

Prologue

Sir Simon Holcroft was not a swimmer. As a trainee pilot in the Royal Navy, about a thousand years ago, the Queen's Private Secretary had endured being dunked in the water on various training exercises. He could, if necessary, escape from a sinking helicopter in the Atlantic Ocean, but ploughing up and down an indoor pool held no allure for him. However, as he approached the grand old age of fifty-four, his trouser waistline was two inches larger than it should be and the palace GP was making noises about cholesterol levels. Something needed to give, and it wasn't just the button above his flies.

Sir Simon felt tired. He felt flabby. On yesterday's long, uncomfortable car journey back from Scotland he had come to the conclusion that here was a man who had eaten too much Dundee cake and not offered to accompany the Queen on enough cross-country walks. His first thought on arriving back at his cottage in Kensington Palace was that he needed to jolt himself out of this slump.

Those last few weeks in Balmoral had been bloody. It was as if the midges had been staging a Highland Games of their own. He had been busy most mornings with Prince



Philip, discussing the details of the impending Reservicing Programme, and then up most nights on the phone, conferring with fellow courtiers about the Duke's latest suggestions and questions, as well as adding several of his own. If they hadn't done all their homework by the time they presented it to Parliament, the proverbial ordure would hit the fan like a fireworks display.

Vigour was what he needed. And freshness. Despite his lack of enthusiasm, the Buckingham Palace swimming pool seemed like the best solution. Staff tended to avoid it when the royals were in residence. The problem was, when the family were away, he tended to be so too, and vice versa. However, catching sight of himself in an ill-advised full-length mirror in the bedroom at KP that night, he made the decision to take a risk and nip in early. He prayed that, with his midge-bitten body stretching the seams of his Vilebrequin trunks, he wouldn't encounter a super-keen young equerry in peak physical condition or, worse, the Duke himself, fresh from a royal dip.

Sir Simon walked across Hyde Park and down through Green Park – one of the few forty-minute commutes you could make through central London that was entirely green – in time to arrive the Palace by 6.30 a.m. He had stupidly put his trunks on under his trousers, which made both uncomfortable. He parked his briefcase on his office desk, hung his suit jacket on a wooden hanger on a hat stand, and took off his brogues. Neatly rolling his silk tie, which today featured tiny pink koalas, he placed it safely in the left shoe. Then, shouldering the backpack containing his swimming





towel, he walked the short distance to the north-west pavilion in his socks. By now it was 6.45.

The pavilion, attached to the North Wing that overlooked Green Park, had originally been designed as a conservatory by John Nash. Sir Simon always thought they should have kept it that way. His mother had been a plantswoman and he saw conservatories as paeans to the natural world, whereas heated swimming pools were a little bit naff. Nevertheless, the Queen's father had decided to convert this one in the thirties for his little princesses to swim in, so there it was, with its Grecian pillars outside, and its somewhat-the-worse-for-wear art deco tiles within, as much in need of updating as so many nooks and crannies of the Palace that the public didn't see.

The pool area was reached from inside the main building through a door papered with instructions for what to do in case of fire and reminders that nobody should swim solo, which he ignored. The corridor beyond was already uncomfortably humid. He was glad he'd left his tie behind. In the men's changing room, he divested himself of his shirt, socks and trousers and draped his towel across his arm. He noticed a cut-crystal tumbler abandoned on one of the benches. Odd, since the family had only arrived back from the Highlands last night. There must have been a homecoming celebration among the younger generation. All glass was banned in the pool area, but you didn't tell princes and princesses what they could and couldn't do in their granny's home. Sir Simon made a mental note to tell Housekeeping so they could deal with it.





He showered quickly and walked through into the pool area, with its windows overlooking the kissing plane trees in the garden, bracing himself for the shock of coolish water lapping against this too, too solid flesh.

But the shock he got was quite different.

