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Queen of Hearts (The Royal Spyness Series Book 8)

By Rhys Bowen



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England, 1934. Georgie's mother, the glamorous and much-married actress, is hearing wedding bells once again—which is why she must hop across the pond for a quickie divorce in Reno. To offer her moral support, Georgie agrees to go along on the all expenses paid voyage across the Atlantic.

While her mother meets movie mogul Cy Goldman—who insists on casting her in his next picture—Georgie finds herself caught up in the secret investigation of a suspected jewel thief. Lucky for her, the lead investigator happens to be her dashing beau, Darcy!

Her mother's movie and Darcy's larceny lead everyone to Cy's Hollywood home, where the likes of Charlie Chaplin are hanging about and there's enough romantic intrigue to fill a double feature. But they hardly get a chance to work out the sleeping arrangements before Cy turns up dead. As if there wasn't enough drama already...



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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the Royal Spyness Mysteries

“Wonderful characters...A delight.”—#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Charlaine Harris

“An insightful blend of old-fashioned whodunnit, clever satire and drawing room comedy of errors.”—*New York Times* bestselling author Jacqueline Winspear

“Brilliant...This is so much more than a murder mystery. It’s part love story, part social commentary, part fun and part downright terrifying. And completely riveting.”—#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Louise Penny

“The perfect fix between seasons for *Downton Abbey* addicts.”—*New York Times* bestselling author Deborah Crombie

“Fans of P.G. Wodehouse looking for laughs mingled with some amateur sleuthing will be quite pleased.”—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Georgie’s high spirits and the author’s frothy prose are utterly captivating.”—*The Denver Post*

“A smashing romp.”—*Booklist* (starred review)

About the Author

Rhys Bowen, a *New York Times* bestselling author, has been nominated for every major award in mystery writing, including the Edgar®, and has won many, including both the Agatha and Anthony awards. She is the author of the Royal Spyness Mysteries, set in 1930s London, the Molly Murphy Mysteries, set in turn-of-the-century New York, and the Constable Evans Mysteries, set in Wales. She was born in England and now divides her time between Northern California and Arizona.

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Chapter 1

KINGSDOWNE PLACE, EYNSFORD, KENT

MONDAY, JULY 9, 1934

Dear Diary: Weather fine but absolutely nothing to do. Dying of boredom.

I was sitting in a white wicker chair under a spreading chestnut tree on a manicured lawn. Behind me the stately battlements of Kingsdowne Place, seat of the dukes of Eynsford, were reflected in the perfect mirror of the lake, its surface ruffled only by a pair of gliding swans. Before me was a tea table, groaning under tiers of cucumber and smoked salmon sandwiches, strawberries and cream, éclairs, Victoria sponges, petit fours and scones with clotted cream. It was about the most perfect afternoon one could wish for, one of those rare English summer days when the only sounds are the buzzing of bees among the roses, the clickety-clack of a distant lawn mower and the thwack of ball on bat at the cricket match down in the village.

I gave a long sigh. It should have been of contentment but actually it was one of boredom. I have a confession to make. Being almost royal isn't always a piece of cake. For one thing it isn't always easy keeping that stiff upper lip in the face of royal relatives, lunatic suitors, and dead bodies. And it's certainly not easy doing nothing all day. I know that ordinary people who have to catch the eight-twenty to Waterloo every day envy our leisure but frankly most of the time our lives are a battle against boredom. I'd love to be doing something useful. I'd love to be making money too. But alas there are no jobs for a young woman whose education has only equipped her to walk around with a book on her head and know where to seat a bishop at a dinner party. My royal relatives would certainly not have been amused if they learned I was working behind the counter in Woolworths or serving tea at Lyons. And in this horrid depression even people with strings of qualifications can't find gainful employment.

What I should have been doing was my duty by marrying some half-batty Continental princeling, thus ensuring the continuation of some outmoded dynasty (while running the risk of being assassinated by anarchists). So far I had managed to avoid all half-lunatic princes that had been thrust in my direction. And in case you think I was against the idea of marriage, actually I did have a candidate for marriage lined up, but he, like me, was penniless with no prospects. A pretty hopeless situation.

And so I did what other young ladies of my station do until they find a husband—endured long empty days punctuated by meals, healthy walks through the countryside and occasional bursts of excitement in the form of hunts. And since the weather in England is usually bloody, even more days of sitting reading, doing jigsaw puzzles, writing letters and counting the hours until the next meal.

A few months ago I thought I had fallen on my feet for once when I was asked to educate the newly discovered heir to the Duke of Eynsford into the ways of polite society. Kingsdowne Place, seat of the dukes of Eynsford, was everything a stately home should be—impressively opulent and elegant with gorgeous grounds, a stable full of fine horses, and meals that were a succession of extravagant courses. There was no hint at Kingsdowne Place that the rest of the world was in a depression. But my stay had not exactly gone according to plan. There had been plots and a murder, and when the dust had settled I had stayed on out of duty to give companionship to the dowager duchess. My nanny and governess were very hot on duty. I had had it rammed down my throat since I could toddle. Rannocho prized duty above diadems. (Actually I'd have prized the diadems if I'd owned any.) Did I mention that I am Lady Georgiana Rannocho, and cousin to His Majesty King George?

I confess that my task had been made more pleasant because Darcy O'Mara, the man I hoped to marry one day, had stayed on with me. But Darcy never remained in one place for long. He was a true adventurer and was always off on strange missions to far-flung parts of the globe. Anyway, he had gone again, the younger members of the Eynsford clan had dispersed and I was left at a great house with a dowager duchess, her two half-dotty sisters and several dozen servants. I was longing for younger company and a change of scenery when my mother came to the rescue.

