shelves of film reels. 'How on earth did you manage to get up here in them skirts, sweetheart?' Dibs panted.

'I – I don't –' said the girl, staring down at her teacup. 'I think I – I think I was having supper. A-and Flick was doing her impression of Gryce trying to convince us that he hadn't been looking at that map of the Walullian Districts upside-

down, a-and – and –’ She suddenly burst out laughing. ‘I’ve just remembered: I’d drawn Gryce’s face on the shell of my hard-boiled egg, and Flick said – Flick said something funny... Why can’t I remember what Flick said? Oh God...’

‘It’s alright, lass, calm down, you’ve just banged your head, that’s all,’ said Dibs. ‘Here, let me look at it with me magic fingers.’ He gave her a leer – and the girl backed away, into Bobby, who was just climbing through the window. ‘Bloody hell,’ said Bobby. ‘Look at them pearls she’s wearing.’ A lopsided grin spread across his face as well. I didn’t like the way this was going, so I said, ‘We should take her to the Crowjobs.’ But Bobby just grabbed the girl’s hand, and held it up to the grey light. ‘There’s rings here too, Dibs,’ he said. ‘Look – I think this one’s got a diamond in it.’ The girl tried to pull her hand free, but Bobby twisted it suddenly behind her back, causing her to cry out. ‘Bobby, you’re hurting her,’ I exclaimed, as the girl dropped her teacup, but Bobby just said, ‘Dibs, get the necklace.’

Dibs gave a shrug. ‘Sorry, sweetheart,’ he said. ‘You wasn’t really my type anyway.’ He calmly unwound the pearls from about her neck.

‘Bobby, don’t!’ I exclaimed. ‘Bobby, I’ll – I’ll –’

‘Piss off, Pete,’ said Bobby – so I threw myself at them, and we all went crashing to the floor. ‘Pete, you *wanker*,’ exclaimed Bobby, letting go of the girl to grab me in a headlock. The girl skittered away across the floorboards on her arse as we rolled through the discarded scraps of celluloid film, hitting and kicking each other. ‘Give her them back!’ I cried, but Bobby managed to elbow me in the stomach, and I curled up, winded, as he scrambled to his feet. ‘You’re such a fucking loser, Pete!’

shouted my brother. ‘You keep following us around, trying to be clever, but really we just want you to piss off! Even Pa thinks you’re an insolent prick. You should go back to school and let Mr Thompson fuck you up the arse!’ He kicked me in the ribs, then turned to the window. ‘Dibs, you coming?’ he asked, and Dibs, fingering the pearls he’d stolen, said, ‘After you, Bob. Hey lass, if ever you fancy learning a few tricks to impress your future husband, just ask for Dibs at the Station Pub.’

They clambered out onto the roof.

This, then, was my rather inauspicious first meeting with Princess Sophie. Hardly the stuff of fairy tales, I know. Poor boy gets beaten to a pulp by his brother in front of the princess.

Most tadpoles have more heroic beginnings.

I rolled onto my back and stared up at the cracked ceiling, blinking back tears. From within the building, I could hear the jangle of a piano being played, whilst outside, the railwaymen shouted, ‘Will you scotch the wheels again before we lift the jib,’ and, ‘Watch your footing, Jack; the puddles from the fire-fight are all frozen over.’ Feeling humiliated, I got carefully to my feet.

‘I-I’m sorry,’ I croaked. ‘He’s not normally like that. He’s a good brother, really. He looks out for me.’

‘I think –’ replied the girl. ‘I think that I want to go home now.’

‘Yes,’ I agreed. ‘Good idea. Home. I’ll take you to the Crowjobs.’

Limping a little, I found a back staircase, where the exposed pipes clanked and groaned, and we crept down to the ground floor. But when I pushed open the door to the foyer, the girl caught my hand. ‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘I thought I was ready, but

I'm not. I need –' She glanced at another doorway, through which the jaunty piano music continued to drift, then said, 'I've never been to a picture house before. Can we sit down for a moment?'

Before I could reply, she had pulled me through the doorway, into the dark auditorium.

With plenty of free entertainment happening outside, the picture house was almost empty. The film in progress was one I'd seen before – *The Assassination of the King of Roiterre*. We sat on the fold-down chairs at the back, as the silent figures on screen plotted to lure the King of Roiterre into his wine-cellar with the aid of a shapely chamber maid. Whilst the girl clasped and unclasped her hands nervously, I agonised over what Bobby had said. I *wasn't* a loser any more. I'd stopped trying to get the top marks at school months ago, and last week, I'd thrown Rob Farr's pen at the ceiling so hard that its steel nib had got stuck in a beam, and Rob got into trouble when it fell on Mr Thompson's head. But all Bobby remembered was how I was once made blackboard monitor, and got laughed at by the entire school when Jimmy Potts pulled my shorts down in assembly. I didn't know what else I could do.

The short film came to an end, and news headlines started to flash up on the screen. 'Eschenbach Crisis deepens; revolt spreads to the Kingdom of Kohenia' said one – and it was followed by a photograph of Kohenian Nationalists manning a barricade; then, 'Princess Felicity of Locklands to attend Peace Summit in Oberbrücke; crowds gather to see her off,' – and suddenly there she was again, smiling at the camera as a cold wind tugged at her hat. 'Is this our last hope for a peaceful settlement?' the captions asked, and the pianist played a

cheerful march. I thought, I could have saved you – I should have stopped that train – and now there's going to be a war, and Amy's leaving, and Bobby hates me, and I don't know what to do with myself. It's all unravelling in my hands.

'No, this is silly,' the girl whispered beside me. 'Flick won't be sitting around, moping. Flick will be organising the rescue effort, and making sure that the injured get properly treated in hospital, and cracking jokes to keep people's spirits up. I should be there helping her.' She got to her feet. 'Come along Master Pete. I think I'm ready now.'

I blinked up at her. 'Sorry, what?' I said, still lost in my own thoughts. Then, 'Yes – yes, we should go.'

I followed her miserably out of the auditorium.

Outside, flurries of snow were eddying about the crowds of people trying to get a glimpse of the accident. I hesitated on the front steps of the picture house, and felt around in my pocket for the silver coin that I'd taken from Pa. 'It won't cover what Bobby stole,' I said, needing to do something to balance out my brother's behaviour. 'But it's all I have.'

The girl took the coin solemnly. 'Thank you, Pete,' she replied, as she began to shiver in the cold.

I tried not to look at her. 'There's a roadblock up there, beyond the police wagons,' I added. 'I'm sure the soldiers will look after you. And if you catch a cold, my sister makes me a cup of black treacle, butter, and linseed tea, which tastes disgusting, but which she always says will 'do me good'.' I risked a glance at the girl's bruised face, then whispered, 'I-I'm sorry. He's not normally like that – I swear. I-I'm sorry.'

'It wasn't you,' the girl replied. 'It was him.' She held up her hand, and unsure what to do with it, I gave it a shake. The girl

laughed. ‘Well, most people kiss it, but I suppose that will do. My name’s Sophie, as you didn’t ask.’

I tried to articulate a response – I wanted to tell her thank you, and that I’d make it up to her somehow – but by the time I’d got my jaw into the right place to speak, Sophie had vanished into the crowd of flat caps and patched jackets, and I was left standing alone, on the picture house steps, thinking what an odd day this had become.

Later, as I trudged back towards Leopold Road, through the slush and falling wet snow, I told myself not to get carried away – that it was dangerous to dwell on daydreams; but I still found myself thinking about the girl, Sophie, and about whether she would like pork scratching, or listening to the travelling organ grinder. I wondered what her life was like, touring the continent in the company of royalty, wearing jewellery that could feed a village for a year – and I looked down at my threadbare trousers, and my ill-fitting shoes, and I thought, is this all I have? Is the best that I can hope for really just a job as a railway clerk and a wife whose only use for reading matter would be the torn-up pieces of newspaper hanging inside the lavatory door? I stared at the snow-blotted vista of terrace roofs, stepping up and down the hills of the Dreieckigland Enclave, and I felt a panicked sense of claustrophobia closing in around me. Please let there be more, I begged, as I finally turned into Leopold Road. Please give me some sign that there is more.

But when I pushed open our front door, all I saw was my future coming to a fullstop.

The hallway was packed with Crowjobs.

They crowded the bottom of the stairs with their black uniforms and bell-shaped helmets, notebooks in hand, truncheons tucked into their belts. Panic gripped me. Oh God, I thought, they've heard what Bobby did to Sophie and they've come to arrest him – or worse, it's about last night, and they've tracked me down just like Bobby said they would – and suddenly even the pits seemed like a manageable fate when compared to spending the next decade in a prison cell. You should run, I thought. Run, Pete, *run*. But I didn't run. I just stood there, glued to the linoleum floor, whilst upstairs, my baby sister, Nancy, screamed in her cot, and Ma shouted, 'You can't take him! Please don't take him!'

Amy came pushing through the crush of black capes and brass-buttoned jackets. 'Pete, thank God you're here,' she said.

'W-what's happened?' I asked.

Amy was looking shaken. 'They're saying that Pa should have known about the pilots, Pete. They're saying that he was dangerously incompetent – or – or worse.'

'I don't understand,' I said. 'Pa wouldn't –'

'Pete, they're arresting him. They're arresting Pa.'

Chapter Two

The Many Small Steps to Adulthood

25 Dec: ...Oh God, oh God, why is this happening to me? What did I do wrong? I keep expecting Flick to walk through the door and tell me that it's all been a mistake, but now Massingbird is talking about funeral arrangements, and I can't escape the truth anymore: she really *is* gone. To think that only yesterday I was so full of excitement at the prospect of telling Flick about the adventure I'd been on – about my meeting with the cutthroat thieves in the Picture House, about the film that I saw and the chat that I had with the boy who gave me a coin (which I shall keep). But now it feels as if I'm looking at the whole world through a dirty window, and that I'll never be happy again. Oh God, oh God, oh God.

– Princess Sophie, Aged 11³/₄, *Diary – Year 1903* (Unpublished), p231

They called it the 'scandal of the century' – which I thought was a little premature, given that we were only three years into it. 'Incompetent signalman kills princess,' said the inter-titles at the cinema. 'Enclave Holocaust – hopes for peace dashed.' With fighting breaking out across the Eschenbach Empire, and people discovering nationalistic roots that they hadn't felt the need for a few years ago, Pa didn't stand a chance. An emotional jury found him guilty of manslaughter, and the judge sentenced him to life in prison. Todd, my eldest brother, told us

how he'd overheard his mates at the steel mill saying that Pa should have been hanged for treason. 'Apparently, there's a bit of a rumpus in Parliament,' he said as he washed his face in the kitchen sink. 'The politicians are asking whether Pa took foreign money to derail the train.'

'Foreign money?' I repeated, sourly. 'Clearly they haven't seen Ma queuing for food cards at the board of governors on a Monday morning.' I handed Todd a rag to dry himself on. 'I'm sick of sorting through the rotten vegetables left behind at market for something to eat, Todd. If somebody wants the Dray family to set up an assassination service, they should offer to pay *me*.'

Todd dried his face. 'We could throw the bodies in the furnace at work,' he suggested. 'Save money on coke.'

'Forward the Revolution!'

'Throw out your nobs!'

We made a lewd gesture with our groins, then dissolved into immature laughter.

I'd never been particularly close to my eldest brother. He spent most of his free time playing football with the Taubert Mill Lads, or drinking bitter in the Dog and Gun. But with Amy evacuating to Locklands with the Melmerby family, and Bobby God alone knew where, we found some common ground in our attempts to keep what was left of the family together. 'You do the school thing, kid,' Todd told me. 'I'll make sure enough money comes in to help Ma and the little one. You can pay me back when you're clerking for the Railway.'

So, with Todd's encouragement, I started taking my lessons seriously again, borrowing books from school to study at home, putting my hand up in class. It was slow work, rebuilding trust

with my teachers, but eventually I came to the notice of the headmaster. Mr Finley liked to think of himself as a strict man – and indeed he'd once caned our entire class after somebody had set fire to Rob Farr's coat in the cloakroom; but he also gave up two nights a week to teach geometry and algebra and foreign languages to select pupils. 'I know people are saying a lot of harsh things about your father,' he told me one morning, as I waited in the queue to see the nit nurse. 'But you're just the sort of bright lad I'm looking for, Dray. I can teach you enough to get a serious job. What do you say?'

I did not hesitate.

And so, as the Eschenbach Empire pulled itself apart, and old friends had fights in the playground as they realised that their parents attended different Churches, I sat at Mr Finley's kitchen table and learnt how to conjugate verbs and solve simultaneous equations. 'Not sure how all those 'y's and 'x's will help you tally up a ledger,' said Todd, doubtfully. 'Still, I'm sure Mr Finley knows what he's doing. We'll make a scholar out of you yet, Pete.'

But then one, wet day, on a muddy field outside the Beermann Bergwerk Colliery, the Taubert Mill Lads played the Beerkorps. I wasn't there, so I don't know the details, but the game got brutal. There were accusations that the Retzen referee was discriminating against Locklander players; stones were thrown through the dressing room windows; and Todd got into a fight with one Karl Heisenberg. 'Don't panic,' he said, as he stumbled through our front door, covered in mud, blood scabbing on his lip and eyebrow. 'I gave better than I got.' Unfortunately, this was all too true. Karl Heisenberg, his nose broken and his ribs cracked, took himself to the police, and

Todd was pulled up before the local magistrate. He was fined twelve marks for assault. It was enough to lose him his job at the steel mill. ‘The bastard magistrate was going to let me off until he realised who me Pa was,’ Todd raged, as we took shelter in a neighbour’s coal cellar that evening. ‘But as soon as he learnt I were Rick Dray’s son, it were all ‘the violence must run in the family’. It’s so bloody unfair.’

He fell silent as, away to the north of us, we heard the thud of rebel shells falling on the town.

Ma cradled Nancy in her arms. ‘Betty Cross says that her boys have joined the Railway Volunteer Battalions,’ she said. ‘They send her back all sorts of perks, like tinned sardines, and bars of chocolate. I ain’t seen a bar of chocolate since your Pa was arrested.’

‘I’m sure a fish supper will be of great comfort to Mrs Cross when one of her sons gets shot,’ I retorted. ‘Don’t worry, Todd. If the idiots around here are all signing up to the Volunteer Battalions, there’ll be plenty of new openings for you to choose from.’

But Todd was looking thoughtful. ‘There’s a recruiting office by the railway station,’ he said. ‘And I hear the pay’s good.’

‘You’re not seriously considering this idea, Todd?’ I exclaimed. ‘Haven’t you seen how fucked-up this war has become?’

‘Peter Dray!’ exclaimed Ma, covering Nancy’s ears. ‘I will not have you using that language in front of your sister! At least your brother’s trying to do *something* to put food on the table.’