At first his brain refused to register what it was seeing. Was it a blanket? A trick of the light? There was so much red. So much dark red against the green tiled floor. In the centre of the stain was a leg, bare to the knee, female. The image imprinted itself onto his retina. He blinked.

His breath came short and punchy as he took two steps towards it. Another two, and he was standing in the gore itself and staring down at the full horror of it.

A woman in a pale dress lay curled on her side in a puddle of darkness. Her lips were blue, her eyes open and unseeing. Her right arm reached towards her feet, palm-up. All were soaked and stained with congealed blood. Her left arm was stretched towards the pale water's edge, where the dark puddle finally stopped. Sir Simon felt his own blood pulse, pounding a one-two, one-two rhythm in his ears.

Gingerly, he knelt down and placed reluctant fingers against the neck. There was no pulse, and how could there be, with eyes like that? He longed to close the lids, but thought he probably shouldn't. Her hair lay fanned around her head, a halo soaked in red. She looked surprised. Or was that his imagination? And so fragile that, had she been alive, he could have easily scooped her up and carried her to safety.





Rising, he felt a sharp pain in his knee. As he tried to wipe some of the sticky blood from his skin, his fingertips encountered grit. Examining it, he could just make out small shards of thick glass. Now his own blood, freshly seeping from a cut on his leg, was mingling with hers. He saw it then – the remains of a shattered tumbler, sitting like a crystal ruin in the crimson sea.

He knew the face, knew the hair. What was she doing here, with a whisky tumbler? His body didn't want to move, but he forced it back outside to seek help. Though he knew it was too late for any help worth having.





Chapter 1

THREE MONTHS EARLIER . . .

‘Philip?’
‘Yes?’ The Duke of Edinburgh raised half an eyebrow from the folded *Daily Telegraph*, which was propped up against a pot of honey on the breakfast table.

‘You know that painting?’

‘Which painting? You have seven thousand,’ he said, just to be difficult.

The Queen sighed inwardly. She had been about to explain. ‘The one of *Britannia*. That used to hang outside my bedroom.’

‘What, the ghastly little one by the Australian who couldn’t do boats? That one?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes?’

‘Well, I saw it yesterday in Portsmouth, at Semaphore House. At an exhibition of maritime art.’

Philip stared pointedly at the editorial page of his paper and grunted, ‘That makes sense. For a yacht.’



‘You don’t understand. I was launching the navy’s new digital strategy and they’d put up a few paintings in the lobby.’ The digital strategy was a complicated business, bringing the Royal Navy up to date with the latest technology; the art exhibition had been more straightforward. ‘Mostly grey things of battleships. A J-Class yacht in full sail at Southampton, because there’s always one. And next to it, our *Britannia*, from ’63.’

‘How d’you know it was ours?’ He still didn’t look up.

‘Because it was *that* one,’ the Queen said sharply, feeling suddenly and vertiginously sad at his lack of interest. ‘I know my own paintings.’

‘I’m sure you do. All seven thousand of ’em. Well, tell the staff johnnies to hand it over.’

‘I have.’

‘Good.’

The Queen sensed that the *Daily Telegraph* article was probably about Brexit, hence her husband’s more than usually prickly mood. Cameron gone. The party in disarray. The whole thing so fiendishly botched . . . A single painting by an unremarkable artist, presented long before Britain joined the Common Market, was hardly important. She glanced up at the landscapes by Stubbs, with their wonderful horses, that adorned the walls of the private dining room at the Palace. Philip himself had depicted her here, reading the paper, many years ago. And he had done it better, one could argue, than the man who had painted *Britannia*. But that picture had once been very precious to her.



It had become a favourite in ways she had never shared with anyone. She intended to get it back.

A couple of hours later, Rozie Oshodi arrived at the Queen's study in the North Wing to collect the morning's red boxes containing Her Majesty's official papers. Rozie had joined as the Queen's Assistant Private Secretary a few months ago, after a short career in the army and then at a private bank. She was still relatively young for the role, but so far had performed admirably, including – and perhaps especially – in the more unconventional aspects of it.

