

Chapter 1

It was an almost perfect spring day.

The air was crisp and clear, the cornflower sky slashed with contrails. Ahead of her, above the treeline of Home Park, Windsor Castle glowed silver in the morning light. The Queen brought her pony to a standstill to admire the view. There is nothing as good for the soul as a sunny morning in the English countryside. After eighty-nine years, she still marvelled at God's work. Or evolution's, to be strictly accurate. But on a day like this, it was God who came to mind.

Of all her residences, if she had to pick a favourite, it would be this one. Not Buckingham Palace, which was like living in a gilded office block on a roundabout. Not Balmoral or Sandringham, though they were in her blood. Windsor was, quite simply, home. It was the seat of her happiest days of childhood: Royal Lodge, the pantomimes, the rides. It was where one still came at weekends to recover from the endless formality in town. It was where Papa was laid to rest, and darling Mummy too, and Margaret alongside them, though that had been tricky to arrange in the snug little vault.

If the revolution ever came, she mused, this was where she would ask to retire. Not that they'd let her. Revolutionaries would probably pack her off . . . Where? Out of the country? If so, she'd go to Virginia, called after her namesake, and home to Secretariat, who won the Triple Crown in '73. Actually, if it wasn't for the Commonwealth, and poor Charles, and William and little George so nicely lined up to follow him after all the ghastliness, that wouldn't be such a terrible prospect at all.

But Windsor would be best. One could bear anything here.

From this distance the castle looked untroubled, idle and half asleep. It wasn't. Inside, five hundred people would be going about their business. It was a village, and a vastly efficient one at that. She liked to think of them all, from the Master of the Household checking the accounts, to the chambermaids making the beds after last night's little *soirée*. But today there was a shadow over everything.

A performer at the *soirée* had been found dead in his bed this morning. Apparently, he'd died in his sleep. She had met him. Briefly danced with him, in fact. A young Russian, brought in to play the piano. So gifted, so attractive. What a terrible loss for his family.

Overhead, a dull roar of engines drowned out the birdsong. From her saddle, the Queen heard a high-pitched whine and glanced up to see an Airbus A330 coming in to land. When one lives on a Heathrow flight path one becomes an expert plane-spotter, though knowing all the current passenger jets

by silhouette alone was a reluctant party trick. The aeroplane noise jogged her out of her thoughts and reminded her she needed to get back to her papers.

First, she made a mental note to ask after the young man's mother. She wasn't, to be frank, normally that interested in the absent relations of other people. One's own family was bad enough. But something told her this was different. There had been a very odd look on her private secretary's face when he gave her the news this morning. Despite her staff's endless endeavours to protect her from anything unfortunate, she always knew when something was up. And up, she suddenly realised, something most definitely was.

'Walk on,' she instructed her pony. Beside her, the stud groom silently urged on his horse in unison.

Under the ornate Gothic ceiling of the small State Dining Room, breakfast was coming to an end. The Queen's racing manager was sharing bacon and eggs with the Archbishop of Canterbury, the ex-Ambassador to Moscow and a few fellow stragglers from the night before.

'Interesting evening,' he said to the archbishop, who was seated to his left. 'I didn't know you danced the tango.'

'Neither did I,' groaned his companion. 'That little ballerina rather swept me off my feet. My calves are killing me.' The archbishop lowered his voice. 'Tell me, on a scale of one to ten, how ridiculous was I?'

The racing manager's lips twitched. 'To quote Nigel Tufnel, it was an eleven. I'm not entirely sure I've seen the Queen laugh harder.'

The archbishop frowned. 'Tufnel? Was he here last night?'
'No. *Spinal Tap*.'

The reluctant dancer grinned sheepishly. 'Oh dear.' He leaned forward to rub his lower leg under the table and caught the eye of the extremely beautiful, model-thin young woman sitting opposite him at the table. Her wide, dark irises seemed to stare into his very soul. She gave a faint smile. He blushed like a choirboy.

But Masha Peyrovskaya was looking through him, not at him. Last night had been the most intense experience of her life and she was still savouring every second of it.