‘We could always toss *Nancy* in the stew,’ I snapped. ‘Perhaps then you’d spare a thought for the rest of us. Todd, are you really going to leave me with –’ I stopped in surprise as I

heard my voice crack. ‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘It’s just so *stupid*, why would you –’ My voice cracked again. ‘Oh, for fuck’s sake!’ I cried, and, shocked to find tears in my eyes, I threw myself up the coal-pile and scrambled out of the wooden door before anybody could see. ‘Pete, come back!’ shouted Todd. But I was done taking orders from people who walked out on me.

A few days later, Todd went off to war.

We heard rumours about how chaotic the Stopnik offensive had become, and how they were lining wave after wave of deserters up against farmhouse walls to be shot. But although Todd’s letters home became increasingly erratic, we never really expected the worst until it happened.

I was on my fifth pint in the Dog and Gun, staring at the photographs of barred prostitutes pinned behind the bar, when Mr Finley caught me.

‘I should hand you in to the police for underage drinking, Dray,’ he shouted, over the bedlam of voices.

I didn’t care. There was a black-edged telegram sitting on our mantelpiece, and Ma had done nothing but cry all day. ‘Piss off,’ I said. ‘I’m not at school.’

‘That’ll be five lashes in assembly tomorrow, Dray,’ replied Mr Finley. ‘Now come with me, before I make it ten.’

Mr Finley was in his sixties, and I could have easily fought him off, but somehow even in a pub the aura of headmaster still hung around him. I followed him outside as the electric lights flickered, then went out. ‘Ach!’ said the landlord, ‘What now?’ and a regular added, ‘I bet it’s those ruddy conscripts, chopping down poles for firewood again.’

The pub yard was filled with children minding prams and playing marbles as they waited for their parents to finish drinking. Mr Finley sat me down on a stone horse-trough. 'I heard what happened to your brother, Dray,' he told me as he opened up his umbrella against the drizzle. 'And I know people will be saying a lot of dark things about what he did. But this is a foolish way of dealing with it.'

'And what would you know?' I slurred.

Mr Finley rubbed his grey beard. 'I know enough,' he said, quietly. 'Dray – I too lost a brother when I was your age. It was during the last of the great cholera epidemics, and they say that the water supply here had become contaminated with run-off from the graveyard where they were burying the victims. I was so angry with the world, Dray, I can't describe it. But instead of lashing out at those around me, I made use of that anger. I decided that even if I couldn't save my brother, I could save others – so I borrowed all the medical textbooks I could lay my hands on, and decided to become a doctor.'

'Clearly that worked out well for you,' I snapped.

Mr Finley gave a sad smile. 'Well, it turns out, I wasn't bright enough to become a doctor,' he said. 'But you, Dray, *are* bright. You have the chance to do what I failed – escape the Enclave. You think this war is messed up? Then how are you going to stop it? Certainly not by getting drunk in the Dog and Gun.' He pulled a notebook out of his jacket pocket. 'I've done my best to teach you what I can, Dray, but I think the time has come to be more ambitious. I want you to go to this address –' He clamped the umbrella handle between his cheek and shoulder as he scribbled in the pocketbook, '– and tell Miss Culpepper that I sent you. Her brother is the Member of

Parliament for this constituency – a good man and an old friend. If she can teach you how to behave like a gentleman instead of a drunken thug, then – well, then there’s a chance that Howard Culpepper might be able to help you.’

‘Help me? How?’

‘There are scholarships you can apply for, Dray. Bursaries that will help you pay your way through university.’ He handed me Miss Culpepper’s address. ‘This is your chance to escape the Enclave, Dray. Don’t mess it up.’ Inside the pub, the lights flickered back on again, and the regulars gave a cheer. Mr Finley furred his umbrella. ‘I *am* sorry about your brother,’ he said, stepping into the porch. ‘But if I don’t see you at my kitchen table the day after tomorrow, Dray, I’m done with you. Understood?’

I gave a befuddled nod.

‘Give my condolences to your mother,’ said Mr Finley, and he vanished inside.

Ma didn’t understand my sudden desire to better myself. ‘What’s wrong with the way you used to speak?’ she asked, as, wreathed in steam, she attacked next door’s linen with a scrubbing brush and washboard. ‘If you took that job at the Post Office I told you about, you wouldn’t need to speak all la-di-da – and it wouldn’t matter if you picked up the wrong fork at dinner, or failed to tie that silly dickey bow of yours.’

I muttered, ‘Short-sighted ferret,’ in Borgovian.

Ma threw a bar of Starlight soap at me. ‘I might not be educated enough to understand what that meant, Pete, but I

know an insult when I hear one. Todd would never have been so rude to his mother. Now pass me the box of soda.'

She was no more enthusiastic when, with the help of Mr Culpepper, I won a scholarship to Whack House College, in the Locklander university town of Timble. 'Seems a long way to go just to get *more* learning,' she grumbled. 'The money they gave you would be much better spent replacing the mangle and buying Nancy a new coat.'

'Then we all could go and join Pa in prison,' I retorted. 'It's called fraud, Ma.'

But in truth, I was beginning to have doubts about attending university myself. Who was going to take me seriously when my only pair of shoes had insoles cut from old carpet to stop them from leaking? And how was I going to make a good impression if I sometimes got jobs like 'steward' and 'valet' mixed up? When the day of my departure arrived, and I climbed into the First Class carriage compartment that a railway-worker uncle had secretly upgraded me to, I found myself hoping that the train would break down, just so I could spend an extra day at home. My only consolation was that the cease-fire, which had been announced a couple of months before, seemed to be holding, so I wouldn't be leaving Ma and Nancy behind in a war-zone. 'Try not to scare the bus driver on the way home,' I told Ma, through the drop-down window. 'And I'll write to you the moment I arrive.'

But Ma was looking distracted. 'Yes – yes, very good Todd – I mean Bobby – I mean *Pete*,' she said.

I glanced down at Nancy. 'I get the impression that I don't have our mother's undivided attention at this critical juncture

in my life,' I said. 'What's she seen now?' and Nancy cried, 'Look at all the fancy people!'

I squinted through the smoke, hanging beneath the iron and glass canopy, and saw a crowd of spectators gathered in their Sunday best on a nearby platform. Swags of bunting printed with the Locklander flag criss-crossed between the canopy's metal pillars, and, somewhere, a brass band was playing. 'Sharon Dodson said that one of the Locklander princes were coming to visit the Princess Felicity Memorial on the way back from his honeymoon,' said Ma. 'I didn't believe her, after the whole 'Nysak priests are bayoneting Locklander babies' thing, but there does seem to be something going on over there. Do you think they'll let us watch?'

'Watch what?' I grumbled. 'Some overweight marionette waving at you for half an hour?'

The crowd suddenly erupted into cheering.

'It's too late anyway, Ma. Look – there they go.'

The brass band started to play the Locklander national anthem, and a shiny locomotive, the royal coat-of-arms resting on its bufferbeam, eased a train of teak-panelled carriages out of the station.

'That's completely ruined my day,' said Ma.

'Yes, things *were* looking quite cheery up until that point,' I sighed.

Because I'd arrived at the railway station early, there was still plenty of time for awkward comments like, 'Only fifteen minutes to go,' and, 'Did you remember to pack your spare shirt collar?' before the guard's whistle finally blew. Ma lifted Nancy up to the window. 'Say goodbye to your brother,' Ma ordered – so Nancy spiked my hair with her hands and

shouted, 'You look like a hedgehog!' in my ear. 'Keep your feet off those nice clean seats,' Ma added, as with a rattle, the train began to pull out of the station. 'And don't get into trouble with the ladies!'

'I should be so lucky,' I replied.

But as I sat down on the buttoned upholstery seat, prepared to spend the next six hours until the ferry crossing worrying about what awaited me in Timble, the corridor door banged open – and two girls came tumbling into the compartment in a froth of pastel coloured skirts. 'Oh, *Lordy*,' giggled the plump, blonde one. 'Did you see his face? He looked as if he was going to have a *stroke*.' and her tall, dark-haired companion replied, 'You're so naughty, Lottie, I think I'm going to die laughing. Do you think that man's wife really believed that you were his mistress?'

I hid behind my newspaper.

'As if I'd play hide the pencil with a fright like him,' said the one called Lottie. 'Still, we embarrassed the old fuddy-duddy into giving us these.' She waved a cigarette case at her companion. 'Ask *him* if he has a light.'

'No you ask him,' giggled the dark-haired girl.

'No *you*.'

I thought I'd better nip this in the bud before it escalated too far, so I said, 'I do *not* have a light.'

Gales of laughter erupted. 'I don't think he likes fast girls, Soph,' said Lottie. 'Hang on, here's the conductor. We'll ask him instead.'

The conductor, when he stuck his head around the door, proved no better at dealing with these two explosions of

confidence and crinoline than I had. 'Can I see your tickets?' he asked.

'Oh, we don't have tickets,' said Lottie. 'The Director of Travel is supposed to sort all this out – but the old goose has gone and left us behind, and we're too beautiful to carry money. Rupert's going to have a fit when he realises.'

'I'm sorry –' said the conductor. 'You can't –'

'Just gives us a light, and pretend that we aren't here.'

'I-I'm really not allowed to –' said the conductor, and the girl called Soph bit down on her thumb to stop herself from bursting into laughter. 'Lottie, stop being cruel,' she giggled. 'You're making him sweat. It's alright, Mr Conductor, we've cleared it with the stationmaster. They're going to hold our train at Mistelstadt until we catch up. You don't need to throw us off or clap us in irons.'

'I – I see,' said the conductor.

'Unless you *want* to clap us in irons,' said Lottie, fluttering her eyelids.

The conductor half-threw his lighter at her. 'I'll collect it later,' he said as he fled the compartment. The girls dissolved into giggles once more, and lit their cigarettes.

'Do you want one?' Soph asked me.

'I gave up smoking at the age of twelve,' I replied, hoping to scare them. But they just burst out laughing again. 'Oh, he's such a tough young man, Soph,' declared Lottie. 'And he speaks so well. But it's all a bit too precise to be real, and that suit is *definitely* a hand-me-down. I think we've found ourselves a native. Tell me, native, do you own a pair of clogs to go with that outfit? Have you ever had to pawn anything? *Do you have rats living in your chimney?*' The look of panic in my face

seemed to amuse her. She took a drag on her cigarette – then collapsed into a fit of coughing.

‘Not had one of those before, have you?’ I said, trying to recover my equilibrium.

‘Oh Lord. They’re vile.’

‘You get used to them,’ I replied.

But Lottie had already snatched Soph’s cigarette off her, and, pulling open the carriage window, she threw them out into the smoky drag of the train. ‘Perhaps we can persuade someone in the restaurant car to buy us gin instead,’ she said, pulling the window closed again. ‘Or *cocktails*.’ She grabbed Soph’s hand. ‘Come on, Soph. Let’s make the most of our hour of freedom by filling it with cocktails!’

But when Lottie tried to leave the compartment, her friend hung back. ‘Sorry if we seem a bit giddy,’ she told me. ‘It’s just that we’ve never been out unchaperoned before.’

I felt a little overwhelmed as her perfume washed over me. ‘Th-that’s quite alright,’ I replied. ‘It was nice to –’

I stopped.

Something was burning.

‘What the...?’ I cried, throwing down my newspaper. There were flames racing up the columns of print.

The girl had used the conductor’s lighter to set the corner of my paper *alight*.

Shrieking with laughter, the two airheads exited the compartment in another whirlwind of skirts, whilst I stamped out the flames, and angrily told myself that I could have handled that situation better. I could have thrown the burning pages at them, for a start. I rescued what I could of the newspaper, then sat back down and tried to continue reading;

but, as the stations flashed by – Mittdorf, Bad Lärchfeld, Holz – I felt my irritation beginning to stew. I'd worked so hard to lift myself up, out of the Enclave; I didn't want to let myself be intimidated by a pair of girls who thought that they were better than me. Somebody needed to teach those brats some manners, I thought, and although I wasn't sure that a signalman's son was the best person to do it, as the train began to slow for the points outside Mistelstadt, I found myself itching for another confrontation. Nothing grand, I told myself. I would just catch them at the station and demand an apology.

Mistelstadt Junction, I discovered, was a complicated maze of tracks, where Imperial soldiers rammed the platforms, and corrugated munitions sheds crowded the skyline. I opened the carriage door to shouts of, 'Goetz, you prick, what've you done with my pack?' and 'Don't you fucking dare throw that mess tin at me, Krecher. Don't you fucking *dare*.' Finding the girls was thus fairly easy. I just followed the wolf-whistles up the platform, until I spotted them, cheering on a group of half-naked soldiers taking a shower underneath the water tower.

'Excuse me,' I said.

The girls turned. 'Why Soph,' exclaimed Lottie. 'Somebody wants to speak with you.'

'But Lottie,' replied Soph, 'who is he?'

'Golly, don't you know either?' exclaimed Lottie. 'Do you think he's a *stalker*? God, this is exciting!'

Irritated that they'd forgotten about me already, I waved the newspaper fragments under their noses. 'If stalking is what it takes to get an apology for this, then I'll happily oblige,' I said, determined to maintain better control of the conversation this time. But the sergeant manning the water tower's handle was

clearly able understand some Locklander, and at the mention of 'stalking' he grabbed my arm. 'Does he bother you?' he asked the girls.

'*Rather,*' said Lottie. 'You should probably stick his head down the station toilet or something.'

I fended off the sergeant's attempt to wrestle me into an armlock. 'That's not how apologies usually work,' I snapped, as we dissolved into an ungainly struggle – and Soph exclaimed, 'Stop, stop. Quickly, let him go.'

'But Soph –' began Lottie.

'*Stop,*' said Soph. Her face had gone pale, and she was staring through the crush of grey jackets and black service caps, clenched nails digging into her palms. 'Oh God,' she whispered. 'What's Mummy doing here?'

We all turned to look. A tall, stately woman with wings of white in her hair was striding through the press of soldiers in an eddy of frock-coated officials. She was dressed in a high-belted jacket, and a long grey skirt, and she looked as if she could quell an entire battalion with one casually deployed frown. '*Lord,*' said Lottie. 'She must have been in Kaltburg, trying to explain the intricacies of the eight times table to the Emperor again. You'd better let me deal with this, Soph.' And, in a louder voice, she called, 'Aunt Imogene! What a pleasant surprise! We weren't expecting to see you here.'

The lady, Imogene, ignored Lottie.

'Ah, Sophie,' she said instead, as her frock-coated officials gathered around us. 'I'm glad that I've found you. Massingbird tells me that you seem to be struggling with the correct method of boarding a train.'

