

PART 1

VIVE LA REINE

PARIS, APRIL 1957



Chapter 1

The Queen knew instantly that she had made a fatal mistake, figuratively speaking.

‘Mais bien sur, madame. Ça arrive.’

During the candlelit dinner at the Louvre to celebrate her second night in France on this, her first state visit, she had merely mentioned, perhaps a shade too wistfully, that she had never seen the *Mona Lisa*. The Salle des Caryatides was packed with *le tout-Paris*. Every minister, grand hostess and eminent dignitary was here, it seemed, sitting elbow to elbow, dressed in their finery, watching her closely. However, beyond the odd statue and ceiling, she had yet to see any art.

Now, after a brief consultation among the luminaries of the museum, two porters were carrying the Leonardo into the room, resplendent in its ornate gilt frame. They leaned it against a chair for her to look at, and it was the most extraordinary moment: those two famous eyes, staring impenetrably back at her from under their heavy lids. One knew the image so well as an illustration that it was astonishing to come face to face with the real thing. The Queen felt for an instant how so many people must feel, perhaps, coming face to face with *her*.

The portrait carried a huge weight of expectation, but was remarkably human in scale, close to, in the flickering light. Behind the eyes, the Queen saw a young woman, beautifully composed and a little bit self-conscious in the act being scrutinised. *I know how you feel*, she thought. The artistry was wonderful, of course, but it was hard to concentrate while everyone was leaning forward to see her reaction.



‘*C’est merveilleux, n’est-ce pas?*’ she said, fully aware that this might well be the understatement of her visit.

Shortly afterwards, when they were joined by yet more of the great and good in yet another lavish salon, the spotlight on the Queen herself was even more intense. Hundreds of people jostled together, eager to greet her, and sharp elbows dug into nipped-in waists as they jockeyed for a better view. At one point the crowd surged forward in a wave and the Queen felt the press of the throng. She was quite hemmed in and there was no room to breathe. For a moment she was almost frightened. It was gratifying to be so popular, but right now, she would be grateful to get out of the evening with her clothes and person intact.

Thinking of what her grandmother, Queen Mary, would say, she steadied herself and put on a brave face. But as she looked out over the sea of eager faces, two stood out. One was not looking in her direction exactly, but at someone in the crowd behind her. His face was briefly twisted into an unguarded scowl and there was a look of savage hatred in his eyes. The Queen had seen that look only a few times before, as a teenager at Windsor, when officers or their families had described some of the worst atrocities of the war. She knew who he was, understood his history, and guessed who he might be staring at.

The other face was scanning the room with undisguised disdain, the mouth crimped in frustration. At last, the eyes found hers, and instantly the face went blank. But the Queen had seen enough. This was someone she knew very well.

She had work to do when she got home, because it was clear that someone from inside her closest circle had been trying to sabotage this visit. Her response would be delicate and difficult, and she wasn’t sure who she could trust.

In the car on the way back to the British Embassy, she said to Philip, ‘Did you notice, they served us oysters tonight?’





‘Yes, very good ones.’ He gave her a knowing grin, before frowning slightly. ‘I didn’t think you liked them, though. Did you eat ’em?’

‘No, I didn’t. Actually, I’m quite fond of oysters.’ She returned his grin. ‘But I simply can’t eat them abroad.’

‘I think we can trust the Frogs, on this occasion. They’ll hardly try to poison you. And they do oysters better than anyone. Always did.’

‘I don’t doubt that. It’s not the French, it’s the oysters themselves. One never knows. And an upset tummy would be a disaster.’

‘I suppose it would. Pity. They were top-hole.’

The Queen adjusted her fur around her shoulders and glanced out at the twinkling lights on the Place de la Concorde. They would be back at the embassy soon. She loved this grand square by the river, with a backdrop provided by the classical Crillon Hotel, a central ancient obelisk, topped with gold, and a general air of panache. But it did not escape her memory that a king and his family had literally lost their heads here.

Should she tell Philip what she was really thinking?