For those of you who don't know my mother, let me assure you that she is not the maternal type. But on that afternoon when I was having tea on the lawn with the three weird sisters the dowager duchess Edwina paused with her teacup raised on its way to her lips.

"That sounds like a motorcar coming up the drive," she said. "How extraordinary. Whoever could it be?"

"We aren't expecting anybody, are we?" her sister Princess Charlotte Orlovski asked, swiveling around in her seat so that she could get a better look at the drive. "My spirit guide didn't warn me of a visitor." (The Princess Orlovski was heavily into spiritualism.)

"It's about time we had company," the third sister, the naughty and poorly named Virginia chimed in. "It's

been as dull as ditchwater since everybody left. I'm sure poor young Georgiana is dying of boredom and frustration. I know I am."

"Oh, no, of course not," I said hastily and untruthfully.

The sound of an approaching motorcar grew louder. Edwina put down her teacup and picked up her lorgnette, peering through the trees as the black shape of a motorcar came into view. It was an open-topped sports car, low and sleek, and it was being driven rather fast. My heartbeat quickened as I watched it come closer. Could it possibly be Darcy, home from foreign missions and coming to sweep me away?

Then I realized that the driver was certainly not Darcy. It was a small person, hatless, with blonde hair that blew out in the breeze. It was only when the driver spotted us and the car screeched to a halt in a shower of gravel that I recognized who she was.

"Who on earth?" Edwina started to say.

"It's my mother, Your Grace," I said as a trim little person in bright red slacks and a white halter top climbed out of the car. She was wearing big sunglasses that hid half her face, and her hair, in spite of having been windswept, now looked perfectly in place. She waved then came toward us, tottering on high platform espadrilles.

"There you are, Georgie," she called in that voice that had delighted theatergoers across the world. "I've been looking all over for you. I telephoned Castle Rannoch but your brother didn't seem to know where you were. You weren't at the house in London where I left you a few months ago. I was quite despairing until I ran into your friend Belinda at Crockfords last night and she told me you were staying with the Eynsford's." She had reached us now, picking her way carefully across the lawn. She seemed to notice the three elderly ladies, all sitting and staring at her in her flamboyantly modern outfit, for the first time. "How do you do," she said. "Sorry to barge in on you like this."

I intervened hastily. "Your Grace, may I introduce to you my mother, the former duchess of Rannoch." I thought it wise to give Mummy the only acceptable title she's ever had. I wasn't actually lying. She was a former duchess of Rannoch. It's just that since that time she had been a great many other things to a great many men. It was possible that the dowager duchess knew a lot of this, but as always her manners were impeccable.

"How do you do," she said, extending a hand. "Delighted to meet Georgiana's mother at last. Although I do believe we met many years ago when your dear Bertie was still alive. I was his mother's lady-in-waiting, you know. He was such a lovable little boy, such a sweet smile. So sad that he died too soon, just like my own sons. One should not have to outlive one's children."

My mother, presumably not having heard of the demise of the Eynsford sons, wisely said nothing.

"Do sit down and have a cup of tea," Edwina said, motioning to the maid who was standing nearby to bring another cup. "Of course you must have been missing your dear daughter. And if only you'd let us know you were coming, we could have had a suitable room prepared for you." It was the nearest to a reproach that manners allowed.

"Most kind, but I'm not intending to stay," Mummy said, accepting the teacup and sinking into a wicker chair. "I only came to collect Georgie."

"To collect me?"

“Yes, darling. We’re going on a trip together.”

“A trip? Where?”

“America,” she said as if this was no more startling than a shopping expedition to London.

“America?” I blurted out.

“Yes, darling, you know that big place with the skyscrapers and cowboys.” She gave the elderly sisters an exasperated smile that her only child could be so dense. “Why don’t you run along and get your maid to pack your things while I have tea with these delightful ladies.” She was already helping herself to a cucumber sandwich.

“But I can’t just leave like this, Mummy. It wouldn’t be right. Her Grace has been through a most difficult time. I can’t walk out on her when she needs me.” But even as I said the words a voice in my head was whispering, “America! I’m going to America with my mother!”

Edwina reached across and patted my hand. “You have been a wonderful comfort to me in my hour of need, Georgiana. Such a kind girl. But I wouldn’t dream of preventing you from going away with your mama, especially not to America. Transatlantic crossings are delightful and a young thing like you needs to see life, not be cooped up here with three old women. Of course you must go.”

“Of course she must,” Virginia echoed. “New York, such an exciting city. And they say that cowboys are wonderfully virile. In fact I remember a thrilling episode with a saddle and a particularly large whip. . . .”

Edwina cleared her throat. Virginia’s sex life had probably even outdone that of my mother and she never minded recalling it in the most vivid detail.

“You’d better run up and pack, Georgiana,” Edwina said, “if your dear mama is really intent on leaving this evening. Are you sure you wouldn’t like to stay the night and leave in the morning?”

“Kind of you, Your Grace, but I’m afraid not,” Mummy said. “We have secured passage on the Berengaria and she sails on Thursday from Southampton.”

“The Berengaria.” Virginia gave a sigh of envy. “The ship of millionaires, they used to call it.”

“Still do,” Mummy said. “Who else can afford to travel these days? Anyway, she sails on Thursday and there is so much to be done that I couldn’t spare an extra minute. Do get a move on, darling.” She glanced at the motorcar. “I don’t see how we’re going to fit in your maid and your trunk. Do you still have that ghastly girl who looks like a hippopotamus?”

