Love In/And History

by JunoInferno

Summary

In Present Day Britain, historians Will Lamb and Victoria Kensington investigate one of the nation's most cherished romances. In 1840, the Prince Consort is dead and Queen Victoria has sent for the one advisor she trusts above all others and the British throne will never be the same.

Notes

So, this is my first Vicbourne fic. Please let me know what you think and happy reading.
Chapter 1

“Frogmore always seems like it ought to be a house at Hogwarts.”

Will Lamb lowered his phone to look over the train car table at Victoria. They had already been on the train for the better part of two hours thanks to every delay known to man, but none of this deterred his partner from speaking.

“It sounds so undignified. ‘Oh, yes, His Royal Highness was buried at Frogmore.’ It seems like a swamp or the country estate of Kermit the Frog.”

“I suppose I hadn’t given it much thought.”

“So, which Hogwarts houses do you think they’d be in?”

“Did your mobile run out of battery?”

“The wifi is dodgy. Albert was a Hufflepuff, obviously. You’re the world’s foremost scholar on Lord Melbourne. What do you think?”

“I wouldn’t know one from the other.”

“I think Ravenclaw.”

He shrugged. “Fine.”

“You always do this on trains. And planes. Long motor journeys...”

“And you never stop talking.”

“Only because you never talk at all.” She crossed her arms. “I would think you would want to talk to me. After all, when we get to Windsor, you’ll be ushered off to the Royal Archives to take your notes on golden tablets as you get to look at the best papers in the world.”

Will put his phone down. “I tried to get you in, but you did yourself in with the whole the Queen was shagging Lord M bit.”

“She was shagging Lord M. That’s a matter of historical record.”

“Not while she was married to Albert.”

“Well, she was probably thinking about shagging Lord M while she was married to Albert. I know I would be.”

“And do you suppose she just wrote this in her diary? ‘Dear diary, I would much rather be shagging Lord M.’”

“‘Dear Diary, Today Albert told me all about his plan to build a model dairy on the estate and I passed the whole time picturing Lord M bending me over my desk while we work on the dispatch boxes.’”

“You know, you have a highly overactive imagination for someone who means to be the world’s
foremost scholar on Queen Victoria I.”

“Why, Professor Lamb, I always thought you enjoyed that I have a highly overactive imagination.”

A smile turned at the corner of his mouth. “So I do.”

“You don’t wonder?”

“About what?”

“About Melbourne’s shagging habits.”

“I can’t say that I do.”

“I do. His first wife was disgusted by him and she sent her ex-boyfriend her pubic hair. What the hell could he have been into?”

A woman leaned over. “There are children who can hear you-”

“I’ll have you know this is simply historical fact and I happen to be a professor, thank you.” Victoria turned her head away from the woman, miffing her in the process as Will scratched his forehead and avoided eye contact. “Oral? Probably, right? Could have been anal. Did he just like to cuddle? General opinion seems to lean towards spanking, but did he like to do the spanking or did he like to be spanked? The latter would make sense, given what we know…”

The train began to slow. Will looked out relieved to see that they were finally approaching the station at Windsor.

Victoria was in her own world. “Probably tied him to the bedposts and had her way with him…”

“The next time you wonder why you aren’t allowed in the Royal Archives, this is why.”

They gathered their things and checked into the small hotel in the village before heading up to the castle. The usual gatherings of tourists and school groups were there as Victoria and Will slowly made their way to the point where they would have to separate.

“Any final requests?,” Will asked as they stood outside the security checkpoint.

“Albert’s funeral preparations. Who sent for Lord M? That sort of thing.”

He nodded. “And what are you going to do?”

“I told you. I’ve got that friend who works at Brocket Hall. I’m going to ring her and see if I can’t get us in.”

“You’re mad. It’s almost summer, the Royal Family will be there.”

“Well, if it has to wait until the autumn, fine, but I’m still going to try it. Besides, it’s not as if I was planning to be there the same time as the Royal Family.”

“You could, you and Victoria V could have tea and you could bring up your theory that her great
great gran fantasized about Lord Melbourne spanking her.”

“Don’t be stupid. It was the other way round.”

“Go and see Albert,” he said walking towards the entrance.

“I’m just saying she buried her mum out here, too. Didn’t like her much!”

Life after ruling the greatest nation on Earth was somewhat understandably more a letdown than a relief.

Life after Victoria was intolerable.

So he retired not just from politics but from the world. For someone who had been so entrenched it was strange to remove himself so, to avoid newspapers and gossip. He soon found that he did not know how many days passed, how many months passed.

The world could move on without him.

So if one day he heard a German prince had died while passing through the village at Hatfield, he tried to will it away because it would change nothing.

Melbourne entered the house from the back door. Powell, the butler, was waiting.

“What is it?”

“Sir Robert Peel is in the drawing room.”

“Why?”

Powell looked taken aback. “I doubt I would know, milord.”

He made his way into the drawing room where Sir Robert paced.

“Sir Robert.”

“Melbourne.”

“To what do I owe the honor?”

Peel took a long while to answer for it seemed as if he were chewing on glass to make the words come.

“Her Majesty asked that I come.”

Of course she had. Melbourne did his best to disguise his reaction.

“She is unwell.”
“Then surely that is her husband’s domain.”

Peel looked as if he had been slapped. “Prince Albert is dead!”

“Is he?”

Peel continued on his own rant. “She keeps to her bed, she won’t see anyone and won’t look at her box. I tell you, Melbourne, this government had been brought to a grinding halt.”

“Your government.”

Peel grimaced. Melbourne had worked tirelessly to rid himself of any thoughts of government and the palace, all but disappearing from public life.

“Do you think if I had any other options I would be here? The Prince Consort has left no heirs, the only thing standing between us and rule by the King of Hanover is a twenty year old girl who may have lost her head.”

“And you’re so terribly concerned about that prospect? I remember once you welcomed it.”

“Do you really care so little, Melbourne?”

There it was. Peel had the winning hand because he knew Melbourne’s weakness.

That he did care.

Melbourne entered Buckingham Palace with a chill. The house was not the same as he had left it, glowing with the excitement of a new marriage. Now though it felt of death.

He passed the Duchess in the hallway and earned her glare. She stuck her nose up and marched off.

Well, some things hadn’t changed.

“Baroness, Her Majesty summoned me.”

“Yes, days ago. She’s in the Blue Stateroom.”

He made his way to where a footman waited and opened the door.

“Your Majesty.”

Victoria walked towards him, silently offering her hand as she always had. He took it to kiss her hand, but she didn’t take it away immediately. Melbourne tried not to look into her eyes on the chance that they might reveal what she was thinking and he certainly didn’t want her to know what he was thinking.

She finally removed her hand and walked towards the window. It was then that Melbourne took the chance of looking at her. How many months had it been? He had tried to persuade himself that she could not be nearly so lovely as she had been in his memory, but even clad in black.

She had worn black the day they met.

“Your Majesty, allow me to offer my deepest condolences on the death of the prince-”
Victoria snapped her head at him, blue eyes shooting daggers.

“How dare you.”

Melbourne did not know what to say. What had he done? “I’m sorry, ma’am, I-”

“That is the first thing you say to me?”

He furrowed his brow. “Forgive me, ma’am, but I only thought-”

“You only thought? That the first words I would want to hear out of your mouth are about my dead husband?”

“What would you have me say, ma’am?”

“It’s not a matter of what I would have you say, it’s a matter of what you would want to say and I certainly don’t think it’s what you wanted to say!”

“Perhaps I am not so free to say what I want to say, ma’am.”

“Then why don’t you just speak on the rooks?”

This was a doomed enterprise from the start, was it not? What had he been thinking by agreeing to this request?

“I should leave, ma’am.”

“Do you think I am free? Free to say how frankly I am just the tiniest bit relieved? Free to say how horrible that makes me feel because poor Albert didn’t deserve that. After all, his greatest crime was not being you and one can hardly blame him for it. I am not free, Lord M, I am meant to grieve and die and I have not done my duty and my country once again sits on the precipice.”

She stared at him. Seconds seemed to become hours.

“You are in mourning, ma’am-”

“No, not you, Lord M,” she cut him off. “You’re the only one who ever took me seriously.”

“I believe His Royal Highness took you seriously.”

“Please. Let’s not.”

“I believe you cared for him.”

“Well, perhaps not as much as I ought to have.”

They were silent. To answer or deny would be to skirt dangerously close to the very topic they needed to avoid.

“The Lord Chamberlain wants me to approve the funeral plans.” She looked up at him. “Will you help me?”

“I am as happy to serve you as ever.”
Will made his way back to the hotel. Victoria waved at him from the window of the hotel restaurant and he made his way to her, receiving the kiss on the lips she greeted him with. It attracted a certain amount of attention from the other patrons. He was used to it. They thought she was clearly too young and he was clearly too old.

“Haven’t ordered yet.” She put the menu in his hands. “So, did they do a cavity search when you left?”

“Not quite, but part of me likes suffering for my scholarship.”

“You like being searched in the toilet? Kinky.”

“Sir Robert Peel sent for Melbourne.”

“How do you know?”

“Victoria’s diary page.”

“You got into her diary?”

“Yes and shockingly not a mention of her BDSM fantasies about Melbourne... but then again her husband had just died.”

“Let me see. Please...”

Another look from the woman at the next table. Clearly she was expecting Will to pull out a piece of jewelry or a stack of money, but instead he pulled out a printed version of Queen Victoria’s diary page to hand it to his delighted girlfriend.

“I’ve got the download, too.”

“We’ll have to look at the Melbourne papers, too, to see what he says.”

“Has your friend gotten us into Brocket Hall?”

Victoria folded her arms. “Not quite...”

“So, no then?”

“I am working on it, but at least we’re certain of why he came.”

“What did you think? That he heard the prince was shot and decided ‘this is my chance.’”

“It was one theory.” She paused, face dropping in such a way as to alarm him. “Don’t look now.”

“Oh, God, it’s not Carrie, is it?”

“No.”

“Worse?”

“Hard to tell.” She smiled. “Professor Peele.”

Roberta Peele stopped at their table. “Professor Lamb. Doctor Kensington. I didn’t expect to see you two here.”
“Why not? I’m a fellow at Windsor, just the same as you.”

“But Doctor Kensington isn’t.”

Victoria smiled. “Not yet.”

“And how is your film going?”

She meant that to be a needle into Victoria’s side. She thought her history of Queen Victoria II was just a little too populist and not enough academic. It had made best seller lists and even landed Victoria a few spots on chat shows. Then unexpectedly a Hollywood producer offered her a ridiculous sum for the film rights. Will’s research on Melbourne might have been the gold standard for academia, but Victoria was popular and he was delighted for her.

Roberta was not.

“Still in preproduction,” said Victoria. “Felicity Jones is in talks to star in it. It’s all very exciting.”

“Who?”

“Felicity Jones. The Theory of Everything.”

“No, that was Stephen Hawking.”

“No, she was in the film. Star Wars. She was in the Star Wars movie.”

“I don’t really go to the cinema.”

“You don’t say.”

“What brings you here, Roberta?”

“Some new research for my latest work on Prince Albert.”

“I really thought you would have covered him by now,” said Victoria.

“And you?” Roberta turned to Will.

Victoria looked at him meaningfully.

“Victoria and I are working on something.”

“Is it a secret?”

“Yes,” said Victoria.

“Well, do let me know when the film comes out.”

Roberta walked away.

“I hate her,” Victoria hissed.

“She’s not so bad, she’s just lacking in imagination.”

“And joy... Compassion... Basic human kindness...”

“I will remind you that most historians agree that Albert and Victoria were basically happy and they
did produce an heir.”

“Which is bollocks.”

“Which you can’t prove.”

“Which we will prove.”

“Right, questioning the legitimacy of the Royal Family. That always goes well,” he said picking the menu back up to reexamine it.

“I don’t see why it matters. No child of Albert’s was ever going to inherit anything by virtue of him. He was no closer to the British throne than Melbourne really.”

“Victoria, this whole process will go much more smoothly if you aren’t focusing on things that aren’t there.”

“Who says they’re not there?”

He sighed. “The historical record.”

“Well, I say the historical record,” she taunted, “is inaccurate or at the very least incomplete.”

“There are no smoking guns in history.”

She smiled. “Want to bet?”

“And what would we wager?”

“Winner’s choice.”

“You’re that confident?”

“Sounds as if you’re not.”

“Fine, I accept your wager, but don’t pout when you lose.”

“Well, don’t pout when I win,” Victoria grinned as they shook hands.

“A year of mourning.”

Melbourne looked up at her. They had worked through most of the details of the funeral procession with the Lord Chamberlain, all that was left for the rest of the guests to arrive. He had stayed to help her with some of the dispatches finding it only too easy to delve into politics even if it was Sir Robert Peel’s agenda.

“I am meant to mourn him for a year and we were not married one.”

Melbourne nodded.

She looked up at him suddenly. “Do you think me callous?”

“No, ma’am. It can be difficult when someone you care for dies with unfinished business.”
“Did you feel the same when your wife died?”

“I suppose I did.”

“Well, Albert never...” She looked away. “That I know of. Perhaps he would have in time.”

“Do you really think that?”

“No, but it makes it easier.”

“Have you eaten, ma’am?”

He watched her brow furrow in consternation.

“Lehzen brought me something on a tray this morning. I couldn’t finish it.”

“Then might I suggest you eat and retire early. There will be much to do in the morning.”

“And will you return in the morning?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She smiled. He bowed his head and backed out of the room.

This was doomed.
The Archbishop stood solemnly before the assembled dignitaries and courtiers at Westminster Abbey.

"If any man has any reason why these two should not be we, speak now or forever hold your peace..."

The crowd gasped as the Prime Minister tossed aside the sword of state.

"Yeah, I'll have a go at it..."

"Melbourne..." Albert seethed.

"Prime Minister!," gasped the Archbishop.

"No, don’t Prime Minister me, you asked. One, he’s German."

The crowd murmured in agreement.

"Two, he’s got that dumb mustache."

More murmurs of agreement.

"Three and not least of all, he is undoubtedly the most boring personage in all of history. There are species of sea algae who lead more varied and interesting lives."

Albert looked at his brother. "Ernst!"

"I'm sorry, Albert, but he is making a strong argument."

“Well, luckily, Victoria-”

As he turned back to his bride, he found her in Lord Melbourne’s arms.

“Victoria... Victoria...” he whispered.

“Victoria?”

In her bedroom, Victoria’s eyes fluttered open. She rolled over to see Will in the chair by the window.
“You were talking in your sleep again.”

“Was I?”

“It was the Westminster Abbey dream, wasn’t it?”

She didn’t confirm, but smiled as she stretched her arms.

“Did they make it back to the carriage this time?”

“No, he took her on the altar.” She looked at him. “Come back to bed.”

“Why?,” he asked turning the page in his book.

“You know why.”

“Do I?”

“Will, get into this bed and shag me.”

He nodded. “You did ask...”

“They arrive today,” said Victoria.

Melbourne had come to the palace early. He knew it as well as her, perhaps better, which dignitaries would be arriving in preparation for the funeral the next day.

The difference was he was not looking upon it as the arrival of an executioner from Calais.

They had sat on either side of her desk with the dispatch box and he gave his usual summary. She nodded and signed with no real investment.

“Uncle Leopold. Cousin Ernst...” Her voice trailed off. “Albert’s father was unwell, his doctor advised him against travel so Ernst is representing Albert’s family.”

Melbourne nodded. “I see.”

“I ought to be dead.”

His blood ran cold. “No, ma’am.”

“We were arguing. He followed me out to the carriage because he just could not let it be! Stupid boring Albert! If he had stayed in the palace, he would be here.”

“And you would not which I am certain the Prince would have found unacceptable. As would I.”

She met his eyes. “Why did he love me?”

“Ma’am, you are going down a path you needn’t-”

“Oh, Lord M, do not patronize me.” She did not say it with anger, just exhaustion. “I have thought on it a great deal. I hardly listened to him, I was not interested in anything he was interested in...”

“A married couple need not share every interest. Ask Lady Portman.”
“I took issue with everything he said-”

He snorted. “Ask Lady Portman.”

“I did nothing for him. He wanted me to dismiss Lehzen, I told him he was mad.”

Melbourne was taken aback. “He asked you to dismiss the Baroness?”

She looked at him. “He thought us too close. Would you not ask it?”

He sighed. This was one of the hypothetical scenarios he really ought to stay away from. Indeed no, if he was her husband, he would probably let her have or do whatever she wanted. The Baroness could spit on him every morning if she wanted.

“No, the Baroness is your oldest friend. I would not ask it even if I thought she despised me... which I am fairly certain she does as it happens.”

“Do you think I ought to make peace with Mama? Albert thought I ought to make peace with her.”

“Do you wish to?”

She snorted. “Absolutely not.”

“Then do not.”

She got up and walked about the room. Her hands fidgeted. He watched her.

“What was the argument about?”

“What?” She looked shocked by the question.

“The argument the day the Prince was...”

She walked towards him anxiously. She never could hide anything.

“How are the rooks?,” she asked.

“The rooks?”

“Brocket Hall? The glasshouses?”

“The glasshouses have been closed.”

“What? Why would you do that, Lord M? How could you?”

“It seemed as if there was very little point to them, ma’am.”

“I enjoyed your flowers.”

“I know you did, ma’am.”

“You must reopen them.”

The door opened. It was Lehzen.

“They are arriving, Majesty.”
“I love you.”

She kissed him, still shaking from their lovemaking. “I love you.”

Will loved that about her, how fresh her passion always was, though he could never work out why. They had basically been together since he returned to Oxford from his last sabbatical and found a star student in the final year of her doctorate. They had been thrown together since he was an expert in the era she wished to be an expert in. As with most professor-student romances, it was not advertised, but it was not a secret. Besides, it wasn’t as if Victoria was in her first year at uni. She was twenty-five. “Older than Victoria when she remarried” she was fond of pointing out.

She was all passion and had come into his life at a time when he had nearly forgotten that passion existed. She was still excited about things that he remembered being excited about, that his wife never understood.

Sated for the moment, Victoria followed Will to the kitchen as he began to putter about and make breakfast.

“You’ve put us behind.”

She snorted. “To what? Our schedule of nothing?”

“You have to be careful on sabbatical, you watch one too many chat shows and suddenly a whole month will have passed without getting any work done.”

“Well, everyone needs a break.”

She sat at the table as he went to the cooker.

“I had a thought... about your office.”

“My office?”

“I was just thinking we could set it up as a sort of base of operations, bring in a table, maybe a board or something.”

“What?”

“I just want to keep us organized.”

“What about your office?”

He snorted. “You’ve seen my office.”

“Well, why do I have to lose my office?” Her voice was getting higher.

“You’ve never used it.”

“I was going to.”

“When?”

“Why don’t we just keep things in the sitting room?”
“I don’t understand why we can’t use your office.”

“I don’t want to!,” she snapped.

“Fine,” he sighed.

There was silence for a moment.

“Look, I was thinking about the funeral.”

“Do you know something I don’t?”

“Albert’s!,” she said in exasperation. “While you went to the Royal Archives, I looked in every article on the funeral and not one of them mentions Lord M is back and there, but he had to have gone.”

“I don’t know.”

“But he must have. I don’t think he’d leave her to face that alone.”

“Unless he thought- quite rightfully- it would cause a scandal.”

“When they consecrated the mausoleum, he was there.”

“That was different. She would have been pregnant then.”

“Right because he wouldn’t let the mother of his child go to consecrate her dead husband’s final resting place alone.”

“Not the mother of his child.”

“We’ll see.”

He drew a breath. “Anything in Emma Portman’s diary?”

“Oh!” She ran to the other room. “Oh, bless you, Emma Portman, you detailer of gossip whose sons were too stupid to realize how valuable your first person accounts actually were.”

“How did she seem?”

Emma looked over to Lady Anglesey and back.

“Better, I think,” said Emily.

“Yes, much,” Emma concurred.

Melbourne sighed. He had relegated himself to the fourth carriage of the procession to Frogmore. For Victoria. Though now she was all he thought of. He had not been reassured when the Duchess of Kent joined her, but Lehzen and Ernst’s presence had reassured him.

But the way she had looked at him as he walked on... It had been hard enough at the funeral. He would have been expected to attend anyway, but he again relegated himself to sit far back with his sister and brother-in-law.
Later still, he looked to Emma. Lady Anglesey had drowsed off.

“What was the state of things between them?”

Emma looked shocked. “William!”

“Well, that answers it.”

“I said nothing.”

“No, but had everything been fine, you would have answered me.”

“The honeymoon was over. The usual things, that’s all.”

He snorted. “And this is what happens when you marry off children.”

“They were not children.”

“Younger than I was when I married and I certainly had no idea what I was doing.”

“You know how it is, William. You expect to have this mad passion forever and it could never last.”

She took a breath. “And I think he was realizing he could not control her as much as he would have liked.”

“A less vain man never would have sought to.”

“Less vain?”

“Yes.”

Emma waited for him to finish a thought he had no intention of speaking aloud.

Albert had Victoria, what more could he have possibly wanted?

---

Melbourne watched from the path to the burial ground. There was a graveside service at Albert’s temporary grave. She had managed to surprise him by announcing her intent to build a mausoleum, but he supposed anything to help her grief was worth it.

The rain was steadily increasing and the Queen had sent all of her ladies back to their carriages to go to the house.

“She is suffering so much.”

It was not until then Melbourne realized the King of Belgium was next to him.

“Yes, she is.”

They were standing a moment longer.

“I should someone to get her. She will stand in the rain all day if we let her...” Melbourne turned looking for an appropriate intermediary.

“You go, Melbourne,” Leopold said in a way that did not broker opposition.
“No, sir, I-”

Leopold was halfway back to his own carriage. Melbourne sighed and walked down.

“Majesty-”

She did not move.

“Ma’am?”

He sighed.

“Victoria?”

She looked up at him. “Lord M?”

“You ought to come inside, ma’am. No one will be served by making yourself ill.”

She shook her head. “I deserve to be ill.”

“No, you do not, ma’am and I am certain the Prince would not wish it-”

“That is the whole point, Lord M! He does not wish anything thanks to me!”

He let that outburst stand a moment before trying to reason with her again. “You had an argument, married people do-”

“I told him I loved you!”

That came as a slap across the face for Melbourne.

“I did not mean to. He was on about something and he said ‘Would you be listening if Lord Melbourne said it?’ Then I said, ‘If Lord M said it, it would actually be interesting.’” She shook her head. “I thought I was doing so well, I thought I had given you up.”

“It was an argument, ma’am. If you had ever heard some of the things that my wife said to me-”

“You mean the wife that did not deserve you?”

“I do not know if I would go that far...”

“Well, I will on your behalf.” She shook her head. “He asked if I still loved you...”

“He should not have asked.”

“You think that is the problem? That Albert should not have asked? Not that I should have lied? Or better still...”

“You are many things, but not a gifted liar, ma’am. He ought not to have asked you to lie to him.”

“Did you never ask your wife if she still loved Lord Byron?”

“Certainly not. I would have already known the answer.”

Victoria laughed mirthlessly. “Do you think Albert already knew the answer?”

“Were you disloyal to him?”
“Of course not!”

“So, there. There is duty and inclination. Whatever your inclination was, you were with Albert and I know you, ma’am, you never would have been with him were it only duty.” He held his arm out for her. “Now, please, ma’am, allow me to escort you to the castle.”

She took his arm and he took her umbrella from her, covering them both as they walked.

“You never wrote, Lord M.”

“I thought it might be easier if I did not, ma’am.”

“It was not.”

“Indeed not, ma’am.”

“Well?”

Will handed Victoria her copy of Lady Portman’s diary. “It’s not your smoking gun, but, yes, it establishes he was thinking of her.”

“I’ll get there,” she said defensively.

She turned away from him.

“Listen, I’m sorry about your office.”

Victoria turned back. “You are?”

“It was just a thought. I didn’t mean to upset you. It’s half your house if you want an empty spare room...” He shrugged.

“I don’t want an empty spare room...” she muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing. Ignore me.” She sat down and curled next to him.

“Are you alright?”

Victoria smiled. “I’ll be fine.”

“Once you get your DNA test of the Queen of England?”

She snorted. “Who would I test it against? You know Lord M’s mother...”

“One of Lord Egremont’s other descendants then.”

“You’re certain Melbourne’s father was Lord Egremont?”

“Have you seen the portraits?” He picked up his iPad from the sofa cushion and put it to her.

“Yeah, that’s definitely his dad...” said Victoria. She began tapping at the screen.
“What are you doing?,” he asked.

She handed the tablet back to him. He looked to see a portrait of Queen Victoria II in her later years. He knew what his Victoria was driving at.

“I can’t believe you haven’t noticed how much she looks like Lord Egremont.”

“I will... grant you that...” He looked down at her. “Still not a smoking gun.”

Chapter End Notes

Seriously go Google a picture of Lord Melbourne and Lord Egremont...
Chapter 3

It began pouring after they returned from Frogmore.

Her ladies stayed for supper along with Peel and Melbourne. Her mama had retired early feigning distress. After all, her favorite child had just been buried.

The pitying looks she could do without.

Melbourne was the only one who did not look at her if she was about to break and she was the only one she wanted to break for.

She waited next to him in the entry hall, the door was open and she could see the storm outside. There was some sort of problem getting the horses. Sir Robert had taken forever to see off and now was the problem of Melbourne’s carriage.

“You should rest, ma’am,” said Melbourne. “It has been a trying day.”

“They are all trying.”

“So it seems at times.”

Victoria looked up as Lehzen returned from the door.

“What is it?”

“It seems we cannot call for Lord Melbourne’s carriage. Or any of the carriages.”

“Why not?,” asked Melbourne.

Peel entered, drenched. “The streets are flooded. My apologies for returning to impose on you, ma’am.”

“Nonsense, Sir Robert. You must stay. And you, Lord Melbourne.”

“I could not possibly, ma’am-”

“There is no fighting it, Melbourne. We are stranded.”

“Won’t you find them some rooms, Lehzen?”

They said their good nights and split. Lehzen seemed to be taking the men to the south wing. She went to her room where Skerrett readied her for sleep.
“Is there anything else, ma’am?”

“Do you know what room Lord M is staying in?”

Skerrett could not stop herself from looking surprised.

“I am just worried about what awful corner of the palace Lehzen will have put him in.”

“It was the Hanover Suite, ma’am. I believe I heard Mr. Penge discussing it.”

“Oh. What a relief. That’s not awful at all, is it?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Skerrett. That will be all.”

---

“Seven pounds.”

Will removed the pillow from his head. Victoria was standing next to the bed.

“What time is it?,” he asked.

“Six.”

He looked at the sun pouring in. “We really must put up the blackout curtains. Did you sleep at all?”

“Yeah, a couple hours.”

“I know this is your first sabbatical, but the point is to sleep in and not be up at six.”

“Funny, I thought the point was to do historical research with sex breaks.”

“That too.” He put the pillow that had been over his eyes under his head. “What do you mean seven pounds?”

“Seven pounds two ounces to be exact.” She got on the bed with a book in her hand and straddled Will. “According to the Duchess of Sutherland’s diary that is what Princess Regina weighed when she was born. Nine months to the day after Albert’s death.”

“And your point is?”

“Doesn’t that seem a bit underweight for an overterm baby?”

“Birth weights were lower-”

“I checked, it was below average, factors taken into account like the access to food the mother might have had. Correct me if I’m wrong, but the Queen of England usually has access to food, does she not? Particularly one known for her sweet tooth?”

“The alcohol they drank probably didn’t help.” He placed his hands on her thighs. “Are you wearing my jumper with no knickers?”

“Of course. Now, I’ve done some maths...”

“Oh, God...”
“Giving Albert the benefit of the doubt, let’s say he died two weeks after Victoria’s last menstrual cycle...”

“Could we have coffee first?”

“Let’s say it was July the first, that takes us to April the seventh for a due date. Now if you were to say the first day of her last period was August the first, that gives you a due date of May the eighth, which is actually quite a nice time for a pregnancy now that I think of it because you’re just cutting out the summer, but you are going to miss any holidays after the baby, aren’t you? Unless you want to take the baby, but honestly, I wouldn’t want to...”

“You already had coffee, didn’t you?”

“Harriet Sutherland had eleven children. Emma Portman had six. Do you honestly think they just thought the Queen had an underweight overdue baby?”

“I don’t suppose they wrote that anywhere?”

“No. But there was an evening in August that the weather was so terrible all the dinner guests had to stay at the palace.”

“All the dinner guests?”

“Remember Cyril? I went to uni with him? He’s a meteorological historian. He said Harriet was talking about the Great Storm of 1840. Streets were flooded.”

Will frowned. “Did you wake him up to ask about the weather in 1840?”

“William!”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t focus, first you’re talking about menstrual cycles, then you’re not wearing knickers, then you’re on about the weather and I still haven’t had coffee.”

“Sir Robert Peel was there, bet he wrote about it.”

“Even if they did, it’s not as if they’d have invited him in. I doubt Melbourne was that kinky.’

“I wonder if Sir Robert wrote about it.”

He sighed. “I suppose we could look at the House Archives-”

“No, his personal papers are at the Wiltshire Archives.” She jumped up. “I thought we would take the car.”

Victoria stared at the panels of her ceiling so long that she thought they would be etched on her eyes. Then there was nothing for it.

She had to go to him.

She put on her dressing gown and tiptoed past Dash. She wondered at what excuse she might give if she was found.

Victoria tiptoed in the room, careful not to make a sound. Lord M slept in his bed, she thought of
how relaxed he looked, yet handsomer without the worry she knew accompanied his every waking moment. How she would love to see him like this forever. She crawled onto the bed, her slight weight making it bow, running her forefinger across, feeling every imperfection that made him hers.

He sniffed and this his eyes flew open.

“Majesty-”

“Shh...”

She gave him a moment to clear his throat and collect himself.

“Majesty,” he whispered.

“Yes, Lord M?”

“What are you doing here, ma’am?”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“Perhaps the Baroness or one of your ladies-”

“I did not want them. I wanted you.”

“I should take you back to your room, ma’am.”

“I am already here.”

They laid there in silence. For all the time they had spent alone, there was something different and they both knew it.

He sighed. “Ma’am, how many times am I expected to summon the strength to send you away?”

“Not once more, Lord M. Not once more.”

She leaned down, her lips brushing against his at first. She could feel him willing himself to pull away, but she didn’t want that. She rested against the mattress, properly sealing her lips to his until she felt his hand pulling her closer.

“Tell me not to.”

She realized what she was asking. She had not realized it when she left her room or even when she climbed into his bed, but she knew now.

Victoria shook her head. “Never.”

He kissed her and there was no turning back.

Will drove as Victoria fidgeted with the radio.

“You said you would pick a station.”

“I am.”
“Today on the History Hour, we continue our series leading up to the one-hundred and eightyseventh anniversary of Queen Victoria I’s accession to the throne that began the Victorian Age...”

Victoria looked over at Will. “We’re not there. Who did they get?”

“We’ve been exploring various points in Victorian history as it were. Last week, we explored the young Victoria II’s short engagement...”

Victoria looked at Will. “How did they not get me for that? Or you?”

“This week we’re exploring Queen Victoria IV and the event that would change the House of Hanover, the war with Germany...”

“It had better not be Roberta...”

“You know, we are not the only two historians in the world,” said Will.

“For that we’re joined by Professor Flora Hastings a senior lecturer at St. Andrews...”

Victoria sighed.

“Good for Flora,” said Will.

“Now Professor Hastings, can you give us a sense of Victoria IV?”

“Well, of course she was born as Victoria I’s firstborn great grandchild, there is of course the rather famous portrait of the four Victorias and much like the first, she had an unlikely path to the throne...”

“Her brother was gay!,” shouted Victoria.

“Not proven,” said Will.

“Yes, of course she survived three brothers,” the host continued, “and the abdication of the Prince of Wales. Some historians have suggested that he abdicated because he was homosexual. What would you say to that?”

“Well, some historians might ascribe to that sort of retcon-”

“Retcon!,” Victoria shouted. “Retcon!”

“But of course we know it was due to the Prince of Wales’ poor health.”

“He liked to have sex with men!” Victoria got out her mobile.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m calling in.”

“This isn’t a call in show, it’s not even live.”

“Now tell us about the choice of the name Melbourne for the new Royal House...”

“Interesting, after all, isn’t it? After all, Lord Melbourne was hardly a notable Prime Minister...”

“What?,” said Will.

Flora continued. “He had not great policy achievements, indeed no great policies, no foreign crises
he could put his name to, he was rather a middling politician—"

“Middling?!”

“Oh, now you’re angry?,” asked Victoria. “Trying to cover up the gay prince didn’t bother you...”

“Sir Robert Peel had his name on the Corn Laws, how did that work out for him?”

“That’s the turnoff,” said Victoria.

“What?”

“For the Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre, it’s the next turnoff.”

He grunted. “Just as well. I don’t know how much more of this I can take...”

“Right.”

“I mean, really, a middling politician? He was Prime Minister!”

“Is it true Victoria IV was unhappy with her trip to her ancestral home in Saxe-Coburg-Gotha? The one undertaken before the war obviously...” the host continued.

“Probably because it wasn’t her ancestral home...” said Victoria.

This was real.

He and Victoria.

Together.

It was not just real, it was the only thing that was real. He had been dying without her.

Part of him knew this was a massive mistake, but he reasoned- if he could be trusted to reason with her hands on his chest- that he had enough follies in his life that one more would not matter.

And by God, he was going to give her pleasure.

He shifted her beneath him, taking off her nightgown which seemed to shock her. Had the prince not- he tried to rid himself of thinking of Albert’s inclinations because it was completely counterproductive to what he was aiming at- though if he hadn’t he was a damn fool to leave so much creamy, taut skin concealed. He brought his mouth to her breast and heard a groan escape her lips. The look she gave him as he shifted attention towards the other told him that the prince had not, but he heard no objections, only more moans of pleasure as he brought his teeth to the other one, rolling the nipple of the other with his hand.

She was glorious when she moaned. Moaned for him. Moaned for the pleasure he could give her. Leaving her breast, he brought his lips to her collarbone and his hand to her center. Her eyes blew open as he began his explorations. She stiffened.

“Don’t fight it,” he whispered, offering kiss after kiss to her shoulders.

Her hands gripped his shoulders as she continued to fight the edge, he offered another sure stroke
and she dug her nails into him as she broke, shaking, out of breath as she slowly fluttered her eyes back open at him.

“Lord M.”

He kissed her again.

“Lord M, please.” She felt as if they were on the edge of something and if it did not happen now, the moment would pass.

He caressed her face, kissing every spot he could as he buried himself in her, again and again.

The archives were much like all of the local history centres they visited, filled with cheerful locals happy to show off their collections. In this case, the private papers of Sir Robert Peel and his correspondence with his family. They were put in a small room surrounded by glass as a school group was led through outside them.

Victoria sifted through another letter. “These are the most boring people I have ever found. Well, other than Albert. Have you found it yet?”

“I will tell you when I find it.”

The archivist came out. “Professor Lamb, I found a letter from the date you asked after.”

“Thank you,” said Will, taking the folder and untying the ribbon around the folder.

Victoria looked at him questioningly.

“Day after the storm,” he said. “Letter to his brother in law. You ought to ring your friend Cyril again, there’s five paragraphs about the weather.”

“What does he actually say?”

Will shook his head as he began to read. “By the time pudding was served, the streets were flooding and my carriage could not leave. Her Majesty gave us the very kind invitation to spend the night at the palace. She and her ladies retreated, then I was forced to make conversation with Melbourne as we went to the south hallway.”

“What?”

“‘This was made all the more tiresome by the fact that we were situated next to each other. I bid him good night and sometime in the night, I was awoken by the storm...’ His face dropped.

“What?,” asked Victoria. “What is that?”

Will shook his head.

“No, he said something. What is that?”

“Which sounded like a woman’s moans of anguish...”

Victoria’s face lit up. “Oh, I very much doubt it was anguish.”

“There’s more,” said Will.
‘There’s more?’

He sighed and continued reading. “Indeed, it was like no wind I have ever known. These moans would cease and no sooner would I doze back to sleep than the moans would start again. Indeed at one point I would have sworn I could hear the furniture shaking in the next room and there was almost a banging on my wall.”

“Well done, Lord M,” said Victoria.

“There’s more.”

Victoria was practically giddy. ‘There’s more?’

“The next morning I asked Melbourne what he had thought of the noises from the previous night and he told me he had not heard anything and perhaps I was letting my imagination run wild.”

“Oh, my God…” She leaned over the table. “Is there more? Please tell me the next morning the Queen couldn’t walk straight or something.”

“It’s not a smoking gun.”

“Oh, come off it!”

“We could hardly publish such a claim based on innuendo.”

“The timing, the letter, the sleeping arrangements-”

“It’s all circumstantial.”

“Alright, it’s not the smoking gun,” said Victoria, “but I think we’ve definitely found the murderer with the gun.”

“Fine.”

“And there’s a dead person on the floor.”

“He might have been with someone else-”

“Who, then? Who are our alternate suspects?”

He scratched his forehead. “I don’t know. All we have is that Robert Peel heard some woman moaning and Melbourne lied about it.”

“And the baby born the next spring.”

“Well, there is that…”

Melbourne kissed her again as he rolled to his side of the bed, trying to catch his breath. Victoria turned into his side still trembling herself.

She ran her fingertips up and down his arm. There was nothing odd about this or awkward. Not like her first night with Albert.

“Are you…” he began, trying to collect himself. “Are you well, ma’am?”
She smiled. “I find I am much better than well, Lord M. And you?”

“Extremely well.”

They laid and listened to nothing but the beating of the rain.

“You should go back to your rooms.”

She looked towards him and he slowly met her gaze.

“I find I am not yet finished here.”

“Well, if it pleases your majesty to stay...”

“It does please me.”

“Then I shall endeavor to make your stay as pleasurable as possible.”

Victoria climbed on top of him. She shifted to a better position as he ran his fingers through her hair.

“I think I shall do the same for you, Lord M.”
Chapter 4

Will watched Victoria above him. She had gripped the iron frame of the bed and was doing a very good job of riding him into oblivion.

She broke first, moaning as she did. Will gripped her hips and pushed up into her raggedly finding his own release.

He met her lips as she came to his side.

“Who’s the best expert on Victoria IV?,” she asked, her hand idly in his chest hair.

It took a few seconds for the blood to reach his brain again. “Now?”

“Yeah. Now.”

He took a breath. “Why are you asking?”

“The House of Melbourne.”

“What about it?”

“Why the House of Melbourne? Nobody changed it for the first war...”

“We were only in it for a year, might not have even gotten in it if the Americans hadn’t made us look bad...”

“She didn’t like Coburg...”

“So?”

“Princess Regina never visited Coburg. Do you know why?”

“I assumed it was because the moment she was there King Leopold or her grandfather would have tried to set her up with one of her cousins.”

“What if there was another reason?”

“It’s a theory.”

“So, who’s the best expert on Victoria IV?”

He turned to face her. “You already know who the best expert on Victoria IV is.”

Victoria sighed. “Anyone else.”
“Shall we take the train to St. Andrews or drive?”

She wrinkled her nose. “A day’s worth of driving just to have Flora Hastings treat me like I’m a moron...”

"Victoria..." She felt her name whispered against her ear ever so gently. "Victoria."

Her eyes fluttered opened and she realized it had not been a dream, she was here with Lord M.

She smiled. "Good morning."

He smiled back, that slight smile he always gave. "Good morning."

She reached up to kiss him which he did not object to, but he did break it off.

"It's seven."

"What? Surely not." She looked at the window. "It can't be. It's still dark."

"The storm..."

Victoria groaned as she searched for her nightdress. She had half a mind just to stay here, let them find her. Albert was gone, how much could it really matter? Certainly others had been guilty of more.

As if reading her mind, he took her hand.

"I would not have woken you if you did not need to go."

"I would not go if-"

He kissed her again. Lord M checked the hall before letting her out. The switch was a quick one and she prayed not to run into her mother on this side of the palace. What would her excuse be? She caught sight of herself in a mirror. She did look...

Ravished. The word was ravished. She smiled to herself and could almost laugh at what a state she looked.

Then she saw another reflection in the mirror. Dr. von Stockmar.

He bowed. "Your Majesty."

"I was walking."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good exercise. Needed to think."

Lord M was right. She was a terrible liar.

“What are you doing here? I had not thought you returned to the palace yet. I thought you were with the King of Belgium and Prince Ernst back at Frogmore.”

“I returned yesterday, Majesty. In a separate carriage, of course.”
“But you were not at dinner.”

He shook his head in sorrow. “I found myself too unwell to eat, Majesty.”

Of course. Everyone was grieving for Albert and it seemed she could not grieve enough. It seemed she would have to dig him back up at Frogmore in order to throw herself in.

“When will you return to Coburg?”

“I had thought I might assist your majesty-”

“Had you? In what matter do I require your assistance?”

The doctor stepped closer. “Forgive me, Majesty, but your husband always distrusted the influence which Lord Melbourne had over you and now that he has returned-”

“You dare question Lord Melbourne’s loyalty to me?” If her cheeks were not red with embarrassment, they would soon be with anger.

“No, I merely relay Prince Albert’s wishes-”

“Is that your place, Doctor von Stockmar?”

“I only wish-”

“I do not need protection from Lord Melbourne and if I did, you certainly would not be the one to provide it.”

She managed to walk back to her room with her heart pounding, blood rushing into her ears. How dare he. How dare Albert, discuss what she may or may not feel about Lord M behind her back with her uncle’s servant no less. In her room, she ran into a very confused looking Jenkins and Skerrett. They curtsied.

"I think the dark blue today."

Jenkins looked at the black frock in her hands. "The blue, ma'am?"

Oh, yes, she was still a widow.

"No, of course, the black..."

The two waited for Flora at the student coffeehouse. It was hardly busy with summer having just started, St. Andrews was abandoned. The blonde entered as cheerful as ever.

“Will!”

“Flora, how are you?”

The two finished their greeting as they sat at the table next to Victoria.

“Victoria, how are you?”

“Good. I’m good.”

"Flora, how are you?”

The two finished their greeting as they sat at the table next to Victoria. 
Will looked to Flora. “So, how’s your summer going?”

“Oh, the usual. A whole new pack of incoming to prepare for.”

“Well, Victoria and I are on sabbatical. We’re working on a book about Melbourne and Victoria.”

Flora smiled. “Roberta said she had seen you at Windsor.”

“What has she got to do with it?,” asked Victoria.

“She rather had the impression you two were working on something quite secret, she wondered if I knew what it was.”

“And what did you say?,” asked Will.

Flora shook her head. “That you two were excellent scholars and there were any number of topics you might be writing about.”

“Do you talk to Roberta often?,” Victoria cut in.

“She’s been writing a new article about Prince Albert’s impact on the Queens Victoria.”

“Did he have one?,” asked Will.

“Well, I have surmised that Princess Regina was tutored in German when she was quite a young child and wrote letters to her uncle, but that was about it.” Flora looked at Victoria. “I was quite surprised she didn’t ask you.”

“Me?”

“Well, why not? I read your biography. You were most thorough. Surely you would know if she had ever thought much about Albert?”

“No,” said Victoria. “Not a word in her journals.”

“We heard you on the History Hour,” said Will.

Flora smiled. “Is this about Melbourne?”

“You did say he was middling.”

“He had no ideology to speak of.”

“Yes, but is being a politician about politics or ideology?”

“Some would say they are the same thing.”

“And yet Lord Melbourne would not have.”


“As you are well aware, anti-German sentiment was quite high.”

“Yeah, but her trip to Coburg, what happened?”

“Well, that’s quite a story on its own,” said Flora.
“No, I tell you, Peel, I did not hear it.”

“You must have!”

Melbourne took his plate and sat at the table. The other guests had begun to gather for breakfast.

“And I tell you again, I did not.”

Emma smiled across the table. “Really, Sir Robert, must you hound poor Lord Melbourne so about the weather?”

“Forgive me, madame, but it was a flood,” said Peel. “And I have never heard such a storm.”

“Well, I heard nothing,” said Harriet.

They stopped and stood to pay respects as the Queen entered.

“May I help you, ma’am?,” asked Harriet.

“No, I shall serve myself. I find I am famished this morning,” she said going to the sideboard.

Melbourne smiled to himself as the queen went to get her plate.

“Did you sleep well, ma’am?,” asked Melbourne.

She nearly dropped the serving spoon.

“Yes. Thank you, Lord M.”

She finally made it to the table.

“Sir Robert was regaling us with the story of a storm that Lord Melbourne did not hear,” said Emma.

“Oh?”

Peel was fixated on the weather. “Melbourne, you must have heard it. We shared a wall last night!”

Victoria froze. “You shared a wall?”

“Oh, yes, ma’am, we were both in the south hallway. Your majesty was most gracious in her accommodations,” said Peel. “But I do say, Melbourne, I could almost swear I heard a banging against the wall we shared.”

Victoria stopped chewing her potato, slowly looking to Melbourne whose face remained implacable.

“Well, Peel, I certainly was not doing anything to cause the furniture to bang against the wall so you must not have heard it.”

“I did! And I could almost hear...”

“You could almost hear what?,” Melbourne pressed.

Peel looked to the women at the table. “I shouldn’t like to say.”

“You’re letting your imagination run wild, Peel,” said Melbourne.
Flora pulled them back to one of her lecture halls. She said it was the usual talk she gave to her students to start putting Victoria IV in her proper wartime context.

“Berlin 1936. Victoria, the Princess Royal and her husband, the Earl of Charlbury attend the Olympics to support British athletes. It’s the first time a member of the Royal Family has visited Germany since Victoria and Albert were married.”

“Must have been quite a boon to the Nazis,” said Will.

“So it was. A descendant of the best German bloodlines, royalty in their midst. Victoria’s second cousin, Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha invited her to stay at Schloss Rosenau, Albert’s childhood home.”

“She could hardly have refused,” said Victoria.

“Hardly. A dinner was held in her honor which by all German accounts went wonderfully well, but by all English accounts went terribly wrong and the Princess Royal insisted upon leaving Coburg the next morning.”

“What happened?,” asked Will.

“Some accounts say she questioned Herr Hitler’s politics, others that her host spoke ill of Disraeli and most scandalously that one of the guests cast aspersions on the Queen of England.”

“What aspersions?,” asked Victoria.

“Well, some nonsense about Lord Melbourne’s impure bloodline ruining what might have been a great Aryan dynasty and the rest of it is just as ridiculous.”

Victoria turned to Flora. “Try me.”

“Have you heard of Dr. von Stockmar?”

“King Leopold’s physician?,” asked Melbourne.

“Albert’s co-conspirator more like,” said Victoria.

“I suppose so,” said Flora. “They had Victoria and Albert’s marriage mapped out, the way the children would be raised, potential matches in other royal houses. Stockmar returned to the palace when it became known that the Queen was pregnant to continue his service to her. Don’t you know this part, Will?”

He frowned. “Why ought I?”

“Because by all accounts it was Melbourne who got rid of him.”

“That doesn’t sound very like Melbourne,” remarked Will.

“Why not? Melbourne had his own vision for the royal family.”

Victoria looked at Will. “It sounds like the Melbourne who loved his family very much. That is if Stockmar knew something that could damage the crown...”

“What do you mean?,” asked Flora.
“Just this thing...”

Flora tilted her head, then turned to Will. “Oh, no, Will. Please tell me you’re not thinking that.”

“Thinking what?,” asked Will.

“Melbourne. Victoria...” Flora did not even wish to speak it. “You don’t think Lord Melbourne was Princess Regina’s father?”

Will shrugged.

“Why not?,” asked Victoria.

Flora sighed. “Even if he was- and mind you, that’s a very big if- it doesn’t really matter. The Royal Family would never admit that the last four monarchs have been based on a lie. Is this about the ring?”

“The ring?”

“The one Melbourne gave Victoria.”

“The blue sapphire? The one that belonged to Lady Melbourne? What about it?”

“His mum’s ring? That seems fairly traditional,” said Victoria.

“Yes, but it was not given to her by the first Viscount Melbourne. It came from Lord Egremont.”

Victoria inhaled deeply, then looked sharply at Will. “Gave her the ring his purported father gave his mother?”

“How can you be certain?,” asked Will.

“Egremont’s initials are on the inside. There was a special reception at Buckingham Palace for a display of jewels last year. I saw the inside,” said Flora. “You didn’t know, did you?”

“No,” said Will. “We were going off a letter Sir Robert Peel wrote his brother-in-law about the weather.”

“Which was probably the Queen and Lord M shagging each other senseless,” said Victoria.

“Was it the night of a storm?,” asked Flora.

“How did you know that?,” asked Will.

She sighed. “Because in the story Stockmar told the liaison also took place during a great storm.”

The dispatch box arrived and the footman placed it, setting it before Victoria and Melbourne. He backed out of the room and shut the door. Victoria came around the desk and seized his lips.

“You wretched man.”

“Am I?”
“How could you go on with Sir Robert like that? You’re going to send the poor man into madness.”

“How could you go on with Sir Robert like that? You’re going to send the poor man into madness.”

“Shall I tell him what he did hear?”

“You did not say you shared a wall.”

He smiled again. “You did not say you were loud.”

She felt her face become red again. “I am not!”

“I am sorry, ma’am, but you are. Well, forgive me, I am not actually sorry.”

“But Albert—” She stopped herself. “I am sorry, Lord M.”

“Do not trouble yourself, ma’am.”

She turned around. “Dr. von Stockmar saw me.”

Melbourne stood. “Saw you where?”

“In the hallway on my way back to my rooms.”

“But not leaving my room?”

“No.”

“Did he say something?”

“Not as such...”

“So? This is your house, is it not? You may walk wherever you wish.”

“In my dressing gown?”

“It is your house.”

“He said Albert thought I needed protection from you.”

Melbourne nodded. “I am sure he did.”

“Lord M...” Victoria shook her head. “You are the last person in the world I need protection from and so help me, if you intend to be gallant about last night, I shall pull my hair out!”

He nodded. “A very distressing prospect...”

“I do not wish you to be gallant or so noble as to leave me for my own good again.”

He pulled her to sit in his lap, fingering the braid over her ear. “I would never leave you otherwise, ma’am.”

“Do not leave me at all,” she nearly whispered. “I do not know what I will do if you do.”

“I have no intention of leaving you again...” He took a breath. “You do realize we cannot be quite as we were last night.”

“What?”
“We were quite reckless.”

“Lord M, if you will not make love to me again, I will-”

“And what if you were to become with child?”

She had not thought of that. She had almost assumed that in the months that passed with Albert she must be barren. The thought had not worried her.

“Oh,” Victoria finally said.

“The best case scenario is that you would need to go into hiding for your pregnancy and the child would be sent off…”

“Sent off where?,” asked Victoria. This was appalling. First she had not thought she could have a child and not it was going away.

“I don’t know. Some relation of mine, my niece, perhaps.”

“Lady Frances? She is not yet married.”

“No, Lady Ashley, she already has six children-” Melbourne cut himself off. “This is idle speculation and will not come to pass. Besides, we know the worst case would be your abdication and the accession of your uncle, the King of Hanover. We will take more care in future.”

“I do not know if I can be trusted to take care where you are concerned, Lord M.”

“Ma’am... do you not think I might find some other way to please you that does not involve conceiving a child?” His knowing smile played at the corner of his lips.

She smiled back. “Show me.”

______________________________________________________________

Schloss Rosenau, Coburg, 1936

Victoria, the Princess Royal, walked into the bedroom and slammed the door.

“Insufferable man!,” she shouted.

A moment later, her husband, Matthew, opened the door and closed it behind him.

“I suppose you have nothing to add?”

“I did not know you had said anything. You rather slammed the door in my face, darling.”

Victoria turned. “Sorry.”

“I do not know what else you would have me do. I practically threatened to meet your cousin with pistols at dawn.” He loosened his tie.

“Well, I am not staying one more day in such company.”

“You know we cannot leave. We’ve yet to tour the gardens or anything else on the itinerary. Your mother will be quite cross.”
She sat on the bed and began removing her gloves. “Please. If William can get by with what he does, I can certainly return to England early. I am done with this country, with its dreadful politics and my dreadful relations. Let me return to Brocket Hall and the rooks and my orchids and sanity.”

Matthew took off his jacket. “You told me once you were ten before you realized you weren’t actually related to Melbourne.”

She rolled her eyes. “Not you as well.”

“It’s just curious, that’s all. No one ever speaks of poor old Albert. Just he was there, he married, fathered a child and died, never to be spoken of again.”

“Are you to think that my great grandmother and Lord Melbourne made love on Prince Albert’s grave as well?”

Matthew shrugged. “I never said that. I only said it was odd.”

“So, we have a letter and a ring now,” said Victoria as they walked back to the car park.

“What about the ring?”

“He gave her the ring from his mother’s lover.”

“Well, it was quite a big sapphire. One must give the Queen of England something.”

“Flora seems to believe it even if you don’t.”

Will sighed. “There’s belief and proof.”

They sat in the car. Will started it, then turned off the engine.

“But Stockmar’s story coincides with what we know,” said Will.

“And if the Duke knew it in 1936...” Victoria led.

“Stockmar spread it around. He had the ear of the King of Belgium, the Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha...”

“We need to go to Coburg,” she concluded.

Will sighed. “I hate Germany.”

“How do you always forget my family came from Germany?”

“I don’t forget,” said Will, starting the engine. “I met you in England, though, I don’t know if I would have liked you as well in Germany.”

“You might try letting me drive on the autobahn this time.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m too old to risk having a heart attack with you at the wheel.”
“You worry too much.” She smiled at him. “I know for a fact you are in excellent condition.”

“We’ll have to stop at your mum’s.”

Victoria shook her head. “No, we don’t. She doesn’t even know we’re coming.”

“She will. I think she has someone on the take at border control.”
Victoria found herself surprised that she enjoyed this.

Indeed, every part of her affair with Lord M surprised her. Most of it took place, here, in her study during the hours they were meant to be working on the dispatches. They did them of course, but perhaps less time might have been spent on it.

None of that seemed to matter, though. She was here, next to Lord M on the chaise lounge, kissing his neck where she had tossed aside his cravat as she held his manhood in her hands. She had not cared for the notion at first, but her Lord M was so good at showing her pleasure with his hands or his mouth that she knew he had to be repaid. She probably never would have performed such a task for Albert.

Albert. She wanted to vanquish the thought of him, but the world still saw her as a widow when she was rapturously in love.

“I love you,” she whispered in Lord M’s ear as she saw his eyes roll back.

He pushed her hand aside as he got the handkerchief kept near for this purpose. She kissed along his jaw then back to his neck as he emptied himself. Her Lord M was so beautiful. He finally dropped his head back to her bosom.

“Thank you.”

She leaned down to kiss his forehead in response. She turned a moment as he made himself presentable and walked back to the dispatch box, shuffling a few papers.

“I wonder what your maids think of your handkerchiefs, Lord M,” she said as he rejoined her by the desk.

He quirked his eyebrow. “Well, they do not ask, but I assume they have their own theories.”

She looked up. “What theories?”

“That I have pleasured myself to the thought of you, ma’am.”

She looked at him curiously. “They know this?”

“My affection for you is not exactly a well kept secret.”

“Then why must mine be for you?”

“You know why, ma’am.”
She sighed. “Because I am still a widow.”

Her eye turned to another box on the desk.

“What is this?”

“That is a gift, ma’am.”

He walked to the side of the desk and pushed it towards her. She opened it to find a beautiful white orchid.

She looked up at him beaming. “You reopened the glasshouses.”

“Your Majesty commanded it.”

She picked up the bloom and held it. “I cannot wear it.”

“I know. That you should look at it and admire it will be enough for me.”

“It is beautiful, Lord M. Thank you.” She paused. “Will you stay to dine?”

“You forget I cannot. Lady Palmerston is having a dinner to celebrate Lady Frances’ engagement.”

“Oh, yes,” said Victoria feeling slightly deflated. If she were Lord M’s wife she could go with him as a guest and they would never have to part. “I must remember to write Lady Frances with my congratulations.”

Melbourne looked up. “I am certain my niece would be most appreciative of Your Majesty.”

“Do you think if I invited she and her fiance to dinner she would be pleased?”

“Yes, of course she would, ma’am.”

“And of course you would come.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Though I suppose I would have to invite Lord and Lady Palmerston...” She frowned. “I confess, Lord M, I do like your sister very much but I cannot abide your brother-in-law.”

“Well, ma’am, pity we cannot choose our brothers-in-law.”

“You remind me I owe a letter to Cousin Ernst. I fear he has taken Albert’s death far more gravely than I have.”

“We do not all show our grief in the same ways, ma’am.”

She followed him to the door and into the hall.

“Will you be at services in the morning?”

He turned to her. “I think we both know the answer, ma’am.”

She sighed. Her Lord M did not care for church. She knew he would be spending his Sunday away in his library and she could not write to him because even the number of the times they corresponded would become a public concern. It was as daunting as it was every week, the prospect of a whole day- day and a half really- away from her Lord M. She felt she had matured enough to understand
why it must be so, but it still displeased her. She wondered if there was a way such a thing could be changed, but Lord M was right, there was no point in even discussing it until her mourning for Albert was done.

They arrived at the door.

“I will miss you,” Victoria whispered.

“And I you,” he said back softly.


“Will, if you are going to insist upon driving, would you please speed up?!”

She could hardly take it as the rest of Germany blurred past them.

“I’m already going a hundred!”

“Keep going until that little red bit is all the way to the right!”

“I’m stopping for petrol.”

“We have half a tank.”

“I am stopping for petrol.”

She sighed.

They pulled into the next petrol station and Will staggered out.

“Let me drive,” Victoria pleaded. “You don’t like driving here.”

He went to the petrol pump and put in his card. “It’s not that I don’t like driving here. It’s that I don’t care for dying.”

“Will...”

Her mobile rang.

“That will be your mother. The Dutch will have called.”

She picked it up. “Hello.”

“Victoria, you have not called me.”

Victoria looked up at Will. “I hate when you do that.”

She walked away. “I have been busy, Mum.”

“I thought perhaps something had happened between you and Professor Lamb.”

“Will and I have been together five years and we are quite happy.”

“But no children.”
“Mum, Will and I do not need you telling us to have children.”

“They don’t have to be with him, but Victoria, your eggs could go any moment.”

“Mum-”

An announcement in German came over the loudspeaker admonishing Victoria for using her mobile by the petrol pumps.

“Victoria, you are in Germany? Why did you not say?”

She got back in the car, trying to escape the loudspeaker.

“We have to visit Coburg for some research.”

“Then you can stop by Frankfurt.”

“But Mum-”

“You must stay with John and I.”

“We don’t want to stay with John.”

“Oh, Victoria, do not be ridiculous. You will stop and stay the night and again on the way back. You are on sabbatical, you have nowhere to be. Shall we expect you this evening?”

“I suppose.”

She hung up as Will opened her car door.

“So, are we stopping in Frankfurt?”

“On the way there and back,” she sighed.

“Right. Did I see you with a scarf?”

Victoria reached into her handbag and pulled it out. “Why?”

“I can’t drive anymore, but I can’t watch you drive so I’m going to blindfold myself.”

“And I’m just supposed to drive along looking as if I’ve kidnapped you?”

“It’s that or we stay at this petrol station for the rest of my life.” He took it from her and she got out of the car.

“You know, you’re so English sometimes,” said Victoria.

Sunday morning she awoke before the church bells and found herself with her head staring down her chamber pot.

She laid back against the bed, out of breath. This was it. She was going to die. She was being punished for not loving Albert enough and loving her beautiful Lord M too much. Even now how she wished for him to hold her. She found herself wretching again as Lehzen entered.

“Majesty!”
“Lehzen, I find-”

She wretched again.

Lehzen rushed off. There was to be no church today as Skerrett held the chamber pot for her off to the side until she had finally, blessedly seen last night’s dinner come up. She laid on the bed weak and dizzy until Sir James arrived.

The man was infuriating today. A series of questions. When was her last blood? What had that to do with anything? She was dying, struck down by God-

“Congratulations, Your Majesty.”

She tilted her head at him.

“You are with child, ma’am.”

Pregnant.

With child.

She felt her world spinning, even more so than it had been when Lehzen had sent for Sir James.

Pregnant. An heir. A child.

“I understand that this must be difficult for you, ma’am,” Sir James said somberly.

Difficult? Yes, of course, but why?

She felt Lehzen’s hand on her shoulder and looked up at the woman. The pitying smile her former governess gave her illuminated something she had not realized.

They thought it was Albert’s.

Was it? She had given Sir James the date of her last blood that she remembered, before Albert was gone, but she also knew that they had not been together in that way for weeks before.

Lord M. Lord M’s child. Was that possible? No, of course it was possible, indeed there were no alternatives.

“Lehzen, I think I should rest today.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

She curled back onto her side as Dash climbed in the bed with her.

A baby.

“We’re off the autobahn,” said Victoria. “Will you take off your blindfold yet?”

“Are we on the street in front of your mum’s house?”

“Well, no-”
“Then I don’t want to see.”

Victoria sighed and continued into Westend, one of the poshest neighborhoods in Frankfurt and of course anything less would not be good enough for her mum.

“Wonder that she had to move back here, I can’t believe she didn’t enjoy trying to control my life from London.”

“Perhaps she enjoys controlling your brother and sister from a closer distance. You said she only came to England to marry your father.”

“To marry his money.”

They finally pulled up in front of the house, a fine old art nouveau mansion with lots of trees out front. Mary came out with John on her arm as Victoria pulled the scarf over Will’s eyes to his neck.

“Victoria, William, so pleasant to see you.”

“Mum,” Victoria said, kissing her on the cheek. “John.”

“Welcome to Frankfurt.”

Mary looked at Will. “Is that the Hermes scarf I gave Victoria for her birthday.”

Will shrugged. “I borrowed it.”

“Sometimes I tie him up with it.”

“Victoria, for shame. You know I do not care for that sort of humor.”

“It’s not a joke, Mum.”

“I’ll get the luggage,” said Will.

They went inside.

“Did your sister tell you?,” asked Mary. “She is pregnant again.”


“Why the disbelief?,” asked John.

“Well, she’s twelve years older than me. Surely her eggs will have gone bad by now.”

“William, how is your son?”

“Gussie is well, thank you,” said Will.

Victoria leaned towards her mother. “We’ve only just arrived, do not start with him.”

“Who is starting? I asked after his son.” She looked back at Will. “And how is Carrie?”

“For God’s sake, Mum!”

 Victoria found herself with fitful sleep. Nightmares plagued her. She dreamed once that her child
was stolen away by some carriage into a heavy fog.

Monday arrived and she had to resume the work of being Queen.

“Your Majesty.”

Peel stood again.

“I am sorry to summon you so early,” said Victoria. “But we have a matter we must discuss.”

“I am at your majesty’s service.”

“I am... I am with child.”

Peel considered his response. Victoria watched him, looking for any flickers of doubt. Did he know? Had it been too long?

“This is welcome news, ma’am, but I know it comes at a difficult time for you. We all feel the loss of Prince Albert most deeply. The nation mourns with you.”

Victoria nodded. “That is very kind, Sir Robert.”

“We must call a meeting of the Privy Council and of course they will want you to select a regent.”

She had not been aware of showing an expression but Peel was quick to speak.

“It is only a formality, ma’am.”

“Yes, of course. Tell me, has the situation with Muhammad Ali resurfaced?”

“Will you be staying long?,” John asked at the dinner table.

“No, just the night,” Victoria answered.

“But, Victoria, there is so much to catch up on,” said her mother. “We should organize a dinner with your brother and sister on your way back. Won’t that be nice, Will?”

Victoria looked pointedly at Will.

“I’m sure it will.”

“I wonder that you two didn’t fly,” said John.

“Oh, the perils of sabbatical research, one must follow new leads and the next one is in Coburg,” Will answered.

“I don’t mind the drive,” said Victoria.

“What is your book about?,” asked Mary.


“And what is in Coburg for that?,” her mother asked.

“We’re seeing if there is anything to do with Prince Albert’s advisor, Dr. von Stockmar,” said Will.
“Apparently, he stuck around after the prince’s death and Lord Melbourne never cared for him much.”

“I can understand that,” said John. “Who wants another man poking around in his house?”

“I have heard of this man,” said Mary. “They say he was treated most unfairly by Queen Victoria.”

“Really? In what way?,” asked Will.

“It all seems unfair on poor Prince Albert, does it not? To have another man raising his child without even his advisor to influence?”

“I’m really surprised to hear you say that, Mum,” said Victoria. “After all, you and Dad had only been split up two months when you married John.”

“You would not understand. You are too young.”

Victoria snorted. “I’m thirty.”

“Yes, but too young to get properly married or have children, apparently.”

“I have a career, Mum, something you never had.”

“Yes, while you live in sin with a man twenty years older than you!”

“Oh, you’re religious now?!”

Will finished his potato dumpling. “This is good.”

“I have always been religious! Unlike you who brags about her sexual escapades.”

John looked at Will with a sigh. “Are you enjoying the schnitzel?”

“Right, much better that I ought to have been married three times!”

“Better than being a Schlampe!”

“Bugger, I knew that word...” Will muttered.

Then the shouting in German began. Will and John stood.

“You know, I’m feeling quite tired,” he said taking Victoria’s hand. “Still the first room on the right?”

“Yes,” said John.

Mary continued in German, “Denken Sie nicht einmal daran, Sex in meinem Haus zu haben, Sie sind nicht besser als ein Tier,”

“Actually, Mum, I’ll be shagging him on anything that stands still long enough.”

“Something to look forward to. Come along.”

Victoria grimaced at Will as they walked up the stairs.

“Why do you always stop me?”
“What are you going to do? Shout some more?”

“I don’t like when she talks about you.”

“Well, I can take it. I think perhaps you don’t like when she talks about your life.”

“I like my life.”

“I never said you didn’t.” He shut the door of the guest room behind them.

She turned to him very seriously. “You know there’s no one else in the whole world I want to be with, don’t you? All the bollocks Mum talks, I don’t care.”

“I know.”

“And weddings and white dresses, I don’t care. Really.”

Will frowned at her. “Is something going on?”

“No. Why?”

He shook his head. “Nothing in particular, it just seems as if you have moments where you’re lost in your own thoughts lately. It’s not like you.”

“It’s not?”

“No, you usually speak a thought the moment you have it. It’s one of the things I like about you.”

“You do?” She smiled. “Well, I meant what I said before about shagging you on anything that would stay still long enough.”

“I had thought you might.”

Melbourne worried when the Duchess smiled at him as he came down the hall Monday morning.

“Ah, Lord Melbourne, you are here for the good news.”

“The good news, ma’am?”

“Her Majesty is with child.”

“I would have thought she would want to tell me herself.”

“Is how you find out so important, Lord Melbourne?”

The Duchess left looking quite pleased. He saw Peel coming down the hall.

“Melbourne.”

“Peel.”

“Be kind to her today. I think she might need a friend more than anything.”

Melbourne was taken aback. He was not used to Peel having such sentiments or really any sentiment. He went to the state room where the dispatch box already sat. The Queen turned to him
and she looked like the frightened young woman he had met years ago.

“I suppose you heard, Lord M.”

“The Duchess told me. Congratulations-”

“Shall we start on the dispatches?”

They sat there, going through the dispatches, unable to look at each other.

They had just finished and Victoria knew there were no more topics to discuss other than the elephant in the room.

Their elephant.

“Ma’am, as awkward as-”

“It is Albert’s.”

She did not know why she had decided that. Of course it would be what she told the rest of the court though they had already made that assumption.

She had not been planning to tell Lord M that.

She had never lied to him before.

“Oh.”

She looked up. What was that going from his face? Hope? Had he wanted a baby? Wanted her to have his baby?

Whatever it was it made her ill to look at him.

“Of course, yes, that certainly...”

He could not finish the thought. He knew he was supposed to say something like that was simpler, but he could not summon the words.

“I am sorry, Lord M,” she said quickly.

Victoria looked down, past that spot where a child- their child- would soon come between them. She stared at the floor, taking note of every fine thread in the rug.

“Victoria?”

She felt his hand gently come to her chin, turning it to face him.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” said Melbourne. “Nothing you could do would make me love you any less.”

She shook her head. “You will not leave me?”

“Of course not.”

Victoria found herself sobbing on the floor, not certain how she had gotten there, but she felt Lord M holding her, her beautiful Lord M. He kissed the tears on her cheeks as she clung to his coat.
“Everything will be fine, ma’am. I promise.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for all the comments, they make my day every time. Please let me know what you think and happy reading!

Victoria and Will had left early the next morning to set off to Coburg. Will continued his willful ignorance courtesy of the Hermes scarf as he sipped the cup of tea they got at the petrol station.

“Did I hear something on the radio about the queen?”

“Your blindness is improving your German now?”

“I heard Victoria.”

“It was the Princess Royal. Baby watch. Victoria VII ought to be arriving any day.”

“You really think she selected embryos?”

“Of course. She’s the daughter of a hemophiliac, she has a one hundred percent chance of being a carrier.” She looked back at his scarf. “Are you really going to stay like that until we go home?”

“No, I’ll drive when we get to the Netherlands. Of course we have to see your mum again before then.”

“No, absolutely not. I am not going back there.”

“What excuse will you give?”

“I’ll say I missed the turnoff.”

“For the entire city of Frankfurt? You’re going to say you missed the turnoff?”

“Well, you won’t be able to help me, you have an Hermes scarf over your eyes.”

Victoria looked over, they were nearing the entrance to Schloss Rosenau and a school bus was next to them.

“There are children laughing at you,” she warned.

“Let them laugh. Someday they’ll know it’s not funny.”

“Well, they’re German children, they won’t be scared of the autobahn.”

They arrived at the car park and Will pulled his scarf around his neck.

“Are you going to wear my scarf permanently?”

“I’m rather getting used to it.”
“Very hipster of you.”

They walked inside the museum entrance and asked to be shown to the archives. As they did, a familiar face appeared.

“Victoria?”

They turned. A brunette woman approached them and Victoria gasped.

“Daisy!”

They began speaking excitedly in German. Will waited.

“Oh, sorry,” Victoria laughed. “Will, this is Daisy Lehzen. Is it still Lehzen?”

“Yes.”

“This is my partner, Will Lamb. Will, Daisy used to babysit me when I spent my summer holidays with my grandparents. She was the one who first got me interested in history.”

Will smiled as they shook hands. “It seems I do owe you quite a debt then. I never would have met Victoria otherwise.”

“A pleasure to meet you. What brings you here?”

Will looked to Victoria.

“We were looking for anything about Victoria IV’s visit here,” said Victoria.

Daisy smiled ruefully. “An interesting episode from a sad time. We have a special exhibit if you are interested?”

“We are.”

“Follow me.”

They followed Daisy down a grand hallway.

“Why the special exhibit?,” asked Will.

“Because of the anniversary of the accession of Victoria I. We thought it would be a mistake not to take advantage of the connection we have. Here we are.”

They went into what had been the dining room. The antique table had been taken away and replaced with a long display case starting with pictures taken at the Berlin Olympics.


“Well, five foot is very short,” said Daisy. “As you know.”

Will paused. “Oh, she can make height jokes?”

“Yes, Daisy can make height jokes.”

“I remember you used to be far more interested in her hats,” said Daisy.
“She did have very good taste in hats...”

“And this is the dinner?,” asked Will.

“Yes.”

“No hats,” sighed Victoria.

“Yes, that pesky tiara gets in the way...” said Will.

“This is the cousin? The Duke?,” asked Victoria.

“In name only. The nobles had lost their right to rule after the end of the first war, but he was allowed to keep his house and the title. He became involved in the Nazi Party in the hopes that he would be restored to his former glory.”

“Or he was racist...” Victoria offered.

“That, too.”

“So, the visit, was it for propaganda purposes?,” asked Will.

“Very much, but the Princess Royal was not willing to play along.”

“Do you know what went wrong?”

“You are a Melbourne scholar, are you not?”

“Yes.”

“Then perhaps you have a guess.”

“Dr. von Stockmar? He came here after he left the Queen’s service, didn’t he?”

“Indeed. He only ever returned to England to accompany the first Duke in 1846.”


“And I suspect you might have a guess why?” Daisy motioned. “This way.”

The Christmas season came and Victoria was still in mourning.

Melbourne made it a point to never hate people. As a politician, it was invaluable, how else could he have worked with someone like Wellington? He could never bring himself to hate Caro, even as she embroiled him in scandal and his family urged him to toss her out. His sister, Emily, had some choice words about what exactly she wanted Caro tossed out on. He could not even hate Byron, his old classmate. He could not hate his titular father despite it all, he could not hate his true father.

But Prince Albert was perilously close though he had been dead since August and it was now the Yuletide season.

The announcement of an heir was welcome news. He could acknowledge the reasons, it had led to
great excitement. It would take one less pressure away from Victoria, assuming...

Of course it would, he told himself. She was young and healthy and strong.

First had been the Duchess of Kent. She was smothering Victoria with her advice and her tonics. Then Dr. von Stockmar returned determined to due his duty to the late prince because apparently Victoria could not be trusted to raise her own child. The prince had thought their family would be an example to Europe, after the moral decay of the Hanoverians.

Melbourne could not think of anything more disgusting than using one’s children as performing monkeys to promote a political agenda. Certainly he had understood as a young father- and before he realized his own heir would sadly never be able to- that children had a function, to carry on the family name, to continue the dynasty that had come before, but they were children. The princess or prince would spend their whole life in service to the nation, certainly there was no need to make a spectacle of them for publicity.

Not to mention Victoria, his poor Victoria, who had never known domestic happiness- whose dolls had not even had names- surely she deserved a chance to try to find that with her own child?

But no, here was Albert’s man, relaying the Prince’s wishes from beyond the grave to try to control everything Victoria and the future monarch would say and do.

Melbourne could see her chafing at it. The restrictions of mourning compounded with her physical condition meant no dancing, no balls, no riding, and von Stockmar was a noose on top of that. And now, the Queen’s diet had become a matter of concern.

“But I am starving,” said Victoria.

“Oh, Drina, you are too dramatic,” said the Duchess.

“We must lower the humors, Your Majesty,” said Stockmar.

Victoria turned to Melbourne. “Lord M, what do you think?”

“What does he know? He is a man,” said the Duchess.

“So is Dr. von Stockmar.”

“Yes, but he is a physician.”

“Lord M had a child.”

“And are we to draw comparisons from the lady who had that child?,” asked von Stockmar.

Melbourne looked up. His surprise was in that it had actually been a few years since anyone had tried to insult his wife, such old news that it was. It would not raise his hackles, but it would raise Victoria’s.

“Dr. von Stockmar, you forget yourself!,” shouted Victoria, rising to her feet.

“Ma’am-” Melbourne tried to intercede.

“You are a servant in this house and you have no right to speak ill of Lord M’s wife!”

“Ma’am-” he tried again helplessly.
“I meant no personal offense to Lord Melbourne but one could not compare her and Your Majesty in any meaningful way-”

“Oh! You mean no personal offense to Lord Melbourne except that you insult his late wife?! You have our permission to withdraw, Dr. von Stockmar and if you do not alter your behavior in future, you may withdraw to the continent!”

“Drina, you must not excite yourself, it is not good for the baby-”

“Withdraw, Mama!”

The two looked at each other, helplessly backing out of the room.

“Do you feel better, ma’am?,” Melbourne asked after the door shut.

Victoria sat. “He had no right to speak of Lady Caroline so.”

“You do realize I have heard quite a bit worse of my late wife.”

“It is an insult to you and I will not have it.” She looked up at him. “Or do you find me irrational because of my condition?”

“No,” he sat down next to her. “I confess I did wonder about that when your majesty slapped me yesterday after I mentioned I had been riding.”

She looked at her hands. She had let her temper get the better of herself when Lord M mentioned he had seen an acquaintance of hers during his afternoon ride, a ride she would have been on had she not been in this condition which at the time she entirely blamed on him.

“I did apologize, Lord M.”

“Yes, ma’am, and you cried for an hour begging my forgiveness after I had already given it.”

She rested her head on his arm. “What am I to do, Lord M?”

“What is to be done, ma’am?” He kissed the top of her head. “Though I think the Duchess and Dr. von Stockmar are wrong about your diet. You must eat if you are hungry and if you crave something, so be it.”

“Was that your advice to your wife?”

“So it was.”

“And the doctors?”

“They said the same things doctors always say, just as yours do, but I could not bear to see her miserable, which reminds me...”

He stood and Victoria followed him around the desk with her eyes. He brought a fancy box from his bag and handed it to her. She opened it.

“You brought me marron glaces.”

“They are your favorite, ma’am.”

“You are not worried about my growing fat?”
“You must grow as fat as you like, ma’am.”

Indeed, he was more worried about her not growing fat. She seemed so small still. He could only see the bump holding her child when she went to smooth her skirts. It was already December, the child was to be born in April. Then again, Victoria was so small. Perhaps the child would take after her mother which would be a relief, he would hate to have Victoria struggle to deliver too large a child.

“And will you still make love to me when I am very fat?”

“I shall do whatever Your Majesty commands me.”

She smiled. “Then I command you to make love to me now.”

“How is your German, Professor Lamb?,“ asked Daisy.

“Nonexistent.”

“What have you got for us?,“ asked Victoria.

She had led them deeper into the castle, in a dark room with cabinets and the odds and ends of a once great castle.

“The Duke’s old correspondence.” She handed a paper to Victoria. “A letter from Dr. von Stockmar.”

“Your Grace,” Victoria read, “It is my sad duty to report what I have found that the child who bears your beloved late son’s name bears only that: his name.”

Will nodded. “Quite a topic sentence...”

Victoria looked at Daisy. “Why hasn’t this been made public?”

“It was not found until quite recently and there is no way to verify it.”

“Not a smoking gun, then?”

“How much circumstantial evidence do you need?”

“You don’t have evidence, you have slander from one embittered courtier!”

Victoria looked at Daisy. “Anything else?”

She smiled. “I am glad you asked...”

“William.”

Melbourne smiled at Emily as he entered the drawing room. They exchanged greetings and then he paid attentions to his niece.

“You remember Robert, don’t you, Uncle?,“ asked Frances.
“Of course I do. How could I forget the man who has stolen my little niece’s heart?”

“Uncle, you will make me blush,” Frances protested.

“Jocelyn. Palmerston.”

“Melbourne,” grimaced Palmerston. “So, how much longer are you to stay in Her Majesty’s service?”

“As long as she will have me, I suppose,” said Melbourne.

“Don’t mind Henry, he’s still bitter about that business with Ali,” said Emily.

“Well, perhaps if your husband did not so often go against the Crown, her majesty might like him more...”

Palmerston looked surprised. “She does not like me?”

“Oh, William, can’t you do something?,” asked Emily.

“I have done something. He is here, is he not? Or you two might turn up on time for once.”

“We are on time. The Queen is not here.”

“I gave you the time an hour before you were to be here and your carriage still arrived late.”

Emily sighed. “You remind me, I have such news from Frederick...”

“Oh?”

Stockmar and the Duchess entered.

“Lord Melbourne...” she began. “I had quite forgotten your family was dining with us tonight.”

“Yes, it was Her Majesty’s idea,” said Melbourne.

“Was it?” The Duchess turned to Jocelyn. “And who is this?”

“Ma’am, might I introduce my niece’s fiance, the Viscount Jocelyn?”

He bowed his head. “Duchess.”

Victoria entered with Lehzen.


Emily bowed her head. “We are honored, your majesty.”

She turned. “And this must be Viscount Jocelyn. Lady Frances wrote to me all about you.”

“I hope to be worthy of Frances’ praise.”

“Well, she does come from a family that tends towards too much praise,” Victoria said looking at Melbourne.

“We most certainly do not, ma’am.”
She smiled at him. “Shall we go in?”

He nodded and held his arm out.

“That’s not right, Drina. Surely Lord Palmerston ought to escort you in.”

“Mama…”

Melbourne answered it. “No, the Duchess is right. Lord Palmerston ought to take you in and then I ought to escort her grace.”

The Duchess scowled as Melbourne held his arm out. They went inside and Victoria took her seat at the head, Melbourne reunited with her at the right, Emily at his side.

“Drina, remember what Dr. von Stockmar said…” the Duchess nudged from her left as the second course was brought out.

“Perhaps we ought to consult Lady Palmerston.”

The Duchess was taken aback. “Lady Palmerston?”

Victoria turned. “Lady Palmerston, would you offer us some advice?”

“I am flattered that your majesty thinks I could hope to advise her.”

“You have had five children, have you not? I remember Lord M saying that.”

“Indeed I did.”

“You see, Dr. von Stockmar and my mother seem to be of the impression that my diet must seek to lower my humors but I find-”

“That you are starving, ma’am?”

Victoria smiled. “Quite, Lady Palmerston.”

“My physicians gave quite the same advice and I tried to follow it with my eldest son to no avail. I found I could much better bear the stresses of my condition if I was not ravenous.”

Victoria looked at her mother and Stockmar. “That sounds eminently reasonable to me.”

The Duchess scowled. “You only ever follow advice you like, Drina.”

Victoria straightened her back and raised her voice. “And you only ever choose advisors-”

“Did you say you had news about Frederick?” Melbourne looked to Emily.

“Oh, yes, it is quite something. Isn’t it, Henry?”

Palmerston swirled his wine glass. “Indeed.”

“What is it?” Victoria looked towards the German contingent. “Lord M’s brother is our ambassador in Vienna.”

“His term will be ending in the new year, ma’am,” said Palmerston.

“Will he be here in time for the wedding?,” asked Victoria.
"We expect so, ma’am,” said Emily, “but that is not the news.”

“Well, Emily, what is it? You’ve held onto it long enough,” said Melbourne.

“Frederick is engaged.”

“He what?”

“How wonderful,” said Victoria. “There are to be two weddings in your family.”

Melbourne was still in disbelief. “To who?”

“She is called Alexandrina, the daughter of Count von Maltzan.”

Victoria smiled. “How funny, Lord M. We share a name.”

“Is she a widow?,” asked the Duchess.

“No, she has never married, ma’am. She is thirty years my brother’s junior.”

Victoria and Melbourne both found themselves staring at Emily.

“Is she indeed?,” asked Victoria.

“Frederick insists it is a love match.”

“Does he?”

“I find that difficult to believe,” said the Duchess.

“If you were better acquainted with my brother, it would not be, ma’am. He is still quite dashing for his age, though as his sister it pains me to admit it.”

“Like Lord M then,” Victoria said absentmindedly, not noticing the Duchess’ look of fury.

They went to the drawing room after Victoria ate every course. Lord M played whist with Victoria, Frances and his sister. She was envious of the connection they all seemed to share. She had never felt as close to any member of her family as Lord M seemed to be to Emily. He still doted on his niece and she accused him of letting her win.

She wondered if she would be as close to her own child.

They reached the part of the night Victoria despised, where she had to say goodbye to Lord M and she made her way back to her rooms, cut off by her mother.

“Drina, how can you be so foolish?”

Victoria sighed. “What have I done now, Mama?”

“Flirting with Lord Melbourne in your condition. Your husband not dead for six months!”

“What flirting? I only agreed he was dashing and-”

“Schlampe!”
The word stung Victoria.

“How dare you, Mama.”

“You were never fair to Albert and he knew it.”

“I was not unfaithful to Albert-”

“Yes, but you still thought of your precious Melbourne, even now as you carry Albert’s child! It is shameful! You must dismiss Melbourne before-”

“Lord Melbourne isn’t going anywhere!”

Her mother shook her head, seeming to laugh silently. “Oh, Drina. What is it that you think will happen? That you will marry your precious Melbourne and live happily ever after? You were always too romantic. Do not be stupid.”

“Did you know about this?”

“What?”

Daisy handed her a letter. Victoria gasped.

“What is it?,” asked Will feeling rather useless in a room full of German letters.

“The Duchess of Kent while Victoria was pregnant... She wrote her brother the Duke...”

Will sighed. “I do keep forgetting...”

“It’s about the regency. Victoria was stalling.”

“She named a regency.”

“Yes, but she would not say who the princess was going to be raised by. The Duchess begs her brother’s help.”

“Then what?”

Daisy brought out another piece. “From March.”

She looked up. “He must have written Victoria because she wrote back.”

“And she says?”

“Dear Uncle, blah, blah, blah... ‘As to the matter of who will raise my child, I will be the sole arbiter. Your entreaties for my mother will not influence me and the matter is none of your concern.’”

Will nodded. “Odd thing to say to your child’s grandfather.”

“Unless he’s not and the only one who she was actually willing to leave her baby to...”

“Is someone she could not possibly say.” He nodded. “Risky.”

“Not for her. She would be dead. There would be one heir before the King of Hanover.”
“And they would have to decide, King of Hanover or take a chance on the daughter of a former Prime Minister.”

“A formidable politician...” added Daisy.

Will froze.

“What?”

“I...”

“You’re thinking something, I can tell,” said Victoria.

“Melbourne didn’t know.”

“What?”

Will was still thinking out loud. “One scenario, the Queen is pregnant, Melbourne knows it is his and Victoria tells him her plan. If Melbourne had known, he would have been making friends, cozying up to the Privy Council, he would have enlisted his sister...”

“His sister?,” asked Daisy.

“Emily was a society hostess, the best there ever was. He would have gotten her to help him in any way she could.”

“He’d have told her?”

“Why not? He helped her with the affair she had with Palmerston through most of her first marriage, got the Queen to approve her second marriage. The Lamb children were always tightly knit. They had to be, the first Viscount was a drunk, Lady Melbourne loved her children very much, but had a string of lovers...”

Victoria looked at Daisy. “Not to mention Lord M’s brother, Frederick, married a woman called Alexandrina thirty years his junior...”

“Really?,” asked Daisy.

Will shook his head. “If he had known, he would have had to do something about the regency...”

Sir Robert had come in most inelegantly. Victoria would have seen the worry on his face when he left Westminster... They went through the usual pleasantries and he drew a deep breath.

“Ma’am, the Privy Council has asked me to further the details of the regency.”

“Further details?”

Peel looked truly uncomfortable. “Supposing you are to not...”

“In the event of my death, I thought that’s what a regency was for?”

“As it stands, we know who will make decisions on behalf of the Crown, but not who will be responsible for the day to day care of the heir to the throne. The Privy Council would like that to be
laid out.”

“Oh.”

“The natural choice is the Duchess of Kent, of course-”

She had flashes of her life at Kensington. Being watched, never able to walk the stairs alone, only dolls for companions after her sister left...

“No.” She looked up at Peel who seemed surprised. “I am sorry, Sir Robert. That will never do.”

“Forgive me, ma’am, but then who?”

Victoria knew who it should be. The one person who could be trusted to raise their child.

“Sir Robert, would it be good enough were I to write it out? To only be opened in the event of my death?”

“Is there a need for such mystery, ma’am?”

“It may never be needed, Sir Robert.”

“The Privy Council will want to know-”

“The Privy Council must not think I am going to entrust my child to just anyone!”

“But, ma’am, I must know who-”

“And you may! When I am dead!” She was on her feet now, Sir Robert hastened to join her. “Thank you, Sir Robert! I believe that will be all for today!”

She left the room before he could bow his head.

“She must name someone, Melbourne.”

Melbourne sipped his brandy. “She does not like to be told what to do.”

Melbourne had been surprised to find Sir Robert here, asking to speak with him.

“The childhood of the future monarch is not a light matter. If she would only name the Duchess of Kent-”

“She will never name the Duchess of Kent. If you mentioned it, that is why she went off.”

“The country loves her.”

“The country did not have to live with her. Do you know the Queen was not permitted to sleep alone or take the stairs alone until she acceded to the throne? And you have Dr. von Stockmar there proposing the Rise of the Second Kensington System. Do you know he’s engaged a Latin tutor?”

Peel frowned. “For the Queen?”
“For the Princess Royal or the Prince of Wales, whichever it is. He’s made inquiries for a wet nurse in Coburg.”

“In Coburg?”

“Yes, he claims that is where the only suitable wet nurses are too be found. Apparently English breasts are too rank.”

Peel coughed. “Melbourne, really...”

“You claim you have no talent with the fairer sex, Sir Robert, but your wife has had six children. How do you suppose Lady Peel would react to such conditions?”

Peel nodded, he stared at his drink.

“I considered the late Prince Consort a friend. Dr. von Stockmar was his closest advisor. I would not wish to betray his memory...”

“That is the problem, is it not?”

“What?”

“The memory of Prince Albert for some reason ranks above the living wishes of the Queen of England? Must we be ruled by a German ghost?”

Peel sighed. “Will you try, Melbourne?”

“I will, though I do not know why I should make a difference...”
“The Princess Royal is well known for her charitable works. She has been the Royal Patron of the Prince of Wales Hemophilia Foundation and the Prince of Wales AIDS Trust since the age of twenty-three...”

Victoria walked into the sitting room. Will was staring blankly at the television.

“You’re still up.”

“Yeah.”

“Are you that concerned about Princess Victoria?”

He sighed. “I needed to think and I couldn’t think in silence so...”

Victoria sat next to him. “Twenty-four hour news, here we are.”

He nodded silently.

“The Princess Royal’s wedding to the Duke of Montrose was a spectacle watched by well-wishers throughout the world...”

Victoria sighed. “Must be awkward having the whole world waiting for your water to break...”

“She already had the whole world waiting for her to get pregnant...”

“No changes from Victoria I then...”

“Maybe she didn’t know...”

“She didn’t know what?”

“That the baby belonged to Lord M.”

“She had to have known.”

“Well, she wasn’t what one would call worldly...”

Victoria looked over at Will. “You’re worried about Gussie.”

“Well, just what were they thinking? Making him give a speech?”

“He’s the Head Boy!”
"Why do they even have a Head Boy?!"

"Will, I know you love him more than anything, but this is just one of the reasons it’s good he went away to school.” She squeezed his hand. “Gussie will be fine.”

"Now you, Lord M."

He sighed. He had been honest with her, that Peel had come to see him and asked after the plans for the future heir to the throne.

It was not going well. He tried to talk while she took her fury out on her watercolors.

"Would you have me name Mama as well?"

"No, of course, not ma’am, but if you do not name someone and if the worst should happen, the Privy Council will name the Duchess of Kent.”

"Not if I have anything to do with it.”

"Yes, you do have something to do with it, but the time to act is now. You will not be able to act should the worst happen.”

"Who shall I name, Lord M? Mama, the King of Hanover? I would not leave Dash to them.”

"Certainly not, ma’am-”

"Could you choose?"

"Ma’am?"

"Choose who would raise your child if you died?”

"I did.”

She looked up at him in surprise. “What?”

"I loved my wife, but her whims were... Well, Frederick is always abroad, I named Emily in my will, though...”

"I am sorry, Lord M.” She sighed. “But I have no sister like yours. In fact, I would wager we have no one in the House of Hanover as honorable as any Melbourne.”

He smiled ruefully. “Then you must not have been paying much attention, ma’am.” He paused. “Your sister. You always speak fondly of the Princess.”

“But she has six children, she cannot very well leave them in Langenburg to raise mine.”

“Well, you could send the Duchess of Kent to raise hers...”

Victoria tried to hide a smile. “You are not amusing, Lord M.”

“Your brother?”
“He is as bad as Mama.”

He sat back. “Perhaps we could send troops to Langenburg and conquer it, make a new colony, then there would be no need for your sister to stay there.”

“I doubt it will come to that…”

“As do I, but you must plan for any eventuality.”

She continued staring at her watercolor. “Will you be going away for Christmas?”

“Lady Palmerston has invited me to the Broadlands, but I think I shall decline.”

“I shall be trapped here with Mama… We cannot even have a ball this year.”

“You will have one next year.”

She looked up at him. “So you shall be alone and so shall I…”

He shifted in his chair. “Yes.”

She stared at him.

“I could not come here,” he said.

“Not for what I want, no.”

“You would not be able to come the whole day.”

“I could retire early. Everyone seems to think I am infirm with my condition, why not?”

“There is the matter of you getting from here to Dover House…” He smiled. “Leave it to me.”

The Lord Melbourne School was located not far from Brocket Hall in Hertfordshire. Gussie had first left to be a boarder when he was eleven, all too soon for his father, but Will knew Victoria was right. The school was the best. Gussie was thriving.

“Big crowd,” remarked Victoria as they waited to get into the car park.

It was the usual end of term crowd, though the end of term was not usually accompanied by a crowd of international news crews. They parked and walked to the door, past bored looking photographers.

“I get that it’s a big crowd.”

Victoria frowned. “Will, are you replying to something I said a full five minutes ago?”

“I mean, bad enough that he must give a speech, let’s toss the most watched woman in the world with him.”

“I did offer you a valium. I want you to remember that later,” said Victoria. “Oh, God, don’t look now.”

He looked. “Oh, God.”
“Carrie,” said Victoria. She looked at the man next to her. “And Gordon. Who knew you were back together?”

“Who knew you two were still together?,” Carrie asked, motioning at them.

“Literally everyone,” said Victoria. “But especially our neighbors.”

Carrie narrowed her eyes. “The house isn’t attached.”

“Yeah, but they can see in the garden.”

“What are you doing here, Carrie?,” asked Will.

“He’s my son, too.”

"Why don't we find a seat?,” suggested Victoria.

They began walking.

"How are you, Gordon? Working on anything?"

"A new novel," he answered.

"Let me guess," said Will, "the misunderstood male lead has graphic fantasies about a woman who doesn't understand him because the whole world fails to recognize his genius?"

"How do you know?"

"They're all like that."

They sat.

Victoria looked at Will. "So, this is going well."

Melbourne entered his sister’s room at Oxford House to find an explosion of packages and what seemed to be the contents of her entire wardrobe.

“William!,” Emily exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

“I have come to ask a favor.”

“You find us in quite a state. We must pack and I still must wrap all the gifts. And now Emily deigns to join us.”

“I thought you had invited the Jocelyns.”

“So I did.”

“The fault, dear Brutus...”

“Yes, William, mea culpa.” She put aside the gowns she had been sorting through. “Not to mention Frances’ trousseau, I had thought her presentation at court would be the end of me, but here we are.”

“I wouldn’t know...”
“Are you sure you won’t come? I hate to think of you all alone at Dover House...”

“I will not spend the holidays with Lord Ashley.”

“Oh, please, at least come for the shoot.”

“Does Lord Ashley shoot? I would have thought he would be against that as well.”

Emily sighed. “One yuletide argument over Dickens and a lifetime of family holidays ruined...”

“I do hate Dickens...”

“If I could never hear you mention Dickens again, I would die happy.” She sighed. “What was this favor you came for?”

He walked closer. “Are you taking both carriages?”

“Yes, it seems to be the only way.”

“Would you send yours back Christmas day?”

She looked up at him in surprise.

“I would pay your driver and your footmen myself.”

“It is not the matter. I will pay my servants, but don’t you have your own carriage?”

“My carriage will not do.”

“And why would mine?”

He looked in the direction of her lady’s maid.

Emily caught his meaning. “Potter, would you find my gray tweed? I should like to wear it to the shoot.”

“Yes, milady.”

She left. Emily shut the door.

“Now, what is so scandalous that my maid cannot hear? Why do you need my carriage?”

“I need to send it to collect someone.”

“What is wrong with your carriage?”

“My carriage would not do.”

“Why will your carriage not do?”

“Did you not ever borrow my carriage?”

Emily narrowed her eyes at him. “Oh, William, really? Another married woman? Christmas no less...”

“She is not married.”
“Then why the need for such secrecy? Who might she...?” Emily’s mouth stayed open. “Good God, William.”

“What?”

“The Queen?”

“No, it is not-”

“It is. At dinner, the way the Duchess glared at you two-”

“No, she always does that.”

“William. Really. Who do you think I will tell?” She paused. “It’s not yours, is it?”

“Is what mine?”

Emily rolled her eyes. “The Queen is pregnant, you tell me you are the Queen’s lover-”

“I have said no such thing-”

“William.”

“The child is not mine.”

“Are you certain?” She leaned forward. “Very certain?”

“She said so.”

“And you believe her?”

“She is a horrendous liar.”

“Would she be a very good one if she let you know how adept she was?”

“Emily-”

“Very well. I shall send my carriage back to London. Will it go to Dover House first or straight to the palace?”

“You must tell no one.”

“Of course not.”

“Not even Palmerston.”

“I will not tell Henry. I will not tell anyone.”

“Not Frederick.”

“Not Frederick?”

“You will be bad enough, both of you are intolerable. I have not forgotten.”

Emily looked very lost in thought.

Melbourne sighed. “Fine, say what you will about Caro...”
Emily turned very sharply. “The Queen said she expected to deliver in April, that was why she could not attend the wedding.”

“What of it?”

“She seems small.”

“She is small.” He shrugged.

“I know that. When did you bed her?”

“Emily, I will not indulge your curiosity-”

“The timing is everything.”

“She says the child is not mine. What reason would she have to lie to me?”

“I do not know, but I also do not know that I would believe her so wholeheartedly...”

Princess Victoria was all smiles as the head teacher escorted her in the hall, past the assembled media, parents and students. She sat politely while the Head Teacher introduced Gussie, who would in turn introduce her.

The country had a soft spot for the Princess Royal. Actually, Victoria had always thought she looked like the sort of person who would be fun to go out for drinks with. She had lost her father when she was eight, then her mother at ten and had spent the rest of her childhood raised at Buckingham Palace, raised by her grandmother, the current Queen Victoria V. Some had thought she would not marry at all, but she had married at thirty and then the nation waited for her to secure the succession, which she had.

She always had a smile on her face.

Victoria felt Will gripping her hand as Gussie came to the podium. She had known the boy since he was ten and had become acquainted with all the rituals and routines that were the focus of their days. Gussie had barely spoken when they first met, but at school he had blossomed, which she knew both terrified and thrilled Will.

“Good morning. On behalf of all the students at the Lord Melbourne School, I would like to welcome Her Royal Highness, Princess Victoria.”

They applauded. The Princess shook hands with Gussie and smiled as she came to the podium.

“I would like to thank you for that very warm welcome,” the Princess began. “I would like to thank you all for coming today to celebrate the eightieth anniversary of the founding of the Royal Lord Melbourne School, chartered by my great grandmother, Victoria IV in 1937. In fact, it was one of her first acts following her accession and one she took great pride in. You may think that an exaggeration when one considers her accomplishments as queen. The war, certainly, but I assure you it is not. In fact, she saw the founding of this school very similarly to the war, where we must ask ourselves who we are as a people...”

The speech carried on and the ceremony finally concluded for the parents to be reunited with their children. After an eternity, Gussie found his way towards them.
“Gussie!,” exclaimed Carrie.

“Well done!,” said Gordon, slapping the boy on the shoulder.

“Don’t do that,” said Will. “Don’t touch him.”

“It’s okay, Dad,” said Gussie.

“You were very well spoken,” said Victoria.

He ignored her as usual. She didn’t think anything of it. It was just how he was.

“So,” said Will, “you said you won the science prize?”

“Yes.”

“You teacher said the project was on display. Did you want to show me?”

“Why?”

Will shrugged. “Because I’m your dad and I want to make a fuss.”

“Fine.”

Gussie led Will away. Victoria went to follow.

“Why are you still with him?,” asked Carrie.

“What do you care?”

“Well, you can never have marriage or children. There’s Gussie and Lord Melbourne and not much room for anyone else...”

“This is really none of your business,” said Victoria.

“Please. I’ve seen it before.”

“Right, well, if he’s consumed by anything, it probably comes from that time you left him to raise two kids on his own. Excuse me.”

Victoria stalked off, Will eyeing her as she went down the corridor.


“Your Lordship, everything has been done as you asked.”

“All the staff are gone?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“And the doors from the service staircase have been locked?”

“As you asked, sir.”

“Very good. If you would be so kind as to lock the door to the kitchen as you leave.”
“Very good, sir.”

Harris left. All there was to do was wait and watch the clock and pace the hall.

He heard the sound of a carriage outside.

Quickly, he hurried to the door. The footman was helping Victoria out. He rushed her in.

“Majesty.”

“Lord M.”

“You answered the door yourself.”

“Yes, it seems my servants have the evening off.”

“So we are entirely alone.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She reached up to pull his head towards hers, catching him by surprise. She brought his lips to hers and he removed her cloak letting it fall to the floor.

“Where is your room?,” she asked.

He took her hand and led her silently upstairs.

Lord M opened the door and it was exactly as she suspected. The tapers were already lit giving the room a warm glow. The tables at his bedside and every spare surface were piled with books. Another stack went up from the floor beside an armchair that his dressing gown lay on. The room had a heady masculine scent, the same as she found when she buried her nose in his neck.

How different Lord M looked here, Victoria thought. He looked at home—more at home than Victoria had ever known possible as she had never been at home in any house that she had lived in. She was always performing, never letting herself show.

She had never let herself go for anyone but Lord M and now she was hiding from him as well.

“Victoria?”

She had been in her thoughts too long.

“Will you help me undress?”

He nodded and she turned. Lord M was painstakingly gentle, undoing the buttons on the back of her dress, placing kisses on her neck and shoulders. It fell to the floor and he pushed the skirts down with it.

Victoria suddenly wondered how many times he had undressed a lady before.

He undid her corset next, turning her to him, placing his hands on her breasts. She got anxious now, trying to divest herself of her drawers and stockings. He chuckled at her, then she yelped in surprise as he lifted her onto the bed. She propped herself on her elbows as she watched him make work of his own clothing.

She saw him staring at something and she worked out it was former flat of her stomach, the place
where their child was just starting to show itself.

She began to turn over.

“No,” he said quietly and she stopped. Now completely bare to her, he laid beside her, meeting her mouth with his. “Don’t hide from me.”

“I thought perhaps you were displeased.”

He scoffed. “Displeased?” He brought his lips to her again and began working his way down. He kissed down her neck and lingered at her breasts down her stomach and that bump of theirs making his way to her center. She opened for him and he buried his mouth there until she was swollen and shaking.

“Lord M, Lord M...” she said frantically, bringing him to face her.

He stared at her. She shook her head. “I need you...”

He nodded burying himself inside her. She thought she might be too free in the sounds she made but it seemed to spur Lord M on.

“Harder?,” he asked.

She shook her head. “Faster.”

This seemed to be just the right thing to say because Lord M gave reinvigorated his efforts, quickly sending her over the edge, finally joining her as he emptied himself inside her.

She held him to her as they regained breath.

This was everything. This was all she wanted. To be Lord M’s and for him to be hers. The only other person they would be beholden to was their child who would grow up loved and cared for.

The bitch really ought to not bother her, but she did.

Five years dealing with Carrie, her least favorite was the Carrie that acted like she was doing you a favor while she tried to tear you down. It reminded her too much of her mother.

Will had been in such a state when they met. His marriage had dissolved once and for all, in the wake of losing a little girl who had been born ill and dealing with a son with special needs. Add into this a wife who had felt the need to reinvent herself every three months.

It really ought not to bother her, but here she was, not quite crying in the toilet.

Victoria finally dragged herself out of the stall. She walked to the sink and did the best she could to dab at her eyes with cold water without ruining her eyeliner.

“Are you alright?”

She shook her head. “Ugh, just the usual encounter with the ex-wife...”

“Sorry.”

“Oh, it’s not really-"
She turned to see Victoria, the Princess Royal.

“Uh...” She curtsied. “Your Royal Highness, so sorry.”

The Princess waved her hand. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Uh, security didn’t come in here or...”

“Well, they didn’t have time to check.” She began washing her hands. “The perils of having a full list of engagements in your thirty-sixth week is that you run into any loo available, security cleared or not...”

“Right, uh... ma’am.”

“Is your child a student?”

“Well, uh, sort of. My partner’s son.”

“Ah, hence the ex-wife...”

“Yes. He was the Head Boy who gave your introduction? Gussie Lamb.”

“You ought to be proud. He did very well. Has he been at the school long?”

“Four years.”

“And the school has been useful?”

“Yes. I’m certain Lord Melbourne would be very proud.”

The Princess tilted her head. “Have we met?”

“No. Victoria Kensington.”

“You wrote the book about Victoria II. I liked it very much.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“I especially like the way you talked about Melbourne... And to be honest, I had no idea about her engagement to Prince Phillippe. That was probably intentional.”

“Do they keep secrets from you often, ma’am?”

The Princess smiled as she finished washing her hands. “Well, they wouldn’t be very good at it if I knew all the secrets they kept from me. There’s probably still one or two whoppers...”

“Possibly, ma’am.”

The princess motioned for Victoria to walk with her. “What are you working on now?”

They stepped out into the corridor. The Princess was soon flanked by bodyguards. Victoria caught sight of Will waiting down the hall looking very alarmed.

“Actually, my partner and I are working on a study of Victoria I and Lord Melbourne.” Victoria motioned at Will. “There he is.”

Will approached warily as the Princess smiled. He bowed slightly. “Your Highness.”
“This is-” Victoria began.

“William Lamb. Yes, I believe I’ve read most of your work.”

“You flatter me, ma’am.”

“And I hear you are the father of the very accomplished Head Boy. You must be very proud.”

“Yes, I am.”

A man in a suit approached. “Your Royal Highness, the schedule...”

“Well, you must excuse me. I look forward to the book.”

The Princess was led away. Will looked at Victoria.

“What did you say to her?”

“She asked what I was working on.”

“Please say you didn’t tell her.”

“I said we were doing a book about Victoria and Melbourne, which we are.”

“Didn’t mention the Victoria I shagging Lord M bit?”

“Well, it was a short conversation, I’m certain it would have come up eventually.”

No one had mentioned to Skerrett the possibility of having to wait for the Queen to return Christmas night when she became a servant to Her Majesty

Skerrett stood in alarm as Jenkins entered.

“What are you doing here? There’s about to be wine in the servants’ hall.”

“I was just helping Her Majesty.”

“Yes, you’ve been up here hours. Is she undressed?”

“Yes. She is sleeping.”

“Okay, then bring the clothes and we’ll put them up before supper.”

Skerrett froze.

“Where are her clothes?,” asked Jenkins.

“I...”

Jenkins frowned. She looked at Dash.

“Why is the dog here and not in the room with Her Majesty?”

“I wouldn’t know.”
Jenkins pushed past her as Skerrett tried futilely to stop her.

The bed was empty.

Jenkins turned to Skerrett. “Where is she?”

“I don’t know-”

“If you didn’t know, you wouldn’t be standing here.”

Skerrett swallowed. “I think she’s with Lord Melbourne.”

Jenkins nodded. “And why would you think that?”

“She did not say, but a carriage came to collect her and...” Skerrett paused. “Do you remember the morning after the storm? When she was not in her room?”

“What of it?”

“The night before she had asked me what room Lord Melbourne was in... and I told her.”

Jenkins’ eyes widened.

“I know, but how could I refuse her? And now she falls pregnant after months with the Prince?”

“What are you implying, Miss Skerrett?”

“I-”

“Now, listen here, whatever the Queen does or does not do is not your concern and you will never speak of this again.” Jenkins walked to the door, turning her key in the lock.

“What are you doing?,” asked Skerrett.

“What? Did you think being Her Majesty’s dresser was going to be all pendant braids and pretty frocks? We’re staying here until she returns just in case someone should come looking for her.”

“We’re to cover up her affair?”

“What? You’re too good for it?”

“No.”

“Is there anything else? Any other time?”

“I don’t think so, but they are so often in each other’s company-”

“Which is none of your business. Anything else she needs help with, you bring it straight to me. Understood?”

Victoria looked at the table. The servants of Dover House had left quite a supper on the table.

“What do they think you’re doing? Your servants.”

“I wouldn’t like to guess, ma’am. I am a most disreputable gentleman, as you know. I could be up to
all manner of depravity.” He took another bite of cheese. “And yours, ma’am?”

“Only my dresser knows I am gone and I told her nothing.” She stared at the slice of bread that had been sitting on her plate. “I must return.”

“Yes.”

She looked up at him. “You know I would never have us part if I could.”

“There is no sense in berating ourselves for something that cannot be changed.”

They walked to the front hall where Melbourne helped her back with her cloak.

“You have no decorations for Christmas, Lord M.”

“I might have if I had known you would be displeased.”

“I am not displeased, Lord M, in fact, nothing at Dover House displeases me. It is just that you do not go with your family, you do not have any decorations, you do not even come to church...”

“Well, I do not think I have celebrated any holiday since Augustus died.” She looked at him questioningly. “I have just always thought children are the reason for these things and I no longer have any, so... We should get you back to the palace.”

“Lord M, I must tell you something.”

“Yes?”

This was it. She should tell him.

“Happy Christmas, Lord M.”

“Happy Christmas, ma’am.”

“He wants to spend summer break with them,” Will sighed when they got back in the car.

“Oh. Sorry.”

“They’re going on holiday to Crete. There will be no routine there, nothing familiar...”

“You have to let him try, Will. I think it’s probably good that he even wants to try.”

“Of course it is.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“He doesn’t need me anymore.”

“You’re his dad. He’ll always need you.”

Will was silent. They looked at the mass of vehicles trying to get out of the car park, quickly devolving into road rage. Victoria reached into her bag and pulled out her phone.

“So, I was thinking, when I did my book, Queen Victoria made a document that left the princess to Queen Adelaide over the Duchess of Kent.”
“Yes?”

“Maybe she told her.”

“About Melbourne? No.”

“Why not?”

“Well, she had the reputation of being the most pious woman in England...”

“Yes, but her husband had like ten illegitimate children. One shag was hardly going to shock her.”

“No.”

“But look at it this way, long game, if Victoria died...” She turned to Will. “If she told Melbourne and Melbourne tried to take custody of Regina, well, everyone’s just going to say he’s making the whole thing up, besmirching the Queen’s name, trying to create a Whig monarchy, right? Probably end up in the Tower. Or whatever they were using instead of the Tower. Tell Queen Adelaide, the most trusted woman in England, who was beloved, who no scandal had ever stuck to, well, if she says the Queen says Melbourne is Regina’s father, she could not be ignored, could she?”

“It’s an interesting idea, but it’s all supposition.”

“Your Majesty, the Queen.”

The footman opened the door as Adelaide stood.

“Your Majesty.” She curtsied.

Victoria smiled. “Aunt. I hope I am not disturbing you. You must have plans for today.”

“And so must you.”

Victoria sat and the Dowager Queen followed.

“I brought you a present.”

“You are too generous, Victoria.”

Victoria shook her head. “I have come to speak with you on a sensitive matter.”

“Yes?”

“I have been asked to name a regency and indeed I have, in the event that I die and my child lives, but... I am being asked who my child shall live with.”

“I see.”

“I cannot leave it with Mama.”

Adelaide nodded. “I can certainly understand that.”

“So I am going to tell the Privy Council I wish to leave my heir to you.”

Adelaide was taken aback. “You honor me with your trust.”
“And I do trust you, Aunt and I know you to be a good Christian woman... which is why what I have to say is so difficult.”

“You worry me, Victoria.”

“After Albert was buried, I went to bed with a man. That man is my child’s father.”

“Lord Melbourne?”

Victoria sat back in shock. “Aunt Adelaide! How did you know that?”

“I may be known for being a good Christian, but I am no fool, Victoria. Have you told him?”

“No.”

“Do you suppose he deserves to know?”

Victoria did not answer.

“Anyway, in the event I die, I would like Lord Melbourne to raise our child. He is the best and kindest of men and his family will help him. I think our child will be very happy. Happier than I was at the least.”

“Yes. He and your uncle may not have gotten on, but, yes, he is a good man.” She sighed. “Then there is the irony...”

“The irony?”

“Please forget I said anything. It was in poor taste.”

“No. What irony?”

“Just the late Lady Melbourne and your Uncle George.”

She frowned. “Not Lady Caroline?”

“No, Lord Melbourne’s mother. As I said, it was in poor taste for me to mention it-”

“Uncle George had an affair with Lord Melbourne’s mother?”

“He fathered her youngest son.”

“George,” said Victoria, the name of Lord M’s youngest brother suddenly making a great deal of sense. “Yes, that is quite ironic.”

“Victoria, you must tell him-”

“No, I don’t think so.”

Adelaide shook her head. “What is it you are afraid of?”


“Do you suppose you would?”

“And he cannot survive another child.”
Victoria looked off, trying to focus on some detail of the molding on the wall. She felt Adelaide’s hand squeeze hers.

“You take on too much alone, Victoria.”

Victoria began sobbing. She felt her aunt’s arms around her.

“There, Victoria... Everything will work out as it’s meant to.”

What Victoria did not know was if she would be a part of how things were meant to be.
So, here we are. Thanks for all the comments. Please, please let me know what you think and happy reading!

---

*Brocket Hall, Present Day*

The Duke of Montrose entered the glasshouse.

“Your royal highness.”

“Your Grace?”

“When might we return to London?”

“When I have repotted the orchids...”

David cast his eye down the glasshouse. There had to have been a hundred.

“Seriously?”

She didn’t answer. He walked around the table.

“I know you hate when I say things like this-”

“Then don’t say it.”

“Aren’t there people-”

“Every Princess Royal has maintained this collection since the time of Melbourne himself-”

“I knew I was going to regret it...”

“Victoria IV defeated Hitler and still had time for these orchids.”

“Yeah, but she had some help, right?”

“This one was a gift from the Emperor of Japan.”

“I just think we shouldn’t be too far from the hospital-”

“Oh, yes, out here in the wilds of Hertfordshire. You will find the society something savage...”

A footman entered and bowed his head.

“Sorry to interrupt, ma’am-”
“No, of course, the meeting with Mrs. Sutherland. I shall meet her in the library directly.”

David followed Victoria out.

“What is this about?,” he asked.

“Some request by some researchers. Granny has left it to me to decide for some reason.”

They took the glass door into the library from the garden. Harry Howard-Sutherland, lead historian for the royal residence, curtsied.

“Your Royal Highness.”

“Mrs. Sutherland. I believe you have a proposal?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Victoria sat down behind the desk as Harry handed her a folio.

“We have had a request from two historians, writing a work of nonfiction about the relationship between Her Majesty Queen Victoria I and Lord Melbourne...”

Victoria opened it. “What makes this one different?”

“As you know, we refuse most requests to research at Brocket Hall, but no one has proposed quite as innovative a look at the two.”

“Will Lamb and Victoria Kensington?”

“Yes, Professor Lamb has written several works on Lord Melbourne and Dr. Kensington wrote that rather popular biography of Queen Victoria II.”

“Yes, I know. I met them at the Lord Melbourne School. Professor Lamb’s son is a student...”

She looked up to see her husband poking at a bookshelf.

“What are you doing?,” she asked sternly.

“What?”

“Are you holding Glenarvon?”

“Not this again-”

“No one touches Glenarvon or the ghost of Lady Caroline-”

“I know, comes and kills us all.” He put the book back on the shelf.

“She doesn’t kill us, it’s very bad luck.”

“And you’re certain Melbourne didn’t just make that up?”

“Last time someone touched that, the war started.”

“I’m fairly certain the invasion of Poland had a bit to do with it...”

Victoria looked at Harry. “Well, I think we should grant this request. Just try to plan their time here
for when none of us are at Brocket Hall. Any idea what their particular interests are?"

“The early days of the marriage, family holidays, child rearing.”

“You must have them sign their books. On that, I am inflexible.”

“I am sure they will comply happily, ma’am.”

Victoria looked at Harry. “There isn’t anything we ought to be hiding, is there?”

“Ma’am?,” questioned Harry.

“What are you on about?,” asked David.

“I don’t know, Lord M wasn’t secretly a Nazi or something, that sort of thing?"

“Not that I’m aware of, ma’am.”

“You might as well ask if he was Batman,” said David.

“Well, permission is granted,” said Victoria. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have eighty or so more orchids to repot.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Harry smiled and left.

“Or perhaps the orchids were part of a secret plot to take over the world,” said David. “Yes, an army of orchids...”

“You read too many comic books for an adult man. I stand by this.”

“And you do too much gardening for any woman. I stand by this.”

“For that comment, you may find some gloves and make yourself useful,” said Victoria, getting up and walking outside.

The day finally came that word arrived that the mausoleum at Frogmore was ready for Albert. Once again, they were all had to go down to Windsor.

“I think I will go into half mourning when we return,” said Victoria. She looked at Melbourne. “What do you think? Has it been long enough?”

“I would not presume to dictate custom to you, ma’am.”

“Mama will think I am acting quite disrespectful,” she said casting a glare at the Duchess and Stockmar down the receiving room. “But I do not think I should give birth in black. It seems morbid.”

Just then, Peel arrived with a man in military dress.

“Your Majesty, may I introduce Colonel Wyndham? He is to head the honor guard for the Prince’s interment.”

Victoria looked to Melbourne. He was desperately looking at the ground.
“Colonel, welcome. We are most grateful.”

“Majesty.” He turned. “Melbourne.”

“Wyndham.”

The men departed. Victoria turned to Melbourne.

“Lord M, do you know Colonel Wyndham?”

“We are passing acquaintances.”

“How do you mean?”

“He is my brother. Well, half brother.”

Victoria frowned. “But he is not called Lamb?”

“He is not my... legitimate brother.”

“Oh, so you mean... Lord Melbourne, that is your father-”

“No, not Lord Melbourne. He was the third Earl Egremont. He was also Colonel Wyndham’s father.”

“Lady Melbourne.”

He could see her trying to piece it together in her mind and wished she would not. “Oh, please, ma’am, do not pity me. I am long since past shock about this.”

Victoria shook her head. “I do not believe you, Lord M. Was it not difficult for you?

She was asking after him, but in her heart, she knew she was asking for their child.

“We must dress if we are to attend the service at the mausoleum,” he said. “That is if you insist upon going.”

“Of course I do. Why wouldn’t I?”

“It’s quite cold out. I would not want you to get ill, ma’am.”

“Lord M...” She looked around. “Would you come to me tonight if I can arrange it?”

“Of course I would, ma’am.”

It was that rare thing, a sunny day in early summer. Victoria took the research outside, gathering her books and the tablet on the table outside. She had donned a string bikini, eager to get some sun and knowing her research meant no beach holiday this year.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Victoria looked up to see her Mrs. Fitz, the elderly great gran who lived next door.

“Good morning, Mrs. Fitz!” She motioned. “Will and I are working outside today!”
“Working? He pays you then, does he?”

“Now Mrs. Fitz, we have been over this. I am not actually a prostitute.”

Will soon joined her. He looked up at Mrs. Fitz.

“Oh, good God...” he muttered.

“There’s no call for your sort of shameful behavior!”

“Ah, Mrs. Fitz, you’re wrong there. It was his birthday.”

The woman disappeared.

“Why do you provoke her?,” asked Will sitting at the bench.

“Honestly, I don’t know what I’ve done to offend her. Why can’t she be a fun old lady? She’s eighty five, you would think at the least our sex life would provide entertainment. Speaking of...”

She pulled out the iPad.

“First royal portrait after Princess Regina was born.”

Will looked. It was the Queen posed in a chair holding her infant with her usual look of reserve.

“Alright.”

“She’s wearing lilac. Half mourning.”

“What? Should she have worn black the rest of her life?”

“She started after she returned from Frogmore. Much commentary on that... Some thought it was too soon.”

“Talk that disappeared when the princess was born.”

“And this one.”

Victoria guided him to another picture. “There’s a portrait of Victoria and her mother, in it she is holding a miniature portrait of her father. They recreated the portrait with Victoria and Regina, the same but for one detail...”

Will nodded. “No miniature of Albert.”

She sat down. “It’s as if there was a concerted effort to forget him. Daisy sent me some more correspondence, the Duke of Saxe-Coburg felt that the Queen was forgetting his son entirely. Stockmar making him suspicious about all the time she spent with Melbourne, all the time she let the princess spend with Melbourne...”

“All waved aside by a nation who never cared for its’ German prince, but did love their infant princess.”

“We just need to reconstruct their relationship in this inbetween period.”

“He never could have pursued her openly.”

“Nor she him...”
The service was just that, a service. The Duchess began sobbing loudly halfway through as if to shame Victoria. She remained stoic, praying that this would put Albert to rest. She knew she had failed him and if he had lived, might have failed him yet more, but she could not live the rest of her life ruled by his ghost.

The Duchess had to be helped out and Victoria feigned being unwell to get out of another dinner in which she was forced to play the widow.

She stared off as Jenkins brushed out her hair for the night.

“Is there anything else, ma’am?”

Victoria paused. “Jenkins, I need a room made up. Away from the other guests.”

Jenkins nodded. “Of course, ma’am. I’ll pass it along to the Baroness-”

“No!” Jenkins looked at her in surprise. “No, not the Baroness. The fewer people who know about it the better, no, never mind, forget I said anything, I am so sorry to impose on you in this way.”

Jenkins paused. “It’s no trouble, ma’am. Perhaps something in the east wing? There are no guests staying there.”

“Whatever you think best.” She took a breath. “I trust we can rely on your discretion?”

“Of course, ma’am.”

________________________

“Here’s my working theory...” said Victoria. She motioned. “Victoria may have been pregnant and yeah, that might be bad news, considering the whole dying in childbirth, but what could she and Melbourne do while she was pregnant that they could not do otherwise?”

Will shook his head. “Not a clue.”

“Really? No clue?”

“No.”

She frowned. “I was thinking more along the lines of unfettered shagging.”

“There is that.”

“She can’t get pregnant if she is pregnant. So, you have Victoria’s journals, I have Melbourne’s. If we go through them day by day, we are going to find an inconsistency and that is where the shagging happened.”

“So, we just go through?”

“Yeah, try Christmas Day 1840.”

Will flipped. “Ate supper with Mama, Stockmar and Lehzen. Had a most generous gift from my excellent Lord M.”

Victoria followed. “Retired.” She looked up at Will. “I think we could mark that as a shag.”
“How do we mark that as a shag?”

“She didn’t say what the gift was.”

“Bloody hell...”

“Let’s try, Frogmore. February 20...” She read. “Attended the consecration service for Prince Albert’s memorial. Went to bed early.”

Will read. “I rode down with my excellent Lord M from the palace. Thankfully, Mama and Stockmar took their own carriage. I met Colonel Wyndham and it hurt me how wounded Lord M looked at the sight of the man...”

“Melbourne’s half brother...” said Victoria. “Interesting she should mention that.”

“When I think of how much hurt my Lord M has endured...”

“Then what?”

“She does not finish the thought.” He went down. “Retired early.”

“Shag?”

He sighed. “Shag.”

Melbourne opened the door surprised to see a woman. Was she one of the Queen’s maids? He was not certain.

She curtsied and handed him a note. “A message from the Queen, Lord Melbourne.”

He nodded and she left. He shut the door and went to his chair.

Melbourne entered the room. Victoria breathed a sigh of relief.

“Your Majesty has managed quite well.”

She sat up.

“I realize I may be quite repugnant to you, Lord M, but if I could just be held by you, I- I would be most grateful.”

He stared at her, considering this. “Is that all you wish? For me to hold you?”

She let out a huge breath. “It is not all I wish, but certainly, you must have some feelings on the matter.”

“I do, ma’am, and they are that I do not find you repugnant in the slightest and I will hold you if that is what you really wish, but I would wish for far more.”

She shook her head. “How could we?”

“Allow me to manage that.”

She kissed him. She found herself back on the bed, nightdress once again removed to his gaze. She
tossed aside his cravat and began helping him with the rest of his clothes.

“On your side...” he whispered.

She frowned, but was persuaded as he gently helped her down to the mattress. A few seconds later she felt him behind her and then felt his manhood pressing against her.

“You’re beautiful.” He swept her hair aside and kissed her neck. “So beautiful.”

His hands went to her breasts and her eyes rolled back. How sensitive they were in their current engorged state, his delicate touches had the power to send her head spinning.

“Lovely.”

“How can you like me in this state?”

“What do you mean? You’re a goddess.”

He freed one hand to the thigh that was on top and brought it to hook around his hip. She had no idea what he was after until she felt him enter her and gasped.

“What? Is that uncomfortable?”

“No, I just had no idea... you could...”

“You must tell me if you need to stop.”

She nodded, but had no intention of doing so. Melbourne began slowly moving in and out of her, so frustratingly gentle with a pace that drove her to the edge. Her body was so ready for him in her current state that she came again as he sought his own release.

Victoria was caught up in the sensations of her own body when she felt another not her own.

The baby. Kicking. She did not know whether to be thrilled or mortified.

“Victoria, what is it? Are you unwell?”

“No, I can just feel it.”

“Oh.” He sat up, realizing what she meant. “Perhaps I should go?”

“No!” She grabbed his hand to pull him back down before she thought of what she was doing. She turned to face him and placed his hand on her stomach. “There, there-”

He smiled. “Yes, I can feel her.”

“Her?”

“Yes.”

“You called it her.”

He looked up at her, smile not fading and hand not moving. “I have always thought that babies should not be called ‘it.’”

“But you do not know that I am not having a boy.”
“No, but I have half a chance of being proven right.” He paused. “I suppose you are hoping for a son.”

“It would be simpler.” A strong, handsome son that was as brilliant and good-hearted as his father. What a great King he would be.

“Are queens so complicated?”

“You know the answer to that as well as I. Though I suppose you favor a daughter?” She had almost forgotten that she was not meant to be speaking of their child.

“I favor anything that means more of you.”

He was staring at her with such admiration, she could not stand it.

“Lord M, will you tell me something? And be truthful?”

“I always try to be truthful with you.”

“Was it upsetting for you? Knowing your father was Lord Egremont?”

He looked at her curiously. “What’s brought this on?”

Victoria searched his face for an excuse. “You just seemed so upset when you met with Wyndham.”

“I do not envy him if that is what you mean.”

“When did you find out?”

“I was thirteen. I had just finished my first term at Eton and I had a poor mark in Greek. My father— that is, Lord Melbourne— well, he had a bit too much sherry. He said something like, ‘Well, you can tell Peniston is my true heir by these marks.’”

“Lord M, that’s terrible.”

“I didn’t know what he meant, but I asked my mother and she turned ashen and denied everything so I asked Peniston.”

“And he told you? How cruel.”

“No, he was a good elder brother. My mother’s affairs were not exactly secret, he did not want me to be caught unaware at school. Boys can be quite rough about such things.”

“Did it hurt?”

“Yes, at first, but I learned to bear the wound. And later I learned that Lord Egremont had forty children so nothing was meant by his... well, I was not special.”

“Lord M, you are indeed special.”

“To you, perhaps.”

“To me most certainly.”

“Then Peniston was ill and died and I ended up the heir. Father never got over it.”

“But you have gone on to such heights, a Prime Minister, a trusted advisor to the Queen of
England...”

“Yes, but I was not his.”

She looked at him. “Do you think you could love my child? Supposing we ever find a way to be together?”

“Of course I will, do not even worry.”

“You are just so good to your family, to your nieces and nephews in particular. I remember before my coronation I was shaking and I looked over to see you with Lady Frances. Do you remember?”

He smiled. “How could I forget? She was terrified she would trip on your train and end the monarchy.”

“I could not hear what you said to her, you whispered, but it seemed to make her feel better and I felt better.”

Melbourne grinned. “Funny that you should say that.”

“Why? What did you say to her?”

“I said ‘The Queen is far more terrified than you and she has to rule the nation after this. She only needs you to carry her robe.’”

“Well...” She laughed. “I am glad I could not hear it.”

“Indeed.”

“You must have been very devoted to Augustus.”

“I suppose I was.” He interlaced his fingers with hers. “Listen, I never told you this, but I had a daughter.”

“You did?”

“She did not live a day, she was born too early. I suppose at the time I might have told you, you found out you were expecting and everyone sought to terrify you.”

“Why tell me now?”

“Because I do not like the feeling of keeping something from you.”

Victoria began sobbing.

“Victoria...” he said in alarm. “Victoria, what is it?”

She shook her head.

“You must tell me.”

“No.”

“What is it?”

“No, you would hate me.”
He pulled her close. “I would never hate you.”

He worried as her sobbing would not cease, kissing her head.

Victoria looked down the list.

“Okay, so that’s quite a lot of shagging...” said Victoria.

“That’s not even counting the hours he spent as her private secretary...”

“There would have been dispatches and letters patent...” muttered Victoria.

“I can see that look you have!,” Mrs. Fitz shouted from next door.

“Mrs. Fitz, I’ve not so much as played footsie all morning!,” Victoria shouted back.

“You might try ignoring her,” Will whispered.

“Why should I?”

“Because if you do, I’ll take you inside,” he said promisingly.

She looked up at him. He was still staring at his laptop. He drove her mad when he did that.

“Now,” she said getting up.

“Oh, now?,” he teased.

“Yes, right now.”

She rushed inside, making it as far as the hallway before untying the strings on her bikini, letting both pieces fall to the floor.

Will joined her pushing her against the wall.

“Oh, God,” she gasped, her lips meeting his. She unbuttoned his linen shirt, pushing it off his arms.

“Are you ready for me?,” he whispered in way that made her shudder.

“Always.”

He kissed her again and their hands met to push down his jeans and boxers. She found him hard and hot as his hands lifted her thighs. He drove into her and she wrapped herself around them, his hands pressed against the wall.

“Oh, God, Will,” she gasped. “Fuck, fuck...”

“Say you like it.”

She grunted. He drove her mad when he teased like this, the way he could maintain composure for so long. The only thing to do was tease back.

“I love it, I love your cock, filling me, stretching me...” She licked her lips as she met his gaze.

“Make me come, Will, make me come apart for you, make me yours, make me come...”
She was rewarded with a dark, lustful look in his eyes and thrusts that made stars fly behind her eyes. She shouted, feeling boneless as they sank to the ground and Will laid her on the floor, one arm propped behind her head, using the other to give him leverage as he found his own completion. He finally did, rolling next to her and pulling her on top of him as he planted kissed on her head.

They were both panting consumed by each others’ heartbeats when they heard a buzzing.

“What is under me?,” Will asked, turning.

“Oh, sorry, that’s my mobile.”

“I thought it would be outside.”

“No, I had it in my top, I must have forgotten about it,” she said retrieving it and kissing him in one movement.

“You’re answering it?”

“It’s Harry.” She pressed the button. “Harry, how are you?”

“Why do you sound out of breath?”

“I’m just running, that’s all. Any news?”

“You’ll be getting a letter, but you and Will are to be the first fellows of Brocket Hall.”

“Oh, my God. Really?”

Will eyed her.

“The Princess Royal herself gave permission.”

“She did?”

“I have to go. There’s a staff meeting, but I wanted to let you know.”

“Thank you.”

Victoria hung up and looked at Will.

“We’re going to research at Brocket Hall.”

He shook his head. “Nobody researches at Brocket Hall.”

“Correction. We do. By the authority of the Princess Royal.”

“Oh, my...” He sat up and kissed her. “You’re amazing. Do you know how many times I have tried?”

She kissed back. “You’re amazing. We should celebrate.”

“Well, off the floor perhaps and there is about three months of research on the table outside.”

She smiled. “You get that. I’ll get the champagne.”
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for everything, I love your comments. Please let me know what you think and happy reading!

Brocket Hall, 1939

“Victoria!”

Queen Victoria IV walked out of the glasshouse.

“Victoria!,” she repeated.

In the distance, her son and younger daughters teased Victoria.

“If I say your name again, you’re going to the tower!”

Victoria sighed as she walked back to the glasshouse.

“What?”

She motioned at the tables. “There are orchids to be repotted, seedlings to be started and you are playing.”

“What’s this?,’’ Matthew approached from the house.

“Someone is not helping with the orchids.”

Matthew looked at his eldest daughter as she pouted. “There is absolutely no getting out of this, you know.”

“I don’t want to!”

“If you start like that, you will just have to hear the story…”

“I learned to do this from my mother who learned from her mother who learned in this glasshouse from Lord Melbourne whose grounds you currently enjoy.”

“Are we even related to him?”

“Oh, look, it’s time for tea!,’’ said Matthew, cutting off his wife. “Go. Inside now.”

The princess hurried off.

“Do not be angry with her when you are really mad at Mr. Chamberlain.”

She took off her gloves. “I am infernally angry at Mr. Chamberlain. Peace in our time. I knew it was bollocks when I heard it, but no a Queen can only advise and what could I possibly understand about
international politics? I am just a feeble minded woman who rules an empire and is preceded by three queens who ruled this empire!"

He followed her through the French doors into the library.

"Your position is difficult-"

"I knew they were awful. I knew it. I knew it in Berlin."

"Victoria..."

"I should have taken a page out of Charles II’s book and dissolved Parliament if it meant I could keep Mr. Chamberlain from running the show."

She looked down at the tea table and snapped her head back up at Matthew.

"What is that?"

He rolled his eyes. "Not this again."

"Were you reading Glenarvon?"

"We have been married fifteen years. In all that time, I have been warned about the ghost of Lady Caroline Lamb coming to rear her rather scandalous head if I so much as lay a finger on that book and yet all I have found is some truly terrible prose. I do not know where the lady’s talents lie, but it was not in literature, but I suspect her husband being a great lover of the English language knew this and that is why we were cautioned to never read it, not some dark luck."

"We sit on the precipice of war that threatens this empire and you think that there is no relationship?" She pointed. "Put it back."

"If you want it back so much, you do it."

"Your Queen commands it."

He sighed and picked up the book. "My Queen is very superstitious like all of her relations..."

As he did a piece of paper fell out of the book onto the table.

"What is that?," asked Victoria.

"You won’t pick that up either?"

"Matthew."

He sighed and picked up the paper off the table.

"What is it?," she asked.

"You may want to sit."

Victoria could not find rest lately. If it was not her increasingly uncomfortable body, it was her conscience or it was the fear of her own death, a scenario that had played itself out dozens of times in her mind’s eye.
Then the relatives descended. Ernst, thank God, was staying away, but Uncle Leopold and Uncle Hanover had descended.

Uncle Leopold was very nice of course, but he kept on about Albert.

“Of course dear Albert would have wanted it so...”

She glanced back at Lord M. Uncle Leopold had intruded upon their daily meeting. He kept himself busy at the desk.

“But I have kept you too long from your duties.”

Victoria smiled and nodded. He had kept her too long from Lord M. He finally left.

“Victoria?”

She felt him sit beside her.

“Oh, Lord M...”

She buried her head in his shoulder, eyes closed.

“You know this is your child,” he said. “Even if the Prince were here, there would be no reason for your heir to be raised solely according to his wishes.”

She could not speak.

“Are you certain there is nothing you wish to tell me, ma’am?,” he asked.

“No.”

She had not told him. She could not bear to.

So one night, unable to sleep, she took the candle at her bedside and went to her desk to write a letter.

Now she had held it on her desk the whole day they had been working. He had magnificently managed to keep Uncle Leopold and Mama and Dr. von Stockmar at bay. She was of a mind to give him the Order of the Garter for that alone.

“Ma’am?”

She looked up at Melbourne. “What?”

He sighed and stood, placing a paper back in the dispatch box. “I think we should stop for the day.”

“No.”

“You are tired-”

“I am not tired, I am not infirm, Lord M-”

“Admitting you are tired is not a sign of infirmity, ma’am, particularly when you have been due to deliver a baby for weeks!”

Weeks. Had he noticed? Had others noticed? How long was it supposed to take anyway?
“I do not mean to upset you, ma’am...” He took her hands in his. “I implore you to get some rest and we will begin again in the morning as always.”

“You implore me.”

“I will beg if that will satisfy you.”

“Mama and Dr. von Stockmar want me to hide in a darkened room and neglect my duties—”

“I would be satisfied if you only went to bed early.”

“Lord M, are you worried about me?”

“You know I worry about nothing else, ma’am.”

Victoria sighed. “I will take a tray in my room and go to bed early.”

“Thank you.”

“And I suppose you must leave.”

“I must.” He kissed her hands.

He began the process of cleaning up the box and Victoria spotted his attention turning away from his satchel. She took her letter and stuffed it in the bottom.

“Good night, ma’am.”

“Good night, Lord M.”

“Oh, my God,” said Will.

“What?”

“This is actually happening.” He drove the car on. “This is us, going to Brocket Hall.”

“It’s just a house, Will.”

“It is the most famous house in the country—excluding the palace—and we are going through the private entrance.”

“Come on, the house from Downton Abbey has to be more famous, right? The Hogwarts castle, maybe?”

As they parked, they saw Harry waiting at the frontsteps.

“Harry, how are you,” asked Victoria.

“Very well.” She smiled. “And this must be Will?”

“He is.”

“Welcome to Brocket Hall, Professor Lamb.”

“Thank you.”
“Victoria says you’ve never been.”

“Well, the public tour in the spring.”

“I think we can do a bit better than that.”

“I have tried. Twenty-five years as the world’s leading Melbourne scholar and I have never once been granted permission to research here. I have been to Windsor, the National Archives, the House Archives.” Will looked up at the red brick facade. “First time being admitted as more than a tourist.”

“I think you’ll find the royal family are more protective of some memories than others. Lord Melbourne is one of the ones they are most protective of.”

“Why is that?,” asked Victoria.

Harry frowned. “I suppose it comes from Victoria II. She loved him very much. And there we are.”

They soon found themselves in the great hall. There was a large portrait on the wall of Lord Melbourne sitting and a small girl next to him.

“I have not seen this in person,” said Will. “I thought it was only for private display.”

“It was recently restored,” said Harry. “Her Majesty wished that it be displayed at Brocket Hall. When public tours begin again in the spring, everyone will see it.”

Will walked closer. “I forget, is it meant to be Margaret?”

“No, it’s Victoria.” Will looked to his partner. “The second.”

“Or as she was known then, Regina, The Princess Royal,” said Harry. “The Queen had it commissioned.”

“Was it a gift?,” asked Victoria.

“It was. Yes, for the wedding.”

“Strange to give a portrait of a stepdaughter as a gift,” Victoria whispered to Will.

“By all accounts, Lord Melbourne loved Princess Regina as his own,” said Harry.

“The public loved it well enough,” said Will. “A fatherless child and a childless father. Particularly after the assassination attempt.”

“We keep the good stuff in the attic,” said Harry. “Follow me.”

Melbourne looked up from his desk at the footman entered. “Lady Palmerston, my lord.”

“Emily...” he groaned.

“Oh, there is my brother. He is yet living.”

“Do you not have a husband? A rather annoying one at that.” He walked up to her and motioned towards the chair by the fire.

“Sir Robert has held another cabinet meeting. I had dinner with Frederick and Alexandrina where we
all wondered why we had not seen you since the Fanny’s wedding and then it occurred to me.”

“What occurred to you?”

“That was April. This is May.”

“I do not take your meaning.”

“When did you bed her?”

“Emily-”

“Do you know why Sir Robert has called a cabinet meeting?”

“I would not presume to know what lies in Sir Robert’s head-”

“They think the Queen will die.”

“What?”

“Because she has not given birth-”

He was seeing red now. “That-”

“They are men and they are fools, but still.”

He shook his head. “Those wretches.”

“Yet we know the Queen is quite fine, do we not?”

“Even if that was the truth, shall I break into the cabinet and say there is no need for worry? The Queen is bearing my child, the timetable is well in hand.”

Emily rolled her eyes. “I thought you ought to know and when the Queen is delivered, all will resolve itself, undoubtedly, but the King of Hanover is undoubtedly a scoundrel.”

“You are not helping.”

“You have not slept...” She tilted her head. “I think you ought not worry. She has the look of a childbearing woman as the Germans often are.”

“Emily.”

“I think you should eat and rest...” She bent down to his satchel. “And take better care of your satchel. Why do you never close it?”

She lifted it up and papers fell out, including one curious new envelope. Melbourne picked it up.

“It is the Queen’s hand,” he remarked.

He opened it.

Emily watched his countenance darken.

“That woman, that foolish woman...”

“William?”
Melbourne stood. "I need my carriage!," he shouted in the direction of the hall.

"It is nearly midnight, William."

The butler entered. "Sir?"

"I need the carriage to take me to the palace."

"My Lord?"

"Now!"

The servant disappeared.

"William, you cannot go to the palace in the middle of the night-"

"She lied!"

"About what?"

"What do you think?!"

"Oh..." She stood. "Still you cannot go to the palace in the middle of the night!"

He realized he still held the letter and walked back to Emily.

"I need you to take this back to Oxford House. Do you have anywhere Palmerston will not find it?"

"William, think who you are speaking to. I have several places Henry cannot find things."

"The Brocket Hall Archives," Harry announced. "Such as they are."

The room appeared to be some unused hall, there were shelves and shelves of journals and art.

"Has anyone been in here?," asked Will.

"No researchers. My lot comes in to do inventory once a year, occasionally, a member of the Royal Family will ask for something..."

"There’s a lot of art..."

"Victoria I’s watercolors were moved here after her death. She was quite prolific."

She walked towards a shelf. Harry handed her a pair of white gloves and put on a pair herself. She pulled out a canvas.

"This is a favorite of mine."

It was Melbourne asleep under a tree, a very small Princess Regina wrapped around him.

"Will, look here," said Victoria.

"That’s something. What’s the date?"

"Uh..." Victoria looked. "Five days after their wedding. How did the princess end up on their
honeymoon?”

“The first of many holidays. I hadn’t realized,” said Harry.

“We would love a digitized version of this,” said Will. “It might make a very nice insert in the book should Her Majesty grant permission. Does Melbourne have journals here?,” asked Will.

“Oh, Professor Lamb, does Lord Melbourne have journals?,” Harry said in astonishment.

“I’ve never found anything past the marriage.”

“Then his second wedding made him prolific.” She led him to another bookshelf solely composed of journals in wine colored leather. “There.”

“Which ones?”

“All of them.”

He looked over at Victoria. “All of them.”

Melbourne was out of his carriage before the driver could fully stop to the chagrin of his footman, bounding up the steps of the palace. The ride over he had gone between enraged to fearful to smitten and back through. He reached the hall before Victoria’s bedroom just in time to see Harriet rushing in as Emma rushed out.

“William, did someone send for you?,” Emma asked.

“No, I-” He stopped himself as he realized he had no legitimate reason for rushing from Dover House to the Palace in the middle of the night. Emily had been quite right about that. Emma stared at him as the wheels turned ever so slowly in his head, searching for an excuse. “I just remembered I forgot to fetch a very pressing document from Her Majesty.”

“Well, I am afraid that will have to wait.”

He shook his head. “I do not think it can-”

“William, the Queen is in labor.”

A second glance past Emma revealed that there was more commotion than he had realized, maids rushing in and out. He could hear Lehzen barking at them past the open door.

“So you see it must wait,” Emma said emphatically.

“Yes, of course.”

“Why don’t you take a seat with Sir James?” She clearly had no idea what to do with him.

He turned to see the Home Secretary, Sir James Graham, who was eyeing him with a mixture of contempt and confusion.

“Sir James.”

“Lord Melbourne.”
Emma stuck her head out. “Sir James, can I get you anything to make you more comfortable?”

“You are most kind, Lady Portman, but no...”

She smiled and went back in the Queen’s room.

Graham and Melbourne were left to stare at each other.

Harry had left them for the time being.

“The date...”

Victoria took the book from Will. A leather volume, delicate, but well preserved. They all had the same binding as if Melbourne had only purchased this particular journal.

“Yes?”

“Look at the first date in the first book.”

“Victoria II’s birthday.”

“He never wrote much about personal matters... Or if he had, he got rid of it.”

“Why write a journal about this child and not his first...”

“Perhaps he was too young then, he was older here, he knew how fleeting every moment was...”

“But he had to have known by now. Why else would he have started a journal?”

“He couldn’t have known through the pregnancy...” Will paused. “Why was he at the palace?”

Victoria shrugged. “Why not?”

“Emma Portman’s diary says she went into labor the night before. The ladies were summoned. She was surprised to see Melbourne.”

“You think he was already there?”

“But she thought he arrived after her.”

“So he just came?”

“Or he had to see her.” He read again. “She has a full head of black hair, big blue eyes like her mother, ten fingers and ten toes...”

“He counted,” remarked Victoria.

“And a strong set of lungs like her mother... She is undoubtedly the most beautiful sight I have seen...”

Victoria smiled. “He loved her so much in an instant.”

“That’s how it goes,” said Will.

“Really?”
He looked up at her. “Yeah.”

“Love at first sight, then?”

“Well, it starts like that. Then you fall in love with them their little idiosyncrasies…”

“Like what?”

“Well, uh, Allison, when she was with us... When she started finger foods, she held her hand out to offer me whatever she was eating. Her stuffed animals she used to line them up before she went to bed.”

“That’s sweet.”

“She was very sweet.” He looked back down at Melbourne’s journal.

“Will,” Victoria began, “you wouldn’t...”

“Wouldn’t what?,” he asked lost in thought.

The door opened. Harry entered.

“So sorry.”

“Yeah, you got called away mysteriously.”

“Yes.”

They looked up expectantly. Harry smiled.

“It seems the Princess Royal is in labor.”

“Do we need to leave?,” asked Will.

“No, of course not. I just won’t be able to help as much as I had planned today. The family won’t be here, of course, but we get well wishers and so forth. Everything must be documented. Please just ring down if you need something.”

“We will,” said Victoria.

“There will probably be champagne later. I’ll come fetch you.”

“Nicking it from the boss?,” asked Victoria.

“No. Royal tradition. Lord Melbourne gave wine to the servants here to wet Princess Margaret’s head. The Buckingham Palace servants heard and were quite cross and it eventually became that all the servants at all the residences got a glass of something when a new royal was born.”

“Well, thank you, Lord M,” said Victoria.

“Quite.”

This was agony.
Victoria was on the other side of the door. She was giving birth to their child and he could not go in. As her husband, it would have been unusual, but he could have. So he was out here perking his ears as Dash did every time he heard a cry or scream.

“You seem nervous, Melbourne.”

The sun was beginning to rise, he and Graham were still out here. Graham, of course, to make certain no other baby was snuck in.

“No more nervous than anyone else, I suppose, Sir James.”

If Graham believed that excuse, he was not showing it. “I suppose.”

He took the snifter of brandy off the table, he had sworn each one would be his last. He needed to think. What if something terrible happened? What if the child died? What if the Queen died? He could not decide which was worse.

As he pondered this, a new guest joined their waiting.

“Your Majesty.”

Leopold waved his hand to stop the two rising. “Melbourne, have you been here all night?”

“It was quite accidental, Your Majesty.”

That was true enough.

He sat and sighed. “And no news?”

“None I am afraid, sir,” said Graham.

At Brocket Hall, Victoria and Will had taken a break, treated to tea and biscuits by the chef.

“Any biscuits at the exalted Windsor Castle?,” asked Victoria.

“No. Then again Windsor has a whole system in place, we have a room with a bunch of journals no one realizes exist...”

“He started a journal the day she was born, Will. That’s got to mean something.”

“So it does, but there are so many excuses we’ll be given for why he might have done that. Melbourne and Regina did share a very close relationship.”

They eventually made it around the back of the house.

“Melbourne’s glasshouse,” said Will.

“The christening gown.”

“What about it?”

“The lace... it’s an orchid pattern.”
More hours passed. Their standoff was an uneasy one. Leopold paced to and fro, but seemed to have genuine concern for his niece. Melbourne knew very well the King of Hanover was just here to lie in wait like a vulture. It made him want to lash out every time the man sighed or shifted in his seat. Graham busied himself with the papers in his box, hoping to stay out of the tension he found himself in. Melbourne cursed himself for not having brought something to do, but of course, he had been planning on shouting until senseless.

The doctor emerged from the room finally and Melbourne stood, the other three looked slow by comparison.

“Her Majesty has been delivered of a girl.”

He heard a tsk from Leopold, one he knew meant towards the child’s sex. He, of course, would have been hoping for his late nephew to have fathered a son. He knew the one from Hanover was because his niece had lived at all and now another girl stood between him and the British throne.

Not that he gave a damn what either of them thought.

“And she is well?,” asked Melbourne.

Sir James seemed surprised that it was Melbourne asking the questions. “Her Majesty is very well.”

That was very good news. “My apologies. I meant the princess.”

He felt another bristle from Hanover.

“Yes, the princess appears to be in exceptionally good health.”

“Excellent news,” said Leopold.

A girl. A daughter. Healthy. He was a father once more. He sat before Hanover took his leave. Graham was packing up.

“You seem very... relieved, Melbourne,” said Graham.

“The Queen is alive and well along with the new heiress to the throne. I think you’ll find the whole country is relieved.”

Graham looked at him strangely. It was only then he realized he had been smiling. How long had it been? At least outside of Victoria’s arms?

“Melbourne?,” asked Graham.

He coughed. “You had better get to Sir Robert and give him the good news.”

It was a girl.

“Told you,” said Victoria as she and Will made their way to join Harry and the rest of the staff in the ballroom. It had been laid out with pink balloons and a banner. The chef had brought in a pink cake.

“You told me,” said Will.
“Victoria, Will,” said Harry giving them each a glass of champagne. “Would you like to see another tradition from Lord M?”

“Of course,” said Will.

“He’s been fanboysing all day,” said Victoria.

She picked up one of the empty bottles. “Note the year.”

“’983,” said Victoria. “The year the Princess Royal was born.”

“The late Prince of Wales made the purchase the year she was born to be served now as the Queen had when he was born as Victoria IV did when she was born- though I am told the Earl of Charlbury was the wine connoisseur as Victoria III did as Lord Melbourne bought the wine from the year of Victoria II’s birth to be served on the occasion of the birth of her first child."

“How very sentimental of him,” said Victoria.

“He didn’t think he would be there,” said Will. He looked at Victoria.

The butler of the house clinked his glass. They all raised theirs.

“To the Princess Royal and the new princess!”

They all repeated and took their drinks.

To his great frustration, Melbourne was the last one to be allowed inside. He watched as the Queen’s physicians wrote the birth announcement to placed on a golden easel at the entrance of the palace for all to see.

*Her Majesty the Queen has been safely delivered of a daughter this tenth day of May, 1841.*

*Both Her Majesty and her daughter are doing well.*

Melbourne knew his late mother had always had great ambitions for him, but for the first time in his life he thought he might have surpassed them.

Leopold had gone. The Duchess of Kent had seemed to stay for hours and Graham had seen the princess and was off to give Peel the news.

Melbourne entered the bedchamber just as Sir James was finishing up. Victoria held the newborn in her arms, though Lehzen and a nursemaid stood nearby.

“Lehzen, won’t you leave us?”

She looked at Melbourne as if something disreputable would happen between he and a woman who had just given birth hours ago.

No, the Baroness had missed her chance to stop something disreputable from happening quite some time ago.

Victoria laughed. “Oh, please, Lehzen, don’t be silly.”
The baroness left with the nursemaid. Victoria waited until the door shut.

“Oh, Lord M.”

“How could you do this to me?”

The words had escaped his mouth before he had time to think about them or put them respectfully.

Or had a chance to look at his daughter.

His daughter.

“I take it you read my letter then.”

He was too distracted then, by the squirming bundle in Victoria’s arms to answer. He knelt down at the side of the bed, pushing aside the white blanket, revealing a head of black hair. He tried to peel away the blanket as she cried and curled away. Fingers, toes, perfect.

“I don’t know what to call her,” Victoria said softly. “Mama and Stockmar want Alberta...”

Melbourne gave her a dark look.

“I was not actually going to call her that, Lord M.”

“Why would you not tell me?”

She shook her head. “You would have hated me.”

“Hated you? For this?”

“I don’t know what to do...” she whispered. “What can we do?”

She was near tears now.

“You ought not have taken this on alone.”

“What can we do?”

He took a breath. He had been thinking of nothing else.

“You have to finish your mourning for the prince.”

She grimaced. “I can’t bear to think of mourning...”

“But you understand.”

“Of course.”

“And then we will see what can be done...”

“Do you mean that?”

“I do not know how it can be managed, but-”

“You want to-” She could not even finish the thought.

Melbourne shook his head. “How could you think otherwise?”
Not thinking, he reached in and kissed her. The baby cooed. Eyes closed he kissed her on the forehead.

He smiled back up at Victoria. “Now, we must decide what to call her. Victoria—

“But then it looks as if I have chosen my name over Albert’s.” She paused. “What was Lady Melbourne called?”

“Elizabeth.”

“It is the name of a queen, but...” She paused. “I do not hate it but Sir John Conroy wanted it for my regnant name. Anne?”

He shook his head. “Too plain.”

“Mary?”

“Too cursed.” He sighed.

“Regina.”

Melbourne looked up. “Do you know someone called Regina?”

“No, I just quite like it, if I choose to name her after no one, I cannot be accused of forgetting Albert. Regina Mary Elizabeth, they are queens...”

“And Victoria.”

“But—”

“No one will ask for them all until the baptism.”

Will ran his hand over Melbourne’s desk in the library.

“Okay, Will,” said Victoria, “you’ve done that forty times already.”

“It’s Lord Melbourne’s desk.” He looked up at her. “When the Queen is in residence, she sits here.”

“I know. I was here when Harry pointed it out.”

She went back to the bookshelves, taking photos with her mobile.

“It would be great if we could find an old portrait of this room, get a sense of what it was like when Lord M and Victoria were here.” She smiled as she spotted a picture on the table of Victoria IV reading to her children by the fire. “I bet Lord M read to the children here.”

“He was devoted to them.”

She went back to the bookshelf and saw an odd display. A miniature of Lady Caroline Lamb and Augustus sitting next to Lady Caroline’s books.

“Glenarvon,” said Victoria.

“What?,” asked Will.
“This copy of Glenarvon, it looks ancient.”

“They’ve kept Glenarvon here?”