‘Can you believe it, Aunt Imogene?’ exclaimed Lottie. ‘They *left us behind*. We should *fire* the Director of Travel, and ban him from using wheeled transport ever again.’

Still Imogene didn’t look at Lottie. ‘Your uncle Louis got left behind by a train once, Sophie,’ she continued. ‘But *his* excuse was that he’d just been assassinated. I take it that you *haven’t* been assassinated?’ She looked at me. ‘Or is this what the clown is for?’

‘Well, almost,’ replied Lottie. ‘That’s our stalker.’

Feeling badgered, I exclaimed, ‘I *wasn’t* stalking them, ma’am. *They* set my newspaper alight,’ and Lottie clapped her hands in delight and cried, ‘Isn’t he a darling, Aunt Imogene? He’s *full* of entertaining stories. Can we keep him?’

‘I see,’ replied Imogene. There was a clatter of couplings behind us as a porter divided our train. ‘Charlotte, perhaps you could go and find Rupert,’ said Imogene. ‘I’m told that he wants to give you a very stern letting off.’

‘But Imogene –’ began Lottie.

‘Goodbye, Charlotte,’ said Imogene, firmly.

Muttering to herself, Lottie flounced away. Imogene, meanwhile, frowned at Sophie. ‘Letting you join Rupert and his wife on their honeymoon was clearly a mistake,’ said Imogene. ‘I’m trying to think of a suitable punishment, Sophie, but somehow I don’t think that curtailing your horse riding excursions will work anymore. We’ll have to be more creative.’ She glanced at where I was stood, hunched against a cast-iron slot machine, frantically trying to work out how to escape this situation, then added, ‘You, boy. Have you stalked anybody else recently?’

‘What?’ I exclaimed. ‘No – I’ve never –’

‘Assaulted anyone?’

‘No!’

‘Joined the Communist Party?’

I ran a sweating hand through my hair. ‘Look,’ I said, a little desperately. ‘I’m just trying to get to Timble University without any more of my personal belongings being ignited – that’s *all*.’

‘A worthy life goal,’ said Imogene, with a suspicious lack of sarcasm. ‘Leave your details with Massingbird, and he’ll get in contact with you just as soon as he’s spoken to your tutor. Sophie, since it’s clear that you have no respect for anybody other than yourself, I’m restarting your education. Once a week, you’ll meet with this boy that you insulted, and learn what you can of his background – his trials, his hopes, his fears, and his beliefs. Maybe this way I can stop the rot that’s turning you into an out-of-control horror.’

‘But Mummy –’ exclaimed Sophie.

‘Enough,’ said Imogene. ‘It’s decided. Massingbird, sort it out. Sophie, with me. Rupert has had this daft idea that somebody in the remains of the Eschenbach Empire might want to crown him king, and I don’t want to leave him unattended for any longer than I have to. Come along.’

And she left in another eddy of frock-coats, whilst Sophie hurried along in her wake, crying, ‘Mummy, it was just a bit of *fun*.’

I remained standing where I was, trying to work out what had just happened.

It was only later, as I climbed back onto my train, that I discovered who I’d been talking to. Sitting down in my seat, I tossed aside the burnt newspaper, and caught sight of a photograph amidst the shoe-prints and flakes of black char.

'Prince Rupert of Locklands visits St Novka's Hospital, with his wife, Princess Charlotte, and his cousin, Princess Sophie,' said the caption – and suddenly there they were again, the two giggling imbeciles, stood behind a man in elaborate military regalia, at the bedside of a wounded soldier.

I'd just been engaged to tutor Princess Sophie, I realised – great-grand-daughter of King Clement III, and ninth in line to the throne of Locklands.

I tried to tell myself that I wasn't impressed.

'Bloody nobs,' I muttered, and went to find a bin.

It wasn't until my train pulled onto the cross-channel ferry, five hours later, that I realised that nobody had actually apologised for burning my newspaper.

Chapter Three

The Quickest Way to Make a Dog Lie Down

7th Oct: Mummy's had another of her 'bright ideas'. I'm to take lessons on the working classes from some prize scarecrow with a burnt newspaper fixation...Lottie says that this just makes it even more essential that I escape my mother's influence. Fortunately, Lottie's heard a rumour that the Borgovians are going to fight for an independent state at the forthcoming Peace Conference in Timble – and since the Borgovians have lived under the rule of the Eschenbach Emperor for so long that they've *forgotten how to govern themselves*, Lottie wants Rupert to be chosen as their new King. That way, she can live in her own palace, and I can be her Senior Lady-in-Waiting.

– Princess Sophie, Aged 17, *Diary – Year 1910* (Unpublished), pp325-6

I spent the following night in Burchester, lying awake in a cheap bed and breakfast, telling myself that there was no chance that the lessons would actually go ahead. Once they discovered who my Pa was, I wouldn't be allowed to walk the royal dogs, let alone tutor Princess Sophie. But still, I found myself imagining what it would be like to stroll along the fairy tale corridors of the Wraywater Palace, discussing factory conditions over crystal glasses of champagne, and addressing the King as 'Clem, old friend'. Needless to say, I ended up oversleeping, and as a result I missed my breakfast, and had to run for the train.

It seemed like half the population of the Eschenbach Empire was on its way to Timble that morning. I'd been aware that a peace conference was beginning in the town, but still, I hadn't expected Timble to be so completely over-run with tourists hoping to catch a glimpse of the Chancellor of Zwischenberger, or the Kleibzen Break-of-Day Men, or even, it was rumoured, the Eschenbach Emperor himself. It didn't help that the town seemed to have re-arranged itself since I'd visited for my interview. The High Street was not where I wanted it to be, and there was a botanical garden where I was expecting to find Whack House College. It thus took some disorientated wandering of the backstreets before I finally stumbled across a gatehouse that looked familiar.

'Thank God I've finally found you,' I said to the porter on duty in the booth. 'I feared that I was going to have to enrol in a fish and chip shop. It's Dray, by the way. Peter Dray.'

The porter scanned down his list of names. 'No Dray here,' he replied.

'Oh,' I said. 'Oh. Perhaps you could check again? It's Dray spelt with an 'a'.'

The porter removed his spectacles. 'I have no Drays, Dreys, Drews or *Drips* on my list,' he said, firmly. 'Either your acceptance to this university was all a terrible blunder – or you've got the wrong college. Where are you supposed to be?'

'Whack House?' I offered.

The porter dropped his list. 'Other side of the street, lad,' he sighed. 'This is St Timothy's Hall, where we prefer to accept students who can read maps. Look, there's Geoffrey Melmerby. He'll be going that way. Melmerby! Can you show this fresher

to your college? His name is Peter Dray with an ‘a’, and he has something against fish and chip shops.’

A young man in riding tweeds clapped me on the shoulder. ‘Hello Dray,’ he said. ‘Ignore Sanderson. He hates all students at the moment because somebody egged him in the Garden Quad. Have you caught the culprit yet, Sanderson?’

Sanderson gave a grunt.

‘That’s porters’ speak for ‘bugger off,’ explained Melmerby. ‘Which I think is probably a very good idea. St Timmy’s gives me the creeps. They have *compulsory chapel* here. Come on, I’ll show you the delights of Whack House.’

He steered me out into a cobbled street, where gabled houses bottled the traffic, and black-gowned students wobbled past on bicycles. It was all considerably more genteel than the smoke-blotted ghetto I was used to, and I felt like an uncivilised thug. ‘Are you Geoffrey Melmerby of Speichelbach Castle?’ I asked my companion, trying to find something familiar in this alien town. ‘My sister, Amy, works as a kitchen maid for the family.’

Geoffrey Melmerby laughed. ‘So I should come to you if ever my shoes need polishing, eh?’ he suggested.

‘That’s – that’s not what I –’ I began, embarrassed; but Melmerby appeared to have already lost interest in this avenue of conversation. ‘Oh look, there’s Knox!’ he exclaimed instead, pointing along a length of blind arcading. ‘Knox is always good for a laugh or two. Knox! Where are you going with that bottle of champagne?’

A dishevelled student, his shirt untucked, paused in the entrance of another medieval gatehouse. ‘Hello sweetpea,’ he said. ‘Some nincompoop has brought their dog to college, and it

woke me at eleven o'clock this morning with its barking. I'm going to try and fire a champagne cork at it.'

'A dog?' said Melmerby. 'What breed?'

'Brown,' replied Knox. 'It's over there.'

He pointed through the gatehouse arch, into a leafy quad where a group of students were playing croquet. The dog, its tongue lolling, was sat at the feet of a white-uniformed thug with a pantomime moustache. I recognised him immediately from the propaganda posters I'd seen pasted about the Enclave.

'Milan Radić,' I spat.

'Radish who?' asked Melmerby.

'Borgovian warlord,' I explained. 'Nasty piece of work. Must be here for the peace conference. He made his dog, Gavran, a Colonel in the Borgovian Independence Force.' I watched Knox stride off across the grass towards his intended target. 'It's said that Radić once had a group of nurses whipped for 'assaulting a military officer' when one of their hospital cats attacked the damn thing. Perhaps Knox should stay back –'

'You think that Knox is about to get lamped?' said Melmerby. 'This I *have* to see.'

He hurried off after his friend.

I sighed. You're in a different world, now, I reminded myself. This is a soft, secure land where the people have never learnt how dangerous soldiers can be. Determined not to get involved, I checked that I had indeed arrived at Whack House, and knocked on the window of the Porter's Lodge. But even as I signed my name on the register, a frenetic barking erupted in the quad; and by the time I followed an under-porter out of the gatehouse, room key in hand, Melmerby was flaying about in the autumn leaves, the jaws of 'Colonel Gavran' clamped firmly

about his knee. ‘Goddammit, will somebody call the bloody thing off!’ he shouted, and Knox, standing well back, replied, ‘I’m sure I’ve heard somewhere that you’re supposed to push their front legs apart.’

Melmerby grabbed the dog’s collar. ‘I’m trying to get it off me, Knox – *not* teach it the missionary position!’ he snapped.

I hurried over to help. Milan Radić, bellowing dog commands in Borgovian, had snatched up the dog’s lead, and after a brief struggle, together we managed to prise the ‘Colonel’ away from Melmerby’s leg. I helped Melmerby to his feet. His riding breeches were torn and bloodied, and there were damp leaves stuck to his tweed jacket. ‘That damn thing should be put down!’ he spat.

‘It’s alright,’ I said. ‘Dog bites are relatively clean.’

‘I demand an apology!’ Melmerby insisted.

An expression that seemed to encapsulate every atrocity that he’d ever committed flickered across Milan Radić’s face. Melmerby was more likely to get a knife in the stomach than an apology from that man. ‘He probably doesn’t understand Locklander,’ I said. ‘Come on, you can show me where my room is.’

‘My father will hear of this,’ declared Melmerby.

‘Of course, of course,’ I said – and I pulled him away, reflecting on how even here, in soft, secure Timble, the War could still tap me on the shoulder.

By coincidence, Milan Radić had come up during my interview to the University.

‘Of course, he’s a complete psychopath,’ the senior tutor, Sebastian Longfellow, had declared, as he poured himself a cup of tea. ‘Ewart and Browning did a study a couple of years back into people who lack empathy, and Radić has many of the symptoms. Extravagant self-worth, lack of remorse, an instinct to manipulate, and the failure to accept responsibility for his own actions.’ He took a sip of tea. We should have been discussing the answers I’d written for my Responsions exam, but Longfellow seemed to have lost interest in them. ‘They’re fascinating creatures, psychopaths,’ he continued. ‘Many can be very charismatic – faking the emotion they don’t have themselves, copying the reactions of those around them to cover the fact that they themselves feel nothing, trying to get people to *like* them – because, after all, it’s easier to manipulate someone who likes you than it is to manipulate someone who doesn’t. And Radić can be very charming around world leaders when he wants something. But get on the wrong side of him, and – well, I’m sure you can guess the consequences.’

I could indeed guess the consequences. But I feared that Geoffrey Melmerby could not. To him, the ‘Hangman of Stopnik’ and the ‘Slodvian Washdays’ were probably just names in a newspaper. As I unpacked my tin trunk in a tiny room above the buttery staircase, I thought again about my tutor’s comments, and I hoped that Melmerby would have the sense to give Radić a wide berth.

I decided not to tell people about my meeting with Princess Sophie on the platform of Mistelstadt Junction. Even if they did believe me, I didn’t want to risk embarrassment when the

tutoring idea came to nothing – so instead, I looked for other ways to integrate myself into life at Timble. Since telling people that my Pa was in prison for crashing the royal train would have been social suicide, I gave him a job in the Railway Statistics Office, made vague references to our ‘staff’ back at home, and tried to pass myself off as middle class. I was a little hazy about how middle class people actually conducted themselves, so I watched the behaviour of the other students at Hall, and in the Junior Common Room, and I did my best to mimic it. I avoided those who were clearly hostile to anybody outside their social circle, and instead sat on the edges of more liberal groups, listening to the in-jokes that they’d brought with them from boarding school, and memorising their banter. When my scout brought breakfast to my rooms, I quizzed him on the backgrounds of those I’d met; but most of the time I kept my mouth shut, not wanting to give myself away. Slowly, I began to build up a picture of my new surroundings.

I initially hoped that Melmerby might be a way into the College social life. But he gave away his true feelings on the matter a few days after my arrival. We had gathered on the steps of the Examination Schools for our Matriculation, black gowns flapping in the high wind. Melmerby, even three days after the event, was still smarting over Milan Radić. ‘He’s just some jumped-up *peasant*,’ he spat. ‘His father kept goats, for God’s sake. How *dare* he treat me like that.’ I tried to point out that it was only a dog bite, but Melmerby was too worked up to notice. ‘It’s that damn war,’ he ranted. ‘It’s messed up all the old structures – ripped apart institutions, given people ideas beyond their station –’

‘I have ‘ideas beyond my station’,’ I said, mildly.

‘But you’ll just become a teacher or something,’ snapped Melmerby. ‘You’re not trying to become the High King of Banditland.’

‘I see,’ I replied, coldly.

I avoided Melmerby after that. It was clear that we’d never be friends. I’d always be the brother of one of his servants – someone to be cordial to, but ultimately someone who could be dismissed as insignificant. Instead, I focused my attention on settling into Timble. Over the following week, I played my first game of croquet, discovered that the local bookshop allowed you to buy books on credit, and visited the observatory where the first asteroid had been discovered. To my delight, I learnt that Amy had arrived in Timble with the Melmerby family for the peace conference, and we agreed to meet up on her first half-day off. I thought no more about Geoffrey Melmerby, or Milan Radić.