'Dine,' she practised to herself in her head, 'and sleep. Dine and sleep. Last week I went to a dine and sleep at Windsor Castle. Oh yes. With Her Majesty the Queen of England. You haven't been to one? They are so lovely.' As if it happened every week. 'Yuri and I had rooms overlooking the town. Her Majesty uses the same soap as we do. She's so funny when you get to know her. Her diamonds are to die for . . .'

Her husband Yuri Peyrovski was medicating an almighty hangover with a concoction of raw green vegetables and ginger made to his personal recipe. The staff were certainly efficient. Yuri had heard rumours that the Queen kept her breakfast cereal in plastic containers (not that she was joining them this morning). He was expecting the old English 'shabby chic', which meant poorly maintained homes with inadequate heating and peeling paint. But he had been

misinformed. This room, for example, had elaborate red silk curtains, two dozen matching gilt chairs around the table and a pristine carpet of bespoke design. Every other room was equally immaculate. Even his own butler would find little to fault here. The port last night had been excellent, too. And the wine. And had there been brandy? He dimly remembered there had been.

Despite the pounding in his head, he turned to the woman on his left, who was the ex-ambassador's wife, and asked how he might go about procuring the services of a personal librarian, such as the one they had met after dinner. The ex-ambassador's wife, who didn't know, but had lots of impecunious, well-read friends, turned up the charm to eleven and did her best.

They were interrupted by the sight of a tall, raven-haired woman in a pleated trouser suit, who appeared in the doorway in a dramatic pose, hand on hip, carmine lips pursed in alarm.

'Oh, I'm sorry! Am I late?'

'Not at all,' the racing manager offered amicably, though she was, extremely. Many guests had already returned upstairs to oversee the packing of their overnight bags. 'We're all very relaxed here. Come and grab a seat next to me.'

Meredith Gostelow made her way to the chair being pulled back for her by a footman and nodded heartfelt assent to the suggestion of coffee.

'Did you sleep well?' asked a familiar voice to her right. It was Sir David Attenborough, as melodious and

solicitous as he was on TV. It made her feel like an endangered panda.

‘Mmm, yes,’ she lied. She glanced around the table as she sat, caught sight of the beautiful Masha Peyrovskaya half-smiling at her, and almost missed her chair.

‘I didn’t sleep,’ Masha muttered huskily. Several heads swivelled to look at her, except her husband, who frowned into his juice. ‘I was thinking all night about the beauty, the music, the . . . “сказка” . . . How do you say in English?’

‘The fairy tale,’ the ambassador murmured from across the table, with a crack in his voice.

‘Yes, the fairy tale. Isn’t it? Just like being in Disney! But *classy*.’ She paused. This had not come out as she had intended. Her English held her back, but she hoped her enthusiasm carried her through. ‘You are lucky.’ She turned to the racing manager. ‘You come here often, yes?’

He grinned, as if she had made a joke. ‘Absolutely.’

Before she could investigate the cause of his amusement, a new footman, resplendent in a red waistcoat and black tailcoat, walked up to her husband, bending to mutter something in his ear that Masha could not catch. Yuri flushed, pushed his chair back without a word and followed him out of the room.

Looking back, Masha blamed herself for mentioning fairy tales. Somehow, this was all her fault. Because when you consider them, fairy tales always have dark forces at their heart. Evil lurks where we most desire it not to be,

and evil often wins. How stupid she had been to think of Disney, when instead she should have remembered Baba Yaga in the forest.

We are never safe. No matter how many furs and diamonds we wrap ourselves in. And one day I shall be old and all alone.

Chapter 2

‘Simon?’

‘Yes, ma’am?’ The Queen’s private secretary, Sir Simon Holcroft, looked up from the paper agenda he was holding. The Queen was back from her ride and sitting at her desk, dressed in a grey tweed skirt and a favourite cashmere cardigan that brought out the blue in her eyes. Her private sitting room was a cosy space – for a Gothic castle – filled with sagging sofas and a lifetime of treasures and keepsakes. He liked it here. However, there was an edge to Her Majesty’s voice that made Sir Simon slightly nervous, though he fought not to show it.