Victoria picked it up and a piece of paper fell from it onto the floor.

“Put it back,” said Will.

She sighed and put it back on the shelf. “You’re no fun.”

Victoria looked down at the paper on the floor and knelt to pick it up. The door opened and she stuffed it in her jacket pocket as Harry entered.

“I’m about to leave for the day.”

“Yes, this has been quite a day, thank you,” said Will.

“So it has.”

“I get in around eight tomorrow, are you staying in Hatfield?”

“Oh, yes,” said Victoria. “A lovely cottage I found on Airbnb. With a hot tub.”

Harry smiled. “You have always known how to have fun. Well, good night.”

“Good night.”

She left.

Will looked at Victoria. “Shall we call it a night? I am starving.”

“Suppose we ought to. Loads more to do tomorrow.”

They walked out to the car park which was now crowded. At the entrance of the house was a copy of the easel of the palace. Victoria took a picture with her mobile.

*Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal has been safely delivered of a daughter this twentieth day of May 2017.*

*Both Her Royal Highness and her daughter are doing well.*

---

**Brocket Hall, 1939**

“I don’t know why this should be a shock,” said Matthew.

“Adultery by the Queen of England is not a shock?”

“It wasn’t adultery, the Prince was dead. The Queen was bereaved, she obviously could not fight her real feelings for Melbourne anymore.”

“Matthew-”

“You look like him.”

“What?”
“Lord Melbourne. You have his eyes. So did your mother and your grandmother. Look at any portrait in this house.”

Victoria sighed. “I could do without this today.”

“Look at the bright side, all the ghastly Germans we met, you aren’t related to them.”

“You forget. Victoria and Albert were first cousins. I am still related to them.”

“Well, you’re less related than you were this morning...”

The door opened and a footman spoke.

“The Prime Minister is here, Your Majesty.”

“Thank you.”

He left and she stood.

“I haven’t even gotten to change,” she sighed.

“Would you like me to tell you to go easy on him or go hard?,” asked Matthew.

“We are going to war, I shall not make it easy for him.”

“William?”

Melbourne opened his eyes. He was back in his study, he had fallen asleep in his chair as soon as he put his dressing gown on over his shirt and trousers. Emily now stood over him.

“You stayed the whole night?,” she asked.

He nodded. “Until I saw them.”

Emily sat in the chair across from him.

“I might have stayed longer, but she was exhausted and the ghastly Stockmar came in, whisked the baby off.”

“I read the letter,” said Emily.

He grimaced. “Of course you did.”

“So...” She smiled. “What is she like?”

He smiled. “Small. A full head of hair, quite a set of lungs, beautiful fingers and toes.”

“Has a name been chosen?”

“Regina.”

Emily tilted her head. “Regina?”

“Yes, Regina.”
“So someday she will be Queen Queen?”

“Is that the most pressing issue?”

“Fine. She will choose a regnant name.”

“The Duchess wanted Alberta.”

“Oh, goodness, that is a name for a fat spinster.”

“I am worried about her.”

“Was she unwell?”

“No, she was quite well, it’s just Stockmar...” He sighed. “I do not like the man, I do not trust the man and he was Prince Albert’s man.”

“So you want to get rid of him.”

“I fear I must.”

Emily nodded. “Has the Queen selected a Lady of the Bedchamber to look after the princess?”

“No.”

“Then you must help her find someone.”

“And you know someone?,” asked Melbourne.

“I do and I do not think Sir Robert Peel can object in the slightest.” She smiled.

“You worry me with that smile.”

Victoria smiled at the TV in the corner of the Thai restaurant.

“Quite a day,” said Will. “First fellows at Brocket Hall on the day of the birth of the second in line to the throne.”

Victoria smiled and lifted the glass of pink champagne the enthusiastic owners were giving out for free.

“Shall we toast Victoria VII?”

“We don’t know her name yet.”

“Victoria is a great name.”

He smiled back and raised his glass. “So it is.”

“To the princess,” she said as they clinked glasses.

Will watched as she patted her jacket pocket.

“What are you doing?”
“Nothing, I just had a tenner in there.”
So, thanks again for the reads and comments. I really appreciate it. Please let me know what you think and happy reading!

Also very happy to indulge history nerd questions should the need arise...

---

*My dearest Lord M...*

The smoking gun. Victoria had to have read this a few dozen times since last night.

She did not know why she had picked up the paper when it fell on the floor and now did not know why she had not mentioned it to Will all night.

Well, she knew the latter.

"Victoria, are you alright?"

She stuffed the letter- which she had placed in a spare Ziploc- back into her toiletry bag.

“I’m fine,” she called.

“Could I come in?”

“Why?”

There was a pause. “I need to shave. Are you sure you’re alright?”

She opened the door.

“I’m fine.”

“You’ve just been in here a while.”

“I’m fine.” She paused. “Why are you up so early?”

“I got a call. BBC wants someone to comment on the history of royal births. I’m going to Skype before we go off to Brocket Hall again.”

“Oh.” She smiled. “Well, something new to fuel my handsome professor fantasies...”

“Fantasies? Strange, I thought I was quite real...” he smiled.

“So you are.”
“Majesty.”

Victoria looked up at Melbourne. The footman shut the door behind him. She did not look herself, pale and still in her dressing gown.

“Oh, Lord M,” she said flatly.

“Were we working today, ma’am?”

(Of course we were.”

Melbourne walked in and set down the dispatch box.

“Are you feeling unwell?”

“I am well.”

“You have not dressed.”

Victoria looked down. “No.”

He sat near her without invitation. “What is the matter?”

“Nothing. What could be the matter? The baby is fine. Surely that is all that matters...”

“It is very good to hear, but it is not the only thing that matters.”

“She does not need me.”

“Does not need you? She is but a month old. How could she not need you?”

“She has nursemaids and Stockmar and Mama and some other woman’s breast to suckle!”

“You said you found the task unpleasant.”

“Does she have to enjoy it so much?! She ought to want me!” She was folding in on herself.

“There is nothing stopping you.”

“My breasts ache and leak and-” She broke up in tears, her head falling to Melbourne’s chest.

Not knowing how to help and wondering how he would explain such a sight, he embraced her.

“It is alright, ma’am...” He tried to rub her back. “Everything will be quite fine, do not worry.”

“So, how did I look?”

Victoria turned to Will as they made the drive to Brocket Hall.

“What?”

“Well, if that’s your answer...”

“No, Will, I’m sorry, what did you say?”
“I was wondering if I had helped fuel any of your handsome professor fantasies.”

Victoria smiled. “You might have. Including one I’ve always had where I try to distract you while you’re on air.”

“Yes, you did that in a lecture hall once, please don’t do that again.”

“Why not?”

“I had to wait for everyone to leave so I could walk from behind the podium. I had undergraduates asking questions for half an hour.”

“Yeah, that didn’t go as planned,” frowned Victoria.

“You just seemed distracted last night and this morning. Is something the matter?”

“No.”

“You didn’t even bring up the hot tub. This is how you were when we saw your mum. She hasn’t rung, has she?”

“No.” She took a breath. “I was thinking today we should take more of a look at the Princess’ household, how the nursery was run, that sort of thing.”

“Well, Lehzen was not as involved as one would expect...”

“She had a whole palace to run and if Victoria didn’t object to Stockmar, what was she going to say? But Melbourne...”

“Melbourne could object.”

“Oh, dear,” said Emily upon her brother’s recounting of the day’s events over tea.

“Indeed.”

Emily sighed. “This is not uncommon, these mercurial moods after having a baby.”

“But she is a queen. She cannot have mercurial moods.”

“You fear a regency?”

“Of course.”

Emily sighed. “I suppose had he lived Prince Albert would have been in charge. A bit insulting.”

“How do you mean?”

“That a queen ordained by God should need a husband ordained by no one to manage things for her.”

“I feel deceitful.”

“About Emmie? Whatever for?”

“She is not herself. She would have given me the Isle of Wight if I asked for it.”
“When she is herself, she will see you are quite sensible.” She took another sip of tea. “Besides, she is your child as well.”

“Lady Ashley,” the footman announced.

Emily Ashley-Cooper, Melbourne’s eldest niece, entered.

“Uncle William,” said Emmie. “Mama did not say you would be here!”

“So I am,” he said kissing her on the cheek.

“We see less of you in your supposed retirement than we did when you were Prime Minister. I think the Queen takes advantage of you,” said Emmie.

Emily coughed to keep from spitting out her tea.

Emmie turned. “Are you alright, Mama?”

“Quite well, dear.”

“It is for the Queen I wished to speak to you,” said Melbourne, giving Emmie a letter.

Emmie sat, reading the letter, pondering it.

“Why should Her Majesty offer me a place at court?”

“Why not?,” asked Emily. “You are a respectable lady, your husband is a prominent Tory.”

Emmie looked at Melbourne. “Uncle?”

“Yes, darling?”

“Why should the Queen want me in charge of the royal nursery? Does the position not usually go to an older matron of higher rank?”

“You are older than the Queen and you have six children.”

“That’s just it. I have six children, I cannot justify abandoning them to look after someone else’s.”

“Emmie, it is not someone else’s, it is your Queen’s. Harriet Sutherland and Emma Portman both have children. As does Lady Anglesy and every other lady at court. They do not whinge about it,” said Emily.

“And a house to run. Lionel is not yet three!”

“It is not forever,” said Melbourne.

“Uncle, I know you do not care for my husband, but-”

“No, my darling, that hasn’t anything to do with this-”

“But I would hate to think you could not trust me. If I thought you were merely asking me to serve my queen, I could bear that, but I feel as if you are asking something more. May I please know?”

“It would compromise you and I wouldn’t wish to make you uncomfortable-”

“Uncle, please.”
Melbourne took a moment, choosing his next words.

“You could not tell Anthony.”

She scoffed. “I do not tell my husband everything.”

“If he were to ask you if what I am about to tell you is true, I would need you to lie to him.”

“Lie?”

“And this is why I cannot tell you-”

“The new princess is your cousin,” Emily interjected.

Emmie tried to make sense of that.

“Emily!,” shouted Melbourne.

“But...” She paused. “How can that be? Uncle?”

“The Queen and I...”

She sighed. “I did not think her so happy with the Prince...”

“He was already gone.” Melbourne shrugged. “If that helps. I am sorry to disappoint you.”

“Oh, Uncle, no.” She paused. “But why me?”

“There is a man in the Queen’s household, Dr. von Stockmar, he worked for Prince Albert. He is in charge of the nursery at the moment and I am afraid of what he might do.”

“Surely the Queen-”

“She is a young mother and she is afraid. She has no example to follow from her mother. I have tried to help-”

“But your position is precarious.”

“I need someone there while I work on how to get rid of the man.”

“Well, you know I shall have to ask Anthony..."

Melbourne sighed. :Of course you shall.”

“But you ought to be here.”

Emmie held her tongue. She and Anthony were dining with his parents as they had been since staying at their London house. Lord Shaftesbury eyed her.

“Yes, but Uncle Melbourne thinks I ought to,” she said hoping that would settle it.

“Uncle Melbourne does not have six children!”

“No, of course not, he has no children,” said Emmie. “Not that it was kind of you to mention.”
Anthony sighed.

“Tell me, Emily,” said Shaftesbury, “why is Melbourne so concerned?”

She blanked.

“Now, Emily, I am on the Privy Council.”

“Yes, sir. I believe my uncle is concerned about the man the dear late Prince enlisted to raise the princess, Dr. von Stockmar.”

“Concerned in what way?”

“I believe he fears he is not a kind man. As the Queen’s friend, he is of course anxious for her and you know what affection my uncle has for children. You have often witnessed it for yourself.”

“And he knows you to be a kind woman...”

“I should hope so.”

Shaftesbury looked to Anthony. “This could be an excellent opportunity for you, it should not be passed by. Mistress of the Bedchamber for the heiress to the throne.”

Anthony tried to object. “But Emily-”

“Melbourne is doing you a favor, you should not throw it back at him.”

“Melbourne is out of politics, Father-”

“He has the ear of Her Majesty.”

“But surely Her Majesty will remarry and his influence will again wane.”

“I would not count on it.”

Emmie looked up. That did surprise her. “How do you mean, sir?”

“Well, it was Peel’s intent that his return would be a temporary arrangement, it hardly seems so temporary now. Sir James Graham said Melbourne was at the palace for the birth of the princess.”

“No surprise,” said Lady Shaftesbury.

“I am not casting aspersions against your uncle or the Queen, Emily,” said Shaftesbury. “Melbourne’s affairs with women have always been more emotional than carnal in nature. Take Caroline Norton.”

“Really, sir-” said Anthony.

“Oh, please stop with your superiority, it is most unpleasant.” Shaftesbury looked at Emmie. “Take the appointment at your earliest convenience.”

“So, I had a thought last night,” said Will once they had settled in Brocket Hall’s attic, let loose again by Harry.
“About what?,” Victoria responded suddenly.

“Don’t be so alarmed. I was just thinking about Lady Shaftesbury, well, she was Lady Ashley then...”

“Melbourne’s niece?”

“She was appointed to the Princess’ household. It stands to reason that he had something to do with it.”

“Suppose so,” said Victoria. “Lady Jocelyn was her trainbearer at the coronation and a bridesmaid at the wedding to Albert...”

“It would go well in the book anyway, even without a smoking gun, him bringing in his own niece to supervise Princess Regina’s nursery.”

“Right, so we should look for his journals from the time she was appointed.”

“Precisely. Then there is the whole thing where the Duchess of Kent made an ass of herself.”

Victoria snorted. “Wouldn’t want to leave that out.”

"I don't know all that much about Lady Ashley, though there is a great deal on her husband..."
her particular inclinations.”

“Oh.”

They stood awkwardly for a moment.

“Perhaps we might begin by Her Majesty showing me to the Princess’ nursery?”

They made their way down the hall. Emmie had only ever observed the Queen from a distance but could tell that she was not quite herself.

They entered the nursery and it was a stark, bare thing. The Duchess of Kent was there along with a man Emmie presumed was Stockmar. The immediate feeling of discomfort she had gave him away.

“Your Majesty.”

Stockmar bowed. The Duchess tilted her head, eyeing Emmie.

“Who is this, Drina?”

“Lady Emily Ashley. I have just made her Mistress of the Bedchamber for the Princess.”

Stockmar frowned. “Surely that is not necessary-”

“No, I am afraid it is customary and an Englishwoman ought to be in charge of an English princess. Lady Ashley is the wife of Lord Ashley, the daughter-in-law of Lord Shaftesbury. She is an experienced mother.” Emmie admired the way she seemed to summon her composure.

“But not to a princess.”

At that she backed down. Emmie decided to lend her voice to the Queen.

“No, Duchess, of course Her Majesty is Princess Regina’s mother, but I have six of my own and I am happy to serve my queen as she would wish.”

“How do you find the nursery, Lady Ashley?,” asked Victoria.

She felt Stockmar and the Duchess boring holes into her. They would not make this easy.

“May I speak freely, ma’am?”

“Of course you must.”

“It is a bit cold to me. Where are the decorations?”

“Too much distraction,” said Stockmar.

“But she has nothing to look at and I fear that cot is too large.” It did remind her of one of the cages at the Zoological Society. No wonder her uncle was worried.

“You really think so?,” asked Victoria.

“I have a bassinet that is in storage in my London house. I would be happy to send my carriage for it this instant.”

“The Queen does not need handouts,” scoffed the Duchess.
“No, of course not, I only mentioned it because the Princess could be in it quickly.” She turned to Victoria. “It may not be to your tastes, ma’am. You might wish to commission something else.”

Emmie made her way from the palace to Dover House. She knew she would not be able to later, certain that the children would be baying for attention. Of course her husband would be chief among them and her father-in-law would want every last detail.

“Lady Ashley, sir.”

Melbourne put down his book and stood as his niece entered.

“Uncle.”

“Emmie.” He kissed her on the cheek. He motioned for her to sit.

“How do you get on in here? How do you find your things?”

“Never mind me. How was your afternoon?”

She sighed. “I will admit I had thought you were exaggerating about Dr. von Stockmar.”

“But?”

“That terrible nursery. The poor Queen has absolutely no good advice from her own mother. Lord knows Mama and I have our own struggles, but she has never been cold or cruel and she has always done the best for my children.”

“You see the nature of the problem.”

“I did manage to get her out of that terrible cot. It looked like a jail cell.”

“You must still be very disappointed in me.”

“Oh, Uncle,” sighed Emmie. “Never.”

Victoria looked up at Will. “No archive entries for Lady Shaftesbury, then Ashley, the artist previously known as Emily Cowper. I know I’ve got Regina’s diary somewhere, she mentions her.”

“Doubtful she remembers much of her from when she was young...”

She shook her head. “I hate this part. Loads of stuff on her husband, nothing on her. We know every last thing about the seventh Earl Shaftesbury, but not his wife. Then you know when they go to make the film about him she’s just going to sit there and ask why he isn’t home more because apparently that’s all women ever do.”

“Excellent point. I hope you bring this up to your filmmakers.”

“Oh, I never knew this...”

“Knew what?”

“The Queen went to Lady Ashley’s eldest son’s birthday party.” She looked up. "Which I found in
an article on the seventh earl, not his wife."

“Sounds strange.”

“And the Duchess. It’s where she made an ass of herself.”

“Seems an odd detail to leave out.”

“Well, back to your point, we have Lord Shaftesbury’s recollections on it, not Emily Ashley’s. He remembers an insult to him by way of his daughter-in-law.”

“Men...” Victoria snorted.

“Melbourne’s got a letter in here...” He paused. “From the Queen.”

“What?!”

He frowned at her. “Don’t get too excited. It’s just the Queen asking him to come round after she got out of church, but it is worth looking at. Didn’t realize Melbourne was the type to leave things in books...”

“Who knew?,” she whispered.

Emmie was getting used to the time at the palace and balancing her home with helping out here. The princess was family. She idly went through the guest list for little Anthony’s birthday party the next week, wondering if it would be appropriate to invite the Queen. She supposed the Queen had better things to do than go to a ten year old’s birthday, but thought she might benefit from being around other mothers and children. Her father-in-law would be beside himself and that was hard to pull off.

She walked into the nursery and the nursemaid curtsied at her.

“How did the princess sleep?”

“Still restless, milady.”

“Well, that cannot be, Princess,” said Emmie looking in the bassinet, taking her cousin’s hand. “You must learn to sleep at night.”

“I fear Dr. von Stockmar is still trying to enforce his schedule. That combined with her finicky feeding...”

“What are these schedules? Babies do not have schedules.” She sighed. She knew the servants were in a terrible position. “Alright, from now on, there are no more schedules by my authority. If Dr. von Stockmar would like to make schedules, then he may be appointed Mistress of the Bedchamber and you may tell him so.”

“Yes, milady.”

Emmie nodded. It was then out of the corner of her eye she saw something that quite frightened her in the form of an oil painting.

“Good Lord!” She took a breath. “Forgive me, Miss McDougal, but what is that?”
The thing took up half the wall and appeared to be the late Prince Consort elevated to angel or sainthood or something. Whatever it was, it was ghastly. No wonder the princess had not slept.

“The Duchess of Kent saw to its installation just after you left yesterday.”

“Well, it must go,” she said, picking up the princess from the bassinet.

“Milady?”

“When I said decoration, I meant flowers or a wallpaper or something, not that. Has the Queen seen it?”

“She has not been in.”

“It must go. Find some footmen at once.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

A few minutes later the footmen had been summoned.

A few minutes after that she found the Duchess.

“Duchess,” she said curtsying with her cousin in her arms.

“You had the painting removed.”

“Yes, Duchess.”

“Why?”

“Because it was frightful.”

The Duchess’ eyes blew wide. “You dare interfere with a child’s memory of her father?”

Emmie held her tongue.

“I suspect the Queen will determine the Princess’ memory of her father. At the moment, I am responsible for Princess Regina’s welfare and that includes sparing her from a painting that looks like a ghoul coming out of her wall.”

“Well, we shall see.”

“Yes, I suppose we shall, ma’am.”

“A full write-up,” said Will.

He held out Melbourne’s journal for Victoria.

“This isn’t like him.”

“Well, the Duchess did not usually make an ass of herself so publicly. It was a rare opportunity.”

Victoria snorted. “I sympathize.”

“She made a mistake in angering Shaftesbury. He became essential later in gaining the support of the
“I don’t see why you had to invite her,” said Ashley.

It was the day of the party. Things were already well in hand at Shaftesbury House except that Lord Ashley did not approve of inviting the Queen.

“I thought it would do her good. You have no idea what those first weeks with an infant are like when you are not feeling yourself.”

“It is just that you seem to have taken a peculiar interest in your new duties.”

She straightened up. “Oh? So it is wrong that I should want to discharge my duty to my queen well?”

“They are here,” said Shaftesbury.

“So the circus begins,” said Ashley.

They walked outside to greet the Queen. Emmie was surprised to see the Duchess had joined her.

“Lord M,” said Victoria.

He bowed his head as he balanced a girl on his hip. “Majesty.”

“Who is this?”

“Ah, ma’am, may I introduce Lady Ashley’s daughter? The Honorable Victoria Ashley-Cooper.”

Victoria smiled. “It is a pleasure, Miss Victoria.”

Melbourne looked at his grandniece. “Do you have any idea who this lady is?”

“No,” the younger Victoria admitted.

Victoria giggled. Melbourne sighed, placing the girl on the floor.

“Go play with your brothers.”

She scurried off.

“You see, Lord M, there are some places I can travel incognito.”

“Yes, I suppose as long as we hide you among three year olds. That is the wonderful thing about children. They do not care who you are.”

She tilted her head. “Lord M, what are you trying to tell me?”

“The princess will know you as her mother long before she knows you as her queen. Even when she does, she will always remember you as her mother first.”

“But you forget, Lord M, I only know how to be queen.”
Melbourne watched as she looked to her own mother who spoke with Shaftesbury.

“I do not know why she came. I hardly need a chaperone at a child’s birthday party. I hardly need a chaperone.”

“Then why did you not tell her that?”

“Ma’am, might we show you to the party?,” asked Emmie.

“Of course.”

They entered the ballroom which had been transformed for young Anthony’s party with tables set up for the children, a group of about thirty, their parents and nurses. The adults in the room stopped in their tracks when the Queen entered. The children paid no mind.

“Anthony,” Emmie hissed.

The boy stopped and his friends with him.

“Your Majesty, may I present my eldest son, Anthony?”

She gave him a severe look and he bowed his head. Victoria smiled.

“Charming,” said Victoria. “Master Anthony, would you show me the rest of your party? I am afraid I have not made their acquaintance.”

“Yes... ma’am,” he added after another look from his mother.

“There was a painting,” said Victoria. “One the Duchess commissioned...”

“Of her favorite child...” said Will. He looked at Victoria. “He uses the phrase. I suppose he got it from Victoria.”

“That’s a very couple thing to do,” said Victoria. “Adopt each other’s jokes and grudges and wishes...”

“We should find what it looked like. I doubt it’s here.”

“Yet they kept that picture of King George and his horse’s rear end...”

“Tradition, I suppose.”

“Will, about Melbourne keeping things in books-”

“Blimey, is that the time?” He stood.

“Where are you going?”

“I told you. More BBC. In light of the anniversary of the accession.”

“Oh. Right.”

“Harry’s letting me use her office, try and find that painting...”

He walked out.
“Yeah, Victoria,” she muttered to herself. “Just brilliant.”

It all seemed to be going well. The Queen and her uncle had left for the garden and she had managed to distract from that. Her mother had not yet arrived, but she was quite used to that along with all of London.

Then she found herself facing the Duchess.

“How dare you.”

Emmie stepped back. “Forgive me, Duchess, I do not know-”

“You dare pretend to be a friend to my daughter when I know the truth!”

“Forgive me, ma’am, what truth?”

“That you and Lord Melbourne are having an affair.”

She felt herself contort her face. “Ma’am, with all respect, what you are suggesting is not just a smear on my character but an unnatural crime!”

Shaftesbury stood. “Duchess, I suggest you retract your baseless and disgusting accusation at once!”

“She was seen going to Melbourne’s house alone.”

“I may visit my uncle any time I wish without you twisting it into something so repugnant! What a dark heart you must have, Duchess!”

“Your uncle?,” asked the Duchess.

“Yes, my uncle!”

“You dare accuse my daughter-in-law of such a crime?”

“Wait. You had me followed?,” spat Emmie.

It was then that Victoria and Melbourne entered.

“I did not know.”

“You did not know what, Mama?”

Shaftesbury turned to the Queen. “Forgive me, ma’am, but I must protest. The Duchess has made the most disgusting allegation against my daughter-in-law and Lord Melbourne-”

“Which I withdraw, Drina. You should have told me she was Melbourne’s niece-”

“Unforgiveable-”

“Lord Shaftesbury-” the Duchess began.

“Mama, I will see you in the other room if that is alright, Lord Shaftesbury.”

“Of course, ma’am.”
They walked away quickly. The Queen shut the door behind them in the drawing room.

“Lord and Lady Palmerston,” the footman announced.

They entered.

“So sorry-” began Emily. She looked at the assembled company. “Oh, dear, have Henry and I missed something?”

“Drina-”

Victoria spun around. “Am I to understand you accused Lord M of having an affair with his own niece?”

She was furious. The Duchess was placid.

“I did not know she was his niece. Did you know?”

“Oh, of course I did.”

“Why does Melbourne want to have his niece in your daughter’s household-”

“No, Mama. Do not try to put the blame on him when he has done nothing but try to help me. Any other mother would be grateful, but you just toss slander at him.”

“And I have not tried to help you?”

“You have tried to take my child from me.”

The Duchess shook her head. “But you have no experience-”

“How am I to get any if you do not let me? It is the same as Kensington all over again and I will not let it happen to Regina.”

“Was Kensington so terrible?”

Victoria shook her head. “That you must ask after all this time simply proves my point. Why do you suppose Feodora married a man she had only met twice?”

“Oh, that is my fault?”

“At least she could escape you. I have no hope of escape. Every time I find some happiness, you must try to take it from me.”

“I only want what is best for you.”

“You will apologize again to Lady Ashley and Lord Melbourne and Lord Shaftesbury, not only for this horrid accusation, but your thoughtlessness at a happy occasion. Then you will leave.”

“I am not to be commanded so.”

“I am your Queen. If you are not to be commanded so, there are remedies for that!”

The Duchess left. She walked past the other guests and went out the door.
Melbourne walked into the other room.

“Ma’am?”

He joined her on the sofa.

“I want to be a good mother, Lord M. Truly, I do.”

“I know that.”

Victoria shook her head. “But you see I have no idea how.”

Victoria looked at her iPad on the lawn by the glasshouse. She had taken a seat there for a break while Will did another quick Skype interviews Harry had lent her office for.

“Well, of course it’s the one-hundred and eightieth anniversary of Queen Victoria I’s accession to the throne and I doubt the palace will let it go unremarked that we now have the potential seventh Victoria to rule born, just a few weeks ahead of that date.”

“Oh, sorry, Professor, we’re getting a live feed now from St. Mary’s Hospital where it appears that the Princess Royal is coming out…”

Victoria watched the royal Victoria exit the hospital with her husband. She held the new princess in her arms, a pink bundle.

She soon realized Will had joined her.

“What-” She looked down at the iPad. “So much buffering. Someone should talk to Lord M about his wifi.”

“I doubt he’s worried,” Will said sitting on the grass next to her.

“I wonder if the tree from the watercolor is still here. We should try and find it.”

He motioned at the iPad. “Did you find it?”

“Oh, yes, I think I found the ghastly thing…” She pulled up an oil painting of Prince Albert looking like some sort of gothic saint-angel-chimera.

“God, I do hope the Princess recovered.”

“Poor thing was probably still having nightmares about it years later. Do you suppose Emily knew? Emily Ashley-Cooper? That could be why she wanted it out of there.”

“Well, whatever the reason, we can’t dismiss the idea they were actively trying to erase Albert’s memory… then again, this painting is terrible.”

“There are letters to the Duke where the Duchess laments that Albert isn’t there because he could have parented so much better than Victoria…”

“Well, she was always in fine form when it came to her daughter.”

“Couldn’t have helped the feeling that she didn’t know what she was doing…”
Will scoffed. “No one knows what they’re doing.”

“I bet you knew what you were doing.”

“The hell I did.”

She looked at him. “What?”

“Carrie and I planned both of our children, I took classes, I read books ad I was still unprepared for everything. I didn’t know Gussie, I didn’t know Allison. They surprised me. No matter what you do, you’re still going in blind.”

“Will...”

“Hmm?”

“Do you remember the bet we made at Windsor? About the smoking gun?”

“We didn’t name terms. We said the winner would choose terms.”

“Yeah, about that...”

“What about it?”

“I’m the winner.”

Victoria could not sleep. She padded through the halls with Dash following and heard crying from the nursery.

“Your Majesty.” The nurse bowed her head.

She saw the wet nurse trying to get Regina to latch on, but she just kept turning her head and crying. Victoria approached.

“I am sorry, ma’am, but she has been having trouble eating,” said the nurse.

“Trouble eating? Why was I not told?,” asked Victoria.

“We have tried goat’s milk and sheep’s milk and of course, the breast-”

The wet nurse looked shocked as Victoria took away the baby.

“Come now, Regina, what is this noise?,” she asked softly.

The nursemaid and wet nurse looked mortified as Regina began mouthing at her mother’s breast.

“I can take her, ma’am-” said the wet nurse.

“But she did not want you,” said Victoria.

Victoria looked down at Regina. So trusting and so wanting. She wondered if she had ever looked upon her mother like this and been rejected.
“No,” Victoria said to no one in particular. She walked and sat in the chair the wet nurse had been using, pushing aside her dressing gown and unbuttoning her night gown. She kept looking at Regina. She had tried before and did not think she had succeeded as Regina was soon swooped away. “Is there much to it?”

“No, ma’am, if you’ll just...” The wet nurse seemed unsure about how to best guide a royal breast.

Victoria helped Regina shift and she latched on immediately, her cheeks in a state of furious work, her eyes pure contentment.

“There we are...” she cooed. She looked up. “In future, if the Princess will not take her nurse’s breast, I prefer she take mine before goat’s milk or whatever else...”

“Yes, ma’am...” The nurse paused. “It’s just Dr. von Stockmar said you were not to be disturbed-”

“Is he your queen?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Good. I was beginning to wonder if anybody remembered.”

Melbourne awoke with the curtains being opened and a letter from the Queen on a tray.

“When did this come?,’” he asked his valet.

“It arrived from the palace this morning. The messenger said it was not urgent.”

Melbourne sat up and opened it.

My dearest Lord M,

Last night, I went to the nursery to find Regina crying and I found myself nursing her with my own breast. I was right, it was disgusting, yet I find myself waiting to be at her service again.

I know you will be sleeping late this morning, but I bid you come join us at your earliest convenience as we shall return from church by eleven.

She had not signed her name. She did not need to.

Melbourne looked up at his valet.

“I shall be going to the palace.”

“Very good, milord.”

Melbourne arrived at the palace to see Stockmar on his way up the stairs.
“Lord Melbourne.”

“Dr. von Stockmar.”

“We do not usually see you at the palace on Sundays. Nor do we see you at church...”

“The Queen invited me and I am glad of the opportunity to speak with you, Doctor.”

“Really?”

“You must have heard of the incident at Lord Shaftesbury’s home-”

“The Duchess-”

“Someone sought to discredit me in the Queen’s eyes and no one has ever attempted it because it is absurd. That is until now.” He tilted his head. “You are here now and I think you did not know Lady Ashley was my niece...”

“Is there an accusation, Lord Melbourne?”

“No, only this, I serve the Queen and I serve her heiress. I will continue to do so as long as I have breath. You serve a man who is not here.”

“Lord M?”

They looked to see Victoria hurrying down the hall.

“I thought I heard you.” She smiled. “I did not think you would be so soon.”

“Your Majesty wished it.”

“I am trying to sketch the princess in the drawing room. Perhaps you might come distract her for me.”

“I would be delighted, ma’am.”

“Majesty, I do not think that is wise to take the princess out of her surroundings-”

“I suppose I shall risk it, then. Come along, Lord M.”
All in all, Victoria was finding herself quite proud of Regina.

She admitted she had not cared much for babies before. They did seem a little frog like sometimes, but Regina was taking on quite a pleasant look. She thought her the prettiest baby she had ever seen, not to mention she had produced an heiress. Something that could not always be said in the House of Hanover.

Her people were pleased. As she understood it, there was a great deal of popular feeling for Regina.

Which all paled in comparison to the look of pleasure on her Lord M’s face when he beheld her.

Victoria sat with Regina in her lap. The baby gurgled and made sounds every second that caught her attention and made her turn her head.

Which was the problem as every time the painter tsked.

“Lord M...”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Can you provide no assistance to us? This is our first official portrait, I do so want it to come out well...”

“How could it not?”

“You are so good at distracting her, Lord M.”

“I think you’ll find you are providing a far more interesting distraction to her than I could...”

“What do you mean?”

“The crown, ma’am, she seems quite taken with it.”

Victoria looked down to the tsk of the painter. Regina was gazing up, reaching almost.

“She has never seen a crown, I suppose...” said Victoria.

“No.”

“Let alone one she might wear one day...” she mused.
“I doubt she thinks upon that, I suspect she thinks it sparkles and is pleasing...”

She smiled. “You are so clever with her, Lord M.”

He had been silent.

For far too long.

“Will?”

He picked up the letter again and put it down. This had been the process for the past hour as they sat at the breakfast table at the cottage.

“Will? I mean, it is the smoking gun.”

“Which you stole...” he said slowly.

“It fell out of Glenarvon.”

“And you took it.”

She shook her head. “I didn’t think.”

“I should hope not since you nicked a document with the potential to change the entire study of British history since 1840...”

“I’m sorry, I just-” She paused. “It is the smoking gun.”

“Which you have broken the chain of custody on!” He sighed. “It needs to be verified, Victoria’s handwriting will have to be confirmed, someone will have to believe that it went unnoticed for almost a hundred and eighty years...”

Victoria looked down at the table. “Sorry.”

Will sighed, running his hand through his hair. “I just don’t understand why you did it...”

“I said I wasn’t thinking.”

“Well, why did you keep it the whole night without telling me? I don’t believe you didn’t read it all that time.”

She did not have an answer for that.

Not one she was willing to say anyway.

Will picked it up again.

“We shall have to sneak it back in,” he said.

“Sneak it back in?”

“If Melbourne kept things in books, we can put this one back in a journal upstairs and just tell Harry we found it there. She’ll start the process of authenticating it and we are no worse off than we started.”
“But why Glenarvon-”

“Glenarvon puts you in jail. I too wonder at the man’s reasoning, but not enough to...” He shook his head. “We’ll put it back in the morning.”

“Will, I want a baby.”

The Queen’s ladies oohed and aahed as Jenkins held out the gown Regina would wear at the baptism.

“So? What do you think?,” Victoria asked the ladies.

“Such fine lace,” said Harriet.

“It is gorgeous,” said Emma.

“The princess will look darling in it, ma’am,” said Emmie.

Victoria held it, the skirt of it went to the floor.

“I sketched it myself,” said Victoria. She looked over to Regina in her bassinet. “And all eyes shall be on you as it ought to be.”

“Have you decided what to wear, ma’am?,” asked Harriet.

“Oh, the most delightful dove grey silk. I can’t wait to show you, but first I think we shall see how Regina looks. Jenkins, will you be so kind?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Emmie took the task of directing the nurse and Jenkins.

“And I commissioned a font for the baptism. It will look most splendid.”

“I am certain it will, ma’am,” said Emma.

The nurse passed the dressed infant to Victoria.

“There we are, Regina. Will we not be splendid?”

Will was not so sure how long ago Victoria had mentioned the word baby, but he was certain it had been ages.

Yes, they had been trying to save her from prison and then “baby.”

“I’m serious, Will.”

“I’m sorry, we were just talking about keeping you out of prison and now you want a baby.”

“I’ve wanted a baby.”

“Funny. You didn’t mention it.”
“I’m mentioning it now.”

“Is this really the appropriate moment?”

“I was waiting.”

“To commit a felony?”

“No, to find the smoking gun.” He looked at her strangely. She continued. “Because we made the bet. Winner chooses the terms-”

“A baby is not a condition of a bet!”

“I wasn’t making the baby a condition of a bet! I was going to use winning the bet just to discuss it which we are!”

“Oh? Is that what we’re doing?”

“Yes! We are!”

“Just right now, you want to hash it out?”

“Yes!”

“Fine! You said you didn’t want children.”

“That was when we met! I also had ombre hair! Don’t see that anymore, do you?”

“When we were at your mother’s you said you didn’t care about that.”

“No, I said I didn’t care about getting married which I don’t.”

“She was on you about it-”

“Well, what I’m going to let her know? I’d rather not tell her until the baby is at least three if that’s alright with you.”

“You see, I don’t think you’ve thought this through-”

“Right, because I’m too immature?”

Will knew there were certain keywords to stay away from in any relationship. Immature was definitely one to stay away with in his and Victoria’s.

“No-”

“Or maybe you’re just afraid of not having a sex doll who can spout history when needed.”

“I would never bloody say anything of the kind!”

“It’s what everyone thinks, isn’t it? That I’m just some piece of ass you happened upon? I don’t get to share anything with you, nothing important.”

“How the hell can you say we share nothing important?”

She stood up. “Never mind.”
“No, not never mind-”

“No, never mind!” She stalked off.

He jumped up after her.

“Victoria, you cannot say you want a baby and then say never mind!”

He followed her up the stairs and she spun around on the landing.

“Your kids are what’s important!”

He did not answer.

“I’m not saying that to be a jealous bitch who thinks she should come first. It just is. It’s how it should be and I never even knew that until I fell in love with you. I just want that! If I could have had that with your kids, I don’t even think I would miss it, but I can’t and it’s all I think about.” She paused. “And this isn’t one of those ultimatum things because I hate when women do that and there’s no point because you’re it for me, Will. You’re it.”

She took a breath. “If it’s okay by you, I’m going to sleep in one of the other rooms. I just...”

“Victoria-”

“Good night.”

She shut the door on him.

“Why is she in here?”

Victoria turned to see her mother had entered the room. She had brought Regina in the drawing room to await Lord M’s arrival. Their private meetings were an opportunity for him to see her.

“Do you not meet with Melbourne now?”

Victoria picked up Regina and held her. “Lord M does not mind.”

“You should not let him spend so much time with her.”

“Did you get my note?”

“Yes, I know you could not make the long journey to the other wing of the palace.”

“If you do not wish to be one of her godmothers, you are under no obligation to accept.”

“And who will hold her? You will not even let me be in the nursery.”

“As I said, you are under no obligation to accept. You can be in the nursery, but you cannot dictate it as I have also said.”

“I saw her coat of arms.”

“And what of it?”
“There is no shield of Coburg.”

No, she had not put a shield of Coburg on the coat of arms. She could not place one from Lord M’s family for obvious reasons, but she found she could not place one from Albert’s. Regina would be using that seal one day in her own name and she could not let it be a lie.

“She is a princess of England, not of Coburg.”

There was a knock at the door. “Lord Melbourne.”

He bowed his head. “Your Majesty. Your Royal Highness.”

“The Duchess was just leaving us,” said Victoria.

The Duchess left in a huff. After the door was safely shut, Melbourne turned to Victoria.

“You asked her, I take it.”

“Yes, for all the goodwill it got me...”

Melbourne walked closer and held his hands out. Victoria smiled as she handed the baby to him. She watched as he kissed her on the forehead and began rocking her.

“I think she is never as happy as when she is with you, Lord M.”

“The feeling is mutual,” he said wryly.

“Her gown arrived for the christening, I am very pleased with it. She will look splendid.”

“As she ought to.”

“And do you like her title? The Princess Royal? I wanted her to have something special.”

“If it pleases you, ma’am.”

“But I want to please you, Lord M.”

He walked towards her. “I am very pleased with what I find before me.”

_________

“Mum. Mum!”

Emily Temple awoke.

“Good God, Frances, what is it?”

Henry rolled over. “Someone had better be dead.”

Frances handed Emily her mobile.

“Uncle Will’s been ringing forever.”

Emily sat up. “What’s happening? Did he say?”

“How do I know? Seriously, who leaves their mobile in the sitting room?”
“Normal people before we got these things.”

Frances groaned and walked away. Emily sat up, mobile to her ear.

“Will, darling, what is it?”

“My life has fallen apart in the last twenty-four hours.”


“Someone had better be dead,” said Henry.

Emily slapped her husband on the back of the head and got up. She walked into the bathroom and sat on the edge of the tub.

“Alright, Will, start from the beginning.”

“Queen Victoria shagged Lord Melbourne.”

Emily frowned. “Well, I don’t see how that’s relevant.”

“After Albert was buried, went into his room, shagged him, scared Sir Robert Peel—”

“I am not following you at all. I don’t even know who Sir Robert Peel is.”

“Wrote about it, apparently he fathered Victoria II.”

“So, you’re upset at your idol?”

“No, Victoria had this theory—”

“Yours or the one who shagged Melbourne?”

“Mine. She knew it all along. And now she wants a baby.”

“Will, it may be late or early, but I’m failing to see how these two are related.”

“You think I know? She said she didn’t want children.”

“When you met, she also wore glitter pumps then. You can hardly hold her to statements she made five years ago. Is this why your life is falling apart? Has she given you an ultimatum?”

“No, she said she wasn’t.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“She wants a baby.”

“And you don’t?”

He was silent.

“So, that’s what I thought,” said Emily. “I’m going back to bed. You work on getting your head out of your arse.”

“Oh, Emily...”
“Yes?”

“Don’t tell anyone about Lord M fathering Victoria II.”

“Yes, Will, because what I was going to do was go wake up Frances and have her Snapchat or Instagram or something that a man who has been dead for two hundred years fathered a woman who’s been dead a hundred years.”

“Your maths are appalling.”

“Good night.”

Melbourne looked at his pocket watch and back up at his sister. The guests were gathering in the throne room for the baptism.

“Are you actually on time?”

“I could hardly be late, could I?”

“I was unaware you knew how to be on time.”

“I had my lady’s maid wake me up at five. There. Are you satisfied?”

He looked down at his brother-in-law talking with Peel.

“And Palmerston?”

“That was harder. I almost came without him.” She looked down. “Prince Ernst is here.”

“Yes, he arrived with the King of Belgium.”

“And he is speaking to Dr. von Stockmar.”

“So he is.” Melbourne sighed and turned to whisper to his sister. “I do think I want rid of that man more than I have ever wanted to get rid of anyone in my life.”

“I thought Emmie had taken control.”

“She has, but he questions everything and she caught him trying to sneak a Latin tutor in the nursery.”

“Perhaps you could arrange some of the Household Cavalry to guard the room.”

“We ought to take our places.”

The rest of the room had the same idea. The Queen soon entered, carrying the Princess down the throne room. Melbourne smiled until he realized Wellington was in the procession of godparents.

“What’s happening?,” he whispered. “She did not mention Wellington. Emmie.”

His niece looked back at him strangely.

“He is proxy for the Duke of Saxe-Coburg.”

“William-” Emily whispered.
“No, I am fine.”

“Victoria, are you listening?,” asked Will.

Harry had just left, saying she had to take a call in her office. Will had sprung into action getting the letter out of his bag, then sliding it out of the Ziploc and finding one of Melbourne’s journals to slide it in. He had done quite a write-up of the assassination attempt, it might as well go in there.

“Victoria?”

“Yeah, yeah, stick it wherever.”

He put the journal back on the shelf.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking at dogs.”

“You’re looking at dogs?” He walked back over to their work table. “I’m trying to save you from Her Majesty’s prison and you’re looking at dogs.”

“I won’t bother you with it, Will. I’m sure it won’t inconvenience you. I’ve already ordered a book on crate training.”

“It’s not about inconveniencing me, Victoria-”

“No, I’m sure I’ll get over it.”

“Would you please deal with the matter at hand?”

Harry came back in.

“What did I miss?,” Harry asked.

“I think we have plenty on the christening,” said Will. “I was just going to look up the volumes from the assassination attempt. It would be excellent to have another primary source, especially from such a unique perspective. When was that again?”

“God, Will, it was December of 1841, I thought everyone knew that,” Victoria snapped.

Harry looked taken aback at her.

“Right.”

Will walked to the shelf picking up the volume, careful to let the pages hang loosely.

The letter fell to the ground.

“Oh, terribly sorry,” he said. He knelt down to pick it up. “These old volumes, they-”

Harry looked at it. “That did not fall from the book itself?”

“No, it’s a letter... from the Queen.”
“Lady Palmerston.”

Emily curtsied. “Your Majesty.”

She sighed, looking around anxiously. “Where is Lord Melbourne? He did not leave, did he?”

“No, I believe he needed some air, ma’am.”

“Lady Palmerston,” said Wellington.

Emily struggled to be civil. “Your Grace.”

The Duke left. Victoria turned back to Emily.

“Do you know the Duke of Wellington?”

“Of course. How could I not?”

“But you do not like him.”

“Well, he has done nothing to me, ma’am.”

“But still you do not like him.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You must know of my late sister-in-law, Lady Caroline?”

“I do.”

“You see, Lady Caroline went to Brussels to nurse her brother during the war with Napoleon Bonaparte.”

“Did he do something to Lady Caroline?”

“There was nothing she did not consent to. She even brought the Duke’s cloak back as a sort of souvenir.”

Victoria was mortified. “They had an affair? Did Lord M know?”

“My sister-in-law was never much for discretion.”

“Would you excuse me? There is something I must attend to.”

She left without waiting.

“Yes, I expect there might be,” Emily said to herself.

“Lord M?”

Victoria breathed relief after finally finding him in the study, sorting the papers in the dispatch box.
“Thank God, I thought you might have gone home.”

“I thought I would just get a start on the boxes, ma’am. There’s a dispatch from Xiamen there that I think ought to be at the top of the list for your attention—”

“I am sorry about the Duke of Wellington. I did not realize about Lady Caroline. I would have never had him stand at the service.”

“Well, he was only a proxy and I do not care much for these things, ma’am, as you know—”

“I wanted you to be pleased and I have displeased you.”

“It matters not—”

“Of course it matters! I could not bear to hurt you because if I did, if I ever hurt you beyond your forgiveness, I could not bear it—”

“Victoria—”

“No, do not stop me. I do not think I could ever look at another man again. I love you. I only want you.”

“You could never hurt me beyond forgiveness.”

She reached up to pull him towards her again, his mouth on hers. They found themselves on their familiar chaise lounge again, his hands finding their way under her skirts to that slit in her drawers. She was aching for him, they had not been together since before Regina was born.

He still knew just how to play her and she was so tightly strung that his elegant fingers did not have much work to do. She broke for him, silencing her cries in his shoulder. As she sat back, he licked his fingers clean stirring her again.

There was a knock at the door. He got up quickly sitting behind the desk. She sat and tried to compose herself on the chaise lounge as the door finally opened.

“Cousin Victoria?”

“Oh, Cousin Ernst. Are you not enjoying yourself?”

“It is a charming party, Cousin. Uncle Leopold sent me in search of you. Come.”

“Lord Melbourne has some dispatches that require our attention. The situation in Kowloon?”

“I thought the battle was in Xiamen,” said Ernst.

She looked to Melbourne.

“I believe the letter was just coming to the situation in Kowloon, ma’am,” said Melbourne.

“And what is the situation?,” asked Ernst.

“Surely that is a matter for the English crown, Cousin,” said Victoria.

“Of course. Shall I escort you back to the reception?”

“Lord M and I are not finished. As I said.”
“May I speak to you in private, Cousin?”

She blanked. She knew Lord M was not in a state to leave at the moment.

“Anything you have to say can be said in front of Lord Melbourne.”

“I do not think so.”

“Then it must not be very important.”

He sighed. “My aunt and Dr. von Stockmar-”

Victoria stood. “Follow me, Cousin.”

Ernst did as he was told.

“Lord M is my friend who came to me in an hour of need-”

“But the hour of need is over-”

She turned her head to him. “Perhaps I might be the one to say whom I do and do not need, what I do and do not wish. I am Queen.”

“Is he your lover?”

“I will not dignify such an accusation with a response! Perhaps one might tell us why we must endure every slander in simply trying to perform our duties!”

She turned and walked away, back to the study, slamming the door and falling against it.

“Victoria, what did he say?”

She turned slowly to face Melbourne. “He asked if we were lovers.”

“To which you-”

“Said I would not dignify such an accusation.”

“Right.”

“What ought I have said?”

He shook his head. “I do not know. Once such an accusation is made, people generally believe what they want the answer to be.”

She nodded. “Shall we deal with Xiamen?”

“Certainly, ma’am.”

Harry hung up the phone. She looked at Will and Victoria.

“As you can imagine, this document raises serious concerns,” said Harry.
Will nodded. “Of course.”

“It will need to be authenticated. I can’t believe that no one ever found it just sitting there. And why would he put it there? Then again, Melbourne was said to not be terribly organized.”

“What will happen to it?”

“Of course it will be authenticated by the archivists at Windsor.”

“Windsor?,” asked Victoria.

“Of course we have our copy,” said Will.

“And the Queen will have to decide how to dispense with it.”

Victoria leaned forward. “Yeah, but does anybody like Albert really?”

Will scratched his temple.

“I mean, this all really makes sense, doesn’t it?,” asked Victoria.

Emmie turned. “Uncle.”

“I just finished supper with the Queen. I had not realized you were still here.”

Emmie looked at Regina. “It was an eventful day. She has not yet settled.”

Melbourne looked at Regina. “Look who is awake...” He picked her up. “Good evening. You look yet more beautiful.”

Melbourne began walking the room with her. Emmie approached closer.

“What?”

“They mean for her to remarry.”

“Who?”

“The Duchess. Dr. von Stockmar. The King of Belgium.”

“They said this to you?”

“They stood here and discussed it openly. In German. They did not know I am fluent and I gave no indication I understood their conversation. They do not know anything, but they see you and the Queen... as an inevitability. They think if they can bring in the right suitor...” She sighed. “They think a young prince has changed her mind before, one can again.”

“She is still in mourning.”

“The moment she is done.”

Melbourne looked down at Regina. “They were never going to make it easy.”

“King Leopold said she would put it all at stake for you.”
“Did he indeed?” He looked to Regina again. “You are not to worry. You are only to dream of good things...”

Emmie smiled. “I remember when you used to say that to Augustus when we stayed in the nursery at Brocket Hall.”

“Do you really?”

“Yes. And you made us come up with things. I was jealous of Augustus then. Mama never really saw us before we went to sleep, though, now that I am older, I think it was probably that she never remembered what time it happened and not that she did not care.”

Melbourne smiled. “That is very likely.”

“Princess Regina is very fortunate, I think.”

Melbourne looked back at the infant, already sleeping. “I hope so.”

Will and Victoria got in the car.

“I suppose thanks are in order for saving me from jail,” said Victoria.

He shook his head. “I would gladly save you a thousand times...”

Will turned and found Victoria staring at him.

“Your office isn’t an office, isn’t it?,” he asked.

“No.”

“Then why didn’t you say that when I brought up putting our work in there?”

“Because while you went to Windsor, I made a promise to myself and that’s where the bet came from.”

“Why didn’t you just say it?”

“Because I didn’t want to be like other women.” She had tears forming now.

“You are Victoria. There’s only one.”

“I’ll remind you that my name has been the most popular girls’ name in England for a hundred and eighty years or so.”

“You know what I mean.” He leaned over and kissed her. She let out a moan that embarrassed her. “I don’t need a wedding. I would be perfectly happy with something at the registry office.”

“You what?”

“You said you did not care about weddings, fine, but if we’re going to have a baby, I care about being married. So, just pick a date for that.”

“Wait...” Victoria shook her head. “We’re having a baby and you just asked me to marry you?”
“We have to make a baby before we can have a baby, but I’m certain you’ll think of something.”

“Will!”

Somehow she leapt across the front seat at him, ending up in his lap, setting off the car horn.

“May I suggest we not make a baby in the Brocket Hall car park?”

“We’d have to put the seat back.”

“We should discuss your proposal at the cottage.”

She smiled and went back to her seat. “I intend to do more than discuss it.”

Chapter End Notes

History nerd time: In case anyone was wondering, yes, Caroline Lamb and the Duke of Wellington was totally a thing that happened. It was after Byron. How does that not come up more?

Also, Emily and Palmerston were famous for being late everywhere they went. The joke was that they had never heard of soup. I don't know, it's more of a rich Victorian joke, I guess... The people on Downton Abbey would think it's hilarious.
Chapter 12

Matthew escorted his sister into the nightclub. It was Claire’s first season and he was quickly tiring of escorting her everywhere. Too many dances, too many exhibits and too many nightclubs. He supposed he could not blame her, up until she had been kept in their house in the country, making herself busy with charity work and helping their mother run the house. London by those comparisons was a much more exciting place.

“Golly, Matthew, do you see who is here?” She tugged at him arm.

He followed her eyes to the Prince of Wales and his sister, the Princess Royal. They were sitting with two companions and the Princess Royal did not seem interested in any of them.

“Don’t you know them a little?”

“I shared one dance with her, that was all.”

“Couldn’t you introduce us?”

“I doubt she remembers me. Every single man in London under the age of thirty-five was invited.”

“But, Matthew-”

“No.”

“If I do not become Queen of England it will be your fault.”

“I am willing to risk it.”

“Look! It’s Tommy!”

Matthew realized that yes, of all the rotten luck, it was their cousin sitting with the royals and their lady friend.

And he had spotted them.

“Your Royal Highnesses, may I introduce my cousins the Earl of Charlbury and Lady Claire Forrester?”

Matthew bowed and Claire curtsied.

“And this is Lady Foyle,” said Tommy.
“Lady Foyle.”

“Won’t you join us?,” said the Prince.

They sat at the table, spoke of the usual pleasantries and then it happened that Claire did get her dance with the Prince, Tommy went with Lady Foyle. Matthew wondered what Lord Foyle might think.

“Your sister is wasting her time.”

“In what way, ma’am?”

She rolled her eyes. “Like every young lady she dreams of being Queen and like every young woman, she is wasting her time.”

“And you?

“What about me?”

“Do you dream of being Queen?”

“That’s how civil wars start,” she said testily as she took a drink.

“I don’t suppose you would want to dance.”

“I don’t.” She eyed him. “Besides, remember, in this country our Queens do not have King Consorts.”

“True enough, we have not had so much as a Prince consort in eighty years or so.”

“And that one was shot,” Victoria said pointedly.

“So he was,” said Matthew, wondering when his sister would get back.

________________________________________

He was hard.

That was the first thing Will realized when he came to consciousness. As he took in his surroundings, he saw Victoria smiling at him with his cock in her hand.

“Good morning,” she said innocently.

“Minx. Didn’t you get enough last night?”

She shook her head.

“You do know, our chances of having a baby one day after you’ve chucked your contraceptives are very slim...”

“Well, they’re even less if we don’t have sex.”

She squeezed her hand around him and smiled.

“Fair point,” he said, kissing her, moving above her.
She spread her legs for him and he settled there, barely entering her. He could see how it frustrated her as he instead concentrated on her breasts, making a game of how erect he could make each nipple.

“Will!”

He smiled, pulling out of her, making her guffaw and then shocked her with how quickly he drove back in. Hard, fast, he loved to watch her eyes roll back and hear her moan.

Then he brought his hand to above the place where they were joined and her clit. She only needed a few strokes of his thumb as her speech became a combination of his name, God’s name and curses. He finished himself, pulling her into his arms to let their heartbeats come back to normal together.

“I love you.”

“I love you,” he whispered back.

There was a kind of routine to Melbourne’s life, different than what he had as solely a bachelor. Wake up, go to the palace, see the Queen, see the Princess and hang on as long as he possibly could. Then every night it ended the same way with he and Victoria saying good night, trying to steal a moment to hold their hands together. If only they could fall asleep next to each other or better yet in each others’ arms...

“Lord M, I have been waiting for you all morning.”

“Have you?”

He walked further into the room. Regina was on the floor, Victoria knelt down across from her.

“Come on. Come to Mama.”

Regina determinedly crawled to Victoria, with Dash trying to help her along. Lehzen tried to shoo the dog off.

“Lehzen, really!,” said Victoria.

“He might bite.”

“Really, Baroness, Dash is more devoted to the Princess than anyone,” said Melbourne.

“Not anyone,” said Victoria looking pointedly at Lord M. She turned her head up to Lehzen. “Lord M and I ought to get started.”

“Shall I take the princess back to the nursery?”

“No, Lehzen, thank you. She is no trouble at all for us.” Victoria picked up the baby and stood.

Lehzen left.


“Well, you have been very clever in putting off your suitors.”
She looked up at him. “There is nothing clever in it, Lord M, I have no interest in them, no matter the parade of them Mama and Uncle Leopold put forth.”

“And Dr. von Stockmar...”

“I am interested in his opinion least of all, but there is very little I can do while he is Mama’s guest.”

“Guests leave, ma’am. That is one of their great virtues.”

“I know you do not care for house parties, Lord M.”

“No, I always found contentment in being with my family.”

He did not mean to but he looked wistfully at the pair of them. Victoria and Regina the two most important people in the world to him.

“I haven’t thought of an excuse for Christmas yet-”

“There can be no excuse, ma’am.”

“Do not say that.”

“What excuse will you give? The one day of the year that you do not work on your box and yet I am here.”

“It is Regina’s first Christmas.”

He sighed, rather than snap. He was painfully aware of that.

“There will be other Christmases,” he said as a platitude.

Sated, breakfast eaten and Brocket Hall closed to them for the weekend, they settled in the sitting room with a pot of tea and some drafts.

They had decided the best way to start the book was to write about Melbourne and Victoria’s lives prior to meeting each other. Naturally, Will had taken Melbourne and Victoria her namesake. They would then get into their meeting at her accession and the early events of her reign which English readers would already know, but they knew would be of benefit to others before making their way to the separation at her marriage to Albert and how they were reunited.

“So, what do you think?”

Victoria looked up at Will. “It’s good. I like it.”

He sighed. “I thought perhaps you might go over it.”

“Me? Why?”

“You always have a bit more life in your writing. I don’t want this part of book to seem disjointed from the rest.”

“But it’s so well done.”

Will shook his head. “Nonsense. I could write about Caroline Lamb and Lord Byron in my sleep. I
think I did in grad school.”

Victoria curled up on the sofa with her draft. “I wonder that we know so little of what Lord M thought.”

“He was never one to make such a scene.”

“Yeah, but when your wife is holding a bonfire on the front lawn, it’s hard not to.”

“I think he was probably just happy to persuade her not to throw herself on it.”

“I’ll take another pass,” said Victoria. “But we should start working on the assassination attempt.”

“Right,” said Will. He got up and got the folder of copies from Brocket Hall. Melbourne’s journals were a bonus, really, the event was well documented.

“It’s a watershed moment, really,” said Victoria. “Don’t suppose we could find out more about Prince Zotov.”

“How much is there to tell? He was hounded by the scandal of the assassination for the rest of his days, lived in seclusion until the Crimean War...”

“When he was shot by his own men.”

Will tilted his head. “Yeah...”

“You see, that must be worth a story. What happened right before that?”

“Well, in 1841, he was quite the favorite at the courts of Europe. A far more interesting choice than Prince Albert, invited by Dr. von Stockmar to turn the Queen’s head.”

“As if it could have been turned away from Lord M.”

Prince Zotov arrived and immediately began ingratiating himself.

“And how did you find your journey from St. Petersburg?,” Victoria inquired. She was becoming ever so good at conveying politic disinterest from her throne.

“Long and cold, Your Majesty, but very worth it for the warm beauty I find here in London.”

“Oh, yes, the palace does have very nice fireplaces.”

Melbourne could hear the Duchess’ teeth grinding from across the throne room.

“I was, of course, referring to the Princess Royal.”

Victoria’s head snapped up. “What?”

“Even at the court in St. Petersburg, her royal highness is known as the jewel in your majesty’s crown.”

“They speak of Princess Regina at court in St. Petersburg?”

Melbourne caught Stockmar smirking.
“Yes, of course. Her portrait has been widely shown. Of course, it must pale in comparison to her actual countenance as it does in the case of her mother. Perhaps your majesty would be so kind as to arrange a comparison?”

“I do not see why not.”

“Melbourne is extremely bothered in these,” said Victoria sifting through the papers.

“Zotov feigned interest in the princess. No, he would not have liked that at all.”

“Why not?”

Will looked up from the laptop. “It’s hard to explain, it’s stupid, but it’s... being a dad, that is your baby, especially your baby girl and if some other man waltzes in and thinks he can be her dad...”

“You sound more jealous than you ever did about Carrie.”

“I got over Carrie. Gussie took longer.”

She smiled. “You’re not over Gussie.”

“I’m not over Gussie...” he sighed.

“Should we try to reconstruct the night of the ball?”

He smiled. “We should.”

“Uncle Melbourne.”

“Oh, Lord M,” said Victoria. “You have arrived.”

Zotov looked up at Melbourne. Regina had turned away from him, reaching for Melbourne.

“Prince Zotov was just trying to amuse the Princess,” said Victoria.

“And failing from the look of it.”

Regina’s lip quivered and Melbourne knew what was about to happen, but Zotov was quite unaware.

Then it did. Her shriek would have broken the glass in the servants’ hall and made Zotov turn his head away.

Yes, her mother’s lungs...

“Perhaps I might help, Your Highness.” Melbourne took Regina out of Zotov’s arms without waiting for permission. He held her and the princess soon stopped screaming.

“Well, I suppose I will not make a nursemaid,” said Zotov.

“No, I suppose not,” said Melbourne.
“Good thing you have such an excellent nurse in Lord Melbourne.”

He stiffened as Regina laid her head to rest on his shoulder. It was not the insult so much as the fact that the man was still here and would be expecting to stay through Christmas.

And of course, Zotov would see Victoria and Regina Christmas Day while he would not.

“We must be getting downstairs,” said Victoria, looking tense.

“May I escort you, your majesty?,” asked Zotov.

Victoria looked back at Melbourne, he had already turned with Regina. The prince led her out.

“How long was he here, Emmie?”

Emmie shook her head. “Not long, it’s absurd to think he has any interest in the princess besides becoming consort. I find it revolting.”

“Does the Queen?”

She was taken aback by the question. “I-”

“Never mind. Forget I said anything.” He looked to the fireplace, it seemed weak. “What is wrong with the fire?”

She sighed and went to the poker, turning the logs. “It keeps going out... I’ve had the maid up here about a dozen times. I have asked the Baroness to get a repairman in, there must be something wrong with the stack.”

“It is freezing outside.”

“Yes, Uncle, I am aware.”

He turned to the nursery maid. “I want it kept lit.”

“Yes, my lord,” she said in confusion.

Will had spread out a piece of paper on the tea table, ticking events off with a Sharpie as Victoria watched, nursing her mug of tea.

“The ball begins,” said Will. “The Queen takes three dances with Prince Zotov...”

“Poor Lord M...” Victoria sighed. “So he leaves.”

“And he goes back to the nursery where we are told Dash is...”

“What number Dash do you think the royals are on?”

“I don’t know... Five Victorias, multiple that by dog years... Dash XXXV?”

Victoria looked back at the newspaper drawings. “And that’s when Lord M finds the assassin in the nursery.”
The Christmas Ball was as splendid as any the palace had seen with candles lighting up boughs of holly, yew branches left anywhere that stayed still long enough.

And at the center of it all, the dancing. The talk was all of the Queen and her new dancing partner, Prince Zotov. Would he be their new consort? After all, the Prince had been dead over a year now, she would have to remarry. At least this one would be a more interesting choice than the last one.

“I do not know if it is a sound choice,” said Palmerston. “He could bring in unwelcome papism.”

“The Russians are not papists, Henry,” said Emily. “Which I keep reminding you.”

“The people will not know that, all they will know is that he celebrates Christmas on the wrong day. Their children will have to be Protestant anyway-”

“He has been here a week,” Melbourne snapped.

Palmerston was unaware of his brother-in-law’s mood. “Prince Albert was here four days when she proposed. I do not think the Queen is one for long engagements.”

Melbourne stalked off.

“What did I say?,” Palmerston asked his wife.

Emily sighed, thrusting her champagne glass into his hand. “Oh, Henry, do shut up.”

She turned to follow her brother, down the hall.

“William, William, where are you going?”

Melbourne walked out into the garden, snow cracking beneath his slippers. Emily joined him.

“William, you will catch your death.”

He glared at her.

“It will be your epitaph. Here lies the 2nd Viscount Melbourne who died for love of the Queen...”

“Yes, I expect so.” It seemed he was in no mood for teasing.

“She cannot be serious.”

“Why not? Might he be too handsome or too princely?”

“Oh, William. She has only just met him-”

“I think that hardly matters. Your husband is quite right. She once went in four days from ‘I can’t stand him’ to ‘Oh, I must marry him as soon as possible.’ I already gave her up once. Well, twice if you count the marriage proposal=”

“She proposed to you?”

“Yes, and I rejected her for some reason that seemed perfectly sane at the time. Idiotic, really...” he scolded himself.

“Then fight for her, damn you.”

“I do not want to fight.”
“As when that cow you were married to ran off with the poet.”

“Suppose I had fought. What? Why fight when she had made up her mind to go? I would have won and dragged her back like some sort of trophy? Or I would have lost her? There is no point in it.”

He went back in.

“Where are you going?,” asked Emily.

“To check the fire!”

“Is that a code for something?”

The first sign something was amiss was Dash outside the shut door. The little dog barked at the nursery then backed up and barked again. Melbourne hastened his pace, his footsteps attracting the spaniel’s attention and he barked frantically.

Melbourne opened the door, the nursemaid was there, only she lay in a heap to the side, blood pooling below her head.

There was a man, lit only by the moonlight, was he with the Prince’s staff? If he was, Melbourne did not bother to remember because he was holding something over Regina’s head.

The next few moments were a blur, a primal urge causing Melbourne to react much too quickly for a man his age. Not that he had ever been much of a fighter. Dash barked as they grappled with each other, Melbourne finding himself crashed into the dollhouse as forced the man back over the rocking horse, causing him to cry out in agony. Melbourne pummeled him but the man rose again. It seemed he was a far more experienced fighter and Melbourne... Melbourne was not.

The attacker leapt again, tossing him over a chair, breaking it and dragging him into the wall, holding him against it. Summoning any strength he had left, Melbourne pushed back, finding himself on the floor again, hitting him with the discarded leg of the ruined chair. He sat back satisfied as the man fell unconscious and time returned to its normal speed with Regina’s cries and Dash’s calls for help.

“Regina?” Melbourne willed himself to his feet as he went back to the cot and lifted her into his arms.

Her face was the color of a tomato as she screamed. He kissed her forehead. “Hush now. I’m here. I’m here...”

He cooed at her a moment more shielding her eyes as he stepped past her unconscious assailant and her dead nurse. Dash whined and finally, a guard appeared.

“Fetch the Queen and Sir Robert Peel. Someone has tried to murder the Princess.”

“Sir.”

He held her tighter as the guard ran off, trying to quiet her. She was safe in his arms and he would not let harm come to her.

---

London, 1922
It was the night of Claire’s ball and the house was thick with guests. Being so friendly as she was, Claire had issued an invitation to everyone she had met, but foremost on her mind were the Prince of Wales and the Princess Royal.

“I wonder if they might come,” said Claire.

“I doubt it,” said Matthew.

His mother, the Dowager Countess turned. “But Tommy did give them the invitation?”

“He promised,” said Claire.

“I doubt the Prince of Wales and the Princess Royal will bother,” said Matthew.

“And it will be your fault if they don’t,” said Claire. She looked at their mother. “He was positively ghastly.”

“I could have been as charming as Don Juan, it would have made no difference.”

There was a hush in the ballroom. They turned to see the Prince, Princess and their companions arrive, the guests curtsying and bowing in a frenzy.

“Your Royal Highnesses,” said Matthew.

“We thought we might accept your kind invitation,” said the Prince.

“You honor us, sir,” he said.

“Lady Claire?”

Claire had to hide her gasp as the Prince led her onto the dance floor. Tommy went with Lady Foyle and Matthew felt his mother’s elbow in his back. The Princess looked at him expectantly.

“I don’t suppose Your Highness would do me the honor.”

Victoria held her hand out as Matthew led her to the dance floor. It suddenly felt very awkward to be silent so he went along the only line of conversation he had at his disposal.

“I doubt you remember, but this is actually the second dance we’ve had-”

“No, I remember, Lord Charlbury.”

“You do, ma’am?”

“Yes, at my birthday ball.”

That did surprise him. She had danced with many partners that night, princes among them and one or two kings. “I assumed you took no notice of me.”

“We danced the Orchid Waltz.”

“You remember the song?”

“I take great notice of all things orchid.”

“Including the ones in your hair? You were wearing the same ones at your ball.”
“I grew these myself.”

“You grow orchids?”

“At Brocket Hall. I keep Lord Melbourne’s collection. Why should that surprise you?”

“I do not know...”

“You see, Lord Charlbury, I must be very careful of who I dance with.”

“Well, I hope you know you have nothing to fear from me, ma’am.”

“Don’t I, though?”

“What would you have to fear from me, ma’am?”

“What I have to fear the most.”

He frowned. “What an enigma you are, ma’am.”

“Good. I should hate to be simple.”

Victoria finished the waltz and found the room bereft of the one presence she wished the most. She walked to Emily.

“Lady Palmerston, I do not suppose you know where Lord M has run off to.”

“No, ma’am, I would not.”

Victoria could just feel a cooling from Emily. Zotov came back to her side.

“May I have the pleasure again, Your Majesty?”

“No, I think I shall take a break from the dancing.”

“Who could bother without your magnificent presence-”

“Prince Zotov, your flatteries are becoming tiresome.”

He stepped back with a bow. Victoria looked past him to see Sir Robert Peel in the strangest state. A guard was speaking to him. Why would a guard be speaking to him? Whatever had been said seemed to greatly disturb Lady Peel. Suddenly Sir Robert was walking straight towards her with no regard for those dancing.

“Your Majesty, there has been an assassination attempt-”

She nearly laughed. “What assassination attempt? We are quite fine.”

“No, ma’am, the Princess Royal=”

She was off running before Peel could follow, darting through the dancers, making a hush run through the ball.
Victoria ran to the nursery, a pool of blood stopping her entrance as the room swarmed with palace guards. There was the body of the nurse and another man, one she vaguely recognized.

“Where is the princess?” She looked to the guard and barked at the boy before he could answer. “Where is she?”

“In the drawing room-”

“Regina!” She swirled back out, almost hitting Emmie and Emily with her skirts, seeing her other ladies come rushing down the hall. “Regina! Mama is coming!”

Another guard opened the door for her and she rushed in, finding Regina being held by Melbourne.

“Lord M...”

“She is quite fine, ma’am.”

“You are bleeding, William.”

It was only then that they both realized they were not alone. Emily, Emily, Emma and Harriet had all followed, joined by Sir Robert.

“No, no, I am quite fine-”

It was just then Victoria’s relief at finding her baby safe vanished into concern. Melbourne looked horrid. His beautiful face was battered. “Good God, Lord M...”

She was going to kill the man who had done this herself.

She walked towards him, his hands were wrapped around Regina.

“Melbourne, what happened?,” demanded Peel.

“Dash was outside the door and he was acting peculiar so I went in and the assailant was holding something over Re- the Princess Royal’s face.”

The ladies gasped.

“What were you doing up there?,” asked Peel.

Emily snapped her head. “Does it actually matter, Sir Robert?”

“Uncle, please, let me take her-” said Emmie.

“I am fine.”

“Lord M, please, I can take her,” pled Victoria.

He reluctantly gave up the baby, surrendering her to her mother.

“William, do please sit down,” said Emily.

“I am fine,” he winced.

“Oh, yes, you are so fine,” Emily snapped. “Sit down.”

“Lady Portman, would you be so good as to arrange a doctor?,” asked Victoria.
“Of course, ma’am.”

“I do not-”

“Sit down!,” Emily and Victoria both shouted to which he finally acquiesced.

Victoria turned to Harriet. “Lady Sutherland, would you get us some water to clean Lord M’s face?”

“Of course.” Harriet nodded turning just as Lehzen entered.

“Where have you been, Lehzen?,” Victoria snapped.

“Prince Zotov has disappeared from the ball, Your Majesty.”

“Disappeared? How can he disappear?,” guffawed Sir Robert.

Lehzen had no patience for the Prime Minister tonight. “I believe it must have something to do with the unconscious man on the floor of the Princess Royal’s nursery. I had Mr. Penge confirm it. He is Prince Zotov’s valet. Or at the least he claimed to be.”

“Find him,” Victoria said to the captain of the guard. “I do not care how. Find him.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The captain left as the Duchess and Dr. von Stockmar entered.

“Oh, Mama, Dr. von Stockmar, congratulations,” said Victoria.

The room turned as this worrying change in the Queen’s tone.

“What?”

“The suitor you selected for me tried to murder your granddaughter and nearly murdered Lord M. I hope you are pleased.”

“I am still breathing, ma’am,” said Melbourne.

“Barely,” Emily muttered.

“And the Princess’ nurse was murdered,” Lehzen added.

“Perhaps you would be so kind as to stop selecting suitors, Mama. I am certain Lord Melbourne would be most grateful.”

“Drina, I am so sorry-”

“And you, Doctor? Are you sorry?”

“Ma’am, I would never cause the Princess harm! Out of devotion to her dear father, the Prince Consort-”

“Yes, your devotion to the late Prince runs much deeper than to me or the Princess Royal, it would seem.”

“Your Majesty, I must insist-”

“It is not your place to insist. We would be away from you now. You will withdraw.” She looked at
her mother, shooting daggers. “You as well.”

The Duchess left, bumping into Harriet along the way who curtsied with a basin of water in her hand.

“Oh, thank you, Harriet.” Victoria handed the baby to Emmie and took the basin. “Here we are, Lord M...”

“Cleaning his wounds herself, that seems a pretty strong statement,” said Victoria.

“So it was. More importantly, the incident created a crisis and a strong distrust of any foreign suitors.”

“Suddenly a much older viscount doesn’t seem such a bad option because we know at least he won’t murder the princess...”

“And the papers were full of it.”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t seem like the sort of thing people would talk much about...”

“Why not? The country was livid. The crowds for the hanging went on for miles.”

“But how did Lord M become the hero?”

“I assume it had something to do with him being the hero.”

“Yeah, but Lord M, always had scandal about him despite being an honest man, a reasonable politician, scandal with the queen back to when people were calling her Mrs. Melbourne... Why do the newspapers suddenly change their tune? And half the Tories are suddenly cool with this.”

“Peel wasn’t.”

“To his detriment. The Queen turned against him and then the public did.”

“Yes, but someone must have started the ball rolling. Why don’t we know who that is?”

Will sighed. “Shall we go out for lunch? I could go for a Chinese.”

“Yes, we do need to keep our strength up,” she smiled.

He smiled back. “Minx.”

“You love it.”
Okay, thanks again for all the reads and reviews, so glad you liked it. Please let me know what you think and happy reading!

“I am fine,” Melbourne insisted.

“You are not fine,” said Emily.

Not long had passed but there had been a flurry of developments. Prince Zotov was still being hunted, the ball below had descended into complete chaos, the cabinet were meeting in a room down the hall and Sir James had been summoned to advise that yes, Lord Melbourne, was as bad as he looked.

Sir James looked up. “I believe you may have broken one or two ribs, Lord Melbourne. It would be better if you would not move. It would be better if you would stay at the palace—”

“I can’t—”

“Of course you will stay here. Lehzen, prepare a room for Lord Melbourne.”

“To stay the night?”

“To stay as long as he needs until he is fully recovered,” said Victoria. “Ought we toss him out into the snow? What if he slips on ice and his rib punctures his lung and he dies?!”

Only her Prime Minister was daft enough to speak.

“Is that wise, ma’am?,” asked Sir Robert.

“He can hardly walk, what is it you think he’s going to do?,” asked Emily.

“It is what might be said, ma’am—”

“I do not need you to defend my virtue, Sir Robert!”

Emmie returned carrying Regina.

“Perhaps the south wing—”

“Are you mad? He will be by Mama there, surely we wish to reward him.” She walked to Emmie, taking the baby. “Come back to Mama...”


“The Belgian Suite—” said Sir Robert.
Emily turned to Sir Robert. “You know that if you object to everything we will be here all night?”
She tapped her brother on the shoulder. “The same to you.”

“Walk very carefully, sir,” said Sir James. “I will assist you.”

“I am not infirm-”

“Oh, do shut up,” said Emily taking his arm.

“Make certain Lord M has everything he needs to make him comfortable, Lehzen.”

The Baroness nodded and left. Victoria turned to Emmie.

“I am afraid, ma’am, that the nursery cannot be cleaned for the Princess to sleep in it tonight-”

Victoria looked at Regina. “You will not sleep in it any night, my love...”

“And the cot was splattered with blood.”

“It is alright. Fetch us one of her baskets, she can sleep in it in my room until we can find something suitable...” She looked at Emmie. “We have kept you far too long.”

“No, ma’am-”

“No, it is far past time for you to attend to your own children.”

“I am only happy to be able to help my queen on this terrible night.”

She curtsied and left.

Victoria looked to Regina.

“Do not worry, my darling... Mama is going to see to everything.”

Will and Victoria arrived at Brocket Hall on Monday to find a tour bus.

“Good morning,” Harry greeted them in the front hall.

“I thought there were only tours in the autumn,” said Will.

“For general admissions. We try to let school groups in other times if we can make the dates work.” She looked at Victoria. “This one is from Berlin. The Wittenberg Gymnasium.”

“That’s so weird, I used to date this guy who taught at-”

“Victoria!”

She froze and leaned towards Will to whisper. “Is there a bloke with the most ridiculous mustache you have ever seen behind me?”

“And a man bun.”

“Albert.” Victoria turned.
“What a surprise,” said Albert.

“Yeah, that’s one word for it...”

“What are you doing here?”

“Research.”

“And who is this? Your professor?”

“We’re partners,” said Victoria. “Partner partners. Twenty-four seven...”

“I’m Will.”

“Oh. This is Will,” said Albert. “I take it Victoria told you absolutely nothing about me.”

“Was I supposed to?”

“We did date two years.”

“If you can call that dating...” Victoria muttered.

“No, Victoria mentioned you...” said Will. “I just pictured someone... shorter.”

“Have you told your students about this painting yet?,” asked Victoria. She motioned at the portrait of Melbourne and Regina in the entryway. “It’s quite a rarity, it hasn’t been seen publicly for some time.”


“Our what?, “ asked Will.

“Sorry, it’s just the way you English idolize this man, even though he probably did more to slow progress than to help it, a leftover from a decadent era-“

“Says the man with the hipster mustache.”

“Do you know he discouraged the Queen from reading Dickens because it was too dreary?”

“Have you ever tried reading Dickens? It’s one of Dante’s circles of Hell,” said Will.

Albert stared.

“That was a joke, Albert,” said Victoria.

“Why should you joke about Dickens?”

Will looked at Victoria. “How long did you two date?”

Victoria slept the whole night with Regina in a basket on her bed.

She found sleep escaped her and she looked at Regina with every tiny sound the baby made. She nursed her a few times even though Lehzen and the wet nurse were in the next room. She wanted these moments of safety with her baby.
She wanted them with Lord M. The only way she would have slept was with Lord M at her side.

She understood fear now. Oh, anxieties she had before about losing Lord M as a Prime Minister and later as a friend, but never anything like this. She could have lost Regina, she could have lost Lord M. Forever and then she would have truly been lost.

She wanted her family. Not the one the House of Hanover provided, but the one she chose, the one they could make together.

It was time to fight for it.

Victoria did not sit as she waited.

The assailant- yes, one of Zotov’s party- entered between the guards shackled by them. She turned her chin up as the man looked at her through battered eyes.

“Answer me truthfully and you may live.”

He looked back down.

“Ma’am-” said Sir Robert.

“It is in my power to be merciful if I have the truth. You tried to murder our princess, an infant, in the room where she slept. You killed a woman. We wish to know why.”

“Ma’am, this is pointless-”

“Did your master know of this?”

“My master ordered it.”

A chill ran up her spine. “Prince Zotov ordered this?”

The man nodded.

“Why? We demand an explanation!”

“Because he would not see his heirs second and it was thought if you were bereaved, you might be weak.”

“I was bereaved by the death of my husband, do I seem weak? Do I?”

“Take him away,” said Sir Robert.

“I want the Prince found. He will pay for this treachery.”

“Ma’am-” said Sir Robert.

“And I will endure no more foreign suitors.”

Peel sighed. “Surely you know you must marry again-”

“I will marry where it pleases me. Now I must go see Lord M.”
“In his room?”

“Yes, seeing as he is unable to move, that is where I thought I might find him, Sir Robert.”

“Perhaps I should join Your Majesty.”

She tilted her head. “Sir Robert, as my Prime Minister, I do not think it is within the scope of your duties to be my chaperone.”

“May I speak openly, ma’am?”

She raised her eyebrow at him.

“Perhaps it is time for Lord Melbourne to retire again.”

“What?”

“Lord Melbourne has been perhaps spending too much time at the palace.”

“He is my private secretary. You brought him back-”

“It was my mistake, ma’am-”

“Mistake? Lord M is not a mistake!”

“There have been concerns-”

“What concerns?”

“That you may be too close.”

“Our princess has been nearly killed but for the intervention of Lord Melbourne- the same Lord Melbourne you wish us to cast aside- and you think this is the moment to bring us gossip?”

“Ma’am, I only wish to protect the Crown-”

“We do not need your protection!”

Will pulled out Melbourne’s journal.

“Well, this is odd...”

“What?,” asked Victoria.

“The day after the attack, I’m trying to make out his hand...’

Victoria stood and walked to the other side of the desk. “You’ve never had a problem with it before.”

“No, but this is almost scribble...”

“Maybe he hurt his hand in the fight...”

“Yes, but what he’s writing is puzzling.”
“In what way?”

“I think he’s trying to trace what ‘Good King Wenceslas’ has to do with Cleopatra...”

“Okay...”

“He also makes mention of the Queen having very nice breasts...”

“Really?”

Will showed her.

“So, you’re saying that the key to Melbourne’s ascension to Royal Consort does not lie in his journal?”

“Well, not on that day, no...”

Victoria entered the Belgian suite. The door was opened to the bedroom and she entered to find Sir James, Emily and Palmerston looking over him.

“What did you give him?”

“Only some Laudanum,” said Sir James.

“William hates Laudanum.”

“Victoria!”

Victoria smiled. Though he was clearly not in his right mind, there was something rather pleasing about her Lord M crying her name out in front of others. The men bowed their heads and Emily curtsied.

“Sorry I can’t bow... but I can’t seem to get out of bed.”

“It’s quite alright, Lord M.”

Emily looked at Sir James. “How much did you give him?”

“It’s fine, I’m fine, we should all have some.”

Emily scowled down at her brother. “You hate Laudanum. Ever since Byron.”

“Who is Byron?”

Palmerston tutted. “He has had it...”

Victoria looked to the doctor. “How is he, Sir James?”

“Well, ma’am, we have managed to alleviate the pain, but we seem to be struggling with the right dosage...”

“Victoria.” He patted the mattress next to him.

Sir James looked positively scandalized.
“William...” Emily prodded.

“No, it is fine.” Victoria smiled as she sat, taking his hand in hers. “How are you feeling, Lord M?”

“I am fine, fine, we ought to go riding.”

“We are not riding today, Lord M.”

“But it is such fine weather.”

“It has been snowing since yesterday, Lord M.”

“Yes, well, I shall stay and contemplate Caesar Augustus then...”

“What about him?”

“Oh, something about Herod and the Hebrews and something... But what has any of that to do with mistletoe?”

She giggled. “I should not worry too much, Lord M.”

“Your eyes...”

“Yes?”

“They are huge...”

“Very well, time to rest, William,” said Emily.

“Seriously, have you seen her eyes?”

“Go to sleep.”

“I can’t, oh, ma’am?”

Victoria stood. “Yes, Lord M?”

“I think it’s about time you issued an order of execution for Charles Dickens. If the man is not stopped, there is no telling what he will write.”

“I shall take it under consideration.”

They left him in bed.

“He is not himself, ma’am,” said Sir James.

“No, certainly not,” said Victoria.

Sir James and Palmerston left.

“Ma’am, might I ask how the Princess Royal is this morning? My brother was anxious for news of her.”

“She is quite well, thank you.” She had an idea. “Would you like to see for yourself?”

“That would be charming, ma’am.”
“How long did you two date?,” asked Will as they perused Victoria's sketches.

Victoria looked up. “Are we jealous?”

“No. I’m just wondering...”

“Wondering what?”

“He doesn’t seem your type.”

“I have a type now?”

“Well, perhaps I flatter myself, but I always thought you went in for interesting people...”

“I do go in for interesting people.”

She looked up at Will. “What?”

“Then you’ll have to explain this one.”

Victoria sighed. “Okay, it was just at the beginning he was interesting and everything he said was interesting, then one day it wasn’t and I got sick of feeling guilty for taking a ten minute shower while part of the Amazon burns down every day.” She shrugged. “Also, as you know, I like lots of sex...”

Will paused. “And he...”

Victoria scoffed. “Twice a week if I was lucky.”

Emily followed the Queen. They went down the hall past the guards into her private chambers. The nurse was playing on the rug with Regina when they entered. She stood quickly and curtsied.

“Please leave us.”

The nurse nodded and left. Regina reached up for Victoria and she obliged. She put the baby on her hip and turned back to Emily.

“I am glad to see the princess in such good health after her ordeal.”

“Lady Palmerston, I feel I can trust you. Am I misguided in my feeling?”

“Not at all, ma’am.”

“You see, Lord M and I share an understanding based on a mutual friendship. We often find that this understanding- well, you see-”

“Ma’am, might I interrupt you?”

Victoria was actually relieved to be interrupted.

“I do not know if you were aware of the understanding my mother, the late Lady Melbourne shared with your uncle, then Prince Regent.”

“Yes.”
“I wonder if your majesty might be referring to an understanding of that nature?”

“I might be.” She took a breath. “It is my sincerest wish to marry Lord Melbourne, but as you can imagine, there are circumstances preventing that. I did wonder if recent events might alter those circumstances in such a way as to make the match feasible.”

Emily tilted her head. “Yes, I suppose they might.”

“Of course Lord M is so honorable as to never seek to use these recent events for what he feels might be his own gain...”

“Yes, he is distressingly honorable. It vexed my mother her entire life.”

“I am not so honorable as Lord M.”

“Nor am I, ma’am.” She turned. “The Princess is so beloved by the people. I wonder if it became general knowledge what transpired recently... that the people might not be so bothered that their Queen should marry a Viscount, seeing as he would be a worthy Viscount, one who risked his own life to save that princess...”

“There is the matter of the Privy Council.”

“I wonder if your majesty recalls that my daughter is the daughter-in-law of Lord Shaftesbury, a man whose predecessors have sat on the Privy Council since the time of the Restoration.”

“But he is a Tory and the Tories despise Lord M.”

“He is family. I believe he would quickly see the virtues of such a match. Lord Shaftesbury might persuade others. Also, my eldest son, the Earl Cowper is married to the daughter of the Earl de Grey...”

“You think the Earl de Grey might see the reason in such an arrangement?”

“Oh, he is an eminently reasonable man.”

“Is there a way to make such inquiries?”

“Do you know, ma’am, I find the art of dealing with such men is in persuading them that they had the idea themselves?”

“Well, I should be grateful for such persuasions, Lady Palmerston.”

Victoria took a walk. Albert’s class had spread out on the lawn to eat their packed lunch.

“How goes your research?”

“Excellent. Nice of you to ask for a change.”

Albert sighed. “You can never just leave something, can you?”

“Like you were going to leave it...”

“You ought to have been a romance writer not a historian.”
“I am a romance writer, the romances just happen to be real.”

“It was a childish crush that some English fools made into a marriage-”

“And the first marriage was a political alliance some fools made into a marriage-”

“If Albert had lived-”

Victoria groaned. “Oh my God...”

“Europe might have been much different with closer links between royal families, there might have been no world wars, no Cold War with support of the Tsar-”

“The Tsar was overthrown because he was head of a government that didn’t give a damn about its people, don’t see how Albert was going to change that...”

“He was a reformer, there would have been a more liberal Germany-”

“You’re assuming he would have done half the things he wanted and not ended up boring his children to death. Who’s being a romantic now?”

He motioned at Will who had ended up talking to some of Albert’s students across the lawn. “Is he a romantic?”

“He’s the man I love. Of course he is.”

Victoria walked down the hall with Regina on her hip. She walked into the Belgian Suite and through the open door into the bedroom.

“Why are you awake? You ought to be resting,” said Victoria.

“Whatever Sir James gave me finally wore off...” He shook his head. “I find I am still confounded. Did I say something about your breasts?”

“No.”

“I certainly thought it...” He looked at Regina and smiled. “What is this?”

Regina reached her arms out for Melbourne. Victoria smiled, walking towards the bed and letting him take her.

“She wanted to see you.”

He smiled back. “I wanted to see her.” An involuntary groan of pain came out.

“You are still hurt.” She tried to take the baby back.

“No, no, let her be.” He kissed the top of her head. “That’s my girl...”

“I should summon Sir James if you are still in pain. I will not have it-”

“Just let me be.”

She watched as he drifted off, Regina with him, the way they seemed to breathe together in their
sleep.

Yes, she was going to see that this is how every night was.
Melbourne found himself growing quite used to his time at the palace. He passed most of the day in the sitting room of the rooms that the Queen had given him. Breakfast on a tray before she came in to work on the boxes, on days when she had no engagements they would stay there with the baby all day, playing with her and reading.

He thought- despite his injuries- that he had never known such perfect happiness.

Which was disturbed as the Duchess barged her way past the footman who delivered his breakfast tray.

“Lord Melbourne, I know you are responsible.”

“Good morning, Duchess. You must excuse me for not being dressed...”

She held up what seemed to be a newspaper and tossed it at him, rattling his tea cup. He picked it up and there seemed to be a depiction of him, one of the more flattering he had in a newspaper, of him thwarting Regina’s assailant, protecting the terrified infant.

“This is in the papers?”

“As if you do not know.”

“I do not.”

“Of course you become Melbourne the great hero-”

“I did not defend the Princess for the newspapers to praise me.”

“But you took advantage.”

“How could I take advantage of anything? I have not left these rooms.”

“You have always had designs on my daughter, seeking to use her to your own advantage-”

He found it hard to hide his appreciation of the irony of the woman making the accusation. “Thank God you are above all that, Duchess.”

The Duchess stormed out. Melbourne looked with dismay at the newspaper.
Will walked in. The cottage they were renting had a very nice conservatory type room with a hot tub, which had been Victoria’s entire deciding factor in choosing it for their stay in Hatfield. She was currently stripping off her dressing gown.

“I thought we were discussing research.”

She turned to face him. God, the way she always stood before him, so confident in her body. He could get hard from that.

“We can’t do that in the hot tub?”

“I don’t think discussion is what you have in mind.”

“Please, Will?” She walked over to him, unbuttoning his jeans and sliding her hand down his boxers.

“I can be good…”

“You will be the death of me,” he said as her hand tightened around his cock.

“Come on.”

He finished undressing as he watched her step down into it. He followed her, coming to sit and pulling her over his lap.

“I don’t think you can make a baby in here,” said Will.

“No, I googled it, it’s fine,” she said, kissing him.

“You googled it?”

“What? I shouldn’t have?”

“No, it’s fine... I just...” He sighed. “I don’t want you to get too obsessed.”

“I’m not obsessed, I just...” She paused, smiling. “I just want your baby so much, Will.”

“Our baby.”

“Our baby.”

The Christmas party at Broadlands was rather larger this year with Emily issuing late invitations to practically everyone she was related to. With one notable exception who was on everyone’s minds and the talk of the nation.

“Might Lord Melbourne be joining us?,” asked the Earl de Grey.

“Oh, no, Thomas, I am afraid not. My brother is still recovering from his heroic ordeal.”

“At the palace?,” asked Ashley.

“Still?,” asked Shaftesbury.

“Oh, yes, the Queen was most insistent. Wasn’t she Henry?”

Her husband frowned at her.
Henrietta de Grey spoke up. “One is so skeptical of the newspapers. They say Melbourne fought the assassin himself.”

“Indeed he did, the nursery was absolutely bathing in blood, wasn’t it so, Emmie?”

“Bathing in blood?,” asked Ashley. “Do not be ridiculous.”

All eyes were on Emmie.

“Well, let her speak,” said George. “After all, she was there.”

“Thank you, brother,” she said quietly. She looked up at the table. “It was quite a horrid scene. The Princess Royal’s nursemaid laid dead on the floor…”

The ladies gasped, save Emily.

“No child ought to have to see such scenes-”

Ashley tried to interject. “And yet children in the East End see just as bad-”

“Let her finish,” implored Henrietta.

Attention turned back to Emmie. They hung on her every word.

“There is not much more to tell really. I shudder to think what might have happened if Uncle Melbourne had not happened upon the room when he did.”

“I hear that he has quite an attachment to the poor child,” said Henrietta.

“Well, that is William,” said Emily. “He has always been so dear with children. It is a shame he never had more than poor Augustus for he is a man very suited to being a father. The Queen just remarked upon that to me before I left London.”

“Her Majesty said that?,” asked Shaftesbury.

“Yes, of course she did.”

“Did she say anything else?”

“What do you mean, Anthony?”

“About Melbourne.”

Emily sipped her wine, taking a thoughtful pause. “She did wonder aloud that William did not have a happier marriage as she could not imagine how any wife of his might become so discontented.”

“Did she?”

“I had no answer for the Queen other than it all owing to my late sister-in-law. She was one of the Devonshires…”

Victoria was screaming.

They had happened upon one of the jets in the tub and he was not getting a lot out of it, but Victoria had begged him to keep her pinned against it and he had obliged, driving himself into her again and
again as she became happy and limp, emptied of everything but the pleasure coursing through her.

“No, no, no,” she pled as he lifted her away.

“I’m sorry, but I think you’ve had enough.”

She groaned as he brought her to lie on the cold tile next to the tub. He pulled some of the nearby towels over them in a makeshift blanket.

“I have not had enough.”

“Well, we can go again once I’m certain you remember your own name.”

“What is my name?”

He smiled.

“You’re so good, Will, you’re so bloody good...” She pulled his head to hers, kissing him and gasping.

“I never knew anyone could be so consumed by me until I met you,” said Will.

Her eyes fixed on him. “I feel the same way.”

“You are young and beautiful and confident-”

“I’m not always confident,” Victoria corrected. “You helped make me this way.”

“No, you are ever as you were...”

Dinner ended. The ladies and the gentlemen separated for their after dinner recreations and Emmie looked to her mother.

“Mama, might I have a word?”

“Yes, of course, darling,” said Emily.

Emmie pulled her mother aside. “How is it Uncle Melbourne was your sole topic of conversation this evening?”

“I do not know what you mean, shall I not speak of my dear brother’s heroism-”

“And how is it the de Greys and the Shaftesburys all find themselves at Broadlands this year?”

“We needed more men for the shoot.”

“Mama.”

“I may or may not have received a commission from the Queen.”

“A commission?”

“She requires my assistance with a great matter.”
Emmie frowned. “This would not be why every paper suddenly has nothing but praises of Uncle William, would it?”

She stared her mother down.

“I only bribed the first paper, the rest just picked up on the story.”

“Mama!”

“Oh, please, it is not as if I drew the illustrations. I might have offered suggestions...”

“What will be said if it is found out who started it?”

“As with my campaign against Lord Byron?”

Emmie frowned. “What campaign against Lord Byron?”

“Precisely.”

“I find myself slightly frightened.”

“As well you should.”

In the billiards room, Lord Shaftesbury had gotten to thinking.

“De Grey...”

The Earl turned from the table.

“I am trying to shoot, Shaftesbury.”

“What do you think of these new developments with Melbourne?”

“I could not presume to say, sir...”

“It sounds as if the Queen is most grateful to Melbourne...”

His interest was piqued, the cue forgotten. “Yes...”

Ashley came from the other side of the table, tiring of the delay to the game. “What are you driving at, Papa?”

“Do not be naive, son. I think the Queen has a mind to remarry and she has rejected every foreign prince so far. Suppose Lord Melbourne were to rise to the rank of Consort...”

“That would be impossible, Father. The party would never allow it.”

Shaftesbury looked at de Grey. “What do you think?”

“I think if the Queen does not marry Melbourne, King Leopold will find her another foreign cousin...”

“Indeed...”

“Father, you can’t be serious-”
“Anthony, do you want the next King of England to be an Englishman or not?”

“Their children could never inherit over a princess of royal blood!”

“We should have someone look into it,” said de Grey.

Ashley was dumbfounded.

“You two can’t be serious. You only wish the Queen to marry Melbourne so you can exert your own influence.”

“Do not be stupid, Anthony,” said Shaftesbury. “If we do not exert influence, some corrupt foreigners will. Providence has sought to spare us from the necessity of royal blood. Do you not think your wretched chimney sweeps might be helped if you have the ear of the Queen?”

“What you are suggesting, sir, is an impossible series of events.”

“So is every revolution until it is done. You ought to know better. You are a Shaftesbury.”

“Are you awake yet?,” asked Will, finding Victoria still in bed.

Victoria moaned and rolled over. “Do you think there’s such a thing as too many orgasms?”

Will raised his eyebrow. “If you don’t start talking sense soon, I’m taking you to hospital.”

“That’ll be mortifying, being taken to A&E because I had too strong an orgasm.”

“Not for me.”

Victoria sat up. “Forget it, we’re not going. I’m not having any matrons try to steal you off me.”

“Right.” Will sat on the bed next to her. “I thought we might do the next section with the change in public opinion towards Lord Melbourne.”

Victoria leaned on Will’s shoulder as he pulled up a newspaper cartoon depicting Melbourne protecting the infant princess on his iPad.

“The Hero of Buckingham Palace,” Victoria read.

“The Princess Royal’s Savior,” Will read off another equally exaggerated cartoon. “It’s not just the illustrations, I found another article criticizing Prince Albert for his lack of foresight in dying and leaving behind a young widow.”

“I don’t even like him and I think that’s a bit harsh...”

“The general mood towards Melbourne changes, he manages to find his third public life as a hero.”

“There’s still a jump from hero to consort...”

“Your Majesty.”

“Do not get up, Lord M.”
“You know, I am not quite as infirm as you make me out to be.”

She smiled. “If you are too well, you will have to return to Dover House. Before Christmas.”

He tilted his head. “Now I see your plan.”

“It was hardly a plan, Lord M. Regina and I would be bereft of your company.”

“And I yours.”

“With that in mind, I have come to issue an invitation.”

“Oh?”

“As you know, I attend Christmas service and I thought as you would be staying, you might accompany me.”

“Your Majesty knows I do not-”

“But you said such things were for the benefit of children and there is Gina this year. I was going to bring her.”

“Isn’t she a bit young?”

“The people want to see her. She has attended before and been no trouble.”

“You do not play fair, ma’am.”

She smiled.

“Though supposing she was troublesome at church, who would mention it to you?”

The Queen’s entrance always caused a stir, but today was different. The first time she came with Regina it was a bit of a stir, but it was a reminder that the queen was a young mother.

Then Lord Melbourne following her caused something of a stir. The service began as usual.

Melbourne felt eyes boring into him from behind. This was why he had stopped going to church in the first place. Too many whispers about Caro, too many whispers about Augustus. He had never bothered explaining to Victoria that he had a scandalous wife and a son who could not be seen in public without being talked about, how could he have attended church?

He felt something pulling at his sleeve. He saw it was Regina as her mother remained stoically interested in the sermon. She smiled at him and he smiled back making her giggle. He shifted her away from the Queen who smiled at them and proceeded to amuse her- and himself- by making faces. Only the Archbishop seemed displeased and he was the only one looking.

What were they saying? Regina distracted him, grabbing his nose and he realized for the first time, there was no gossip, the ladies behind him were swooning.

Swooning as Regina wrapped her arms around his neck.

It continued as he carried Regina after the service. Victoria and the Duchess were preoccupied with
speaking to other parishioners, the great and the good. He amused Regina walking in circles pointing things out for her.

“It is most distressing how Melbourne hangs on...” said the Duchess. “The way he ingratiates himself.”

He pretended not to hear, it was a skill he had.

“No, I think you are mistaken, Duchess. It is quite pleasing,” said another lady of fashion.

“To see a man feign affection over a child?”

“I see nothing feigned in it. To the contrary.”

Victoria walked back to Melbourne.

“Do her eyes look different to you?”

Melbourne looked at Regina. “Not that I had noticed.”

“I thought they might be changing color. You do not suppose she’s getting ill, do you?”

“She is fine, but sometimes that happens.”

“What happens?”

“Babies’ eyes, they can change color. Augustus’ did when he was a few months old.”

Victoria looked taken aback. “You mean she might just wake up with a different eye color?”

“Possibly.” He smiled. “It is not so uncommon, ma’am.”

“What about this?” Will pointed out, another article.

“He went to church with her.” Victoria looked up. “Melbourne hated church. So did Regina, actually. She used to disguise novels as prayer books. Even when she was an adult.”

“But it’s a first step towards Melbourne looking like a potential consort, some snide mentions of the way the ladies at the church swooned at him fawning over Regina, but that wasn’t a largely popular opinion.”

Victoria smiled. “Your childless father and fatherless child.”

“And as it turned out neither was really childless or fatherless...”

“Yeah, but nobody knew that, did they?”

“Well, the Queen. Melbourne.”

“Do you think they told Regina, though? I mean, she never wrote about Albert, she never called Melbourne anything but Papa...” She shook her head. “And yet, I never found one mention of anyone thinking Melbourne was her real father.”

“There are even those who thought Victoria I was fathered by Sir John Conroy...”

“So how come nobody ever put it together?”
“Here we are...”

Victoria opened the doors to the new nursery. It was much lighter than the old one and covered in a floral wallpaper. The window by the cot faced to the gardens, dolls and books were on shelves against a wall. There was a new rocking horse and dolls’ house and a small table and chairs set.

“I even put new furniture by the fire,” said Victoria. “I want to spend more time with her in here. What do you think?”

“It is not what I think,” said Melbourne. He whispered down to Regina. “What do you think? Are you pleased with what your mama has done?”

“Mama,” Victoria said suddenly.

Melbourne turned. “Duchess.”

“You are looking much better, I think, Lord Melbourne.”

“I was just showing Lord M Regina’s new nursery. What do you think?”

“I think it is awfully far from my rooms.”

“Yes, but it was closer to my rooms. A child should be near her mother, I think.”

“What a surprising thought from you.”

“I am not a child.”

“Did you ask Dr. von Stockmar about this?”

“Do I need to?”

“He is your advisor.”

“I never asked him to advise me, but somehow he still feels free to do so.”

“I only want to help and so does he. We can find another suitable husband.”

“No, thank you.”

The Duchess left muttering in German.

“What did she say?”

“You would not like it.”

“You know, if you think about it,” Victoria began, “it’s really an extraordinary set of circumstances that put Melbourne and Victoria together.”

“How do you mean?,” asked Will.
He was trying to outline Melbourne’s rise and Victoria was assembling their Indian takeaway into a meal on the table.

“Well, first off, none of King George’s sons had any legitimate heirs before Victoria. She might have never existed if just one of them had and then for her to become Queen? Long shot, right?”

“Right...”

“Melbourne was the second son of a newly made Viscount. He was headed for a career in the army before his brother died because he didn’t have a way to make a name otherwise. Everything would have gone to Peniston.”

“Not to mention he never would have had a title if his mother hadn’t been sleeping with the Prince Regent.”

“But Peniston dies and suddenly, he can pursue politics and then becomes Viscount and Prime Minister to the only other person whose path there has been as strange and winding as his.”

She sat down at the table with him.

“I just wish we could say exactly how they got through that last mile...” said Victoria. “Someone must have wanted to make Melbourne a hero.”

“Yeah. Victoria did.”

She looked at him quizzically and he turned to her.

“We’ve been looking at this wrong. It’s not a matter of who wanted Victoria to marry Melbourne, it’s that Victoria wanted to marry Melbourne and she had to find a way to make it palatable. He had to be a hero who saved the life of the most beloved member of the Royal Family, even the most ardent Tory would be forced to admit he possessed a noble character.”

“They didn’t have to love him, they never loved Albert, he just had to be bearable.”

“And he was always good at being bearable...”

“Lord M...”

Melbourne looked up from his book. The Queen was standing in the parlor of his suite in her nightgown, the silhouette of her figure coming through the gauzy fabric.

“Ma’am.”

“Might I be Victoria tonight? In this room?”

“Of course.”

She shut the door, turning the key in the lock.

“Say it.”

“Victoria.”
She smiled and walked closer, kneeling before him.

“Again. Slower.”

He put his book aside.

“Victoria.”

She squirmed. He put his hand to her cheek.

“Victoria, what have you come for?”

“You. I need you.”

“We can’t-”

“I need you how I can have you tonight.” She sighed. “I do want us, Lord M. I want us to be a family with Gina, but I need something tonight...”

He traced her clavicle and her shoulder with his hand, coming back around to her breast, teasing it through her nightdress.

Suddenly she stood, taking off her nightdress, her body flickering in the candlelight.

He had missed seeing her naked, not since before the baby was born. He had likened her to a goddess then, bursting with life. She had transformed into a different goddess now, no less impressive. Her breasts were heavy and swollen and her body was dotted with little shiny flecks where she had carried their baby.

He stood.

“Lay down.”

She got the idea immediately, stepping back and slowly going to the floor, settling on the rug. He took off his dressing gown and his own nightshirt and watched as she bit her lip as she stared.

He came down to his knees and pulled a cushion from the sofa, placing it under her bottom. He went down to his elbows realizing that truthfully it was not very comfortable, but what was comfort. He nuzzled between her legs and she spread for him as he kissed his way up her thighs finding himself at her center.

He felt her hand in his hair, moaning as she sought to pull him closer. She needn’t have worried as he began running his tongue on her folds and lapping up the nectar he found there.

She came as sucked on that button above her womanhood, her own hand stifling her cries.

Victoria finished shaking and sat up, a lustful look in her eyes.

“Lord M, lie back.”

She did not intend to broker opposition and watched him as he laid back. She settled between his legs. Every part of him was so fascinating to her, since she had seen that bit of his neck at Dover House. His chest, shoulders, arms, so different from her own.

His hipbones held a special fascination, the way they jutted out, she traced her hand down them as she heard him hold a gasp. His manhood of course, such a funny looking thing and the way it gave
him such pleasure, the way it felt inside of her... It was already erect, a little liquid coming from it...

She placed her hands on his hips and brought her mouth over him, alternating between sucking and bobbing her mouth. She could hear him moaning, begging for release and could feel him shaking under her hands. He came in her mouth and he sat up, presumably to spare her this, but she locked eyes with him as she drank him up, finally letting him go, wiping away a little that had dribbled onto her chin.

“Victoria...” he sighed.

“When I ask you to marry me again, will you say yes?”

“I do not think it would be advisable-”

“When it is advisable, though, will you say yes?” She tilted her head at him. “You once said any man would be a fool to turn me away.”

“You heard me.”

“Yes, and I ought to have come back to you then, possibly could have spared everyone a great deal of trouble, including Albert.”

“Were you... were you so unhappy?”

“I do not know. I just could not feel the happiness I have with you... And Regina. I do not know what I might have done without you.” She looked back at him. “So, when I ask you again, will you say yes?”

“Ma’am, as you know, I have lost the ability to summon the strength to refuse you...”

She smiled as she remembered him saying something of that nature the night they made Regina.

“I am so glad you were my Prime Minister,” she said.

Victoria awoke still humming with pleasure from her night with Lord M. It was still too early for her maids but she could hear Regina down the hall. She put on her dressing gown and hurried down.

“Dr. von Stockmar, what are you doing here?”

He bowed. “The Duchess sent me to look at the Princess’ new nursery. She had some concerns.” Victoria walked to the baby and lifted her from the cot. “I do not remember asking your advice.”

She wrapped her arms around the baby, wanting to protect her.

“The Duchess is concerned for her grandchild.”

“There is no cause for concern and again, I do not recall granting you permission to be here.”

“Yet Lord Melbourne is permitted?”

“Lord Melbourne is my friend.”

“Some think you are more.”
“Is that their place?,” she asked tightly.

“The Duke of Saxe Coburg has expressed to me a concern for his grandchild.”

“He has expressed no such concern to me.”

“Well, I think I should write him and explain he has no cause for concern.”

“We should be grateful.”

“I cannot help but notice the Princess’ change in eye color. Perhaps Lord Melbourne would be interested.”

Stockmar left.

Victoria cuddled Regina, then she held her back and had a realization that shocked her and was a cause for worry.

Regina had awoken with Lord Melbourne’s eyes.

And Stockmar knew.
Dover House, Present Day

The Duke of Montrose paced the floor as Dash, the latest in a long line of King Charles Spaniels followed him. He looked up to see his wife’s lady-in-waiting, Divya, a post that was usually more ceremonial than anything and was today becoming quite functional.

“No.”

“She’ll be five minutes-” Divya insisted.

“She was five minutes an hour ago. Victoria!,” he shouted rolling the r in his thickest Scottish.

He headed up the stairs of Dover House as Dash followed.

“Victoria!”

He finally made it back to the bedroom.

“What happened to tan?”

“Beige. And I look fat in it.”

“We have to leave for Buckingham Palace-” He looked at his watch. “Ten minutes ago. So that we can take a car to the palace to ride in a horse carriage with your gran to sit in what amounts to our back garden, but before we can do that, you need to leave this room.”

“I don’t want to look fat.”

“You just had a baby!”

“So I do look fat?”

“I’ve just decided I like it much better when they make you wear a uniform.”

“I’m Colonel of the Grenadier Guards!”

“An argument no other couple in the world is having. Come on, you’re wearing the blue dress, I like the blue dress, let’s go with the blue dress.”

“I need a hat.”
When they arrived at Buckingham Palace, there was no change.

“I mean, either I leave the baby and I’m a bad mother or I stay with her and I’m a terrible granddaughter.”

“There’s really no way to win, ma’am,” Divya commiserated.

“You know, other men get to spend Saturdays playing football or going to the pub,” said David.

“Are they married to royals?”

“The King of Jordan seemed fun. I bet he gets a Saturday off now and again.”

They passed the oil painting at the top of the stairs.

“Morning, Grandmama. Morning, Lord M.”

Divya frowned. “What are you doing?”

David looked back. “She always talks to the painting.”

“Why?”

They ran into the Queen. Victoria curtsied first. David bowed and Divya curtsied.

“You didn’t forget my birthday, did you?”

“No, Granny.”

“Well, let’s go.”

They turned around to follow the Queen, joined by the liveried footmen.

“Good bye, Grandmama. Good bye, Lord M.”

“That really is compulsive,” said the Queen. “Perhaps you should have someone look into that.”

“I think it’s probably too late, Granny.”

“How is my great granddaughter this morning?”

“Victoria is very well. You ought to come and see her again.”

“I’m supposed to go to India tomorrow.”

Victoria was shocked. “You just got back from Australia. Don’t you think you ought to take a rest?”

“I can’t very well break the engagement now it’s made, can I? Oh, speaking of your painting, what have you decided about Brocket Hall?”

“Oh, you mean the historians? I gave permission.”

“What? Why?”

“Why not? There’s so much at Brocket Hall and nobody has ever looked into it.”
“So they’re free to roam around our house?”

“Why? Did you leave something in the medicine cabinet?” asked David.

Victoria spoke again. “If you didn’t want me to grant permission, I wish you would have just said so.”

“No, no, it will be your empire someday, run it how you wish.”

“A guilt trip. This is how you want to begin your birthday parade?”

“Victoria.” Melbourne waited as she looked up at him. He had to resort to using her first name very early this morning.

She looked up anxiously as she held Regina who was uninterested in everything but a silver rattle sent by Leopold for Christmas.

“He knows nothing.”

“How can you say that? He knows everything. He saw me that morning.”

“Do you honestly think he has put the dates together?”

“He saw her eyes.”

“That is not proof. He knows nothing. If he tells anyone, no one will speak of it.”

“He will tell Uncle Ernst and he will tell Uncle Leopold and Mama. Word will travel throughout the courts of Europe that the Queen of England is a whore.”

Melbourne sighed. “Then you ought to send me away.”

“What?”

“That is the obvious solution, ma’am, to dismiss me. I’ll retire to Brocket Hall—”

“That is not a solution, Lord M! I will not be separated from you again!” She looked at him in shock.

“You wish to abandon me? And your daughter?”

“I wish to do no such thing, but it is not a matter of what I wish and if you feel your reign is in danger because of me—”

She stood without a word and put the baby in his arms. He sighed as she stormed out.

Victoria walked out and down the hall where Lehzen stood with her dressers.

“I need Sir Robert Peel to come to the palace at once.”

“Yes, Majesty.”

“And I need to send a messenger to Lady Palmerston. She is staying at Broadlands. I want him ready to leave as soon as it is finished.”
“Yes, Majesty.”

“It’s coming on!,” Victoria called to Will.

“I’ll be right there!”

Will finished gathering the items for a late brunch. They were back at the house in Oxford as the royal family was due to take up their summer residence at Brocket Hall and there would be no room for interloping historians.

It was Queen Victoria V’s official birthday and the nation was set to celebrate the day as well as one hundred and eighty years of Victorian rule. The first event was the Queen’s official birthday parade.

Will came in the sitting room with a tray containing all the necessary items for brunch.

“Have I missed anything?”

“Just the cousins.”

“Oh, yes, here we are,” said the announcer. “We have the arrival of Her Majesty, Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal and His Royal Highness, the Duke of Montrose.”

The Queen sat in an open carriage across from her granddaughter and her husband.

“Of course, the Princess Royal just gave birth a few weeks ago to Princess Victoria. I don’t know that we’ll be lucky enough to get a glimpse of her on the balcony later. This September, the Princess Royal and the Duke will celebrate their fifth wedding anniversary...”

“I like her hat,” said Victoria. “I should wear more hats. Trouble is there’s nowhere to wear them except for church and I don’t go to church.”

Will shrugged. “You could just start wearing them, that could be your thing.”

“Maybe I’ll wear a hat when we get married,” she smiled.

“Right-”

“I think she looks good. Some nasty person is going to say she looks fat.”

“She did just have a baby.”

There was a knock on the door.

“Who’s that?,” asked Will.

“I don’t know.”

“You didn’t actually order the dog, did you?”

“No, but I do think we should discuss it-”

“You want to have a baby and a puppy?”
“If we get the dog now, it will be less of a puppy by the time we have the baby.”

The knock resumed. Will got up.

“Think about it!,” Victoria called after him.

Peel had been puzzled when the messenger arrived at his house on Boxing Day with a summons to the palace.

He made his way to the throne room and did his usual bow to kiss her hand.

“Your Majesty.”

“I hope your Christmas was a pleasant one, Sir Robert.” She seemed almost nervous now.

“Yes, Majesty, thank you for asking. Might I inquire, ma’am, about your Christmas? I trust the Princess Royal enjoyed herself?”

She turned back to him, an almost smirk on her lips.

That frightened him.

“Oh, yes, Sir Robert, my Christmas was most satisfactory. In fact, I have made plans that I believe will secure my happiness for future holidays.”

He was really starting to become frightened.

“I am pleased to hear it, ma’am.”

“You are the first to know of my engagement to Lord Melbourne.”

He did not quite process the words. Engagement? Melbourne? Melbourne? Engagement?

“Ma’am?”

Melbourne? Engagement?

“I shall call a meeting of the Privy Council as soon as possible after the New Year to announce my intention. Of course there are matters to be seen to in Parliament after that time, but I have every confidence you will be able to see to it, Sir Robert.”

“You wish me to go to Parliament and announce you are to marry Lord Melbourne?”

“Well, I suppose they will have heard of it by that point, I do have some understanding of this process. Perhaps Lord Melbourne could advise you.”

“Ma’am, you cannot marry Lord Melbourne-”

“Is it your place to tell me what I can and cannot do in the matter of my domestic happiness?”

“He is not of royal blood-”

“Yes, it so happens there is no legal requirement for the consort of a monarch to be of royal blood. You might recall, Sir Robert, that Henry VIII had several wives from among the English nobility. Of
course, Anne Boleyn did not end at all well, but surely we can count on Lord M to behave much better than that.”

“The Royal Marriages Act, surely-”

“The Royal Marriages Act only requires that the monarch grant permission and I am the monarch and so I have granted myself permission.”

She was smiling.

Sir Robert surely felt an ulcer forming.

“He is a Whig.”

“So the Consort of a Queen ought to be permitted to hold opinions only when they coincide with yours? As they did with my late husband?”

“Ma’am, at our last meeting, I expressed a concern-”

“Yes, it was impertinent then and I think a resurrection along a similar line will be equally impertinent at this time.”

“The Prince, I am told, always had a fear of Melbourne’s influence over you-”

“I am Queen. No man rules me. Please do not speak of my late husband again for I will be forced to say something unkind about his thoughts on how I might be influenced.”

“You cannot marry Lord Melbourne, ma’am.”

“It is not the place of a Prime Minister to tell his Queen who she may marry, Sir Robert.”

“You have had a great shock, it is only natural that you should be grateful to Lord Melbourne.”

“Do you suppose I do not know my own mind, Sir Robert?”

Will opened the door.

“Emmie!,” he said in surprise.

She walked in rolling a suitcase behind her. “I can’t do it.”

She tossed aside the bags on her arms.

Will shut the door. “What can’t you do, darling?” He walked over to her and kissed her on the cheek. “Hi. By the way.”

“Hi. Sorry.”

“Now, what’s going on?”

“I can’t marry Tony.”

He paused, trying to feign regret. “Oh. Bother.”

“I know you never liked him. You thought he was pretentious and bizarrely religious.”
“That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t like him.”

“And you hated that he liked Dickens.”

“Well...”

“Will, who is it?,” Victoria called from the other room.

“It’s Emmie!”

“Emmie! We’re eating in the sitting room! The birthday parade is on!”

Emmie did as she was told. This was one of the stranger aspects of having a much younger partner, Will thought. Victoria was only a couple years older than his niece and the two got on remarkably well, sharing interests and conversation.

“Don’t you think the Princess Royal looks good?”

Emmie looked at the television. “Oh, that’s ridiculous. I want to hate her but I can’t.”

“I know.”

Will sat down on the sofa. “So, Emmie’s cutting it off with Tony.”

“Oh,” said Victoria.

“You needn’t fake disappointment. How is there no alcohol? What sort of brunch is this?”

“Oh, I could get pregnant any second, I don’t want to poison the baby. There’s some in the kitchen. Help yourself. I can’t drink it.”

Will looked at her in amazement. “So, we’re just telling people that?”

“I can’t lie to Emmie, Will. She’d know I was full of it if I said I was giving up alcohol.”

Emmie chewed on some toast. “I would.”

“Are we telling your mother?”

“God no.” She turned to Emmie. “So, did something happen?”

“He wants to become a missionary in Guatemala.”

“What?”

“I told him my Spanish is terrible, I sunburn too easily and am terrified of insects, but apparently that was all less important than his calling. He said I ought to support him.”


“I mean, why doesn’t he support me for once? I gave up my Thailand beach holiday to go work in a Ugandan orphanage- which don’t misunderstand me, was incredible- but I just don’t think I am that sort of person. But of course, I’m horrible for thinking that.”

“No, you have to be honest with yourself,” said Victoria.

“You’re a teacher, Emmie, that’s an amazing thing already,” said Will.
“So I left...” She looked at them. “I don’t suppose I could stay here for a bit?”

“Of course!,” said Victoria.

Emmie looked at Will. “I’ll find a flat as soon as summer term ends.”

“Of course you can stay.”

“Just don’t get alarmed if we disappear,” said Victoria. “I might be ovulating.”

Will looked at Victoria again. “We’re telling her that?”

“She’d know I was lying if I said I needed you to help me with something in the bedroom.”

“I am an adult, Uncle Will.”

“I had to buy you twenty My Little Ponies while I watched you while your mum was on honeymoon with Henry.”

“I still have them somewhere.”

“I loved My Little Pony,” said Victoria. “Then the internet made it a bit weird...”

“Are you trying to marry your brother off to the Queen?”

Emily looked at her husband as he shot off his rifle and waited for his loader.

“Is that what I am doing?”

“It is still a Tory government, Emily.”

“Do you doubt I could if I so desired it? Not that it matters what I desire, it is the Queen’s inclination.”

A shout came out to stop the shooting and they looked as a Royal Messenger approached.

“Lady Palmerston!”

“Yes?”

He handed her an envelope. “A message from the Queen, ma’am. She said I was to wait for your reply.”

Emily opened the envelope as the other began to gather closer.

“Mama, is Uncle Melbourne alright?,” asked Emmie.

“No, darling, I take it he is fine.” Emily looked up at the messenger. “Will you accompany me to the house? There is something I must have you take to the palace.”

“Yes, milady.”

“What’s going on?,” demanded Shaftesbury.
“All in good time, my lord Shaftesbury.” She looked at Henry. “I shall take the wagonette back to the house.”

“Is something wrong?,” asked Palmerston.

“I will tell you all at dinner.”

The Queen had taken her seat at the parade ground along with her granddaughter and granddaughter-in-law. Victoria and Emmie watched, happily eating a second serving of waffles.

“I mean, I like the Duke of Montrose,” said Emmie.

“Haven’t met him,” said Victoria.

Emmie looked up.

“The Princess Royal was at Gussie’s school. We got to meet her.”

“How brilliant! What’s she like in person?”

Victoria shrugged. “I don’t know. Royal? She’s friendly but she’s definitely royal.”

“Well, I think the Duke must be very special and not some man all wrapped up in his ego. He would have to be, wouldn’t he?”

“Definitely, to be married to a woman who is going to be Queen?” Victoria looked at Will. “Like Melbourne.”

“Right, how’s the book going?,” asked Emmie.

“It’s a process...” Will said disinterestedly.

“Lord M was Victoria II’s father, don’t tell anyone.”

Will looked at Victoria again. “And you told her that?!?”

“She would have known I was lying.”

Emmie shook her head. “No, I wouldn’t have. So, the Queen and Melbourne hooked up before they were married?”

“They did a lot of hooking up,” said Victoria.

“Lord Melbourne.”

He looked up to see the royal messenger who handed him a small bag.

“From Lady Palmerston.”

“What?” He opened the bag to see the contents: their’s mother’s large sapphire ring on an elaborate gold setting. It had come from Lord Egremont. He looked back up at the messenger. “Did she give a message?”
“No, sir. She just said she thought that would do.”

“Thank you.”

He walked out and down the hall to the nursery.

“Majesty?”

“What is it, Lord M?”

“Might I have a word with you alone?”

She kissed Regina on the forehead and gave her back to the nurse. “Mama won’t be a moment, darling.”

They walked back to the study. He pulled the ring out of the bag.

“Do you know why my sister has sent this?”

“Oh, excellent.” She held her left hand out.

“Might you care to explain, Majesty?”

“I suppose it might be because I told her of my intention to announce our engagement to Sir Robert Peel.”

“Our engagement?”

“Yes.”

“Were you going to tell me? Or ask me?”

“I did not think you would mind.”

“Apologies, ma’am, but, yes, I do mind if Sir Robert Peel knows we are to be married before I do. Not to mention Emily.”

“You will have to not call me ‘ma’am’ so much.”

“Could we please return to why you told Sir Robert that we are to be married?”

“Because they have no right to stop me.”

“They can stop your allowance.”

“They will do no such thing. I have a reliable subordinate working on my behalf with some very prominent Tories.”

“Really? Who is this reliable subordinate?” He sighed. It was so obvious he ought to have known. “Emily.”

“Yes.”

“And these prominent Tories?”

“Lord Shaftesbury. The Earl de Grey. The way I see it, Lord M, no one will concern themselves with Dr. von Stockmar’s ramblings. Now, Lord M, you can either be sensible and we will live our
lives forever separated or you can help.”

He sighed, finally taking the seat he had been longing for, sitting in the Queen’s presence be
dammed.

“You can’t ask for an allowance.”

“What? Albert had an allowance! Uncle Leopold still—”

“I do not need it and Parliament will only object to it. And you cannot ask for a title—”

“Of course I can—”

“Do you understand that the object is to give them as few items to object to as possible? They will start on anything that they can find. Remember, I have been in Peel’s position. I know how it is done.” He paused. “Now, was there something you wished to ask me, ma’am?”

She shook her head. “Why can’t you ask me? In this room? No one will know.”

“I will.”

“Don’t you want to ask me?”

“I would if you were anyone but a queen.”

“Forget I am Queen.”

“No, you are Queen, you are Victoria, you are my child’s mother and you are all of these things at once. To disrespect one would be to disrespect them all and I have too high a regard for you to do that.”

She tilted her head at him, wanting to make him out. Two years ago she had wanted to be an ordinary woman. Today she wanted to be the woman Lord M described.

“Lord Melbourne, I wonder if you would do me the honor of letting me become one more thing: your wife.”

“The honor would be mine, ma’am.”

She held her hand out and he slid the ring on her finger.

It was loose.

“Yes, I forgot to mention my mother was quite a tall woman. I shall have it resized.”

“No, let me keep it a while.” She splayed her hand.

Emily was splayed on the sofa with her fifth mimosa.

“You know, maybe the Queen just said sod it. Melbourne and I have been shagging a while, we’re getting married and if you fat old white men have a problem with it—”

“No more alcohol,” said Will as he sat at the tea table with his laptop.
“Maybe she did,” said Victoria. “Harriet Sutherland said she was wearing a new ring by New Year. Announced it to the Privy Council in January.”

“All while Stockmar was still in the palace.”

“This Stockmar sounds like an utter ass,” said Emmie.

Victoria sighed. “We need information on the Privy Council.”

The party gathered at Shaftesbury House was confused about why they had been summoned back to town.

Shaftesbury entered last of all with de Grey at his side.

“Ah, gentlemen, won’t you join me in the library?”

“What’s the meaning of this, Shaftesbury?,” asked Falkland once the brandy was passed out.

“I have it on good authority that the Queen means to marry again.”

The room stirred.

“To whom?,” demanded Fitzroy. “There hasn’t been a prince presented who can turn her head.”

Falkland scoffed. “One wonders what turned her head about the last one.”

“Not a prince,” said Shaftesbury. “A hero. To the nation.”

Falkland shook his head. “Who do you mean?”

“Lord Melbourne.”

“You can’t be serious,” said Falkland.

“Gentlemen, who do you suppose the people care for more? Us or the pretty young widowed Queen with an adorable infant daughter? A daughter who was nearly murdered but for Melbourne’s intervention. Whose side do you suppose they will be on?”

“And suppose we don’t allow it,” said de Grey. “Which foreign prince ought she marry this time? Perhaps we ought to ask King Leopold. Bad enough we’re still paying the man an allowance, he also has to determine who will father the next King?”

“And you suppose the Queen has a mind to ignore the wishes of her family?”

“From what I understand she does not have a mind to listen to anyone who disagrees with her.”

Victoria sighed. “Why must you go back to Dover House?”

“It would not do for me to stay given the circumstances. You do not want anyone to be able to say we are living together yet unmarried.”

She sighed. “And the same reason you gave me that I could not live apart from Mama.”
“I shall be returning in the morning as always.”

“See to it that you do or I shall be forced to come and find you myself.”

“I shall.” He kissed her hand. “Say good night to Gina for me.”

“I will.”

She stood and watched as his carriage left. The Duchess approached.

“Is he finally gone?”

Victoria smiled. “For now.”

“I am glad to finally see him go.”

“No, Mama, we shall be seeing a great deal more of Lord M.”

“More? How could we possibly see more of him?”

She walked away with a mad smirk on her face. “I shouldn’t know, Mama.”

---

**Buckingham Palace, Present Day**

Victoria entered the sitting room.

“Granny?”

The Queen turned.

“David and I were just going back to Dover House. I wanted to say goodbye since I won’t see you before you go to India.”

“Oh, yes. I shall need you to run things here. There are investitures and such.”

“Of course, Granny.”

“Come here.”

Victoria walked in closer and sat across from her. Her grandmother handed her a ring box with VR inscribed.

“Open it,” said the Queen.

Victoria opened it. “Victoria I’s engagement ring. Really?”

“I thought you ought to have it.”

“Whatever happened to the one Albert gave her?”

The Queen shrugged. “In a box somewhere, I suppose.”

“Well, thank you.”

“David is very good for you, isn’t he?”
Victoria smiled. “Of course he is.”

“Because it takes a special sort of man for his position. God knows my father was, my husband certainly was not.”

She shook her head. “Granny-”

“My son would have never had that problem. It’s different for a man or so I hear anyway.”

Victoria stood back up and kissed her grandmother on the cheek. “Thank you for this.”

“You are welcome.”

“Are you sure you want to go all the way to India?”

“I won’t break the engagement. Is the date set for the baptism?”

“August.”

“Good. I’m looking forward to it.”

Victoria walked out into the hall. David waited.

“Ready?”

“Yes.”

He eyed her. “What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know. She just seems tired.”

“She’s probably fine. Just a big day, that’s all.”

Victoria nodded.

“Shall we travel back the eight tenths of a mile back to our house that we were sitting in the back garden of for the better part of two hours?”

“You won’t let that go, will you?”

“I just want to know why we can’t walk out the back door,” he said starting down the stairs.

“Perhaps that is how things are done in the Duchy of Montrose but not here. This isn’t Scotland.”

“So it’s not,” he admitted.

She looked at the painting. “Good night, Grandmama. Good night, Lord M. Taking your ring home... well, to your home, Lord M.”

“Are you ever going to tell me why you do that?”

“Perhaps one day.”
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Hi! Thanks again for all the reads and reviews! Please let me know what you think and happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will kissed Victoria awake.

She sighed. “Good morning.”

“Morning. I wondered if I might impose on you...” He pressed against her, he had woken up with his cock desperate for her and she immediately took his meaning.

“Of course...”

Her eyes were half opened as he moved between her legs, rucking up her short nightgown so he could get to what he needed. She gasped as he entered her and he was slow and deliberate with her, dragging out every stroke.

“I love you, I love you,” he said as her hands dragged him closer.

He came quickly, his world spinning as he finished her with his hand. She rubbed circles on his back as they embraced laying on their sides, facing each other.

“That was nice...” she said.

"We need to get in the car," Will sighed.


Victoria looked at herself in the mirror. She had a deep blue opera gown for tonight all the better to go with Lord M’s ring which had finally been resized to sit on her finger.

No one had said a word about it. She had left Albert’s ring on her dressing table when her hands became too swollen to wear it during her pregnancy and never bothered putting it back on. She had caught Emma and Harriet staring at it, but not asking. Emmie had seen it and obviously knew who it had come from, but still nothing.

Jenkins draped a rather impressive necklace around her and there was nothing left to do but put an orchid in her hair.

“Lord M,” said Victoria.

“Majesty.” He bowed his head and kissed her hand. “You remember my brother, Baron Beauvale.”
“Majesty. Might I introduce my wife, Alexandrina?”

She was a young woman around Victoria’s age carrying with her a certain elegance. Alexandrina curtsied. “Your Majesty.”

“Welcome, Lady Beauvale. I am only sorry it has taken us this long to meet.”

“The pleasure is all mine, ma’am.”

“I expect we will have much in common.”

The Duchess entered the room with Stockmar at her side,

“Why are there so many of Lord Melbourne’s family here?”

“I wouldn’t know, Duchess.”

She looked around the room. “Why is Lord Shaftesbury here?”

Shaftesbury looked at her and walked away. Chin held up with all the pride Coburg could summon, she walked towards her daughter, currently on Melbourne’s arm.

“Drina, may I speak to you?”

“Oh, but Mama, we are just about to go in.”

“Why are they all here?”

“They are our dinner guests, Mama.”

“Do not play coy with me, why are these guests here?”

Victoria looked up at Melbourne. “Shall we go in, Lord M?”

“But he cannot-”

“Uncle Sussex has already agreed, Mama.”

The Duchess looked up. Sussex waited with his wife as Victoria and Melbourne walked into the dining room.

“What could be the meaning of that?,” Stockmar wondered.

The Duchess’ situation did not improve as they went in. She was seated down by the Earl and Countess de Grey, who seemed to be the in-laws of one of Melbourne’s nephews. How many did he have? The nieces were present with their husbands. Melbourne’s brother and his new wife sat by the Queen and Melbourne. Lehzen and Lady Beauvale seemed to have much to discuss in German, with Victoria occasionally joining in, but as usual she was besotted with Melbourne and his every word. Lord and Lady Palmerston held down the middle of the table with the Sussexes and the Dowager Queen.

She might as well have been in Siberia.

The Duchess watched as Victoria looked to Melbourne. She then tapped her glass.
“I know you are all probably wondering why we have asked you here this evening, but we wanted you all to be the first to know...”

It was only then that the Duchess noticed her daughter’s new gold and sapphire ring.

“Lord Melbourne and I are going to be married. We shall announce it to the Privy Council tomorrow and we will set a date as soon as we meet with the Lord Chamberlain.”

She smiled, but she said it firmly, looking directly at the corner where the Duchess and Stockmar sat.

“To the bride and groom,” said Sussex raising his glass.

The Duchess tried not to choke on her champagne.

“Wellington was an ass,” Victoria announced to no one in particular.

They had come to London and were currently standing in front of the Wellington Arch. There was a group of what seemed to be art students sketching nearby.

“Well, you don’t get monuments by being nice to people.”

“Lord M did.”

“He was married to the Queen. That does help.”

Victoria looked to the students. “Wellington was an ass. Write that down.”

“Uh, we’re just like sketching and stuff-”

“Have you ever read Persuasion?”

“Um, yeah?”

“Imagine Persuasion if the guy she fell in love with came back, said the girl was ugly, married her anyway then spent the rest of his life criticizing her and cheating on her.”

“Didn’t he like shag the Queen once?”

“No, he shagged Lord M’s first wife!,” Victoria said in exasperation. “What school do you all go to?”

“Victoria...”

“Seriously, I’m writing an email...” She pointed. “The man’s lucky to get a monument at all.”

“Here,” said Will, holding up his phone.

“What?”

“I’m taking a photo.”

“In front of Wellington?”

He frowned at her. She relented and smiled for him.
“Come on, we can’t be late.”

Victoria had tried to keep her mother out, but she finally caught her while she was dressing. Jenkins was just finishing lacing her corset.

“Were you even going to consult me?”

“Why, Mama? Was your answer going to be different from what I assumed it would be?,” she asked as she stepped into her skirts.

“You are sullying your line, making Regina stepdaughter to a Viscount. Is he to outrank her?”

She turned, ignoring the fact that Jenkins was waiting to put on her new dark blue silk with embroidery. “Why not? You always had Sir John to tell me what to do.”

“That was different-”

“Yes. Indeed. Lord M loves Regina, something we could never accuse Sir John of.”

“He was not your stepfather.”

“No. He just made my childhood a misery! Why can you not accept that after all this time?”

She went to let her dressers put her in the dress with its long sleeves and high collar. The Duchess came closer.

“He only wanted to help you-”

“How can you possibly believe that now?”

“I only want to help you now.”

Victoria shook her head. “I will never believe that.”

Lehzen entered. “Your Majesty.”

“Is Lord Melbourne here?”

“No, it is the Duke of Wellington.”

She turned. “The Duke of Wellington?”

“He is requesting an audience with Your Majesty.”

They arrived at the Great Ormond Street Hospital to find Carrie waiting in the lobby along with Gussie stuck to his mobile.

“You brought her?”

Will sighed. “Good morning, Carrie-”
“I left Gordon at home.”

“We’re doing research. I thought we could give Gussie lunch before we took him back round to your place.”

“You want to take give him lunch?”

“You’re taking him to Crete for summer holiday.”

“Hey, Gussie,” said Victoria.

He nodded.

Carrie grimaced and led their parade to the lifts.

Victoria entered the throne room. The Duke bowed and she held out her hand.

“You Grace. What have you asked to see us?”

“Sir Robert Peel asked me to see you before the Privy Council.”

Her countenance darkened. “Did he?”

“He is of the opinion that this marriage may not be in Your Majesty’s best interest.”

“And you share this opinion?”

“I do, ma’am.”

“I think that rather ungentlemanly of you, Your Grace.”

“Ungentlemanly, ma’am? I do not follow your meaning.”

“You did have an affair with Lord Melbourne’s previous wife. It seems rather petty to try to deny him a second one.”

“Did Melbourne tell you that?”

“No. He would never be so spiteful.” He eyed her questioningly. “Lady Palmerston did.”

“Marrying a former Whig Prime Minister might be seen as being partial.”

“I see. Are we to repeat the Bedchamber Crisis?”

“With respect, ma’am, you are choosing to repeat it.”

“With respect, I have not asked Sir Robert to resign. I have proposed no changes to the government. I propose only to marry the man that I choose. I think we ought to end this conversation lest we be forced to not part as friends.”

The door opened and Melbourne entered.

“Forgive me, Your Majesty. I thought you were alone.”
“All in all, Gussie is doing excellent,” said Dr. Clark. “I see no reason why he shouldn’t go on holiday if he keeps to his medication routine and sleep schedule. You can do that can’t you, Gussie?”

“Uh-huh.”

Dr. Clark smiled at them. He was very used to the boy by now. “I remember when Gussie first came here, he wasn’t taller than my desk.”

Will spoke. “I’m concerned about activities, swimming, climbing—”

“Well, we all know the rules for that. No going in the water alone and it would be better if he didn’t do any climbing.”

“I know that,” Carrie said through clenched teeth.

“Well, I’ve kept you all long enough. Enjoy your holiday, Gussie and we’ll see you before the school year starts.”

Carrie and Gussie got up with Will hot on their heels. Victoria turned to the doctor.

“Dr. Clark, I wonder if I might ask you something?”

“Of course, Miss Kensington.”

“I’ve been doing some reading and I don’t quite understand if epilepsy is genetic.”

Dr. Clark smiled knowingly. “You and Mr. Lamb are considering having children?”

“Well, we’re pretty much decided on it—though nothing has happened yet which isn’t your problem—but I’m concerned.”

“It’s perfectly natural.”

“So, is it?”

“In some cases, yes. Sometimes it is a random mutation. As for the genetic cases, since your child and Gussie would only be half siblings—genetically—the chances would be very remote.”

“The chances were remote in the first place, though. And Allison.”

“There are no guarantees in life,” said Dr. Clark. “And I will be here no matter what happens.”

Victoria said goodbye and went to the lift. Will, Carrie and Gussie were standing there.

“Where did you go? We lost you,” said Will.

Carrie scoffed. “If only.”

“I just had a question about light bulbs,” said Victoria.
“You mean you still don’t know what kind of light bulbs he needs?,” Carrie sneered.

The doors opened and revealed the Princess Royal, the Duke of Montrose holding a baby carrier and a bodyguard behind them.

“Oh, it’s you!,” she said with delight.

Victoria curtsied. “Your Royal Highness.”

Will bowed. Even Gussie had looked up from his mobile. Carrie was gobsmacked.

“David, these are the historians I was talking to Granny about.”

“Oh, the Victoria I, Lord M book.”

The Princess Royal smiled. “Well, don’t feel as if you have to wait for the next lift.”

They entered the lift.

“And this is Gussie, he’s Head Boy at the Lord Melbourne School,” the Princess said to David.

David looked at Gussie’s phone. “Is that Clash of Gladiators? What level are you on?”

The Princess looked at Carrie. “I’m afraid I haven’t been introduced to you.”

“This is Carrie Ponsonby. Gussie’s mother,” said Victoria.

“Oh, you’re the ex-wife,” she said in realization.

“What? Why did you say it like that?”

The Princess turned back to the lift doors. She had the look of a woman who knew exactly what she was doing, was used to getting away with verbal murder and she was about to become Victoria’s favorite Royal for it. “Did I say it in a certain manner? So sorry.”

“What brings you here, ma’am?”

“Oh, just some shots before we go to Brocket Hall,” said the Princess. “One of the benefits of being the Royal Patron is the express service.”

Victoria motioned at the baby. “Could I have a look?”

“Oh, sure. David?”

David was leaning over Gussie. “Now if you take out that sentry you get five extra lives...”

“David!”

“Bit busy.”

“Could I have the baby?”

“Oh. Sure.”

Not looking up, he handed her the carrier and the Princess held it up. Victoria oohed and aahed. Carrie seemed offended that the two seemed to be friends.
“Will, you know who she looks like?”

The words were almost out of her mouth before she realized it, but Will stopped them.

“Victoria II.”

“Yes,” Victoria agreed.

“You really think so?” The Princess peered at her daughter and put the carrier back down to her side.

“So, have you found anything good at Brocket Hall?”

Victoria and Will looked at each other. Clearly her courtiers had not informed her.

Will answered. “We’re finding great use in Victoria’s sketches and Lord Melbourne’s journals.”

“Not hers, though?”

“Well, we have the published ones,” said Victoria.

“Oh, no, I mean the unedited ones. I hear they were a bit...”

“A bit what?,” asked Will.

She cast a glance in Gussie’s direction for them to catch her meaning. “Descriptive about her married life.”

“Really?,” asked Victoria.

“A list maker.”

“Really?”

“I think the originals are at Windsor,” said Will. “I don’t think I’ve seen that volume.”

“I’ll write a letter, get someone to fish it out for you.”

The lift doors opened.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

They parted ways. Carrie turned to Victoria.

“Why did she say ‘the ex-wife’ like that?”

Victoria shook her head. “Did she say it in a certain way?”

Victoria entered the room where the council met with Melbourne following. The room seemed to be split. Her government ministers and Sir Robert on one side. Lord Shaftesbury and his contingent on the other and in the middle those counselors she assumed had no idea what was about to happen.

“My lords,” she began, “it has been well over a year since my poor dear husband Prince Albert was murdered. In that time, I have found, I have borne a daughter and found the will to carry on in my duties as your Queen. I could have done none of this without the help of one of my oldest, dearest friends, Lord Melbourne.”
The middle of the room began to look confused. Peel’s side looked ready for the sword of Damocles to drop on them.

Shaftesbury’s side looked ready and that gave her the encouragement to carry on.

“Lately, we find ourselves indebted to Lord Melbourne for saving the life our of heiress, the Princess Royal against a scheming and ruthless foreign villain who wished to take our throne for himself.”

She saw Sir Robert rolling his eyes. Lord Shaftesbury’s men nodded their disapproval and disgust.

“So, I think it may not come as such a shock when I announce to you our engagement to Lord Melbourne to whom we are to be married at the earliest possible convenience.”

She changed the position of her hands, engagement ring facing out now so there was no confusion.

The middle of the room was in shock. Her archbishops looked at one another in silent panic. Peel had his men ready, though.

“Are we to call Melbourne king,” asked Sir James Graham.

She smiled. “Of course not, Sir James. In fact, we will ask for no titles other than the ones Lord Melbourne is already holder of or the ones that are in my personal gift.”

“Are to pay him an allowance,” asked the Duke of Wellington.

She opened her mouth to speak, but found herself beaten.

“We paid the late Prince an allowance, surely we can come up with something for the Queen’s new consort,” said Shaftesbury.

Melbourne tried to interrupt as Peel’s men stirred. “My lords, I am asking for no allowance-”

Shaftesbury looked at him. “But it’s beneath the dignity of the Queen’s consort to have no allowance. Are you to be a pauper?”

“I am hardly a pauper now-”

“I do not see why public money ought to go to a Viscount-”

“Certainly you would not have the father of a king be destitute-”

“You propose their children inherit,” Sir Robert guffawed.

Victoria looked towards Melbourne. She had not predicted this turn as Peel’s men turned on Shaftesbury’s. Certainly she had not expected Shaftesbury to be so actively for her.

“The son of a viscount should be king?”

“We let the son of a baronet be Prime Minister,” muttered de Grey.

“I take offense, sir-”

“I should hope so, sir,” said de Grey.

“My lords, surely the issue is not whether the son of a viscount can inherit, but whether the son of a Queen can inherit!,” Victoria shouted raising her voice over the fray. The men stopped and looked.
“Should the Princess Royal inherit, would it be because she is the daughter of the Queen of England or the daughter of the prince of an inconsequential German duchy?!”

That seemed to have silenced them.

“So, surely, my lords, we will not need to have further discussion on whether my children can inherit the throne. It seems rather unbecoming for a Privy Council.”

“It shall be done, ma’am,” Shaftesbury tried to reassure her as the council broke up.

“Shall it?” She looked in the direction of Peel’s men. “The Tories seem quite determined to play rough.”

“The title was a savvy move, ma’am, but they cannot deny Melbourne an allowance, not once the people hear of it.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Melbourne’s popularity far exceeds any of theirs…”

Wellington went to Melbourne. He braced himself.

“Well, Melbourne, you have seduced her…”

“I have done no such thing-”

“You could not have found yourself a different pretty young thing?”

“You and I have never seen women in the same way, Your Grace. I certainly would not refer to Her Majesty in such a manner.”

Melbourne walked back to the Queen’s side as Shaftesbury left.

“What did he say to you?”

“Nothing.”

“I do not think it was nothing.”

“Victoria, you really cannot concern yourself with everything that will be said-”

“He insulted you.” She moved to go towards the Duke, he stilled her.

“You cannot fight every battle. Let this one go.”

“So, Gussie, Victoria and I are going to be married.”

They had been sitting in the quiet corner of Gussie’s favorite pizzeria for an hour when Will broached the topic.

He didn’t answer.
“You did hear me?,” Will asked.

“Yeah.”

“So, do you have anything you want to say?”

“No.”

Victoria nodded. “It’ll be pretty much the same as things are now.”

“Okay.”

“So, did you want to be there when we get married or anything?,” asked Will.

“No.”

Will and Victoria looked at each other. Gussie was never very verbal- in fact had become much more so since going away to school- and puberty certainly was not helping matters.

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah.”

They drove Gussie back to Carrie’s. He would be taking the train back to school the next day and Victoria waited in the car as Will went in for a few minutes.

He emerged.

“He really doesn’t want to come,” said Will.

She shrugged. “Teenage boys. Weddings. Not really their thing, is it?”

Will shook his head. “Do you think he’ll want me at his wedding? Good God…”

“Will, we’re going into a registry office and signing a piece of paper, it’s not that big a deal.” She paused. “By the way, I have a great idea for our honeymoon.”

He turned to her. “We’re having a honeymoon?”

“Will Lamb, don’t begin to think I’m getting married without a honeymoon. Who do you think you’re talking to?”

Chapter End Notes

History nerd time: Persuasion if the guy turned out to be a jerk is pretty much how the Duke of Wellington's marriage went. Like I really grew to hate the Duke of Wellington writing this chapter...
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

So, here we are. Thanks again for the comments and the reviews. They mean a lot. Please let me know what you think and happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

London, 1924

Matthew awoke to the hall light shining in his eyes.

“My lord?”

He rolled over checking his fob watch.

“Smith, it’s two in the morning.”

“You have a visitor, milord.”

“Who the bloody hell is it? Tell them to come back at a decent hour!”

“I am not certain that would be the best course of action, sir.”

Matthew went downstairs. The butler and head housekeeper stood waiting in their dressing gowns as the Princess Royal stood.

“Victoria, what on Earth are you doing here? Haven’t we shown you to the drawing room?”

“They tried valiantly. I refused. I can’t sit.”

“Won’t you-”

“No, I just came to tell you that I can’t marry you, that’s all.”

“What?”

“I am so... frightfully sorry for the inconvenience.”

She spun around and left.

“Victoria!”

He tried to follow her out but she was away in a car and he noticed a milkman staring. It would not do for the Princess Royal to have been seen leaving the house of her fiance in the dark.

“These things always happen,” the housekeeper tried to reassure him. She was a kind woman and had worked for the family since before Matthew was born. “I shouldn’t worry, milord.”
He nodded and tried to smile. He looked to his butler. “I’m going to write a note. Could one of the footman take it to the palace at first light?”

“Of course, sir.”

Winter gave way to spring and the excitement over a royal wedding grew. Though some would suppose it to only be half a royal wedding, the vast majority of the British people could not be bothered to, much to Tory consternation.

Lord Melbourne had found a third public life as their hero, their knight who had saved the life of their Princess and would be marrying their Queen, much to the consternation of some Tories who frowned as they carried the Sword of State through the entire wedding rehearsal.

The day grew nearer. The wedding guests began to arrive and it was finally down to the logistics of actually getting the business done.

“Collier, how are the preparations going?”

“All in hand, sir. Your new Windsor uniform arrived from the tailor yesterday.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” said Melbourne. “I do not care for superstition but it did seem rather a bad omen to have to wear the same one as I watched the Queen marry another man in.”

“Understandable, sir.”

“And the preparations for the move?”

“Most of your things are ready, sir, the rest will be done during your honeymoon.”

He nodded. “There are some books in Augustus’ room. I would like to give them to the Princess Royal.”

“I shall see to it, sir.”

“The rest of his things we can move to Brocket Hall.”

Collier nodded as he brushed the shoulders of Melbourne’s jacket.

“Have you met Dr. von Stockmar’s manservant?”

“Yes, sir. At Windsor and of course when you stayed at the palace.”

“What sort of man is he?”

“German, sir.”

Melbourne nodded. “That figures.”

“Sir?”

“Never mind, Collier. Thank you.”

Will was sad.
Sad like she hadn’t seen him. He had been in a funk since they returned from London and the business with Gussie. She tried to cheer him up, waking him up with gentle lovemaking that left them both shaking between whispered ‘I love yous.’ It usually ended with him on top of her and Victoria stroking his back.

But he was sad and Gussie had gone off to Crete.

“How’s the baby making going?”

Victoria looked up in surprise. Emily shook her head.

“He was having a panic attack. When you mentioned it. Not now.”

Victoria shrugged. “Nothing. Yet.” She looked over. “He’s so upset over Gussie.”

“And Allison.”

She looked back. “What?”

Emily frowned. “Did he not tell you why I’ve come?”

“No.”

“This was the day Allison died.”

Victoria ran through her thoughts. It had been the summer, she knew that much.

“He usually spends the day with Gussie, but...”

“Right,” said Victoria.

“Not that Carrie cares...”

“She seems so protective of Gussie, though.”

“That’s guilt,” said Emily. “She hardly knew Allison. When she gave birth to her, she left her and went back to Gordon. She left Will to sit at her bedside alone.”

Victoria shook her head. “I had no idea. Will never said a word.”

She nodded. “He keeps Allison very close to his heart.”

“Uncle Leopold is here.”

Victoria said it with consternation. Melbourne approached the cot. Regina had begun to stand with her hands on the railing and was excitedly waiting for him. He smiled at her and lifted her into his arms. He turned back to see Victoria pace.

“I do recall you invited him.”

She scoffed. “Did I have a choice? And he’s brought his wife and his children. The boys are terrors, they’re running all over the palace.”

“His daughter is not much older than Gina, I recall,” said Melbourne. “Perhaps Princess Charlotte might make a suitable companion.”
“He tried to make the boys play with her. I do not know why, they are far too rough.”

Melbourne sighed. “Prince Phillippe?”

Victoria turned. “How did you know that?”

“Because he is the third son and has nothing to inherit.”

She stared at him a moment. “Oh, Lord M, no.”

“You think it is too early for him to have decided whom it would be most beneficial for Regina to marry?”

“She is a baby!”

“I am well aware.”

Victoria grunted in frustration. Melbourne gave her a bemused smirk.

“Not to mention Ernst. I do not even know why he bothered to come.”

“You invited him.”

“I did not think he would accept! Or the Prince of Orange!”

“Ah, has he brought Prince Willem?”

Victoria turned again.

“If we do have a son, Regina would not inherit the throne and thus would find another establishment.” He looked at Regina. “Though I think you ought never leave England...”

“Why is it people so eager to not see us get married are so intent on marrying off Regina?”

“They’re royalty, it’s how they think.”

“Do you suppose that’s how I think?”

“No, I know you do not think like that in such matters. How could you have possibly proposed to me if you did?” He sighed. “Have Emmie bring her children to the palace. They will adore it, Lord Shaftesbury will be beside himself and they can take the brunt of playing with the royals.”

“Ah, Mr. Collier,” said Jenkins. She nodded at the small trunk he carried in between bites of bread. “Moving in already?”

The valet smiled. He had been round a few times to drop off Lord Melbourne’s things and of course he had met the Queen’s dressers during his master’s stay at the palace and stays at Windsor. Their relationship grew increasingly strange as their employers moved closer to the altar.

“Not yet, Mrs. Jenkins. This is a gift from Lord Melbourne to the Princess Royal. I came to deliver it.”

“A gift?,” she asked skeptically.

“Books. They belonged to his lordship’s late son.”
“That’s kind of him,” said Skerrett.

Matthias, Stockmar’s man, looked up with disdain. “I did not know Melbourne had fathered a child.”

“He was never a well young man. His death was a great blow for his lordship.”

“What was wrong with him?”

“Now, what sort of valet talks about his employer’s business with outsiders? Of course things may be done differently in Coburg. I am not very familiar with foreign customs.”

“I am servant to Dr. von Stockmar-”

“Her Majesty’s servant. I doubt my master would approve.” He looked at the dressers. “Perhaps you might tell me where I could put this.”

