





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 on to 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-and-white 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 Abbottswood, 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 seawater 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. The Queen 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 frowned. ‘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 to 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.’





The Queen briefly closed her eyes. *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, such an eager, inventive boy. 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.

Chapter 2

The Queen accompanied Mrs Maddox on a quick tour of the house to check that everything had been set up to her satisfaction, which as always, under this housekeeper's care, it had been. Afterwards, she was drawn back to the saloon, with its inviting smell of woodsmoke. Most of Sandringham's rooms were quite small and intimate by royal standards, but the saloon was designed to impress. It was double height, with a plasterwork ceiling, a minstrels' gallery and a grand piano. The tapestries and royal portraits on the walls might have made it look like a museum, which it effectively was when she wasn't here, but modern sofas, cream walls and soft lamplight gave it a cosy, welcoming air. The crackling fire in the hearth – the only one in the house these days – was a Christmas highlight.

Among plentiful photographs of family, the ornaments were mainly horse bronzes and silver statuettes. If it was possible to be surrounded by too many representations of the horse, the Queen hadn't yet discovered how. Beyond the windows she caught a glimpse of the splendid new life-size statue of one of her favourite racehorses, the magnificent Estimate, which had recently been installed at the far end of



the courtyard opposite the front porch and rounded out her collection rather nicely. For now, though, she approached a baize-covered table next to the piano, where a wooden jigsaw had been set out. Jigsaws were a feature of her six-week stay at Sandringham and she studied this one carefully. It was a Constable painting, she noted – lots of open sky and feathery trees. Tomorrow it would be disassembled, ready to be made again. There was no additional picture, which added a certain piquancy to the challenge. One had to rely on memory and patience – something not all members of the family possessed in equal measure.

She had hoped to distract herself with the picture, but her mind inevitably drifted back to Ned St Cyr. He was two years older than Charles, which would make him seventy now. Three-score years and ten, she thought. A biblical lifetime, although now one could easily live to a hundred, as witnessed by her own mother and all the centenary birthday telegrams one sent these days.

Poor, dear Ned. In her mind, he was still a schoolboy. He had been a regular visitor here in the fifties, in the company of his glamorous mother and her family, with his shock of strawberry blond hair and always a winning smile, usually in apology for something he had just done, or was about to do. He had once persuaded a youthful Charles that it would be a good idea to hide a few of the jigsaw pieces for a joke. Philip's expression when Charles admitted to it after a fortnight had been something to behold.

Ned, when he visited the next time, took his scolding with good grace. He had arrived with a home-made bird





table, she seemed to remember, to be given as penance, and a couple of jokes from school that had made Philip hoot with laughter.

Ned usually got away with his naughtiness. Like his mother and his beloved uncle Patrick, his charm and charisma made him ‘one of those special people’, as her own mother always put it, and she should know, because the Queen Mother had been the very definition of ‘one of those special people’ herself.

Perhaps it was an accident. Perhaps Ned had died at sea and a boat propeller had somehow caused the hand to become detached. Except, no – there was the bag. Somebody must have . . .

She prayed that at least they would find the body soon, otherwise intact. She really must not indulge her worst imaginings. The Queen brought her mind back to the jigsaw and tried to lose herself, unsuccessfully, in Constable’s feathery trees.

Back at her desk, Rozie stared in frustration at her computer screen. After a stint as a captain in the Royal Horse Artillery and a couple of years on a fast-track role in the City, she could strip and reassemble a rifle blindfold, disarm an attacker, tack up a horse and break down a P & L statement – but the kind of estate she grew up on in West London did not feature farms and country houses, and there was still a lot the royal family took for granted that she had yet to learn.

In this case, she had googled ‘Edward Sincere’ and looked him up in every directory she could think of, starting with *Debrett’s*, but there was no aristocrat with that name. She



couldn't ask the house staff, because they were all rushing around like blue-arsed flies, as Prince Philip would say, getting ready for the arrival of multi-generational royals tomorrow. But there was one person who would certainly be able to help, if she could bear to ask for it.

Sir Simon Holcroft hadn't risen to the heights of private secretary without being a bit of a control freak. He had exhorted her to call him in Scotland 'at any time, day or night' if she had any questions or concerns of any kind. For her part, Rozie hadn't survived several years as a black female officer in the British Army without developing a strong sense of self-sufficiency, so she had equally vowed to herself that she wouldn't. Yet the Queen had been here for less than two hours, and already Rozie's finger was hovering over Sir Simon's number in her phone. She could hardly call the police to identify the victim if she didn't know who he was. And one didn't ask Her Majesty for the same information twice.