'Any news?' the Queen asked, looking up from the final paper in the pile.

Yesterday, Rozie had been tasked with finding out how the painting of the ex-royal yacht had ended up where it was and organising its swift return.

'Yes, ma'am, but it's not good.'

'Oh?' This was a surprise.

'I spoke to the facilities manager at the naval base,' Rozie explained, 'and he tells me it's a case of mistaken identity. The artist must have painted more than one version of *Britannia* in Australia. This one was lent to the exhibition by the Second Sea Lord. There's no plaque on it or anything. It's from the Ministry of Defence's collection and it's been hanging in his office for years.'

The Queen eyed her APS thoughtfully through her bifocals.

'Has it? The last time I saw it was in the nineteen nineties.'

'Ma'am?'

There was a belligerent glimmer behind the royal spectacles. ‘The Second Sea Lord doesn’t have another version. He has *mine*. In a different frame. And he’s had it for a long time, you now tell me.’

‘Ah . . . yes. I see.’ From the look on her face, it was clear that Rozie didn’t.

‘Go back and find out what’s going on, would you?’

‘Of course, ma’am.’

The Queen blotted her signature on the paper on her desk and put it back in its box. Her APS picked up the pile and left her to ponder.

Chapter 2

This place is a deathtrap.’

‘Oh, come on, James. You’re exaggerating.’

‘I am not.’ The Keeper of the Privy Purse glowered at the Private Secretary across the latter’s antique office desk. ‘Do you know how much vulcanised rubber they’ve discovered?’

‘I don’t even know what that is.’ Sir Simon’s raised left eyebrow managed to convey curiosity and amusement. As Private Secretary, he was responsible for managing the Queen’s official visits and relations with the Government, but he ended up taking an interest in everything that might affect her. And the deathtrap status or otherwise of Buckingham Palace most definitely fell into that category.

His visitor, Sir James Ellington, was in charge of the royal finances. He had worked with Sir Simon for years, and it wasn’t unusual for him to make the brisk ten-minute walk from his desk high up in the South Wing to Sir Simon’s spacious, high-ceilinged ground-floor office in the North Wing, so he could complain about the latest fiasco. Behind every stiff upper lip lies an Englishman bursting to share his withering irritation in private. Sir Simon noticed that his friend was



unusually exercised about the vulcanised rubber, though. Whatever it was.

‘You treat rubber with sulphur to harden it,’ Sir James explained, ‘and use it to make cable casings. At least, they did fifty years ago. It does the job, but over time it degrades, with exposure to air and light, and so on. It becomes brittle.’

‘A bit like you, this morning,’ Sir Simon observed.

‘Don’t. You have no idea.’

‘And so . . . What’s the problem with our brittle, vulcanised rubber?’

‘It’s falling apart. The cables should have been replaced decades ago. We knew it was bad, but when we had that leak in the attics last month, they discovered a nest of the blasted things that practically disintegrated on contact. It means the electricians around the building are being held together by a wing and a prayer. A hundred miles of them. One dodgy connection and . . . pffft.’ Sir James made a gesture with his elegant right hand to suggest smoke, or a minor explosion.

Sir Simon briefly closed his eyes. It wasn’t as if they didn’t know the dangers of fire. The Windsor Castle disaster in ’92 had taken five years and several million pounds to put right. They had opened Buckingham Palace to the public each summer to help pay for the repairs. Unfortunately, when they’d done a survey of *this* place, to be on the safe side, they discovered it was even more hazardous. Plans to fix it were under way, but they kept discovering complications.

‘So what do we do?’ he asked. ‘Move her out?’

No need to specify who may or may not need to move.





‘We probably should, pronto. She won’t want to go, of course.’

‘Naturally.’