Jenkins scoffed.

Skerrett stood. “I don’t mind, I was heading up to Her Majesty’s chambers anyway.”

She began leading him up the myriad stairs.

“Is Lord Melbourne excited for the wedding?”

“Lord Melbourne is a man whose experience has taught him to temper his excitement, but, yes, he is looking forward to it.”

“The Queen speaks of nothing else. Well, almost nothing. Princess Regina is cutting a tooth.”

Collier chuckled. “I heard.”

Skerrett felt uncomfortable. “And what about you? Are you looking forward to moving to the palace?”

“It will be different, certainly. The whole time I’ve worked for Lord Melbourne he’s been a bachelor with a minimal staff. That’s certainly not the case here.”

“Certainly not, the princess has five servants herself.”

“Does she?”

“Her wet nurse, the day nurse, the night nurse, there’s another one for when something happens to one of those two and a maid.”

“Well, that’s the life of a princess, I suppose.”

“Here we are,” said Skerrett.

“What’s going on?” Miss McDougal looked at them skeptically.

“Miss McDougal, this Lord Melbourne’s valet, Mr. Collier.”

Collier smiled. “I’ve just brought some books for the Princess Royal, a gift from Lord Melbourne.”

McDougal nodded. “You can put them over there. I’ll have the maid place them.”

Collier put the trunk down. “Well, thank you, Miss Skerrett.”
It was far too crowded a dinner. There were too many guests at the palace and Victoria had barely had time to exchange a word and this would be the last dinner before the wedding. She spirited them away into one of the palace’s many hallways.

Victoria sighed, reaching for Melbourne’s trousers. He grabbed her hand.

“What are you doing?”

She smiled. She was playing quite the coquette and enjoying it. “What do you suppose, Lord M?”

“We are to be married in two days. You cannot wait?”

“Lord M, even if we made a baby, who would know the difference if it happened now or two days from now?”

“Your family is waiting for us.”

She moaned despondently. He took her chin in his hand. “I promise I will make up for this in two days time.”

“You must swear it, Lord M.”

They went back to the drawing room where the guests were assembled.

“Lord Melbourne, what is this son I hear of?”

He looked up at Stockmar. “I did not realize you were interested.”

Emma and Emily looked to each other.

“Why is there no music?,” asked Emily.

“Harriet, why don’t you play?,” Emma suggested.

“Is it true he was an idiot?”

“Dr. von Stockmar!,” Victoria shouted.

“I only wish for Your Majesty to know what she is getting into. Surely you wish to know what sort of children you might have-“

“You dare to speak to us in such a manner!”

“Perhaps we might get some air, ma’am...”

Victoria looked to him. He was trying to save her from herself, ready to lead her out of the fire of her own temper.

“He should not say such things!”

“I agree.”

“Then why will you not let me-”

“Shh.”
She saw he had led her to the nursery. Regina sat awake and the nurse curtsied.

“You are still awake, you are very naughty,” said Victoria, picking up the baby.

“I brought her something...”

“Did you?”

Melbourne browsed the bookshelf, dissatisfied. He looked to the nurse. “Was not something delivered?”

“Not that I know of, Lord Melbourne.”

“What is it?,” asked Victoria.

“Never mind. I thought it had come, but I will bring it later.”

“You are so good to her, Lord M.”

“That’s my job, ma’am.”

“How did it happen?”

It had been practically silent since Emily and Emmie went off to have dinner. Will wasn’t in the mood to leave and Victoria was unwilling to leave them alone so she ate handfuls of popcorn as she tried to coax him into picking a delivery menu.

He had no interest, though, staring off at a book about the wedding of Victoria and Melbourne.

Will looked up at her. Victoria sat down, curling next to him.

“You never told me.”

“Not much to tell.”

“Of course there is.”

There was a long pause.

“She was ill. She was always ill. But that night...” He sighed. “She woke up ill. I had to find someone to watch Gussie and I took her to A&E and I thought it was just the usual thing but she couldn’t breathe and I was holding her hand... then, then she was gone.”

Victoria wrapped her arms around him.

“I didn’t think it was real at first and I sat there so long. Emily had to come collect me. Carrie was furious with me...”

“You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Allison, you see. We had planned her, but we hadn’t thought it out and Carrie was so unhappy. She wasn’t even there when I brought her home from hospital. I stayed with her all night, I took her back to hospital every time, she was mine.”

“Of course she was.”
“I wish I had her... She’d be nine. I think about that, how old she would be, what she would be doing.”

“You never told me that.”

He looked at her ruefully. “I never told anybody that.”

“Why not?”

“Sometimes I think I’m not grateful enough for Gussie. I feel guilty because...”

She turned to face him.

“I love Gussie but... Allison needed me, she ran to my bedroom in the mornings, when she had nightmares she needed me, when she woke up that night, she needed me... right up until that last second when I held her hand she was looking to me and I told her everything was going to be alright...”

Victoria felt tears coming. She could see it in Will, he wanted to cry but he was frozen, his mind’s eye stuck at the moment his daughter left.

“Will...” She got up on her knees so she could bury her head in his neck.

“Baroness!”

Lehzen looked affronted at having been called by Melbourne who was being trailed by his valet into the front hall.

“Did Mr. Collier come through the front door?”

“Never mind that, I do not have the patience to wait for him to come through the servants’ hall today. Tell her what you told me.”

“Lord Melbourne had me bring a trunk of books to the Princess Royal. I put them in the nursery.”

“And they are missing,” said Melbourne.

“I will look-”

“They belonged to my late son. I wish to know where they are now.”

“I will have to ask the servants-”

“I will go with you.”

The first was an interrogation of the staff in the nursery which left nowhere to go but the servants’ hall. The shock on the servants’ faces as Melbourne entered was apparent. Penge was practically erupting out of his chair.

“Lord Melbourne, Baroness, to what do we owe the visit?”

“Mr. Collier brought some books for the Princess Royal. They have disappeared.”
“But I saw him put the trunk down myself,” said Skerrett.

“Matilda,” said Lehzen. She looked at Melbourne. “This is Her Royal Highness’-”

“She’s my maid. Yes, I know. Did you see the books, Matilda?”

She curtsied, the girl was unused to anyone knowing she existed, indeed she was on the bottom rung of the servants with the scullery maids and hallboys. “I saw a trunk, my Lord. Mr. Matthias took it.”

Melbourne turned to Collier.

“Dr. von Stockmar’s servant, sir.” He motioned at the man.

“Where are they?”

“I do not answer to you, sir-”

“You certainly will if you know what’s best for you.”

Collier was surprised. He had never seen his employer have something like anger before.

“What were you doing in the nursery? You certainly must answer on that or I shall send for the Household Guards,” said Lehzen.

“Removing the books. Dr. von Stockmar thought such a gift would be unsuitable.”

“Where are they?,” said Melbourne.

“I would not know now. They were put with the rubbish.”

Anger quickly turned to Lord Melbourne fighting to keep his composure.

“Did he know they were my late son’s?”

At this, the servants grew uncomfortable. It was not like one of the people from upstairs to appear here and quite another to reveal themselves as human. All eyes were on Matthias who had begun to show symptoms of guilt.

“Dr. von Stockmar ordered me to-”

“I must see the Queen,” said Melbourne.

“Yes, of course,” Lehzen replied.

“Collier,” said Melbourne, motioning for him to follow.

The three left and the servants took their seats with all eyes on Matthias.

Lord M had been correct about pairing Regina up with Princess Charlotte. They did not so much play together as play next to each other, sharing toys as Emmie watched over them with her Victoria, prodding her to take an interest in Charlotte.

Marie-Louise, Leopold’s wife was just seven years older than Victoria, but somehow she seemed to imagine more of an age gap between her and her husband than her own engagement. Then again, she had never thought of Lord M as old, while she had always thought of Leopold that way.
“She is the Princess’ Mistress of the Bedchamber?”

“Yes.”

“And Lord Melbourne’s niece?”

She looked up from her watercolor.

“Yes. She’s also the wife of Lord Ashley, daughter-in-law to Lord Shaftesbury who sits on my Privy Council.”

“Your mama says he has been quite in favor of this match.”

“Yes, he has been. I know it shocks my family that anyone should ever be on my side.”

She looked up to see Lehzen leading Melbourne and another man towards them.

“Lord M, we were not expecting you.”

“I am so sorry. Ma’am, you have not met my valet, Mr. Collier?”

“No,” Victoria said in confusion. She supposed the man would be moving into the palace. “How are you, Mr. Collier?”

“Very good, Your Majesty.”

“Collier has been arranging my move to the palace.”

“Yes, of course.”

“I am sorry, I-” He looked at Lehzen. “You tell her.”

Victoria frowned. She had never seen Lord M in such distress as he walked towards Regina.

“Lehzen, what is it?”

Lehzen looked to Collier to speak. Victoria was growing frustrated.

“Ma’am, I have been moving Lord Melbourne’s things and those of his late son. The majority of those will go to Brocket Hall, but he had wanted to make a gift of his late son’s books to the Princess Royal.”

“Yes?”

“I delivered them to the nursery myself, ma’am.”

“Are they not there?”

“It would seem that Dr. Von Stockmar had his servant toss them out, ma’am,” said Lehzen.

“He what?”

“We are searching for them-”

“Yes, you must.” Her Lord M loved books so, ones belonging to Augustus must have been very precious to him. He had been so distraught.
“What is going on?,” asked the Duchess.

Victoria looked up to see her mama and Uncle Leopold had joined them.

“Yes, thank you, Collier. Thank you, Lehzen.”

The two left.

“Dr. von Stockmar will be travelling back to the continent with you, said Victoria.

“What?,” asked the Duchess. “He is my guest, the servant of your late husband-”

“This is my house! Surely I may say who can live in it!”

The Duchess opened her mouth to speak. Leopold tried to still her.

“Yes, of course,” he said.

“He had disrespected the memory of my soon to be living husband’s late son, my daughter’s-” She paused, stopping herself. “Well, had he lived, he would have been Regina’s brother after the wedding.”

“What did he do?,” asked Leopold.

“He tossed out his books, very precious to my fiancé, belonging to his late son-”

She saw her mother flinch. What was that? Shame? She had never seen it on her mother’s face before.

Marie-Louise spoke. “I believe the doctor returns to Coburg every summer to be with his family. Perhaps it would be less objectionable if he simply did so early and the invitation to return never came.”

Leopold smiled. “Yes. That would be simpler.”

The Queen of Belgium nodded.

“Surely there has been a misunderstanding-”

“Did you want to visit Coburg as well?,” asked Victoria.

“What?”

“The thought of sharing the house with my husband seems to disturb you so. Perhaps you would rather not.”

“I mean no such thing."

“Lord Melbourne is so good with the girls,” remarked Marie-Louise.

They turned. Melbourne had taken Emmie’s place in charge of the three young girls now, Regina in his lap, directing Charlotte in Victoria in some sort of game they seemed to enjoy.

“Yes,” said Victoria.
Will woke up in his clothes from the day before, feeling like he had been run over by a truck. He and Victoria had held each other until he fell asleep at least and that solace at least gave him the peace to have a dreamless sleep.

He showered and found Victoria downstairs.

“Hey,” she said brightly. “Emmie’s already off. I could make you breakfast?”

“How are you going to make me breakfast?,” he asked sitting at the table. Victoria’s laptop was out, open on Pinterest.

“I could pour cereal in a bowl-” She stopped, mortified to see him scrolling through. “That’s just-”

“You’re looking at nursery ideas.”

“I was just bored, I-” She paused. “We don’t have to-”

“No.” He tapped the button down.

“Um, so Harriet Sutherland’s diary has this interesting note about Lord M trying to give some books to the princess-”

“Why are they all blue?” He looked up. “Not planning on a girl?”

“It’s robin’s egg blue,” Victoria said sheepishly. “I didn’t want it to be too girly if we do end up having a girl-”

“There’s nothing wrong with girly.”

“No, of course not, I just thought maybe something more subtle or a mint green...” She paused. “Anyway, it reminded me of this thing Regina wrote in a journal when she was a bit older.”

“She wrote about Augustus?”

“She wrote about the Duke of Saxe Coburg, telling her in German that her brother had been a deformed half breed.”

Will rolled his eyes. “I can’t imagine why Melbourne didn’t want him around.”

“When she was older, she asked Lord M what he had meant and he told her everything.”

Will smiled ruefully tapping at the keyboard. “I remember it from your book. I did like that part.”

“Because it referenced yours?”

He quoted from memory. “Previous biographers have rightfully noted that the life of Royal Consort was Melbourne’s third public life, the first having been as the cuckold in a society scandal and the second as a Prime Minister. It never occurred to Regina that the man she loved as her father had any life before she existed or any life other than that of- as she would refer to him in her later years- as the very best of men. To her she was only ever her papa, her mother’s Lord M.”

She smiled. He smiled back at her.

“I told you I do like that part.”

“Anyway, Stockmar tried to bring Augustus up at dinner or something and these books disappeared
that had belonged to Augustus.”

“You think Stockmar got rid of them?”

“I don’t know a last ditch effort to break them up? They were very close to the wedding.”

Victoria walked with Melbourne to the door.

“I will miss you.”

He smiled wistfully. “You only need wait until tomorrow and then you will see far too much of me.”

“I am sorry about Augustus’ books, Lord M.”

“It was not your fault.”

“Dr. von Stockmar will be returning to Coburg. I told Mama and Uncle Leopold.”

“He has returned to Coburg once before.”

“It will be permanent this time.” She stood on her tiptoes to give him a peck on the lips. “I cannot wait to be your wife. I hope you cannot wait to be my husband.”

“Of course I cannot.”

“I so want to make you happy.”

“You have already made me so happy. I only hope I can repay you.”

Victoria glanced behind them. Their chaperones were encroaching.

“I do not know how I will wait,” she said.

“We have waited so long, what is one more night?” He kissed her on the cheek and whispered in her ear. “Good night, Victoria.”

Dover House, 1924

Victoria sighed as she was announced to her brother. In some ways, she was terribly jealous of him, but it had nothing to do with the throne. He was a man, allowed to keep a residence outside of Buckingham Palace even though he was a bachelor. She was looking forward to moving out of the house as a married woman, though she certainly knew that was over.

“Ah.” She looked at her brother’s companion, Tommy. “You are not alone.”

“Tommy’s here to help,” said William.

“Of course. Why else would he be here?”

“I think I might take a walk.”
Tommy got up and left.

“What is it?,” asked Victoria.

“Your wedding."

“Oh, yes, I’ve called that off.”

“You’re getting married.”

“No.”

“Yes, you are, if I have to drag you down the Abbey by your hair.”

“Try it,” she sneered.

“You’re being ridiculous. You love Matthew. We know that. And besides that, you and I both know he will be the father of the next king or queen after me, though Mama certainly doesn’t...”

“If you’re so concerned about the next king or queen after you, there is a solution to that.”

“I can’t.”

“Oh, why not?,” she snarled. “Lots of people do things they don’t like in service to the Crown. Victoria I married Prince Albert.”

“You’re scared to have children.”

“No, I’m terrified!”

“Why haven’t you said anything?”

Victoria froze. She turned as he entered the room. She looked at her brother. “I hate you.”

“Then I’ve done my job.”

Matthew shook his head. “You never mentioned... Is it the marriage bed...”

Victoria looked pointedly at her brother.

William shook his head. “I’m not going anywhere until I’ve put you two to right.”

Victoria relented. “It’s not... that.”

William stood and turned to Matthew. “You know Victoria and I lost three brothers. George, poor chap, died when he was five.”

“Yes, he fell down the stairs, I thought,” said Matthew.

William nodded. “Leo died in the war. Augustus when he was fourteen.”

“Horse back riding,” said Matthew.

“It wasn’t the fall from the horse,” Victoria muttered.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”
“There’s a condition carried in our family called hemophilia, something about the blood not being able to clot properly so a fall, a cut, it can be fatal.”

“But why did Prince Leopold go to the war if he had this?”

“He was pig-headed,” Victoria insisted. “He announced his intention publicly so Mama could not stop him without giving everyone the real reason. The House of Hanover is cursed.”

“So all the princes...”

“Suffered from this affliction, yes,” said William. “I have been spared.”

“And you, Victoria?”

“It doesn’t affect women,” said William.

“No, I just get to pass it on,” said Victoria. She looked at her brother. “I will thank you to leave what does and does not affect me to my judgment, thank you.”

“So your fear is that our sons might...”

“That we might have to watch them bleed to death, yes,” said Victoria. “I will not put you through that.”

“But it’s not a certainty.”

She looked at him incredulously. “Is not the chance of a horrible death not enough deterrent from you?”

He smiled. “No, it’s not. Victoria, no one is guaranteed anything in life. In fact, my only guarantee is that mine will be a waste without you.”

“And you must feel the same way since you gave him enough time to talk you out of jilting him,” said William.

Victoria sighed. “Shut up!”

“Behave yourself. We don’t want him to change his mind. God knows where or when we’ll find the next poor blighter to fall in love with you...” William mused.

“Yes, I think we’ll be quite fine on our own,” said Matthew.

“Actually, I can’t leave. You aren’t married for another two days.”

“Shall we chaperone you and Tommy?,” asked Victoria.

“Someone probably ought to.”

Matthew smiled at Victoria. For the first time in days, she smiled back.

Chapter End Notes

I know there's been more interest in the alternate history than I expected and I think I'll
get to some of it, but is there anything anyone is dying to see? I would be really interested to know. Please feel free to tell me in the comments.
Victoria awoke before the sun rose.

It was today.

A glance out her window revealed that preparations were well underway. She walked down the hall with Dash to find Regina sitting awake.

“Hello.” She picked her up. “Could you not sleep, either?”

She walked her to the window, swaying along the way.

“It is a wonderful day, Regina. Papa and I will be married at last and he will come to live with us. We will be together forever. Is that not a happy thought?”

Will rolled over to see Victoria as the morning sun lit her.

“Are you reading my book?”

“I was just reviewing the wedding,” she said. “Though his two brides could not have been more different in the public imagination, to Melbourne they shared key commonalities. A wild passionate spirit that he never sought to contain and his ardent devotion. It was on this day that Lord Melbourne officially began his third public life as a royal consort.”

“My, my,” said Emily. “Don’t you all look dashing.”

“What are you doing in here?”

“I came to check on you.”

She walked over to where Collier brushed his tunic.

“I still think some form of military dress…”

“Well, I refused to wear a uniform I had no right to. The Queen did try. The Windsor uniform is perfectly fine.”

“Perfectly uncomfortable,” said Frederick. He kept shifting in his, trying to feel at ease and never succeeding.

“Oh, yes, you must be suffering so…” Her brothers turned to her. “What with all those stays and
whalebone binding you in so. You poor thing.”

Melbourne looked at Frederick. “You are losing this argument.”

Emily turned her attention back to Melbourne. “Are you ready?”

“I am ready.”

“Nervous?”

He sighed.

“So you are nervous?,” she asked.

“I am not nervous!”

“Do you know there’s about a thousand people on the street waiting to watch you come out?”

“I am not nervous.”

“Well, do not trip on the steps. We do not want Sir Robert to say you are too infirm to marry the Queen.”

“To the great disappointment of the Duchess of Kent, I will not trip.”

Will was surprised to see Emmie dressed to join them.

“You want to come along?”

“I love royal weddings. And I’ve seen every episode of The Young Queen.”

He scoffed. “That series was sensationalist, tabloid worthy.”

Victoria cut him off. “So you didn’t care for the part where Melbourne’s shirt got so wet it was transparent?”

He rolled his eyes.

“What did you think, Emmie?,” asked Victoria.

“I liked the bit where he punched Prince Albert in the face much better. Do you really think he left the Queen in the wood with her dog?”

“So much fragile masculinity,” said Victoria.

“I doubt it ever happened,” said Will. “Let’s be off. We have an appointment to keep.”

Victoria looked at the mirror. A bride again, though a different woman than the girl who had walked down the aisle before to meet a groom she was uncertain would have ever made her happy. She looked like a queen this time, embellishment enough to satisfy any monarch.

She turned to see Harriet and Jenkins approaching her with a wooden box.
“What is this?”

“It is a gift from Lord Melbourne. In place of his orchids on your hair.”

Her other ladies gathered around as Jenkins opened the box. It was diamonds formed in the outline of orchids, blue stones in the middle of each. It was for a queen yet also somehow theirs.

Victoria smiled.

“Good morning!”

Flora called out cheerfully to them outside the entrance to St. James’ Palace.

“Yay,” said Victoria.

“Give her a break.” He turned to smile at the blonde. “Good morning.”

“Morning,” said Victoria.

Will motioned at Emmie. “This is my niece, Emmie Cowper. I hope that’s alright.”

“Oh, perfectly fine. I know the curator.” She looked to Emmie. “Are you interested in royal weddings?”

They began walking in. Flora showed a pass to a security guard. There were a few people.

“Well, my sister and I did camp out for the Princess Royal’s wedding on the pavement opposite the Abbey.”

“That’s quite a commitment.”

“It was worth it. The wind blew a little too hard and we got to see a bit of the Duke of Montrose’s thigh.”

Flora laughed.

“So, here we are, the first Victorian wedding dress.”

The dress Victoria wore when she married Albert was on display next to a portrait of the event. It was on a faceless mannequin with a wreath of orange blossoms and holding a bouquet.

Emmie peered at the painting. “I always think Melbourne looks sad in these.”

Victoria snorted. “He probably was sad.”

“I know I would be,” said Will.

“Usually brides would reuse pieces of their wedding dress, so we might find the lace removed, but Victoria I never did that as you can see,” said Flora.

“To be used on a baptism gown,” said Victoria. “But she had an entirely new one commissioned with a lace made in an orchid pattern.”

Flora turned to Victoria. “Are you still on that?”
“You have no idea how on that I am.”

“Wait a moment, did you find something?”

Will cleared his throat. The women turned to see Roberta Peel approaching.

“Well, fancy meeting you here,” she said.

“You know I am allowed to be places you are,” said Victoria.

“Except Windsor.”

“Yes, but I am allowed at Brocket Hall.”

Roberta looked to Will.

“Yes, it would seem we are the first fellows of Brocket Hall,” said Will.

“How exciting,” said Flora.

“Yes, it is,” said Victoria. “What with Lord Melbourne’s journals and Victoria’s sketches...”

“How did you get an invitation?”

“By royal permission, of course.”

“Shall we take a look at the second dress?,” asked Flora.

They walked away, leaving Roberta to discuss Prince Albert’s wedding uniform with someone.

“The Orchid Tiara,” Flora said to Emmie. “A wedding gift from Lord Melbourne to Queen Victoria I, worn at the weddings of their daughters and by every Victoria since.”

“And the Windsor uniform...” said Victoria. She looked at Will. “Have you thought of getting one?”

“I doubt I would have much use for it.”

“I could think of at least one.”

“It seems so grand compared to the one she wore to marry Albert,” said Emmie.

“The difference between two men,” said Will. “One of whom was intimidated by marrying a Queen.”

The streets were crowded. Victoria wondered if they had been as packed when they gathered to see her married to Albert. She could hardly remember that day now it seemed, blinded by emotion, but she did remember leaving Lord M that day for what they thought would be the last time.

Harriet smiled at her from across the carriage.

The crowd was at its’ thickest as they reached the chapel. They erupted in a roar as she was helped out by her Uncle Sussex.

There was Peel with the Sword of State.
She floated down the aisle but there were no nerves in it. She watched Lord M from behind, the
dashing figure he cut growing larger and larger.

Until she stood before all the world next to him.

At last.

Was this happening?

For Melbourne his first wedding was lit in his memory by the glow of youth, unaware of the trials
and tragedies that were to come. Somehow that glow had just returned to him, not lost in time, but
here and now. The difference being that he had Victoria’s face shining back at him, the regality of a
Queen fighting to keep control over the pleasure of a young bride.

“William,” the Archbishop began snapping him back to life, “wilt thou have this woman to thy
wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou love
her, comfort her, honour, and keep her, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee
only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?

“I will.”

He had perhaps said it too quickly. After all, he wanted to be certain to answer before anyone came
to their senses.

Soon enough, Victoria echoed his words and Sussex placed her hand in his.

Yes, this was happening.

“You do not know that he was intimidated,” said Flora.

They had been arguing since the second dress and were now by Victoria IV’s wedding dress, a swirl
of white fabric and hardly any embellishments.

“Honestly...” Victoria moaned. “How can I appreciate the dress with this happening?”

“Inconsequential German prince,” said Will. “Do you think if he had not married the Queen of
England anyone would know who he was?”

“Would anyone know who Melbourne was-” Flora interjected.

“He would have still been a Prime Minister, whether you think he had any accomplishments or not!”

“He didn’t!”

Emmie turned to Victoria. “Is this how it always is?”

“Yes, your uncle takes Lord M’s honor very seriously.”

Flora turned to Victoria. “Have you found anything to support your theory?”
“What theory?”
“You know what theory.”
Victoria looked at Will.
“Perhaps,” said Will.
“So you have?”
“We’re not really at liberty to say,” Will explained.
“So the royals know? Did you find it at Brocket Hall?”
“Are we to tell you everything?,” asked Victoria.
“Well, whatever it is I hope you have a copy.”

The procession from the altar grew deafening as the bells tolled and then the doors opened. They stepped into the bright light of a spring day and the cacophony of a cheering city as they walked towards the carriage.

“God save the Queen!”
“God save Lord Melbourne!”

He had said something to her but could not hear himself and forgot what it was almost as soon as it was uttered. He helped her into the carriage and then himself. The door shut and they could finally hear each other.

She kissed him as soon as the carriage was moving. It had been seen outside and seemed to invite some rather raucous cheers.

“Thank you for my tiara,” she said. “I like it very much.”
“I am glad.”
She clasped her hands in his. “I can hardly believe this. I am yours.”
“I am yours.”
She kissed him again and he obliged, swaths of fabric landing in his lap.

“Victoria, we’re at the palace.”
Melbourne got out first, helping her out and then Victoria dashed in the palace ahead of her husband, grabbing her train and letting her skirts fly.

“Where are you going?,” he called after her.
“You’ll have to find out!”

He followed her up the stairs and down the hall to her chambers. He walked in and she shut the door behind him.
“What are you proposing?”

“I believe it was the custom once for a couple to consummate their marriage directly after the ceremony.”

“And where did you learn about that?”

She smiled.

“If I take you out of that dress, I’ll never be able to get it back on again.”

“I find I am sorely disappointed in your lack of imagination.”

“Shall I take that as a challenge?”

“I certainly hope so.”

He took off his gloves placing them on a table and walking towards her. There was something very pleasingly predatory about the looks in his eyes. His lips crashed into hers. He pushed her into the wall, lifting her skirts up, getting her to hold them. Victoria grinned, watching as he unbuttoned his breeches then lifted her up, pinning her against the wall as his hands explored the slit in her drawers.

“You are ready, aren’t you?”

“It’s been months!” She wanted to scream at him.

He stroked her a few times, kissing along the line of cleavage on her dress. She wanted to help, but he had her against the wall and there was so much fabric between them. He hooked up one of her legs, then the other his manhood finding her warm and wet for him. She came just before he emptied himself into her, finding themselves gasping for breath.

“Oh, Lord M...”

“Victoria.”

They came back to reality and he helped straighten her skirts. She repaid him by smoothing out his Windsor uniform and helping with his breeches. She felt so debauched, sticky with him under her wedding dress.

Melbourne rearranged the orchid tiara and put his gloves on.

“Will people know, you think?”

“And if they do?”

She frowned. “I do not know.”

They walked off to the nursery. Regina played on the floor in a white silk gown.

“Regina, how beautiful you look.” Melbourne lifted her up.

“Oh, Majesty, there you are,” said Harriet. “We wondered where you two had gone to.”

The final selection was of course the Princess Royal’s bespoke Vivienne Westwood.
“It does look better in person,” said Victoria.

“You can see the detail,” remarked Emmie.

“Trouble is she would look good in a paper bag,” said Victoria. “Of course when your mum was a supermodel that happens.”

“There’s a book no one’s done yet,” said Will. “I can’t imagine the Queen was pleased.”

Flora spoke. “You don’t think there have been no books for lack of trying? The whole topic became forbidden when the Princess died.”

“The poor Princess Royal,” said Emmie. “It must have been very hard on her, losing her dad like she did and her mum two years later.”

“An only child in Buckingham Palace,” said Victoria. “It must have been so lonely.”

Flora looked at Will. “Was it in Melbourne’s journal?”

“That reminds me, Will, we should find out when we can go look at Victoria’s sex journal.” Emmie eyed her. “The first one.”

“Queen Victoria I had a sex journal?,” Emmie asked.

“Apparently.”

Will ignored her, looking at Flora. “Now, do you suppose he would have written that down?”

“I am going to miss you so much.”

Regina giggled as Melbourne swung her back into his arms.

Victoria had gone to change for the journey to Brocket Hall. The guests waited to see them off and the visiting royals did their best to not engage Melbourne in conversation. He did not mind it, he wouldn’t be seeing Regina for a few days and was far happier in her company.

“I am going to stay with you, you know,” he whispered into her ear. “I will never leave you.”

“Lord Melbourne.”

He looked up to see Ernst.

“My niece seems very taken with you.” He smiled at Regina.

His niece. He wanted to bristle but could not.

“I am taken with her.”

He felt himself holding Regina closer.

“I am glad to see she is well looked after,” said Ernst.

Of course the prince was thinking of his late brother. He suspected this is usually where one might say something about how his brother would be glad that his child was being cared for so well, but
they both knew Albert to not be quite that generous in spirit. Not that he needed to be in this particular instance.

Melbourne nodded. “Will you be staying in England long?”

“No, I shall be returning with Uncle Leopold and then back to Coburg. Ah, Dr. von Stockmar.”

“Your Highness.” Stockmar bowed his head and chose not to acknowledge Melbourne.

“Lord M, there you are.” Victoria walked over, changed into her travelling clothes. She kissed Regina. “It is almost time to go.”

Melbourne looked to Regina. He did not want to leave her, not in the least. He glared at Stockmar as Victoria led him away.

The four sat at lunch where Emmie perused the catalog that accompanied the exhibition.

“But you cannot think they will permit you to publish anything that disparages the royal family,” said Flora. “And what of your fatherless child and childless father?”

Will feigned surprise. “So you have read my book?”

Victoria shook her head. “Scandal plus time is a total non-issue.”

“Of course you’re just looking to make the film more interesting.”

“That’s right,” said Emmie. “Have you heard any more on Felicity Jones?”

“Well, she has signed on,” said Victoria. “There’s still quite a bit of work to do before anything really exciting happens.”

“And how do the consequences of your next book affect your last book?”, asked Flora.

“Melbourne raised Regina. Everyone knew that. Why is there a difference between raising her as his own and raising his own?”

“We already knew she was an exceptionally politically acute monarch,” remarked Will. “An acumen that’s been passed down the generations. You call that middling?”

Flora shook her head at Will. “Let it go.”

It was done.

The Duchess watched with the rest as the carriage left and said farewell to the guests.

“She is happy,” said Leopold as they walked the halls after dinner. “We shall have to content ourselves with that. Melbourne obviously cares deeply for Regina. We ought to be grateful for that.”

“But she could have done so much better. Someone like Albert...”
“We had our chance at that, I am afraid. Poor dear Albert.”

“Yes, poor dear Albert, replaced by a viscount.”

“Do you want me to give Stockmar the news? I am the one who found him.”

The Duchess hesitated.

“Marie...” he prodded. “You know what he did is too cruel for him to stay here.”

She sighed. “Of course I know. I cannot defend it.”

“I will speak with him-”

“No, I will do it.” She looked up at him. “Thank you.”

“You are still coming to Windsor in the morning?”

“Of course.”

“Until the morning then.”

The Duchess went to Stockmar’s rooms.

“Duchess.”

“I am sorry to disturb you, Doctor. I will only take a moment.”

“A tiresome day,” said Stockmar.

“Dr. von Stockmar, I do not know how to say this, but...”

He looked at her inquisitively.

“I am mindful of the service which you have done my daughter the Queen and the Princess Royal and her late husband, but...” She hesitated, hardly believing that it had come to this. “I cannot condone the cruelty displayed towards Lord Melbourne.”

“Cruelty?”

“His son’s books. To throw out the keepsakes of a late child...”

“You side with him?”

“I side with my daughter. I am afraid I must. She is right this time. You must leave Court and return to Coburg. I have spared you the humiliation of being publicly dismissed and no one in Coburg need know-”

“I would rather everyone in Coburg know. I will say all I know.”

The Duchess was puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“Melbourne is the father of the Princess Royal.”

She wanted to laugh. “What?”

“Do you remember the great storm after the Prince’s funeral?”
“What of some rain?”

“I saw her leaving the hall where Melbourne’s room was in her nightdress.”

“I am certain that there is an innocent explanation—”

“And for why they spent so much time alone together? And why the Princess was born so late yet small? And her eyes?”

“What about her eyes?”

“They are Melbourne’s. I would not be surprised if they staged the assassination attempt themselves!”

The Duchess thought back to that night. Such terror in her daughter’s eyes, realizing how close she had come to losing Regina.

The same terror reflected back in Melbourne’s eyes.

The way Melbourne waited outside when Victoria gave birth. She had left twice, prodded to eat by her own lady-in-waiting, but she could not recall Melbourne moving.

Why had he suggested his own niece for Mistress of the Bedchamber?

“That is an outrageous accusation,” she said. “All of it. Baseless slander. You should be ashamed.”

“Duchess, look at the evidence—”

“What evidence? Your lies?!”

Stockmar was in disbelief. “Your Grace, I would never lie to you—”

She shook her head. “I believe my daughter was mistaken. You should not wait to leave with my brother. You shall leave tomorrow for the port and book the next passage.”

“Duchess, you cannot be blind—”

“I am not blind, Doctor, but I will side with my daughter and if asked, I will continue to side with my daughter.”

Stockmar sighed. “What an age we have lost in your daughter.”

“Perhaps.”

The Duchess took the long walk to the other end of the palace where Regina’s new nursery sat. The night nurse curtsied as she walked to the cot.

The candle, the fire and the clear night revealed all. She did have Melbourne’s eyes. How had she not seen it before? Had she been so preoccupied with trying to find pieces of Albert that were not there that she had been blind to what was there? Her daughter’s child. She could not be bothered to care about her father, she had idolized Albert and well, would never idolize Melbourne.

“Meine Frechdachs, are you awake?”
She lifted her from the cot, thinking on these past months. Her affections for her granddaughter had not changed. She was angry at her daughter, but the mistake was already so long ago and now rectified as well as honor could provide.

Then Melbourne. She very much wanted to be angry at Melbourne, but she knew Victoria’s personality. She would have been just as culpable as him. No, in fact, she thought she might have been unfair on Lord Melbourne. His affection for Regina had no agenda. She had spent the past year or more annoyed at him for pushing in when he had been trying to look after his child in any way he could.

She could certainly understand that.

The Duchess smiled at Regina. “Meine Leibe, do not worry. Your grandmother will protect you.”
Will and Victoria prepared for another day spent in the house writing the next chapter.

“What’s next?”

“Honeymoon.”

Will sighed. “Nothing to add at the moment.”

“The Princess Royal said she’d send a letter.”

“Victoria, she probably sends a thousand letters a day. Maybe we ought to just skip to Margaret.”

She sighed. “Fine, but there’s nothing new to add to Margaret without going to Brocket Hall again.”

The doorbell rang. Will went to get it.

Two smartly dressed men stood at the door. He noticed their royal seal on their blazers.

“Professor Lamb?”

“Yes?”

“Sign here.”

He signed his name to a clipboard.

“Here you are. Good day.”

Will took the plastic box from them and carried it back in the house.

“What was that?”

He shook his head and took the lid off the box finding a letter over bound papers.

“Dear Professor Lamb and Dr. Kensington, here are copies of the archived papers as requested by Her Royal Highness, the Princess Royal. Best wishes in your scholarship.”

Victoria pulled the first bound papers out, clipped together, typewritten.

“The date is Victoria I and Melbourne’s wedding.”

“And?”
“Overwhelmed as I was by feelings of affection for my Lord M, I could not help but grow anxious for the moment we would finally be alone as man and wife.”

“Her journal?”

“I ran into my chambers, forcing him to chase me. He refused to undress me and-”

“Where is this going?”

Victoria looked up. “It’s going with Melbourne shagging her against the wall in her wedding dress.”

“It’s what?”

He took it from her.

“What is this?”

“Her... sex journal?”

“No...”

“The Private Diaries of Her Majesty Queen Victoria I as transcribed by Prince William of Wales, 1938...” She shrugged. “I guess he needed a hobby after the abdication?”

“I thought she was just going to let me into Windsor.”

“Apparently she did better.” Victoria took the first bundle back, flipping through the pages. “Nothing in the carriage on the way to Brocket Hall? Really, Victoria... Ah, here we go, next time is in the bedroom at Brocket Hall. ‘William seemed to take an age to come to me. I had wanted nothing but him inside of me since we left the palace...’”

She laughed with glee.

“It seems to be doggy style. Hey, maybe we can finally sort out what Caroline Lamb had a problem with...”

Victoria was no blushing bride this time.

They ate in the clothes they traveled in at Brocket Hall at her insistence. Somewhere in the carriage between kisses she had made a calculation how long it would take before she and Lord M were left to their marriage bed. She had decided changing for supper, having drinks in the drawing room, eating and then meandering upstairs were all unacceptable so after being presented to her new household at Brocket Hall she announced herself famished and asked if they could not just go in to eat? After supper she quickly announced herself ready to retire.

She found their bedroom very pleasing catching glimpses as Jenkins and Skerrett got her ready for bed.

“Oh, no, I think I will be fine without curling papers tonight.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She sat at the dressing table. She would have to consent to a brush out even though it took up
valuable time that she thought would be better spent with her husband but he had not yet emerged. Skerrett had just put down the brush when there was a knock at the door.

She smiled. “Enter!”

Melbourne entered in his dressing gown and nightshirt. She could not help but grin.

“Thank you, Jenkins. Thank you, Skerrett. That will be all for tonight.”

They nodded and curtsied as they left. Victoria stood.

“You knocked.”

“Yes?”

“This is your bedroom, you needn’t knock to come in.”

“You are my wife, I certainly owe you the courtesy.”

“How could you think there was something of mine I would not want you to have?”

“Generous as always.”

“There’s nothing generous in it, Lord M.”

She reached up to kiss him. He kissed her back deeply. She jumped up into his arms and he laughed, moving to deposit her on the bed.

“So, William...”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “You do know my Christian name?”

She smiled. “I believe the Archbishop said it this morning.”

“Well, that is cheating.”

“I wonder, William, of all the acts usually shared between a man and a woman, how many have we actually performed?”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “How many?”

“To speak honestly, I have found more variety in these acts with you than with a previous lover... I wondered if there might be much more. I was quite hoping there would be.”

“I am sure there are, but I have not kept a list...”

“Well, I think I shall from now on.”

He smiled to himself.

“Take off your nightdress.”

She quickly did as he asked, breasts heaving with anticipation.

He gave nothing away. “Turn around on your hands and knees.”

“What?”
He raised an eyebrow at her, but there was nothing severe in it. She turned over almost mortified to find herself in the mirror, breasts dangling. She couldn’t quite make him out beyond her own body, but heard him put aside his dressing gown and nightshirt. Suddenly his hands came to her hips and he gripped them, lowering down to kiss his way over her back.

She was shivering as he sought to spread her legs and she felt him enter her. It was the most thrilling sensation, her Lord M holding her, seeing him come undone in the mirror, watching herself come undone. There was something so savage about it. He reached to her womanhood and made her break, holding her as she lowered to the bed. He pulled her on top of him.

“What did you think of that?”

“How can you need to ask?” She put her hands in his, stretching their arms out. “William, you’ve had mistresses?”

He raised an eyebrow. “I have no plans to pursue one.”

“No, but you must have had one. My uncles have.”

“Yes, I took a mistress from time to time.”

“Mrs. Norton?”

“No, not Mrs. Norton, actually. No one you will ever meet. Does this bother you?”

“No, it just seems a bit unfair that you have so much more experience than me. I should like to surprise you sometime.”

“I should think imagination will be more of an asset than experience in such an instance, Victoria.”

“I like it when you say my name.”

“I say it often enough.”

“No, I like it when you say it without Queen or ma’am or Majesty, as if you are speaking to your friend or lover...”

“Or better still, my wife.”

She smiled back. “Better still.”

Will was shaken.

“It’s not so much the journal of a Queen as a letter to Penthouse,” said Will.

Victoria had not moved her eyes from the pages since they arrived. “It’s too tame for a letter to Penthouse. There’s only two of them and they’re married.”

“I had no idea you were such a devoted reader.”

Victoria turned the page. “I had an older brother who was terrible at hiding things.”

“How do we use it?”
“Who cares? We sell the book rights to HBO.” She paused. “We haven’t done it in front of a mirror... Why is that?”

Jenkins looked at Skerrett. The pair of them were the only servants from the Palace to accompany the Queen and they were vastly outnumbered by the staff who had been at Brocket Hall for years. Collier was the only one who knew them at all and he did not see perturbed by the morning’s developments.

Notably that the Queen had not called for her dressers.

“It’s twelve.”

Skerrett shrugged. “Surely she would have rung the bell.”

“I wouldn’t.”

Collier sat at the servants’ table. He had spent the better part of the morning there with the papers.

“Do you do anything?, asked Jenkins.

“I’ve prepared his clothes, shined his boots and even gotten his dinner clothes ready, though I doubt he’ll want them...”

Skerrett thought she might blush.

Collier looked at them. “He has certain appetites, Lord Melbourne. I doubt they shall be needing any of us the rest of the day. The kitchen maid hasn’t even gotten in to make the fire.”

“You suppose he can keep up with her?, Jenkins sneered.

Collier smiled. “I doubt it will be a problem for his lordship.”

“They’ve been up there fifteen hours,” said Jenkins.

“Yes.”

“Do you know I think you have not realized something?”

Melbourne traced his finger down her sternum and belly.

“Yes?”

“You need not be quiet.”

“What?” She shook her head. “But you have said I am loud...”

“Yes, but that was when we could not be heard...” He leaned over and dotted kisses on her breast.

“I cannot be heard now.”
“Why not?”
“Because it’s...”

“Are you embarrassed?”
“Yes,” she admitted.

“Why ought you be? You are married, you are doing nothing wrong...” He moved to the other breast as she tried to stifle a moan. “And I like to hear you.”

Jenkins and Skerrett walked up the servants’ stairs.

“Maybe Mr. Collier is right-”

“You think I’m going to believe him?”

They approached the bedroom door when they heard the Queen’s screams.

“Oh! God! Lord M!”

They shuddered as they heard something fall and looked to each other.

“They’re fine,” said Collier.

The women looked to see the man had snuck up on them, holding Melbourne’s clothes. The Queen’s moans resumed.

“I should think they’d be a while longer.”

He smiled and walked into Melbourne’s dressing room.

It was two when the bell finally rang. Jenkins opened the door to find Melbourne kissing his wife’s neck. She and Skerrett averted their eyes.

“Lord M,” said Victoria, playfully pushing him away.

He sighed. “I suppose I shall let you dress.”

“I suppose you shall.”

He kissed her again and then left.

“Nothing too formal,” said Victoria. “Lord M wants to take me for a walk around the estate.”

“Very good, ma’am.”

This was some sort of spell she was under, Victoria was convinced. Walking through the grounds holding her husband’s hand she was in a haze. Her body still hummed with the pleasure he had given her and somehow she still ached for more.
“We are neighbors with the Marquess of Salisbury here, you know.”

“Are we?” It pleased her to say we. After all, she was also Lady Melbourne now, Viscountess of Melbourne having been added to her other titles.

“Yes, the Gascoyne-Cecils are there often, though they usually don’t bother with me, but I expect that will change.”

“How do you mean?”

“You don’t think you won’t be invited to dine at Hatfield House? I very much doubt you will be able to avoid it. In fact, I would think we ought to be expecting an invitation no later than tomorrow.”

“But we are on our honeymoon!”

“I doubt that will matter to the Marquess. You will not be able to refuse him.”

“I find I am quite busy.”

“Quite busy with what?”

“Things that shall keep me from dressing for dinner. Or dressing at all.”

“You are scandalous.”

“I thought no scandal could occur between us now that we are married.”

“Only that Lord Melbourne’s baser appetites are so extreme they kept the queen from all society.”

“Perhaps it is my appetites that are so extreme.” She looked at the trees. “That is a very pretty wood there. Perhaps we might rest a bit in it?”

“You have no intention of resting, do you?”

She smiled, breaking away from his hand and giving chase into the wood.

Victoria put down her copy.

“Why have we never shagged in a wood?”

“We’ve shagged outside.”

“Yes, but not in a wood.”

“We don’t go tenting.”

“We don’t need a tent, we just need sex in a wood.”

“Maybe we could put a bit of David Attenborough on in the background next time.”

“How do I look?”

Melbourne looked to his wife as they walked back to the house. Her skirt had perhaps too much dirt
on it to be credible, but it was nothing to her hair, hanging out from her head in loose locks.

“You look as if you were deflowered in a wood.”

“Lord M!”

“You Majesty, Lord Melbourne,” the butler said.

“I had a fall,” said Victoria.

Powell looked confused. “Shall I send for Doctor Brandon?”

“No, no, I am quite well.”

Melbourne sought to change the subject. “What is it, Powell?”

“The Marquess of Salisbury has been waiting, sir.”

Melbourne looked at Victoria. “Told you.”

“His lordship is in the library.”

Melbourne looked. Salisbury had already spotted them from the library doors.

“I warned you.”

They walked in the library. Salisbury bowed his head.

“Your Majesty. Melbourne.”

They stood there awkwardly. Melbourne looked at Victoria and it was only then she remembered she was lady of the house.

“Do sit down,” she said, taking a seat on the sofa. Her husband sat next to her and Salisbury followed suit.

“I have come to issue an invitation if your Majesty would honor Hatfield House with your presence. Perhaps this Wednesday?”

“We would be delighted,” said Victoria.

“I am sorry I cannot linger, ma’am, but I must get home before the gong.”

“Is it that time already?”

“Indeed, ma’am. I have been here for quite some time, though I do hope you enjoyed your walk.”

“It was most invigorating. The paths around Brocket Hall are so interesting.”

“I do hope you are pleased with Hertfordshire, ma’am, so that we might see more of you in these parts.”

“Yes, I have found it most pleasing.”

They saw him off. Melbourne turned to Victoria.

“You fell?”
“Well, I was on the ground.”

“Fortunate that you were not hurt, ma’am.”

“There may yet be hidden wounds, perhaps you would be so good as to check for me?”

She giggled, grabbing her skirts and running back in the house. Melbourne sighed and ran after, catching a glimpse of her as she ran up the grand staircase.

“I would not have you actually hurt yourself!,” he called.

“Any wound I have, I know you can soothe.”

Victoria turned to see her dressers. They curtsied.

“Oh, yes, I find I am quite exhausted. I shall take to bed immediately,” said Victoria.

“Yes, ma’am,” said Jenkins. “Do you need to change?”

“Lord M will help me,” she said motioning at her husband the moment he stepped onto the landing. She darted into the bedroom.

“Collier?”

“Yes, milord?”

“We shall be dining with the Salisburys Thursday.”

“Very good, sir.”

He disappeared into the room, letting the door slam.

“Well,” said Collier, “I would expect that’s all for tonight. Surprised about the Salisburys. I don’t think his lordship has had an invitation there since King George, but I suppose that was bound to change.”

Collier looked to the dressers.

“Were you going to stand here all night?,” he asked.

“Alright, that’s quite enough porn for now.”

Victoria guffawed as he took the journal from her hand.

“I was reading that!”

“That’s quite enough for today, come on.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“Don’t ask questions.” He finished leading her up the stairs and to the room that would be the nursery.

“What are we doing here?”
“We’re going tenting.”

She frowned at him as he opened the door. The window was open, a small tent had been set up on the ground with a sleeping bag laid out, piled up with pillows. He flipped on a star projector that illuminated the ceiling.

“Oh, wait.” Will walked over to an iPad set up in the corner and hit “play” on a BBC Nature documentary. Victoria giggled.

“Will Lamb, you romantic.”

“Well, I have no estate, so you see we must make do.”

“I’ve always thought you have a rather large estate.”

“Good if you to say that. Thank you.”

“You’re quite welcome.”

They kissed and the phone rang.

“Let me just shut that off.” He reached into his pocket. “Oh, it’s Gussie.”

“Well, take it.”

“I’m coming back.”

“I know. Tell him I said hi.”

“Gussie, mate, I am so glad to hear from you.”

Victoria wandered off back downstairs to find Emmie standing over the journals.

“What is this?”

“Queen Victoria’s sex journals.”

“I’ve read tamer fan fiction.” She looked up. “Where’s Uncle Will?”

“Oh, Gussie just rang.”

“Right, doing any better with the wedding?”

Victoria shook her head. “What do you mean?”

“Because he doesn’t-”

“Doesn’t what?”

“Doesn’t-” Emmie froze, looking up from the journal. “Never mind.”

“No. What?”

“Well, I mean, he doesn’t like you.”

“What?”
“I wouldn’t take it personally.”

“But he-” Victoria paused. “I thought he was just, you know, Gussie.”

“Well, yes and he doesn’t like you.”

“Will never told me that.”

“I-”

“Okay, that’s all sorted,” said Will. “Ah, Emmie, won’t you excuse us?”

“You never once said Gussie doesn’t like me.”

Will looked helplessly to Emmie and back. “Gussie doesn’t like... people... generally.”

“Specifically, me. Does Gussie specifically like me?”

“There’s really no reason to make an issue out of this.”

“Except that you want us to get married!”

“Lots of people have family members they don’t like. Emmie, do you like Henry?”

“God, no.”

“So I’m Henry in this scenario?!”

“No, you’re much better than Henry,” said Emmie.

“Does he like Gordon?”

“Well...” said Will.

“He likes me less than Gordon?!?”

“You have to understand Gordon has no ethical boundaries.”

“I am not here to be the evil stepmother!”

“You are not the evil stepmother!”

“So, you were just going to let me marry you, not knowing your son hates me?”

“Hate is... a strong word.”

“The wedding is off!” Victoria stormed off.

“We haven’t fixed a date! And we were going to the registry office!”

He heard the bedroom door slam.
“Divya, you can’t be anxious. The horse will sense it.”

“I should be worried about his feelings?!”

“Hers,” Victoria corrected. “She weighs half a ton and has an unmedicated anxiety disorder like all horses.”

She looked further up the ride as her friend went on. She was on a tour of Scotland and this was a rare day off, though she was never really off, but she was being toured around. Her host for the weekend was the Duke of Montrose, a young Duke, those were a rarity. Very handsome, doubly a rarity. He glanced back at her and smiled.

“I have it on good authority he wants your patronage,” said Divya.

“My patronage?”

“Some Zimbabwean charity.”

The Duke stopped. Victoria looked over to his vantage point of what seemed to be a dilapidated stone castle. She trotted over to join him as the rest of their party went on.

“What is that?,” she asked.

“It’s called Balmoral, built in the fourteenth century, I believe?”

“I take it no one lives there from the state of it.”

“No, but Victoria I had a mind to buy the place once.”

“Really?”

“Yes, but Lord Melbourne was opposed. Story is that he told the Queen she might well buy the place but would not find him in it.”

“No, Lord M never cared for Scotland.” They restarted their trot down the path. “My grandmother believes it made him very unpopular among the Scots.”

“To the contrary, ma’am. We have a high opinion of him.”
“Really?”

“Yes, he’s done more than anyone to keep the English monarchy out of Scotland.”

Victoria laughed. “Is that how it is?”

“It is, ma’am.”

“You invited me as your guest, Your Grace.”

“So I did.”

“My lady says you want my patronage for a charity?”

He sighed.

“Well, your scheming is revealed, Your Grace, what is it?”

“I hope it will not be too big a burden.”

“That depends.”

“Does Your Royal Highness know I was born in Rhodesia? Well, of course it’s Zimbabwe now.”

“No.”

“When I was eight I was sent to school here. I went home rarely, my grandparents had the estate here and I stayed with them, but at home, I had a nanny, a native woman called Anoona. My father died and I went back to settle his affairs and I looked up my old nanny.”

“What happened?”

“I found Anoona was raising four grandchildren. Their parents died of AIDS, you see.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Those children were lucky, they at least had their grandmother to raise them. Millions of children have no one. AIDS orphans, like yourself, ma’am.”

“Hardly. I’m an orphan raised in a palace. And my mother died of being on a yacht at the wrong time, not disease.”

“Wealth and power do not render you immune to loss. It must be presumptuous of me to assume—”

“No, not really. I am patron of many AIDS related charities. Tell me, what does your charity do?”

“We started with a school and an orphanage in Harare, we opened in other provinces, then other countries. We run a scholarship fund. We even sponsor some of the children to come to the UK for medical treatment.”

“That’s brilliant.” She paused. She would likely do anything the Duke asked if he just smiled at her again. “Of course I must be very careful with the charities I select. They must be vetted.”

“I would be happy to provide Your Highness with anything she needs.”

Your Highness. Always so hard to start a relationship with a man when he must call you “ma’am” and “Highness.”
“I wonder if I might visit?,” she asked.

“Visit?”

“The orphanage? In Harare. I imagine it might take some work to get it cleared by the Foreign Office, but I would be very interested to see it. It might also get you some publicity even if I don’t end up as patron.”

“I would be honored to host you again, ma’am.”

Victoria rolled over to find her husband. They were completely bare to each other having fallen asleep after their umpteenth round of lovemaking. There was something so pure about seeing her husband’s naked body being lit by the sun, the thrilling knowledge that they were husband and wife and could not be stopped from satisfying every urge.

His eyes fluttered open. “Good morning.”

“Good morning,” she said tracing her hands along his chest.

“Did you sleep well?”

She nodded. “Oh, William, how can my body ache for you when I have had so much of you?”

“What is that?”

“I hear nothing.”

Melbourne stood and looked out the window, leaving Victoria bereft of her explorations of his body. “It’s a carriage from the palace.”

“Lord M-”

He bolted out the door. Victoria got up and found her nightdress and dressing gown.

Melbourne had dressed quickly in whatever Collier had left out, forgoing a waistcoat and stepping into his boots.

A million thoughts ran through his head. A carriage from the palace. Regina. What had happened? Why had they not sent a messenger? Surely they could be back at the palace quicker...

“Lord M!,” he heard Victoria calling after him.

He was at the door with the footman opening it before she could stop it.

The carriage door was opening with the footman there to help out Regina’s nurse. He saw the toddler at the door.

“Regina!”

She held her arms out for him and he happily obliged, taking her.
“I wanted to surprise you.”

He turned to see Victoria, the Queen of England looking quite a state wearing her dressing gown on the front steps of Brocket Hall.

Melbourne nodded, holding her closer, cradling her head with his hand. “You have succeeded.”

He moved her to his hip, taking his wife’s hand as they walked inside.

“You are such a big girl coming such a long way. Did you get up very early? Do you know where you have come?”

Victoria smiled. She loved the way Melbourne would talk to Regina.

“Are you hungry? Are you hungry, Mama?”

“Yes. Are you, Papa?”

They sat around the breakfast table with the meal the servants had prepared. Melbourne insisted upon Regina sitting on his lap, holding her with one hand and feeding himself with his other when he could. Regina had her own plate with bits of cheese and apple that she kept offering to her parents. Victoria happily took one of the apple pieces and then gave Regina a few spoonfuls of porridge.

An ordinary family.

“Did you sleep out here again?,” asked Emmie.

Will looked up. The sofa was his new home. Victoria was ill-tempered. She just needed time.

“Why don’t you just go beg or whatever it is you do?”

“You don’t think I’ve tried?”

Emmie sighed. “It’s pathetic whatever it is.”

She left. Will sighed, going up to the bedroom.

The door was locked.

“Victoria, please.” He sighed, resting his forehead against the door. “Victoria, this isn’t what we do. Please let me in.”

There was no answer.

“Victoria, please!”

He heard something fall on the floor.

“Victoria! Answer me so I know you’re alright!”

There was no answer. He knew her. Tempestuous she was, cruel she was not.

So he made a decision to kick the door in.
Which he immediately regretted.

Will began limping as soon as his foot hit the floor. He found Victoria laying on the floor of the en suite.

“Victoria!” He rushed to her side, as well as he could with the ruined foot.

“I’m fine, I was just trying to get to the loo and I didn’t get there.”

He helped her sit up, immediately finding his hand covered in sick.

“I was laying in my own sick, wasn’t I?”

“Yes, you were.”

She shook her head. “I think I’m going to vomit again.”

“Okay.”

She turned and he helped her to the toilet, helping hold her up.

“I’m taking you to hospital.”

“What? No.”

“You just passed out in your own sick. You’re going.”

——

“Do you suppose she’ll walk soon?”

Melbourne sat beneath the tree. Regina crawled by him, exploring every peony and blade of grass.

“She is not yet a year,” he answered.

“Well, what is expected?”

“Expected?”

“Yes, I shouldn’t like her to fall behind.”

He raised an eyebrow at her, pulling Regina to him, standing her up with her feet on his legs and his hands supporting her. “There is no expected, Victoria, but she’s very sharp in all things.”

Regina’s lip began to quiver. Melbourne knew it. Her temper changed in a flash, which he expected came from her mother. She screamed.

“Oh, darling, what is it? Papa is here. Yes...” he cooed, taking her into his arms. “Are you tired? They should not have woken you so early...”

He sat back against the tree trunk, letting Regina settle wrapped around him as he joined her in closing her eyes.

Quietly, Victoria reached for her sketch pad and pencil. She could see so much similar in them, the way her tiny cheekbones stuck out even beneath fat baby cheeks. The waves in her dark hair mimicked her father’s. Even the way she managed to breathe with him.
Will helped Victoria into A&E. It had been a long ordeal to get here with her insisting on at least washing the sick off herself and two stops on the way over for her to wretch on the side of the road. She was still out of it.

“Are you limping?,” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Why are you limping?”

“I kicked the door open.”

“Why did you kick the door open?”

“Why did you lock it!?,” he spat back.

The receptionist at the front looked up at them.

“Sorry,” said Will. “This is my partner. She’s really not well.”

“And he broke his foot,” said Victoria.

She handed them two clipboards and Will took them both, filling in Victoria’s details first, then his. He helped her when the nurse called and led them to a room for her to lie down in.

“And when was your last menstrual cycle?”

Victoria looked at Will. “Sort of forgot about that.”

“So, I take it, pregnancy is a possibility?”

“God, I should think so,” said Victoria.

The nurse nodded. “We’ll get fluids started and we’ll run a pregnancy test. The doctor will be in shortly.”

The nurse left.

Will looked at Victoria. “Why didn’t you come get me if you were feeling so unwell?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t connect the two.”

He was irritated, letting his foot speak. “We’ve been doing nothing but shagging and writing about Victoria and Melbourne shagging for weeks and you didn’t connect the two.”

“I’m sorry.” She let out a sob.

“Okay, okay.” He sat at her side and rubbed her back. “No need for that. You weren’t feeling well.”

“Why couldn’t you just tell me Gussie hated me?”

“Because I love you too much.”

“I love you. I don’t want your son to hate me.”

“It is going to be fine.”
“You’re just saying that.”

“IT is, though.”

Victoria laid in bed before her husband arrived. She knew his attentions were now divided between her and Regina, not that she minded. It was so pleasing for her to see them together, reminding her of the paternal affection she never received herself. So she busied herself until his arrival.

“What are you doing?,” asked Melbourne.

“Writing in my journal.”

“But that is not your journal.”

“No, I had Skerrett go into the village and buy me a new one.”

He laid down next to her. “I see.”

“I told you I would keep a list.”

“So, this journal is to be...”

“A chronicle of our married life.”

“I see.” He kissed her neck. “You do know the writings of the Queen of England are bound to attract the attentions of future historians.”

“You think people care what we do in bed?”

“I think if you write it someone will read it.”

He was pressed up against her and Victoria could feel him hardening against her. Smiling to herself, she pushed back into him, rubbing her bottom against him. She heard him choke back a groan.

“Shall we work on the next chapter?,” he asked feigning disinterest.

“You think someone will be as interested in what we do in bed as I am?” She was growing distracted. “How peculiar.”

“Very.” He kissed her neck, rolling her nightdress up from the hem. She was forced to put aside her writing as his hands covered her breasts and she rolled onto her back.

He paid her breasts further attentions with his mouth. She raised her hips up involuntarily and he brought himself between her legs. She spread for him but he surprised her grabbing her legs, kissing each ankle as he hooked the leg over his shoulder.

Victoria was surprised but complied as he moved to come inside her, his hands gripping her hips.

“Too much?”

She shook her head. “No. Never.”

She liked it, liked being at his mercy, clutching at the sheets for purchase. His angle was deep and different and she broke for him with no trouble, limp as he filled her.
“Did you enjoy that?”

“Oh, William, how can you even ask?” She kissed him.

“I’m not keeping this thing on.”

“You most certainly are,” Victoria shot back as she helped him through the door.

Will had been fitted with a walking boot. Victoria was a new woman with IV fluids and anti emetics. They made a quick stop at Boots for their prescriptions and her vitamins.

They walked inside where Emmie was sitting.

“What happened to you two?”

“I’m pregnant and Will broke his foot.”

She frowned. “Are those two related?”

“In a roundabout way,” said Will as he finished limping to the sofa.

Victoria pulled the tea table closer.

“Don’t do that!,” he urged.

“Oh my God, Will! It doesn’t weigh anything. I’m not infirm.” She paused, placing his broken foot on the table. “Okay, I was infirm earlier, but I’m better now and you’re infirm.”

“I am not infirm. I have a small fracture and I am not wearing this ridiculous thing.”

“Yes, you are!”

Victoria was surprised to find herself alone. In a few days, she had grown used to waking up with a husband next to her. She called for her dressers and readied herself for the day.

She walked to the nursery. Regina’s nurse was just finishing dressing her. Victoria took the baby wondering where to find her husband just as he appeared.

“Oh, good, you are both dressed.”

“Dressed for what?”

“Come.”

He took her hand, leading her out to the spot with the rooks.

“I was hoping we would not be too late, they can lay eggs as early as February.” Melbourne took Victoria’s free hand and pointed. “Do you see there?”

“Is that a mother with her babies?,” she asked.

“It is.”
Victoria tried to move closer. She could make out three little black puffs of down.

“I believe you told me once that rooks mate for life.”

“Ah, yes, I did say that.”

“Where is her husband?”

As she said it, another adult appeared, flying into the nest, offering food to their babies.

“He went to gather food. You see they gather it in that pouch under their beak.” He moved closer to the baby, guiding her with his hand. “Do you see, Gina? The birds?”

“Vogel,” said Regina.

“What?,” asked Melbourne.

“Oh, it’s German for bird,” Victoria said absentmindedly.

“So, she’s said a word?” Melbourne turned her back. “Gina, did you say something?”

“Vogel?,” Victoria prodded.

“Vogel.”

“Victoria, she said a word,” Melbourne said in amazement.

“But it was in German.”

“I do not care if it was in Chinese, it was a word from her mouth.” He took her into his arms. “Oh. Good girl. Very good girl!”

Regina seemed delighted by this sudden burst of attention. They finished with the rooks and walked back to the house for breakfast.

“I do not want German to be her first language,” said Victoria.

“It was one word. Besides, it will be an asset to her to speak German. I should hope she’ll take after your gift for linguistics.”

“Did you know I used to speak with a German accent?! I had to unlearn it! I do not wish her to go through that.”

Melbourne sighed. “You worry for nothing. She has English parents, English ladies and nurses look after her, we can obtain an English governess, but I would think it would be rather important for her to learn continental manners-”

“This has Mama all over it.”

“There are things from your mother I am far more worried about than teaching Gina to speak German. For example, what a brilliant match Prince Frederick Wilhelm might make.” He looked at the baby. “To which I am vehemently opposed.”

“A Prussian prince? But the Hohenzollerns are so rough and warlike.”

“My thoughts exact.”
Victoria sighed and looked to her baby, content being held by her father. “Royal princesses marry too young.”

“We all marry too young.”

“Did you?”

“Do you suppose I have rushed into this second marriage?”

She was forced to smile. “No, I meant Lady Caroline.”

He sighed. “Well, it would be arrogant to say that I had not, but it was a love match. When I met Caro, you see, I was the second son, headed for the army, no match for her, daughter of an Earl, relation to the Devonshires...”

“I could never imagine you being seen as an unsuitable match, Lord M. For any lady, no matter her rank.”

He smiled wryly at her. “I count myself lucky for it.”

She smiled. “What changed?”

“Nothing at first. It took years, I went to the army, hoped I could make a name for myself but then Peniston died and I was to become Viscount Melbourne. I was good enough for her.”

Too good, Victoria thought. How many times before had she thought that Caroline Lamb was the worst sort of harpy to cause her husband such distress? And he was so kind, so good to her in spite of it all. He never disowned her.

“I intend to make you very proud to call me your wife,” she said finishing her thoughts aloud.

“What makes you suppose you haven’t already?”

She smiled.

Victoria sighed. She and Will had come to bed early, content to just rest, letting the TV play softly. The drugs for his foot had made him tired and though her nausea had thankfully abated she was tired.

“I didn’t think it would be like this.”

“What?”

“When I found out. I didn’t think I would be vomiting uncontrollably or that you would break your foot on that Gussie would hate me. I thought it would be perfect.”

“Life is very rarely perfect. It does get close, though.”

She sighed. “What do we do?”

“For starters, I am going to take very good care of you.”

She smiled, curling further into Will’s chest.
“We don’t have to tell the baby about my fainting into a puddle of my own sick, do we?”

“As long as we don’t mention my foot.”

“It’s a deal.” She took the remote.

“What are you doing?”

She brought up the recordings.

Will groaned. “Not The Young Queen.”

“I’m pregnant and I passed out into my own sick this morning. Let me have this.”

“I broke my foot. Skip the episode where she marries Albert. You cry on a good day.”

She was silent. He turned to her to see her lip quivering.

“Lord M just looks so sad…”

He sighed. “Go right to the wedding or I’m taking the whole telly away.”

Harare, Zimbabwe 2009

Victoria smiled. It was her job to smile in front of the assembled photographers as she played with the children at the orphanage, but it was not a burden.

She had joined the boys in a game of football, glad to be in slacks and trainers and not her usual posh touring clothes. She kicked the ball, travelling down the field.

She eventually ended up in front of David, swiftly kicking it to the side for one of the boys to dribble away.

“You’re too good at this for a posh girl!,” David shouted.

“This posh girl won the Girls’ School Trust Championship four years in a row!”

“Not exactly the Premier League!”

“Have you played against posh teenage girls?!”

He tilted his head. “You may have a point.”

Victoria’s teammate called for her and she turned as he kicked the ball back, catching it and dribbling ahead, just to be tripped up by a boy who apparently was very unimpressed his opponent being heiress to the throne of England.

She landed in the dirt in front of the world’s press as David rushed to her side and one of the schoolteachers scolded the boy.
“I am fine,” Victoria insisted.

David was cleaning her face as they sat far away from the world’s press in the house’ first aid room.

“I can’t have the heiress to the throne dying under my protection,” he said. “Or the most beautiful woman in the world getting a scar.”

She shook her head. “That was such a silly magazine thing.”

“Who was talking about a magazine? Though to be fair, I suspect a scar would only make you more beautiful.”

She moved slowly to meet his eyes.

“You’re serious.”

“Of course I am.” He took away the cloth, bringing back an ice pack. “So, football champion.”

Victoria nodded. “Captain of the team.”

“Your grandmother let you play?”

“She didn’t realize I played. Her private secretary would come and get the papers she needed to sign for school from me and just put them with everything else and she just signed them. I did every activity at school.”

“Like what?”

“Rowing. Cricket. Gardening club. Piano. Violin. She did find out about the violin. I was in the same quartet as the Home Secretary’s daughter and he mentioned how much he had enjoyed my playing the next time he saw her.”

“Was she cross?”

“It’s hard to tell with her. I know she loves me, but she is always so busy.” She looked at him. “It’s a peculiar life I lead. I will be Queen some day, I had rather it not be soon, but I will be Queen.”

“I know.”

“It would be quite an imposition for any man, trust me-”

“Then perhaps you have not been keeping company with the right men.”

“What are you saying?”

“I think that I would like you to impose upon me, ma’am.”

She took a breath. “Do you suppose you might call me Victoria?”

“David.”
So, here is part of my idea with the Princess Royal's parents, if you care, the Prince of Wales would have finally been born in a time where hemophilia wasn't quite as deadly as it was for earlier generations because blood transfusions came along and greatly improved the options for hemophiliacs, but the AIDS crisis in the 1980s was catastrophic for hemophiliacs until they started screening blood donations for HIV and that is what happened to the Princess Royal's father, the Queen's son and this may have other implications.

Oh, forgot, History Nerd time, in our universe, Victoria and that other guy's daughter, Victoria did actually marry into the Hohenzollerns. She was seventeen- I actually think this is one of the crappier things the other guy did- and had a hard time with court life in Prussia and actually, she was bringing most of the money to the marriage, like seriously send her to Prussia and have her pay for it? Thanks, Dad. The other guy also hounded her to liberalize Prussia. Great, send your teenager to Prussia and have her try to change the government. Just great. Not to mention the terrible relationship that Victoria ended up having with her own son, Kaiser Wilhelm II, who you may remember from such films as Wonder Woman. So, yeah, great move all around there...
“Lord Melbourne.”

Melbourne looked up to see Collier. He and Regina had been playing on the floor of the library with her dolls.

“May I have word, sir?”

Melbourne smiled at Regina and stood. He walked to the valet.

“Yes?”

“I believe your Lordship said you were dining with the Salisburys on Thursday?”

“Yes. What of it?”

“The Marquess’ chef just sent one of her kitchen maids to see if the Queen had any special preferences and the girl said the dinner was tonight.”

Victoria entered.

“What is it?”

“Did the Marquess say Wednesday or Thursday?”

“Wednesday.”

Melbourne sighed. “What time is it?”

“Four, sir.”

“What?,” asked Victoria.

“It is Wednesday.”

“The dinner?”

“No. Today is Wednesday.”

“Can we not say I am ill?,“ she sighed.

“No, better that we go and get it over with or we shall be besieged my visits trying to make a new date.”
Will followed Victoria through the front door of the shop.

“Flora did have this bit of help, recollections from Hatfield House.”

“Do you have to walk around the shop with that?”

Will sighed. “This is the fourth time we’ve been to this shop this week.”

“I want to see what they have!”

“We’ve seen what they have, we’ve seen everything in the store.”

“I don’t want the baby stuck with a second rate nursery because I was in a hurry!”

Will sighed and once again followed Victoria deeper into the hallowed halls of Mothercare. There was one aspect of the paternal experience he had not realized he had missed out on: Carrie- despite agreeing to it- had been never been terribly keen on preparing for their babies. It eventually came down to Will sheepishly asking Emily for help and enduring an hours long rant about his choice in wife as she unloaded hand me downs from her Volvo estate.

He had the idea he would at least avoid the rant.

“I want to start with the cots and the bedding. I brought paint samples, we can see what goes.”

“You brought paint samples?”

“Yeah.” Victoria revealed a fistful of paint sample cards.

A saleswoman approached. “Back again?”

“Yes.”

“And you have paint samples.”

“You’re acting like people don’t bring paint samples in here.”

The saleswoman did not comment.

“Have we found out what baby is?”

“It’s too early.” Will began.

“I don’t need anyone to tell me. We’re having a girl.”

Will frowned at Victoria.

The saleswoman nodded. “We do have some lovely pinks.”

“I said I was having a girl, not that she needed to conform to the gender stereotypes you expect her to. I’ll find my own, thanks.”

The saleswoman left in a huff.

Victoria looked at Will. “Maybe we ought to go to London-“
“You decided we’re having a girl?”

“I didn’t decide. That’s what we’re having.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Of course I know. I’m the mum.”

“You don’t get to pick, Victoria.”

“I’m not picking. That’s what we are having.”

“Victoria-”

“I woke up this morning and knew we are having a girl. That is what is happening, Will, get with the program.”

“And suppose we don’t have a girl?”

“There’s no supposition. We are having a girl.”

“We could wait for the scan-”

She turned from him and took her paint samples to the nearest cot. The saleswoman returned.

“Enjoying yourself?”

He looked her in the eye. “Immensely.”

Hatfield House was the most prominent house in the county, dating back to the fifteenth century. The Marquess was only too happy to receive the Queen and delighted in pointing out some of the details of the house’s royal associations before they sat to dinner.

Salisbury was a widower and his four eldest children dined with them, the youngest among those was seventeen.

“How do you find Brocket Hall, ma’am?,’ asked Lady Blanche.

“I find it most pleasing.”

Lord James, the eldest son, spoke. “Not too small.”

Melbourne smiled at Victoria. Salisbury looked ready to strangle his son.

“No, I find Brocket Hall has everything I require.”

“It must be a welcome respite from that business in the Black Country,” said Lady Mildred, the elder daughter.

Victoria frowned. “What business?”

“Oh, just those silly nailers causing trouble, rioting.”

Victoria looked at Melbourne.
They stayed for just a few entertainments after dinner before excusing themselves. They walked into the house.

“Collier, newspapers.”

“Newspapers, sir?”

“Yes. Now.”

Victoria looked at the butler. “Have I received any dispatches?”

“No, ma’am.”

“No new boxes? No messengers?”

“No, ma’am.”

Collier returned with the papers. Melbourne did not have to open them. It was on the cover.

“What happened?,” Victoria asked anxiously.

“There have been strikes all over the country. The army has been sent in.”

“The army?,” asked Victoria.

Melbourne looked at Collier. “Do you know how it started?”

“It would seem, sir, that the factory owners tried to cut the nailers’ wages by twenty percent. From there, it spread to the other counties.”

“Why was I not told of this?”

Collier looked hard pressed for an answer.

“You did not ask Collier,” Melbourne reminded her. “Nor did I. Besides Sir Robert was to inform you of this.”

“We must return to London,” Victoria said with resignation.

“Yes,” Melbourne sympathized.

“So, this would have been the same week as the Black Country Nailers’ Riots-”

“Try the handlebars.”

Victoria had settled on a bedding set. Will had thrown his influence behind the gray one with the elephants she had decided would go with mint green and was currently carrying a shopping bag over his shoulder. She had led him over to the pushchairs and prams, ready to commit to something that he knew cost more than his first car.

And his second.

“What?”
“You’re taller than me. These are adjustable.”

She pulled the handlebars out, he resigned himself to holding the iPad under his arm and gripping.

“Satisfied?”

“Try the Bugaboo.”

He walked over to the next, seemingly indistinguishable from the last.

“I like the Bugaboo, but I just feel like I have my mum’s voice in my head asking why I didn’t get the Silver Cross...”

“So, are we telling your-”

“God, no.”

“She is going to get suspicious. So, remember the Swing Riots? You know, one of those policy achievements Flora says Melbourne didn’t have-”

“I remember the usual. Somebody takes money from peasants, peasants get mad, Tories get angry-”

“Except Melbourne didn’t send in the army. Then Peel does it all during the honeymoon.”

“So you think he was being a bit of a prig? Because he wasn’t for the wedding, then it happens-”

“Then there’s a Whig Prime Minister who always has the ear of the Queen.”

“And her heart.”

“Peel didn’t care about her heart, he just wanted her support.”

“But Melbourne wasn’t interfering-”

“To Peel it must have looked as if he was, just by being there.”

“You could always ask Roberta...” said Victoria as she pondered a parasol to attach to the pram. “Do we need this?”

“No.” He paused. “And no, I would rather stab myself in the eye than ask Roberta.”

“Strange how she fixates on the two men who felt their ambitions frustrated by Melbourne.”

“How were Albert’s ambitions frustrated by Melbourne?”

“Well, I’m Victoria was thinking about Melbourne while Albert shagged her. Wonder if she ever cried his name out...”

“How about something that is documented?”

“Melbourne gave her more orgasms.”

“Victoria-”

She looked up. “She documented it. The line where she says ‘I have come apart for William more this week than I did for Albert our entire marriage.’ What did you think that meant?”
“You think it was Albert’s ambition to give her orgasms?”

Victoria tilted her head. “You might be onto something there...” She settled back on the Bugaboo. “Okay, I can feel it, this is the one.”

Will looked up at the pierced teenager in charge of the department. “We want this one before she changes her mind.”

“Like what color?”

“Whichever one has the least gender stereotypes,” said Will.

Victoria was fuming. She had spent the whole night fuming except for a few moments were her husband managed to distract her. But it had resumed when she awoke, displeased to leave her honeymoon.

“He has made me look foolish.” She looked up at her husband. “I go away for a few days and he sends in the army!”

“Yes, that was unfortunate.”

“You would have done differently?”

“I have done differently.” He shifted Regina in his lap. The toddler seemed taken with every word he said.

“What do you mean?”

“When I was Home Secretary, there were a series of riots. The Tories reacted harshly.”

“But you did not?”

“No. The Whig government came into power and I acted against the military being used. The situation was threshers not nailers and the reasons were somewhat different.”

“They do not seem that different.”

“No,” he admitted.

“Peel knew this.” She looked at her husband. “Say what you are thinking. I know you will have already thought through every aspect of this and will have reached some conclusion.”

“He thinks I would have told you to be against him. That is why he did not tell you.”

“That is not his place to decide what he does and does not tell me for fear of what I might say!”

“Which you will need to remind him of when we arrive at the palace.”

“I will?”

“Yes. Do not tell me you are afraid of Sir Robert Peel.”

“But I have never summoned him to dress him down.”

“Do not say why he is to come to the palace. You are Queen. He will have to come. Let him think it
is his usual audience and then present it to him.”

They finally arrived at the palace in time for Regina to have grown fussy.

“I know, I know, you must have your nap.”

“Drina.”

They looked up to see the Duchess.

“You have returned early.”

“Affairs of state, Mama.”

“Your uncle and his family have returned home.”

“I should hope Dr. von Stockmar has as well.”

“Yes, of course.”

Regina shrieked.

Victoria looked at her husband. “I must prepare for Sir Robert.”

“I have her.”

Victoria left them. Melbourne headed for the nursery suddenly realizing the Duchess was walking with him. He prepared himself for whatever arrow would be slung at him.

“Did Regina like Brocket Hall?”

That was unexpected.

“Yes, I think she did. It’s a very good house for children. There are gardens and she was quite taken with the rooks.”

“Yes, she has a great delight in animals.”

“She said a word to us.”

“A word?”

“In German. Vogel.”

The Duchess looked at Regina and smiled. “You funny little thing.”

They arrived at the nursery. Melbourne kissed the baby goodbye handed her over to the waiting nurse.

“I will see you at dinner, Lord Melbourne.”

“Of course.”

Melbourne frowned to himself.

“Lord Melbourne?”
He looked up to see Collier.

“Are you alright, sir?”

“I am fine, just a peculiar day. What is it?”

“I did not think you knew where your rooms were.”

He nodded. “Quite right. Thank you.”

Melbourne followed Collier further down the hall. The suite of rooms was across the hall from Victoria’s. The first room was set up as an office and library, his books having been moved in. The next was a dressing room, then a bedroom and finally a room with a tub.

“A bath, I think.”

“Very good, sir. I’ll call the footman.”

He went back to the library to explore the arrangement that had been settled upon in his absence. He noticed a trunk on the table and opened it to find Augustus’ books.

“Collier.”

“Yes, milord?”

He motioned at the trunk and Collier stepped forward.

“Master Augustus’ books, sir?”

“You did not find them?”

“No, I did not.”

Melbourne searched around the trunk. “No note. Would you see if you can find out who found it? I should like to thank them.”

“Certainly, sir.”

“Why is this all terrible?,” asked Victoria as she went through the maternity clothes. “Maxi dress, probably not meant for short women. Giant sacks of cloth. Like I had all that sex for people to think I’m fat!”

A pregnant woman with a toddler glared at her. “Do you mind?”

“Do I mind what?”

“The s-word.”

“Oh, right. I do have three or four pages I’ve memorized where Victoria I goes on about Lord Melbourne’s cock, would you rather I discuss that?”

The woman frowned, covering her son’s ears and leaning in. “Four pages?”

“The man was apparently well endowed but also imaginative.”
“But four pages?”

“There was no telly. What else was she going to do?”

“Angela! There you are!,” a man called.

The woman sighed in resignation and walked away. Victoria turned back to the display.

“Oh, a jumpsuit, just what I want went I have to pee every ten minutes: a piece of clothing that makes it impossible.” She sighed. “I hate it all.”

“Do you even need it?”

“Of course I need it, else I’ll be wearing joggers for the next seven months.”

---

To her great consternation, Peel had taken his monarch’s invitation as his usual weekly audience and had taken the opportunity to discuss everything but the riots.

“An income tax?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“But why? We are not at war.”

“The government has debts, ma’am—”

“But you opposed this same measure only last year.”

He looked surprised.

“Should it surprise you that Lord Melbourne told me so?”

“I see. Do you consult Lord Melbourne on every matter I bring before your majesty?”

“We may consult our husband whenever we wish.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

He was fuming. She could tell.

“Speaking of which, I wonder if you might enlighten me about the aftermath of the unrest in the Black Country.”

“Ma’am?”

“Since you did not bother to tell me while I was at Brocket Hall.”

“And what would you have had me do, ma’am?”

“To keep your Queen informed so she does not appear foolish when she dines with the Marquess of Salisbury!”

“I was to understand you were on your honeymoon.”
“I see. What else have you kept from me? Such as the reason you felt it necessary to resort to military force?”

Peel did not answer.

“I am your Queen. You will answer me.”

“Well, excuse me, ma’am, I find it difficult to answer when I know Lord Melbourne will only contradict me.”

“What Lord Melbourne does is none of your concern-”

“Perhaps you would like me to report directly to him, ma’am?”

She stood, approaching Sir Robert closer. She wanted to look him in the eye, but she was short and he would not deign to face her, adding to her fury. “You will show us the respect due your monarch. You will show Lord Melbourne the respect due our consort.”

“And what of the respect due a Prime Minister? Is that only to be due to Lord Melbourne?”

“The question of my husband has been settled to your disdain, Sir Robert. The question of my Prime Minister can be raised when I wish as I understand it. I cannot imagine that your party would be so pleased that you lost your influence because you could not get along with my husband because as you know the question of who is Queen cannot be raised.”

“Perhaps we ought to adjourn for the day, ma’am.”

“Perhaps we ought to.”

Peel left. A few moments later, Melbourne entered.

“He did not look pleased.”

Victoria huffed, spinning towards him. “If a Prime Minister cannot rule without the support of his Queen, how is a Queen supposed to rule without the support of her Prime Minister?”

Melbourne tilted his head. “An interesting question. One that’s not been attempted since Charles II...”

“I cannot disband Parliament, Lord M.”

“No, those were simpler times.”

“Besides the problem seems to rest with Sir Robert...” She sighed. “He has never been like you, Lord M.”

“I am relieved to hear it.”

She smiled. “So? What must I do?”

“You must wait and find something you can agree with Sir Robert on.”

She sighed. “The only other matter he wanted to speak of was an income tax and I cannot imagine that will be very popular.”

“Indeed not. This will pass. Peel will be forced to do better. You must have patience.”
“Patience has never been one of my virtues, Lord M.”

“Well, perhaps I might teach you.”

She smiled. “I shall look forward to it.”

“Come on.”

Will motioned at the boxes he had just finished dragging from the car. “I’m just going to put this in the nursery—”

“I want you here.”

He smiled back at her as she led him past the myriad packages and into the sitting room, pushing him into the sofa.

“Have I been horrible?”

“No, not horrible.” He watched as she pulled her top over her head. “Never ever horrible.”

“I want to do a good job.”

“You are.” He helped her push down her jeans and knickers until she was in front of him in only her bra. He reached behind her to unhook it, tossing it aside. “You’re gorgeous.”

She helped pull his shirt off over his head and he caught her nipple in his mouth.

“Oh, God, Will,” she moaned, arching into him. She brought her own hand to the other, pinching it herself. “God, that feels so good now...”

Their mouths met again and they worked to pull down Will’s boxers and jeans. She sank down onto him, rocking to her own rhythm.

“That’s it, you’ve got it,” Will whispered in her ear.

“Oh, God, that’s so good...”

“Yes... Go on.”

“Take me on the floor.”

He did as she asked, gently moving to the floor, propping himself up as he began thrusting into her.

“Oh, God, Will, I love it, I love your cock!,” she shouted.

“Victoria! Was ist das?!?”

They froze.

“No...” Victoria hissed.

Will shook his head. “Please tell me I’m already dead...”

They looked up to see Victoria’s mother, Mary, enter the sitting room. She accusingly held up one of the Mothercare carrier bags.
“Were you planning on telling me?”
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

So, here we have another chapter. Please, please let me know what you think and happy reading!

Victoria looked at her mother and motioned at Will. “Were you going to even comment on this?”

“As if I haven’t caught you having sex before.” Mary rolled her eyes. “Like with that Albert.”

“I was the only one having sex then, Mum. Albert was mostly lying there.”

Will motioned. “Does anyone mind terribly if I get up?”

Will turned away to pull his jeans up. Victoria grabbed Will’s discarded jumper from earlier off the sofa and pulled it over her head.

Mary had moved on to the table behind the sofa. “Do you ever dust?”

“My housekeeping is none of your concern-”

“And what if the baby has asthma?”

“Who said I was pregnant?”

Will threw his head back.

“And all those packages in the hall?,” asked Mary.

“Gifts for a friend.”

“And I suppose you’ve gotten breast implants?”

“Yes. I did. Will loves them.”

Will turned to her. “You are grasping at straws here.”

“And when were you going to tell your mother that you were having a baby?”

“When I put her in nursery school.”

“You are so immature.”

Victoria’s jaw dropped.

Will shook his head. “I know I usually leave you two to this-”

“No, get in this,” said Victoria.

“But weren’t you harassing her about having children the last time we saw you?”
“Well, obviously I was mistaken. She is not ready.”

“Too bloody late to change your mind, Mum!”

Victoria awoke with the light in her face and her husband at her back.

It was today. Regina’s birthday. One year since she had become a mother and it seemed a lifetime ago. She was a different person.

One year since her Lord M had learned her secret and rushed to her side.

And Regina. How she had not known the little creature that lived inside her, how she had even resented her at times for seemingly taking over her life and her body. How she loved her, how her love grew more extraordinary with each day.

“Good morning,” Melbourne breathed into her ear, running his fingers through her hair.

“She is a year old.”

“Yes, she is.”

She turned back to him. “I have a surprise for you.”

They put on their dressing gowns and she raced him to one of the drawing rooms. There was a canvas with a cloth draped over it.

“I mean to present it to everyone after dinner, but I cannot resist showing you now. I saw it yesterday myself.”

Victoria rushed over, pulling the cloth down, revealing a portrait: Melbourne sitting, Regina clambering towards him, rapt in attention at him and he the same.

“She... she is breathtaking.” He turned to Victoria. “Like her mother.”

“I am so pleased with it.”

“I am glad it turned out, Sir George seemed very displeased with the fact I could not keep Regina still.”

Victoria walked back to her husband and took his arm. “I mean it as a wedding present.”

“Thank you.”

“You must think of somewhere appropriate to hang it.”

The next morning had begun with Victoria sobbing.

Will held her.

“Perhaps it was a little far-fetched for you to think you could get by without mentioning the baby to
her,” said Will.

“It was not!,” she screeched.

“Victoria...”

“It’s our baby! I want to do what I want to do! Not have her tell me what to do!”

“You’re thirty years old, she can’t tell you what to do anymore.”

The bedroom door opened. Mary entered with a tray.

“Here. Drink this.”

Will sighed. “That’s it. I’m dead and this is hell.”

Victoria turned her nose up at the thick green glass on the tray. “I’m not drinking that.”

Will looked up at Mary. “Did I forget to mention that this is our bedroom? Inside our house?”

“As if she was going to make a decent breakfast for herself. This is my own recipe, Feodora swears by it, though you really must have a better blender.”

Will stood up, bringing Mary back into the hall.

“Can you not see that you are upsetting her terribly?,” asked Will.

Mary shrugged. “Victoria is always high-strung-”

“No. You make her high strung.”

“I see. You are turning my daughter against me.”

“How could I possibly turn her against you? You’ve done a fine job of that yourself.”

“And what have I done?”

“You drive her mad, you criticize every choice she makes and then you nag her! She may be your daughter, but she is a grown woman and she is having our baby, so if you think I am going to let you walk all over her, you are mistaken.”

“Am I?”

“Yes and don’t think for a second you can walk into my house and tell me what to do!”

Will saw the glint in Mary’s eye. He thought he might have gone a step too far.

Good God, this is where Victoria got it.

She was taking it as a challenge.

The party was set for the afternoon. Emmie had been the one to organize it, inviting the children of Victoria’s ladies and those in Melbourne’s family.
The birthday girl herself was quite nonchalant about the festivities. She sat quite happily in Melbourne’s arms, immune to all other amusements.

“The Princess Royal seems so attached to Lord Melbourne,” remarked Lady Flintshire.

“Yes, unusually so,” remarked Lady Ethel.

“And what are you implying?,” asked the Duchess, turning sharply.

The women looked to their patron.

“I—” Lady Flintshire stopped. “It is just so unusual to find any man taking such an interest in a child—”

“Let alone a stepdaughter,” added Lady Ethel.

The Duchess turned from them.

And if the women thought the princess bore a resemblance to her mother’s former Prime Minister, they said nothing.

The cake had been decorated by the new palace chef with little birds on it of all types and variations. It was the only part of the party apart from her father’s arms that she seemed to take an interest in.

“And swans and ducks and geese...” Melbourne said pointing out for her.

“Bird,” she answered, though it sounded more like “birb.”

Victoria joined them. “Might you say Mama or Papa?”

“Bird.”

Melbourne smiled at Victoria. “Bird.”

“It seems odd that we should rank so low in her affections,” said Victoria.

“Are you jealous?”

“Certainly not.”

Dash scurried past them.

“Da!,” Regina cried out.

Victoria looked to Melbourne, a look of consternation on her face. “She’s trying to call to Dash before she calls to us.”

“I shouldn’t worry about it. Dash and flocks of birds are doubtless far more interesting than either of us. We’re just boring Mama and Papa.”

Will avoided Mary the rest of the morning. Victoria decided to hide under her covers and he went to work on the next bit of the book, Melbourne’s clashes with Sir Robert, something he had dealt with before.

“She’s told my sister. And my brother. And John.” Victoria threw her hands up.
“Calm down.”

“I am calm.” Victoria paced back and forth. “Now Feodora will be telling me what to do.”

“People always give unsolicited advice-”

“It’s not advice! It’s them telling me how to live my life, just like always! Nothing I ever do is ever right!”

“No, you’re right.”

Victoria stopped. “I’m right?”

“You’re absolutely right, you need to tell your mother that you and I can manage our child just fine.”

“I did.”

“No, I think you denied being pregnant and said you had breast implants.”

“I can have breast implants if I want!”

“First off, not needed. Secondly, that’s not the point, Victoria. You just don’t...”

She shifted. “I just don’t what?”

“You focus on the wrong things sometimes-”

“I focus on the wrong things?!”

“This is what I mean, you came in mad at your mother and now you’re turning on me!”

“I’m turning on you?! You’re the one who started criticizing me!”

She stormed out.

Will frowned. “You didn’t happen to talk to your mum before you came in here, did you?”

“So what if I did?!”

Will sighed.

Melbourne had come to the nursery and sent away the night nurse, content to read to Regina.

“Did you like that one?” He kissed her forehead as she ruffled the pages. “Augustus liked that one. It was his favorite. He was your brother...”

He got stuck in that thought for a moment until Regina looked up at him, babbling for his attention.

He smiled back at her.

“I wish you could have met him...” He leaned closer to whisper. “I am so glad to be here with you... I swear to you, I am yours forever.”

He heard a throat clear and looked up.

“Emma.”
“You are needed. Sir Robert has arrived.”

“Sir Robert? She does not need me to handle him.”

“No, I think perhaps you ought to come to handle her.”

He sighed and kissed Regina on the forehead.

“Ma’am, I assure you it was the usual parliamentary procedure-”

Melbourne knew he was entering at a critical moment. Victoria was so upset he could tell it from the back of her neck.

“Drina, you must be calm-”

“I will not be calm, Mama! I am being undermined by my Prime Minister!”

“It was never my intention to undermine you, ma’am-”

She spun around, skirts spinning and came face to face with him.

“Lord M, thank goodness.”

A quick glance to Sir Robert confirmed that he did not think it was goodness that had brought Melbourne here.

“Sir Robert informs me that today he has managed to push a bill through Parliament authorizing an income tax. Today.”

Melbourne quickly realized the reason for his wife’s consternation. Passing an income tax on the birthday of the heiress to the throne created a litany of problems.

“If I could persuade Her Majesty to see the reason in the measure-”

“What reason is there in the measure if not to insult me? If not to insult our princess? Have you grown so resentful that you cannot see it, Sir Robert?”

“I have no intention of insulting you or the princess, ma’am.”

Melbourne edged forward. “Perhaps if you were to not sign your assent for a day or two-”

“Withhold assent?!,” Peel said scandalized.

“Postpone assent,” Melbourne shot back.

“That cannot be done!”

“Surely it is not the Prime Minister’s place to tell the monarch what to do!”

“It always seemed to be your place!”

“Thank you, Sir Robert, that will be all,” said Victoria.

He bowed his head. “Ma’am.”
Will finally braved leaving his office under the auspices of going to the kitchen for a cuppa. He found Victoria gathering up the bedding from Mothercare.

“What are you doing?”

“Taking this back and the paint.”

“Why?”

“Mum doesn’t think it’s right. She’s probably right. Feodora listens to her and none of her children have murdered anybody.”

“No. You are not returning anything.”

“You can’t stop me!”

He nearly slammed his cold mug into his forehead. “Why is it when someone tells you to do something or asks or begs your instant response is to say ‘you can’t make me?’ Except once in a while somehow your mother gets into your head and you can’t fight her?”

“I do not.”

“Why should she want to fight me? I only want what’s best for Victoria.”

Will turned to see Mary join them. She said something to Victoria in a hushed tone in German.

“No, I’m sorry, you can’t speak German directly in front of me.” He snapped his head towards Victoria. “And no, do not start telling me I can’t make you.”

She glared at him in irritation.

“Besides, you can’t return anything, I tossed the receipt.”

He walked towards the kitchen.

“You can’t. Gray is no color for a nursery!,” Mary shouted.

“Victoria, calm down.”

“How am I to be calm when my Prime Minister makes me look foolish? You never would have done such a thing, Lord M. Even if you despised my husband!”

Melbourne sat in the chair. Usually he did not have so long to wait for his wife to be ready for bed, but usually she did not need to be persuaded.

“It’s an insult to our daughter,” she said as Skerrett struggled with her hair, mostly because her head kept moving. “Parliament passes an income tax on Regina’s birthday! The article is here next to the one detailing her birthday celebration! Making me out to be some sort of Marie Antoinette!”

“A cake and some games for a one year old can hardly be compared to feasting at Versailles while the French peasantry starves.”
“A tax bill on her birthday. I cannot imagine it will be very popular. I may not be one of the people, Lord M, but I do know that they do not like to part with the money they earned. I believe my grandfather might have lost some colonies over it.”

He smiled.

“What is funny?”

“You are. I find your sarcasm most invigorating.”

Victoria sighed. “What shall I do? A monarch cannot change her Prime Minister at her whim, but Sir Robert seems determined to undermine me, to make me look like a foolish girl, Lord M and I am not!”

“No, indeed not, you are a Queen.”

She looked irritated by that remark.

“That will be all. Thank you, Skerrett.”

The dresser left. Victoria stood and walked towards him, shift illuminated by the candlelight.

“Yes, but I am your wife.”

He leaned back. “Indeed you are, but you are also my queen.”

She moved to sit in his lap, pulling the shift above her knees to bunch higher up her thigh.

“So when I ask for your help ought I ask as your wife or your queen?”

“How could I possibly help?”

“I do not think Peel can stay if he is going to work against me.”

“That is not your choice.”

“William! That is what my Prime Minister would say!”

“Perhaps the people might take your view of the situation.”

“How do you mean?”

“Gina is beloved, that much is certain. Perhaps if people knew Sir Robert pushed the vote for today with no respect for the princess... he might be brought into line.”

“Are you agreeing with me?”

“But it ought not come from you. It ought to come from a Tory.”

She looked up. “Like Lord Shaftesbury?”

“Perhaps. Now, are we done with this and ready to discuss being my wife?” His hand dipped between her legs finding her wet there. She pushed into his fingers, begging for touch. “How can you be so ready?”

“I am always ready for you.”
“So wanton,” he tsked. He dipped his fingers between her folds and she pushed down. “So impatient.”

“Your wife needs you,” she said definitively. She held his head to face her. “Would you deny your wife?”

“I am unable to deny my wife anything.” He pulled her close. “Get on the bed.”

Victoria did it so quickly that her husband had to hold back a laugh. He watched her twitch, rubbing her thighs together and he undressed.

“What did I say about patience?,” he asked moving between her thighs.

“You said you would teach me.”

“And so I shall...” he said taking her wrists in his hands. She whined as he put delicate kisses around her face. “Do you not care for my kisses?”

“I adore your kisses but I adore other things.”

“Then you must wait.”

“No...”

He began moving slowly, slowly pushing into her. She let out a frustrated groan, trying to move her hips to plead for more.

“You must be patient.”

“I am not. I want you. Do you not want to be buried inside me?”

“Patience.”

“I am patient!”

She surprised him by freeing her wrists pushing against his chest. The way she moved was so desperate he let her push him onto his back. Victoria joined them again, sinking on top of him.

She was beautiful in the way she rode him, the abandon with which she sought what she wanted most.

“I need you,” she murmured. “I need you inside me.”

“You have me.”

She screamed, finishing her release, he thrust into her for his, holding her against him, whispering into her hair.

“You are not patient,” he said again as they clung to each other in the aftermath.

“No.”

“You must learn.”

“No...” she decided.

“I do have other ways to teach you.”
Will bade his time. Victoria returned with her mother and he found her on the sofa trying to choke down one of Mary’s mysterious green drinks.

“Was there a lump in that?”

She nodded her face contorted into revulsion.

Will walked over. “Tomorrow, I think you should write about Regina’s first birthday. I’ve worked on the Peel-Melbourne stuff today. Then I think we ought to get into the later stuff before Margaret.”

“Right.”

He watched her try to choke down the next chunk of green. Will took the glass away amid her protests.

He took her face in his hands.

“I love you. I love our baby and I think you are going to be a great mum.”

Victoria sighed. “I love you...”

“Would you like me to take you for a Chinese?”

She put down the glass of green sludge. “God, yes.”

Melbourne went to the nursery and was surprised to find that the Duchess had beaten him in.

She was speaking to Regina in German as the toddler seemed to take it all in. Did he catch ‘mama’ and ‘papa’ somewhere in there? Regina spotted him first smiling and holding her arms out. The Duchess turned.

“Lord Melbourne, I was just-”

“You hardly need to make excuses for being in the nursery, Duchess.” He answered Regina’s questing arms by picking her up, taking her into an embrace.

“My daughter grows frustrated that Regina will not call to her. She has never been patient. Even when she was not much older than Regina she would throw a tantrum to get her way. Regina does not seem to take after that.”

“She has her moments,” said Melbourne.

“I think there is a much simpler explanation for why she has not said either of your names yet.”

“Oh? What might that be?”

“She does not have to.”
“No,” Melbourne agreed.

“Well, I must go. I have much to do.”

The Duchess left. Melbourne frowned at Regina.

“That was unexpected,” he said to the oblivious toddler.
“How many more of these are there?,” Victoria murmured to Matthew. She glanced up from the baby she held. “I don’t know how much longer I can look convincingly regal...”

“How I should think you have that well in hand,” said Matthew as they posed again for the photographer.

“When I was a child we had to sit for our portraits to be painted,” said the Queen, not even slightly amused.

“So we have heard, Mama, though I wonder at all the photographs I have seen of you as a child,” William offered from behind the camera.

“That is enough from you,” said the Queen.

Victoria caught her brother pulling a face at her, she could not help but giggle.

“Your Royal Highness,” the photographer said sternly.

“Really, Victoria,” the Queen tsked.

The baby began to fuss which became a scream. Victoria tried to soothe her, but Matthew stepped in, taking the baby in his arms.


“Perhaps your lordship could sit and hold the Princess?,” the photographer prodded.

“No, I cannot,” said Matthew.

“I assure you-”

“No man in this family sits while his wife stands.”

The photographer finally understood the implication. “Alright, one of you holding the Princess then, your lordship.”

Victoria shifted the baby to her husband. A lady came again to rearrange the long skirt of the orchid Christening gown.
“You must see reason, Peel,” said Shaftesbury.

“See reason? Is this the Tory party or not?”

Shaftesbury sighed, looking across the table. They had brought Peel and Wellington here to see sense, but it was a losing battle.

“You might not have passed the tax bill on the Princess Royal’s birthday,” said de Grey.

“Is Parliament to be dictated by a child’s birthday party?”

“When that child is heiress to the throne of England, yes, perhaps it should take it into consideration,” said de Grey.

Peel looked to Wellington. The Duke offered his opinion freely. “You might recall we were against the match. Bad enough when her nickname was Mrs. Melbourne.”

“Oh, come off it,” said Shaftesbury. “Melbourne is a fact. Better to make the best of it than whinge about it.”

“He is not a young man,” said Peel.

“So what?,” asked de Grey.

“He will not be here forever.”

Shaftesbury scoffed in disbelief. “That is your plan? To wait for him to die?”

“He has fathered no heirs.”

“Yet.”

“Perhaps he is too old.”

Shaftesbury shook his head and stood. “You vex me, Sir Robert. I tire of trying to reason with you and this reality: Melbourne is not a king, no, but the Queen loves him so he may as well be.”

Shaftesbury and de Grey took their leave. Peel looked to Wellington.

“Do not tell me you agree with them.”

“I had hoped that this infatuation would die out or that Melbourne would have the sense to end it, but they are married now. Perhaps it is time to face facts.”

“I will not be ruled by a middling Whig.”

Hayter had been standing before the Royal Family for nearly an hour now. Regina grew fussier the longer the artist took to make up his mind.

“Are we any closer, Sir George?,” Victoria was forced to ask as her daughter climbed between chairs, the swift intervention of her parents having saved her several times already.
“Perhaps Lord Melbourne might sit and your majesty stands.”

“Fine,” said Victoria.

“No,” Melbourne said immediately.

“Why not?,” she asked.

He looked at her. “To sit while a Queen stands is a grave insult.”

“But you are my husband, you are not so formal in private-”

“This is not private, this is public.”

“I am your wife in public!”

“Perhaps you both might sit,” said Hayter.

They did. Regina went to climb up Melbourne’s lap.

“Oh, no, your royal highness must remain on the floor.”

This earned Hayter a glare from Melbourne who lifted Regina onto his lap. The painter opened his mouth to protest.

“I believe we are ready, Sir George. Thank you,” said Victoria.

Victoria turned to her side, standing naked in front of the mirror, examining her naked form.

“Have I missed something?”

She looked up at Will. “You’re back.”

“Yeah.”

“How was it?”

“Good. Gussie is looking forward to being back at school. Gordon only mentioned his new book five times. It would have been better with you.”

Victoria shook her head. “No. I don’t think so.”

He took off his jacket. “Well, I’m not going to tell him without you there.”

She snorted. “Yes, I’m sure that will make me even more popular with him.”

“It is what it is, Victoria. We just have to do it. Now,” he motioned at the mirror, “what is going on?”

She sighed. “I wanted to see if I looked pregnant enough.”

He smiled. “You what?”

“Well, do I? I mean, my breasts are huge but I feel like I’m the only one who can see this bump.”

Will sighed. “Are you just going to stand there naked and point out your breasts?”
Victoria smiled back. “My mum could be back any minute with John.”

He walked over taking her hands in his. “It is our house,” he said punctuating each word with a kiss.

“Have I mentioned I’m really enjoying this dominant side of you?,” Victoria smiled.

“Get on the bed, I’ll show you how dominant I can be…” He paused. “Assuming that’s alright with…”

Victoria nodded. “Yeah, Will, next time just assume it’s alright with me. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Victoria was surprised.

“Really?”

Sir James looked at her. “Is this such a surprise?”

“But I do not feel at all like I did when I carried the Princess Royal.”

Indeed not. Victoria had sent for Sir James as she wondered about a dizzy spell that had sent her to bed, she had attributed it to the exceptionally warm ride she had earlier.

“But your blood…”

“Has been absent. Yes.” She had not given it much thought, only too happy to spend those extra nights with her husband. “Will I feel ill?”

“Perhaps, but each pregnancy could be different.”

Victoria felt a pang of fear. She did not want it to be different. She wanted her husband to have another healthy baby and if that meant she was ill, so be it.

She smiled. “Thank you, Sir James.”

The door opened and Collier’s hasty bow told him who had arrived without looking.

“Collier, won’t you excuse us?,” asked Victoria.

He turned. “Is something the matter?”

She smiled. “No. Not in the least.”

Melbourne furrowed his brow. “But what-”

“I just had a visit with Sir James.”

“Are you unwell?”

“No.”
“Is Gina-”
“Would I smile were Gina unwell?”

He shrugged. “No, I suppose-”

“William, I am with child.”

“What?”
She smiled. “I am-”

Victoria had not finished the sentence before her husband had lifted her into his arms and off the floor. She yelped in excitement.

“Are you pleased?”
He shook his head. “How can you even ask?”

Will entered the office with a tray of snacks. “Are you reading Roberta’s book?”

Victoria looked up. “You said you wouldn’t speak with her.”

“Do you want to speak with her?,” Will shot back.

“I mean it is a bit fun to see her get angry.”

Will sighed and sat, passing Victoria her plate of sandwich.

“Victoria! William!,” Mary called.

They sighed and were soon joined by Mary and John.

“Ah, there you are. How nice to see you have all your clothes on,” said Mary.

“Well, now,” said Victoria.

“Sorry to disturb you, we can see you’re working,” John said meaningfully towards his wife.

“But you just got in. Surely they want to visit.”

“He’s staying here, surely that’s visit enough,” said Victoria.

“No, I’ve gotten a hotel.”

Mary looked at John. “But John, how can we stay in a hotel when there is family?”

“They’re busy and I’m certain we’ll all see enough of each other at dinner. I wouldn’t mind another visit to the university if Will and Victoria would oblige us.”

Will exchanged surprised looks with Victoria. “No, we wouldn’t mind at all.”

“We’ll leave you to it then.”
Mary and John left. Will heard a flurry of German and looked to Victoria.

“They’re arguing over the hotel and whether or not she’ll stay in it.” Victoria frowned. “Oh, good, she wants to stay when the baby comes.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” said Will. “What about Robert Peel?”

“Of course he was vehemently opposed to Melbourne, but this makes it sound like he had to change his tune once the Queen got pregnant again.” She paused. “With Melbourne’s child. Which was really, Melbourne’s child again.”

“Which Robert Peel didn’t know,” said Will.

“But if it was a boy, he would have been king one day.”

“And if anything happened to the Queen...”

“There’s only one person she would have made Regent.”

Peel went to Holland House again, preparing for the onslaught of unreasonable requests.

“Why have you dragged me here? I do have business to attend to.”

“The Queen is with child,” said Shaftesbury.

Wellington snorted. “Who knew Melbourne had it in him still?”

“Where did you hear this?,” asked Peel. “I am the Prime Minister-”

“I heard it from my daughter-in-law. She dined with her aunt and uncles last evening. Melbourne is apparently quite pleased but then again, who can begrudge him that? Except perhaps you, Peel.”

“Will you see reason now, Peel?,” asked de Grey.

“See reason? Why ought I see reason?,” asked Peel.

“Because now the Queen must select a Regent, one to rule if she dies and a son is born or if she dies someone must rule for the Princess Royal,” said Shaftesbury.

“Do you suppose there can be any question as to her selection?,” asked de Grey.

“The people will want a regent of royal blood-”

“Who?,” asked Shaftesbury. “The King of Hanover? Or the mad Duke of Sussex? Do you suppose any of them are more beloved than her Lord Consort who will either be the father of an infant king or the only father a child queen has ever known?”

Peel looked to Wellington.

“Do not tell me you are against me in this-”

“It would be better to be with him than against him in such an instance-”

“He is against us-”
Shaftesbury interrupted. “Should the Queen die do you suppose the country will be more sympathetic to her grieving husband or the heartless Tories who did not want them together?”

“Are we to be dictated to so-”

“I shall put it another way, Peel. Either you work with Melbourne or this party shall find a Prime Minister who will.”

A messenger rushed in. “Prime Minister-”

“What?,” Peel barked before the boy was finished.

“The Queen wishes to see you at once.”

“I wonder that they do not publicize the Princess’ christening,” said Mary.

Emmie shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s just how it’s done.”

Will entered with Victoria.

“Oh, you’re all getting to know each other,” said Victoria.

“Yes, I was wondering how it is Will’s niece may stay but your mother is forbidden.”

“I-”

John looked at Will. “Do you know why royal christenings are not publicized?”

Will shook his head. “I don’t know. It’s always been a family occasion, but I suppose there will be photos later.”

“Of the orchid gown,” Victoria said pointedly at Will.

“Wasn’t that their flower?,” asked Emmie.

“Whose?,” asked Mary.

“Victoria and Melbourne’s.”

Victoria cleared her throat loudly.

Mary turned. “Do you have a cough? I told you not to have artificial sweeteners.”

“Back to work,” said Will.

Peel entered the palace and headed towards the Queen’s study met by the sound of laughter as the footman led him.

“The Prime Minister.”

He bowed as he saw the reason for the Queen’s laughter. She and Melbourne played with the Princess Royal. The Queen stood from the floor and offered her hand. He kissed it as Melbourne
scooped up the toddler.

“Your Majesty.”

“I shall leave you-” Melbourne offered.

“No, we will not take up much of Sir Robert’s valuable time,” said Victoria. Melbourne stilled as Regina toyed with his jacket. “Sir Robert, I am with child.”

He forgot to act surprised or to offer congratulations. After a moment, the Queen’s eyes began to narrow at him.

“Congratulations, Your Majesty.”

“Sir James Clark thinks my second child will be delivered in the spring, hopefully by our anniversary.”

Another pause too long. “That is excellent news, ma’am.”

“So again we must raise the issue of regency-”

“Not yet, I think-” he said, hoping to avoid this discussion.

“Now is as good a time as any because the solution is simple. Lord Melbourne will be regent should anything happen to me. He is my husband and he is the one who will be guardian of the Princess Royal.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Sir Robert.”

Peel bowed his head and left.

Melbourne turned to his wife. “Was that necessary?”

“Entirely. Should something happen to me I do not want him to think that you and Gina can be separated.”

“You do realize that I am only agreeing to this because of Gina.”

“I know,” said Victoria. “And I love you all the more for it.”

Emmie rushed into the office as Will and Victoria worked.

“Good, you’re not having sex.”

Will stood. “Emmie, what is it?”

“The news. You have to see the news.”

They followed her out to the sitting room. Mary sat on the sofa holding John’s hand.

“All the channels just got interrupted. We’re waiting on some announcement,” said John.

“What announcement?,” asked Victoria. “It’s not another terrorist attack, is it?”
“There’s nothing on Facebook,” said Emmie.

Will sighed. “It’s only one thing.”

Mary looked up at him. “What?”

The Queen’s portrait came on the screen as the anthem played.

“What was that for?,” asked Emmie.

The BBC One presenter finally appeared.

“Good afternoon. Queen Victoria V has died at Buckingham Palace in the company of her granddaughter the Princess.” The presenter stopped, her words becoming out of date. “In the company of Queen Victoria VI and her grandson-in-law, the Duke of Montrose.”

“Oh, my God,” said Victoria. “The Queen is dead.”

“Long live the Queen,” answered Will.

Buckingham Palace, One Hour Earlier

The photographer motioned towards the royal family. “Perhaps you might sit, Your Grace.”

“No,” David demurred, “I couldn’t possibly.”

“Your Grace?”

He looked to his wife. “I do not sit while she stands,” David said.

“Just one more,” said the Queen hastily. “I think I should like a rest.”

Victoria looked to her grandmother. “Are you alright, Granny?”

“One more with the Princess,” said the photographer.

“I am just a bit hot, wasn’t it awful in the music room?”

“No,” said Victoria, as she shifted her daughter in her arms. Divya knelt down and arranged the flowing skirt of the orchid baptismal gown.

“Smile.”

They turned towards the camera. The flash went off and the Queen stood.

“I shall retire.”

Victoria could not help but think her grandmother had something strange about her. “Granny, are you-”

The Queen was not five steps when she fell to the ground.

Victoria stood frozen with her baby in her arms as her husband made his way to the fallen monarch, joined by servants and courtiers.
“Call an ambulance!,” he shouted. He turned back, loosening her jacket. “Majesty! Victoria, can you hear me?! It’s David!”

Victoria watched in horror through the scramble of other assistants. Divya had enough sense to take the infant princess to her and pass her off to the nanny.

David did CPR but life drained from the Queen’s body. He sat back on his knees, closing the Queen’s eyelids. He looked up at his wife.

“I’m sorry.”

Victoria shook her head. “No.”

All eyes turned to Victoria.
Grief was a strange thing. To grieve someone, you had to remember they existed.

It would happen now that Will would go days not quite remembering Allison existed, just that there was a black hole in his heart and he did not give much thought to why. He had Gussie. He had his work to get back to.

Then it would hit him.

Allison. Lying pale on that hospital bed, covered in tubes, him promising her everything when he knew it wasn’t. Not for him. Nothing was ever going to be okay again.

There was a knock on the door.

“Professor Lamb?”

He looked up to the door of his office. A short-ish young woman with ombre hair- is that what the girls called it- tights and a short skirt. Was that a spray tan or a real one?

And was that a smile on her face?

How long had he been staring at her?

“Uh, sorry, yes?”

“Professor Portman set up this meeting?”

Oh, God, what had Emma been saying?

“Victoria Kensington?” She entered the room. “My thesis is about Victoria II? We haven’t met yet. You’ve been on sabbatical?”

Right. The Early Victorian scholar. Emma was Department Chair and Victoria had entered the program just as he went on sabbatical, forcing her to take over as adviser, but she wanted him to help her now.

“Have a seat.”

She smiled, taking the uncluttered chair on the other side of the desk. Immediately, her eye caught something and she picked up a frame.
Allison’s drawing. Why had she picked up Allison’s drawing?

“Brocket Hall? An abstract piece?”

Their last day trip together. Tables had been set up for children’s activities, like sketching the house. Allison had presented him with a work of red crayon and some very strange shrubs and oversized rooks which he had promptly sworn to put in his office.

“My daughter did it.”

“How old?”

“She was three when she did that.”

“How old is she now?”

“Victoria II. Tell me about it.”

“Well, I suppose I’m more concerned with Regina. The politicization of her childhood. The engagements that never were. Even her childhood illnesses were politicized.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, she had a fever when she was not yet two- while the Queen was carrying Margaret- it was the talk of all the papers. And I find this passage from her diary quite significant.”

“What passage?”

“About Lord Melbourne. I could read it?”

Will motioned. Victoria got out an iPad.

“My first memory- though Grandmama says I was far too young to remember such things- was of a cold night. My skin felt as if it were on fire and I screamed. I remember Papa coming to me, he looked like a giant. He lifted me and held me, telling me that everything would be well and of course it was so long as he was there...” She looked up. “Are you alright, Professor?”

“Fine and call me Will. Graduate scholar’s privilege.”

She smiled. “Okay, Will.”

“So to you Melbourne is a key figure?”

“Of course. Her political acumen was unrivaled. She had to learn that somewhere.” She smiled. “Just like your daughter appears to be quite the scholar on Brocket Hall.”

He smiled back.

The Queen was dead.

Long live the Queen.

Victoria maintained her composure long enough for her grandmother’s body to be taken away. She
excused herself to the next room not even noticing that her husband had followed her. He finally stood in front of her.

“I’m so sorry, Victoria.”

“What am I going to do?”

David shook his head. “What do you mean?”

“I am not ready for this. I have no idea what I am doing.”

“You’ll sort it out.”

“No, quite literally I have no idea what I am doing, David! Is someone going to come in here? Do I have to go back out there and start queening?”

“Start queening?”

“What happens next?”

“We’ve had briefings.”

“Were you listening? Because I don’t remember anything.”

“Okay, how about this, The Young Queen-”

“The Young Queen?!?”

“Look, Lehzen wakes up Victoria I and she finds out the King is dead and right, then Melbourne shows up. And there’s a lot of close ups and some terrible piano music...”

“David, I don’t think we can use The Young Queen as a guide.”

“Why not?”

Victoria rolled her eyes. “Well, I very much doubt Lord Melbourne ever jumped in a lake or punched Prince Albert in the face or had a shag in the glasshouses!”

“Shag in the glasshouses? When was that?”

“It was on the extended cut!”

There was a knock at the door. The Queen’s private secretary, Sir Frederick Jennings, appeared.

“Your Majesty, I am so sorry to disturb you.”

“Yes, his grace and I were just engaging in quiet prayer...” said Victoria.

David cast a sideways glance at her.

“I thought you would want to know, ma’am, that the Prime Minister is on her way.”

“The Prime Minister?”

“To swear allegiance to you, ma’am.”

David looked at Victoria. “Episode one.”
“Sir?,” asked Jennings.

“Never mind him. Next. How will the news be conveyed?”

“The Foreign Office is relaying the news to the commonwealth now. It will be on the news in about an hour. The meeting of the Privy Council is tentatively set for six.”

“The Privy Council...”

“Still episode one...” David whispered.

“That’s not helping.”

Though Melbourne held no reservations about his marriage, there was one little problem.

He was married to the head of the Church of England and he really couldn’t be bothered. So every Sunday morning he came to services on his wife’s arm- lest his detractors say he was irreligious or infirm- and sat in the front pew, the whole congregation staring at the back of his head.

The one highlight was Regina. Every week, his little girl sat in his lap waiting for him to come up with some sort of amusement for her. Funny faces progressed to her completely untying his cravat and he finally resorted to keeping some sort of trinket in his pocket for her to play with. This usually earned some glare from the archbishop who seemed to think he was not taking the Princess Royal’s religious education seriously.

Which he did not. He knew Victoria did, raised as she was. As did the Duchess. It seemed to be one thing that they actually agreed on.

Except today Regina required no amusement. She seemed rather tired, having fallen asleep against his chest, only awakening to bury her face in her father’s coat as the congregation stood to sing.

“Lord M, ought we not walk back?”

Melbourne looked to the waiting carriage his wife never used for the walk back to the palace after church. She was very pregnant now, again chafing at the restrictions of her condition, but who could argue with a woman walking back from church? He looked longingly toward the carriage, wanting to get Regina inside of it.

He was being looked at as well. The parishioners were waiting. Would the Queen win her fight to walk back to the palace? Or would her Lord Consort put his foot down?

“Of course.” He shifted Regina again as he began to follow his wife.

She went on, wondering at what christening gift she ought to get. Frances had just had a baby, named in honor of her Queen and Great Aunt, soon to be godmother.

“It is always better to be simpler on such occasions,” the Duchess said offering strangely sound advice. “A prayer book with perhaps your favorite scripture as the inscription.”

“Yes, thank you, Mama.”

They arrived at the palace. Regina barely stirred as Melbourne handed her to a waiting nurse.

“One moment, please,” he said, handing Collier his gloves. He put the back of his hand to Regina’s
“What are you doing, Lord M.?” asked Victoria as she was divested of her own outerwear.

“Is she ill?,” asked the Duchess, casting aside her bonnet, her maid hastening to catch it.

“She is not warm, but she seems so tired today.”

“Perhaps she did not sleep,” the Duchess suggested.

“Regina never gets ill,” Victoria said confidently.

Indeed she did not. Never a cough or a fever.

“Put her back to bed,” said Melbourne.

“Do you want me to stay?”

Victoria looked at David as she smoothed the last imaginary wrinkle out of the black dress Divya had to dig from the far reaches of her closet.

“A Queen always meets the Prime Minister alone,” Victoria chided him.

“Right.”

“Episode one. And as far as I know Mrs. Bainbridge has never been accused of a criminal conversation so I think we’re safe there.”

There was a knock at the door. Victoria looked to David. He stood and gave her a peck on the cheek as he disappeared out the other door of the sitting room. The door opened and Mrs. Bainbridge appeared, bowing her head along with the footman. She entered the room and curtsied.

The next bit of awkwardness ensued as Victoria remembered she was to offer her hand to be kissed.

“Your Majesty,” said Bainbridge bowing her head and kissing her hand.

God, that was terrible. Did she feel lipstick on her hand? This was probably much more pleasant with Lord Melbourne.

“May I offer my condolences on behalf of the nation on the death of your grandmother? She was much beloved and saw this country through many trials.”

“Thank you.” She motioned towards the settee. “Do sit down.”

The Prime Minister went to the seat and Victoria took a chair.

Yes, that was definitely lipstick.

“This must come as a shock, ma’am.”

“Yes.”

“Her Majesty was much beloved by the people.”
“Yes.”

The Prime Minister paused. “Of course, the Privy Council will be meeting at six.”

“Of course.” Victoria shifted her legs again.

“There will be many matters that require your attention in the coming days. Please allow me to assist you in any way I can.”

“Well, I suppose you had bring me up to speed.”

“Ma’am?”

“Well, you are the Prime Minister and I am the Queen. We’ve never spoken before. Perhaps you want to fill me in.”

Melbourne could not sleep that night. He stared at his wife the expanding swell of her belly lit by the taper, watching it rise and fall with her breath.

Then he heard crying.

Melbourne put on his dressing gown and slippers, heading down the hall. He found Lehzen standing outside the nursery, in hushed conversation with the night nurse.

“Regina-” He pushed past them.

“Papa!” It was not a call so much as an invocation to the highest power she knew. He lifted her from the cot and into his arms, trying to rock her as he discovered what he had dreaded.

She was burning up.

“How long has she been like this?,” he demanded.

“She awoke like-” the nurse began.

“Have you sent for Sir James?”

Lehzen began. “I was just about to-”

“When?! Send for him now!”

Lehzen turned to the maid and nodded. Melbourne shook his head and turned back to his daughter.

"All shall be well, Gina..."

David was waiting when the Prime Minister finally left.

“How was it?”

“How was it? I’m meeting the Privy Council in four hours and I just realized I don’t know who they are!”
David frowned. “You know who they are. You know politicians.”
“I’m terrible with faces.”
David paused. “Oh. You are terrible with faces.”
“By the way, you need a black suit.”
“Why?”
“You’re coming.”
“Why?”
“You’re on the Privy Council.”
“What? When did that happen?”
“When my grandmother died and you became the consort of the sovereign!”
“Oh. Right.” He paused. “Is there any possibility of getting the councilors to wear name badges? Could we make flash cards or something?”
“Well, if I had known my grandmother was going to drop dead, I would have stayed up late studying last night instead of watching one more Kardashians.”
“Google specs?”

Victoria had two surprises when she woke up.
The first was that she was alone having fallen asleep very comfortably with her husband next to her.
The second was that her mother was waking her up.
“Drina, here,” she said passing her the dressing gown from the foot of the bed.
“Mama?”
“Come.”
There was just barely light in the hall as her mother led her.
“Mama, what is going on?”
They arrived at the commotion taking place inside the nursery. Her husband and Lehzen standing with Sir James as Regina screamed.
“Well, if you had bothered to wake me!”
“I do not report to you!”
Victoria looked at the screaming toddler. “Gina, what is the matter-”
Her husband stood in her way, blocking her path.
“William, what are you doing?”

“I am sorry.”

Sir James spoke. “I believe the Princess Royal has a contagious fever, Your Majesty.”

“What? Regina does not get ill!”

“She is,” Melbourne said softly.

Sir James stepped closer. “For your own health, ma’am-”

“What of it?”

“And of the child you carry, it would be better if you had no contact with the Princess.”

“What? No. Certainly not. She needs me-”

“Victoria, please,” said Melbourne.

She spun around.

Melbourne followed her.

“Victoria-”

“My child needs me. I will not be kept away from her!”

“You have another child to think about.”

“Regina-”

“I will stay with her.”

“I should stay with her!”

“What if you fall ill? What then? What if-” He sighed, taking her hand in his. “Please. I can’t lose...”

“Lord M...”

“Please.”

Melbourne turned away and Victoria watched as he disappeared down the hall.

Victoria looked out the window of the palace. The news cameras had gathered first and then the people carrying cards and flowers and balloons.

“I think it’s just about everywhere now,” David said looking at his phone as he joined her.

“What do the comments say?”

“Uh, nice things.”

“Let me see,” she held her hand out.
“Victoria-”

She took the phone from his hand.

“How many times have I told you not to read the comments?,” he asked.

“‘Now we have the daughter of a coke-snorting model as queen.’ Oh, good.”

“I told you not to read the comments.”

“Oh, slut drug addict that’s original...”

“Stop it.” He took the phone back. “You’re the granddaughter of a Queen who was the great-great-granddaughter of the greatest queen this country ever knew.”

“Elizabeth was pretty good.”

“I mean, she was okay, but Victoria never had her cousin executed. Prince Albert did get shot, though...” He shook his head. “Point is, you are a Queen and you will be a great one.”

“Thank you.”

Jennings entered. “Your Majesty. Your Royal Highness.”

“Yes, Jennings?”

“The car is ready to go to St. James’ Palace.”

“That time already?”

“When you return a copy of your speech will be ready for you to review.”

“My speech?”

“Yes, Your Majesty is to address the nation this evening.”

“I don’t recall that having been in the briefing.”

“Well, your last one was some time ago and the Queen- that is, the late Queen- thought it would be appropriate.”

“Did she?” Victoria turned to look at her husband.

“Yes, it will be simulcast on television channels around the globe and the internet.”

“We’ll be right out, Jennings.”

The secretary retreated.

Victoria looked at her husband.

“This day sucks.”

“Yeah,” he agreed.

“‘Thought it would be appropriate,’” she grimaced as they walked to the door. “Because that’s what I need right now.”
Days.

The sun rose. Sir James visited. Melbourne paced around him, hoping the doctor would come up with something.

The fever would seem to be gone and then it would return. The prescribed cold bath was as frightful as the fever itself as Gina screamed and he offered apologies to her.

He sat with her in the rocking chair, humming, reading, doing anything that would help. Though he must have slept himself, he could not remember it. He only ate when Collier brought him a tray.

It seemed wrong to live if Regina should...

“Papa...” she moaned. Though Regina had added many words to her vocabulary, this seemed to be the only one she cared about.

“I know,” he said, shifting her again, hoping for something that would soothe her. “Everything shall be well, I promise.”

Victoria could not sleep.

No husband. No baby. Dash was forced to play the part of infant as she held the little spaniel and sobbed. The dog knew better than to resist, letting his mama shed tears onto his coat.

She took to the chapel, she took to her own solitary prayers, usually on her knees, usually ending with crying into her empty bed.

Take me, she begged.

She could be done. Regina had Lord M, she would be fine. He might make her an even greater queen, a better one. There of course was the problem of the child she carried, who she loved deeply and fiercely, but Gina was alive and if that was the trade off...

If that was the punishment finally come due for whatever sins she committed...

Fine.

She woke up and felt nauseatingly well. No lightning bolt came. No burning bush came appeared in the palace garden to tell her that her bargain was accepted.

So she took again to the chapel. She did not know how long she had been there, but she looked up and saw her mother.

“Mama? What are you doing here?”

“The same as you, Drina. I came to pray.”

The Duchess took the opposite pew.

“To pray for what?”
“I expect the same as you.”

“I doubt it.”

“Do you?”

“Well, I am not praying for the fever to take my husband instead of Gina.”

“You think so little of me?”

She scoffed. “I think we both know the answer to that.”

Victoria tried to turn back to her prayers.

“I pray for your first. Always, Drina.”

She did not turn, but was listening.

“For your health. That your reign will be a peaceful one. That you will deliver the child you carry safely. Then yes, I pray as you do for the restoration of Regina’s health. I pray that God will give your husband the strength to look after my granddaughter and spare him from the fever.”

“You expect me to believe you have been praying for Lord M?”

“What motive would I have to lie to you?”

“My favor.”

“Yes, but I know you well enough by now to know that your favor is not so easily restored once it has been withdrawn.”

“I thought it went well,” said David.

Victoria sighed. “Yes, well, I did only get half the names sort of wrong and I do have an entire speech to muck up.”

“And there was the woman who didn’t want to kiss your hand...”

“You mean my aunt?”

“No, the other one.” David checked his watch.

“What?,“ she prodded.

“I thought I might go and check on the baby.”

“Bugger. I-”

“I’ll just run to Dover House and back. Do you need anything?”

“A time machine?”

He kissed her. “I won’t be long.”
David left.

Victoria approached Jennings. “Is there some text for this speech?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said handing over the papers.

“Thank you.”

“Your box is in the study.”

“My box?”

“The Queen’s box—”

“I know which box. I just didn’t realize that—” Victoria shook her head. “If I had ever had a job, I think they might have given me more time for training.”

“You have been in training your entire life, ma’am.”

“It seems woefully inadequate.”

“There is a letter next to the box that may interest you.”

Victoria walked into the study and sighed.

The speech was about three pages, assuring the people of a smooth transition, eulogizing her grandmother’s years of service. She idly wondered if she had written this herself?

Finally, her eye came to the red wooden box inscribed with “VR.”

And the letter next to it.

“’My dear Victoria...’” She realized it was not meant for her, the date was all wrong and she skimmed down to the end. “Victoria IV?”

She went back to the top.

“You find yourself in the same place I was on the death of my mother and she on the death of hers. I can do no better than the advice and well wishes offered to my grandmother by her beloved papa on that day. I have enclosed a typed copy of that letter- his hand was appalling- here for your guidance. Be assured that you carry with you my love and best wishes for the duty you take on today...”

Victoria sat down, tears welling.

“I have no regrets to speak of. I have loved and been loved, but most of all I have done my duty. I take comfort in the fact that you are my successor and in death, I shall be reunited with my parents, my dear brothers and most of all my son...”

She sighed.

“I shall never forget. Yours always, Mama...’”

She reached for a tissue, dabbing at her eye makeup. Was she allowed to cry anymore?

She went for broke and opened the letter from Lord Melbourne.

“’My Darling Regina... It is my most fervent hope that I am not there to see this letter read because I
wish your mother the most long life...” She snorted. “Well, you got your wish, didn’t you, Lord M?
‘There was a time that I thought my life was over, but it had just begun again for you see I was
awoken to the news of the death of a king and the accession of an eighteen year old queen...”

Victoria awoke surprised to find she was not alone in bed.

Her husband had fallen asleep next to her, wearing only trousers and shirt, the rest tossed beside the
bed.

“William?” She sat up. What could this mean? “William!”

He did not stir.

Anxious for an answer she slapped him across the cheek.

“Ow!” He awoke, rubbing the side of his face. “Did you slap me?”

“How is Gina? Is she alright? Did she-”

He sat up, cupping her face. “The fever broke last night and has not returned. Sir James believes we
are in the clear.”

“I can see her again?”

“Yes-”

“Why did you not wake me?!” She stood, grabbing her dressing gown, bolting out.

“I did not-”

Whatever the response, Victoria did not hear, racing down the hall, one hand keeping her stomach in
place. The nurses curtsied in surprise as she rushed to the cot. She lifted her daughter into her arms,
carrying her to the rocking chair and sitting.

Regina did not stir, so much as curl into her the best she could with the noticeable obstacle of
stomach. She looked up to see her husband standing in the doorway.

“I was so frightened...” said Victoria. “I do not know what I would have done.”

He shook his head. “Better not to dwell on it.”

David’s trip home took much longer than planned. For one, he spent about an hour putting off his
mother's questions. Mostly because he had no answers. Every two seconds his mobile rang or
buzzed and this was all before he had see the baby, located the other black dresses he was to carry
back and then Divya had texted him about something called a Nars palette.

Surely there was a better way he thought handing off the bag he had used to a footman which was a
carrier bag from the Nike store. The servant looked at him skeptically. He shrugged back at the man
and headed upstairs to where the broadcast was to be done from.

“David, have you seen Vic-” Divya stopped herself. “The Queen?”
“What? You lot lost her? She’s only been Queen eight hours!”

David went back out into the hall, taking a turn towards the private family quarters. He found Victoria by the staircase, sitting under the portrait of Victoria and Melbourne.

“Hey,” he said, quickly sitting on the step next to her. “What are you doing? You’ve got a speech to the world in about five minutes time.”

“Have I ever told you why I always say hello and goodbye to this portrait?”

David sat back. “No.”

“When my dad died, it was terrible. He just became this shell and my mum... I think she was relieved.”

“No.”

Victoria shook her head. “She didn't want him dead or anything. She just wasn’t cut out to be a nurse and I think she went a little mad. I stayed at Dover House with the nanny and then I moved in here and it was so big and empty and Granny was always gone, but Jennings, I think he felt sorry for me. He gave me this biography of Victoria II for my birthday and I envied her. We were growing up in the same house and had the same life, but she had... a family. So I daydreamed that they were mine and when I said hello and goodbye, good morning and good night, it was like someone was there for me.”

“You pretended.”

“I pretended and it made me feel better so I just kept it up.”

He looked at the paper in her hand. “What’s that?”

“Letter from Lord M,” she said.

Victoria stood. Her husband followed.

“I’m ready.”

“I have no doubt of it.”

------

Oxford, 2012

Will sat in his car for a full thirty minutes before he walked into the cemetery.

The plot was far off from the others, Allison’s simple headstone.

He knelt down, taking aside some weeds that had cropped up.

“Sorry about that.” He took the pink orchids out of the brown paper he had brought them in. “I brought you these. I remembered how much you liked them at Brocket Hall. We had fun that day, didn’t we?”

He sighed.

“What am I doing?” Will shook his head.
He heard footfall on the grass next to him and looked up to see Victoria.

He didn’t say anything at first.

“Sorry,” she said. “Emma told me you would be here and...”

“And?”

“I didn’t think you should be alone.”

He nodded. “Thank you.”

Victoria knelt down. “I shall never forget.”

Will snorted. “Pathetic, isn’t it?”

“Pathetic? How?”

“A Melbourne historian who can’t find another epitaph for his daughter’s headstone.”

“I think it’s beautiful. I’ve always loved it.”

“Have you?”

“Yes.” She looked to him. “No one can control if they’re remembered or forgotten, loved or hated, but Victoria could say to Lord M that she would never forget, she would always love him.”

The wind blew.

Will finally spoke.

“Allison. She had a short life, but it meant something to me. Sometimes I feel as if I am the only one who knew she was here or that she’s gone.”

“Is that why you didn’t tell me she was gone?”

Victoria looked at the headstone.

“Well, I shall never forget that there was once a little girl called Allison, who drew the most brilliant picture of Brocket Hall...”

Will chuckled despite himself.

“And her father loved her very much.”

“Thank you,” said Will.

Victoria reached over and squeezed his hand.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Hi again. Thanks again for being here. Please, please let me know what you think and happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Victoria entered the study set up for the broadcast with David behind her. It was one of the larger rooms, sometimes they took tea there with a family portrait of Victoria I, Melbourne and Victoria II as a toddler on his lap. She looked up at the portrait and back at the camera. David settled beside it.

“Your Majesty, the autocue-”

“I have it, thank you.”

“In three, two-”

Victoria looked to the camera. “Good evening. I know this day has been quite a shock for all of us. I began it with high hopes as my newborn daughter was christened, an event now I am extremely grateful my grandmother was able to witness.”

Divya whispered. “This isn’t the speech.”

David frowned. “What?”

“My daughter wore a replica of a christening gown that I wore as did my father, my grandmother, her mother and her mother, whose mother was the first infant to wear the gown as she was christened Regina Victoria Mary Elizabeth. I have always found my four times great grandmother’s choice for the name of her firstborn rather telling. As you might surmise Victoria means victory and Regina is Latin for queen. So she essentially named her victorious queen and you see that is what we have had in this nation, a victorious queen.

“A little over eight weeks ago we celebrated my grandmother’s birthday and the one hundred and eightieth anniversary of Queen Victoria I’s accession to the throne. Those one hundred and eighty years have probably been more altering for this nation than all the years that came before. We have had wars and upheaval and empire and always a Queen Victoria.”

She glanced at David.

“I vow you to now that I will dedicate my whole life, as the five Victorias before me have, to your service. In the coming days, I will be visiting you across this realm. There are difficult days ahead just as surely as joy is ahead and future victories beyond that. We will also come together and mourn and then we shall go on. Thank you and God bless you all.”

“And we’re off,” said the director.

“You went off speech,” said Jennings. “The government will not be happy.”
“I didn’t plot revolution.”

“So, you just came up with that?,” asked David.

“Yes.”

The door opened. They looked up to see a taller, older man baked by the sun enter.

“Lord Shaftesbury,” said Jennings.

“Grandfather,” said Victoria.

He stepped forward, bowing his head and kissed Victoria’s hand.

“Your Majesty.”

“William...” Victoria sighed.

Melbourne pushed her hair aside as he slid slowly out of her again to bury himself. They had retreated to their bedroom, the Queen feigning exhaustion in the middle of the afternoon, requiring rest before the ordeal of dinner at Lady Palmerston’s. She was in his arms, facing away, her new favorite position that still let her press against him with her belly in the way.

She had tried them all and was currently working on a list deciding which was best suited.

“I love you,” he said, again coming into her. “I love you.”

His hand reached down and pressed around her nub, toying with it as he kissed her neck. She broke for him and let out a scream that would certainly let anyone on this side of the palace know the Queen had recovered quite well from her exhaustion.

“Oh, Lord M...”

“What is this dinner for anyway?”

Melbourne shook his head. “No idea.”

“You do have an idea.”

He sighed. “Lord Shaftesbury’s request. He wants to reconcile us with Sir Robert.”

“Oh, Lord M, no.”

“It will not do for us to be opposing your Prime Minister all the time.”

“He will not be my Prime Minister forever. Surely it is time for a new one.”
Victoria looked up at Will as the news played on the bedroom TV.

“It’s so weird. I never knew her but she was always just there.”

Will shrugged. “I suppose so.”

“They must not have had this when they were going through kings every ten years.”

“Then Victoria came and completely changed the monarchy.”

Victoria pulled closer to Will in the bed.

“Quite a speech she gave,” said Will.

“Will, we know the Queen now.”

“We’ve met her twice,” he laughed.

“I’ve talked to her in a loo. I don’t know how much closer we could get.”

The phone rang. Will reached for his mobile.

Victoria rolled her eyes. “Is it Carrie again?”

He sighed and answered.

“Will, you know she just wants to-”

“Hello, Carrie. Is Gussie alright?”

Victoria laid back. “Gussie is fine.”

He sighed. “Carrie, ringing me ten times does not change the fact that yes, the Queen of England knows you’re the ex-wife. If it’s any consolation I don’t think she’s going to have you beheaded.”

“What is he doing here?,” Victoria hissed.

David sat at the breakfast table, holding the baby in one arm, attempting to eat with the other.

“I should think it probably has something to do with his wife dying. Would you eat something?”

She stood angrily tearing her toast. “I haven’t seen him since we got married. Why bother turning up now?”

“How would it look if he didn’t turn up for his wife’s funeral?”

“How has it looked for the past thirty years or so while he’s been encamped in the French Riviera?”

The door opened.

“Ah, Anthony, have you come to join us?”

“That depends. Have any whiskey?”
“It’s breakfast,” said Victoria.

He took a sniff at a pot. “Coffee. Why is it you all drink coffee in the morning?”

“What?”

“Everyone else in the civilized world starts their day with a cup of tea but the royal family of England drinks coffee. Think about that. England.”

“Grandfather, have you come all this way to criticize my coffee consumption?,” Victoria asked.

“Certainly not, Your Majesty.”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t call me that.”

“Why not?”

“Because you don’t mean it.”

“Oh, I have to mean it?”

“There’s a memorial service at Oxford tomorrow. Will you come?”

Anthony considered his response. “Yes.”

“Will you behave?”

“That would be telling.”

Victoria eyed David. He shrugged.

“Your Majesty.” Emily curtsied.

“Emily.” She exchanged kisses with her sister-in-law. Emily turned to kiss William on the cheek.

“You are looking quite well, Majesty,” said Emily.

Victoria smiled. “I feel quite well. I have suffered no nausea as I did with Regina.”

“Poor Emmie was too unwell to even come this evening,” Emily commiserated on the latest pregnancy of her eldest.

“Regina is despondent without her at the palace,” said Melbourne.

They entered the room where Palmerston waited with Shaftesbury, de Grey and their wives. Wellington had also joined. Victoria went to exchange pleasantries.

Melbourne turned to his sister.

“Is he late?”

“He said he was bringing his sister-in-law. I needed someone to even the numbers.”

He rolled his eyes.
“Behave.”

The door soon opened again. Sir Robert Peel entered with Lady Peel and another woman. A rather attractive petite brunette who made Melbourne and Emily immediately blanche.

“Lady Palmerston, thank you for inviting us,” said Peel.

“Not a bit.”

“Of course you know my wife.”

“Lady Peel, of course.”

“My sister-in-law was unexpectedly detained but I ran into Mrs. Norton and asked if she might come along. Have you met?”

“Yes, I believe we have.”

“And of course you know Lord Melbourne.”

Caroline smiled. “Yes.”

On the other side of the room, Shaftesbury finally looked up from the Queen to see what had transpired. He walked over.

“Peel, may I see you in the hall?”

“I only just arrived.”

“Now, Peel!”

The Earl and Prime Minister disappeared. Only muffled shouts could be heard from the hall.

“So, Mrs. Norton, are you staying in town now?”

“Yes. I have much work to do here.”

“Do you?”

Melbourne looked to Lady Peel who seemed as if she wanted to sink into the floor herself. A feeling her very much shared. The Queen approached.

“Your Majesty.” Lady Peel and Caroline curtsied.

“I have not met your friend.”

“May I introduce Mrs. Norton?”

“Mrs. Norton, how nice,” said Victoria.

"A pleasure, Your Majesty," said the woman.

Once they returned it was not long before the servants’ hall heard about the development at Lady
Palmerston’s once the Queen’s dressers returned.

“Mrs. Norton. At the dinner.”

Penge shook his head. “I never...”

“The cheek of that Sir Robert...” Jenkins commiserated eating her dinner. “And that Mrs. Norton. I’d be ashamed to show my face in front of the Queen.”

“Why should she if she’s done nothing wrong?,” asked Skerrett.

“Did you follow the trial?,” asked Penge.

“No.”

Brodie looked at her in surprise. “It was everywhere, all the sordid details. Locked doors, secret meetings, servants sent away... handkerchiefs...”

Jenkins and Skerrett exchanged glances. Collier entered.

“Mr. Collier.”

“Mr. Penge.”

“How was Lord Melbourne this evening?”

Collier smiled and sat with his tea. “You mean Mrs. Norton, don’t you?”

Penge rolled his eyes. “Are you going to tell us or not?”

“Tell you what?”

“Oh come off it. Did they or didn’t they?”

“If I knew, why would I tell you?”

Jenkins shook her head. “You don’t play fair Mr. Collier. Bit of gossip never hurt anyone. We all know the business of this palace.”

Penge snorted. “I reckon the soldiers at the Mews know the business of this palace from some of the sounds I’ve heard...”

“I am unmoved.”

Victoria sat at the table.

“You’re not eating,” said Will.

She shook her head. “I don’t have much of an appetite.”

He sat across from her. “Do you want something else?”

“I’m fine, Will.”
“I’m meant to take care of you, remember?”

His mobile rang.

“Carrie?,” she asked.

“No. Emma.” He took it.

“Well, don’t answer it!”

“Why wouldn’t I answer Emma?”

“We haven’t told her about you know.”

“About you know what?”

“Victoria I’s baby daddy drama.”

He sighed and answered the phone. “Hello.”

“Will, the Queen is coming to Oxford.”

“Hello to you as well.”

“I don’t have time. This whole accession thing is chaos. There’s going to be a memorial service at All Souls’ complete with meeting the Queen.”

“I’ve met her.”

“Yes, thank you for passing that along by which I mean you have not mentioned it in the slightest.”

“We’re on sabbatical.”

“Right, it’s tomorrow at ten. You were requested.”

“Right.”

He hung up and looked at Victoria.

“What?”

“We were requested for the Queen’s memorial tomorrow.”

“What?”

He shrugged. “We were requested according to Emma.”

---

“Skerrett, has anyone downstairs ever discussed Mrs. Norton?”

The dresser froze then resumed her work on the Queen’s hair. “I do not think we are acquainted with the lady.”
“Yes, but someone must know something. What about the trial? Did anyone mention that?”

“They might have.”

“What did they say?”

“Just the usual sort of thing. Locked doors, servants sent away, handkerchiefs.”

Victoria’s face darkened.

“Handkerchiefs?”

“It’s just gossip, I’m sure, ma’am.”

“Yes, of course. After all, Lord Melbourne was acquitted.”

Victoria entered her husband’s rooms. He was hardly in here, but it smelled like him, his cologne, that place she buried her head at night, undeniably him.

She walked in to his desk.

Mrs. Norton. She had not left Victoria’s mind. Victoria had pictured some homely woman her Lord M would not bother with, but alas no. She had been attractive and charming and intelligent.

So she went in the drawers, though she did not know what she was looking for.

“Your Majesty.”

Victoria swished around to see Collier.

“Collier.”

They stood there for a moment.

“Is there something I might help you with, ma’am?”

“No, I was just looking for Lord M.”

“I believe he said he was going to take the Princess Royal for a walk to the Royal Mews.”

“Oh.” Victoria smiled. “She does so love horses.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Collier, have you worked for my husband very long?”

“Since his lordship returned from his post in Ireland. His previous valet married a local girl and stayed behind.”

“So you were his valet during the Norton trial.”

“I suppose I was.”

“I met Mrs. Norton the other evening. She seemed charming. What did you make of her?”
“I would not dare to make anything of her, ma’am.”

“I insist.”

“Mama!”

Regina ran in racing to grab her mother’s skirts.

“Hello, Gina.”

“Victoria.” Melbourne looked at the ransacked desk. “What are you doing in here?”

“I was just looking for you.”

“I was with Gina.”

“Horsey.”

“Yes, I believe Regina selected her horse for the next inspection of the troops. She is quite interested in a colonelcy of the Grenadier Guards.” He looked to Collier. “Collier, why don’t you take Regina back to the nursery?”

The valet left.

“You do not usually come to my rooms.”

She scoffed. “Am I forbidden?”

“Of course not. I could not forbid you if I wanted to which makes me wonder what you were looking for.”

“What could I have to look for in your rooms?”

“I could not imagine.”

“You told me once you never had an affair with Mrs. Norton.”

“So you came to my rooms to search for evidence of a criminal conversation with Mrs. Norton?”

“Is there any to find?”

“You do realize that this is what Peel intended when he invited Mrs. Norton to Emily’s?”

“You are not answering me. Were you telling the truth when you told me you never had an affair with Mrs. Norton? Because some of the details seem terribly familiar, Lord M.”

“Are you interrogating me about something that would have happened three years before we met?”

“Did you?”

“I refuse to be held accountable for matters that have nothing to do with you—”

She crossed her arms.

“Just as it would be inappropriate for me to hold you accountable for matters that had nothing to do with me.”
“I had no affairs! Only Albert!”

“And he is none of my concern.”

“You lied to me!”

“It was inappropriate for you to specifically ask.”

“But I asked!”

“Would you rather I have put another woman’s face in your mind on our wedding night?”

“You should not have lied to me!”

“How many times did you accuse me of caring for Lady Holland’s company more than yours?”

“What has that to do with it?”

“You have a jealous streak.”

“I do not!”

“Do you not suppose there are ladies who upon our engagement approached me in concern for their standing in society, their place at court?”

“How many former lovers do you have at court?”

He laughed.

Victoria was infuriated. “This is no laughing matter, Lord M.”

“Do you think I would seek out a former lover? Do you think I require such companions?”

“That is not answering me.”

“I will not answer you.”

“Yes, you will.”

“No, I will not.”

“At least Albert was honest with me.”

“Told you about his roommate, did he?”

Victoria was befuddled. “What?”

“Never mind...” Melbourne sighed.

“I have no secrets from you.”

“Really? You suppose you ought to answer any query I put to you?”

She tilted her chin upward. “I have nothing to hide.”

“Fine. Did Albert ever make you come apart with his mouth as I do?”
Victoria blushed.

“Did he use his teeth on your nipples? Did he ever make you come by touches to your breast alone as I have?”

She was red now. And furious. Her husband stood there placidly looking as if he had asked about the weather.

“That’s not-” She stammered as he arched an inquiring eyebrow. “I asked first!”

“So, it is that you asked first, not that perhaps we should not speak of our former lovers for reasons that are quite apparent to you now?”

“I think you should withdraw, Lord M."

He was still amused. “You are in my rooms.”

She scowled at him as she marched out.

The bells at Oxford began tolling just as Will, Victoria, Mary and John got out in the car park.

“This is a big turn out,” said Victoria.

“Careful, Victoria, your gown might touch the ground.”

She rolled her eyes. “Thank you, Mum.”

“It is not a criticism. You are too short. I told you to have it hemmed.”

“Not a criticism, but I’m too short?”

“Here, let me help,” said John, taking the robe from her.

“Thank you, John.”

They arrived at the entrance.

“Victoria V was the first royal to go to university,” said Will.

“About time, too,” said Victoria.

“She had private tutors until she came to All Souls,” said Will.

They met Emma at the entrance.

“About time,” said Emma.

“I couldn’t find my cap.”

She passed them each papers. “Order of events for the service. Who are they?”

“Emma, you met Victoria’s mother and stepfather at her graduation.”

“Yes, we spoke at length while Victoria disappeared,” said Mary.
“Mum, seriously,” said Victoria.

“Right, well, you’ll all be in the chapel, there are screens outside and the whole thing is being broadcast on every channel. They’re arriving in ten minutes.”

“You are being very childish, Drina.”

Victoria looked up from her mirror. “Thank you, Mama. To what do I owe this latest criticism?”

“You and your husband hardly exchanged ten words at dinner. It makes the court talk.”

“He knows what he did.”

The Duchess scoffed.

“Mama, you do not even know what this is about.”

“Oh, I do not? Would it be Mrs. Norton?”

Victoria felt embarrassed that her mother had so easily guessed her secret. “He believes he does not need to tell me the truth of what happened between them.”

Her mother laughed and it infuriated her. The same infuriating laugh.

“Oh, Drina, husbands always have secrets from their wives.”

“Albert did not.”

“Albert was a boy just out of university. Lord Melbourne is a man who has lived in the world and been married before and fathered children.”

“So you think I do not deserve to know?”

“A good wife would not ask.”

“And you did not ask Papa about his mistresses?”

Victoria had been hoping for a reaction, hoping to hurt her mother even.

It did not work.

“No.” She neared her. “He is a good husband and a good father, Drina. That is all that matters.”

Will stood next to Victoria in the line of professors, each awaiting their turn to bow or curtsy to the Queen, dressed in their full academic regalia.

“Stop smiling.”

“I can’t help it. I love you in that gown with your bishop’s sleeves and the Tudor bonnet.”

“You have a Tudor bonnet.”
“No tassels, though...”

The doors opened. The new Queen and the Duke of Montrose began. They soon realized they were accompanied by the Earl of Shaftesbury.

“Oh, my God, I can’t believe he’s here...” said Victoria.

It soon came their turn.

“Professor Lamb,” said the Queen.

He bowed his head. “Your Majesty. My condolences.”

“Thank you.” She appraised Victoria and the swell of her belly. “Doctor Kensington, I see there have been some changes.”

She curtsied. “Your Majesty.”

“When are you due?”

“April or so.”

“Congratulations.”

Jennings approached. “Your Majesty, we need to get into place-”

“Mind if I just pop in the loo?”

“Technically, I don’t think they can mind,” Anthony offered.

The Queen left, flanked by a bodyguard.

“I think I’ll just pop to the loo,” said Victoria following her.

“Victoria!,” Will hissed. “Where are you going?!"

“Will Lamb, was it?,” asked David.

“Yes, Your Grace.”


“Yes, my lord.”

“What an insufferable saint he was,” said Anthony.

Victoria awoke to a scream that turned out to be her own.

Such pain as she awoke, Dash was disturbed enough to hop off the bed and bark.

“Lord M!,” she shouted. “William!”

The door flew open. He took a look at her and rang the bell for the servants as he walked over.

“William.”
“I am here. Shh...”

He sat next to her. “What is it? Tell me.”

“I just feel pain in my stomach. It’s not the baby, is it? I can’t be having him, it’s too early, I want our baby-”

“Shh.”

“But it’s too early!”

“Panic will not serve. Now, breathe-”

“I can’t-”

“Of course you can.”

He demonstrated a long, deep breath and she followed his example, her head landing on his chest.

“Your Majesty, my Lord-”

The hall boy couldn’t finish.

“Send for Sir James Clark now.”

“Yes milord.”