Damn.

Sir Simon was all charm. There was the clinking of glasses and the hum of congenial chatter in the background. He sounded as if he was in a bar or social club of some sort, having a good time.

'Rozie, Rozie. Edward Sincere, d'you say? How did you spell it?'

Rozie frowned. How many ways could you spell Sin—?
Damn.

He voiced the thought as it entered her brain. 'Don't tell me it was "S-i-n-c-e—"



‘Yes it was,’ she said crossly, tapping a nail on the leather-topped desk in front of her.

‘Have I taught you nothing about the British upper classes? Think “Chumley”.’

Rozie did. It was spelled Cholmondeley. He had taught her how to sidestep the pitfalls that were the ‘*Beevors*’ (Belvoir), ‘*Orltrups*’ (Althorp), ‘*Bookloos*’ (Buccleuch) and ‘*Simjons*’ (St John). She should have known.

‘Is it “Saint” Something?’

‘Exactly. S-t C-y-r.’ He spelled it out for her. ‘It’s the family name of Baron Mundy. They’re based at Ladybridge Hall. It’s a lovely place with a moat, not very large, about a forty-minute drive from you. The Mundys are ancient Norfolk aristocracy. They were first ennobled by King John in the thirteenth century,’ he went on. Of course, Sir Simon, the amateur historian, would know. ‘He was the king who famously lost the Crown Jewels in the Wash. Why?’

‘Why what?’ Rozie asked. She was still thinking about the Crown Jewels, lost at sea, a bit like the hand with the signet ring.

‘Why d’you need to know?’

‘Nothing to worry about,’ she said firmly. It was true: the recent discovery was hardly the Private Office’s business. Now she had the name right, the police could take care of it.

‘Nothing is ever nothing to worry about,’ Sir Simon countered, unhelpfully. Rozie couldn’t hear the clinking glasses in the background anymore. He had gone somewhere quiet to concentrate. She reluctantly explained about the hand and the ring.





‘Oh, Lord,’ he said. ‘How grotesque.’ He was silent for a minute, contemplating the news. ‘Was it literally just the hand? No sign of any other body parts?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Be very careful, Rozie.’ He was suddenly deadly serious. ‘Keep the Boss out of it, whatever it takes.’

‘Absolutely,’ she agreed, crossing her fingers. Rozie knew that keeping the Boss out of anything the Boss wanted to be into was very unlikely, regardless of what she did or didn’t do. Sir Simon didn’t know Her Majesty in quite the way she did. ‘She mentioned that the victim was a baron’s grandson.’

‘Not this baron,’ Sir Simon said. ‘Distant cousin, I think. However, we should probably call Ladybridge Hall; let Lord Mundy know.’

‘Why?’ Rozie asked. ‘If he’s a distant cousin?’

‘He’s a friend of the Boss. And family’s family. He won’t want to hear this on the news and then find out the identification came from someone at Sandringham and we didn’t tell him first.’

After a brief call to her contact at the Norfolk constabulary HQ to update them on the identity, Rozie called Ladybridge Hall. She had half hoped to speak to an underling such as herself who could pass on the grisly details, but it was the Right Honourable the Lord Mundy himself (she had looked it up to make sure of his title) who answered the phone. He was silent for a long time, pondering the news. Having said her piece as gently as she could, Rozie wondered if he was still on the line.





‘Are you all right, My Lord?’

‘Goodness me.’ He sounded breathless. ‘I need to sit down. Oh, my goodness.’

‘I’m sorry to be the one to—’

‘Oh, no, my dear, don’t apologise. And do call me Hugh. Thank you for calling. Very considerate of you.’ He had the cut-glass accent and almost exaggerated good manners of his class, reminding Rozie of the many earls and dukes she had encountered in this job. But they usually sounded formal and composed, whereas he seemed all at sea. ‘So you’ve informed the police?’

‘Yes, just now.’

‘Oh, dear me.’ His voice fluttered up and down. ‘Oh my goodness. A *hand*, you say? I saw him only recently . . . We hadn’t spoken for years, as you probably know.’

‘No, I didn’t,’ Rozie admitted. Sir Simon probably did.