‘We ran the idea up the flagpole last year and she didn’t exactly salute,’ Sir James mused, glumly. ‘I don’t blame her. If she did go, it would have to be to Windsor, so she could keep up her schedule, and we’d clog up the M4 with ambassadors and ministers and garden party guests zipping up and down. The castle itself would need to be reconfigured to cope. She’ll soldier on as is, if she possibly can. If it ain’t broke . . .’

‘But it *is* broke, you say,’ Sir Simon pointed out.

Sir James sighed. ‘It is, as you rightly remind me, broke.’ He raised his eyes heavenwards. ‘Buckingham Palace is broken. If it were a terraced house in Birmingham the experts would stick a notice on the front door and forbid the family to return until it was fixed. But it’s a working palace, so we can’t. We were just finalising the Reservicing Programme to work around her – this will add another million or two, no doubt. Oh, and I almost forgot: you know Mary, my secretary? The efficient one who always answers emails on time and knows everything in the Reservicing planning agenda and is a bit of a genius?’

‘Yes?’

‘She’s just handed in her notice. I didn’t hear all the details, but she was in floods of tears this morning. So—’

He was cut off by the arrival of Rozie with the boxes, which she placed on a marble-topped console table by the door, ready for collection by the Cabinet Office later.

‘All good?’ Sir Simon asked her.





‘Mostly. How do I find out if we loaned the Ministry of Defence one of the Queen’s private paintings back in the nineties?’

At this question of negligible interest, Sir James stood up and took his leave.

Rozie observed his departure with curiosity. Leaning forward, meanwhile, Sir Simon steepled his fingers and focused on the matter in hand. He was good at leaping from one problem to another – like a gymnast on the asymmetric bars, Rozie had often thought, or a squirrel on an obstacle course.

‘Hmm. Talk to the Royal Collection Trust,’ he suggested. ‘They look after her private art as well as Crown stuff, I think. Why do we care?’

‘The Boss saw it in Portsmouth,’ Rozie explained. ‘The MOD say it’s theirs. The thing is, she says it was a personal gift from the artist. You’d think she’d know.’

‘She tends to. What’s the MOD’s excuse?’

‘They’re suggesting there must be two of them.’

Sir Simon whistled to himself. ‘Brave move on their part. Can you ask the artist?’

‘No, he’s dead, I checked. His name’s Vernon Hooker. He died in 1997.’

‘Did he paint a lot of boats?’

‘Hundreds. If you google him, you’ll see.’

Rozie waited while Sir Simon duly typed in the artist’s name to Google Images on his computer and instinctively recoiled.



‘By God! Did the man ever sail?’

Rozie was no expert on maritime paintings, but Sir Simon’s reaction didn’t surprise her. Vernon Hooker liked to depict his subjects in bright colours, with exuberant disregard for light and shade. The images featured more emerald green, electric blue and lilac than you might expect for scenes that were largely sea and sky. But then, one of the Queen’s favourite artists was Terence Cuneo, whose paintings of trains and battle scenes were hardly monochrome. And to Rozie’s surprise, when she looked up Hooker online yesterday, it turned out that his work generally sold for thousands. He was quite collectable.

‘They’re probably right, aren’t they?’ Sir Simon concluded, peering back at his screen. ‘The Ministry, I mean. There are dozens of the bloody things. I bet this Hooker would get more money for a Day-Glo royal yacht than a bog-standard seascape. He probably did loads of them.’

‘She’s adamant. And actually, he didn’t do any others of *Britannia* that I could find.’

‘As I say, talk to Neil Hudson at the RCT. See if we loaned it. Twenty years is long enough for the MOD to hang onto it.’

‘OK.’ Rozie changed the subject. ‘Why did Sir James look so uncomfortable just now? I hope I wasn’t interrupting anything.’

‘Only existential despair. It’s the bloody Reservicing Programme. His secretary’s leaving, and they’ve discovered vulcanisation or something. Dodgy electrics, anyway. The Palace is a deathtrap, apparently.’