By the time Sir James appeared, half the palace had awoken and Victoria had not let go of her husband. The pain had dissipated, but that did not stop him from examining her. She did not let her husband leave to Sir James’ consternation.

“It was nothing to worry about, ma’am. False labor pains. Quite common.”

“False labor?” She looked up at her husband. “That is ridiculous!”

Melbourne kissed her forehead.

“Of course I would advise rest and not engaging in any...” Sir James expected a hand motion to carry him through.

“Any what?”

“Any marital activity...”

She scoffed. “That is even more ridiculous! You mean I should not make love to my husband? I will not have it!”

Sir James looked ready to fall over dead.

“I had this false labor on a day and night I did not make love to him so I think the answer is perfectly straightforward!”

“Thank you, Sir James...” Melbourne said.
He bowed and left.

“You will not leave?”

“Not if you wish me to stay.”

She shook her head. “I am so sorry-” She was starting to cry.

“Shhh,” he tried to soothe her, letting her rest in his arms. “If by some magic I had met you first, I would have married you first and you would have been my first and my only for the whole of my life, but it was not to be, so you see I must offer you all I have left.”

“Oh, Lord M, don’t speak so.”

“But I must.”

“Certainly not. We have lots of time.”

“It’s never enough,” he whispered.

Victoria walked to the ladies’ room where a policeman stood outside.

“Sorry, Miss. You can’t go in.”

Victoria crossed her arms and looked up at him. “You know it’s still legal for me to wee in your helmet, don’t you?”

“I-”

Victoria pushed past him to find the new Queen at the mirror.

“You played the pregnancy card, didn’t you,” she asked.

“I did.”

“How are you?”

“Well, I’m pretty shit at the moment.”

Victoria nodded. “You know Carrie?”

“The ex-wife?”

“The same. She’s not had a decent’s night rest since your accession, convinced the Queen of England hates her.”

The Queen frowned. “She’s a bit of a bitch, isn’t she?”

“Just a bit.”

“Listen, do you know about a letter Lord M wrote Regina?”

Victoria tried not to betray anything. “A letter Lord M wrote Regina?”
“Yes, someone gave me one.”

“Did it say anything?”

“Well, that he loved her and to never let them see how hard it is to bear.”

“It sounds like a good letter.”

The Queen shook her head. “I never quite realized how heavy the weight of it was. It’s as bad as becoming a mum- in terms of responsibility that is- only it’s the whole commonwealth. I don’t know how Victoria I could bear it, she was only eighteen.”

“She had Lord M.”

“So she did. Wonder that she didn’t marry him in the first place...”

“Interesting thought,” said Victoria.

There was a knock at the door. It was Jennings. “Your Majesty!”

“And there we go again,” said the Queen, heading out.

“Yes, there we go,” said Victoria, mind racing.

Chapter End Notes

So, there’s a line about Albert's roommate. IRL, Albert did have a roommate that shared a flat with along with Ernst who he mentions having given him "the best years of his life." So, do with that what you want. My inkling is that Victoria wouldn't have a clue what that might be about and... Lord M might.

Also, did some Caroline Norton research this week, all very interesting and some of the sordid allegations did seem to remind me of some things that happened. So we'll probably hear from her again...
“You are not coming in.”

“But, Victoria, that is cruel.”

Will sighed. This argument had been going on for the better part of two days since John had innocently asked when the first ultrasound of the baby would be, recalling his children from his first marriage with great fondness. Victoria had answered and then her mother began campaigning to come along so here they were in the waiting room.

“Mum, you honest to God, cannot think you are going in there. I already said no.”

“Will gets to go.”

Will’s eyes widened. “I am the father.”

“Oh, yes, I forgot about your huge contribution,” Mary said rolling her eyes.

“Mum, you are not coming in.”

“Ms. Kensington?,” a nurse asked.

Victoria pointed at Mary. “She’s staying here.”

“But-”

“Shh!” Victoria pointed at her mother. “Stay!”

Will and Victoria followed the nurse as Mary looked stunned.

“Did you just speak to your mum like a dog?”

“It worked.” She looked up. “Also, I think it’s time to revisit the puppy conversation.”

Victoria felt so...

Pregnant.

It was almost time now, she could feel it. She felt quite large, convincing her she had a boy that would take after his father and not the slight little thing Regina had been. Gina herself was starting to
be perplexed by her mother’s condition and why she could not be carried by Mama or held in her lap at this point. The concept of there being a baby in there seemed to strike her as fantastical and it was quickly forgotten in favor of other amusements.

Of course Mama had all of her advice as usual. Lehzen was getting as bad as the Duchess urging her to take more rest and be calmer.

Then her Lord M. She could see him stop himself from urging the same.

But today he was distracted by his birthday. They had passed the day as a family, he only consented to a small dinner where they were joined by his family and her ladies.

The cake finally came out at the end with Victoria leading them in “For He’s A Jolly Good Fellow” and a round of applause.

“You’re very kind,” said Melbourne sheepishly.

“Speech!,” Frederick demanded.

“No-”

“Speech!,” Emily chimed in.

“Yes, speech, William,” added Emma.

“No-”

“You have never had a problem speaking in the House,” said Portman.

“Certainly Sir Robert Peel would agree,” said the Duchess.

Portman burst into laughter and the others still followed. Victoria sat in astonishment that her mama had actually made a joke.

“Thank you for that, Duchess,” said Melbourne.

She nodded and smiled.

“Yes, well done, Duchess,” added Emily.

“Right, I-” Melbourne began.

“No, Uncle, you have to stand to give a proper speech,” said Emmie.

“She’s quite right, William, stand up,” said Frederick.

He sighed and relented, standing up.

“I have nothing really to say, but to thank you all for coming. This has been quite a year for me and I have only to thank my wife and look forward to the growth of our family. To Victoria-”

“No, you will not toast me on your birthday!,” said Victoria. She quickly grabbed her wine glass. “To William.”

“To William,” the table echoed.
They waited in the room for the consultant to come in.

“Hello. I’m Doctor Jenkins.”

“Victoria.”

“And this must be the father?”

“Will.”

“Is this your first?”

“My first,” said Victoria.

Jenkins looked questioningly at Will.

“My third,” said Will.

She nodded. “I see you were admitted to A&E for some nausea?”

“Yes, we were only there a few hours,” said Victoria. “The prescriptions worked, but I haven’t even had to use any.”

“Any other symptoms?”

Victoria considered. “The sex is bloody amazing. Really, it’s just one orgasm on top of another...”

Jenkins nodded. “Okay.”

“I can keep that going, right? No need to stop that?”

“As long as you’re comfortable and there are no indications of any preterm labor, you can keep going until you’re due. Then of course, nothing for six weeks after baby.”

“Six weeks?!?” She looked at Will. “Did you know about this?”

“I knew.”

“You won’t even miss it,” Jenkins promised.

“Yes, I will.”

“So, you’re set to deliver at the Honorable Miss Lamb Ward?”

“Yes. It had great reviews.”

“Have you given any thought to your birth plan?”

“A little. Is there anything I can do to cut down on that no sex for six weeks thing?”

“No.”

“Damn,” Victoria muttered.

“So,” said Jenkins, “let’s get a scan and come up with baby’s birthday, shall we?”
Victoria was in bed by the time her husband came.

“There you are. I was waiting.”

“I thought you might be tired.”

“Certainly not. I was waiting.”

He smiled ruefully and took his dressing gown off. Victoria greeted him with a passionate kiss as he got in the covers.

“As you can see, I am certainly not tired, Lord M.”

“No...”

“William, what is the matter? Did you not enjoy yourself?”

“No, the dinner was wonderful. Thank you.”

“Then what?”

“I am old.”

“You are not!”

He frowned at her. “I think you will find I am.”

She frowned back. “You simply need rest. We ought to go to Brocket Hall.”

“We ought to, but-”

“But what?”

“You are about to have a baby.”

“So?”

“Well, your physician is in London, the Home Secretary is in London-”

“I am certain we would be back in time.”

He looked questioningly at her. “Are you?”

She sighed. “If Sir James says it’s alright, will you agree to go?”

“These men fret so,” remarked Harriet upon hearing of the Lord Consort's remarks. “I rode my carriage to my London house to give birth to Caroline and she was delivered a half hour after we arrived and she is perfectly fine.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes, we were at the South Bank house and I knew it better to deliver in town.”
“Why?”

“Oh, it’s much better for visitors, ma’am.”

She frowned to herself. “I do not think I would mind giving birth at Brocket Hall.”

“No, of course not. Brocket Hall is a lovely house and you hardly need to worry about visitors. I suspect they shall come to you wherever you are, ma’am.”

“I would not mind a lack of them. We have hardly had any time as a family.”

“Sir James Clark,” the footman announced.

The doctor entered and bowed. “Your Majesty.”

“We require your advice, Sir James.”

“I hope to help, ma’am.”

“I find my husband in need of a break in the country. Naturally, he is concerned that such a journey might be detrimental to my condition.”

“Naturally, ma’am.”

“Do not tell me you agree with him, Sir James.”

“You seem so very close to delivery, ma’am.”

“I will be taking a carriage to Brocket Hall, not completing the journey by foot.”

“I would not recommend-”

“But Princess Regina was so late,” Harriet interrupted.

“What do you mean, Duchess?,” asked Sir James.

“We all expected the Queen to be delivered of Princess Regina for weeks before she was, but she was not and she was perfectly healthy.”

Victoria froze. They did not realize Regina had been early.

“Perhaps there is some peculiarity of the Queen’s constitution,” Harriet suggested.

“I cannot recommend travel-” said Sir James.

“But you do not object?,” asked Victoria.

“No, ma’am.”

The next room was darkened and cold jelly spread onto Victoria’s belly. She smiled up at Will and took his hand as black and white images began to appear on the monitor.

“So, there we are, inside the uterus and there we are, see...”
“See what?,” asked Victoria.

“Right there, bit of a prawn shape to it,” said Will.

“Well, don’t call the baby a prawn.”

“Well, it’s my prawn.”

“Let’s see if we can hear something...”

They were silent as the volume went up and they heard the very certain, very there beat of the baby’s heart.

“Oh, my God...” Victoria whispered, holding Will’s hand tighter.

“What day did your GP think?”

“April the seventh?”

“No, I would say closer to May. April twenty-fifth is my best guess...” said Jenkins.

“The twenty-fifth?,” asked Will.

“It’s just a guess,” said Jenkins.

“No, of course.”

“Why? What’s on April twenty-fifth?,” asked Victoria.

“Nothing.” He bent down to kiss her. ‘It’s fine.”

Rain plagued the entire journey to Brocket Hall. Then they became plagued with thunder and lightning as they entered Hertfordshire.

Regina did not care for the storm, crying at the first roll of thunder, rushing for her father’s arms.

Which Victoria could not help but think a little ironic considering the night Regina was conceived.

They finally arrived at the entrance to Brocket Hall, the house’s footmen rushing out to meet them. Powell met Melbourne with an umbrella.

“Help the Queen inside,” he said.

“Yes, milord.”

Powell held the umbrella over Victoria as they rushed in. Melbourne carried in Regina under his coat and put her on the floor.

“Dash!,” cried Regina.

“I shall get Dash,” Melbourne promised her.

“Dash!,” Regina shouted.

“I shall-”
Not letting him finish, Regina darted back outside.

“Gina, get back here!,” Victoria shouted.

Melbourne darted back out, two of the footmen following him.

Victoria was about to go look for herself when she heard sobbing. Melbourne came back in, holding Regina, he covered in mud up his trousers and the princess covered in it. Collier followed holding the spaniel, muddy up to his haunches.

“What happened?”

Melbourne did not answer. “Powell, call the nurse. The Princess Royal needs a bath.”

He did not answer her as he disappeared up the stairs. Victoria looked to the valet.

“Collier?”

“The Princess Royal ran out, I was going to lead her back in by getting the dog. The dog ran at the sound of a clap of thunder, the Princess Royal ran after him and then Lord Melbourne after her.”

“Oh, no,” said Victoria.

“Indeed, ma’am.”

“Well, put Dash in my washing room. I shall give him a bath.”

“Certainly, ma’am.”

“Collier, is there anything in particular troubling Lord Melbourne? Anything I could help with?”

“I don’t think so, ma’am.”

Victoria did not see her husband as she bathed Dash and changed herself. She sat in the library alone, hoping he would turn up as she idly went through his books. She finally summoned the nurse to bring Gina for afternoon tea.

“Mama!”

“Hello, my darling.” She went to help her onto the sofa but the toddler was determined to climb up.

“Where Papa?”

“I do not know where Papa is, but I am certain he will come along. Now, would you like to have afternoon tea? All the ladies of fashion are doing it.”

Regina nodded. Victoria poured her a cup of very little tea and mostly milk so it would cool. Ages seemed to pass before the door from the garden opened and Melbourne entered soaked through.

“Papa!”

“Lord M, what on Earth happened to you?”

“I went for a walk.”
“In this storm? Why?”

“I needed some air.”

“Will you change and join us?”

“No, I have some paperwork to do.”

“But Lord M-”

The rest of the day involved a trip to Hertfordshire. They had not been able to get back to the archives at Brocket Hall, but there was some work to be done at the Royal St. Etheldreda’s Memorial.

“Why wouldn’t she tell me it was a girl?,” asked Victoria.

“Because the baby just got internal organs,” said Will.

She put the picture back in her handbag as she took Will’s hand. The car park was crowded today. The mourning for the late Queen was still going on and people were flocking to royal sites all around the country to pay their respects. St. Etheldreda’s was no exception. The church had first been built in the thirteenth century and by chance became one of the Royals’ parish church when Victoria married Melbourne. The memorial had been built during her reign and added to over time. There was a little museum commemorating the royal connections to the church.

“So, how did Victoria end up here?”

Will paused. “You mean buried? Melbourne was buried here. His children were here, if she wanted to be with him-”

“No, I mean on the day she had Margaret.”

The Lamb family graves were simple headstones, not far off from the royal mausoleum. They had been replaced over the years, it would not do for the family of the Queen’s Consort to have their graves in shambles, particularly Melbourne’s children from his first marriage.

“One day. Poor thing.”

The Honourable Miss Lamb. Beloved Daughter. One date. Victoria could see people had placed pink flowers on the little girl’s grave. The story had become well known over the years as the Royals took on more causes dealing with premature infants and related charities.

“Do you think Lord M was special?”

Will shook his head. “How so?”

“Well, lots of people lost babies then, but somehow, Lord M’s the one we know about. Do you suppose everyone missed theirs or just-”

“I’m sure they missed them,” said Will.
Victoria began the next day determined to start afresh, planning a day as a family in her mind before she had barely finished breakfast. She gathered Regina and made her way downstairs.

“Oh, Powell, have you seen Lord M?”

“He went out, ma’am.”

“Out? What for?”

“He did not say, ma’am.”

“Oh,” Victoria smiled down at Regina. “The Princess Royal and I will be taking a walk.”

“Shall I fetch the nurse?”

“Certainly not.” Victoria held her hand out. “Come along, Gina.”

They went into the garden first. Regina was an attentive student to every flower, stopping as they went along.

“Oh, look, Gina, here are your rooks.”

Regina smiled. “Bird!”

“Yes, bird.”

Victoria took a seat on the edge of the bridge. She felt so tired and now her husband had gone off. It certainly was not the way she had envisioned their family holiday going.

“Gina!”

As she looked up, she saw that Regina was currently running. Further into the wood in pursuit of one of her rooks.

“Gina!”

She hastened to follow her, hindered by her condition as her daughter went deeper into the wood.

“Gina!,” Victoria called. “Gina, come back!”

Victoria heard crying before she could see her daughter.

She found her finally on the ground, sobbing.

“Gina! Gina, my darling!” Victoria knelt down to help her up. She was crying, her dress covered in dirt and grass, scrapes on her hands. She helped her stand. “Why did you do that?”

The toddler had no answer, instead sobbing more.

Victoria took her in her arms. “There you are, my darling. There you are. All is quite well, you see?”

Gina nodded. Victoria stood and suddenly felt a sharp, unmistakable pain.

“Oh, my.”

“Mama?”
She smiled. “All shall be well. We just must return to the house.”

Victoria took Regina’s hand and began to walk a few steps forward. It was then she realized she did not know the way she had come or indeed the way out.

“Hey, do you think this is the shagging wood?,” asked Victoria.

“The shagging wood?”

Victoria turned. “Come on, from the journal.”

Will sighed. “Well, did she write down any notable landmarks?”

“I don’t know. Which tree looks good for a shag?”

“We can put a blue plaque on it.”

Victoria took Will’s arm again as they walked into the wood. They had decided to investigate the path from the church to Brocket Hall.

“You know, I’ve been reading ahead in the journal.”

“Have you?”

“Yes, every time I jump you, I was reading ahead. She has very interesting thoughts on pregnant sex.”

“Oh?”

“God yes, I have several positions I want to try. And Lord M was very talented.”

“And Flora says he was not a renaissance man.”

“Why wasn’t he there?”

“Who?”

“Melbourne. It doesn’t seem as if he would willingly let his very pregnant wife go for a walk on her own with only their toddler as company.”

“Perhaps he had something come up.”

“All is well, Gina, you see?,” asked Victoria. “We are out for a turn in a pretty wood.”

She looked down at the toddler. At this point her patter was more to convince herself than anyone else. Regina was not convinced and how could she have that questioning look of Lord M’s on such a tiny face?

The pains were thankfully far apart, so she knew she had time left. Regina’s birth was such a blur, she could barely remember the order of events. It had been so short after Lord M left that the pain had begun and her waters had broken to her complete surprise. But she hardly remembered anything,
even the pain, just the moment when they finally put Regina in her arms. So tiny, so perfect, so hers.

So Lord M’s.

So theirs.

She had to stop again, holding a tree trunk for support as another pain came.

“Mama.” Regina instinctively wrapped her arms around what she could reach of her mother as she breathed through the pain.

“Oh, thank you, Gina. You see, that was so much better.”

They walked and came upon a graveyard. Victoria breathed a sigh of relief as she spotted St. Etheldreda’s, Hatfield’s parish church. She had attended several times on her visits, though the vicar seemed very surprised to see Lord M.

“Why don’t we visit the rectory?,” she asked Gina. She took her hand again as they walked through the graveyard. “Now, you must be very quiet as we walk through here...”

She stopped.

Peniston Lamb, Peniston Lamb II, Elizabeth Lamb. Lord M’s father- well, purported father-, his brother and his mother. Harriet Lamb. Yes, she remembered Lord M mentioning a baby sister who died as a teenager. George Lamb, his younger brother. Well, her first cousin as well actually.

Caroline Lamb. The closest she would get to meeting the lady that had tormented her husband so. How could she have wanted anything more than her Lord M?

Augustus. Poor dear Augustus. She wondered what it might have been like had he lived, what Lord M would have been like, what they would have been like as a family. Her cheeks flushed remembering what Stockmar had said about him, calling him an idiot. Lord M had told her everything long before that night, when he was a Prime Minister and she just his young Queen, in the early golden days of her reign where nothing seemed to exist beyond each other. He explained when Augustus was young they had realized he was not like other children his age. He was very much in his own world sometimes, that he would throw a fit at the oddest things. The doctors had advised them to send the boy away as he would never improve but he would not have it, neither would Caroline- which Victoria considered to be one of the woman’s few virtues. She had learned something very important from Lord M that day, that it had not mattered if Augustus was not perfect. He was his and that was enough. Her Lord M held great love for the imperfect.

Including her.

And finally, the tiniest marker with only a day.

His daughter. The poor girl with no name.

But she had been his.

“Your Majesty. Your Royal Highness.”

She turned. A handsome man not much older than herself stood by them.

“You are not the vicar.”

He smiled. “I am quite afraid I am, ma’am.”
“Where is Reverend Faulkner?”

“Off to Africa. He was called to missionary work.”

“He did not seem much of a missionary to me.”

“The Lord works in mysterious ways, ma’am.”

“And you are?”

“Evelyn Brunswick, ma’am.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Reverend Brunswick.”

“I am afraid you just missed Lord Melbourne.”

She frowned. “Lord Melbourne was here?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Her eyes drifted back to the marker. Pink blooms. Fresh.

Lord M had been here.

She felt another pain. The vicar’s eyes widened.

“Reverend Brunswick, I am afraid we find ourselves in great need of assistance. I must return to Brocket Hall at once.”

“Oh.” He remembered himself. “Yes, ma’am. Of course. I am afraid I do not have a carriage, but I can send my servant to borrow one?”

“That would be very kind of you.”

“This way, ma’am.”

“Mama...” Regina whined.

“Would you be so kind as to pick her up? I am afraid the Princess Royal walked a great deal farther than we planned.”

“Of course.”

The vicar led them back to the rectory. His wife greeted them, looking positively shocked as the Queen sat down in her parlor and utterly outraged at her husband for inflicting such a thing on her with no notice.

“I am so sorry, majesty, we were not expecting visitors.”

“Quite alright. I was not expecting to be a visitor. I did not get your name, Mrs. Brunswick?”

“Margaret, ma’am.”

“Margaret,” Victoria repeated.

“Ma’am?”
“Forgive me. I am distracted.”

“The Queen is...” Brunswick looked from the Queen to his wife and back. “The Queen...”

“I am in labor,” Victoria finished for him. “I must return to Brocket Hall at once.”

“Of course. We must fetch Doctor Brandon.”

“No, I-” She stopped herself, realizing the order of things. She needed Sir James Graham for the succession otherwise she might well bear a king who could not be crowned. “I need to send a messenger to London to fetch Sir James Graham.”

The couple looked at each other.

“The regiment is quartered in town,” suggested Margaret.

“I’ll send James there, then to the Dyers,” said the vicar.

He left as another entered, this time a toddler.

“You were not supposed to be up,” Margaret admonished.

“Who is this?,” Victoria smiled.

“Marianne, ma’am.”

“Charmed to meet you, Miss Marianne.”

“It was just time for her tea,” said Margaret. “Is the Princess Royal hungry?”

Regina looked at her questioningly.

“Yes, but she took a tumble earlier and needs to wash her hands.”

Margaret smiled. “This way, your highness.”

Melbourne entered the house, the footman took his hat and gloves.

“Tea, sir?,” asked Powell.

“No, give the Queen my apologies.”

“Her Majesty has not returned.”

“What? Where did she go?”

“She and the Princess Royal went for a walk.”

“When?”

“After breakfast.”

“Did anyone accompany them?”
“No, milord.”

“No one?”

“No, sir.”

He took his gloves and his hat back. “What is the name of the captain of the guards?”

“Captain Wright.”

Melbourne nodded. “Gather the menservants. Send them out to search for the Queen and the Princess Royal.”

“Yes, milord.”

Melbourne put on his hat and walked out to the barracks that had just been completed at Brocket Hall. A visible symbol of the change to Brocket Hall, the Queen needed guards and they needed to be quartered somewhere.

“Sir!”

“Captain Wright, please.”

He waited a mere second before the captain of the guard appeared.

“Sir!”

“Her Majesty and Her Royal Highness went for a walk after breakfast. They have not returned. You must form a search party.”

“Right away, sir.”

Victoria watched as Regina played happily with the little girl. They could not have been very far apart in age. Perhaps Regina would be happier playing with more children? She was so often in the company of she and Lord M.

She heard horses and turned. It was the captain of the guard with Lord M and a few of the soldiers.

The vicar met them and led them inside.

“Victoria,” said Lord M.

Margaret seemed taken aback. “Will you take tea?”

“No, we must be going.” Victoria struggled to get up as Melbourne helped her. “It is my time.”

“Your time for what?”

“My time, Lord M.”

“Oh.”

“Yes.”
“Gina, darling, won’t you come?”

He barely spoke to her on the way home, letting Gina ride in his lap. He handed her off to the nanny and dutifully helped Victoria up the stairs.

“Did they send for Sir James Graham?,” she asked.

Melbourne looked up at her. “Surely you mean Sir James Clark and Doctor Brandon will be here shortly-”

“No, I mean Sir James Graham.”

“I do not care if they have sent for Sir James Graham-”

“How can you say that?” She walked towards him, leaving Skerrett to chase her to finish unlacing her corset. “What about when our son is born and we have no one here to confirm that he was born of my body and is to be king?”

“I do not care.”

“You do not care?”

“I do not care. Perhaps if you were so concerned we ought to have stayed in London! Or better still if you had not spent the morning wandering through the wood!”

Victoria finally batted away her corset as Skerrett followed. “You act as if it was my fault, Gina ran off-”

“Gina is not yet two, you are a grown woman and a queen, yet I ought to blame her?”

“It was an accident-”

“Yes, Gina did have an accident!”

“It was only a fall!”

“So concerned are you for the future heir, you’ve completely forgotten the current one!”

Victoria fumed. “No more than you! We have hardly seen you since we arrived at Brocket Hall! You have been nowhere! Reverend Brunswick has seen more of you than we have!”

“I am not going to argue with you.”

He walked away.

“William!,” she shouted. “William, I command you to-”

She was cut off by another pain.

The rain started again. Melbourne paced the hall as the sun set, hoping someone would arrive. He could hear Victoria in the bedroom. Foolish woman. What had she been thinking?

Of course he had often been a victim of Regina’s sudden bolts- which he naturally expected came
from Victoria. Their walks to the Mews and through the gardens inevitably had a bolt. One of her more memorable ones had involved two of the Grenadier Guards chasing her as she headed for the Mall until their lieutenant had the presence of mind to offer a bribe. It was a trick he had been forced to use again and again.

He looked down to see Regina.

“What are you doing out of bed?,” he whispered.

“Mama.”

“Come on.” He lifted her up, carrying her back to the nursery and sat on the bed with her.

“You know, I used to sleep here when I was your age...” Regina watched her. “And so did your Cousin Emmie and her brothers and sister. Augustus slept in here.”

“August...”

Melbourne smiled. She could not quite form the word yet, only knowing it was important.

He eyed the bassinet in the corner. Never removed. They had tried, but he could not bear to lose any reminder of her no matter how pointless.

He pulled Regina closer.

“Here we are.”

They had arrived at the far border of Brocket Hall, across the bridge.

Victoria sighed. “Of course I just realized that our car is back at the other end.”

“April the twenty-fifth is Allison’s birthday.”

Victoria turned. “You didn’t say.”

“I’m saying now.”

She shook her head. “I didn’t know.”

“I know.”

“You never say.”

“I know.”

“It doesn’t mean that the baby has to be born on the twenty-fifth.”

“No.”

“We could have her induced, people do it all the time-”

He shook his head at her. “We’re not having the baby induced.”

“It’s not-”
“It’s ridiculous,” he said. “No one could ever write over her and yet I don’t want her to be.”

She walked back over to him, taking his hands in hers.

“Allison will never be written over. You’re too good for that.”

He snorted. “Am I?”

“Yes, you are.” She stood on her tiptoes and kissed him, then turned to walk towards Brocket Hall. “Come on. We’ll grab an Uber back to the car.”

“Lord M. I want Lord M.”

“We’re nearly there, ma’am-”

“Lord M!,” she shouted.

“Ma’am, it is quite unusual for a husband-”

“I am the Queen of England. I will have what I-”

The door opened.

“Victoria?”

She held her hands out, desperate to grab hold of him. “Stay with me.”

“Yes.”

She stared at him, locking eyes, searching his eyes.

“Your Majesty-”

The door opened and they looked up to see a very frazzled Sir James Graham.

“Where have you been?!,” Victoria shouted.

“Your Majesty,” the home secretary quickly bowed.

“Well, do whatever you must to be satisfied we have not smuggled a baby in because, oh!”

Victoria was interrupted by her own shout, holding her own husband tighter as the doctor instructed her to again push. Before she realized it, she was free of the pain, introduced by a loud squall to her newborn.

“It is a girl, Your Majesty.”

“A girl? I was meant to have a boy, I-”

Her objections fell quiet as the wrapped infant came to her breast, squirming, searching for her. She felt her husband closer to her and they were soon alone. It was finally quiet enough to look at her. Some of the same as Gina, though bigger. Dark hair, blue eyes. Victoria sat transfixed as Lord M counted fingers and toes, kissing each hand and foot.

So theirs.
“She is beautiful,” Melbourne said softly. “Not that I expected any less.”

“We could still have a son.”

He raised his brow at her. “I realized something at my birthday.”

She looked up at him, not saying anything.

“My daughter... from before... you see, I realized I had forgotten her birthday and so also the...”

“The day she died,” supplied Victoria.

“So, no one remembered her, it was as if she never existed, I let her fade from the Earth.”

“You have been at the cemetery?”

He nodded.

“Oh, Lord M, why did you not tell me?”

He shook his head. The man so talented with words was rendered speechless. “I felt guilty... She might have been married by now, you know. So many things she might have done but she never...”

She kissed him.

“I shall never forget her. The three of us, we shall make certain of it.”

He looked up at her. “No more talk of sons. We will love whatever we have because they will be ours.”

“Of course I love her.”

“And I think queens do quite well in such circumstances.”

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact:

The story that Harriet relays is totally a thing that happened.

St. Etheldreda is the place where the real Lord M is buried.

Did you know? The reason Sir James Graham has to be there is because of something called the warming pan incident where it was alleged a baby had been smuggled in. So then a cabinet minister had to witness royal births and they only got rid of that when Elizabeth II had Prince Charles and her dad was like enough is enough.

Oh, and when Victoria tells Regina taking tea is what all the ladies of fashion are doing, get this fun fact: the taking of afternoon tea was started in 1840 by the Duchess of Bedford. She started by having her servants sneak her sandwiches then it just became a
meal. Other fun fact, the Duchess of Bedford was a Lady of the Bedchamber from 1837 to 1841 for you guessed it: Queen Victoria. Even more fun fact, IRL, she was the one spreading the "Lady Flora is pregnant and it's totally John Conroy's rumor" along with Lehzen.

(And seriously, have any comments, I'm stuck here under like weekend rain delay because of the storm so... I'll be here. Rewinding the part where Lord M gets off the horse if I look away...
London 1942

Victoria laughed.

Churchill frowned at her. “Ma’am, I do not think this is a laughing matter.”

“Victoria, you must take this seriously,” said Matthew.

“How can I possibly take this seriously?” She looked between the both of them. “We have been at war three long years. Half of London is in ruins, thousands dead, every night we are terrorized again by bombs. You, my Prime Minister, come to me tell me that Adolf Hitler, who marches across Europe, murders millions in the most unspeakable ways, wants me dead? How could I possibly take this seriously?”

“Ma’am, he has called you the most dangerous woman in Europe.”

“Is he going to send a plaque with that inscription?”

“Victoria,” Matthew pled, “please listen to him.”

“If Hitler did not want me dead, I would think I was doing something wrong.”

“In the event that the worst happens you do not want a situation where-”

“In the event that the Germans invade by land and storm this palace, I fully expect I will be shot in the head because I will not be used as a propaganda tool. This is England. Not France.” She looked at Matthew. “I am sorry, darling, that means you as well.”

“No one was saying you should acquiesce, ma’am, but for your own safety, perhaps you should evacuate.”

“And what? I am not the Queen of the Netherlands, I will not rule from Canada. I am not my cousin Leopold, I will not give my gracious surrender to the Wehrmacht. I am not the King of Denmark, I will not be riding my horse through the streets in some pointless exercise to show how brave I am. I am the Queen and Empress of the greatest nation in the world, thousand year reich be damned and I do not rule from the shadows. If this nation falls, so do I.” She finally took a breath. “To have to say so again is becoming tiresome.”

Churchill realized his mistake.

Victoria changed the subject. “Now, as to the matter I brought up with you the last time...”
“The Cabinet did not seem enthusiastic.”

“Why not? An English queen should not come from a German house. The last influx we had of German blood was when the Duke of Kent married Princess Victoria.”

Churchill frowned. Victoria met Matthew’s widening eyes.

“Surely you mean when Queen Victoria married Prince Albert?”

“Oh, right. That.”

“Ma’am, they might be persuaded to let you choose an English name for the House of Hanover, but not the House of Melbourne.”

“Why not?”

“He may have married a Queen-”

“He did marry a Queen. I believe it is documented behind your head.”

Churchill turned to see the regal wedding portrait of Victoria I and Lord Melbourne.

“Yes, but he’s still seen as a controversial figure.”

“Controversial figure?,” Victoria lamented. “What must one do to not be considered a controversial figure? How dare Lord Melbourne have the revolutionary idea that we needn’t send in the army to put down striking workers displeased at being paid in straw.”

The Prime Minister left. Victoria and Matthew began the walk to their next duty.

“You do realize you almost told the Prime Minister that your great-grandmama-”

“Well, at least I didn’t quote those journals William found.”

He shook his head. “I do wish we could forget those.”

“I can hardly believe the woman had the strength to rise from bed, let alone rule the empire.”

“I’m not nervous,” said Victoria.

Emmie frowned at her. “You ate that whole bag of crisps without breathing.”

“And it’s eight in the morning,” added Will.

“Why would I be nervous? Just because your son- who hates me- is coming for the weekend and we get to give him the super great news that I’m pregnant!”

“Have you been drinking coffee again?”

“I will not be accused.”

Mary entered. “Victoria?”

She rolled her eyes. “Made your way here from the rental house already?”
“I know Gussie is coming. I thought you might need my help.”

“How are you going to help, Mum?”

“Let me smell your breath.”

“I’m an adult woman! I can have coffee! It’s not illegal!”

“Okay, so, I think we’ll just not buy any more coffee,” said Will.

“What? No! Why? Don’t do that!”

“We’ve been through this, you try to give it up and then you fall off the wagon and then you’re...”

“I’m what?!”, Victoria protested.

“A heroin addict who’s gotten his first hit in a month,” said Emmie.

“Thank you,” said Will.

The doorbell rang.

“That’ll be Carrie,” he said.

He got up and walked to the door. Victoria followed.

“Carrie. Where’s Gussie?”

“Getting his things from the boot.” She looked at Victoria. “And thanks for telling the new Queen what a bitch I am.”

“No problem,” said Victoria.

“Yes, very mature,” said Carrie. “Though what can I expect?”

“Oh, like running off with Gordon and abandoning two children? Like that was mature?”

“Victoria...” Will said under his breath.

“No, Will, don’t try to help her,” said Carrie. “She obviously thinks she’s a big enough girl to handle me.”

“No, Will, don’t try to help me,” said Victoria. “I am woman enough to handle your bitch of an ex-wife anytime any place.”

“You don’t know me.”

“I think I know you well enough, like the way the Queen dies and your immediate response is ‘How can this be about me?’”

“What’s taking Gussie so long?,” Will mused. “Gussie? Mate?!?”

“You think I’m self centered?,“ asked Carrie.

“You think you’re not?”

Will had an idea. “Mary!”
Victoria looked at Will. “That is not fair.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Mary appeared at the door. “Ah, Carrie, how nice to see you again.”

Carrie rolled her eyes. “What? Are you staying here too now?”

“I am letting a cottage not far from here. To be close by when-”

Mary stopped herself.

Carrie narrowed her eyes. “What?”

“Nothing, Mum, let’s go inside.”

“No, what, either she’s dying or she’s pregnant and I know I’m not that lucky-”

“That is beyond inappropriate!,” said Will.

“Oh, up the duff, is she? That’s why you wanted to switch weekends? To tell Gussie?”

“Gussie,” said Victoria.

They looked up to see the boy standing in the path.

“Thank you, once again, Carrie,” Will said tightly. He turned to his son. “Gussie, mate-”

The boy stormed past them and into the house. Will turned to Carrie.

“Victoria, why don’t you go in?”

“I-”

“Come, meine leibe,” Mary urged softly.

Will shut the door behind him.

Victoria paced the parlor.

“You invited him.”

“Of course I invited him. I had to. He’s my cousin and my brother-in-law.”

The family was due to descend upon the palace for the baptism. They had not seen them since the wedding and they seemed so far away. The invitations had been a formality until they were returned with news on sailings.

Margaret squealed. Melbourne looked up at his wife.

“She wants you.”

“Oh, Margaret, why must you be so demanding?”
They traded places, Victoria took her breast out, letting the baby latch on.

“You suppose she’s demanding?”

“Of course she is. Gina never behaved so.”

“Well, perhaps she is a different person.”

Victoria had taken over more of the care of the baby this time, insisting upon the baby sleeping in her room for the time being, the nurses were only to take her when she was elsewhere. The wet nurse was a necessary evil: she was Queen, she could not always be there and it probably would have been quite scandalous to open Parliament with a breast out.

“Gina was sweet and never demanding,” Victoria insisted. “And she never made a sound at night. Margaret has such crying fits.”

Melbourne knelt down. “She is here and she is ours.”

“You do know I love her?”

Melbourne smiled. “Of course I do.”

The door opened. Regina ran in.

“Gina!” Melbourne took her in an embrace, planting a kiss on her cheek. “There you are!”

A woman entered with Lehzen.

“Fraulein Hesse,” said Victoria. “How was the Princess Royal’s lesson?”

“She is progressing most beautifully, Your Majesty. We worked on her greeting for her uncle.”

“Oh?” Victoria looked at Regina expectantly.

“Oh, well, Gina, what will we say when Ernst arrives?,” asked Melbourne.

“Ernst?,” asked Victoria.

Melbourne eyed her.

“Yes, of course, Uncle Ernst.”

“Onkel Ernst,” said Regina.

“Very good.”

The Duchess joined them as they waited downstairs. Ernst was to be the first arrival.

“Oma!”

The Duchess smiled. “Very good, meine liebe.”

“Fraulein Hesse says she is doing well,” said Melbourne.

“Fraulein Hesse came highly recommended.”
“We do know, Mama.”

“Just because she came from Coburg does not mean she is up to no good, Victoria.”

“His Serene Highness, Prince Ernst of Saxe-Coburg.”

Victoria smiled. “Cousin Ernst.”

“Cousin Victoria!”

They exchanged kisses. Ernst turned to Melbourne.

“Cousin William, how are you?”

“Well, Ernst.”

“Meine kleine Nichte! Bist du nicht in den Armen, als ich letztes Jahr verließ?”

The Duchess smiled. “Sie verlässt niemals die Arme.”

“Excuse me?,” asked Melbourne.

“Ernst only asked if that’s not where he left Regina last year and I only answered that she never leaves you.”

“Please. I am happy to see it.” He bowed his head to look at Regina straight on. “But I do hope we may become good friends during our stay, niece.”

It was now Victoria noticed the man with Ernst.

“We have not been introduced,” said Victoria.

“Oh, forgive me, Cousin Victoria, I was so excited to see you all, manners departed me. This is a friend of mine and Albert’s. Christoph Florschutz.”


“Oh, Mr. Florschutz,” said Melbourne.

Victoria smiled at her husband. “You cannot know each other, Lord M, surely?”

“No, I just remember Mr. Florschutz from some correspondence to do with the late prince.”

“We are very tired, but first, I must see my little cousin,” said Ernst.

“Of course,” said Victoria, leading the way.

“Oh, Ernst,” said the Duchess, “you will see how charming Margaret is. She is the image of Victoria as a baby. The same temperament as well.”

“Is that intended to be a slight, Mama?”

Ernst laughed. “Then I think I will like her very much, Aunt.”

“Gussie...”
Will sighed, knocking at the door.

“Gussie, mate, we need to talk.”

He had no answer and sighed.

“Alright, Gussie, we’re back to the old rules, if I count to ten and this door is not opened, I open it.”

“I’m not a little kid!,” he shouted.

Will was pleased to at least get a response. “No, you’re meant to behave as a young adult and that means you discuss matters, not lock yourself in your room.”

Gussie opened the door.

“Victoria’s pregnant? So what?”

Will stood in the doorway. “Is that what you think of having a new brother or sister? So what?”

“Yeah.”

Will nodded. “And that’s why you’ve locked yourself in your room? Because you don’t care?”

“I don’t even like her.”

“She likes you.”

“She pretends to so she can suck up to you.”

“Who told you that? Was it your mum?”

Gussie did not answer. Will sighed. It was hard enough to navigate divorced parents’ agendas when you could understand how other people felt, all the more difficult for him.

“It was her idea to send me away, wasn’t it?”

“I thought you liked your school.”

He was silent again. Will sat in his desk chair.

“Well, yes, Victoria researched the school because I couldn’t. I was being selfish. I wasn’t thinking about what was best for you, I was only thinking about my own feelings, how I didn’t want you to leave home... I wasn’t thinking about the fact that you need to learn to get on without me.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t always be there. Because someday I won’t be there and neither will your mum or Gordon or even Victoria.”

“What does she need a baby for?”

Will smiled. “She wants to be a mum.”

“So why do you have to have a baby?”

“Because that’s how it goes, mate. Two people like each other very much, someone decides they want a baby and the other one says yeah.” He paused. “At least now, I mean, royalty used to say,
hey, we need an heir to the throne...”

Gussie frowned at him.

“So, that’s probably enough for now...” He stood. “So, you can come down when you’re ready to talk to Victoria and I together or when you want lunch. Whichever comes first.”

“Do not think my offer is rescinded because of Lord Melbourne,” said Ernst as he held Margaret.

Victoria looked up. “What?”

He smiled. “I only mean I would still make a very excellent godfather to any of my new cousins and teach them very unsuitable things.”

Victoria relaxed and smiled. “That is very good, Ernst, but I am afraid Lord M’s brother and Lord Shaftesbury will have the honor of teaching Margaret naughty words.”

“Perhaps another time.” He rocked the baby and looked towards Melbourne as he played with Regina. “Your mother writes less and less to my father of Regina.”

“Oh?”

“I tried to get him to accept your invitation, but he would not.”

On the other side of the room, the Duchess was having far too enjoyable a time bragging about her granddaughter to Christoph.

“Regina is such an attentive little girl,” said the Duchess. “So much more so than her mother was.”

“She must get that from her father,” said Christoph.

Melbourne looked up at him.

“The late Prince was always such an attentive student.”

“Was he?”

Regina abandoned her toys and pattered back to Melbourne, her outstretched arms a silent command. He relented quite quickly and lifted her into his lap.

“Not tired,” Regina protested.

“Yes, you are,” said Melbourne.

Regina pouted as the nurse finished changing her into a nightdress. Melbourne picked her up and carried her to the bed.

“I solemnly vow we will have no fun until you wake up.”

“Promise?”

“I promise. We have more dispatches from Natal to look at, our newest colony.”
“Natal?,” she repeated.

“Yes, it’s in Africa, the southeastern part-” He paused as he tucked her in, following her expression.
“You think that sounds fun, don’t you?”

She nodded.

“What if Mama and I read about the disruption of the Church of Scotland first? That has things I know you will not find fun, like church and Scotland...”

He smiled and she giggled. He kissed her on the forehead.

“Now, you are to dream of only good things. What shall you dream of?”

“Horses.”

“Excellent! Horses!”

Melbourne left and nearly walked into Florschutz.

“Mr. Florschutz.”

“I was hoping to visit the Princess Royal.”

“I am afraid that’s quite impossible. It is her naptime.”

Florschutz followed him down the hall.

“Lord Melbourne.”

He sighed internally as he turned his head. “Yes, Mr. Florschutz?”

“I wonder if I might speak to you alone.”

“Of course.”

“Albert was always eager that his children have an education grounded in practical learning. Woodwork, needlecraft, cookery.”

“Well, I do not think Regina is quite big enough for an axe...”

Christoph frowned.

“That was a joke.”

“A joke?”

Germans.

“Mr. Florschutz, I know the Prince had good intentions, in fact, Dr. von Stockmar was keen to execute his wishes, but the end result was that Her Majesty and the Princess Royal were quite unhappy.”

“Yes, I hear it was you that had him sent away.”

“I did not get along with him, but it was ultimately the Queen’s decision. Should she not have the right to decide who is in her household? You needn’t worry for the Princess Royal’s education.”
"He always felt you kept the Queen from being in touch with the common man. The problems of real people. Is it true you advised her to not even read Dickens?"

Melbourne nodded. "Yes, I know the Prince was very knowledgeable in the plight of the working classes having just finished university. I myself learned nothing about them having spent my entire adult life in public service. No, I never learned about their struggles when I was secretary for Ireland or when I was Home Secretary and stopped the army from marching on starving protestors or when I was Prime Minister and worked to end slavery in the colonies or when I sought to emancipate Catholics or when I tried to work with Tories whose views were so contrary to my own as to make the prospect of a partnership laughable."

"I have offended you."

"No," said Melbourne. "I do not get offended. A skill your dear departed friend seemed to lack."

Christoph scowled.

"The Queen and I will see to the Princess Royal’s education. She will be prepared for the life and duty that she was born to. I should hardly think the working classes need her to swing an axe."

The scowl did not leave.

"To be clear, I advised the Queen to not read Dickens because he is verbose and he never seems to really explore the internal struggles of his characters. It’s all very well and good to do social criticism, I suppose, but not when it lacks depth.” He tilted his head. “To be fair, I do not like that he got his break in literature off my back, but surely you or the Prince would not begrudge me that?"

"Lord M?"

"Please excuse me, Mr. Florschutz."

He went down the hall and joined Victoria in the study.

"What did he want?,” she asked, looking up from Margaret’s bassinet.

"Oh, just to tell me that Albert would have wanted Regina to learn practical things."

"Practical?"

"Cookery. Woodwork. Sewing."

"Why would she need to know that?"

"Haven’t a clue.” He went to open the box. “Also to admonish me for my taste in books."

"Certainly not."

"My lack of appreciation for Mr. Dickens…"

Victoria approached. “Lord M, I do have a confession to make.”

He looked up, beckoning her to say more.

“While Albert and I were married, I did try to read Oliver Twist.”

“And what did you make of it?"
“I made nothing of it. I fell asleep after the first chapter.”

He smirked.

“Besides, if anyone should understand about the education of a monarch, I think it would be you.”

“So?,” asked Victoria.

Will sat down at the desk. “It’s a process. What are these?”

She smiled. “These are very exciting. Daisy just sent me the copies.”

Will looked. “They’re in German.”

“Letters from Albert to his boyfriend.”

“What?”

“Well, sort of. Back then, they thought it was a gay until graduation kind of thing. Christoph Florschutz, they shared a room and wrote some very questionable letters.”

Will frowned. “Christoph Florschutz? Why do I know that name?”

“He was at Margaret’s christening.”

“No, that’s not it.”

“Well, he was on the Duke’s council back in Coburg. Trust me, it’s all very steamy nineteenth century love letters.”

“Shouldn’t there be a set from Florschutz to Albert then?”

“You don’t think somebody wouldn’t have gotten rid of them? Victoria even?”

“Why would she?”

“Oh, gee, I don’t know, ‘I’m the Queen of England and I just found my dead husband’s letters to his gay lover, what shall I do?’”

“Ask Lord M what to do,” Will answered.

She frowned. “Damn. You’re right. She would ask Lord M.”

Will looked at the letters even though he couldn’t read them. “Why would he come to Margaret’s baptism?”

The ceremony was well-attended. There was an unusual mix of European royals, courtiers and Melbourne’s relations. It was again held in the throne room. Victoria carried the baby to the font, Melbourne held Regina.

Emily was the one to hold her at the font. Queen Adelaide, Lord Shaftesbury and Frederick all stood beside them.
“Margaret Emily Adelaide,” the Archbishop began pouring water on her head as she squirmed, “I baptise thee in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

Margaret let out a yelp as Emily tried to rock her and Queen Adelaide cooed at her.

“You have been clothed with Christ as many who are baptized have put on Christ...”

The Archbishop continued to speak as Emily gave Margaret back to the Queen. Victoria rocked her and kissed her on the forehead as her husband peered over. Regina leaned down to kiss her baby sister on the forehead and had the ladies of the court positively swooning.

Later, they waited for the festivities to begin as Melbourne held Margaret and spoke to Emily.

“I think your daughters have the court quite in their thrall,” said Emily.

“I think so.”

“You will have quite a time of it when they start in society, I think.”

“Yes, I think it might be what finally kills me.”

“You are terrible. Do not say such things!” She paused. “And I do not think I said so, but I am quite honored to have my name alongside Queen Adelaide’s.”

Melbourne smiled and kissed his sister on the cheek.

“Though where did Margaret come from?”

“I am not sure. Victoria seems very determined that our children not share a first name with anyone in our families.”

“I suspect she would make an exception for a prince.”

“I do not think that would be a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Because that prince would be king.”

“The last king was also called William. It is not as if the Tories can claim the name is the domain of dictators.” She paused. “Prince Ernst is very affable.”

“Indeed.”

“Though I find his travelling companion very odd. He looks at you with great disdain. How is he acquainted to the prince?”

“He, the Prince and the late Prince Consort all knew each other at university.”

“Oh. Well, then...”

“You know nothing, Emily.”

“I know what any woman of the world knows when she hears that a companion knew one prince at university...”

“The Queen is innocent of such matters.”
“Good God, William, you are meant to be her husband. Educate her in such matters.”

Victoria was going to make a break for it.

She was going to talk to Gussie.

She waited until Will was well into trying to sort out where he had heard the name Christoph Florschutz and went upstairs.

Then she heard the strangest thing.

Her mother.

Talking to Gussie.

“But certainly you do not wish to be cruel to her?”

She was about to go in and stop her when Gussie answered.

“Cruel?”

“Yes, when she found out you did not like her, her feelings were very badly hurt.”

“Why?”

“Victoria loves your father very much and that means she must love everyone that he loves. Can you think of what it might feel like to be hated by someone you love?”

“Not good.”

What in the hell was happening?

“No, not good at all. Do you suppose you might try to like Victoria? Just a little?”

“Why do you care?”

Yeah, that was the question of the day.

“Because I love her so I must try to love everyone that she loves.”

Victoria stood gobsmacked.

“Victoria!,” called Will. “Where are you?!”

She hurried back downstairs and into the sitting room as Will thrust the iPad in her hands.

“Christoph Florschutz was hanged during the war.”

Victoria frowned. “I'm guessing not the same one?”

“No, the great grandson of the first one, dispatched by Hitler himself to kill the Queen. Flora knew right away.”

“So, what, these people had a grudge against the royal family for four generations because Albert was Florschutz’s boyfriend?”
“Is there a better explanation?”

“How come I haven’t heard of this?”

“Flora says he was executed quickly and quietly. Apparently, Victoria IV fought off the attacker herself and they didn’t want to let the Germans know how close they had come to succeeding.”

Mary and Gussie appeared.

“Gussie?”

“Gussie is going to come with me to the grocer’s if that is alright?,” asked Mary.

Will looked at Gussie. “You want to go?”

“Yeah.”

“Gussie has not had my spaetzle before,” said Mary. She looked at Gussie.

“She does make a very good spaetzle…”

Mary looked at Gussie. “Come. You must help me buy all the ingredients though your English grocers’ are not as good the stores in Germany…”

“And there it went…” said Will, once he heard the front door shut. “I’ve honestly not seen a woman get so mad at a Tesco…”

Victoria scoffed. “It was a weekly thing when I was growing up. Go to Asda, watch Mum tell the clerk that the apples are better in Germany, someone says something about the war…”

“So, the Florschutz thing might be an interesting historical side note, if only there was some corroboration from an English source…” Will paused. “You would think Lord M would have known, he arranged the marriage almost…”

“Will, do you ever get the feeling that my mum does not exist to make my life a misery?”

“Yes, I think your mum does things out of love for you, misguided as they are.”

Victoria shook her head. “I just have this strange feeling all of a sudden like empathy for my mother… It has got to be the hormones.”

“We could ponder that or we could pop upstairs for a shag while everyone is out of the house?”

She looked up at him, smiling. “Will Lamb, you do say the nicest things…”

“Lord Melbourne.”

He stopped in the hall, turning to see their visitor. The man followed him into the parlor.

“Mr. Florschutz. I understand you are off to Windsor.”

“Yes. I want to pay my respects to the late Prince Consort.”

“Yes.”
“The Queen will not accompany us.”

“She Majesty has many duties to attend to.”

“Albert wrote to me about you.”

“Did he?”

“He said you and Her Majesty were perilously close.” He paused. “I really came to meet the Princess Royal, to take comfort in the man’s daughter, but I found none.”

The door opened and the Duchess entered.

“Oh, there you are Mr. Florschutz. The carriage is waiting. We must be off.”

Melbourne looked at the Duchess. “We were finished.”

“No, we were not, my lord.”

He raised his voice. “I believe we were, sir.”

“I found none because there was none to be had. It must be obvious to anyone with eyes-”

“You will cease-”

“I believe the Princess Royal is your child, Lord Melbourne which makes the Queen no better than a whore-”

“Mr. Florschutz-” said the Duchess.

She had just begun her rejection of his slanders when Melbourne grabbed Christoph by the lapels, taking him against the wall.

“Unhand me! I will tell the world what I know!”

“And I will tell the world what I know!”

“You know nothing, Melbourne!”

“I know you and the Prince were far more than friends.”

He let the man go, dropping him against the wall. Melbourne stepped back, having surprised himself at his actions. The Duchess looked at him with wide eyes.

“You-”

“So, if you insist upon slandering my wife, I will slander you. I will slander you and I will take the late Prince with you.”

“How can you?”

“Did you think I would not have known everything there is to know about the Queen’s husband? Do you think me naïve? These affairs are common, well, common enough, even in England. Of course I never partook, but I suppose I have enough of my own foibles. Better to leave it alone.”

“You have no proof.”
“Of course I do. I have the letters.”

The Duchess looked at Melbourne. “The letters?”

Christoph shook his head. “Albert- Stockmar would have handled that.”

“He did not want Stockmar to know. When I returned to the palace after the Prince Consort died, his valet came to me. He was eager to spare the Queen the grief and embarrassment of such a situation and felt I could be trusted.” Melbourne smiled. “My loyalty to Her Majesty is above reproach.”

“Albert’s valet...” seethed Christoph.

“Yes. I had thought about burning them, but I suppose that I got it into my head that the gentlemanly thing to do would be to return them to you in exchange for the ones the Prince wrote to you, of course. Then you arrived here and of course now, plans have certainly changed. I shall be keeping them in exchange for your silence.”

Christoph shifted uncomfortably.

“Should I hear any slanders against the Queen, I will of course release them so that everyone knows the man who speaks such lies is a sodomite. A jealous one at that who could not stand losing a lover. I think that might endanger your position on the Duke’s Council?”

“You will not get away with this.”

“Now I think we are truly finished.”

Christoph stormed out.

Melbourne turned to the Duchess.

“You knew about Gina.”

“Yes.”

“How long?”

“Since the wedding.”

“And you never... thought to say?”

“I love my daughter and my granddaughters. I thought only of them.”

“I think only of them.”

“I know.” She smiled. “I must get to my carriage.”

“You are still going?”

“I think it better not to leave Mr. Florschutz alone with Prince Ernst, don’t you?”

Melbourne entered the nursery. Victoria held the baby as she sat in the window seat with Gina’s head in her lap as she slept.

“They are gone.”
Victoria shook her head with relief. “I was happy to see Ernst again, truly, but Mr. Florschutz regarded me so strangely...”

“How so?”

She shook her head. “I do not know.”

He sat by her.

“I have decided we ought to call her Maggie,” she announced.

“Maggie?”

“It is short for Margaret, is it not? I think we have given her too stern a name which will serve her well as a princess later, but not today in her mama’s arms...” She ran her thumb across the baby’s cheek. “Will it, Maggie?”

Melbourne smiled. “Gina and Maggie.”

“William and Victoria’s little girls,” his wife said back.

“How lucky we are...”

Victoria smiled as Gina stirred.

“Look who has joined us,” said Victoria. She looked up at her husband. “Perhaps we could start on the dispatches.”

“Yes,” said Melbourne. He took the red box from the table next to them as Gina watched. He took one. “Sir Henry Cloete presents his humble duty to Your Majesty to inform you that the government of your new territory is running to plan. Many of the Dutch settlers have left here, no doubt headed for the Orange Territory...”

London 1942

Victoria awoke to a shadow over her husband.

“Matthew!,” she shouted, pushing the shadow away, her pajama sleeve and wrist getting slashed in the process.

Matthew leapt and wrestled the man, shoving him away as the wrestled back towards the wall, knocking over a vase.

Victoria crawled over the bed to the night table. She rushed into the drawer, pulling out a gun.

She leapt back over, placing the gun against the back of the intruder’s head.

“Back away slowly and drop the knife.”

The man froze and as Victoria ordered. Matthew rang the servants’ bell.

“Are you alright?”

“Fine.”
“You’re bleeding.”

“Hands on your head!,” Victoria shouted. She looked at the man. “Fetch the guards.”

“And leave you alone with him? I think not.”

“I have a gun.”

“What if he tries something?”

“Then I will shoot him.”

It was not very long before the Prime Minister arrived in his stovepipe suit, fresh from the underground war rooms.

“Your Majesty.”

“Prime Minister.”

“I understand you took down the attacker yourself.”

“It was nothing.”

“The most dangerous woman in Europe...” Churchill chuckled. “Indeed.”

“Who was he?,” asked Matthew.

“German, obviously. His name is Christoph Florschutz.”

“Why does that seem familiar?,” asked Victoria.

“Good God. I thought he looked familiar,” said Matthew.

“What do you mean?”

He turned to her. “We met him in Coburg. At Schloss Rosenau. His great-grandfather went to university with Albert.”

“What?,” asked Churchill.

“He was the one who chimed in when the Duke started on about Victoria I and Lord M.”

“What? He volunteered to kill me because my great-grandmother took Melbourne to bed?”

“It’s a theory.”

“Forgive me,” said Churchill. “What is this about Victoria I and Lord Melbourne?”

They turned back to the Prime Minister.

“I...” Matthew stammered.

Victoria went all in.
“It is simple, Prime Minister. After Prince Albert’s funeral, Victoria I went to bed with Lord Melbourne. My grandmother was the result of that coupling.”

Matthew looked up slowly at the Prime Minister.

“Majesty, this is most unusual, but might we sit?”

“I think so.”

Churchill took the chair with no thought to that it was the Queen’s usual chair. Victoria and Matthew sat opposite.

“Might I get you a drink?,” asked Matthew.

Churchill looked at Victoria. “You know this for certain?”

“Well, I do have it in her hand to Lord Melbourne, dated a few nights before my grandmother’s birth...”

“Ah.”

“She calls it ‘the most pleasurable night of her life.’”

“Ah.”

“She writes that she can still feel his breath on her breast.”

“Victoria, perhaps you ought to stop,” suggested Matthew.

They did not speak a moment.

“When did this come to light?,,” asked Churchill.

“Before the war.”

“And this is why you wished the new royal household to be called Melbourne?”

“It’s not the new royal house, is it? By all rights, my grandmother was born to the House of Melbourne, not Hanover, not Saxe-Coburg-Gotha.”

Churchill spoke again.

“When I was a boy, my father was posted in Ireland. Your grandmother came to visit and to this day, I can remember she had the most striking green eyes. You have the same eyes, Your Majesty. As did Lord Melbourne...”

There was another pause.

“I think we might be able to persuade the cabinet to go along with this choice, but I see no reason that they need to know of Queen Victoria II’s paternity.”

“Very wise,” said Victoria.

They walked back to the bedroom, stopping at the portrait of Victoria I and Lord M over the stairs as the sun rose.
“Why do you suppose he ignored the succession? Surely there are questions to be answered.”

“What questions?,” asked Victoria. “I am the daughter of a Queen who was the daughter of a Queen—”

“Who was illegitimate. What about divine right and all that?”

“Well, if God had not wanted me to be Queen, then perhaps he ought to have had Queen Victoria get caught... or not sent that rainstorm in the first place or not had Albert get shot, but the fact is, here I am and I am Queen. For better or for worse.”

Chapter End Notes

So, I've been researching Dickens and Lord M because this is an actual accusation leveled at him that he discouraged the Queen from reading Dickens and kept her from having a social conscience. Charles Dickens was actually a reporter assigned to cover the Caroline Norton trial, which you know, that probably didn't make him his favorite person. The next step in his career was to write The Pickwick Papers, loosely based on the trial, so... I really doubt Lord M was trying to keep the Queen from having a social conscience. I think he really just didn't like Dickens.

And Natal is in what is now South Africa.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Here we are! Thanks for your reads and reviews, please let me know what you think and happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was a fine autumn day at Brocket Hall as Victoria sat in the garden with her watercolors. The scene overlooking the water and the bridge. She must have tried to paint it a hundred times in the three years since her honeymoon, but it never failed to fill her with peace. How fortunate was she?

“Mama!”

Victoria looked up at Gina as she ran towards her. Maggie followed not far behind as they ran from the house. She chased after her elder sister everywhere.

“How fortunate were you?”

She kissed her on the cheek. “Did you and Papa finish your geography?”

“She most certainly did,” said Melbourne, joining her on the picnic blanket on the grass. “Soon she shall be able to point at every place on your dispatches on the globe.”

Victoria turned her head and smiled at her eldest. “We shall put you to the test when we begin my box later. Where are your bonnets? Your papa is always forgetting to make you put them on.”

Melbourne sighed. He looked at Gina. “Do as Mama asks.”

Gina ran off, Maggie trailing her.

“My only two subjects who must hear an order from my consort for it to be obeyed,” she smiled. “Do you suppose it is time to engage a more permanent tutor for her?”

“Doubting my abilities?” he smiled.

“No, I just...” She grew frustrated at herself. “There is so much I am ignorant of and I do not wish our daughters to be ignorant of anything. Mathematics, science...”

“I shall look into it if you wish...”

Victoria smiled looking upon the prospect of the water. “I do love it here. My life as a country gentlewoman. I would think myself ordinary if not for the delivery of my boxes each day.”

“Well, we certainly cannot have you thinking yourself ordinary...”

“No, I think I would have been very happy as Lady Melbourne. I would do nothing but make babies and tend to them.”
Her husband tilted his head. “An interesting prospect.”

“I think so.”

“Might I trouble Lady Melbourne with the business of Queen Victoria?”

“Perhaps you ought to ask Lord Melbourne’s permission. I cannot imagine he will be pleased with you taking away his wife.”

He smiled. “As it happens, Lord Melbourne and I have discussed it and we think it would be perfectly appropriate for Lady Melbourne to consider Queen Victoria’s matter.”

She sighed. “If you must...”

“I’ve had a letter from a man called Daniel O’Connell. Do you know him?”

“No.”

“I knew him a little when I was secretary for Ireland. He was desperate enough to write to me.”

“On what matter?”

“There has been a poor potato crop this year in Ireland.”

“What a shame.”

“More than a shame, it could be catastrophic.”

Gina and Maggie returned. Victoria smiled, prodding them to sit next to her, an arm wrapped around each girl.

“How do you mean?,” she asked.

“The potato is a staple crop. Most of the peasantry depends on it as a primary food source.”

“Should not their landlords do something?”

“The Irish tenant system does not have the history of the English system. There is not the relationship that we would expect.”

“And what did Mr. O’Connell ask you?”

“For me to speak to you on a proposal... I am happy to show you the letter later.” He looked at the girls. “But for now the rooks await us.”

“And who is Caroline Norton?,” asked Emmie.


“The first was dismissed,” said Will.

“Yeah, like that means anything,” Said Victoria.

“Dismissed-”
Victoria spun to him. “But you must do something more to quiet me than look stern and cunning. This is all a most unsatisfactory way of spending an evening designed for better purposes...”

She bit her lip at him.

“Are you flirting?,” asked Emmie. “What are you doing?”

Will looked at Emmie. “She’s quoting a letter from Lady Branden.”

“The first adultery trial.”

Emmie looked at Will. “And the case got dismissed? How?”

Gussie entered with his duffel.

“Ready to go back, mate?,” asked Will.

“Yeah.”

“Not quite.” Mary entered.

“How did you get in?,” asked Victoria.

“I had a key cut.”

“We changed the locks.”

“Emmie let me borrow hers.”

Victoria and Will turned to Emmie. “She said she lost hers!”

Mary handed Gussie a plastic container. “I have made you some of my strudel. It will be a nice treat. You can share it with your friends.”

“What is happening?,” Victoria whispered.

“You must be getting off,” said Mary.

“Right, we’re going to drop Gussie at school, then we’re off to Brocket Hall,” said Will. “There’s food-”

“I will make something,” said Mary.

Victoria shot a look to Emmie.

“What? You know your mum is a very good cook!”

“We’ll be back late,” said Will.

_____________________________________________

“Do you think the servants talk of us?”

Melbourne kissed her on the cheek. She sat in his lap on the sofa, facing the fire in the library. “How do you mean?”
“That we do not act as a married couple is meant to when we are here. We do not eat at table when we are alone. Sometimes we take dinner with the girls in the nursery.”

“And?”

“All so we can make love sooner. Is that not scandalous?”

Melbourne sighed. “Do you know Caroline once hosted a dinner in Byron’s honor at this house?”

“No...” Victoria said scandalized.

“And she served herself at table.”

Victoria turned her head towards him.

“Nude.” He smiled as her jaw dropped. “I would not worry, darling, you will have to do a great deal more to scandalize them than make love to your husband.”

“Indeed.”

“I suppose we could tell them you keep a most detailed account of our lovemaking. What volume are we on?”

“The fifth, but we are nearing very close to the sixth.”

There was a knock at the door. Victoria stepped off her husband’s lap.

Powell entered. “Apologies, Your Majesty.”

“Yes, Powell?”

“A parcel arrived from Lady Palmerston with instructions that it be given to Lord Melbourne immediately.”

Melbourne held his hand out. “Thank you, Powell.”

The butler left. Victoria sat across from him.

“What is it? Is everything alright?”

Melbourne frowned and opened the parcel.


“A book by Mrs. Norton.”

“Mrs. Norton?”

He opened it and read. He immediately closed the book again.

“What?,” asked Victoria.

Melbourne passed it to her.

“Daughters of the Islands?,” she asked.

“Read the dedication,” Melbourne fumed.
His own anger had clouded his judgment because he realized it was a mistake to show his wife as soon as she began reading.

“She means this towards our daughters?” She flipped the pages. “This is a poem?”

Harry led them into the attic.

“Sorry, everything is at sixes and sevens lately, so I won’t be able to help much, but the Princess—” She stopped herself. “Her Majesty says that you are more than welcome here. Oh, she wanted you to have this.”

Harry gave Victoria a piece of paper.

“What’s this?,” she asked.

“It’s her mobile number. Put her in your mobile and tear up the paper. Then for God’s sake, don’t lose your mobile.”

Harry left.

Victoria looked at Will. “You don’t think she really...”

“Couldn’t possibly...”

Victoria got her mobile out of her pocket and began dialing.

“What are you doing?,” asked Will.

“I’m seeing who it’s a number to. Like customer service or-”

“Hello?”

Victoria hung up.

“Who was it?,” asked Will.

“It was the Queen of England.”

“Are you sure?”

“Well, she didn’t answer ‘Queen speaking’ but I’m pretty sure.”

“Okay, let’s see about Mrs. Norton...”

“Good plan.”

Melbourne awoke to find his wife with her arms crossed.

“You finished it.”
“Yes, I did,” she said tightly.
Melbourne sat up, running his hand through his hair.
“We ought to ignore it.”
Victoria tightened her arms.
“You know, I read a critic that called her the female Byron...” he mused.
“Was Byron this irritating?”
Victoria threw the book across the room.
“Well... now that you mention it...”
“And I dare say Lord Byron had the manners to leave your son out of it!” She stood. “This book is insulting. It makes it seem as my daughters are somehow unworthy of their birth? How can they be unworthy of their birth? I am God’s anointed, they were born of my body- Sir James Graham was there to see it-, how are they unworthy?! That others are unfortunate means that my daughters ought not be fortunate?! That is nearly treason! Actually I think it might be!”
Melbourne sighed. “Before we condemn Mrs. Norton to death by hanging-”
“Hanging is too good! Let her be drawn and quartered!”
“We could let it be.”
“You are not in agreement with her.”
“Of course not, Victoria, but we do not want to create a scandal where there is none!”
The door opened.
“Mama...” said Maggie.
“Are you fighting?,” asked Regina.
“No, darlings, oh come here.”
Victoria kissed them both, taking Maggie into her arms. Gina hopped up on the bed with Melbourne. She crawled into her fathers’ arms.
“How can there be any doubt that these are the most special girls in England?”
“All the more reason to not bring attention to this.”
“I am Queen! Who would Mrs. Norton even be were she not your-”
She stopped as she noticed the attentive look on Regina’s face.
“Dinner companion,” she finished.
Her husband quirked his eyebrow. “My dinner companion?”
“Yes, I believe the whole country was aware when her husband sued you for having dinner with her. The various details of the menu and the courses...” She huffed as she adjusted Maggie on her hip. “I
suppose you have nothing to say on the matter.”

“No, as you know, I prefer we not discuss my former dinner companions.”

“Of course you do, but this lady would be no one had she not dined with you.”

“Perhaps we ought to forget that she and I dined together and treat her as we would any other person who wrote a criticism.”

“But-”

“You know it is sensible.”

She scowled as she sat back on the bed with Maggie.

“Fine, but I will not be held responsible should she allude to any other details of your dining arrangements.”

Regina looked up at Melbourne. “Why are we talking about dinner?”

“Because Mama did not have time to choose her metaphor wisely.”

“She came here?,” asked Will. “She was in this house?”


Will went to his laptop. “What’s the date?”

“Looks like eighth of September, 1845?”

“The Brocket Hall guest book is digitized on the Windsor archives page...” He paused. “Right. There she is. Mrs. Caroline Norton.”

“We do know that she made it out alive?”

“Perhaps she-”

“Will, trust me, your ex-girlfriends start writing poems about our baby, I am not having them over just to be friendly.”

He looked up at her. “Jealous of my exes?”

“No.” He eyed her questioningly. “No. I know how good we are. No one can compete.”

“Not even Carrie?”

She sighed. “I don’t like her.”

“Shocking. I never would have suspected.”

“Carrie used you very badly. I don’t like what she did to you. Or Gussie. Or Allison.”

“I don’t need to be defended.”
“No, you’ll never defend yourself. I find that very upsetting.”

Melbourne sat with Maggie in his lap at the desk. He was finishing some correspondence and she did like to think she was helping by shuffling his other papers. Of course his papers were always in such a state that he never noticed if it was to their detriment.

“America?”

“Canada. The United States…” He looked up at her expectant face. “That did used to be British, but when your great-grandfather was king, we did lose them…”

“There’s a carriage!,” she shouted.

“Probably just the courier for the box.”

“No.”

Melbourne looked up. No, it was not the carriage for the boxes. It was Emily’s.

He made his way to the door with the girls underfoot. The carriage arrived with Palmerston helping Emily out.

“Aunt Emily!” Regina ran towards them.

“Regina! Margaret! My darlings!” She leaned down to kiss them both. “My goodness, you both must have grown a yard since I saw you last!”

“Did you bring us anything?”

“Gina, that’s rude,” admonished Melbourne.

Emily cast him a look. “William, I am their aunt. If I do not spoil them, who will? But I am afraid, darling, your mama summoned me with such haste I had no time to get you anything. I do believe your uncle has some boiled sweets he’s been hiding.”

Melbourne escorted her in the house. Palmerston knelt down to give the girls candies.

“Victoria summoned you?”

“Yes. She did not tell you?”

“No.”

“It sounded like a house party from her invitation.”

“A house party?”

“I know, it did seem unusual, you never host house parties at Brocket Hall.”

Melbourne turned to the butler. “Powell, are we expecting more guests?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, dear, Powell, how are you?,” asked Emily.
“Very good, your ladyship.”

“The princesses are not too much trouble for you? Not as much trouble as Harriet and I were?”

“Considerably less if I may take the liberty, milady.”

Emily laughed. “Pray tell, did the Queen say who else we might be expecting?”

“The Prime Minister and Lady Peel. Lord and Lady Portman. Mrs. Norton.”

“Oh, well, won’t this be charming? Just like when the then Prince Regent came to stay.”

“Victoria!,” Melbourne shouted.

Emily looked at Powell. “Ah, he shouts just like the first Lord Melbourne did, does he not?”

Melbourne found Victoria sitting by the glasshouse, trying to coax Dash into staying still for a sketch. He went to them.

“Victoria!”

“You invited Caroline Norton to this house?”

“Yes.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because she ought to be responded to in person.”

“That is a terrible idea. I thought we were going to let it lie.”

She snapped her head up at him. “Yes, I tried that. It did not work.”

He took a breath. “How long did you try?”

“Most of yesterday morning.”

“I thought we had agreed to let our pasts-”

“No, this is not about your past. This is about our present where your former lover insults our children. Because she seeks to use notoriety- I say again, notoriety because what else would she be known for if not her relationship with you?”

“So, this is not about my past except to order a former lover into our home to be reprimanded?”

“Yes.”

Victoria looked up at Regina.

“This one is from Punjab.”

“Punjab?” Regina went back to the globe, spinning it around.

Victoria smiled. “You can’t go that fast. How will you read the names?”
“I’m looking!,” she said defensively.

Victoria stood and went next to her, taking her hand to stop at India.

“India?”

“Punjab is a part of India, you see how far, Gina?” She slowly turned the globe back to England. “We are all the way back here, yet I have lands and peoples all over the world.”

“Yes.”

She took her hand, turning her to face her.

“Gina, do you know why mama gets boxes every day?”

Regina thought on an answer. “Because people send you letters?”

Victoria smiled. “That’s part of it. Do you know why?”

“To tell you things?”

“And why must they tell me things?”

Regina looked nervous.

“Oh, darling...” She brushed her hair aside. “That is alright. You are a very little girl—”

“I am four now—”

“No, you are still very little...” She planted a kiss on her forehead. “You are my little girl and I will always take care of you.”

She turned to see a carriage.

“Ah, our final guest has arrived.”

“Four and one-quarter.”

“Come on.”

She took Regina with her outside.

“Welcome to Brocket Hall, Mrs. Norton. Of course you remember Princess Regina.”

“I have not had the honor, ma’am.”

“Oh, have you not? Because you certainly presumed to in your poem. I must have been confused or perhaps the confusion was yours.” She watched with satisfaction as Mrs. Norton flinched. “No matter. Powell will have someone show you to your room. We dine an hour after the gong.”

“Do I know her?,” asked Gina.

“No.”

“Then why—”

“Gina—” She spun around, kneeling down. “Gina, do you know you are a princess?”
She frowned.

“It means you have a duty to your subjects, but it also means that sometimes people will try to take advantage of your position. You must not let them.”

Victoria saw the look on confusion in her daughter’s face. She held her close.

“Do not worry. For now, your mama will protect you.”

“Shockingly, no mention of the bloodbath,” said Will as he took over Melbourne’s journal. He pulled out a piece of paper.

“What’s that?,” asked Victoria.

He pulled the paper out.

“Any children we don’t know about?,” she asked.

“Ha ha.” He opened the paper. “It looks like a child’s writings.”

Victoria stood and walked back to the other side of the table.

“Is that Punjab?”

“I think it must be Regina’s.”

“Really?”

“Yes, she wrote later that when she was little, her parents would go through the dispatch boxes and she would make a list of the places they mentioned and try to find them on the globe.”

“It’s remarkable they let her be so involved.”

“Well, they both had a firsthand look at what it was to be an under prepared queen...”

Will looked up at her. “You know, I think Melbourne had a type.”

“Just now?”,

“We know all of his lovers were beautiful, intelligent, passionate, temperamental”

“Temperamental?”

“Yes, I do know what that’s like.”

“You do know what your problem has always been,” Emily said to Melbourne after dinner.

Emma played on the piano. Victoria had played twice before giving over the bench to her lady-in-waiting. Now she sat with Peel discussing matters of state, Palmerston and Portman caught up as Lady Peel spoke with Mrs. Norton.

“No, but I am certain you will enlighten me.”
“You fall for the same woman.”

“I do not-”

“Do you remember when I tried to match you with Emily Eden?”

He rolled his eyes. “Are we really back to Emily Eden?”

“Do you know what the problem was with Emily Eden?”

“That I did not want to marry her?”

“Do you know why you did not want to marry her?”

“Why ought I ponder it? You are about to enlighten me.”

“Emily Eden was attractive, intelligent- I dare say you even thought her witty- but she was too sensible and even-tempered.”

“I-”

“You like women that lose their temper. You like women prone to jealous fits.”

He cast a glance over at his wife, who appeared to be giving Peel one of her “I am Queen” reminders. “Oh, yes, I am certainly enjoying myself this evening.”

“The Queen is different. Her love for you is just as you as virulent as any of her faults...” She looked over at Victoria, chatting with Emma. “That is what makes her so dangerous. Mrs. Norton has set off the lioness.”

“A lioness?”

“Indeed. A gentleman at the zoological society explained to me that the male lion is the titular king, but while the lioness hunts he stays and minds the cubs.”

He stared at her.

“Did you not find the metaphor apt?”

Mrs. Norton stood. “I think I will excuse myself.”

“Oh, but Mrs. Norton, you cannot deprive us of your company yet.”

“I am afraid I am tired, ma’am.”

Emily quietly snorted.

“No, you must join me in the library.”

Victoria stood and waited for the woman to come. Mrs. Norton saw no choice but to obey.

“Is grandpapa’s sword still in there?,” asked Emily.

Melbourne sighed and followed his wife in.

“Majesty, I understand that you are upset-”
“You have three boys, do you not?”

“I have two. My youngest boy died.”

“I know. I was very sorry to hear it as was my husband.” She took a breath. “Do you suppose I have any less love for my daughters than you do for your sons? Or less love than any mother has for her child?”

“It was not intended as a personal attack, ma’am—”

“Oh.” Victoria picked up the book off the tea table. “It is perhaps scarcely necessary to inform my readers that the title of this poem ‘The Daughters of the Islands’ has reference to Her Royal Highness Regina the Princess Royal and Her Royal Highness Princess Margaret.’”

She put the book down.

“If it was not intended to be a personal attack, then why did you name my children? Particularly with your history with my husband which the entire country is well aware of. What else could your intent possibly be?”

“Ma’am, I write for the cause of the welfare of all children, not petty personal vendettas.”

“Petty?,’ asked Victoria.

“This business with William—”

“William?!,’ she raised her voice.

“Our acquaintanceship is longer than—”

“Oh, I see the nature of the problem now, Mrs. Norton, you have forgotten your place. You see I am Queen. You are Mrs. Norton. No one would care about your poetry if you did not have your association with my husband—”

“Who was not your husband then.”

Melbourne wondered what he might have to do to leave this room.

“You were a girl who had not even been to a ball yet when he and I—”

“Do I seem like a girl to you now?”

“I wonder how someone of your majesty’s limited experience can possibly amuse Lord Melbourne—”

“You suppose he found any of your experiences amusing?”

“He seemed to well enough at the time.”

“Or perhaps it was you who cannot is bereaved of Lord Melbourne and that is why you write about his ‘clear blue-eyed Queen.’”

“You did read it.”

“I did. Perhaps in future you will keep that in mind.” She turned to Melbourne. “Now I find I have tired. I will you see in my room?”
“Of course.”
She left.
“Does she speak to you so?,” asked Caroline staring off into the gardens.
“No, but I do not anger her so.”
“Were you angry?”
“One has to wonder at what you were thinking.”
“Did you at least like the poem?”
“Oh, I think I’ve gone off poetry.”
“Have you?”
“Yes, poets have been a great source of trouble in my life.”
She snorted. “You know George sent for me to go to William, but I did not get there in time.”
“I heard. I was sorry. So was the Queen.”
“Was she?”
“Yes, she’s a woman of great, though sometimes violent, affections.”
“Well, I suppose I would be, too.”
“Good night, Mrs. Norton.”
“Good night, Lord Melbourne.”

Will pulled over on the road out of Brocket Hall.
Victoria looked up at him. “What are you doing?”
“Historical research.”
He got out of the car. She followed him into the woods.
“What? Are we looking for Caroline Norton’s remains?”
“No, we’re looking for the shagging tree.”
“What?”
He turned back to her as he kept walking.
“You wondered which it was. I think I know.”
“You do not!”
“Come here.” He motioned again as he held his hand out. “Come here.”

Victoria followed letting him take her hand. She found herself backed into a tree with Will pressed against her, his hardness growing.

“You see, no low branches, wide enough to hold her against, but I suppose there’s only one way to be certain...”

“What would that be?”

He rucked up her dress and began pulling down her knickers.

“Please don’t just leave those,” she sighed. “Proper maternity knickers are terrible to find.”

Will stuffed them in his jacket pocket as he undid his jeans shoving them down. He grabbed her again, hooking her leg around him and entered her quickly. Victoria gasped.

“That seems to fit,” said Will. “Perhaps more investigation.”

She nodded.

Will hooked up her other leg and began driving into her.

“Mine,” he whispered. “Mine.”

“Of course yours,” she answered ready to burst from the sensations of her body. She grabbed him back. “I love you. I love you.”

She broke, Will following her with a long, deep groan after.

“So,” he asked, “do you think this is the shagging tree?”

“Definitely a good option,” she answered.

It was finally quiet. The guests having gone to bed. Melbourne sat and waited for the dressers to finish with his wife.

“Are you disappointed in me?,” she asked.

He looked up. “Why ought I be disappointed in you?”

“All of your lessons on restraint and diplomacy and I choose to confront your former lover at the first opportunity.”

“Emily has the notion that I intentionally choose women that...”

She frowned. “That what?”

“Are... prone to fits of passion.” He looked up to her. “That I enjoy it. I think she may be right because I did enjoy it, but please let us never do that again.”

Victoria climbed into bed.
“I have made my position clear.” She moved into his lap, taking his face in her hands. “I may be queen, but I will not stand for any attack on my husband or my babies. You see, Lord M, I will protect what’s mine.”

She kissed him.

“Mine.”

Victoria pushed up his nightshirt, hands up his thighs. She brought her lips to his again as her hand went to his cock. She smiled as she began to stroke it.

“Mine.”

“Of course yours.”

She finished rolling up his nightshirt, tossing it aside. He helped bare her, lips meeting until bared flesh pressed. She sank down on him.

“I love you, I love you...” he whispered. He always needed her to hear it.

“William...” She brought her teeth to his shoulder. “Mine.”

She rode him with abandon until they were both shaking, clinging to each other.

“I love you,” she whispered. “I love when we are together. I love our babies.”

“I love you.”

Chapter End Notes

So, Caroline Norton did write a poem called "Child of the Islands" with reference to the then toddler Prince of Wales. So I just went with that on the basis Victoria would have been much more pissed off were she married to Lord M...

And Emily Eden was a person. You may have seen her mentioned in my other story this week. Story is she was an author and she and Lord M had mutual friends who really thought they should have gotten married, but they just didn't want to even though they got along. We know Lord M...
“And let’s tell sad stories of the death of kings...” David said in his best brogue.

Victoria glanced over at David. “Not helping.”

“I like Richard II.”

“Yes, but mad Richard II is hardly a suitable comparison for Granny’s eulogy.”

“Well, I’ve never written a eulogy for a monarch before.”

Victoria turned. “Did you eulogize your dad?”

“That’s hardly an example.”

“Why not?”

“Because I had to go ten minutes without mentioning either his casual or formal racism. Or that he was shagging the housekeeper when his heart finally gave out.”

“I wish Victoria would ring me.”

“Which one?”

“The historian. She ought to know about the funerals for previous Victorias.”

“Do you want to just copy one and go through and change the numbers?”

Victoria groaned and put her forehead on the desk.

“I wouldn’t do that. Melbourne and Victoria probably shagged there...”

“If we went by that, we wouldn’t touch anything in the house.”

“I know. The Young Queen.” David stood getting his iPad.

“No, not Victoria’s eulogy for Lord M. It’s too sad.”

“Give it a go.”

“No!” She paused. “How long would it take to get to Oxford right now?”

“Ten at night? An hour?”

She picked up the house phone. “Yes, Skerrett, I need a car.”
“Where are you going?”

“Oxford.”

“You’re going to wake up a historian in the middle of the night to ask for help with your gran’s eulogy?”

She stood up, grabbing her jacket. “David, I am told that three billion people on this planet saw my address to the nation. You bet I am going to go to anyone’s house in the middle of the night that I can for help.”

“I should go.”

“No,” she said handing him a monitor. “You stay with the baby.”

“Where are we?,” Regina asked as she was led into the house.

“I told you. We are visiting some relations of mine.”

Regina looked around in awe.

“Lady Byron and Lady Lovelace are expecting you, your royal highness. Your lordship.”

Regina held his hand as the butler led them to the parlor.

Ada smiled. “Cousin William.”

“Cousin Ada. Cousin Annabella.”

“Your royal highness,” said Annabella. “Cousin William.”

Ada looked down. “Forgive me, your royal highness. I am very pleased to meet you.”

“Cousin Regina will do,” Melbourne suggested.


“You may blame me if it does.”

Ada knelt down. “Cousin Regina, your papa tells me you are to have a birthday soon.”

“Yes.”

“And how old will you be?”

“Five.”

“Five. That is a very important birthday. How many days do you suppose you will have lived?”

Regina shrugged. Ada smiled.

“May I show you something?”
Ada took Regina’s hand and led her to a table with pencil and paper.

Melbourne sat next to Annabella.

“I was surprised when I heard of your proposition. Are you really so desperate for tutors?”

“Regina needs a maths tutor. I thought it would be negligent of me to not call in a favor from a second cousin. A rare combination of society lady and intellectual, do you not agree?”

“I have secured a tutor for my grandchildren, perhaps I could point you in the right direction.”

“What is your opposition?”

“You know my opposition.”

Melbourne rolled his eyes. “He is dead. She is dead. I really do not see why we ought to revisit that matter.”

“She has her father’s nature, it must be tempered...” she whispered.

“And tutoring two princesses might drive her to what?”

Annabella leaned forward. “She nearly eloped with her tutor, you know.”

“And leave you?”

“I do not wish her to lead the princesses astray.”

“I find it negligent of a well born lady to not have at least one lapse in judgment.”

“We shall see what you think when it is your daughter.”

“We know you are talking amongst yourselves,” Ada called. “Regina finds it most distracting.”

“He does it a lot,” said Regina.

Ada turned back to her. “Yes, Cousin Regina, when I was your age my mother always spoke in hushed tones around me usually about my papa.”

“He and Mama always talk about dinner.”

“He and Mama always talk about dinner.”

“Dinner?,” Ada asked with a puzzled look.

“Mind what Cousin Ada is showing you, Regina,” said Melbourne eager to change the subject.

Ada turned her back to the paper. “So, you see Regina, one thousand eight hundred and twenty-five days. We could count them all, but it would take a very long time, see how much simpler? Then if we want we can find out how many hours you will have lived. And we can do it with any number we like, any sum you wish to know.”

Regina looked at Melbourne. “How old are you, Papa?”

“How old do you suppose I am?”

“Twenty?”

Annabella cackled then stopped herself.
They played at numbers more and then Ada walked them to the front of the house.

“How much instruction do you suppose?,” asked Melbourne.

“I could come to the palace twice or thrice a week depending on how interested the princesses are?”

“That sounds reasonable. Of course you will meet the Queen at the Princess’ birthday party.”

“I will be honored.”

He stood closer to Ada, letting Regina follow the Lovelaces’ cat. “I implore you to not talk above her.”

“I have no intention-”

“Not that you would intend to it is just that she thinks herself lacking when she is one of the most brilliant women I know. Any other lady would be considered very well bred to have half of her accomplishments, but she does not think this.”

“And she does not want the same for her daughters?”

“Precisely.”

“Well, I think I should like her very much then.”

“Will.”

Victoria poked him.

“Will.”

He groaned and opened his eyes. “What?”

“I have a craving.”

“Good God, didn’t you have five orgasms?”

“No, it’s weird. It’s not a sex craving.”

“What?”

“It’s a food craving.”

“A food craving?”

“Do you remember that curry you cooked me in my flat?”

“Yes...”

“Could you make it?”

“Victoria, your mum did the shop. It’s all German food and green juice. I don’t even think we have rice.”
“But you could go to Tesco.”

“It’s closed.”

“Not the one on Cowley.”

“You mean across town?”

“Yeah.”

He sighed. “So you want me to get up, get dressed, drive across town, shop for the ingredients for a full Indian dinner, drive back and prepare it?”

“Well, I could do the shopping I guess-”

Will groaned and stood. “No, no chance.”

“I could-”

He began searching in the dark for his clothes. “Victoria, there is no way I can let the mother of my child travel across town alone in the middle of the night. I’ll be brought up on charges.”

“I could come with you.”

“No,” he insisted, pulling his jumper over his head. He kissed her on the lips. “I love you.”

“I love you.”

He bent down to kiss the bump of her stomach. “I love you.”

Will began to walk out.

“Will?”

He turned. “Yes.”

“They have a Krispy Kreme at that store, would you-”

“I’ll check.”

“And if they don’t have that, would you get some ice cream? And prawn crisps? You know what, get those either way.”

“Right. Doughnuts, ice cream, prawn crisps, full Indian meal.”

“I want a horse,” Regina declared on the ride back to the palace.

“You want a horse?”

“Yes.”
“What do you need a horse for?”

Regina looked up at him. “To go places.”

“What do you want to go?”

“Cousin Emmie’s.”

“I can take you to Cousin Emmie’s any time you please.”

“Your Royal Highness. Your Lordship.”

Melbourne nodded his head as he brought his horse to a stop. “Lord Ilchester.”

“An early congratulations on your birthday, ma’am.”

Regina looked at him in confusion.

Melbourne smiled. “My thanks on behalf of the princess, Lord Ilchester.”

“Move aside!”

Melbourne turned his head back. A footman was shouting at him and he spotted the crest on the carriage.

Saxe-Coburg.

The Duke had arrived.

“Aside, sir!,” shouted the coachman.

“Good God man, do you know who you are speaking to?!,” shouted Ilchester.

“No, it is no matter.”

Melbourne put his arm around Regina as he cantered to the side. Three carriages bearing the seal of Saxe-Coburg and a wagon followed.

“Is that Prince Albert’s father?,” asked Ilchester.

“Yes.” He smiled at Lord Ilchester. “I am afraid we must be going. Good day, Ilchester.”

“Good luck to you, Melbourne!,” the man shouted after him.

“They are here,” said the Duchess. “Where are Melbourne and Regina?”

Victoria shook her head. “I would rather spare them as long as I can.”

“I wonder that you invited him,” said the Duchess.

“He has never accepted before!”

Her ladies looked at her anxious reaction.
“I am sorry, Mama.”

“Never mind, Drina. I do not think any of us is looking forward to this.”

Victoria cast a confused look at her mother.

“His Serene Highness the Duke of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha! His Serene Highness Prince Ernst!”

The men entered. Ernst had his usual smile on his face.

“Your Majesty,” said the Duke.

“Uncle Ernst, how are you?”

The Duchess leaned in for a kiss. “How was your journey, brother?”

“Terrible. Where is my granddaughter?”

“She is out with my husband,” said Victoria.

The Duke snapped his head. “Is she?”

“Yes. I told you. Lord Melbourne is very attentive to her, Father,” said Ernst. “She writes to me that he takes her to ride?”

“Gina adores horses.” Victoria looked up. “Dr. von Stockmar.”

“Your Majesty.”

They moved to the drawing room.

“Shall we order tea?,“ asked the Duchess to break the silence.

“I think we shall.”

“Mama!”

Regina ran in, rushing over to her mother. Victoria picked her up.

“Where is Papa?”

“Where is Papa?,” the Duke questioned. “Surely Papa is dead.”

“What?,” asked Gina. She looked frantically at her mother.

“Gina...”

“Gina?”

Melbourne entered.

“Cousin William!,” exclaimed Ernst. “How good to see you again! Come. Meet my father.”

He bowed his head. “Your Serene Highness.”

“Dr. von Stockmar,” Melbourne observed.
“Come, William, we were about to take tea.”

“Papa.”

The conversation in German had begun. Melbourne was trying to make himself agreeable by being scarce. Regina stood next to him.

“Yes?,” he whispered back.

She held her arms up. Melbourne lifted her.

“Is he my grandfather?”

He froze.

Her future. Her possible reign depended on what he answered.

“Yes.”

She shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

He desperately wanted to reply that he did not understand either, but they were interrupted by an outburst of German in their direction. Regina clung tighter to him.

“At any rate she speaks, Father,” said Ernst. “She has only just met you.”

The Duke said something else in German. Victoria’s eyes widened, Ernst looked as if he wanted to sink into the sofa. The Duchess began something that sounded like admonishment.

“Don’t speak so about my papa!,” Gina shouted.

“Regina-” Victoria cautioned.

“Now the child speaks. I did not come here to see my son’s memory so disrespected! Or to see this child be so insolent!”

“Brother,” the Duchess began, “you must show some understanding. After all, Lord Melbourne is the only father Regina has ever known.”

“Maggie, come along,” said Melbourne holding his hand out for his youngest.

“I was not done-” said the Duke.

“You are.”

“Go with Papa, darling,” Victoria prodded.

Maggie followed Melbourne as he carried Regina out.

“Do not disrespect my husband as long as you are in this country,” said Victoria.

“Yet you disrespect my son who was your husband.”

Ernst again tried to broker peace. “Cousin William looks after Regina as dearly as if she was his own child. Surely you cannot begrudge her that?”
“If looking after her has turned her into a creature no better than a street urchin—”
“...A street urchin?”
“She might as well come to Coburg.”
“Coburg?”
“I am tired,” said the Duke. “I think I shall sleep.”

“Coburg?,” Victoria whispered to Ernst.
“It is just the ramblings of an old man. Stockmar put it into his head that her education is lacking.”
“And it would be better in Coburg?” Victoria scoffed. “She is heiress to the throne. The English people would never accept it.”
“Stockmar is in his head, pouring poison in his ear.”
“Poison? What poison?,” asked Victoria.
“I would be ashamed to say. Please. Just let him see that Regina is well cared for. I am certain it will silence Stockmar.”
“You know I dispatched that man from my household.”
“I know.”

Victoria heard a knock at the door.
“Will?”
She picked up her mobile and walked towards the front hall.
“Will, did you lock yourself out?”
She looked through the keyhole to see a man in a blazer. Uneasily, she opened the door a crack.
“May I help you?”
“Doctor Kensington?”
“Yes.”
“Francatelli, could we make it less dramatic?” The Queen stepped out from behind him. “She probably thinks someone died.”
“Your Majesty,” Victoria said in surprise. “Uh, I... do not have a bra on.”
“I need to do a security sweep.”

Francatelli walked in past Victoria. The Queen rolled her eyes and followed.
“She didn’t know I was coming, how could she plot to kill me?”

“Is there anyone else in the house?”

“No, Will’s niece, Emmie is staying with us but I think she’s having a booty call with her ex and Will ran to Tesco.”

“Tesco?” asked the Queen.

“It’s a shop?”

“No, I know what Tesco is, just why is he-” The Queen paused. “Craving?”

“Curry.”

“Chips with vinegar dipped in custard.”

“Wow.”

“Scotland is great for cravings. They will fry anything.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“So, I suppose you’re probably wondering why I’m here.”

“A bit.”

“My grandmother’s funeral is Friday and I am set to deliver the eulogy and I have nothing.”

“Oh...” Victoria said with concern.

“Yeah. Oh,” said the Queen. “It’s just I know you and Professor Lamb know everything about Victorias and I thought you might be able to help.”

“Right.”

The Queen shook her head. “I’m sorry, I’ve been presumptuous. And the whole surprise visit thing. I’m afraid it’s a family disorder.”

“Well, you come by it honestly.”

“I just have this feeling as if I can talk to you. Really talk to you. I don’t always get to really talk to people. And even less now. I think my husband might be the only one who hasn’t taken to entirely calling me ‘ma’am.’ Even my mother-in-law is doing it. Do you have any idea how frightening that is?”

“Well, I don’t have a scary mother-in-law, but I can guess. Cuppa?”

“Please.”

The Queen followed Victoria to the kitchen. She put the kettle on and began getting out mugs. The Queen sat at the table.

“Is she usually scary? The Duke’s mum?”

“She doesn’t like me.”
“Doesn’t like you? How could she not like you?”

“She didn’t want David to marry someone who was going to be queen. And the hemophilia.”

“But that’s not your fault.”

“Yes, but there’s a whole other level of complications and...” She sighed. “Everyone knows it anyway. I suppose, but we selected embryos. She didn’t like that. Sort of softened when I actually had the baby, but...”

“And the Montroses don’t like the Melbournes.”

The Queen frowned. “What?”

“Victoria I, during the Flora Hastings scandal, she appeared at Ascot and the Duchess of Montrose hissed at her.”

“Hissed?,” asked the Queen. “An actual grown woman hissed?”

“Victoria never forgot it. Neither did the Duchess.”

After dinner was very quiet. Victoria glanced over at her husband.

“William?”

Melbourne did not look up from his book. “I do not care who that man thinks he is, he will not speak to my children like that.”

“Do you think I disagree?”

“I did not hear you argue with him.”

“What am I supposed to say?”

“Your mother said more in my defense.”

“I was not aware you needed defending, you have always been quite capable.”

“I do not have the rank of your relations, I cannot speak to them as you can.”

“I wanted you to have a similar rank!”

“I do not want a similar rank and frankly, I do not need defending. Gina does.”

“Then-”

“But he is- he thinks he is-”

“I would not let my father speak to her so nor would I let your mother! God knows what is in the old man’s mind!”

Victoria quickly decided that her husband need not know of the Duke’s desire for Regina to visit Coburg.
“And Stockmar!”
“I did not invite him.”
“He ought to have been tossed out the minute he arrived.”
“What am I to do?”
“You are Queen, do not pretend you are helpless.”

She frowned at him at he put out his taper and put aside his book, turning to sleep facing away from her.

“Green juices?,” the Queen mused as she looked in the fridge. “Do people actually like those?”
“My mum bought them. She thinks she’s helping.”
“Well,” the Queen picked one up and twisted off the cap. She took a swig.
Victoria frowned. “Did you like that?”
“No, but I’m very good at doing things I don’t like.”
“That’s sort of impressive,” said Victoria.
“My mum never forced me to do anything. I suppose because she couldn’t force herself to do anything.” The Queen came back and sat next to Victoria at the table.
“So, of course, the gold standard in royal eulogies is Victoria I for Lord M.”
The Queen grimaced. “David tried to get me to watch that bit of The Young Queen again.”
Victoria smiled. “You watch The Young Queen?”
“God, yes, I was just as obsessed with it as everyone else. There’s no way Albert really left the Queen in a wood with Dash, is there?”
“Not really sure.”
“Just, God, how did she marry him at all?”
“She thought she was doing her duty. Not everyone can find a handsome Duke,” Victoria looked away from the laptop. “How did you meet him? There are lots of stories, but I never know which is right.”
“He invited me to be his guest on my tour to Scotland and I said yes. I wasn’t quite intending to find a suitor- that’s what Granny would call it- but I knew he was around my age and handsome...”
Victoria smiled. “Consistently at the top of the list of best looking nobles.”
The Queen smiled. “So I prayed to God he would actually be interesting to talk to and he was- and is- the very best of men.” She took another swig of green juice. “So?”
“So?”
“How did you meet Will?”

“Do you want the story we tell or the one that makes me sound like a bit of a stalker?”

“Obviously I want the one that makes you sound like a bit of a stalker.”

“I was obsessed with Victoria for as long as I can remember. I had a babysitter, Daisy, and she would tell me all about her and Lord M and their family and I don’t know, I never really took to another subject. So I was a teenager and doing yet another paper on Queen Victoria and there was this special on telly and one of the talking heads had amazing cheekbones, green eyes and a beautiful jawline...”

“It was Will,” the Queen smiled.

“I can’t describe the feeling I had. It was as if I knew him. So, naturally, I watched that special again and again, I read every book he wrote and went to uni, but I decided that I needed to get my doctorate in history at Oxford.”

“Where he was.”

“I didn’t sit at home pining. I had boyfriends, but they were just never... him. So, I applied to Oxford and got accepted and get there to start my degree with one of the world’s leading Victorian history experts and he is on sabbatical.”

“No!”

Victoria smiled. “I did briefly think about just going to the department chair and saying, ‘Oy, could I just have the hot professor’s home address if it’s all the same to you?’ I didn’t, though. I stayed and did my research and finally he came back and a meeting was set up and I saw him sitting at his desk, staring into nothing and I knew. He was mine.”

“What did he say when you told him?”

“Oh, he doesn’t know.”

“Still?”

“Oh, God, no. Will would have a panic attack.”

“That’s not why, what’s her name, the ex-wife...”

“No, they were already broken up. Not that I pretend to stand on any moral high ground, mind you. I would have taken him if I had to.”

The next day brought more visitors and more uncomfortable silence as they sat in the drawing room.

Victoria looked across the room. Little Leopold, Louis Philippe and Charlotte had all come. Maggie and Charlotte seemed to take to each other. She could not help but notice Regina who did not play, but sat in Melbourne’s lap. He whispered to her, the same gentle way that had guided her through a thousand engagements.

“So she will be Victoria II?,” asked Leopold.
“What?,” asked Victoria.

“Oh, but brother a son could still come,” the Duchess insisted.

“I have seen no evidence of that.”

“Seems too timid a creature to be queen of anything,” muttered the Duke.

Victoria’s head was spinning. First, comments of the state of her womb, the lack of a son when she had two perfectly wonderful daughters and then Uncle Ernst saying Regina could not be queen!

Then her husband, staring at her with disappointment. He wordlessly got up with Regina and left, letting the door slam.

“What was that?,” sneered Leopold.


“I think it unbecoming that you should remark on such things, Uncle.”

She caught Ernst grinning from behind his teacup. Even her mother looked please.

“Surely such matters are between my husband and I.”

“People wonder, Drina,” said Leopold. “And they will want a son. A country needs a king.”

She ignored it. “And if God should call upon Regina to be Queen she will be much better prepared than I was.”

“Through Melbourne’s tutelage,” sneered the Duke.

“Yes, and a very good tutor my husband is. The very best.”

“I think your great grandmother had a very good one. The one for her mother is okay, but I think the one for Princess Emma is even better.”

The Queen smiled. “My granny told me about Princess Emma. She used to give them sweets whenever they visited. War. Rationing. She still had sweets.”

“Victoria!”

Victoria looked at the Queen. “So, Will’s back.”

She got up and went to the door where Francatelli was going through his carrier bags.

“I leave and now there’s a police car? And this arse looking through my groceries?”

“Standard procedure, sir.”

“What in the hell is-” He paused. “Your Majesty.”

“Professor Lamb.”

“The Queen needs some help with her eulogy.”
“Right...” said Will. Francatelli finally gave him back the bags. “I hope you like prawns, ma'am...”

Melbourne knelt down. “It is your birthday.”

She shook her head. “I do not care.”

He sighed. The guests had begun to arrive, he could see them gathering outside in the tables and tents set up in the palace gardens. He had been summoned by the nurse when Regina began to have a fit at changing into her party dress.

“Cousin Alice will be there. Cousin Mary. Charlotte is here.”

“I do not care!” She was sniffling. “I will stay here. I will be good. I will do my lessons, even Bible.”

“I will not force you to go.”

“No?”

“No. Gina, I will never force you to do anything, but perhaps if you told me why you do not wish to go, we could work out a solution?”

“Grandfather Coburg will be there and he does not like me.”

“Yes, but I will be there and I like you. I like you a great deal more than he does not like you.”

“Really?”

“Of course really.”

“Where are you now?,” the Queen asked as Will cooked.

“Oh. Regina’s fifth birthday party, an extremely uncomfortable visit with the Duke of Saxe-Coburg and the young King Leopold II being a bit of a jerk.”

“I’m sure the people of Congo would agree.”

“Good point,” said Victoria.

Will continued spicing the curry sauce. “I think Victoria is right, ma’am. Princess Emma’s funeral is a good guide.”

“In what way?”

“You will want to stress continuity without seeming as if you are being self-serving. The underlying theme of the eulogy of Princess Emma is love. The flesh dies. Love does not. Love carries us through, when people die, the love we had for them still exists and in turn the love they had of us. Your grandmother’s love for you, the love she held for the country and her subjects...”

Melbourne finally managed to join the party.
“What is it?,” asked Emily.

“I do not know what you mean-”

“You are not glued to her side, that is what I mean.”

He looked across where Victoria chatted with her ladies.

“I needn’t always be at her side.”

“What is it?”

“The Duke of Saxe-Coburg. He is not kind to Gina and the Queen has done very little to stop it.”

“What is she to do?”

The children played off further into the garden.

“I had a party,” said Louis Philippe. “It was nowhere near as grand as this.”

“Nor mine,” said Charlotte.

“It is because you have no brother,” said little Leopold.

Regina looked up at him. “What do you mean?”

“Well, your mama must have a son and he must inherit the throne. I heard my papa say so. Bad enough to have one queen but the people will not accept two.”

Regina shook her head. “But I am the Princess Royal.”

She had no idea what that meant, but she knew her mama had given her the title and it was very important.

Leopold snorted. “That doesn’t mean anything. They will probably send you away. They will not need you.”

It was then that Ada headed towards them. “Cousin Regina?”

Regina tried to summon up all her strength, but Leopold was still looking at her so. How could he be so mean? Surely Papa would never send her away, but was that what happened? She remembered when she went to Hatfield House and she had been told Queen Elizabeth had been sent there to live as a little girl.

She did not realize though that Maggie had decided something quite different and so shoved Leopold into the fountain.


The Belgian prince stood, soaking wet and began crying. This was too much for his younger brother and sister who began laughing profusely.

There were no answers from the girls. Ada looked to little Leopold.

“Are you alright?”

“Your highness!,” he screeched, still sobbing. “Address me by my title!”
Ada looked quizzically at the boy who stood in the fountain and sobbed as Melbourne arrived.

“Cousin William.”

“Cousin Ada. What has happened?”

“I am not certain but this little boy fell in the fountain...”

“Prince Leopold.”

Leopold stuck his finger at Margaret. “She pushed me!”

Melbourne considered the relative size of his three year old and the nine year old heir to the Belgian throne. “She pushed you?”

“Yes!”

Others were looking now. Victoria and Queen Marie-Louise were walking over.

Melbourne turned to his youngest. “Margaret, did you push him?”

“Yes,” she said proudly with more than a glint of Victoria in her eyes.

“Why?”

“He was mean to Gina.” She said so with distressing calm as this made all the justification in the world to her.

“You are mean!”

“I will push you again!,” she said stepping on the edge of the fountain.

“That’s quite enough,” said Melbourne pulling her off the ledge.

Marie-Louise came and helped her son out of the water as she cooed in French. Leopold continued to sob.

“Do not listen to him, he is a mean boy!,” Maggie shouted after them loud enough for everyone at the party to hear it.

Victoria’s eyes widened. She looked at Maggie. “You pushed him? He could have been hurt!” Victoria turned to Gina. “And where were you when this happened?”

Maggie continued. “He was mean! Now you are mean.”

“Margaret Emily Adelaide!”

“Everyone is mean to Gina! Mr. Coburg, Leopold, you!”

“Go inside! Now!”

Victoria met her husband’s disapproving eyes as he walked off with Maggie.

“Shoved him?,” asked the Queen.
“Little three year old shoving nine year old King Leopold II. Knew better than the rest of them,” said Victoria. “The people of the Congo probably wish he had drowned.”

“Political acumen,” Will added.

“Sorry?,” asked the Queen.

“Will contends that Lord Melbourne is the source of the success of the Queens Victoria.”

“He tutored Victoria, tutored Regina, tutored Victoria...”

“Who tutored my great grandmother who did tutor my grandmother. Even during the war. She always knew- I suppose they all did- that her son was never going to be king.” She took a crisp.

“No, you should talk about that in her eulogy,” said Victoria. “Talk about her mum and her dad. People still love Lord Charlbury.”

Are you angry, Papa?”

Melbourne had absconded with Maggie to one of the lower drawing rooms. His plan was to introduce Maggie back into the party after twenty minutes or so.

He knelt down before her. “Angry? No.”

“But I was bad.”

“No, we cannot let you go about pushing people into fountains.”

“But he was mean.”

“What did he do?”

“He said you would send Gina away after you had a boy.”

Melbourne’s heart sank. “He said that?”

“He says Uncle Leopold said so.”

He sighed. “You know I would never send you away?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” He kissed her. “Now, the real question...”

“What, Papa?”

“How can you be so strong?”

She giggled.

“It is a genuine question, Maggie. You pushed Leopold into a fountain.” He sat back on his haunches. “Go on. Push me.”

Maggie smiled at him.
“No, I mean it. Push me. I want to see how strong you are.”

Maggie pushed him. He pretended to fall back a little.

“No, you have more.”

Maggie shoved harder.

“More!”

Maggie stepped back and ran towards him to shove. Melbourne pretended to be shoved over and grabbed her as she squealed. He looked up to see Lehzen.

“Baroness.”

“Lord Melbourne.”

“May we help you?”

“Princess Regina has run away from her party.”

“Ah.” Melbourne got up. “Maggie, go find Aunt Emily. Stay with her until I return.”

“Gina!,” Victoria shouted. “Gina!”

She and her ladies had fanned out into the grounds of the palace along with a few palace guards. Her mother walked next to her.

“You have always had a temper,” lamented the Duchess.

“Is this really the time, Mama?”

“Margaret inherited it from you. You threw such tantrums when you were her age, I would have been happy if you had only shoved a rude little boy into a pond.”

Victoria’s eyes darted across the gardens. “Of course, Mama, I do know what a disappointment I am! Gina!”

“You cannot have tantrums with your children, you ought to always take your husband’s lead with them.”

“Oh, so my husband can do something right?”

“He is calm and thoughtful. That is why Regina is so calm and thoughtful.”

“Oh, surely you will want to credit Albert with that...”

“What has Albert to do with it?”

Victoria froze and turned to her mother. “What are you saying?”

“I know, Drina. I know your secret.”

That was impossible. If her mother had known, she would have crowed over her! She would have sold her out! She at least would have been asked to be named regent in exchange for her silence!
“I do not know what you mean, Mama, I do not know what gossip-”

“Drina, stop. You are embarrassing us both.” She sighed. “Regina is Lord Melbourne’s daughter in the sense that you were lovers and he fathered her. I am tired of this pretending.”

Victoria stared at her mother as if they had just met.

“I will check the Mews. She does so love horses,” said the Duchess.

Victoria walked into a group of trees still stunned by the revelation. Very by chance, she noticed a small pair of slippers at the base of one of James I’s mulberry trees.

She looked up to see Gina’s feet dangling from a much higher branch than she would like.

“Gina, get down from there!”

There was a pause. “No, thank you.”

“Gina, Mama is sorry. Will you come back to the party?”

“No. I did not want to go at all!”

“Gina, come down so we may speak!”

“No, thank you.”

Victoria weighed her options.

She shucked off her shoes and tried to get a grip. Her foot slipped. She grimaced as she bent down to unclip her stockings from the garters, rolling them down one leg then the other. Her feet touched the grass and she let out an exhale. How long since her feet had touched grass? She had to have been Gina’s age.

“Alright, Mama is coming there.”

She reached for a hold, pulling up, bringing her feet along. She wanted to giggle, how like a child she felt. She found a perch at the top of the trunk where the branches went out.

Gina looked over. “Your legs are showing.”

Victoria looked down. Her skirts were hiked up in such a way that the very edge of her drawers was showing.

She laughed. “Yes, my legs are showing.”

Gina eyed her.

Victoria straightened. “Now, Regina, we must discuss whatever it is that is bothering you.”

“No, thank you.”

“No, I am quite afraid we must for you see if we do not, then we will stay in this tree forever and Papa and Maggie will have to run the country.”

“May I stay at Hatfield House?”

The request threw her off. “Why would you stay at Hatfield House?”
“It is close to Brocket Hall and I could visit if you let me.”

“Yes, but why would you stay at Hatfield House? Why not Brocket Hall?”

“Because Queen Elizabeth stayed at Hatfield House.”

“So?”

“When they sent her away. May Dash come with me?”

Victoria finally caught up with her daughter. “Why do you think you are being sent away?”

“Because you will have a boy and you will not need me.”

“Who said that?”

“Leopold.”

Victoria was now entirely caught up. “That is why Maggie pushed him.”

“So, may Dash come?”

“No, Gina, you are not going anywhere nor is Maggie nor is Dash.”

“Leopold said-”

“You mustn’t listen to Leopold.”

“He said his papa said so.”

Victoria scoffed. “Did he? Well, tell me this, Gina, how old is the Belgian monarchy?”

“I don’t know.”

“Sixteen years. There has been a king of Belgium for less time than I have been alive.”

She tilted her head, “How old are you?”

“I will be twenty-seven in two weeks.”

She frowned. “So, you are older than Papa?”

“Gina, where do you get these thoughts from? The point is that there has been a king or queen of England for eight hundred years. Who do you suppose takes precedence?”

“You do.”

“Yes and why would I send my beautiful Princess Royal anywhere? Even if I have a son, nothing will change that.”

“And Grandfather Coburg?”

“You need only be polite to him. And frankly, his throne is of such a short term as to be laughable.”

“Victoria!”

“William?!” She looked down through the branches. “We are up here!”
“I should certainly hope so,” he said holding up a stocking for her benefit.

“How did you find us?”

“Natural order of Gina. Dash, horses, swans and if that fails, tree.”

“Will you help us down?”

“Gina can get down.”

“Then help me!”

Victoria turned, helping herself around. She worked her way back down until she felt her husband gripping the tops of her thighs. She realized scandalously he was holding her beneath her skirts. They stumbled back and her feet rejoined the ground. She turned.

“Will you help me with my stockings?”

He silently did as she bade as Gina climbed down.

“You never saw this,” he muttered to her.

“Surely there are worse things for her to see.”

He scoffed. “Than her mother the Queen half-dressed in the garden?”

She held his shoulder as he put her shoes on. “I have been wrong lately.”

He looked up in surprise. “Have you?”

“You have been right. And I do wish to apologize to you more formally at dinner.”

“Dinner?,” he asked as he stood handing her gloves and bonnet from the ground.

“Yes, I shall serve you myself.”

“Professor Lamb, you make an exceptional curry,” said the Queen.

“He’s very exceptional.”

The Queen’s mobile rang. “Ah, husbands...” She picked up the mobile. “You know, David, if I were dead it would be on the news.”

She stood and walked away.

Will motioned at Victoria.

“What?,” she asked.

“What is the Queen of England doing here in the middle of the night?”

“I don’t know. I guess we’re friends?”
“Friends?”

“Yes, I like her. We have a lot in common.”

“Do you?”

“Yes, we’re both named Victoria, neither of us likes Carrie, we both watched The Young Queen...”

Melbourne went into the nursery. Maggie was sound asleep as was Princess Charlotte in the bed that had been set up for her. Regina was lining up her dolls.

“What are you doing?,” he questioned.

“Grandmama gave me these for my birthday.”

“You are meant to be asleep.”

“But I am five now.”

Melbourne took her hand. “Come on.”

He led her into the bed and tucked her in.

“You do not think you will be sent away, do you?”

“No.”

“Good. Because I do not wish to hear you dreamt of bad things.” He placed her bear under the blanket with her.

“What do you dream of?”

He raised his brow. “What do I dream of?”

“Yes.”

“I dream of Mama, my two beautiful daughters...”

“And Augustus?”

He smiled back at her. “Yes. Augustus.” He brushed her hair back with his hand. “Have I told you about the day you were born?”

“No.”

“I waited with Sir James in the hall just outside Mama’s room. Uncle Leopold was there as was your Uncle Hanover...”

“Why did he not come to my party?”

“He... is not much for parties. But, anyway, I waited the whole night and when everyone had left, I could go in and do you know what I saw?”

“No.”
“Your mama looking more beautiful than I had ever seen her and you... you were so tiny and so perfect and so beautiful. I did not know how so much beauty could fit within something so small. I swore I was yours.”

She smiled. He returned it.

“And now you must really go to sleep.” He kissed her forehead.

“Mama.”

He looked over his shoulder to see Victoria. She bent down to kiss Regina.

“Good night, my darling.”

Victoria and Melbourne waited in the drawing room.

“So, when you said dinner...”

“I did mean dinner, but also dinner. You must decide how you wish me to serve you.”

“Much more talk like that and we will not make it through dinner to get to dinner.”

She leaned forward as her husband looked at her over his snifter. “Shall I serve you with my mouth or my quim?”

He groaned. The door opened revealing the Duke.

“Uncle Coburg.”

“Victoria.”

“You are the first down. Which is very good because I wanted to speak to you.”

The Duke sat. “Did you?”

“Yes, we do not care for the way you have behaved towards Gina.”

“I am sorry if my behavior towards your bastard is less than satisfactory.”

“I am so glad Dr. von Stockmar could find a place at your little court after I dismissed him.”

“We should all be so compliant to your will?”

“In my palace, in my kingdom, yes.”

“And outside your kingdom?”

“Of course you may do as you wish, Uncle, but for my favor I do expect something in return.”

“And what is that, Drina?”

She smiled. “Your friendship.”

The door opened again. The Duchess entered.
“Is everything alright?”
“Quite fine, Mama.”

The Duchess nodded. The door opened again as Ernst, Leopold and Marie-Louise came in.

“Leopold is so sorry,” said Marie-Louise.

“Yes, it might be good for him to bear in mind that he is to inherit a throne and someday his second cousin might inherit a much more powerful one.”

Marie-Louise narrowed her eyes. “Margaret did not behave well.”

“She has been spoken to,” said Melbourne.

“Margaret is sweet and impulsive, just like her mama,” said the Duchess.

The Duke snorted.

“Of course the entire matter would not have begun if you had not been so concerned with the lack of a male heir, Uncle Leopold. Perhaps you should stop concerning yourself with condition of my poor barren womb which is certainly not barren.”

Melbourne froze and looked to his wife. “What?”

The Duchess gasped. “Drina!”

“You are...” Melbourne began slowly.

“December.”

“December,” he tried to take in. “You climbed a tree today.”

“I have climbed many trees.”

The Duchess scoffed. “I thought she was part bear when she was Gina’s age.”

“Congratulations,” said Leopold. “My most fervent prayers for a son.”

“No, Uncle, I will pray for a healthy child.”

“As a Queen you have a duty-”

“Yes, I would be negligent in it if I did not remember my duty to my heiresses.”

The Duchess smiled. “Quite right.”

The sun was beginning to rise as Victoria VI and Victoria sat in the garden.


The Queen nodded. “I know.”

“No, I love coffee.” She paused, looking longingly at the Queen’s mug. “God, I miss coffee.”
“What are you doing down there?!,” came a shout.

The Queen frowned. “Who is that?”

“Mrs. Fitz.” Victoria looked up. “Good morning, Mrs. Fitz!”

“And who’s the trollop with you?!”

The Queen looked up in surprise. “Her Majesty Queen Victoria the Sixth.”

“What?!”

“Defender of the Faith, etcetera.”

“You young people have no respect for anything...” Mrs. Fitz tutted as she disappeared. “Pretending to be the Queen.”

The Queen turned back to Victoria.

“So I ought to be off.”

“I ought to be putting Will back in bed.”

“Until next time. Ring me, though. You’ve got my mobile.”

Victoria waited for her dressers to leave and took off her nightdress again waiting for her husband to enter.

He did, raising an eyebrow.

“You have kept me waiting, my lord.”

“How long did you know?”

“A few days.”

“And you thought to tell me in front of everyone?”

She edged closer. “I wanted to tell you later but you have no idea what it is to have your womb talked about so, Lord M! That I should just keep it going like some horrid factory!”

“Do you suppose I wish that?”

She shook her head. “No, of course not.”

“Now, I believe there was talk of dinner.”

Victoria smiled. “Have you decided how I may best serve you?”

She helped him off with his nightshirt. As she finised, he grabbed her roughly and she let out a yelp as she was pushed on her back. Melbourne pulled her to the edge of the bed, standing between her legs, hooking them around his waist. He pushed into her quickly and she moaned.

“So ready...” he tsked.
“As are you,” she shot back, releasing another moan. “William...”

It was not much more thrusting before they both reached their peak. Melbourne crawled into bed next to her, spooning behind her and resting his hand on her belly which did not yet show a sign of a child.

“If I did not mention it, I am very pleased,” said Melbourne.

“So am I,” said Victoria. “Not the actual carrying of our child, that I do find very unpleasant, but the prospect of having another. That pleases me. If only there were some way to get more without carrying them...”

“If there were, I think you might miss the process of making them.”

“Oh. Now that I cannot do without...”

“Will...”

She curled up behind him, hands on his chest.

“Will...”

“Victoria, please. I am old, I want to sleep.”

She smacked him lightly. “You are not old.”

“What is it?”

She rested her face next to his. “Was there a moment when you knew I was...”

“Was what?”

“You know. The one.”

“Well, the sexting was a hint.”

“Oh, come on, Will, be serious.”

He sighed. “You remember when you came to Allison’s graveside?”

“There?”

“Not there, when we grabbed coffee afterwards and you were talking about primogeniture and I just thought...”

“Thought what?”

“That I had known you forever. Then. That’s when I knew you were the one.”

“Dr. von Stockmar,” called Victoria.
He turned. “Your Majesty.”

“You are leaving for Windsor?”

“Yes.”

“My mother will accompany you.”

“I am sorry we have not had a chance to speak, ma’am. Every time I tried to leave my room two guards were at the door.”

“Oh, how awkward.”

“You think the Duke does not know?”

“Know what?”

“That you can stand here and lie about how you dishonored a man who was devoted to you.”

“I needn’t justify myself to you. I only came to remind you that should you come to England again, you will be arrested.”

“For what crime?!” he asked incredulously.

“Oh, I do not know. Lord Melbourne assures me that we will find something.”

“Is this English justice?”

“You are not English, Doctor.”

He walked outside. Victoria followed at a distance watching as he let himself into one of the carriages.

“Uncle Coburg.”

“Niece.”

“I hope you have enjoyed your stay.”

“As well as can be expected. I only have one wish.”

“And what is that?”

He leaned closer. “That you know the pain I know. That your son dies before you. Only then will I forgive you.”

Victoria stood frozen and made her way through her farewells with Ernst, Leopold and the others.

“Mama!,” called Maggie.

She turned to see her little girls heading towards her, Melbourne following. She knelt down, bringing Maggie and then Gina into her arms.

“Mama, you’re hurting me,” said Maggie.

“Oh, I am sorry, my darling.” She kissed them both and stood.
“They are gone?,” asked Melbourne.

“Yes. We are free again.”

“I like Windsor,” Maggie pouted.

“Yes, but Gina’s birthday present is not at Windsor.”

Regina looked up. “My present?”

“Yes, there is one more. This way.”

Victoria led the way to the stables. A man waited. He came and bowed before Victoria.

“Lord Arran.”

“Your Majesty. Your Royal Highnesses. Lord Melbourne.”

Victoria looked at Regina. “Lord Arran is from Galway in Ireland. I hear you may have brought something for the Princess Royal.”

“Yes. A gift from the people of Ireland on the occasion of her royal highness’ fifth birthday.”

“What is it?,” asked Regina.

Victoria took her hand as they walked forward. Soon a steward led a gray pony from the stables.

“She is called Elodie, your royal highness. The people of Ireland hope you find her most pleasing.”

Regina looked up at her mother. “She is mine?”

“Yes, she is yours, she has been given to you as a gift.”

“May I ride her?”

“Of course, but you must learn to ride her sidesaddle, not astride as Papa lets you,” she said casting a look in Melbourne’s direction. He rolled his eyes.

“Would her royal highness like to take a short ride-”

Regina bolted towards the pony.

Victoria laughed. “Yes, Lord Arran. I think the princess would find that most pleasing.”

“Where is mine?,” asked Maggie.

“It is not your birthday and you are too young to ride a pony on your own.”

She looked up at Melbourne.

“Do not look at me for another answer. Your mama is right. You might ride straight to Dover, take a boat to Calais and declare war on France.”

“I will not!,” said Maggie.

“We cannot take the chance.”
Victoria smiled at her husband.

“Not without an army!,” Maggie protested.

Melbourne and Victoria shared a concerned glance.

“Go and be happy for your sister,” Victoria instructed.

She took her husband’s arm as Lord Arran helped Regina up into the saddle.

“She gets it from you, you know,” said Melbourne.

“So Mama has told me...”

“We ought to keep her allowance low. She will not be able to pay any soldiers on a shilling a week.”

“Well... now we are ruined.”

“Oh, there’s Mummy.”

Victoria frowned at her grandfather. He held the baby in his lap on the sofa in the Brocket Hall library. “Where’s David?”

He nodded towards an armchair where David was collapsed. “You know you really ought not leave your husband in charge of childcare. We’re just not cut out for it.”

He passed the baby back to Victoria.

“Where did you run off to?,” he asked.

“I needed help with the eulogy. I went to a friend.”

“Is that a new thing? Queens having friends now?”

“I hope so.” She looked up from the baby. “Grandfather? May I ask you a question?”

“Is there a way to stop you?”

“How did you know Granny was the one?”

“What is that? The one? Of course I didn’t know that. The Shaftesburyys have been trying to get into the house of Melbourne since before there was one. Back to the eighth earl, they might have gotten away with it if Melbourne hadn’t been so opposed to cousins marrying. Not wrongly, though. Prince Albert had been shot...”

Victoria shook her head. “You are lying.”

“Why would I lie about a thing like that?”

“I don’t know... but I know you are.”

Chapter End Notes
So, shoutout to kieradavey13-blog for the Connemara idea. Thanks!

And just Google: Leopold II. Congo. It is some bullshit.

So, I haven't seen Ada Lovelace on the show, because, well, American and I probably won't watch Series 2 so... But I do love Emerald Fennell and am just writing her the way I want because Ada Lovelace sounds AWESOME and if the princesses need a math tutor, why wouldn't Melbourne ask her? And just so you know, yes, they were second cousins. See, Lord M's mom spent a lot of time trying to get Byron to break up with her daughter-in-law and even resorted to setting up Byron and her niece, Annabella, which is one way to solve a problem, but create about twenty more.
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Here we are again. Sorry about the delay but real life sucks sometimes and I blew my writing time on a migraine. So, just to clarify, haven't seen the famine episode because I haven't seen anything this season just in case you wonder later (though I might be pondering a trip to France in this verse, thoughts?). Please let me know what you think and happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Victoria awoke with a start.

She looked next to her, her husband sleeping contentedly. She carefully pulled off her covers.

Strange, though. The palace seemed cold and it was already June.

And silent.

She walked into the hall, instinct driving her in the direction of the nursery.

And there was Albert, standing in the hallway.

"Albert," she said in shock.

"I always knew you loved him more than me."

"No, Albert, I-"

"And now you'll pay-"

"Albert!"

And then she really awoke then, the same scene, her husband asleep but the air filled with the sounds of the city and the only the slight breeze of a summer night.

She carefully put aside her covers again, padding out.

Her husband stirred. "What is it?," he asked sleepily.

"Nothing."

Satisfied he accepted that answer, Victoria watched as her husband's head hit the pillow. She walked down the hall for real this time walking into the nursery. The nurse curtsied as she sat between their two beds.

She reached down to kiss Gina on the head.
Victoria awoke with a start. Will stirred, eyes raised as her hand went to her stomach.

"What is it?"
She shook her head. "I don't know. I just..."
Will sat up, reaching for her as she turned.

"Are you alright?"
"I don't know."
"What is it?"
"I had a dream."
"What sort of dream?"
Victoria shook her head. "I should have felt the baby by now."

"What?"
She looked up at him. "What if there's something wrong?"
"There's nothing wrong."
"You don't know that!"
"Fine, I don't know that, no one does-"
"That's not good enough, Will!" She stood up.
"What are you doing?"
"Well, I'm not going to just lie here and do nothing!"

"Victoria..." he groaned.
Will followed her into the hall.

"Where are you going?"

"Hospital."

"Are you in pain?"

"No."

"Then why are you going?"

"Something is really, really wrong, Will!"

"Would you please try to calm?"
"How the hell am I supposed to stay calm?!"

She grabbed the car keys and her bag off the counter, rushing out.

“Victoria!,” Will called out grabbing the nearest pair of shoes and racing after her.

“You did not sleep,” Melbourne observed over the breakfast table.

“I am fine.”

“You must take care of yourself, Drina,” the Duchess chided.

Gina and Maggie looked up at their mother.

“Please do not speak around them so, you worry them,” said Victoria. She looked to the girls.

“Mama is perfectly well. I have had two babies before.”

“May we go for a ride?,” asked Gina.

“Your mama cannot ride a horse in her condition!,” the Duchess chided.

“Why not?,” she asked.

“Why don’t we take a turn in the open carriage in the park? Papa and Gina can ride beside us.”

“I am afraid I have some business this morning,” said Melbourne.

“It cannot wait?,” asked Victoria.

“No, but we can ride tomorrow.” He smiled at the girls. "But you ought to go today."

They arrived at A&E and quickly checked in.

"Why are we just sitting here?,” Victoria fumed.

"Well, that last man did have a knife sticking out of his thigh."

"Oh, who cares? Cut it off!"

The other patients glared.

"What? Who ever heard of having a knife fight in Oxford?!"

Will looked up from the clipboard. He sat back, holding her hand.

"You are having a panic attack."

"I am not having a panic attack!"

He raised an eyebrow. "You're certain about that?"
"Panic attack implies that I am being hysterical for no reason!"

"And you're not?"

"Do you think we had too much sex?"

Will sighed. "I'm going to fetch some tea."

Victoria did her best to inhale the fresh air. She smiled across the open carriage at her daughters.

“Are you enjoying your lessons with your cousin?,” she asked.

“Yes,” said Regina.

“No,” Margaret answered.

“What? Why not?”

“I do not like numbers,” she replied.

“You must pay very close attention to everything she teaches you. Lady Lovelace is quite renowned. You are fortunate to have such a connection.”

“Did you like numbers?,” pouted Maggie.

“I was never taught numbers,” Victoria admitted. They looked at her in surprise.

“But you know everything,” Regina protested.

“I can certainly count,” said Victoria. Yes, that and a bit of basic maths were the full reach of her skill. “And I certainly do not know everything, but I want you girls to know as much as you possibly can.”

No. Never let them be caught ignorant, never let a man think he knew more than they did.

“Mama, may I sit next to you?,” asked Maggie.

“Of course you may.”

She held her hand out to help her walk steadily across the carriage to her and then something broke in the air. Then screams.

A gunshot, she realized. Just as when she had been sitting next to Albert.


Maggie’s.

Maggie was screaming.

She moved swiftly, yanking Gina from her seat and covering their bodies with hers. She heard another shot and shouted for the driver to take them back to the palace.
“Mama!,” Maggie screamed.

“It is quite fine.”

Still covering them she reached for her discarded shawl. Maggie’s arm, she wrapped it around tight and held it there, praying to God.

Do not take her. She does not deserve this.

Melbourne stepped into the House.

Somewhere he thought he would never be again.

His presence did not go unnoticed by his former colleagues. Or current. He still had a seat, every right in the world to be there, but had chosen to stay away out of deference to his wife’s position. He knew some of his former colleagues feared the day when a son might inherit a throne and a seat among the Lords, blurring the constitution. He admitted to himself it was a blur, but what was to be done?

“Peel.”

He approached the object of his visit.

“Melbourne.”

“I have come with a view to speaking to you.”

“Is that so?”

Peel still seemed as if he wanted to scrape Melbourne from his boots after all this time.

“If it is about the regency, Her Majesty has fully informed me.”

“No, it’s about Ireland.”

Peel scowled.

“Follow me.”

Peel led the way to his office.

“And what do you know about Ireland?”

“I was minister for Ireland for many years.”

“Yes, who could forget Lady Branden?”

He sighed. “I approach you not to say that I know better-”

“Do you now?”

“You have always been a stubborn creature, Peel. Peculiarly so. Ireland is starving thanks to the poor potato crop and countless other factors...”
“And I do not know this?”

“Starving people are not peaceable. People who watch their children starve fight. I do not think the Irish people immune. Rebellion spreads. Given the state of the continent... we cannot allow those who would work against the monarchy to gain traction.”

He snorted. “Tell that to my party.”

“I know it has been some years but I do recall the Prime Minister was leader of his party.”

Peel sat. “Not for much longer.”

“But Shaftesbury, de Grey, Wellington-”

“Wellington is an old man. A warhorse they keep for parade duty. Shaftesbury and de Grey do not need me. They have you.”

“Me?”

“You connect them to the Queen by marriage. God knows they have her favor which I have never had.”

“You fought her.”

“I brought you back to her. That was my error, one which I will have to live with. Oh, how I think back to that day at Brocket Hall. You. Unshaven, half-dressed and you tried to resist it. And I fought you.” He shook his head. “A very grave error indeed.”

They heard shouts in the hall and a commotion. As they both turned, Peel’s secretary entered.

“Prime Minister- Lord Melbourne-” he stammered.

“Oh, come out with it, man!”

“There was an assassin in the park, he shot at the royal carriage-”

“And the Queen?,” asked Peel.

“No one is certain.”

Melbourne was gone without a word.

It seemed to take an age for them to arrive back at the palace. A footman and a guard were there quickly.

“Your Majesty!”

Her dress was covered in blood.

“I am quite fine. Take Princess Margaret to my drawing room and send for the doctor!”

She followed as the guard carried Margaret inside screaming.

“Mama!”
“I will be right there!”
She ushered Regina in, kneeling down before her, running hands over her looking for any wound.

“Are you hurt?”

“No, Mama.”

“Drina!”

She looked up actually grateful to see her own mother.

“Drina, you are hurt!”

“No, Mama, it is Maggie. Please take Gina. I must go to Maggie.” She began running towards the parlor. “And send for Lord M!”

She went to the parlor. The nursemaid was already there along with Harriet and Lady Anglesey.

“No!,” screeched Maggie.

“I am sorry, your highness,” said Harriet.

“Do as Lady Sutherland says,” Victoria snapped quickly.

Together, the women and the nursemaid managed to get Maggie to her shift and drawers. Victoria took over holding Maggie to her bosom as Harriet made orders.

“Majesty?”

She looked up. “Captain Wright.”

“This is Captain McCullough. He and I were in Xiamen together, he was the regiment doctor. He just happened to be visiting when-” Wright looked towards the princess. “I thought he might be of assistance.”

“Yes, of course.”

“No! I want Papa!,” screamed Maggie.

“No, Maggie, you must be brave,” said Victoria as the army doctor set up next to them. “Papa will be here soon.”

The doctor looked at the arm. He took an instrument and poked at the wound. Maggie screeched.

“Mama is here, Mama is here, shhh...”

“It is not very deep, ma’am. With your permission, I can remove it.”

“Yes, of course.”

“The Princess will need to be held very still.”

Victoria nodded at the waiting nurse and ladies to help as McCullough moved them into position. Maggie could be a wily thing on the best day so she held her other hand tightly and kissed her forehead, resting her cheek on hers.
She let out the most blood curdling scream as McCullough dug the bullet out. She looked up as her husband appeared, rushing to her side.

“Papa!”

It felt like it had been years since she had seen him.

“We are nearly done,” said McCullough.

Not missing a beat, Melbourne came to Maggie’s side.

“Yes, that is my big strong girl.” He kissed her. “So strong. And brave. Would not you say so?” McCullough caught on quickly. “I have seen grown men, soldiers, cry more, your royal highness.” Maggie seemed emboldened by that and the scrap of metal came out.

“Well, done, ma’am,” said McCullough. “We must stitch the wound closed.”

They finished and Sir James finally arrived with something to ease Maggie to sleep.

“I must go to Gina,” said Victoria.

“No, I will go to her. You must change first.”

Victoria looked down at her dress. There was blood on it.

“She behaved quite bravely,” Victoria recollected.

“Yes, very.”

“No, no, of course Maggie did, but Gina. She was quite queenly.”

They looked down the hall to see Sir Robert Peel approaching.

Sir Robert bowed and kissed the Queen’s proffered hand. “Your Majesty. Might I inquire after the Princess?”

“She will recover, thanks be to Almighty God,” said Victoria. “Have you found the man?”

“Yes, ma’am, he offered himself to the police.”

Victoria frowned. “Offered himself? Surely he realizes the penalty for such a crime will be death.”

“Who is he?,” asked Melbourne.

“A Mr. Daniel O’Leary, some sort of Irish radical.”

“An Irish radical?,” asked Melbourne.

“Yes. Obviously someone bent on home rule-”

“Are you certain?”

“Well-”

“Has he been questioned?”
“No-”

“Then how can one be certain?”

“I was not aware that I answered to you-”

“Oh, how you remind us!”

“You do not understand the pressure I am under!”

“Because I have never been in your position, you suppose?”

“I am in my position now and I will be the one to deal with the issue!”

“To save your own hide which may not be in the interest of Her Majesty!”

“Enough!,” Victoria shouted.

“Do you suppose I enjoy this?”

Will shook his head. “I never said-”

“You act like I’m making this up! Like it’s fun!”

He looked over at her. “I do not think you are making it up.”

The door opened. Doctor Jenkins came in. “Ms. Kensington.”

“Doctor,” Victoria sighed. She threw herself back against the hospital bed as Will stood.

“It seems you are having a wee bit of an anxiety attack...”

“Wee bit! You call this wee?!”

“What were you doing when it happened?”

“I was sleeping! Am I not allowed to sleep anymore?!”

“Shouting won’t help.”

Will looked at the doctor. “Is everything alright?”

“Yes, everything appears to be normal, even her blood pressure seems to be coming down a bit.” She looked at Victoria. “It would probably come down a bit more if you weren’t quite so loud.”

Victoria ground her teeth.

“So can we go home?,” asked Will.

“Probably. We’ll do a quick scan beforehand just to give you reassurance.”

She frowned. “Ooh, a scan. That’ll solve everything.”

Jenkins left without comment.
“Victoria, if you don’t get better, I will have to call your mother and tell her you need her more than your sister and have her come from Hamburg early.”

Her jaw dropped. “You would not.”

“I certainly would.”

Melbourne walked into the bedroom. Victoria was still awake, Gina asleep next to her.

“She asked if she could sleep with us.”

“Of course.”

He got in next to them.

“Did you find anything out?”

“His children died.”

Victoria nodded. “The famine.”

“Yes. So you see he did not care about the consequences for turning himself in.”

“No...” She looked down at Gina. “You know I slept in a room with Mama until I became queen. Yet Gina begs to come to us.”

“You have led very different lives.”

“Is this what I am to be? The Queen who let her people starve?”

“No.”

“You remind me so often that it is not my place to interfere as I would wish. We have known this for months and Sir Robert...” She shook her head. “And it might have taken Maggie.”

“But it did not.”

She shook her head. "Everything I do has an effect and yet... how do I protect them?"
"All the accounts have her throwing herself over the princesses..."

"Even though she was queen and they..."

"She was their mum, what else would she do?"

Victoria shook her head. "I just worry... I... wouldn’t."

Will did not hesitate.

"I don’t."

Melbourne walked into the nursery the next morning.

"Princess Margaret!,” the nursemaid shouted.

"Papa!"

Maggie practically leapt into his arms.

"Well, you are certainly feeling better,” Melbourne remarked.

"She refuses to lay down, Lord Melbourne."

"I am bored..."

"Have you not had enough excitement?” Melbourne sat in the chair with her, cuddling her close.

"Do you think I will have a scar? Mama thought I might."

"I think it is too soon to worry about such things."

"I want one."

He raised his brow. "You want one?"

"To scare my enemies."

He paused. "To scare your enemies? I think that is your mother’s side coming out."

"So?"

"Maggie, you have no enemies?"

"What about the bad man?"

"I do not believe you have enemies so you needn’t worry about them.” He kissed her forehead.

"You do know I love you very much?”

He looked down to see she had fallen asleep. He looked up at the nurse.

"Perhaps when Sir James returns we might suggest lowering the dosage?"

He tucked her back in bed and went to the hall.
“Melbourne.”

“Shaftesbury.”

“I came to check on my goddaughter. How is she?”

“She is well, considering. She wonders if she will have a scar.”

“Poor child.”

“No, she is quite looking forward to it.”

Shaftesbury tilted his head. “The Princess is a very strange girl at times.”

“I cannot deny it.” Melbourne approached Shaftesbury. “The man who shot at the Queen and the princesses...”

“I heard. Irish radical.”

“Well, losing one’s children will do that...”

“Still-”

“Radical or not, starving or not, the fact is that there is a problem in Ireland and Sir Robert refuses to deal with it.”

“There is no willpower among the Tories, I heard our treasury minister say that this was God’s punishment.”

“There is no political practicality in such a punishment.”

“God is no politician.”

“Do you suppose God means for the Queen to lose Ireland? Because that is what will happen.”

“Surely not, it is one man-”

“One man we must execute, who will become a martyr.”

“What are you saying?”

“Peel must go.”

Shaftesbury sighed. “And make way for a Whig? There is no other Tory who can form a government.”

“And there is no government without Her Majesty.”

He sighed. “You think it so dire?”

“I would not interfere if I did not.”

“Some impartial consort you are...”

“I am partial to Her Majesty.”

“Indeed you are...” Shaftesbury looked up. “Peel will lose the next vote. I shall see to it.”
The lights went out and the scan began.

Victoria closed her eyes.

“Relax,” Will whispered.

“How can I relax?”

The sound of a heartbeat began. Will smiled at her.

“Well, that’s strange,” said Jenkins.

“Oh, God, what?!”

“Ms. Kensington, please be quiet.”

“No, you don’t get to tell me to be quiet! Tell me what is wrong with my baby!”

“Victoria, please,” Will urged.

Jenkins looked up at Victoria, growing impatient. “There is nothing wrong with either of your babies.”

Will slowly turned his head. “Either?”

“Either?,” Victoria echoed.

“You mean...”

“Twins,” Jenkins finished. “One heart there, one there. One was probably hiding behind the other last time. Did you want to know the sex?”

“You suppose we can take much more?,” asked Will.

“Girls. I’m having two girls.”

“Did you want to really know?”

“Oh, just tell her so we can get over it,” sad Will.

“You won’t need to get over anything. You’re having two girls.”

“As I said,” Victoria declared.

Jenkins looked at Will. “How long have you two been together?”

“You do not seem yourself,” said Melbourne as they sat after dinner.

Victoria looked up. “Are you yourself?”

“Maggie will recover quite well. I am certain of it. There is something else bothering you.”
Victoria shook her head. “I have been having bad dreams.”

“Bad dreams?” He tilted his head. “You know I have a rule for the children.”

She chuckled. “I am not your child.”

“Certainly not, but my methods work.”

“I have never seen what happens if they should have a bad dream.”

“Regina did have a bad dream once.”

“What?”

“She dreamt a great bear came into the palace, mauling the guards and attacking her.”

“And what did you have her do?”

“I told her to reimagine it. We made up a story where the bear really came because it wanted to play.”

She shook her head. “The creature in my dream would not be my friend.”

“Oh?”

“It is Albert.”

“And what does he accuse you of?”

“What do you suppose?!” she shrieked.

Melbourne swirled his brandy. “I thought the vows were ‘til death do us part...”

“You suppose he has no right to be angry with me?”

“Were he alive, then yes, but were he alive, I would not be here and he would be in my place.”

Victoria froze. “Now that is a dreadful thought.”

“Do you suppose you would have been so unhappy?”

“I do not suppose it. I know I was unhappy.”

“The first months of a marriage are always difficult.”

“Not for us,” she protested.

“That was different.”

“In what way? Lord M...” She let out a breath. “In all the time I have known you, there is no place I have wanted to be other than with you. I know of no circumstance that could have made me happier.”

“I feel exactly the same.” He leaned forward. “Then why do you feel guilty? Do you regret our affair?”

“No. I cannot regret anything that gave me Gina. I would do precisely the same again.”
“Then should you see the late Prince again you must tell him that, let that put an end to the matter.”

Will and Victoria finally walked into the house.

“We’ll need another cot. And another carseat. Oh, God, we have to return the Bugaboo,” said Victoria.

“Could we sleep first?,” asked Will.

Victoria turned to Will. “You think I’m an idiot, don’t you?”

“No. I just wish I knew why you were upset.” He practically fell onto the couch.

“You will think I’m an idiot. I had a bad dream.”

Will nodded. “Okay.”

“You’ll think I’m an idiot.”

“You have to tell me, Victoria.”

“It’s so stupid.”

“Please just tell me so that we do not have to go through this again.”

“I dreamt I was Victoria I again.”

“Not the Westminster Abbey...”

“No.”

“The glasshouses?”

“No?”

“The one where Albert leaves you naked in a wood and Melbourne finds you and the only way to get you warm and save your life is to-”

“Shag my brains out? No.”

“Well, that’s the ones I can remember off the top of my head.”

“I dreamt I was being haunted by the Duke of Saxe-Coburg.”

“Okay...”

“See, now you think I’m an idiot!”

“I do not, I just... That’s not a historical figure everyone has nightmares about.”

“He said I had wronged Albert and that something terrible was going to happen to my baby.”

“Well, tell the bugger to sod off.”
Victoria giggled. Will held his hands out as she took them and climbed into his lap.

“It just seemed very real,” said Victoria.

Victoria awoke with a start. Melbourne followed.

“What? Was it the dream?” He moved to kiss her.

“No, no bad dreams...” She wrapped her arms around him. “I do not know. I just awoke.”

There was a knock on the door.

“Yes?,” she called.

Lehzen entered. They both sat up.

“Is Maggie alright?,” asked Victoria.

“A messenger from Coburg.”

Victoria clambered over the bed to Lehzen. The Baroness handed her a letter. Melbourne joined her.

“What is it?”

She looked up. “Uncle Ernst has died.”

“I am sorry, Majesty,” said Lehzen.

Victoria looked up at her husband. “Should we wake Mama?”

“No, there is nothing she can do now.” He looked to Lehzen. “Wake her maid, prepare her things so it is all ready.”

Lehzen left.

“I should write to Cousin Ernst. Though I do not know when to say to expect Mama and Gina...”

“Gina is not going.”

“What will people say if she does not?”

“That she is too young to travel without her mama who cannot travel across the continent because of her condition, whose other child has just been hurt and so she cannot be without her-”

“But Mama-”

“And her father forbids it. If the old bastard does not like that, let him haunt me.”

“William! You cannot be so... blasphemous.”

He got back in the bed. “I will be as blasphemous as I like protecting Gina.”

Victoria went back to her side, knowing there would be no point in arguing her ever conciliatory husband over this.
And just to let you know, next time you will be getting a Christmas Classic Vicbourne thing.
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

So, sorry for the programming interruption and delay caused by my vacation and the emotional breakdown of the Rumbelle fandom.

Um, please let me know what you think and happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You won’t believe this,” said Victoria.

“Believe what?”

“It’s an outrage.”

Will sighed. “What is?”

Victoria turned on the television. It was the same twenty-four hour death of a monarch coverage it had been for over a work, but the new talking head was...

“Roberta,” Will observed.

“Talking absolute rubbish like she’s some sort of expert when she’s really just an Albert fangirl...”

“As opposed to a Melbourne fangirl.”

“Says the ultimate Lord M fanboy.”

“Of course we are expecting more dignitaries today, including the Fifth Duchess of Mumbai. Could you tell us about that?”

“Yes, of course the title descends from the time when Queen Victoria I decided it was unsuitable for her daughters to not possess proper titles. Of course Princess Regina was always known as the Princess Royal. The Duchess of Mumbai- formerly the Duchess of Bombay- is a direct descendant of Princess Emma, daughter of the Queen and—”

“And here is the Duchess of Mumbai now, Emma Lamb-Gold...”

“Yes, most descendants of the first Victoria have the ability to use the surname Melbourne or Lamb as it relates to the title...”

Victoria turned to Will. “Is it me or did that bitch just start to say something about Princess Emma?”

“She would not be the first.”

“I’m calling in.”

Victoria stormed away.

“It’s not a call-in show!,” Will shouted in exasperation.
“What do you think?”

“It’s brilliant.”

Victoria took the pages back from David. “I’m not sure.”

The door opened. “The Duchess of Mumbai.”

Victoria stood. Her cousin entered, elegant as she always was, seamlessly going from walk to curtsy and to kiss her hand.

“Your Majesty.”

“Your Grace.”

She stood and the two women burst into a fit of giggles and hugged.

“It is good to see you.”

“I’m glad I could come.” She turned to David for a hug. “David.”

“Emma.”

“Did you make up that whole had a baby story? You look ridiculous,” said Victoria.

“I did not make it up and I have about a thousand pictures.”

Victoria groaned.

“Speaking of which, I should check on our baby,” said David.

David left.

Emma sighed and looked to her cousin.

“So? How are you?”

“Wretched.”

She sat and Emma joined her.

“Good to know you are bearing your new duties bravely.”

“Oh, would you like to switch?”

“I think there are several hundred people between your position and mine who might object, beginning with your aunt Vicky.”

“I thought she was going to bite my hand at the Privy Council...”

“Not to mention there are those who think my great-great-great-grandfather was a Scottish ghilly.”
“Which is ridiculous,” scoffed Victoria. “You’re stupidly tall and have great cheekbones. If you aren’t related to Lord M, I don’t know who is.”

They stared at the portrait of the subject in question on the wall.

“We both do have great cheekbones,” said Emma.

Victoria picked up her speech and handed it over. “Read this.”

“Are you still talking to the painting?”

“Who else would I talk to? Well, Victoria.”

“Are you referring to yourself in the third person now?”

“No, she’s called Victoria Kensington. She’s a historian. The one that wrote the book about Victoria II. She’s a friend now, she helped me with the eulogy.”

“Really?”

Victoria rolled her eyes. “I can have friends.”

“Does she know about the sex journals?”

Victoria threw her head back, propped on her elbows as her husband stood before her.

“William...”

“That’s it...”

“I need you, you-”

She screamed.

Melbourne shuddered himself, finishing inside her and falling into bed next to her.

“How was it?,” he asked. He rubbed his hand on her belly.

“Excellent as usual.”

“But no different?”

“This child seems determined to stay in...” She sighed. “Gina could not wait to come out, nor Maggie.”

“We must be patient.”

“So easy to be patient when you are not a cow.”

“You are not a cow.”

She groaned. “You do not know what it is like, your body becomes not your own. The doctors just look at you as if you are a piece of livestock!”
“Do you suppose I think so?”

“No.”

“No, you are my very precious wife, mother to my very precious children...”

Victoria and Melbourne came in the breakfast room.

“So sorry we are late.”

Regina looked up. “Mama, why does this not look like you?”

Victoria peered over her shoulder. “What is that?”

The Duchess spoke. “The London Illustrated sent their artwork for your approval.”

Victoria examined it. The illustration was of her and Maggie in the foreground of a Christmas tree at the palace, looking in wonder, her husband following Gina’s direction at placing an ornament and the Duchess in the background.

“Why do you suppose it does not look like me?”

“Your belly is bigger.”

“Gina, you must not speak of such things,” said the Duchess.

“Why not?”

Victoria sighed, turning Gina’s face to hers. “Because some people seem to think it indelicate that their Queen be flesh and blood and have a baby inside of her.”

“When will the baby come?,” asked Maggie.

“I do not know...” she sighed, taking the illustration to her seat.

“Will it be before Christmas?”

“I do not know.”

“Will Father Christmas bring the baby presents?”

Victoria passed the illustration to her husband.

“Meine leibe, that is enough,” said the Duchess.

“Mama, she is only curious.”

“All to come much later.”

“You will have a new sister or brother when she or he is ready to come out,” said Melbourne.

“Out of where?,” asked Maggie.

Melbourne snorted as the Duchess prayed fervently in German.
“What do you make of the illustration, Lord M?”

“Most flattering. I think they forgot to add a few years on me...”

“Hush. You are not old.” She snapped her head at the Duchess. “I can hear you, Mama.”

“I said nothing.”

“I heard you thinking.” She turned back to her husband. “Do you think it will go with the letter?”

“I do.”

“I still do not think it is a good idea,” said the Duchess. “To take away the mystery of the throne, to act as if you are an ordinary family.”

“We are an ordinary family.”

“Where the mother is Queen, the father used to be Prime Minister and the youngest girl has threatened to declare war on France...” mused Melbourne.

“I do not like Joan of Arc,” said Maggie.

“Joan of Arc is dead,” said Regina.

“She may come back,” the younger sister shot back.

Victoria ignored her daughters’ new favorite debate. “Besides, I must make my appeal on behalf of the Irish somehow.”

“Again, Drina, why involve yourself?”

“Mama, my people are starving. Am I to sit idly by and do nothing?”

“You already gave them money. What more could they ask of you?”

“Mama, should I send my pocket money?,” asked Regina.

Victoria looked at her in surprise. “You want to send your pocket money for the famine?”

“Ought I?”

Victoria looked at her husband.

“Well, Gina, if you want to, then of course you should,” said Melbourne.

The door opened. Lehzen entered, looking to Lord Melbourne.

Victoria frowned. “Lehzen, what is it?”

“There is a messenger at the door. You must come quickly.”

“Well, send him in here. I am having breakfast with my family.”

“He is from Leiningen.”

“Leiningen? Feodora...” Victoria stood, walking towards the door.
Lehzen followed the Queen out.

Melbourne looked at his mother-in-law. “I do not think she has caught on...”

“What?,” asked Regina.

“Come on and see,” said Melbourne.

Victoria rushed into the parlor.

“What is the meaning of—”

A woman turned to the Queen.

“Feodora!”

She ran to her elder sister, pregnancy forgotten.

“Drina! You must not run!”

“Oh, I am fine. What are you doing here?!?” She turned to see her nieces and nephews. “You all came! What is the meaning of this?!”