The limousine traced the edges of the square and drove down the Rue Royale. The last time she and her husband were here in ’48, she had been secretly pregnant with Charles. Oh, to be twenty-two, newly married and hopelessly in love, in Paris for the first time, while everyone went wild all around them, still carrying the joy of Liberation. What a trip that had been.

She didn’t think, before they arrived two days ago, that they could possibly repeat that experience – not now she was the grand old age of thirty, with two children at home and all the cares of state, and the endless unfounded marital rumours one had to endure. But tonight, the Parisians thronged the streets as enthusiastically as ever. She was touched beyond measure. Philip was right: she doubted very



much indeed that they had tried to poison her, or undermine her with a dodgy *huître*.

And yet . . .

The Queen asked for little when she went abroad. She had a strong constitution and decent stamina, was happy to work to a punishing schedule and ate almost anything that was put in front of her. However, shellfish were a rare but firm exception. One simply couldn't fulfil one's duties if one was doubled over with stomach cramps; her Private Office always made that clear. Nevertheless, last night she had been served six oysters *à la sauce mignonette avec fraises et champagne*, as if nothing had been said.

It would be easy to put it down to a simple muddle. Inevitably, little things were always going wrong and usually it was terribly funny. But there had also been the question of the missing speech.

Twenty-four hours ago, her reply to the toast from the President of France was set to be the *pièce de résistance* of her first day in France. It was a reminder that she spoke fluent French and a hymn of praise to the Entente Cordiale that bound two nations whose joint sacrifices had won a war against terrible odds. The text wasn't long, but it had been weeks in the making and she had practised it endlessly.

Then, an hour before she was due leave for the Élysée Palace to deliver it, her private secretary had approached her, pale as death, and announced that both it and all copies and carbons had gone missing. He and the ambassador were desperately scrabbling to put something new together, but she knew it wouldn't be the same. There was a high risk that speaking unfamiliar phrases in her second language would lose most of the speech's power.

By a stroke of luck, she had remembered that one of the later drafts of the original had come back from the typing pool

at Buckingham Palace with a couple of excellent suggestions, in perfect, idiomatic French. It had occurred to the Queen that the secretary in question might have kept a carbon of her own, and she must have done, because fifty minutes later she was dictating it down the telephone to the private secretary himself. Disaster was averted.

That temporary loss of the original, on its own, one might have put down to misfortune. But all copies and carbons? Really?

And now, on top of those near disasters, the unguarded look of disgust directed at the pressing crowd around her at the Louvre shed a new light on everything. Someone most definitely did not want this visit to succeed. Someone in her own circle. Someone she had always trusted implicitly until tonight.

The Queen recognised that on this evidence of missing carbons and unexpected shellfish and sour expressions, it would be easy to say she had a young mother's overactive imagination, or that she was tired and emotional after two busy days abroad and developing an unhealthy complex of some sort. None of which she dared be accused of, when this visit was so important.

Anyway, at this moment what could she or Philip do? As the car turned left into the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, she kept her thoughts to herself.

Chapter 2

‘Well done, Your Majesty,’ her private secretary told her the next morning, a trifle patronisingly. ‘I think we can chalk last night down as another success.’

‘Thank you, Hugh. It was a bit of a crush. There were moments I wondered if they were going to swallow me whole.’

Sir Hugh Masson smiled as if her observation were merely a joke. He hadn’t been on the receiving end of that tidal wave of attention.

This morning, her three pinstriped senior courtiers were lined up neatly in front of her at the ambassador’s residence, ready to discuss the new day. Sir Hugh was accompanied by Major Miles Urquhart, the deputy private secretary (or DPS, as he was known); and Jeremy Radnor-Milne, her press secretary. Solid, traditional and dependable, they were chief among ‘men in moustaches’, as Philip called them – a collective term for the old guard the Queen had inherited from her father.

Sir Hugh Masson’s solid grey whiskers were counterbalanced by a large pair of black-rimmed spectacles that emphasised his bookish tendencies. ‘The prime minister wanted me to let you know how pleased he is with how everything’s going, ma’am. Your evening gowns are a particular hit. The choice of flowers of the French fields for the decoration was much admired.’

