MURDER MOST ROYAL

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The Windsor Knot
A Three Dog Problem

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PART 1

THE HAND OF FATE

We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors;
we borrow it from our children.

Native American proverb

DECEMBER 2016

The girl on the beach emerged into the light and stared out across the mudflats at the horizon. She had been checking the hides at the end of the path to the wildlife reserve at Snettisham, on the Norfolk coast, to see how they had weathered the night's heavy storm. By day, the huts were home to birdwatchers who came from miles around to observe the geese and gulls and waders. By night, they were an occasional refuge from the cold sea breeze for beers and . . . more intimate activities. The last big storm surge had smashed up some of the hides and carried them into the lagoons beyond. This time, she was glad to see, the little piggies at the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds had built their home out of more solid wood.

Back outside, the girl studied the skyline. One of the things she loved about this place was that here, at the edge of East Anglia, on the eastern-most coast of the United Kingdom, the beach stubbornly faced due west. It looked out onto the Wash, a bay formed like a rectangular bite out of the coastline between Norfolk and Lincolnshire, where a clutch of rivers ran into the North Sea. No pale pink sunrise here; instead, the sun had risen above the lagoons at her back. Ahead, a bank of cloud sat low and heavy, but the watery light gave it a pale gold glow that was mirrored in the mudflats, so that it was hard to tell where the earth ended and the air began.

Not far from the lagoons, a little further along the shore to her left, lay the marshy fringes of the Sandringham Estate. Normally, the Queen was there by now, with Christmas so close, but the girl hadn't heard of her arrival yet, which was strange. The Queen, like the sunrise and the tides, was generally a reliable way of marking time.

She glanced upwards, where a trailing skein of pink-footed geese flew in arrowhead formation, home from the sea. Higher still, and closer, a hen harrier circled in the air. There was a brutal, brooding quality to Snettisham Beach. The concrete pathway at her feet, and the skeletal wooden structures jutting out into the mudflats beyond the shingle, were relics of her great-grandfather's war. Shingle mining for airbase runways had helped create the lagoons, where ducks and geese and waders now gathered in their thousands, filling the air with their hoots and honks and quacks. The gulls had deserted the land for decades, her father said, after the

constant bombardment of artillery practice into the sea. Their return was a triumph of nature. And goodness knew, Nature needed her little triumphs. She was up against so much.

Most of the birds themselves were out of sight, but they'd been busy. The expansive mudflats ahead were the scene of a recent massacre, pitted with thousands upon thousands of footprints of all sizes, where goldeneyes and sandpipers had landed once the tide receded, to feast on the creatures who lived in the sand.

Suddenly, a black bundle of fur caught the girl's eye as it raced from right to left across the mud. She recognised it: a collie-cocker cross from a litter in the village last year who belonged to someone she didn't consider a friend. With no sign of its owner, the puppy sped towards the nearest wooden structure, its attention caught by something bobbing in the sky-coloured seawater that eddied around the nearest rotten post.

The storm had littered the beach with all sorts of detritus, natural and man-made. Dead fish were dumped with plastic bottles and dense, bright tangles of fraying fishing nets. She thought of jellyfish. They washed up here too. The stupid young dog could easily try to eat one and get stung and poisoned in the process.

'Hey!' she shouted. The puppy ignored her. 'Come here!'

She began to run. Arms pumping, she hurtled across the scrubby band of lichen and samphire that led down to the shingle. Now she was on the mudflats too, the subterranean water seeping into each footprint left by her Doc Martens in the sand.

'Stop that, you idiot!'

The puppy was worrying at an amorphous, soggy shape. He turned to look at her just as she grabbed at his collar. She yanked him away.

The floating object was a plastic bag: an old supermarket one, stretched and torn, its handles knotted, with two pale tentacles poking through. Grabbing a stick that floated nearby, she used the tip to lift it out of the puppy's reach and looked nervously inside. Not a jellyfish, no: some other sea creature, pale and bloated, wrapped in seaweed. She intended to take the bag back with her for disposal later, but as she walked back towards the beach, the puppy straining against his collar at her feet, the contents slithered through a rip and plopped onto the damp, dark sand.

The girl assumed at first that it was a mutant, pale-coloured starfish, but on closer inspection, moving the seaweed aside with her stick, she realised it was something different. She marvelled for a moment at how almost-human it looked, with those tentacles like fingers at one end. Then she saw a glint of gold. Somehow one of the tentacles had got caught up in something metal, round and shiny. She peered closer and counted the baggy, waxy 'tentacles': one, two, three, four, five. The golden glint came from a ring on the little finger. The 'tentacles' had peeling human fingernails.