“It was Mama’s idea, actually.”

Victoria looked behind her to see her mother, husband and children.

“I thought of it at my brother’s funeral. It had seemed so long since we had been together, but your husband saw it through, actually. He was able to persuade her where I was not.”

Victoria smiled, motioning for her girls. “Gina, Maggie, come here. Meet your aunt.”

Feodora knelt to them. “Oh, how darling you both are! Your mama has sent portraits but they do not do you justice!”

“I like it,” said Emma. “It’s a great tribute to your grandmother.”

“I feel like it’s more about the family.”

“You sound like you think the two can be separated.”

“Do you ever wonder who you might be if you weren’t...”

“The Fifth Duchess of Mumbai?”

“Princess Victoria,” the footman announced.

“I’m sitting right—”

“You’re the Queen,” said Emma. “I think he means your aunt.”

The Queen stood. Aunt Vicky entered and curtsied.
“Your Majesty.” She looked over. “Emma, I did not realize you were here.”

“Here I am.”

“I just wanted to run my eulogy by you-”

“Your eulogy?”

“Yes?”

“Why are you writing a eulogy?,” asked Emma.

“I was her daughter.”

“Yes, but I am Queen.”

“You may not do her justice-”

“No one speaks at a funeral for the family-”

“You are barely in this family,” snapped Vicky.

Emma was not deterred. “As I was saying, no one may speak for the family except the head of the family, the head of the Church, the head of the commonwealth, the Queen. As with each Victoria.”

“They were all eulogized by their daughters.”

“They were all eulogized by queens. You think you are above God’s chosen?,” asked Emma.

The Queen turned to Emma. “You really went there?”

“Yes, I went there. If God had wanted her to be queen, she would be, yet you are queen...”

The Queen sighed and handed the paper back to her aunt. “I am sorry, Aunt Vicky. Emma is right. There is simply no precedent for anyone to speak but me.”

“Fine,” said Vicky. “Have it your way.”

“That’s what being queen is!,” Emma shouted back as Vicky stormed out.

Victoria turned to Emma.

“Not helpful.”

They settled in the great parlor beneath the Christmas tree. Feodora’s youngest, Little Dora, was two years older than Gina, the girls seemed to be taking to each other. Carl was her oldest nephew, just eighteen, he and the younger boys, Hermann and Victor seemed to be very caught up in discussing something with Lord M. The Duchess was in conversation with Elise, her sixteen year old niece, what a debut she would make at the Christmas ball in a few days and Adelheid, eleven, nowhere quite to go with this crowd, but Victoria knew she would find some companions among her ladies’ children.

“My husband persuaded you to come?”
“He is very persuasive. I could not believe him when he told me Mama was...”

Victoria nodded. “I do not know if she is changed, but I believe she is a better grandmother than she was a mother. She used to despise Lord M but.. well, now they have done this.”

Feodora frowned. “You still call him Lord M?”

“I use his name as well, but I find I cannot give it up.”

Feodora looked to her sister’s belly. “And when are we to expect your newest addition?”

Victoria looked down. “As soon as he or she is ready to make an appearance.”

“Eleanora,” said Will.

“You know the sex journal gets very interesting around the time of her birth...”

“Presumably not after.”

“You think she was trying to get her out?”

Will looked at Victoria. “I know how this ends.”

“How what ends?”

“You get that cheeky grin on your face, then you waltz over here...”

Victoria smiled and stood. “What? Like this?”

“Only closer.”

“Oh, sorry.” She stepped forward. “Here?”

“Yeah, then you pretend you are still talking about our work...”

“I wonder if Lord M ever gave Victoria attitude like this.”

“Well, she was his queen.”

“And uh...” She got in the chair, straddling him. “Who’s your queen?”

“Who do you think?”

She kissed him.

“Taking a break, are we?”

Victoria rode her husband, moaning out her pleasure.

“That’s it,” he whispered encouragingly. “You have it.”
Victoria broke in her pleasure as her husband jerked up into her. After he finished, her eased her to her side, placing delicate kisses onto her breasts.

“So beautiful,” he murmured.

“Nothing,” she lamented. “I am beginning to think Harriet was quite mistaken in her advice.”

“Oh, so I have Harriet to thank for this? To think I have not bought her a Christmas present yet...”

“Lord M...” She smiled and he kissed her. “She insisted this would work. Harriet has had ten babies, you would think she would be an expert.”

“I think the baby will come when she is ready, though I am happy to help in any way you like until then.”

“Perhaps the ball will encourage the baby.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You are going to dance at the ball?”

“Unless this baby comes, yes.”

There was a knock at the door. Melbourne sighed.

“Majesty!,” said Lehzen. “The Prime Minister is here!”

“Fine! Send my dressers!”

There was a pause before they heard the Baroness stomp away.

“We’ll have been married five years soon enough,” said Victoria. “What does she suppose we do in the middle of the afternoon?”

“I think she would rather not suppose...” Melbourne stood. “I must go.”

“Go where?”

“I have been issued an invitation?”

“An invitation?”

“Yes and you may not know where. I am bound in the strictest confidence.”

Melbourne entered the music room, a small stage having been placed. He was surprised to see another patron.

“Emily. I did not expect you.”

“I was invited by the Princess Royal.”

Melbourne looked down at Regina. “Are you issuing invitations now?”

“I wanted to show her the surprise for Mama.”

Emmie walked over. “I have just about gotten Adelhilde and Dora to participate. Elise has offered to play the piano for us so that will be a help.”
“Sit, Papa!,” demanded Maggie. “You must be the audience!”

“Very well.”

Melbourne and Emily took their seats while Harriet and Emmie tried to assemble the children into some kind of order.

“Is the Queen enjoying Princess Feodora’s visit?”

“Of course.”

Emily nodded.

“Why would she not? She has not seen her sister since she married the late Prince.”

“You think that unintentional?”

“Of course it is-”

“She has had a husband die, had two babies and remarried, but her sister has not visited until now.”

“She has a difficult relationship with the Duchess-”

“Yes, because were it not for the Duchess she would be Queen.”

“Of what?”

“England.”

Melbourne shook his head.

“King George was going to marry her,” Emily explained in exasperation.

“Mama’s George?”

“Of course Mama’s George. The king had a mind to marry Feodora, they would have had children who would have displaced your wife and then your marriage would have only been a mild scandal.”

“Victoria said nothing.”

“She was a girl then. The Duchess sent her off to visit family in Coburg before anything could happen. King George would not even give away the bride when Princess Feodora married.”

“You think Feodora is upset still?”

“Would you rather be Queen of England or mistress of Schloss Langenburg?”

Victoria rolled over. Will rolled next to her, kissing the back of her neck.

“Will.”

“Yes?”

“Did we start out at the head of the bed?”
Will looked from where they were at the foot of the bed back to where their pillows were.

“Yes, I think we did.”

“God, we are good.”

He smiled, moving back to kiss her. “Again?”

“Mmm, let me take a minute.”

“Work?”

“Oh, Will...”

“Christmas 1846. The visit of Princess Feodora and Prince Carl...”

“Bastard...” muttered Victoria.

“Oh, you won’t believe what I saw on telly...”

Will took the remote and brought up a recording. The talking head in this case was Victoria.

She groaned. “Not this.”

“Yes, this.”

“Why did no one tell me I had too dark a spray tan? Why didn’t you?”

“You think I would argue with perfection?”

Victoria the talking head began. “The Kensington System was a set of rules by which the young Princess Victoria was governed, designed to make her weak and dependent on her mother and her advisor, Sir John Conroy. The princess grew to hate this system. When she became a mother herself, her daughters were raised in almost the complete opposite of this system...”

Victoria groaned and buried her face in the mattress. “Why am I wearing blue mascara?! I’m an academic!”

“You’re an academic no matter the color of your mascara.”

“If not the complete opposite, the spiritual opposite of the Kensington System where her daughters were encouraged to be strong and independent, prepared more as a young prince would be, though certainly not as one of Victoria’s uncles would have been. Their education was more akin to something like Lord Melbourne would have received as a boy...”

“I can’t look at myself...” Victoria groaned.

“I won’t have you speak ill of the woman with the spray tan and the blue mascara... I liked her a lot. I still like her.”

“I’m going to find one of those old interviews where your hair is feathered and see what you have to say...”

“I have had more bad haircuts than you have had spray tans. I lived through the eighties. Do your worst.”
“Of course, Victoria’s half brother, Prince Carl always defended the Kensington System, going so far as to publish a book praising it and of course, he took issue with the manner in which the Queen raised her own daughters...”

“Papa,” said Regina.

“Yes?”

“What was your mama like?”

Melbourne frowned, putting down his paper. “Why? What have you heard?”

She pointed at the painting on the wall. “Mama said that was her.”

Melbourne looked up at the painting his wife had gifted him, his mother, the Duchess of Devonshire and a famous lady sculptor depicted as the three witches from Macbeth. Victoria had been so happy to give it to him.

“Was she a witch?”

Melbourne smiled. “No. They were just playing dress up.”

“So?”

Melbourne walked from behind the desk and sat on the chair, motioning for Gina to sit in his lap.

“She was really quite remarkable. She loved us very much. She would have loved you and Maggie a great deal.”

“And Mama?”

Melbourne thought of his mother’s ever increasing ambitions for him. “She would have loved Mama a great deal and would have been quite happy that we married.”

Lady Melbourne would have been beside herself to be mother-in-law to the Queen of England.

“What else?”

“She was the one who asked me every night what I was going to dream of.”

“Now you ask me.”

“Now I ask you.” He kissed her cheek.

“Do you ask the baby?”

“The one inside Mama?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, no, you see I do not have to. Babies still inside their mamas are the most content creatures on Earth. Nothing may harm them, not even bad dreams.”

The door opened. They looked up to see Victoria.
“Lord M, tell me you did not do this.”
“I must know what I have done.”
“Carl is here.”
“Who is Carl?,” asked Gina.
“Your brother?,” asked Melbourne.
“Yes! My brother! Say you did not invite him!”
“You have a brother?,” asked Regina.
“I did not invite him. I would assume your mama has.”
“What for?!”
“I would assume because he is her son.”

Victoria walked downstairs on her husband’s arm, resigned to welcoming her brother.
“He wrote me when he heard of our engagement.”
“Did he?”
“He was against it, of course.”
“I think you ought not hold that against him. I do not recall very many being for it.”
She huffed. “Lord M, how can you be so relaxed? I was so looking forward to my sister’s visit, the ball, the arrival of our child... Now Carl is here, he and Mama will join forces against me-”
“I am with you.”
She shook her head. “I know he will criticize everything we do with the girls. Just as he defended everything Mama and Sir John did with me.”
“Families are complicated.”
“Not yours. I want Gina and Maggie to be like your family, not mine.”
“Gina has persuaded Maggie to give up her pocket money as well.”
“What? Maggie was saving that to pay her army.”
“I think she hopes you will give her a command one day.”
“What command?”
“Whatever the Duke of Wellington is in charge of, I think.”
Victoria cast a look at him. “Am I to believe you had no influence over that, Lord M?”
“You could if you wished, I suppose.”

They entered the parlor.

“Papa!,” Regina cried.

Melbourne lifted Regina into his arms.

“Carl, you must not be so rough on her.”

“Why? What did you do?,” Victoria said quickly.

“Is that any way to treat your elder brother, Drina?”

“What did you do?”

“It was in jest-” the Duchess tried to save him.

“I only asked how she would lead an army.”

Maggie tugged at her mother’s skirts. “I can lead the army, Mama. Gina does not have to.”

“I am certain you can.”

“What a pair of odd ducklings you have, Drina. And Lord Melbourne. This one to inherit the throne-”

“And how are things in Leiningen?” Victoria turned to Gina, caressing her daughter’s cheek. “Gina, do you know Uncle Carl’s principality belongs to Bavaria?”

“I sit in the Bavarian Diet.”

Victoria kept looking at Gina. “As one of many ministers.”

“A queen who is merely an ornament is no use to anyone.”

“I dare say far more than a prince with no kingdom...”

“Mama, I can lead the army,” Maggie insisted again.

“Yes, I heard you.”

They sat.

Melbourne changed the subject. “Well, no king has led troops into battle since your great great grandfather, Gina, so I hardly think you need to worry.”

“Carl probably supposes I should mount my horse and ride to Kashmir...”

“Perhaps you will have a son and the British people will rest easily,” said Carl.

“Not that a younger sister ought to let Regina rest easily,” Feodora half-muttered.

Victoria shook her head. “What does that mean?”

The Duchess spoke up. “We have so many amusements planned for the holiday, Carl. We are to have a command performance from a famous ballerina. There is to be a ball and even Regina-”
“Shh!,” Regina hissed loudly.

“Oh, my apologies, meine Frechdachs.”

It was finally the morning of the funeral. The family was gathered into the throne room to try and muster, a display of black and military uniforms and absurd hats.

“I think you ought to keep an eye on that one,” said Emma.

“Aunt Vicky?” The Queen wanted to laugh. “What is she going to do to me? Have me beheaded?”

“Well, perhaps not that, but just about.”

“She’s right, you know,” Anthony offered.

Emma motioned at Shaftesbury. “See? Her own father knows.”

“I’ve never trusted her.”

“Could we possibly get through the funeral?,” asked Victoria.

David approached. “I’m worried about your aunt.”

“Not you. You’re not a blood relative of this family. You’re supposed to be the sane one.”

“How am I meant to be the sane one?”

She shook her head. “What has she done now?”

“I think she still wants to make a eulogy.”

“Well, too bad. I’m the queen.”

“We should do something,” said Emma.

“What? Tackle her if she gets up at the Abbey?”

“Okay,” said Emma.

“That was sarcasm.”

Jennings approached. “Your Majesty. It’s time.”

“Why does Mama not speak of Uncle Carl?,” asked Gina.

Melbourne looked at Regina as he helped her onto her pony. “It is not always so simple with siblings, Gina.”

She frowned. He kissed her on the forehead and turned to Maggie. He mounted his own horse and waited for the groom to lift her to him.
“Am I too late?”
Melbourne looked to Feodora.
“I was hoping I might join you.”
“Of course.” Melbourne looked to the hand. “Prepare the Queen’s horse for the Princess.”
“Victoria’s horse?”
“Vesta is miserable without her mistress. I sometimes invite my nieces to ride her. The Queen does not mind it.”
Feodora mounted the white mare and they were soon off.
“My sister wrote me that you ride with the princesses.”
“I do as often as I can.”
“I am getting a horse,” said Maggie.
“Are you?,” asked Feodora.
“You know you must wait until your birthday,” said Melbourne.
“I remember when your mama and I used to ride out with dear Lehzen,” said Feodora. She looked wistfully. “It was the only time I was truly happy.”
“Victoria is very pleased to have you with us,” said Melbourne.
“I am sure she is.”
“She has missed you.”
“I know.”

“I do not like the way she looked at you.”
“I beg your pardon?”
Victoria fumed. “Madame Taglioni was leering at you, Lord M.”
“I saw no such thing.”
“It was there, I assure you, just because I have turned into a cow-”
“You are not a cow.”
“I am a cow but I believe I provide enough satisfaction for-”
“Enough.” He turned to her and kissed her. “I have no interest in Miss Taglioni. I would rather see you.”
Victoria sighed. “Will you come to me?”

“Don’t I always?”

They separated and went into their rooms.

“Collier?,” he called.

Melbourne walked to his desk, looking for a book. He heard the door to the bedroom open.

“Collier, we must-”

He looked up to see not his valet, but his sister-in-law.

Nude.

“Feodora.”

“William.”

“I believe there has been some sort of mistake...”

“My sister seems to be a very satisfied woman.” Feodora placed her hands on his chest. “I wonder if you can be as satisfied. After all, these things are never as easy for a man.”

“Yes, I do believe that there has been some mistake.” Melbourne backed away, stepping out of her touch.

He quickly stepped out, bumping into Collier in the hall.

“Apologies, milord, I was kept waiting-”

“Never mind.” He took his dressing gown and nightshirt from the surprised valet. “Do not go in there.”

“Very good, milord.”

He carried his things into the Queen’s rooms. Victoria was just down to her shift and drawers.

“Lord M, I did not expect you so soon.”

“I can wait in the parlor.”

“Surely it is nothing you have not seen before, Lord M. Even my dressers must surely realize that I did not get into my current condition without you having seen me less than dressed.”

She smiled as Jenkins and Skerrett tried to hide their laughs.

“Lord M, is something the matter?”

“No.”

“You seem strange.” Victoria walked to him. “What has happened?”

“Nothing.”

“How dare you!”
They looked up to see that they were joined by the Queen’s still unclothed sister.

“Feodora!,” Victoria gasped.

“Why is it you always get everything?!,” she shouted.

“What?”

Skerrett and Jenkins desperately tried to look down. Melbourne desperately tried to avert his eyes.

“Feodora, what are you doing? Put something on.”

“Enough, Drina! So superior, so perfect! You get to have everything and a husband who adores you! You did not even have to be stuck with the one the family chose for you!”

“Feodora, stop!”

Feodora looked at Melbourne. “Do you know how she cried the night before she was to wed Albert?”

“That was in confidence!”

“And now you even make friends with Mama!”

“My relationship with Mama is... it is different now. Would you please put some clothing on? You are embarrassing my husband.”

“Oh, did he not tell you that I went to his bedroom?”

Victoria looked at Melbourne.

He sighed.

“Must you have everything, Drina?!”

“You mean must I have my throne, my husband, my house, my family? Then the answer is yes! Do you really suppose you would have been queen?!”

“Of course I would!”

“Name a woman my Uncle George did not flirt with!”

“Were it not for Mama’s ambitions for you, I would have been queen!”

“Ambition? I was born to this, it is my right! Do not hold it against me because you settled for the first position offered to you! Actually offered to you!”

“Could we please-”

“Withdraw!,,” Victoria shouted.

“You cannot tell me to withdraw!”

“I will or I will have the guards throw you in the tower!”

Feodora left.
“Skerrett, Jenkins, please leave us,” said Victoria.

The dressers left.

“May I stay?”

“Were you going to tell me my sister propositioned you?”

“No.”

“And why not?”

“It would upset you and I would not destroy your relationship with your sister for her momentary lapse in judgment.”

“Momentary? You heard her! Her resentment for me has festered for years it would seem.”

“If she did not care for you, she would not have agreed to come.”

“To the contrary. She came with the intent of destroying my life!”

“Is your life destroyed? Do you still have two healthy girls, a third child on the way, a throne and a husband who worships you?”

“Worship me then.”

She pulled him towards her, her lips against his. He pressed back, pulling her flush towards him. She ran her hands to his trousers, feeling him harden beneath her touch as he growled. He freed her from the shift and drawers, falling next to her on the bed, his mouth lathing one breast then the other kissing his way down her round belly to her core. He lapped her up until she screamed for him.

“Satisfied?,” he questioned.

“Never.”

Victoria glanced over at her aunt, sitting across the abbey as Mrs. Bainbridge spoke.

She noticed her aunt doing the same thing to her.

“She’s going to get up,” Emma whispered from behind her.

“She would not get up. The Prime Minister is going to say my name,” she said attempting to hide her moving lips for the benefit of the billions of viewers at home.

Then she did.

The Queen stood and caught sight of the Prime Minister looking slightly panicked. Victoria strode up.

“Thank you for that, Prime Minister.”

She turned to the crowd, knowing it was not just them but the crowds outside the Abbey and the world beyond.
“A hundred and eighty years ago, a young woman became queen...”

“There are my darlings,” said Victoria.

The nurse let the girls walk in.

“How beautiful you both look,” said Victoria. She kissed them both. “What do you think, Lord M?”

“They will be the prettiest girls at the ball.”

They were suddenly joined by the Duchess. "Drina, what has happened between you and Feodora?"

Victoria looked towards her two girls. "Nothing. Are we ready for the ball?"

She took her daughters' hands as her husband followed. She soon realized the Duchess was not far behind.

"She says you will not speak to her."

"If I will not speak to her, she must have done something."

"What sort of example is this for your girls?"

Victoria snapped her head. "Leave my girls out of this. It is not my fault you did not raise children but a den of snakes. My daughters will never be like your children."

"I have not!"

Victoria and Will sat in front of the telly.

“Bold choice,” said Victoria.

“Well, I told her to stress continuity...”

“Oh, so now the monarchy has your political acumen to think?”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“You wouldn’t?”

“Well...”

Victoria looked at Will. “How about this?”

“Hmm?”

“Is Victoria’s coronation the watershed event we think it is or was it something else?”

“Like what?”
Victoria caused stirs when she took her first dance, but she was queen and she did not care.

"Lord M, you are thinking something and I do not like it."

"How do you know you do not like what I think?"

"Every so often I see you throw a pitying glance at Mama."

"It is Christmas, you are her children and you are all fighting."

"Did my sister try to seduce you, yes or no?"

He sighed. "Do you not suppose I receive offers?"

Victoria was taken aback. "You receive offers? From whom?"

"Suffice it to say, the Court knows how satisfied you are. Do you suppose I have any interest in any offer I received?"

She frowned. "And what of Carl? He still defends Mama and Sir John, everything that happened at Kensington."

"I think you sometimes forget you are no longer at Kensington. You have your own family, quite a different one."

"But Mama is still in it."

"I know you think her different than she was."

Victoria sighed. "I do hate when you do that."

Suddenly she gripped his hand so hard he thought it might break and a pained expression crossed her face.

"Victoria?"

"The baby."

Melbourne looked around, taking his wife's arm as they left their dance. They hurried down the corridor.

"No, here."

He followed her lead into an empty parlor.

"We need to get you upstairs."

"I do not think I have time to go upstairs..." She took a seat on a chaise lounge.

"How can that be?"

"I do not know, I just very suddenly..."
She screamed as Harriet entered.
"Majesty?"
"Fetch Sir James. Both of them."
"You forget, it's Sir George now."
"I do not know Sir George!"

Melbourne looked at Harriet. "Fetch them."

Harriet rushed out.

"William, you need to look."

"To look?"

"I feel as if the baby is coming out now."

He frowned. "You want me to look there?"

"You enjoyed looking well enough when the baby got there!,” she snapped.

"Fine, fine."

He helped her off with her shoes, stockings and drawers. He looked back up at her.

"What?,” she demanded.

"Well, I am no expert..."

"Now you are no expert!"

"But I think that is the head..."

Victoria screamed. The door opened and it was not Sir James or Sir George, but Gina and Maggie.

"This gets better...” Melbourne looked at the girls. “My darlings, you must go back to the nursery and-”

“What is wrong with Mama?,” asked Maggie.

“Mama is fine,” said Victoria, attempting to put a smile on her face.

“You do not look fine,” said Gina.

“Mama is going to have the baby and you must go to your room because-”

Maggie made a beeline for her mother, wrapping herself around her neck.

Melbourne finished his sentence in a sigh. “Because little girls do not watch babies being born...”

“Oh, Maggie, my sweet Maggie...”

The door opened again, this time revealing Sir James and Sir George along with Harriet and the other ladies.
“Your Majesty,” said Sir James. “May I have permission to—”

“What do you suppose you are here for?”

“Perhaps the Princess ought to—”

“No!,” Maggie shouted.

Victoria sighed. “Let Papa hold you. He will not take you from me.”

Maggie relented and let her father pick her up. Gina stood peeking out from behind his leg as Sir James finished his examination.

“I would say we are very close, ma’am. Perhaps the princesses—”

“No!,” Maggie screeched again.

“Here,” Harriet went to Melbourne, offering her arms for Maggie. “We shall stay right over here and you will tell me if you wish to leave.”

“I do not think—”

“William, please!,” Victoria shouted.

He went back to his wife’s side, taking her hand.

It was not long before Victoria let out a final scream and her voice was joined by a new one.

“You have a daughter, Your Majesty. Lord Melbourne.”

Victoria gasped, taking the bundle Sir James offered.

“She is so beautiful, Lord M.”

“Oh, yes.”

“Gina, Maggie, come here.”

Harriet led the princesses over.

“Meet your sister...” Melbourne added softly.

Victoria looked at the audience at the abbey.

“My grandmother told me that her parents never encouraged her to marry. In fact, they rather discouraged it, but she did. Though she was not as happy as she would have liked, she confided she never thought she could have been happier. That was my grandmother, who despite all outward appearances, bore the heart of a romantic. It is not easy to have a romantic heart in a harsh world, all too often, it hardens, but not as much as one would like. She passed her childhood in uncertainty, became a woman in the midst of the darkest hour this nation ever knew and became Queen as the world wondered if we needed one. Her answer, through the years, through her steadfast dedication to her people and the commonwealth, her service as a head of state even as the woman struggled with her own trials, not the least of which was the death of her eldest son...”
She wanted to stop then. Victoria could almost see her father then as he was in those last days. Pale, painfully thin, lesions on his face.

“I was eight when my father died...” She began speaking off the cuff. “AIDS and hemophilia were just these words, big, mysterious words that hung over my head like the darkest clouds. I knew they were what my father had, but I had no idea. I could just remember him being strong enough to hoist me on his shoulders and sometimes, when I looked at him at the end, I could not remember him as the same person. I was afraid to touch him sometimes, I’m ashamed to say it...”

She glanced over at David and Emma, willing her to go on.

“Granny never was.”

Quiet finally came over the palace. Victoria felt exhausted but as if she were the only one awake as she held her baby, her exhausted husband collapsed next to her.

“Eleanora,” she whispered. “I have not told Papa yet, but I am Queen and he cannot argue with me on such matters...”

She heard sobbing. Placing a kiss on the baby’s forehead, she put her back in the cradle.

She knew the sobbing.

“Gina?” She hurried down the hall to the parlor. She found Gina sitting alone.

“Gina!” She used her taper to light the ones over the fireplace. “Gina, what are you doing? Alone in the dark, in a room with no fire? You will surely catch a cold.”

She walked over, throwing her own shawl over her daughter and cuddling her close.

“And why do you cry?”

“I do not,” Gina insisted.

“Gina, I know when you are crying. I know everything about you.”

“I am sad.”

“Why are you sad?”

“I had a surprise for you.”

“For me? Why does that make you sad?”

“Because you had the baby and you cannot attend my surprise.”

“Where is this surprise to be?”

“In the music room.”

“Gina, if you wish it, of course I will go to the music room for my surprise.”

“Really?”

“Indeed. I would not disappoint my Princess Royal, not for anything.” She stood. “Now, you come
“Am I going to be a good mum?”

Will looked up at Victoria. The funeral had just finished. “Not this again...”

“Will!”

“I can’t do another panic attack in hospital.”

“No, I just...” Victoria shuffled her notes. “So many ways to screw it up.”

“Are you certain you are well enough?”

Victoria did not look as one expected a queen would, but she was satisfied enough, changed into a fresh nightdress and fur-trimmed dressing gown. Skerrett had given her hair an elaborate braid and trimmed it with festive flowers.

“Lord M, my daughters have prepared a surprise for me and I intend to see it. I am certainly well enough to travel to the music room.” She stood and walked back to the cradle, lifting the baby up. “What do you suppose, Eleanora?”

“I do not know how I feel about that name.”

“She must have a name fit for a princess.”

“Please, let me.” Melbourne took the baby from her. “There we are.”

They took the walk down to the music room which had been festooned with holly and yew branches, chairs arranged facing the way in which they usually saw command performances. The little stage was fixed with what seemed to be a nativity scene.

Victoria looked around curiously at her husband. He shrugged in feigned ignorance and she giggled at him.

The piano began and the children marched in procession to the stage as singing began.

“O heil'ge Nacht wo Gott zu uns gekommen Entkleidet all seiner Hoheit und Macht...”

Victoria turned to see Regina was leading the children. She gasped as they formed a nativity and Regina finished the song.

Victoria was the first to her feet with applause, her husband joining her in standing. The courtiers resounded with applause as Victoria hurried to her eldest daughters.

“Are you pleased, Mama?”

“Yes, I am so pleased, how ever did you put it all together?!”

“Grandmother said it was your favorite,” said Regina.
Victoria looked to her mother’s proud face, her siblings’ warm applause and remembered her own Christmas when she was Gina’s age at Kensington, a memory that still remained warm despite the intervening years.

“Yes, it is,” said Victoria, squeezing she and Maggie tighter. “Thank you.”

---

Victoria entered the new nursery to find her mother.

“I disagree with your husband.”

“Oh?”

“I think Eleanora is a charming name.”

Victoria sighed and sat. “Why did you do it, Mama?”

“Do what?”

“Carl. Feodora.”

“I wanted to have my children together at Christmas, at least once more.” She looked at Eleanora. “Even if they are a den of snakes. The viper with whom I sit now has not the least poisonous bite.”

“You raised me as a prisoner.”

“No. I raised you to be queen.”

Victoria shook her head. “How can you still defend it?”

“You know, Drina, I dare say someday you may disappoint your daughter...”

---

Brocket Hall, 1866

Regina walked into the hall, seeing someone she did not care to see.

Why was he back?

“Your Royal Highness.”

She nodded her head in silent acknowledgement.

“You have returned.”

“Your mother insisted I attend the festivities.”

“Did she?”

“Brocket Hall seems a very pleasant place.”
“Does Brocket Hall require your approval?”

“Well, I should like to give it.”

“Would it mean something?”

He eyed her. “You do have a bit of a burr in your bonnet, don’t you, lass?”

“Well, as we are being informal, perhaps I ought to share that I think your presence here completely inappropriate and the best thing for you would be to leave at your earliest convenience.”

“I was invited by the Queen.”

“You take advantage of the Queen.”

“Gina!”

She was soon joined by her sister.

“Mr. Brown,” said Margaret. “To what do we-”

“We are well past that, Maggie.”

“I do not take advantage of Vic-”

“Do not dare speak of her so informally! Mr. Brown, I will make myself plain. My father, whose house this is, was the best man I have ever known. I would not have you clean his horse’s shoes.”

“Is that the German or the Viscount? Your father?”

Maggie looked to Gina.

“Mr. Brown-”

“Withdraw,” said Regina. It was nearly a snarl.

“Or what?”

“Or the guards will.”

“Is that the German or the Viscount talking?”

“No, that would be my mother. The Queen.”

Brown left.

“Do you suppose-” Maggie began.

“He goes.”

“Gina, he is the only one who has been able to help Mama...”

“Papa must be rolling in his grave.”

“Gina...”

“He goes.”
“But how? You know how Mama is...”

Regina marched down the hall.

“He goes,” she said.

Jennings walked to Vicky.

“Your Royal Highness, Her Majesty wishes to see you.”

“In a moment-”

“Her Majesty commands it now.”

Vicky stiffened and walked to the drawing room where the new Queen stood.

She looked at her expectantly, staring her down until the elder curtsied.

“You asked for me, Your Majesty?”

“Indeed I did. I saw you at the Abbey.”

“Saw me what?”

“I am Queen. What you do now, you do at my pleasure, unless of course you wish to retire from royal duty, it would certainly be understandable.”

“No. Thank you, Majesty.”

“Good.” The Queen paused. “Do you really wish it was you?”

“Well, there was a pattern going for a bit.”

“Indeed, but here we are.”

“Is that all, ma’am?”

“For now.”

Vicky curtsied and left.

Victoria alone turned to the portrait of Victoria II on the wall.

“I took to that a little too well, I think...”

Her mobile rang. She picked it up.

“Victoria.”

“Not bothering you, am I?”

“No. Just wrapped something up,” the Queen answered.

“I just wanted to say it was a good eulogy. I know you were worried about it.”
“Thank you. That means a lot.”

Victoria laughed. “I don’t know why it should.”

“Well, trust me, it does.”

“What do you do now?”

“Get to queening, I suppose. There’s a commonwealth to meet, coronation to plan...”

Victoria finished her call and walked back to Will in the sitting room.

He motioned at the telly now featuring him and some remarkably feathered hair.

“You think this frightens me?”

“It ought to. The amount of gel in there looks flammable.”

She sat next to him.

“What next?,” she asked.

“I was thinking it may well be time for a research trip.”

“A trip?”

“Le Chateau D’Eu...”

Victoria turned and grinned. “You mean it?”

“I do.”

“I think a research trip is just what we need.” She looked up at him. “By which I mean weekend shagging in a posh hotel room.”

“I assumed so.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

France

Also, the thing with Prince George and Feodora? A total thing.

Real painting "The Three Witches From Macbeth" featuring Lady Melbourne, the Duchess of Devonshire (aka Kiera Knightley) and some third wheel friend.

And Victoria's brother totally wrote a book defending the Kensington System... He also was head of the Adelsverein at one point which is only interesting because they put German settlers in the Texas Hill Country and I live just south of there... All about that
random trivia. I'm sure the City of New Braunfels tourism board has more info.
Hi, so here we are again. Thank you so much for reads and comments.

Programming note: my great-grandmother died earlier this week so I'm not sure about the update schedule at the moment, just FYI.

Please let me know what you think and happy reading.

“What are you doing?,” Will demanded.

Victoria looked up. “What? I’m putting these in the boot.”

Will took the absurdly large cases from her. “I will put them in the boot.”

She rolled her eyes and followed him down the stairs. “I am not helpless just because I am pregnant.”

“I will carry the cases, put them in the boot and then get them out again.”

“And what will you permit me to carry?”

“Just bring yourself.”

“Oh.” Victoria picked up a fancy carrier bag. “Can I carry this?”

“What is it?”

“Absurdly obscene lingerie.”

“Well, bring that.”

“I thought so.”

May I bring Elodie?,” asked Regina.

Victoria looked down at her eldest. “Regina, you would not put your pony through a boat steamer journey?”

“Much better that you only put your children through such things...”

Victoria cast a glare up at her husband. “Yes, we know your opinion...”

“Would you like my opinion as your Prime Minister would give it?”

“Will it be any different than my husband’s?”

“The monarchy of France hangs on by a thread.”
“A thread is exaggeration.”

“Of course they ally themselves with the Spanish. Their only hope to continue to exist at all is to establish alliances and of course, they invite you to court an English alliance.”

“And who would they seek an English alliance with?”

Melbourne pointedly looked at Gina.

“Oh, Lord M, certainly not!,” she laughed, running her hands over Gina’s hair. “My baby is only six!”

“What, Mama?”

“Nothing, nothing at all. We are going to have a wonderful journey to France.” She smiled. “Which reminds me, I have a present.”

“Present?,” Maggie shrieked and leapt up.

Victoria handed them two wrapped parcels. Maggie was quick to tear hers while Regina untied the string and unfolded the paper, each girl revealing a small journal.

Maggie looked inside. “This book is blank.”

Victoria laughed. “Well, of course it is blank. When I was a girl, Mama gave me a journal to record my observations on our trip to Bath. Certainly the King of France’s villa will be more exciting than Bath. I should like you to write down your thoughts and observations.”

“So, you are giving them schoolwork…” Melbourne observed.

“I would only like them to take this opportunity to learn as much as they can.” She turned back to the girls. “Do you know I will be the first English monarch since Henry VIII to visit France?”

“Charles II,” said Melbourne.

“What?,” asked Victoria.

He glanced up. “Charles II was exiled in France.”

“That was before the Restoration.”

“But he was the monarch, assuming of course monarchs rule by divine right and not parliamentary consent. Your coronation is a consecration not an inauguration-”

“Well, of course it is.”

“Then Charles II has obviously been to France since Henry VIII was there.” He looked at the girls. “You may want to jot that down.”

Will pulled into the Eurotunnel train and parked.

“God, I love the train,” said Victoria.
He was about to ask her what she meant when he felt her lips on his.

“Thirty-five minutes and do you know what the best bit is? You’re not going to be able to think of anything better to do.”

“Better than what?”

She smirked, bringing her hand to cup him. “Just having a little something until we get to France... well, between the two of us, a rather good-sized and well-proportioned something.”

“You know anyone could walk past here? There’s a people carrier of children over there and the only thing keeping them from running out is Finding Dory...”

“Will, let me be blunt.”

He snorted. “You mean you’ve been holding back up until now?”

“We are about to have two babies and while I have every confidence that we will love them and find very interesting ways to have sex in light of our new circumstances, this may be the last time I can go down on you in a semi-public setting for a while.”

“Right...” Will considered this. “You do have a point.”

Victoria smiled, opening his trousers and freeing him. She ran her hand along his shaft. “Of course I do.”

Will casually slid his seat back.

“I don’t know if-”

She took him in a swift movement and his eyes rolled back, head landing against the driver’s seat. She hummed with pleasure.

“Victoria...”

He grabbed her hair and she murmured an approval. He grew harder and tighter as she bobbed her head, using her teeth.

“Victoria!”

He came into her mouth, stars exploding behind his eyes. He came to as she finished swallowing him up. She cleaned her face as he tried to put himself back together.

“You shouted my name,” she said. “That’s a bit of a giveaway...”

“I suppose so.”

“You could keep randomly shouting it if you wanted, make people think that’s just what you do.”

“Now what would you like?”

“Oh, no, you can make it up to me when we get to the hotel.”

“I can? Not like you to let me be indebted so long.”

She smiled. “Besides, I read it’s good for the babies.”
“What is?”

“Blowjobs.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“They did a study, if you swallow at least, something about antigens lowering the risk of miscarriage and I obviously don’t mind...”

The trip began with the carriage ride to Dover and then boarding the steamer. Victoria attended to some state papers and went in search of her husband.

“Lord M, I-”

Victoria entered what had been intended to be the sitting room of the steamer. She found her husband in his shirtsleeves holding Gina’s hair back. The nursemaid was holding Maggie up as she looked positively green and Ellie was screaming.

“What is the meaning of this?,” she demanded.

“The meaning of this?” He raised an eyebrow. “I believe your children are seasick.”

“Certainly not, I have the healthiest girls in-”

Maggie wretched on the nurse’s apron. Victoria covered her nose. Maggie looked up, bursting into tears.

“Oh, Maggie...” sighed Melbourne. He stood exchanging places with the nurse, picking Maggie up. “There we are. See? All shall be well.”

Victoria sighed. “So, when the English court arrives in France it will be covered in sick?”

“I’m sorry, Mama...” Maggie sobbed.

“There is no need to be sorry, Maggie...” said Melbourne. He looked up at his wife. “After all, you cannot help yourself.”

“What is the meaning of that?,” Victoria demanded of her husband.

“I am not concerned with meaning or the appearance of the English court. I am very much concerned with the state of our daughters...”

Victoria sighed as she held Ellie. She had taken her away from the sitting room and to the room meant as her bedroom.

“Perhaps I could be your favorite, Ellie. I know Papa has much to offer, but I...”

She sighed as Ellie turned her head. Her eyes had just recently changed to resemble her father’s. She was a happy baby, though. Aunt Adelaide had pointed out that she was like Victoria in that way and why not? Showered with attention from her parents and two elder sisters from nearly the moment she was born. She had just begun to crawl.
“It is a thought, Ellie.”

The boat slowed. Victoria went to the porthole seeing the French coastline growing larger.

Victoria grinned and looked at Will as they got out of the car, the valet taking the keys.

“There has been no change,” she smiled.

“Certainly some things have changed.”

Victoria walked around the other side of the car and took his hand.

“Right, I don’t have to seduce you this trip...” She kissed him. “I can’t wait to get upstairs.”

“We do have some research to do.”

“We got research done last time.”

“You know, beyond finding out what a Brazilian is, I don’t remember any research from that trip...”

“Professor Lamb, Miss Kensington,” said the clerk at the front desk, an older man called Louis.

“Oh, look, they remember us.”

“Probably from the noise complaints...”

“Sorry, he is just really good,” said Victoria. “And it was our first... I’ve learned to control the screaming... A bit.”

“I see congratulations are in order...” Louis nodded at the swell of Victoria’s belly.

“Twin girls,” said Victoria. She turned to Will. “Will, I bet there are French baby shops with totally different things!”

“You don’t suppose we have enough?”

“Think about it. Adorable matching outfits to come home from hospital in all the way from France.”

“We have put you in the Queen Victoria suite.”

“Really?,” asked Victoria. She looked at Will. “Did you ask for that?”

“No, I didn’t, I-”

“Consider it complimentary, in light of the noise complaints.”

They got into the lift.

“God, you wouldn’t expect France to get all judgmental about your sex life...”

“You were quite loud.”

“Alright, when you have multiple orgasms, you let me know how loud is appropriate.”
Louis Philippe was waiting when they disembarked along with the French court. Victoria came down the ramp with Ellie in her arms. Melbourne and her elder daughters followed not far behind.

“Your Majesty,” said Louis.

Victoria smiled. “Your Majesty.”

“You have chosen to grace us with all the princesses, how delightful.”

“Yes, I do so hope this trip will improve their education.”

“I am certain it will. Your royal highnesses. Lord Melbourne.”

Melbourne bowed his head. “Your Majesty.”

“And this is my wife, Queen Maria Amalia.”

She curtsied at Victoria. Melbourne bowed his head to her.

“I cannot believe we have not yet had the pleasure of meeting,” said Louis. “After all, our dear Louise is married to your uncle.”

They found Amalia looking at Maggie. “Is she the one who pushed little Leopold?”

“You know Leopold?,“ asked Maggie.

Louis laughed. “Of course. He is our grandson, your royal highness.”

“He is a mean boy,” said Maggie.

“Well, our other grandchildren have joined us here. Perhaps you will find their company more agreeable.”

Melbourne cast a tired glance at Victoria.

“Yes,” said Amalia, “I do not think little Philippe is that much older than Princess Regina.”

Victoria sought to change the subject. “Allow me to introduce my foreign minister and brother-in-law, Lord Palmerston.”

“You Majesties.”

“And my sister-in-law, Lady Palmerston.”

Emily curtsied. “Your Majesties.”

Victoria sighed as they walked into the suite.

“Oh, my God, this is so exciting,” said Victoria. She looked at the bellboy. “This is the room, right? The one where Queen Victoria stayed?”
“It was recently upgraded-”

“Oh, screw the upgrades. I’m looking for sex markings.” Victoria gasped. “Bedroom.”

She ran off. Will looked at the bellboy.

“She does so love history...”

“Ha! Scuff marks under the bed!”

Will went into the room.

“You do realize there were a couple of wars between then and now?”

Victoria looked up at him. “Wait until we get into the sex journal.”

Will looked up at the portrait on the wall, chosen to commemorate the room’s most storied guests, a portrait of Victoria and Melbourne from the period of their visit.

“So, the meeting of two royal families, one goes on to rule an empire and the other’s holiday home gets turned into a hotel.”

Victoria sighed and sat down.

“I am surprised you brought Princess Eleanora,” said Amalia.

Victoria and Melbourne rode across from the French royal couple. Ellie sat on Victoria’s lap.

“Why is that?”

“She is so young. I assumed she would be in the care of a nurse. Surely such duties must be beneath your dignity.”

“Well, I do not believe so.”

At the palace doors, they were reunited with the other girls. Victoria watched as Maggie handed her journal to Emily.

“What are you doing, Maggie?”

“I was writing in my journal, Mama.”

Victoria looked at Emily.

“Yes, Majesty.”

Maggie exchanged a mischievous smile with her aunt. Melbourne raised an eyebrow at her sister.

“Never mind.”

“Very good, Maggie,” said Victoria.

The king and queen led them into the palace.
“Ah here is my daughter-in-law, the Duchess Helene and my grandson, Prince Philippe.”

Bows and curtsies were exchanged.

“Perhaps Philippe can show the princesses some of his favorite spots at the chateau,” said Amalia.

“Do you know Leopold?,” Maggie questioned.

Regina stood behind Melbourne.

“What is wrong with her?,” asked Philippe.

“Nothing.”

“I believe the princesses may be tired,” Emily suggested.

“Yes, of course,” said Victoria. “Perhaps we could be shown to our rooms.”

“So, Victoria writes in her journal that she gave the princesses journals...” said Victoria.

“Right.”

“Where are they? I mean, here’s Lord M, very unhappy because the little prince tried to kiss Regina. Victoria has a hell of a sex journal chapter...”

Will opened his laptop. “I know I’ve seen Margaret’s, there was an exhibit about royal childhood at Kensington once...”

“Yeah, but I know everything about Regina. She has a journal, why nothing from her?”

“Found it.”

“Regina’s? Impossible.”

“No, Maggie’s.” Will stood and walked to the window.

“What?”

“I think she’s sketched the chateau, well, not so much sketched as outlined.”

Victoria looked at the laptop. She picked it up and carried it over, looking out the window next to Will.

“She has. What do you think they stick figures are?”

Will looked back. “They’re at the doors.”

“Where the guards would have been?”

“These look a bit like cannons. And those look a bit like knives sticking out of that guard...”

“Margaret came to France and put attack plans in her journal...”

“So it would seem.”
“They do say she had the Hanover temper. She hit John Brown once.”

“Hit him?” Will frowned. “Slapped?”

“No, closed fist. I saw a courtier’s letter. She left a mark.”

Will nodded. “The Hanover temper.”

“Though imagine being the man who had to say he got punched in the face by Princess Margaret.”

__________________________________________________________

“She is shy.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Victoria looked at Melbourne. “Do not tell me you have not noticed it.”

“Gina?”

“Yes, Gina! Certainly not Maggie.” She motioned at her middle daughter, conversing with one of the king’s guards. “She just walked up to that man and began chatting. We must do something.”

“What must we do?”

“Lord M, if she is to be a queen someday this will not stand. I know history well enough to know such monarchs do not end well.”

“She will grow out of it soon enough.”

“You suggest we do nothing?”

“She lives in your shadow-”

“In my shadow?,” she asked. “Really? Is it so terrible to live in my shadow?”

He looked at her. “How do you suppose you would feel if your mother were queen? If every day of your life people looked to her and never to you?”

“That is nonsense you are talking.”

“Papa!”

They realized they were joined by the topic of conversation. Melbourne took Gina’s waiting arms.

“Prince Philippe has invited me to play.”

“Well, of course you must,” said Victoria.

Melbourne looked at her. “She very obviously does not wish to.”

“We are guests of the French and guests must be amenable.”

“I doubt whether Gina plays or not has anything to do with the Queen of Spain’s marriage.”

Victoria looked at Gina. “I told you that you would be representing England on this trip and I do not
think it would do for the Princess Royal to refuse an invitation from the Count of Paris, do you?"

“No...”

Melbourne looked aghast at Victoria. “She does not want to.”

“Of course she does. Don’t you?”

“Yes, Mama.”

“That is my good girl. Run along.”

Melbourne put Regina down in disbelief as she went off.

“She did not want to.”

“She will not able to do what she wants. Isn’t that what you are always telling me?”

“You are Queen. She is a child.”

“She will not always be a child!”

“I see and if she does not want to marry the man you have chosen for her someday-”

Victoria laughed. “You are being ridiculous, I told you, she is far too young.”

“When was Albert intended for you, hmm? What age do you suppose you were when he decided
how nice it would be for a Coburg to sit on the English throne?”

“I made my own decision.”

“Like Gina made her own decision just now with you manipulating her.”

“You certainly did not mention your thoughts on my first marriage at the time-”

“What exactly was I in a position to say?”

Victoria stiffened. “Well, you are in a position to speak now, William. Why do you not tell me?”

“Your Uncle Leopold is one of the most scheming, manipulative men I have ever had the misfortune
to meet and I would not have you go through with anything that he recommended. I said I do not
think marriage for first cousins wise. You and the late prince were ill-suited. I’ve never had the
misfortune of meeting someone so condescending and I think he was too like Leopold. Shall I
continue?”

“Why don’t you?”

“You have said yourself you were miserable and I think your misery would have only grown
through the years. I think your entire family would have been miserable, but no, of course it was
your decision.”

Victoria fumed. “I have business with the king.”

Melbourne sat on the blanket in the garden with Ellie. He had managed to place himself not far from
where Regina played with the Count of Paris and from a distance, she seemed miserable. Ellie obliviously tried to get his attention by throwing her rattle at him.

He looked down at her as she giggled.

“‘You do take after your mama, do you not?’”

“Papa?”

“Yes, Maggie?”

“Why is Mama not with us?”

Melbourne sighed. “She has business to discuss with the King.”

“The invasion?”

Melbourne had to smile. “We are not invading France, I am very sorry to disappoint you.”

“I have been making plans.”

“Have you?”

Maggie leapt off the wall she had been walking along the top of. She went to her bag and brought out the journal Victoria had gifted her.

“I have been spying.”

“Spying? As Princess of England? That is a very clever disguise indeed...”

“I have made a note of all the guards and where they stand so that our army may know where to attack.”

He nodded. “You have been very thorough.”

“Lord Melbourne.”

He looked up to see Duchess Helene heading towards them. He closed Maggie’s notebook and stood. “Your Grace.”

“I am glad you seem to be enjoying yourself here in His Majesty’s gardens.”

“They are quite delightful.”

“I understand you are quite a gardener yourself.”

“I am no professional.”

“Papa grows the best flowers,” Maggie insisted.

“As you see my critics are quite biased in my favor.”

“Are those your orchids the Queen wears?”

“Yes. I keep glasshouses at Brocket Hall.”

Suddenly, Maggie shrieked.
“Maggie, what on Earth-”

“He kissed her!”

Melbourne turned to where Maggie pointed, where Gina and Philippe were. He rushed over.

“Gina, are you alright?”

Gina did not answer, she threw her arms around his leg.

Melbourne turned to the young prince.

“What did you do to her?”

“Nothing.”

“Did he kiss you?”

“Yes-”

“You keep your hands off her. You are not to set eyes on her! If you should, I-”

“Lord Melbourne!” Helene seemed to find him amusing. “They are children.”

“Yes. This is my child. You may keep your child away from my child, prince or not!”

“You are overreacting.”

“If anything, I am underreacting. Good day to you.”

“What? Research now?”

Victoria turned to see Will staring at her notebook.

“What are you doing?,” she asked in a panic.

“This is a list of names.”

“Oh, that’s just-”

She tried to take it back, he held it further away.

“Are these baby names?”

“I’m just brainstorming.”

“Do I get a vote?”

“Will-”

“Do I get a vote?”

“We aren’t even close to needing names!”
He frowned at her. “Poppy?”

“What’s wrong with Poppy? Poppy Lamb-Kensington, come on.”

“I hate the name Poppy.”

She sighed. “Fine. Take Poppy off the list.”

“Then Isla goes as well.”

“You don’t like Isla?!”

“Or Ava...”

“Will! You can’t just go cancelling out my name choices.”

“These children will have these names every day for the rest of their lives, you can’t just pick out what sounds trendy to you.”

She sat up. “Fine. How did you and Carrie decide?”

He snorted. “You think I let Carrie decide? If I had, Gussie would have been called Zed and Allison Stardust.”

“Stardust?”

“She was in a hippie phase then. Well, hippie, David Bowie thing, she was really into incense, fact is she didn’t stay at hospital long enough to sign the birth certificate, so I had the final say on that.”

“Well, very obviously I will be staying at hospital long enough to sign the birth certificate so we are going to need to reach an agreement. Do you have any proposals?”

“Victoria.”

“Yes?”

“No, that’s my first proposal. Victoria Lamb-Kensington, I mean, if that’s how you want to do the surnames...”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I hate that whole naming the daughter after the mum thing.”

“Why?”

“I just do!”

“We’ve got a whole monarchy based on the naming the daughter after the mum thing. Why don’t you call your new mate the Queen and ask her opinion?”

“You know, Victoria didn’t name her daughter after herself.”

“No. Lord M wanted her to and he worked it in there. Then she took the regnal name anyway, not as if she could have been Queen Queen.”
Victoria looked to her brother-in-law.

“The trouble is, ma’am, we have nothing to offer the French.”

“What do you mean? Certainly there must be an eligible English lady somewhere.”

“Certainly there are, but we could not offer them anyone as prestigious as the Spanish queen. Unless...”

“Unless what?”

“Well, it would not happen soon, ma’am, but I believe the French favor a match between Prince Philippe and the Princess Royal.”

Victoria’s eyes widened. “Oh, no, Lord Palmerston. You would not want to travel back to London with Lord M if I did that.”

“Strictly speaking, the matter is entirely at your majesty’s discretion. You are her only living parent.”

She froze. After all this time, Lady Palmerston had not told him?

“Lord Palmerston, in every way that matters, I regard Lord M as Regina’s father. Is that understood?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Then the German options.”

“Certainly, ma’am.”

The door opened. Melbourne stormed in, carrying Gina, Maggie chasing after.

“Lord M, I was just coming to join you and the girls-”

“Gina will not be playing with the French heir apparent.”

“What? Why not?”

“He kissed her,” Maggie said eagerly. She walked to her uncle. “Uncle Palmerston, do you want to see my attack plans?”

Victoria let that go and looked up at Regina. “Gina, did the prince kiss you?”

“Yes.”

“Did you want him to?”

“Of course she did not!”

“Gina?”

“No, Mama.”
“Well, that must have been unpleasant and I am sorry.”

“Unpleasant? He forced himself on her!”

“Lord M!” Victoria shook her head. “Little boys do such things as I understand-”

“Ill-mannered little boys, who are three years older!”

“And French,” Palmerston added as he perused Maggie’s notebook. He motioned. “What are these?”

“Where we shall place the cannons.”

“Oh, very good.”

“What would you like me to do, William? Declare war on France?”

Maggie leapt up. “Hurrah!”

“Maggie.” Victoria took her daughter’s hand. “We are not declaring war on France and it would really be better if you did not continue to plan for it.”

“They gave me snails to eat!”

“You are in a foul mood,” Emily remarked.

“This journey has me in a foul mood,” Melbourne replied.

“Oh, William, you do know little boys often kiss little girls-”

“That is no excuse.”

“Better that you should threaten the nine year old heir to the French throne.”

“In defense of my daughters, I will do worse.”

Emily sighed. “I see you are going to be terribly wonderful to be around when it is actually time for your daughters to begin in society.”

“I do not want them trapped in royal marriages. There is no escape from such misery.”

“You do not think your wife realizes that?” She sighed. “Such despair it must have seemed.”

“I will not see them married off unhappily.”

“No, much better that they should choose their own husbands and then be unhappy as you chose your own wife.”

Melbourne rolled his eyes.

“Go apologize to your wife.”
Melbourne asked after where the queen had gone to one of the guards. He found the place where her sketching things were laid out, but no sign of her.

He caught sight of her dress as she disappeared among the trees.

They were accompanied that week by quite a group of Louis’ sons who were at the moment bathing in the nude while his wife looked on.

Transfixed.

He walked back to the house, mood fouler than ever.

“What are you doing?”

Victoria looked back at Will.

“What do you think? I’m coming up with a new list of baby names since my taste is so terrible.” She went back to her laptop.

Will came and sat next to her. “Why don’t you want the name Victoria?”

“I don’t.”

“The topic of our life’s work...”

“The most popular baby name in England for a hundred and eighty years. She’ll probably have four Victorias in her nursery school class. And there’s to be a coronation?” She snorted. “The number of Victorias always goes up after a coronation...”

“There were three Williams in my nursery class. I managed.”

Victoria mumbled.

Will rolled his eyes. “You know I could not actually hear you.”

“I don’t want her to hate me.”

“Why would she hate you?”

“Because that’s what happens. Daughters hate mothers.”

“They do not.”

“Regina and Victoria.”

“She was angry with her, she didn’t hate her. It passed, it happens. Do you hate your mother?”

“Yes.” Will raised an eyebrow at her. “No. Sometimes. I wouldn’t murder her.”

“Do you want to know why I would like one of them to be called Victoria?”

Victoria looked back at him.
“Because if she ever has doubts about herself, I want her to look at you and be reminded how strong she really is.”

Victoria smiled. “Fine. You get one, but I still get to pick the other one.”

“Well, I have veto power.”

“No Poppy, Isla, Ava...”

“Just rule out most common nouns and any sort of Bowie reference.”

“Layla?”

“Layla Lamb?”

“Right. Too much alliteration.”

Will sighed. “What now?”

Victoria turned to him and grinned.

“Historical research,” she answered his silent question.

Victoria did not like being at odds with her husband. She wondered why she did it so often. She could not recall actually having won one of these arguments, though she suspected sometimes her husband endeavored to make her believe she had.

Her shadow. Did she keep Gina in her shadow? She remembered Lord M telling her how her Uncle George had often despaired of his position as Prince of Wales: a life of idleness, waiting to be king. Would that be Gina one day? Waiting to be Queen? She knew she had Lord M’s temperament, never one to be disagreeable.

He was not beside her. He had slept here last night, though few words were exchanged and today was passed with even less words.

No, that would not do.

“Lord M?” Victoria walked into the sitting room. “What are you doing? Why are you not in bed?”

“Go back to sleep.”

“No.” She walked closer. “You have been drinking.”

“I am fine.”

“You have been drinking alone in the dark. You will not come to bed.”

“I saw you.”

She shook her head. “Saw me what?”

“When the men went bathing.”

She sat beside him. “And what of it?”
“You tell me. Did you decide that you made a mistake?”

“In what?”

“Tying yourself to an old man.”

“Lord M, you are not old.”

“You tire of me.”

“I could never tire of you, Lord M.”

“You have been distant.”

Had she?

“I am jealous.”

“Of what?”

“You are the girls’ favorite. You are so at ease with them.”

“They adore you, Victoria. Do you not see that?”

“And as to my thoughts when I saw the men bathing...” Her lips curled. “I would be embarrassed to admit it out loud.”

“Then you must tell me.”

“I remember thinking my husband is larger than the men I saw.”

“Larger?”

“Yes. Larger,” she smirked. “Does this observation please you?”

“Well, I am a man, Victoria.”

“You concern yourself with this...”

“I do not know if I concern myself with it, but I am pleased to hear it.”

“And I was thinking how much fun it looked.”

“Bathing in the nude?”

“Well, yes. Obviously, I have never been able to do anything so...” He raised an eye at her. “Have you?”

“Yes, when I was a younger man.”

“You are a younger man now.”

“Are you proposing something?”
Victoria wrapped herself in her favorite green coat of her husband’s, putting on the only flat shoes she could find as he followed him and a lantern to the lake.

“What will someone think if we are seen?”

“Presumably that I am trying to sneak out my mistress...”

“You would never have a mistress, let alone bring her to France...”

“Alright, here we are.”

They arrived at the cliff.

“I should go first,” said Melbourne.

“What?”

“Just in case I should break my neck, it should be me, not you.” He began undressing. “Though you are going to have a difficult time explaining what happened...”

“You should not jest so.”

“No matter. Ask Emily to come up with something.”

He stood before her completely nude. Victoria’s eyes tilted down.

“Still considering my size?”

“I do find it very pleasing.”

“Well, wish me luck...”

Melbourne stepped backwards off the edge making his wife screech. She hurried over, not seeing him.

“William!”

He emerged from the water.

“William!”

“I told you I had done this before.”

She groaned, momentarily hating herself as she stripped off the coat and nightdress. She was a queen and a wife and mother to three girls, what had she been thinking?!

“Is it cold?,” she shouted.

“Well, I no longer feel the effect of my brandy...”

She sighed and steadied herself, breathing deeply. Suddenly, she ran off the clip letting out an embarrassing squeal as she felt the ground disappearing from beneath her feet.

Free. Nothing holding her back, flung from the Earth.

Her feet in the water was a harsh return to reality. She bobbed down as she felt Lord M’s hand on her arm, pulling her back up and into the moonlight.
“Are you alright?,” he asked.

“Perfectly alright.” She smiled, wrapping one arm around his back and bringing another to his head, bringing his lips to hers.

He returned the kiss, holding her by her bare waist, putting his hand further down onto the curve of her buttocks.

“I remember once Lord M you did not like me to be touched there...”

“That was different.”

“Indeed.” She had been not much more than a girl then. She could see it now, just over ten years from that night. A girl who insisted she was a woman, who had feelings for her dashing Prime Minister that burned deep within her that she did not understand. She was a woman now who understood all too well, lust, desire and of course, love. Not the kind they all insisted would come with an arranged match, the kind that both grew and consumed them.

Melbourne kissed her again, bringing his hand to her breast. They were sensitive from the water and she was still feeding Ellie...

She moaned.

“William, let us go ashore.”

“Yes.”

He pulled her ashore with hardly any effort. She opened her legs for him as he settled between them.

“We ought to get our clothes,” he said.

“Yes.”

She brought her hand between them, bringing it to the piece of anatomy she had so admired earlier. She could see his eyes roll back as she worked up and down his shaft.

“Victoria...”

He fought back, hands to her breasts again, making her moan. He places kisses on them as he took her hand away. He took himself in hand, lining them up, going in slow, achingly gentle.

“William...”

“Victoria...”

He grew rougher, quicker and she broke, her scream tearing across the night.

She sighed as they laid together.

“Why do we ever fight?”

“I suspect it has to do with you.”

Victoria took a breath. “I suspect that is probably correct...”

He eyed her curiously.
“We are not jumping off the ledge,” said Will.

They walked in the dark.

“Will, that’s half the point.”

“You’re pregnant,” Will said as he dragged her down the path towards the lake.

She sighed. “I am well aware.”

“I know.” He turned back and kissed her as they reached the shoreline. She reached up on her tiptoes as he began hiking her dress up. They had each worn a minimum of clothes as they had an objective to this little trip. She was bare to him in no time, light reflecting as she grinned mischievously.

And then made a break jumping in the water.

“You said no jumping off the ledge!”

He groaned, shirt and jeans off, rushing to join her.

“And the point of this exercise?”

“You know I think Victoria I had very good sex tips. If she were alive today, she would have a column in Cosmo.”

“Why don’t you have a column in Cosmo?”

“It’s not the sort of thing historians get asked to do a lot.”

He pulled her close, lifting her towards him for a kiss. They broke.

“What?”

“Deja vu...”

Will frowned. “I certainly haven’t done this before.”

“No, it’s just with you...” She looked at his quizzical expression. “It’s just sometimes I get the sense this is where I’ve always been, where I belong...”

““We waited too long,” Victoria whispered as they walked back into the chateau, holding her husband’s coat around her.

“Just walk as if you are the Queen of England.”

“Do you think they will talk?,” asked Victoria as they walked past the guards.

“No you think they will not?”
“So long as we are not caught by-”

Victoria and Melbourne walked back into the bedroom to be greeted by the faces of their daughters.

“Gina, Maggie, what are you doing here?”

“We were looking for you,” said Gina. “Where were you?”

Victoria looked at her husband.

“We went on a walk.”

“And you didn’t take us?!” screeched Maggie.

Melbourne cleared his throat. “You know, Maggie, sometimes adults must go on their own.”

Maggie pouted.

“Monsieur Lamb. Mademoiselle Kensington.”

Louis was eyeing them suspiciously.

“We were doing research,” said Victoria. “Important historical research.”

She pulled Will into the lift and kissed him again.

“Might need to do more research...”

“There wasn’t a lift here in 1847.”

“Yeah, but Victoria totally would have had a shag in here if it was.”

Will considered this, pressing the hold button. Victoria grinned.

“No one is going to think this was an accident,” he said.

It was the last night at the chateau. They passed dinner comfortably and then the ladies took turn playing.

It finally came time to discuss the matter at hand.

“Certainly there are more profitable alliances to be made,” said Victoria.

“Perhaps we could come to some arrangement,” Louis suggested. “After all, if England and France were to be more closely linked.”

Victoria smiled and turned to her husband, pleased. “Who did you have in mind?”

“The Princess Royal.”

Victoria’s face burned. “I beg your pardon?”
Melbourne attempted to take over. “I do not believe that would be possible, sir. The English would never accept a French consort and Parliament would never approve a Catholic one.”

“No matter all that. I did not come here to sell my daughter!”

“Majesty-”

“She is but six years old, still in the nursery and yet you would have me choose the partner with whom she is to spend the rest of her life? That is out of the question-”

“Majesty-”

Victoria stood. The rest of the British guests followed suit.

“I did not mean to offend-” Louis began.

“I do not know how you could have done otherwise!”

They did not speak until they returned to their room.

“Would you like to gloat?,” she asked pulling off her own gloves.

“I have no desire to gloat. I only wish to go to bed and return home in the morning.”

Victoria smiled. “I wonder that you have no other desires, Lord M.”

“Indeed I do if Her Majesty would oblige me.”

“There is nothing that Her Majesty would not oblige Lord Melbourne.”

“Lord Melbourne would take Her Majesty, strip her naked and give her such pleasure as to disturb the King of France’s sleep.”

Victoria glanced over to see her maids had entered and had definitely heard her husband.

The predatory look in his eye did not abate.

“Jenkins, Skerrett, I think we shall manage alone tonight.”

“Very good, ma’am,” said Jenkins. The women curtsied quickly to get out.

Victoria turned back to her husband. “Now. Lord Melbourne, your queen is waiting.”

“What are you doing?,” asked Will.

Victoria looked up from the floor. “Our scuff marks match their scuff marks. Shagging marks. Though you think they might have refinished the floors since then.”

“Well, it’s the Queen of England’s shagging marks. They’re historic.” Will helped Victoria up. “We need to be off to Paris.”

“I cannot wait. I’ve found some shops to look for outfits for V and X.”

“V and X?”
“Well, V obviously is for Victoria and I haven’t made up my mind so X meaning unknown. V and X.”

“And whom is whom?”

“We’ll sort that out.” She picked up her bag and laptop case.

It was finally time to leave.

Victoria held Gina’s hand as they walked to the steamer.

“Did you enjoy our stay?”

“No, Mama.”

“Did you not care for anything at all? They have such wonderful puddings here. At the least, you must have enjoyed those.”

“I did like those...”

They boarded the ship and went to Victoria’s state room as Melbourne pulled up the rear with the others. Victoria sat and brought Gina to her lap.

“I know you. You miss your pony and your rooks and your orchids...”

“I miss Dash.”

Victoria froze. “I miss Dash as well. He was my only friend for a very long time. He was very old for a dog. We ought to be grateful he was with us for so long...”

“Yes, Mama.”

“Though I find it hard to be grateful when I feel so bereft of him.” She met Gina’s eyes. “I think Dash was too good a friend to leave us if he did not think we could bear it. Don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Now, why do you not show me your journal?”

Gina shook her head.

“What? Is it secret?”

“I did not write anything.”

Victoria shook her head. “Why did you not write anything?”

“I could not think of anything.”

“You must have thought of things.”

“They would not be interesting.”

“Of course they would.” She put her on the floor. “Here. Go get your journal.”
Regina went ahead to the small bag she had carried and pulled out the journal. She handed it to Victoria.

“I want you to write everything that happens to you.”

“It will not be...”

“Of course it will be interesting.” She smiled. “Gina, if you ever need anything, you must tell me. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mama.”

“Good.” Victoria pulled her back in her lap. “We will be home soon enough.”
**Chapter 33**

Chapter Notes

Here we are again. Thanks so much for your comments! Please let me know what you think and happy reading!

“I love seeing Ada,” said Victoria.

They were making their way to the medical school at the Sorbonne.

“Really, just a bonus that you’re a second cousin with her,” said Victoria. “I don’t know any of my second cousins. Luckily. My first cousins are the biggest collection of weirdos...”

“I wonder if she likes teaching here.”

“Have you ever thought of teaching somewhere else?”

“I’ve gotten offers.”

“Offers?”


“Berkeley? Why didn’t you ever say yes?”

“Our life is in England.”

She sighed. “Well, keep it in mind in case we ever need to threaten my mum with something. Do you know how much the thought of going to another continent would terrify her?”

He smiled. They made their way into the building, all very high tech and clean lines. They quickly located Ada in her office.


“Very impressive,” said Victoria.

Ada rolled her eyes. “Paris can be exhausting. So, when are you due?”

“April. I have photos.”

“There are some amazing baby shops.”

“I want to know about all of them.”

Will cleared his throat.

“Right,” said Ada. “Now, I’ve done a forensic analysis of Sir James’ account, combined that with what the ladies had to say...”
“And?”

“There is a convincing argument for the baby the Queen lost to have been a hemophiliac. Of course today, we would do a blood analysis of any tissue and see what it was, then offer genetic counseling.”

“She had to have been very early along, she didn’t even realize,” said Victoria.

Ada shrugged. “People back then had no idea about anything. That’s why you get reports of fourteen month pregnancies, they miscalculated the dates.”

“She hardly knew anything when she married Albert,” remarked Victoria. “Not that he would have had much to teach her…”

“This was her fourth pregnancy, though,” said Will.

“But we know every pregnancy can vary greatly from woman to woman, child to child. We know from Victoria’s own accounts that her experiences were wildly different.”

“Are you alright, ma’am?”

“Quite fine,” said Victoria. She frowned at Harriet. “When do you suppose you must leave us?”

“I think I shall deliver late in the winter, ma’am.”

“Eleven babies, I do not think I could manage such a number…”

“Then you suppose your child-bearing days are behind you, ma’am?”

“Well, Lord M has no particular desire for more children. I have three heiresses…”

The door opened as the two eldest entered.

“Lady Lovelace.”

The countess curtsied. “Your Majesty.”

Victoria smiled as the Gina and Maggie came back towards her. “How are the princesses progressing?”

“Very well, ma’am. Princess Margaret is taking to multiplication quite well and I do believe the Princess Royal can handle nearly any problem I put before her.”

“Well,” said Victoria, “how very good to hear.”

Victoria stood. She immediately winced as her hands went to her sides.

“Mama?,” asked Regina.

“Your Majesty,” said Ada.

“I am quite fine, thank you.”

Harriet waited until the room had cleared. “Are you alright, ma’am?”
“I think it is just women’s troubles.”

“Should I send for the doctor?”

Victoria sighed. “Send for the doctor for my monthly troubles? And have them all say I am mad?”

Ada had brought them to the next portion of the reconstruction of the day.

“The Queen starts exhibiting symptoms that she takes as a heavy period, but of course, now we know...”

“Why do we assume it was Victoria’s father who was responsible for the genetic mutation?,” asked Victoria. “He was old, so was Lord M.”

Ada frowned. “Obviously because of Victoria II. We know she lost three sons and Melbourne was not her father.”

Will stared at Victoria.

“Oh. Right,” said Victoria.

“Right,” said Will.

“Shall we continue?,” asked Ada.

Victoria looked in the mirror. She had been stripped of her petticoats and looked as pale as her chemise and drawers. She looked at the latter to see telltale blood on her drawers.

“I shall need to change entirely.”

“I’ll fetch some fresh things, ma’am.”

“Perhaps I ought to bathe,” she mused. She felt disgusting and hot.

There was a knock at the door.

“Who is it?”

“It is me, may I come in?”

“I am really not in a state for visitors, William.”

This did not seem to dissuade him. “Harriet said you were not feeling well.”

Victoria motioned for a dressing gown from Jenkins. Skerrett curtsied before Melbourne as she took her leave with the soiled linens.

“I am fine. It is just women’s troubles.”

He frowned at her. “You look unwell.”
“Yes, well, I believe I missed last month’s, this must be repayment.”

She felt the cramping again and reached for her sides.

“Let me send for the doctor.”

“No, I will not.”

She swooned slightly with Jenkins catching her. Melbourne rushed to her.

“Into bed,” said Melbourne.

“I cannot. The Duchess of Montrose is dining with us. You know how she despises me.”

“She will not like you any better if you faint at table. Into bed.”

She sighed. “Thank God Mama is not here.”

“You really think your mother would mock you for being unwell?”

“Better that she visits my brother.”

Ada looked up at them.

“So, that’s what we know. Miscarriage.”

“And you think the baby had hemophilia?,” asked Victoria.

“Well, it was a boy and there was a lot of bleeding according to the diaries...” Ada looked up. “We often find today in hemophiliacs that the mother’s blood has mixed with the child’s and the clotting factor in the mother has been lowered. Today it would be treated as a high risk delivery. Are you alright, Will?”

He looked up. “Fine.”

“The next step would have been to wait for the fetus to be delivered. If it did not come out on its own, the next step would have been for the physician to remove it.”

“Remove it?,” asked Victoria.

“Manually. The same intervention recorded in Princess Charlotte’s case, but the Queen fared much better.”

“Either Sir James didn’t intervene...”

“We know the Queen was generally in good health and she never undertook the same regime that Princess Charlotte did. Obviously known for her appetite and we know she had five other relatively complication free deliveries... The first was long but that’s not unusual for a first baby. The only slightly remarkable one was Princess Euphemia’s but that still produced a living child.”

Victoria caught Will staring at her, more specifically her belly.

“Well, this has all been very informative,” said Victoria.
“You’re probably tired,” said Ada. “And this can be so dull.”

“No, it’s terribly interesting,” said Will.

“We must meet for lunch before you go.”

“And a bit of shopping,” said Victoria.

Melbourne waited outside as Sir James examined the Queen. She wanted him when she gave birth, but Victoria had found the spectacle of Sir James poking around inside her while avoiding eye contact with her husband in attendance too much to bear.

“Lord Melbourne.”

“Sir James.”

“The Queen appears to be suffering from a miscarriage.”

Melbourne stood stunned. “We did not even realize-”

“No, it was not far along, but there seems to be a heavy hemorrhage as the body tries to expel the child.”

“Expel...” breathed Melbourne.

“The bleeding is profuse, which is troubling and of course, the fever.”

“Papa?”

Melbourne dismissed Sir James and went to Gina. He knelt down in front of her.

“What is wrong with Mama?”

“Mama is just a bit unwell, that is all.”

“May I see her?”

“No, Mama needs her rest. You may see her in the morning.” He kissed her. “I love you.”

The nurse took her away.

“Paris in the autumn doesn’t get nearly enough attention,” said Victoria.

They were seated in a restaurant overlooking the lights along the Seine.

“I suppose not.”

“Poor Regina,” Victoria mused over dinner.

Will looked up at her.

“It must have been a precarious position. Any second, your mum could have a son who would displace you...”
“You think she wanted it? The crown?"

“No. She was too much Lord M’s daughter, no ambitions. Which is the other reason her position was so precarious.”

“Which was?”

“If Victoria had died, she would have been queen immediately.”

Melbourne pulled up a chair to the side of Victoria’s bed. Emma and Harriet took turns attending her, but he and the nurse sent in were the constant companions.

“Lord M...”

“Yes, Victoria?”

“I do not wish to open Parliament. I would much rather go to Windsor.”

He frowned at her. He could remember this argument from when she had been a young queen. He had won it.

“Of course, ma’am.” He pulled the a cold cloth from a bowl on her bedside table. “Ma’am, who am I?”

“Lord M.”

“But who am I to you?”

She smiled at him. “My Prime Minister.”

He took the cloth to her forehead again. “Yes, ma’am.”

Melbourne changed clothes and shaved. It would not do to look disheveled in front of the girls. Even if it was all falling apart.

He heard Victoria scream and rushed out, nearly knocking Collier over.

In the bedroom, he found Emma and Harriet standing nearby as Sir James put something away in a bowl, covering it with a cloth.

“Sir James.”

“Lord Melbourne. Her Majesty has expelled the last of the...”

Child. Their child.

“And the fever?”
“We must wait.”

Lehzen entered.

“Baroness.”

“The Prime Minister is waiting.”

“Certainly Her Majesty is not in a state-”

“He wishes to see you, Lord Melbourne.” Lehzen could not hide her annoyance.

Melbourne made his way to the drawing room where Lord John Russell waited. He was such a small man, a former cabinet minister of his. Of course it was such a strange relationship now.

“Lord Melbourne.”

“Lord Russell.”

“How is Her Majesty?”

“She is...” Melbourne tried to find the right words. “She is ill, but I have no doubt of her recovery.”

“I find it incumbent upon me to remind you of the Regency Act of 1842. If Her Majesty were to die, the Princess Royal would become Queen.”

“I do not think it will-”

“And you would be Regent.”

“As I said, I do not believe it would come to that-”

“The Tories will not like it.”

“There is very little they can do. The Act passed.”

“Many would prefer a royal regent or a blood relative of the Princess Royal.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“If we were speaking of another child, there could be no argument as to your natural rights-”

“Princess Regina is-” He watched Russell’s eyebrow quirk. “She is to me as my own child. I have known her every day of her life. She knows no other father.”

“I doubt some in Parliament can be moved by such sentiments.”

“We need not discuss this. Her Majesty will recover-”

“I do pray so, but-”

Melbourne closed the conversation by walking away.

Melbourne entered the nursery to find his sister with the girls.
“Papa! Look Aunt Emily has come!,” said Maggie.

“I can see.”

“I was just admiring Maggie’s collection of toy soldiers.”

“A gift from her Cousin Ernst.”

Gina looked at Melbourne. “May we see Mama?”

“She is resting, we must not disturb her.”

Gina looked bereft.

“Now, my darling, we mustn’t disturb your mama’s rest,” said Emily. “The sooner she regains her strength, the sooner she can be back to you.”

Emily stood leaving the girls.

“How is she?”

“Not well.”

“I am so sorry, William.”

“I need the letter.”

“What letter?”

He looked at Regina who was watching their every move. “I need the letter Victoria wrote to me. Before Gina was born.”

“What do you need that for?”

“Do you still have it?”

“Of course I still have it.”

“Then I need it.”

“What do you need it for?”

“As it is seen by the public and some members of Parliament, I am not her natural father.”

“You would be regent-”

“I do not care about being regent, I care about being her father.”

“They would not separate you-”

“They might. Do you think everyone will be quite content to leave me in charge-”

“They have no choice-”

“I cannot take that chance. I will have that letter-”

“You do realize her legitimacy as queen would be called into question-”
“I do not care.”

Emily straightened. “Your wife will not thank you for destroying her daughter’s reign—”

“I do not care!”

“And you would do what if they did try to take her from you?”

“Quit England.”

“Quit England? Are you mad?”

“If I am her father, there can be no question of my natural right to do as I please with her.”

“You are not thinking straight. When did you sleep?”

“Give me the letter.”

“No. Not until you have slept, not unless you actually need it and certainly not for you to quit England and have God knows what happen!”

“Emily, I am not one to broker opposition today.”

“Nor am I.”

Will sat on the sofa of the hotel room.

“Morning.” Victoria leaned over from behind the sofa and kissed him. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, just looking at a book by an author I admire.”

She glanced at his iPad. “My book.” She smiled.

“Regina. You’re right. It must have been frightening for her.”

“Terrible.” Victoria walked around and sat next to him, curling under his arm. “She had Lord M, though...”

“Though you have to wonder what Melbourne was thinking.”

“Because to the world Regina wasn’t his? He was regent.”

“Do you suppose if Victoria had died Leopold would have just sat across the sea while Melbourne ruled as regent?”

“They had a regency act placing Melbourne in charge.”

“Yes, but the rights of the child’s father- even a supposed one- and his family who wanted a Coburg on every throne.”

“Melbourne.”
He sighed. “Russell. What do you want?”

The Prime Minister seemed surprised by this. “I came to ask after the Queen’s health-”

“You know someone will notify you if the Queen actually does die. A Royal Messenger.”

“I.”

“I know, you have genuine concern, etcetera...” He sighed. “I know you. You are just dying for the chance at a Whig regency because you think will be able to have all the reforms you like and I am here to tell you, it will not happen. So long as I am regent- I will do everything in my power to protect my daughter’s crown and that includes putting a stop to your ambitions.”

Russell shook his head. “You never have had the heart of a politician, have you, Melbourne? No love of a fight.”

“You’ll forgive me. I must go to the Queen.”

Melbourne returned to the Queen’s bedroom and took his station again.

“William.”

Melbourne looked up. “Victoria.”

“Where are the girls?”

“In the nursery, of course.”

“I need to see them.”

He could see it in her. She looked further away than ever. Caro had given him the same look.

“When you are feeling better.”

“I need to see them.”

“Of course. When you are feeling better.”

“Now.”

“Victoria...” He took her hand, squeezing it tighter. “Do not give up.”

“William...”

“No, I can see it, I have seen it before and you... you must not go. Gina is too young to be queen and Maggie needs you... Ellie barely knows you. Do not deprive her.”

“I want to see them.”

Melbourne walked into the nursery as he hung his head. There was no choice in what to do. He had tried to keep his daughters ignorant of what was happening, but they had not seen their mother in days.

And he found he could not deny them one last meeting.
Maggie laid on the floor with her toy soldiers.  

“Maggie?”  

He sighed.  

“Maggie.”  

She looked up from her toy soldiers. “What?”  

“Come. I must speak to you and Gina.”  

“Gina ran away.”  

Melbourne looked around. “Gina ran away?”  

“Yes.”  

Melbourne walked back out to where the nurses and Lehzen gathered.  

“Perhaps it would be quite nice if we could keep the heiress to the throne in sight! Do you suppose we could manage that, Baroness?!”  

“I did not-”  

“I do not expect much of you, perhaps you could grant me that!”  

“Lord Melbourne-”  

“In fact, I expect nothing of you! Yet you cannot keep to the simple task of keeping a child in her nursery-”  

Lehzen spat something in German.  

“I swear-”  

“Lord Melbourne.”  

He turned to see Collier.  

“My apologies for interrupting...”  

“What is it?”  

“A message from Lady Beauvale.”  

His sister-in-law, Alexandrina, was waiting at the foyer of Dover House. “William.”  

“Where is she?”  

“In the sitting room.”  

“If she was running away, why did she stop here?”  

“She thought she might stop for a map.”
Melbourne sighed as he walked into the sitting room. Gina was on the sofa, still dressed in her coat and bonnet.

“Gina...” Her name came out as a sigh of relief, picking her up. “What were you thinking?”

“I do not want to be queen. I do not want Mama to die!”

He sighed. “I do not want Mama to die, either, but my darling Gina, running away will solve nothing. I am afraid you have the sort of life where you may never run away from it.”

She wrapped herself around him.

“I promise to be with you. Do you understand? I promise to be with you.”

“Where have you been?,” an exasperated Emma asked.

“What has happened?”

“She is awake. She is asking for the Princess Royal.”

“ Asking for her?”

“Trying to get up! Sir James seems determined she should not move.”

“Come.”

Melbourne took Gina’s hand and they rushed towards the Queen’s rooms.

They heard Victoria before they could see her.

“Lehzen, if I do not have my eldest daughter in my arms in the next two minutes, I will have the heads of everyone here on a pike!”

“Mama!”

She was sat in the hallway when Gina went running.

“Gina...”

“Mama, do not leave me.”

“No. Mama will not leave you. Do you understand?” She shook her head, bringing her daughter to her chest. “Mama will never leave you.”

Papa.

Will woke up. He found his hand in Victoria’s closed over her belly.

He sighed.

“Will?” Victoria turned her head back. “Are you awake?”

“Did I wake you?”

“You stirred…”

“Bad dreams.”

“About what?”


"Why do you suppose Victoria recovered? By all accounts, she ought to have died."

"She couldn't die. Too much to do. Three girls, one of whom was stuck being Queen if she did die."

"What was the dream?"

"What?"

"You made me tell you mine."

He sighed loudly, resting his head behind hers.

"I thought it was about Allison, but then it wasn't. Had to have been Regina."

"Why were you dreaming about Regina?"

Victoria heard snoring behind her and knew her question would go unanswered.

“Did they say what it was?”

Melbourne looked up from the book.

“The baby, I mean.”

“A boy.”

Victoria nodded. “Would you have liked another son?”

“I would have liked any child you gave me.”

“Do you suppose I will be able to give you any others?” She was growing tearful. “I know I have said I do not like to be pregnant, but I did not mean for-”
The book was put aside. Melbourne took her into his arms as he joined her on the bed.

“You did nothing. Nothing you would have done-”

“I did not even realize... I went riding, I danced, I ran-”

“You rode and danced and ran while you did not know you were carrying Maggie and Ellie, they are strong and healthy. You mustn’t blame yourself, Victoria.”

“Uncle Coburg before he left for Windsor, the last thing he said to me...” She swallowed and looked up at him, eyes shiny with tears. “He said he wanted me to suffer the death of my son and-”

“He was a bitter, hateful man, Victoria.”

She nodded. “What if we never have a son?”

Melbourne shook his head. “Victoria, we have three daughters. There are greater tragedies than three healthy daughters.”
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

So, here we are again. Please, please let me know what you think and happy reading!

“I have a surprise.”

Those were dangerous words from anyone. Even more dangerous from Victoria.

So Will obligingly put her Hermes scarf over his eyes and it was removed about an hour outside of Paris.

“Surprise!”

Will looked up. “We are in a car park.”

“Yes, but where is the car park?”

She got out of the car and he followed suit.

“The car park is at a hotel?”

“Yes, but where is the hotel?”

He followed her inside the hotel and it grew increasingly clear through the assortment of small children and exhausted parents.

“We are at-”

“Disneyland!”

“You kidnapped me to Disneyland?”

“Yes. You said you’ve never been.”

“No.”

“And I went once with my niece and nephew and they ruined it with their constant complaining and demands and just being absolute children...”

“How old were they?”

“Eight and six, but that aside, I thought of what a great time I could have and here we are.”

“You do realize we will have two children and they will want to go somewhere like this.”

“Which is why I want to go before they suck all the fun right out of it.”
“Is there going to be any research today?”
“I sincerely doubt it.”

“Can I have a suit of armor?”
Melbourne looked at Maggie. He sat down next to her on the floor. Gina was at her side, taking copious notes.

“Maggie, I think you’re rather missing the point.”
They were gathered in the library at Windsor Castle and the girls had joined him there for their daily lessons on history and politics.

“I want to go into battle.”

“No, you do not. A good queen must be able to avoid the battle.”

“I am not going to be queen. Gina is.”

He caught Gina staring off pensively.

“That is enough for today. Why do we not get some fresh air?”
Maggie did not have to be told twice, she was out of the room like a shot.

“There you are, Gina,” he said taking away her notebook. “Go on.”

“I want to go to Brocket Hall.”

“Gina...” Melbourne sighed. “I want to go as well, but Mama has her duties to attend to.”

“Then we should go.”

“No, we must-”

“She would not miss us.”

“Of course your mama would miss us,” he said in platitude.

“Ah, Lord M. Come here.”

He followed her direction, happy to see her at work on something.

“What do you think?”

“That depends on what it is.”

“It’s a house.”

“A house? For whom?”
She smiled at him. “Us.”

“Where?”

“The Isle of Wight. It will be most private.”

“You are a queen. You do not have a private life.”

“But somewhere for us to be off with the girls on our own-”

“We have that. At Brocket Hall.”

She looked up. “Why do you object to this?”

“Our children do not need another house-”

“Well, perhaps I want one! Should I not be able to have what I want??”

“Gina asked to go to Brocket Hall only this morning.”

“Are you forbidding me from this?”

Melbourne shook his head. “You know I can forbid you from nothing.”

“So, what shall we do first?”

Victoria smiled up at him as they walked into the park with a map.

“Shall I cross off everything you can’t do?”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, Will. I know I’m pregnant. No Space Mountain for me, V and X, but you could go.”

“No, thank you.”

“You can. I don’t want you to miss out on something just because I can’t.”

“Find something for the both of us.”

“Alright, Buzz Lightyear.”

“There appears to be a thirty minute wait so we can discuss the Scottish expedition.”

“Ugh...” Victoria groaned. “No one wants to talk about Scotland.”

“People are going to ask. John Brown was in the employ of the Montroses at the time. They must have met.”

“Who cares?”

“The diary entries are curiously empty. No letters describing the visit from their hosts the Montroses. Who knows how they came to host anyway?”

“Do you want a candy apple?”
“I feel as if you’re changing the subject.”

“I’m pregnant. You’re supposed to get me whatever I want. You don’t want V and X and I to get angry.”

“Now there is a thought...”

“My daughter grows restless in her grief.”

Melbourne could not believe it had come to this, taking a walk with the Duchess of Kent. He had taken to steering the pram as Maggie and Gina played.

“I have grieved before, but these flights of purpose...” He sighed. “What does she want with the Isle of Wight?”

“Perhaps she needs a change of scenery. I have heard her speak of Scotland.”

He sighed. “Oh, God. Not Scotland.”

“You have been?”

“Of course. My mama sent me to Glasgow to study with a tutor after I finished Cambridge, in lieu of a grand tour.”

“And what did you think?”

“It was the most ghastly place I have ever been in my life....”

The Duchess smiled. “She has been reading Jane Eyre.”

“Yes, talented fellow Currer Bell.”

“Why not take her? She does so love to be indulged and you could romance her.”

“I do not believe I have ever had to romance her...”

“Yes, imagine what you might do if you applied yourself, William.”

“Jokes, Duchess? You joke now?” He sighed and looked back to Ellie as she cooed for attention. “I would have to find a suitable house to let.”

“I may be able to manage something with the Duchess of Montrose.”

“Would you? She is no great supporter of Victoria.”

“Perhaps so.”

He shook his head. “Fine. I will not ask how you accomplish it.”

Victoria looked in amazement at her husband.
“An invitation to Buchanan Castle? Why? The Duchess despises me. She has never forgotten Flora Hastings. What does she want?”

Melbourne shrugged. “Shall I decline?”

“You despise Scotland. I have heard you speak of Glasgow.”

“It might be instructional for the girls. We have been studying Elizabeth I, perhaps it is time to look at Mary, Queen of Scots.”

He caught the first sight of a smile on her face.

“Have you told them about Leicester?”

“No, I rather think they are a bit young for Leicester.”

“Or perhaps you rather fear the day they find their own Leicesters.”

“As I said, too young for Leicester.” He sighed. "So, shall we accept?"

“Admit it, you did have fun.”

Will smiled. “Yes. I did have fun.”

Smiling, she kissed him. “You ought to have fun more often.”

“I thought we did have fun.”

“We do. History fun, sex fun, but normal fun...”

“I don’t get to have fun.”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“No, tell me what that meant.”

“Are you hungry?”

He walked off, leaving Victoria perplexed.

“They are said to make love like beasts.”

“Who?” James looked up from his paper.

“Her Majesty and the Lord Consort.”

“And where did you hear such a thing?”
“My maid.”

“And where did she hear that?”

“At Hatfield House, I presume they heard it from the servants at Brocket Hall. Apparently, Lord Melbourne will have the Queen in any spot that stays still long enough. Shocking that they only have three children.” She looked up at the butler. “Which reminds me, McGregor, we ought to move the vases somewhere high up. I do not want them broken on account of Lord Melbourne’s ardour.”

“Then why did you invite them?”

She sighed. “A favor for the Duchess of Kent.”

“It could not possibly be that perhaps you no longer wish to court the Queen’s contempt?”

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“You have made an enemy of the Queen since she came to the throne—”

“She was the one who humiliated an innocent woman!”

“Oh, please,” said James. “Who didn’t think she was with child? When were you ever a friend to Flora Hastings?”

“I cared deeply—”

“She has three daughters who will need husbands. You wish one of ours to fill that role.”

“And you are so above that?”

“Of course not. Who would not want a member of the House of Montrose on the throne? But I will not play at false piety.”

Catherine looked up at McGregor. “But still, let’s move the more fragile pieces out of the rooms the Queen shall stay in.”

“I am cold.”

“My little soldier,” Victoria smiled. “You must be able to bear some hardships.”

Maggie whined. Regina looked away.

“Perhaps Papa could continue reading.”

“No!,” said Regina. “I do not like that story.”

“But it seemed so very exciting,” said Victoria. “Hiding in the forest, learning to live simple lives—”

“Their papa died.”

“Well, I suppose perhaps it seems like fun to ordinary children,” Melbourne remarked.

“I would have all the Roundheads executed,” said Maggie. “If they executed my papa.”
“Heartening to know.”

“I would avenge you, Papa. And you, Mama.”

“I do not believe it will come to that.”

“Are we there?,” she asked.

“Yes, this must be Buchanan Castle,” said Melbourne.

“How charming,” said Victoria.

“It looks frightful,” said Regina.

“Welcome to Scotland...” said Melbourne.

The Duke and Duchess stood in front of the castle.

“Your Majesty,” said James.

“Your Grace,” said Victoria. “We are most grateful for your generous offer to host us. It is not an easy thing to host us.”

“The honor is ours, Majesty,” said Catherine as the several trailing carriages and wagon began to be unpacked.

They followed them into the castle.

“We have many things planned for your amusement, Majesty. There is stalking and coarse fishing here.”

“Of course the Ghillies’ Ball is at the end of your stay,” said Catherine.

“It all sounds charming,” said Victoria.

“Are you certain you don’t want to have a rest?"

Victoria looked at Will. “What would I need a rest for? We’ve been on three rides and eaten lunch.”

“I wouldn’t want you to get overtired.”

“Will...”

“Alright, never mind.”

Victoria motioned at a bench. “Why don’t I sit for a moment and let you bore me with John Brown?”

“So I see I’m stuck writing the Scotland chapter,” he said as he joined her.

“As I said, I don’t care about John Brown and I have no idea what Roberta is threatening with her ‘widely believed’ to be the Queen and Melbourne’s youngest daughter.”
“The timing is a bit off.”

“Will.”

“Alright, alright, shall we go over whatever the Queen has in here?” He pulled an iPad mini from his jacket.

“You brought work with us,” she sighed.

“Well, here, let me take a photo first.”

Victoria giggled as she posed for him.

“Nice save.”

“I thought so, now, let us turn to...” He paused. “That’s strange.”

“What is?”

“No transcript...” He punched a few buttons. “If you go to the archival scans... there’s no page at all, in fact that looks a bit like it’s been torn out.”

“You think she wrote something she regretted?”

“You will not go stalking?”

“No.”

“I do not understand, William. What was the point of us coming here if you were only going to sit and read?”

“I am taking Gina and Maggie to Holyrood Palace.”

“Why can you not do that another day?”

“Because the date was fixed for today. You could always join us.” He paused. “I am certain they would be delighted.”

“No, I think I would rather have fresh air.”

She left before he could propose an argument.

Victoria watched the carriage with her husband and daughters leave, then made her way to the stables expecting to meet the Duke of Montrose.

“Ma’am.”

“I was given to understand that the Duke would be here. I thought we were going stalking.”

“His Grace sent word that he was not feeling well. I thought Her Majesty would have been told.”

“Oh. Well...” She paused. “Mister...?”
“Brown, ma’am.”

“Mr. Brown, I wish to go riding then.”

“Very good, ma’am.”

They rode in silence for a while.

Victoria could not stand silence.

“Have you worked for the Montroses long, Brown?”

“Ay, ma’am.”

He offered no more conversation.

“The Lord Consort and I...” She mused to herself. “We would often take long rides. Sometimes I thought we would sort out the whole world on our rides.”

It had been very long since such rides. There had been no such rides all summer, she knew her husband took the girls and often invited her.

And she would decline.

Then she might catch a glimpse of them on the way back. Her girls laughing and she knew he must have made some joke to them.

But she never said anything and she never accepted any invitation.

Suddenly, she felt a raindrop. She looked up, to see the sky had grown black.

“This way, ma’am!,” shouted Brown.

They happened upon a cottage. By now the rain had become a tempest. She followed him in without question.

“John Brown, what are you doing here? And what have you dragged in?,” the lady of the house asked.

“Guest from the big house.”

“Oh.” The woman curtsied. “Begging your pardon, miss.”

Miss? The mistress and master of the house did not recognize her. Brown was about to say something.

“Please. Call me Victoria. Mrs?”

“Rona. Might as well be informal, though I’m sure it’s not what you’re used to.” She turned to her husband. “Angus, put more wood on the fire. She’s soaked straight through.”

They soon sat down. The couple worked one of the estate’s sheep farms and they began pleasantly chatting over tea.
“Are you married, miss?,” asked Angus.

She had taken her gloves off, Lord M’s ring now pointedly on her finger.

“Yes.”

“Won’t your husband be worried about you?” Angus looked at Brown with grave concern.

“No. He went on a day trip to Edinburgh for the day. I doubt he is back yet.”

“Did he not wish to go stalking?,” asked Brown.

“He had business.”

“Not much of a sportsman, then?”


“No, he rides and shoots when his sister has a party…”

“So no then?”

“Not everyone has to have the same tastes as you, John.” She looked at Victoria. “Do you and your husband have any children?” -

“We have three girls.”

“Oh, lovely,” said Rona. “How old?”

“Gina is six, Maggie is four and Ellie is…” She found herself searching. “Ellie is eight months old.”

Where had the months gone?

“I know, the time disappears when they are that age,” said Rona. “They change every day.”

She nodded and smiled.

“Oh, come on!”

“No!”

“The slinky dog just goes up and down, there’s not even an upside down!”

“No.”

She sighed. “Fine.”

“Better to be safe.”

“Was Gussie never able to do anything like this? Is that it?”

He sighed. “God no. The people, the line, the rides…”

“But Allison?”
“She would have adored it, but she was never well enough for long enough.”

Victoria frowned. “Didn’t you ever go anywhere?”

“We managed a day trip now and then, but...” Will shrugged.

“Oh.”

She seemed dismayed in some way.

Victoria looked over. “I think I’ll just pop into that shop.”

Victoria laughed. It had been hours and she had perhaps had too much whiskey.

“Surely not!”

“Surely yes,” said Brown.

There was a banging on the door of the cottage. Brown stood, hand on his knife.

Angus walked over. “Who goes there?”

“Lord Melbourne.”

Victoria stood. “William?”

Their host opened the door. Melbourne entered, removing his hat. Rona and Angus stood exchanging frantic glances. If they had not recognized their Queen, they did now. Lord Melbourne had been in public life long enough to even be recognized in the far reaches of Scotland. This was Lord Melbourne and that meant they had been spending the better part of their evening chatting casually with their Queen.

“Ah, there you are.”

“Have you been looking for me?”

“You went out hours ago, of course I was searching for you.”

“You needn’t have worried, milord-”

Melbourne turned his eye to Brown. “You. What is your name?”

Rona and Angus tried not to roll their eyes visibly.

Victoria spoke. “Mr. Brown was most helpful-”

“Is Mr. Brown sitting while the Queen stands?”

“William-”

“Is he?”
Brown sighed as he stood.

“As I was saying, Mr. Brown was of great service-”

“Did Mr. Brown get Her Majesty lost in the first place? Did Mr. Brown fail to send word back to the castle that Her Majesty was safe so she could be collected?”

“Perhaps you ought to have gone with her.”

“That was not an invitation for your opinion, Brown.”

Victoria stood, collecting her coat and hat.

“We are most grateful for your hospitality.”

“The honor is ours, ma’am.”

“I’ll help Her Majesty-”

“No, I do believe I have it. Thank you,” said Melbourne.

Victoria and Melbourne rode in silence.

“What?”

“That was very heavy-handed of you, Lord M. He was only trying to help-”

“I see. So his feelings are worth more than mine. That is very good to know how highly you regard a servant you just met!”

“What is the matter with you?”

“My wife was missing!”

“Am I your wife? I thought I was your Queen. At least the way you paraded in there seemed to say so!”

“You are my wife, the mother of my children and my Queen.”

“Perhaps sometimes I would like to be an ordinary woman!”

“Is that what you want? For me to disrespect you?!”

“Treat me like a woman!”

“Is that what you suppose being a woman is? Disrespect?! Is that what your new servant friend supposes? Or perhaps Albert?”

“What do you want?!,” she screamed.

“I want you back!,” he shouted back at her, surprised at himself.

“Where have I gone?,” she asked in equal surprise.

“I do not know, but since the child...” He shook his head. “You have not been with us. You find
“I do no such thing-”

“The girls only see you once a day if they are lucky. You think they do not notice? Poor Ellie gets a passing glance.”

“I love my daughters-”

“I do not doubt it, but they depend upon you and it is cruel to withhold yourself.”

“And you?”

“I have had a wife leave me before.”

“I have not run off with a poet-”

“No, you just do not speak to me, avoid me when your box is finished and do not invite me to your room at night. I dare say that the practical effect is not very different.”

“I lost a child!”

“I have lost three! And yet, we still have three!”

They arrived at the front of the castle. The groom helped the Queen down as Melbourne followed.

“You do not feel these things as a woman does.”

“What?”

“You are a man. How could you understand?”

“You suppose your feelings are more important than mine?”

“Yes!”

Melbourne nodded. “As I said, I have had one marriage fail. I can hardly recognize the difference.”

“You cannot compare me to her!”

“Well, I was the one there, I am fairly certain I have a sound basis for comparison...”

“You-”

“I think I ought to take the girls to Brocket Hall.”

“What?”

“I do not see what there is for us here or in London. And I think you ought to find a new private secretary.”

“You mean to abandon me, Lord M?”

“No. You mean to abandon us.”

He walked into the castle, leaving Victoria alone to their bewildered hosts.
“You think it’s too much.”

“No, who am I to say that it’s too much?”

Victoria looked down at the two large Disney carrier bags full of toys and outfits for V and X Will carried.

They walked into their hotel room. Victoria jumped on the bed.

“I am not the fun dad.”

“What?”

“I am not a fun dad. I make the meals, I make sure everyone has their medications on time...” He sighed. “That’s what I do.”

“Come here.”

Victoria held her hand out, fingers interlocking until he joined her on the bed.

“You had Carrie. Now, I know I’m nowhere near as deathly serious as you, but, I am half German.”

He was forced to smile.

“I am sure I can funnel some of that into making lunches and setting bedtimes...” She smiled. “So maybe you can work on being a bit fun which I know you are.”

She kissed him.

“You think some of your mother has rubbed off on you?”

She rolled her eyes. “I hope it’s not as bad as that.”

Melbourne hated himself. He sat in his room alone at Brocket Hall in his nightshirt and dressing gown with brandy at his side.

He had always thought he had made Victoria happy, at the basis of everything was their easy friendship, but he had not made her smile in the past few months, but to find her smiling, hear her laughter and know it was not for him.

The door creaked open. In a flash, he imagined it was Victoria that she had come to apologize and he would apologize and they could fall into each others’ arms.

“Papa?”

“Gina,” he sighed.

“You did not see us before bed and I had a bad dream.”

“I am sorry, Gina. Come here.”
She climbed to his lap and he pulled a blanket from the end of the bed to wrap around her.

“Now, you know what we must do, you must tell me what your bad dream was.”

“It was about Mama.”

“Oh.”

“I dreamt she was lost. When will she join us?”

“Mama has many duties to attend to.”

“And there, you see, Gina?”

Melbourne watched. Gina was standing on a stool in front of him between him and the table as he showed her the intricacies of orchids.

“May I try?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Papa!,” Maggie screeched.

“Maggie, I dare say you will break the walls one day...”

She rushed in. “There’s a carriage!”

“Oh. Wonderful.”

He presumed it would be Emily, having heard what a disaster the Scottish journey had been through her husband or society gossip. He took Gina’s hand as Maggie ran back through the library into the house.

“Mama!,” Maggie exclaimed.

The servants were taking her coat, bonnet and gloves as if this were not an extraordinary event. Indeed to them it was not. It was merely their mistress returning home.

Gina broke away from him to join Maggie as she rushed to her mother.

“Hello my darlings.” She looked at Maggie. “Were you in the sun without your bonnet?”

“I do not like it.”

“I know.”

She stood up, looking at her husband.

“Perhaps it is time for your tea,” Melbourne suggested to the girls.

“But Mama just came!”

“Go on,” said Victoria.
The girls left. Victoria looked at Melbourne.

“You used to say that there was nothing I could do to hurt you beyond forgiveness, when you left Buchanan Castle, I wondered if I had finally done it.” She paused uncertainly. “Have I?”

“No. As I said, there has never been anything you could do to hurt me beyond forgiveness.”

Victoria nodded. “When I lost... when we lost...” She struggled to say it. “The baby. I... you were so gentle and the girls we so loving and I did not think I deserved it. I do not think I deserve it still... I just do not know how to live without it, but I failed him. I was meant to see him safely into the world and I could not. You are right. I am no better than Caroline.”

“That was never about the children. I never blamed her for the loss of our daughter any more than I blamed you.”

“I blamed myself.”

“That is human nature. To blame ourselves for matters over which we have no control.”

“But you did nothing-”

“Neither did you.”

“Come with me.”

She followed him down towards the river, where a curiously young sapling overlooked.

“What is this?”

“This is where I buried him.”

“Our boy?,” she asked, voice cracking.

“Yes. I do not know what Sir James was going to do with him, but... I did not want him to end up on a trash heap and I could not make a spectacle obviously...”

Victoria fell to her knees. Melbourne concerned joined her. She was sobbing as she moved to hold her.

“Why did you not say anything?”

“I did not wish to vex you.”

“But we made him...” she said softly. “He was ours.”

“I know, but we have other children and as long as I have breath, I cannot let grief consume me.”

“I know...” She sobbed.

“Though I know that is easier said than done,” he sighed. “But we must carry on.”

“And never let them know how hard it is to bear.”

“Yes.”
Victoria rolled over. She had not realized what had stirred her, but Will’s mobile was going off.

“Will.”

He stirred, reaching for his mobile. “It’s Emily.”

Victoria sat up, turning on the light as she listened to one side of a conversation. He finally reached the conclusion.

“Yeah. We’ll leave right now.”

He sighed, putting up the phone.

“What is it?, asked Victoria.

“My mum. She’s had a stroke.”

“Oh, God, Will, I’m so sorry.”

“Care home called Emily. I…” He stood. “We have to go. You can go, can’t you? You’re feeling alright?”

“I’m fine, Will. Don’t worry about me.”

She got up.

“Are you okay?, she asked.

“Fine.”

“You just sit a moment and I’ll pack our things. It won’t take long, okay?” She forced him into a chair and kissed him on the cheek. “Okay?”

Okay,: 

The evening was passed at Brocket Hall with a quiet dinner followed by a retreat to the parlor. Gina was charged with showing off her new piano lessons as Maggie shoved her way onto the bench.

“I want to show her!,” Maggie protested.

“I am showing her!”

“Maggie, it is very rude to interrupt someone else’s performance,” said Victoria. She looked to Ellie on her lap. “Perhaps we ought to find something the three of you could play together.”

“A trio of strings perhaps,” said Melbourne.

“What do you say, Ellie? Though I think she would try to play anything you gave her with her mouth.”

“She is only cutting a tooth.”

“Must we return to Scotland?,” asked Gina.
“What?” Victoria looked in dismay. “I thought it was charming.”

“It was cold,” said Maggie.

“I am sure it is not always cold,” said Victoria.

“I lived there once. I am certain it is,” said Melbourne.

“Because I saw this charming castle, Balmoral...” said Victoria. “I thought we might make something of it.”

The girls looked to their father with pleading eyes.

“What?”

Melbourne looked at her. “Victoria, I am your husband and your subject—”

“Speak to me as my husband. I implore you.”

“As your husband, you may buy the castle if it pleases you, but you will not find me in it.”

She stared at him in astonishment.

“I see.” She sighed. “I take it you are all of the same mind?”

“Yes,” said Gina.

“What about the Isle of Wight?”

“No.”

“Do you know how many children would love to have a holiday home? You could play in the wood and swim at the beach!”

They looked again at Melbourne.

“That’s a no then?”

“Yes.”

“Well,” sighed Victoria, "if that is how we are to be..."

"It is."

"I will endure it then."

"A terrible fate," said Melbourne.

"Oh, yes, I suffer so at the hands of my cruel daughters..." She passed Ellie to her husband. "They even make me capture them for a kiss!"

The girls squealed as Victoria lunged after them, tackling them both to the floor in a fit of giggles and screeches as she kissed them. Her husband laughed and all was well in the world.
Chapter 35

London 1866

“We should not be here.”

Effie turned to her younger sister. “What?”

“We have no chaperone.”

“Do we require a chaperone to merely attend a lecture? What sort of scandal can we be accused of while sitting in this hall full of people?”

“What if someone recognizes us?”

“That would be most flattering.”

“Flattering?”

“Yes, the Court Circular is full of Maggie’s engagement and our photographs make us look so dour. I should like people to know I do not walk around with a permanent scowl on my face.”

The house lights lowered. The audience applauded as a man stepped onto the stage.

“He has not done anything yet.”

“He is famous.”

“As am I but no one applauds when I enter the room.”

“Good evening my lords, ladies and gentlemen-”

“Are there lords here? Goodness,” whispered Effie.

“Quiet.”

“Were there no other events on the social calendar? We shall have to give a concert.”

“Effie...”

“What sort of lords? Just baronets or-”

The man spoke. “This evening is to be an evening of discovery. It may be uncomfortable as I seek to contact the other side...”

The man spoke for a while, seemingly contacting the husband of a widow of a factory accident worker who was among them.

Then he began his centerpiece.

“I am so sorry, I am getting a message from the late Lord Consort...”
The audience gasped.

“As if Papa would interrupt. That is so rude.”

The man spoke again. “I have a message for the Queen.”

“Why would Papa deliver a message through this man? Surely he would speak to someone in our circle.”

“Effie-”

“This is absurd.”

“Is there a problem, ladies?”

Effie looked around.

“He is speaking to us,” said Della.

“Ladies? Surely not.”

“Might I continue?,” he asked.

“No, that will not be necessary.” The tall brunette stepped forward. “You are a fraud, sir.”

There were some gasps in the crowd. She stepped forward, leaving her seat, walking closer to the stage. Anyone could see that she was an elegant sort of woman, with command of the room.

“I assure, you miss, my methods are entirely scientific.”

“I am not called ‘miss.’”

“Apologies, milady?”

She removed her hat and anyone with the gift of sight could see who was in their midst. Della remained seated, wishing to disappear.

“I am called Princess Euphemia of the United Kingdom and you will call me your royal highness.”

“Princess Eupehemia,” the man stuttered as he bowed. “Your Royal Highness, forgive me, but my methods are quite scientific. I can communicate beyond the grave with your dear departed father-”

“Well, either you are lying or the spirit is.”

“What must I do to persuade you, your royal highness?”

“There is nothing you can do to persuade me.”

“What makes you say such a thing?”

“You say you first communed with my father in Aberdeen.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“My father would not leave the afterlife to go to Scotland.”
Victoria drove the way back to Hertfordshire and there were no stops except for the Channel Tunnel and one for petrol.

“Are you sure you don’t want to eat something?,” Victoria asked Will.

“I’m not hungry.”

“I’m sure you are-”

“If you want to eat, go ahead.”

Defeated, she followed him into the lift. They were soon greeted by Emily, Henry and Fred, Will’s brother.

“Will, thank God.” Emily hugged him.

“How is she?”

“Not well,” she answered. “She’s been asking for you.”

They went into the hospital room.

“Mum.” Will immediately went to her side. She was not too feeble to reach for his hair.

“My dear William...” she sighed. “You cut your hair.”

“Yeah, I did.” Will looked at Victoria. Will’s mum had been suffering from dementia the whole time they had been together.

“Did you bring that bitch? What for?”

“Uh, no, Liz, it’s me, Victoria?” She stepped forward. “The short tart?”

“Victoria...” Will chastised.

“The streusel?”

“I had forgotten the streusel bit...” said Victoria. “That is clever...”

“Oh. Right,” said Liz. “How are you, dear?”

“Mum, how do you feel?,” asked Will.

“Do not worry about me. Much better now that you are here, my dear boy...”

Melbourne awoke to his wife wretching into a chamber pot. He got to his feet and quickly joined her at the side of the bed. When she was done, she fell back against his chest, panting.

“That is the third time.”

“William...”
“And still no blood I take it. When was that? Ellie’s birthday?”

“I do not wish to speak of it.”

“I expect we must speak of it, you are with child. Sooner or later, I believe the child will arrive.”

She sighed. “I do not want to lose it.”

“You will not.”

“You do not know that.”

“No, but fearing you will shall not change anything except to make you very unsettled.”

“I do not wish to tell the Privy Council yet.”

“Very well, but we will not be able to hold off forever. Can you stand?”

“I am not an invalid.”

He helped her to her feet.

“And do not tell Lehzen. Or Mama.”

“The circle of people I can tell is rapidly decreasing...”

There was a knock at the door.

“Enter!,” Victoria called.

The Baroness entered, seeming as perturbed as ever to see Melbourne in the Queen’s bedroom.

“What is it, Lehzen?”

“A dispatch came by messenger.”

Melbourne held his hand out.

“Lehzen, you may certainly give it to Lord Melbourne.”

She did as the Queen asked.

“Would you please send up my dressers?,” asked Victoria.

“Yes, Majesty.”

Lehzen left.

“I am fairly certain she thought she was well rid of me,” said Melbourne.

“What?”

“Well, you know as well as I do that you were speaking to her more than me for the whole of the summer...”

“That was all months ago. Lord M, Lehzen does not wish to be rid of you.”
“I am not so convinced.” He opened the letter.

“What is it?”

“King Louis-Philippe, it seems he has abdicated.”

“What?!”

“Crowds in the streets demanded it...” He looked up. “Shall I send for Palmerston?”

“Does it say what has become of him? And his family?”

“No, nothing.” He looked up.

Victoria nodded. “Send for Palmerston.”

“Alright.”

“Gina is clever, isn’t she?”

The nature of the question took Melbourne by surprise. “What?”

“You always say that we are not unbiased observers but all of her tutors say she is exceptional.”

“Of course I agree with them.”

“I want her with me.”

“She is often with you.”

“William, if something were to happen to me, I want her prepared to be queen.”

“Nothing will happen to you. You have had three babies with no complications, there is no reason to think that will not be the case again—”

“You told me Gina was frightened.”

“Of course she was. She was afraid she might lose her mother.”

“Should something happen to me, she would be Queen. Under your regency, but I will not have her live in fear of her duty.”

“You think this is the best course of action?”

“I know of no better way not to fear a thing than to see it.”

He nodded. “Very well.”

The rest of the day was passed quietly in Liz’s hospital room with an assortment of chat shows and trash TV that she seemed to enjoy.

“Do you remember when I took you to Blackpool?,” she asked her son suddenly.

“Blackpool?” Will snorted.
Victoria looked over. “What happened in Blackpool, Liz?”

“I took William to a famous clairvoyant to have his aura read.”

“You paid a woman to tell me I was once a Greek soldier and a Queen’s consort.”

“It was a past life reading,” Liz corrected.

“Really?,” asked Victoria. “Queen’s consort? Which one?”

Will looked up. “You’re going to do this to me?”

“What? I’m curious. Were you married to her or did she just have her wicked way with you?”

“I always knew you were special,” Liz said to Will. “The brightest of my children.”

“Mum, you’ll embarrass me.”

“I miss your long hair.”

Victoria smiled at him.

Will sighed. “Why did you have to bring up Blackpool, Mum?”

“Why not?”

Gina had no idea why she had been summoned from the nursery, but was pleased to be with her parents. She sat on the floor as they began to advise her.

“What does that mean?”

Victoria looked at Melbourne, then back at Regina.

“It means that King Louis-Philippe has said he is no longer King of France. Your friend Philippe was to be king, but the French have decided not to have a king or queen anymore.”

“But you said kings and queens are chosen by God.”

“Yes, of course they are, darling.”

“But if they are chosen by God, how can the King say he is not the King? How can the French decide not to have a king?”

“It is not quite so simple, Gina,” said Melbourne. “France is not England. They have a history of revolution.”

“But England had a revolution. You told me. Charles I. And the Roundheads they killed him and Charles II had to hide in an oak tree.”

“That was very long ago, Gina,” said Victoria, joining her on the floor. “Papa always says the British are not a revolutionary people. We do not have anything to worry about.”
The door opened.

“Lord John Russell.”

The Prime Minister entered bowing his head. Victoria got up from the floor to let him kiss her hand and motioned for Gina to follow.

“Majesty.”

The man was so short he was almost looking Gina in the eye as he knelt. He stood again.

“Your Royal Highness. Lord Melbourne.”

“Lord Russell.”

He looked expectantly in Regina’s direction.

“Oh, no, Lord Russell, the Princess Royal will be staying.”

“If you insist, ma’am...”

“I do.”

Victoria took a seat, a quick flick of her eyes signalling Regina to do the same. Melbourne watched with amusement as Gina sought to imitate the exact way her mother took her chair and smoothed her skirts. She succeeded ably, he knew she possessed that natural dignity he had seen in Victoria at their first meeting.

Russell looked more bewildered than anything else at the spectacle.

“Now, Lord Russell, what is on the agenda today?”

“I am afraid we must discuss the Chartists today, ma’am. Ever since O’Connor was made an MP the rabble has become deafening. Something must be done or we will be no better than the streets of Paris...”

“That seems rather alarmist,” said Victoria.

“There was the business in Newport, ma’am. They have a petition which they would like to parade into the capital, claiming it has six million signatures-”

“What do they want?,” asked Gina.

Russell looked taken aback.

Regina looked at her mother. “If they have a petition, that means they want something, does it not?”

“Yes, of course.” Victoria turned back to her Prime Minister. “Lord Russell?”

“Ma’am?”

“The Princess Royal asked a question.”

“You mean to interrupt our-”

“What if I had asked it?”
Gina was looking to Melbourne.

“Electoral reforms,” Melbourne answered.

“The general feeling is that we ought to increase the police presence in London and bring in the army-”

“The army?,” asked Gina.

“That seems a bit extreme,” said Victoria. “It seems to me that whenever some sort of demonstration happens there is an excessive show of force followed by an overreaction, followed by some tragedy.”

“These matters are complex, ma’am.”

“Did my summation strike you as simple?” She looked at Melbourne. “Lord M? Was my summation too simple?”

“No, ma’am. As you know, you and I share much the same view of these matters.”

Russell tried to hide his eye roll. “We think it would be better if you took residence in the country...”

“I am to run and hide for a demonstration?”

“It is for your own safety, ma’am.”

“What do you suppose?”

Will was talking to Emily.

Emily looked up from her cuppa. “What do you mean? Isn’t it obvious?”

“Well, I think she’ll probably spend a few weeks here-”

“In hospital? No, Will.”

“No what?”

“Will, Mum has had a massive stroke-”

“She’s fine.”

“She is not fine. She is dying.”

“She is not dying-”

“God damn it, Will, how can you be so bloody dumb? God knows you’re her favorite because you’re meant to be clever.”

“I am not her favorite-”

“Yes, you are.”

They both looked and turned to see Victoria.
“Sorry,” she said.

Emily stormed off.

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” said Will. He looked at her cup. “Is that coffee?”

Victoria groaned. “I’m just so bloody tired.”

Will took the cup away from her.

“Hey!,” she snapped.

“I’m protecting you from yourself.”

“What do you suppose?”

The room after supper had finally cleared. The ladies and courtiers seen off for the night.

“I think the fish soup was off.”

“Lord M...” she sighed.

“No, I do think so. That may well be the cause of your early morning predicament...”

“You are not ill from the fish soup.”

“I never have a chance to finish mine. It is taken away as soon as you finish yours.”

“About what Lord Russell said.”

“He is overreacting.”

“You do not think we ought to flee the palace?”

“No, but one thing is certain, there will be trouble, blood will be spilt if a Chartist demonstration goes through the capitol on so grand a scale.”

“How do you propose we avoid it?”

“An envoy from Her Majesty to the Chartist leaders might help smooth things over.”

“Who would perform such a task?”

“I may have someone.”

“Where is Will?”

Victoria smiled. “He had to get some sleep. I thought I might join you if that’s alright.”

She took the chair by the bedside. “Franny brought your photos to you. How nice.”
There was a collection. Will looking very young in his Cambridge garb. Emily’s wedding photos, Fred at his club, photos of the grandchildren. Victoria’s interest went to another grouping, Liz in her heyday, posing.

“Wow, Liz, you were...”

“Young?”

“That, too.”

“I was a model.”

“Will never mentioned that...”

She shook her head. “I never told him. I was also married to a prince for a few days.”

“You were what?”

“From Saudi Arabia or Qatar or somewhere like that. I just know it was dreadfully hot.”

“What happened?”

“I went out for cigarettes.”

Victoria laughed. Liz did not join her.

“You weren’t serious, were you?”

“You never knew when I was joking.”

Victoria frowned. She could not remember a time that Liz had joked with her. Even the streusel comment was never meant with malice, but no joking.

“Liz, what do you mean?”

Liz’s attention was taken away by a chat show, leaving Victoria to wonder.

Feargus O’Connor walked into his terraced house.

“Mr. O’Connor, you have a visitor.”

“A visitor?”

“In the parlor, sir.”

O’Connor walked into his parlor, surprised to see Lord Melbourne.

“Lord Melbourne.”

“Mr. O’Connor.” He stood.

“Don’t stand on my account.”

They sat.

“I won’t beat around the bush,” said Melbourne. “I have come because Lord Russell says that the
Chartists are going to hold a demonstration in the capitol.”

“Yes.”

“It is a terrible idea.”

“Is that what Lord Russell thinks?”

“No. That is what it is. Lord Russell will overreact, he is already trying to bring in the Duke of Wellington though the man grows deafer every day...”

“Not that you fear revolution.”

“These matters never result in a revolution.”

“Ask the King of France. Or Marie Antoinette.”

“Is that what the Chartists want now? To behead the Queen?”

“Does that concern you?”

Melbourne sighed. “You ask me if the potential execution of my wife and children concerns me. Yes, it does.”

“And you, my lord.”

“If anything were to happen to them, I would not much care, but so long as I have breath I will do all I can for them and that includes not allowing a bloodbath outside the gates where my daughters play. I do not think you want that either.”

O’Connor sighed. “I do hate you, you know.”

Melbourne was amused. “Really?”

“Yes, you are always so reasonable. Even when I was in the House you were one of the few to not turn up your nose when I walked in the room.”

“I do so hate taking sides.”

“With the exception of the Queen.”

“Yes, one glaring exception in my resume, I am afraid.”

O’Connor nodded. “I will speak to my people.”

Will walked in the corridor, running into Emily.

“I need some air,” she said.

“Right.”

“She’s not making any sense, but as ever she is convinced she is...”

Will frowned, going back in the room.
“Mum.”

“William. You are such a good papa to Augustus and the girls...”

He paused. “How did you know Victoria is having girls?”

“She’s very good at having girls.”

“She, she’s never had a baby before. Carrie had Allison.”

“She had us.”

Will was growing frustrated. He wondered if it was even worth the argument at this point.

“She, I think you are a bit confused, perhaps you’re overtired-”

“I am quite tired, but I am not confused.”

“Victoria is not your mother-”

“She was and she found you and I am so glad for the two of you apart is ever a tragedy.” She grabbed his hands. “Promise you will not leave me.”

“No, Mum, of course not.” He sat down, taking her hand.

“I shall never forget.”

The words struck through Will like electricity. “What?”

Liz didn’t answer.

“She, why would you-”

One of the sundry alarms went off and Will became very aware that his mother was not responding to anything.

Victoria moaned, Melbourne gripping her hips as she rode him.

“Oh, yes, Lord M...”

“My beautiful, Victoria...” He held her closer, whispering in her ear. “Come for me.”

She broke for him, becoming boneless. Melbourne switched their positions, driving into her until he found his release.

“So...” she mused. “It is nearly evening and we seem to have not been overthrown.”

“Yes, a very good thing, too for I do not know what history would make of us were we found like this by the raging mob.”

She sighed. “Lord M, do be serious.”

He let his hand slide down her stomach. She braced herself as it settled on the slight swelling of her stomach.
“May we discuss this yet?”

“Is it noticeable?”

“Only to me and your dressers, I presume.”

“They will have already noticed I have not had my blood.”

“Then perhaps it is time to make an announcement.”

She nodded. “Lord Russell will be coming.”

They went into the parlor where Regina sat with the Duchess.

“Gina, how very grown up you look,” Victoria remarked.

“She is quite charming,” said the Duchess.

“The goal is not for her to be charming, but queenly, Mama,” said Victoria.

“Charm has never done a queen wrong,” said Melbourne. “Luckily for Gina she succeeds ably at both.”

“Is this all the party we are this evening?,” asked the Duchess.

“Yes, we thought to keep it a small party.”

Penge entered. “Lord Russell, Your Majesty.”

They stood. Victoria took her tribute and resumed sitting.

“So, Lord Russell, I take it the demonstration was a success?”

“I do not know if I would say that, ma’am. The Chartists proved to have far less support than they claimed.”

“I mean, Lord Russell, that the assembly was a peaceful one, no one was hurt and it would seem that the entire matter was an overreaction.”

“I suppose so, ma’am.”

“What do you mean the Chartists had less support than they claimed?”

“Well, ma’am, they claimed to have six million signatures but the number according to the clerks is closer to one point six million,” Russell said confidently.

“That is still a lot,” said Gina.

Russell seemed surprised. “Your Royal Highness?”

“Lady Lovelace says the population of England was last recorded at thirteen million,” said Gina. She looked at Victoria. “One million six hundred thousand out of thirteen million is still a lot, I could do the sum if I had a pencil.”
“No, Gina, you’re quite right.” She looked up at Russell. “That is still a lot.”

“A minority, ma’am.”

“A large minority it would seem. As your monarch, I would suggest you consider seriously what they have to say.”

Victoria entered the room. Maggie was fast asleep and Regina still had her taper lit as she read a book.

“You ought to sleep.”

“Papa has not been in yet.”

“Ah.” It sometimes pained Victoria that she did not always tell the girls good night. Very often she was meant to entertain some politician or diplomat and could not break away. Her own ladies would understand on evenings when she left briefly, they all had children of their own. Melbourne was the one who came and said good night to them.

“He says I may read until he comes in.”

“Well,” said Victoria, gently taking away the book, “I wanted to come and tell you how proud you made me. I have always been quite proud of you, though.”

“Why?”

“When you were a baby?” She smiled. “Well, you were so beautiful and I could always tell you were clever. Now, though, you were very good with Lord Russell. You had very good questions for him. That is very important for a monarch to ask good questions.”

“I do not like him.”

Victoria nodded. “Sometimes that is the case with Prime Ministers. I am afraid they are not all like your papa.”

“Thank you, Mama.”

A voice came from the door. “Are we keeping her up?”

Victoria looked back at Melbourne. “I am doing so such thing.”

“Well, then you will not mind if I wish her good night.” Melbourne knelt down. “So, you are only to dream of good things. What shall you dream of?”

“Dogs.”

“Dogs, excellent choice and very subtle with your mama right here.”

“Your Majesty.”

They turned to see Lehzen.
“There is a visitor.”

“Visitor? At this hour?”

They went down to the throne room and were quite surprised to see the French royal family standing before them. Louis-Philippe, Amalia, Helene, the little crown prince looking quite little and lost. Indeed, the whole family did look lost, their clothes soiled, worn.

“Your Majesty. Lord Melbourne,” said the king.

“Your Majesty,” said Victoria, looking at her husband. “We were not expecting you.”

The king shook his head. “We did not know where to go.”

“Will?”

Will looked up from his stupor to see Victoria holding a box.

“What’s that?”

“Your mum’s photos.”

He stood. “You shouldn’t be carrying anything heavy—”

“It’s not—”

Will took the box away.

“Will.”

They rode home in silence. Victoria followed Will inside.

“Are you hungry?”

He did not answer.

“Will? Are you hungry?”

“I should ring Gussie.”

“It’s late. They have curfew.”

“No, right.”

“You ought to go yourself.”

“No, there’s classes tomorrow.”

“His grandmother’s just died.”

“I can tell him at the weekend.”
“You can’t wait until the weekend to tell him someone has died.”

Will sat on the sofa. Victoria walked over.

“How did my mum seem to you?”

“What?”

“She was not making sense at the end...”

“Well, no, but she had a stroke, Will.”

“She was speaking so strangely...”

Victoria sat down next to him, taking his hand. “Like what?”

“She said you were very good at having girls.”

Victoria smiled. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know.”

Victoria tilted her head. “She did say that I never knew when she was joking.”

Will frowned. “She never joked with you.”

“I know. She was probably thinking of someone else.”

Will fell back against the sofa, Victoria with him.

“My mum’s gone.”

“Yeah.”

Effie walked into the dining room as the footmen bowed. She walked to the sideboard.

“You awoke,” said Della.

“So I did,” Effie remarked choosing her breakfast.

They looked up.

“Your Royal Highness.” He bowed and turned to Della. “Your Royal Highness.”

“Sir Charles.”

The man cleared his throat. “Your Majesty wishes me to convey a message about your... exploits.”

“Does she?” Effie looked up. “Well, I am here.”

“She wished me to convey it.”

“Well, that will not do.”
“Ma’am?”

“I can hardly be expected to have a conversation with my mother the Queen through a servant. Certainly it is beneath both our dignities.”

“Your Royal Highness—”

“That is all I have to say on the matter.” She turned her attention back to her plate. “You may withdraw.”

Effie sat down at the table. She caught her younger sister’s incredulous expression.

“What?”

“Mama will not be pleased.”

“That will not be a novelty, but Mama must attend to her duties and certainly one of them is to criticize me in person. Besides, now that she and Gina are barely speaking she cannot even force her to chastise me.”

Della nodded. “I thought I might take a turn around the garden, would you—”

Effie burst into tears.

“Effie, what is it?”

“Papa is gone.”

“Yes?”

Della stood, going to her sister’s side. “We all miss him,” she tried to reassure.

“His entire life was for us and now he is gone and there is nothing I can do for him.”

Della embraced her sister as the footmen tried not to notice.
Spring faded into summer and so the family left the palace for Brocket Hall. Gina and Maggie raced through the garden. Melbourne and Victoria sat on a blanket as Ellie toddled by them.

“So,” said Melbourne.

“So?”

“Names.”

“Oh, certainly it is still too soon for that.”

“Do not suppose for a moment you have fooled me into thinking you do not think upon these matters. The way you seemingly pull them from thin air. It does not fool me for one moment.”

“I have a name chosen for a son, but I do not think it will be a son.”

“But no name chosen for a daughter?”

“No.”

Ellie toddled back to them. Melbourne took her in his arms.

“You are not worried, are you?,” he asked.

“No,” said Victoria, looking down at the ball that used to be her stomach. It was a half lie. This baby had seemed nothing but healthy, now hardly giving Victoria a full few hours of sleep without some kick or movement, but she could not shake the feeling of doom.

“You are beautiful.”

“William...”

“Majesty.”

Melbourne sighed as Lehzen approached. The new nurse Frau Widner was with her, personally selected by Lehzen herself.

“Yes, Lehzen?,” asked Victoria.

“It is time for the princesses naps, Majesty.”

“Since when?,’’ asked Melbourne.

Lehzen scowled her disapproval.

“What Melbourne means to say is that the princesses have never really had a schedule at Brocket Hall,” said Victoria. “They nap when they are tired.”

“I do not see how that can work.”
“Yet it does...” said Melbourne.

Gina ran up to them.

“Papa, may we go riding?”

Melbourne looked at Victoria, glancing up at Lehzen. “May we?”

“Go riding.” Victoria took Ellie’s hand. “You will come inside with me.”

“Who is that?”

Victoria rolled her eyes as her mother looked over her shoulder. “Frau Widner.”

“And who is Frau Widner?”

“A minor historical footnote. She was the nanny when Princess Margaret broke her arm, went back to Hanover after that.”

Mary snorted. “I would send her back to Hanover as well. Did she break her arm herself?”

“No, the Captain of the Guards at Brocket Hall records that Princess Margaret broke it climbing out of the nursery window.”

“Victoria!,” Will called.

“In here!”

Will walked into the kitchen. “Good morning, Mary.”

“Good morning. How are you?”

“Fine. Victoria, have you seen a green plastic box?”

“No.”

“It would have been with my mum’s stuff.”

“No, but I can help you look-”

“No, I don’t want you lifting things.”

“Will, I’m not-”

He walked out.

“Helpless,” she finished.

“He just needs time, meine liebe.”

“He’s been distracted like this for weeks,” Victoria lamented.

“His mother has died.”
“I know, but he won’t let me help him. Emily and Fred ought to be helping, but they’re not because he was the favorite or something. He even tried to put some of it in the nursery.”

“No.”

“He said he would take it out before V and X are born, but I don’t want a dead woman’s things in my nursery!” Victoria whispered the last bit.

“Do not worry, Victoria. Mama will see to it.”

“Oh, God, don’t say that.”

The doorbell rang.

“That will be the nanny,” said Mary.

“The what?”

Victoria walked down the corridor as Ellie toddled along beside her and Lehzen. She had lately become interested in the various portraits at the palace and Windsor Castle, now enamored with exploring Brocket Hall.

“Things are done differently at Brocket Hall, Lehzen. That is all.” She looked down to Ellie. “Come on, darling.”

“Who that?”

Victoria looked up. “Why that is your grandmama, Lady Melbourne. I believe this was painted after she was introduced at court.” She took her hand. “Tell Grandmama goodbye.”

“Bye grandmama.”

“She should be napping.”

“She is not tired.” Victoria laughed as Ellie’s little legs scurried down to the next portrait.

“Who that?,” asked Ellie.

Victoria sighed. They had arrived at the portrait the Prince Regent had given to the master of the house of he and his horse’s rear.

“That is my Uncle George,” said Victoria, supposing today was not the day to tell her daughter the story of just how closely entwined the two families she hailed from were. She wondered if there would ever be a day. “Say hello to Uncle George.”

“Hello, Uncle George,” she said the words coming out a little garbled.

“Children need structure, Majesty.”

“You mean as I had structure of Kensington?”

“I would never suggest that, but, majesty, if I may, you are going to be a mother of four.”

“I had noticed, but Lord Melbourne likes things done a specific way in his home. He likes the
children to be free here without the pressures of the court. That is why we so often do not entertain here."

“You have brought Sir George.”

“Because we cannot risk him not making it from London. The same for Sir James.” She led Ellie to the next portrait. “Now, who is that fine gentleman?”

“Papa!”

“That is right. I had this painted when he was Prime Minister. Look how well the painter has captured his eyes.”

“I think the princesses have too much freedom.”

“Surely not, Lehzen. I hope this is not why Frau Widner was taken on.”

“She came with the best references, Majesty.”

“I am certain she did, but you know Lord Melbourne can be very protective of the princesses and he does not yet know Frau Widner.” Victoria took Ellie’s hand. “Let me show you something.”

She led her onto a stool so she could peer over the case of family enamels.

“Who is that?,” asked Victoria.

Ellie mumbled something.

“That is Papa!”

“Not Papa!”

“When he was very young. You see, I went on a tour of Eton and they have a great gallery of all their graduates but they had none of Papa so Papa found this one, but I decided I would much rather have it for myself.”

“And still Eton lacks a portrait of Lord Melbourne,” lamented Lehzen.

“Well, perhaps I will commission another, but then I might like that one too well to give it up.” Victoria leaned over to Ellie. “Is not your papa handsome?”

“So,” said Victoria, looking down, “Mrs. Gerta Widner Hanover.”

“Yes.”

“You are applying for the position of nanny.” She looked at her mother. “A position I did not know I was hiring for.”

“There will be two of them. You will be very busy.”

“What happened to you helping me?,” asked Victoria.
“Are these boxes always here?,” asked the woman.

Victoria nodded. “Yes, we always keep stacks of boxes that smell of care home in our sitting room.”

“My son-in-law’s mother has just died. These are her things.”

Victoria turned to her mother. “Your son-in-law.”

“Yes. Professor Lamb.” Mary smiled at Gerta. “He and my daughter are both professors at Oxford. My daughter wrote a book about the second Queen Victoria that is going to be a film starring what is her name?”

“Felicity Jones.” She leaned over to her mother. “Are we interviewing her or is she interviewing us?”

“Please excuse us.”

Mary hustled her off to the office.

“She is the best nanny in Europe.”

“Then who has Victoria VI got? I’m going to text her.”

“Yes, you are so clever.”

“I will. Watch.” Victoria took out her mobile.

“Your sister wanted her, but I persuaded her to come here. More money for less children and of course her own suite.”

“Mum, we don’t have a suite.”

“We can sort that.”

“Mum!”

“You just need to add on to the house. You know this house is too small.”

“This house is fine.” She looked back at her phone and started typing again.

“Victoria, you do not need to pretend to be texting with the Queen.”

“I am texting the Queen. Look, we don’t need a nanny.”

“No?”

“No, we’re both on sabbatical until next September and I’ve already started talking to Emma about waiting until the spring to go back to teaching. I’m only going to do one or two classes a semester if I can help it.”

“You do not need to.”

“Will can make his own office hours. He’ll be here when I’m there.”

“And what about time for yourself?”

The mobile rang.
“You hired someone to ring you?,” asked Mary.

“Hold on. She wants to Facetime.”

The screen came on and they were soon joined by the Queen.

“Why are you asking about nannies?,” the Queen asked.

Mary nearly fainted.

“My mum brought a terrifyingly old German woman in for an interview. Say hi mum.”

“Your Majesty,” Mary stammered.

“Hello, Victoria’s mum.”

“How old is she?,” another voice asked.

The Queen rolled her eyes. “Sorry. My cousin Emma is here.”

Emma popped her head behind the Queen. “Hi. So you’re Victoria.”

“So I am. Nice to meet you, Duchess.”

“How old is she?”

“Ancient.”

“Is your partner very attractive?,” asked Emma.

The Queen looked to her cousin. “He is not at all bad looking. And he can cook. Good point.”

Victoria looked at her mother. “You think Will would cheat on me?”

“Not if you do not invite an eighteen year old au pair into your home.”

“My nanny is actually the niece of David’s nanny,” said the Queen. She motioned at her cousin. “She actually managed to get her old nanny.”

“Pari is the best and I know she will beat any ambitious eighteen year olds with a broom if they try to make a move on my husband.”

“Because she beat you with a broom,” said the Queen.

Emma turned to Victoria. “She caught me sneaking out of my window. She swept me a bit. The man I was meeting got beaten with a broomstick and then the Hoover after that broke.”

“Tell us about the book,” said Emma. “Where are you now?”

“Princess Euphemia.”

Will entered. “Victoria, there’s a woman in the sitting room who says she’s here for a job interview.”

“I’ll ring you back,” Victoria said to the Queen.

“Yes, sounds as if you have a bit going on there.”
She hung up and looked at Will. “Mum asked her.”

“Well, she can ask her to leave then.”

“You need the help, William,” said Mary.

“I took care of two children on my own- both with special needs- and worked and was chair of the bloody Parents’ Council! I do not need a nanny!”

Victoria frowned. “You were Chair of the Parents’ Council?”

“Yes.”

“Did you run for that?”

“I don’t know, it just happened and one day I was Chair of the Parents’ Council. We are not hiring a nanny.”

“William, perhaps you could just use some help-”

“I do not like people around my children. People who do not love them as much as I do, people I have to worry about, people I have to put a spy camera on-”

“A spy camera?,” asked Victoria.

“That woman looks like a Bond villain or at least a Bond henchman. I’m not hiring her.”

“Fine. I never even wanted a nanny.”

Melbourne was awoken by the loudest shriek he had ever heard.

“William, that is Maggie.”

“Maggie?” He stood. “It cannot be. It is coming from outside.”

“William...”

“Right, this is Maggie.”

They both quickly donned their dressing gowns and Melbourne carried a taper into the garden.

“Maggie!”

“Papa! Papa, help!”

He handed Victoria the taper as he broke into a run. Victoria struggled to waddle quickly.

Maggie had landed before the nursery window in the grass, crying. This shocked Victoria more than anything as she cradled her arm.

“It hurts, Papa!”
“Let me see.”

She sobbed as Melbourne took her wrist.

Melbourne looked up at his wife. “I think it is broken. We should fetch Sir James.”

“Help Ellie.”

“Why do I need to help Ellie?”

“Your Majesty! Lord Melbourne!”

Powell joined them, rushing with some hallboys and a few footmen in their nightshirts.

“Help me get her inside and wake Sir James.”

Powell nodded at the hallboy as Melbourne lifted Maggie. He ran off as the rest of the party gathered around him, taking her into the library and lighting the tapers.

“You need to help Ellie.”

“What is wrong with Ellie?,” asked Victoria.

Maggie sobbed.

Victoria turned to head upstairs, walking towards the nursery.

The new junior nursemaid was asleep outside the door. She cleared her throat.

“Ma’am, I-”

She heard screaming. Ellie screaming.

Victoria shoved past the nursemaid. She nearly lost breath at the sight. Ellie was screaming and thrashing, Regina trying to hold her.

“Ellie.”

“Mama,” said Gina. She was nearly sobbing. “I am sorry.”

“Why?” She took Ellie away from Gina, careful of her very protruding stomach.

The nursemaid stared at her.

“Ma’am-”

“Fetch Sir James!”

“I.”

“Now!”

Victoria sighed, waiting until Sir James arrived, Melbourne not far behind.

“Majesty.”

“Sir James, you must help her, she is having some kind of fit!”
Her mind went to the worst. Was this what Augustus had? Would she be damaged? She took Gina aside as Sir James took over.

“Your Royal Highness, did something happen to your sister?,” asked Sir James.

“No. She just fell asleep.” Gina looked up. “I tried to help her.”

Sir James looked at her soberly. “I am certain you did, your royal highness.”

“What is it?,” asked Victoria.

“Night terrors,” supplied Melbourne.

“Did Augustus have them?”

“No. Both Emily and my sister Harriet suffered from them.”

“Yes,” agreed Sir James. “It happens very often in families.”

“What is it? Can’t you make it stop?!?”

“It will stop on its own. One must simply keep the child from injury.”

They waited again as Ellie finally calmed down.

“Has this happened before, your royal highness?,” asked Sir James.

“Yes.”

“And you did not think to tell us?,” asked Melbourne.

“Frau Widner said not to.”

“She said not to?,” Melbourne asked, his voice growing louder.

Sir James stood. “Ma’am, it appears this has passed, might I suggest I return to Princess Margaret?”

“Yes, of course.”

Sir James left.

“Why did you not tell us later?,” asked Victoria.

“She said you would not believe us, that she would punish us.” She looked up at Melbourne. “That is why I sent Maggie.”

“You sent Maggie?,” asked Victoria.

“I thought... if you saw her we could help her.”

“Oh, Gina,” sighed Victoria.

“But why did you not come down the hall?,” asked Melbourne.

“We are not allowed.”

Victoria looked to her husband.
“Gina...” Melbourne put her hands in his. “Your aunt Emily had this. So did Cousin Fanny. It is a sort of nightmare, but Ellie does not remember it in the morning.”

“You always tell us to only dream of good things.”

“I know, but this cannot be helped and they cannot hurt her. It is more frightening for us.”

“And we are brave, yes?,” asked Victoria.

“Yes.”

“Go to our room. You may sleep there,” said Victoria.

They waited for Regina to pad away.

“Well-respected, is she?”

“Lord M-”

“Majesty, I-”

They looked to see Frau Widner.

“Get out of my sight!,” shouted Melbourne.

“What?”

“You are dismissed and if you so much as lay eyes upon my children, I will have the guards throw you in the Tower!”

Widner looked at the Queen.

“You have our permission to withdraw,” said Victoria.

Widner left.

“I must go to Maggie. It goes without question that you will decide what to do with the Baroness.”

“Lehzen?,” asked Victoria. “What do you mean what to do with Lehzen?”

He shook his head and did not answer, walking away.

Victoria walked into the sitting room.

“You found your green box,” she said.

“Yes, I did.” He took a jar out.

Victoria sat down next to him. “What sort of science experiment is that?”

“It’s my mum’s caul.”

Victoria took the jar. “A what?”
“You know. A caul. From when she was born. Like Princess Euphemia.”

Victoria froze. “You mean this is a dried out eighty year old membrane?”

“Yes.”

She handed the jar back. “Okay.”

“Well, I can’t keep it in the garage.”

“Yeah, I get that.”

“They’ve kept Princess Euphemia’s. It’s at the Windsor Archives.”

“You mean to tell me there is a one hundred and seventy year old dried out membrane in a jar at Windsor Castle?”

“No, they had it put in a special box. Well, part of it. Part of it Euphemia wore in a locket her mother had made for her.”

“She wore membrane around her neck.”

“People save umbilical cords, people save baby teeth.”

“Wait. People save umbilical cords?”

“Yes.”

“If I open a drawer in this house, am I going to find an umbilical cord?”

“No, but people do. Besides, I already paid the cord blood and tissue people.”

“You already paid them?”

“Of course I did. It was buy one get one half off.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

“I didn’t think you would mind potentially saving our children’s lives…”

“Yeah, but maybe you ought to run it by me?”

“As you ran the nanny by me.”

“That was all Mum, Will. Besides, I thought we were going to discuss things.” She looked at jar. “Like what you’re going to do with that jar.”

“You want me to just bin it? My mum was born with this thing.” He stomped off.

"Right, no, keep the dried membrane…” Victoria said to herself.

“Your Majesty.”

Victoria looked up at Lehzen. She had been pacing the room, having summoned Lehzen before she dressed or worse yet knew what to do.
“Maggie has broken her arm, Lehzen.”

“I know, Majesty.”

“Because she thought she had to climb out a window to speak to her parents. Because you hired a woman who kept them locked up.”

“I am sorry, Majesty-”

“She could have been killed! And Gina was in tears and Ellie, poor Ellie, suffering whilst her parents had no idea!”

“She does not even remember these fits, Majesty.”

Victoria straightened. “You knew.”

“I-”

“Gina and Maggie do not share a nursery with Ellie at the palace. They would not have known, but you knew.”

“She will grow out of it, Majesty.”

“How long?”

“Majesty-”

“How long, Lehzen??”

“A few months, Majesty. I did not want to worry you in your condition.”

“Then why did you not tell Lord Melbourne?”

“Majesty?”

“If you did not want to worry me, you could have informed Lord Melbourne. He is my husband and Princess Eleanora’s father!”

“The physician said-”

“Physician? What physician? You summoned a physician without asking so much as my permission?”

“Yes, Majesty.”

“What else? What else has been happening to my children- our heiresses- without my knowledge or consent? Or Lord Melbourne’s?”

“With permission, Majesty, I think you let Lord Melbourne dictate too much-”

“Dictate?”

“Yes. Everything he says must be done-”

“He is their father.”

“Princess Regina is not his daughter-”
“Yes, she is.”

“It is very kind of him to feel that way-”

“I went in his room. The night you put him in the Belgian Suite.”

“I do not remember-”

“After we returned from Windsor after we buried Albert.”

Lehzen was in disbelief. “You...”

“Yes.”

“He seduced you.”

“I went to his room and got in his bed, Lehzen. He did not have to seduce me.”

“You were in mourning.”

“I needed him.”

It was that simple. She had needed him. She had no answer, no regrets, no apologies.

Lehzen turned and left.

“Lehzen!”

Just then, Victoria felt a sharp pain.

“Lehzen, come back! I think I-”

She was greeted not by the face of her governess, but her husband.

“What is it? Is something the matter?”

“It’s the baby.”

“Are you certain?”

Victoria nodded. She felt tears start coming. Melbourne approached her, embracing her.

“All will be well. We know that.”

“Will you stay with me?”

“Yes, of course I will.”

Victoria walked into the bedroom. Will was under the covers.

“Can we talk?”

“I’m not binning it.”
She sighed. “No, we need to talk about your mum, not just her membrane-y thing...”

He didn’t answer. Victoria got in the bed next to him and took his hand.

“You know you haven’t been here... mentally. And I am sorry, Will, but I am just not having it. I took too long to find you. You aren’t going anywhere.”

“Mum said that.”

She frowned. “Said what?”

“She said you found me.”

“Okay,”

He sat up to face her. “She said you were her mother-”

Victoria was a bit flabbergasted. “She what?”

“She said that you were her mother and you found me and she was glad for the two of us apart was a tragedy.”

“Will, she wasn’t in her right mind. Is that what’s bothering you?”

“She said ‘I shall never forget.’”

“So? Will, lots of people use ‘I shall never forget.’”

“Why would she say that?”

“Will, I don’t know why your mum-” Her face dropped. “Oh, my God.”

“What?”

Her hand flew to her stomach. “They’re kicking. Well, at least one of them is kicking or something-”

“Kicking?”

Victoria smiled. “Yeah.” She grabbed his hand, adjusting it on her stomach. “There.”

Will smiled back at her. “They’re strong.”

“Yeah, it’s starting to worry me a bit. Is it going to be like this the entire rest of the time? What if they break something in there? Something I need?”

“They’re not going to break anything.”

“Will, your mum died and that sucks. It really sucks. And she didn’t know what she was talking about and I’m sorry, but I need you.”

Will sighed, taking her in an embrace. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be, just be here.”
Victoria took another breath, holding her husband’s hand.

“William.”

“I am here.”

“We are almost there, I think, Majesty.”

“You think? I do not know how much more I can stand of you thinking!”

Melbourne looked over at Sir James. The man seemed positively befuddled which was not something he wanted.

“William?”

She looked to him desperate for reassurance.

He kissed her hand. “You are almost there, Victoria.”

“Push, Your Majesty.”

Victoria grunted, erupting into a scream and gasping for breath.

She looked up to see the perplexed look on Sir James’ face.

“What is it?” Her heart raced. “What is it?”

“Majesty, you mustn’t move-”

“There are no cries, why not?!”

“Victoria-”

“It appears the child has been born en caul.”

“En caul?” Her husband left her side joining Sir James.

“What is that? What does that mean?”

“There is a sac that the child lives in whilst it is in the womb, sometimes the sac comes through childbirth intact.”

“I have never heard of such a thing.”

“Well, look over.”

She leaned forward as best she could, one of the nurses helping her. Her baby seemingly floating in an oval.

“A moment,” said Sir James.

He brought out some sort of scalpel, puncturing the shield. The child wailed instantaneously.

“Oh, do not cry, my love...” Melbourne said almost instantly.

“It is a girl, Your Majesty.”
“A girl,” Victoria smiled. “I am very good at having girls.”

“You are the best.”

Victoria made her way downstairs to the kitchen.

“You’re up early.”

“I’ve work to catch up on. Lehzen’s departure.”

“Well, I’m about done with Euphemia’s birth, though I think I’ll let you put in all the membrane trivia...”

She walked to the kettle and poured a cuppa.

“I don’t suppose you sorted out how Princess Margaret broke her wrist?”

“Total mystery. If the nanny had done it, you think we would know a bit more. Just that she was climbing out the window of the nursery.”

He sighed. “Why would she climb out the window of the nursery?”

“Well, she was five, I think that’s about as good a reason as we’re going to get.”

Victoria sat at the table with him. “A bit of a mad time for them. New baby, one daughter with a broken bone, not to mention all the usual Queen stuff...”

He looked up at her. “Do you think we need help?”

“No, Will, I told you, we’ll be fine. I’ll teach part time.”

“Is that what you want, though?”

She shook her head. “What do you mean?”

“Do you want to teach part time or would you rather stay on as you are? Because we could get someone or I could be the one who’s part time-”

“Will, no.” She put down her cuppa. “I want this. I want to do the mum thing. When I said I wanted a baby, this is what I had in mind. I don’t want to feel like I missed it.”

“What makes you say that?”

Victoria shrugged. “Dunno. Just this feeling I have.” She took his hand. “So, Lehzen’s departure.”

“Lehzen’s departure.”

“What does it mean?,” asked Victoria.

“Some believe that the caul bestows favor on the bearer.” Melbourne ran his hand over the baby’s head as her mother held her. “Though one must suppose that she already has great favor having been born the daughter of the Queen of England.”
“What else?”

“It was thought that they have powers of perception...”

“That could come in useful.”

“Sailors believe if they carry a piece of it with them it protects them from drowning...”

“Carry a piece?”

“Oh, yes, they are sold. I have seen advertisements. We could make one or two pounds I suppose...”

“Lord M...”

“I am serious.”

Victoria took a breath. “It seemed as if, for a moment, that- I thought we did not have her.”

“I know.”

Victoria smiled, turning back. “She has very fine features, I think.”

“Yes. She reminds me a bit of my mama.”

“Lady Melbourne? Really?”

“Yes, she appears to be a Milbanke.”

“You have classified all our children?”

“Well, Maggie is a Hanover.”

“What makes Maggie a Hanover?”

“She has the Hanover temperament. Do not deny it. Were she Queen, she would dismiss her ministers on every day they did not declare war on someone.”

“Gina?”

“I should not say.”

“She has the look of an Egremont. As does Ellie.”

“Many people have the look of an Egremont, all the more reason not to mention it.” He looked up at her. “So, when will you tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“Her name.”

Victoria smiled. “Euphemia.”

“Euphemia...” Melbourne appraised.

“Effie.”

He nodded. “Princess Euphemia of the United Kingdom.”
“Her Royal Highness, Princess Euphemia of the United Kingdom,” said Victoria. “Though the title seems very strange to me.”

“In what way?”

“Sons of monarchs are always the Prince of Wales of the Duke of York or the Duke of Kent or Sussex or somewhere, but the daughters of monarchs have no special titles other than the Princess Royal. Should daughter of monarchs not be treated the same as sons?”

“I believe the intent was that daughters of monarchs are married into other royal houses...”

“You do not wish this.”

“Good God no, but I am their father. I would not have them marry ever if I could possibly help it.”

Victoria sighed. “We shall have to do something about that...”
Windsor Castle, 1942

Victoria stared at the paper.

“Christmas... Christmas is...”

She laid her head down on the desk. She had done three Christmas speeches just like this. Christmases at war and now she was to do another.

“Your Majesty.”

She looked up to see Tommy Lascelles.

“Tommy, I don’t suppose you have a Christmas speech you haven’t bothered to tell me about tucked away somewhere, do you?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Damn.”

“You usually have it well in hand, ma’am. After all, you have the Melbourne gift for rhetoric.”

“Is it too late for Lord Melbourne to write this?,” she asked.

“That would be difficult, ma’am. He has been dead over seventy years.”

She stood. “What did you need, Tommy?”

“The dispatches are here.”

“Oh, good. Have you seen the Earl of Charlbury?”

“I think he was going to take a walk.”

She rolled her eyes. “The prize idiot.”

“Ma’am?”

“This time of year he always wants to collect mistletoe. God knows why.” She picked up her coat. “I shall be back in an hour.”
“Poor children used to collect mistletoe.”

The Queen turned. “Tommy?”