‘That young Russian. Was there something you didn’t tell me?’

‘No, ma’am. The body is on its way to the mortuary, I believe. On the twenty-second, the President intends to arrive by helicopter and we were wondering if you’d like to—’

‘Don’t change the subject. You had a look on your face.’

‘Ma’am?’

‘When you broke the news earlier. You were trying to spare me. Don’t.’

Sir Simon swallowed. He knew exactly what he had been trying to spare his aged sovereign. But the Boss was the Boss. He coughed.

‘He was naked, ma’am. When he was found.’

‘Yes?’ The Queen peered at him. She pictured a fit young man lying nude in bed under the covers. Why would this be unusual? Philip in his youth was known to spurn pyjamas.

Sir Simon peered back. It took a while to realise she didn’t see this as odd. She needed more; he girded his loins.

‘Um, naked, except for a purple dressing gown. By whose cord, most unfortunately . . .’ He trailed off. He couldn’t do it. The woman would be ninety in a fortnight.

Her stare resolved sharply as she grasped his meaning.

‘Do you mean to say he was hanging by the cord?’

‘Yes, ma’am. Most tragically. In a cupboard.’

‘A cupboard?’

‘Strictly speaking, a wardrobe.’

‘Well.’ There was a brief silence while they both tried to picture the scene and wished they hadn’t. ‘Who found him?’ Her tone was brisk.

‘One of the housekeepers. Someone noticed he wasn’t at breakfast and’ – he paused fractionally, to remember the name – ‘Mrs Cobbold went to check he was awake.’

‘Is she all right?’

‘No, ma’am. I believe counselling has been offered.’

‘How extraordinary . . .’ She was still picturing the discovery.

‘Yes, ma’am. But by the look of it, accidental.’

‘Oh?’

‘The way he was . . . and the room.’ Sir Simon coughed again.

‘The way he was what, Simon? What about the room?’

He took a deep breath. ‘There were ladies’ . . . underwear. Lipstick.’ He closed his eyes. ‘Tissues. It seems he was . . . experimenting. For pleasure. He probably didn’t mean to . . .’

By now he was puce. The Queen took pity. ‘How dreadful. And the police have been called?’

‘Yes. The commissioner has promised absolute discretion.’

‘Good. Have his parents been told?’

‘I don’t know, ma’am,’ Sir Simon said, making a note. ‘I’ll find out.’

‘Thank you. Is that everything?’

‘Almost. I’ve called a meeting this afternoon to contain publicity. Mrs Cobbold has already been very understanding on that point. I’m quite certain we have her absolute loyalty and we’ll make it clear to the staff: no talking. We’ll need to tell the guests about the death – though obviously not the manner of it. Because Mr Peyrovski brought Mr Brodsky here last night, he has already been informed.’

‘I see.’

Sir Simon stole another look at his agenda. ‘Now, there is the question of where exactly you wish to welcome the Obamas . . .’

They returned to business as usual. It was all very unsettling, though.

To have happened here. At Windsor. In a cupboard. In a purple dressing gown.

She didn't know if she felt more sorry for the castle or the man. It was much more tragic for the poor young pianist, obviously. But she knew the castle better. Knew it like a second skin. It was awful, awful. And after such a wonderful night.

It was the Queen's habit to spend a month at the castle in spring, for the Easter Court. Away from the excessive formality of the palace, she could entertain in a more relaxed, informal style – which meant parties for twenty, instead of banquets for a hundred and sixty, and the chance to catch up with old friends. This particular dine and sleep, a week after Easter, had been somewhat hijacked by Charles, who wanted to use it to curry favour with some rich Russians for one of his pet projects that needed a cash injection.

Charles had requested the presence of Yuri Peyrovski and his preternaturally beautiful young wife, as well as a hedge-fund manager called Jay Hax who specialised in Russian markets and was known for being crashingly dull. As a favour to her son the Queen agreed, though she had added a few suggestions of her own.