She dropped the broken bag and screamed fit to fill the sky.

Chapter 1

The Queen felt absolutely dreadful in body and spirit. She regarded Sir Simon Holcroft's retreating back with a mixture of regret and hopeless fury, then retrieved a fresh handkerchief from the open handbag beside her study desk to wipe her streaming nose.

The doctor is adamant . . . A train journey is out of the question . . . The duke should not be travelling at all . . .

If her headache hadn't been pounding quite so forcefully, she would have found the right words to persuade her private secretary of the simple fact that one always took the train to Sandringham. The journey from London to King's Lynn had been in the diary for months. The station master and his team would be expecting her in four and a half hours, and would have polished every bit of brass, swept every square inch of platform and no doubt had their uniforms dry-cleaned to look their best for the occasion. One didn't throw all one's plans in the air over a sniffle. If no bones were broken, if no close family had recently died, one soldiered on.

But her headache *had* pounded. Her little speech had been marred by a severe bout of coughing. Philip had not

been there to back her up because he was tucked up in bed, as he had been all yesterday. He had no doubt caught the infernal bug from one of the great-grandchildren at the pre-Christmas party they had thrown at Buckingham Palace for the wider family. 'Little petri dishes', he called them. It wasn't their fault, of course, but they inevitably caught everything going at nursery school and prep school, and passed it around like pudgy-cheeked biological weapons. Which young family should she blame? They had all seemed perfectly healthy at the time.

She picked up the telephone on her study desk and asked the switchboard to put her through to the duke.

He was awake, but groggy.

'What? Speak up, woman! You sound as though you're at the bottom of a lake.'

'I *said* . . .' she paused to blow her nose '. . . that Simon says we must fly to Sandringham tomorrow instead of taking the train today.' She left out the bit where Sir Simon had suggested Philip should remain at the palace full stop.

'In the helicopter?' he barked.

'We can hardly use a 747.' Her head hurt and she was feeling tetchy.

'In the navy we were banned . . .' wheeze '. . . from flying with a cold. Bloody dangerous.'

'You won't be piloting the flight.'

'If it bursts my eardrums you can personally blame Simon from me. Bloody fool. Doesn't know what he's talking about.'

The Queen refrained from pointing out that Sir Simon was an ex-naval helicopter pilot and the GP who had advised

him was thoroughly sound. He had his reasons for counselling in favour of a quick journey by air instead of a long one by rail. Philip was ninety-five – hard to believe, but true. He shouldn't really be out of bed at all, with his raging temperature. Oh, what a year this had been, and what a fitting end to it. Despite her delightful birthday celebrations in the spring, she would be glad to see the back of 2016.

'The decision is made, I'm afraid. We'll fly tomorrow.'

She pretended she didn't hear Philip's wheezy in-breath before what would no doubt be a catalogue of complaints, and put the phone down. Christmas was fast approaching and she just wanted to be quietly tucked up in the familiar rural comfort of Sandringham, and to be able to focus on her paperwork without it swimming in front of her eyes.

The autumn and early winter had been fraught with uncertainty. The Brexit referendum and the US elections had revealed deep divisions in Whitehall and Washington that it would take a very steady hand to repair. Through it all, the Queen had played host to presidents and politicians, she had been a greeter of ambassadors, a pinner-on of medals and a host for charity events – mostly at Buckingham Palace, the place she thought of as the gilded office block on the roundabout. Now Norfolk drew her with its wide-open spaces and enfolding pines, its teeming marshes, vast English skies and freewheeling birds.

She had been dreaming of it for days. Sandringham *was* Christmas. Her father had spent it there, and his father before him, and his father before *him*. When the children

were small, it had been easier to celebrate at Windsor for a while, but her own childhood Christmases were Norfolk ones.

The following day the helicopter whisked the royal couple, blankets on their knees, dogs at their feet, past Cambridge, past the magnificent medieval towers of Ely Cathedral, the 'ship of the fens', and on, north-eastwards towards King's Lynn. Soon, wetlands gave way to farmland that was patched with pine woods, with paddocks and flint cottages. Below them, briefly, was the shell-pink Regency villa at Abbotsgate, where she was surprised to see a herd of deer ambling slowly across the lawn. Next came the stubbly, immaculate fields and scattered copses of the Muncaster Estate, whose furthest reaches bordered one of the royal farms, and then at last the fields, dykes and villages of the Sandringham Estate itself. As the helicopter made its turn, the Queen saw a glint of sea-water in the distant Wash and a minute later Sandringham House appeared behind a ridge of pines, with its formal and informal gardens, its lakes and its sweeping lawns amply big enough for them to land.