“Queenie? Yes, I’m afraid I do.”

“She’ll never fit into the backseat, darling, let alone with the luggage. Have her come up by train with your things. Brown’s Hotel, of course. I wouldn’t stay anywhere else.”

“Ah, Brown’s Hotel. Such fond memories.” This time it was Princess Charlotte who gave her sisters a wistful look.

“Off you go, then.” Mummy clapped her gloveless hands impatiently.

“If you’re sure, Your Grace?” I looked at Edwina.

“Don’t keep your mother waiting, Georgiana,” Edwina said. “We old ladies will carry on as we always have done.”

I put down my teacup, and tried to rise gracefully from my deck chair. Unfortunately I stepped on my skirt so that my graceful ascent turned into a stumble that nearly caught the tea table. I righted myself and set off, red-faced, with as much dignity as I could still muster.

“Typical Georgie. Always was a walking disaster area, I’m afraid,” I heard Mummy saying as I moved out of earshot. “Has she wrecked your house yet?”

Oh dear. I’d actually done rather well until now with nothing broken and no elderly ladies knocked off their feet. But unfortunately she was right. I am rather accident-prone when I’m flustered—like the time I caught my heel in my train at my debutante presentation and was propelled rapidly toward Their Majesties instead of backing from the chamber.

There was no sign of Queenie when I entered my bedroom. I tugged on the bellpull and waited. No maid appeared. I tugged again and started taking items of clothing out of the wardrobe. After a few minutes there was a tap on the door and Edie, the head housemaid, came in.

“Did you ring, my lady?” She curtsied.

“For my maid,” I said. “Have you seen her recently?”

“She was at tea,” Edie said. “I’m afraid I haven’t seen her since.”

“Then please have somebody find her. I need her right away.”

“I will, my lady.” She bobbed a curtsy and took off.

Why couldn’t I have a maid like that, I thought. Willing, efficient, a joy to be around . . . Of course I knew the answer. Because I couldn’t afford to pay her. Queenie had one advantage. She worked for almost no money, knowing that no gentlewoman in her right mind would employ her. The situation suited both of us most of the time.

I had emptied the contents of the chest of drawers onto my bed when I heard sounds resembling a stampede of elephants coming up the hall toward me. Queenie burst through the door, red-faced and disheveled.

“Bloody ’ell,” she said, observing the large pile of clothing on the bed. “What the devil’s going on ’ere?”

“We’re leaving,” I said. “I need my trunk retrieved and my clothes packed.”

“Leavin’? What do you want to go and leave for?” she demanded, hands on very ample hips. “First decent food we’ve had in months.”

“And I see you’ve taken full advantage of it,” I replied, noticing that her uniform was now bursting at the seams. “Where were you? I rang twice.”

“Well, I had three pieces of seedy cake at tea today and I felt a bit sleepy afterward so I just went up to my room to have a bit of a kip, and before you know it I was out like a light,” she said. “So where are we going, then? Not back to that god-awful castle in Scotland.”

“Queenie, I’ve pointed out to you before that you should not criticize your employer or your employer’s

family. You should be glad you have a job in these hard times.”

“Oh, I ain’t got nothing against you, miss,” she said. “It’s her what lives at the castle in Scotland. The ruddy duchess. She don’t like me, does she? She thinks I’m too common.”

“Well, you are. You’ve seen how other lady’s maids behave, haven’t you? You haven’t even learned to call me by my proper title yet.”

She sighed. “I know you should be ‘my lady’ but that sounds awful toffee-nosed, if you ask me. And you’re so nice and normal and friendly that you’re more like an ordinary miss.”

“Nevertheless, Queenie, society demands that an aristocrat should be addressed in the correct manner. My cousin Elizabeth is a friendly little girl but one still has to address her as ‘Your Royal Highness.’ Now please get a move on. My mother is waiting.”

“Your mum? We’re going off with your mum? Oh, that’s all right then. She’ll make sure we eat properly. Where are we going? Back to London?”

“No, we’re going to America.”

“Bloody ’ell,” she said.

Chapter 2

AT BROWN’S HOTEL, LONDON

JULY 9

An hour later Mummy and I were speeding through the Kentish lanes on our way to London. Queenie and my trunk had been crammed into the estate car with much grumbling from her. What if she fell asleep and missed the station? What if a strange man got into her compartment and accosted her? And how would she manage all that luggage? I pointed out that the train terminated at Victoria and she should select a Ladies Only carriage. When she arrived all she had to do was summon a porter who would take her to a taxi. When last seen she was heading to the nearest station and one hoped that she would eventually wind up at Brown’s Hotel.

“So what on earth were you doing with those awful dreary old women?” Mummy asked as we drove through the impressive gateway and out onto a country lane.

“Keeping the dowager duchess company. She’s had an upsetting time, you know. You probably didn’t hear about it in Germany.”

“Oh, I think I did hear something about it, now that you mention it. Something to do with the heir, wasn’t it?”

“It was. All rather horrible, actually.”

“Well, in that case I’m glad I’m whisking you away. We’ll have much more fun where we’re going.”

“Where are we going, exactly? And why are you taking me along?”

“That’s obvious, darling. I didn’t want to travel alone. A woman feels so vulnerable and those Americans

can be wild and dangerous.”