“When I was a boy, the poor children would collect mistletoe from the wood and sell it. They used to come to the back door at my house and sell bunches of it to the housekeeper.”

She sighed. “That does not explain the Earl.”

“What are you doing?”

“Oh. You’re up.”

“The light is on, why aren’t you resting?”

“Well, I was reading one of the baby books—”

“Even though I told you not to.”

“Then I got distracted with this article about a couples’ only resort in Mexico, all inclusive—which would kind of be a waste since I can’t drink—”

“No.”

“And it seemed really hot at first—”

“No.”

“But then it sounded like I might have to share you and I am not sharing you. You are mine.”

He sighed. “And you are still up because?”

“Well, I just wanted to get some things ready for our tour of Windsor.”

“We’ve been to Windsor.”

“Yes, but not like private tour arranged by the Queen been to Windsor.”

“We’re there to research...”

“You know what I find curious, Ernst was there but his soon to be wife wasn’t. If they were going to get married in February, shouldn’t they have at least met in December?”

Will sighed. “Please don’t start about the baby—”

“And the baby!”

“Last time you did that we had to get pregnant.”

Victoria raised an eyebrow. “You had to get pregnant?”

He forced his eyes closed. “You had to get pregnant.”

“I mean, are your breasts huge and your feet swollen?”
Melbourne awoke to his wife’s absence, most conspicuous here at Windsor.

He stumbled out of bed, donning his dressing gown and went in search of his wife.

He found a clue in the nearest nursery where their youngest was sleeping. The door was open and the nurse gone. He heard tears.

“Victoria?”

He found her with in a chair, with Effie suckling away at her breast as she sobbed.

“Victoria...” He knelt down before her, taking her hand. “What is the matter?”

“You will think me foolish.”

“I will not.”

She met his eyes. “I was just thinking of... of the boy we lost.” She shook her head. “Of what it might be like were he here.”

“That is not foolish at all. This time of year often brings out a bit of melancholy...”

“But we have four healthy children, I should not be so ungrateful and were he here, we may not have Effie and I would not trade her for the world.”

“I know.”

“I still hate nursing, though I still hate the thought of her latched onto some woman’s breast...”

“You are beautiful, a Madonna and child.”

“Your Majesty.”

They looked up to see Lehzen.

“I am sorry to interrupt, but the Duke of Saxe-Coburg has arrived.”

“Thank you, Lehzen.”

The Baroness left.

“She is acting strangely.”

“I do not think so...” said Victoria.

They arrived downstairs to find Ernst was already being greeted. The Duchess was there along with
the three eldest girls.

“Gina! How you have grown! Maggie, I heard you broke your arm.”

Maggie held up the limb. “It’s fixed!”

“Is it? Well, broken bones only make you stronger.”

“Cousin Ernst,” smiled Victoria.

He bowed. “Cousin Victoria. How wonderful it is to see you and your beautiful family again!”

He kissed her cheek and then greeted Melbourne.

Maggie stepped forward. “Cousin Ernst, did you bring us a present?”

“Margaret!,” gasped the Duchess. “It is almost Christmas!”

“No matter, Aunt. I have brought my cousin a present.”

He motioned for his valet, who quickly emerged with a parcel. Ernst unwrapped the cloth to reveal a set of wooden swords.

“Mein Gott,” gasped the Duchess.

“Mine!,” Maggie shrieked.

She took her new weapon quickly.

“Certainly, Cousin, if you are to lead your army, you must begin your training now!”

“Ernst, her splint was taken off only last week,” Victoria chided despite her smile. “Maggie, not inside the palace!”

“And where is my goddaughter?”

“Right here,” said Victoria beckoning the nurse forward. She took the infant into her arms.

“How very lovely she is,” said Ernst.

“She bears a striking resemblance to dear William’s mother,” said the Duchess.

“She must have been a lovely woman,” said Ernst.

“We are so pleased to have you for Christmas, Ernst,” said Victoria.

The tour guide was a Mr. Penge, a serious man with glasses, leading them through Windsor and stopping in the ballroom.

“Princess Eleanora’s birthday celebrations were always held here when the family was at Windsor for the festive season.”

Victoria looked up at the frescoes and chandeliers. “Hell of a spot for a little girl’s birthday party.”

Penge ignored her. “The family had their Christmas trees and presents in this room, joined at various
times by Lord Melbourne’s relations. They were frequent guests at the Castle, almost constant when Palmerston became Prime Minister.”

“Charles Dickens performed here, didn’t he?”

Will rolled his eyes.

“Yes, Mr. Dickens performed in the Christmas of 1848 at the Queen’s request and later after Lord Melbourne had died.”

“Spared him a second performance at least,” said Will.

Penge glared.

“He was joking,” Victoria reassured. “Would you show us the spot?”

The court gathered in the chapel of St. George to watch the christening. It was a large party for Christmas this year, courtiers, diplomats and of course, relatives. Emmie was back as the Mistress of the Bedchamber for the princesses and today as one of Effie’s godmothers.

“I baptise thee Euphemia Mary Noelle...”

The Duchess of Gloucester handed the baby back to Victoria. The court looked on with admiration as the three elder princesses looked on. The service finished and they retreated inside the castle for a reception.

“Are you feeling better?”

Victoria looked up. “Do not worry about me, Lord M.”

“I worry about nothing else.”

She smiled. “The sun rises and Euphemia is baptized...” She looked over at her daughters, playing across the room. “I am very fortunate.”

Victoria made eye contact with Lehzen across the room. The Baroness quickly looked away.

“She continues to act strangely.”

“Lehzen is not acting strangely.”

“I admit it’s not unusual for her to not be speaking to me, but to not be speaking to you, that is quite unusual and it has been going on months now. I can only imagine what sort of dressing down you gave her about Frau Widner...”

Victoria looked down as Effie cooed for her attention.

“ Though you would think she would be well over it by now...” he remarked. “Perhaps I ought to speak to her.”

Victoria blanched. “What?”

“To explain it was at my insistence that Frau Widner was dismissed.”
“I would have dismissed her as well.”

“Yes, but things might be easier with the Baroness were it explained that I insisted.”

“I do not think you need to speak to Lehzen.”

“Well, she shall have to speak to us eventually...”

“Papa!,” cried Regina.

“Yes, my darling?” He knelt down before her.

“We want to play outside.”

“Are you not tired of playing in the snow?”

“Emmie said I must ask you.”

He sighed. “Very well, but we must all change.”

“And do not take Ellie. I do not want her in the cold,” said Victoria.

“You cannot coddle her,” Melbourne warned.

“I certainly can.”

“I do think she ought not play with that sword...” said Emily.

“It was a gift from the Duke. She adores it,” said Emmie.

“She is only playing,” said Melbourne.

“And how do you expect a warrior princess to get a husband?”

“There was Eleanor of Aquitaine,” said Melbourne.

“And that is the path you propose?”

Maggie bounded into the snow.

“Maggie!,” Cousin Emmie called after her. “Stay where I can see you!”

Maggie carried further on. In the snow-covered field she spotted a small figure beneath a tree.

“Halt!,” she pointed her wooden sword at the figure’s neck. “Who goes there?!”

A little boy turned, slapping away the sword. “Oi! This is my mistletoe!”

“It is my tree!”

“Is not! I’ve never even see you here!”

“I am Princess Margaret and these all belong to my mama! The Queen!”
“So?”

“She is the Queen,” Maggie said, emphasis on the last word.

“So? She wants it she can come get it!”

“Guards!” She shouted. “Guards!”

“Maggie!,” called Melbourne.

The boy ran. Melbourne appeared out of the thick of the trees.

“Maggie, you must not run so far away from the rest of us,” said Melbourne. “You may get lost.”

“I would not! Besides there was-”

He scooped her up, balancing her on his hip. “We only just healed you.”

“I am fine!”

“Do you know I once had to rescue your mama from these woods?”

“You are lying.”

“I most certainly am not.”

“Mama does not need rescuing.”

“Not as a rule, no…”

Penge led them to the music room. There were footmen inside cleaning it.

“Are we interrupting something?”

“Her Majesty will be hosting a reception this evening.”

“Is Her Majesty here?,” asked Victoria.

Her question was answered as the Queen entered followed by the Duchess of Mumbai.

“Victoria! Will!”

Penge snapped to a bow. Victoria curtsied and Will bowed his head.

“Your Majesty.”

“I’m so sorry to interrupt, Penge. I just wanted to come down and see you all. I’m so pleased we’re here on the same day. This is my Cousin Emma.”

“Duchess,” said Victoria.

“Is Penge showing you around?,,” asked the Queen.

“Yes, Mr. Dickens performed in this room,” said Will.
“Not just Mr. Dickens. Absolutely everyone has performed in this room,” said the Queen. “Tonight, we will be joined by the London cast of Victoria.”

“Which I still don’t know what the big deal is.”

“Excuse her, she lives in Mumbai and doesn’t listen to music,” said the Queen.

“Really? Victoria’s impossible to get tickets to. I’ve been trying for months. Will refuses to let me use his name.”

The Queen looked at Will. “But you wrote the book it’s based on.”

“I thought it was rap,” said Emma.

“It’s hip hop. Do try to make it seem as if you’re from this century.” She turned back to her guests. “There is Katherine Jenkins and Adele.”

“Oh, my God, Adele?,” asked Victoria.

“I know!,” the Queen squealed. She looked at them. “You have to come.”

“No-” Will protested.

“We didn’t bring clothes, though, granted, would have had I known Adele would be performing.”

“I have about a dozen maternity evening gowns that I’m never going to wear again.”

“You are about half a foot taller than me.”

“That’s why I have a seamstress on staff.”

Victoria looked at Will. “Please? We passed that tailor in the village last time we were here. I bet they’ve got something.”

“Fine. So long as we don’t have to go to a Mexican couples’ only resort.”

“I will never mention it again.”

---

“Papa, is Father Christmas real?”

“Certainly.”

“Miss Lucy said that he was called Santa Claus and brought presents to her.”

Melbourne sat. “The American ambassador’s daughter?”

“Yes.”

“Well, she is American, they do have different customs there.”

“Because they dumped our tea in their water?,” frowned Maggie.
He pulled her onto his lap. “I see we shall have to review our history....”

“I do not like history.”

“You do like it. Wait until I tell you about the time General Washington attacked our soldiers on Christmas Day.”

“Really?,” asked Maggie.

“How is your arm?”

Maggie held the formerly broken limb out proudly having just been released from her splint. Melbourne kissed it.

“Now, what story shall we have?”

“Cousin Ashley gave us this.”

Gina handed him a book.

“Dickens...” fumed Melbourne. “Of course he did.”

“He said it was a Christmas story.”

Melbourne put the book down. “What about Shakespeare?”

“But he said Mr. Dickens was coming to perform for court.”

“No, Mr. Dickens is not going to perform for court...” Melbourne scoffed.

“I do hate having to bring this up,” said Ernst.

Victoria took a chair, motioning for him to sit. He did.

“You needn’t be nervous, Cousin.”

“It is about Saxe-Coburg.”

Victoria blanched, fearing the work of Stockmar. “Oh?”

“The succession. As you know, it had been our family’s intention that you and Albert would have multiple sons, one of whom could inherit. Sadly that did not happen.”

“Yes...” said Victoria. “But surely, Ernst, you are young, you could still marry-”

“I do not think so.”

Melbourne entered.

“William.” She looked anxiously at Ernst.

“No, certainly, you must hear this, Cousin William. I know how Cousin Victoria values your opinion.” He sighed. “I am in need of an heir and my dear niece is the only blood of Saxe-Coburg.”
“I do not understand, Ernst. Surely you could marry! You are being ridiculous!,” said Victoria. “I could surely find you a wife!”

“What are you proposing?”

“You two could still have a son, in which case Regina will not be Queen.”

“So I am meant to have a son for the sake of Saxe-Coburg?,” asked Victoria, growing irritated.

Melbourne took her hand.

“Her son could be heir to Saxe-Coburg. It would require a special dispensation…”

“Yes, but if we do not have a son, Gina will be Queen,” said Victoria. “And her son will be the Prince of Wales, her second the Duke of York…”

“And a third?”

“So now Gina must bear three sons for the sake of Saxe-Coburg.”

“And two for England,” said Ernst.

“Or you could father one!” She looked at her husband. “What do you think?”

“I think it unwise to try and determine Gina’s future in this way.”

“She could always marry Cousin Philippe-”

“No, I will not determine who she should marry,” said Victoria.

“Cousin, be sensible of the position we are in. I admit. I tired of Uncle Leopold’s machinations, but he does have a point.”

Melbourne sighed. “I do share Victoria’s concern. Why is it you cannot have a son?”

Ernst shook his head. “I am sorry to bother you. Forgive me. I have grown tired.”

Ernst departed. Victoria looked to her husband.

“Do you have any idea what Ernst means by this?”

“I do not know. It is certainly not that he does not care for the ladies…”

“What do you mean does not care for the ladies?”

“Forget I said anything.”

“No.”

He sighed. His wife had become so worldly in some matters, but still remained ignorant of this one. She looked at him curiously.

“What do you mean? Some men do not care for ladies?”

“No. Some do not.”

“In what way? They prefer the companionship of men?”
“They prefer the companionship of men in the bedroom.”

He watched as the wheels turned in her head. Her mouth opened slowly in a perfect “O.”

“How is such a thing possible?”

“You really wish me to tell you?”

“William, if you do not tell me, who will?” He saw her try to sort it out. “But surely men and women are meant to fit together, so how can men fit with other men?”

“Surely we fit together in more than one way?”

“Mouths, you mean?”

“And there is another point of entry, one you and I do not use.” He sighed. “From the rear…” Victoria gasped. “And this is pleasurable?”

“I have heard it described so.”

“But you do not think this is Ernst’s case?”

“No.”

“Then we must find him a wife,” said Victoria, getting up to pace.

“We must?”

“Ernst reminded me that Albert and I were meant to provide an heir for Saxe-Coburg.”

“Yes, but he is not here. And surely your only concern is to provide an heir for the throne of England—”

“And the Viscountcy of Melbourne.”

“Which does not bother me. I had long ago planned to die with no heir other than Frederick, but now we must find a wife for Ernst?”

“I think you know why.”

Melbourne sighed. “Fine. I will think upon it.”

Victoria smiled. “I knew my clever husband would think of something! I think if you applied yourself, you could give Uncle Leopold competition.”

“Were you going to flatter me like this when you told me Charles Dickens would be coming here?”

“Perhaps.”

“I hate the man.”

Victoria rolled her eyes. “You hardly know him.”

“I know him well enough.”

“Well, I am sorry, but it was the only entertainment my ladies could think up.”
“Then perhaps we ought to get new ladies...”

“They were your friends first,” she chided. “Besides, two of them are your nieces...”

“Emmie has been corrupted by her radical husband.”

“What about this one?,” Emma proposed, holding up a blue dress.

“Oh, yes,” said the Queen. She passed it to Victoria. “What do you think?”

Victoria turned to the mirror with it. “Oh, I do like that...”

“You have very striking blue eyes,” said Emma.

“Try it on,” prodded the Queen.

Victoria went behind the screen that the Queen motioned towards.

“Did they tell you about the Hall Boy yet?,” asked Emma.

“The hall boy?” Victoria popped her head out from the screen. “What Hall Boy?”

The Queen rolled her eyes. “Story is, that Princess Margaret was in love with a hall boy. Actually, I think he got promoted to footman, but of course, the relationship was impossible. Thought it might have destroyed her engagement to Prince Frederick..."

“I thought Lord M wasn’t too keen on that.”

“He wasn’t,” said Emma. “And Wilhelm was not too keen to be another German prince forgotten in the wake of an Englishman of lesser rank.”

Victoria came out from behind the screen. “Well?"

Emma shrugged. “If we cut a foot off it, yes.”

“Oi, you knew I was short when I was invited in.”

The children at Windsor were summoned to one of the ballrooms which had been converted for a holiday celebration of Ellie’s birthday.

The Queen doted on the birthday girl.

“Eleanora is such a charming girl,” said Ernst. “So happy.”

Ellie waved to Melbourne from the game she was playing. He used Effie’s hand to wave back on his behalf.

“Gina wrote in one of her letters that she was worried about her? I admit I was slightly worried.”

“Ellie has night terrors,” said Melbourne. “We have tried to keep it inside the family because people
usually try to make something of these things...”

“Quite understandable,” said Ernst. “No one will hear anything from me.”

“Thank you.”

“Has Cousin Victoria given any thought to my proposal?”

“She has, but you may not like her thought.”

“Which was?”

“She commanded me to find you a wife.”

Ernst sighed. “I am afraid that will not be possible.”

“Your Serene Highness, perhaps if I knew the reason for your reticence, I would be better able to handle it.”

“I should be ashamed to say.”

“You have no judgment to fear from me.”

Ernst motioned for Melbourne to follow him. They went to the next parlor.

“I have a condition that will prevent me from fathering children.” He sighed. “A consequence of early indulgence.”

Melbourne took his meaning immediately. “Ah.”

Ernst looked distraught. “Albert tried to warn me against such bad behavior. As usual he was correct.”

“Well, it is always easier to give advice than to take it,” said Melbourne. “The late Prince had many virtues, but I never took understanding human frailties to be one of them.”

“No,” Ernst agreed. “So you see why I could not tell Cousin Victoria. She would not understand.”

“No, but not from lack of compassion, I think. She is quite capable in many things, but she is quite innocent of such matters.” Certainly after the previous night’s explanations, he did not wish to revisit a similar scenario.

“So you understand why I cannot marry.”

“No, I do not see that. I do see that we must alter expectations a bit...”

Ernst frowned. “You think you have a solution?”

“Not yet, but I find almost anything can be managed.”

Penge announced. “Mister Charles Dickens!”

Melbourne struggled to not roll his eyes. Dickens approached and bowed.
“Your Majesty.”

“Mr. Dickens, welcome to Windsor Castle. We have all been so looking forward to this.” She glanced at her husband. “All of us.”

Ernst smiled, noticing Melbourne’s dismay. “Mr. Dickens, what a privilege this is. The late Prince was a great admirer of your work.”

“I am delighted to hear I have any support in the palace,” said Dickens.

“Shall we adjourn to the music room?,” asked Victoria.

“I take it you know the man?,” Ernst asked Melbourne.

Melbourne sighed. “I was once charged with adultery and a young journalist wrote a novel of it.”

“Mr. Dickens? So that is why you do not like him?”

“Yes.”

Ernst smiled.

“What?”

“It is funny. Albert thought you were elitist to the point of ignoring England’s real problems and that was why you did not care for Mr. Dickens, but it was personal, not political.”

“It is a bit literary.”

Ernst laughed.

Will loitered around as the great and the good clearly wondered who the hell he was. Finally, Victoria descended the stairs.

“Well?”

His eyes widened. It was figure hugging dress, with one shoulder, the blue set off her eyes and gleamed. The curves lent by pregnancy were conspicuously on display.

“What do you think?,” she asked, taking a turn.

“I think I want to take you out to the car.”

“Shag in the car park at Windsor Castle?” Victoria frowned. “Maybe later.”

He smiled and took her arm. They walked into the music room where chairs were set up.

“Actually, I have passed several rooms that look like they’d be great for a shag...” said Victoria.

“You think everywhere is great for a shag...”

“Name one place that wasn’t great for a shag.”

“The church Emma Portman got married in.”
Victoria frowned. “It was a wedding, not a funeral, Will. Besides, she never found out it was us. Though I can’t think how. You weren’t exactly complaining.”

“You started on me in the car park. I was dying.”

“Still. Great shag, though.” She looked at her program. “What is this thing?”

Will read off the program. “A concert to celebrate the one hundred and eightieth anniversary of the accession of Queen Victoria I.”

They all stood to attention as trumpets played. The Queen walked in on the arm of the Duke of Montrose in his Windsor uniform.

“You have got to get one of those,” Victoria sighed dreamily.

“I did not like that story,” Gina declared.

Gina sat on Melbourne’s lap, permitted to stay awake as the adults discussed the evening in the drawing room.

“Well, I am sorry to hear that, Cousin,” said Lord Ashley. “It seems that you have inherited your papa’s literary tastes.”

“She could do worse,” said Victoria.

“Now, now,” said Ernst, “certainly Regina is entitled to her own opinion? What did you not like, niece?”

“Scrooge was very stupid. He took forever to change his mind.”

“Gina has no patience for the verbose,” Melbourne said with a smile.

Ashley turned to Melbourne. “And what did you not care for?”

Melbourne looked at Emmie. “Remind me, did I consent to this marriage?”

Emmie chuckled. “You did.”

“I am far too indulgent an uncle.”

“You are,” she smiled.

“If you do not answer, I will assume you have no argument-”

“Well, I do share Gina’s opinion, it was verbose, Scrooge was stupid, but as a template for social change, I find it a bit fanciful. I think you will find that most businessmen are motivated by self interest. You and Mr. Dickens do not offer that. You expect everyone to be moved by the same dedication to what is right.”

Victoria looked at her husband. “Is not that right?”

“In Utopia, perhaps, but here in the real world, it is a bit more difficult.”
“This is the child labor laws all over again...” moaned Ashley.

“You want to restrict children’s working hours, but you have no answer for how their families are to be supported! Perhaps Mr. Scrooge ought to provide them an annuity?”

Maggie looked up from the floor. “Children work?”

Emmie glared at her husband. “See what you have started?”

Melbourne looked at Maggie. “Yes, some children must work to help support their family. I believe Mr. Dickens himself had to work in a factory when his family had difficulties.”

“A factory?” Maggie stood up, going to her mother’s skirts for comfort.

“Yes, Cousin Maggie, many children work in factories,” said Ashley. “Though some work is done elsewhere. This time of year children very often collect mistletoe to sell.”

Maggie burned with shame. “To feed their families?”

“Oh, my darling,” said Victoria, pulling her in for a kiss. “You do not need to worry about such things.”

“May I go to bed?”

“Of course you may,” said Victoria. “You are not feeling unwell, are you?”

Emmie stood, again casting a look of disapproval at her husband. “Perhaps some warm milk to help you to sleep.”

Melbourne looked at Gina. “And it is time for you to sleep as well...”

“Will you tuck us in?”

“Of course I will.”

They saw off the girls and kept the conversation going. Melbourne excused himself to go to the nursery. Victoria followed, stopping him as he left.

“Lord M, will you come to my bedchamber?”

He frowned. “Well, I had been planning on it...”

Victoria looked around at her ladies. She motioned for her husband to lower his head.

“I meant, will you come to my bedchamber and make love to me?”

“You are ready?”

“Oh, yes, I am quite ready...” she smiled. “And you must not be gentle.”

“Good God, Victoria... do you have any idea what you do to me?”

“I look forward to seeing what I do to you.”
The maids were just finishing with her. Victoria’s eyes darted up as her husband entered.

“Yes, that will be all...”

They curtsied and took their leave. Victoria turned to her husband.

“You did not have your valet undress you.”

“I do know how you enjoy the Windsor uniform, ma’am...”

“I do...” Victoria walked over. “But I think I would rather have you out of it.”

She stood before him and took off her nightdress, stepping towards him, her hands on his chest running over the gold brocade. She took her hands to his buttons, unfastening them one by one.

“Do you remember our wedding day?,” she asked idly.

(Of course I do.”

She looked up. “Do you remember what happened after our wedding? The way you took me in my bedroom?”

“I feel to take something implies resistance...”

“No resistance, William...” She pushed the Windsor jacket off of his shoulders and held it, walking away.

“Are you done with me?”

She did not answer, putting the jacket on herself. “It is heavy...” She glanced back over her shoulder at him. “Though not as heavy as most of my dresses. Do you find it uncomfortable, Lord M?”

He took off his own shirt, shucking his slippers. “I have never complained.”

“Yes, but you never complain about anything and some have complained a great deal to me about the Windsor uniform. That it is a burden to wear it.”

“Well, none who have worn it look quite as fetching as you do.”

She sat on the bed as he finished divesting himself of his socks and breeches. There was nothing between them as he pushed her to lay down. She giggled as he kissed her, covering her and pushed inside.

Victoria gasped.

“Alright?”

“More than...” She took a breath. “I always fear you will not be pleased with what you find after a baby...”

He turned her head towards his and kissed her again. “Never.”

Victoria! was the number one show on the West End and had won a series of awards. It was now headed to Broadway. It featured a multicultural cast centering on the early days of Victoria’s reign.
“I’m gonna be Victoria!,” the young woman playing Victoria I as she performed the show’s signature number.

“Victoria!,” the supporting cast echoed back.

“Gloria!”

“Gloria!”

“Hallelujah!”

“Hallelujah!”

“Victoria Gloria Hallelujah!”

“Victoria Gloria Hallelujah!”

The song ended and the cast bowed to applause.

“You still ought to get me tickets,” Victoria whispered. “I am having two babies who by the way seem to love this.”

He put his hand on her stomach to find yes, they were moving furiously. She smiled back at him as he noticed her hair.

“Are those the diamond orchids in your hair?”

“She said they went with the dress.”

“They do, it’s just...”

“What?”

“There’s something very familiar about them.”

They stopped to applaud again as Katherine Jenkins took the stage.

———

“Papa! Mama!”

Victoria’s eyes flew open. Her last recollection was of her husband giving her so much pleasure that she had fallen asleep in his arms, still wearing his coat. Now her second born was standing before her.

“Maggie...” She kicked her husband with her heel. “William, it is Maggie.”

“Ah, yes...” He pulled the bedclothes further over Victoria.

“It is Christmas Eve!,” said Maggie.

“So it is,” said Melbourne.

“Where is your nightshirt?”

“I... lost it.”
“Why is Mama wearing your coat?”

“She was cold.”

“Why do you not have nanny get you ready for breakfast?” Victoria smiled.

Maggie ran off.

“You lost your nightshirt?,” asked Victoria.

“Do you have a better suggestion?”

“Yes... take me again.”

“Good morning,” said Victoria as they entered the small dining room. “Is this not a wonderful Christmas Eve?”

The Duchess narrowed her eyes. “You are not subtle, Drina.”

“I do not know what you mean, Mama.”

She kissed Ellie and then Gina. “Where is Maggie?”

“She has not been down?”

Melbourne looked at his eldest. “Gina?”

“I have not seen her since Nanny dressed her.”

“What?”

Melbourne sighed.

Ernst entered. “Is something the matter?”

“Maggie is missing,” said Victoria.

“I shall look outside.”

“Outside?”

“This is Maggie.”

“I will come with you,” said Ernst.

Maggie trudged through the snow.

She spotted the boy again.

“Boy!,” she cried. “Hello!”
She approached. “I have come to help you!”

Just then, the boy fell over. Maggie gasped, rushing to his side.

“Boy!,” she shouted. “Wake up!”

She slapped him across the face because that seemed to be the sort of thing to do. He groaned a little.

“You must come back to the palace.”

He groaned some more.

“Fine,” said Maggie. She grabbed him by the legs. “I’ll do it.”

“Maggie!,” Melbourne shouted. He and Ernst had donned thick coats. He had a blanket over his arm because he did not expect her to have the sense to have brought a coat or hat. “Maggie!”

“Maggie!,” Ernst joined in.

Melbourne sighed. “My son had many ill behaviors, but I can safely say he never ran away!”

Ernst chuckled. “They have inherited their mama’s high spirits.”

“I confess I have always had a weakness for ladies with high spirits...”

“I surmised as much.”

“Maggie!”

“Papa!”

“Maggie?!?” His shout was a mixture of joy and concern. They still could not spot her in the forest. “Maggie!”

There in the distance, they spotted her dragging something. They ran towards her, the guards not far behind.

“Maggie!” He was almost relieved, she had put on a jacket but no scarf, no mittens and certainly no bonnet. Then he caught sight of the boy. “Maggie, what happened?”

“I found him.”

Ernst went to the boy’s side. “He is ice cold. We must get him inside. I will take him.”

Melbourne handed him the blanket he had saved for Maggie. Ernst wrapped the boy and picked him up, beginning a breakneck pace back to the castle. Melbourne wrapped his scarf around Maggie and pulled his coat over her as they hurried back to the house.

Victoria paced the hall facing out of the castle.

“Uncle George,” said Ellie.
Victoria looked up at the portrait. “Yes, that is Uncle George...”

“Perhaps Your Majesty ought to sit,” suggested Lehzen.

“I cannot sit. How can I sit?” She shook her head. “Lord M thinks you are acting strangely.”

Lehzen did not answer.

“I can hear you disparaging him. He knows you have never liked him and still he has never moved against you. He has never wanted to do anything but love me.”

“And what has he done to you?”

Victoria turned her head up. “He has made me.”

“He has turned you into someone just like him. Dishonest-”

“Dishonest?”

“Yes, whatever your faults you were always honest.”

“Certainly you must understand the reasons I could not be so honest!”

“Who is that?,” Ellie interrupted.

Victoria turned to her. “Why that is my Uncle William.”

“He had a dozen illegitimate children,” offered Lehzen.

“Is that quite necessary, Lehzen?”

“I do not know. Perhaps Lord Melbourne would like to tell us.”

“Papa!”

They looked to the window. Melbourne hurried in, followed by Ernst with the boy, assisted by one of the guards.

“Maggie,” Victoria sighed with relief.

“She needs to be by the fire,” said Melbourne.

“And this boy needs a doctor.”

Victoria followed them into the parlor. Ernst put the boy down in the couch by the fire.

“Send for Sir James,” she told one of the footmen. She walked to her daughter. “You are ice cold. Maggie, what were you thinking?”

“I wanted to help.”

“Help what, my darling?”

“He was picking mistletoe and I was mean... because this is your forest.”

“Oh, Maggie...” Victoria sighed, hugging her daughter.
“Sir James.”

Sir James entered with Lord Ashley.

“How is he?,” asked Victoria.

“He will be fine,” said Sir James.

Lord Ashley spoke. “He’s called Giles. It seems he is a boy from the village. His father was a nailer but died this past summer. He has four younger siblings. He was picking mistletoe to help his mother.”

“Of course. She must be terribly worried about him,” said Victoria.

“We should send word to her,” said Melbourne.

“I think he’s well enough to be sent home,” said Sir James.

Maggie walked into the parlor.

“Are you better?,” she asked.

“What is this place?,” asked Giles.

Maggie looked around. “It is our parlor. In our house. One of our houses. I like Brocket Hall better-”

“I must get home.”

The door opened with Lord Ashley, Melbourne and the Queen entering.

“You must save your strength, lad,” said Ashley.

“But my mother, sir-”

“I will take you home to your mother. I will explain everything.”

He looked to the Queen and Melbourne, clearly in awe.

“We must certainly send something back with you,” said Victoria. “We cannot have you picking mistletoe in such cold again, can we?”

Giles did not say anything.

“What happened? Did he lose his voice?” Victoria looked at Ashley in confusion.

“Begging your pardon, ma’am,” Giles stammered. “It’s just... I’ve never seen nothing so fine as this.”

Maggie stood in the window seat with Victoria as Melbourne saw out Giles and Ashley.

“What will happen to him?”
“You know, I do not know?,” said Victoria. Maggie looked at her. “None of us really knows what will happen to us, but I will see if there is any way to help his mother. I understand what it is to have four children and I cannot imagine it without your papa...”

“Would Gina have to work if Papa died?”

“No, do not be silly. You and your sisters will never have to work. You have a far greater purpose, that is why you were chosen by God to be my daughters. That is what you have shown today.”

Maggie frowned at her mama.

“You said you were mean to him.”

She cast her head down in shame. “I was.”

“You thought you were defending my rights and yes, you were correct. I am Queen, these are my lands, I have a perfect right to them, but you realized today that you were beholden to something greater. You realized you needed to be kind.”

“Yes, Mama.”

Victoria held her in her lap.

“And you were. Some parts of these duties are difficult, the most difficult to face is that I cannot change everything, as much as Cousin Ashley would like. As much as I would like sometimes, but we can- and we must- do good where we can. So we will help your new friend.” She kissed her. “I often think how fortunate I am to have such wonderful daughters.”

Adele finished her set with “Water Under the Bridge” and had a standing ovation. The Queen finished with a speech and the party dispersed.

“Did you enjoy yourselves?,” asked the Queen.

“Very much, ma’am,” said Will.

“I suppose I should give these back,” said Victoria, taking the diamond orchid combs out of her hair. “Shame, though. I look good in them.”

“Sorry, I don’t have a spare million quid.”

Victoria looked at the Queen. “What? Really?”

“That’s what most of this is worth,” said the Queen. “Especially if it’s something Victoria I’s dandruff is probably on.”

“We should be going,” said Will.

“Thank you for coming,” said the Queen.

She watched as they left. Emma walked to the Queen.

“There is something so familiar about them,” she said.

“I know,” said the Queen. “I wish I could put my finger on it. It’s like I know her. I almost wanted
“Can I have the combs?”

“No.”

“What about one?”

“No.”

“What are you doing?,” Victoria chided. “Effie has not gotten to open any!”

“She is a baby!,” Maggie protested.

The girls were bouncing between the Christmas trees as the adults looked on. It was a chaotic Christmas morning and all seemed well in the world.

“I have her!,” Ernst cried, swooping Maggie up as the others laughed. “Effie, quickly, go girl! What are you waiting for?”

Victoria laughed. “Cousin! You are too silly!”

“He does have a point,” said Melbourne.

Victoria rocked Effie. She motioned at the table. “Open that one with the gold paper.”

Melbourne opened the box and what appeared to be a locket. It bore on an embossed orchid and he opened it to reveal a miniature of he and Victoria. The other side had a curious case.

“Her caul.”

“You said sailors used it for protection,” said Victoria. “I wondered why Effie should not be entitled to the same benefit. It is hers.”

“Quite sound, I am sure that she will appreciate it.”

Maggie broke free of Ernst and went back to her tree.

Ernst made his way to Melbourne as Victoria went between the girl, marvelling over each bauble and gift.

“Such a happy family you have here,” said Ernst.

“I like to think so,” concurred Melbourne.

“Albert and I we never had a family like this one.” He looked wistfully towards Victoria. “I often wonder if he and Victoria would have been this happy. It is difficult not to at this time of year. I am sure you must have similar thoughts about your son.”

“I do.”

“I think not. I do not see how two scarred children could have had a happy family. Everyone is so filled with joy here, even my aunt. That is all due to you.”
“You give me too much credit.”

“I do not.”

Melbourne took a breath and shifted Effie. “I may have had a solution to your dilemma.”

“You have?”

“How much longer can you stay in England?”

“That would depend on what you have in mind.”

“It occurred to me that you need a wife who is in want of a husband and quickly.”

“How quickly?”

“Oh, nine months give or take.”

“Ah,” said Ernst.

“I may have heard of someone from my sister. The daughter of the Duke of Atholl, perhaps a bit lower than your people would expect, but not too low.”

“And she finds herself in such a situation?”

“She does. Emily has arranged an invitation for you and she and Lord Palmerston will go along with you for the New Year’s shoot.”

“Do they know the reason?”

“Emily is very clever, she will know there is a reason, but not ask what it is. You need never fear her indiscretion.”

“And Lord Palmerston?”

“He is an idiot.”

Ernst laughed.

“But the timing, won’t it.”

“I guarantee that no one will question the timing, if they do, they will assume it is because you are the father...”

“Of course Albert would say this was deceptive and dishonorable.”

“Well, I am not Albert.”

“Lord M!,” called Victoria. “Oh, Lord M, do come open one of your presents!”

Windsor 1942

Victoria walked to the tree and found a figure laying in the snow.
“Matthew!,” she shouted as she ran towards the tree.

“I’m fine!”

She stopped to find her husband quite conscious but laying in the snow.

“What happened?”

“I threw my back out reaching for some mistletoe. I was just taking a bit of a breather before I headed back.”

“Are you about done breathing?”

“In a moment. I’m quite fine.”

Victoria grabbed his legs and pulled, heading towards the castle.

“What are you doing?,” he demanded.

“The number of times that Hitler has nearly killed us, I’m not having you freeze to death in Windsor Great Park.” She paused. “This does have a terrible feeling of deja vouz about it, though.”

He sighed. “I don’t suppose I have a choice?”

“You gave up your choices when you married me. Now you must live or die as it suits the Crown.”

“Is that going in the Christmas speech?”

“Might as well, I haven’t got anything except a dozen sheets of crumpled paper.”

She dragged him for a while.

“You know, I heard a story that Prince Albert left Queen Victoria in this wood when they were courting and Lord Melbourne had to rescue her.”

“I doubt she ever needed rescuing...”

“Why are you having difficulties with your speech? It’s the best year of the war there’s been.”

“Exactly, best year of the war. The people want peace, they want an end to rationing and we have got a rationed Christmas where children are more likely to see a Messerschmidt than Father Christmas’s sleigh.”

“That’s not your fault.”

“I’m Queen. Everything is my fault.”

“The people don’t think that.”

She dropped his legs and turned. “Matthew Giles Charlbury, did you hit your head?”

“I think I may have while you were dragging me.” He sat up.

“Oh, now you can stand?”

He pushed himself off the ground. “We are going to go inside and write a speech to inspire the British public and then send for a doctor because I need a good cracking or something...”
He walked back to the castle.

“Unbelievable,” Victoria muttered.

Chapter End Notes

So, could we just clarify that Albert didn't invent the damn Christmas tree? I feel like I've read that twenty times this year. Popularized it beyond the upper classes, sure, but nobody would have been looking if he hadn't married the Queen. And yeah, Victoria totally had a Christmas tree in her nursery (I think the show said something different).

Anyway, mistletoe, actual fact.

And, yes, this universe has a Hamilton-esque hip hop musical called Victoria! because I listened to "Say No To This" about a hundred times writing chapter three. And I stole Tommy Lascelles from The Crown/Reality. Because I could.
I was sick over the weekend and didn't get to update, but since the state of Texas was closed for ice today, here you go. Please let me know what you think and happy reading!

“There! There! There! Will, for God’s sake-”

Will took a breath. For the first time, Victoria had admitted that her belly was rather in the way of their lovemaking and for the better part of the last half hour he had been trying to please her. She had finally chosen to have her leg hooked over his hip as he went in and out. One angle was too shallow, one too deep which had unleashed a crying fit- on her part- desolate at the loss of sex in her life.

“I’m here...” he whispered as he kissed her neck. “Is that good?”

“Yes, yes...”

“Just relax.” He took his hands to her breasts. “You will never come if you don’t relax.”

“I want to come...” she whined.

“Patience.”

He finally thrust her home and she shrieked. He held her as he finished himself, much quieter than her.

“Oh, thank God,” she said. “I was so afraid I would never orgasm again...”

“We had sex three days ago.”

“Yes! Three whole days ago! Do you know the last time I didn’t have sex for three days?!”

“When I went to that conference in Toronto?”

“Yes, it was horrible. Do you know how many batteries I went through?”

“Still finding them under the bed...”

“Will, you can’t expect a woman to find an untapped sexual genius like you and then be easily satisfied.”

“Untapped sexual genius?”

“Yes. You know how to do everything...”

“I believe last visit Dr. Jenkins had to remind you there’s going to be a six week dry spell...”
She groaned. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You do get two babies, though.”

She wrapped his arms around her. “I do want two babies. I just want to be sexy while I do it.” She kissed his hand. “Six weeks. Alright, but when six weeks is up, you had just better clear your schedule.”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

It was a sunny day as the royal family at the Zoological Society. The various dignitaries greeted their monarch and began leading them around to the various animals.

“Mama...” Regina whined.

“Sir Henry, I believe the Princess Royal is eager to see your new exhibit.”

“Of course, Majesty.”

“Yes!”

Sir Henry led them towards the newest exhibition.

“Papa! Hurry!”

Regina ran ahead, closely followed by Maggie and Ellie.

“I do wish just once they would display a little measure of self restraint.”

Melbourne raised an eye at her.

“Really?”

“Lord M...”

“Besides, how can you expect restraint when Gina gets to see a new animal?”

There was quite a crowd by the exhibit. The hippo was the first one seen in Europe since the Roman Empire.

Gina looked back. “Papa!”

She pushed her way through the crowd. Melbourne hurried to follow.

“I can’t see, Papa!”

“Yes, at your service.”

Melbourne lifted her up.

“There are too many hats,” she lamented.

“Make way for the Queen.”

Lord Alfred helped to clear the crowd away, forced out of their admiration by bowing and curtsying.
Victoria smiled at Gina as they walked to the edge of the enclosure.

“My, look how big he is,” said Victoria. “Maggie, Ellie, can you see?”

Lord Alfred helped the girls up.

“He is not as big as the elephants,” said Gina.

“No, your royal highness,” said the director. “Obaysch is still a juvenile, though. We think he is but a year old.”

“Quite a size for a one year old,” said Melbourne.

“When they are born, the Nile Hippopotamus weighs between sixty and a hundred pounds.”

Victoria winced. “I do not like the thought of that.”

“How could he come without his mama?,” asked Gina.

“A herd of cows fed him on the journey, your royal highness.”

“But what if he misses her?”

“Perhaps he does not think upon it,” suggested Victoria. “Perhaps he wonders about his new home. It must seem so different from his home in Africa.”

“You look sexy. Have I mentioned you look sexy?”

Will looked up at Victoria. They were seated in the green room.

“You might have.”

She shrugged as she took another crisp off the snack table. “I just want you to know how exceptionally sexy you look tonight. That’s all. Give you that confidence boost for dealing with Roberta.”

“Victoria, it’s a historical symposium. Not a boxing match.”

She snorted. “Not with Roberta.”

The evening was part of a series of BBC History specials for the accession anniversary called “Pax Victoriana.” Tonight’s was one of the first such discussions titled “The Queen’s Husbands.” Will was there to talk about Melbourne, Roberta about Albert and other experts they hadn’t met yet.

“It’s not a boxing match, Maggie!”

The door opened, revealing another man and woman.

“And you heard that,” said the man.
“Twice, really,” said Will. He stood and shook the man’s hand. “Will Lamb.”

“Matt Giles. This is my wife, Maggie.”

“My partner, Victoria Kensington.”

“Oh, I know Dr. Kensington’s work well. This is a real honor.”

“You’re the Charlbury expert, aren’t you?”

“That’s me.”

Maggie rolled her eyes. “I have been trying to bolster his confidence.”

Victoria looked at Will. “See? I’m not weird.”

“I never said you were weird. I just think it’s a bit out of place to treat a discussion between experts like, like...”

“Roberta Peel is here,” said Maggie.

“You know Roberta?,” asked Victoria. “What did she do to you?”

“Well, good evening, all...”

The four looked to see Roberta.

“Roberta, nice to see you again,” said Will.

“That just leaves Professor Callum...” said Roberta.

Just then, James Callum bumbled in. An older man, dropping his case as he landed on the floor. Will went to help him up as Matt got the case.

“Right. Hello, everyone. Thank you, Will.”

“Not at all.”

“Are you alright?,” asked Maggie.

“Fine.”

A production assistant appeared and shuffled away the speakers.

“You cannot be serious.”

“I am serious,” said Victoria. She looked at Effie, who discovered had a miraculous gift for posing for her sketches. “Effie, you are splendid. How did I get so lucky to have such a marvelous baby?”

Melbourne sat. “You cannot put my name on a royal order.”
“I can. I can form any order I like.” She smiled at Effie. “The Royal Order of Victoria and Melbourne. Unless you suppose William sounds better.”

“Victoria, do be reasonable.”

“It is the custom for female members of the royal family and courtiers to receive an order of the sovereign. Agreed?”

“The sovereign. Not her husband.”

“The sovereign can make the order whatever she wants. I could put the hippo from the Zoological Society on it.”

“A far better choice than me.”

“I think you have a stronger chin than the hippo. It looks so handsome in profile.”

“Our chins aside, go with the hippo.”

“We have four daughters who are not entitled to any royal orders. So I must make one.”

“Gina will like the hippo far better.”

“I named a city after you.”

“I did not want you to do that, either.”

“I shall name cities after whomever I like. Euphemia could be a lovely city somewhere.” She smiled back at the baby. “Where shall Euphemia be? The Americas or Africa? Then again, perhaps Australia. All my children could be cities in Australia.”

The door opened and Penge appeared.

“Penge? What is it?”

“Your Majesty, His Majesty the King of Belgium is downstairs.”

Victoria laughed. “Oh, Penge, what a joke. You almost had me. Well done.”

Melbourne stood. “The King of Belgium is downstairs?”

“Yes, milord.”

“That is impossible. Uncle Leopold did not write to say he was coming.”

The Duchess entered. “Your uncle is here.”

“Yes, the question is what is he doing here?,” asked Melbourne. “He did not attend Effie’s christening.”

“I think he is still insulted you did not make him a godfather.”

“What does he want? He is Gina’s godfather.”

The Duchess tilted her head. “He thinks you do not like him.”

“Of course I do not like him. He does not like me. He is doubtless still hoping that I have a massive
stroke and leave him to decide the fate of my children.”

“Oh, Lord M, do not speak so,” pled Victoria.

“I have no intention of dying. I will outlive him if I must make a deal with Lucifer himself.”

“Lord M!,” Victoria gasped.

“Well, what are we to do with the man?,” asked Melbourne.

Victoria sighed as she stood, picking up Effie. “Go downstairs, I suppose. Penge, put him in the throne room.”

Melbourne cleared his throat. Victoria looked at him.

“The parlor.”

“The parlor? Maggie has taken it over with her soldiers.”

“If he wanted to be greeted in the throne room as King of the Belgians, he ought to have said he was coming. As it is, your uncle has just arrived at the door.”

Victoria nodded. “Penge. The parlor.”

“Very good, Majesty.”

Victoria and Maggie walked out to the studio where the audience was gradually being ushered in.

“What do you do?,” asked Victoria.

“I own a Krav Maga studio.”

“Wow,” said Victoria.

“Surprised I married an academic?”

“No, I’m just looking at your arms. You are ripped.” Her eyes focused on what seemed to be a round scar. “Sorry, I was staring.”

“No, it’s just this weird birthmark.”


“Not really.”

“No, really. I’ve always thought it could come in handy to kick someone’s arse, but you know, I’m a whole five foot. I used to depend on my heels, but they’ve gotten progressively lower as my center of gravity has shifted...”

“You could learn.”

“Really?”

“Well, after you’ve delivered.”
Leopold stared at the toy soldiers. The little men were engaged in a battle along one of the Turkish rugs as well as having taken over the tables. The door opened. Victoria entered with Effie in her arms, followed closely by her mother and husband.


The king bowed and kissed her free hand.

“Your Majesty.”

Victoria sat as her mother and uncle exchanged pleasantries. Melbourne sat.

“I expected to be greeted in the throne room.”

“I rather expected you to receive an invitation to come.” She shifted Effie. “Which I issued and you declined.”

“I had other matters to attend to.”

“Matters more important than the baptism of your great niece?”

“Perhaps I will make time for the next which will hopefully be a nephew.”

Victoria shifted the baby, wrapping her closer, trying to fight off images of her dead boy. The one she could not carry. The would be king near the river at Brocket Hall.

“What have you come for, Uncle?,” she said tightly.

“I came to check on my niece, of course. Rumors abounded that not all was well here.”

“How is your boy?,” asked Melbourne.

“Leopold? He is fine.”

“No, the new one.”

Leopold chuckled. “Philippe is almost eight.”

“No, I meant the baby. George, I think he is called?”

Victoria and the Duchess slowly turned to Melbourne.

“What baby?,” asked Victoria.

“Marie was not expecting...” said the Duchess.

Leopold’s face was slowly turning red.

“No, I believe his mother is called Mrs. Mayer.”

“You do not know your place, Melbourne!”
“You hardly seem to know yours. In Belgium.”

“I do not need to sit here and be insulted by a minor noble!”

“That minor noble is our husband, Uncle.”

“Du hättest nicht unter dir heiraten sollen.”

Melbourne sighed. “So the German begins.”

“You are such a little man.”

“Better than being a little king...”

“Drina!,” gasped Leopold.

Victoria looked at her husband. An expression of complete impunity.

A very attractive look of impunity.

“Lord Melbourne and I have a pressing matter to attend to.” She stood and handed Effie to her mother. “Mama, would you have the nurse take Effie back to her nursery?”

“Of course.”

Melbourne followed Victoria out.

“I hope your daughter will talk sense into her husband...”

The Duchess tsked. “I sincerely doubt that is what is going to happen, brother.”

The host, a BBC Radio presenter called Martha Oshodi began.

“Welcome to the History Hour, where we are continuing our program of discussions in celebration of the one hundred and eightieth anniversary of the accession of Victoria I, live from London, simulcast on BBC Four, BBC World Service and BBC Online.”

The audience applauded.

“We are lucky enough to have with us tonight a group of experts on our proposed topic, the Queen’s husbands. First, Professor Roberta Peel from the London School of Economics, an expert of Prince Albert of Saxe Coburg Gotha.”

The audience applauded politely.

“Professor Will Lamb, an expert on Lord Consort and Prime Minister William Melbourne, author of Melbourne: Cuckold to Prime Minister to Consort and Victoria I: Chronicle of a Young Queen which has of course inspired the hugely popular West End hip hop musical Victoria! Professor Lamb.”

The audience gave polite applause.

Except Victoria.

“Woo! Go Will!”
The people sitting at her left stared.

“That’s my man,” she explained.

“Right...” Martha continued. “With us also, Professor James Callum, a hugely respected expert on Queen Victoria II and Professor Matt Forrester, author of a soon to be released biography chronicling the marriage of Victoria IV and Lord Charlbury.”

Polite applause finished, Martha began.

“So, what I find most interesting as perhaps an unintended consequence of Victoria I’s accession is that Britain has had one hundred and eighty years of rule by women. Tell us what you all think is the place of the most prominent man in the country, the Consort and what sort of power does he have? Professor Lamb, perhaps you could go first?”

Victoria hurried into the bedroom. Melbourne followed. She locked the door behind him.

“You are wearing too many clothes.”

“Is that to be my punishment for my insubordination? To be stripped naked?”

“Who would punish you?” She tossed aside his cravat and helped him shrug off his jacket. “I will reward you.”

He kissed her, pulling her tight. It was a fight between them and their clothes. Melbourne rid her of her dress and then shoved down her nursing corset.

“Just take me,” she pled.

He pushed her to the bed, coming behind her. She rubbed her bottom against him and he held her with one arm under her bosom, ridding her of her drawers and flipping her skirts up. He settled behind her and she heard him hiss as he was freed from his trousers.

“I meant to reward you.”

“May I take my reward, ma’am?”

“Oh, yes, Lord Melbourne, if you do not object.”

He hooked her leg over his hip and pushed in as she gasped. His hands went to her breasts as he thrust. She thought she might come from that alone as she sought to stay grounded.

“Yes, yes, yes!”

“Good God, Victoria, you are so tight. How can you be so tight?”

They both screamed and panted as there was a knock at the door.

“I do not care who is here, Penge!,” Victoria snapped.
“Are you alright, Mama?,” asked Maggie.

“Why is it always Maggie?,” Melbourne whispered.

Victoria shrugged. “Mama is fine, darling!”

“What are you doing?”

“We are taking a nap!”

“I cannot find Papa!”

“Papa is taking a nap, too!”

“How do you make so much noise taking a nap?!”

“Maggie, did you need something?,” asked Melbourne.

“Uncle Leopold is here and will not let me play on my battlefield! He says he is sitting there!”

“Tell him to go back to Belgium!,” Melbourne sighed, flopping his head to the mattress.

“Lord M!,” hissed Victoria.

“I already said that!,” Maggie shouted.

Melbourne looked at Victoria. “She already said that.”

“I heard.”

“She is going to start a war with someone,” muttered Melbourne, rolling onto his back.

“Maggie,” Victoria sat up. “Tell Gina we are going riding, have nanny change your clothes.”

“You are coming?”

“Of course I am, darling! And Papa!”

They heard footsteps hurry away.

“How does she know?,” asked Victoria.

At the symposium, the topic had shifted to the impact of the consort.

Roberta began. “Well, of course Prince Albert did not have as great an impact as one would have liked.”

“Have liked?,” asked the host.

“His incumbency was tragically shortened. He had begun to make sweeping changes in Buckingham Palace.”

“That made no one happy,” said Will. “Trying to bring German efficiency to an English institution?
That was doomed to failure or at the very least resentment.

“Of course Lord Melbourne brought English inefficiency to an English institution....”

“Now, that’s not quite fair, is it?,” James interrupted. “The monarchy was already very tied up with the various German royal houses. Victoria I’s mother, grandmother and so forth were all German princesses. Lord Melbourne was decidedly English. He was able to cement the monarchy as an English institution with English blood. Victoria II married an English noble, not a foreign prince.”

Martha turned to Will. “Perhaps now would be a time for you to say what you think Lord Melbourne added to the institution of the monarchy.”

“I think a respect for the constitution that we had not seen before, starting from Victoria I, obviously because he had worked in the parliamentary branch of the constitution.”

Martha smiled. “Not enough respect not to marry the monarch, though?”

Will smiled as the audience chuckled.

“Well, he did try it, I suppose! It just never took.”

“I understand you and your partner- the noted Victorian scholar, Victoria Kensington, here in the audience with us tonight- are writing a book about the love story between Victoria I and Lord Melbourne. Without destroying your book sales, would you give us a flavor of that?”

“Destroying sales?”

“Well, there’s no spoilers, I suppose?”

“No, no spoilers...” He shifted. “I think it is important to understand how quickly they became everything to one another. We have this in the Queen’s diaries, in Melbourne’s diaries. They spent most of their time together and then she married Prince Albert. I think that separation was cruel and impossible for them both and I don’t think it’s really surprising that Victoria I turned to Melbourne again when Prince Albert died. Who else in her life was there to fill that space? They were best friends, teacher and student, parents, lovers, all at once. Just everything and I suppose that’s why the nation continues to be so taken.”

“Should they be, though?,” asked Roberta. “We know how in love Victoria was with Albert despite what programs like The Young Queen show us.”

Will took a breath.

“It’s interesting that you bring up The Young Queen, Professor Peel,” said James. “I always find it rather interesting in Victoria I’s diaries- and rather telling- that we find Victoria saying how lucky she is to have married Albert, but somehow manages to mention Lord Melbourne once a paragraph on her honeymoon, no less. That gives one pause, does it not? It would give me pause if I found my wife writing about another man on our honeymoon.”

“She saw him as a mentor-” Roberta began.

“Sorry, but it hardly seems she saw him as a mentor given what we know comes next?,” asked Martha.

The audience chuckled.
“What do you think?”

Victoria showed Gina and Maggie her sketches of the new medallion.

“How do we win one?,” asked Maggie.

“You do not win one, Maggie. It is a royal order, not a medal,” Victoria.

“So we just get one?,” asked Maggie. She seemed very disappointed.

“Of course. I shall be giving one to all the female members of our family.” She smiled. “Gina, you shall be the first member of the order, of course, then Maggie, then Ellie and Effie.”

“I would rather win one,” said Maggie.

“Why do we need one?”

Victoria smiled at Gina. “So people will know who you are. That you are members of the British Royal family.”

“But I know that.”

“You are being nearly as stubborn as your papa.”

She realized her husband had just entered the room. “She is what?”

Victoria sighed, lifting Gina into her lap. “Your daughter is being distressingly noble. You know how I do not like it.” She turned Gina’s head to her. “Do you know when your papa left my service as Prime Minister, he would not take any of the titles that I wished to grant him? Then he would not let me grant him any titles when he became my husband.”

“I do not need titles.”

“And you disrespect your monarch when you will not allow her to grant you one.”

“I have the utmost respect for my monarch, I would like her to remain my monarch. That is why I do not permit her to grant me titles.”

“That is some cheek, Lord Melbourne.”

“Gina, would you like Papa better with a greater title?”

“No.”

“There you have it. A rose by any other name.”

“Monarchies- as a rule-,” said Matt, “are dominated by men. The English throne is the exception. And monarchies are- as a rule- dominated by dynastic ties. Again, the English throne is an exception. Though the queens have titularly belonged to the House of Melbourne, there is not a very deep bench, there isn’t a Melbourne on every throne in Europe.”

“As Leopold I wanted a Coburg on every throne in Europe,” added James.
“Yes, precisely. I would say that has led to a reluctance on the part of the British people to get involved in continental affairs, dating quite far back. Will can correct me if he wishes, but I suppose that would be due to Melbourne’s reluctance to argue for the affairs of Europe.”

“What about the second World War?,” asked Martha.

“Yes, well, I suppose that comes down to Victoria IV. She regarded the beliefs of the Nazis as anti-British, anti-Christian, she saw herself as Queen of a diverse empire. Her trip to Germany in thirty-six had a profound effect on her. She saw past Hitler’s charade and became his enemy. The British crown was never willing to compromise in the way other monarchies were, Belgium for instance.”

“We must speak.”

Melbourne looked up from the letter he was finishing. Leopold showed himself in the room. “Must we?”

“I understand we have you to thank for Ernst’s new bride.”

“Why? Are you unhappy they are not first cousins?”

“No. I am unhappy she was with child.”

“Majesty, that is quite an insult. I grant you, the new Duchess is perhaps a bit rotund, but to be so unkind...”

“Do not play stupid with me, Melbourne.”

“I never play stupid.”

Leopold narrowed his eyes. “You have grown bolder since we first met, such a meek Prime Minister, cuckolded...”

“I have had enough of my wife and children being insulted. I have had enough of you and your machinations and I will not let it happen to my children.”

“Who do you think you are? You are no one, master of nothing, the Queen’s husband! Had you not been there to take Albert’s place, any other warm body would have done just as well! Perhaps better!”

“I do not doubt it.”

“She ought to have had a son by now. A king, but no, we are stuck with a Coburg you have ruined, who will need a husband—”

“Do not speak of Gina.”

“I trust it was you who already thwarted one marriage proposal.”

Melbourne narrowed his eyes. “You do not mean that absurd offer from the French.”

“Absurd?”
“A Catholic prince from a throne that is now nonexistent!”

“Thanks to you!”

“If I had tried to hold back the mob at Versailles myself, I could not have saved it. Of course now that your wife is from a house that means nothing, I suppose that is inconvenient for you, doubtless why you could be so public with Mrs. Mayer! What will her father do? Nothing. You would not even take them in!”

The door opened.

“What do you think you are doing?,” Victoria demanded. “Effie is sleeping in the next room! You will wake her!”

“You should not nurse her.”

“It is not any of your concern what I do with my breasts, Uncle!”

“You should be trying to do your duty and provide your country with a son.”

“I warn you not to start along these lines,” said Melbourne.

“It is fine, William.”

“It is not!”

“No, Drina, it is not. Should something happen to you, this man is in charge and it will be the end of England.”

“Uncle Leopold, were you going to visit Windsor?”

“What?”

“I know you so often like to visit Windsor when you come to England. I would not keep you.”

“Are you ordering me, Drina?”

She did not answer. “And I suggest you do not return without my having issued an invitation.”

Victoria stood against the car, watching Will talk to James.

“When are you due?,” asked Maggie.

“April.” She shrugged. “I know. I’m huge. Twins.”

Matt looked over. “I always pity poor Professor Callum.”

“What for?”

Victoria sighed. “His wife died back when Will was at Cambridge. Hasn’t gotten over it.”

Maggie looked at her phone. “Sitter only has an hour left.”

“We should be off.”
“It was lovely to meet you, Victoria,” said Maggie.

“You have my number, text me.”

“I will.”

Victoria walked over to the men.

“So?,” asked Victoria. “Are you still trying to persuade him to grab a bite to eat with us?”

“It is a long drive back to Cambridge.”

“Yes, but I’m pregnant and you’ve kept me waiting for a Chinese so come on.”

James looked at Will.

“It is useless to argue with her,” said Will.

________________________________________

It was a quiet morning and the London Zoological Society was open to its most prominent admirer. Melbourne looked over at the hippo and back at Gina.

“I think he likes you.”

“Really?”

“Really. It must be such a privilege for him to have such an admirer in the Princess Royal. Perhaps we could invite him to court.”

“No.”

“No?”

“I do not think he would like it.” Gina looked up at him. “He might like Brocket Hall. They say hippos live in rivers. He could live in ours.”

Melbourne smiled. “Perhaps.”

“Do you wish I was a boy?”

“Good God, Gina, where did you get such a thought?”

“Uncle Leopold thinks I should have been a boy.”

“Yes, well, Uncle Leopold thinks a lot of things.” He leaned forward. “I would not change a hair on your head for the whole of the world. Never. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Papa.”

“And do not believe you cannot be queen for a second.”

“I do not want to be queen.”

“Why not?”
“Because it means Mama will have died.”

Melbourne nodded. “Well, we all must die someday, Gina. But do not worry, it will not be for a long, long time.”

Gina walked closer to her father, letting him pick her up. She rested her head.

“Why can we not be together forever?”

“That is not for us to know, I am afraid, but I agree...” He turned her back to face the hippo. “But that would be ideal.”

“I noticed something, James,” Victoria said coyly as they finished their spring rolls.

“I’m afraid to ask.”

“We were getting up to the founding of the Royal Order of Victoria and Melbourne,” she said, drawing her iPad from her bag. “Which of course, coincides with the founding of the Royal Order of the Hippo so I was flipping through the catalog from the royal childhood exhibition.”

Will leaned over as James put on his glasses and looked at the iPad.

“Oh, that.”


“James?,” asked Will.

“My wife’s father, he was private secretary to the Princess Royal and then assistant secretary when she became Queen.”

“You mean Victoria IV?,” asked Victoria.

“My wife was born during 1940, rationing had started, so the Queen very generously gave my father-in-law her daughter’s baby things.”

“What was your father-in-law called?,” asked Victoria.

“Sir William Bourne.”

“He must have worked under Tommy Lascelles,” Will speculated.

Victoria got on her iPhone.

“You know, historians used to have to look at books,” said James.

“Yes, well, thanks to Ada Lovelace, I can look at Wikipedia and see that William Bourne was a British civil servant who served two queens and was widowed twice...” She paused. “His second wife was murdered.”

James shrugged. “I never got the whole story. Gina and my father-in-law never spoke about it. She was six when it happened.”
“He resigned,” said Victoria.

“He did. He devoted himself to raising my wife.”

Victoria frowned out the window on the drive back to Oxford.

“You went quiet,” said Will in the car.

“Sorry.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know. Sad story. And Wikipedia said James’ wife’s mum was called Victoria.”

“So? It’s a common enough name.”

Victoria shook her head as she stared out the window. “I don’t know.”
Hi, here we are again. I think this might clear up some things. Anyway, please let me know what you think and happy reading!

Ireland, 2012

Victoria took another glance in the mirror, trying to look as if she wasn’t while Will drove.

Perfect. She wanted to look perfect. She had played out this trip in her mind for weeks. They were sharing a car—she had let him book separate rooms on the ferry, mistake—and now they were headed for Drogheda House.

Ireland was important for understanding Victoria II. They would have been remiss in not coming.

And if she got to go on a mini break with Will so be it.

They had become fast friends, best friends almost, they had spent all their time together, but so far as the romantic aspects... not so much.

It was driving her mad.

“Have you been here before?”

“Drogheda House? No.”

“Ireland, though?”

Victoria looked up at Will. “School trip during Sixth Form. We visited the Famine Memorial and some places in Dublin. Some boys did end up at the Guinness factory.”

Will smiled. “Did you?”

“No comment.”

They got out of the car. Even in the fog of the morning, the place was beautiful.

“Shall we go in?”

There was a mix of primary school children and tourists looking over the exhibits mostly steered towards the famine and the royal family.

“Look at that,” Will pointed out.

Victoria looked. It was an old photograph of the Churchill family with Victoria II while she was still a princess.
“Is that-”

“Baby Winston.”

“Oh, look at him!,” exclaimed Victoria. “That man must have had the same face his entire life.”

“His father was posted here for a bit.”

Victoria pointed at another photo, Churchill later in life.

“There’s tidbits,” she read from the headline. “Victoria IV. If Regina was her grandmama, I wonder how much she told her about Ireland.”

“Well, Prince William was the heir apparent then.”

“Oh, I doubt they would have left her out of it just because they thought she wouldn’t inherit. After all, they gave her the name.”

---

**London, 1943**

William Bourne walked into the office on the far side of Buckingham Palace. Anna, the slight little secretary stood.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Good morning. Shall we be expecting Sir Henry?”

“Still under doctor’s orders.”

“Right,” said Bill, putting down the paper.

“Tea, sir?”

“Uh, coffee.” His eye turned towards the red lacquered box already waiting, V IV gilded on the lid.

“That this morning’s?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’ll give it the once over while I make a call.”

Bill retreated into his office with the box as he dialed home, absentmindedly looking through the various documents for the Queen’s review.

“Bourne House.”

“Nancy, would you put Lady Victoria on the line?”

“Certainly, Sir William.”
It was not two seconds before his wife came on the line.

“Bill?”

“You wanted me to ring, so I rang.”

“You made it alright?”

“It’s a train ride.”

“Yes, but there’s a war on.”

“Really? Who’s in it?”

“Bill!” She paused. “You know I worry.”

“I don’t think the Germans are terribly interested in bombing the route from Hatfield to London.”

“I wish the Queen would stay more at Brocket Hall, then you could come home every night.”

He sighed. “I am certain she does as well. Is Gina awake yet?”

“Not yet. She will be cross with you. More cross than I am.”

“Why are you cross?”

“Because of this morning.”

He looked up at Anna as she came in with his cup of coffee. “I thought that would make you rather not cross.”

“Cross that it won’t happen again until Friday,” his wife said breathily.

Bill got distracted, spotting something with Bengal on one of the dispatches.

“Bill?”

He snapped back to the conversation. “It’s difficult while Tommy’s ill, but... I might be able to sneak out Wednesday night.”

“Don’t toy with me.”

“Never.”

They said goodbye and Will turned back to the box.

He carried the box down the stairs and the length of the palace. He nodded to the equerry who knocked on the door.

“Enter.”

Victoria sat beneath the portraits of her forbearers. Bill bowed his head and she stood in greeting as he approached. He placed the box on the tea table and kissed her hand.

“Your Majesty.”
“Good morning, Bill.”

“Good morning, ma’am.”

“Have you peeked?,” she asked, sitting down before the box. “Tommy thinks you peek. I think Tommy peeks.”

“I may have had a glance, ma’am.”

She motioned for him to take a seat and opened the lid. “Lord Melbourne peeked.”

“Lord Melbourne was the Prime Minister and later the Queen’s Consort. I suppose he thought he was privileged enough to do so. I did move one dispatch towards the top.”

“Bengal?” She looked at it with interest. “Bengal is a vast cremation ground, a meeting place for ghosts and evil spirits, a land so overrun by dogs, jackals and vultures that it makes one wonder whether the Bengalis are really alive or have become ghosts from some distant epoch...”

She finished reading and looked up.

“Good God, what am I reading?”

“Well, ma’am, after the Japanese invaded Burma, your majesty’s government began preparing for an invasion of India itself. Crops were destroyed and the means to transport goods were cut off.”

“That seems to have been short-sighted.”

“Then there is the matter of the foodstuffs that are available having been redistributed to military use...”

“Like Ireland.”

“Ma’am?”

“Granny drilled us on the Irish famine. She could have written a textbook on it. At the height of the Irish famine, foodstuffs were still being transported to England for sale there.”

“I suppose your grandmother was greatly impacted by the Irish Famine.”

“Not more than the Irish.” She frowned. “Why do you suppose Mr. Churchill has not... never mind. I know the answer and so do you.”

“Mr. Churchill is nothing if not single-minded.”

“Yes, but Mr. Churchill serves the government. I serve the crown. The crown must serve the subjects...”

“I do not understand why you must go,” said the Duchess. “It seems so dangerous.”

Victoria bounced Effie on her lap. “It is not dangerous, Mama. I am their Queen.”
“Must you take the children? Euphemia is so little and for Eleanora it could be most upsetting.”

“Lord M, would you tell Mama not to worry?”

“Well, Duchess, I lived many years in Ireland and am still here.”

“But there was not the unrest! This famine!”

“You suppose there was a time in Ireland that there was not unrest?,” he asked.

“Besides, Lord Russell assures me that everything is quite settled,” said Victoria.

The door opened. Regina entered escorted by her nanny and a dressmaker. She was clad in a green dress and cloak.

“How charming!,” exclaimed the Duchess.

Victoria stood, coming to examine the garments closer. “Perhaps I was wrong to put the dress and the cloak together. I want the Irish to know they are looking upon their future Queen...”

“I think you look very pretty, Gina,” Melbourne offered.

“Yes, of course, darling, you look wonderful,” said Victoria. She looked at the dressmaker. “Perhaps another cloak. In cream, perhaps?”

“Another cloak, Drina? Such extravagance.”

“She is going to be Queen one day, Mama.”

“You were going to be Queen. We never had such extravagance.”

“Yes, we did not have many things at Kensington...” She looked back at the dressmaker. “And a new dress in white.”

“Yes, Majesty.”

“Show me the rose fabric again.”

“Drina...” chided the Duchess.

“I may point out that Gina does have three younger sisters,” said Melbourne. “They will be worn again, though I do not know that they will be of any use after Maggie's been through them.”

“That is quite right. Princess Margaret will need new petticoats,” Victoria said to the dressmaker as she examined the rose fabric. “The lace trim on this one as well.”

“Are we finished?,” asked Gina.

“You must have a new wardrobe,” said Victoria.

“I have my new necklace.”

Victoria smiled at the gold locket Gina had gotten for her birthday, the orchids embossed on the outside. “Yes and it will go very well with your new wardrobe.”
Mr. Churchill had just finished his summation for the weekly audience.

“Is there anything else?”

“No, ma’am.”

The Queen tilted her head. “Are you certain there’s not anything else?”

“Quite, ma’am.”

“That surprises me, Prime Minister.”

“Ma’am?”

“Because I’ve had a dispatch from Bengal.”

“Oh, that.”

“Yes. That.” She shifted her legs. “I must say that I find it rather disheartening that you do not seem to be alarmed.”

“The current shortfall is due to hoarding and speculation.”

“Surely the reasons do not matter so much as the fact that there are people starving and dying in the streets?”

“We have soldiers dying on the battlefields in Europe and Africa and Burma—”

“Yes, but to the crown, not one subject is less valuable than another. I believe that is the principal disagreement that Herr Hitler and I are having at the moment. Surely we must do all that we can for our Bengalese subjects as we would any other?”

“Our priority must be defeating the Germans, ma’am—”

“We have a famine code, do we not?”

“Yes, ma’am, but famine has not been declared.”

“And why not?”

“Ma’am?”

“Why hasn’t famine been declared to enable the resources the Bengalese people need to be delivered?”

“Even if we did, the Germans might well destroy any resources we could get to them and they would starve any way.”

“You suppose it’s not worth the bother?”

“Our resources are limited, ma’am—”

“And so you suppose some lives are worth more bother than others?”

“Our priority must be to win the war, ma’am.”

“And when this war is over I would just as soon not be Empress of a graveyard!” She sighed. “You
have our permission to withdraw.”

“Ma’am?”

“You have our permission to withdraw.”

Churchill took his censure, backing out of the room slowly. A moment passed and Bill entered with a bow of his head.

“I take it that went well, ma’am?”

Victoria sat back. “I will not be ignored.”

“No, ma’am.”

“I don’t suppose you have any ideas.”

“I can’t say that I do, ma’am. A sovereign can advise, warn—”

“Yes, but a sovereign must also be heard. I am the nation’s fourth queen of four sovereigns, yet somehow I am underestimated, you would think people would have learned by now.”

The first Irish stop began as the royal yacht anchored in Cork.

There was quite a crowd waiting to greet them and cheering. A band played.

Victoria stepped out first, closely followed by Regina and Melbourne.


“Lord Mayor.”

“Cork is humbled to receive Your Majesty.”

“We are pleased to be here and to find our subjects in such great spirits, particularly after your misfortunes.”

“If you would, ma’am...” the mayor said, motioning down a path of dignitaries.

Victoria began greeting them as the mayor introduced them. Gina reached up for Melbourne’s hand as he followed his wife down the line.

“God save Princess Regina!”

Victoria looked back in amusement. Regina? Then more joined the chorus. She looked back at the Catholic Archbishop she was meeting.

“This is quite a reception for my daughter.”

“Oh, yes, ma’am,” said the archbishop. “The Irish people have great affection for her.”

“Do they?”

“Certainly, ma’am. They were touched when the Princess Royal gave her own pocket money to the
famine relief. That such a small girl could be so affected by their plight, well, it brought a tear to many eyes. A sign of a pure Christian heart and of course, good and loving parents.”

“You flatter us, Your Grace, but the Princess Royal’s good heart is all her own.”

The cheers continued for Regina.

“Gina.” Victoria called.

Her daughter turned.

“Wave,” she mouthed with a smile.

Gina froze. Victoria excused herself from the dignitaries and turned Gina away from Melbourne.

“Oh, God, that’s it, God, yes, William-”

Her husband’s hand came over her mouth as he gave a meaningful look towards the cot tucked away in the corner. Gina and Maggie had been tucked away in one room, Ellie with the nanny who watched over her and the only solution had been to place Effie in their stateroom.

Which was proving a difficult challenge for the Queen. Effie gurgled something in her sleep and quieted again. Melbourne resumed.

Victoria broke, coming in silence. Melbourne followed soon after. Victoria kissed him again and again as they rolled onto their sides.

“I love your cock.”

“You have told me.”

“Do you love my...” She searched for the right word.

He smiled. “Quim. When we speak of cocks, it must be a quim.”

“Quim. Well, do you like mine?”

“There is nothing better than being buried inside your quim.”

She kissed him again.

“The dispatches...”

“You are such a taskmaster, Lord M.”

Melbourne stood and she watched him with great amusement as he padded naked to the table where her red box sat to bring it back.

“What?,“ he asked.

“I was just wondering what would be thought of us seeing to Crown business in such a manner.”

He sat back down. “Well, so long as it gets done...”
She kissed him again as he opened the box.

“What did you think of Gina’s reception?”

“I thought it went very well.”

“I do want her to be beloved.”

“She is.”

“By the people I mean. I know so many still hope we will have a son but if Gina is to be Queen, I want the people to love her.”

“I think you ought to focus on the task at hand, securing the loyalty of your Irish subjects.”

“Your Majesty.” The Earl of Drogheda bowed as the family stepped out. “We are humbled to have you.”

“Thank you for inviting us. It will be such a welcome break to have some room for the princesses.”

“We look forward to it, ma’am.”

A great Irish Wolfhound bounded in the room. Ellie screeched.

“Gracie,” admonished the Earl.

Gina stepped forward.

“What is it?”

“She is one of my Irish Wolfhounds, Your Royal Highness.”

“She is big.” Gina started petting her. The creature seemed a gentle giant, letting the girls pet her.

Melbourne smiled at the Earl. “The Princess Royal has an affection for all creatures great and small.”

“Gracie did just have some puppies,” offered the Countess.

“Puppies!,” Gina exclaimed.

The adults went for a tour of the estate while the girls were set in the garden with the puppies.

“I don’t think I’d want to be Queen,” Maggie mused.

Gina looked up from the puppies.

“Too much work.”

Gina looked down. “Oh, no.”

“What?”

“We are missing one.”
Maggie and Gina looked around.

“There!”

Ellie pointed, the little creature was plodding towards the forest.

“I will get him,” said Gina. “You watch the others.”

Gina bounded towards the line of trees. Maggie looked back down at the puppies.

“Do you want to be Queen?,” Maggie asked Ellie. “You can go before me.”

They heard a scream.

Maggie looked up. Gina was being taken off into the wood.

“Gina! Gina!”

Gina continued to scream. Maggie looked around in a panic.

“Papa!”

Inside at the window, Gracie began to bark.

“Girl, hush now,” said the Earl.

Melbourne looked out the window. Maggie was screaming- which was not all that unusual- but-

“Where is Gina?”

“What?,” asked Victoria.

Melbourne flew down the stairs, the Earl after him, his wolfhound a step behind. Victoria, Harriet and the countess followed.

Outdoors, the dog wasted no time hurrying towards her pup at the treeline, beating the men.

“Gina.”

Melbourne rushed into the wood without thinking.

“Gina! Gina!”

Victoria looked at Maggie.

“What happened?”

“The puppy ran off and Gina went to get him and she screamed and-”

Maggie burst into tears.

“It is alright, darling.” Victoria went to embrace Maggie. “Papa will get her.”
“Gina!”

Melbourne had been shouting so long he thought he would go dumb.

“Gina!”

The rain began. He was getting stopped by mud as he remained vaguely aware of Drogheda and his menservants following him.

Then he found the road suddenly, forking off in not two but three directions.

“Lord Melbourne!,” called Drogheda. “We must go back to the house to form a larger search party.”

“Gina...”

They went back to the house. Collier was waiting for Melbourne.

“Sir.”

“I need my riding clothes and a horse.”

“Certainly, sir.”

He started up the stairs as Victoria met him there.

“Where is she?”

“I am going to see to it.”

“What does that mean? You are going to see to it?” Victoria shook her head. “Where is Gina? I want Gina!”

“As I said, I will see to it.”

Victoria shook her head. “I do not understand.”

Harriet frowned. “Has the Princess Royal been... kidnapped?”

Victoria tried to not react, it was too awful a thing to contemplate. No, Gina had only wandered off. She did that sometimes, lost in thought, following a bird-

“I do not see any other option, the path we followed was too long for the princess to cover alone.”

“Who would do such a horrid thing?,” asked Harriet.

The Countess contributed. “Radicals, Duchess. The worst sort of vermin.”

“I will see to it,” said Melbourne. “Duchess, see to Her Majesty.”

“Sir William.”

“Yes?” He looked up from the desk.
“Lady Victoria on the line.”

He groaned as the secretary left.

“I know.”

“You said Wednesday.”

“I have duties to discharge. Tommy’s not back yet. The Queen is in the midst of a crisis.”

“Why did you even say Wednesday?”

“I thought I could manage it. I wanted to come home, Victoria, I did.” He sighed. “I will be home Friday.”

“You had better be.”

Melbourne knocked on the door. The maid looked up in shock at him and the bevy of guards standing behind him.

“Is your master in?”

“Who is calling-”

“Lord Melbourne.”

The maid finished showing him in and Melbourne walked inside. There was some chaos, he could sense. O’Connell himself finally appeared.

“Lord Melbourne, to what do we-”

“Where’s my daughter?”

“Now, Melbourne-”

“I know by now you must have heard of it. Where is my daughter?”

“Come sit-”

“I will not sit! Now you must know-”

“You think I would do such a thing?!?”

“You know people who would!”

“The Young Irelanders do not run their plans by me!”

“But you know who they are!”

“You cannot expect me to betray my countrymen!”

“I do not care about your countrymen, I care about my daughter!”

“And that is the problem!”
“Gina is eight! The problems of your people existed long before she was born and will continue-”

“Ah! But she will be responsible for them one day! Like her mother!”

“The Queen came to Ireland to show her affection and concern for the Irish people-”

“If she is so concerned, why are they still starving?”

Melbourne stepped forward. “I want my daughter back.”

“I told you, I do not control the Young Irelanders-”

“You know who they are, who their leaders are and who might think to kidnap the heiress presumptive to the throne of England. You can persuade them of the sense of stopping this matter before it goes too far.”

“I do not know who-”

“Then I suppose you had damned well better find out!”

“Or you will what?”

“I do not yet know!” He finally took a breath. “That ought to frighten you. It bloody well frightens me.”

How long had she been here in this wretched place?

Gina could not tell. There were no clocks, no windows, just cries of the children who stared at her. She had never dreamed there was a place like this. All houses had windows and sunlight and fires and smiles...

And they did not smell.

“What were you thinking? Taking a little girl?”

The girl was Anne. The sister. She knew that much. Seamus was the boy who had taken her.

“I was thinking it might be worth something to have her returned.”

“That’s not how the English think!”

Gina continued to stare down at her feet. A night had passed, surely? The hut was cold. And dirty. The cot had three small babies in it.

She wanted to cry.

But it would not be queenly to cry. Whatever happened, she must be queenly.

“Give me your necklace.”

“Seamus-” Anne tried to admonish.

“That necklace could feed us a month!” He grabbed Gina by the arm. “Give it.”
“It was a birthday present from my papa-”

“Now. Do as you’re told!”

“I-”

He yanked the locket from her neck, making her cry out.

“Seamus!”

Seamus stormed out, the locket in hand. Anne knelt down.

“Are you alright?”

Gina did not answer, did not make eye contact.

The train home was a quiet one. Most of the men who travelled home for the weekend were already there. Bill had a car to himself to go over the latest from Bengal.

It was a short walk from Hatfield Station to Bourne House, a cottage that had been in the family for around fifty years.

“Daddy!”

Bill smiled as Gina ran from the garden. Victoria glanced up from the vegetable patch.

He put down his briefcase and swooped Gina up.

“Hello, my darling. Did you miss me?”

“Yes.”

He walked over to his wife.

“It’s Saturday,” she said not hiding her dissatisfaction.

“I know. I couldn’t leave until this morning.” He put down Gina, taking off his coat and suit jacket, rolling up his sleeves as he knelt down. “How are our vegetables doing?”

“Well, we are excellent carrot farmers...”

“Potato!,” shouted Gina.

Victoria smiled. “And potatoes. Do you have enough at the flat? We ought to send some back with you.”

“You do not need to send anything back with me.”

They walked inside as Bill carried the basket of vegetables. He spotted a bowl of fruit on the table.

“Where did we get peaches?”

“Brocket Hall sent a boy over. The Queen’s glasshouses apparently. Gina loves them.”

“I shall have to thank her. Where’s Nancy?”
“Her grandmother is ill. Or so she says.”

“So she says?”

“I think she has an admirer.” She looked at Gina. “But we manage, don’t we?”

“Yes.”

“Yes,” Victoria repeated back.

“Daddy, milk.”

“Certainly, Gina...” Bill said, heading towards the icebox.

“Uh, we are out,” said Victoria.

“Out?”

“Out? I saw the bottles on the step. Shouldn’t the milkman have been by?”

Victoria looked down. “It’s fine.”

“Are you out of rations? I’ve got mine. I never use them, I ought to just get them here before I head back to town.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Not worry about what my wife and daughter are eating?”

“Do you think we starve without you here? We manage just fine.”

“Is this Mrs. Peel again?”

She shook her head. “You think I can’t manage Mrs. Peel?”

“I’ll have a word.”

“Oh, thank God you’re here to have a word with Mrs. Peel! Else we’d be cast out on the streets.”

Bill shook his head. “You are so stubborn sometimes.”

He walked out.

“Where Daddy?,” asked Gina.

“Daddy’s off to prove what a big man he is,” said Victoria.

The door slammed. Gina looked questioningly at her mother.

“When you have a husband you’ll understand.”

The headquarters such as it was had been set up in the mayor’s office. Melbourne felt very ill at ease, as if his stomach was being twisted and twisted again.
Soldiers in civilian streets never struck him the right way. In Ireland he knew it was just asking for trouble, the country was a powder keg, the slightest spark...

But the heiress to the throne was missing.

Gina was missing.

“Perhaps now is the time to consider a house to house search,” suggested the captain of the guards.

“House to house?”

“We are running out of options, sir.”

“Lord Melbourne.”

He turned to see the archbishop approaching, another priest at his side.

“Your Grace.”

He motioned at the priest next to him. “This is Father Murphy.”

“Your Grace, forgive me-”

“No, we come with a purpose.” He motioned at the priest. “Show him the necklace.”

Melbourne waited. The priest handed him a necklace.

Gina’s. The chain broken.

“Where did you get this?”

The archbishop looked at Murphy.

“A woman in my parish brought it to me. She runs a grocer’s. A young man paid with this. When she saw the miniatures inside, what with the princess missing, she brought it to me.”

“Where is this young man?”

The priest stalled. “His father’s a drunk, the mother’s unwell, there are nine children-”

“Father, do not think me an unfeeling man, but I want my daughter. Now.”

The captain looked down at the clergymen. The priest sought the nod of his own superior.

“Of course.”

Bill knocked on the door to the milkman’s house. The door slowly opened and a woman appeared, the milkman’s wife he remembered.

“Mrs. Peel, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

She gave away nothing.
“Anyway, I’m Sir William Bourne-”

“I know who you are.”

“Right. Well, I was just home for the weekend and I noticed my milk delivery hadn’t come. Mistake, I’m certain. I have my ration book-”

“Not a mistake.”

“Wasn’t it?”

“If your wife wants milk, she can get it from the Luftwaffe.”

“Do you have any idea who I work for?”

“I know.”

“Listen, you may have gotten to decide who you sold to before the war, but now you don’t. My family has ration booklets. I want everything we are entitled to or the authorities will hear of it.”

“Do you know my son is over there?”

“And my daughter is here and rather thirsty.”

Bill walked into the cottage, proudly carrying the milk bottles with half that week’s ration.

“Gina! Daddy has come home victorious! I-”

He stopped short. Gina was sitting at the kitchen table with a glass of milk. He looked to the counter where another set of filled milk bottles sat as Victoria chopped potatoes.

“What is Daddy victorious in?”

“I-” He paused. “Where did you get milk?”

“I’m not saying until I get an apology.”

“An apology?”

“Yes. You acted as if I would let my baby starve rather than deal with some woman who doesn’t like me.”

He walked towards her, adding his milk bottles to the collection.

“Where did you get milk?”

“An apology, saying, ‘Victoria, I have greatly underestimated your abilities-’”

“Where?”

“‘You are not some simple little woman who needs her husband’s help-’”

“Victoria, if you bought it off the black market, you have no idea how bad this could be for us-”

“I didn’t buy it off the black market. I didn’t buy it at all actually.”
“Victoria, please.”

“You know Brocket Lea Farm?”

“Yes.”

“Anyway, Mrs. Lewis had been keeping it up while her husband’s away and obviously she has two cows and Gina and I were just taking a walk through when I saw the lady she has helping her. Miss Bowen.”

“What does this have to do with anything?”

“Bill, I saw Mrs. Lewis with Miss Bowen.”

“I don’t.”

“With. Like the time Nancy walked into the sitting room and saw you with me.”

Bill followed her to the end of the thought. “Oh.”

“Yes.”

“So, you’re blackmailing them? That’s monstrous.”

“Really, Bill? First off, I could be monstrous for my baby. I would. I am a mother, but no. Mrs. Lewis started offering me things left and right to shut me up and before I could explain that I really didn’t care what they got up to—except I had to offer Gina the wrestling explanation as to what they were doing. She is going to have lots of questions one day. Anyway, Mrs. Lewis offered milk since everyone in the village knows Mrs. Peel doesn’t care for me. I thought, well, why not? It’s not really black market, I’m not taking what’s rationed for me, am I? And I don’t have to set eyes on Mrs. Peel because every time I see her, I want to scream. And we do get eggs sometimes which is good because Gina is so picky and eggs are the one thing I can guarantee she will actually eat.” She looked up. “So?”

“So?”

“Where is my apology?”

Feet. Gina kept staring at her feet. So hungry, so thirsty, so tired...

She bolted awake as the door burst open, soldiers in red coats flooding in as the children screamed.

“Your Royal Highness, are you alright?”

Anne looked at Seamus. “What have you done?”

“Oh God, oh God...”

Seamus had the look of someone who knew he had signed his own death warrant. His face was nothing but panic. Two soldiers had him pinned against the wall, one to each of the others, even the little ones.
Then Melbourne walked in.

“Gina.”

She was lifted up before she could answer. Back in Papa’s arms.

“Papa.”

“Oh, my darling.”

“I want Mama! I want to go home!”

“Yes, of course. I shall take you home right now.”

Outside a crowd had gathered, held beyond the line of soldiers. They watched as Melbourne walked out, carrying the princess in his arms. They quickly bowed their heads and curtsied as he walked back with her to the carriage.

“Surely it’s safe enough for us to come to London now?,” Victoria mused as Bill read through the papers he had brought.

“What?”

He looked at her.

She shrugged. “The Blitz is over. Gina and I could stay at the flat.”

“The Blitz may be over, but that doesn’t mean a hundred other things couldn’t happen, like an invasion.”

“Yes, but in an invasion, you’ll be seeing to your queen, won’t you? You shall have to get her off to Canada or something.”

“The Queen has no intention of surrender and I will be going home to my family with Her Majesty’s blessing.”

“Then what?” He raised an eyebrow at her. “It won’t be safe for you. It won’t be safe here- we’re too close to Brocket Hall- where will we go?”

Bill held his hand out for her as she walked to him giving her hand over to be kissed.

“You’re not to worry.”

“How can I not worry?”

“We will be together.”

She nodded and took his invitation to sit on the sofa.

“Are you still reading about Bengal?”

“Yes. It’s dreadful.”

Victoria leaned over to share the paper. “What is that? Why is that woman naked?”
“The people are so destitute they cannot afford cloth so they’re forced to go out like this.”

“They look like skeletons. Can’t the Queen do something?”

“She wants to do something but the Prime Minister won’t hear of it. He thinks it’s not worth losing the war.”

“Can’t the Queen go to Parliament?”

Bill frowned. “The Queen doesn’t go to Parliament.”

“She goes for the State Opening.”

“She goes to the House of Lords, she can’t set foot in the Commons, she has to summon the MPs to the House.”

“Then she ought to do that.”

Victoria was half asleep. She had not moved from the nursery. Her courtiers had struggled to keep pace, Harriet was passed out herself.

“Mama,” said Ellie.

She stirred, reaching out for her cheek.

“Yes, my darling?”

“I do not know any of the people in the paintings.”

“Oh.” She sat up. “Well, those are Lord Drogheda’s relatives. You would not know them.”

“It’s Papa!,” Maggie shouted.

Victoria leapt to her feet and to the nursery window. It was her husband, his coat wrapped around Gina.

“Gina!”

Victoria did not wait. She flew down the stairs.

The butler opened the door as Melbourne entered with Gina on his hip.

“Gina!” She helped her down. “Are you alright? Were you hurt?”

“No, Mama.”

“But you must have been very frightened. My poor darling...”

“No.”

“But I know you must have been.”

“Queens are not afraid.”
“Oh, Gina.” She wrapped her arms around her. “I assure you, queens most certainly can be afraid.”

Gina burst into tears as Victoria held her.

“It is alright.” She rubbed her back. “I will get you anything you like. Something to eat?”

“You said the famine was over.”

“What?”

“You said I helped, you said it was over!”

“Gina!”

“It is not! People are sick, they are hungry, we did not help!”

Victoria held her face. “Mama will see to everything.”

The Earl of Charlbury entered the room, a flurry of dressers and courtiers, halfway dressed in his ceremonial uniform.

“Why am I getting in full battle dress?,” he asked as his valet followed.

“Because we are going to Parliament,” the Queen answered.

“You’re not opening Parliament.”

The Queen looked at Bill. “Crown?”

“No. No robe, either.”

“Why are we going to Parliament?”

“Because you shall have to be Black Rod.” The Queen looked over the assortment of decorations. “Sash?”

“Sash and royal orders, Garter star.”

“So we are...” said Matthew.

“Going to speak to Parliament.”

“I realize Tommy isn’t here, but isn’t this where he usually says something?”

“It would be, but he’s not here and if he asks, this was entirely my idea.”

Lord Russell entered the throne room.

“Your Majesty.”

Victoria held her hand out. He kissed it.
“May I inquire after the Princess Royal?”

“She is still frightened. She sleeps in my bed and cries out in the night.”

“I am very sorry to hear—”

“And she asks me if the famine is over, why are the people still starving to death?”

“Majesty—”

“Lord Russell, if the famine is over, why are the people still starving to death? Why is there disease?”

“Well, of course, the emergency is not over but the government cannot be expected to improve every corner of Ireland. Some of the Irish are quite shiftless, I know Her Majesty only really visited Cork, if you had seen the North—”

“Lord Russell, did I not ask you to form a government in my name?”

“Of course, ma’am—”

“Am I not Queen of Ireland?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Then it would suggest to me you must improve it or I must find someone else to.”

“Ma’am, with respect that is not in your power—”

“The Princess Royal was taken from her family because of the failings of your government and I will make certain that the people know that. Certainly it is not outside my power to do so and I have as much right as any mother.”

“Do you suppose the Tories will do better, ma’am?”

Victoria stiffened. “I would advise you to go back to Parliament and reinstitute the famine relief measures.”

“Ma’am—”

“You do know I have a brother-in-law who sees himself in your place one day? How soon do you suppose that can happen? Do you take my meaning?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The car pulled up to the entrance of the Houses of Parliament quickly. Bill got out first as the Queen’s equerry opened the door for the Earl. They walked in briskly amidst a flood of reporters and pages.

“Your Majesty—”

“Ah, Mr. Attlee, how nice,” the Queen said not missing a step.
“Your Majesty, perhaps I could show you the way-”

Attlee stood in front of her. She looked up at him.

“We know the way, Mr. Attlee. We have been here many times.”

“Your Majesty-”

“Are you standing in our way?”

Attlee bowed his head and backed away.

“We shall be in the House of Lords.”

Attlee rushed to the Commons. They were mid-debate.

“What did you do to her?,“ Attlee hissed at Churchill.

“To whom?”

“The Queen!”

“What about her?”

“She is here! She went to the Lords! There were reporters! You must speak to her now before-”

There were three knocks at the door. The debate silenced as none of the MPs were quite certain of what to do.

One shyly opened the door.

Matthew entered. The confusion only grew.

“Her Majesty wonders if you might join her in the House of Lords.”

“Before that happens...” Attlee muttered.

The members stood, seemingly no choice but to shuffle over to the Lords.

Victoria stood before where she usually sat at the Lords as her husband walked in and took his place at his side. The rest of the members shuffled in.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” said Matthew.

“So do I.”

Victoria watched as they stared, not the least Churchill.

“My lords and gentlemen,” she began, “I wonder if any of you recalls the story of my grandmother then Princess Regina. On Her Majesty Queen Victoria I’s first state visit to Ireland. She was kidnapped by a boy, not ten years older than her. Because people who are hungry do desperate things, because we cannot expect to keep our subjects when we violate our promises. We wish to win the war as well, but what sort of victory is it when we violate all of our promises, every principle we hold dear, every principle that explains why we are better than the Axis. Are we now? How can we condemn the graveyards of Europe when we sow our own?”
Victoria entered the drawing room. Melbourne was sitting with Regina.

“I do not like this story.”

Melbourne closed the book. “Well, perhaps you have gone off fairy tales.”

Victoria sat and smiled. “Are you feeling any better?”

Gina curled more into Melbourne.

“I have a gift for you,” said Victoria.

She motioned the footman in with a box. She sat before Gina and her daughter joined her on the floor. Gina took the lid off the box and gasped pulling out a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel puppy.

“Like Dash.”

“Yes, precisely like Dash,” said Victoria. “I thought we might get you a new friend. She is a girl, eight weeks old.”

“What is her name?”

“You must choose her name.”

Gina looked up. “Thank you, Mama.”

“You are most welcome, my darling.”

“Why do you not show her to Maggie and Ellie?,” asked Melbourne.

“Yes, Papa.”

Gina left with the puppy.

Victoria sighed. “I am worried about her.”

“She will bounce back. She just needs time.”

"Of course."

“I would lecture you about the importance of guiding the sovereign,” said Tommy as he walked with Bill down the hall, “but certainly no one has been able to guide the sovereign since Lord Melbourne. Where did she get the notion to storm Parliament, though?”

“One can never know how ideas enter a Queen’s head.”

“Is that so?”
They arrived at the entrance to the parlor and met the equerry escorting the Prime Minister.

“Prime Minister,” said Tommy.

“Prime Minister,” said Bill.

“I heard you were unwell, Sir Alan. Good to see we have an experienced hand back at the palace.”

“The Queen was here. Certainly that was enough.”

Churchill looked at Bill. “You’re Bourne, are you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Your wife is German, isn’t she?”

“My wife is half German. Her father was English.”

“But she lived in Berlin until nineteen thirty-eight, where she had been married to a prominent Nazi?”

“I take it congratulations are in order. I heard the Bengal Famine Relief Act passed very quickly. Quite a success for you, sir.”

The equerry cleared his throat. “Her Majesty is waiting, Prime Minister.”

Churchill went into the audience room.

Tommy exhaled deeply, sighing at Bourne. “Were you a bullfighter in a former life?”

“Sir?”

“You seem to enjoy taunting him.”

Ireland, 2012

“So, I think we ought to head out to the Victoria statue in the morning...” said Will. “Then the Regina statue.”

“That sounds like a plan.”

They were walking back from the restaurant they had shut down with the length of their conversation.

“We could grab a pint.”

“No, I don’t think so...”

“Will,” said Victoria, stopping in her tracks, forcing him to turn back, “I’m not alone in thinking there’s something between us, am I? Actually, I know I’m not. I’ve seen you looking at my legs and I’ve known you long enough to know you don’t ogle women like a pig, you would only ogle women you had feelings about.”
Will looked as if he wanted to vanish into the pavement. “Victoria, what are you driving at?”

“I like you. I really, really like you and I am fairly certain you like me.”

“You are a student.”

“I’m a graduate student and an adult. So, if there’s something stopping you from kissing me...”

“You need to make the first move.”

“What?”

“I don’t push myself on women...”

“You’re not pushing yourself, I’m asking you to. I’ll ask you to do a lot more than that...”

“You need to make the first move.”

Victoria stood on her tiptoes and took Will’s face in her hands, her lips on his.

It felt like a first kiss, just not the first kiss ever, but the first kiss in a long time. She finally had to break for air and she stayed with their fingers interlaced.

“Now,” she smiled, “was that so hard?”

“No.”

“Good. Now take me back to my room.”
Will came to the kitchen where Victoria was on her laptop.

“You’re not Googling again, are you?”

“Of course not. I’m looking up wedding announcements.”

Will raised a brow. “Wedding announcements? I thought you had forgotten about that.”

“Oh course not. ‘It is lately announced that Sir William Bourne, son of the late Edward and Enid Bourne was married to Miss Victoria Kent of Strathearn.’”

“Sorry. What is this about?”

“Gina Callum’s parents. What were you talking about?”

“Our wedding?”

“Right. So do we make a reservation for that?”

“Victoria!”

They looked up to see Mary.

“You are planning a wedding?”

“Registry office.”

“You cannot get married at a registry office!”

Will sighed. “Here we go.”

“Could we get back to the real issue?,” asked Victoria.

“Which is?,” asked Will.

“Victoria Kent doesn’t exist. I pulled Gina Callum’s birth certificate-”

“You did what?”

“I had to get a birthdate somehow. The only remotely close one I can find is for Alexandrina Victoria Edwards.”

“Could we focus?”
“Yes,” said Will, “we have Sarah Forbes Bonetta to work on.”

“I meant the wedding, of course,” said Mary.

“Perhaps you might leave the planning of our wedding to us,” suggested Will.

“Papa! Papa!”

Melbourne awoke with a snap. He was alone with Gina in her bedroom, a concession to her newfound fear of the night and the dark after Maggie fell asleep at breakfast. Which had only served to make Gina more afraid so here he was.

“I am here.” He stood, the book that had been in his lap clattering to the ground. “I am here.”

He took her hands and smiled.

“Bad dream?”

“I did not know where I was.”

“You are here, in the palace, in your room and no one will ever take you from here. You understand?”

“Yes, Papa.”

He sat next to her on the bed and took her in his arms.

“Coffee.”

“Lord M, have you heard one thing I said?”

Melbourne looked up at his wife. Maggie and Ellie stared at him as Victoria bounced Effie in her lap.

“Of course, you were saying something about...”

“This is absurd. You must come back to sleep in our bed.”

“It is just until Gina is better.”

“You cannot continue on like this. Gina will have to learn to sleep on her own or leave the nanny to it.”

“She does not want the nanny. She wants her parents.”

“I do not see what good it does to push you to the brink of exhaustion.”

“We will have to agree to disagree, I think.”

“I do not have to agree to disagree ever.”

“Yet you do in this instance!,” he snapped.
“William!”

Melbourne stood. “I am going to go start on the box.”

“Here.”

Victoria was startled away from her work, looking up as her mother put about twenty printouts of white dresses in front of her.

“Mum, what is this?”

“Wedding dresses, of course. It would have been better if you had not been pregnant-”

“Mum!”

“But then again, what do I know?”

Will entered. “Have you got Regina’s diaries around the time Sarah Forbes Bonetta joined the household?”

“Yeah, on my night table. Mum, Will and I are getting married at a registry office.”

“You will still need a dress!”

“Mary, we really are trying to be low key about the whole thing,” said Will.

“Is that what you want or what my daughter wants?”

Victoria looked up expectantly at Will.

“I want what Victoria wants. Let me just find those diaries...”

Mary looked knowingly at Victoria.

“Wait a minute, have you just been saying that?”

“No, of course not.”

“Fine. Let’s have a wedding!”

“Victoria, no-” said Will.

“I can plan a wedding. Watch me.”

“I’m really not daring you, Victoria.”

“You need to pick a date-” said Mary.

“New Year’s Eve.”

“Stop!”

“What? It’s not like I was going to be able to drink.” She looked at the printouts. “And none of these
are going to work, I want a pink one.”

“Pink? But Victoria-”

“Mum, I’m pregnant. I think people will know I’ve had sex.”

Mary sighed, taking her printouts away. “The people who know you would have known that anyway!”

She walked off.

“Victoria...”

“No, I’m going to give you a wedding. Watch me be a wife.”

Will sighed. “Weddings have nothing to do with being a wife.”

Victoria frowned. “There does seem to be a correlation.”

Victoria did not like to be at odds with Lord M. Such things made her feel unsettled even as she sat at the throne, he standing at her side.

“William, I-”

“No, I-” He sighed. “Ma’am.”

“You do not have to call me ma’am when we discuss matters such as this. I am only worried. You have been so exhausted.”

“Gina needs me.”

“Gina needs to learn to be by herself again.”

They were interrupted. “Your Majesty, Captain Frederick Forbes.”

Victoria turned to watch as a naval man entered holding the hand of a small black child in a white dress. She supposed the girl must have been between Gina and Maggie’s ages. He bowed. The girl curtsied.

“Your Majesty.”

“Captain Forbes. And who might this be?”

“Sarah.”

“Sarah,” said the Queen. She smiled.

“If I may, ma’am, she is a gift from King Ghezo.”

“A gift? I do not take gifts of children, Captain.”

“I know, ma’am, but you see, I found the girl in the King’s court. She was a slave there, taken by Ghezo’s army after they slaughtered her parents. She was a princess, meant to be a human sacrifice, but I persuaded the king that it was better to give her as a gift to your majesty.”
“A princess?” She looked towards the girl. “Come here, Sarah.”

The child looked up to her protector and took his push to walk forward. She curtsied again before the Queen.

“This is my husband, Lord Melbourne.” The girl curtsied again without prodding.

“Sarah. Do you like England?”

“Yes, sir, but...” Victoria watched as Melbourne raised an eyebrow and smiled, his sure strategy to draw an answer out. Sarah smiled back. “It is cold and wet.”

“Yes, very, but you see, we English need dreary weather to give us something to be miserable about, else we would have no conversation at all.”

She giggled.

“Lord Melbourne and I have four little girls,” said Victoria. “Would you like to meet them, Sarah?”

“Excellent, Cousin Gina,” said Ada.

“I like numbers.”

Ada smiled, taking the paper away. “So do I.”

“They always make sense.”

Ada sighed.

“You know, when I was a little girl, my papa was never around.”

“Lord Byron?”

She was surprised. “You know who Lord Byron is?”

“No. People always seem angry when they mention him, though.”

Ada considered this. “That is probably right, Cousin Gina. I am afraid he was not always a very good papa, not like yours. So I turned to numbers because you are quite right, they always make sense. They are always there, but sometimes, they are not enough.”

The Queen entered. Ada stood and curtsied.

“Lady Lovelace.”

“Your Majesty.”

“How are the princesses progressing?”

“Princess Regina is as sharp a student as ever, though I fear Princess Margaret’s interests lay elsewhere.”
Victoria cast her eye towards Maggie and her wooden sword.

“Maggie!”

“What, Mama?”

Melbourne entered, leading in Sarah.

“Girls, this is Sarah. She is a princess from Africa.”

“Like us?,” asked Ellie.

“Yes, precisely. Sarah, this is Gina, Maggie and Ellie. We have a baby called Effie but she must be having a nap.” She motioned at Ada. “This is the princesses’ tutor, Lady Lovelace. Perhaps you could join their lessons.”

“Join us, Majesty?,” asked Ada.

“Certainly. Sarah will be staying in the royal nursery. You may stay in Maggie’s room.”

Melbourne followed Victoria out.

“What?”

“I had no idea you had any intention of moving her in.”

“Why ever not? Certainly it is not her skin color.”

“Of course not. Perhaps she would like to be back with Captain Forbes and his family.”

“She is of royal blood. Certainly our nursery is a far more suitable place for her.”

“Do you think that this is the best thing for Gina?”

“Of course it is. Sarah has been through a great deal, just as Gina has. Perhaps she could even be a help to Gina.”

“We have a cake tasting appointment set,” Victoria announced.

Will looked up as Victoria joined him across the desk.

“Do we?”

“Yes. I just took a chance on the caterer. Nancy knew him. All of the guys she dates can usually cook. It’s her gift.”

“You are certain you want to go through with this?”

“Yes.”

Will sighed. “How’s your chapter on Lehzen?”

“Coming along.”
Melbourne walked into Maggie’s room. He found Maggie and Sarah hopping atop Gina’s former bed with the pair of wooden swords.

“Alright, that is quite enough.”

“But Papa-”

“Bed. Now.”

Maggie hopped down and back to her bed. Sarah resigned laying down and pulling the covers over herself.

“Now,” said Melbourne, pulling the bedclothes over Maggie, “you are only to dream of good things. What shall they be?”

“My army victorious.”

“Anything else?”

“Why do you always want me to change mine?”

He sighed. “I would not change you.”

“Are you going to ask Sarah?”

“Of course I shall. Sarah, you are only to dream of good things. What shall they be?”

The child was quiet.

“Oh, now, there must be something.”

Sarah was silent.

“You know, I had a son. He died a long time ago...”

Sarah watched him rapt.

“Sometimes I dream of him, imagine him in a place where he is safe and happy, someplace he is not so far away, where I could still touch him.”

“That would be nice...”

He smiled at her. “Good night, Sarah.”

“Good night, sir.”

“Good night, Maggie.”

He walked to Gina’s room. She was already in bed.

“I shall only be a moment,” he promised.
“No, Papa.”

“What do you mean?”

“I will sleep alone.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes,” she said looking anything but certain.

“Very well. I shall be in Mama’s room should you need anything.”

Melbourne entered the Queen’s bedroom.

“Are you sleeping in here?”

“Am I no longer welcome?”

“I am only surprised. What about Gina?”

“She has said she will sleep alone tonight.”

“Well, I suppose that is good.”

“I suppose...” He took his place under the bedclothes and his wife curled next to him.

“I never slept alone. You knew that. Not until I was Queen. Gina is so much stronger than I was, I do not wish her to lose that.”

He did not answer.

“William?”

His response was a snore.

Victoria typed away. Will entered.

“Mum is making a guest list,” she sighed. “Though it does give her something to do besides trying to redecorate the girls’ room.”

“Mind if I give a wedding suggestion?”

“Of course not!”

“What do you think of getting married at the Bodleian?”

“At Oxford? Will, that’s perfect!”

“You really think so?”

“Of course! Where at in the Bodleian?”

“I was thinking we could hire the Divinity School, I sent an email to the venue manager, it’s still
available for New Year’s Eve.”
“For God’s sakes, let’s get it.”
“You do like the idea?”
Victoria stood and kissed him. “I love the idea. Really, really love it.”
“Good. I’m glad.”

“The Princess Royal seems listless today,” said Lehzen. She looked to Victoria. “I do hope she is not catching something.”
Victoria looked up from her embroidery. Gina was sitting with her puppy while the others played.
“She is fine. Lord Melbourne said she even wished to sleep alone last night.”
“Did she?”
“Surely Lord Melbourne can be trusted concerning his own child...”
Lehzen left.
“Lord Melbourne.”
Melbourne looked up. “Baroness.”
“Do you have a moment?”
“Of course.”
Melbourne put away his papers as the baroness entered.
“I wish to discuss the matter I brought to you before you departed from Ireland.”
He sighed. “So your feelings have not changed?”
“I was happy to delay the matter while the Princess Royal was in such a delicate state, but she is recovering and I do not think it can be delayed any longer.”
“I am going to ask again if there is anything I did, anything I can apologize for?”
“No, Lord Melbourne-”
“I understand we had a difference of opinion regarding Frau Widner and I would not do other than I did, but that is not a reason for you to leave. The Queen values you.”
“Yes, but I do not believe she needs me any more. She is a grown woman.”
“You must be the one to tell her.”
“I know.”
“It is beautiful,” said Victoria. “Really, really beautiful.”

Victoria looked up at the ceilings of the Bodleian. She held Will’s hand.

“We really have to find a good photographer.”

“Well, barring anything else, Fanny is very good.”

“She does have a really good Instagram account.”

Victoria felt someone’s eyes on her. She turned back and saw a figure disappear.

“We should go sign the papers.”

“You know what? I’m just going to run to the loo.”

Will frowned. “Okay, I can get it.”

“Thank you.”

Victoria walked outside. There was the usual fall bustle of students about, the air getting crisper every day.

She saw a figure that matched the silhouette of the one she had seen inside. She could hardly believe it.

The Duchess of New South Wales. Fifth cousin- or something around there- of the Queen, direct descendant of Victoria I. She was only what, twenty? She seemed shorter in person and that was saying something.

Staring right at her.

Not stopping, not giving up.

“Hey.”

She realized Will was standing next to her. She turned back to see the Duchess staggering back a few feet.

“Will, that’s the Duchess of New South Wales.”

“So it is. I’ve no idea what she’s doing here...”

Lehzen entered the nursery. Victoria watched as Maggie, Sarah and Ellie played tag. She laughed and rocked Effie.

“Oh, Lehzen, they are getting on so well...” She smiled. “Have you seen Gina?”

“Majesty, I must speak to you.”
Victoria frowned. “Of course.”

“Alone.”

Victoria handed Effie to the nurse and walked out with her governess following, settling in the empty bedroom.

“What is it, Lehzen?”

“I am afraid the time has come for me to return to Hanover.”

“Oh,” said Victoria. “You wish a holiday? That is no trouble.”

“No, Majesty, I must resign.”

“What?”

“I believe the time has come.”

“I do not understand. Lord Melbourne did not ask for this, did he? Because I will speak to him-”

“No, Majesty, Lord Melbourne tried to dissuade me.”

“You mean you have been thinking about this? You told Lord Melbourne and not me?”

“Majesty, the time has long since passed that you need me. You have children of your own now and they do not need me as you once did.”

“Is that about what I told you at Brocket Hall?”

“Majesty-”

“It is! You mean to abandon me for-” She sighed. “I will not even call it a mistake because I will never be sorry for it and I am sorry if that disappoints you!”

“Majesty-”

Victoria shook her head. “How can you abandon me?!”

Lehzen called after her, but she turned and ran for the sanctity of her private study. Victoria burst inside and shut the door.

She went to the chaise lounge in sobs. Lehzen who had raised her, who had been more mother to her than her own mother, how could she abandon her? For this!

Sobs began to escape her and she looked down to see Dash II at her feet.

“Girl, what are you doing here? Where is your mama?”

She picked the puppy up and noticed a figure by the window that had escaped her. It was Gina, curled up in the light that the sun cast very much asleep.

Victoria sighed. She sat down next to Gina and set the puppy back down. With resignation, she laid down behind Gina holding her close.

Gina startled at this.
“Shh, it’s only Mama.” She curled her tighter. “What were you doing?”

“Sleeping.”

“I could see that, but surely you sleep in your bed…”

“No.”

“Why not? You told Papa you were ready to sleep alone again.”

Gina was silent. Victoria turned her chin to face her.

“Gina, why did you not tell us the truth?”

“Because you like Sarah better!”

“Gina-”

“Because she is royal and I am not!”

“Of course you are royal! You are the Princess Royal, my heiress-”

“Because I am still frightened! And she is not! I wanted you to like me again! I heard you speaking to Papa!”

Gina burst into tears, making Victoria feel wretched. She sat up, taking Gina with her.

“You said you did not need Papa to stay with you in order to please me,” she concluded. She held her face again. “If you are still tormented by what happened in Ireland, Gina, that does not disappoint me nor does it matter because my love for you began before you arrived on this Earth and will not change after I leave it. Nothing can change that. Nothing.”

Gina collapsed into her crying. Victoria braced herself.

“Tell me what frightened you in Ireland.”

“It was so dark and cold.” Gina looked up. “And the crying. No mama or papa.”

“You have a mama and a papa. You are warm, you have light, you need never fear again.”

Victoria picked up the mobile. "Am I allowed to go anywhere on my own? Well, not entirely, V and X are always here. Surely the three of us can manage?"

“Where are you?,” asked Will.

She sighed. “Hertfordshire.”

“What in hell are you doing there?”

“Just getting something from the Hatfield Historical Society.”

She stepped out of the car and took her bag, walking in.
“What? And why didn’t you ask me to go with you?”

“I will be back in no time, okay? And I expect a shag.”

Victoria ended the call. There was the usual smattering of Brocket Hall sightseers even if the house was not open. There were exhibits on the royal family and this one in particular was on the family’s early years at Brocket Hall.

“Hi,” she said to the woman at the desk. “Victoria Kensington. I rang ahead?”

“Oh, yes, you were interested in the Bourne Cottage?”

“Yes.”

“This way.”

Victoria stood politely as the woman recounted the history of the cottage, bought around the turn of the twentieth century as a home for the Bourne family. The eldest son had ended up private secretary to Victoria IV and the family resided there...

“Until the death of Mrs. Bourne?”

“Yes.”

“You wouldn’t happen to have any details, would you? I couldn’t locate anything on a Victoria Bourne.”

“I wouldn’t have any. It was all very hush-hush.”

“Why?”

“Well, I presume because of her husband’s position.”

Victoria sighed. “Right.”

“You know you’re the second one to ask me about this case. You wouldn’t believe the other.”

“Who was it?”

“The Duchess of New South Wales.”

“Really?”

“She’s gotten a bit strange since the business in Kuwait.”

“She did almost die.” Victoria sighed. “Could I have the address of Bourne Cottage?”

---

The day had come.

Victoria watched as the footmen took out Lehzen’s bags.

“Are you sure you will not consider a retirement in England?,” asked Victoria. “I could give you any house you like.”
“No, Majesty, I think it is time I returned home.”

“Will you visit?,” asked Maggie.

“We will see, your royal highness.”

Victoria looked helplessly at Melbourne.

Lehzen curtsied. “Your Majesty.”

“Lehzen...”

“I must be off.”

Victoria watched as Lehzen got in the carriage. She could hold it in no longer and hurried back to the parlor, flinging herself onto the first open sofa.

“Mama?,” asked Gina. “Are you alright?”

“Come here.” She held her arms out, Gina, Maggie and Ellie came to her.

“I am sorry, Victoria,” said Melbourne.

She nodded. “I will be fine. We will all be fine so long as we have one another.”

Victoria stared at Bourne Cottage.

“You’ve been here before.”

She turned to see the Duchess.

“Yeah, I hired it while my partner and I were in town. I didn’t realize it was the same place.”

“So you don’t remember?”

Victoria frowned. “What am I supposed to remember?”

“Everything.”

“Duchess-”

She shook her head. “Don’t call me Duchess.”

“I don’t know you.”

“You do.”

Victoria nodded. “Okay, I’m just going to leave now...”

“Please don’t go.”

“No offense, I really have to get home...”
“Don’t go! Please!”

Victoria stopped in her tracks and turned around.

“You have no idea what it’s been like, how alone I’ve been! No one understands!”

“I’m sorry, but...” Her heart ached. She wanted to tell the Duchess everything would be alright, but...

“I have to go.”

Victoria went back to the car and rushed off.

Her heart ached, it wrenched and she did not know why.
Chapter 41

Hi there! So, I've sort of had a rough couple of weeks and this weekend was no picnic, but I powered through. Please let me know what you think and happy reading!

Also, I am fully aware of the year Carmen debuted. Please assume that Albert's death somehow facilitated Carmen being written and performed sooner.

2013

“What is that crap?”

Della looked over at her boyfriend and took the remote, turning up the volume louder.

“It’s Carmen.”

“Why are they screaming?”

“It’s the opera...” She resumed using the non-royal approved bright purple nail varnish. “I love the opera.”

“So why?”

Della frowned. So strange a question. Her parents had been no great lovers of the opera? Hadn’t she heard a bit of Carmen in a Bond film or something and tracked down the rest of it?

It felt like home.

There was a knock at the door.

“Great, been here a day and you’ve pissed off the neighbors...”

“You can get it. I’m busy.”

“Right-o, your highness.”

“Your grace.”

Della continued listening to Carmen and heard nothing back from Eric. She thought that strange and stood, walking to the sitting room just in time to see a group of men in clad in black shoot Eric in the head.

She screamed as Carmen called out, the men running to grab her and a black bag over her head.
“I am so glad that mama is not back from Brussels yet...” She looked up at her husband as they rode home in the carriage.
“She would not have approved of Carmen.”

He nodded. “It was... unconventional...”

“It was most puzzling.” said Victoria.

Melbourne raised an eye. “In what way?”

“Why choose a love that may destroy you?”

“Is that so very puzzling?”

“Why, William, are you saying you have chosen a love that could destroy you?”

“Is that so very hard to believe?”

Victoria leapt into his lap and over her husband’s lips.

“What an unusual effect it has had on you.”

The carriage stopped. The pair saw they were at the palace.

“Take me to my room.”

“Your room?”

“You know what I want.”

He followed her up the stairs and into the bedroom. Melbourne took her wrists and she grinned as he held them, backing her into the mattress. He covered her lips with his and kissed along the tops of her breasts as the door opened.

“Ma’am, I-” Skerrett started.

“You are not needed, Miss Skerrett,” said Melbourne.

She quickly backed out. Victoria looked at Melbourne. “What now?”

“Now I take you.”

Victoria grinned.

Will awoke to find he was alone.

He stood and groaned, padding out to what he assumed would be the kitchen when he found the light on in the nursery. In a near daze, he walked in.

“Victoria, what are you doing?”

“Trying to assemble this cot.” She looked up from the pile of pieces. “How did you manage it? Is it carried on the y chromosome?”

“I’ll do it in the morning. Come back to bed.”
“No, I can’t leave it. We already have one assembled.”

“We thought we were only having one baby.”

“Yes, but then we went to France and other things happened and...” she sighed. “I’m not putting it off any longer.”

“Victoria, come to bed. You’re not due for months yet, the babies won’t even sleep in these when they come home.”

“And we really ought to decide which one belongs to whom...”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, I don’t want them arguing about it.”

“They aren’t going to argue about it. They aren’t going to be able to speak for a year.” He sat down next to her, taking away the directions. “What are you doing?”

“I want everything to be nice for them. I want them to feel safe.”

“Of course they will. Why do you suppose they wouldn’t?”

She remembered the Duchess’ face. Fear. She was looking to her, expecting her to fix it. She looked back at him, turning away from the project. “Did you ever feel like you failed Gussie and Allison? And I’m not trying to say you did, please don’t think that-”

“Only ten times a day.”

“But did they ever look at you like they were afraid?”

“Of course they did.”

“And you fixed it for them?”

“Of course I did. That’s the job.” He eyed her. “You haven’t failed them. They’re not afraid.”

1860

“What do you think of him?,” asked Gina.

“What do I think of him? I was asking what you thought of him,” said Maggie.

“It does not really matter what I think of him. I am not the one entertaining a marriage proposal...”

“I am not!”

“Why else would Frederick William be visiting?”

Effie ran up to them, the eleven year old bounding forth with all of her romantic notions. “Are you getting married, Maggie? May I be a bridesmaid?”

Maggie’s face was reddening. “I am not marrying!”
“Well, no, Mama has some hopes for it, but Papa will never let you go if you cannot say you love him and Mama will never let you go if Papa is not happy."

Ellie looked back. “Della! Do catch up!”

Maggie took Effie’s hand. “She is so small we could lose her in the nursery let alone Windsor Great Park...”

“Maggie...” chided Ellie. “Do not be unkind.”

“I am not being unkind!”

“She is very small,” said Effie.

“See?”

Gina stopped. “Do any of you hear something?”

Ellie turned around. “Della! Come here now!”

Della looked up from her flower picking and was face to face with a man. She screamed and ran as fast as her legs could travel.

“Lord M, does my box seem strange to you?”

“In what way?”

“Lord Palmerston’s dispatches. Where are they? I know they were sparing but today they are nonexistent. Surely something must have happened with the affairs of my empire today.”

Melbourne moved a chair next to her, going through the papers.

“I know he won the Don Pacifico debate, but still, I am queen. My foreign minister should not be able to go off on his own accord and make decisions that have consequences for my empire.”

Melbourne sighed.

“So?”

“There are no dispatches from Palmerston.”

“Perhaps you could speak to Emily.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because she is your sister.”

“Palmerston is your minister. If you must have an intermediary, it must be Lord Russell.”

“But it would be so much better if you could only help me.”

“Victoria.”
“You were his Prime Minister once. Surely you know how to deal with him.”

“Victoria, if I knew how to deal with the man, would he be married to my sister?”

“A marriage you asked me to approve.”

“I do not know how I would have lived with Emily had you not.” He sighed. “Fanny and Emmie both have sons, yes?”

“Yes?,” she said uncertain of the point.

“They might someday take posts in the government, suppose you wish them to do your bidding as Auntie Victoria? Or with Gina because she is Cousin Gina?”

The door burst open. Maggie and Sarah ran in.

“Maggie! What are you doing?,” said Victoria. “You’re meant to be having your French lessons.”

“Grandmama has returned! May we go to meet her?”

Victoria sighed, looking at Melbourne. “I believe we must.”

They went downstairs, following the girls. Gina and Ellie were already downstairs.

“Meine frechdachs!” The Duchess held Gina tightly. “I am so happy to see you. And Maggie! Have you grown?”

“Yes!”

The Duchess laughed.

“And this must be Sarah.”

The little girl curtsied.

“Cousin Charlotte?” Victoria looked behind her mother to see Leopold’s daughter, hanging back. “What are you doing here?”

“I thought she might stay in the nursery for a bit.”

The girl did not answer.

“Of course she may,” said Melbourne. “We are very happy to have you, your highness.”

“Girls, why do you not show Cousin Charlotte to your rooms?,” asked Victoria. “It has been so long since she was here, things must look so different.”

“Come on!,” said Maggie.

She and Sarah were the first to bound up, Charlotte following with eyes downcast.

“Gina, see to it that Cousin Charlotte settles in, would you?,” asked Melbourne.

“Yes, Papa.”

The Duchess’ maid finished helping her with her cloak and gloves.
“Such a long carriage ride, I will be glad to have a bath and have this journey off of me.”

“Mama, you did not mention that Charlotte would be coming to visit,” said Victoria. “We would have prepared some amusement for her, the poor child has just lost her mother.”

“I did not know she was accompanying me, Drina,” said the Duchess. “Your uncle rather surprised me.”

They walked into the parlor and sat. Victoria ordered tea.

“Surprised you in what way, Duchess?,” asked Melbourne.

“He wishes Charlotte to be raised away from Belgium, in her own household, except for a visit in the summer.”

“You are not serious,” said Melbourne. “She is only just ten!”

“I am.”

Victoria saw a meeting of the minds in her mother and husband. Different as they were in their approach, she knew either would sooner stab themselves in the heart than send their children away.

“The girl has just lost her mother and he wishes her to be away from her family?”

“He means for her to live in Claremont.”

“With his exiled in-laws, who he kept from their daughter’s funeral for fear of his own standing?” Melbourne looked at his wife. “You know, I did not think I could dislike your uncle more...”

Victoria sighed. “So we shall host Charlotte.”

“I do think it would be best, Drina. At least for a little while. It is so ghastly at Claremont on the best day,” said the Duchess.

“Perhaps you are right.”

The Duchess paused. “So, the Baroness has left.”

Victoria stood and left.

“What did I say?”

Melbourne sighed and stood to follow his wife. “You must learn to choose your moments, Duchess.”

When the black bag was drawn from her head, the light nearly blinded Della. She fell back on her haunches blinking.

Someone shouted something at her she did not understand.

“What?”

The shouting carried on.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand! I-”
A smack knocked her backward. A knife at her throat.

Carmen in her head.

Ellie sat on Melbourne’s lap. Effie was on the floor next to Victoria as she wrote letters. She smiled as she looked over at them, his hand guiding her fingers as they read together.

“You do not suppose she is too young, Lord M?”

“You forget how preternaturally brilliant our offspring are...” He kissed Ellie on the top of the head. Penge entered. “Your Majesty, Lord Palmerston.”

“You did not say you were inviting Palmerston...”

“Didn’t I?”

“Your foreign minister is your foreign minister-”

“Who was your foreign minister!”

Palmerston entered and bowed. Victoria stood, allowing him to bow and kiss her hand.

“Your Majesty.”

“Lord Palmerston.”

“I ought to take the girls...”

“Oh, William, do not be silly.” Before he could stop it, Ellie was holding Victoria’s hand as they walked to her chair. She ignored his glare as he sat back down with Effie. “Lord Palmerston is their uncle, I am certain he will not mind.”

“Certainly not, ma’am.”

“Did you know, Palmerston, that Ellie can identify every portrait in the palace? And Brocket Hall and I think Windsor.”

“She is very gifted, ma’am.”

“Preternaturally brilliant, I am told,”Victoria said carding her fingers through her daughter’s curls. “Ma’am, I had heard something that concerned me.”

“What is it, Lord Palmerston?”

“I had heard that Princess Charlotte was staying here.” Victoria shook her head. “What of it?”

“She is to reside in England, permanently?”
“It is the wish of my uncle that she live at Claremont with her mother’s family. In the meantime, she will stay here at the palace.”

“Do you suppose that is wise, ma’am?”

“Wise?” She looked to her husband to help her out, but he offered nothing.

“Melbourne, tell her.”

“Tell me what?”

“Why do you not tell her?,” asked Melbourne.

“Ma’am, the princess is the granddaughter of deposed French monarchs—”

“And my first cousin.”

“All I mean is that it could pose problems with the new French government if the princess is to be kept under the same roof as your majesty.”

“Her mother has just died, she has been sent away from home, why should I care what the new French government thinks of the living arrangements of the royal nursery?!!”

“Louis Phillippe is using you, ma’am.”

“Using me?”

“He means to use your influence to help him retake his throne and our relationship with the new French government—”

“Did you not suggest arranging a marriage between the Princess Royal and the Count of Paris?”

“You suggested what?,” spat Melbourne.

“Those were different times, ma’am.”

“It was two years ago!”

“I am sorry, but what was this about Gina?,” asked Melbourne.

“That alliance would not suit us now.”

“Us? Surely you mean the crown.”

“How could you be so stupid?,” demanded Melbourne.

Victoria looked at her husband in surprise. “What?”

“Not you. Him. Under what circumstances would it have suited the Crown to have Gina marry a French royal?”

“Surely you do not think you have control over who she marries?”

“What—”

“You have no control over your own house, you never have, why ought you have control over a stepchild?”
“Lord Palmerston-” said the Queen.

“No control over my own house?”

“Then you marry into a situation where you are never to have control, truly it is the best place for you, Melbourne.”

“Lord Palmerston!,” shouted the Queen, standing. “I think you forget yourself! Lord Melbourne is our consort and will be accorded the respect due his position!”

“Ma’am, I must caution you-”

“And I must caution you that our personal connection is no substitute for our difference in rank.” She sighed. “I think I will take some air. Come along, Ellie.”

2013

David sighed as he followed Victoria in.

“So your gran didn’t like your dress-”

“You so clearly don’t understand.”

She stomped into Dover House, discarding her high heels in a fit. They had just been to the red carpet premiere of the latest Bond film.

“I like the dress.”

“Of course you do. I apparently look like one of my grandfather’s tarts.”

David frowned. “Since when do I like your grandfather’s tarts?”

“You know what I’m saying. You like this...” She motioned significantly at her breasts, the topic of contention with her grandmother who had not cared for the illusion neck or sides doing nothing to dispel the idea of Victoria’s assets. “You can see this, so...”

She picked up her heels and began walking up the stairs.

“I can see that anytime I want.”

Victoria stopped and turned to face him.

“What I meant was, I can see that any time you let me...”

“Thank you.”

He followed her up the stairs towards their bedroom.

“I didn’t even want Vivienne Westwood for my wedding gown, but no. I had to have a British designer. And she tried to put me in mutton sleeves. Mutton sleeves!”

“I think you would look wonderful in mutton sleeves. What are mutton sleeves?”

“The big poofy ones. Like Victoria I.”
She walked into the bedroom. Dash was asleep on the bed.

“Oh, Dash, darling, did you get shut in here? Did you?,“ Victoria cooed as she greeted the spaniel.

David sighed. “Then why didn’t you just tell her-”

“She’s the Queen.”

“So? You’ll be Queen someday.”

She sighed. “That is how wars start.”

An alarm rang on David’s mobile. Victoria sighed.

“Ah, time for your jab.”

She cringed. David walked into the bathroom and to the mini fridge where the hormone shots were kept hidden behind bottled mineral water from even the prying eyes of the staff. Victoria sighed, standing up and turning to face the bed, hands down, bent over.

“Why don’t you talk about something else with her?,“ asked David.

“Like what?”

He lifted the skirt of her dress up over her bum and pulled her pants down. “Oh, I don’t know, this?”

“You saw how well that went over with your mother...”

“Yeah, but that’s my mum...”

He jabbed her with the needle and she yelped.

“You could warn me!”

“I can’t warn you! You flinch!”

She sighed. “Unzip me.”

David did as she asked and she kissed him in thanks. She stepped out of the dress.

“Is that tape?,“ he asked.

“Of course it is.”

“Why?”

“Well, how else do you think my tits are up? And besides, I can’t talk to gran about this, she has to summon the archbishops when we discuss this and I would rather not...”


Francatelli appeared. “Apologies, ma’am.”

“Do you bloody mind?!,“ she shrieked.

“Sorry, ma’am, there’s a security threat. I had to verify your location for the government.”
“Do they want a bloody picture?!”

“The Prime Minister is on his way.”

“What?,” asked David. “It’s midnight.”

“Does he mind if I put some clothes on?!” She paused. “Francatelli, get out!”

The boduguard left.

Victoria sighed. “Honestly...”

David walked out. “Francatelli!”

“Sir?”

“What security threat?”

“The Duchess of New South Wales, sir.”

“What’s she done now?”

“She’s been kidnapped, sir. The Prime Minister will have more information.”

Victoria fumed.

"Not one dispatch!"

"Being angry at your box will not help, you need to summon him,” said Melbourne.

“How does he suppose he can circumvent me in this manner? I am Queen.”

Gina looked up. “What is wrong, Mama?”

“Not a thing, darling.”

“A lie if there ever was one...”

“Uncle Palmerston is in the papers,” said Gina.

“Of course he is.”

“He gave a speech.”

“Politicians must very often give speeches, Gina, though there is very little correlation of them having any significance,” said Melbourne.

“Lord M,” Victoria admonished. “Your papa was a very eloquent speaker.”

“He talked about Louis Phillippe.” She stood up with the newspaper, bringing it to Melbourne. “I do not understand what he means.”

Melbourne took the paper and appraised it. “Ah, well, I suppose that he is referring to the short term
of the French monarchy... at least the latest one.”

“Uncle Leopold has only been king of the Belgians a short time.”

“So he has.” Melbourne passed the paper to Victoria.

By the time the Prime Minister arrived, Victoria and David had changed and were waiting in the sitting room.

“I don’t understand how this could have happened,” said Victoria. “Where was her security?”

“The Duchess doesn’t have the same security level that you have, ma’am.”

“Yes, but abroad in potential danger—”

“She was the guest of Mr. Eric Debauche-Graves.”

David looked at Victoria. “I could tell he was scum.”

“You don’t know that—”

“I am afraid his highness is on to something there. MI6 found a series of communications between he and an associate of his that we now think is linked to the terrorist group in question.”

“And Mr. Debauche-Graves?,” asked David.

“Found dead at the scene.”

Victoria sighed. “Good God.”

“Oh. Darn.”

Victoria glared at him.

“Scum.”

The Prime Minister spoke again. “We’re asking that Your Highness remain in place and limit your engagements.”

She sighed.

“What is Mama doing?,” asked Gina.

Melbourne looked up at the Queen as she rode out ahead of the family as they took their usual turn in the park. She was oddly silent today. Ellie rode in front of him astride his horse, Gina beside him while Maggie, Sarah and Charlotte rode in front of them.

“I believe she is pondering what to do about your Uncle Palmerston.”
“What about him?”

“A monarch must listen to her ministers, but a minister must recognize he represents the Crown. At this moment, Uncle Palmerston is not doing that.”

“Why not?”

“Oh, who knows? He has never been easy to control.”

They finished the ride and arrived back at the palace. The girls clamored for Melbourne to help them off as Victoria settled for a groom. She swooned as soon as her feet hit the ground.

“Mama!,” cried Maggie.

Melbourne hurried over. “Victoria?”

“I am fine. I overexerted myself.” She looked to the girls. “Go in and change for tea. Go on.”

The girls went off.

“You are well?”

“I am fine.”

“Are you certain?”

“What do you mean?”

“You would not be...”

“I would not be what?”

“With child?”

She laughed. “No!”

“Why is that a laughing matter?”

“Effie is hardly a year old.”

“That is not a bar and we have not been careful.”

“I am not with child again. I would think that you would not be so eager.”

“I am not eager.”

“You love babies.”

“And you do not?”

“No, they look disgusting.”

“And ours?”

“Ours are the exception. Besides, I do not see why we need more.”

“It is not a matter of what we need, more of what we are given.”
“Della!,” a voice called through the wilderness. “Della!”

Della awoke with a start, a bucket of cold water landing on her. She coughed as she went to her knees, sputtering out water.

“I was at Windsor. I was hiding.”

“You will read a statement.”

“No. What am I doing here? Where is this?”

The men dragged her up as the woman thrust a paper in her hands.

“I don’t know what you want! I-”

Light shone in her face.

“Della! Della!”

It was if she were in the wilderness again, the trees of Windsor Great Park appearing before her.

“Della! Della, there you are!”

She watched as Ellie came towards her.

“What did you run off for?”

“There was a man.”

Ellie laughed. “Hardly a man, just some stupid Eton boys. They were playing a prank. Maggie knocked one over with her parasol. Come on. Papa will have half the army out for you by now.”

Ellie took her hand as they started back towards the castle.

“Papa claims that Mama was lost in this wood once and that he had to rescue her.”

Della was quiet.

“You must be a little braver, Della.”

“What do you mean?”

“You cannot run at everything that frightens you.”

“But.”

“You are the daughter of a Queen. Royal blood runs through your veins. We represent Mama. We represent England.”

She snapped back to what was before her. The lights, the camera, the men with knives.

The statement.
“No.”

“No?”

She crumpled up the paper, tossing it aside.

“No. I have the blood of the Queen of England. I am not to be commanded.”

“You can spill the blood of the Queen of England.”

She doubled down. “I am not to be commanded.”

The knife went to her throat and then the walls blew open.

Victoria stared at the laptop.

“What are you looking at?,” asked Will. He glanced over her shoulder. “Not the kidnapping again.”

“Sorry, just seeing the Duchess made me think of it.”

Will went into the kitchen and put the kettle on. “I heard they were going to make a television movie of it. Disgusting. And that boy’s parents are demanding a portion of the profits. Of course you were obsessed with it.”

“I was not obsessed.” Victoria paused. “Was I obsessed?”

“Well, I dropped Gussie at school and found you in the same place I left you, a day later still watching telly when it happened.”

“Huh.” She paused. “I guess I was a bit obsessed...”

“I’m thinking pasta.”

“Right. Pasta’s good.”

Will went about cooking and Victoria stared back at the laptop. Her mobile rang.

“Hello?”

“Hello.”

She paused. “Duchess?”

Will looked back at her.

“Don’t call me that.”

“How did you get this number?”

“I’m sorry I bothered you.”
“It’s no bother—”

“Gina was just always the... well, she was the heiress. Maggie was Maggie and look what she’s done since. Ellie is everything and Effie was always so amazing. What have I ever been?”

“What are you on about?”

“I can’t go on like this. I can’t go on remembering when no one else does.”

“You’re frightening me.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have rung.”

Victoria heard church bells followed by nothing.

She hung up.

“What is it?,” asked Will.

“Bells.” Victoria stood. “I need to do something.”

“What?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Well, give me a moment to turn the cooker off—”

Will turned back to see she was gone and heard the car screeching outside.

Victoria stared up at her husband. She was in her bed, where she certainly not been last she remembered.

“What happened?”

“You swooned again.”

“What? I—”

She sat up. Sir James was standing at her bedside.

“We were at dinner.”

“Yes.”

She sighed. “How is this even possible?”

“Based upon our earlier discussion, I would say Her Majesty is expecting again.”

“Yes, thank you, Sir James. That will be all.”

The court physician left.

“This is ridiculous.”
“Ridiculous?”

“Yes. I am too fertile.”

“Too fertile? My mother gave birth to eight.”

“Yes, but she was not a queen. Every time I am with child all of my ministers act as if I have no mind of my own and wait for me to be delivered of a son to free them from having a queen...” She took a breath. “If it was up to me, Gina would rule even if we had a son.”

She looked back at him.

“But you are pleased,” she said.

“I have told you before any child you give me will please me.”

She sighed. “I do so hate being confined.”

“I know, but I will look forward to whatever name you devise to hide from me.”

“Why you?,” asked David.

“What?”

They followed the guard who showed them through the hospital. British special forces had brought Della to a nearby hospital in Jordan where the King had offered his personal guarantee of safety. Then she had asked for Victoria.

“Why did she ask for you?”

“She was nearly killed, David. She had to ask for someone. Her parents are dead, her boyfriend is definitely dead...”

“Good riddance to the blighter,” said David.

“Please try not to make that the official statement of Dover House.”

“He was getting a payoff to deliver her to terrorists! What ought I say?”

“There’s no evidence he knew what was coming.”

“No, he just needed the money for his coke habit... or meth... or opium, whatever the hell people are smoking these days.”

“This way, your royal highness.”

They went into the hospital room. Della was flanked by nurses.

“Ellie!,” she cried out.

“Ellie?,” David whispered.

“No, it’s me Victoria and I’ve brought David with me.” She stepped forward. “We’ve brought a private plane, we’re going to take you home.”
Della frowned at her. “You mean you don’t know?”

“Know what?”

Della sank back on her pillows.

“I’ve brought some clothes. We will get you back to England and you can decide where you want to recuperate. Windsor, Sandringham, Brocket Hall.”

“Brocket Hall.”

“Well, you don’t need to decide anything straight away.”

“Brocket Hall.”

Victoria was surprised. “Right. Of course. Brocket Hall.”

It was the bell tower at St. Mary’s through some miracle. Victoria found her at the first one she went to. She hurried up the stairs and found the Duchess standing at the ledge.

“Duchess! What do you think you’re doing?!?”

Victoria looked around frantically. It was dark. Not a soul on campus.

No one to help.

“I’ve sorted out what I need to do. See, I just need to go away again so I can come back.”

“What?”

“I won’t remember anything, it was better when I didn’t...”

“Remember what?”

She didn’t answer. Victoria found another window and stuck her head out.

“Duchess, you have to tell me and maybe I can help, what is it you remember?”


Victoria frowned. Oh, how she wanted to help her, wanted to hold her and she could not specifically say why.

“Duchess, come inside and we can speak about it!”

“Della!,” she screamed. “My name is Della!”

“Alright, Della, alright...” She sighed, looking at the ground. “Della, you have to come back inside.”

“No, this way’s better!”

“No, it is not better! It’s easier, not better!”

Della seemed to finally be listening.
“And I would come out there and get you, but I can’t. I’m not even certain I can climb out there and if something happened to me, the babies would be hurt and Will would never get over it. I can’t risk hurting him like that.”

“Will? Is that your partner? The man I saw you with?”

“Yes, that’s him. You wouldn’t hurt him, would you? You wouldn’t hurt anyone.”

“You don’t know who I am.”

“I don’t. I wouldn’t want you to be hurt, though, ever since I saw you at Bourne Cottage... I don’t know. I felt like I let you down and Della, I do not want to let you down. Please come back inside and if there is anything I can do, I will do it.”

Della finally relented. “I don’t know how.”

“I’ll come to your window and take your hand and you just take it, okay?”

Victoria rushed back to the window Della was at, reaching her hand inside. She grabbed it and took it, the two women clambering to the floor.

Victoria went to Della who was sobbing.

“I’m sorry,” she said between tears. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright.” She took the younger woman in her arms. It felt right. “It doesn’t matter, but never do that again. Don’t harm yourself. You mustn’t ever.”

“No one knows who I am. And the woman I am? Nobody cares for her.”

“Not true.”

“You don’t know me! You just feel sorry for me!”

“Of course I know you. You’re Della.”

Della fell into her arms again, crying.

Victoria had no idea what to do but she felt better holding her.

“You need to warn me this time,” said Victoria.

“I am not going to warn you.”

“We are in a plane where everyone thinks we are having sex in this loo-”

David shook his head. “Why would everyone think we’re having sex in here?”

“Because my name’s Victoria and I think the woman was a nymphomaniac.”

David sighed as he got the syringe out. “I think you are in a bad mood.”

“It could be my enlarged ovaries. Ow!” She looked back at him. “I told you to warn me.”
“And I told you I wasn’t going to warn you.” He put the needle away.

They went back out in the cabin. Victoria was soon asleep with her head smashed against a pillow.

David walked to where Della was. She was not asleep, staring out the window.

He sat across from her.

“Want to talk?”

She looked at him skeptically.

“Victoria is never going to ask you about it. Your whole family is too bloody English and she’s the most English of all of them...” He sighed. “Well, second most English. The Queen is obviously the most English of them all.”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Perhaps not. Nobody’s tried to murder me on the internet.”

“It’s not that.”

“It’s not that?”

“No.”

“Then what is it?”

She sat up. “Do you believe in past lives?”

“No...”

“Then you wouldn’t understand.”

“Well, I don’t know everything, I just haven’t really... given it any thought... at all.”

“I’m going to find the rest of them. I am.”

“You sure this wasn’t about being nearly murdered on the internet?”

“Yes!,” she shouted.

“Fine, alright.” David sat back.
Hi, happy Easter! Happy Passover!

So, since last we met. My dog died and I have been pretty well effed up over it for lack of a non-sweary term. It's been hard to write, I've eked out this chapter amidst a horrible hay fever.

Thank you for your reads and comments. Please let me know what you think and happy reading!

Oh, also, Ke$sha Finding You is officially the theme song of this fic. Go on. Listen.

---

**Berlin 1936**

Alexandrina was tired of listening to her husband.

Or perhaps her husband?

“Drina! Can you not just do what is asked of you?!”

“Asked! You didn’t ask me! When have you ever asked me??”

“I thought you would be proud to do your duty for Germany!”

Alexandrina looked down at the vanity. A swastika brooch. She was expected to meet the English Princess Royal at the train station. Albert had volunteered her to the party on account of her excellent English- which she knew they were all suspicious of- and now she had to go be the Princess’ tour guide, to show her the new Germany.

Trouble was, she hated the new Germany.

“I would be proud to do my duty for Germany,” she said, finally fastening her brooch onto her dress. “This is not for Germany. This is for you and your ambitions, Albert.”

“Most wives would be happy to help their husbands.”

“I am not most wives,” she said standing, putting her gloves on. “Damn.”

Albert rolled his eyes.

“I cannot wear gloves with a hole in them, Albert.”

“But certainly you could wear mended gloves. It is not as if you are Queen.”

Victoria scowled as she took out a fresh pair from the box from the KaDeWe.
"I cannot believe there are mended gloves in your new proud Germany."

"You still don't know. You still don't remember me."

Della seemed perturbed now.

"No. I'm sorry. I-"

"You might as well have let me jump!"

"You are being a bit dramatic, don't you think? What is it I'm meant to remember?" She sighed. "You said Gina, Maggie, Ellie and Effie. Now, the only ones I know-"

"Are?"

"Well, Queen Victoria's daughters, but that's-" She looked at her. "You didn't mean them?"

"Of course I meant them! My sisters, your daughters!"

Victoria stopped the car. "My daughters?"

"Yes!"

"You think I'm Victoria I?"

"Well, not precisely, you were reincarnated, we all were-"

"You think I'm the reincarnation of Victoria I?"

"Yes, obviously."

"And Lord Melbourne would be-"

"The man you were with. Will."

"Right, and I suppose my mum is the Duchess of Kent..."

"Probably."

"And the others?"

"I haven't found them yet. Just Ellie."

"You found Princess Eleanora?"

"Well, she's the Queen."

"Princess Eleanora was reincarnated as Victoria VI?"

"Yes."

Victoria sighed. "Please don't mention this to Will. He'll flip out."

They pulled to a stop outside the house. Della followed Victoria out.
"If you don't remember the last time, why were you at Bourne Cottage?"

"The last time? What I have another past life?"

"Lady Victoria Bourne."

Victoria turned. "What do you know about it?"

"More than you, apparently."

"I know her son-in-law, a bit. Will was a student of his when his wife died."

"The daughter? Gina."

Victoria rolled her eyes. "Lots of people are named Gina-"

"But only one person at a time is Gina."

Victoria entered the house, soon greeted by Will.

"Where in hell did you go-" He paused. "Duchess."

"Will, this is Della. Della, Will."

Della stared up at Will. "Hello."

Will frowned. "Hello, uh, Victoria-"

"Della is going to be staying with us a bit."

"Is she?"

"Yes. Emmie stayed."

"You have an Emmie?," asked Della.

"Emmie is my niece-"

"Who was getting over a breakup. Della is just... laying low. So, where's the pasta?"

Melbourne stood nearby as Sir James once again oversaw his wife’s expanded belly.

“Everything seems to be well, ma’am.”

“Except that I am confined to my rooms and this baby does not seem to want to come out.” She looked up in exasperation at her husband.

“Perhaps now is the time to discuss any future pregnancies...”

“In what way?"

“Perhaps Her Majesty would consider abstaining-”

“Abstaining!” Victoria sat up appalled. “You mean not have any fun in bed?!”
“Is there some reason you are concerned for Her Majesty specifically?,” asked Melbourne.

“Well, no-”

“Thank you, Sir James,” said Victoria. “Oh, but that reminds me, any news on the chloroform?”

“Chloroform?,” asked Melbourne.

“It is said to work most brilliantly to stave off labor pains.”

“Is it safe?,” asked Melbourne.

“Of course it is, I ought to have had it with Effie-”

Sir James interrupted. “The research is not yet there to support its use.”

“Then perhaps it is time to do more research, Sir James.”

The physician bowed and left. Melbourne joined her on the bed.

“Why do they want to deny me relief? They certainly would not were I a man.”

“Were you a man, you would not require such relief...”

“But Lord M, it would make such a difference in having babies...”

He laid his hand on her belly. “In what way?”

“It would be so much more pleasant to think of without the pain of labor.”

“You would still have to carry the baby.”

She looked up at him. “I think you like me like this, Lord M.”

“Like what?”

“Fat. Swollen.”

“I do not take pleasure in your discomfort.”

“But?”

“I think you are beautiful.”

She huffed. “I suppose you think cows are beautiful as well.”

“Papa!”

The door burst open with no further ceremony. Ellie rushed in.

“Ellie, darling, what is it?,” asked Victoria.

“Buttons is sick.”

“Young cat? What is the matter with her,” Melbourne asked, kneeling down.

“She won’t play.”
“I do hope she has not gotten into something,” said Victoria.

“Papa,” whined Ellie.

“I will come have a look at her.”

Victoria joined them. “Perhaps we should fetch the veterinarian.”

Melbourne held Ellie’s hand as she dragged him down the hall. They arrived at Ellie’s bedroom where Buttons was. The calico cat laid on her side and was licking away at something.

“What is that?”

Melbourne smiled. “It’s a kitten. Buttons is not, ill, darling, she is only having babies.”

“Only you say,” scoffed Victoria.

“It also explains the weight she has put on.”

“How did she get kittens?”

“The same as everyone else, I suppose...”

“What does that mean?”

Melbourne looked up, eager to change the subject. “Why do you not fetch Nanny? Tell her to send one of the maids in and we shall look after Buttons.”

“Yes, Papa.”

Ellie left.

“Fetch one of the maids to look after Buttons?”

“Would you like me to call Sir James back? He has done well enough for you.”

“Or perhaps he would deny Buttons pain relief as well.” She sighed. “I thought she was simply growing fat. She is the best rat catcher in the palace.”

“Well, perhaps she shall teach her offspring her techniques. You could keep a regiment of rat catchers. Perhaps they could go on parade.”

“I could scarcely keep a more lively parade.” She looked at him. “Lord Russell will be coming for his audience.”

“Be firm.”

“He seems to think the papal aggression as a move against my sovereignty.”

“Hardly. Why risk offending more of your subjects-”

“But so many of my subjects have asked for this-”

“They must be made to understand. The crown must make them understand.”
Victoria had bought time by rushing into the shower, but found Will was patient. He was waiting for her when she emerged.

“Victoria.”

“I was just going to bed. Wow, what a day!”

“Victoria, the Duchess of New South Wales is in our guest room.”

“Please call her Della. She really prefers Della.”

“What’s she doing there?”

“She just really needs a... friend.”

“Since when are you her friend?”

“Since now! Okay?! She’s staying, that’s it!”

“How did you even meet her?”

“I ran into her doing research-”

“And decided she needed to come stay with us? Between the time you left the house and came back?”

“Look, you’re running up to see Gussie tomorrow anyway, she won’t bother you.”

“She’s not mad or something, is she?”

“No, of course not.”

Alexandrina found it hard to hide her contempt. There was a full complement of party leaders there to greet the princess along with wives and children in uniform.

"This could be easier, Drina,” said Albert.

"Yes. The rest of the world could agree with me."

Albert rolled his eyes and went to speak to his colleagues. There was some sort of delay with the princess. She turned back to the train where she spotted a tall man in a hat and suit.

She found herself transfixed by the figure, walking towards him, she felt as if she had seen him before.

He looked up at her with stunning green eyes and she was certain she had seen him before.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello." He paused. "You wouldn't be with the delegation, would you?"

"I might..."

"It's just no one seems to be speaking any English and the princess doesn't speak German. Nor do I."
Alexandrina smiled. "Well, then, I am your woman."

He tilted his head.

"I am the woman for the job. I am the woman who-" She stopped as he stared at her growing loss of the command of any language. "I'm here to translate. Frau Alexandrina von Coburg."

"Sir William Bourne. A pleasure."

They shook hands and they were both surprised by the familiarity of it.

“Well, perhaps we ought to introduce you to the princess,” Bill suggested.

He led her into the train car as well appointed as any fine hotel.

“I don’t even know why we had to come!,” said the Princess.

“I am well aware,” Matthew replied. “I’ve heard it the whole way from London.”

Alexandrina exchanged a look of amusement with Bill as he knocked on the door and cleared his throat.

“Your Royal Highness."

“Oh, yes, Bill. Have they decided who is senior enough to greet me out there?"

“Not quite. Might I introduce Frau Alexandrina von Coburg? She has been assigned as your highness’ translator.”

Alexandrina curtsied and crossed the room, taking the princess’ proffered hand to kiss as she curtsied again.

Again, that same sense of familiarity passed through her as she eyed the princess closely. The woman seemed to be doing the same to her.

“Welcome to Berlin, your highness.”

“Thank you. Do tell me, will they be marching the racially unworthy in some sort of parade for my amusement or will they be locked away?”

Alexandrina was gob smacked for a moment. Mostly embarrassed.

“Hidden, I should think, your highness. After all, they’ve taken down the ‘Jews Unwelcome’ signs.”

Will came downstairs. Della was holding a picture of Allison.

“Good morning.”

She turned and smiled. “Good morning.”

“I’m on my way out...”
“Is this your daughter?”

“Yes.”

“Is she somewhere-”

“She died.”

“Oh.” Della put the portrait back. “I’m sorry.”

Victoria joined them.

“You’re off?,” she asked.

“I am. I’ll be back tonight.”

Victoria tilted her head. “I thought you were staying over-”

“No, I think I had rather drive back this evening.” He kissed her. “Bye.”

“Bye.”

Will left. Victoria looked to Della.

“Okay, we don’t have a lot of time.”

“Was Allison your daughter?”

“No. Why are you asking about Allison? God, you didn’t ask Will about Allison, did you?”

“I think she was Gina.”

“I thought Gina Callum was Gina.”

“She was.”

“And that brings us to Bourne Cottage. What did you mean the last time?”

“The last time you were here.”

Victoria sighed. “So you’re saying I’m Queen Victoria I and now this other woman, Lady Victoria Bourne?”

“Born Alexandrina Kent, then married Alexandrina von Coburg.”

“What? She was married before?”

“To Albert.”

“Now, there’s an Albert, too? I can see why I’d want Lord M around, we’ve got to keep Albert reincarnating as well?” She paused. “Oh, God.”

“Do you know an Albert?,” asked Della.