The house, built for Edward VII when he was Prince of Wales, was a Victorian architect's red-brick, beturreted idea of what a Jacobean house should be, and people who cared a lot about architecture were generally appalled by it. The Queen, like her father before her, was enormously fond of its idiosyncratic nooks and crannies. Philip, who had strong views about architecture, had once unsuccessfully proposed to have it knocked down. However, what really mattered

were the twenty thousand acres of bog, marsh, woodland, arable land and orchards that made up the surrounding estate. She was a natural countrywoman and here she and Philip could quietly be farmers. Not the kind who mended fences in the lashing rain and were on lambing at dawn, true, but together, they looked after and loved it because it was a small part of the planet that was *theirs*. Here, in north Norfolk, they could actively participate in trying to make the world a better place: for wildlife, for the consumers of their crops, for the people who worked the land, for the future. It was a quiet legacy – one they didn't talk about in public (Charles's experience on that front illustrated why) – but one they cared about very much.

In her office at the 'working' end of the house, Rozie Oshodi looked up from her laptop screen in time to see the helicopter skirt the edge of the treeline before coming in to land. As the Queen's assistant private secretary, Rozie had arrived by train earlier that morning. For now, the suite of staff rooms, with its functional Edwardian furniture – and to an extent the whole house, and in a way, the nation – was her domain. According to Rozie's mother it was, anyway. Sir Simon, who ran the Private Office with the combined skills of the admiral and ambassador he might have been, had gone to the Highlands for the first part of the holiday. He and his wife Sarah had been given the use of a cottage at Balmoral for the Christmas break in recognition of his sterling work over the autumn, and as a result, for two precious weeks, Rozie was in charge. '*It's all down to you,*' her mother had said.

'*No pressure. But think, you're like the first black Thomas Cromwell. You're the right-hand woman. The eyes and ears. Don't mess it up.*' She'd never had her mother down as a big fan of Tudor history. Hilary Mantel had a lot to answer for.

This close to Christmas, Rozie didn't expect to have much to do. With no monasteries to dissolve or royal marriages to broker, the main job of the Private Office was to liaise with the Government, manage communications and organise the Queen's public schedule. But Whitehall and Downing Street had effectively shut down for the holidays; the media were fixated on holiday stories; the Queen's next public event was in three weeks, and even that was only a tea party in the village. Thomas Cromwell would have found it all very tame. Rozie had mostly been catching up with the residue of emails that had somehow never made the 'urgent' list in her inbox. However, an hour ago a new one had come in. Perhaps this break wasn't going to be as quiet as she'd anticipated, after all.

Lined up outside the entrance hall, Mrs Maddox, the immaculate housekeeper, and her team were waiting to welcome the royal couple back. Today, the interior smelled deliciously of woodsmoke from the fire that popped and crackled in the saloon behind them, where the family would gather later for drinks and games. The dogs happily padded inside, keen to be back, while Philip took himself straight off to bed.

The Queen had just enough energy to do justice to a couple of freshly made mince pies and a pot of Darjeeling in the light and airy drawing room at the back of the house, whose

large bay windows overlooked the lawn. In one of the bays a Christmas tree was already in place, its branches partly decorated on a red and gold theme, ready to be completed when the rest of the family arrived tomorrow. Normally, she chose the tree herself, but this year there hadn't been time. A small price to pay for a cosy afternoon indoors, which she very much needed.

She had just finished talking to Mrs Maddox about the next few days' arrangements when Rozie appeared at the drawing room door. As her efficient APS curtsied, the Queen noticed that, rather ominously, she held a closed laptop under her arm. 'Your Majesty, do you have a moment?'

'Is there a problem?' the Queen asked, hoping there wasn't.

'Not exactly, but there's something you ought to know about.'

'Oh dear.' They caught each other's eye, and the Queen sighed. 'The small drawing room, I think.'

She led the way to the room next door, whose floral, silk-lined walls gave it a gentle, feminine air, somewhat in contrast to the lively bird sculptures that Prince Philip chose to keep there: reminders of one of his chief pleasures of the estate. Rozie closed the door behind them. The Queen looked up at her. Rozie, a striking young woman of thirty, was over six feet tall in her signature heels. At her age, and at a shrinking five foot two, the Queen was used to looking up at almost everybody . . . figuratively speaking. She didn't find it problematic, except when she had to shout up at tall, deaf dukes and ministers. Fortunately, her APS's hearing was excellent.