‘But after my wife’s funeral in the summer . . . He was very *decent* about it. I sensed that he wanted to extend an olive branch. Do they have any idea how . . .?’

‘It’s early days,’ Rozie explained. ‘The police don’t really know anything yet.’

‘Well, you’re very kind to inform me. I . . . Excuse me. I don’t know what to . . . How did Her Majesty find out about it?’

‘The hand was found near Sandringham. The police told us as a courtesy.’

‘Near *Sandringham* . . . How ghastly. Her Majesty must be . . . Do give her my sympathies. We’re supposed to be seeing her after Christmas, but if this makes things difficult,





I quite understand. How did they know it was Edward, by the way?’

Rozie took a breath. ‘It was the ring, My Lord.’ She couldn’t call him Hugh. She hadn’t yet developed Sir Simon’s ease at hobnobbing with the aristocracy.

‘My goodness . . . The ring . . . I have one myself, just like it . . .’

He tailed off again and Rozie pictured him staring at his own left hand.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be. There’s nothing you . . . Oh, my goodness. Thank you for calling, my dear. Please wish Her Majesty a happy Christmas on our behalf. I hope she feels better soon.’


Rozie was a bit startled by this last remark. How did he know the Queen was unwell? Then she remembered that it had been reported in *The Times* because of the cancelled train trip.

‘I’ll tell her,’ she assured him, but she wouldn’t. The last thing the Boss would want was people outside the family circle remarking on her ill health.


Afterwards, she went back to her laptop and typed in ‘Edward St Cyr’.

Wikipedia informed her that he was born in 1946, the only grandson of the tenth Baron Mundy. After growing up at the St Cyr family seat and brief sojourns in Greece, London and California in the 1970s, where he had managed two failed rock bands, he had joined his mother at a small estate called Abbottswood, south of King’s Lynn, where he hosted a couple






of controversial rock concerts and, later, what was briefly the second-most popular literary festival in Norfolk. He had been married and divorced three times, his second wife being the nanny to the children with his first. There were links here to various newspaper articles about the scandal, which Rozie ignored. He was on the boards of various charities, two of which were anti-addiction and one that supported the welfare of refugees in Greece.



While she was at it, she looked up the current Lord Mundy. Hugh was the son of Ralph, the eleventh baron, who in turn was the nephew of Edward's grandfather, the tenth baron, who had died without a living male heir. That made Hugh and Edward St Cyr second cousins. Sir Simon was right again. Rozie thought about the equivalent in her own family. She had a raft of second and third cousins, some in Nigeria, some in Texas and New York, and some in Peckham, South London. Thanks to social media, and the endless family chats set up by her mum and her aunts, she couldn't avoid hearing what most of them were up to: the 'good students' (Rozie was one of these), the 'bad boys', the pastors, the finance whizz-kids, the Gen Z tech gurus, the ones who were settling down with kids ('*See, Rozie?*' as her mother would say), and the ones who, to her mother's gentle despair, were trying to get their own lives under control before they created more Oshodis. It wasn't quite the same thing as being 'an ancient Norfolk family', but a big family – yeah, she got that. And yes, if something happened to one of them, her mum would absolutely want to know.





A subsequent search on Google Images brought up pictures of a tall, rangy man with skin the colour of milky tea, a sharp nose, ruddy cheeks and straight, bushy eyebrows over eyes as blue and piercing as the Queen's.

In earlier pictures, Edward lounged moodily as a young man against bougainvillea-clad white walls, barefoot in bell-bottom jeans and faded T-shirts, accompanied by women in minidresses with Brigitte Bardot hair. Later, alongside a variety of slim, blonde companions in tight-fitting dresses, he seemed to favour pink and purple jackets that were just this side of fancy dress.

By the most recent photographs, he seemed to have adopted the more relaxed country style of a waxed jacket over a denim shirt, a battered trilby hat and a fringed cotton scarf that brought out the colour of his eyes. His face could look forbidding, accentuated by those eyebrows and prominent nose, but when he smiled, showing bright, white, un-British dentistry, he had a charisma that drew you instantly to him, even in the images where his hair had faded from burnished copper to spun gold.

In the latest photograph she could find, he was standing at the rear of an old Land Rover Defender, painted pink, with three dogs sitting in the back. He was resting his arm against the open door and the signet ring was clearly visible on the little finger of his left hand. It made her shiver.