“Never mind that.” She motioned towards the kitchen. “Alexandrina von Coburg. Who is she?”
Bill and Alexandrina stood to the side as one of the German government officials introduced the Princess Royal and the Earl to a plethora of dignitaries. It was a sparkling reception set to distract the princess from anything that might have been going on that she would not like.

Judging from the permanent royal scowl, it was not working.

“Is there anyone in particular the Princess Royal should not ignore?”

“Oh, I am certain they will all make themselves known to her. I guarantee you have never seen such a collection of self-serving jackals.”

“Then you have not been to court?”

“I doubt English courtiers are to par with the party.”

“Did you grow up in England?”

Alexandrina nodded. “Until I was ten, then my mother decided to move back to Germany. God knows why.”

“Perhaps she missed home.”

“She missed the Germany of her girlhood. The great writers, the great thinkers... That is all gone now.”

“Then you do not believe that there has been progress in Germany?”

“No.”

“Your husband’s views differ greatly from your own, then?”

“Sir William, do you not believe that a woman can have a thought separate from her husband?”

“I never said anything of the sort, Frau von Coburg. In England, we take quite a different view of these matters than in most parts of the world.”

Alexandrina smiled. “So you do not find it a humiliation to be forced to answer to a woman?”

“No, quite to the contrary. It’s an honor to serve God’s representative on Earth. My father served the first Queen Victoria in her later years. She apparently thought I was quite handsome.”

“How old were you when she decided this?”

“Oh, six months or so.”

“I do not believe you.”

“Well, true enough she did abhor most babies though she did make an exception in the case of her own.”

“They belonged to Lord Melbourne, though.”

Alexandrina caught sight of Albert’s disapproving glare.

“Excepting her eldest, of course,” said Bill.
“Yes, of course.”

“I like dogs better,” said Gina.

Victoria smiled. “Yes, but all of God’s creatures have their virtues.”

Gina put down Dash II, a name that still confounded Victoria, but her husband had dissuaded her from objecting too harshly.

“What questions before Lord Russell arrives?”

“I do not understand. I thought you did not dislike Catholics.”


“But Papa says Lord Russell’s act will upset them.”

“I do not mean to upset anyone and I do not dislike Catholics. I am head of the Church, just as someday you will be, that church must reign supreme.”

“Why?”

Victoria could not answer just then because Lord Russell was shown in. She registered his usual annoyance as Gina joined them and he bowed to a nine year old.

“And the bill?,” asked Victoria after he went through a list of other things.

“I think it will pass easily and assure your majesty’s supremacy.”

“Why?,” asked Gina.

Victoria turned. “Why?”

“Why do you need a bill for that?”

“Because the Catholics do not respect our true church,” Russell supplied. “Even after all of the tolerance we have shown for their pagan rituals.”

“Why is our church the true church?”

Victoria was flummoxed. “Because we are Protestant.”

“Because Henry VIII wanted a divorce.”

Now she was downright terrified.

“Because he wished to follow the true faith,” said Victoria.

“With Anne Boleyn? But he chopped her head off.”

Victoria felt Lord Russell staring.

“That was because of her adultery,” said Lord Russell.
“Gina, you may go. I believe Lady Lovelace is waiting.”

“But-”

“Go.”

Gina scowled as she left.

“I am sorry,” Victoria said to Russell.

“Not the slightest, ma’am. After all, children must be molded.”

The Olympics were as spectacular as one would expect. Alexandrina toured around behind her husband as they headed for the Lang See, site of today’s rowing competition.

“You see, your highness, the stadium is a symbol of the new Germany, built on the ashes of the humiliation we were forced to endure after the war...”

Victoria looked at her husband. Alexandrina watched between them as he pled with his eyes.

“Humiliation? I thought it was reparations.”

Albert seemed to stammer which Alexandrina loved the princess for.

“Reparations? With all respect, your highness, our people were starving and ashamed. The Fuhrer has let us to be proud again.”

“I rather thought the reparations had something to do with the war that killed millions and wreaked havoc upon the Earth.”

“That is all behind us and nothing but the thousand year reich ahead.”

“Reich is a sort of kingdom, is it not?”

“Yes, your highness.”

“What is this? Year three?”

Albert had no answer and the princess was not interested in one. The rowing was to begin, the team of eight.

“Seems a shame we aren’t doing better,” said Victoria.

“The Germans have been doing surprisingly well,” said Matthew. “We must let the hosts have their day.”

“All fine examples of Aryan genetics and discipline, your lordship,” said Albert.

“Are they? I met an American journalist who told me the most remarkable story about his country’s team. All working class young men, the people in the town they come from raised the money for them to come here.”
“Still no match for our team,” said Albert.

“Shall we see?,” said Victoria.

Albert went off to talk to some other party member for a moment. Bill looked at Alexandrina.

“Well, one of us is going to have an unpleasant evening,” he whispered.

“How do you mean?”

“I suspect her highness will be very unhappy if the Germans win and your husband will be unhappy if they do not.”

She glanced at Albert. That glare again.

“I suppose so, though I doubt your princess will be as intolerable as my husband.”

“Oh, give her a chance.”

“How long have you known her?”

“Oh, I was the assistant to her private secretary as soon as she began keeping her own public engagements during her first season. The man above me was such an old relic. They did not get on. He decided to retire and Her Majesty promoted me to secretary.”

“Rather like Victoria I and Lord Melbourne, then. Wasn’t he her secretary?”

“While he was her minister and later unofficially as her husband, yes.”

“No temptation, then?”

“No, I have never thought of her highness in that light.”

“Oh, Bill, I think they’re starting!” Victoria seemed to wave him over.

He followed her in amusement as the guns went off. They watched with binoculars as the boats took off, situated far towards the end of the course. The Germans were quick of course and the crowd roared for them.

Albert had returned along with one of his party friends who seemed to be taking too much joy in the fact that the Americans were starting out quite slow.

“Inferior stock,” he slurred, Schnapps in his hand.

“Hardly. They always start out like that.”

“Too tolerant, your highness. You shall soon learn.”

Victoria turned towards the man. “I shall soon learn what?!”

“Victoria...” Matthew whispered.

“No, this man thinks he can teach me something, I should like to know what it is.”

“I-” He was so clearly drunk. “Look at you, highness. You come from the best Aryan stock.”

“I beg your pardon-”
“Queen Victoria. Prince Albert. Both Aryan.”

“I am English. You shall soon learn that,” she snapped.

“By cheering on the Americans?,” Bill whispered.

“Shut up,” she said without malice.

Bill pointed back towards the race and they continued to watch. The roar of the German fans was deafening. Then the Americans sped up at pace with the Germans.

Then the princess became loud.

“Yes! Yes!” She was jumping up and down, practically giddy. She had Bill and Matthew caught up in her joy as the Americans finally went over the finish line to victory.

And some very quiet Germans where they stood. Alexandrina noticed Albert first among them.

“That was well fought,” said Matthew.

“Very.” She turned to Bill. “I should like to congratulate the victors.”

“And of course the silver and bronze teams.”

She sighed. “If I must.”

“The crown must. And our team as well.”

“The crown would have liked a team with a podium finish.”

Bill left to make arrangements. Albert came to Alexandrina’s side, whispering harshly in German.

“You are meant to be helping the Fatherland.”

“I don’t know how to row, Albert.”

“Do not be clever, you have done nothing to help!”

“I thought I was here to translate. If any of your party wives had bothered to learn anything but how to breed for the Reich, perhaps you would not be so disappointed in me.”

“Perhaps I would not be so disappointed in me if you had bothered to breed for the Reich! You can’t even keep one baby alive!”

That had caught the attention of the nearby Party members. Their wives were a mixture of disdain for her and pity for her. Their royal guests knew nothing of what had been said, but only that there was an argument.

“You bastard,” said Alexandrina.

“Frau von Coburg, so sorry to interrupt...” said Bill.

“Yes.”

“You wouldn’t speak any Italian, would you?”

He was saving her. She could see it in the kindness in his eyes, one that looked so familiar but was
so foreign to her.

“A little.”

“See, the Princess Royal wants to meet all the medalists and I don’t speak any Italian and their handler does not seem to speak any English.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Gina is questioning me.”

Melbourne looked up from the basket of kittens he was attending to. “And?”

“She wishes to know why I am head of the Church.”

“Seems fair enough.”

“She wanted to know what made the Church of England superior to the Catholic Church!”

“It seems fair enough.”

“Because Henry VIII only started his own church because the Pope would not grant him a divorce!”

“Well...”

“Well what?!?”

“He was an avowed defender of the Catholic Church before...”

“I should have known!”

“You ought to have known what?”

“You are behind this...”

“Skepticism?”

“You have always been irreligious.”

“I have no problem with religion so long as it does not interfere in my personal life.”

“You are married to the head of the Church of England!”

“Yes, it has been very hard to keep the church out of my personal life, but we have never invited the archbishops into our bedchambers...” He paused. “Though given some of your tendencies there is a chance they are already well aware.”

“This is no laughing matter! Gina will be head of the church one day and you have her questioning its very existence!”

“How did this even come up?”

“When Lord Russell came to tell me that he was taking the Ecclesiastical Bill to the House.”
Melbourne stood. “He is what?”

“He is taking the bill to the House.”

“Did you not advise him otherwise?”

“Why ought I?”

“Because it could be disastrous.”

“I am the head of the Church! No one ought to be above me!”

Melbourne shook his head. “Because you are the head of many lands and peoples including Catholics.”

“The Pope-”

“The Pope does not give a damn about what you do! This is not the 1600s! That you have allowed Russell and your bishops to be persuade you otherwise-”

“Instead of allowing you to persuade me?”

“The advice I give you, I give out of love for you and your crown.”

“Gina will be getting a religious tutor. I will ask the Archbishop to select someone.”

“Oh, I see. You would like Gina to be led about like a puppet for her bishops and ministers to purport their own agendas.”

“I do not-”

“Someday she will be Queen and she will do as she pleases and believe what she wishes and there is not a damned thing you will be able to do about it.”

Victoria began to march out.

“I will explain to Gina that the reason for the Church of England is that it ought to be the way that the Church need not rule the Crown.”

She glared and stormed out.

“Mama, have you seen my kittens?,” asked Ellie.

“They are with your father since he knows everything.”

“I can hear you!,” Melbourne called out.

“I don’t understand,” said Victoria. “Why the subterfuge? Why wasn’t she Alexandrina Bourne?”

“To hide her previous marriage, to hide her German connections.”

Victoria shook her head. “But the royal family would have never tolerated an employee with a
divorced wife.”

“That was Maggie.”

“What do you mean Maggie?”

“Oh, Maggie was Victoria IV.”

Victoria sighed. “So, now you’re saying Princess Margaret came back as Victoria IV?”

“Yes, so she could have never cast aside Papa.”

“But if she didn’t know that-”

“You’ve met the Queen, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Did you have a connection?”

“Yes, but that-”

Yes, she had quickly become rather close friends with the most famous woman in the world now that she thought of it. They had hit it off immediately.

“We’re friends.”

“You’re friends because you’re really her daughter. Victoria never found new friends. Every friend she has she’s known since she was a child. Well, except her girlfriends in uni.”

Victoria paused. “When you say ‘girlfriends in uni’...”

“Don’t tell anyone.”

“Oh, my God.”

“She doesn’t know I know. Actually, some of them have gone on to make some very good marriages.”

“The less I know the better, really.”

“You’re not a homophobe, are you?”

“No, I just don’t know when to keep my mouth shut or stop investigating things so I would rather not know so as to not bring down the monarchy and make a five-month-old queen.”

__________________________________________

“Are you fighting with your husband?”

“Yes, but I think you would rather take my side this time.”

They were gathered in the study, a rare quiet night with no guests to entertain. Maggie, Charlotte and Sarah had Maggie’s soldiers mixed up with the two girls’ dolls who seemed to have been made generals.

Gina was not speaking to her, having had her first tutoring from a Bishop.
She had not taken to it.

She sat on her father’s side of the room reading. Melbourne had Ellie on one leg, Effie on the other, the latter nearly asleep. He was encouraging Ellie to read to him, she needed her practice.

“Would I?”

“Yes, you would.”

“Then why do you not tell me instead of presuming what I think?”

She sighed, putting her book down. “Gina’s religious education has been neglected because I have allowed her father to see to her education and he is...” She paused. “You know how he is.”

“What has been wrong with letting Lord Melbourne direct her education? She is going to be a queen, after all.”

“She questioned the very existence of the church of which I am head and someday she will be head.”

“Did you answer her question?”

“What?”

“You like it well enough when she questions everyone else.”

“You have never cared for questions.”

“You never asked any.”

Victoria looked at her in amazement. “I never asked any?”

“No and now that you mention it, I think your husband directs his daughters’ educations very well.”

“Would you care to sit?”

The crowd was still milling about, they were among the regular spectators now, far from the rarefied air of the party elite.

“Yes, thank you.”

They took a bench.

“I am sorry if the Princess Royal’s enthusiasm caused you any distress.”

“No, it is not that,” she sniffled. “Though I do not know how it could have gone more wrong...”

“Nor I.” He paused. “Then what?”

“My husband blames me. He blames me for everything that goes wrong in his world.”

“How can that be?”

“I... I hate his world.” She felt so free to speak with him. “I hate the party, I hate the men in the party,
I hate the other women in the party. I hate how they make children dress up like soldiers. I hate what they say about Jews and everyone else. So I am delighted whenever something goes wrong in his world."

"Do you love him?"

"I thought I did. I thought I could. Our families expected it and..."

"Why do you not leave him?"

She looked up.

"You have no children, do you?"

"No." She paused. "There was a boy. He died."

"I am sorry. I know what that is like."

"You do?"

"My son.... He died two years ago, not long after his mother. It does not get easier, we only learn to live with it."

"I wanted to be a mother so much, I thought it would fix everything but the world changed around me..."

"So, why do you not leave him?"

"I made a promise-"

"So did he."

"Why should you care?"

"Because I cannot bear to see you waste your life."

She looked up at him. How she loved him though she had no idea when she had decided that.

"Take me somewhere," she said.

"I don’t know anywhere. I’ve never been here."

"Then come with me somewhere."

"Anywhere."

She took his hand, dragging him along as they raced, dodging between happy families out for the day. Alexandrina stopped in front of their destination, a boathouse.

"Do you trust me?"

"Of course I do."

She led him inside. The place was unlocked though the boats were dry docked.

"What is this?"
“It belongs to my sister’s husband.”

“They aren’t here?”

“No, he’s terrified of water.”

“Then why does he have a boathouse?”

“To make himself feel important.”

“Alexandrina, what are we-”

She stood on her toes to kiss him. He met her lips, taking her in his arms.

“Here,” she said motioning at a work table.

“Here?”

“Here.”

He brokered no further argument, lifting her up to sit on the table.

“Kiss me.”

He did as she asked, the motions of commanding and obeying coming so easily to both of them. She put her hat and gloves to the side, he put aside his straw hat.

They kissed again.

“Help me,” she commanded again, directing his hands to her stockings. She silently cursed the infernal items as they worked to release her garters and move aside her knickers.

He surprised her, taking his hands to her womanhood, giving tender strokes that made her eyes roll back.

“Lovely...” he said as he stroked her. “So very lovely.”

Alexandrina reached for his trousers, unbuttoning and shoving them down to stroke his manhood.

“You’re so big,” she whispered. “Do you think I shall be too tight for you?”

He groaned. “I think you are a minx.”

She scooted up to help push up her skirt and slip, leaving her bare bottom against the table. They locked eyes as he pushed inside of her.

“Oh, you are sized just right, I think...”

“Yes...” She rolled her head back, dragging her fingers through Bill’s hair as he thrust into her. Everything was so familiar, so right even though it ought to have been strange and wrong. There was no discomfort.

“Will?”
Victoria looked up.

“You’re even earlier than I expected.”

“Where’s your friend?”

“Della? She had to go... find some people.”

Her sisters she had said.

“Oh.”

“Will, could you please try and be nice to her next time you see her? It would mean so much.”

“Why should it?”

“She’s not well, okay? She tried to kill herself.”

“Jesus...” he sighed. “Why didn’t you tell me that to start?”

“Hi, this is Della, she’s suicidal? Something like that?”

“Okay.” He sighed. “Blimey, Victoria, first the Queen, now the Duchess of New South Wales.”

“I’m pretty sure the Duchess of Mumbai likes me as well.”

“You’re becoming quite the courtier.”

Victoria smiled. “I’ve finished with the Ecclesiastical Act and it’ll be on to Della. Well, the first Della. It’ll take us right to Palmerston’s resignation.” She looked up. “Della was a small baby, right? Even smaller than Regina. All the other girls were little bruisers.”

“Well, she was a small woman. She took after her mother, I suppose.”

“And the chloroform.”

“We have Dr. Jenkins Wednesday.”

Victoria groaned.

“And she’ll have expected you to come up with a birth plan.”

She scoffed. “I have a wedding to plan and a book to write and...” She thought about Della’s revelations. “Several other things going on.”

“I’ll make a deal.”

“A deal?”

“I’ll put the other cot together if you work on your birth plan.”

Victoria turned up her nose. “Never mind. I’ll hire someone.”

“You aren’t hiring someone.”

“I can have Mum hire someone.”
“You know you can have pain relief-”

“Thanks. I did know.”

He sighed. “Let’s go to dinner.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll get my coat.” She stopped and turned around. “Remind me not to tell you about the person who I found out was bisexual. Is, I suppose. Well, now you know it’s an is-”

“Victoria?”

“Don’t remind me about the person you found out is bisexual.”

“Thank you.”

Melbourne opened the door to find his wife in her nightdress.

“You knocked?”

“You always knock.”

“Yes, but you are my wife-”

“How you believe in God?”

He took a deep breath, motioning her in. She sat down.

“Does it matter?”

She looked at him in amazement. “Of course it does!”

“Why should what I think of God bother you in the least?”

“Because you are my husband and I should very much like to see you in the next life.” She paused. “You always joke so about religion-”

“Well, it is a bit of a joke.”

“William-”

“If I believe in you and you are the head of the Church, is that not good enough?”

She sighed. “I do not know.”

“Well, I am afraid if you wanted a religious husband you rather picked the wrong man.”

Victoria shook her head. “I wanted you for my husband.”

“Then I do not understand the problem.”

“How can you not believe in God?”
“I rather don’t know. I think there is more to the world than what we can see...” He sighed. “Religion mostly seems to come between people and I have never liked separating people.”

“You are a snob,” said Victoria.

Matthew looked at his wife. “I am a snob? You are the snobbiest snob to ever snob.”

“Bill?,” Victoria looked at her secretary.

“I rather liked them.”

Victoria sat on the sofa, removing her heels. “And it is always delightful to deny Herr Hitler something he wants even if our rowers could not deliver it.”

Matthew shook his head. “I’m going to dress for dinner.”

Victoria shook her head as her husband disappeared.

“Do you wish to admonish me, Bill?”

“Never, ma’am.”

“If I am positive and glowing in all of my remarks, Hitler will use it. I will not be used by him. Better to be the snobbiest snob that ever snobbed.”

“Indeed, ma’am.”

“Ugh, I had to shake hands with him anyway. Thank God that I had gloves on which I had my lady’s maid burn.” She sighed. “What tomorrow?”

“Shooting.”

“Shooting,” she sighed. “I ought to have been a shooter in the Olympics. Why wasn’t I?”

“They don’t allow women for one thing, ma’am.”

“Why is that? It is not as if bearing children has diminished my ability to aim at a target. Rather the opposite...” She looked at him.

“Ma’am?”

“You disappeared with Frau von Coburg a rather long time.”

“She needed someone to talk to.”

“Well, if I were married to Herr von Coburg so would I, but you were gone rather a long time.”

“I feel as if I have met her somewhere but I can’t place her.”

“I feel the same.”

“Now you are teasing, ma’am.”

“No. I feel exactly the same. Shame that she’s one of them.”
“If it makes a difference, ma’am, I don’t think she is.”
“Do you think I ought to wear trousers?”

David sighed as they walked down the hall of the palace. “Is this going to be the nail varnish all over again?”

Victoria carried the baby to the staircase. David was going to be taking pictures for the baby’s six month birthday to be shared with the public.

“I just don’t recall my grandmother wearing trousers. Queen Victoria I never wore trousers.”

“She also lived in the nineteenth century.” He pointed at the step. “Here.”

“Here?” Victoria looked at the portrait. “Good morning, Grandmama. Good morning, Lord M.”

“And turn to me.”

David began snapping. He had become quite the photographer, his family photos having been released on occasion by Dover House and now the Palace to commemorate events in their daughter’s life.

“She’s not smiling,” said Victoria.

“That’s her resting bitch face.”

“David, you can’t say a baby has-” Victoria looked at her daughter. “Oh my God, my baby has resting bitch face.”

“Told you.”

“Well, we have to do something!”

“Do what, Victoria? Have her DNA altered? Maybe we could also arrange for spider webs to come out of her hands.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Have a look around. She didn’t get that face in a vacuum.”

Victoria looked around at the portraits of her predecessors.

“Resting bitch face...” she sighed. She turned back to the baby. “Victoria, Victoria, who’s a good girl? Yes, you are! You’re a good girl!”

“You can’t talk to her like she’s Dash. She’s a baby.”

“Well, Dash would smile for me.”

“Victoria, look at Daddy, yes, here’s Daddy...”

The baby smiled and he took a few snaps. Victoria rolled her eyes.

“It won’t work if you roll your eyes, madam.”
“Well, photo shop it, then...”

“Victoria...”

She smiled. David got a few shots in and they headed back towards their rooms.

“I was thinking about your coronation.”

“My coronation? Surely that’s a year away.”

“Yes, well, there were thoughts...”

“Whose thoughts?”

“A few people. Since we are in the midst of celebrating the Accession-”

“We’re mourning.”

“Would you let me finish? The idea is that you have your coronation on the anniversary of Victoria I’s coronation. Two Victorias, two coronations, separated and joined by one hundred and eighty years of history.”

She sighed. “It was your idea.”

“And a bloody good one. Your granddad thought so.”

“We don’t ask him things like that. What type of caviar pairs well with which champagne, yes...”

“You know it’s a good idea.”

“You know Will Lamb might be able to shed some light on this.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s a Victorian history expert, I remember the chapter in his book about Melbourne planning the coronation. He wanted the whole thing just so...”

“Should we discuss the coronation concert series?”

“The concert series?”

“Yes, I thought we might ask Beyonce.”

“Why would we ask Beyonce?”

“She’s got that song, who runs the world, girls. Or is that too on the nose?”

“That is far too on the nose.”

“I’ll make a list.”

It was pouring when Will took Victoria to Heathrow.
“I still can’t believe you let your passport expire.”

“As you have expressed,” he said as he stood in the queue with her pulling her suitcase along.

“I still think you ought to just use the premium service-”

“I don’t need to go.”

“Of course you-”

“It’s your book, it’s your film, Felicity Jones wants to speak with you.”

She paused. “I do wish you were coming.”

“We are allowed to function as individuals.”

“You rang me when I went to Hertfordshire!”

“I thought you had made a run to the shops and hadn’t come back after two hours, forgive me for being concerned.”

They arrived at the counter and Will passed over the suitcase to the waiting clerk. Victoria got her boarding pass and they walked to the security gate.

“Will you miss me?,” she asked.

“Of course I will.”

She waited for her kiss which he gave readily.

“Will, if you hear from Della-”

“Why would I hear from Della?”

She did not answer. “Just take care if you do hear from her.”

“Fine.”

“I have to get in the queue.”

“I know.”

They kissed again and Victoria was off.

Will headed back to the car park and wondered what he was going to do the next few days. He definitely had to get the second cot assembled, perhaps run up to see Gussie again, but that would be disrupting his son’s routine and he hated that. The book, of course.

Then his mobile rang.

“Hello?”

“Is this Professor Lamb?”

“Yes. Who’s calling?”

“Jennings. Her Majesty’s private secretary.”
“Right. I thought I would be hearing from Mrs. Sutherland about this.”

“Mrs. Sutherland?”

“The archivist at Brocket Hall?”

“I know who she is.”

“I just thought she would be handling... the letter.”

“What letter?”

Will paused. “So, this isn’t about-”

“Her Majesty wishes you to come in for a meeting at your earliest convenience.”

“Well, I’m in London now, actually-”

“Good. We shall see you around eleven.”

Jennings hung up.

“Well, that went wrong...” said Will.

Melbourne awoke to no sound in particular.

It was the dead of night at Brocket Hall, his very pregnant wife asleep next to him. They had journeyed home at Victoria’s insistence on having the baby here. It was a matter of waiting.

He stood taking his dressing gown off the end of the bed and putting on his slippers. He opened the door to the bedroom to find the head nanny.

“Lord Melbourne,” she curtsied.

“What is it? Is Sarah doing poorly again?”

“No, Princess Eleanora.”

He went down the hall, turning past the nursery where the other girls slept. Eleanora was still alone with a nanny most nights. The night terrors had lessened, but still happened.

Melbourne could hear the problem before he saw his daughter: a loud cough with her gasping for air. He made his way in where the junior nanny was with her.

“Ellie? Darling.” He sat next to her. “Tell me, what is the matter?”

She could not answer, only cough.

“She awoke after she fell asleep, my lord,” said Lillian. “She can’t stop. She seems to faint with the exhaustion.”

“Allright, my darling...” He looked up at Richards. “Sir James is not expected until tomorrow, send a boy into Hatfield for Doctor Brandon.”

“Yes, milord.”
“Della,” said Victoria as she looked up at her cousin. “Do tell me we didn’t have an appointment.”

“No, I just dropped by.”

“Oh. How nice.”

“Has Emma gone?”

“Well, I couldn’t keep the Duchess of Mumbai away forever, but I am making her Mistress of the Robes. She’ll be back soon enough.”

“Not her anyway...” muttered Della.

“Not who?”

Della sighed. “I was just wondering if you’ve met anyone lately.”

“I meet lots of people.”

“Someone you might have hit it off with. A new friend.”

“Not that I’m aware of...”

David entered with the baby.

“Hello, Della.”

Della eyed the baby. Jennings entered.

“Your Majesty, Professor Lamb has arrived.”

“Thank you, Jennings. Send him in.”

Jennings nodded and disappeared briefly. Della looked to Victoria.

“What’s he doing here?”

“Why? Have you two met?”

“Yes...” Della stammered.

Will entered, seamlessly following the royal protocol by bowing and then coming in to kiss the Queen’s proffered hand.

“Your Majesty.”

“Professor Lamb. You remember my husband?”

“Your Highness.”

“Good to see you again. How’s your boy?”

“Very good, sir. Thank you for asking.”
“And when you last saw the princess she was a bit smaller.”
“I can see. Your Highness.” He bowed his head slightly.
The baby smiled. Will smiled back and she erupted in giggles.
“How did you do that?,” asked Victoria.
“Do what, ma’am?”
Victoria shook it off. She motioned at Della. “I’m told you have met the Duchess of New South Wales?”
“Yes. Duchess.”
“Professor Lamb,” Della tried to chew through.
“Well, won’t you excuse us? Professor Lamb and I have some business to discuss.”
The others left with Della dragging her feet.
“Thank you so much for coming.” She motioned for him to sit.
He took a seat across from her. “It was no problem, your majesty, though I am curious what expertise I have to offer you.”
Victoria widened her eyes. “You have all the expertise I need. You are an expert on my family.”
“Well...”
“I have a coronation to plan and my committee seems to think it would be a good idea to match the date with the anniversary of Victoria I’s coronation.”
“That’s a brilliant idea.”
“You think so?”
“I do, ma’am. I think the more you can associate your coronation with your lineage the better.”
“In what way?”
“Take your late grandmother’s coronation, it was significantly pared down from her mother’s- and that took place at the tail end of the Great Depression- there was nothing for the people to grasp at, to become invested in.”
“You don’t think it an extravagance?”
“Well, I’m hoping you’ll only have the one coronation, ma’am, so I think it little extravagance is permissible.”
Victoria smiled. “Fair enough.”
“Think of the monarchy as a sort of factory. You have to keep supplying the raw material that in turn creates your legitimacy. Your charity work, every ceremony, every knighthood-”
“You mean me,” she interrupted. “I am the raw material.”
“Yes, but what separates you from an actress or an Instagram model is that your raw material goes back centuries. It gives it weight. British history is reflected in your family history.”

“What?”

Melbourne caught Victoria’s glare. She had not liked any of what the doctor said as she sat in her bed.

Doctor Brandon cleared his throat. “This sort of cough is highly contagious, ma’am.” I would recommend the speedy removal of yourself and the other children from the household.”

“I am to have a baby.”

“I am well aware, ma’am. In my experience, this sort of cough can be fatal to newborns and younger children, around the age of Princess Euphemia.”

“But what if they have already been exposed? What is the point then?”

“Doctor Brandon, would you excuse us a moment?”

“Of course. I shall look at the other children for any signs of the disease.”

The doctor left. Melbourne shut the door.

“You can take the children to Windsor Castle.”

“I will do no such thing!”

“I will remain at Brocket Hall with Ellie.”

“I am about to have a baby!”

“Are you suggesting I abandon Ellie?”

“No, but- we don’t even know if there is a real problem!”

“We cannot take the chance, Victoria. You forget how fragile children are. Aside from which, we cannot leave the monarch and the heiress presumptive at risk for disease.”

“But-”

“No. I shall tell the servants to begin packing.”

“William-”

“No argument.”

“Of course the usual historians will tell you that Lord Melbourne was a politician who accomplished nothing…”

“Marrying a queen did not count as something?,” Victoria asked.
“Well, no great policies, no wars to fight...”

She scoffed. “Was the Crimean War such a great accomplishment?”

“I like to think he exerted his influence in other ways. Take the coronation...”

He pulled his iPad out of his bag.

“This is just a powerpoint I show to my introductory students...”

“Did Lord Melbourne arrange Victoria I’s marriage to Prince Albert?”

“Yes.”

“That must have been difficult. My own marriage had about a hundred details to be dealt with and it didn’t involve marriage to a foreign prince...”

“Well, in terms of influence I would argue that the Duke of Montrose is a more powerful position than the second-born son of the Duke of Saxe Coburg...”

“Not to mention that I don’t think the Prime Minister was in love with me.”

“You think he was in love with her then?”

“Why wouldn’t he have been?”

“No family insider knowledge to offer me, ma’am?”

“Nobody talks about her marriage to Albert. I hardly know anything about him except that he was frightfully boring...” She paused. “I suppose I ought to know something about him, but we just know so much about Lord Melbourne, we stay in is house, keep his orchids...”

“Let me show you Lord Melbourne’s preparations for the coronation.”

__________

“Will we be away long, Papa?”

“I do not know, my darling.”

Melbourne helped Maggie into the carriage. Sarah was next. The girls and the trunks of things that they required had been gathered and packed up into the carriages. Charlotte was still with them, not wishing to consign her to her grandparents’ dismal situation yet.

“I have sent a letter this morning to see to it that your grandmother and cousin Emmie meet you at Windsor.” He looked over at Gina. “Gina-”

“I do not want to go.”

“I am sorry, you must. No arguments.”

She pouted to Melbourne’s amusement. For all Gina took after him, she could still act like her mother at times. She hated not to get her way.

Victoria emerged, pouting as well.

“I do not want to go.”
“Effie and the nanny already left so you may as well follow them.”

“And what if the baby comes? I shall need you there.”

“I will if I can, but Ellie needs me here.”

She pouted.

“Why did Mama go?” Ellie could not voice her objections without a cough interrupting.

“Mama has business at Windsor.” He took her away from the window.

“But why did the others go?”

He did not want to answer.

“We shall have fun.”

Ellie did not seem to believe him.

“Come. Let me show you something.”

Melbourne took Ellie into the library and sat her on the sofa. She was covered under a blanket and clutched her doll as she coughed.

He knew he had such a different view of this from Victoria. His parents had lost twins to a similar cough and then Harriet to consumption when she was only fourteen. One of the hidden blessings of Victoria’s isolated childhood at Kensington was not having to go through the death of a sibling.

He pulled an album from the shelf.

“Cousin Fanny made this for me,” said Melbourne as he sat next to Ellie.

“What is it?”

“It is a scrapbook of sorts. From your mama’s coronation. Would you like to see it?”

“Am I in it?”

“Certainly not.”

She looked despondent.

“You were not born yet, Mama was not even married.”

“Oh.”

“Oh,” he repeated laughingly. “Fanny was one of your mother’s ladies at the ceremony. She made this as a gift for me.”

How his niece had not known how he treasured each page. Ellie now peered over them and each
“She was pretty...”

“Your mama is very pretty still. Beautiful even, like her daughters.”

Ellie smiled up at him, he smiled back.

“Besides, the point of a coronation is to be regal. Now your mama is a queen she was born to it, it cannot be taught but you must cultivate it. See this engraving?”

“Yes.”

“What do you see about the horses?” He watched Ellie. “Think it over. What do they have in common?”

“They are all white.”

“Yes, see? They tried to put brown horses in front of the State Coach and I stopped them. I wanted her to look as if she stepped out of a fairy tale.”

“Is Mama from a fairy tale?”

“Only a bit.”

Ellie turned the page.

“See? That is an engraving of inside the Abbey.”

“Where are you?”

“I am here holding that sword.”

“Why are you not next to her?”

“I am near enough. See that is the Sword of State-”

“Who is Albert?”

She watched him carefully.

“Albert was Mama’s first husband. You must know that.”

“No.”

Melbourne wished to change the subject. “Yes. Cousin Ernst is his brother. Now, why do we not look at something else?”

The second day Will went into the palace with a plan. He had surprised himself with how quickly he took to the work of the coronation question.

“I have drawn up a list of items from Victoria I’s coronation that I think might have a place with your majesty’s own coronation.”

“Such as?”
“Well, there was a ball given at the palace. The Duke of Wellington also gave a ball attended by some two thousand guests.”

“Well, of course we must have a ball. I think even Granny had a ball.”

“A way to modernize it may well be to come up with a scheme for members of the public to attend.”
She sighed. “Well, I wouldn’t want it to be based on buying a ticket. It would have to be random.”

“Perhaps some tickets could be distributed by your charities, others might go to members of the armed forces, emergency services.”

Victoria nodded. “What else?”

“There was a three day fair held in Hyde Park around the coronation. This may be a good opportunity for your majesty as I presume screens will be set up as they were for your wedding in the parks.”

“Sort of hold a fair around it?”

“Exactly.”

“Sounds like a security nightmare.”

“So were the Olympics.”

“Fair point.”

“Also the evening of the coronation, all of the entertainments in the capitol were free of charge.”

Victoria made a face. “How do I do that?”

He tilted his head. “I’m not entirely certain. Some things have certainly changed.”

“The Duke of Montrose seems to have fixed on the idea of a concert. Outdoors. With Beyonce or someone.”

“That’s a brilliant idea.”

She was amused. “Really?”

“Queen Bey performs for the Queen.”

“Queen Bey?”, Victoria asked skeptically.

“I’m not entirely out of it.”

“Indeed not.”

Every day at Brocket Hall—rather predictably—began with a letter from his wife, no doubt carried by some poor messenger in the night. She would ask after Ellie, lament her own condition and beg him to come as soon as possible.

Then he would write back and give an update on what Ellie’s condition was and say that he could not be there soon.
Thus began a messenger’s ride back to Windsor.

“When can we go see Mama?,” Ellie asked between coughs.

Melbourne rubbed her back as the nurse handed him a glass of water. He gave her little sips.

“Soon, darling.”

“I miss everyone.”

Poor Ellie. She had begun her life surrounded by her family and found it impossible to live any other way.

“I know you do.”

“May I sleep in the nursery again?”

“What?”

She coughed and they had to wait for another fit to pass before she could take it up again.

“I do not like to sleep alone. I hear Maggie and Sarah and Charlotte and they have so much fun.”

“Gina sleeps alone now.”

After her trouble in Ireland, he had thought she never might but soon after she began to sleep without trouble again, she had discovered the joys of having her own room.

“I do not want to be alone. I promise not to wake anyone up.”

“Ellie, that is not-”

It was the issue. She coughed again and he held her.

“Just because you are not with them does not mean they love you any less. We do not sleep in the same room, do we?”

“You and Mama play games in her room.”

“What makes you suppose Mama and I play games in her room?”

“The noises.”

Melbourne looked up at the now amused nanny.

“Why do we not see if the princess’ broth is ready?”

Victoria walked into the bedroom. She saw her husband holding what seemed to be a coronet.

“What are you doing?”

“My granny had Uncle Jamie drop it off. She thought I might need it.”

“The coronation is not happening soon unless you significantly moved up the timetable.”
“Jamie thinks I ought to have one made. The last time anyone wore this your gran was being crowned and this was made for when your great-grandmother was crowned.”

“I think we have Lord Melbourne’s coronet somewhere around here. With the tiaras.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. What do you want us to do? Put it in a car boot sale?”

“You know what a car boot sale is?”

“I saw one on telly. Don’t act as if you’re a man of the people while I was a princess in a tower. You had zebras in your garden.”

“I grew up in Zimbabwe, it’s like having a deer walk through your garden or don’t you have any deer?”

“Will Lamb likes your concert idea.”

“Does he?”

“Apparently Victoria I had every place of entertainment in the city free of charge the eve of the coronation, which I don’t think is going to happen.”

“Well, let me think on it...”

“You think you can manage that? And Beyonce?”

“Oh, now you want Beyonce?”

“Queen Bey for the Queen. Or barring that at least get me Lady Gaga. She’ll still be of the nobility.”

Days passed and Melbourne was pleased to watch Ellie strengthen. She did not require him to carry her around the house as they wandered aimlessly inside. It was further between the coughing fits and they lessened in severity.

One day he came in from the orchids to find her in the library.

“Ellie, what are you into?”

“I found Mama’s crown.”

Melbourne frowned, walking around the other side of the table to see the wooden box that held his own coronet. He knelt down across from her.

“That is not your mama’s crown. It is a coronet. A viscount’s coronet.”

“Oh.”

“You must remember Mama’s crown is much grander.”

“Why?”

“Because she is the Queen of England and I am only the lord of this estate.”
“Put it on.”

“Put it on?”

Ellie pled with him. He knew it was no use arguing. He would do anything for any of them. He placed it on his head and Ellie giggled in delight.

“Why are you laughing? What do I look like?”

“Nothing.”

“I do not think it is nothing.”

“It is a pretty hat.”

“Then perhaps you ought to wear it.”

He took it from his own head and put it on Ellie’s much smaller head as it fell over her eyes, unleashing her own fit of giggles.

“It is too big!”

“Is it? It is only a very small estate, I should have thought you would be able to manage it.”

He took the crown from her.

“Papa?”

“Yes?”

“Why are you not king?”

“Why ought I be?”

“Because you are married to the Queen.”

“I see. Someday Gina shall be queen, do you think her husband ought to be king?”

“Ew.”

“What?”

“Gina cannot marry a boy. She does not like them.”

“That will change.”

“I think boys smell.”

“Do I smell?”

Ellie frowned at him. “You are not a boy.”

He raised a brow. “That is quite a surprise to hear.”

Ellie came towards him, curling next to him. He held her.

“Do you feel better? Your cough is nearly gone.”
“Yes, Papa.”

“Good. If Doctor Brandon says it is alright, we will rejoin Mama and the others at Windsor.”

“Really-”

“Only if Doctor Brandon says it is alright. But you will still rest when we get to Windsor until you are entirely well.”

The surreal was starting to become real as he again drove into Buckingham Palace and parked his car as if it were perfectly normal. He brought his things and waited for the Queen in her study.

“Professor Lamb.”

“Majesty.”

“I wanted to show you something.”

She motioned at a wooden box, gesturing for him to open it. Inside, he saw a coronet.

A viscount’s coronet.

A smile crossed his face. He looked up at the Queen.

“Is this-”

“I heard you were a fan.”

“Oh, I couldn’t...”

“Of course you can. It’s been sitting in a box probably since Victoria I’s coronation...”

Will took it out. “Actually, he had his portrait done in it. Painted once by Hayter of course. Then Princess Eleanora rather liked to draw and paint.”

“Did she?”

“Oh, yes. Melbourne’s journals tell us she took to learning who each portrait was when she was very young, going so far as saying hello and goodbye to them.”

Victoria was startled. “Did she?”

“Yes. Victoria I loved to sketch and do watercolors. Eleanora took after her. Melbourne encouraged her.”

“He sounds as if he was an amazing father.”

“I like to think so.”

“I wonder if I could ask a favor.”

“A favor, ma’am?”

She took her time. “I would like you to join my coronation committee.”
“Me?”

“Well, these things must be done right and so many of my courtiers just don’t have the right tone. Just look at my mother’s ladies in waiting. My grandfather... Granny’s ladies are fine enough but the most boring collection of women that has ever been assembled.”

“I’m not a courtier, ma’am.”

“No, you’re much better.” She paused. “Will you?”

“Of course, ma’am.”

“Really? You don’t want time to think on it or discuss it with Victoria?”

He smiled. “Ma’am, if I may give some advice, don’t question someone when they give you the answer you want.”

“Right, right.” She smiled. "Thank you."

It was the Duchess who met them at the door at Windsor.

“Grandmama!”

“Meine leibe, I am so happy you are feeling better and here with us.”

“I missed you.”

“We all missed you.” She looked up at William. “And you have missed something else.”

Melbourne took her meaning. “The baby?”

“A girl.”

“And Victoria?”

“Resting.”

Melbourne turned to Ellie. “Go with your grandmother.”

He soon met Sir James who led him to the nursery.

Melbourne lifted up the baby from the cot.

“She is small,” said Melbourne, cradling her. “Smaller than Gina even.”

“She was delivered of the Queen quite easily.”

“I expect the Queen will tell a different story.” He looked back at the baby. “Will she not, my darling?”

Melbourne entered the bedroom.

“Is that you, Lord M?”
He waved off the nurse in attendance as he went to the bed.

“How do you feel?,” he asked.

“Delightful.”

“The chloroform did its job then?”

“Admirably.”

“She is beautiful.” He kissed her. “I thank you again.”

“Small, though. A bit odd seeming. What if she is a midget?”

“She will not be a midget. What did you take with the chloroform?”

“Some brandy. And port.”

“Ah.”

“And too thin. I cannot have a thin baby. Reminds me of a frog. She must be fattened up immediately.”

“And her name?”

“Della...” She sighed. “Princess Della of the United Kingdom, daughter of Her Majesty Queen Victoria and the Second Viscount Melbourne.”

“Della...” he repeated.

“But she really must be fattened up.”

Will stared at the portrait of Princess Eleanora. He had gotten distracted ages ago and wandered into the internet, a sure counter to any serious writing.

“Hello!”

“Victoria?”

He jumped up to meet her in the hallway as she rolled her suitcase in.

“What are you doing here? I thought you were home tomorrow.”

He kissed her.

“Yeah, terrible story.”

“What? Are you alright?”

“No, no, I’m fine. I tried texting you to say I was coming home early-”

“What? I didn’t get a text.”

“Yeah, I accidentally texted Mum, texted her some other things and I have been getting an earful
since Heathrow.”

“Oh, God, what did you send?”

“I shall give a demonstration later.”

“Looking forward to it.”

“Meanwhile I am starved.”

She headed towards the kitchen and Will followed. She spotted the red folder on the table.

“What’s that?”

“That? Oh, some paperwork.”

“With the seal of the Queen?”

“Yes. She’s asked me to join her coronation committee.”

Victoria was incredulous. “She what?”

“Yes, as a sort of consultant.”

“You’re a consultant? On the coronation committee?”

“Well, once I fill this out and MI5 looks at it, yes.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Congratulations or something, probably.”

“Yeah, of course.” She took a breath. “Will, when you met the Queen, did you-”

She stopped. He tilted his head at her.

“Did I what?”

“Nothing. Sorry. I don’t know what I was saying.”

David came out to find Victoria on the stairs looking at her favorite portrait.

“Good evening, Grandmama. Good evening, Lord M.”

“Don’t mock.”

“What? You’re the only one allowed to speak to them now? I can’t have a chat with my in-laws?”

Victoria looked at her husband. “Your dad loved you, didn’t he?”

David sat down. “My dad was a racist and a serial womanizer...”

“But did he love you?”

“Yes.”
“My dad...”

“I am certain your dad loved you.”

“Maybe but I don’t feel it.” She rested her elbow on her knee. “Maybe he was trying to prepare me. He had to have known he was dying for years.”

“I am certain he worried every day about what was going to happen with you and your mum. I know I would.”

“And that’s just it. My mum.”

David sighed. “And here we go.”

“What? Here we go?”

“You’re always doing this.”

“And you’re always calling your father a racist!”

“Because he was.”

“I just- I just wish I had parents like Melbourne and Victoria, parents you could rely on. I have gotten more good advice from a letter from Melbourne from the two of them combined and he’s been dead over a hundred years.” She sighed, looking back at the portrait. “I’m going to have a coronation.”

David nodded. “Yes, you are...”
“I do not understand,” declared Gina.

Victoria looked at her daughter. “Of course you do! You are clever.”

Lord Aberdeen spoke. “Because your royal highness, the Tsar wishes to dictate the course of Europe and of course the rights of pilgrims in the Holy Land.”

“I understand that,” Gina clarified. “What do I care for Europe or the Holy Land for that matter?”

Melbourne smirked behind the papers at the desk.

“Gina, of course you care for the Holy Land. You are to be head of the church one day.”

“The church is in England, which is here, not on the continent, not in the orient-”

“Your Royal Highness, you must understand-”

“It seems to benefit Napoleon III more than anything to declare a war.”

Aberdeen turned his head. “Your highness?”

“To assert his legitimacy through war. He only declared himself emperor, he must legitimize himself somehow.”

“All rulers really only declare themselves.”

Now Victoria turned to her Prime Minister. “Is that what you suppose I am, Lord Aberdeen?”

“Apologies, ma’am. I in no way was referring to your majesty.”

Aberdeen left and Gina was excused. Victoria turned to her husband.

“You enjoyed that entirely too much.”

“Did I?,” he asked.

“Gina is entirely too clever.”

“Is she?”

“Yes! I never questioned so when I was that age.”

“She is nearly thirteen. In fact, I would expect her to question more...”
Victoria sighed. “I do not think I can handle that.”

“Then perhaps you shall have to content yourself with Effie and Della’s company.”

Victoria scoffed. “I expect every day that Effie will turn to me and say that she wishes to have her own household. Do you know she asked me why she does not have her own lady’s maid?”

“Effie rather does think the world ought to stop for her. I wonder where on Earth she might have gotten that...”

“I do not! I was never-”

“Your mama told me when you were Effie’s age you made your playmates address you by your title.”

Victoria huffed. “Well, that was only proper!”

“I always get Christmas!”

Victoria looked up. Will had been on the phone with Carrie a half hour now and no improvement.

“Yes, but-” He paused. “I gave up the bloody summer!”

“Will, just...”

The door opened and Mary appeared in the kitchen.

“That’s not the bloody point!”

Mary looked at Victoria. “What is this?”

Victoria sighed. “He’s trying to get Gussie all of winter break, including the wedding, but most of the time he takes Christmas, Carrie gets New Year, but we’re getting married on New Year’s Eve...”

“I cooperated with you and bloody Gordon when you got married! The first and the second time!”

“Will...”

“I see! It’s the story of our relationship! I give everything and get absolutely nothing in return!” He scoffed after she said something. “Well, those may have been the best years of your life, Carrie, but they were shit for me!”

“Perhaps I should speak to her,” suggested Mary.

“Mum, no. God no.”

“Then perhaps you should. After all, you are going to be married-”

“No, Mum, I don’t deal with Carrie.”

“But you will be Gussie’s stepmother.”

“You can’t count my mother’s funeral!” Will shouted. “I’m sorry she didn’t die on my weekend in the rotation!”
“William,” Mary said sternly.

He actually stopped to Victoria’s great surprise.

“This is too upsetting for Victoria.”

That actually did seem to have an effect on him and he ended the call with a only a sprinkling of sarcasm.

“Sorry.”

“But it is a stupid idea,” said Gina.

Melbourne nodded. “Wars often are.”

He looked down. Effie rode in front of him astride the horse these days. Ellie rode ahead with Maggie and the others. Gina, of course, at his side, a consummate horsewoman as they discussed the business of the day or animals or flowers. Had it really been so long since she sat in front of him, trying to braid his horse’s hair?

Of course it had.

“Then why must we go to war?”

“I am not the one to ask. The country seems to want it, the government certainly does.”

“Papa, I want a horse,” said Effie.

“No, darling, I am afraid the sooner you get a horse, the sooner you ride away from me.”

“I would not!”

“No, I have seen it happen.”

They made their way back to the Windsor stables. Melbourne passed Effie off to a groom, moving to help Gina down.

“Effie!,” called Ellie. “We are going in the kitchens!”

“Come on, Gina!,” called Maggie.

“I do not wish to bother the servants,” said Gina.

“Papa!,” said Effie.

“Now, Effie, you know I certainly cannot.”

Maggie led the charge through the Windsor Castle kitchens.

“What is he called?,” Sarah asked Charlotte.

“Maximilian,” said Charlotte. “My father seems very keen that we meet.”
Ellie jumped ahead into the kitchen. “Mrs. Burr, may we have something to eat?”

“He wants you to marry, that is what Papa says. That is all Uncle Leopold ever thinks about,” said Maggie.

The cook brought a tray over to the group of princesses filled with little cakes.

“What about Gina?,” asked Charlotte.

“What about her?,” asked Maggie chomping down on a cake.

“Your parents must have a match for her.”

Before Maggie could answer, she turned to face the hall boy who she soon realized was quite familiar.

He bowed his head.

“I know you,” said Maggie. “Giles?”

Charlotte scoffed. “You know him?”

“Did I not rescue you from the forest?”

“Yes, your highness.” He did not lift his head.

“And you work here now?”

“Yes, your highness.”

“Giles!,” a loud shout came.

“Begging your pardon...”

Giles left.

Victoria stirred to the sound of shoes hitting the floor. She opened her eyes to find it was still dark and Will was dressing.

“Will, what are you doing?”

“Go back to sleep.”

“What time is it?”

“Absurdly early.”

“Well, what are you doing?”

He sighed. “I’m running down to London. If I see Caro in person, perhaps she can be reasonable.”
“The car isn’t done yet.”
“I’m going to catch the train.”
“Will...”
“I can take the tube while I’m there and I’ll be home later.”
She sat up. “Let me come with you at least.”
“There’s really no need, Victoria.”

Melbourne awoke to a hand caressing under his nightshirt. He moaned before he realized what was happening as his wife nibbled along his neck.

“Ought you rest?,” he asked.

“I am most restless.”

“Are you?”

She brought her nails to the base of his cock, gently cupping him and moving to the shaft itself.

“I should like a ride.”

“Perhaps we ought to ring for a horse...”

“That is not what I want to mount.”

She began to stroke him. Melbourne moaned as she kissed his neck. He became unbearably hard and Victoria shifted down, taking off her nightdress.

“Hold them.”

She only quirked an eyebrow, years beyond expressing surprise at what her husband requested. She rather enjoyed it.

“Your breasts, hold them in your hands.”

She did as he bade.

“Massage them, do what I would do.”

“I doubt I can get my teeth around them.”

“Tell me.”

She sighed, teasing herself, plucking at her nipples.

“My hands are softer than yours. Yours are so rough, they give the most exquisite sensation.”

“I thought you wished to mount me.”

She did not wait for a response and took her time, sliding down the length of him.
“You are so big...” she moaned. “I love when you fill me up.”

“Do you?”

She began riding in earnest and just when she thought she would reach her peak, Victoria found gravity rather shifted. She screamed for loss of him and he shut her up with a kiss.

“No.”

He rather impressively managed to hold her wrists together as he took off one half of his nightshirt and did the same with the other side.

“William...”

“No. Patience.”

He held her wrists down as he settled between her legs, slowly entering her. Victoria groaned loudly.

“Not nice.”

“You are not nice,” she complained.

“I could stop.”

“Oh, please, God...”

He thrust again and again, until their movements were a blur and the only thing that mattered was feeling. She came and he followed, pulling out to spill most of himself away from her. Victoria moved to cling to him, breathless.

“That is always exciting,” he mused.

“Your wife trying to seduce you in the middle of the night?”

“Well, it hardly has the same effect as when I sleep alone.”

Melbourne entered the nursery.

“Papa!”

Effie and Ellie both bade for his attention at once and it was Ellie that won. She was starting to be just a bit big for him to hold long, but he would not give her up. Effie went back to her mother’s side.

“We are overtaken,” he remarked looking at the collection of dolls.

“Mama thought the girls might want to play with my old dolls,” said Victoria.

“So, you really had over a hundred...”

“They are not even all out,” said Victoria.

Melbourne sat. “Aberdeen sent a message, he is coming again today.”

“So soon? Why?”
“I assume it must be some pressing business.” He looked up. “Where is Della?”

Victoria looked about.

“She is behind you,” Effie said with feigned exhaustion.

Melbourne turned behind him. “Della!”

The toddler looked up from her spot in the corner.

“What are you doing over there? Come sit with us.”

Della shook her head. Victoria took a seat next to her husband.

“She is so meek,” Victoria whispered.

“She is three.”

“Yes, but she seems too timid to even be among her own family.”

“You had the same concerns about Gina and now you cannot abide her lack of timidity.”

“You know that is not true.” He quirked an eyebrow at her resistance. “Not entirely.”

“Gina often played on her own.”

“Because we were her only companions.” She sighed. “I worry.”

“I know you do.” He knew it too well. Victoria had a lonely childhood and was keen not to let her children have one. He shared her feelings, his childhood tinted by the sunny days spent at Brocket Hall with his own siblings. He had always been a little sad that Augustus never had that and was just pleased to have five healthy girls, the presence of Sarah and Charlotte never displeasing him. The more the merrier.

“Do you know Maggie’s hall boy?,” Ellie interrupted.

“Maggie’s hall boy?,” asked Victoria.

“Ellie, what do you mean?”

“When we went to the kitchen-”

“Why were you in the kitchen?,” asked Victoria.

“They go in the kitchens sometimes,” said Melbourne.

“Why even at the palace?”

“Of course. Children always love to go in kitchens. Cooks have never minded...”

“You mean you went in the kitchen when you were a boy?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I never went in the kitchen.”

Melbourne looked back at Ellie. “What do you mean Maggie’s hallboy?”
“He’s called Giles.”

“Giles? Why does that sound familiar?,” asked Victoria.

“The boy she rescued from the snow,” said Melbourne.

“Giles!,” called Maggie.

The cook stuck her head out of the kitchen. “May I be of help, your highness?”

“I was looking for Giles.”

Burr seemed surprised. “Oh. Here he is, ma’am.”

She turned to see her friend.

He bowed his head. “Your Highness.”

“Do you have any plans?,” she asked.

Giles frowned. “Plans?”

“For today?”

“Maggie!”

Maggie frowned as she heard Effie screech.

“What?”

She snapped away and Giles quickly disappeared.

“Papa asked for you.”

Will arrived in London and half awake in a foul mood. He got off the commuter train and made his way to the tube.

“Will?”

He turned next to him. “Maggie, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. Maggie Giles.”

“Is this your train?”

“It is this morning. And you? What brings you from Oxford?”

He sighed. “Visiting the ex. Car’s being mended.”

“Visiting the ex? That sounds fun.”

“Oh. Terribly. What are you up to? Victoria said you owned your own studio?”
“Yes. Krav Maga. I’m meant to be on the way to this thing, a demonstration with a web magazine.”

A man shoved past her and she frowned as he knocked into Will.

“Oh!,” she shouted.

He glared at her and kept walking.

“Papa?”

Melbourne looked up. “Oh, Maggie, good. Come here, darling.”

Maggie approached. “Am I in trouble, Papa?”

“Ought you be?”

“No.”

“Come sit.”

Maggie sat in front of him.

“I hear you saw that boy, Giles, in the kitchens.”

“Yes. The one I rescued.”

“I know the one. His mama has sent him to work here so he can earn a higher wage to help support his family.”

Maggie frowned. “But he cannot be older than I?”

“You know some children must work.”

“But why?”

“It is the way of things.” He paused. “I think it might be best if you did not go in the kitchens here at Windsor.”

“Why?”

“Because there is a line that needs to be maintained and when you go in the kitchens as if you are calling upon a friend it makes everything most difficult.”

“But he is my friend.”

He sighed. “You have your place, Maggie. Giles his. If you are his friend, you will not put his place at risk. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Papa,” Maggie said though she did not.

The door opened. Melbourne looked up at the page.

“The Queen wishes you to join her, Lord Melbourne. The Prime Minister has just arrived.”
Maggie checked her watch.

“I’m going to be late.”

“Yes, this train does seem to be running quite slow...”

She scoffed. “Count yourself lucky you don’t have to do this every day.”

Maggie cast a glance back at the man who had bumped into her earlier. He was staring at his mobile.

“So, you teach mostly?”

“Yes. I teach. Manage. Do things like this.” Her mobile buzzed and she took it out of her pocket. She frowned.

“What is it?”

“Matthew asking if I’m alright...” She played with the buttons and tried to ring him back. “Can’t get a signal out.”

“Probably too far underground.”

“That’s not like him.”

The train stopped.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said the announcer, “due to an emergency at the station we are stopped for the moment.”

The crowd moaned.

Will looked back at the man who had bumped into Maggie.

She followed his gaze.

They both saw the same thing. The man’s backpack was opened as he fumbled with something that seemed to be beeping.

Will reached out for Maggie and realized she was already holding his arm. They looked in surprise at each other because the gesture seemed too intimate for acquaintances.

The man had a remote.

Maggie seemed to want to break and Will held her back. She fought him as another passenger cried out there was a bomb.

There was a split second where Will threw himself in front of her.

And everything went dark.
“War?”

Aberdeen nodded. “Of course, ma’am, that has always been the outcome if the Russians would not capitulate—”

Melbourne entered.

“Lord M, thank goodness.” She looked back at the prime minister. “Tell him what you have told me.”

“Certainly, ma’am. The Russians have refused to withdraw from the Danubian principalities—”

“And we have declared war?”

“Yes, Lord Melbourne.”

“Well, you have what you want, you must be pleased.”

Aberdeen stiffened. “I shall be very pleased when our soldiers easily secure our victory.”

“Yes, that would be nice.”

Aberdeen glared at Melbourne.

Will awoke to some smoldering and the sensation of being held down.

Will.

William.

Lord M.

“Good God, no.”

Any passerby—were there any in a tunnel crowded by the wreckage of the carriage—would have thought he meant the smoke or the fact that he seemed to be trapped under a heavy piece of metal.

He did not.

“It’s so much harder when you remember...”

“What?,” asked Maggie. She coughed.

She seemed to be trapped under the same piece of metal.

“Nothing. Are you alright?”

“I’ve been better...”

She coughed again.

He turned his head to look at her.

Maggie.
She seemed to want to fall asleep.

“Hey, hey, Maggie, Maggie? Don’t fall asleep.”

“I’m so tired.”

“I know. I know.” He took a breath. “You have children, stay awake for them.”

“Okay...”

“What are they called?”

“Gina and Ellie...”

Will laughed.

“Why is that funny?”

“Nothing. You have a boy, don’t you?”

“William. He’s only five.”

“William.”

“What?”

“Nothing. It’s a fine name.”

The oldest princesses soon learned the news the whole nation was about to: England was at war.

“That is terrible,” said Gina.

“What is terrible? It is so exciting,” said Maggie.

“I do not think exciting is the correct word,” Victoria corrected.

“Can’t you do something, Mama?,” Gina asked Victoria.

“There is very little your mama can do,” said Melbourne.

The gong went off.

Victoria sighed. “I hardly feel like supper.”

“Now that would be something.”

Victoria cast a glance at her husband.

“Now, you know I have always greatly admired your appetites...”

“What are you talking about?,” asked Gina.

“Nothing,” said Victoria. “Come. We must dress for dinner.”

Victoria and Gina left.
“Maggie...”

“Yes, Papa?”

“I know that you are not yet old enough to understand this- I know I am not- but they way the world works is that others will go and fight and die and leave wives and families...”

“Not if we win-”

“Even if we win. Those below your station make your existence possible. You have a duty to that.”

“I do not understand.”

“No,” Melbourne sighed. “I expect not.”

“Will?,” said Maggie.

It was still dark. There was activity in the distance.

How long had it been?

“Yeah?,” said Will.

“I know you, don’t I?”
The church was crowded and Melbourne could not help but think it had something to do with his wife’s presence.

Robert, his niece’s husband, was dead. A long drawn out illness as he prepared to depart for the Crimea. Fanny was beside herself, left alone with four children.

Victoria reached for his hand as the congregation rose to sing.

She was taking it rather hard as well.

He felt a tug at his other hand and looked over to see Maggie.

Melbourne leaned over. “Are you alright?”

“No,” she admitted.

He glanced behind them. Maggie was too old to take out of a funeral now.

“Not much longer,” he reassured her. He looked past her at Gina. “Are you alright?”

Gina nodded, not missing a beat of the hymn.

Victoria awoke to kicking.

She groaned. “I just want to sleep in. What is it with you two?”

Normally, this would be where Will would remind her that quite soon they would be getting very little sleep at all. The silence in the room reminded her he had left while it was still dark out.

She sat up in resignation and wandered out of bed.

“Oh, good, you are awake. It does no good to be lounging about in bed all day.”

Victoria rolled her eyes at her mother. “I slept in two hours.”

“I made you breakfast.”

Victoria looked at the green smoothie awaiting her.

“You remember those sausages you used to make at breakfast? What happened to those?”

“You need vitamins.”
“I want sausage.”

“Where is William?”

“He had to go to London.”

Mary stopped and looked up. “He what?”

“He thought if he could speak to Carrie in person, she would be reasonable, though God knows why.” Victoria looked up. “Mum, what’s that face?”

“Have you heard from him?”

“No.”

“Have you tried to ring him?”

“No, I don’t need to ring him every two seconds.”

Mary picked up her phone.

“Mum, what are you doing? Don’t bother him-”

It was then her attention finally went to the television on quietly in the corner.

Victoria stood and walked towards it.

Two explosions on the London Underground.

1937

Bill entered his flat as he would have any other day. He put down his hat and keys as he noticed a pair of white gloves on the side table.

He stepped into the bedroom where he found Alexandrina under the bedclothes.

“Do you know how many pairs of gloves you left last time?,” he asked. “There’s a drawer full of them.”

“Last time,” she said sitting up. “And the time before.”

“And the time before that,” he said, stepping towards the bed. “Naked under there?”

“Completely.”

Bill sat down as he shrugged off his jacket. Alexandrina went after the buttons on his waistcoat.

“How was your journey?”

“Dull. How was your day?”

“Difficult. Her Majesty’s doing poorly.”

“I’m sorry.”
“Any day, really. England will have her first king in three generations.”

“You don’t sound as if you’re excited, Bill.”

“The Prince of Wales will be a fine king, but there’s such a sense of continuity, it gives the nation stability.”

“Well,” said Alexandrina going after his shirt, “I am not interested in stability.”

“No?”

“No.”

She brought her mouth to his chest kissing along the scattered dark hairs she found there and then licked his nipple and brought her teeth down.

“Oh, you know what that will get you,” Bill warned playfully.

“A smacked bottom?,” she teased.

“And then some.”

Bill stood shucking his shoes, socks and trousers as Alexandrina giggled. He rushed under the bedclothes as they began to kiss.

“Yes,” gasped Victoria.

Melbourne came out and entered her again, slowly, prolonging her pleasure and her agony as well as his own. He watched her cover her own mouth as he thrust again and her eyes rolled back. He finished himself, dragging himself out of her.

“I think I left a mark...” mused Victoria staring at her hand.

He glanced over. “Well, you have left one on me often enough, it only seems fair.”

“Do you think me very wicked?”

“Of course not.”

“Having intercourse hours after attending a funeral?”

“Do not call it ‘intercourse.’”

“Then what?”

“Making love? Fucking-”

“Lord M!”

“Marital relations, if you must...”

“Did you think me wicked when I came to your room that night?”

“What night?”
“After Albert’s funeral at the palace.”

He looked up at her in astonishment. “Of course not!”

“Why not? My husband was barely in the ground.”

“You needed something, I was happy to give it.” He stood from the bed and walked to the table where the red box waited, bringing it back. “And Gina came out of it, so there’s that. Why are you on about this?”

She shook her head. “Just seeing Fanny in black, I suppose.”

“Funerals do have a way of making one ruminate...”

“He never even got to the Crimea. He died before he could leave.”

“I know.”

“Four children and a wife. He had no business going.”

“He was an army officer.”

Melbourne felt his wife pulling him close, keeping him from going through the box.

“I do not know what I would do without you.”

Victoria tried Will’s mobile for the hundredth time.

“The phone circuits never work correctly after these things,” John offered. “Something about emergency services, everyone trying to call at once.”

“Yes, of course,” Mary agreed.

“And he might be lying dead somewhere!”

She threw her phone down on the sofa.

“Victoria, all this stress is not good for the babies.”

“Neither is their father being dead!”

“Let’s all take a breath,” said John. “He could be fine, he might not be able to get a call through.”

“I’m going to London.”

“Is that wise?,” asked Mary. “We do not know what else might happen.”

Victoria looked at John.

“Alright,” said John.

Mary snapped her head back at her husband. “What?”

“She’s always been stubborn, she’s going to go no matter what we do, we might as well take her.
Besides, she was probably planning on stealing our car anyway.”


“We can stay at Lizzie’s,” said John.

Victoria sighed. “This day just keeps getting better…”

“Don’t go back,” said Bill, running his fingers over Alexandrina’s bare back.

“I have to go back,” she sighed.

“What for?”

“I cannot just leave.”

“Why not? You have no children.”

“Bill-”

“If you did, I would tell you to bring them here. You do not love him.”

“You suppose it’s that simple? To just leave my whole life?”

“I-”

There was a knock at the door.

“Who is that?,” asked Alexandrina.

“I’ve no idea. I wasn’t expecting anyone.”

He stood up, quickly finding last night’s pajamas and dressing gown. He donned his slippers and shut the door to the bedroom. He walked to the door and looked through the keyhole to see Tommy Lascelles.

He let out a sigh of relief and opened the door.

“Sir Alan.”

“Bourne. Already turning in?”

“Yes, I had thought I had better get some rest. Who knows what the next few days might bring?”

“Good man. May I come in?”

“Of course.” He stood aside for Tommy and shut the door. “Might I offer you something?”

“No.”

Bill motioned for him to take a seat and followed suit.

“I suppose you’re wondering why I’ve come, Bourne.”

“The thought had crossed my mind.”
Tommy sighed. “As you are aware, Her Majesty is not well. Upon her death, the Prince of Wales will become king.”

“Yes, of course.”

“And will immediately abdicate.”

Bill shook his head. “What?”

“Certain information about the... private life of His Royal Highness has come to light and a delegation from the Church of England plans to make it known.”

“But that would cause a schism within the Church.”

“Our source is a reliable one, but the Prince of Wales has never had deep support within the Church. He feels that the best way forward for all parties is for him to abdicate.”

“And the Princess Royal?”

“She is as yet unaware. The Prince of Wales thought you as her closest advisor ought to be made aware.”

“Of course. I will aide her in any way I can.”

“The Princess Royal relies a great deal on you.”

“We’ve been together a long time.”

Tommy left. Alexandrina emerged.

“Well...”

“You can’t tell a soul.”

“Of course not.” She walked towards him. “What is it? You don’t think she can do it?”

“Oh, no, she could do the job with one hand tied behind her back.”

“So what is it then?”

“She may be the first Victoria in history to not want it.”

“Papa!”

Ellie ran towards Melbourne and he lifted her up.

“My Ellie.” He kissed her.

“Me next!,” Effie shouted.

“Is there to be no acknowledgment of your poor mama?,” asked Victoria.

Melbourne put Ellie down, the younger girls went to their mother.
“Where is Della?,” asked Melbourne.

“Sleeping,” said Effie.

“And your nap?,” asked Victoria.

“I am too old for a nap.”

“We shall see what nanny has to say about that.” Victoria stood. “Where is Mama?”

“Grandmama is sad,” said Effie. “She is in her room.”

Victoria looked at Melbourne.

They made their way to the Duchess’ apartment in the palace. Melbourne followed Victoria.

“Mama? Are you in here?”

“Oh, my dear, Victoria.”

They made their way to the Duchess’ bedchamber.

“Mama, are you quite well?”

“No, I am afraid I did not have the strength to rise from bed.”

“What has happened, Duchess?,” asked Melbourne.

“I received word that Sir John Conroy has died.”

Melbourne shifted. “Well, my condolences-”

“Are you serious, Mama?,” asked Victoria. She looked at her husband. “Is she quite serious?”

“Victoria-” said Melbourne.

“He was a terrible man and I must say I think the world much improved by his death.”

“Why must you always be so hateful? He did so much for us-”

“He did what for me precisely, Mama?”

“So ungrateful.”

“I will not participate in this. If you are going to mourn Sir John, please stay in your apartment, I would not have the girls bother you.”

“Victoria-” Melbourne tried to interject.

“No.”

“Yes, because you are so perfect and you have done nothing that would make anyone angry at you, least of all your beloved Baroness Lehzen!”

Victoria gaped at her mother, then turned and left.

“Victoria, Victoria-”
“I am not apologizing to her!”

He sighed. “Do try to see it from her point of view-”

“For years, I was kept locked up by she and that man-”

“Are you locked up now?”

The Queen was dead.

The Palace had rung before it broke on the wireless.

“Her Majesty Queen Victoria III, oldest granddaughter of Her Majesty Queen Victoria I has died...”

He rushed to Charlbury House.

“Oh, Bill, good you’re here,” said Matthew, greeting him at the door. “Victoria is absolutely beside herself.”

“Has His Majesty sent for her?”

“No, I expect he’ll be busy kinging.”

“Bill.”

“Has Tommy Lascelles been here?”

“No.”

“Bill, thank God.”

He bowed. “Your Highness.”

The butler entered. “Your Highness, message from the palace.”

“Oh?”

“His Majesty has asked for your presence immediately.”

“Immediately? That hardly sounds like him.”

“Ellie!,” called Victoria. “Where are you going?”

“I picked flowers for Grandmama.”

Victoria tried to collect herself. “Come here.”

Ellie came forward. “Yes, Mama?”

“You are not to go to Grandmama’s apartment.”
“Why not?”

“Because I said so.”

“But why?”

“Because I am your mama and I am the Queen so there!”

She stormed away, leaving a confused Ellie in her wake.

“No,” said Victoria.

Bill looked down.

This had not gone well.

“No, I don’t accept this.”

“Well, hard cheese, it’s already done,” said the recently resigned king.

“Do not joke about this, William.”

“I am afraid, your majesty, his royal highness is quite right. It is already done,” said Tommy.

“It can be undone.”

“No, your majesty, it cannot.”

“Oh, do shut up!”

Victoria stormed out of the room.

“Oh, brilliant,” Matthew spat at William.

“What do you want me to do?”

“I don’t know! Your bloody duty!”

Bill followed Victoria into the corridor.

“Your Majesty.”

“Do not call me that.”

“You have a meeting with the Privy Council in less than two hours, ma’am.”

Victoria stood and turned. “There has to be a way to undo this.”

“Do you think you’re the only monarch who has ever been frightened, ma’am? Good God, Charles II’s father had just been beheaded. He saw London set alight by fire and plague. Elizabeth, Henry VIII.”

“It was never meant to be me.”
“I know.”
“I was born sixth in line, an afterthought, I was never meant to be here.”
“Ma’am, if I may, you have a way of clinging to what’s right. It is your most admirable quality—”
“My only admirable quality…”
“Your most admirable quality,” he repeated. “You know how the world is, what is coming. Britain needs her queen and only Victoria will do.”

Maggie slowly opened her eyes. Will smiled back at her.

“Hi.”
“Hi,” he said back. “I was worried. They think you have a concussion.”
She went to push herself up and he helped her.

“Is it possible to have every muscle in your body hurt?,” asked Maggie.
“I think so, yes.”
Maggie frowned at him. “We were by a fire and someone rushed in to tell us about the Charge of the Light Brigade…”

“You should rest. I ought to try to ring Matthew again.”
“Or was it Dunkirk?”
Will shook his head. “Best not to dwell on it.”
“I had definitely made Hitler angry, I know that.”
“You should rest.”

Will walked into the corridor. Maggie had barely been conscious when the emergency services finally arrived and he had lied to get himself on the ambulance with her until finally arriving at the Royal Melbourne Hospital.

“Listen, I am really in no mood to be told to stand in a queue!”
Will turned his head back at the nurses’ station.

“Victoria, calm down.”
“Victoria.”
She turned at the sound of his voice and it was as if he was seeing her for the first time.

“Will!”
He was in her arms before he could react. The full force of her affection had always been strong.

“Will...”

He hugged her back.

“I was afraid I’d...”

“I’m fine,” he cut her off. “Bumps, bruises, but I’m fine.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know, there was a bloke with a backpack...” He shrugged.

“I’ll kill him.”

“Too late for that, I’m afraid.”

“We were looking for you.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know where my mobile went.” He saw John and Mary get nearer.

“Are you discharged?,” asked Mary.

“I’ll ring Lizzie and she can organize supper.”

“Will nearly died, I don’t think he wants walnut loaf!,” Victoria spat.

“I can’t quite leave yet,” said Will.

Victoria turned back. “You said you were alright.”

“I am, I just have to help Maggie.”

“Maggie?,” asked Mary.

Will looked at Victoria. “You remember Maggie Giles?”

“From the BBC thing?”

From the BBC thing. Of course, that’s all she was to her. Since the moment he had awoken after the explosion, a thousand moments were pounding through his mind. Holding her the morning after she was born at Brocket Hall, chasing after her in the snow, her first ball.

The first time they had met when they had been merely Princess Royal and servant. They were still the best friends either one of them ever had.

Victoria and the others were staring.

Maggie from the BBC thing.

“Yes, I ran into her on the train and we got to chatting and then...”

“Is she alright?”

“Concussion, they think, but I haven’t been able to get a hold of Matthew and I don’t have my phone so I can’t email...”
“Do you know where they live?,” asked John.

“Her bag actually made it through.”

“Well, I could take the care and bring him round,” said John.

Victoria stole away a few moments between meetings and went to the nursery, hoping to surprise the girls.

And found it quite empty, save Della at her nap.

She looked at the nanny.

“Where are my daughters?”

“Begging your pardon, majesty, Lord Melbourne took them to see the Duchess—”

She turned around and marched to the other wing of the house. The Duchess entertained the girls in her sitting room. Her husband spotted her and walked towards her.

“Victoria—”

“You ignored me!”

“Yes.”

Victoria cast an angry glare at her mother with the girls.

“She loves them,” Melbourne offered softly. “You cannot bar children from their grandmother, particularly when they live in the same house.”

“Then perhaps it is time Mama finally gets her own residence.”

“Victoria—”

“No, you told me I could not when I was a single woman but I am married! Surely, there must be someplace to put her—”

“Is this not what she and Sir John did to you?”

“What?”

“Kept you from your grandfather, your uncles, the court?”

“This is not the same. She wished to control me.”

“As you wish to control the girls.”

She was galled. “I would never—”

“You have forbade them to see a woman who lives in the same house as them.”

“I will not have her poison them against me!”
“No, you are trying to punish her.”

“That is absurd.”

“You lash out. As it suits you and no one may stop you.”

She was taken aback.

“No one has ever said so-”

“Who would say so except me?”

Bill entered the flat.

“You’re back,” said Alexandrina. “I listened to the Queen’s speech on the wireless-”

“Marry me.”

She stopped. “What?”

“I didn’t think it would need explaining. Marry me.”

“I am married.”

“But you’re not happy.”

She shook her head. “You could never keep your position.”

“Fine.”

“You love your job-”

“I can find another job, there’s not another you!”

“I.”

“Marry me.”

“Bill-”

“Just forget all of the excuses, the reasons why not, marry me.”

A smile slowly grew. “I’ll marry you.”

“What?”

“I said I will marry you or can’t you-”

She shrieked as he swept her up, carrying her back to the bedroom. He threw her to the mattress as the shared kissed and whispered to each other.

He awoke alone the next morning.
Will watched Victoria. Every so often, he caught her glance at Maggie’s sleeping face and a look of bewilderment overcame her, as if she had forgotten something but could not remember what it was.

Then it passed and she went back to checking her mobile.

She looked up at him.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Finally, he caught a glimpse of Matthew in the corridor with Mary and John at his side.

“About time,” he muttered.

They went into the corridor.

“Will,” said Matthew. “I wish I could say it’s good to see you again...”

“No matter.”

“I’m waiting on the doctors.”

“Right, they were just round but they’ve got quite a lot of work today-”

He felt Victoria’s hand on his arm.

“Will, please, you need rest.”

“I do not-”

“Mr. Giles?”

A doctor led him away. Victoria squeezed his hand.

“Come on. Time to go.”

Dinner had been a tense affair with more talk of the war effort, Queen and consort hardly exchanging a dozen words.

So he finally made his way across the hall where the maids were just leaving.

“William. I find I am indisposed this evening.”

He tilted his head. “Do you?”

“Yes.”

“How long do you suppose that will last?”

She pouted.
“You are not entitled to my bed every night, particularly when-”

“When I have angered you.”

“When you have insulted me!”

“I have pointed out you have a temper-”

“You compared me to Mama!”

“Yes.”

“How could I ever be like Mama? How could you say I would be that cruel as a mother?”

“You were not intentionally being cruel, you were being ridiculous which over time might have resulted in some cruelty, but, fortunately, our girls have both parents with them.”

“If Lehzen were here, she would side with me.”

“Yet she is not...”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

He sighed.

“No, Lord M, speak!”

“Fine. Your mother is here, Lehzen is not, do we wonder why that is? Could it possibly be because she found out who fathered Gina?”

She was taken aback by the accusation. Her former governess’ letters were few and far between.

“Lehzen would never-”

“Then why did you never tell Lehzen yourself?”

“It was never the right moment-”

“Was it not? In the years that followed?” He walked closer. “You know that I have and would never condone the way your mama behaved when you were a girl...”

“No,” she admitted softly, thought it pained her.

“But your mama has not betrayed you.”

“No.”

Victoria stood, walking past him. Melbourne stood more than a little bewildered.

“My iPad was in my bag.”

Victoria was doing her best to be doting in Lizzie’s guest room, tucking Will in.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said.
“I know it doesn’t matter, Victoria. I’m just rather annoyed.”

Victoria climbed on top of the bed. “Does it hurt?”

“Well, imagine getting thrown from a train carriage and having another piece of it land on you.”

She laid her head down next to his and rested her hand on his chest.

“I was worried that I would never see you again.”

“Don’t worry about that.”

“How can I not-”

“Victoria, seriously,” he turned to look at her, “no matter what happens, do not ever worry that you will never see me again. Okay?”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“Now, can I see your breasts?”

She giggled. “What?”

“Oh, the painkillers have kicked in and I tend to get a bit cheeky-”

“A bit?”

“I just thought I might feel a bit better if I could have a look at them.”

Victoria sat up, shoving the straps down on her nightdress, revealing her breasts.

“Oh, yes...” he observed.

“That’s a terrible line.”

“Do you remember the first sext you sent me?”

“Yes.”

“You’re rather good at it, quite the artist.”

“No one’s ever made that remark.”

“Those glorious breasts and my book over your...”

“My pussy.” She leaned down to kiss him.

“Who is there?”

The Duchess looked up to see Victoria.

“It is only me, Mama.”

“If you are looking for any of the children, they are not here.”
“You hate William.”

The Duchess sighed. “I do not hate him.”

“You hated him when we married, you tried to talk me out of it at every turn—”

“Yes, but it was not just about what I felt.”

“You did not tell Uncle Leopold who Gina’s father is.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Why would you not?”

“You still cannot believe that I love you? That I love Gina? That I would not to see either of you hurt?”

“You made it very hard for me to believe that.”

“I can see that now.”

Victoria stood silent.

“You ought to return to bed now. You have many duties to attend to and no one likes to see bags under their queen’s eyes.”

Victoria sighed.

“Good night, Mama.”

———

“Victoria!,” Will called.

“Car is finally done?,” she asked.

“Yes, all I had to do was show that I was nearly killed,” he sighed.

He put an ridiculously large stuffed hippo on the counter.

“Will, what is that?"

“It’s for the babies.”

“It’s huge! What will they do with it?”

“They’ll grow into it. I’m going to work on the cot.”

“No, we can sort it later.”

“No, I’ll sort it now.”
He picked up the hippo and went to the stairs.

Victoria followed him. When she arrived at the nursery, he was already cutting open the box for the cot.

“Will?”

“Hmm?”

“I don’t want you to work on the cot right now.”

“You have been asking for weeks...”

“Will-”

Before he could look up, he was in her arms and she was sobbing.

“Please, I don’t want you to do anything.”

“Shh,” he said trying to soothe her. “I keep telling you, I’m alright.”
Victoria awoke next to her husband as he shuffled papers.

“How long have you been awake?”

“Someone must attend to state business.”

“Why not attend to me?”

“Well, you make a sound point, ma’am…”

He put aside the papers and she moved to straddle him.

Effie bounded into the bedroom. “Papa! Mama!”

They broke apart with a sigh.

“I thought you had locked that.”

Effie jumped on the bed. “Look!”

She broke into a wide grin and used her tongue to push her front tooth back and forth.

“Oh, Effie, do stop,” said Victoria.

“That is very loose, let me see,” said Melbourne.

“Oh, Lord M…”

“It is barely hanging on.”

“Take it out!”

“If it does not come out today, I will take it out before you go to bed.”

“And then the mouse will leave my present?”

Victoria shuddered. She was terrified of rats, but did not like mice, even ones that came for her children’s teeth.

“Yes.”


“What is it, Skerrett?”
“Miss Palmer wonders if her majesty might come to the Princess Royal’s room.”

Melbourne sighed. “I’ll see to it-”

“No!,” Skerrett said a little too quickly. Melbourne frowned. “That is Miss Palmer would not bother your lordship.”

“But she would bother her majesty?”

“I shall be there directly.”

Will awoke to Victoria’s snores.

Pregnancy had altered that in a way he had not yet admitted to her. It was common, but he knew she would overreact.

She always did.

He rolled over to look at her. The tank she wore had rolled up, revealing her swollen belly. He smiled as he spotted one of the almost alien protrusions that he knew was only a baby kicking a foot or punching a fist out.

“Hello, darlings,” he whispered.

He reached his hand over her belly. There was some kind of furor in there.

“No fighting in there,” he whispered. “There’s plenty of room out here, but for now you must share.”

That seemed to quell them.

“Take your time, though... take all the time you need.”

“Ah, God!”

For all his care, Victoria awoke. She glanced at him and her belly, then sighed.

“I think someone is trying to break my rib in there.”

“They’re restless like their mother.”

“Of course. Blame me.”

He laid next to her, she rested her forehead against his chest.

“Will?”

“Yes?”

“I’m starving.”

Victoria travelled the distance to Gina’s room. A maid curtsied as she walked out with the bed linens.
Miss Palmer curtsied as she entered.

“Ma’am-”

It was then she noticed Gina sobbing in a chair.

“Gina, what is the matter? Why is she crying?!” She snapped her head to snarl at the nanny.

“Your Majesty, her royal highness awoke to find her monthly...”

Victoria frowned at the woman.

“Inconvenience has begun.”

“Oh, my darling...” She held Gina and rubbed her back. “It is alright. There is no reason to cry.”

“Yes, it is!”

“Shh...” She looked up. “Miss Palmer, leave us.”

“Shall I send for the physician, ma’am?”

“Are you feeling unwell, Palmer?”

“No, ma’am, I-”

“Then what do we need a physician for?”

The maid curtsied and left, closing the door.

“No reason to cry at all, Gina.”

“Charlotte said it...”

“Charlotte said what?”

“That it made you mad!”

“Am I mad, Gina?”

“No, Mama.”

“It only means that you are becoming a woman and someday you will have a baby.”

“I don’t want a baby.”

Victoria smiled. She could almost remember such an age. She had only been five years older than Gina when her courtiers began insisting to her about husbands and babies. “It becomes quite unavoidable.”

“Why?”

Victoria froze. “Why what?”

“Why are babies unavoidable?”

Victoria froze. Her baby.
She was saved by a knock at the door.

“Enter.”

Skerrett appeared. “Majesty, I brought some things for her royal highness.”

Victoria stood. “Excellent idea. I shall help you clean up and show you what to do and the world will seem a much better place.”

“I should put you back to bed...” Will mused.

One snack had turned into a meal into a buffet as Victoria turned on The Young Queen.

God, he did not like this interpretation.

“We can’t, we just started.”

“It’s two in the morning.”

“So? I’m awake.” She took another handful of popcorn. “Where did Gussie and Allison go to nursery?”

“What?”

“Emma sent me an article, she said it was never too soon to start thinking on it.”

“Gussie couldn’t. Allison had a place at Rose Hill...”

“Oh.” She looked back at the telly. “Why do you suppose they never named any of their babies Alice?”

“What?”

“Well, it was Lord M’s favorite name, certainly not a lack of opportunity.”

“Not enough of a name for a queen.”

“Yes, but only one of them could be queen.”

“Yes, well, perhaps Victoria thought differently.”

He stood up, leaving her arms, storming towards his office. He searched in vain for some papers to shuffle.

“Will? Did I upset you?”

He felt her hands on his arm.

“I’m sorry.”

That is why this was always harder to remember because he knew damned well Victoria chose every baby name after Gina and he was so drunk on love and family, of having another life.

“It’s nothing.”
It was nothing, he knew that to be true, but when you remembered every nothing from every life...

She held his hand. She was trying so damn hard.

“Come on. We can go back to bed.”

“You’re not tired.”

“Is it what happened in the train?”

He turned to her.

“I want to help,” she said.

“What is the matter with Gina?”

Victoria looked up from her desk. Melbourne entered.

He continued explaining. “She was all out of sorts during our talk on the Magna Carta. I tried to get it out of her, but she would not tell me what was the matter.”

“She is out of sorts. Gina began her monthly inconvenience. That’s why Skerrett practically forbade you from going to her.”

She looked up from her letter. Her husband stared at her incredulously and fell to the chair across.

“Lord M, what is the matter?”

“What is the matter?!”

“It’s perfectly natural, a little sooner than I anticipated, but no cause for alarm.”

“No, of course not...”

She stared at him, trying to make out his reasoning. “I would not expect this from you, Lord M. You have never been upset when I have my monthly inconvenience. Well, not very.”

“Our baby can...” He sighed.

“I know. I was thinking about that.”

His face turned grave again. “In what way?”

“Not that she should have one very soon at all, but I wonder when it might be time to tell her about babies.”

“What about them?”

“How they are made.”

“Monthly inconvenience or not she is thirteen.”
“I was Queen and no one had told me. Good God, do you not remember Lady Flora? I was so stupid. Virgo intacta, is she with child?”

“You were not stupid, you were ignorant of such matters...”

“I acted stupidly because I was ignorant of such matters. Mama did not tell me anything until the night before my wedding and I was so distraught...”

“Over that?”

“Over the prospect of losing my Prime Minister,” she admitted. “I did not listen to a word she said. Imagine my surprise the next evening.”

“I do not wish to,” he said under his breath.

“I did not understand how there could be pleasure in it until you.” She drew breath. “I do not wish that for Gina. I do not wish her to be ignorant. I do not think you do, either.”

“Surely she should be older-”

“When do boys learn?”

“What?”

“When do boys learn about how babies are made? About the pleasures of the flesh? I doubt you were spared until the night before your wedding.”

He sighed. “No-”

“When?”

“That is different.”

“Because you are a man?”

“I was at school, boys talked.”

“Who was your first? Some maid or prostitute?”

“Is this what you wish to discuss?”

“You know all of my lovers.”

He sighed. “A friend of my mother’s.”

“Of your mother’s?”

“The lady is no longer with us.”

“Then there can be no harm in you telling me.”

“Victoria...”

“Oh, very fine that again you should know everything and I so very little-”

“Lady Elizabeth Foster.”
The wheel’s turned in Victoria’s head. “The one who was the Duke of Devonshire’s mistress?”

“Before they married, yes.” He shrugged. “I was just out of Eton.”

“Didn’t Lady Caroline and she—”

“Live in the same household? Yes. There was a house party and I was in love with Caro, but she was still too young and obviously... Lady Elizabeth offered to instruct me as it were.”

“Apparently she was a good teacher.”

“Victoria! Do you suppose I am proud of this?”

“What exactly did you learn from her?”

“Are you serious?”

“I am made to understand that not all husbands have the... skill that you do. Or even offer all that you give me.”

“She may have...” He sighed. “Fine. I shall leave it to you.”

“What?”

“You are her mother, you must be the one to tell her.”

“Alone?”

“Victoria, do you suppose she wants to learn such a thing from her father?”

“I never had one.” She had not realized she would be going into this alone. “What if I were not here? Who would tell her then?”

“Your mama or Emily or Emmie or Frances...”

“And I am to do this alone for all of our daughters?”

“Yes... though I suppose by the time Della is ready to marry she will have gotten most of the information she needs from her elder sisters...”

She huffed. “It seems most unfair.”

Will awoke on the sofa. Victoria had lured him back there, The Young Queen still on, telly Victoria arguing with telly Albert.

“You do not listen to me, Victoria! I am your husband not some servant!”

Will sighed audibly. Tiresome, tiresome Albert.

“I think you are forgetting that I am Queen and you are merely a prince from some German backwater—”

“A wife must submit to her husband, Victoria!”
“Well, I am sorry that I cannot take time from ruling my subjects to assuage your ego!”
“I take it you would not mind if it were Lord Melbourne here!”
“If it were Lord Melbourne here, I would not have to!”
“Would you listen to what Lord Melbourne says?”
“When Lord Melbourne speaks it is actually interesting!”
“Do you love him?!”
“Of course I do!”
Will heard his mobile. He picked it up and paused the show.
“Hello?”
“Please hold for Her Majesty.”
Ellie.
“Certainly.”
He did not have to wait long.
“Professor Lamb-”
“Your Majesty.”
“I only found out today what had happened to you. Are you alright?”
“I’m quite fine. It was kind of her majesty to inquire.”
“Not a bit.”
Sweet Ellie. What a hard life she had this go. To be so alone.
“I wonder-” She stopped herself. “I am bothering you and you must recover.”
“You could not bother me, ma’am.” A little forward, but he knew what she was craving, what had drawn her to he and Victoria.
“Please do let me know if there’s anything I can do.”
“You’re very generous, ma’am.”
They finished as Victoria stirred on the sofa. She looked up at the frozen scene on the telly.
“God, is Albert still alive?”

Victoria did not have the chance to tell Gina anything for the next day they were off to Chatsworth.
Which Victoria thought had a little irony to it.

She was somewhat preoccupied as Lord M went over the papers from her box in the carriage. Gina was quiet again, preoccupied by the workings of her own body, she had practically turned red when her father had casually inquired if she was feeling quite well at breakfast.

It seemed so sad to Victoria. Lord M and Gina had lived her whole life nearly tied as one. Now something had emerged which they could not speak to each other about.

So it was Maggie who had taken up the questions about her box. Asking after the Crimea, she did not have Gina’s gift for the larger picture - not yet. She asked after battles and army officers.

A Hanover.

“He is Caro’s cousin, is he not?”

“What?”


“Yes,” he admitted.

“Who is Caro?,” asked Maggie.

“Papa’s first wife, surely you remember that,” said Victoria. “Did he know you when you were younger?”

“Yes.”

She could sense that her husband had suddenly become very tight-lipped.

The Duke met them outside with the full complement of guests and house staff.

“Your Majesty.”

“Your Grace.”

“Your Royal Highnesses.” He turned. “Melbourne.”

“Devonshire.” He turned back to Victoria. “After you, ma’am.”

Victoria led the way into the house. Chatsworth was as fine a place as any royal residence, seeming more like a palace than a country home. Still taking in the decor she was confronted by a rather large oil painting of her predecessor.

And she did not mean her Uncle Bill.

“Is that not Caro, your grace?”

“Indeed, ma’am.”

Maggie seemed puzzled. She looked at Melbourne.

“That is your first wife?”

“Yes.”
“What happened to her hair?”

“Maggie,” chided Victoria.

The Duke laughed. “She cropped it herself, your royal highness.”

“I see.” Maggie paused. “Could I-”

“No!,” Victoria and Melbourne replied simultaneously.

The Young Queen had the deference enough to the crown to make certain that there was absolutely no doubt for the audience that Regina was Albert’s child.

They had gone a little far with that, Melbourne thought, relying on unrequited sexual tension. Hardly unrequited at that point.

In the scene that had just finished, Peel had left- looking a damn sight more handsome than the original article and Will wondered how he would react the next time he saw Roberta, a perpetually frowny potato faced woman when he had been a perpetually frowny potato faced man. Melbourne and Victoria turned to each other leaving so many things unsaid.

He was fairly certain that after this conversation occurred Victoria had demanded he lock the door and take her over the desk.

Why did Victoria like being taken over desks and tables so much? In any life.

She stirred.

“Albert dead yet?”

“Yeah.”

Victoria sat up.

“You ought to have gone back to bed.”

“I’m fine.” She sighed, looking at the TV. “God, just take her over the desk!”

Dinner was a formal affair. It was Maggie’s first formal dinner and she seemed to do well enough, surprising a visiting general with her questions.

So now she waited for her husband. So long she thought he was not coming.

When he did, he seemed particularly so ill at ease.

“What kept you?”

“What kept me? What kept me?” He pointed in the air. “That damned Devonshire put me at the other end of the house, that’s what kept me!”

“You are not on this hall?,” she asked.
“No, it seems you would find yourself in the late Duchess’ bedroom, that is Georgiana’s and I am in the bedroom of the other late Duchess. They were quite separate for reasons that you can imagine.”

Victoria was amused. “Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“Is that where you...”

He looked at her in irritation as he took off his dressing gown.

“What is the male equivalent of virgo intacta?”

“Victoria...”

She giggled as he sat, kissing his neck. “Oh, my beautiful husband... I think I am only fascinated because I cannot imagine you in need of instruction...”

“I was not born your Prime Minister, you know.”

She continued her kisses as she snuck her hand under his nightshirt, grazing her nails across his thigh and towards his cock. She took him in hand, stroking him. “What did she teach you?”

He groaned, half in irritation half because she was demonstrating the full breadth of his own tutelage.

“She must have taught you about mouths, certainly? How to use your tongue...” She pushed him down on his back. “Or certainly about that spot above my entrance where you bring such pleasure. I have been told many husbands have no idea that exists...”

“Perhaps,” was all he gave away.

Victoria tossed aside her own nightdress before she mounted him. She lowered herself over his waiting cock as she took his hands in hers. They jointly explored her curves before settling on her hips so she could ride him.

Sated, she laid next to him, buzzing with the contentment between her legs.

“Caro didn’t like it...” he said after a long silence.

She was nearly asleep. “Did not like what?”

“Sharing a bed.”

Victoria propped herself up on her elbow and stared at her husband for this was the strangest thing she had ever heard.

“She did not like making love to you?”

“No.”

Two babies. She ought to have realized. Her husband had put six on her. Seven years of marriage before Byron and only two babies. He took such care to space out their babies, it was her own recklessness that narrowed the gaps. She had thought it was something to do with Caro after all there was certainly nothing the matter with him.

“Why not?”
“She did not like my methods of bringing pleasure... what I like.”

Victoria stroked her husband’s face. “Would she not... use her mouth on you?”

It was the one act Victoria had not immediately taken to, back in the early days of their stolen moments with her boxes. He had gone under her skirts so many times... she had finally relented, coming to her knees as he tried to object that it was too much to ask and she had firmly said he was not asking, she was commanding.

“She did not like me to use my mouth on her.”

“Oh, Lord M...” She sighed. “She used you very ill, I think.”

“I...”

“No. She used you very ill. For a wife to not submit to a cruel husband is one thing, but to not submit to a kind and loving one who only wishes to show his affection is quite another.”

“You should not be so quick to judge.”

“Certainly I may judge. I am the only other woman who has shared her position!”

“And what position would that be?”

“Your wife, of course.”

The Duke of Devonshire was known for his massive glasshouse, people came from all over the world to see it and today the Princess Royal was quite in her element.

Victoria walked with Gina and Maggie and the Duke’s nephew, a boy a few years older than Gina called Edward.

“Over this way are the banana plants, your majesty.”

“Do you visit your uncle often, Master Edward?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What is a banana?,” asked Maggie.

“It is a fruit, technically a member of the berry family,” said Regina.

“Musa cavendishii,” supplied Edward.

“I believe you will find it is Musa acuminata, Master Edward,” said Gina.

“Forgive me, your highness, it is a Musa cavendishii-”

Gina did not like being interrupted. Victoria knew full well that any sparks of temper that erupted over the calm facade she shared with her father, came from her.

Her mother’s daughter.

“No, forgive me, Master Edward,” she said emphasizing the courtesy title, dripping future queen, “I
believe you will find that the scientific name is Musa acuminata, not merely a nickname your uncle’s gardener has given them.”

Maggie looked impatient. “Could I just see one?”

She marched off as Edward led the way.

Gina turned to her mother.

“Why do men and boys insist they know everything when they so obviously do not?”

She walked off to follow.

Victoria could not help the swell of pride she felt in that moment.

She wandered back to find Melbourne and Devonshire, she did not know where they had gone off to.

“Conveniently enough your youngest nephew joins us—”

“My nephew visits me—”

“You pulled him away from school for the week.”

“You spoke with him?”

“I always speak with boys being forced upon my daughter...”

Devonshire muttered something.

“What about Caro?”

“Nothing. So happy to see how easily you have assuaged your grief.”

“Is that what this invitation was about? Not merely ingratiating your nephew with the future Queen, dragging up Caro.”

“Caro never would have married you had she known your true nature.”

“You have her portrait in your front hall! God, was there nothing of your mother?”

“Or perhaps you would rather my father’s second wife.”

“Drag her up as well.”

“You did not deserve Caro. You could not take care of her, look after her. No wonder you do so well at the Queen’s side, a husband of no more use than a woman.”

“You speak with all the wisdom of a man who has never married. I used to think the same as you, that if a wife and children and even the dog ran amok it must certainly be the fault of the master of the house. I was still not far off from a boy then, I knew better once I took a wife. I am sorry to see you are still but a boy.” He turned to take the path. “Perhaps that is why Caro did not marry you.”

He made his way down the path to the palms his wife hid behind.

“How much did you hear?,” he asked.
“Enough.” Victoria took his arm and they walked together. “The Duke was in love with Caro?”

“Yes, their families thought they would marry most of their lives.”

“But Caro did not wish to?”

“Not precisely. Caro had trouble on settling on anything.”

“Caroline, Duchess of Devonshire. It is somewhat difficult to imagine.”

Melbourne snorted. “So it is.”

“Then it might have been her that was terribly jealous of my husband.”

“You suppose in such a world we would have married?”

She looked up at him and smiled.

“Oh, Lord M, we would have married in any world.”

Victoria paced the throne room.

They had been back a day now and Victoria could find no further reprieve.

She might as well have been summoning her Prime Minister, not her daughter.

“You asked to see me, Mama?”

“Oh, yes, Gina come here.”

Gina looked surprised as Victoria sat on the steps before her throne, patting the spot next to her.

“How is your inconvenience?”

“There is... less blood.”

“Good. That means it will be ending soon.”

“But it will come again.”

“Yes...” She nodded. “It will not come when you carry a baby. That is one of the ways you will know you are with child.”

“I do not want a child.”

“I think you will. I think you will want a husband as well.”

“Why?”

“Because you will need a companion and your husband will be your companion in a way that no one else can.”
She was not thinking merely of babies then. She realized she still had not gotten out what needed to be said.

“When you are in love with someone, truly in love, you want nothing but each other. The sun, the sky, the air you breathe are all him and you are his sun and sky and air, you will want to be even closer and that is when you will go to your bed together.”

“What?”

“After you have married, of course,” she was quick to add, tugging at her own sleeve. “You will of course have noticed men and woman are built quite differently. Men are stronger and bigger. Women have breasts and are made for carrying babies. There is another difference as well, your most private area, a man has his own private area, rather a member, meant to go inside a woman’s.”

Gina stared at her.

“When he does, it can be most pleasurable. And wonderful. And that is when a baby is made, the product of her parents’ love.”

She was thinking of Gina as she looked at her then and a rainy night many years ago.

“So you see it will not all be bad,” said Victoria.

There was silence again.

“Did you have any questions?”

“May I be excused?”

“Yes, of course.”

Gina got up quickly and headed for the door.

“I can answer any questions later!”

Victoria sighed, landing her head below her throne.

“I take it that went well.”

Victoria did not look up at her husband. “What did she say?”

“She did not say, she could not bear to look at me before she ran in the other direction.”

He sat down next to her and turned her head.

“Do you think I did the right thing?, she asked.

“Of course you did. It is just a shock, leaving your childhood.”

“I feel as if I stayed in mine an inordinately long time.”

“Certainly not.”

“I do not think I left it until Gina was born.”
“Since when can you do stuff like this?”

Will looked up. The day had been nearly wasted as far as writing went apart from a couple of hours in which they had deigned to write. Then back to The Young Queen and Will for his part had begun to redesign the nursery, possibly frightening Victoria with a series of architectural drawings.

“I can do stuff like this,” he responded weakly. “Now, the cots can stay, we haven’t given enough thought to rocking chairs, there’s a play space over here and surely we only need one changing table.”

“I swear this looks like Melbourne’s royal nursery layout.” She motioned. “Except you haven’t got anywhere for the maid to sleep.”

“I’m not paying her to sleep,” escaped him.

He looked up at Victoria who stared at him.

“I was joking…”

The doorbell rang.

“Ah, yes, I cooked,” said Victoria.

“I’ll get it.”

Will walked to the door and instead of a delivery boy he found Maggie Giles.

“Maggie, what brings you-”

It was then that he noticed the ornate metal box in her hands.

A box he had not seen in many years.

“I have some questions,” she said.

“I suppose you must.”
Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

Hi, so it's been a while. This is like the third or fourth version of this chapter so I hope you like it.

Please let me know what you think and happy reading!

Oh and thanks to Zaboraviti for some Russian help this week.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Beijing 1992

Bobby Reid walked into the school. He was accompanied by a couple dozen other dads doing the same thing running in from the various embassies and businesses run by foreigners in China.

“Bobby!”

He spotted his wife in the classroom.

“Saved you a seat,” said Izzy.

He sat. “You sat next to the only other two Aussies in the room.”

“Oh. Like you wouldn’t have picked the Scots if you beat me here.”

Just then one such Scot waved at him from across the room and he waved back.

“Well, what’s this supposed to be?”

“End of term. They’re all presenting their research findings.”

“Ten year olds have research findings?”

“Don’t let Maggie hear you say that, she’s been working on this for weeks. Locked in her room, wouldn’t even let me proofread her speech. She didn’t want to go to judo class last night because she had to make transparencies.”

“Why was she making transparencies?”

“I don’t know, but if it can take her interest away from wars and learning new ways to beat the piss out of people, I say we encourage it.”

“That’s her Australian side.”

“No, it’s her Scot side.”

The argument stopped as the teacher brought the class to order. They sat through a number of presentations, a genealogy project, a volcano, a group presentation of a scene from Hamlet- at least they thought it was Hamlet- and it was finally Maggie’s turn.
“Now Maggie Reid will tell us about her findings in her research about the second World War.”

“Warfare,” Bobby muttered.

“So long as she doesn’t reenact.”

Maggie very seriously moved her overhead projector into place and set up an easel draped with a cloth. Izzy waved slyly at her and she waved back.

“I must confess,” she began, “I was going to do the usual sort of report about the war with Churchill and Roosevelt and Stalin, but I realized that wasn’t enough.”

Bobby leaned towards Izzy. “If this ends up going wrong, you grab her while I ask the Foreign Office for a change of assignment and hire a psychiatrist.”

“Agreed.”

“I am here to talk about the greatest hero of the Second World War...” She pulled away the cloth. “Soviet Marshal Georgy Konstantinovich Zhukov.”

Bobby and Izzy exchanged glances.

She turned on the projector.

“Our story begins in the cold Russian winter of 1896...”

---

**London, 2017**

Maggie sighed.

Hospital was boring.

Being in hospital was boring. She had always needed movement and now she was forced to be still.

Not that Matthew was helping.

“Matthew?”

“Sorry, I’ve got to finish this passage,” he said staring at his Macbook.

She wanted to scream at him, but was interrupted by a man in a suit.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Mrs. Giles. Mr. Giles. My name is Jennings. I’m private secretary to Her Majesty. She’s visiting some of the survivors and wonders if she might meet you. With cameras.”

“Of course,” said Maggie, straightening up.

“I’m in the middle of something-”

“Matthew!,” she snapped.

It was a few moments and they were joined by the Queen and the Duke of Montrose. The cameras stayed outside the glass walls of the room.

“Mrs. Margaret Giles, ma’am.”
“Mrs. Giles.”

“Your Majesty.”

They shook hands.

There was something very familiar about her.

“Are you from London?”

“Not originally. I do live here now.”

“Oh. Where originally?”

“I was born in Melbourne. The Australian one.”

“A well named city,” she smiled.

“My dad’s Scottish.”

“Oh, good on him,” David said with a smile.

“He worked for the Foreign Office, we moved around a bit.”

“I can imagine. And how are you feeling?”

“Quite well, ma’am. I can’t wait to get out of here.”

The Queen smiled at the drawings taped up. “Did your children do those?”

“Yes.”

“They’re a talented group.”

“I think so. Thank God Will Lamb was there, he kept me reminded of them.”

The Queen froze. “Will Lamb?”

“Yes?”

“The Oxford professor?”

“Yes.”

“He was on the train?” She turned to Jennings. “Why didn’t I know about this?”

Jennings stammered.

“Find where he is. Now.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The Queen looked back at her. “Lovely to have met you, Mrs. Giles.”

“Ma’am.”

They left.
“That was weird,” said Matthew, opening his laptop.

---

**Prussia, 1861**

“I do not know why Mama could not have come,” said Maggie.

Gina didn’t look up from her book. “Odd. I do not know why I had to come.”

“I think it all rather exciting,” said Ellie. “We haven’t been anywhere since Charlotte married”

“Papa, you will be nice to Friedrich, won’t you?,” asked Maggie.

Gina shook her head. “Who are you? Papa, has Maggie been replaced?”

“Could we please call me Margaret?”

“I have never called you Margaret in my life and I have absolutely no intention of starting now.”

Melbourne sighed. “I believe we have been repeating this argument since Dover.”

“But you will be nice to Friedrich?”

“I shall be civil.”

“But if we are to marry-”

“Mama has not given her permission yet and you know there is only one way that Mama will give her permission.”

Ellie looked out the window. “Is that the palace?”

Gina looked out. “Is it a palace?”

The carriage came to the front of the palace, stones arranged in a Gothic style.

Melbourne spotted an unwelcome sight.

“Leopold,” he said as they stepped out.

“Melbourne.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to hear the engagement announced in person.”

“There is no engagement yet.”

“I thought perhaps you would require assistance with the negotiations.”

“Is the prince worried about his allowance?”

Leopold frowned. “You do know they will be expecting a dowry?”
“They think I will pay them?”

“Of course. You must have realized.”

“Not Maggie.”

“They are taking on a Viscount’s daughter—”

“The second in line to the throne of England—”

“Who will move further and further back once her sister marries. I had some thoughts on that—”

“I am not interested and I believe you will find Gina is even less interested...”

They were soon joined by Friedrich and the rest of the court.

“Margaret.”

“Friedrich!”

She ran, forgetting protocol.

“I am so happy to see you here. What do you think so far?”

“Well,” said Gina, walking over, “I think it was the most boring carriage ride in my life... and I have been to Scotland.”

Friedrich bowed. “Your Royal Highness. I am sure we have much to show you in Prussia—”

“I am certain you do not. That is why I brought books.”

Gina walked away to be introduced to the rest of the court. Maggie turned back to Friedrich.

“Are you coming?” asked Maggie as they parked.

Matthew looked at his mobile. “I’ll be a moment. Publisher.”

Maggie entered the house.

“Welcome home!,” the family shouted.

Bobby and Izzy were there to help control the grandchildren. Five year old William was the first to run towards Maggie and attach himself, followed by Ellie, who was six and Gina, who was eight.

“We missed you, Mummy,” said Ellie.

“I missed you,” she said distributing hugs and kisses. She looked at her parents. “Did they behave?”

“Like wee devils,” said Bobby, kissing his daughter.

“Grandad!,” Gina admonished.

“They were fine,” said Izzy hugging her daughter. She held her face. “We’re glad to have you back and safe.”
“You met the Queen,” said Gina.

“I did,” said Maggie, remembering the air of familiarity.

“Tell us all about her!,” Gina begged.

“Oi, let your mum have a seat first,” said Izzy. “Come on, let’s have tea.”

Matthew entered.

“Daddy!,” clamored William.

“Sorry, mate, I’ve got to get to work.”

Maggie looked at him. “Work?”

“I’m way behind. Deadline’s coming up.”

“Ask for an extension,” said Maggie.

“Yeah, use the fact that your wife was nearly blown to bits as leverage,” said Bobby.

“Bobby, not in front of the kids,” said Izzy.

The grandparents shepherded the kids off to the next room. Maggie looked at Matthew.

“You couldn’t ask for an extension?,” asked Maggie.

“I’ve wasted enough time as it is.”

“Sorry my near death experience has been such an inconvenience for you.”

“Not everything is about you, Maggie.”

“No, it’s about our family. Seeing to it that our children are alright which is why my parents have come from Glasgow to pitch in.”

“And some help they’ve been.”

“Some help you’re being.”

“I have to go work.”

Matthew went upstairs. Maggie turned away in a huff.

“Ritochka...”

“What?,” she barked snapping her head back.

There was no one there, but there was something there. Ritochka, Ritochka. That was Russian, wasn’t it? She hadn’t had many Russian classmates, they always had their own schools.

“Maggie?,” asked Bobby. “We’re all sitting down.”

“He has to work. It’s this book about Charlbury...”

“So I’ve heard. Come on, lass.”
Melbourne entered the room with Leopold at his side.

He shuddered at the thought of Leopold being his supposed ally in the room.

“Princess Margaret is a very charming girl,” began the Emperor. “Her Majesty should be very proud.”

“Yes, Her Majesty and I are very proud.”

“Five hundred thousand pounds.”

“What?”

“That is the dowry we require.”

Melbourne looked at Leopold. Once again, he was looking to Leopold.

“It is just an opening.”

“No, that is what we require.”

Melbourne knew this was impossible.

“Parliament would be required to approve such a sum and I can tell you as the former head of that house, it will not be approved.”

“My son is getting the poorer end of the bargain in this match.”

“You cannot be serious, sir. The daughter of the Queen of England—”

“The daughter of the Second Viscount Melbourne. You are asking that the grandson who will rule one day be not of pure royal blood.”

The conversation dithered on until the Emperor had to go attend to some great matter.

“You must see his point,” said Leopold.

“I should pay him a fortune to take my daughter off my hands because she is inferior goods?”

“You must pay something.”

“That is where you are wrong. I must do nothing.” Melbourne scoffed. “Poorer end of the bargain. I hardly think so.”

“I will write my niece—”

“I will write my wife.”

Maggie entered the gym.
“Mags!” Her receptionist, Lulu, ran from behind the desk. “I can’t believe it! Well, I can because you’re here, but your mum didn’t think you’d be in for a while.”

“Well, I’m just dropping in. I can’t do anything until I’ve been cleared by a doctor.”

“Maggie!”

Her friend, Sarah, hugged her next. Sarah was her partner in the studio, best friends since uni. Though sometimes it felt longer.

“How are you feeling?”

“Better.”

“That’s smashing. Well, I’ve kept the place running. Everyone’s been asking about you, Natasha’s covering your classes. She’s just wrapping up now.”

The club music stopped and the students began to leave. Maggie greeted them and exchanged pleasantries until Natasha came out. The Russian ginger was a favorite of the students, she had gotten her skill set God knows where and moved to London when she married an Englishman.

“Maggie...” She hugged her and stood back. “I hope your terrorist rots in Hell.”

“Well, that’s kind...”

“I was a teenager when the Chechen scum took those hostages, I lived barely a kilometer away. They can all rot in Hell after slow, painful deaths.”

Sarah nodded. “That’s very... Russian.”

“They ought to have their eyeballs taken out through their arses...”

Sarah nodded again. “And very explicit...”

“Right...” said Maggie.

“I need a shower, I’m meeting Bertie.”

“Oh, Natasha, do you know what Ritochka means?”

Natasha frowned. “Ritochka? Who called you that?”

“I’m not sure.”

“What’s it mean?,” asked Sarah.

“Well, it’s like a nickname for Margarita-”

“Margaret,” said Maggie.

“Exactly, but a personal one, only someone close would use.” Natasha smiled. “Do you have a new Russian friend?”

“Bertie. Meeting,” said Maggie.

“Oh, a gentleman friend?”
“Sarah, why don’t you show me the books?”

Melbourne returned to their rooms and wrote a letter to Victoria. The girls entered just as he was wrapping it up.

Maggie threw her bonnet at Gina.

“You were rude!”

“You were pathetic. Changing yourself so a bunch of inconsequential people will like you?”

“They are not inconsequential! They are to be my court!”

“No, your future father-in-law’s court. Your future husband has all the power of a newly elected MP to the Commons.”

“Oh, thank you for that, Gina,” Melbourne said dryly. “I was once a new MP in the Commons.”

“Yes, but you got power later, something I doubt Friedrich will do.”

Ellie sat by Melbourne. “This is all they’ve spoken of.”

“You needn’t have been rude, Gina,” said Maggie.

“I will not pretend these people are more important than they are. Please. Show me the great German empire. Go on. I will wait.”

“Just because you are heiress presumptive-”

“May I make a point as heiress presumptive?” Gina turned to Melbourne. “May I? Because when I am Queen someday, I will have to suffer this marriage.”

Melbourne sighed. “How do you mean?”

“This is not just a marriage, this is an alliance. Someday these Hollenzollerns will do something stupid and expect England to help them out of it.”

“What will they do?, asked Maggie.

“I don’t know, invade Russia? It could be anything.”

“Papa, tell her she is being ridiculous,” said Maggie.

She looked anxiously at him.

“Well?”

“Gina makes an excellent point. It is not just you marrying, it is your country.”

“You always take her side, why is that? When I am your real daughter?”

They froze.
“Apologize to your sister,” said Melbourne.

“My half-sister-”

“You will apologize to your sister now.”

Maggie crossed her arms.

“Gina, Ellie, leave us.”

Ellie quickly did as he bade. Gina followed with a glare.

“Gina is as much my daughter as you are.”

“Except-”

“As much my daughter as you are!,” he felt compelled to yell over her. “And you will go and apologize to her.”

“But why do you always side with her?”

“I side with her when she talks sense. You need to know something.”

“What?”

“The negotiations. The Emperor is asking a fortune for your dowry. Five hundred thousand pounds.”

“Well, do we have it?”

“It’s not the point of if we have it. The point is if Parliament will grant it, which they will not.”

“You could change their minds-”

“Maggie, I am not going to bankrupt England for you to marry.”

“So my happiness means nothing?”

“Your happiness means a great deal which is why I will not let you marry Prince Friedrich.”

She straightened. “I shall ask Mama.”

“Your mama will never agree to it if I do not say yes.” He sighed. “The Emperor wants that fortune because he thinks it an imposition to take on a princess of half-royal blood. That is what these people think of you and that is why I will not allow it.”

She shook her head. “But I can show them-”

“You cannot show people like that. That’s an end to it.” Melbourne sat back down.

“I can-”

“Maggie, speaking as the Second Viscount Melbourne, having been married to the Queen of England for some time now, I do know.”
“What are we doing out here?,” moaned Maggie.

“Getting you some sun,” said Izzy.

“Mum, it’s London. It’s December. There is no sun.”

“Here’s a nice spot.”

Izzy sat down on a bench and opened the hamper. They had walked to the Victoria IV memorial park and their bench faced the statue of the late queen in all her ceremonial glory over a reflecting pool with the words “Victoria Gloriana” inscribed around it.

“You know, the first time I came to London with your dad, I thought I would die of cold,” said Izzy getting out a thermos of tea.

“Now you just overcompensate for it with two jumpers, a coat, hat and scarf.”

“And gloves.”

Maggie sighed, eyes resting on the statue.

“Everything alright with you and Matthew?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“It’s just usually when someone goes through what you went through, it gives you a bit of perspective about what’s really important.”

“I know what’s important.”

Maggie’s eyes drifted. The large statue of Victoria IV was surrounded on all sides by smaller statues of the men at her side during the war. The Earl of Charlbury and Churchill of course, General Montgomery and...

“Why does a Soviet general get a place in the park?”

Izzy frowned and looked. “Georgy Zhukov? You don’t remember?”

“What am I supposed to remember?”

“You gave a speech in school once when we lived in Beijing. He fought the Nazis at the Eastern Front, stopped the Japanese from expanding into Russia before that and then somehow found time to save England-”

“From the Germans’ only attempt at occupying the British mainland.”

“Well, it sounds like you do remember.”

And she did remember something.

A fevered day and trees.

Rooks staring at her.

“Actually, Melbourne has a Zhukov statue,” said Izzy. “I used to pass it on my walk to school.”

Maggie stood.
“What are you doing?”
“I just remembered, I have an errand to run.”
“We only just sat. I wanted to go over the plans for the kids’ Christmas presents.”
“It’s really very important.”

Maggie entered the ball late.
Which no one seemed to notice.
“I would hate for you to have a bad impression of us, your royal highness.”
Gina smiled. “No, Lord Zhukonov. The slight was long ago. I think England and Russia ought to be friends.”
She noticed Maggie.
“Might I introduce my sister, Princess Margaret?”
The young lord bowed. “Your royal highness. It is a pleasure.”
“Vasily.”
An older man approached in a Russian uniform. He locked eyes with Maggie.
“Might we be introduced?”
“Of course. Your Royal Highnesses, this is my grandfather Count Georgy Konstantinovich Zhukonov.”
“Your Royal Highness,” he bowed his head at Gina and kissed her hand.
“Count.”
“Your Royal Highness.”
“Count,” said Maggie.
His lips and his hand seemed to linger. No one else seemed to notice.
“How do you like Prussia, your royal highness?”
“It’s lovely.”
“And the court?”
Friedrich approached. “Excuse me. Margaret, we must speak.”
Maggie smiled at the old count. “Excuse me.”
They walked off.
“Your father is being unreasonable. You must persuade him.”
Maggie was shocked. “I must persuade him? Papa is not the sole arbiter of this. My marriage must be approved by Parliament and Papa thinks they will not pay such a huge sum.”

“Then you must persuade the Queen.”

“Mama will never go against Papa on this.”

“Margaret, if you cannot do this, what is the point of all our plans?”

“If I cannot do this? What about you? What have you done to persuade your father?”

“My father? I can barely get him to agree to this marriage under any terms given you.”

Friedrich stopped short.

“Given what?”

“Never mind.”

“No. Given what?”

He sighed. “Your mother is a Queen, yes, but your father is...”

“A viscount.”

“If that. I am told he is a bastard.”

“Why should that matter? You are marrying me.”

“Of course, but you are not-”

“Not what?”

“Of pure royal blood.”

“And that matters?”

“Of course it matters!,” he hissed.

Maggie stepped back as if the wind had been struck from her.

She ran out into the gardens.

Brocket Hall was closed to tourists today and she was turned around from the car park.

Maggie pulled over on the side of the road and got out her phone to look at Google Earth. If she couldn’t get in through the front door, there had to be another.

She had no idea how she was putting this together but she parked by the Hatfield parish church. She grabbed the spade she had picked up on a quick pop into Asda on the way and stuffed it in her coat pocket.

She was fairly certain people weren’t allowed to take spades into royal lands.
She walked until she saw the bridge to Brocket Hall.

Rooks.

She stepped back, trying to recollect.

“One, two... third one in,” she said to herself.

Maggie knelt down and got the spade out.

“This is mad,” she muttered. “Mad. Who do I think I am? Queen Victoria IV? Princess Margaret?”

No. Maggie Giles nee Reid. Wife. Mother of three. Recent survivor of a terror attack. This was just some bizarre coping mechanism.

She should stop digging.

Maggie took the spade and dug more.

She was shocked when she hit metal.

“No, no, no...”

She reached in and pulled aside a cloth, pulling out an ornate metal box and remembering the fevered day she had put it here.

Here to find again though she only knew what that meant now.

That meant tears.

Tears.

She had never felt this many tears. Maggie thought she might crush under the weight of them.

“Don’t cry.”

She turned quickly, she thought she had been alone and found herself facing the old count again. Georgy.

“He’s not worth your tears.”

She snorted through her tears. “Then who is?”

“Absolutely no man.”

He offered a handkerchief and Maggie took it. She noticed one of his medals glimmering in the moonlight.

“You fought against Napoleon.”

“So I did. I fought him when he invaded Russia and then we saw him back to France.”

“What was it like?”
“Were I a younger man, I would be happy to sit and tell you all about it. How Moscow burned, how he turned back in winter, but lately I find all war stories are gone from me.”

“And how is that?”

“I only remember how I missed my wife.”

“Your wife.”

“Margarita. We had not been married long and we missed each other terribly. She stayed in Moscow too long after the rest of the civilians had left the city because she wanted to see me.”

Maggie shook her head. “Was she not frightened?”


“Is she with you?”

“She died. Not then, but later. It’s been nearly twenty years. I have spent this whole time waiting to see her again...” He paused. “I got my wish sooner than I thought I would.”

Maggie shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

He smiled. “I would know her anywhere.”

Maggie was dumbfounded. What was he on about? But she did not wish to leave him.

“Here.”

He held out something and Maggie took it. A Russian cross of emeralds and diamonds.

“It is beautiful,” she said.

“I gave it to my wife when we married.”

Maggie tried to pass it back. He closed her hand over it.

“It’s yours.”

“I couldn’t possibly-”

“It’s yours.”

“It belonged to your wife-”

“It’s yours.”

He started speaking in Russian and swooned, falling to the grass.

“Count?” Maggie knelt beside him. “Count, please-”

Failing, he grasped for her hand. Maggie grasped back.

“Stay with me, Count. Please.”

“Maggie!,” she heard Ellie call. “Maggie!”
“Help!,” Maggie called, but she would not leave the count’s grasp. “Ellie, get help!”

Ellie appeared before them. “What happened?”

“I have no idea, get a doctor, he needs a doctor!”

Ellie ran back and began calling for help. The count grasped Maggie’s hand as he spoke in Russian.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand—”

“No tears, Ritochka. I will see you again.”

Maggie knocked at the door. She waited a moment and Will answered.

“Maggie, what brings you—”

He looked down at the box.

“I have some questions.”

“I suppose you must.” He motioned. “Come in.”

Her parents’ house. One set of parents. There was an orchid and pictures of Will’s kids. That was the only resemblance.

“Maggie,” said Victoria. “What are you doing here?”

“She just needed—”

“I just needed to talk. To Will. About the train.”

Victoria nodded. “Yeah, of course. Can I get you something?”

“No, I’m quite fine.”

“My office is this way,” said Will as Victoria stared strangely at them.

Will shut the door and locked it.

“She doesn’t realize.”

“I know.”

“Usually we just remember at death or a near death experience will do—”

“I know.”

Will paused. “You know?”

“Last time, when the Germans took me. I remembered.”

Will sat. “How much do you remember?”

“Not every time. Enough. Last time. The time before that and the one before that.”
“That’s plenty. Trust me.”

She frowned. “Why? What do you remember?”

He motioned at the box. “You never said what was in there.”

“You remember this?”

“I remember it was a gift from Marshal Zhukov. Tommy Lascelles thought he probably looted it from Berlin.”

“He did loot it from Berlin.”

“How did you find it?”

“I dug it.”

Will raised an eyebrow. “Dug it from where?”

“Brocket Hall. The tree we used to find Della hiding behind.”

“You took it from Brocket Hall?”

“I left it there so I could find it again. I didn’t want it to get passed on to my bitch granddaughter.”

Will frowned. “How old was she when you died?”

“She was a bitch as a little girl and she is a bitch now. I could spot it. Too much English blueblood got in her.”

“You can’t go digging things up at Brocket Hall.”

She sat. “It’s mine. I wanted it back.”

He sighed. “It doesn’t work like that-”

“It’s mine.”

“It’s a box.”

“It is all I have of him.”

“All of who?”

“Georgy. Which does lead me to my main question.”

“Which is?”

“Where is he?”

He sighed. “I don’t think-”

“Do you remember the old count that died when we were in Potsdam?”

“Vaguely.”

“That was him. I was his wife. I was robbed of him that time, we got robbed the last time, I will not
be cheated again.”
Will shook his head. “Maggie, that isn’t how this works—”
“Seems to work well enough for you.”
“I don’t choose this—”
“You’ve gotten her, every time.”
“You have a husband and children.”
“I will deal with that when I come to it. Do you know where he is or not?”
Will sighed. “I’m sorry. No.”
Maggie put her face in her hands.
Tears.
Will hugged her.
“I’m so sorry, Maggie. I know it’s not easy remembering.”
There was a knock on the door. “Will?”
“Yeah?”
“Flora’s on the phone. She’s been texting you.”
He sighed. “I’ll ring her back.”
“Well, it’s a bit of a thing...”
Will sighed. He kissed Maggie on the forehead and stood to open the door.
Victoria looked at Maggie. “Are you alright?”
“Fine,” said Maggie.
“What is it?”
“Well, Roberta Peel is releasing papers she got at the Kremlin—”
“The Kremlin?,” asked Will.
“They seem to indicate that Victoria IV was having an affair with...” Victoria shook her head. “This is really weird.”
“What is? Who was it?”
“Georgy Zhukov, you know the Soviet—”
“Tell Flora I’ll ring her back. Would you excuse us?”
Will shut the door again leaving Victoria confused.
He turned back to Maggie.

“Did you-”

She sighed. “First of all, let’s not pretend I’m the only one around here who has had any scandals.”

Chapter End Notes

So, a few notes.

The 1861 time jump is temporary this week. Expect to rejoin the Crimean War at some point.

So, I watched The Death of Stalin recently because I LOVE Armando Ianucci. The Thick of It is my favorite show ever. That’s just the sense of humor I have. And I really enjoyed the Jason Isaacs' Georgy Zhukov, so that's what we're going for.

And if you're mad at me, I hate myself a little, too, so...
Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

Hi! So, the 4th of July. My day off, your win.

Please let me know what you think and happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

--------------------------

London 1943

Victoria waited.

“Is that all, Mr. Churchill?”

She knew him by now. This war. These audiences.

And he wanted to hide something.

“Ma’am?”

“I know you have so much on your mind, I would hate for you to forget something. Then of course, later, should it have come out, I will think you lied to me. Which would be unfortunate...”

Churchill sighed. “We have received a guest.”

“Do I know him?”

“You most certainly know of him. Soviet Field Marshal Georgy Zhukov.”

“I see.”

“We have been coordinating our efforts with the Soviets. It is imperative that no one know he is here.”

“Do you suppose I go blabbing about everything you tell me?”

“No, ma’am-”

“Where is General Zhukov now?”

“Well, he’s in the Tower, ma’am.”

“The Tower?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I thought the Soviets were our allies? I recall something about us saving the world from fascism.”

“Ma’am, as I said it is of the utmost importance the Nazis not get wind the General is here. That’s
why he is at the Tower.”

“Where we put the soon to be executed German spies.”

“Ma’am, what do you suggest?”

“Is he here the weekend?”

“Yes, there’s no way to arrange his transport back to the Eastern Front until next week.”

“I shall invite him to Brocket Hall.”

“Brocket Hall, ma’am?”

“No one is there. Minimal staff, all cleared by the OSS as stringently as anyone at the Tower.”

“You would be alone with General Zhukov the entire weekend.”

“He speaks English, yes?”

“Yes, ma’am, but how would it look if anyone were to find out?”

“Then no one had better find out.” She stood, Churchill followed suit. “Bill and Tommy will know, of course. Bill was going to be in Hatfield anyway.”

They walked out into the hall. Tommy and Bill were waiting.

“Bill, we’re going to the Tower on the way to Brocket Hall.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Bill.

“Ma’am?,” asked Tommy.

“We’re picking up a friend.”

“Ma’am, he is rather conspicuous in his uniform...” said Churchill.

Victoria sighed. “Bill, could you also arrange some clothes for our friend?”

Will sat down, brought back to the role of father, not friend, not private secretary.

“What did you do?”

“You can guess what I did, can’t you?”

“Adultery by the Queen of England.”

“No one cares about adultery when it’s the King of England, do they? Besides, I don’t know how we can call it adultery.”

“Did Matthew ever find out?”

“Certainly not.”
“The Russians knew.”

“Well, what was I meant to do about that?” She sighed. “We had a system. We exchanged letters through British diplomatic pouches. I used Lady Shaftesbury’s name, he used the name of some colonel who had been purged for years.”

“Did Tommy know?”

“Tommy was clever enough to figure out something, but he knew to never ask.”

Will sighed.

“I didn’t abandon you when you announced your intention to marry the wife of a Nazi party official. Not to mention, I think there might have been another time the Queen of England had sex with someone who wasn’t strictly her husband.”

“You know Matthew’s book is all about Charlbury and his marriage.”

“Yes, I am aware.”

“You don’t think the Queen’s affair with a Soviet general might muddle things up?”

“Oh, dear me. I didn’t stop to think of my husband’s research in our next life! What was the matter with me?”

“What was the matter with you?”

Maggie didn’t answer. “The Queen. Ellie, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Anyone else?”

“Well, Victoria’s mother is... her mother. Stepfather is Sir John Conroy. The Duchess of New South Wales is Della. I think she is. I haven’t seen her since the bombing. The rest I don’t know that you’d care.”

“Right.” Maggie stood, taking her box. “Let me know if you see him.”

Victoria walked up the stairs as Bill and the guards followed. They arrived at another guard.

“Open the door.”

The guard looked flummoxed.

“What? Are you waiting for someone higher ranking?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Open the door.”

He did. The little cell was not so terrible, probably redecorated at least once since Anne Boleyn found herself there.
Zhukov lay on the bed, trousers and shirt, book in his hand.

It seemed so perfectly natural to Victoria.

“Soldier, I need you to fetch your commanding officer. I have no idea why he thought I would want
to read War and Peace. I’m fucking living it.”

“I prefer Anna Karenina.”

Zhukov looked up, turning his head towards the Queen.

He sat up.

“Your Majesty.”

Victoria waited for him to stand.

Something that clearly did not seem to be happening.

“It is a pleasure to meet you,” said Victoria.

“Well, I didn’t think I’d be meeting you, that’s for sure.”

He did finally stand book in hand. “Have you read this?”

“I did. I had a very terrible chest cold one summer. Bedridden. I must have read a hundred books.”

“Have you read it since?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“It’s a book that changes every time you come back to it because you’ve changed...” He tossed the
book onto the bed. “And today, I can’t fucking stand it.”

“I’ve come to issue an invitation.”

“An invitation?”

“Yes. I wonder if you might be my guest at Brocket Hall for the weekend.”

“Brocket Hall?”

“The family home. A little country house. If nothing else, we do have quite a library.”

The car ride to Brocket Hall was very quiet. The car finally stopped with Queen and General staring
at each other.

Georgy looked outside. Some sort of cottage with a pretty little garden out front.

“Is this is?”

“No, this is Sir William’s stop. His country home is in the village.”
Bill got out of the car. The driver came around to open Victoria’s door.

“Do you mind if I stop in? Bill’s little girl is my goddaughter.”

“No.”

Bill looked in the car. “You’re more than welcome to come in, General.”

“I couldn’t impose.”

“We won’t be a moment. Just Bill’s wife and daughter, I understand the maid runs off at regular intervals.”

He sighed and agreed, following the Queen into the house.

“Victoria!,” called Bill.

Georgy looked at the Queen. “His wife is called Victoria as well.”

A little girl came barreling towards them.

“Daddy!”

“Gina!”

He lifted her up and swung her into his arms.

“Now, is that how we greet her majesty?”

The three year old bowed her head. “Your Majesty.”

“How are you, Regina?”

“Well, ma’am.”

“Gina, this is-” He turned to introduce the general.

“Georgy,” he interrupted. “Georgy is fine.”

“Alright,” said Bill. “You may call him Georgy but only because he gave you permission to do so. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

The other Victoria entered from the stairs. She curtsied at the Queen.

“Your Majesty.”

“Lady Victoria.”

She and Bill kissed. She turned to see Zhukov.

“General Zhukov...”

Bill and the Queen exchanged glances.

“What? Was it meant to be a secret? You brought the head of the Soviet army.”
Georgy held out his hand. “My pleasure, Lady Victoria.”

“The pleasure’s mine, General.” She looked at Bill. “Are they staying for dinner?”

“No, we’re really not meant to be here,” said the Queen.

“Well, at least have some tea.”

Maggie entered the house, box in hand.

“Mummy!”

William ran towards her.

William.

Little William. Long lost and found again.

“William!”

It was as if she hadn’t seen him in a hundred years. She grasped him closely. William. The little prince she had always known would never be king. Safe. Close.

“Mummy, you’re squishing me.”

She released him. “Oh. I’m so sorry, darling.”

Bobby entered. “Where’d you get off to?”

“I had an errand to run.”

“William, mate, why don’t you go help Gran with the biscuits?”

“Okay.”

Maggie stood up with the box.

Bobby looked at her. “Your husband’s a tosser.”

“Dad-”

“No. I’ve always thought it, I’ve held my tongue-”

“Really? You held your tongue? Remind me when that was.”

“He’s not come out of his office-”

“He has to work. You worked.”

“Yes, but if there’s no space for a man’s family in his work, he needs to find a new bloody job. Especially if he’s just going to lose his temper because Queen Victoria IV might have shagged a Soviet general.”
Maggie froze.

This was weird, having her father discuss her previous sex life. Of course, she and Will just had the same discussion.

This was weird.

“Dad...”

“What? You didn’t hear?”

“No, believe me, I heard-”

“I mean, stands to reason.”

“What do you mean it stands to reason?”

“I don’t know, maybe she wanted to shag someone who actually did something during the war.”

“Charlbury did things.”

“Giving speeches? Walking around in fancy dress? Visiting Blitz victims? ‘Yes, I’m so terribly sorry you’re house is a pile of rubble, no, I personally am not going to do anything about it...’”

“Dad, please. I’ll go talk to Matthew, okay?”

Tea with the Bournes was pleasant enough. Their little girl seemed to delight in showing their visitor toys she brought down from the nursery and Georgy thought they looked surprised at how easily he took to it. True, he had been mostly been standing in blood and dirt for the past two years, but he had daughters of his own. He missed them more than he could say.

Victoria finally stepped out with Georgy following.

“Welcome to Brocket Hall.”

Georgy stopped and stared. He had been thinking of a dacha. He noted there was a substantial difference between a little English country house and a dacha.

“How did the house come to the family?”

“Lord Melbourne left it to my grandmother.”

“And before that?”

“The first Viscount Melbourne left it to him, Sir Matthew Lamb purchased the place in 1746.” She turned. “I have a few houses this is the one I prefer.”

“Is it?”

“We don’t have a smaller one. Well, Dover House, I suppose.”

“I made no mention of the size.”

“General Zhukov, I am made to understand Comrade Stalin admires your forthrightness.”
“You know what Comrade Stalin thinks?”

“I get briefings.”

“Then I find myself at a disadvantage.”

“I doubt that.” She took a breath. “No one is to know you are here, I have a few staff all sworn to secrecy, so while you are here, I propose that we speak frankly to one another.”

“Speak frankly?”

“We are allies, are we not?”

“So we are.”

“And I don’t think you need to fear my retribution. Ought I fear yours?”

“No.”

“So, the house?”

“A bit large.”

“A bit decadent?”

Georgy shrugged. “That remains to be seen.”

He followed her inside. Servants appeared out of nowhere to take their coats.

“There’s a park, some fine glasshouses. Lovely walk to see the rooks.”

“The rooks?”

“Little black birds, corvids-”

“I know what rooks are. I didn’t realize you would.”

Victoria shrugged. “Our family’s an oddity. A Melbourne would rather take notes on the birds than shoot them. You’re welcome to hunt while you’re here, if you wish it. It would be no trouble to set you up with a loader. Please leave the rooks, though.”

“I think I would be happier reading.”

“Oh, yes, our library. Come this way.”

Georgy followed her into another room. This one was just as large as the rest, but felt more like a home. A desk, sofas, doors to the garden and walls of books.

“You’re more than welcome to any of them. We have first edition Jane Austens, gifts from the then Prince Regent. Probably all the important English literature you could think of, oh, except Dickens. You weren’t hoping to read any Dickens, were you?”

“I don’t know that I’ve heard of him.”

“Well, generally some poor unfortunate child starts out is poor, unfortunate, forced to slave for terrible people who treat him cruelly and things don’t much improve from there.”
"No, thank you. I know that story."

"So you have read Dickens?"

"I lived it."

"Well, there was no Bolshevik revolution in Oliver Twist, so..." Victoria considered. "Though I think I would have liked it better."

"What do you prefer?"

"Oh." Victoria looked to the shelves. "Thomas Hardy. The Mayor of Casterbridge, Jude the Obscure, Tess of the d’Urbervilles."

She handed the general a stack.

"All lovely. Now, Thackeray." She pulled out another book. "Vanity Fair. War and Peace from the other side as it were. Only much more decadent. All sorts of bourgeois immorality."

"I’ll have it."

"Are you really going to read these all in a weekend?"

"I haven’t read a book in months."

"I sympathize. Every time I pick up a novel someone puts a state paper under my nose."

"What else?"

"P.G. Wodehouse?"

"Isn’t he doing propaganda for Hitler?"

Victoria sighed. "Such a shame. They’re brilliant books."

Georgy eyed her.

She took his meaning. "Which we will pass on. Do you like mysteries?"

"I don’t know."

"Well, no one does mysteries like us." She took out a selection. "Murder on the Orient Express, A Study in Scarlet and the Hound of the Baskervilles. Do you know the Hound of the Baskervilles?"

"No."

"It’s brilliant." She smiled. "I hope you enjoy yourself, General."

Maggie searched for an appropriate place to hide the box. A metal box, she could explain. A Russian cross, she could explain away, saying she had picked it up at Portobello Market and after all it was only costume jewelry, wasn’t it?

She could remember Georgy giving it to her. She hadn’t even cared for jewels, not really, happy to borrow some of her mother’s extras when they went to the Imperial Court, but Georgy... He was so eager to show her she hadn’t made a mistake in marrying him, that he would give her everything.
She had worn it for him.

The Russian medal was harder to explain.

“What are you doing?,” asked Matthew as he looked in on her in the closet.

She hid the box behind a selection of wellies.

“Rearranging.” She turned back to him. “What’s up?”

“What’s up? What’s up?”

She shook her head.

“I’m fucked, Maggie. That’s what’s up.”

She followed him out into the bedroom. “What do you mean you’re fucked?”

He stared at her. “Are you completely stupid?”

“I rather suggest you change your tone.”

That was sounding very Victoria...

“My tone? My tone? Well, so sorry if my tone is a trifle disagreeable...” he mocked, “but I’ve been writing a book on the Earl of Charlbury and his wife was fucking Stalin’s general.”

“Well, two things-”

“Oh, please tell me.”

“One, he wasn’t exactly Stalin’s general. Stalin feared his popularity even as he manipulated it for wartime propaganda-”

“Not as if he made any of the decisions himself.”

“Well, I think you will find that Georgy-” She remembered to add the last name. “...Zhukov had to give credit for many of his accomplishments to Stalin in an effort to not be shot in the head or sent to a gulag.”

“What? You’re a Soviet historian now?”

“I can read.”

“Well, other sources sat Zhukov had very little to do with any of it-”

“Yes, sources also trying to stay on Stalin’s good side.”

“Your degree is in Russian literature, Maggie, really, stick with what you know.”

She sighed. “I don’t see what his wife’s affair has to do with him.”

“Oh, you don’t?”

“Isn’t that what men are always saying? That their infidelities have nothing to do with their wives? Why can’t it be true for women?”
“Are you actually trying to sell me on that? My whole book has to be rewritten because of this affair and I was supposed to go back to teaching full time this spring, this book was supposed to get me tenure, now it won’t, because what? The Queen wanted to get fucked by someone in a uniform?”

Part of her wanted to scream.

Actually, all of her wanted to scream.

And throw things.

Like fists.

“You have no idea what you speak of.” She leaned forward. “I also think you’ll find that when Nikita Khruschev came to power, he minimized Zhukov’s accomplishments because insecure men are never comfortable in the presence of strong ones.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Maggie stormed out of the bedroom.

Victoria was reading in the glasshouse when a book landed on the table in front of her. She looked up as Georgy motioned at The Hound of the Baskervilles.

“It was a dog?”

“Yes. Wasn’t it brilliant?”

“It was a dog,” Georgy repeated.

“Yes.”

Georgy sat down across from her. She saw the pile of books under his arm. “What the hell is happening between Holmes and Watson?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean what sort of grown man goes around writing stories about another grown man who he happens to live with?”

“So you did not care for it? Did we have any successes, General?”

“I liked Hardy alright, but what was Eliot?”

“Which one?”

“Middlemarch.”

“Oh, I always have a difficult time with that one.”

“Casaubon, the corrupt capitalist with too much and no intention to do anything with it. Dorothea was alright, she would have made a good Soviet.”

“You can’t be serious.”
“Excuse me?”

“She doesn’t want to give up her inheritance and marry Ladislaw, who, by the way, there’s your revolutionary.”

“And I suppose you’d have given it up?”

“Not quite. I would have spent all of Casaubon’s money and then married Ladislaw.”

“Really?”

“I don’t like to be told what to do.”

“That I can well imagine.”

“Come now, General, this must certainly be a fault that we share.”

“I follow orders.”

“I heard that you do not like some orders...”

“And how would you know that?”

“I heard you had a disagreement with Stalin about strategy.”

“I do what I do for the collective good.”

“Do you imagine that I do not do what I do for the collective good?”

“In my experience, queens don’t care about the collective good.”

“I’m not Russian.”

The butler entered, clearing his throat.

“Perkins, what is it?”

“Master Thomas Forrester has arrived. He wishes to stay the night.”

Victoria smiled at Zhukov. “My cousin. No one to worry about.” She stood. “Perkins, would you see these books back to the library?”

“Certainly, ma’am.”

“Now, General, you don’t mind a bit of deception, do you? We shall have to give you a name.” She considered. “The Earl of Talamh. George Talamh. Do you suppose you can manage that?”

“I suppose so.”

“Perkins, spread the word. The General is now his lordship.”

Georgy shook his head. “I don’t know about that-”

“I’m the Queen. If I say you’re a lord, you’re a lord.”
Tommy bowed. “Your Majesty.”

“Ah, Tommy, how nice.”

“I was just passing through, saw you were here, hoped you would put me up for the night.”

“Of course. Perkins put Master Forrester in the Prince Regent suite.”

“No Lord Melbourne suite?”

“No, I’m afraid Lord Talamh has already claimed that.”

Tommy looked up to see Georgy.

“Oh, Tommy, you haven’t met?”

“No.”

“This is Lord Talamh.”

“Lord Talamh?”

“Yes, just in from Africa.”

“Where’s Matthew?”

Victoria smiled. “In Canada. George is just in on leave from Egypt. One of Monty’s best.”

“Oh, good chap,” said Tommy.

Victoria stared and smiled at him. Georgy internally rolled his eyes as he realized the Queen was expecting him to make some sort of conversation.

“What unit are you serving with?,” Georgy asked.

“The Forestry Service.”

It was hard to hide all contempt. “The Forestry Service?”

“Didn’t pass the physical. Bad shins, I’m afraid.”

“You know what’s really bad for shins?”

“What?”

“Sturmgewehr 44.”

Victoria rolled her eyes at him.

“What?,” asked Tommy.

“Why don’t you go rest before the gong? You must have had such a long drive. Perkins?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Perkins disappeared with Tommy.
“So you know what a Sturmgewehr 44 is then?,” asked Georgy.

“Of course I do.”

“He doesn’t.”

“Well, there’s a lot of things he doesn’t seem to know…”

“Such as?”

“When to keep his mouth shut.”

The school run was all new. Or at least it seemed so. The same walk, trying to keep the kids in line as she popped into Costa Coffee.

But she recognized things. Houses she’d gone to balls in, turned into luxury flats. A bookshop that had turned into a Lush, which wasn't horrible.

Her mum accompanied her.

One of them.

As far as she could make out Izzy had been her mother twice before: once as Countess Elizaveta Talamova and another as Victoria III. She had ended that life so tired it had seemed, but here she was, light, happy and free from the cares of a queen.

“Gina! Mind where you’re going!,” Izzy shouted.

Gina. Ellie. William. She really had no original ideas for names. Gina had taken to trying to walk and read an iPhone at once.

They arrived at the school, ending in hugs and kisses.

“Dad had a chat with me.”

“I bet he did.”

“About Matthew.”

“I know he’s never liked him-”

“It’s not that.”

“Isn’t it?”

“You almost died. Your husband is more bothered about his book.”

That did irritate her.

“What school did you go to?”
Georgy was not loving this. The previous evening’s simple dinner with the Queen had been fine, actually quite pleasant. Tonight he was clad in a penguin suit being forced to make what passed for conversation in England.

Then again still better than a dinner with Stalin where he tried to force everyone to drink long enough to admit their traitorous hearts.

“Fettes.”

The Queen had supplied him with the answers. Apparently she had seen this conversation coming.

“Tommy, do tell us what you’ve been up to,” the Queen implored. “Such important work.”

“The trees haven’t switched sides on us, have they?,” asked Georgy.

“Switched sides?”

“Started working for the Germans?”

“No, no, no...” he chuckled too long. “Switched sides. That’s clever.”

Georgy’s glance at the Queen revealed she was trying to hide the fact she thought that was funny. She was very skilled at it, he only knew from years of practice at dinners where everyone tried to hide emotion. She was clad in a green silk setting off a lovely neck and shoulders.

He was fairly certain the oppressor of the proletariat wasn’t supposed to be this attractive.

“Is your necklace Russian?,” he asked.

She reached down fingering the Russian cross of diamonds and emeralds.

“It is. It was a gift to my great aunt, Princess Margaret.”

“How did she get it?”

“Interesting story, actually. She got it from an old Russian count who had fought Napoleon at the Emperor’s court. He gave it to her as he died.”

“As he died?”

“Yes. Granny gave it to me when I turned ten. I always reminded her of Margaret, I suppose. At least that’s what everyone said when I was a girl.”

“William always said it was because you were such a scrapper,” said Tommy.

“William?,” asked Georgy.

“Of course he means the Duke of Windsor.”

Oh. There was something they were trying to hide. The one-hour king and this person...

“How is his grace?,” asked Tommy.

“Fine.” The Queen had turned terse and put her fork down. The plates were taken away. She wasn’t going to make them drink themselves into a stupor, but she could certainly control the meal. Tommy’s plate of roast was taken away as he held his fork and replaced with the salad course.
He tried to ingratiate himself then barely getting three bites of salad as the Queen put down her fork again.

“Well, that was lovely. Perhaps you would like to join me in the library, George? I do have some new novels from America.”

“No pudding?,” asked Tommy.

“I do believe there is a war on,,” said the Queen. “Rationing. Or haven’t you heard of it?”

“Anyone for some cards?,” asked Tommy.

“No, Tommy, we couldn’t impose. You must be so tired.”

She was done with him. That much was for certain.

Maggie was on her mobile, doing what had to be the dumbest thing she had ever done.

Ringing up the Russian embassy.

“No, I don’t need an Ushakov medal, I’m looking for someone by the name of Zhukov.”

The Russian embassy worker on the other end continued professionally. “Given name?”

“Georgy, probably.”

“You’re looking for Georgy Zhukov? Do you mean the footballer? He’s from Kazakhstan.”

“No, not him. Trust me, I already went down that road. Someone called Georgy Zhukov or very much like Georgy Zhukov.”

She paused. “You mean the general?”

“You all don’t currently have a general called Georgy Zhukov, do you?”

“Mrs. Giles, Georgy Zhukov died in nineteen seventy four.”

“Yes. Trust me, I know.” She paused. “Is there a way to find out if any of his daughters had a son or a grandson named after him and very much like him?”

“Is there a visa or something I can help with-”

“No, I don’t need a visa! Actually, I might.”

“There is a form on the website-”

“Most likely I’m looking for someone very much like him. Brilliant, but impossible. Completely full of himself... hates borscht and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.”

“I am going to hang up now.”

Maggie nodded. “Yeah.”

She put her mobile down. Matthew entered with a file folder.
“New papers. Roberta Peel was kind enough to give me copies of the Kremlin translations, if you
can call it kind...”

“Right, well, let’s not mind that-”

“There was a coup after Stalin’s death and this man who was head of their intelligence services,
Beryl-something-”

Maggie sighed. “Beria.”

“Oh. You’re a Soviet historian again?”

“I can use Wikipedia.”

“This man Beria ends up dead, Zhukov was part of it and they were redoing something in his offices
and what do you know, Beria had a file on Victoria IV and Zhukov.”

“Surprised no one burned that file.”

She had rather been told someone had.

“Don’t you get it? It looks as if Zhukov killed Beria to protect this affair.”

Maggie took a breath. “Well, first off, there were lots of reasons to kill Beria that had nothing to do
with the Queen. Take his frequent habit of raping women.”

“What?”

“Oh, was that not in the papers? He would rape women, sometimes young girls and give them a
bouquet of flowers afterwards so that they couldn’t say it wasn’t consensual. Failure to take the
flowers meant death or the gulags. The man was a pig. I won’t cry over him getting shot in the
head.”

“It says firing squad.”

Maggie shrugged. “Whatever.”

“My book is a disaster.”

“Right. Now the plot to remove Beria is about you. Just like the affair’s about you.”

“I didn’t say it was about me-”

“Maybe she liked him. Maybe she loved him. Have you thought about that?”

“The Queen and a Soviet general? I doubt it. What would they even talk about?”

Matthew walked out, lost in his own thoughts.

“What would they even talk about?,” she muttered. “What wouldn’t they talk about?”

Georgy looked at the Queen. The little art tour of Brocket Hall had ended in an unusual spot in one
of the great halls.

“It’s a man next to a horse’s ass.”
“George IV. Lady Melbourne— that is the first— was his mistress. This was a gift to the master of this house from the then Prince Regent.”

“So a portrait of two horse’s asses?”

Victoria nodded. “That remark has been alluded to before, though never quite as blunt as you put it.” She motioned at another portrait. “That’s their son.”

“One I suppose the Master of the House was obliged to pass off as his own?”

“Don’t feel sorry for him. He kept a mistress for twenty years.”

“Fun party game you had going with your cousin,” said Georgy. “I was waiting for the pistols to come out.”

He followed her back towards the library.

“Some help you were.”

“Not my fault he works in the Forestry Service.”

“Everyone has to do their bit.”

“You think that’s fair? Some people do their bit looking after trees while some boy dies drowning in his own blood, calling out for his mother?”

Victoria thumbed through the bookshelf. “You must have seen a lot of death.”

“I have.”

She picked up a novel and looked back at him. “How do you cope with it?”

“Excuse me?”

“Forgive me, I don’t mean to sound as if I’m accusing you, but... I make the speeches, I pass out the medals, I give counsel to my ministers and I... sometimes I wonder how I can possibly live with my part in sending young men to their deaths.”

He nodded. “Do you know what happened when the Germans occupy a place?”

“They take over? Find a number of unprincipled locals to do their bidding?”

“Well, for starters. There’s a special unit, they go place to place, round up all the Jews or whoever they don’t like the look of... They take them out to the woods, men, women, children, the old, make them dig a hole and strip their clothes so they don’t run. Then they shoot them, all. Hundreds, thousands at a time, just shot into a mass grave. Then they torch it and bury over it like it never even happened. Now, as for my end of it, I send a lot of boys to die. But our intelligence has it that Hitler wants to expand the Reich as far as Moscow. And you know what he has no room for? Russians. He wants to burn down Russia and starve us to death.”

“So you are at an impasse,” said Victoria.

“So, I don’t send boys to their deaths because I think it’s fun, but because these are our only choices. They’re shit choices, but nobody asked me. You don’t seem like you’re having fun, either.”

“I haven’t been.” She looked up. “Do you suppose my government knows about what you told me?”
The killings and—"

“I think they must.”

Victoria fumed to herself.

“You’ll have to rip that Prime Minister of yours a new one. I’d like to see that.”

She couldn’t stop a smile. Georgy felt rather proud of himself for that. The Queen handed him a novel.

“Have you read this one? It’s American.”

“The Grapes of Wrath. What’s it about?”

“The failures of capitalism.”

He sighed. “Got something a bit more escapist? What’s this?,” he asked reaching towards the shelf.

“No, not that one!”

Georgy looked back at the Queen.

“Is this censorship?”

“No, just embarrassment. It’s called Glenarvon. Lord Melbourne’s wife wrote it as a roman-a-clef about her friends and family after her affair with Lord Byron. She wasn’t terribly good.”

She looked nervously at him.

He decided to grant her a break and took his hand away from the book. “What then?”