Nobody in the world could take care of herself better than my mother. She might look frail and diminutive but she came from good Cockney stock and was as tough as old boots. She had been a leading lady on the stage when she had met and married my father, who was Queen Victoria’s grandson, but she chose to forget those humble beginnings. She had actually enjoyed being a duchess and probably would have remained one longer if living at Castle Rannoch had not been part of the bargain. I looked at her face. She was now playing the part of a weak and helpless female—playing it really convincingly, as always. I had to laugh. “There aren’t any cowboys and Indians any longer, you know.”

“But plenty of gangsters,” she said. “Al Capone, you know. I thought you’d be pleased and want to spend time with your mother.”

“I am. I do,” I said. “It’s just that it’s rather sudden. When last seen you abandoned me to that awful woman’s cooking in London and went off with Max to Lake Lugano. Have you finally broken up with him?”

“Au contraire, darling,” she said. “Max is insisting that he wants to do the right thing and get married. He’s quite a puritan at heart.”

“But don’t I remember correctly that you are still married to someone else?”

I should also add that my mother was a serial bolter, much married, and had worked her way through many men on all continents but Antarctica.

“Isn’t he a Texan oilman?” I went on, “And didn’t he refuse to give you a divorce?”

“How was I to know he had a strange religious streak?” she said irritably. “When I met him in Paris in the twenties he seemed quite gay and debonair, refreshingly naïve and ridiculously rich. It was only after I’d married him that I found that he didn’t drink and he actually wanted me to live on a ranch in Texas.” She turned to me with a horrified face. “A ranch, darling. In Texas. Moi? Can you imagine it. All those cows and oil wells. Castle Rannoch was bad enough but at least they could send up hampers from Fortnum’s on a regular basis.”

“Is that why we’re going to America? You’re going to plead with him to set you free?” I asked. “Or has he conveniently died?”

“Neither of the above,” she said. “But I think I’ve found a way to circumvent him. I have been told that one can obtain a quickie divorce in Reno, Nevada, where anything goes.”

“But if he wouldn’t divorce you in Texas, why would he agree to it in Nevada?” I heard myself almost shouting over the roar of the motor as we had now reached the London Road and Mummy had put her foot down.

“He doesn’t have to agree to it. Given the right circumstances the other party doesn’t have to show up.”

“Golly. Is it legal?”

“Perfectly, in Nevada, according to my authority. So I thought we’d have a nice little trip to Reno together. You’ll enjoy the crossing on the Berengaria, won’t you? And a train trip across America?”

“Oh golly, yes,” I said.

She turned to frown at me. “You must learn to stop saying such schoolgirlish expressions if you ever want to be a woman of the world.”

“Sorry,” I said. “They just slip out in moments of stress.” I cleared my throat. “Thank you for your kind invitation. It sounds heavenly.”

“Jolly good.” She gave me a rare encouraging grin. A grin of coconspirators. “Now we only have two days to get you kitted out. You simply can’t be seen on the *Berengaria* in a cotton frock like the one you are wearing. You look like an orphan in a reform school.”

“That’s because I’ve owned this since I was a schoolgirl,” I said. “One doesn’t buy clothes if one has no money.”

“You really must find yourself a rich man, darling. I know that Darcy is quite delectable and I’m sure he’s wonderful in bed, but he’s not suitable husband material, is he? He’ll never be able to provide for you properly.”

“I’d rather live in poverty with Darcy than with a rich man I didn’t love,” I said hotly.

She smiled. “So young. So romantic. You’ll learn. And if you’re smart you’ll snag yourself an American millionaire on the ship.”

“Are there any millionaires in America these days?” I said, smiling at the absurdity of her suggestion.

“Of course there are. Live with him for a year, divorce him again and you’ll be set up for life.”

“Like you did, you mean? And then have all the trouble of trying to divorce him again? That’s not for me, thank you,” I said.

“You’re just like my father,” Mummy said, frowning. “Too damned proud and honorable.”

“You’ve been to see Granddad?” My heart leaped at the mention of the man I loved almost as much as Darcy. My mother’s father was a retired London bobby who now lived in a semidetached in Essex, bought for him when Mummy was in the first flush of fame.

“I have, and he won’t take a penny from me. Claims it’s German money and he’ll never forgive the Germans for the Great War.” I had heard him say the same kind of thing.

“How is he?” I asked, feeling a wave of longing for my grandfather.

“Not too well, actually. I offered to take him with us to America. I thought a sea voyage would do him good, but he refused.”

“I must go and see him before we sail,” I said. “How long do you think we’ll be away?”

“Not too long, I hope. A few days in New York—at least they’ve started drinking legally again. Those speakeasies were such a bore. And then a train ride across the country to Reno. Let’s hope we have it all sewn up and back within a month. Max pines if I leave him too long.”

I turned to look at her. “Do you really want to marry Max and live in Germany?”

“Darling, he’s richer than God and the sex is divine. He’s like a rampant stud bull and he wants it several

times a night.”

I felt my face turning bright red at the mention of such things, having led a sheltered life so far.

“But you don’t speak German and you don’t like German food.”

She shrugged. “I can stand a week or two in Berlin when necessary. It’s really quite civilized if that nasty little Hitler man doesn’t last long. Besides, when Max saw that I loved the villa in Lugano that we were renting, he bought it for me. So I now have a bolt-hole in Switzerland. He’s so generous. I may even learn to converse with him some day. I’ve promised to take German lessons.”

“Granddad won’t like that,” I said.

“Then he’ll have to lump it,” she said with true Cockney candor.

BROWN’S HOTEL GAVE Mummy the sort of welcome she expected.