I tried not to think about Princess Sophie as well, but that proved harder – and on occasion, I’d catch myself, sat in the library, imagining what I’d teach her given the opportunity. ‘You could start by telling her that the maids in her kitchen would have been up at half five this morning, working,’ grumbled Amy when she came to visit. ‘Just *look* at my hands – they’re still raw from all the soda.’ But I was more interested in things like trade union rights and the unfair benefits system, and I kept a file of graphs on my desk just in case I should be called upon to teach the Princess at short notice. It was a good job that I did, because one morning in Second Week, my scout, Collins, appeared at breakfast with a letter addressed to me. This in itself was a surprise, since, with the arrival of the Conference in Timble, the local postal service had pretty much

collapsed. But when I saw the crest stamped on the envelope, I felt a chill of excitement. ‘It’s an invitation from the Lord Steward to wait upon Princess Sophie,’ I explained to Collins once I’d ripped it open.

Collins did his best to look unimpressed. ‘I scouted for the Duke of Radwinter’s son, back in the day,’ he said. ‘Though I confess, *he* never got an invitation to Timble Castle – but then his father had fallen out with the late Prince Harold over a girl. Or possibly it was a horse.’ He picked up my waste-paper basket for emptying, then added, ‘Will you be wanting commons for lunch?’

I gave a shaky nod.

Fortunately, once Collins realised that I had no idea what to do with the invitation, he became more sympathetic. With his help, I cobbled together some basic knowledge of royal etiquette, though much of it was hearsay, and, regardless of what Collins said, I was fairly sure it *wasn’t* traditional for Timble University scholars to wear a sword in the royal presence; I also bought a new tie, and some shoelaces, though the price-tags at the haberdashery seemed to be obeying a rate of inflation that was completely detached from real life; and I spent many hours in both the College and History Faculty libraries, collecting facts and planning my lesson. But regardless of all this preparation, I was still bubbling with terror when I arrived at the grey battlements of Timble Castle one rainy afternoon at the end of Third Week. Despite the foul weather, a crowd of tourists had gathered outside the gates to watch the guards in their green tunics and bearskin hats marching up and down the Castle Yard, and I had to fight my way through them to reach the policeman on duty.

‘You need to report to the Service Entrance and ask for Sir Hugo Bramhope,’ the policeman told me. ‘He’s Princess Imogene’s private secretary. Be careful, though. They’re using the State Rooms for the Peace Conference, and it’s chaos back there.’

The policeman wasn’t exaggerating. I passed through the Castle gatehouse, and crossed the lower ward to cries of, ‘Does anybody know where the International Telegraph Cable Committee is taking place?’ and, ‘No, no, bring the Warrington out again Gillett, or the Chancellor’s man will never get his motor in.’ Magnesium ribbons flashed against the gloom as journalists took photographs of top-hatted delegates and their bowler-hatted assistants, and when I finally managed to track down the Service Entrance, I found its entrance crowded with off-duty interpreters, smoking cigarettes, and discussing the perils of translating at high speed. ‘Does anybody know how I get in contact with Sir Hugo Bramhope?’ I asked. The interpreters pointed me in the direction of a palace equerry, who in turn tracked down Sir Hugo Bramhope’s undersecretary for me, and a short while later, I found myself being led through a maze of back corridors and servants’ chambers to a small, plain study, filled with pieces of mismatched furniture. ‘Wait here,’ said the undersecretary. ‘I’ll let Her Highness know that you’ve arrived.’

I sat down on a settee and tried to settle my nerves. I told myself that there was no need to worry, that I’d done more than enough preparation for the lesson; but even so, I was too wound up to sit still, and a few minutes later I was on my feet again, pacing up and down the wooden floorboards. I studied the dingy watercolours that hung above the overmantel; I

stared out of the windows at the shuffling crowd of umbrellas in the courtyard below; I accidentally broke the arm off a ghastly porcelain figurine, and tried to hide it behind the fireguard; and I stared at the case clock, biting my nails as the hour slowly ticked by. Princess Sophie did not appear. Instead, at about half-past four, a page walked into the room, flicking through the racing news. He jumped at the sight of me. ‘Oh, hello sir,’ he said. ‘What are you doing here?’

I explained about Princess Sophie’s tutorial.

‘Are you sure, sir?’ asked the page. ‘It’s just – she left town for Courtley Spout about three-quarters of an hour ago, and she isn’t expected back until Monday. There’s a cubbing meet up that way tomorrow, I’m told.’

Confused, I checked my invitation again. ‘It definitely says Friday, 3pm,’ I said, and the page replied, ‘There was probably some miscommunication between the Princess and her mother. I’ll let Sir Hugo know. I’m sure he’ll be most apologetic. In the meantime, sir, you might as well go home. It’s growing dark, and the rain’s getting worse. Shall I call you a taxi?’

‘No, no, it’s alright,’ I said, picking up my hat and umbrella. ‘I’ll walk.’

I tried not to feel irritated. What did it matter if the Princess turned up or not, I asked myself? I was still getting paid. But even so, I felt that I had better things to do than sit around in a cold study all afternoon, being ignored, and when Friday arrived again, I almost stayed in the library; but the thought of my weekly battels finally drove me to the gates of Timble Castle once more, and, just as before, I was shown to the small, plain

study, where I sat for nearly two hours before I conceded that Princess Sophie had no intention of attending. This time, rather than wait for another random page to stumble upon me, I gathered up my notes, and left of my own accord.

It was as I crossed the lower ward that I saw a maroon car, bumping around in circles over the cobbles. I recognised Geoffrey Melmerby at the wheel – and in the back, I caught a glimpse of Princess Sophie and Princess Charlotte, laughing hysterically. A plump little footman in a red wig was running along beside the vehicle, and at first I thought he was trying to get Melmerby’s attention. But then I caught sight of a leash, tied about the footman’s neck – and to my horror I realised that Geoffrey Melmerby was tugging at the other end. ‘Giddy up! Giddy up!’ shouted Melmerby, as they rattled past again – and the two Princesses screamed with delight. Disgusted, I walked on, head down, hoping that they wouldn’t recognise me. Not even a guaranteed wage could convince me to return to Timble Castle after that spectacle, and I spent the Friday of Fifth Week reading about ceremonial urns in fourth century Woldshire.

And that might have been it, so far as my story with Princess Sophie was concerned, had I not returned home, one dreary November evening, to find Whack House Lane jammed with polished black cars.

‘What’s going on?’ I asked a second year called Hughes.

‘So you weren’t invited either?’ said Hughes, as he wheeled his bicycle into the quad. ‘The Warden’s holding a cocktail party tonight for conference delegates, but only select students have been allowed to attend. Clearly, they didn’t want the local riffraff embarrassing the Warden in front of his royal guests.’ He pointed through the crowd of evening jackets and silver-fur

coats, to where a pair of motor cars were drawn up on the other side of the gatehouse. I saw Princess Sophie and Princess Charlotte, their diamond studded dresses glimmering dimly in the early evening twilight, being helped down from a running board by Prince Rupert. 'We're having our own party tonight, if you fancy it,' said Hughes. 'Flanner's going to be coronated with a paper crown, and we're planning to turn the gramophone up really loud to see if we can make them jealous. What do you say?'

I thanked him, but declined. I wasn't sure that I could keep up the pretence of being middle class under the influence of alcohol. Besides, despite my irritation with her recent behaviour, I wanted to catch a closer glimpse of my errant pupil. Ever since the incident on the train, I'd been wondering if she could be the same girl as the one I'd met on the roof of the Royal Picture House. So, whilst Hughes wheeled his bicycle off in the direction of the bike shed, I remained standing by the ancient oak gates, watching jealously as Geoffrey Melmerby managed to reduce the two Princesses to tears of laughter. He was clearly making a much better impression on them than I'd done, and I felt a stab of envy. Miss Culpepper's etiquette lessons had never stretched to charming young royals. Back when I'd stood in her living room, practising how to say my vowels, I'd thought that reaching Timble University would solve the problem of my background. But instead, I just felt even more out of place here than I had in the Enclave. I stood by the gates for about ten minutes, growing cold in the autumn wind, before I finally concluded that my memory was too hazy to be certain of any connection between the two Sophies. Since I had nothing else to do that evening, I decided to retreat to the

library, reasoning that even if I couldn't make an impression socially, I could at least create a few waves academically. But once ensconced in a draughty alcove, lit by a flicking gaslight, I found myself being repeatedly distracted by cries of, 'Get us another drink, Hammond!' and 'What's the etiquette for telling the Princess you're madly in love with her?' drifting from the Warden's Lodge. I gritted my teeth and persevered – but it grew harder and harder as the party became more raucous, until, at about half past ten, an eruption of shouting outside brought my studies to a final halt. 'Don't even *think* about walking away from me!' I heard Geoffrey Melmerby cry. 'If you won't replace my riding breeches, then I'll damn well take *your* trousers and wear *them*.'

I put down my book on medieval ecclesiastical charters and peered out of the window. The Warden's guests had spilled out along a raised terrace, lit by electric fairy lights, and Melmerby, clearly drunk, was being dragged away from Milan Radić by a group of top-hatted students. 'Look at me!' Melmerby bellowed. 'Do you have any idea who my father is? Look at me, you walrus-faced *cock!*'

There was a sudden flurry of movement – a scuffle, a shout – and in an instant Geoffrey Melmerby was sailing backwards over the balustrade, his arms flaying in the night air. Screaming rippled up the terrace. I leapt to my feet, thinking, Oh my God, he's killed him, he's *killed* him. But by the time I'd sprinted out of the library and around to the foot of the terrace, Melmerby had managed to sit upright in the herbaceous border. His white scarf looked as if it was trying to hang him from a rhododendron bush, and he was vomiting champagne.

'Is he alright?' a voice shouted from above.

‘In a manner of speaking,’ I replied.

‘Lucky fellow. That fall should have broken his neck. He must have been too drunk to tense.’

Running footsteps approached along the gravel path. I glanced up, and recognised a few of Melmerby’s friends – Fitzwilliam, Knox, Hamilton-Gryce – charging out of the darkness. ‘Bloody hell, Melmers,’ panted Fitzwilliam, ‘didn’t you hear? They’ve invented a machine for those who wish to take flight,’ and Knox added, ‘Dammit, Melmerby, you knew that it was *my* lifelong ambition to become a human cannonball.’ They helped Melmerby to his feet. ‘Can anyone see his hat?’ asked Hamilton-Gryce, and a familiar voice exclaimed, ‘Can anyone see his *dignity*?’ I quickly pressed myself back into the shadows of the rhododendron bush. Princess Charlotte had come striding down the terrace steps amidst a gaggle of fluttering girls, all pigeon-breasted dresses and puffy, pompadour haircuts. ‘Are we going to steal his trousers?’ she asked, cheerfully. ‘Or better yet, tie him to a lamp-post?’

‘That wasn’t quite the plan, ma’am,’ replied Knox.

‘*Please* let’s tie him to a lamp-post,’ begged the Princess. ‘I saw a *fabulous* one from the car as we arrived.’

I forced myself to relax. She probably wouldn’t recognise you, I told myself. You were a momentary diversion – five minutes of entertainment amidst the cigarettes and the cocktails; there’s no need to act like a coward. But my presence at Timble still felt precarious, and, after my previous confrontations with the Princess, I didn’t want to risk being humiliated in front of the other students until I felt confident enough to laugh it off. I watched as the party slowly gathered itself together and moved off across the quad, vowing that, one

day, when I'd learnt the unspoken rules of this place, I would face Princess Charlotte without getting tongue-tied. In the meantime, I hoped that Melmerby had finally learnt to treat Milan Radić with the wariness he deserved. I waited until they were out of sight, then returned to the library and tried to put the incident from my mind – instead spending the next hour completing my notes on the alienation of land in the eleventh century. But I was still feeling distracted when I cut across the quad later that night. I thus didn't notice the girl, tottering barefoot between the elm trees, until it was too late to avoid her. It was my absent pupil, Princess Sophie. She was carrying her shoes in one hand, and a bottle of champagne in the other, and she was being tailed by a pair elderly chaperones. 'Your highness,' the chaperone in an ostrich-feathered bonnet was saying, 'please come back to the party – you're ruining your stockings,' and her diamond tiara'd companion added, 'Your mother will be told of this, ma'am. I insist that you return to the party at once.'

The Princess saw me. 'Huzzah!' she exclaimed. 'Train boy! I thought I might see you here. Are you as drunk as I am?'

'Not really, ma'am,' I replied, stiffly.

'Oh,' said Princess Sophie. 'Oh.' She shook off Diamond Tiara's attempt to steer her away from me, then added, 'Actually, to be honest, I'm not that drunk either. But everybody else was being degenerate, so I didn't want to be the odd one out.'

'Well that's easily solved, ma'am,' I replied. 'If you're looking for something degenerate to do, I have my lesson notes somewhere. Perhaps you'd like to set *them* alight this time.'

The Princess had the grace to blush. ‘Lord. The lessons,’ she said. ‘Look, don’t take this the wrong way, train-boy, but fascinating though I’m sure your tutorials would be, I find that the best way to deal with Mummy’s ‘bright ideas’ is to ignore them, and hope that she’s too busy being important to notice. Sorry about your newspaper, by the way. Lottie and I were perhaps a *little* excitable that day. But when you’re the most junior member of the royal family, you have to do *something* to get noticed, and getting left behind by the royal train seemed like a jolly good start.’

‘In my day, a girl would have been ashamed of such behaviour,’ said Diamond Tiara, pompously; and I added, ‘So taking up singing isn’t an option, then ma’am?’

‘Well,’ replied the Princess, ‘Lottie’s suggested that I start telling people I’m a heroin addict, but I think I’ll save that for the next time Mummy is *really* beastly to me. Hang on, I have just the thing to apologise.’ And ignoring her fidgeting chaperones, she pulled a scrap of paper from her handbag, and scribbled out a note. ‘Can you read it in the darkness?’ the Princess asked. ‘It says, ‘I.O.U. one obscenely generous gesture – signed Sophie Legsby St Claire’. Or at least I hope it does. It was hard to see what I was writing in the moonlight.’

I took the note, feeling wrong-footed. ‘Well, if ever I need a ceremonial tree planting, I’ll know where to come,’ I replied.

Across the quad, a man called, ‘We should bring the motors around to the front gate,’ and another added, ‘Massingbird, have you seen Her Highness?’

‘It really *is* time to go now, ma’am,’ said Ostrich Bonnet.

Princess Sophie glanced over at the brightly lit Porter’s Lodge. ‘Lottie’s probably said something to infuriate Rupert

again,' she sighed. 'Come along, train-boy, you can walk me to the car.' She slipped her arm through mine, then whispered, 'Ignore the two witches. They've been driving me mad all evening. Apparently I'm not to be trusted anymore, which is a *joke*. They've stopped me from talking to all the interesting young men, and the only people I've been allowed to dance with have been drooling old bores, and some foreign brigand who wants to marry me.'