‘Mr Hartnell did try very hard with the embroidery.’

‘It’s good to see British design compete with the French,’ Miles Urquhart, the DPS, added cheerfully. ‘And outclass them, you might say.’ He sported a russet ‘tache that bristled with



delight and national pride. Urquhart was always absolutely certain that the British monarchy was the best institution in the world and the answer to almost any problem, even fashion-related. The Queen found it quite challenging to live up to such high expectations.

‘Oh, I hesitate to say we outclass Dior and Balmain,’ she demurred, ‘but I’m glad we can hold our own.’

‘One begins to understand why they wanted you as head of state.’

She shook her head. ‘That was very odd, wasn’t it?’

It was still astonishing to her, and not helpful in managing Urquhart’s expectations, but – unknown to all but the British prime minister and his closest circle – the French prime minister had indeed raised the idea of a Franco-British union on a visit last year, with her as its figurehead. It had taken them all aback.

‘After all they went through to get rid of the last lot,’ she added. ‘Mr Eden was right to say no. Anyway, I get the impression it was all the scheme of Monsieur Mollet alone. Nobody’s mentioned it since.’

Jeremy Radnor-Milne laughed a little too loud. ‘Haha! You’re well out of it, ma’am. France hasn’t covered itself in glory recently. They seem rather desperate, if one may say so.’

The press secretary wore a thin black line of facial fuzz modelled on the actor David Niven’s, in an attempt to suggest the actor’s military derring-do and suave urbanity. Like Urquhart, he was conspicuously patriotic and he was probably referring to France’s ill-fated attempt last year to maintain control of Egypt’s Suez Canal by sending in the troops. However, the United Kingdom had done the same, and come out of last year’s Suez affair equally disastrously.

Gone were the days of gunship diplomacy, when the old imperial powers could sail in and sort out problems abroad



with a little show of muscle. One needed the Americans on board now and, as Mr Eisenhower had made it very plain from Washington that he was not going to get involved, the French and British were forced to make an ignominious retreat. At home, Mr Eden had lost his premiership because of it.

‘The talk here is all about making friends with the Hun,’ Urquhart said, with a shake of his head. ‘This new treaty of Rome. The “Economic Community”, whatever they call it. You wouldn’t think France and Germany had been at each other’s throats for the best part of a century.’

‘I suppose that’s what they’re trying to avoid,’ the Queen pointed out. ‘But I’m not so sure everyone’s behind the treaty.’ She addressed herself to her private secretary. ‘I wanted to tell you, Hugh, the Comte de Longchamp is not in favour at all. You know his war record – what the Nazis put him through. And my papers tell me he has the ear of his president.’

‘How do you know, ma’am? Who told you?’

‘I saw it on his face last night,’ the Queen said. This had been the first of the two odd expressions she noticed at the Louvre. ‘A look of pure hatred, directed at the German ambassador standing behind me. I know it was the German ambassador because he has the most frightful breath. Somebody really ought to tell him at some point. Not ideal for a diplomat.’

‘I’ll pass the news on,’ Sir Hugh promised.

‘Not the bit about the breath.’

‘Oh, that, too, ma’am. The Foreign Office will be delighted. Thank you.’

They moved on to her itinerary for the day, which was set out in five-minute increments from now until midnight, describing exactly where she would be and whom she would expect to meet, from the workers at a Renault factory to the Mayor of Paris. She noticed that there were two comfort breaks, of five minutes each, and planned to limit her liquid intake accordingly.



At the end, she mentioned the oysters.

Two sets of bushy eyebrows furrowed in horror and the lips of Jeremy Radnor-Milne pursed in confusion under his thin black moustache.

‘Shellfish,’ Sir Hugh explained in hushed tones, before turning back to the Queen.

‘Did you eat any, ma’am?’

‘No. I was terribly rude. I had some of the sauce mignonette.’