“Welcome back, Your Grace,” the doorman said.

“Welcome back, Your Grace,” the snooty young man at the reception desk cooed, bowing to her. “We have champagne on ice, waiting for you.”

I followed Mummy up the stairs, feeling horribly self-conscious about my now-crumpled cotton dress. She had a lovely room on the first floor with French windows looking onto Albemarle Street. I had wondered why she always chose Brown’s instead of the Ritz or Claridge’s, but now I understood why she stayed here. They conveniently forgot that she was no longer “Your Grace” but Mrs. Homer Clegg, if my memory served me correctly. And soon she’d be Frau von Strohheim. I wondered how Brown’s would take to that?

I had been given a small but charming room facing away from the street. I was just realizing that I had nothing to wear for dinner when Queenie arrived, red-faced and panting.

“Some bloke’s bringing up your trunk,” she said. “I had a bleeding awful time getting the bloody thing off the train by myself. Do you think I could find a ruddy porter? No, I blinking well couldn’t. I had to leave the guard with the luggage and go looking for one. ‘Now don’t you let anyone nick that,’ I told him and the ruddy man wanted a tip when I came back. The cheek of it. ‘I’ll have you know that these here bags belong to someone what’s a cousin of the king,’ I told him. ‘You should consider it an honor to look after them.’”

“Queenie, please hurry up and unpack,” I interrupted this flow. “I have to go down to dinner soon and I’ve nothing to wear.”

“Where am I supposed to have me dinner, then?” she asked, opening the trunk and flinging garments onto the bed. “I ain’t half hungry after all that traipsing around.”

“I’ll ask Mummy’s maid where the servants dine,” I said. “I think I’ll wear the red one. We’ve been in mourning too long at Kingsdowne. I need cheering up.”

And as I said this I realized I was cheering up. A shopping spree with Mummy tomorrow and then a luxury liner across the Atlantic. What more could a girl want?

Chapter 3

AT BROWN’S HOTEL

STILL JULY 9

Things are certainly looking up for G. Rannoch these days. Brown's and a spending spree with Mummy and then a transatlantic crossing. Golly.

The red evening dress was rather the worse for Queenie's packing and I saw Mummy's face when I went into her room to go down to dinner. "Whoever told you that red was your color, darling?" she demanded. "Don't you possess any decent clothing?"

"I have the outfit that Coco Chanel bought for me at the Galeries Lafayette," I said, "but that's up in Scotland. There wouldn't be time to telephone Fig and have it sent down to London, would there?"

"Knowing your sister-in-law she'd probably flush it down the nearest loo and then claim she couldn't find it," Mummy said. "Let's just hope there are a few decent-looking outfits to be found in London tomorrow. Although God knows where we will find them." She was prowling around me, examining me as if she were a tiger sizing up her next meal. "It's a pity you are so impossibly large," she said, "or you could wear some of my things. Max loves me to buy new clothes and I never know what to do with the old ones. But I fear I have nothing you'd fit into."

"You make me sound like a giant," I said. "I'm only five foot six. You're the one who is small."

"Petite, darling. I'm petite. Too bad you inherited the robust physique of those Scottish ancestors. The royal side were small enough, just those wretched hearty Scots must be to blame."

"Darcy seems to like me the way I am," I said.

"I've found that men are often blinded by love," she said. "Never mind, we'll have you looking respectable, if not fashionable, by the time we leave."

THE NEXT MORNING we set off right after breakfast. "Might as well try Fenwick's first since they are just around the corner on Bond Street," she said. But half an hour later she had declared them too impossibly frumpy. "You'll be dining on the Berengaria with me, darling. They can't get the impression that I let my only child run around in rags."

"You have until now," I wanted to say. My mother had only popped into my life on rare occasions and it had never crossed her mind that I had no money and had been surviving on baked beans on toast.

She hailed a taxicab. "Harrods might just have something," she said.

"Selfridges is closer," I pointed out.

She looked at me in horror. "Selfridges is where typists and lower-middle-class housewives shop," she said, conveniently forgetting again that she had been born in the back streets of the East End.

So we went to Harrods where doormen leaped and bowed, murmuring, "Welcome back, Your Grace. It's been too long."

Mummy swept in, ordering a jar of her favorite face cream as she passed the cosmetics counter, a pair of red leather gloves and matching beret, suitable for a sea cruise, before she took the lift to ladies' dresses. A formidable woman bore down on us. "And how can I assist madame?" she asked.

"You can find me an assistant young enough to have a feel for what is fashionable this season," Mummy

said. "I'm taking my daughter on a sea cruise."

"That young lady is never madame's daughter," the woman said in her silky voice and gave a false titter. "Your sister, surely."

Since she had been one of the few people in the civilized world who had failed to recognize my mother and give her the appropriately groveling greeting, Mummy had taken an instant dislike to her. "I should point out that 'that young lady' is Lady Georgiana Rannoch," she said. "Cousin to His Majesty. She will be seen as an ambassador of her country when we visit America. We want to do Britain proud, don't we?"

The woman's face was now rather red. "Oh, we do. We do. Forgive me for not recognizing you immediately. I will summon our Mademoiselle Dubois. She has recently joined us from Paris where she worked at the great couture houses. Allow me to escort you to a fitting room."

"That told her," Mummy muttered as the woman disappeared to find the fashionable Frenchwoman. "Sorry, but that remark about you being my sister got my goat. And fancy not recognizing me."