I tried to articulate a reply – but for some reason, despite the fact I kept telling myself that I was really, really cross with this girl, the Princess' close proximity had fused my thoughts, and once again I felt a spike of jealousy that Geoffrey Melmerby was clearly so much better at dealing with this sort of situation than I was. I racked my brain, searching for something witty to say – but all I succeeded in doing was distracting myself long enough to trip over a lead that had been tied about the trunk of a nearby elm tree.

'Good Lord, are you alright?' the Princess exclaimed.

'Yes – *yes* – I'm fine. Fine,' I replied, quickly.

Behind us, Diamond Tiara said, 'Will you stop looking for excuses to dally, ma'am,' and Ostrich Bonnet added, 'Oh dear, Massingbird is going to be so annoyed.'

The Princess ignored them. 'What is this?' she asked, bending down.

'Perhaps they decided to tie Geoffrey Melmerby up after all,' I said.

We traced the lead through the moon-shadows, to a dark lump sprawled in the leaf litter. I gave the lump a prod with my shoe.

‘Oh God,’ I said, hoarsely, as I realised what it was. ‘It’s – it’s –’

I dropped to my knees in the damp grass.

It was Milan Radić’s dog.

By the light of shuffling moonbeams, I could see that a white rag had been stuffed into the dog’s mouth to muffle its barks; the attacker had then set to work, gouging out its eyes, cutting off its tail, mutilating its body, and slitting its throat. I felt nauseas. The Princess, leaning over my shoulder, was struggling for breath. ‘What sort of sick mind could do *that*?’ she whispered.

I pulled at the rag stuffed in the dog’s mouth, and immediately recognised Geoffrey Melmerby’s scarf.

By now, the two chaperones, still unaware of our discovery, had called the royal party over. ‘She’s over here, Massingbird,’ Ostrich Bonnet cried, and a male voice added, ‘The Warrington’s blown a gasket, Lawley; she’ll have to travel with the Prince.’ Before I could react, we’d been surrounded by men in court dress. ‘Your Highness, it’s time to go –’ an elderly gentleman began, but the Princess just said, ‘Oh God, I think that I’m going to be sick,’ and suddenly Diamond Tiara was shouting, ‘Get the Princess out of here – there’s been an attack.’ An official grabbed my arm and cried, ‘He’s got a knife!’ so I waved my free hand in the air, exclaiming, ‘I *don’t* have knife!’ But my free hand was covered in dog’s blood, and I realised that there *was* a knife lying on the grass where I’d been kneeling; then a fist slammed into my jaw, and the next thing I knew, I was sprawled in the leaf litter, being pummelled by a man in a white uniform.

‘Radić, stay back!’ a voice called.

But Milan Radić just kept on smashing down his punches like an out-of-control steam hammer.

‘You bastard!’ he screamed. ‘You psychopath! *You kill my dog.*’

Chapter Four

How to Dream With Your Eyes Open

17th Nov: Urrgh. Too hungover to write. Will do this tomorrow.

18th Nov: Urrgh. Too hungover etc., and my handwriting has gone all shaky. Also, I think that I've lost my silver bracelet. Lottie says that she might have told the Klinovite ambassador that he looks like a pregnant ostrich, so we're pretty sure there's going to be declaration of war in the next few hours. Drinks at Whack House tonight. Apparently, that's the college my personal scarecrow attends, so Lottie is planning to spill champagne down him. Vowed that I'd only drink water today. Gave in at half past three.

19th Nov: Actually felt alright this morning. Even managed to eat breakfast. But then Mummy appeared and the day went downhill from there...

– Princess Sophie, Aged 17, *Diary – Year 1910* (Unpublished), pp410-1

I woke the next morning to ribs that seemed to have rearranged themselves, and a face that was experimenting with several interesting new colours.

‘Brawling?’ guessed Collins.

‘Well, I might have returned one of the punches,’ I conceded.

Collins tried to medicate me with some vile substance made up of vinegar and parsley, but I succeeded in escaping his ministrations, and, after breakfast, I limped over to the university lecture halls, to spend the morning avoiding eye contact with people, and hoping that I didn't run into any more Borgovians. But although I managed to escape being jumped by foreign thugs, it turned out that Milan Radić was not the only person who'd been upset by last night's events, and I was instead caught leaving a lecture on the social impact of plague by a palace equerry.

'You'd better come with me, sir,' he said. 'Princess Imogene has requested your presence.'

'I see,' I said. 'Is that a good thing?'

'I suppose that rather depends on whether you enjoy being shouted at,' the equerry replied.

Not exactly filled with confidence, I let myself be escorted across town to Timble Castle, where once again, I had to fight my way through a lower ward rammed with secretaries carrying dossiers stamped 'Top Secret', and press officers trying to brief rowdy crowds of journalists; but this time, instead of being taken to one of the public wings, I was led over to the Round Keep – a grey, medieval building that rose out of the Inner Curtain. A page showed me up the stairs to the Castle Constable's study, which Princess Imogene had apparently commandeered for her own use, and I found myself stood on a wool pile rug, waiting uncertainly whilst the Princess sat at a cumbersome oak bureau, going through her official correspondence with Sir Hugo Bramhope. Her daughter hovered in a window recess, looking sullen.

It was several minutes before Princess Imogene finally deigned to look at me.

‘Ah, Mr Dray,’ she said, putting down her fountain pen at last. ‘Glad you could make it. Can I assume that you’re more of a cat person, then?’

I bowed to both her and her daughter.

‘I-I don’t quite follow, ma’am,’ I said, nervously.

The Princess screwed up a piece of paper and dropped it on the wooden floorboards for a servant to pick up. ‘Well, it’s either that or Massingbird failed miserably to explain the rules of service to you,’ she replied. ‘In general we try not to attack the pets of state allies. The Foreign Office have their own, preferred methods of making enemies.’

I rubbed my bruised eye and wondered how to get out of this situation with all my future career prospects still intact.

‘Radić’s dog didn’t actually have anything to do with us, ma’am –’ I began.

‘So Sophie tells me,’ said the Princess. ‘Although these days I have a hard time believing anything that comes out of her mouth, and it’s clear from your rather spectacular eye shadow that you *did* decide to have a fight with Milan ‘I’m a walking atrocity’ Radić. I’m a busy woman, Mr Dray. My schedule reads like a short novel as it is. I thus do not appreciate having to waste time placating foreign dignitaries and disciplining members of my staff. Oh – congratulates on the lessons, by the way. They seem to be going well.’

Thrown by the sudden change in direction, I stammered, ‘Er – thank you ma’am,’ – and I caught a glimpse of Princess Sophie making an urgent cutting gesture behind her mother’s back. ‘Yes,’ Princess Imogene continued, ‘teaching a pupil who

is sixty-eight miles away at Courtley Spout is quite a unique skill – isn't it Sophie? You both use telepathy, I presume? Perhaps we should get the Royal Society to study your methods.'

Princess Sophie pulled a face. 'The lesson must have just slipped my mind, Mummy,' she said. 'My brain is like a sieve these days – *with extra holes in it.*'

'So I've gathered,' Princess Imogene replied. 'And I'm growing a little tired of its convenient ability to ignore direct orders. I don't think that you realise how embarrassing these escapades have the potential to be, Sophie. I could just tell you and Mr Dray off, I suppose, but I'm not sure how effective that will be; so instead I've come up with a plan. Hugo, show my daughter the schedule please.'

Sir Hugo picked up a sheaf of typed papers from Princess Imogene's desk.

'What's this?' asked Princess Sophie, warily.

'This' is what you'll be doing over the next few days, Sophie,' said Princess Imogene. 'We've taken the least important engagements from your brother's timetable – and from your Aunt Katherine's too – and created what I suspect is a vain attempt to put some structure into your life.'

Princess Sophie frantically leafed through the sheets of paper. 'Oh God, Mummy,' she said. '*Please* don't send me out handshaking –' and her mother replied, 'Meeting the King's subjects is an important aspect of our existence, Sophie. I'm going to send Mr Dray along with you tomorrow, in the hope that he'll be able to learn something of how to behave in the royal presence. Again, my hopes are not high. Mr Dray, you'll

report to the Service Entrance at eight o'clock sharp. My Page of the Backstairs will be waiting for you. Don't be late.'

I started to protest that I had lectures to attend that day. But Princess Imogene just frowned at me, and the words withered on my tongue.

'I-I'll be there,' I stammered.

'See that you are,' replied, Princess Imogene – and I was dismissed.

Outside the office, in a stone-walled Guard Room, I put on my hat and gloves and tried not to feel as if three inches had just been removed from my spine. Princess Sophie joined me a few minutes later, looking equally frazzled. 'Well, that could have gone better,' she sighed as she flopped onto a wooden bench. 'Generally I find that the best way to deal with Mummy's interviews is to nod and play music in my head, but even that was bit of a challenge today.'

I retrieved my coat from the page on duty.

'I get the impression that I don't have Her Highness' complete confidence, ma'am,' I said, carefully. 'Perhaps this whole teaching plan was a bad idea. I-I think I will send in my resignation tomorrow.'

'Oh *Lord*,' said Princess Sophie. 'Don't feel so bad, train-boy. Everybody feels a little suicidal after an interview with Mummy. My brother and I call it 'Mummification', and it's best just ignored.' She popped a boiled sweet in her mouth, then added, 'Besides, at least you have the *potential* to be interesting. If you resigned, then I'd just be lumbered with some humourless ball bearing instead, and he'd annoy me so much that I'd be forced to chop up his tie or something, and then Mummy would send me to Rensdale for six months as

punishment, and I'd end up with nothing to do but count sheep and learn how to play the *ukulele*. So really, you'll be doing me a favour.'

I didn't quite know what to say that.

'I – I suppose –' I began.

But as I floundered around, looking for a suitable reply, we heard a voice echoing up the stairwell.

'Soph!' it cried. 'Soph! Breaking news!'

The Princess crunched her sweet and swallowed it. 'Lottie, is that you?' she called, and Princess Charlotte came bouncing into the Guard Room. 'Quick, come with me, Soph,' she exclaimed. 'A fight's just erupted in one of the committee rooms and we really *have* to go and see it!'

'Oh, oh, do you think they'll let us join in?' asked Princess Sophie excitedly, and Princess Charlotte replied, 'I expect they'll need us to throw in a couple of upper cuts.' She mimed a punch, then saw me. 'You'd better come along too, Mr What's-your-name!' she added. 'We'll probably need some help if it turns into a brawl. Feel free to grab a ceremonial halberd from the rack.'

Before I knew what was happening, I'd been bundled into a spiral stone staircase by the two princesses. 'Details? Details?' demanded Princess Sophie, as her crinoline skirts swept down the steps, and Princess Charlotte exclaimed, 'None as yet – just a lot of shouting coming from the State Rooms opposite. Hopefully we'll get there before somebody is shot.'

But by the time we'd tumbled out of the Round Keep, into the gardens that adjoined the State Apartments, the disturbance was already over. All I could see was a pair of magpies hopping along the knot garden paths, and a stone

statue of King David II, looking a little unregal without his head.

‘That’s *so* inconsiderate,’ said Princess Charlotte.

I disengaged myself from her grip. ‘Well, now that the fight’s over, ma’am,’ I said, ‘perhaps I could think about getting back to college.’

‘Oh, if you must,’ replied Princess Charlotte, sulkily.

It wasn’t exactly the dismissal that I’d been expecting, but I meekly gave the two princesses a bow, then I risked a peek at their faces to make sure that I’d done it all correctly. But the princesses were no longer paying me any attention. Instead, they had been distracted by a disturbance in an arched entrance on the opposite side of the garden. I turned in time to see a gang of officials come stumbling out of the State Apartments, carrying a middle-aged woman in an unfashionable hooped skirt.

‘Good God,’ said Princess Sophie. ‘Is that Aunt *Katherine* over there?’

‘Oh Lord, it is!’ cried Princess Charlotte. ‘Please tell me that somebody has knocked her out for being boring!’

Princess Sophie quickly went skipping over the box hedges and bare flowerbeds of the intervening knot garden. ‘Melmerby!’ she called. ‘What’s going on?’

I tensed at the name, not eager to come face to face again with the boy who cut up dogs. But the figure who detached himself from the crowd was an older man – the father, Lord Melmerby, I realised. He had been a formidable politician once, famous for his campaigns against alcohol prohibition and women’s suffrage; but the death of his eldest son during the War had aged him, and he now looked bent and elderly.

‘Ma’am,’ he greeted, as behind him the officials laid a grey-faced Princess Katherine down on the gravel. ‘Don’t panic, ma’am. Her Highness just went a little faint whilst having tea with the Countess of Huntford.’

Princess Charlotte looked crestfallen. ‘So you mean there *wasn’t* a fight?’ she asked, and Lord Melmerby, bemused, replied, ‘Fight? No. No fight. Just Princess Katherine feeling faint. I don’t think she’s been getting much sleep recently.’

Princess Sophie quickly knelt beside her aunt. ‘We should get her a glass of water,’ she said. ‘And check her pulse. Heavens, I don’t think I’ve ever seen a person sweat so badly. Has anybody sent for the doctor?’

Lord Melmerby gestured through a break of bare fruit trees. ‘Sidebottom’s coming now,’ he replied.

I glanced over my shoulder – and was a little thrown to see a group of mud-splashed men, dressed in the striped cotton shirts of a rugby sevens team, hurrying towards us. One of them was carrying the soft leather bag of a doctor. Perhaps the aristocracy and their attendants really *did* live in a different world to the rest of us, I thought, because I wasn’t sure that *I’d* trust the bedside manner of a man whose chosen sport involved throwing people around a waterlogged field. I watched as the rugby players jostled about Princess Katherine, their studded boots grinding against the gravel. ‘Sophie!’ one of them exclaimed. ‘What in damnation do you think you’re doing?’

‘Oh, don’t start, Rupert,’ said the Princess, as she used an upturned plantpot to raise her aunt’s feet. ‘I’m just trying to help.’

Prince Rupert grabbed his cousin's arm. 'Then for God's sake, leave her alone and let the doctor do his business,' he snapped. 'This isn't one of your games of charades.'

He tried to pull Princess Sophie to her feet.

'Easy, Rupes,' exclaimed the team's prop. 'Perhaps this needs a woman's touch,' and the fullback added, 'She could certainly give *me* a woman's touch.' There was some suppressed sniggering.

'You don't know what this brat's like,' the Prince growled. 'She and my so-called *wife* spent the other afternoon trying to pin 'kick me' notes to my back.'

'That was only because you'd stopped us from being useful at the Conference,' retorted Princess Sophie.

'We could have made you King of Borgovia, Rupert,' Princess Charlotte added. 'But instead you told us to *leave*.'