Sitting at her desk, she considered the guest list, where a copy still sat among her papers. Sir David Attenborough had been there, of course. He was always a delight, and one's own age, which was rare these days. He had been

very gloomy about the state of global warming, though. Oh dear. And her racing manager, who was staying for a few days and was never gloomy about anything much, thank goodness. They were joined by a novelist and her screenwriter husband, whose gentle, funny films were the epitome of Britishness. And there was the Provost of Eton and his wife, who lived round the corner and were regular stalwarts.

For Charles's sake she had included various people with Russian connections. The recently returned British Ambassador to Moscow . . . The Oscar-winning actress of Russian descent, who was rightly famous for her *embon-point* and acerbic tongue . . . Who else? Ah yes, that star British female architect who was building a rather grand museum annex in Russia at the moment, and the professor of Russian literature and her husband (you could never assume the sex or sexuality of professors these days – as Philip had learned the hard way – but this was a woman, married to a man).

And somebody else . . . She looked back at the list. Oh, of *course*, the Archbishop of Canterbury. He was another regular who could be relied upon to make the conversation go with a swing if some of the others became tongue-tied, as could unfortunately be the case. The other misfortune being if they all talked too much and one could hardly get a word in edgeways. For which there was little remedy, apart from the occasional stern look.

The Queen always liked to provide a little entertainment for her guests, and Mr Peyrovski had suggested to Charles

a young protégé of his who ‘played Rachmaninov like a dream’. There were also a couple of ballet dancers who would perform cut-down solos from *Swan Lake* in Imperial Russian style to recorded music. The whole thing was set to be refined, serious and soulful. In fact, the Queen had been rather dreading it. The Easter Court was supposed to be jolly, but Charles’s *fête à la russe* sounded positively grim.

And yet. You never know what will happen.

The food was sublime. A new chef, keen to prove herself, had created wonders with produce from Windsor, Sandringham and Charles’s kitchen gardens at Highgrove. The wine was always good. Sir David, when not prophesying the imminent death of the planet, was impishly amusing. The Russians were not nearly as dour as one had feared, and Charles beamed with gratitude (though he and Camilla had departed after coffee for an event at Highgrove the following day, leaving her feeling like the mother of a university student who comes home merely so that one can do his laundry).

Slightly tiddly, they had joined a few other members of the family, who had been eating together in the Octagon Room in the Brunswick Tower, and had all gone to the library to be shown some of the more interesting Russian volumes in her collection, including some nice first editions of poetry and plays in translation, which she had always intended to read one day and never quite got round to. Philip, who had been up since dawn, disappeared without fuss to bed and the Oscar-winning actress, whose profile had been much admired and whose views on Hollywood had

been highly entertaining, was whisked off to a hotel near Pinewood, where she was filming at dawn. And then . . . the piano and the dancers.

Thoroughly relaxed, the remaining party had gone to the Crimson Drawing Room to listen to extracts from Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto. This was one of her favourite rooms for entertaining, with its red silk walls, the portraits of Mummy and Papa looking glamorous in their coronation robes either side of the fireplace, its vista of the park by daylight and extravagant chandelier by night, and the elegant view of the Green Drawing Room beyond. It was one of the rooms gutted by the fire in 1992 – though you would never know it now. Restored to perfection, it was the ideal backdrop for evenings such as this.

The young pianist had been, as promised, quite magnificent. Did Simon say he was called Brodsky? In his early twenties, the Queen thought, but with the musical sensibility of a man much older. He seemed borne away by the passion of the piece, while she found herself reliving scenes from *Brief Encounter*. And he was so good-looking. All the women had been entranced.

Afterwards the ballerinas had done their solos – very nicely. Margaret would have enjoyed them. One secretly found them rather clip-cloppety, but that was probably just their shoes. And then, somehow, young Mr Brodsky was back at the piano and playing dance tunes from the thirties. How did he know them? And she agreed the furniture could be moved back for dancing.

It all started out quite decorously, then someone else had sat at the piano. Who? The professor's husband, she seemed to remember, and he was surprisingly good too. The young Russian was freed to join the assembled company. With impeccable manners he had clicked his heels and bowed down to his hostess, with a look of real supplication in his eyes.