Radnor-Milne’s jaw had dropped. He gaped like a fish. ‘I . . . I . . . I don’t see why on earth they would have—’

‘Some chef must have got carried away with the menu,’ Urquhart snapped, puffed up with indignation on her behalf. ‘I’ll have a word.’

‘Please don’t bother,’ the Queen said. ‘It’s too late now.’

She had been watching them closely. The men in moustaches all seemed equally aghast, just as they had done two days ago when her speech went missing. These were men whose service her father had prized, and she relied on them completely in order to carry out her job. One of them, she now knew, was lying to her. What about the other two?



Chapter 3

Bobo Macdonald – Margaret, or Miss Macdonald to everyone except the immediate royal family – had a few whiskers of her own, but she was very much *not* one of the men in moustaches. She was the Queen’s dresser and more: her original nursery nursemaid, her confidante, the only person except her sister to have shared a childhood bedroom with the young princess, and the only one trusted nowadays to prepare and preserve her clothes. There was nowhere Bobo didn’t travel with her mistress. She had even accompanied the royal couple on honeymoon.

That evening, she was on duty while the Queen got ready for her last night in France.

‘What do you think?’

The Queen was peering at herself anxiously in the cheval mirror in her dressing room at the ambassadorial residence. Her third evening gown of the visit was a new step: the first time she had ever worn a body-skimming column dress, instead of one with her signature full skirts, like her mother’s.

The silk glittered in the lamplight, heavy with handsewn crystals. It was a beautiful creation, but was it too much? Or not enough? Its designer, Hardy Amies, had also created the peacock-blue gown she had worn last night. When he showed her the sketch for it, she had wondered about the strong colour. He suggested it worked because ‘you are a *femme de trente ans*, ma’am’. It was the unkindest thing he had ever said to her, and she had told him so.

Perhaps to make up for it, Mr Amies had put her in this shimmering silver column, which was just the sort of thing



Marilyn Monroe might pick. Could this *femme de trente ans* get away with it?

‘You look magnificent. Your best frock yet. Och, you know you do, Lilibet. Look at you!’

At least Bobo was convinced about this one. The Queen turned to check her silhouette from different angles. She missed the comforting swish of net skirts. Last November, when she had met Miss Monroe at a film premiere, the actress had been in a golden figure-hugging dress that might as well have been a bathing suit. The Queen herself had chosen a black velvet crinoline, narrow at the waist and roomy everywhere else, and was grateful for the confidence it gave her. Poor Marilyn in her golden frock had chewed all her lipstick off by the time they shook hands.

She had been the sweetest thing to talk to, though. Marilyn was staying near Windsor at the time, and they talked about how nice it would be to meet up there too, not that either of them had the time. The Queen had the impression of a bold but fragile creature, like a young racehorse or a wild deer. She had wanted to lend her a fur and wrap her up.

Anyway, that was then. Now, *she* was the one in the slinky dress. She needed a second opinion. ‘Bobo, can you call the duke for me?’

To everyone but the Queen, Prince Philip was ‘the Duke of Edinburgh’, or ‘sir’. He didn’t have a Bobo of his own to call him by a nickname and be treated as a trusted friend. Certainly not since he had recently lost his own much-missed private secretary in a divorce scandal. At least he had her.

Bobo spoke to the page outside the door, who passed on the message to Philip in his dressing room. The reply came back that he would be a couple of minutes, which gave the Queen time to touch up her lipstick and put on the jewellery that Bobo had laid out for her. While she fiddled with the earrings



at her dressing table, Bobo sought to calm her mistress's rare attack of nerves.

'Did you see the newspaper headlines? The French are calling themselves monarchists! It's just you and the Chelsea murders on the front pages at home.'

'The Chelsea murders?' the Queen asked, turning round with the left earring in her hand. 'What murders?'

'Oh, it's dreadful. Two bodies, found in one of those little mews houses off the Old Brompton Road. It was all over *The Times* and the *Daily Express*.'

'How do you know?'

'The ambassador gets them by air from London. The housekeeper showed me.'

'Did they say who they were?'