'I find it highly unlikely than anybody was taking political advice from you two,' said Prince Rupert. He caught sight of me, hovering by a discarded growing frame, then added, 'And what's he doing here? For God's sake, girls, get rid of him; the last thing Aunt Katherine will want is a witness.'

I felt like pointing out that there were already five witnesses present, besides me and the doctor – but apparently it didn't count if you played rugby, because when Princess Sophie said, 'Peter's with me, Rupert,' her cousin just snapped, 'Not any more, he isn't – Renwick, get rid of him,' and I suddenly found myself being shoved towards the nearest exit by an oversized rugby player. I briefly considered protesting; but getting beaten up once in a week was probably enough, and besides I had no desire to make an enemy of the third in line to the throne. 'I may well see you tomorrow, then, ma'am,' I said with about as

much dignity as a person can muster whilst being pushed into a corridor criss-crossed with temporary telephone wires, and I heard Princess Sophie cry, 'Make sure that you do, train-boy! Remember the poor ukuleles! I feel that it's highly impolite to take up a musical instrument that you don't know how to spell!'

Back at College, I considered my options. I knew that any experience I could get working for the Royal Family would be invaluable if ever I wanted to make a name for myself in politics; but at the same time, I wasn't sure how successfully I could continue to weather Princess Sophie's personality, which seemed to lurch from 'I'll write you an I.O.U.' to 'I'll burn your newspaper' without a moment's warning. I wrestled with the dilemma of whether I should return to Timble Castle all evening – even accidentally writing, 'The Burghal Hidage suggests that up to 27,000 princesses could be conscripted for defence'. But eventually ambition won out, and the following morning, as the chapel clock struck eight, I found myself splashing through the puddles of Timble Castle, wondering what surreal experience the Royal Family would throw at me today.

A plump man in a flamboyant wig of red hair met me on the bank of the central motte.

'You look vaguely familiar,' I said, as I shook his hand, and the man replied, 'You've probably seen me floating about in the royal wake at some point, ducky. I'm Guy Glover, Princess Imogene's Page of the Backstairs. You must be Peter Dray.'

'The tutor, yes,' I replied.

Guy Glover laughed. 'Oh, aren't you a dear,' he said. 'No, 'tutors' are 'Members' of the Royal Household, ducky. They get all sorts of swanky privileges, like free tickets to the Royal Opera, and use of the Member's Dining Room. You're *not* a tutor. Her Highness has decided that her previous arrangements were too lax, so this time she's putting your lessons on a more official footing. Given your background, and your lack of qualifications, she felt that you were not really palace 'Member' material, so instead she invented a new 'Staff' post for you – Special Page of the Princess' Learning. Which is why, ducky, old G.G. is here to teach you everything he knows. But first, we must get you into livery.'

'*Livery?*' I exclaimed.

It turned out that Princess Imogene had decided that I should now wear a ridiculous black and white checked uniform, complete with white gloves and fiddly rows of silver buttons. I was horrified. 'It makes me feel like a stuffed magpie,' I complained, as I got changed in the Livery Room, and Guy Glover beamed. 'You look *ravishing*,' he said – which just made me feel even more uncomfortable.

Once my fancy dress outfit was complete, Guy Glover led me out into an overcast yard behind the servants' block, where three motorcars were waiting. A pair of footmen were stood at the vehicle that had curtains in its windows, checking the straightness of each other's bowties, whilst around the other two motors, a gang of press officers and secretaries had gathered. 'This is us,' explained Guy Glover. 'Quite a crowd, today, I see. We'll probably have to travel on the running board, ducky, so do try to hold on tight – but whatever happens, *don't get your gloves dirty*.'

A little exasperated by his choice of priorities, I fiddled with my shirt's itchy collar, as the press officers and secretaries discussed last minute preparations, and Guy Glover started to lecture me on royal etiquette. '*Never* begin a conversation with Her Highness. Only respond to questions that *she* asks *you*. And never ask her anything personal. She will consider it rude. Don't address a 'Member' or an 'Official' of the Royal Household unless they first address you – and always refer to them as 'sir'. If a member of the Royal *Family* walks past you, bow from the waist...' And so on. Some of it went in. Most did not, and increasingly I felt as if I was trapped in some crazy fantasy. Even the servants were mad here.

We'd been waiting nearly half an hour before Princess Sophie finally arrived. She was being shadowed by Ostrich-bonnet and Diamond-tiara, and Sir Hugo Bramhope was quietly lecturing her on the day's schedule. The Princess already looked bored. 'Perhaps, instead of listening to the school children sing, we could get them to have a piggy-back fight,' she suggested to Sir Hugo as he helped her into the first motorcar, and Sir Hugo replied, 'An interesting idea, ma'am, but sadly not one that is on the schedule.' Neither of them spared me a glance as the chauffeur cranked the motor, and I realised that it was true what they said about uniforms making you invisible. Instead, Guy Glover tapped me on the arm and asked, 'Are you ready?' I felt that 'No' was the only appropriate answer to this question, but apparently Guy Glover didn't agree; so instead began a morning of hair-raising journeys through the narrow streets of Timble (accompanied by such pertinent comments as, 'Oh my God – the tram! the tram!'), followed by engagements of mind-squeezing boredom, where

Guy Glover and I had nothing to do but stand still, and stare into the middle distance, trying not to meet people's eyes. I found the experience mildly infuriating; but at least I didn't have to fake enthusiasm wherever we went. Princess Sophie, on the other hand, was gamely trying to pretend that there was no place she'd rather be than standing on the rain-swept platform at Donnington Park Station, naming a new locomotive 'The Timble Peace'; or, alternatively, lingering outside the Church School at Hardraw Force, listening to a children's choir mangle the national anthems of all the main powers present at the Conference. I have to admit, I was a little surprised. I suppose that I'd expected her to behave like a spoilt child, drawing attention to her impatience with little acts of rudeness. But by the time we returned to Timble Castle, I was forced to concede that, whatever her other faults, Princess Sophie knew how to behave like a professional when she had to.

Back in the yard, Sir Hugo opened the car door for the Princess. 'Right,' he said, 'we've got three-quarters of an hour before you're scheduled to have tea with the embassy wives, ma'am. We should go over to your mother's chambers, and squeeze in a lesson from Mr Dray.'

Princess Sophie climbed out of the motor. 'Oh God, Hugo,' she said. 'I'm exhausted enough already without having to suffer Mummy's disapproval. So I've got a better idea. Mr Dray and I are going to go over to the kitchen gardens for some peace and quiet, whilst you're going to tell Mummy what a fantastically good girl I've been today, and how I'm clearly responsible enough to go to the Callerton's White Party tonight.'

Sir Hugo sighed. ‘I feel that this isn’t one of your better plans, ma’am,’ he said.

Princess Sophie patted his hand. ‘I’ll take Glover along in case Mr Dray decides to try anything indecent,’ she said – and before Sir Hugo could protest, the Princess had steered me away, into a gap between the mock-medieval buildings of the Upper Ward. ‘Thank heavens *that’s* over,’ she told me. ‘I was beginning to think that Aunt Katherine’s approach of spontaneous collapsing fits had merit.’

Without thinking, I asked if Princess Katherine was alright, before I remembered that personal questions were one of the things that Glover had said were forbidden. But the Princess didn’t seem to notice. ‘Lord knows,’ she replied. ‘I thought that Glover was just being a bit stroppy when we overheard him say that Aunt Katherine was a drunkard, but now I’m not so sure. It makes me feel a little bad about punishing him.’

It suddenly occurred to me where I’d seen Guy Glover before.

‘Oh God,’ I exclaimed. ‘He was the poor fellow that Geoffrey Melmerby was dragging around on a dog-lead the other week.’ I felt a swell of disapproval. ‘Is that a *common* form of discipline around here?’

The Princess fiddled with her left earring in embarrassment. ‘I suppose that we were a bit naughty that day,’ she conceded. ‘But don’t worry – I made it up to Glover. I sent him a signed photograph of Mummy and a chocolate cake from Henson and Cartwright’s, and now he’s completely in love with me again.’

She flashed me a grin.

I wasn’t sure whether this made it better or not; but before I could say anything further, the Princess changed the subject.

'You don't mind getting your hands dirty, do you?' she asked, as she pushed open a wooden gate.

'Physically or metaphorically?' I replied, warily, and the Princess laughed. 'A bit of both, I suppose,' she said. 'My brother's rooms overlook the kitchen terrace, and I want to rearrange the plant-pots so that they spell 'Loser'.'

So began my first tutorial with Princess Sophie.

I call it a 'tutorial', although I'm not sure that I did much tutoring. As we moved around the pots of basil and rosemary, I tried to tell the Princess about the unfairness of the food stamp system. But somehow, my noble ambition to educate her on the difficulties of living in the Enclave kept getting distracted by rather less edifying conversations, like 'What would it be like if apple trees *bit back*?' and 'Would cross-breeding hickory with chives give you 'hives'?' Before too long, I found myself being persuaded to race snails with her along the rim of the fountain. Later, we accidentally broke the bench swing by seeing who could swing the highest, and my attempt to teach the Princess how to play conkers was an abysmal failure – mainly because the Princess kept trying to cheat by aiming her conker at my knuckles. At some point, despite Guy Glover whispers of 'Don't stand so *close*, Dray,' and my complete failure to get the Princess to focus, I think that I actually began to enjoy myself, because when Sir Hugo reappeared, three-quarters of an hour later, I was surprised to feel a genuine pang of regret that the day had come to an end.

'I hope that you've had a successful lesson, ma'am,' said Sir Hugo, as we returned to the Round Keep – and, without blinking, Princess Sophie exclaimed, '*Rather*. Mr Dray has been telling me all about how discipline at his school was so

strict that they weren't allowed to use the letter 't' until they were *sixteen* – which can be very embarrassing if your name is 'Pete'.

'I... see,' replied Sir Hugo.

And that, I thought, is probably that.

If Sir Hugo made any attempt to test Princess Sophie on what she had learnt today, then there was little chance of me being invited back. I told myself that it was probably for the best; if Princess Imogene really wanted somebody to tutor her daughter, then she'd have to replace me with a person that Princess Sophie would actually listen to. But even so, as I left the Castle that day, I couldn't help feeling a little sad at the prospect of never returning there again.

For the first time since I'd arrived in Timble, I'd had fun.

Of course, my tutorials with Princess Sophie were not the only thing occupying my mind during those last days of November. I also had my end-of-term progress review with the Warden and Professor Longfellow to look forward to; I'd joined the Whack House debating society, and was currently working up the courage to actually join in one of the debates; and, of course, I'd been following the Peace Conference negotiations with much interest. I was always conscious that the latter could break down at any moment, and throw Ma and Nancy back into a warzone – so I was very relieved when, one morning, I was woken by a din of klaxons and bells echoing up the street outside my bedder window. It was the Borgovians celebrating a settlement on borders. With that stumbling block overcome, everything else happened very quickly. The following day,

agreed treaties on international aviation and labour relations were leaked to the press; the day after that, a rumour went around that the Eschenbach Emperor had agreed to abdicate; and the day after *that*, the antiques shop opposite my window was suddenly filled with panicking delegates who'd just realised that diplomatic procedure meant that they were expected to add a seal to their signatures on the final Treaty. The downside to all this, of course, was that, with a Treaty signed, Princess Sophie would have no reason to remain in Timble. But since I wasn't really expecting to see her again, I told myself that this made little difference. I was thus slightly wrong-footed when Collins brought me a last, unexpected invitation to wait upon her at the Castle, one frosty Thursday morning.

Guy Glover met me at the Service Entrance. He was wrapped up to the ears in a woollen scarf patterned with royal unicorns. 'Well, ducky,' he sighed, 'I tried to tell them that you lacked the proper respect for the hierarchies of this job, but they didn't take any notice.' He gestured through the open door. 'Shall we begin?'

I got changed in the Livery Room, and then was taken by Glover to a small cloister, just off the Lower Ward, where we found Princess Sophie stood on the lawn with a group of delegates, watching her brother plant a ceremonial tree. 'Just remember this, ducky,' said Glover as we walked across the frosted grass. 'Even if it may seem otherwise, you are always the servant and she is always the mistress. *Never* mistake her for a friend.'

I wondered if he was jealous.

The Princess was dressed in a somewhat demure palate of fawns and browns – the unglamorous daywear of a lady with

no immediate public engagements. ‘Ah, train-boy,’ she said, as she watched her brother and the High Sheriff lift the ash sapling into its hole. ‘I’m glad you’re here. The ceremony has been a huge disappointment so far. Tom’s usually better entertainment than this. Last year, he leapt into a ditch at the Austwick Races, having mistaken a car backfire for a gunshot.’

There was a polite applause as Prince Thomas began to shovel soil around the sapling’s roots.

‘I suppose that short of falling down the hole, there isn’t much comedy value in planting trees, ma’am,’ I said, and the Princess replied, ‘It’s ridiculous, train-boy. Tom can barely eat a bowl of soup without spilling it down himself; but because he’s a treasured royal male, they just laugh and say ‘he’ll grow into it’ – before turning a blind eye when he goes to the Naughty Pussycat Club and gets completely shampooed. But the moment I try to have a personality, it’s all, ‘Act your age’ and ‘Learn some dignity.’

Sensing that, if Princess Sophie was left in charge of this conversation, we might end up playing pranks on her brother again, I tried to change the subject. ‘Perhaps if we turn our attention to the problem of long-term unemployment it will help distract you,’ I suggested, hopefully.

‘Well, I suppose that being made to vomit *is* a distraction of sorts,’ the Princess conceded.

But before I could follow up on this unpromising opening, a voice from the arcade shouted, ‘Soph, Soph, drop everything except your knickers!’ and Princess Charlotte came dashing over. ‘Operation Balderdash is *go*, Soph!’ she exclaimed. ‘We need to get your agent over to the apartments *triple* quick.’

I felt my chances of making a good impression slipping away. ‘Your agent?’ I asked, suspiciously, and Princess Sophie beamed. ‘Congratulations!’ she exclaimed, shaking my hand. ‘We’ve just promoted you to Extra-Special Page of the Princess’ Secret Service. It’s a most dazzling privilege. Your first task is to retrieve my tennis racquet from Aunt Katherine without her noticing. She confiscated it last week after she caught Lottie and me trying to hit oranges off the Green Drawing Room balcony. This mission is of *national importance*, Mr Dray, because oranges are evil, and should always be punished. Any questions?’

‘But the lessons, ma’am –’ I began, and Princess Charlotte exclaimed, ‘Soph is pretty close to being a genius already. Any more knowledge and her head might explode.’

‘Don’t worry train-boy,’ added Princess Sophie. ‘This will only take five minutes, and then you’ll have my *full* attention.’