‘Good to know,’ she remarked breezily, heading for the door. ‘It sounds expensive.’

‘It will be. The budget has sailed past three hundred and fifty million already. We need Parliament to sign it off in November, and they can’t even give themselves a pay rise.’

She paused at the threshold. ‘Yeah, but this is the second most famous house in the world.’

‘But . . . three hundred and fifty million.’ Sir Simon folded his shirtsleeved arms and stared despondently at his computer. ‘When it was only three hundred it didn’t sound so bad, somehow.’

‘Over ten years,’ she reminded him. ‘And it’ll come in ahead of time and under budget, like Windsor Castle did. And the bill for the Houses of Parliament refit was four billion, the last I heard.’

The Private Secretary brightened slightly. ‘You’re absolutely right, Rozie. Ignore me, I need a holiday. How d’you stay so chipper?’

‘Fresh air and exercise,’ she said decisively. ‘You should try it some time.’

‘Do not cheek your elders, young lady. I’m very fit for my age.’

Rozie, who was very fit regardless of age – hers happened to be thirty – threw him a friendly grin before heading back to her office next door.

He tried not to show it, but her remark rankled with Sir Simon. She was a tall, attractive young woman, with a short, precision-cut Afro, an athletic physique and a fitness level that had hardly dropped since she left the Royal Horse Artillery.



He, meanwhile, was a quarter-century older, and his knees were not what they were. Nor was his back. As a young helicopter pilot and then a diplomat at the Foreign Office, he had been reasonably athletic: an ex-college rower who was handy on the rugby pitch and a demon at the wicket. But over the years, his consumption of good claret had increased in inverse proportion to the time spent wielding an oar, a ball or a cricket bat. He really ought to do something about it.

Chapter 3

Back at her desk, Rosie clicked on a series of images stored on her laptop. She had asked the facilities manager at the naval base in Portsmouth to send her a photo of the *Britannia* painting, so she would have some idea of what she was talking about. The image he'd sent showed the royal yacht, flags fluttering, surrounded by smaller boats with a flat blob of land in the background. She wondered briefly why the Boss was so attached to it. This was a woman who owned Leonardos and Turners, and a small, very lovely Rembrandt at Windsor Castle that Rozie would have cheerfully sold her Mini for.

The facilities manager had been quite firm. The Second Sea Lord – a vice admiral in charge of all ‘people’ matters in the navy – had a variety of paintings in his office, all legitimately sourced from the Ministry of Defence. Any loans from other places were quite clearly recorded and always returned shipshape and Bristol fashion. This wasn't one of them. There must simply be two paintings.

And yet the Boss was equally certain there were not.

Rozie made a phone call. The artist's dealer in Mayfair wasn't aware of any other paintings of *Britannia* by his late client, but suggested she talk to the son.



‘Don’s the expert on his father’s stuff. He’s in his late sixties, sharp as a tack. He lives in Tasmania. It’ll be evening there now, of course, but I’m sure he won’t mind talking to you.’

Rozie considered what a generous offer that was, then remembered on whose behalf she was calling. No – the artist’s son probably *wouldn’t* mind talking to her about the Queen’s little problem. People were usually fine with it.

Don Hooker was everything the dealer had promised.

‘The royal yacht in Hobart, for the regatta? Oh yeah, I know the one. It was 1962 or ’63 – something like that, and Her Majesty was on one of her tours. I remember Dad telling me the story. He was so proud of that painting! He was a big monarchist, was Dad, and there she was, this beautiful lady, travelling the world on her boat. He followed her on all the news broadcasts and made us listen too – even though, to be perfectly honest with you, Rozie, I was a callow youth at the time and I didn’t really care. But Dad loved the whole thing. He had a map on the wall and he marked off where she went with little green pins. Collected postcards, mugs, the lot. He said she looked so happy on that trip, and he wanted her to have something to remember it by. “A piece of that joy”, that’s what he said. He copied the picture from a newspaper photo, added the colours, you know . . . And he got a proper Pommie thank-you on Palace notepaper, with a big red crest. It said the Queen had never seen *Britannia* look so colourful. It was the only one he did. We’ve probably still got that letter in Dad’s archive somewhere. I can look it out if you want . . .?’