There was a tap on the fitting room door and the woman, still red-faced, put her head around it. "Here is our young French assistant, madame," she said. "Mademoiselle Dubois, I'm sure you'll be able to find the perfect wardrobe for Lady Georgiana, won't you?" And she stood aside to usher in a svelte, dark-haired young woman.

"Bonjour, and 'ow may I assist madame today," she started to say, then a look of horror wiped the smile from her face. I swallowed back a gasp. I think Mummy did too. I waited until the senior saleswoman had closed the door behind her before the young Frenchwoman let out a sigh of relief.

"Crikey," she said. "I thought you'd blow it for me."

"Belinda!" I exclaimed. "What on earth are you doing here?"

My best friend, Belinda Warburton-Stoke, put her finger to her lips. "Shhhh," she said. "I'm supposed to be Mademoiselle Dubois."

"But why?"

"Money, darling—why else? I'm rather broke at the moment and I saw this advertisement for a fashion assistant with knowledge of haute couture, preferably French."

"Belinda, you're terrible." I started to laugh.

"Not at all. I fit the bill perfectly. After all, I did work with Chanel and I designed my own line of clothing."

"No, I'm sure you're perfectly qualified. Just not French."

"Well, I had to claim to be French to beat out the other candidates. Also I wouldn't want word to get back to the family. Granny might cut me out of her will if she heard I'd gone into trade."

"But what if you have to serve real French people?"

"I'll have you know my French is damned good," Belinda said. "We had three years at Les Oiseaux, didn't we, and then I worked with Chanel in Paris. And my liaison with Jean-Luc taught me all sorts of words I'd never learned in school."

“Jean-Luc—was he the one who was Chanel’s lover, and that’s why you were dismissed?”

“How good to see you again, Belinda dear,” Mummy interrupted. “I’d love to sit here chatting, but we have rather a lot to do in a short time. We need suitable clothing for a transatlantic crossing for Georgie. Silk evening pajamas, I think. She does have nice long legs. So maybe some linen slacks. A couple of decent tea dresses, although there won’t be time for alterations and I’m sure nothing off the peg fits properly.”

Belinda was wonderful. Within an hour I was kitted out with the sort of clothes I’d so admired on others—the white Chinese silk evening pajamas, a backless midnight blue evening dress that made me look almost sexy, slacks and jackets, silky floral-print dresses and even a velvet evening cape.

“You are lucky, going to America,” Belinda said wistfully as Mummy went off to write a check. “I can’t afford to travel anywhere at the moment.”

“No sugar daddies in sight?” I asked, “Or have you forsaken men for a life of respectability?”

“God, no,” she said. “I’m positively sex starved, but any man worth looking at has fled from London this summer. And I have no funds for travel, alas, and I’m no longer welcome at home. America sounds divine. Do write and tell me about all your exploits there. Shall you be going to Hollywood?”

“Only Nevada, I think,” I said.

“But that’s so close. You must go and see Hollywood. Who knows, perhaps you’ll be discovered while drinking a soda on Sunset Strip.”

“Fat chance of that,” I said, laughing. “Anyway, Mummy says she can’t be away long. Max will be pining.”

“She certainly doesn’t want to upset the applecart with Max,” Belinda agreed. “There are so few people with his kind of money these days. I think I may have to go and visit her in Germany. You don’t think Max might have any young rich relatives, do you?”

“I wouldn’t know. Personally I’d rather stay in England and be poor. I don’t like the sound of the way things are going in Germany.”

We broke off the conversation as Mummy reappeared. “Well, that’s done. They’ll hem the trousers and have them delivered to Brown’s by this afternoon. I must say the one thing one can count on from Harrods is efficiency. And I was pleasantly surprised by the quality of the clothing too. Quite chic. We may find you a rich man on the boat after all, Georgie.” And she winked at Belinda.

Before I could answer this she was making for the lift.

“Write to me, and don’t forget . . .” Belinda started to say, then remembered she was supposed to be French. I blew her a kiss as I rushed to keep up with my mother. We emerged from the lift and Mummy swept grandly across the main floor, past bowing attendants and out to a waiting taxicab.

Chapter 4

THURSDAY, JULY 12, 1934

We sail today! Dying to see the Berengaria. America, here I come. Can’t wait. But I do wish I could have told Darcy where I was going. He is so infuriating!!!!

The next days were a whirlwind of Mummy doing her own shopping for essentials that apparently couldn't be obtained in America—like toothpaste, getting her hair done, getting my hair done, buying new luggage for me and new hats for us both. I must say it was rather exciting to be caught up in this shopping whirlwind. I hoped Max didn't have a fit when he saw the bills and decide not to marry her after all.

Then the day of departure dawned. It was almost like a dream as our bags were whisked downstairs and into taxicabs. Soon our train was steaming out of Waterloo Station, bound for Southampton. My only wish was that my hateful sister-in-law, Fig, might have been there to watch me depart in style. (Usually I have a nice nature but Fig had certainly made my life miserable for quite a while and deserved comeuppance.) My other wish was that I could have told Darcy where I was going. As usual I had no way to contact him. Better still I would have wished that he was coming too!

I had crossed the Channel plenty of times but I'd never seen an actual ocean liner. My jaw dropped as we pulled up beside the *Berengaria*. She was enormous with three shiny red funnels, already puffing out wisps of smoke. It was like staring up at the *Dorchester*.

"Come along, darling, don't dawdle," Mummy said, heading for the first class gangway. "And try not to gawp. You look like a country bumpkin."