I tried to protest that this was outside the agreed parameters of my job, but the two princesses just herded me down the cloister arcade, and into the wing that contained the Royal Apartments. ‘I really don’t think that Sir Hugo will approve,’ I said, as we stumbled up a flight of marble stairs.

‘Then I suggest you don’t tell him,’ said Princess Charlotte.

‘Look,’ added Princess Sophie, ‘all you need to do, is sneak into Aunt Katherine’s solar and retrieve the racquet. Lottie and I will keep the page at the door distracted. It’s Hebbert today, so we’ll just send him off to find ice cream. There really is no way this plan can go wrong.’

‘Unless of course Aunt Imogene finds out,’ said Princess Charlotte.

‘Or the building collapses,’ added Princess Sophie.

‘Or there’s an outbreak of scarlet fever.’

‘Or the sun explodes. It’s probably best if you do this as quickly as possible.’

Which is how I found myself, a few minutes later, stood in a solar that was larger than some houses, wondering how the hell I’d let myself get trapped in this situation. At least the page on the door had been promised some of the ice cream. Heart thumping, I quickly scanned the room for Princess Sophie’s racquet, vowing that this was a one off, and that I’d never let myself be caught in this situation again. But, hard though I looked, I could find no evidence of any sports equipment; instead, all I could see were a few chintz-covered armchairs, a bureau cluttered with family photographs, and a settee with a lady sprawled on it.

I froze.

Oh hell, I thought. Princess Katherine is *here*.

The Princess was asleep – or at least dozing restlessly – on the settee. One of her arms was draped languidly to the floor, the other was flopped on her chest; she was sweating, and muttering incoherently. My first instinct was, of course, to run; if she awoke in time to catch me, then I knew that I could face arrest. But even as I turned to flee, I saw a leather tourniquet strapped about her upper arm – and the shock stopped me like a wall. I stared at the Princess again, not quite crediting what I was seeing, and slowly other suspicious details became noticeable, like the chased-silver syringe lying on the rug by her hand, and the small glass bottle sitting near my shoe. I picked up the bottle and read the word ‘MORPHINE’ printed across its label.

At that moment, the door creaked open.

Startled, I dropped the bottle, and winced as it clonked against the parquet floor. But Princess Katherine didn't stir. Instead I found myself face to face with Guy Glover.

'Quick, lad,' he hissed. 'Her dresser's approaching. You need to get out of here immediately.'

'B-but the Princess –' I began.

'That one's out for the count, and the other two have run off, giggling. We need to go.'

Dazed, I stumbled after him, out of the solar, and into a corridor hung with oppressively large oil paintings.

'She was drugged,' I stammered. 'A member of our royal family was on *drugs*.'

Guy Glover handed me his hipflask.

'Shut up,' he said. 'I don't want to know.'

'But she was on drugs, Glover!'

'Whatever you saw, ducky, forget it, *now*. There are some things that it just isn't safe to know.'

But I couldn't forget it. If Princess Katherine, granddaughter of King Clement III and elder sister to Princess Imogene, was a morphine addict, then everything that I thought I knew about the Royal Family had been turned upside-down. I stumbled after Glover, wondering if Princess Sophie had known about this addiction before she'd sent me into her aunt's rooms. I couldn't help feeling hurt that she'd abandoned me at the first sign of trouble. If it hadn't been for Glover, I thought, I might have been arrested. I felt a flash of annoyance. Clearly, Glover had been right. All those silly games that we'd played in the kitchen gardens had meant nothing to her. She was the mistress, and I was the servant.

‘We should tell the press,’ I told Glover, as we arrived back in the Livery Room. ‘And the police.’

Glover retrieved his hipflask.

‘And what do you think telling the press and the police will achieve, ducky?’ he asked. ‘This is the Royal Family you’re talking about. They’ve spent the last few centuries perfecting the art of scandal suppression. If you threaten them, they’ll retaliate.’

‘But we have to do *something*,’ I said.

‘No we don’t,’ replied Guy Glover. ‘Look, I’ll help cover for you with Princess Imogene today, but after that, you’re on your own, lad. I have my own position to protect here, and this is not something worth losing my job over. If you want my advice, go home and pretend that this never happened.’

‘But –’ I began.

‘Go home, Dray,’ said Glover, firmly.

‘But –’

‘Go *home*.’

Chapter Five

The View From the Bottom of the Stairs

26th Nov: Nearly got the train boy into trouble today; but it all seems to have sorted itself out, so Lottie says not to worry about it... I'm still not entirely sure what to make of Mr Dray. He lurches from a kind of embarrassed charm to total tongue-tied awkwardness. You can tell that he didn't go to a proper school because his public speaking is atrocious, and I've discovered that if I look at him too intently, I can make him blush – which, now I think about it, is actually a little bit adorable... In other news, spent much of the evening offering to teach the brash and utterly clueless Lady Milena of Rab obscure Locklander words. Lottie and I *may* have got a little creative in our definitions. Milena later called Uncle Richard a 'retard' to his face. I practically had to eat my hand to stop myself from laughing.

– Princess Sophie, Aged 17, *Diary – Year 1910* (Unpublished), pp423

In the end, I took Glover's advice, and didn't go to the press about Princess Katherine; but what I'd witnessed in her solar continued to haunt me long after I'd returned to College. I thought about it in the Dining Hall that evening, and as a result I got fined for not bowing my head whilst the Warden said grace; I thought about it as I walked to lectures the following morning, and as a result I was very nearly knocked down by a

tram; and I was *still* thinking about it when I popped into the Stationers on Walkergate to buy blotting paper. As a result, *I can never go in that shop again*. By the time Amy invited herself around for tea and pikelets that Sunday, I was so wound up that I had to tell *somebody* about it – and, unfortunately for my sister, she caught the brunt of my indignation.

‘It’s obscene!’ I cried. ‘She was just lying there on the couch, *drooling*. My eyes will never be the same again.’

‘At least she had the decency to shoot up in private,’ said Amy, calmly. ‘You hear stories about people injecting themselves under the table at dinner, or in their box at the theatre. It happens more often than you’d think.’

‘But she’s a member of the Royal Family,’ I protested. ‘She should be above that – and – and – and you know, you really don’t have to do that on your half-day off.’

Amy was sat in an armchair by my fireplace, darning socks.

‘The Dray family has little enough dignity left without your grubby toes sticking out for all to see,’ my sister replied. ‘Look, Pete, this Glover fellow seems to have his head screwed on right. Listen to what he says. The things that I’ve seen in service would make an innocent like you blush, but the only reason I still have a job is because I know when to keep my mouth shut.’

‘If only that stretched to home life as well,’ I muttered.

Amy kicked me in the shin.

‘Ow!’ I exclaimed, clutching my leg. ‘What was that for?’

‘Oh, I do apologise,’ said Amy. ‘Apparently my foot has developed an allergy to wisecracks.’ She handed me the darned sock, then added, ‘I don’t know how you’ve done it, Pete, but in the two months that you’ve been here, you seem to have made enemies with a lot of powerful people. Please be careful.’

I put the sock over my hand and mimed a thoughtful pose with it.

‘I’ll try,’ the sock squawked.

But, as it turned out, it wasn’t me who needed to be careful. A couple of mornings later, I was awoken by an urgent banging at my door. Unable to find my dressing gown, I wrapped a sheet around my shoulders and opened the door to find a young girl in the black and white uniform of a maid, standing in my stairwell.

‘Marie?’ I said, recognising one of Amy’s friends. ‘What is it?’

Marie was still breathless from running up the two flights stairs. ‘You must come quick, sir,’ she panted. ‘Amy’s been attacked.’

I stared at her blearily, not quite grasping what she’d said. Actually, my first thought was ‘Who has Amy attacked?’ which, to my sleep-befuddled mind, made better sense. But then Marie said, ‘They’ve taken her to St Gemma’s,’ – and suddenly I was grabbing clothes, and pulling on shoes. ‘*What happened? What happened?*’ I demanded as I leapt down the stairs.

Marie chased after me. ‘I swear, sir, I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I were in the kitchens when it happened, and they whisked her straight off to hospital. But Amy weren’t looking right all evening – not since she come off her fag break.’

Out in the street, I desperately scanned the stalled traffic for a tram or a taxi.

‘Amy *smokes?*’ I asked, surprised.

‘Of course Amy smokes,’ said Marie. ‘We all do.’ She grabbed my arm. ‘Come – it’ll be quicker on foot.’

I dashed after the maid, through the stationary tradesmen's carts and motorcars that clogged Whack House Lane. 'The whole town's at a standstill this morning because of that bleeding treaty signing,' Marie explained. 'I don't know why everybody's making such a fuss – it weren't as if it were *our* war.'

But all I could think about was my sister. 'Who'd want to attack Amy?' I asked.

Marie shrugged. 'She were going on about some creepy gent in a white coat the other day, but I don't know if that's got anything to do with it.'

Oh God no, I thought, please not Milan Radić.

Suddenly all I could think about was how Radić had once hung an entire family upside-down over a pile of smoking rye, and then drunk their wine until they'd died from asphyxiation. The *dog*, I thought – if he'd taken revenge on Amy for what he thought I'd done to his dog, then I knew I'd never forgive myself. By the time we reached St Gemma's Hospital, I was almost unhinged with anxiety. Pushing my way through the front doors, I pestered the first butterfly-capped sister I came across until she agreed to track Amy down. We finally found my sister sat in a metal-framed bed near the women's ward sluices, her back propped up by a wicker board.

'Amy,' I exclaimed. 'Thank heavens you're alright! What happened? Did he try and asphyxiate you?'

'*Asphyxiate* me?' repeated Amy, confused. 'No, you moron, I haven't been asphyxiated. They say I've bruised my spine.'

'Oh, thank God,' I sighed.

'What do you mean, 'thank God'?' demanded Amy. 'I'm in bloody agony, thank you very much, and my back's all swollen.'

But the feeling is beginning to return to my legs, so they say I should make a full recovery.'

I slumped down onto a stool, lightheaded with relief. 'Was this him?' I demanded. 'Was this Radić?' and Amy replied, 'Who?'

'The guy you met the other day,' I said. 'The one in a white coat.'

'What guy in a white coat?' asked Amy, and after a couple of confused minutes, we managed to ascertain that Marie had seen Amy talking to the milkman. 'He keeps trying to chat me up,' Amy explained. 'But I think he's already married.'

My previous panic suddenly began to feel a little silly. As a trainee nurse came around to clear out Amy's bedpan, I made an effort to steady myself. 'So who *did* attack you, then?' I asked.

'I'm not even sure I *was* attacked, Pete,' said Amy. 'It's all a bit confused.'

'Just tell me what happened.'

There had been a Peace Ball at the Melmerby residence the previous evening. As it drew to a close, Amy had gone upstairs to help tidy up, and she was stood at the top of the staircase, with a tray of dirty glasses, when Geoffrey Melmerby and his friends had appeared. 'Now, everybody was laughing and jeering like the drunks that they were,' said Amy, 'and I tried to avoid them, which for a while was fine, but – but then, I don't know what happened, Pete, because suddenly I was staring *up* the marble staircase, unable to move, and there was smashed glass all the way from me to Mr Geoffrey.'

'He pushed you down the *stairs*?' I exclaimed.

‘I didn’t say that, Pete,’ said Amy, wearily. ‘It’s possible that I tripped – though I’ve spent years avoiding high-heeled shoes in fear of just that. But...’

‘*But?*’ I repeated.

‘There *was* something else that evening, Pete. Something that I probably wasn’t supposed to see.’

It was just before they’d started the preparations for dinner. Amy had popped out into the yard for some ‘fresh air’ (ha!), and she was standing around, minding her own business, when Lord Melmerby had come stumbling out of the house with a couple of his associates. A motorcar was waiting for them, and they’d immediately bundled a limp figure onto the back seat. ‘Now I didn’t see much, Pete,’ said Amy, ‘but I’m pretty sure of this: the figure they’d carried outside was Princess Katherine.’

A shadow of dread passed over me.

‘The morphine, again,’ I said.

‘Well, I don’t know about that,’ Amy replied. ‘But Mr Geoffrey was certainly wound up about something. He must have seen me in the yard, because later that night, when I went upstairs to collect the empty glasses, he started pestering me. I mean, he was drunk, so at first it was more annoying than threatening, but he was insistent, telling me that I shouldn’t spy on things that weren’t my business, and Princess Sophie was there, so he was trying his best to impress her, and then, when I attempted to walk away, he grew aggressive, and – and... well, you know the rest.’

‘Princess Sophie was there too?’ I asked, heavily.

‘I seem to remember her playing football with the butler’s hat at one point,’ Amy replied.

I rubbed my temples and tried to decide what to do. Here, I realised, was more evidence that any optimistic evaluations I'd made of Princess Sophie's personality had been way off the mark. Clearly I needed to refine my people-reading skills. However, if Glover was right about the influence wielded by the Royal Family, then there was no point in trying to implicate her in what had happened to Amy. But Geoffrey Melmerby, I decided, was a different matter. The Melmerby family might be powerful, but surely they weren't powerful enough to dodge an attempted murder charge. I got to my feet.

'Pete, are you alright?' asked Amy.

I gave her a kiss on the forehead, and promised to come and visit her that evening.

'Pete – what are you doing?' Amy demanded.

But a righteous anger had begun to burn inside me. I said goodbye to Amy and Marie, and left the ward, with some vague intention of going to the police. But as I strode into town, it quickly became apparent that the police had more pressing matters to deal with that day. Despite his lack of popular support, it had been confirmed that the Eschenbach Emperor would *not* be abdicating the Imperial Throne after all, and word had gone round that some of the conference delegates were so appalled by the terms of the treaty, that they'd turned up for the signing drunk. Already I could see protestors gathering on street corners to burn the Locklander flag, and throw stones at passing motorcars, whilst burly police officers had linked arms to form blue-jacketed cordons across the more important streets. I knew that any complaint I made against Geoffrey Melmerby today would probably get buried – so instead I quickly felt around in my pocket for the I.O.U. that Princess

Sophie had written to me, and turned my steps towards Timble Castle. Even if I couldn't touch Princess Sophie, I reasoned, I might be able to pressure her enough to get Geoffrey Melmerby arrested.

More protestors had gathered outside the Castle's main gates by the time I arrived. Cavalry had been called in to hold back the crowds, and I could see a lorry filled with secretaries trying to nudge its way through the mass of angry people. The constable on duty was thus not particularly pleased to see me. 'Can't you come back at a better time?' he demanded, as he wrestled to keep the protestors back. But I showed him the I.O.U., and demanded to be allowed entry, and reluctantly the constable passed the message onto his sergeant, who got on the telephone to his inspector, and the inspector liaised with the Constable of Castle Yeomen, and within twenty minutes I was being led out of the noisy scrum at the Castle gates to the considerably more peaceful office of the Keeper of the King's Swans.