When Rozie rang him back, the facilities man from the Ministry of Defence was much less confident about his multiple-paintings theory.

‘Perhaps ours is a copy?’ he suggested. ‘I agree it’s very unusual, but I can absolutely assure you it’s not a loan from the Palace.’

Sir Simon was due to see the Queen next and, at Rozie’s request, he updated the Boss while he was there.

‘She says it’s not a copy, it’s her original,’ he informed Rozie on his return. ‘Find out how they got it and tell them to stop stalling. She’s pretty pissed off.’

‘How can she tell it’s the original?’ Rozie wanted to know. After all, the Queen had only seen the painting for a couple of minutes in bad light in a makeshift exhibition at a naval headquarters building on a visit about something else.

‘No idea. But she’s certain.’

If she was certain, Rozie would get the job done.

‘Just a little closer towards the light.’

The Queen adjusted the tilt of her neck, which was getting stiff.

‘Like this?’

‘Lovely, ma’am. Perfect.’

She closed her eyes, briefly. It was nice and peaceful in the Yellow Drawing Room. Beyond the heavy net curtains, sun-rays gleamed off the golden statue of Winged Victory on the Victoria Memorial – or the Birthday Cake, as the guardsmen called it. Warm shafts of light fell on her left cheek. If only





one didn't have to maintain this wretched pose, one could quite easily fall asleep . . .

But she *did* have to maintain it. The Queen opened her eyes sharply and rested her gaze on a Chinese pagoda in the corner, which was nine tiers high, reaching almost to the ceiling. Her third-great-grand-uncle, George IV, did not do things by halves.

'Are you getting what you need?' she asked.

'Absolutely. Won't be long. You can roll your shoulders in a couple of minutes.'

Lavinia Hawthorne-Hopwood, who stood at an easel making preparatory sketches of her, was a considerate artist. She knew what her sitters went through and tried to minimise the trouble. It was one of the reasons the Queen liked to work with her. This wasn't their first rodeo, as Harry would say. (What a marvellous expression. The Queen was delighted by rodeos. She had always thought that, under different circumstances, she might have been rather good at them.)

'Which bit are you working on now?'

'The eyes, ma'am. Always the trickiest.'

'I see.' Through the window, she watched several people posing for photographs outside the Palace gates. One seemed to be doing dance moves. Was this for one of those social media crazes Eugenie had told her about? The Queen craned slightly forward to get a better view.

'If you wouldn't mind, ma'am . . .'

'What?' The Queen was jolted out of her thoughts and realised she had changed position. Lavinia had stopped drawing. 'I'm so sorry. Is that better?'





‘Thanks. Just another minute or so and . . . there. That one’s done. Phew! Would you like a glass of water?’

‘A sip of tea would help.’

A porcelain cup and saucer appeared at the Queen’s elbow, proffered by Sandy Robertson, her page. After a welcome hit of Darjeeling, she stretched discreetly and rubbed her stiff knee, while the artist reviewed her sketches.

Nearby, two video cameras on tripods and a boom microphone on a stand recorded the session. A small team of three, dressed in practical T-shirts and trousers, moved softly between these and their assigned chairs against the far wall. A lanky young man in the red and navy-blue Royal Household uniform stood by to help or corral them, as appropriate. A documentary was in progress: *The Queen’s Art*, or something like that – they hadn’t finalised the title. Not just what one owned, but also what one contributed to.