'Your Majesty. Would you care to dance?'

Well, as a matter of fact, she would. And the next thing she knew, she was foxtrotting across the floor with no thought for sciatica. She was wearing a light silk chiffon gown that evening, with plenty of swing in the skirts. Mr Brodsky was an expert partner, reminding her of steps she had forgotten she knew. His timing was flawless. He managed to make one feel like Ginger Rogers.

By now, most of the party were joining in. The music was louder and bolder. An Argentine tango struck up. Was it still the professor's husband at the piano? Even the Archbishop of Canterbury was tempted to cut a rug with one of the dancers, much to everyone's amusement. A few other couples gave it a go, but nobody could begin to match the Russian and his latest partner – the other ballerina – striding majestically across the floor.

She had retired soon afterwards, leaving the guests with the reassurance that they could continue for as long as they liked. In her day, the Queen could outlast half the Foreign Office, but now she tended to droop after half past ten. However, that was no reason to cut short a good party. Her dresser, who got it from one of the under-butlers, informed her it had gone on until well after midnight.

That was the last she had seen of him: dancing around the drawing room floor floor with a beautiful young ballerina in his arms. Looking magnificent, happy . . . and so intensely alive.

Philip was full of the news when he arrived to share a coffee with her after lunch.

‘Lilibet, did you hear the man was nude?’

‘Yes, actually, I did.’

‘Strung up like a Tory MP. There’s a word for it. What is it? Auto-sex-something?’

‘Autoerotic asphyxiation,’ the Queen said grimly. She had googled it on her iPad.

‘That’s the bugger. D’you remember Buffy?’

One did indeed recall the seventh Earl of Wandle, an old friend who had been rather partial to the practice in the fifties, by all accounts. Back then it had seemed practically *de rigueur* among a certain set.

‘What the butler saw, eh?’ Philip said. ‘Had to rescue the blighter on many an occasion, apparently. Buffy was hardly an oil painting, even with his clothes on.’

‘What was he thinking?’ she wondered.

‘My dear, I try not to imagine Buffy’s sex life.’

‘No. I mean the young Russian. Brodsky.’

‘Well, that’s obvious,’ Philip said, gesturing around him. ‘You know what people are like in this place. They come here, decide it’s the pinnacle of their bloody existence and need to let off steam. The high jinks that go on when they think we’re

not looking . . . Poor bastard.’ He dropped his voice sympathetically. ‘Didn’t think it through. Last thing you want is to be discovered in a royal palace with your goolies out.’

‘Philip!’

‘No, I mean it. No wonder everyone’s keeping it hush-hush. That, and protecting your fragile nerves.’

The Queen threw him a look. ‘They forget. I’ve lived through a world war, that Ferguson girl and you in the Navy.’

‘And yet they think you’ll need smelling salts if they so much as hint at anything fruity. All they see is a little old lady in a hat.’ He grinned as she frowned. That last remark was true, and very useful, and rather sad. ‘Don’t worry, Cabbage, they love that little old lady.’ He rose stiffly from his chair. ‘Don’t forget, I’m off to Scotland later. The salmon’s spectacular this year, Dickie says. Need anything? Fudge? Nicola Sturgeon’s head on a platter?’

‘No, thank you. When will you be back?’

‘A week or so – I’ll be in good time for your birthday. Dickie’s going to stuff up the atmosphere and fly me in his jet.’

The Queen nodded. Philip tended to run his own diary these days. Years ago, she had found it rather heartbreaking when he disappeared off, with who-knew-who, to do God-knew-what, leaving her in charge. A part of her was jealous, too, of the freedom, the self-determination. But he always came back, bringing with him a burst of energy that cut through the corridors of power like a brisk sea breeze. She had learned to be grateful.

‘Actually,’ she said, as he bent arthritically to drop a kiss on her forehead, ‘I wouldn’t mind some fudge.’

‘Your wish is my command.’ He grinned, making her heart melt with clockwork precision, and strode to the door.