'Not yet, dear. Just that it was a man and a woman, and she was no better than she should be. The awful thing is, it seems almost certain the Dean of Bath did it, or one of his guests.' Bobo shook her head. 'He rents the house where it happened for his visits to London. He looks such a mild-mannered man in the photograph, although they say he had a good war – so not *that* mild-mannered.'

'Was it definitely murder?' The Queen knew the dean in question a little. An upstanding member of the Church of England and a charming occasional dinner guest at Windsor.

'Oh yes, dear. It was all very violent. And a little bit suggestive.' Bobo pursed her lips and her eyes gleamed. 'The girl was wearing nothing but satin lingerie and diamonds. Lying on the bed like Snow White, the papers said, but they probably make that sort of thing up, don't they? And I don't think I've ever seen Snow White depicted in her smalls.'

'Who was depicted in her smalls?' Philip asked, striding into the room and looking somewhat distracted as he inserted a cufflink into a recalcitrant cuff.

‘The dead woman in Chelsea, sir,’ Bobo explained.

‘Oh?’ He didn’t look up. The cufflinks were gold, held together by a delicate chain, and fiddly to use. ‘And how did she die?’

‘According to the papers, they were both strangled and the gentleman was stabbed in the eye. Isn’t it wicked what some people can do? It beggars belief.’

‘Oh, I can believe anything of some people,’ Philip said. He glanced up from his shirtsleeve. ‘You wanted to ask me something, Lilibet?’

The Queen had put on her earrings by now. She placed her tiara in position and stood up again, saying nothing, because she wasn’t quite sure how to ask for what she wanted.

He looked her up and down.

‘New dress?’

‘Yes.’

‘Haven’t seen you in that style before.’

‘No.’

‘It’s different. Very . . . sparkly.’

‘Oh.’

There was a short silence.

‘Isn’t she a picture?’ Bobo said, with an edge of Scottish censoriousness in her voice.

Philip took his cue at last.

‘You look ravishing, my darling.’ He grinned rakishly and strode towards her. ‘If Ava Gardner was a couple of inches shorter . . .’

He took his wife’s hands in his and kissed her palms, one after the other, and she was reminded how irresistible he was himself, and how hopelessly devoted she was. Not just because of his Viking-blond looks, but for his ability to make her weep with laughter one minute and to be quite serious the next, as he was now, aware of how important this visit was, how much was asked of her, and how much she needed him.



‘Good, well, that’s settled, then,’ Bobo said. ‘Your tiara’s a bit wonky, dear. Don’t forget the necklace. I’ll go and fetch your fur.’

Outside the room, at the top of the stairs, a small group was gathered. It consisted of the ambassador, two military equerries who assisted the royal couple in their public duties, Sir Hugh and Philip’s new private secretary, all ready to accompany them down. They were speaking in low voices but the words ‘Cresswell Place’ were audible.

‘What’s that?’ Philip asked. ‘What’re you talking about?’

‘The murders in Chelsea,’ the ambassador explained. ‘Have you heard?’

‘Oh that. Strangling and stabbing,’ Philip said, fiddling with his second cuff. ‘Those the ones?’

‘Yes, exactly. Hardly the *modus operandi* one would imagine of the members of the Artemis Club.’

‘What?’ Philip’s head jerked up.

‘Well, apparently the dean was dining at the club that night and he brought a small group back to play cards. Nobody else went in or out, apart from the victims, so . . .’ The ambassador trailed off and coughed. ‘I’m aware you’re a member of the Artemis, sir.’

Philip’s face tightened. ‘I am.’

The ambassador laughed nervously. ‘I don’t mean to imply . . . Rather, the people who came back with the dean that night were all above board. Decent men, spotless reputations. You knighted one of ’em last year, ma’am.’ He nodded to the Queen. Nobody had said anything about her dress yet, but they were men, so they wouldn’t. ‘They apparently accompanied the dean home for a quick game of canasta.’

Sir Hugh intervened with a slight cough. ‘So they claim. The awkward thing is, according to the press reports, the dean





told the charlady not to clean upstairs the next day, as she usually did. He then returned to Somerset, and she only discovered the bodies when she went upstairs a week later.'