“Have you read Jane Austen?”

“Really?”

“I know, I know, but...” She pulled out another one. “I do love all of her novels, but Persuasion is the one that most appeals to me lately.”

He took it. “I’ll give it a chance then.”

"Good." She smiled. "Well, I suppose I'll be off to bed. Good night, General." He smiled. "Good night."

“Russia?,” asked Bobby. “You can’t go to Russia.”

“Roberta says there’s more there.”

Bobby shrugged. “Who in hell is Roberta and why the fuck do I care?”

Maggie entered. “What’s happening?”

Izzy looked up. “Matthew was just telling us about his plans to extend his sabbatical.”
“In Russia,” said Matthew.

“Russia? You can’t be serious.”

“Why not? It’s research. You and the children can come along—”

“Oh, we can come along?,” asked Maggie. “Thank you so much for that offer—”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“The hell it’s not!”

“You want to have this argument in front of your parents?!”

“We can have it anywhere. It makes no difference. I’m not going. Neither are the kids. You drag yourself to Moscow whenever you like. Have fun. You’re cold here.”

Maggie walked out.

Matthew looked back at Izzy and Bobby.

Bobby finally spoke.

“I’m just going to let this one play out, I think.”

Georgy could not sleep.

He would have been better off back at the Tower.

He must have spent too much time on a cot. The flat in Moscow could easily fit in two of what they called bedrooms.

The paintings seemed to stare back at him, though he supposed they were not altogether unpleasant faces, family portraits of the first Victoria and her second husband.

Girls. Was one of them holding a toy soldier in her hand? Strange hobby for a princess.

This Victoria. He had been warned that they treated her like a goddess and Georgy could see how that happened. She enforced her will with such persuasion, changing the tone of a room with the putting down a fork, not so much as being impolite.

But she was a woman. A very beautiful one, which was definitely not something he ought to be thinking.

He caught a flash of light through the window.

Georgy got up and looked out the window. It had been a car pulling up, headlamps just flicked off. A man got out, he seemed to be meeting the Queen’s cousin.

More men got out of the car. They weren’t in uniform but he could spot Germans anywhere.

“Fuck me.”
Georgy made it down the hall. A fucking palace. It was a good thing Stalin wasn’t here to see it or he’d want one.

He opened the door to the Queen’s bedroom. Why wasn’t there a fucking bodyguard?

“Majesty-”

He found a pistol in his face.

“General.”

“Ma’am.”

“What are you doing in my bedroom?”

“Might want to take the gun out of my face.”

She lowered the pistol.

“You have visitors.”

“What?”

She got out of bed and went for her dressing down.

“Germans.”

“Germans? How-”

“Your cousin Tommy is bringing them in.”

“Tommy?”

“You might want to put some clothes on. Where is your security?”

“There’s a patrol-”

“Probably already dead. That big barracks out back, how many men?”

“How many do you think we need?”

She stepped back behind a screen.

“I’ll let you know. Got any more guns?”

Victoria turned. Georgy caught a not unpleasant glimpse of royal skin in the reflection on the mirror. She emerged in a jumper and trousers. She opened a drawer and handed him a pistol.

“Well, that will do for the moment. Follow me.”

They made their way downstairs to the hall.

“Go that way,” said Victoria.

“What’s out that way?”

“The library and a door to the garden.”
“Which will be surrounded by guards by now-”

“Just shoot them!”

“And then what happens when we get to the garden? There’s one way out round the back of the house which I’m sure they’ve covered.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I have to take this from Stalin, I don’t have to take it from you.”

“Well, you don’t know!,” she hissed.

“Fine. We’ll do it your way.”

He opened the door to the library where two men in leather coats stood with large guns.

“Wrong room,” said Zhukov, quickly firing two shots, dropping them to the ground.

He turned to the Queen. “Next time I pick.”

“Fine.”

They ran back down the hall.

He motioned at another door. “What’s that one?”

“Servants’ stairs.”

“Servants’ stairs. I like that.”

They ran down the stairs where they stopped, running into a wall of guns backed by Tommy and the German who Georgy had seen getting out of the car.

The German turned to Tommy. “What the hell is he doing here?”

“He’s just a houseguest, the Earl of Talamh-”

The German slapped Tommy across the face.

“That’s Georgy Zhukov!”

“Who?”

Georgy looked at Victoria. She shrugged by explanation.

“I should mention he’s a cousin by marriage... Never thought him terribly bright but my brother does like them dumb.” She looked back at the German. “Who are you?”

“Put your gun away, Your Majesty.”

“You have broken into my house and done God knows what. I will be answered.”

“Obersturmbannführer Muller.”

“And what the hell are you doing in my house?”
“I am the one giving orders—”

“I am the only one who gives orders and I certainly wouldn’t take them from you.”

The doors opened behind them and more men descended on them, wrestling with Georgy and finally one stuck a needle in him.

“General?,” asked Victoria.

He squinted his eyes at her.

“Ritochka.”

“What?”

She soon found herself jabbed and fell to the kitchen floor, turning her head to see the general falling to the floor.

“Georgy.”

Chapter End Notes

So, thing I learned about Georgy Zhukov, he didn't have what one might consider an extensive formal educationirl, but sort of sought to improve himself as the Russian Revolution went on and went to officer training schools. At the time of his death, he had a library with 20,000 books in it, so I'm guessing there was a novel, but here he is outside state censorship. No word on what he thought of Middlemarch. Anyone enjoy that reference?

BTW, has anyone spotted the not so hidden Rumbelle?

That guy I mentioned, Beria. IRL scumbag.
“Victoria!” pled Mary. “Do take this seriously!”

“It’s a centerpiece,” said Victoria. “Will!”

Will came into the sitting room. He glanced over at the examples before him. Poinsettias, fairy lights, garish flowers.

“I think all of them are...” He looked over them as the women stared. Something very Lord Melbourne was about to come out. “No. Just no.”

“Where are you off to?,” asked Mary.

“I’m meeting Maggie for a coffee.”

“Again?,” asked Mary.

“Not really again...”

“What’s going on with her?,” asked Victoria.

“Nothing.”

“She was crying, Will.”

“She’s been through a trauma, that’s all.”

Will went to the front hall.

“You’ve been through a trauma,” she said following him,

“Well, I’m different.”

“What makes you different?”

“I just am.” He smiled. "I won't be long."
“Handsome than his photographs,” said Victoria.

Bill looked up from his newspaper at the cottage's breakfast table.

“General Zhukov. Don’t you think?”

“Victoria, I really haven’t given any thought to General Zhukov’s appearance compared to his photographs.”

“Will you go up after church?”

“We have to go through the boxes.”

“What do you think they’ve been doing up there?”

Bill looked at Victoria who was grinning.

“Certainly not what you think they’ve been doing.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“What?,” asked Gina.

“Never you mind,” said Bill.

There was a knock at the door.

“I’ll get it.”

Bill opened the door to the sight of one of the royal guards.

“Yes?”

“Her Majesty requires your presence, sir.”

“Does she?”

“New dispatch from Worcestershire.”

“I see.” Bill looked back. Victoria had followed him from the kitchen. “I have to run up to Brocket Hall.”

“Will you be long?”

“Very,” said Bill fetching his coat and hat.

Victoria awoke on a wooden floor.

She turned to see Georgy. His hands were tied and an attempt at movement revealed she was in the same state.

Georgy.
“So...” he began.

Victoria sighed in agreement. “So.”

“What have you been up to?”

“Queen and Empress. You?”

“Hero of the Red Army.”

“What a fortunate meeting,” Muller chimed in. “The great queen and the great general.”

He came to stand over them.

“What a surprise to find you in the company of Her Majesty, General Zhukov. What did you two find to talk about?”

“Why you Germans are always losing to us. I reckon it’s because you spend too much time sucking each other’s cocks. What do you suppose, Queenie?”

She turned her head. “Queenie?”

“You’re going to stand on protocol while you’re tied up on the floor?”

“Obviously.”

Muller shook his head. “You two act as if you have known each other for years. You will have more time to get to know each other on the way to Berlin.”

“No, thank you,” said Victoria. “I went once. I did not care for it.”

“Oh, I reckon you’ll like it a lot better once I burn it to the ground,” Georgy chimed in.

“Only if you let me light the match.”

“If you ask nicely.” Georgy winked.

“I am missing something,” said Muller.

“A moral compass?,” asked Victoria.

“Why are you going to go to the trouble of dragging us to Berlin?,” asked Georgy.

Victoria scoffed. “Isn’t it obvious? They can’t be bothered to assassinate us properly in our own countries.”

“No one bothers anymore.”

“Take Franz Ferdinand.”

“Yeah, that fucker was dead.”

“No, no, no, you will be the Fuhrer’s honored guests. Your capitulation will save your nations and end the war.”

Victoria was gobsmacked. “You expect us to willingly participate in Hitler’s propaganda?”
“Not willingly at first, but we have ways of making you cooperate.”

Georgy burst out laughing.

“Something funny, General?,” asked the German.

“If you think you can get her to do anything she doesn’t want to, you obviously have no fucking clue who you’re dealing with!”

Georgy kept laughing.

“It’s not that funny,” said Victoria.

“It’s fucking hilarious.”

“Get them up.”

The guards lifted them up off the floor.

“Don’t manhandle her, show some fucking respect!”

“I can handle myself,” said Victoria.

“She’s quite right, General. You ought to be concerned for yourself.”

Another guard rushed in. “The car is waiting.”

“Good. Her first.”

The Queen was hustled out, glancing back at Georgy.

“I need a piss.”

“What?,” asked Muller.

“I need a piss.”

Muller sighed. “Take him to the lavatory.”

The young soldier ushered him to the toilet.

Georgy stared at him. “Are you going to hold my cock as well?”

“What?”

“You can’t wait to run back and tell your mates how you held the great Marshal Zhukov’s cock?”

“No, of course not—”

“Then you might want to untie my hands—”

“But I can’t—”

“I mean it is impressive, not sure your dainty little girl hands can take it—”

“I do not have girl hands!”
“You have a gun, what the fuck am I going to do? Or are your hands too small to pull the trigger?”

The guard relented, untying the ropes.

“See, soldier? That wasn’t that hard, was it?”

He turned towards the toilet and then kicked behind him, sending the guard into the wall. He struggled for his gun and Georgy grabbed him by his throat, strangling him.

He finally dropped to the floor. Georgy went for the gun and the spare ammunition.

He took a breath. Two men in the next room.

Victoria was in the car, stuck between two guards, arguing with the driver in German, wondering if perhaps she ought to have taken her mama’s suggestion that she study German and not frighten off the governess.

A shot rang out. She was pushed to the floor of the car as the driver’s head exploded.

More shouting as one of the guards scrambled to replace his compatriot.

She could see it was Georgy and he had at least improved to a Gewehr 43 and was apparently good enough with it to shoot the would-be driver.

The remaining guard dragged her from the car.

“That’s enough! That’s enough! What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Victoria was yanked back by her guard by the hair as she turned to look.

“What are you doing?,” the guard demanded.

“What’s it look like I’m doing? Let her go.”

The guard stumbled over what to do next. “I’ll shoot her.”

“And tell your boss what? You lost your target?!?”

The guard froze and it was only now Victoria noticed how very young he looked.

“Do you have any idea who I am?,” asked Georgy.

“You’re Soviet Field Marshal Zhukov.”

“That’s right. How many Germans do you think I’ve killed? Go on. Guess. Lost little boys who looked at me just the way you’re looking at me now, wondering where the fuck did I go wrong? How many?”

“Hundreds?”

“Thousands. Do you think one more will make a difference to me?”

The boy stared.
“Go on,” said Georgy. “Go on, let her go and be on your way. One less doesn’t make a big
difference to me, either.”

The guard turned and ran.

Georgy took him out with a shot to the back.

Victoria flinched as time froze.

The guard seemed to drop at her feet and Georgy rushed towards her.

He didn’t say a word, he kissed her.

“You alright?” His hand on hers.

“I’m fine. I-” She paused. “Am I bleeding? Oh, good God.”

“No, no, it’s just a bit of splatter.”

“Splatter?”

“Yeah, people have a tendency to bleed when you shoot them.”

She shook her head. “I thought you were letting him go.”

He shook his head. “How could I let him go?”

“He was running away!”

“I was tricking him.”

“He was practically a boy.”

“Yeah, that’s how they come usually.”

“But he was a boy and now he’s dead and-”

He grabbed her wrist. “He had a gun at your head. I had to get it away from your head. Come on.”

Will had been seated in the Windsor car park about half an hour when Maggie finally arrived.

“Here?,” she asked.

“Well, it’s halfway between Oxford and London. About anyway.” He got out of the car. “It was here or Slough.”

“Well, this is better than Slough.”

They turned back to Windsor Castle.

“Why did Mama like this place?,,” asked Maggie.

“It lends a certain gravitas.”
“Brocket Hall or Buckingham Palace for me, thank you.”

“You kept the girls here.”

“It was the war.”

They arrived at the ticket counter.

“Twenty-one pounds?,” Maggie exclaimed. “Seriously, twenty-one pounds?”

“I’ve got it,” said Will.

They walked inside where most of the tourists had gathered in the great hall to behold the enormous Windsor Castle Christmas tree.

“I liked having my own,” said Maggie.

Her eyes went to the side table, decorated with photographs of the royal family meeting the great and the good.

And Georgy Zhukov. The Queen and General caught in a seemingly rare smile at some ceremony or other among the other victors of the war.

“What was he saying?,” asked Will.

“He was mocking Winston.”

“Charming as ever.”

If it was physically possible for Tommy Lascelles to swear, Bill knew it would have happened when he walked into the library and saw the dead Germans on the floor.

“It looks as if someone shot from the door,” said Captain Foyle.

“And where were your men?,” asked Tommy.

“I lost a dozen on patrol last night.”

“Then they failed.”

Bill spoke. “Tommy Forrester was here.”

“This gets better and better,” said Lascelles. “Does he know about Zhukov?”

“Claims not to have a clue,” said Bill. “Thinks he’s the Earl of Talamh. Don’t worry, he’s not going anywhere.”

Foyle seemed uncertain. “Shouldn’t we alert someone-”

“And do what? The Queen of England is missing, possibly dead along with Soviet Field Marshal Zhukov. First we cause a panic here and then we must tell the Soviets we’ve lost their most able general at a country house party. Would you like to tell Premier Stalin, Captain Foyle?”
“No, sir.”

“Then I suggest we keep this secret.”

“The Prime Minister?,” asked Bill.

“Oh his way,” said Lascelles. “Rather surprised he didn’t beat me-”

“Out of my way, man!,” shouted Churchill.

“Better and better,” muttered Lascelles.

The Prime Minister entered the library. “Good God.”

“Indeed.”

“No sign of the Queen or General Zhukov?”

“No,” said Bill.

“We should dispatch extra security to the Prince of Wales,” said Churchill. “And send for the Earl of Charlbury. If there’s to be a regency-”

“Regency?,” asked Bill. “Perhaps we might make some effort to find Her Majesty first.”

“This country is without a Queen!”

“We have a queen, we just can’t find her!”

“You don’t even know if she’s alive!”

“The guns are missing from her room.”

“What?,” asked Lascelles.

Bill took a breath. “Her Majesty kept a gun under her pillow and another in her bedside table. Both are missing. That means one for Her Majesty, one for General Zhukov. However they left Brocket Hall, they knew what they were up against.”

Lascelles spoke up. “A regency also requires the Duchess of Melbourne’s presence. She is, of course, co-regent with the Earl of Charlbury as the closest relation of royal blood. Not to mention recalling the Earl from Canada at this point would cause undue attention.”

Churchill looked at Foyle. “Have you any clues?”

“There were tire tracks out of the village, we’re sweeping the area now.”

Maggie looked up at Will. They had made it to the gift shop.

“So, that’s where I am. Marriage disintegrating, husband currently applying for a visa to research in Russia. Other husband, missing in action.” She motioned at a rack. “Care for a tea cozy? Good God.
Ten pounds?

“He’s not your husband.”

“He never stopped being my husband. You don’t understand. What if you could remember Victoria and were still married to Caro?”

“She’s called Carrie here.”

“Whatever. Well, what would you do-”

Will tilted his head.

“No, actually, never mind. You don’t count.”

“I don’t count?”

“No. You’re too much of a masochist. Mama always thought so or she would have had the word masochist been in wide use then.” She picked up a mohair teddy bear from a shelf, there were an assortment of them, dressed to emulate the Queens Victoria. “Is this meant to be me?”

“Yes. Have you tried speaking to Matthew?”

“How do you know it’s me?”

“She’s wearing a hat and there’s a four embroidered on her foot.”

“Talk to Matthew about what?”

“Your marriage?”

She sighed. “Why am I supposed to try to save something that I know will never live up to what I...” She couldn’t finish the thought. “I need more. I know there’s more.”

Maggie picked up another bear from a shelf, dressed in cravat, waistcoat and a fur-collared coat.

“Now I think we know who this is,” said Maggie.

“Yes, he’s got an ‘M’ on his foot.”

“I thought it was the rather bored expression on his face.”

“Ritochka, watch your step-”

It was cold it was wet and their escape seemed to be going well thus far.

“Don’t call me that.”

“Don’t call you Ritochka?”

“I’m supposed to be Queen.”
“You’re my wife. I’ll call you what I like.”

“I’m not your wife anymore!”

They walked and she glanced up at him.

He was hurt.

She thought he might suffer in silence, but it had been a long time since she had known him and forgotten that Georgy was never one to suffer in silence.

“Where is your husband? The Viscount of Charleston?”

“Earl of Charlbury.”

“Earl? They let you marry a peasant?”

“Earl is equivalent to a count.”

“Which ranks higher? General or Earl?”

“I don’t know. I’ll have the Lord Chamberlain look into it. I thought everyone was equal in the Soviet Union.”

“In principle, yes. In practice, I don’t think a poncy noble is my equal.”

“I’ll be sure to pass that along to the Lord Chamberlain.”

“So, are you going to tell me where he is?”

“He’s on tour.”

“In the middle of a war? Convenient.”

“I can’t be everywhere. Someone had to go inspire the Canadians.”

“Inspire them to what?”

“Could we not discuss this?”

“Not discuss what? That were he here his royal brains would be on the floor and you would be on a boat to Berlin?”

“What is your problem?”

“That you don’t have someone to protect you!”

“From Hitler? From the German army? That’s rather a tall order!”

“Yes, luckily, I was here.” He stopped grabbing her wrist. “Wait. We’ve passed that tree.”

“What?”

“Do you know where we’re going?”

“I thought you knew.”
“Why would I know? I’ve never been here.”
“Well, I’ve never been... wherever this is.”
“Yeah, but you’re the Queen of the place.”
He stared at her.
“Right, that was my mistake, just as much as yours.”
She rolled her eyes.

Victoria looked up from the laptop.
“Windsor Castle?,” she asked.
“It was halfway. Here, have a bear.”
He put the carrier bag down. Victoria pulled out her likeness in bear form, wearing a purple dress with mutton sleeves and a bonnet.
“Okay...”
Will went to the kitchen. “Fancy pasta for dinner?”
Victoria walked in. “Is this a Lord M bear?”
“He has an ‘M’ on his foot.”
“I thought it was the bored looking expression.” She followed him into the kitchen holding it. “So, how’s Maggie?”
“Maggie?”
“You were going to meet her and apparently shop.”
“It was that or Slough.”
“What’s wrong with her?”
“Trouble with Matt.”
“That’s part of it.”
Victoria sighed. “Are you just going to be obtuse?”
“She thinks she’s unhappy.”
“There’s no thinking you’re unhappy. If you think you’re unhappy, you’re unhappy.”
“Well...”
“Why does she think she’s unhappy?”

“She wonders if Matt is the right partner for her. And he’s caught up in this Zhukov matter...”

“Didn’t his wife just almost die?”

“Well...”

“And now she wants to leave him-”

“They have three children.”

“So?”

“They have children. That’s a commitment.”

“That’s a commitment to her children, not to misery for the rest of her life.”

“But-”

“Life’s too short to waste it with someone who doesn’t appreciate you.”

“How do you know he doesn’t appreciate her?”

“She nearly dies and she’s got time to come crying to you.”

“Nothing of the sort-”

Victoria laughed. “Trust me, Will, I know. Do you see me letting you out of here without asking a hundred questions? Like is this the only Victoria bear they have?”

“What?”

“Well, is it?”

He sighed. “They have all the queens.”

“But Victoria I?”

“I think there were three different versions.”

It was getting dark. They had come across a country house.

Victoria entered the house first. “Hello? Is anyone here?”

Georgy entered, shutting the door behind her. “Where is everyone?”
“I don’t know.” She motioned at the drop cloths on the furniture. “Maybe they’ve quit the house for the moment. Odd there’s no caretaker.”

She turned back as Georgy seemed to be forming some kind of fortification with the furniture against the front door.

“What are you doing?”

“Securing the door. Have they got a phone?”

“Do you need to ring someone?”

“God, it’s like talking to someone from another planet. Your army. We need to ring your army.”

They went to the hall. Victoria picked up the phone.

“Hello? Hello?” She sighed and put it down. “No operator. Probably had it turned off when they quit the house. This is turning into a gothic novel.”

“What’s that?”

“Horrible things happen to posh people in mansions.”

“I think I’d enjoy that. Where are the other doors?”

“Probably a door to the back and the servants’ hall.”

“Show me.”

“I don’t recall you being quite as revolutionary…”

“Well, try it one round from the other side, see what you think.”

“You don’t seem to be doing so poorly.”

“Are you hungry?”

There was not much in the kitchen, but there was tea and potatoes. Georgy seemed to consider this a feast as he cooked. They sat across from each other at the servants’ dining table.

“So,” said Victoria.

“So?”

“Are you married?”

“Sort of.”

“What does that mean? You’re sort of married?”

“I have a common law wife.”

“Common law?”

“Try not to sound disgusted.”
“I can try. What’s she called?”

“Alexandra.”

“And is she nice?”

“Completely unrefined.”

Victoria frowned. “Was that my question?”

“We have two daughters. Era and Ella.”

“How lovely.”

“I have another daughter, Margarita.”

Victoria took a breath. “Margarita?”

“Yes. Her mother is called Maria.”

“Two women.”

“Three. Lydia. A lieutenant of mine.”

“Oh. A campaign wife. What a surprise.”

She went back to her potatoes.

“Are you kidding me?,,” he asked.

“What?” She feigned confusion. “Was I meant to be surprised?”

“One whore a hundred and thirty years ago and you’re going to drag that up?!”

“Tell me, these women of yours, how do you keep track of which ones mean nothing?”

“I cheated on you one time-”

“Once?”

“With one woman. Worst fucking mistake of that life and you forgave me. At least you said you did and I thought you had until you dragged it up just now!”

“And Alexandra? Did she forgive you?”

“She’s not like you. No one’s like you. Does he know that?”

“Does who know that?”

“Count Charleston.”

“Matthew. He’s called Matthew.”

“Does he have any idea about you?”

“He’s my husband. I love him.”
“I don’t think he does.”

“If I’m not meant to be disgusted by your apparently cavalier attitude towards monogamy, perhaps you could stay out of my marriage.”

“I would have never left your side.”

“Easy for you to say-”

“I missed you every fucking day.”

She tried to think of a response.

“No, not every day. Every fucking minute. I should have gone first because you could have gotten on without me. I never could. And when I saw you in that ballroom...”

She saw herself as Maggie. A strange man giving her a cross that meant nothing but somehow did.

“I couldn’t let this opportunity pass without telling you.”

“How fucking dare you.”

He raised an eyebrow at her.

“You have always acted as if it was so hard to bear your love for me and I could never possibly know what it was. I loved you just as much, just as hard, being apart from you tortured me just as much as it did you. You do not love me more than I love you.”

“I don’t see you struggling!”

“Struggling? You don’t think I’m struggling?! I am Queen of the greatest empire on Earth-”

“And I’m general of the greatest army on Earth!”

She screamed in exasperation.

“Do you think I wanted to die? That I was ready to go? I have a life, a family, a husband, a nation-”

“Shut up.”

“No, you shut up. Your army is poorly armed! How can they possibly be the greatest?!”

“We have got to stop arguing about who’s got the better army! Because it’s certainly not the bunch of pansies you’ve got!”

“Don’t call my army pansies.”

She grabbed the back of his head, bringing his lips to hers.

“Now that’s more fucking like it...” Georgy growled.

“Bed,” she muttered.

“Just a second,” he said putting her down.

“What?”
He looked up at her, collecting the pistols from the table.

“Guns.” He stuffed them in his pocket. He picked her up. “Now, where were we?”

It was a hunt for a bedroom, occurring between kisses and frenzied grasps under clothing.

They opened the first door.

“Nursery,” concluded Georgy.

They looked at each other.

“No,” they said in sync.

The next door was more productive.

“Room. Bed.”

“Good enough,” said Victoria.

They made their way to the bed, Victoria sat down first.

He moved her hands aside, discarding belt and trousers, then tossing his shirt aside. He knelt onto the bed between her legs.

“My army’s better.”

“Do you remember what you said on our honeymoon?”

He turned her chin back to him.

“I will never hurt you. I will never let anyone hurt you. I will always love you. And I will never forget it.”

He kissed her again.

Maggie tried to forget everything that had gone wrong in front of the telly, but it wasn’t working.

“Mummy,” said Gina, “will Dad be back soon?”

Maggie looked up. “What?”

“I need help for my history quiz.”

Maggie held her hand out.

“You don’t know about history.”

“I know everything.”

Gina sighed as she handed over the study guide. She looked at the telly.
“What are you watching?”

“Georgy Zhukov: The Man Behind the Victory.”

“You’re watching history?”

“Fetch me a pen.”

“What?”

“Your study guide is wrong.”

“I’ll just get Dad-”

“Your father is not the only authority.”

“You don’t know anything about history-”

“Regina.”

She said it in such a way that caught her daughter’s attention. She spoke as a queen now.

“I will be fetched a pen.”

“Okay.”

Gina went and returned with a pen.

“You’ll pick your toys up and come back.”

“My toys aren’t-”

“Your toys will be picked up-”

“Fine!,” shouted Gina.

“I suggest you alter your tone,” said Maggie as her daughter stormed away.

Victoria stirred awake to the sounds of Jane Austen.

Georgy read, “I hope I do justice to all that is felt by you, and by those who resemble you. God forbid that I should undervalue the warm and faithful feelings of any of my fellow-creatures! I should deserve utter contempt if I dared to suppose that true attachment and constancy were known only by woman. No, I believe you capable of everything great and good in your married lives. I believe you equal to every important exertion, and to every domestic forbearance, so long as—if I may be allowed the expression—so long as you have an object. I mean while the woman you love lives, and lives for you. All the privilege I claim for my own sex— it is not a very enviable one you need not covet it—, is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone.”

She turned to see Georgy with a copy of Persuasion and a pair of gold-rimmed reading glasses.

“What are you doing?,” she asked.
“What do you know? They had a copy.”

“And the spectacles?”

“They’re mine.”

“Yours?”

“Is that such a shock?”

“We were trying to escape Germans invading my house and you stopped for your reading glasses?”

“Have you ever been woken by your guards, dragged somewhere as you’re getting dressed and then tried to read a map without your glasses as the Germans drop bombs on you?”

“No.”

“Then you would understand why you need to get your reading glasses first thing.”

“You didn’t have them on at the Tower.”

“Never show weakness in front of the imperialists...” He looked down. “Present company excepted.”

“Honored, I’m sure. And Jane Austen?”

“I didn’t finish it yet. Is Wentworth going to get his head out of his arse anytime soon?”

“She rejected his proposal.”

“Because this Lady Russell doesn’t mind her own business.”

“And what would you have done?”

“Gotten her to mind her own business.” He dropped his head to kiss a round birthmark. “You didn’t have this before.”

“No, I got it last time round. I was shot.” She sighed. “It’s cold.”

“It is not cold. It’s practically summer in here.” He pulled a blanket over her. “You’ve forgotten Russian winters.”

“I remembered you had your methods of keeping me warm.”

“I’ll keep you warm.”

He pulled her into his arms.

“My son isn’t well.”

She had just blurted it out. Georgy’s face furrowed in concern.

“What do you mean?”

“I have three children. Victoria and William and Elizabeth...”

“I know you have three children. What’s the matter with William?”
“He’s ill, he’s always been ill. My brothers had the same affliction, hemophilia, the blood doesn’t clot properly, the women pass it on in our family. My grandmother for instance—”

“Ritochka.”

“He was circumcised as an infant, we nearly lost him then... I argued with Matthew about it, I didn’t want to take the chance and he didn’t listen. But he bruises and bleeds and... there’s nothing I can do. There’s nothing anyone can do.”

“I’m sorry, Ritochka.”

“We have him in hiding, obviously, partly for security, partly for his doctors... He’s not going to get better and I can’t even look after him because I’m...”

“It’s alright.”

“It’s not alright. What sort of mother am I?”

“The sort of mother who must do her duty. You don’t suppose I miss my daughters when I’m away?”

“It’s different for a man.”

“It is not. Why isn’t your husband with him?”

“He has duties...”

“He’s got a duty to you.”

“I have duties.”

Will knocked at the door.

Izzy appeared.

He could not help but break out in a wide grin. Of course, he remembered the Queen whom he had served but he was rather thinking of the beautiful baby he had beheld.

“Can I help you?”

“I’m Will Lamb. I was just in town—”

“From the train? Yes, of course. Do come in.”

He followed Izzy past the sprawl that the existence of three children caused.

“Who is it?”

“We have a guest, Bobby.”

Bobby appeared. Izzy motioned.

“This is Will Lamb.”
“Will Lamb,” said Bobby. He stuck his hand out. “Well, I’ve been wanting to thank you.”

“Thank me?”

“Maggie seems to think you helped save her life. We would be lost without her.”

Will shook his head. Being thanked for saving his own dear girl. “It was nothing.”

“Not to me.”

“Cuppa?,” asked Izzy.

“Or something stronger?,” asked Bobby.

“I’ll take tea. I have to drive to Oxford.”

“Matt’s not here. Went up to Leeds.”

Will nodded. Roberta’s university. Of course he had. What was it with Roberta?

“What brings you into town?,” asked Izzy.

“Picking up my son from his mother’s.” Bobby motioned for him to sit on the sofa as Izzy went to the kitchen. “I thought I would stop in on Maggie.”

“You’re a professor, aren’t you?,” asked Bobby.

“Yes.”

“Don’t bother him!,” Izzy warned from the kitchen.

“This Vicky IV - Zhukov thing, what do you suppose?”

“I typically stay in early Victorian studies.”

“Well, you must know more than me. In my line of work, we typically concerned ourselves with who was sleeping with who right then on an international level...”

“And what line of work is that?”

“Foreign office. Not as glamorous as one would think. Though I did have to get the Earl of Shaftesbury out of a casino jail once.”

“And what do you suppose about Zhukov?”

“The Queen and a Soviet general? The start of the Cold War, Churchill would have lost his bloody mind.”

“At the least,” said Will, wondering indeed if Sir Winston or some version of him was somewhere losing his mind at the moment. “Why do you ask?”

“Matt seems to have taken it especially hard, thinks it’s spoiling his book on Charlbury.”

Izzy returned with the tea.

“It’s difficult to keep your distance from a subject you’ve studied for so long,” said Will.
“And for you? Do you keep your distance from your subject?”

“It’s particularly hard in my case...”

Before he could be expected to elaborate, they were joined by sound. Maggie entered with who Will expected were the three children.

William.

“Hi,” said Maggie.

“Hi,” said Will.

“This is my friend, Will,” Maggie said to the children. “This is Gina, Ellie and William.”

The children said hello. They excused themselves.

“What did you come for?,” asked Maggie.

“I wanted to tell you I was wrong.”

“What?”

“You’re right. I’ve gotten exceptionally lucky.”

“Not always.”

“Often enough. It’s a burden to remember because in some ways it is much easier to live in ignorance, but that’s the thing it is ignorance. I’m awake, as it were, and I am certain that I am spending my life with the one woman who could ever make me happy. So, if you’re awake and know there’s someone else who is without a doubt the one to make you happy, this is a gift and you should not squander it.”

“Easier said than done,” said Maggie.

“You tend to circle back around.”

Maggie eyed him. “Do you remember more of my lives than I do?”

“Yes.”

“And was Georgy in them?”

“Very often.”

“As what?”

“What you’ve always been.”

Bill followed Churchill and Lascelles into the makeshift field hospital.

“He’s the only one we found alive and he won’t be that way for long.”
“No sign of Her Majesty?”

“He knows.” Foyle nodded at the man in front of him. “Make him talk.”

They looked to see a soldier on a table.

“Go on. Tell them what you told us.”

“The king and the Valkyrie...”

Churchill looked at Foyle. “What is this?”

Foyle looked at the man. “What is this?”

“Not that!”

“The king and the Valkyrie, on the wings of victory...” He looked up. “We’re done for.”

The next morning was a continuation of the walk to return the Queen to her throne.

“We’re by the sea,” said Georgy.

“How can you tell?”

“How can you not even smell sea?”

The trees began to thin as Georgy led the way.

“What’s Stalin like?”

“You didn’t hear from your Prime Minister?”

“He doesn’t tell me things that he thinks I’ll disapprove of...”

“We’ve got something similar.”

“Except I haven’t had anyone killed...”

He eyed her.

“Come on, Georgy. Who am I going to tell?”

“I don’t know. This might be some massive plan.”

“Well?”

“What do you want me to say? He’s a fucking moron, he doesn’t listen, I carry a bag of guns and fake passports with me just in case?”

“But you’re a hero.”

“Yeah and that’s what makes me dangerous to him. He wouldn’t keep me around if he thought he could get away with it.”
“Get away with it?”

“Well, he’s got to kill me before he can kill me but right now he can’t kill me because he needs me to kill a bunch of Germans...”

She nodded and they walked a few paces. “Well, you’re always welcome here...”

He looked back at her.

“If you needed... a place to go. I would make sure you had it.”

“It’s not just me. Stalin would go after Alexandra, my girls...”

“They’re welcome as well. You have my word. If they needed a place to go, they could come here.”

Georgy paused. “Shouldn’t we be seeing someone?”

“Who?”

“Anyone? Or aren’t there any subjects in your kingdom?”

The trees finally thinned into a cliff overlooking the coast.

On the beach below, Germans brought rubber boats ashore, laden with cases and supplies.

“Now, that is a fucking problem...” said Georgy.

He looked over at Victoria. The Queen took a breath.

“Fuck.”

He shrugged. “Well, you’re having a better reaction than Stalin.”

Chapter End Notes

A couple things: Zhukov wore glasses, ydhuda gave that to me and I had to have it. That passage is from Persuasion if you didn’t catch it. And that seriously was his personal life in 1943.

And just remember we’re doing AU WWII. Though Stalin did not react well to finding out the Nazis were weeks from Moscow. And supposedly made Zhukov cry, but I want to hear the exact words, people.
Chapter 50

1865

Della was out of the carriage as soon as it stopped.

She flew up the palace steps and up the grand staircase at such speed the maids could barely catch her bonnet and gloves as they flew off.

She arrived at the bedroom just as people seemed to be leaving. A doctor, an archbishop. They stopped and bowed to her.

Ellie was out next.

“Oh, Della...”

“I-” She shook her head, stammering as she tried to fend off the inevitable. “I must speak to Papa.”

Ellie shook her head. “I am so sorry, Della. Papa is, is-”

She could not finish the sentence. She did not need to for they were soon joined by Maggie, who strode from the room red-faced and sniffing. Effie had to be helped out by one of the Queen’s ladies.

“Some wine,” Maggie said to the nearest footman.

Della made her way inside without further objection. The only ones left in the room were the Queen, Gina and her husband, James.

Melbourne lay on the bed, so lifeless. Ashen, none of the spark that made him what he was. A shell.

Victoria held onto Gina, a grown woman, a mother herself now, the Heiress Presumptive to the throne, reduced to sobbing into her mama’s bosom like a toddler.

“Your papa loved you so much, Gina,” said Victoria, holding her eldest. “If only you could remember the way he looked upon you the day you were born, such love and such wonder... Sometimes, I do not think he believed you to be real...”

The Queen had to choke back her own tears at that.

“And he loved Belle, too. You made him so happy.”

“Mama,” said Della.

Victoria looked up. Della curtsied.

“Della.” She looked at her son-in-law. “Perhaps Gina could use something to drink.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

James helped Gina out of the room.

“Della, darling-”
“I said I was coming.”

“I know.”

“Did you tell him I was coming? Did anyone bother?”

“Of course we told him, Della.”

“What did he say?”

Victoria shook her head. “Della-”

Della turned and walked out.

The Queen looked at her husband and cousins, gathered around the library of Brocket Hall.

“Ninety years ago, my great-grandmother, Victoria IV gave her first Christmas speech from this house in this very room...”

“Then probably snuck off to shag a Russian...” David’s uncle, Jamie, muttered.

Victoria rolled her eyes. “Was dinner with my aunt not enough amusement for you?”

“I’m Scottish. I’ll never tire of English royalty having a go at each other.”

The Queen looked at her husband. “Why do we invite him?”

“Because he’s my most socially acceptable relative,” said David. He motioned at the sleeping baby in his arms. “Well, aside from her, but she still vomits on people.”

Victoria rolled her eyes.

“No, eye rolling,” warned Emma.

“I’m not doing the practice now.”

“You’re always practicing,” said Della.

“Oh, I think I have had quite enough,” said the Queen, putting up her speech.

“You’re no fun,” said Emma.

“Go to bed.”

Emma, Jamie and David left. Della moved to go after watching Victoria quite too long.

She was staring at a painting, a Christmas gift from some noble or other. To her, it was a foreign lady, sitting with two girls and a curiously familiar looking King Charles Spaniel.

Della knew the subject.

“I don’t know who she is, really, seems dreadfully familiar. Lord Dalkeith said it was commissioned
by Charles II, the portrait of a German lady. Wife of some ambassador or other from one of the German states.”


The Queen scoffed. “ Knowing him? Most likely. I can never understand how Queen Catherine put up with it.”

“She was the kindest woman.”

The Queen looked at Della. “ Have you made a study of her? I didn’t know that.”

“Yes, she was raised in a convent. Patience was one of her strongest virtues.”

“I suppose it would have to be.” The Queen changed the subject. “ You’re off to Will Lamb’s wedding for New Year?”

“Yes.”

“Do have fun. I’m glad you have plans.”

Della nodded, making a turn to leave.

“Oh, Della, do wait a moment.”

Della stopped. “Yes?”

“I need to ask a favor.”

“What favor?”

“Your favorite major.” She sighed. “ I know you two have a special and unique relationship, but it’s come time to select a new equerry. His superiors have put him up for the position.”

“Oh.”

“So you see he’d no longer be at Kensington.”

“Right...” Della nodded. “ I think you should take him. He’d be excellent.”

“Are you certain?”

“Of course. It would be selfish of me to keep him from such an honor.”

“Must we?,” sighed Melbourne.

Victoria could not fathom his reticence. “ Why not? It sounds diverting.”

“A purveyor of oddities, as it were.”

“If Mr. Barnum makes people happy, what is the harm in it?”

“Any number of things make people happy that are not good for them or indeed good.”
Victoria straightened. “I think you are being rather snobbish.”

“I am being snobbish?”

“Yes.”

“Well, Victoria, I am so sorry I cannot lower my tastes to what you and the rest of the masses prefer.”

“I and the masses?”

“Yes, I never did realize what a woman of the people you were until just now…”

“Now you are teasing me.”

“Perhaps soon you will begin to extoll the virtues of Mr. Dickens.”

“He was perfectly charming-”

“That’s one word for it.”

There was a knock at the door. A nanny entered and hastily curtsied.

“What is it?”

“Majesty, it’s Master Winterhalter-”

“Is he finished?”

“No, ma’am, he’s actually threatened to quit.”

Victoria looked at Melbourne.

He shook his head. “It was your idea.”

---

New Year's Eve.

The wedding.

Here they went again, Will could not help but think as he entered the Bodlein with Augustus. They were soon confronted by the venue manager.

“Cathy Guzman.”

Will was struck by how confidently the woman in front of him stuck her hand out and how firm her handshake was.

And how well he knew her though they had never met.
“Good to meet you. You must be the groom.”

“Yes-”

“Good. Well, your guests will enter through here, your ready room is just over there-”

“We-”

“Well, we have just over an hour until the guests begin to arrive. As you can see the caterers have begun to set up-”

“Right-”

“Where’s the loo?,” asked Gussie.

“Of course. Down the hall, second door on the right.”

Gussie followed the woman’s directions without looking up.

“Lovely boy,” said Cathy.

“Yes. Yes, he is.”

“That’ll be three for you, then, won’t it?”

“Yes. God willing.”

“Lovely to have a legacy like that,” said Cathy, looking wistfully at her mobile.

“Some legacies carry on in other ways...” said Will.

“Oh. How’s that?”

“You’d be surprised.”

“Will!,” called Emily.

“Excuse me, won’t you?,” asked Cathy.

Emily soon joined him, embracing him.

Will motioned at Cathy as she walked off. “Do you have any idea who that is?”

Emily frowned. “No. Not in the slightest.”

He quickly remembered his sister would not know.

“The venue manager.”

“Okay.” Emily shrugged. Will shrugged back at her. “Anything I could do to help?”

“No, no, everything’s in hand.”

“Master Winterhalter-” said Victoria.
“No, Majesty, I cannot work like this!”

Victoria looked to her daughters. They were all wearing white dresses, the portrait meant to seem as if it were in a garden on a spring day. Gina and Maggie looked rather bored with it.

Della seemed to have gone off completely, fighting with one of the nannies as she threw a tantrum. It seemed so odd she should still have such tantrums, none of her other children had. She supposed perhaps Maggie, but her outbursts were less tantrums than declarations of war.

“Della?,” Victoria tried to call her over with no effect. “Della. Della, come here. Now, Master Winterhalter, there must be some compromise we can reach-”

“Exclude Princess Della from the portrait.”

“Exclude her?” Victoria frowned. “But I want a portrait of my daughters.”

“She will not take direction, she will not answer, does she speak?,” he spat.

“Oh course she speaks!”

It was true she did not speak.

“You are meant to be an artist, why do you not imagine something?,” asked Gina.

“Better still imagine all of us so we do not have to sit here...” said Maggie.

Victoria ignored her eldest daughters. “Master Winterhalter, all I want is a portrait of all of my daughters-”

“I cannot manage that imbecile!”

The nannies visibly stiffened.

Victoria was perplexed. “Imbecile?”

“The child does no follow direction, she screams at the slightest-”

“Princess Della is high-spirited-”

“She is an imbecile. And I do not see why my artistry ought to be wasted-”

Victoria frowned as the room stared at her.

“You may leave us, Master Winterhalter.”

“Majesty-”

“You may leave us or the guards will take you out.”

Maggie entered the library. She spotted Della searching for a seat among the other guests.
Looking around her, she carefully made her way towards Della.

“Excuse me.”

Della looked up. Her mouth forming a perfect ‘O.’

Maggie motioned at the hall. “Should we talk?”

“Yes.”

Moving their way past the other guests, the two women made it to the hall, glancing around for anyone else.

“You remember me? You really remember me?,” asked Della.

Della had collapsed into Maggie before the elder could respond.

“Of course I do. I just couldn’t think of a very good way to get a hold of you. I suppose I could have rung up Kensington Palace and said I was your sister from a previous life...”

Della shook her head. “It never goes well when you try that.”

“So you tried it?”

“I don’t understand. How do you remember?”

“I was in the tube bombing, things have sort of come back in pieces.”

“But you do remember Mama and Papa and-”

“All of that.” She sighed. “A bit more which has become a bit of a problem. I’ve been sorting through it with Will-”

“Will?”

“Yes,” said Maggie. “He’s-”

“I know who Will is. How long has Will known?”

Maggie searched. “Since the bombing, I suppose-”

“Will knew? Will’s known who I am for the better part of a month?”

“I don’t know-”

Della's face turned dark.

“Oh, I do.”

__________________________________________

“Mama?”

Victoria looked up at Effie.

“Hello.”
“I brought you a present.”

“Did you?” Victoria put aside the state papers she had been going through.

Effie nodded. She handed over a drawing...

Of something.

Effie was becoming quite the artist, but she was still perfecting making things actually look like what she intended.

“Thank you.”

“It is the portrait you wanted.”

Victoria realized there were five vaguely human figures. “Oh, yes, of course. Thank you, darling.”

“I am sorry I could not get Della to let Master Winterhalter finish.”

Victoria shook her head. “That is quite alright. Mama will find someone else.”

“I will do better.”

“Effie, you do not need to do better.”

“But you need me to help Della.”

Victoria smiled. “You help your family a great deal.”

“Nervous?” asked Fred.

“Hardly.”

“I’d be. Only done this once before and look at the roaring success that was...” Fred cast a glance at Gussie. “Present company excepted, mate.”

“Done it a bit more than that...” Will muttered.

“What? Had a secret wedding and not told us?,” Fred asked with a laugh. “How many were there then?”

“To tell you the truth, I’ve lost count.”

Fred laughed.

They made their way to the ceremony space where the guests were clustered around. It was one of the smaller ceremonies he could recall, right next to his last foray into the registry office with Victoria.

He spotted Maggie and Della. Maggie smiled at him, Della did not. He had not realized Della was invited.

His ruminations were interrupted by Victoria coming down the makeshift aisle.

She was a vision. She had chosen a ballerina pink dress and a bouquet of white pink orchids.
How many times had this happened? How many places, how many lives, how many weddings?

Why did it always feel the same? Why would he go through this so many times? It was something even he did not understand.

Victoria smiled at him, blissfully unaware of the thousand thoughts and memories stampeding through Will’s mind.

“Hello,” she whispered.

“Hello,” he echoed.

Victoria finally finished the meeting with Palmerston. Having a relative as Prime Minister seemed to make the business no more pleasant. She would never be as happy with one as she was with her husband.

She made her way to the nursery.

“Your Majesty.” The nursemaid standing outside the door curtsied.

“I wanted to see my children.”

Victoria found it odd she needed to voice the request.

“Princess Eleanora and Princess Euphemia are in the garden.”

“Well...”

She heard a screech, pushing past the girl to shove open the door. She found Lord Melbourne, another nursemaid and a man she did not recognize. Della was hiding in the corner.

“What is going on?”

Melbourne looked at the other man. “Ma’am, may I introduce Doctor Cartwright?”

“Is Princess Della ill?”

“No-”

“Then why do we need a doctor? And what have you done to her?”

Della still turned away. Victoria neared her and she screeched again, in the throes of another tantrum.

“Della-”

The girl ran away.

“If I may, your majesty, this behavior is very common among children with such conditions.”

Victoria turned, glaring at Melbourne.

“Yes, I think that will be all, Doctor Cartwright.”

The doctor bowed and left.
“You dare consult a physician without asking my permission-”

“Permission? I am her father.”

“I am the monarch. I am the one in charge of my children’s welfare or have you forgotten? So I am the one to say when and if we need to consult a physician-”

“Could we discuss this somewhere else?,” Melbourne asked, motioning towards a very distraught Della.

“And whose doing might that be?”

“You are thinking about this sentimentally, not rationally.”

The ceremony was a quick one and they soon moved on to the reception. The guests were happily dancing New Year’s Eve away and soon Victoria had to excuse herself.

“Lovely ceremony,” said John.

“Oh, thank you,” said Will.

“I know Mary won’t say it, but she is secretly pleased. I think she’s just happy to see Victoria settled.”

Will took a glance over at his time and again mother-in-law. She was talking to some cousins of Victoria’s.

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“I’ll try to see if I can keep her out from underfoot, but you have no idea how persistent she can be.”

Will had to snort at that. If anything, he knew exactly how persistent Mary could be.

He caught a look over at Della. She and Maggie seemed to be engaged in a heated discussion over something none of which could possibly be good for him.

“I’m going to go check on Victoria.”

He left the party and went into the small anteroom.

“Oi!”

As soon as he heard Della, one of the Bodleian’s no doubt priceless books landed on the wall in front of Will.

He turned back to see Della and Maggie. Maggie seemed shocked.

“You’ve known!,” she shouted. “You have known who I am!”

“Della-”

“And you didn’t care, did you? You’ve never cared-”

“Della, I-”
“Remember Dash?”
Will shook his head. “Which one?”
“The original. The one you gave Mama.”
Maggie looked between the two of them.
“I am missing something,” she said.
“What about Dash?,” he asked.
“Nothing. I just thought I would remind you how you didn’t care then, either.”
“That’s not true-”
“Everyone else has always been more important than me. Admit it! That’s why you wanted to put me away-”
“I never wanted to put you away.”
Victoria appeared.
“What is going on?,” she asked.
“Nothing-” said Will.
“Absolutely nothing,” spat Della. “Nothing other than what always happens!”
“I-” Will did not know where to finish with Victoria staring at him.
She could never know.
“I don’t know what you’re-”
Della stormed away.

Melbourne entered Victoria’s room.
“Did I send for you?,” she glared.
Skerrett finished and curtsied, endeavoring to leave quickly. Things had been tense throughout the day and into the dinner they hosted for the Cabinet.
“Will you allow me to explain myself?”
“What is to explain, Lord M? You clearly think there is something wrong with Della-”
“Of course there is something wrong with Della!”
Victoria sat taken aback.
“You do not understand yet that it is possible to love a child and realize there are problems.”

“You think Della is like Augustus? That is absurd—”

“I remember when I was like you, when I thought I just needed to find the right method, the right tutor, the right doctor... I would have the child I always imagined. The years wasted, time from a shortened life that I can never recover. You have no concept of how deep regret can be.”

Victoria tried to process what he had said.

But still.

“Della is not—”

“Perhaps she is not Augustus but you know she is not like our other children. Given the life she is expected to lead as your daughter, it is beyond cruel to continue to behave otherwise.”

“What do you suggest then?”

He surprised her.

“I do not know.”

“You do not know?”

“No. I do know that I do not wish her to become an oddity to be laughed at.”

“That will never happen, William.”

“I think you do not appreciate how truly cruel people can be, Victoria and I will only do anything to protect her.”

The ride in the back of the car from Oxford back to Kensington was a blur punctuated by the tolling of Big Ben and the sounds of people ringing in the New Year.

Della just stared blankly at the back of the driver’s head and ran into her apartment in the palace the moment the car slowed down.

Only in the safety of her sitting room did she allow herself to break down.

“Your Grace?,” began the knock at the door. “Your Grace, it’s Major Beadle.”

Della sighed. “Go away!”

“Want to talk about it?”

“No!”

“Want me to stand here the whole night knocking?”
“No!”

“Well, there’s one answer to that, then…”

Della groaned. “It’s unlocked.”

Her favorite major entered.

“I thought you were going to a wedding.”

“I did.”

“I thought women liked weddings.”

“It’s complicated.”

“I can see that. Cuppa?”

Della groaned, standing to walk into the kitchen as George followed.

“What happened?,” he asked.

“I was disappointed.”

“In what way?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Well, productive conversation this is turning out to be.”

“You wouldn’t understand!”

“I’m trying to help you here-”

“I don’t need help!,” she snapped.

Della dropped the mugs and the tea. George knelt down and helped her to pick them up.

“Why don’t you start from the beginning, eh? What happened at the wedding?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Then why don’t you try explaining it to me?”

Della sighed. Such an impossible thing to explain.

“Would you believe me if I told you there was more than just this life? That we had other lives, we were other people?”

Beadle considered her proposition.

“Yes.”
By the time they arrived at the hotel, the guests were well drunk and New Year was in full swing. Victoria had tabled the subject. Little did he realize she was just lying in wait while they checked in.

“So, just give me a moment-”

“What happened with Della?”

“What?”

“She ran out crying.”

Will shrugged. “What did she say?”

“She won’t answer me. What did she say to you?”

“I didn’t say anything to her-”

“What was Maggie angry about?”

“What?”

“Yeah, stop playing dumb, Will, it really doesn’t suit you.”

“Maggie could be angry about anything-” It was a line that came out without him thinking.

Victoria sighed. “She didn’t mention her reincarnation thing to you, did she?”

Will stood shocked. “Well-”

“I told her not to. I knew you would flip out-”

“I did not flip out-”

“God, Will, she’s just a messed up kid practically! Just because she has a crazy theory is no reason to lose it.”

Will decided to take the lifeline that had been given him. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“Jesus...” Victoria stood up, walking towards the bathroom. “I’m taking a bath.”

“Victoria-”

“I’ll be fine. Just give me a minute.”

“I’m sorry-” he tried again.

The bathroom door slammed.
Della listened at the door.

“Have you heard anything interesting?”

She jumped back as she looked up to see Maggie.

Della shook her head. “He doesn’t think me capable.”

“It’s just a silly little bridge dedication.”

“Precisely and he doesn’t think me capable.” She frowned. “Perhaps he is right...”

“Oh, please. I have done a half dozen. You just stand there and say, ‘I hereby declare the bridge open in the name of Her Majesty Queen Victoria’ and everyone applauds.”

“No one applauds when I speak.”

The door opened. Della and Maggie jumped back as Victoria entered.

“Maggie, do you have nothing to do?,” she asked.

“I was... about to... ask Ellie about her Scottish friend...”

“You can’t remember his name, can you?,” asked Victoria.

“No.”

Victoria sighed turning to Della. “You will be travelling to York to dedicate the new bridge in my name.”

“Thank you, Mama.”

She glanced up to see Melbourne behind her, looking very badly beaten in an argument.

“I will make you proud,” Della said.

“I have no doubt,” said Victoria.

Della looked to Melbourne. He avoided eye contact with her.

“You ought to be on your way,” said Victoria.

“We’ll see you when you get back,” Melbourne muttered.

Their parents left and the girls were on their own.

“There you have it,” said Maggie. “Have fun with your bridge.”
Chapter 51

Chapter Notes

So, we're slower going, but here we are. This chapter had a few versions.

Happy reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1867

“How can you possibly begin the day looking so vexed?”

Gina looked up at James across the dining table. “Do I seem so?”

“Yes, and if you tell me again it’s about that Mr. Brown-”

“Good God, how could it not be?”

Things had not improved on that front since the ghillie’s unwelcome appearance at Brocket Hall. It seemed each day the Queen grew more under his thrall.

“She is a widow.”

“She is the Queen of England.”

“She is still a woman.”

“Oh, that is disgusting.”

“What?”

“To think that.”

“Because he is a servant?”

“Because he is coarse, uncivilized and absolutely unworthy of being a successor to my father.”

At that time, the door opened. A nurse curtsied as she led Gina’s daughter in. Princess Victoria Regina Isabelle of the United Kingdom- Belle as she was called by her family- was three now. She shared her mama’s- and some would whisper her step-grandfather’s- shocking green eyes and dark hair growing more and more into the role of princess every day. She was third in line to the throne, no brothers to push her out. Sadly, Gina had endured several miscarriages and one prematurely lost son before fortune finally favored their house. She ran towards her mother and Gina pulled her up to her lap.

“Good morning, darling.”
Belle mumbled something about the morning though it was difficult to tell if good was used.

“I have much to do today. I must meet with the Prime Minister and deal with architects. Nothing is quite so tiresome as dealing with architects.”

“For the memorial?,” asked James.

“Yes, I do believe Mama gave them the impression she wanted something an Egyptian pharaoh could be buried in quite fashionably.” She played with Belle’s hair. “Of course Papa would be livid at the thought. This statue dedication this afternoon would be excessive as it was.”

“You had mentioned something about a musical center?”

“Oh, yes. That is to be part of the memorial as well. A concert hall. It does seem fitting. Papa and Mama did share a great love of the opera. They have in mind some odd name, ‘Central Hall of Arts and Sciences.’”

“Not terribly romantic. And what were you thinking?”

“I thought Royal Melbourne Hall might do very well.”

“And your father would not find that an indulgence?”

“He did love the opera.”

Will followed Victoria in. They had just been for another scan and she immediately moved to attach the black and white printouts to the fridge with a magnet.

Healthy children. Always a relief.

Though Will found his worries had not abated since the tube bombing.

“Well, we’re getting pretty far along, aren’t we?,” Victoria asked brightly.

“Hmm?”

“The book. All the way to Regina’s engagement-”

“It was hardly an engagement. She was fifteen-”

Victoria shook her head at him in amusement. “I know that. All I mean is that we have around ten more years of material? Unless you intend to cover John Brown-”

“I would rather not,” he said sharply.

He opened his laptop and found a waiting email.

James.

“What?,” asked Victoria.

He looked up into her waiting eyes.

“One of my colleagues at Cambridge emailed... James Callum has died.”
“Oh, Will, I’m so sorry.”

“Well...” He tried to think of some platitude.

“When’s the memorial?”

“Why?”

“Because we’re going down. Obviously.”

“You needn’t—”

“I want to. You need me there.” She kissed him on the cheek. “And that’s that.”

Gina took the carriage to Buckingham Palace from Kensington. The intended London residence had been Dover House, but her Aunt Alexandrina was there and her father had decided she ought to keep it so long as she lived and desired it.

Gina was met by Ellie as soon as she arrived.

“You know—”

“Can’t I announce it yet?”

Gina sighed. “Once Maggie has given birth.”

Ellie sighed. “She’s taking forever to have that baby.”

“The Duke of Hamilton will not grow as impatient as you do. There could be no greater prize.”

Ellie sighed. “It is not the Duke of Hamilton’s patience I worry about. It is my own. I would like to not commit murder the longer I stay in this house.”

Gina nodded as they began up the grand staircase. “What has happened this time?”

“He ate at table. With us.”

“At table?,” asked Gina. “Were there guests?”

“No, thanks to God. The man has the table manners of a gorilla.”

“I think that may well be an insult to gorillas,” said Gina. “In fact, I think I would rather have a gorilla.”

Ellie’s eyes turned up. “Oh, hello, Mama. Hello, Papa.”

Gina looked up at the newly placed canvas over the staircase. A large portrait of her parents near the beginning of their marriage. The Queen sat, her Lord Consort stood as it always was. Melbourne had always instructed on the finer points of portraits, including once to her then fiance’s chagrin. “You may never sit while she stands,” he had sneered. “She is and will always be your superior. And it would be better if you not always stand together for then she will appear insignificant and she is certainly not that, is she?”

“I rather like it,” said Ellie, ignorant of her elder sister’s thoughts. “It makes me feel as if he’s still
“Indeed.” She turned back to Ellie. “Did anything else happen at dinner?”

“Brown was rather harsh on poor Della.”

“What did Mama do?”

“Not terribly much.”

Gina sighed again. She was rather starting to feel as if that was all she did.

The head butler waited at the top of the stairs.

“Your Royal Highness, the Prime Minister is waiting.”

“And Her Majesty?”

“She has departed for Windsor.”

“Departed for Windsor?,” asked Ellie. “But Papa’s statue is being dedicated today.”

“I shall see to Lord Derby,” said Gina. “Thank you, Putnam.”

Gina walked into her father’s former study, a space shared with the Queen as they worked on state papers and matters. The same place Gina had received her education at their feet. Melbourne’s portrait sat fixed on the wall.

The Prime Minister bowed. “Your Royal Highness.”

“Lord Derby. Please do accept Her Majesty’s apologies. She is quite indisposed today.”

Derby tilted his head. “Does that mean she will not be attending the dedication this afternoon?”

“I would not presume, one can hope,” said Gina.

She motioned for Derby to sit and smoothed her skirts as she followed suit.

“I do find I still miss your father, ma’am,” mused Derby. He shook his head. “Begging your pardon, ma’am, I did mean Lord Melbourne. I never knew the late prince, though I understand he was a fine young man.”

Gina shook her head. “No matter at all, Prime Minister. Lord Melbourne was... the only father I ever knew.”

“I know many would say he was never a great politician, but I do think perhaps he was so concerned with being a good man as it were, he hadn’t the stomach for politics.”

Gina smiled. “I do think that may have been the case.”

“Anyway, we must stop being so morose. I am to brief you. First of all, you will be pleased to know that the finalization of the jurisdiction of Singapore is complete. Singapore is her own separate colony under the Crown.”

“Was it well received by the locals?”

“Well, the population has swelled recently. They are nearly half Chinese, workers brought in to see
to the pepper and gambier plantations.”

“So long as our possessions are secure. I know all manner of conquest is being discussed on the continent.”

Derby tsked. “Like the King of Belgium.”

“Yes, Cousin Leopold has always had an air of self-importance about him. Papa said he got it from my uncle. Well, had Maggie become a Hohenzollern, he would not have been entirely wrong in it.”

“How is Princess Margaret?”

“As well as can be expected,” said Gina. “I shall see her tomorrow. She’s too far along to attend the dedication. What else?”

Derby sighed. “John Stuart Mill wishes to give women the vote…”

“Oh, do tell me about that, Lord Derby.”

Victoria absentmindedly tuned the radio.

“Her Majesty has appointed a new equerry. Major George Beadle a veteran of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, decorated for his services in the operation to rescue the Duchess of New South Wales…”

“Gina and James never had any children?”

“No.”

“Huh.”

“Huh?,” he echoed back.

“Nieces? Nephews?”

“I don’t know.”

“What are you getting at, Victoria?”

“I still haven’t forgotten about Gina Callum’s mother.”

Will shifted uncomfortably as he drove. “Perhaps it’s best to leave it alone.”

“Why?”

“What does it matter?”

“A woman was murdered-”

“Seventy years ago-”

“And it was covered up.”

“So what?”
“By the Queen. Her private secretary’s wife. Do you suppose there’s absolutely nothing going on there?”

“We are already going to be in enough trouble with this book, it completely baffles me why you would want to unleash a world of innuendo with more-”

“Innuendo? What innuendo?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Besides, opinion’s going to change on Victoria IV given recent events.”

“She could hardly help her feelings, could she?”

Victoria frowned. “What an odd thing to say.”

Will cringed internally though he kept his eyes on the road. It was terribly odd.

“Well-” he tried to salvage.

“I mean, do you suppose Victoria IV really loved Georgy Zhukov? Maybe it was allies with benefits. Maybe they were fuck buddies.”

“I doubt they were fuck buddies.”

“Why not?”

“Well, her upbringing for one-”

“Yeah, we all saw Victoria I’s upbringing and it turned out though she might have been a queen in the streets, she was a freak in the sheets.” Victoria shook her head. “Good God, some of her diaries, I thought I was the only one kinky enough to think of such a thing. Which reminds me, we should shag in a train.”

Will froze. “What?”

“I know, not right now, because I’m huge and if you’re still too traumatized by the tube bombing, obviously not, but yes, sex on a train is a thing that we should definitely do.”

“We’ve had sex in the Channel Tunnel.”

“Yeah, but that’s basically sex in a car and Victoria I seemed to make great use of her train carriage.”

Will looked up as they arrived at Cambridge.

He sighed internally in relief.

“Oh, look, we’re here.”

“Did she not attend the dedication?” Maggie shouted.

Gina froze as she came up the steps the grand staircase of Melbourne Hall. “Are you shouting at me? I attended the dedication. I spoke as it were.”
Gina finished coming up the grand staircase. Maggie looked quite pregnant and she appeared miserable, wearing her nightdress and dressing gown, swollen bare feet.

“Was she with him?,“ she asked.

“Invariably.” Gina tilted her head. “I do recall at Christmas you seemed to think I spoke too extremely of Mr. Brown.”

“Things were different then. I could see my feet.”

“Wait, who told you?”

“Aunt Emily is here. To look after me. Because my own mother could not be bothered and my husband supposedly has greater duties.”

“Have you received a letter from Charles?”

“No. Why would he write me? I am only his wife.”

“I suppose we ought to have let you marry the hallboy,” said Gina. “He would have nothing to do.”

“It’s not about the hallboy!,“ Maggie snapped.

Suddenly, her mouth gaped in pain. She reached to grasp at the wall.

“Maggie?,“ asked Gina.

“It is only my back.”

“I see. And these pains in your back? Do they come at intervals?”

“Why-“

Maggie needn’t have finished her sentence.

“Mrs. Blake!”

The housekeeper appeared. “Your Royal Highness?”

“Would you send for Sir Henry Thompson and fetch my aunt from wherever she is hiding? My sister must be abed, it is her time.”

“Certainly, ma’am.”

“I want chloroform!”

“Come along,“ Gina said guiding her to the bedroom, an army of maids slowly appearing.

“I hate Sir Henry, he thinks we should all eat vegetables...”

“Perhaps some wine would improve your mood...”

The memorial was a quick one in King’s College Chapel with some songs from the choir, words from the Vicar and a few readings from some students and fellow faculty. Afterwards, they were all
invited to the Callum house.

“Well,” said Victoria looking up at the rather large house, “this is a bit posh for a professor. What are we doing wrong?”

Will sighed. “I hadn’t really thought on it before.”

“Well, don’t let Mum see or she’ll think we ought to move here.”

“Actually, it’s a gift from Queen Victoria IV,” an Australian voice added.

Will turned. It was Izzy and Robert Reid.

“Isabelle-”

“Please, Izzy.”

Victoria looked between them. “You know each other?”

Will motioned helplessly. “These are Maggie’s parents.”

Maggie’s other parents.

“I’m Izzy Reid, this is my husband, Bobby. You must be Victoria?”

“Yeah. How’d you know?”

Izzy smiled. “Maggie told us about you both.”

“What brings you here?,” asked Will.

“Oh, I knew Gina.”

“You knew Gina Callum?,” asked Victoria with interest.

“She taught at my school in Melbourne for two years, she was practically a second mother to me.”

“Was she?,” Will tried to ask with disinterest.

Victoria led Izzy away. “So, tell me about this house.”

Will and Bobby began following the ladies into the house with the rest of the mourners.

“Well,” began Izzy, “when Gina’s mum was killed, her dad decided to leave the Queen’s service so he could spend his time raising her. She had died in the family home so Victoria IV gave this place as a royal gift.”

“And I suppose their children will inherit?”

“Never had any kids.”

Victoria frowned. “No kids?”

“No.”
It had been hours and Maggie was sleeping. Gina was grateful because she seemed exhausted by her condition and the labor.

Papa would have known what to do. He had sat with her at all of her labors and even in her miscarriages, though it scandalized the physicians. A grandfather in the birthing room? He had stayed because she had begged him to, because still then she looked at him and was not afraid.

She had begged him not to go when he lay on his own sickbed.

“Papa, you can’t go. You promised.”

He had used what seemed to be among his last recesses of strength to bring his hand to her cheek and smile.

“Worry not, my daughter. We always find our way back to each other.”

It had confused her. The ramblings of a dying man, she supposed... Strange for a man who confided to her he had no certainty of a God or gods or an afterlife...

“What are you thinking?,” asked Maggie.

Gina smiled as her sister awakened, her head smashed against her pillow.

“I am thinking of how much better Papa would be at this than I am.”

“You’re probably right...”

Gina shook her head. “You were to lie to me, you know. Reassure me.”

“I cannot lie to you when I am the one in desperate need of reassurance. Papa would have held me. Remember when I broke my arm?”

“Yes. Climbing out of the nursery window.”

“It was your idea.”

“Because you were the one mad enough to do it. I am the heiress, I have leadership duties.” Gina moved some errant hair from her sister’s face and noticed a peculiar choice in jewelry. “You are wearing your Russian cross.”

“What of it?”

“Nothing. I know your husband has bought you many fine pieces and yet we see you here in a cross given to you by an old Russian count.”

“I think about him all the time.”

“Charles?”

“No.”

“Friedrich?”

“Certainly not.”

“Not the hallboy, Maggie, please.”
“No, not the hallboy- who did have a name, you know, Giles, not that any of you care to remember it- Count Zhukonov.”

Gina frowned. “The Russian count you knew for all of fifteen minutes?”

“Sometimes I think I knew him longer.”

“I…” Gina shook her head. “I have no idea what you mean.”

“Do you know Ritochka means Margaret in Russian? As an endearment?”

“Fascinating, but-”

“Do you believe in past lives?”

“As future head of the Church of England, I make it my business to not believe anything not found in Church doctrine.”

“The Hindus think so. The Buddhists think so. I think there’s more of them than there are of us, so why ought we automatically be right and they wrong?”

“I would refer you to my previous answer…”

“What if I did know him? What if I was Ritochka? What if he recognized me?”

“That’s-”

“What if he spent the last twenty years of his life separated from me and now I am doomed to walk the Earth without him? What sort of torture would that be?”

Gina paused. “Are you certain you’re quite well?”

“I do not love Charles. I suppose I like him well enough and he is companionable enough- when he is here- but I do not love him in the way that Mama and Papa loved each other. Or perhaps I ought to say in the way that Papa loved Mama because I doubt he would have made some maid his companion.”

“Papa did have his own life before Mama. If we are to believe Aunt Emily, there might have been a maid or two in the mix.”

Maggie looked at her severely. “If Mama had died before he, do you truly believe he would have ever looked at another woman?”

“It does seem unlikely.” Gina shifted. “So, this is your conclusion? You do not love your husband as well as you suppose you should and therefore you must be a late Russian countess?”

“He said that he would see me again.”

Gina nodded. “Do let me know how that goes.”

“What makes you suppose you’ll be there?”

“So, I do not get to be there?”

“No, I want a chance at being Queen.”
Izzy and Victoria walked together through the house, their men following.

“This is her.”

Izzy motioned at a black and white photo. One which Will recognized. Sir William Bourne was dressed in a simple morning suit, his new bride in a white suit and hat, a simple bouquet in her hands.

Victoria peered at her former self closely. “There is something very familiar about her.”

Izzy shook her head. “That’s so strange, I’ve always thought the same thing.”

Victoria turned back to look at her. “Really?”

“Like you’ve known her, but older,” added Bobby.

Izzy looked at Bobby. “You’ve never said that.”

“Well, I only just now saw the photo.”

“That’s so strange,” said Victoria, turning to look back at herself. “Why would we all think she seemed familiar?”

Will shrugged. “Perhaps she just has one of those faces.”

“One of what faces?”

“You know, the kind you see around, again and again, common faces. People can have faces in common...”

He was not helping his case at all.

“I’m going to get a drink.”

Over at the bar, it got worse. Sir William’s mementos of service were kept on a wall next to where drinks were being served. He remembered them all. His orders, his photographs with Queens, standing to the side as she met Heads of State. Oh, God.

“Brandy,” he said to the bartender. “And don’t go light on it.”

“Look at that,” said Bobby, apparently coming to the same conclusion about the wall. “Knight Grand Cross of the Royal Victorian Order.”

“Yes,” said Will.

“Bobby’s got an order of St. George and St. Michael. Yours looks rather paltry next to that, darling.”

Victoria leaned in. “Is that Georgy Zhukov in that photo?”

Will turned back to the bar. “Where is that brandy?”

“Seems a shame. Gina had no family, this will probably all end up binned or James’ niece and nephews will sell it at the estate sale.”
“What?,” asked Will.

“They told me. They’ll take what they want, but the rest is going to an estate sale and then they’ll sell the house.”

“But it’s not theirs to sell!,” Will shouted too loudly.

Bobby and Izzy regarded him strangely. Victoria put her hand on his wrist. “Will, are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” He took his brandy off the bar. “I’m going to take some air.”

“Oh, sir, you can’t take the glass outside,” said the bartender.

“I beg your pardon? What the hell do you mean I can’t take this outside-”

“Can I help?,” a kindly woman asked.

Izzy motioned. “This is James’ niece, Rosemary.”

Will looked at her perturbed. “Why can’t I take this snifter outside?”

“Oh, you mean the goblet?”

“No, I mean a snifter. You drink champagne out of a goblet. Brandy from a snifter.” He took a sip and turned back to the bartender. “Was this decanted?”

“Uh, no-”

“So, you served me brandy without decanting it?”

“It’s my fault,” said Rosemary. “I don’t know much about alcohol. See, Daddy was an alcoholic-”

“Oh, what’s his name? Peter?”

“Yes! Did you know him?”

“Knew him well enough.”

“Well, some of the pieces are quite valuable so the family is going to auction them.”

“These aren’t your pieces.”

“My uncle did leave them to us-”

“But these belonged to-” He stopped himself. “Gina Callum. They were a wedding gift to her parents.”

“Okay, this has been an emotional day for us all,” said Victoria. “I think it’s time to call it a day. Thank you so much for hosting us in your lovely home-”

Victoria hustled him out of there.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“I don’t trust people who don’t drink and I never trusted Peter.”

“Why? What did he do to you? And since when do you drink brandy? I’ve never seen you drink
brandy."

“Maggie had the right idea.”

“The right idea about what?”

“Burying her things.”

“Will, what the hell are you talking about?”

“Nothing.” He made a note of the cellar door with no latch. “Let’s go home.”

“She is a wonderful baby,” Emily cooed.

Gina smiled as she held her niece. In the early hours, Maggie had given birth as the day broke. The little girl held into the light of her first day.

“She reminds me a bit of Mama,” said Emily. “It would have pleased William.”

“I do think Maggie was considering Elizabeth.”

“That would be lovely.” Emily paused. “It has been so difficult. First, Frederick, then Palmerston and dear William... I never thought I would be the last one standing.”

“Oh, Aunt Emily,” Gina said, though she had no words to offer.

“William would have been so pleased. I presume he is wherever he watches from.”

“Do you suppose Papa watches us?”

Emily frowned. “Do you suppose he doesn’t?”

“It is only that he never took much stock in religion...”

“No. I always supposed it was that he could never bear to be disappointed.” Emily yawned. “I should rest. Do wake me when Maggie wakes.”

“I will do no such thing.”

“Impossible like your father...” tutted Emily as she went away to her rooms.

Gina looked back at the baby.

“Dear niece, have you any idea who you are?,” she asked. “You carry the blood of Kings and Queens and the best man there ever was. Your grandfather.”

She heard a carriage and gave the child to a waiting nurse, instructing her to clean the infant up. Mama did so abhor most babies.

She looked down in the great hall to see the Queen enter...

And Mr. Brown.
Mr. Brown. She still had not found a way to get rid of the man. Of course most of her mother’s courtiers looked for some scandal in the man, which was ineffective. He was a coarse, brute of a manservant, what could be worse? She had tried what her father would have prescribed: a sort of promotion, given by way of a friend of a friend of an acquaintance, offering Brown a better position than he could ever enjoy under the Queen’s patronage, but it had not even tempted him.

She would have to do better. Or worse as it were.

“Mama.”

“Gina. I suppose I am obliged to look upon the thing.”

“A healthy girl, Mama. Aunt Emily says she looks very much like Grandmother Lamb.”

“I see and where is it?”

What had happened to Mama? Where had the warmth and kindness gone? Did they leave with Papa? Were they sealed alongside him in his tomb?

“With the nurse.”

“Wet nurse?”

“No, Maggie’s not engaged one.”

“Why not? Breastfeeding is a disgusting thing.”

Gina looked up to see Brown still there. Were they really discussing this in front of a male servant?

“Shall I ring for some tea? Perhaps Mr. Brown would care to go to the servants hall?”

Victoria frowned. “Mr. Brown will eat with us.”

“Certainly we would not wish to make Mr. Brown uncomfortable.”

“I’m not near uncomfortable as you are.”

“You were not being spoken to.”

“I was right here.”

What would Papa have done?

“No, Brown, I do believe you had a misapprehension. I am speaking to you now. Had I spoken to you then, I would have said, ‘Brown, go downstairs and take your tea with the rest of the servants.’”

“How dare you speak to John like that! Apologize!”


“I shall not apologize to a servant when I have done nothing requiring an apology to a servant.”

“Ay, this one has some fire though it’s all misdirected,” said Brown. “Must have been her father’s doing.”

“I see. Was your father as disgusting as you are?”
Gina hated herself for that. Her father would have been infinitely more clever. At night, she would turn the conversation over and over in her head working at an elegant insult.

“You didn’t go to the dedication.”

The three turned to see Maggie emerge, reminiscent of one of Dickens’ ghosts.

“Maggie, back to bed, this instant.”

“You did not attend the dedication,” said Maggie. “I would have given anything to be there, to honor Papa, where were you? With this brute?”

“I am a Queen, there are many bids for my time-”

“Is his bid so bloody special?”

“I don’t like your tone, lass,” said Brown.

Maggie said something angrily in Russian.

“What?,” asked Brown, though they were all genuinely confused.

“Something my husband used to say, never mind.”

What staggered them next was that Maggie threw a punch. Though her legs may have been wobbly from childbirth and chloroform, her fist was not. It hit Brown squarely on the jaw, giving a bloodied lip. He looked at Maggie with fury as a nearby maid tried to hide a laugh. For a terrifying moment, Gina thought Brown might retaliate and readied herself to shout for the guards. Brown stepped towards Maggie as Victoria stepped in front of Maggie.

“Go see to your wound, John,” Victoria said sternly.

The ghillie departed down the stairs, tail between his legs.

“Help me put your sister back in bed,” said Victoria. “She is obviously not herself. And since when does Charles speak Russian?”

Maggie opened the door. She looked curiously at Will and the boxes he had on her front step.

“Are you moving in?,“ she asked.

“Can I keep some things here?”

He walked in past her. Maggie shrugged.

“Use Matthew’s office. That’s empty. What are they?”

“Better that you don’t know.”

Will began placing the boxes in the empty office. He went to the car for more and returned to find Maggie had opened them.
“Brandy snifters?,” she asked.

“Among some other items. Items they won’t even miss.”

“You stole these?”

“They were mine. I repossessed them.”

Maggie raised an eyebrow at him. “I remember you criticizing me for-”

“Forget I said it, you were right.”

Maggie opened another box. She smiled as she pulled out a baby picture of Gina.

“It’s hard to fathom she didn’t have any children.”

“Not with James.”

“But you liked him,” said Maggie.

“You didn’t know him this time, an amazing teacher, but not what I would want for my daughter’s husband.”

“Is it always you and Gina?”

“What?”

“You seem to run into her more than anybody.”

Will sat down, feeling defeated.

“It’s harder this time. It’s harder to remember. I’ve never remembered this early before and every time...” He shook his head. “I want to push it all back down where it was, to abandon it all and when I try...”

“There I am? There Della is?”

He shook his head. “I’m transported. I remembered the taste of dormice the other day.”

“When did you eat dormice?”

“Rome.”

Maggie frowned. “How much do you remember?”

“That’s just it, more than I ever have. I think I remember it all.”

“But having that all in your head, that can’t-”

“You suppose I’ll go mad?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never known anybody who remembered ancient Rome.” Maggie sat next to him.

“We had a scan of the babies, first scan since the bombing,” said Will. He looked over at Maggie. “Gina’s coming back. I could tell just on the screen.”

“Why does that unsettle you?”
Maggie had a slight fever which was the given reason for her punching Brown. Gina and Victoria sat vigil on either side of the bed as Maggie seemed to finally settle into restful sleep.

Though Gina thought she really did not need one.

“You did not come to the dedication,” said Gina. “I had to speak. I lied for you. I lied to Lord Derby, I lied to your subjects. I said you were indisposed.”

“Do not presume to judge my affections for my late husband.”

“Which one? The Prince or the Viscount?”

“Gina, we are not amused.”

“Nor am I. Do you know Brown said that to me? He thinks it is funny, what if some of the other drunkards catch wind of it? This is what he thinks of the faith you have put in him.”

“I will speak with him, but because you girls seem to think you know what it is like to have been married so long and lose that anchor. I shall deal with it any way I please.”

Gina straightened. “I heard a story once. It seems there was this young queen, barely out of girlhood. She made a terrible mistake and a woman died. Now, she did not kill her but she felt the guilt of the death nonetheless. She did not know how she could carry on being Queen.” Gina met her mother’s gaze. “Her Prime Minister gave her some advice. He said that she must continue, she must smile and wave and never let them know how hard it is to bear.”

Victoria suddenly found something very interesting on the wallpaper.

“So, Mama, while you think you have the right to carry on as you please, I find at least one source says you do not.”

Gina turned back to her own staring at a blank space. She smoothed her skirts and waited.

Brown would go.

She would see to it.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone was on tumblr and wondering which character I am distantly related to, that would be Lord Derby. We're both descendants of that Battle of Bosworth side switcher, though presumably he's more closely related than I am. Though to be perfectly honest, switching sides during the Battle of Bosworth feels like something I would do.
Alexandrina awoke to the sound of the wireless.

“Queen Victoria III has died, surrounded by her children—”

She rolled over to see Bill rushing to get ready.

“Bill?”

“I have to go,” he said.

“Of course.” She sat up, pulling the blankets around herself.

Bill finished getting ready and was off to affairs of state. Alexandrina made a breakfast for herself and was surprised as there was a knock at the door.

She looked through the peephole.

Albert.

Sheisse.

“I know you are in there.”

She opened the door.

“Congratulations, you’re so clever.”

“Where is he?”

“I’m not going back, Albert. I have a British passport, you can’t—”

She was very surprised by the next turn of events which was Albert’s hands around her throat.

She couldn’t breathe, looking at Albert’s angry face, she was remembering a conversation they could have never had.

“Would you be listening if Lord M had said it?,” he shouted angrily.

“If Lord M had said it, it would actually be interesting.”

“Do you love him?”

“Of course I love him!,’’ she had shouted.

His hands came away from her throat. They were no longer alone in the flat. They were joined by someone else.

“Drina.”
They had never met, she and this older man.

“Leopold,” she replied.

But she knew him,

“Is he expecting you to be here this evening?”

For some reason there was absolutely no question of who he meant.

“Of course he’s expecting me to be here this evening.”

Leopold nodded. “You’ll meet us at the embassy no later than midnight.”

“Or what?”

“Or he’s dead. Along with your mother and the maid and anyone else you ever cared about.”

“You would do that?”

“Why would I not?”

Will looked up at Victoria. “How’s that?”

Victoria considered the present state of the furniture. The nursery was nearly done, two cribs assembled, walls painted, curtains put up, toys in place including a rather fine collection of Queen Victoria bears.

“I think maybe they should both be on that wall,” she mused.

“We tried that wall, you didn’t like it.”

“Well, perhaps I changed my mind.”

“You? Changed your mind?,” he tsked. “Never.”

“I’m not that bad, am I?”

Will pretended he hadn’t heard the question and looked at his watch. “I ought to be changing if I want to make it to the palace. Coronations are always a peculiar business and you can never arrive late.”

Victoria smiled. “You sound like you’ve done one before.”

Will froze. “Of course I haven’t.”

She frowned. “I know you haven’t done a coronation before, Will.”

“Right.” He kissed her. “Must dash.”

1938
“It seems rather medieval to me.”

The Queen scoffed. “Medieval?”

“For a man to kneel before his wife and swear his loyalty.”

Bill exchanged looks with Tommy. The coronation had been planned for the better part of a year now and every time they returned to this sticking point.

“Medieval?”

“I needn’t swear my loyalty to you, I believe that was the wedding...”

“That was to a woman, this is to the Crown,” said Victoria.

“I don’t see the difference.”

“Well, start because it’s happening.”

“Not if I say it’s not.”

Victoria shook her head. “Irrelevant.”

“Excuse me? I won’t be bullied into kowtowing to you.”

“Then who would you kowtow to?”

“Perhaps we could discuss the matter of homage later,” Tommy suggested. He placed a folio before the queen. “The guest list, ma’am. Lords and Ladies, Heads of State from the Commonwealth, foreign royalty and...”

“Why is the Soviet delegation struck out?,” asked Victoria.

“Some domestic trouble. It would seem the chair of the delegation, Marshal Mikhail Tuchachevsky has been placed under arrest. We received a communique from some underling of his...” Tommy looked at Bill. “What was his name?”

“Commander Georgy Zhukov,” supplied Bill. “He sends his deepest regrets, ma’am.”

“It seems to be a dangerous business being a Soviet Marshal...” mused the Queen, still transfixed by the guest list.

“Indeed, ma’am.”

“Do I need to be here?,” asked Matthew.

“Why? Did you have some thoughts on the state of the Soviet Army?”

“Of particular interest may be the Nazi delegation. Of course, Count von Ribbentrop...”

Victoria sighed. “Always a way to ruin any gathering...”

“And some more from Berlin. Including I believe your hosts from your visit there.”

Victoria glanced at Bill and then back to the list. “Albert von Coburg and his wife, Alexandrina von Coburg.”
“Indeed, ma’am?,” Bill added.

“So it would seem.”

Matthew interrupted again. “So there is no point in my staying?”

Matthew got up and walked out. Tommy looked to the Queen.

“Is there anything you would like me to do at the moment, ma’am?,” asked Tommy.

“No, thank you. Bill, won’t you stay a moment? I’ve a question on the music.”

Tommy bowed and left. Victoria looked at Bill.

“Did she write you?”

“No, she hasn’t sent one word to me since she left.”

“What are you going to do?”

“What can I do? She very clearly wants to go back to her husband. Did go back to her husband.”

“Except in that she professed a hatred for him, the manner in which he lives his life and the political situation of her country.”

“Quite finished, ma’am.”

“Nothing is ever really finished...”

“Ma’am?”

The Queen shook her head. “My grandmother used to say that, said her mother used to say that at the end.”

“An odd place to take your thoughts if I may say so, ma’am.”

“So it is.”

Alexandrina didn’t think she had said a word the entire way from Berlin.

It had been a long time. Nearly a year. A year of near death and dreams and memories. Leopold would try anything to get the memories out of her. She didn’t quite understand why. Something about seeking immortality. Was it immortality? Were all these things real?

In a way, it was too fantastic if they weren’t. So many places, so many people, but there was always the two of them. She and Bill.

Albert remembered too, but unlike her, he went through these things willingly. Anything to help the Reich.

The memories leaked out in pieces for her. Her sitting on the floor with some sort of King Charles spaniel puppies.
“They are my favorite.”

She turned to the sound of Bill’s voice. The memories had a dreamlike quality. Unable to act, unable to change. She saw Bill was in fact King Charles II.

“They are lovely,” she said. She shrugged. “My husband does not care for dogs who cannot hunt.”

“Then the loss is entirely his.”

Leopold snapped her out of her dreamlike trance and another warm moment lost. “You are only going because it was the Queen’s wish. You needn’t speak to her or him.”

“Why are you so afraid?,” asked Alexandrina.

“Afraid? I am never afraid.”

“You’re afraid of me having a mind of my own. You and Albert.” She shook her head. “I think you always have been.”

Leopold grabbed her wrist. “Listen here, you are no longer a queen—”

“And you are no longer a king—”

“I will get what I want from you. And when I do, the Fuhrer will be very pleased.”

Victoria crossed her arms. “I may no longer be a queen, but I will not be dictated to.”

Nancy frowned. “What are we doing here?”

“Bit of shopping.”

Nancy looked up at the Callum house. “This is someone’s house.”

“Well, not anymore it’s not. The owner’s died, it’s an estate sale.”

“What are we doing here?,” Nancy repeated as they got out of the car.

“You really want to know?”

“That would be why I asked.”

“The mother of the woman who used to own this house was murdered by someone and I’m looking for clues.”

Nancy blanched. “How does that make any sense?”

“Never mind how it makes any sense. I’m sure they have kitchen things. Will seemed to really like their brandy glasses. Maybe I should get him one.”

“Since when does Will drink brandy?,” she asked as they entered the house.

“No idea, but he has very strong opinions.”

Victoria made her way upstairs. Most of the buyers were looking at the study and master bedroom.
The walls were filled with art.

She opened a door and found what looked like a teenager’s room. There was a record player and a poster for the Rolling Stones on the wall.

“Gina Callum, here you are,” she said with satisfaction.

There was more. A vanity with a stool. Victoria sat down to look at the treasures Gina had amassed. A picture of her at her presentation to Court- given her age, it was probably the last one since Victoria V had done away with them after her mother’s death. There was a portrait of Victoria IV standing outside a church with Bill Bourne and the mystery wife, along with Tommy Lascelles and some other women Victoria didn’t recognize. The baby Gina in a white gown was a giveaway that this was a christening.

Victoria began rifling through the drawers and was rewarded with an old journal. She opened it surprised to find it was in German.

“Well, here we are then...”

She read through it to find strange sort of series of stories. All in the first person.

“It began raining at Frogmore,” she read from the German. “I felt as if the sky had opened up to shame me. I loved William too much and would have never loved Albert. We rode in the carriage in silence back to London and the flood began...”

Victoria froze. How strange.

“The streets were too flooded for the carriages and so I insisted he stay the night...”

Carriages? Train cars? Why would they have carriages in the thirties?

“I went to his room...”

“Anything you’d like, Madame?”

Victoria looked up. It was an attendant for the sale.

“Oh, uh...” She paused. “I’ll take this vanity.”

“Very good, ma’am.”

Victoria nodded. “Is absolutely everything for sale?”

“I suppose so. What were you interested in?”

She held up the diary. “I’d like this book and these photographs.”

He frowned. “Why would you want them?”

“Aesthetic.”

Nancy popped her head in. “I tried asking about the brandy glasses and I think someone already got them.”
“This is absolutely the last time that we are going to discuss this!,” the Queen shouted. “And it had jolly well better be since this is happening in a matter of hours.”

Bill sighed as Matthew glared. Tommy remained stoic about the whole matter. It was the morning of the coronation, the Queen’s dressers fretted at her side, Matthew’s valet at his.

“I am not some lord supplicant, I am your husband.”

“That is where you are quite mistaken. You are my lord supplicant,” Victoria said sharply. “And you can kneel and pay homage or you can find somewhere else to sleep tonight.”

Matthew glared as he marched out of the room.

“I’ll speak with him, ma’am,” said Tommy.

Victoria sighed. She held her arm out for the lady’s maid to put on her gloves.

She turned to Bill. “Do you suppose I’ve destroyed my marriage?”

“It’s not for me to say, ma’am.”

“That’s a yes, then?” She paused. “Have you seen her yet?”

“Seen who?”

“Mrs. Von Coburg.”

“And why would I have seen her, ma’am?”

“Because you’re in love with her.” She paused. “Bill, as your Queen, I am going to be terribly disappointed if you don’t speak to her.”

“Ma’am-”

“In fact, I intend to make it my business that you speak with her.”

“I would feel better if you would keep yourself to the business of the coronation, ma’am.”

Leopold needn’t have worried about Alexandrina speaking to Bill. Her seats in the Abbey were so far back the Queen appeared as a speck and Bill was at her side.

Ever the Queen's servant.

Albert gripped her wrist so tightly she bruised.

She had the feeling this was not the first time she had been in this place or the first time this had happened.

Crowds calling to her, like the ones outside.

Bill again, waiting for her, only dressed as some sort of lord and carrying a sword.
She found she saw several men dressed in the same sort of robe and hat. As for the sword, the Prime Minister was carrying that...

She had definitely been here before, she had never seen it from this side and there was something astonishingly new about that.

And the Queen. The Queen was hers, was Maggie...

As proud and as stubborn as her.

“Vas ist das?”

Nancy dragged in the vanity. “Oh. Victoria, you didn’t say your mum was here.”

“I didn’t know my mum was here,” said Victoria carrying in a box of purchases.

“Why are you carrying that?,” Mary chastised her, taking the box away. “You should not be doing anything strenuous.”

“But actually giving birth, that won’t be strenuous?”

“I’ll get the chair,” sighed Nancy. “And the mirror.”

“Why do you have a box of rubbish?”

“It is not rubbish. I was at an estate sale.”

“An estate sale?”

“Yeah, Mum, can I go shopping or is that too strenuous?”

Victoria rustled in the box for the diary.

“What is that?”

“A diary.”

“What are you reading some dead woman’s diary for?”

“Because I am.”

Mary sighed. “I will go help Nancy since you have left your friend to slave for you.”

“You said I couldn’t-”

Her protests fell on deaf ears. Her mobile rang.

“Hello?”

“Victoria, it’s Maggie.”

“Hi.”

“Is Will there? I couldn’t get his mobile.”
“Oh, he went to the Palace, turns it off when he goes there.”

“Right...” She paused. “If he rings, would you tell him I’m meeting my husband at Claridge’s?”

Victoria frowned. “And Will needs to know that, why? You don’t want to be a bit more specific?”

“I really can’t.”

“Right... I’ll do that then. Have fun.”

Victoria returned to the diary.

“You cannot imagine my astonishment when the physician told me I had fallen pregnant...”

Alexandrina dutifully walked up the staircase behind the Ribbentropp and his cronies. Albert held her arm.

They paused below a portrait.

Queen Victoria I and her Lord Consort.

That was her. She was looking at a portrait of herself.

It was all well and good to know you used to be someone, but what was she supposed to do about it? What good was a past life as a Queen if you were a hostage now?

Leopold was right.

God, how she hated Leopold to be right.

“Frau von Coburg.”

She looked up at the man.

“Sir Alan Lascelles, Her Majesty’s private secretary.”

“How do you do?”

“Her Majesty wonders if she might have a word.”

“My wife is not feeling well-” Albert tried to intercede.

“She was well enough to come to the reception.”

“I insist on accompanying her.”

Tommy narrowed his eyes. “I am afraid Her Majesty was most specific.”

Ribbentropp interceded, quickly snapping at him. For once, Alexandrina was grateful for the Nazi ambassador’s sense of self importance.

“I trust all is well. This way, ma’am,” said Tommy.

She followed Tommy into a room where the Queen was taking photographs.
Bill stood to the side.

“Ah, Frau von Coburg, how nice.” She motioned. “You remember my husband?”

“Who could forget?,” Matthew sniped.

“Careful, darling, Frau von Coburg might think you are unhappy.”

“And why would I be unhappy?”

“These are my children,” she said gesturing at the boy and three girls in party dresses. Alexandrina curtsied to them. “And of course you remember Bill.”

“I do,” said Alexandrina.

“I think that’s quite enough,” said the Queen. “Shall we clear the room? Bill, you stay.”

God, being queen made matters so much easier. The Queen and her family left with Tommy, the only ones left the photographer and his assistants.

“Apologies for her, she is most...” Bill sighed.

“Don’t apologize for her.” She took a breath. “I-”

“You went back to him.”

She didn’t even know how to answer.

He shrugged. “I don’t even know what the point of her hooking you in here was, you went back to him. You’ve made your choice.”

“That was not my choice! I had to go back!”

“And why’s that? Hmm?”

She couldn’t tell him why. It was all too fantastic, too much to bear and she didn’t even understand.

“He was going to kill you.” She took a breath. “Albert was going to kill you and I went back to calm him down, to talk him down-”

“And you didn’t say anything?”

“How could I have said anything? You would have tried to stop me.”

“You didn’t write, you didn’t telegram-”

“I haven’t been left alone this whole year.” It was true enough. She walked towards him. “Bill, I don’t love him. I love you. Do you understand? It has always been you, since the beginning.”

He shrugged at her. “Since the beginning? What does that even mean-”

She shut him up with her lips over his. She kissed him until she found herself climbing on top of him on a chaise-lounge.

Which was oddly familiar.

“Alexandrina, we can’t, not here,” said Bill. “Someone is bound to hear us.”
Victoria awoke. She had fallen asleep with the diary in her hands, surrounded by her purchases from the estate sale as her mobile rang.

“Hello?”

“Victoria.”

“Will. Where are you?,” she asked as she struggled to sit up.

“A friend of mine is having a... family emergency.”

“Not Maggie, is it?”

There was a definite pause. “Why would you ask if it was Maggie?”

“Well, she rang earlier-”

“Did she say anything?”

“She said she was meeting Matt at Claridge’s-”

"Did she say it was Matt?"

"Well, she said it was her husband-"

“Victoria, I have to go-”

“What do you mean you have to go? When are you coming home?”

“I’ll ring later.”

He hung up.

Alexandrina lay awake as Bill slept beside her. It turned out she ought to have left her husband at the palace long ago, no one could cause a scene in the middle of such an important occasion.

No one other than a Queen she supposed.

She rolled over on her side to look at Bill.

Or William? Or Charles? Or Servius?

“It is you, isn’t it?,” she whispered.

The memories were clearer when she was with him. Peculiar thing that what would have helped Leopold the most was something that he would never permit.

She could nearly remember everything now. Her mind raced since being back in the palace. Their walk when she moved in, their dance at the Coronation Ball...
The flood. That night in his room.
All the years that came after.
The day he died.
Alexandrina stood, stealing Bill’s dressing gown.
She walked out into the sitting room, taking a chair at his desk. She found a journal. Still blank.
With nowhere else to put her racing thoughts, she took pen to paper.
It began raining at Frogmore. I felt as if the sky had opened up to shame me. I loved William too much and would have never loved Albert. We rode in the carriage in silence back to London and the flood began.

Victoria awoke to find Will asleep beside her.
“Will!”
She slapped him on the shoulder.
“What? What’s happened?,” he stumbled over his words.
He sat up and she noticed the bruise on his face.
“What the hell happened to you?”
“Well, someone did hit me.”
“Who hit you?”
“I was helping that friend of mine with his family emergency.”
“What friend?”
Will paused. “George.”
“Is George a real friend or did you just make up a name out of thin air?”
“No, George is unfortunately very real.”
“And if he’s such a good friend, why haven’t I ever heard of him?”
“He has been... abroad.”
“Abroad? Are you gonna name a country or just assume I’ll ask no follow-up questions?”
“You know, it was something rather sensitive with his wife as it were-”
“Oh, there’s a wife now?”
“Where is it you think I was?”
“I don’t know. Orla Brandon, maybe?”
He snorted rather loudly. “Orla Brandon, are you joking?”

“Is that any less likely than you getting into fights with this friend George I’ve never heard of?”

“I might as well ask if you were off with Jack Brown!”

Victoria guffawed. “I have not seen Jack Brown in two years!”

“I thought it was five years.”

“Well, I can’t tell him what Tesco to go to, can I?”

“Oh, he goes to Tesco? I assumed he just foraged in a wood then ate his kill raw!”

“Jack’s a vegan!”

Will sighed. “Of course he is.”

“What the hell are we even talking about?”

“The propensity of your Scottish friend for self-importance no matter where he seems to find himself.”

Victoria fumed. “No, we were talking about your imaginary friend, George.”

The doorbell rang.

“Who the bloody hell is that?”

“I assumed it was your imaginary friend George coming round.”

Victoria stormed out and downstairs. She opened the door.

“What?!”

A kindly seeming older man was at the door.

“Apologies, I have disturbed you,” he said with a German accent.

“No. No. I’m sorry.” She took a breath. “How can I help you?”

“My name is Leopold Bruscelles. I have just moved in two doors down.”

“Oh, next to Mrs. Fitz? Aren’t you lucky?” She paused as she achieved no response. “It was a joke. Sorry. You’re German, aren’t you?”

“Bavaria.”

“Ah, my mum’s from Bavaria.”

“Victoria!,” Will called.

“Is that your husband?,” asked Leopold.

“Yes. I’m sorry, Mr. Bruscelles, this is not a good time.”

“I am sorry. I will come back another day then.”
“Thank you.”

Victoria shut the door.

“Who was that?,” asked Will as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

“George along with the Abominable Snowman.”

“Can’t be. I’ve got George on my mobile. Here.”

Victoria took the phone and tossed it into the sitting room. Will rolled his eyes.

“I see. We’ve chosen irrationality as the mood of the day.”

“If you must know, it was our new neighbor.”

“We’ve a new neighbor?”

“Mr. Leopold Bruscelles. From Bavaria.”

Will’s face dropped.

“You’ve got to be bloody kidding,” he muttered.

“What?”

Will walked into the sitting room after his mobile. Victoria watched as he stared at the vanity and boxes from the estate sale. He turned around.

“What is this?”

“I went to an estate sale.”

“What estate sale?”

“At the Callums.”

“And why would you do that?”

Victoria huffed. “Because I seem to be the only one who cares what happened to Gina Callum’s mother. I was going to get you the stupid brandy glasses and the carafe-”

“Decanter.”

“But they said someone nicked them.”

He shook his head. “Imagine that.”

“What?”

“I mean, crime... terrible business. Etcetera...”

Victoria sighed. “I’m going to go polish my chapter on Gina’s engagement.”
“Where is Gina?”

“We discussed this,” chided Victoria. “She was staying over at Claremont House.”

“Yes, but it’s nearly...” Melbourne paused and turned back to the door. “What time is it?!”

“Ten o’clock, sir!,” shouted some faceless footman.

Melbourne looked at Victoria. “It’s nearly ten o’clock.”

“She’s hardly just gotten up, probably and you agreed it was too far for her to undertake in the carriage after supper. Honestly, Lord M, she is fifteen.”

“She was going to help with the boxes.”

Victoria motioned at the boxes, currently spread out on her desk. “Here are the boxes. Let her have a little fun before they consume her altogether.”

Melbourne sat down across the desk. “I do not have argument with her having fun-”

“Your petulance begs to differ.”

“Petulance?”

“Yes. Petulance. You have been intolerable since she left. She only went to help poor Cousin Charlotte face a marriage to a man she has never met.”

Melbourne rolled his eyes. “Oh, yes, the marriage your uncle has invented. That is his hobby, is it not?”

“The Archduke is not a terrible young man,” said Victoria.

“He is her second cousin.”

Victoria sighed. “Would you look over these papers on China? It seems as if we are to be at war again.”

Maggie opened the door of the house for Will.
“I rang you last night.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” said Will, stepping in the doorway. “Victoria wanted to rearrange the entire nursery.”

“Do you have long?”

“No, I’m off to see Ellie—” He sighed. “I have a meeting with the Queen and her coronation committee.”

“I got a note.”

She handed a paper to Will.

He looked. “Isn’t this lines from Persuasion?”

“Yeah. That was our thing.”

He tilted his head. “That was your thing?”

“Are you judging me?”

He sighed. “I don’t know what you—”

She handed him another slip of paper. It’s a phone number and a time.”

“You suppose this is Georgy?”

“Who else would it be?”

“If he knows where you are, why wouldn’t he just say? He’s never been particularly coy. Actually, quite the opposite.”

“Who else would it be?”

“I’ve no idea, but I don’t want you going to meet anyone alone. He could be very different this time.”

Maggie rolled her eyes. “I doubt it.”

“Albert was a Nazi and now he has a man bun.”

Maggie frowned. “Weird.”

Will checked the time. "Beyond weird. I must go. Promise me?"

"Promise what?"

"Promise you won’t go off adventuring on your own."

"I promise."

Will narrowed his eyes. "And yet, I don't believe you."

“Mama.”
“Oh, Gina. Come here.”

Victoria dismissed the maids as Gina walked towards her. She embraced her.

“Your papa will be so pleased to see you home. You have just missed him taking your sisters riding.”

“I am glad of the chance to speak to you alone.”

Victoria smiled. Curious. “Are you indeed?”

“Yes. I must ask your permission for something.”

She shook her head. “I do not understand, what must you ask my permission for?”

“I wish to marry.”

“What?”

“Philippe asked me to marry him-”

Victoria felt as if a very heavy weight was falling down on her rather slowly.

“You did not accept?”

“I said I must ask your permission-”

Victoria stood. “You are fifteen years old. You are my daughter, my heir and you certainly may not marry Philippe.”

“But, Mama-”

“But nothing!” Victoria was flummoxed. “We are going to Claremont and we will settle this business and God willing spare your father.”

“Mama-”

Victoria walked into the hallway. “Prepare my carriage at once!”

Will noted the time as he drove to Buckingham Palace.

He was late.

“Professor Lamb.”

“Lieutenant Patel, how are you?”

“Very good, sir. You’ll be meeting Her Majesty’s new equerry today. He’s only just begun.”

“Oh, really?”

Patel led him up the staircase and they arrived at the top where he found a very surprising face.

“Professor Lamb, I’m Major Beadle.”
The two men shook hands.

“Her Majesty’s new equerry?”

“Indeed. Her Majesty is waiting.”

Will followed Beadle to the audience room.

“I would like to speak with you if you have a moment after your meeting, Professor.”

“Gladly.”

Beadle nodded and knocked on the door.

“Professor Lamb, your majesty.”

The Queen smiled. “Thank you, Major.”

Will went to kiss hands and stopped himself from fully kneeling.

“Your Majesty.”

“Were you going to kneel?”

“Ma’am?”

“You looked as if you stopped yourself from kneeling. No one kneels. Well, except at the Coronation, I suppose. I’ve never been to one.”

“No, I suppose you haven’t, ma’am.” He paused. “I hope I am not asking too personal a question, ma’am.”

“I’ll let you know.”

“Has the Duke of Montrose expressed any reservations about the paying of homage?”

The Queen paused. “No, we haven’t discussed it. I doubt the Duke has given it any thought.”

“Because some men—” He paused. “Some royal husbands have found the prospect uncomfortable.”

“Victoria III’s husband? I thought he didn’t live that long.”

“No, the Earl of Gaston was not there, but he did express his displeasure. The Earl of Charlbury also had some reservations—”

“Did he? Granny never mentioned anything of that sort.”

Will considered that perhaps he should have not let that tidbit go. “Well, very few people know.”

“Well, I suppose every marriage has its moments.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“Mama, you will not listen to me!”
The drive was a trial in itself.

“How can I when you have chosen to behave so stupidly?!”

Gina tried to steel herself. “You are being unfair.”

“And you are being foolish! What made you suppose that you could ever marry an exiled French prince? A Catholic one at that!”

“He can convert!”

“That is not the point! You are to be a queen and you cannot have a husband who is forever in your debt as a penniless prince!”

“As you had.”

Victoria was speaking before she thought. “William is not-”

“Albert.”

Oh, yes. Albert.

Victoria looked back.

“You do remember my father? Albert.”

“What has Albert to do with anything?”

“You chose him. You married him. You loved him well enough to have a child with him-”

She was gobsmacked. “That is not the point-”

“What is the point?”

Victoria steeled herself. “First, you are far too young to marry-”

“Charlotte is two years older.”

“Second, you must not have a foreign husband. An English marriage will do very well.”

“Did you even want to marry my father?”

“What?”

“You speak of the whole matter with such condemnation, I wonder if you like anything that came out of the union.”

Victoria steeled herself. Gina was very much a teenager and in her she could see her own stubborn nature. She had always prided herself that it came out of her determination to defy Sir John Conroy and her mama, but no, it seemed to be an ingrained trait. It had been combined with her Lord M’s wit and could deal a deadly blow when provoked.

This was one such moment.

“We are not discussing Albert.” She could not make the words “your father” form.

“No, we never do.”
The Duke of Norfolk had taken control of the meeting.

That’s what the Norfolks did.

Will tried to make a mental tally of how many Dukes of Norfolk he had dealt with. He found himself missing Tommy.

“Has Her Majesty selected a Mistress of the Robes?,” asked the Duke.

“Yes,” said the Queen. She glanced furtively at David. It was such a tell that she felt some conflict. “The Duchess of Mumbai. I have asked her and she has accepted the position.”

“Excellent, your majesty,” said the Duke. “We will still need to select the rest of your ladies for the ceremony. We do have some suggestion lists...”

Norfolk suggested it was time for a break. Will went to join David and the Queen.

“Forgive me for inquiring, ma’am,” said Will, “but I sensed some hesitation about appointing the Duchess of Mumbai.”

She glanced at David again.

“I had also considered the Duchess of New South Wales.”

Della.

“Ah,” said Will.

“But I don’t want to pressure her, she’ll be in the ceremony anyway, for the paying of homage.”

Will looked at David. “And you?”

David frowned. “I didn’t have anything to do with it-”

“You did-” said the Queen.

“I just mentioned your a head taller than her, that’s all, don’t put it on me.” David looked at Will. “She’s really afraid she’ll hurt someone’s feelings-”

“I am not.” She paused. “Alright. A bit.”

“The Duchess of Mumbai is well liked,” said Will. “Her life is followed, her charitable works commended, her wedding was as well watched as yours. She’s a fine choice.”

“I do wish we could find something for Della to do,” said the Queen. “She’s been so out of sorts lately. Since New Year.”

Will tried to hide his expression.

“I am sure you’ll think of something, ma’am,” he said.

Victoria was almost out of this, she prided herself. Maria Amalia had listened. Petit Philippe who was not so little stood beside her. Victoria could see the attraction, but that would not make it
“So, obviously, this engagement cannot happen.”

“I understand,” said Maria Amalia.

“I thought you would,” smiled Victoria.

“Your daughter is a little tramp.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“She flirts and dances.”

“What teenaged girl will not flirt and dance?”

“I would not allow my daughter to behave so—”

“This is England, not France, we do not lock away our daughters in convents until their wedding nights.”

“Then perhaps it is the madness that runs from your grandfather—”

“You have no right to speak so—”

“I have every right! I am a Queen! I have lost my home, my country, my husband and now you wish us to lose our dignity!”

Victoria sighed. She grabbed Gina by the arm and hustled her out of the room.

“What were you thinking?,” she snapped. “You have a reputation to protect!”

“I have done nothing wrong—”

“It is not enough to have done nothing wrong, you must be above reproach.” Victoria huffed, stifling a scream. “It is your Lamb blood, I think.”

“My Lamb blood?”

“Of course. Your grandmother and my Uncle George—”

“But I have no Lamb blood.”

Victoria paused. “Of course not.”

“Then what did you mean?”

They took their bonnets from the waiting servants.

“We must be back to the Palace as quickly as possible.”

Gina followed her to the drive, not even wearing her hat and shawl.

“What Lamb blood?,” she called after her.

“I misspoke.”
“You did not misspeak.”

“Gina, get in the carriage.”

“You continued to speak and made reference to Papa’s mother.” She paused. “Elizabeth.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Gina seemed to be turning something over in her head. “Regina Victoria Mary Elizabeth.”

Victoria stepped in the carriage. Gina was forced to follow and she had that look Victoria feared most.

She was thinking.

Victoria had always feared the day she began thinking about this in particular.

“Mary is your mother, Elizabeth is Papa’s mother, Louise was the name of Albert’s mother...”

“That had nothing to do with your name. Victoria, Mary, Elizabeth, all queens. Regina is Latin for queen-”

“Yes, but Elizabeth was a queen most people like whereas Mary is a queen no one likes. Why would you not choose Anne?”

“But you named Maggie Emily Adelaide-”

“Oh, Gina, do stop.”

“What? If there is nothing to it?”

Victoria tried to resume her best stoic facade.

“You expect to continue this tiresome conversation all the way home?”

“Why name Elizabeth when mentioning your Uncle George would have sufficed? Or perhaps my reproachable blood comes from both sides?”

“You have no idea what you are talking about-”

“Then why do you not tell me? Supposing my mother were not a queen, would my title be Her Serene Highness or the Honorable Miss Regina Lamb?”

“You ought not even speak of such things-”

Suddenly the details of the night Gina was conceived were as clear as the scenery outside the carriage. The storm, the flood, the feeling beneath her feet as she walked across the palace.

The next morning when Lord M tried to warn her about the consequences of her conceiving his child.

The consequences stared back at her finally demanding answers.

“I want to know the truth about who I am-”

“You are better off without it!”
“Why is that?”

“Fine, Gina! You want to know the truth?! Yes, William is your father, not Albert. You are a viscount’s daughter, does that suit you?!”

Gina stared back at her.

“Gina, I did not mean that, I only meant to-” She sighed. “It is preposterous to think-”

“You lied to me,” said Gina. “You lied to everyone. You made Papa lie to me-”

“Gina, we had to protect you. I thought we would have a son, that your legitimacy would never be a question, but it is-”

“So, more accurately, I am not a viscount’s daughter, I am a viscount’s bastard.”

“Never say that.”

“No, really, I am surprised you did not expect my reproachable behavior.”

“It doesn’t mean anything, Gina.”

“Yes, it does.”

Will left the meeting exhausted. He had almost forgotten how tiresome coronations could be.

He stopped to check on his phone. Missed calls from Maggie. He stopped and rang back to no answer.

“I’m calling back,” he said.

He sighed and hung up, realizing he was standing before a painting he had commissioned in another life. A life when he was monarch and Victoria was the ambassador’s wife. His mistress, painted here with their two daughters.

“Professor Lamb.”

He turned to see Major Beadle.

“Oh, I was just on my way-”

“Admiring the painting?”

“Yes.”

“I was hoping to have that word. My office is-”

“I am going to meet a friend-”

“Or you’re meeting one now.”

Will let out a breath he did not realize he had been holding in.

“Here we are then,” said Will.
“Yes, here we are.” He shrugged. “We really should come up with a code word.”

“I don’t see how it would do us much good.”

“Where’s my wife?”

Will furrowed his brow. “You-”

“Oh, God, has she married that horse-faced shite again?”

Will sighed. “I thought that you might have... contacted her.”

“How would I? I don’t know where or who she is. Except apparently she’s-”

“You didn’t send her a passage from Persuasion?”

“No.”

Will got out his mobile again. Beadle eyed him.

“What’s going on?”

“Well, if you didn’t know who she was, someone else certainly did...” He waited for her to pick up.

When they arrived at the palace, it was indeed dark. Melbourne greeted them at the door.

“Where on Earth did you go?,” asked Melbourne. “You know you left me alone with your ministers? I had to fend for myself.”

“I am going to my room,” said Gina.

“Are you not hungry, darling?”

“No,” Gina proclaimed as she violently gathered her skirts and stormed up the staircase.

Melbourne looked at Victoria. “What happened to her? Is she ill? I would have gone to Claremont myself-”

He stopped speaking.

“Something’s happened,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Well, are you going to tell me?”

“I ruined everything, Lord M.”

“Ruined what?”

“Gina tried to accept Prince Philippe’s proposal-”

“His what?!!”
“So I went to stop it because I did not wish to worry you and I accused her. I said her Lamb blood led Philippe on—”

“Her Lamb blood?”

“I tried to deny everything, Lord M, to say I misspoke, but she is too clever by half—”

Melbourne scoffed. “Some of that Lamb blood again.”

“Lord M, this is no time for jokes!”

“Of course not. Strictly speaking it would be Egremont blood.”

“This is serious!”

“Did you suppose she would never know?”

“I thought that was the point.”

“These matters are never secret forever.”

“How can you be so relaxed?!”

He sighed. “Because it has happened to me before, remember? And Emily and Frederick and George, but truly, George was not surprised...”

Victoria sighed. “This is a nightmare.”

“I shall go to her.”

Gina sat at the maid brushed out her hair. There was a knock at the door.

“May I enter?”

The maid curtsied at Melbourne.

“You may leave us,” said Gina.

The maid left. Melbourne motioned at the tray.

“I sent up supper for you.”

“I find I have no appetite.”

“Oh. Very dramatic,” said Melbourne.

He took his seat on the sofa by the fire.

“You know, your room looks less and less as if it belongs to a child,” said Melbourne. “Every time I look in here I think a young woman must live in here. You have your own maid. You shall need your own ladies soon enough.”

“Did she send you to tell you what a child I am being?”
“I sent myself.” He tilted his head. “Though I would never tell you what a child you are being. You have a right to be upset. Though you ought not be solely upset at her.”

“You lied to me.”

“I lied to you so you would not have to. You were too young for a very long time.” He leaned forward to take her hand. “Do not think that I love you any less.”

“And if I had been Albert’s?”

“Oh, darling, I would never in any circumstance to able to love you any other than I do.”

“She said she was hoping for a son so I would not...”

Melbourne sighed. “She did want a son. We came close once, but... I think she wanted to spare you the strain of becoming queen one day. Before you judge her too harshly, remember, it is a burden she had borne since she was not much older than you.”

“Do you think I am capable of being queen?”

“Since the moment I laid eyes on you.” He paused. "You are still her eldest daughter."

"I believe the law mentions something about legitimacy."

"You think the title will not belong to you?"

"Of course it doesn't."

"You know, I have a title that does not belong to me and if I had not had it, I would have certainly never met your mama or had you or your sisters. What a sad life that would have been." He looked up. "Perhaps titles are not so arbitrary, perhaps there is a case to be argued for the hand of destiny in the cause of English monarchy."

“So, I am to be Queen not because I am correct, but because I am destined?"

"As good a reason as any."

Gina shook her head. "I do not know if I believe that."

"Perhaps try and then one day you will." He kissed her on the forehead. "I will go to Claremont-"

"Papa."

"And see what I can salvage of this. Your mama is not one for subtlety." He paused. "You do see why he would be a bad match?"

"Yes, I suppose."

"Good. Now, you must sleep, tell me what you will dream of?"

"Papa-" She rolled her eyes.

"I insist."

Gina sighed. "A quiet day at Brocket Hall reading a novel amongst the rooks."

"A very good choice."
Will had tried everyone as Beadle saw to the end of the Queen’s official calendar. Bobby, Izzy, and even Matthew, still in Russia. He hadn’t even answered.

So he tried Victoria.

“Hello?” She sounded as if she had been asleep.

“Victoria.”

“Will. Where are you?”

“A friend of mine is having a... family emergency.”

“Not Maggie, is it?”

His eyes widened just as Beadle arrived dressed in civilian clothes. “Why would you ask if it was Maggie?”

“Did she say anything?”

“She said she was meeting Matt at Claridge’s-”

That was impossible. "Did she say it was Matt?"

"Well, she said it was her husband-"

“Victoria, I have to go-”

“What do you mean you have to go? When are you coming home?”

“I’ll ring later.”

He hung up and looked at Beadle. “Claridge’s. She thought she was meeting you.”

“Well, she’s not.”

Will nodded. “We need to go.”
Hi there. It has been a while and I feel like I should give some explanation. I kind of have had a lot of struggle with my mental health as of late and it's been hard to get back to this.

On a tangential note, would anyone be interested in a prompt based modern Vicbourne AU? I have an idea and it might lay the groundwork for a larger story, but small to start. I basically want something I can work on during my lunch break on my phone which was kind of why Fortune's Fools started (Any Discovery fans in here?).

So, please spot subtle and not so subtle references to actors’ other works. Let me know what you think and happy reading!

(Oh, and for anyone playing the home game, the hint for the Russian readers was that Zhukov is Russian for beetle hence... Beadle)

There was once an old man who lived in Moscow...

George Beadle paused, taking a sip of tea as he wrote.

A strange old man, who had won battles and saved the world. Now the world no longer had use for him and he walked each morning with his dog.

And that was how he found out she was dead.

“Are you writing again?”

He looked up from the table, the teenager bearing a tired expression.

“Good morning, Emma.”

“Why do you write?”

He sighed. “Good morning, Dad. How are you? Ready for your new job?”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Have we got anything in?”

“Your breakfast is on the counter.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Dad, I can’t eat all of that fat and carbs.”

“You need fat and you need carbs. We’ve spoken about this, Emma.” He paused. “Maybe you ought to write.”

“Me?”
George nodded. “I find it helps me organize my thoughts, see things clearly.”

“What thoughts?”

He shrugged. “Just thoughts I have. Memories.”

“I need to get to school.”

“I’ll drive you.”

She shook her head. “I can get the bus.”

“Darling—”

Emma picked up her bookbag and stalked out.

“I love you!,” he called.

The door slammed.

Victoria looked at Zhukov.

“What do we do?”

“What do you think I can do? I’m here, we’ve got two guns—”

“Well, we can’t just let the Germans invade—”

“There’s no just letting, we have nothing here!”

“I have what I’ve always had, I have you!”

He tilted his head, revealing a smile. “You do have me.”

He looked at the Germans.

“We’ve got to find your people.”

Beadle took one last look in the mirror, making certain his uniform was in order.

He stepped out into the anteroom in front of his office meeting Patel. The lieutenant had been here with the last equerry but Group Commander Lowe had decided not to stay with the new queen.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Good morning.”

“What’s on Her Majesty’s agenda?”

“The usual. She will meet with you and then she receiving three new ambassadors and their wives.
A luncheon with the board of the Prince of Wales’ Memorial Trust and the afternoon is filled with preparations for the coronation.”

Beadle looked over the agenda and nodded. “Later on today, I’ll have you type up a memo to the squadron commanders to begin our own preparations for the coronation.”

“Yes, sir.”

“It’s a once in a lifetime opportunity to be in a coronation parade...”

“Yes, sir.”

The door opened as Della entered.

“Duchess,” said Beadle in surprise.

He and Patel quickly bowed their heads.

“You’re excused, Lieutenant.”

Patel left.

“I just came to wish you luck on your first day,” said Della. “You’ll like the Queen.”

“I’m sure I will. Thank you.”

“I wanted to give you something-”

“Oh, that’s not necessary. Really.”

“But-”

“Duchess, I’ve got to be getting on.”

Della nodded. “Of course. I won’t keep you.”

Beadle and Patel walked up to the Queen’s reception room. The Queen was already waiting.

“Good morning, Major.”

“Ma’am.”

She motioned towards the royal photographer. “Shall we?”

“This way if you please, your majesty.”

The Queen looked up. “Ah, the Victoria IV ceremonial portrait. Any objections, Major?”

“Absolutely not, ma’am.”

The photographer set to work.

“Are you married, Major?”

“No, ma’am. Divorced.”

“Children?”
“I have a daughter. Emma.”

The Queen smiled. “Named after my favorite aunt, perhaps?”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

“How old is Emma?”

“Thirteen going on thirty.”

“You’re frightening me, Major. Someday the Princess Royal will turn into a sullen teenager.”

“It will be here before you know it, ma’am.”

The Queen looked at the photographer. “Do we have enough?”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you.”

The photographer and his assistant left. The Queen turned to Beadle.

“I haven’t got any rules or anything, I suppose. I haven’t done this before. I shudder to think what Group Commander Lowe must have told you. She was not my greatest admirer.”

“Well, ma’am, Group Commander Lowe has always been rather good at admiring herself, if I may say so.”

The Queen smiled. “I think we’ll get on just fine, Major.”

Victoria came out of the empty tea shop, again meeting Georgy on the pavement.

“No one?,” she asked.

“Not a soul. Worst case, they’ve been rounded up and taken somewhere.”

“The church,” she suggested.

They walked down the path to the idyllic little village church. Georgy reached for the door.

“It’s locked.”

Victoria spotted a loose brick on the ground.

“Here.”

“What do you want to do with that?”

“Break open the door.”

“I’m not breaking the door on a church-”

“I thought you all were against religion, the opiate of the masses and all that.”

“You read Marx?”
“Well, I had to know what you were all on about, didn’t I?” She turned with the brick. “I’m head of the Church, it’s my church and I can break the door open if I want to.”

Victoria gave it a few tries. Georgy sighed and took it from her.

“Oh, now you’ll do it?”

“Seeing as how I’m accompanied by the Defender of the Faith...”

He busted it open in one try.

“I hate you,” said Victoria.

“No, you don’t.”

They walked inside. The windows were shut.

“I’ve been here before,” said Victoria.

“Have you?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Suddenly, someone grabbed Victoria’s hand. She shuddered and Georgy pointed his gun, pushing her aside to reveal an elderly nun.

“The general and the Valkyrie, you have returned to us.”

“What was that?,” asked Georgy.

“No, it can’t be,” said another woman.

“It is you, isn’t it, ma’am?”

There was a clamor as the people in the sanctuary emerged from their hiding places.

The vicar appeared.

“Your Majesty,” said the Vicar.

He bowed as the congregation became a mass of bows and curtseys.

“We came here to pray when we saw the Germans arriving...” he started.

Beadle could not believe his luck in looking at Will Lamb. His old compatriot. Well, perhaps not under the name Will Lamb, but so many others. Patel led him up the staircase.

“Professor Lamb, I’m Major Beadle.”

Will looked at him, trying not to betray surprise. Beadle knew the look.

“Her Majesty’s new equerry?”
“Indeed. Her Majesty is waiting.”

Beadle led Will to the audience room. He turned as they arrived. He needed to speak to him in any way he could.

“I would like to speak with you if you have a moment after your meeting, Professor.”

“Gladly.”

Beadle nodded and knocked on the door.

“Professor Lamb, your majesty.”

The Queen smiled. “Thank you, Major.

Beadle shut the door on them.

He was here and he was awake.

“And that’s really all there is to that,” said Victoria.

The congregation stared at her.

“Why are you wearing trousers? The Queen don’t wear trousers,” said a little boy.

An older sister smacked him on the head.

“So, this is Marshal Georgy Zhukov, the hero of Stalingrad, the-”

“Why’s he praying?”

Victoria looked behind her at the altar.

“One moment. Excuse me.”

Victoria knelt at the altar.

“Georgy, I will stab you to death right here-”

“That you defending the faith?”

“What are you doing?”

“I’m thinking.”

“Is this what you did at Stalingrad?”

“At Stalingrad, I had tanks and men and maps, here I’ve got the elderly, children, two guns, no communications-”

“You didn’t have communications at the Battle of Borodino-”

“Because that went so well.”
“Perhaps you could strike them with her sword.”

They turned to see the nun kneeling beside them.

“And could someone please explain her to me,” said Georgy.

“I have no idea.”

Georgy turned and stood, smiling.

“Anyone got any guns?”

“We’re supposed to be issued some,” a woman offered. “Civil Defense.”

“Any chance of that coming in about the next hour?”

There was silence.

“That wasn’t a rhetorical...” He sighed. “Who has got a telephone?”

“We have one in the rectory,” offered the vicar.

“Does it work?”

“Yes,” the vicar said in puzzlement.

“That is the first good news I have had so far.” He turned to the Queen. “You, call your army. Can someone give me the lay of the land?”

After a tea welcoming him into the Royal Household, Beadle spotted Will after the meeting in front of Victoria’s Restoration portrait.

“Professor Lamb.”

Oh, I was just on my way-”

“Admiring the painting?”

“Yes.”

Beadle nodded. He could remember the scuffle surrounding it, the constant power struggle of Charles’ mistresses. It had been bloody exhausting. “I was hoping to have that word. My office is-”

He tried to squirm out of it. “I am going to meet a friend-”

“Or you’re meeting one now.”

He let out a breath as the other shoe dropped.

“Here we are then,” said Will.

“Yes, here we are.” Beadle shrugged. “We really should come up with a code word.”
“I don’t see how it would do us much good-”

He couldn’t hold onto the question any longer. It had been years. Years of waiting for an answer.
“Where’s my wife?”

Will furrowed his brow. “You-”

Not that anything but that. “Oh, God, has she married that horse-faced shite again?”

Fucking Count Charleston.

Will sighed. “I thought that you might have... contacted her.”

“How would I? I don’t know where or who she is. Except apparently she’s-”

Married to that horse faced shite. Though he really ought to stop using that expression. After all, he liked horses.

“You didn’t send her a passage from Persuasion?”

He could remember a pleasant night with tired limbs in a country house curled next to her, but the alarm he sensed cut through any pleasure. “No.”

He eyed Will as he got out his mobile. “What’s going on?”

“Well, if you didn’t know who she was, someone else certainly did...”

“Who?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“More tea, Tommy?,” asked Victoria.

“No, thank you.”

Victoria exchanged looks with Bill. She had been let in on the secret that Her Majesty was missing. They had finally taken a break from the search for breakfast. Still, the Queen was first in their mind.

Rather Maggie. And Georgy. It had been a surprise to see him, just as it was a surprise when she had first spotted him in this life on a magazine cover. She had been teasing Bill about how handsome he was, but she knew her Maggie, destined to make every mistake she had.

“Gina, darling, are you quite finished?,” Bill asked, cleaning up the toddler’s face.

The phone rang. Victoria stood to get it.

“Bourne Cottage.”

“Is Bill there?”

She knew the voice immediately. “Mag-” She stopped. “Majesty.”
They stood immediately.

“Where are you?”

Bill struggled to share the phone, practically bending over his much shorter wife.

“A village with a church on the coast. There are Germans here.”

“What village, ma’am?”

“I don’t know. The church is familiar, but it’s just stone and a turret and-”

Victoria interrupted the Queen. “Are there roses in the windows?”

Bill frowned at her.

“Well, now that you mention it-”

“Burnham Deepdale,” said Victoria.

“Norfolk?,” asked Tommy.

“How do you know?”

“I saw it once on a sketching holiday,” she partially lied.

The Queen exited the church as Georgy finished up with some of the teenagers from the village.

“Did you know we’re in Norfolk?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“I asked someone where we were.” He held up a paper as he took out his glasses. “Someone even made me a map. Great plan your civil defense people had to destroy all the maps, though they also took down the street signs so why bother?”

Victoria shrugged. “How inconsiderate of us. We don’t have five feet of snow to protect us.”

He grunted. “How did your communications go?”

“Well. Help will be on the way. Somehow Lady Victoria knew where we were from the description.”

“You mean your mum?”

She sighed. “Yes. Sometimes my mum.”

“You really don’t remember?”

“What ought I remember?”

“Your father built this church. That’s what he did once, built churches and cathedrals. You helped.”
“Why didn’t you remember where we were then?”
“I was never here. William’s mark is on the foundation stone.”
She watched him look over the map.
“You have a plan?,” asked Victoria.
“I have a plan.”
Victoria looked at the teenage boys suddenly scurrying away.
“What’s happening?,” she asked.
“They’re going to get us some guns.”
“Does this village have a hidden weapons cache?”
“No, but the Germans have.”
“You sent boys to-”
“They were men the moment the Germans landed their boats.”
“A great comfort to their mothers.”
She started walking away. Georgy grabbed her by the wrist. Victoria caught sideways glances from a group of the village women.
“Unhand me.”
“I will not.”
“I am-”
“If the next word is queen, you can just forget it. You asked me for help-”
“Not like this-”
“If there were another way, I would, but there isn’t, Ritochna and this is what we have.” He took a breath. “You asked me the other night about this and I told you then I don’t like it, either, but I like the other options even less.”
He finally let her wrist drop to her side.
“What is your plan?,” she finally acquiesced.
“Those boys are going to steal anything they can. There’s dynamite from a mine around here. We will blow up the road the Germans are going to come in on and ambush them.”
“That isn’t a terrible idea,” said Victoria.
“I know. I came up with it.”
“What can I do to help?”
“Try not to get yourself killed.”
"I was going to do that in any event."

"I mean it. Stay out of danger."

"I know it’s been quite some time, Georgy, but you must know me better than that."

"Fine," he said. “Do me a favor, though.”

“What?”

“If either of us dies, don’t marry that horse-faced shite next time round.”

“I doubt I will be able to do anything about that.”

“Well, let’s give it a go anyway.”

After his duties were seen to, Beadle returned to where Will had frantically been calling for any sign of Maggie. “Why would you ask if it was Maggie?”

He waited. Presumably, it was Victoria on the other end.

“Did she say anything?” He waited. "Did she say it was Matt?"

Beadle waited expectantly.

“Victoria, I have to go-” Will tried to hurry her off the phone, “I’ll ring later.”

He finally managed to hang up and looked at Beadle. “Claridge’s. She thought she was meeting you.”

“Well, she’s not.”

Will nodded. “We need to go.”

“The car park’s out this way,” said Beadle.

“Do you have a gun?”

Beadle caught him looking at the one he had taken out of the locked box in his office.

“You don’t?,” he shot back.

“No, of course not.”

“Is that wise?”

“It’s not as if we’re off to fight the Germans.”

“Or the Dutch,” said Beadle.

Will sighed. “Can’t you get over that?”

“No. Never.”
“We did get New York out of it."

“You say that like it makes up for everything.”

This was bad.

So bad.

Victoria had thought little else as the battle raged on and she tried to keep her vantage point.

How many Germans had they brought along with them? They seemed to be neverending and Victoria knew the ammunition was running low.

“Your Majesty!”

Victoria looked from behind her hiding place. Reinforcements were here and God knew what Bill was doing here, shouting from behind a Jeep.

She made a dash for him as one of the officers shouted to cover her. Soon enough she had reached Bill and Tommy behind the Jeep.

“Ma’am-” started Tommy.

Victoria threw her arms around a very stunned Bill. Her best friend, her father... It was like being home.

Tommy looked at her as if she had lost her mind.

Victoria released him and turned to the captain standing with them. “We need reinforcements. Send your men in there.”

The captain looked stymied.

“Were you waiting for someone else?!,” she snapped.

“No, ma’am.”

The captain went off and started barking orders.

“And for God’s sake, get Georgy out of there!”

“Georgy, ma’am?,” asked Tommy.

“Marshal Zhukov, of course.”

“We’ve made arrangements for your return to Brocket Hall-”

“No, I won’t leave.”

“Commendable as that may be, ma’am, your duty is to your own safety.”
“Oddly enough I don’t recall that from my coronation oath.”

Suddenly, they heard an explosion and turned to see a fiery ball on the road.

“Georgy-”

She felt Bill holding her back, protocol going out the window.

Finally, some began to emerge out of the smoke. Women from the village and finally Georgy. Victoria was so relieved she did not notice for a second that he was dragging someone along with him.

“Marshal Zhukov-” she began trying to fashion some patrician words of relief.

“You got air support?,” he asked in the direction of the captain. “Meanwhile, look who I found.”

Victoria stood face to face with Uncle Leopold.
“How long are you two staying?,” asked Maggie as her father worked in her kitchen.

Bobby shrugged. “That depends. How long’s your husband going to be an ass?”

“How long’s your husband going to be an ass?”

Her father nodded. “And so I’ve been proven right.”

“So you finally have your chance to say I told you so?”

“I wouldn’t do that to you. I’ll just quietly stand here and be self-satisfied.”

Izzy came into the kitchen. “What’s all that in Matt’s office?”

Maggie recalled Will’s myriad boxes. “I have a friend, he asked me to hang onto some things for him while he shifts.”

“Post came.”

Maggie sifted through the envelopes. “You know, you two don’t have to stay. I have to learn to manage on my own sometime.”

“Absolutely not,” said Bobby.

“You’re our only daughter, these are our only grandchildren, where else would we want to be?,” asked Izzy.

Maggie’s heart stopped as she found an envelope with Russian writing.

“Alright, wee bairns, supper is ready!,” called Bobby.

Georgy Zhukov read.

It was the usual, papers of state and more particularly the plans for tomorrow. Khruschev’s charm tour of the West. He had been asked by the premier to come along himself for this leg.

“She likes you for some reason,” he had said.
“I’ve not seen her—”

“I know. Since the war.”

“Since the victory.”

Now he was here, some nine years later and less than twelve hours away from seeing the love of his lives.

There was a knock at the door of the hotel room.

“Comrade Marshal,” said the guard at the door.

He sighed and put aside the papers. Hopefully he wasn’t being summoned for something. That never went well.

He opened the door. The young door minder tried to hide a smirk.

“Your delivery has arrived, Comrade Marshal.”

“Delivery? I didn’t—”

He then spotted a blonde.

“Comrade Bulganin sent me,” she said in perfect Russian.

“Well, who am I to refuse Comrade Bulganin? Do come in.”

The blonde entered.

Georgy turned to the guard.

“You may want to grab a drink. I won’t be going anywhere.”

The guard tried to hide a smirk. “Yes, Comrade Marshal.”

Georgy closed the hotel room door and locked it. He forced a chair under the doorknob and turned to see the blonde removing her hair to reveal deep brown locks.

The Queen turned slipping out of her fur coat.

“I came incognito,” she said.

“I can see that.”

“You look as if you didn’t find it convincing.”

“Only because Bulganin would never send me this high end a prostitute,” he said taking the coat.

“How much was this?”

“No idea.”

“Of course not.”

“Are you interested in furs?”

“I ought to be. I worked as a furrier.”
“You what?,” Victoria asked in amazement.

“You keep forgetting I have actually had to work this time round. Where do your people suppose you are?”

“I said I was taken ill.”

“Did you come unaccompanied?”

“No. I have a very confused driver downstairs.”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Are you criticizing my plan?”

“No, who am I to question the oppressor of the masses?”

“Mind your place.”

“And my place?”

She walked back towards him, hands on his chest. “Beneath me.”

Georgy nodded. “I suppose I could make an exception this once.”

Maggie practically burst as she answered the door for Will.

“I rang you last night.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” said Will, stepping in the doorway. “Victoria wanted to rearrange the entire nursery.”

“Do you have long?”

“No, I’m off to see Ellie-” He sighed. “I have a meeting with the Queen and her coronation committee.”

“I got a note.”

Brimming with excitement, she handed the note over.

He looked. “Isn’t this lines from Persuasion?”

“Yeah. That was our thing.”

He tilted his head. “That was your thing?”

“Are you judging me?”

He sighed. “I don’t know what you-”

She handed him another slip of paper. It’s a phone number and a time.”

“You suppose this is Georgy?”
“Who else would it be?”

“If he knows where you are, why wouldn’t he just say? He’s never been particularly coy. Actually, quite the opposite.”

“Who else would it be?”

“I’ve no idea, but I don’t want you going to meet anyone alone. He could be very different this time.”

Maggie rolled her eyes. “I doubt it.”

“Albert was a Nazi and now he has a man bun.”

Maggie frowned. “Weird.”

Will checked the time. "Beyond weird. I must go. Promise me?"

"Promise what?"

"Promise you won’t go off adventuring on your own."

She rolled her eyes. "I promise."

Will narrowed his eyes at her. "And yet, I don't believe you."

He was out the door all of sixty seconds before she had her mobile out and dialed the number in the letter.

“Thank you for calling Claridge’s. A member of staff will be with you shortly.”

Maggie hung up the phone. “Getting sentimental, aren’t we, Georgy?”

The Queen waited in the reception hall.

“I’m surprised that you didn’t force Papa to come.”

She turned to see the Princess Royal come to her side flanked by her own ladies-in-waiting.

“After all, it seems rather important. The Soviet Premier.”

“Mind your manners.”

Princess Victoria glanced over at Emma, being given a final once over by nanny. “What’s she doing here?”

The Queen rolled her eyes. “Learning her place. As you ought to.”

“I am a grown woman. I know what I am doing. Why even bother sending me to university if I wasn’t to make my own decisions?”

“Anthony Ashley-Cooper is not a decision so much as a suicide mission. When you choose a husband, you are choosing a partner in ruling the commonwealth.”

“Is that why you chose Papa?”
“I was never supposed to be Queen.”

“Nor was I,” the Princess bit back.

The Queen looked at her eldest. “You need to learn to save your sharpest tools.”

“My lords, ladies and gentlemen,” came the announcement as the great doors opened, “Her Majesty, Queen Victoria IV, her royal highness the Princess Royal, Victoria and her royal highness Princess Emma.”

They descended the stairs. The Queen tried to avoid looking at Georgy. After all this was for state.

“Premier Bulganin. Minister Khruschev.”

Khruschev took the lead in speaking. “Your Majesty. We are honored to be your guests.”

“I am always glad when our two nations meet happily.”

“I feel the same way.” He motioned. “Of course you know our defense minister, Marshal Zhukov.”

The Queen smiled. “We are acquainted.”

“That’s an understatement,” said Georgy.

She had to smile at his utter contempt for the pretense.

“Always good when old war comrades meet,” said Bulganin who seemed completely clueless.

“Indeed.” The Queen beckoned the princesses forward. “Might I introduce my daughters? Victoria, the Princess Royal and Princess Emma?”

Pleasantries were exchanged. Emma stared up at Georgy.

“Stop it,” hissed the Princess Royal.

Emma seemed unaffected. “That’s one of our medals.”

Georgy looked down. Of course his uniform was covered in medals. “Yes, the Order of the Bath. Your mother gave me that one.”

“For services to the Crown and to everyone, really,” said the Queen. “Shall we go in to dinner?”

She motioned for the nanny to take away Emma. Bulganin took her arm.

“I was sorry to hear your husband wouldn’t be here.”

“Well, it could not be helped. I’m afraid he has other duties.”

Maggie entered Claridge’s. She walked towards the desk.

“How may I help, madame?”

“My name is Maggie Giles. I wonder if you have a message for me?”

The clerk looked. “No.”
“Maggie Reid?”

“No.”

“Victoria.”

“Victoria Reid?”

“No, Victoria...” She paused. “Wait, what was my surname?”

“Pardon, madam?”

“Victoria Melbourne? Victoria Lamb?”

“Madam, there are people waiting.”

“Oh, I know. Countess Margarita Rostislavna Zhukonova.”

The clerk stared. “Did you just make that up?”

“No.”

The clerk went to the computer. “How does one spell-”

Maggie paused. “Oh. I’ve never transliterated it before. There must be an R...”

“This must be it,” said the clerk. He went to a cabinet and came back with an envelope. “Here you are, Countess.”

“Thank you.”

Maggie looked at the letter and frowned.

“You ran,” said the Queen as she walked onto the balcony.

“Well so have you now.” He offered her the cigarette he had been smoking. She took it.

“I thought Bulganin was meant to be in charge.”

“Not much longer on that one.”

She sighed. “Why does your lot have to change leaders so often?”

“Unlike here. Nothing ever changes.”

“How is your position?”

“My position?,” he asked.

“Are you safe? On the edge? What?”

“Khruschev needs me. I have the military. I’ll be fine. Now, I have a real question.”

“Do you?”
“When can I make love to you again?”

“You had me last night.”

“One night after nine years? Ritochka, don’t be cruel.”

“We can’t sneak off at the moment.”

“Suppose I just took you in the cupboard?”

“You’re incorrigible.” She paused. “There will be opportunity at Brocket Hall for the ceremony. I’ve seen to the room arrangements myself.”

“Oh?”

“I insisted you have a view of the river. There’s a hidden door.”

“Why is there a hidden door?”

“Given the previous occupants, there’s no telling. Your comrades will be situated far away.”

Maggie walked into the restaurant. She gave her introduction as the Countess and followed the hostess to a table.

“Ritochka.”

The endearment fell flat leaving the impostor’s lips. Still, who had sent him? And how did he know?

“Georgy.”

“I am so relieved you understood my message. I thought I might be here waiting alone.”

Wrong again.

“How did you find me?”

“One can always find one’s soul companion, no?”

This imitation was pathetic.

“Why don’t we go upstairs?”

“I thought we would talk,” he said.

Such bad answers.

“I’m done talking,” she said.
“Emma doesn’t belong to Father, does she?”

The Queen tried not to freeze as she turned about, stopped in the hall.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Come to think of it, the invasion was just nine months before Emma was born, wasn’t it? Everyone’s always thought it was that ghilly from the Duke of Hamilton’s place, but they were wrong, weren’t they?

She shook her head. “You’re talking nonsense.”

“Then you won’t mind if I tell everyone.”

“Who would believe you?”

“Well, perhaps no one here would believe me and even if they did, they might never say anything, but perhaps Khruschev or Bulganin might be interested.”

The Queen walked towards her daughter. “Even speaking such baseless gossip would put Marshal Zhukov’s life in danger.”

“Why would you care?”

“Victoria—”

“I want to marry Anthony.”

The Queen stepped back. “You’re blackmailing me.”

“I ought to be exposing you! Poor Father not to mention William must not have been cold in his grave when you decided to sleep with that brute—”

Before she knew what had happened, the Queen had slapped her daughter across the cheek.

“You do not know what you speak of.”

The Princess straightened herself, all that stubborn Hanover in her.

“The price for my silence is permission to marry Anthony.”

“You are making a terrible mistake.”

“I won’t even tell Emma she’s a bastard.”

“You bitch,” spat the man as he regained consciousness.

“You arsehole.” Maggie took the chair from the desk and sat. “Now, ought I knock you unconscious again or are you going to tell me what I need to know?”

“About what?”

“Who are you?”

He was quiet.
“I don’t know you, so you must not be part of the inner circle, but I did find this Austrian passport.” She held it up. “Fritz Wagner. That makes me suspect you somehow know Uncle Leopold. He’s always come back Germanic.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Come now. Who are you? A disgruntled Nazi?”

“I’m not a Nazi!”

“Second question, where is Georgy? The real one? Not the pathetic impression you did.”

There was a sudden frantic knock at the door.

“Who is that?,” Maggie whispered. “Friends of yours?”

“I have no idea what you mean.”

Maggie stood and walked to the door. She stood to the side, waiting to attack. The door suddenly burst open and two tall figures strode in, she struck the first blow.

Which she realized too late was going into Will’s face.

“Jesus! Margaret!,” he shouted.

“I’m so sorry! How was I to know it was you?!?”

“Look presumably!”

“I didn’t know you were coming!”

“Answer your bloody mobile!,” shouted Will.

It was then she realized Will had company.

“Georgy.”

“Ritochka.”

He covered her mouth with his as he backed her against the wall.

“I’m sorry, could you two not shag right now?,” spat Will.

They stopped.

“Seems a bit hypocritical coming from you,” said George.

Will pointed. “Why is there a man tied up?”

“Oh, well, he’s the one who invited me here.”

“Did he now?,” asked George crossing the room to the hostage. “Who sent you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

George turned. “I could take the wiring out of one of the lamps, see if he changes his tune.”
“I don’t think that’s wise,” said Will.

“So, the next best option really is to go...” said Maggie.

“Are you going to leave me tied up like this?,” the impostor spat.

“Obviously not,” said George. He took a stripped a pillow of its case. “I’m going to gag you.”

“Your Majesty.”

The Queen gave words of greeting to Khruschev, Bulganin and Zhukov. Eden offered to serve her and she declined.

“Marshal Zhukov was explaining to us the English custom of serving oneself at breakfast,” said Khruschev.

“We English always serve ourselves at breakfast.”

“But not the rest of the time,” sniped Bulganin.

“Of course you wouldn’t understand our ways, Premier Bulganin,” said the Queen. “But I assure you our customs are hardly the customs of the Czar. I don’t own my servants.”

“Do you ask what they wish?”

“Why on Earth would I insult them in such a manner?”

The Queen sat.

Georgy spoke. “Comrade Bulganin does not yet grasp English manners. Or possibly any fucking manners.”

Eden’s eyes widened. “I say-”

“It’s alright, Prime Minister,” said the Queen. “If you do recall, Marshal Zhukov and I are old compatriots.”

“Yes,” said Khruschev. “It was heartening to see how many of your people had come out for the ceremony. I think you might be as popular here as you are at home, Georgy.”

They split for the morning. Bulganin and Khruschev pleading some matters of state because of their next stop at a factory.

“I do hope they don’t incite a revolution,” said the Queen.

“Those two couldn’t incite a whore at a brothel.”

“As eloquent as ever.”

“Don’t worry, should they manage to incite a revolt, I’ll protect you.”

“Against the proletariat?”

“Haven’t I always?”

She nodded. “Yes, you have.”
He smiled and they began their walk.

“You seemed distracted last night,” said Georgy.

“How are your daughters?,” asked the Queen. “It is just daughters, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Well, Era is married. Margarita is a lawyer and a professor. Ella is studying at the university.”

“Not bad for a furrier’s daughters.”

Georgy cracked a smile. “I suppose not.” He took a moment. “I hear the Princess Royal has a suitor.”

“She does.”

“You hate him.”

The Queen looked up at him questioningly.

“I can always tell when you despise someone, Ritochka.”

“Excepting yourself.”

“No. Especially myself. Is that why you were distracted last night?”

“A bit,” Victoria answered half-heartedly. “He’s a playboy and that just won’t do for this sort of life.”

“What does her father say?”

“Matthew always takes the position opposing mine.” She was desperate to change the subject. “Does Era have children?”

“Not yet.” He looked at her. “What’s the problem? You’re the monarch. Tell her no.”

“I might not be able to.”

“Why not?”

“You know my mother’s had a saying about me, centuries now. Victoria, the first one, that is.”

“Oh?”

She nodded. “She said I was destined to always make her mistakes.”

“What mistake?”

Victoria’s attention flicked to the distance where Emma rode astride her mare. The horse bucked her.

“Emma!”

Before she knew it, she had arrived where the nanny and one of the grooms were already at Emma’s side.

“Emma, darling, what happened?,,” she asked.

“I hate her! She never does what I want!”
“Did you try to take her over the hurdle?”

Victoria turned back to see Georgy holding the mare by the reins.

“She got scared and threw me off!”

“What’s her name?”

“Lily,” said Emma.

“Hello, Lily...” He looked over at Emma while he patted the horse. “Of course she’s scared, you’re scared.”

“I did jumps with Orchid all the time!”


The Queen shrugged.

Emma ignored this. “I am not scared!”

“I suppose Orchid was a bit older than Lily is. How old are you, Lily? Three?”

“She’s four and it’s no excuse.”

“You need to start being a bit nicer to Lily if you ever want to really work with her.”

“She’s hopeless!”

Victoria sighed. “Emma, do go inside and-”

Emma stared aghast as Georgy took the saddle off the horse.

Georgy looked at the groom. “Be a good man and fetch me a saddle.”

The groom glanced at the Queen for approval before rushing off.

“You aren’t going to ride my horse?”

“You said she was hopeless, I just thought I’d see for myself.”

“Mummy!”

Emma looked plaintively at Victoria.

“He is very good with horses,” said the Queen.

The groom returned with the saddle. Georgy began putting it on himself. He went astride the mare.

“Well trained, is she?,” asked Georgy.

Emma watched in horror as Georgy took the mare over the hurdle. He trotted back.

“How did you do that?”

“Everything that happens with a horse is your responsibility,” said Georgy. “Not the horse. You. Understood?”
"Yes, sir," said Emma.

“Who do you suppose he is?,” asked George.

They had found a pub. Their impostor was secured with a do not disturb sign and they mulled it over pints.

“No idea,” said Will, holding some ice to his face.

Maggie flinched at the bruise forming. “Is it that bad?”

Will looked at her. “If I could still, I would send you to your room.”

“It’s hardly my fault you came in determined to save me.”

“Never mind. I’m sending you to your room.” He sighed. “What on Earth am I going to tell Victoria?”

“You got in a fight,” shrugged George.

“Yes, well, I’m not you, am I?”

"Didn’t you punch Albert?"

"That was only in The Young Queen!," Will snapped.

“Suppose someone’s found us again,” said Maggie. “Like Leopold and Albert and the last time.”

“I’ve seen Albert. I don’t think he’s part of some epic conspiracy,” said Will.

“Right. The man bun.”

“Man bun?,” asked George.

“Who else is there?,” asked Maggie. “Of us. Della, Ellie...”

“John and Mary,” said Will.

“Hold one moment.” George turned to Maggie. “Have you spoken to Della?”

“Yes.”

“She didn’t say anything about you to me.”

“She didn’t what? You mean, she knew you were-”

George shrugged. Maggie looked at Will.

“Don’t look at me. Della and I are hardly on speaking terms.”

“Which I would still love an explanation on,” said Maggie.

“I need to go home,” said Will. “We’ll sort this out later.”

Will got up.
“As straightforward as ever,” said George.

George stood as Maggie watched. He took the seat in the booth closest to her.

“Now,” said George, “where did we leave off?”

“I never saw you again,” said Maggie.

“No,” said George. “A bit rude of you if you ask me, going off and dying like that.”

“You got stripped of power.”

“Well, Khruschev was an arse, but I think we know whose statue is still standing in Red Square.”

“We all have statues.”

“Yes, you do have a nice one over at the park. They put me next to Churchill on that one. I used to go every weekend. Emma and I went past on the way to the playground.”

“Emma?”

“My daughter.” He reached into his pocket for his mobile. “Thirteen going on forty.”

He opened the photos, happily showing off the latest.

“She rides. Quite a horsewoman. I taught her what I know, but now she rides every day.”

Maggie froze as he saw the picture. It was her Emma.

Really, theirs.

“Her mum lives in Essex with the new husband, new kids... Hardly sees her.” He shook his head. “Some of it’s my fault. Well, most of it. You knew that, though.”

He smiled.

“What’s the matter, Ritochka?”

“Nothing, I...” She kissed him. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?”

“Everything.”

Georgy was packing his suitcase when Victoria came through the concealed door.

“What is it?”

“Don’t go.”

Georgy shook his head. “Don’t go where?”

“Home.”

“Do you know something I don’t?”
“Yes.”

“Want to tell me what it is?”

“Not particularly.”

“Am I going to be shot in the head?”

“Perhaps?”

“Nothing new in that,” he quipped.

“Don’t tease, it’s-”

“Oi. Ritochka.” He walked over, placing his hands at her cheeks. “It’s not that bad-”

She scoffed. “I think you’ll find it is. If the Iron Curtain weren’t enough, you have that nest of snakes to contend with-”

“I can handle myself. You don’t need to worry.”

“Don’t go.”

He sighed. “If it was just us, in a second, but it’s not, is it? I have my daughters, their mothers. You don’t want to know what would happen to them if I didn’t come back.”

She sighed. “I hate lives like this.”

“I’ll see you again soon enough. How long do you suppose this Cold War nonsense can go on?”

He kissed her.

The Queen headed downstairs to see her eldest daughter speaking with Bulganin.

“Victoria, come here, please. Tommy, you as well please,” she hastened to say.

Tommy looked quizzical as he followed the princess.

The Queen looked to Tommy. “Would you please draft a statement announcing the Princess Royal’s engagement?”

“Ma’am?”

“Do you mean it?”

“Assuming you can promise no indiscretions.”

The princess looked back to Bulganin and then her mother. “No. There have been no indiscretions.”

“Let’s keep it that way.”

The princess smiled for the first time in weeks. “I’m going to ring Anthony.”

She raced upstairs, brushing past Khruschev and Zhukov.

“Well, living’s for the young, isn’t it?”

Khruschev had no idea how to answer that. They walked to the cars.

“Your Majesty,” said Georgy, offering his hand, “it was a pleasure.”

A hand. So inadequate, but all they could offer.

“Marshal Zhukov, as always, yes, it was.”

And that was that. He got in the car and that was all.

“Ma’am?,” asked Tommy. “I do not wish to question you-”

“Spit it out, Tommy.”

“Has Anthony Ashley-Cooper done something to alter your view on him?”

“No.”

“And yet your majesty’s view on the matter is altered?”

“No, but I gave my permission anyway.” She turned to go back in the house. Tommy followed.

“Did you know rooks mate for life?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Tommy. “I had heard that.”

Works inspired by this one
   Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!