We were welcomed on board in the effusive manner that Mummy expected, and escorted up to A deck where Mummy was to have a suite. I had once had a cabin on an overnight Channel crossing from Ostend so I was expecting something like a railway sleeping car with bunks on one side and a washbasin. Therefore I was not prepared when the steward opened the door and we stepped into a spacious sitting room with a sofa and armchairs, a writing desk between two picture windows and thick pile carpeting. There were flowers on the table and champagne on ice.

Mummy nodded with satisfaction. "Oh yes, this will do nicely," she said. "I suppose the bedroom is through here." And I followed her through to a pretty bedroom with dainty white wood furniture and chintz covers. Two picture windows opened onto the deck. I observed there were two beds.

"Am I to be sharing this with you?" I asked.

"Good heavens, no." She sounded horrified. "Sharing with my daughter would definitely cramp my style. You never know whom I might want to invite up to visit me."

I didn't like to point out that she was on her way to get a divorce so that she could marry a rather puritanical German and news of shipboard antics wouldn't go down well with him. Also that he was paying for this little jaunt. The steward gave a discreet cough, making Mummy break off and grin. "Thank you. That will be all," she said. "Please show Lady Georgiana to her quarters."

My cabin was farther along A deck. Not a suite and not as grand but rather more to my liking with a big window looking onto the deck and the ocean beyond. It also had a lovely big bathroom and I was feeling extremely satisfied when Queenie arrived with the first of the luggage.

"They're bringing up the last lot now," she said. "Cor—this ain't bad, is it? You ought to find yourself a bloke what's got money like her German."

"Queenie!" I wagged a finger. "You can start unpacking while I go and explore."

"Your mum's maid is right hoity-toity, ain't she? I had to travel all the way down in the train with her and she hardly gave me the time of day. And we've got to share a cabin for the next five days too—and I bet it

won't be as big as this one."

I had accepted Queenie's failings, knowing that I wouldn't find another maid for what I paid her, but enough was enough. It was about time I behaved like a proper lady of my class and didn't let my servant treat me as an equal. I took a deep breath. "Queenie, I'm rather concerned about you," I said. "You seem to be doing an awful lot of complaining recently. May I remind you how lucky you are to have a job with a good family, and enough to eat and a roof over your head when frankly nobody else would employ you. If you were smart you would study Claudette and see how a good lady's maid behaves. She certainly doesn't speak to her employer the way you speak to me or she would be out on her ear in five minutes."

She gave me an apologetic grin. "Sorry, miss. You're right. My old dad said I was getting too big for me boots when I went to see them last time. He said pride comes before a fall."

"Then listen to your old dad," I said. "And find an ironing board. Some of these things crumple easily." I headed for the door. At the door I turned around. "Oh, and Queenie, one does not use a hot iron on silk. It will melt."

"Bob's yer uncle, miss," she said. I sighed. She was never going to learn and I was stuck with her.

I left her to unpack and went out onto the deck. I stood looking down at the impossibly small people moving like ants on the dock below. The wind in my hair was fresh and had the tang of salt in it. I felt so excited that I did a little dance—a sort of hop, skip and jump as I went toward the railing.

"Very attractive," said a voice behind me. I spun around, blushing, to see a young man leaning against the railing, smoking. "I must make a note to secure you as my first partner in the ballroom."

"I'm afraid I'm a hopeless dancer when it comes to ballroom," I said. "I hardly know a fox-trot from a two-step."

"You prefer the more primitive sort of dance, like the one you just did?" His eyes were challenging me and I felt distinctly uneasy.

"That wasn't really a dance, just letting off steam after being cooped up with my mother for days."

He came over to me. "So you're traveling with your mother, are you? Off to find a rich American husband? I'm afraid there aren't so many of them these days."

Under moments of stress I always seem to channel my great-grandmother Queen Victoria. "You know, you're frightfully rude and we haven't even been introduced, so I shouldn't be speaking to you," I said.

He threw back his head and laughed. "We're on a ship. Anything goes. No outdated society rules here, and a lot of cabin hopping too."

"Not to my cabin," I said. "I have a young man, thank you, and do not need a rich American."

He opened his cigarette case. "Do you smoke?" he said. "I'm Tubby Halliday, by the way. And you are?"

"Georgiana Rannoch," I said, accepting a cigarette although I'd never quite learned the taste for them and certainly had never inhaled the smoke.

"Are you? Good heavens. And your mother is the actress Claire Daniels? I thought I recognized her when she was being whisked on board. What are you going to be doing in America, may one ask?"

“Mummy has a spot of business. I’m keeping her company,” I said.

“A spot of business. How intriguing. Is she planning to buy land out West? There’s plenty to be going for a song these days.”

“You really do ask a lot of questions,” I said. “What will you be doing in America, then?”

“Amusing myself. It’s what I always do. And things have become more amusing since I met you. It’s usually only old fogies on board—the young rarely have the money to travel these days.”

I leaned over the railing and looked down. “It’s so big, isn’t it? Like being at the top of St. Paul’s Cathedral.”

“Is this your first time on the ship?”

“First time crossing the Atlantic,” I said.

“Good heavens. Then let me give you a tour so that you can find your way around,” he said.

I hesitated. I had been planning to explore the ship and I wasn’t sure that I wanted to be too friendly with the chatty Mr. Halliday. But in the end I decided that having a tour would be better than wandering around on my own. “All right. Thank you,” I said.

“We’ll start at the top, at the promenade deck,” he said and led me to some outside stairs. “There are just a few very swank suites up here.”

“Dear me. Mummy will be upset to know she’s not on the most exclusive level,” I chuckled.