'All right. What is it? Nothing to do with the new president?'

'No, ma'am. The police have been in touch. I'm afraid there's been a discovery.'

'Oh?'

'A hand was found yesterday morning, in the mudflats at Snettisham Beach.'

The Queen was startled. 'A human hand?'

'Yes, ma'am. It was washed up by a storm, wrapped in a plastic bag.'

'My goodness. No sense of where it came from?'

'Ocado, ma'am, since you ask. They deliver food from Waitrose.'

'I meant the hand.'

The APS took it in her stride. 'Not yet. They hope to identify the victim soon. One of the fingers was wearing an unusual ring, which may help.'

'So, a *woman's* hand?'

Rozie shook her head. 'A man's. It's a signet ring.'

At last, the Queen understood the presence of the laptop. Sir Simon would have come without it, but fortunately – in the circumstances – he wasn't here. Her private secretary liked the spare her any 'unpleasantness'. But after ninety years, an abdication, a world war, the early loss of her father and a rich selection of family scandals, she was more capable of dealing with unpleasantness than most. Rozie was more realistic. Women understood each other, the Queen found. They knew each other's strengths and weaknesses, and didn't underestimate the strengths.

'May I see?' she asked.

Rozie placed the laptop on a little writing desk in front of the window. When she opened it, the screen came to life, revealing four grisly images. The Queen put on her bifocals to examine them more closely. They had been taken in a forensic laboratory and showed what was unmistakably a male left hand and wrist with a pattern of fair hairs below the knuckles, the skin deadly white, bloated, but largely intact. It looked, absolutely, like a gruesome theatre prop, or a model for a practical joke. Her eyes rested on the final image showing the little finger in close-up. Set tight into the ghostly flesh was the gold ring Rozie had mentioned. It was indeed unusual: large for its type, featuring a reddish-black oval stone carved with a crest.

Rozie explained the situation. 'The hand was found by a local girl, ma'am. She was out dog-walking from what I understand. They're working on the identification now. It shouldn't take longer than a few days, even with the Christmas holiday. They think it may belong to a drug dealer because a holdall containing drugs washed up further down the beach. There's a theory the victim may have been kidnapped and the hand cut off as some sort of message, or possibly for ransom. It was done with some violence, but there's no proof the owner is actually dead. They're casting the net widely. They—'

'I can save them the trouble,' the Queen said, looking up.

Rozie frowned. 'Ma'am?'

'Of casting the net widely. This is the hand of Edward St Cyr.'

Ned, she thought to herself. Dear God. Ned.

Rozie looked astonished. 'You *know* him? From this?'

In answer, the Queen pointed to the top left-hand photograph. 'Do you see that flat-topped middle finger? He cut off the tip doing some carpentry when he was a teenager. But it's the signet ring, of course . . . Bloodstone. Quite distinctive. And that carving is of a swan from the family crest.' She peered again at the final picture. The ring was a garish thing; she had never liked it. All the men in the St Cyr family wore one like it, but none of the others had lost the tip of their middle finger. Ned must have been about sixteen when he did it. That was over half a century ago.

'I take it he wasn't a local drug baron, ma'am,' Rozie ventured.

'No,' the Queen agreed, looking up at her. 'He was the grandson of an *actual* baron. Not that that means he was necessarily a stranger to drugs of course. Or *is*,' she corrected herself. It was troubling, this idea, as Rozie suggested, that he might not be dead – but he probably was, surely? And God knew what state he must be in if he wasn't. 'I hope they get to the bottom of it soon.'

'This will certainly speed them up, ma'am.'

The Queen's blue eyes met Rozie's brown ones. 'We needn't say exactly who recognised the ring.'

'Of course.' After a year in her service, Rozie knew the drill: the Queen categorically did *not* solve, or even help solve crimes. She was merely an interested observer. However, as Rozie had learned, her interest sometimes went deeper than

most people knew. 'Is there anything else you'd like me to do?' she asked.

'Not this time.' The Queen was firm. 'I think that will be enough.'

Terrible though the news was, she reflected with relief that Snettisham, though close, was a nature reserve run by the RSPB. This was not, to put it bluntly, her problem. And just before Christmas, after a devil of a year, nor did she want it to be.

'Certainly, ma'am.' Rozie closed the laptop and left the Boss to get on with her day.