'It wasn't actually you I was trying to get in contact with,' I said, grimly, as I shook the man's hand, and the Keeper replied, 'Well, you'll be lucky to get hold of anybody else today, lad. What is it you want?'

I asked for pen and paper, and scribbled out a short note. *I know that you saw what happened at the Melmerby residence last night, I wrote. I would be obliged if you would spare me ten minutes of your time.*

'Can you see that this is passed onto Princess Sophie?' I asked.

The Keeper scratched his head. 'It's all highly irregular,' he said. 'And I don't like to bother Her Highness on a day like this.'

But, I suppose that her signature can't be ignored. I'll see what I can do.'

And he departed, leaving me standing by the office window, trying desperately to settle my nerves. Keep calm, I told myself. You can't touch Princess Sophie, so there's no point making an enemy of her. Just make a clear argument for why the police should be informed of Geoffrey Melmerby's behaviour, and hope that her conscience will do the rest. I watched the stream of generals and politicians and diplomats and bankers flow past the window, and I wondered if I'd made the right decision.

My answer came ten minutes later when the door banged open, and Princess Imogene came striding into the office.

'Ah, Mr Dray,' said the Princess. 'I've read your cryptic little message, and I have to say that I'm not particularly intrigued. You aren't the first person to try and use a story of my daughter's drunken antics against her.'

'I'm not attempting to blackmail her, ma'am,' I said, quickly. 'This is something else entirely.' But before I could clarify my position, other people began to squeeze into the office. There was Princess Charlotte, who gazed at me predatorily, and Princess Sophie who just looked sick; there was Prince Rupert, who seemed to be concerned that his naval uniform had lost a button, and, behind him, the inevitable bevy of secretaries and pages, trying desperately not to stand on any royal toes. And finally, to my alarm, there was Geoffrey Melmerby, dressed in a top hat and tails, and looking edgy. I found myself suddenly at a loss for words.

'Did someone say that the tutor was trying to blackmail us?' asked Princess Charlotte. 'Well, this is certainly a lot more

exciting than waiting for a queue of elderly men to deface a piece of paper!

Princess Imogene ignored her. 'If your defence is just to stand there and open your mouth a couple of times, Mr Dray, then that makes things a lot easier for me. Obviously, you are relieved of your tutoring duties, and blacklisted from any future honours that you might be suggested for. And let me assure you that any leverage you think you may have over my daughter is nothing of the sort. We have an understanding with the press barons, Mr Dray. Drunken party behaviour, however undignified, does not make the day's news.'

I finally found my voice.

'You think that this is some drunken prank?' I shouted. 'My sister very nearly broke her back!'

There was a confused silence. Outside, I heard the distant boom of a cannon marking the beginning of the signing.

'I'm sorry, I don't quite follow,' said Princess Imogene. 'What's your sister got to do with this?' – and there was another pause, before Princess Charlotte began to laugh.

'Oh, I get it,' she said, fluttering her hands excitedly. 'It's the *maid*. Don't worry, Aunt Imogene. I think I can explain. There's this maid in the Melmerby household who's taken a bit of a shine to Geoffrey – isn't that right, Geoff? Now Geoffrey wasn't leading her on or anything, but he'd been nice to her on a couple of occasions, looking out for her when she got into a catfight with one of the scullery maids, and the girl took that to mean that he was in love with her.'

'This isn't true,' I said, hotly. 'Amy would never fancy Geoffrey Melmerby.'

But the catfight did sound all too plausible.

‘It might have all ended then and there,’ Princess Charlotte continued, ‘but then the butler caught this ‘Amy’ doing an unflattering impression of Lord Melmerby, and he wanted to fire her on the spot; but again Geoffrey intervened – because let’s be honest, Melmerby senior is pretty much a walking cadaver who deserves all the mockery he gets. Unfortunately, this convinced the maid that Geoff was in love with her, and she kept trying to slip him little notes.’

‘This isn’t true,’ I protested again. But my voice sounded a little weaker this time, and I could just imagine Amy strutting up and down the Melmerbys’ kitchen, doing impressions of her master.

‘Of course, Geoffrey was rather embarrassed by her attentions,’ Princess Charlotte added, ‘but because he’s a gentleman he didn’t tell his parents; instead he tried to gently hint that the maid’s attentions would be better focused on somebody from her own class. Sadly, the maid misinterpreted his words, and became convinced that he was suggesting they elope together.’

‘No,’ I said, desperately. ‘No, this isn’t true.’

Princess Charlotte gently took my hands. ‘I’m sorry, Mr Dray,’ she said. ‘I’m not trying to shame your sister. There was no silly behaviour on her part – she just tried to pass Geoff a love letter last night, and when he refused, she burst into tears, and ran for the stairs. Don’t blame her for twisting the truth a little. She’s probably just embarrassed. If she hadn’t been wearing high heels, she would never have tripped.’

And suddenly, all my growing doubts vanished.

Amy did not wear high heels.

My expression must have changed, because the Princess seemed to realise that I was no longer falling for her lies, and just for a second the mask slipped. It was like looking into a void. There was nothing there behind her eyes – no feeling, no empathy, no compassion, just a blank emptiness where a person’s soul should be. I’d seen that expression before in the cold, dead face of Milan Radić. Oh my God no, I thought, it can’t be – she can’t be. But suddenly things started falling into place. I remembered Longfellow’s check-list of psychopathic attributes: extravagant self-worth – a lack of remorse – the instinct to manipulate. Princess Charlotte had displayed all those qualities. More importantly, her influence helped explain the apparent contradictions in Princess Sophie’s personality. The bullying on the train – it had been egged on by Princess Charlotte. Sophie had been embarrassed when her mother had confronted them about it; Charlotte hadn’t. Then there was the incident with Guy Glover; I was suddenly certain that dragging him around on a dog-lead had been *her* idea; somehow Princess Charlotte had managed to convince Princess Sophie and Geoffrey Melmerby that it would be an entertaining way of punishing him for what he’d said about Princess Katherine; and when the reality of their behaviour had dawned on Princess Sophie, she’d gone out of her way to apologise to Glover, but Princess Charlotte had shown no sign of remorse. And whose idea had it been to let me ‘stumble’ upon Princess Katherine’s drug habit? Again, I was sure that Princess Charlotte had arranged the whole thing; she must have known what the Princess was up to; it wouldn’t have been hard to convince Princess Sophie how ‘funny’ it would be to see her tutor caught in an embarrassing situation. I racked my brain

for other examples – and suddenly I remembered the dog – Milan Radić’s dog. Cut up and tortured by some very sick mind. I didn’t for one moment think that Princess Charlotte had done the deed herself; but Geoffrey Melmerby had been so drunk that night that it would have only taken a few jibes to stoke his anger at Radić, and suddenly a boy who had probably never shown a particular appetite for violence before was slashing apart an innocent dog. I stared at her, wondering why someone would do such things, and with a sickening jolt of understanding, I realised that she *enjoyed* it. She’d discovered that she had the power to manipulate others into doing horrific acts, and it amused her. Probably she would never be the one to get her hands dirty – I doubted that it was *her* hand which had given Amy that push – but she was the one behind it, carefully probing and prodding the weak spots of those around her, waiting until something within them flipped. ‘It was you,’ I whispered. ‘It was you,’ and Princess Charlotte gave me a radiant smile. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘What was me?’ And I knew that I’d lost. Who was going to believe me? The word of a signalman’s son, against the wife of a prince. I didn’t know what to do. Get out, I told myself. You can’t win this, so get out before she turns the tables on you.

‘Well, if this is all just some sordid love story, I have little further interest in the matter,’ said Princess Imogene. ‘Mr Dray, I will speak with you in private about exactly what I expect of you in the coming days. Sophie, you’d better stay as well. The rest of you may get back to the peace signing.’

Princess Charlotte flashed another of her utterly dazzling, utterly fake smiles. ‘Of course, Aunt Imogene,’ she said. ‘I’ll see you at the reception afterwards,’ and she floated out of the

room, followed by the servants and a rather pale Geoffrey Melmerby. But when Prince Rupert made to do the same, Princess Imogene said, 'Rupert, I'd like a word with you too, if you don't mind. Shut the door.'

Frowning, the Prince pushed the door to.

'I'm sure that you don't need my help disciplining members of your staff, aunt,' he said – and Princess Imogene rounded on him furiously. '*I thought you said that you had her under control!*' she snapped.

Prince Rupert took a step backwards. 'Had who under control?' he asked, confused. 'Are you talking about Lottie?'

'Of course I'm talking about 'Lottie',' said Princess Imogene; and suddenly I realised that she *knew*. She knew that Princess Charlotte had been lying about Amy, and she knew what Princess Charlotte was capable of. As I frantically tried to work out what this meant, Princess Imogene advanced on her nephew. 'The agreement was that Charlotte would be allowed to associate with my daughter only as long as you kept an eye on her behaviour,' she said.

'Her behaviour?' repeated Princess Sophie. 'Mummy I don't understand.'

'Shut up, Sophie. I know that the story about the maid's crush on Geoffrey Melmerby was a lie.'

Prince Rupert found himself backed up against a bookcase by his aunt. 'Are you saying that you believe the tutor?' he demanded. 'You think that *my wife* pushed his sister down the stairs.'

'I certainly think that she was responsible,' said Princess Imogene, and her daughter exclaimed, 'Mummy, don't you

dare say such horrible things about Lottie. I know that you don't like her, but this is going too far!

'And why do you think that I don't like her, Sophie? It's because I *knew* that this day would come. I told the King, I told Richard, I even told you Rupert, but you all said, 'It's just a phase' and 'she'll grow out of it'. Well she hasn't, Rupert. Instead she's come very close to killing somebody. And you Sophie – you just *stood and watched!*'

There were tears in Princess Sophie's eyes.

'Mummy, stop it, stop it!' she said. 'I hate you, you always do this, you blame me, you blame my friends! Just stop it! I'm not going to listen to you anymore. When they crown Rupert King of the Borgovians, I'm going to go with him and Lottie to Borgovia, and then I'll live there for the rest of my life, and never speak to you again!'

There was an awkward silence.

Prince Rupert scratched his cheek.

'Rupert *isn't* going to be King of Borgovia,' explained Princess Imogene. 'There was a lot of discussion about this, but in the end we decided that until his brother, Anthony, produces an heir, it was best to keep the third in line to the throne here in Locklands. Instead, we're going to install your brother, Thomas, in Borgovia. God knows how *that's* going to work. He's still dithering over whether brown or black shoes are more fitting footwear for official functions, and at some point I'm going to have to break it to him that, as part of the international agreement, he'll be marrying Lady Milena of Rab; but the whole continent is signing their names to the treaty as we speak, so he won't have much chance of ducking out of it. However, I do think that you've inadvertently made a very good

point, Sophie. Some time in Borgovia, away from Charlotte's influence *would* be an excellent idea –'

'Mummy, please –'

'When Thomas leaves to claim his new throne in the spring, I'm going to send you along with him. A couple of years away from Locklander Society might be just what you need to finally grow up. In the meanwhile, you can cool off in Rensdale. Now get out of my sight, and tell your Mistress of the Wardrobes to start packing. I want you gone from Timble before dusk.'

'But Mummy –!' protested Princess Sophie.

'Go!'

And with a sob, Princess Sophie fled the office.

'Rupert, make sure she does as she's told,' said Princess Imogene.

Prince Rupert gingerly slipped along the bookcase to the door. 'Yes aunt,' he said, and he too fled the room.

I suddenly found myself alone with Princess Imogene. Feeling self-conscious, I tried not to fidget, as the sound of rain started to patter against the latticed windows. 'Well, Mr Dray,' said the Princess, sitting down behind the desk, 'it's just you and me now. First of all, on behalf of the Royal Family of Locklands, let me apologise to both you and your sister. What happened last night was unforgivable. But you must understand that it's not in the national interest for this matter to go public. The scandal could be very damaging for the government of this country.'

I felt my anger flare. 'So you're just going to pretend that it never happened?' I demanded.

The room had started to darken with the rain, but I could still see the tiredness that appeared in Princess Imogene's face.

‘Oh it definitely happened, Mr Dray,’ she said, quietly. ‘And I have to live with the knowledge that the daughter I birthed was at least tacitly complicit in the outrage. But there are layers to this situation of which you are unaware, Mr Dray. Much as I would love to get rid of Charlotte, neither the King nor Prince Richard would allow it, and unfortunately we don’t have any conclusive proof to force their hand. One day, I’m sure, Charlotte will overreach herself, and I promise you that I will be there waiting to strike her down when it happens. But until then, there is little we can do. You in particular are powerless and exposed and only capable of getting hurt. I know that this won’t be easy for you, Mr Dray, but I strongly suggest that you retire from this battle. I will make it worth your while, of course. Your sister’s hospital bills will be covered, and I’ll make sure that her name is added to the Civil List so that she need never work again. As for you, all you have to do is name your preferred career, and I will see that you get your foot firmly in the door. In return, all I ask is that you never mention a word of what happened last night again.’

Outside, the rain grew heavier, and a gust made the window panes creak.

‘But this is bribery!’ I protested.

‘Of course it’s bribery,’ replied Princess Imogene. ‘It’s also, I’m afraid, the best outcome that you’re going to get. Talk it over with your sister, if you want. See what she says. Just make sure I have an answer by midnight tomorrow.’

‘And what if I refuse?’ I asked.

By now the room was so dark that I could barely see the Princess’ face.

‘Then I’ll do nothing,’ Princess Imogene replied. ‘And you’ll have to deal with the consequences alone.’

I took the Princess’ offer back to Amy in hospital. She was considerably more sanguine about the deal than I was.

‘It’s not as if we have any evidence,’ she pointed out. ‘Even if we did go to the police, the case would never make it to court. And, to be honest, I’m sick of blacking grates, and scrubbing pots. An early retirement would be very welcome.’

‘But we’d be selling out,’ I protested.

Amy patted my hand. ‘Welcome to the big, bad world Pete,’ she said, gently. ‘We’re only little people here. Either we float or we sink. Don’t overthink the situation.’

But I was determined not to give in so easily. Ever since Mr Finley had offered me private lessons all those years ago, people had been telling me that I was clever. They’d told me that I would go far. Well, I thought, perhaps the time had come to see if they were right. I *would* go far. I would accept Princess Imogene’s offer, and name a job in politics as my price. And then I’d start to build up my career. I’d work hard, and I’d find allies, and I’d make a name for myself, and one day – perhaps a decade from now, perhaps two – I’d be powerful enough to look Princess Charlotte in the eye.

And then I’d make her pay for what she’d done.