'Gosh, so when did they die?' the Queen asked.

'I suppose it would be a week ago last Sunday,' Sir Hugh said, rapidly calculating. 'The thirty-first. That would be the night of the card game. They must have been lying there all—'

'Damn!' All eyes turned to Philip. 'I've bust a cufflink. You!' He held out the offending article to the young equerry standing nearest to him. 'Find my valet and get replacements. Quick, or we'll be late.'

He caught the Queen's eye and she could see how irritated he was. They looked like the Britannia cufflinks he'd had personally designed to commemorate his recent trip to the Southern Hemisphere.

'I suppose they'll say in the papers that I was involved somehow,' he grunted.

His new private secretary coughed. 'They already are. I'm sorry, sir, I haven't had the chance to update you. I've just read the piece. They noted that you dined at the club that night too.'

Philip glowered at him. 'And did they equally note that I was tucked up safe in bed by eleven?'

'They didn't.'

'They wouldn't.' He gave a theatrical shrug and glanced at his wife. 'I only have my security detail and Her Majesty to plead my case.'

At this, five pairs of eyes turned quizzically to the Queen. After the minutest of pauses, she smiled back at them with a raised eyebrow and a little shrug of her own. They allowed themselves a chuckle.

'The papers didn't suggest you were part of the dean's party, sir,' the private secretary assured him. 'Merely that you were in his set.'





'I'm damned well not. Who is this blasted dean anyway?'

'Bath,' the Queen told him.

'Oh. Yes, we do know him, vaguely. Decent sort. Worked at St George's Chapel. Hardly a friend.'

'Cufflinks, sir.'

The pink-faced equerry was back, spurs clinking on the boots of his uniform, hand outstretched with the replacement links in his palm.

'Let's go,' Philip said. 'I can fix these in the car. Bring the papers, too. I can read 'em on my lap, nobody'll know. Time to be zoo animals again.'

The final event of the day was to be a river cruise down the Seine, and the Queen had been hugely looking forward to it. What could be more romantic, in April, than a trip under the bridges of Paris, accompanied by her husband, with the Eiffel Tower behind them, and in the distance the illuminated towers of Notre Dame?

What she had failed to imagine, and perhaps she should have done because it was there in black and white on her itinerary, was that the President of France would be sitting on her other side. They were on his launch after all. Both he and Philip were positioned at arm's distance from her, too far to chat comfortably to the president, and certainly too far for Philip to tell her what he really thought of all the tableaux that had been set up for them to admire along the banks.

It was difficult to see very much, because there was a spotlight trained on her face from a few feet away. She could just about make out that the river was lined with thicker crowds than ever, all craning their necks to see and packed so tightly one worried they might push forward and fall in. If it were possible to spend a *less* romantic evening in Paris, it would take some doing.





Nevertheless, her new dress sparkled obediently under the lights and her cheeks grew numb from smiling. Philip, grinning at a floodlit tableau of Napoleonic soldiers near Les Invalides, seemed to be enjoying himself. He always did, on the water.

As they glided along, the Queen thought about what Bobo had said about the Artemis Club, and the night the murders must have taken place. She pictured the poor girl, strangled to death in a room with a man who was essentially a stranger, wearing nothing but silk and diamonds. A true pause for thought, when one happened to be wearing silk and a large array of diamonds oneself.

What an awful way to die. She must have felt so terribly alone.

The Queen realised she wasn't concentrating and glanced out to see several ranks of floodlit choristers singing ethereally in front of Notre Dame Cathedral. Soon, the launch was floating past the Île Saint-Louis, and the sky lit up with a sudden explosion of fireworks.

Her initial surprise gave way to gradual delight. She imagined an anonymous young couple in the crowd, his arms around hers, his chest warm and solid against her back, craning their necks towards the fireworks together, unseen.

Yes, that would be lovely.

She turned her head to the president and called out something pleasant and diplomatic, in French. The spotlight still trained on her face, they headed back the way they had come.