Today they were filming the making of the latest artwork she had agreed to sit for: a bronze bust. There really should be someone recording the filming, the Queen mused, just to round the whole thing off. Or someone to write about the recording of the filming of the sketching . . . ad infinitum. She was used to being watched and used, by now; to being such a source of fascination that her watchers were watched too.

‘Is it going to be life-size, the bust?’ she asked Lavinia.

She knew the answer to this question, but also knew the need to make small talk for the cameras, and the need for that small talk not to be about Lavinia’s recent, horrendous divorce, or her son’s arrest for drug dealing at boarding school. The poor woman was entitled to some privacy.





‘Yes,’ Lavinia said, peering at a group of sketches spread out on a table near her easel. ‘Actually, slightly larger. They want you to stand out at the Royal Society.’

‘Mmm. Was the last one larger too?’

‘I think it was, ma’am, from memory. Did you like it?’

‘Oh, yes. I thought it was rather good. You managed to avoid making me look . . .’ She puffed out her cheeks and made Lavinia laugh. ‘Too much like my great-great-grandmother.’ Heavy. Jowly. Old.

Lavinia went back to her easel. ‘My aim is to make you shimmer. Even in bronze. Right, are you ready, ma’am? If you can turn your head to look at my hand, here. Just a bit more. That’s lovely . . .’

The artist kept up a gentle patter of conversation while she worked. She got more from her subjects when they talked than when they stayed silent. The Queen’s face, in particular, lit up when she was animated. At rest, it could look grimly forbidding, which gave quite the wrong impression of her.

‘Have you been to any good exhibitions recently?’ Lavinia asked, and then regretted it. She should have asked about racing.

But the Queen didn’t seem to mind.

‘We’re opening one next year that I’m looking forward to,’ she said. “‘Canaletto in Venice”. We have rather a lot of Canaletto.’ By which she meant the largest collection in the world. ‘Bought in bulk by George III from Joseph Smith. He was the consul to Venice at the time. A dull name for a rather interesting man, I’ve always thought.’



Lavinia gulped. ‘Goodness.’

The Queen smiled to herself. She’d had a lively chat on the subject with her Surveyor of Pictures recently. After several decades of living with them, she knew her Canalettos very well, although she preferred her own impressions of the place. Sailing from Ancona to Venice on board *Britannia* in 1960 – or was it ’61? – visiting the ancient little island of Torcello with Philip, and taking a moonlit gondola ride . . .

She thought back to those early tours on the royal yacht. Italy, Canada, the Pacific Islands . . . *Britannia* had been fitted out after the war, in another time of austerity, and its interior was practical, rather than extravagant. It suited the Queen’s temperament better than the gilt and grandeur that surrounded her now. How *happy* they had been, she and Philip and the ‘yotties’, visiting the furthest corners of the globe together. So many marvellous memories. The ‘ghastly little painting’ uniquely conjured some of them in particular.

‘I saw one of my personal paintings at an exhibition by the Royal Navy recently,’ she said aloud. It still rankled.

‘Oh, that’s nice,’ the artist said absently.

‘It wasn’t really. I hadn’t lent it to them. The last time I saw it, it was hanging opposite my bedroom door.’



Lavinia’s head jerked up in shock. ‘Oh dear.’

‘Oh dear precisely,’ the Queen agreed.

‘How did it get there?’

‘That’s a very interesting question.’ A minute later she added, ‘There. I think we’re done.’

Her tone was friendly but firm. The artist looked up, then glanced at her watch. The hour was up, precisely, and her



subject was already removing the diamond tiara she had kindly agreed to wear for the sculpture, which had looked delightfully over the top above her shirt and cardigan. The documentary team took charge of their cameras, watched by the eagle eye of the lanky young man from the Household. The Queen's equerry was already hovering in the doorway, ready to accompany Her Majesty to her next appointment.

'Thank you very much, ma'am,' Lavinia said.

The Queen nodded. 'I look forward to seeing the shimmer.' Her tone was dry, but there was a twinkle in her eye.