“They are usually empty. Reserved for royalty and millionaires.” He went ahead and helped me up the last stairs onto the promenade deck. “The ballroom’s also up here, and the first class lounge. And the ladies’ lounge where you and your mother will undoubtedly be sitting to escape from bores like me.”

“I don’t think my mother is the ladies’ lounge type,” I said.

“Ah, is that it?” he asked. “She’s going to America with a man? Or to meet a man?”

“You know, you’re frightfully rude, either on or off a ship,” I said. “My mother isn’t meeting anyone and her private life is nothing to do with you.”

I started to stalk away. He came after me. “I say, I’m awfully sorry. My father tells me I put my foot in my mouth every time I talk. I’m just interested in people’s lives, that’s all. I’m a writer of sorts.” He held out a meaty hand. “Can we be friends? I promise not to mention your mother’s private life again.”

I took it, reluctantly. “All right,” I said.

We started to walk together, looking first into the ballroom and then the lounge, each with impressive stained glass skylights. “How long will the crossing take?” I asked.

“I think with this old tub it’s usually five days,” he said. “Other ships have done it in four but since the Mauretania retired the English don’t really have a contender for the record. We’ll have to wait until they finish the new Queen Mary. Then we should win back the Blue Riband from the Germans.”

He started down the grand central staircase. “She used to be a German ship, you know. There was a big

portrait of the kaiser on that wall.” He pointed to a nautical scene that now graced it. “Their pride and joy. The Emperor, she was called—or should that be ‘he was called’ since it’s a male name. They had to hand it over as war reparations and it was rechristened Berengaria.”

“What exactly does ‘Berengaria’ mean?” I asked.

“It’s an old-fashioned female name,” Tubby Halliday said. “I seem to remember I had a great-aunt called Berengaria. Phew, I’m glad that one’s gone out of style, aren’t you?”

“I’m not madly keen on Georgiana,” I said, “but since my other names are Victoria, Charlotte and Eugenie they’re all equally stuffy.”

“They’re all royal, aren’t they. You lot are always stuck with that sort of name. But my name is actually more hideous. I’m stuck with Montmorency. Nothing could be worse than that, could it? Which is why I go by Tubby.”

“I go by Georgie,” I said and rather wished I hadn’t. He seemed nice enough, just a little too friendly.

Tubby guided me through the various decks, through the Winter Garden with its wicker furniture, the palm court with full-size palm trees and a stage for the orchestra, the first class dining salon and finally into the bowels of the ship.

“What’s down here?” I asked nervously as there was no sign of anybody else heading this way.

“You’ll see. Best part of the whole ship.”

It crossed my mind that he was luring me down here to have his way with me. He didn’t seem like the type of person who had his way with unsuspecting females, but then I’d been surprised in the past by frightfully proper English boys with horribly groping hands.

“This way,” he said and his voice sounded strange and echoing. I hung back. He disappeared through a doorway. I followed, stopped and said, “Golly.”

It was a swimming pool. And not just any swimming pool—it was flanked by Greek columns, marble everywhere, subtle lighting in the ceiling.

“Pretty neat, wouldn’t you say? Maybe you’ll join me for a swim one day?”

“What happens if it gets rough?” I asked.

“The water slops around a bit. But it’s no fun in a storm. You get tossed about like a cork. They close the pool if it’s too rough.”

“Does it often get rough?” I asked, realizing that I had no idea whether I was a good sailor or not.

“All the time. The Atlantic’s notorious for it. Haven’t you noticed the furniture is all bolted down?” He saw my face and laughed. “Just teasing,” he said. “It should be fine at this time of year. No icebergs either. We’d better get back on deck. We’ll be sailing soon and you don’t want to miss the grand departure.”

When we came out onto the deck again it was lined with people, some with champagne glasses in their hands. Down on the quayside a band was now playing “Anchors Aweigh.” The ship’s siren sounded a great blast and they were just starting to release the great ropes that held the ship fast when I thought I spotted

someone I recognized. Surely nobody else had that shock of unruly dark curls and that purposeful, confident, almost arrogant way of walking. He was forcing his way through the crowd still clustered around the last gangway. My heart did a complete flip-flop.

“Darcy!” I yelled but my voice was drowned by a second blast of the ship’s siren. Smoke wafted across the deck and when I looked again I couldn’t see him. The crowd had backed away from the liner and were now waving handkerchiefs furiously. We were inching away from the dock. I was leaning over so far that I felt a hand yanking me back. “Don’t want to lose you, young woman,” said an elderly military-looking man. “It’s a long way down, you know.”

“I thought I saw somebody I knew,” I said, giving an apologetic smile. “I wanted to see if he was coming on board.”

“If he’s on board you’ll meet him soon enough.” The man gave me a kindly smile.

My newfound friend seemed to have disappeared. The throng of people on the deck began to thin out as the tugs pulled us away from the docks and out into the shipping lane. I stayed on deck, half wanting to go down and try to find Darcy, but then realizing what an impossible task that would be on a ship this size. I tried to tell myself that he couldn’t have come on board, just as the ship was leaving. The man I had seen, forcing his way through the crowd, had no luggage with him, and the ship’s officers wouldn’t have let him board without a ticket. But then why couldn’t I still see him among the crowd? I stood watching as the dock with its waving people receded and we were sailing up the Solent, skirting the coastline. I wished I knew whether it really had been Darcy, and felt a small thrill of pleasure that he had learned of my trip and come to see me off, even if he was too late.

And if by some miracle he had come on board, then he’d find me soon enough.

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