

CHAPTER ONE

The royal family had plans for Prince James's twenty-first birthday, but so did James, and they didn't include the royal family. Everyone would be at the palace ball, everyone except his friends.

James went to his bedroom, tossed jeans, ball cap, and sunglasses into his bag, and headed to the garage. He nodded to his bodyguards, Rex Zook and Vern Farrell. They were parked beside James's VW Rabbit. As he pulled out, their uncertain looks amused James. They followed James's car closely.

James pulled up to the Ministry of Truth Bookshop, which his friend, Colin Smith-Courtenay, owned. Entering the empty bookstore, James ran down an aisle. As he glanced at his two bodyguards, they bolted from their car as though shot from a cannon. James exited to the back alley where Colin waited in his Mini Cooper.

James jumped in and howled, "Go! Go! Go!" As they skidded around the corner, he heard Rex yelling into his mouthpiece, "Hamlet's running!"

"I hope you have an elusive route in mind."

"Don't worry." Colin grinned. "They won't catch us." He shot into oncoming traffic and darted down an alley. He did a quick U-turn and parked behind two large dumpsters. Through the gap between them, they saw the bodyguards' vehicle streak past. Moments later, Colin pulled out and drove in the opposite direction.

"Silk, Colin. Very smooth."

Colin rifled through his bag for his flask. "A toast! To twenty-one, chum, and bottoms up." Colin took a long draw.

"Here's to no more birthdays!" James took a swig followed by another. "Let's jiggle some molecules, Colin."

Colin focused on the road as his arm fumbled around the back seat. He revealed a wrapped gift. "Happy birthday, James."

"This isn't from your bookstore?"

"No. It's something I bought. A book."

"You bought a book?" Laughing, the prince stripped off the wrapping, which revealed the title: "***Princess Christina's Death: A New Investigation.***"

"Quite compelling stuff about your mother's accident four years ago."

A curtain of ice rose between them. "That's enough!"

"Terrific read. Eye-opening stuff."

James looked at the cover price and leafed through it. "You wasted your money. You shouldn't read this rubbish."

Colin reminded him, "You once instructed me, 'If you want to be my real friend, don't be another ass kisser. I'm surrounded by them. I want to be told the truth, even if it makes me uncomfortable.'"

"Yeah, well, I must have been drunk."

"Well, you're sober now."

"Yeah, but not for long." He flung the book out the window. "I owe you a drink. Let's get good and fucked up."

CHAPTER TWO

When they entered the rented banquet hall, twenty of James's schoolmates erupted with cheers. When the doors closed behind James, confetti and balloons dropped from the ceiling. Deafening heavy-metal music blared, shaking the windows.

At the bar, James's friends lifted their rum glasses and called out, "Here's to James, twenty-one tonight!" They toasted again and again, the room spinning as James drank one double after another.

Colin interjected, "Slow down, James. We still have your presents."

"Then I'd better get to them, because this rum is calling my name."

James made it to the gift table and tore into the packages: a Rigby rifle, the finest audio headset, and a silver flask he pressed to his head as if answering a phone. "Hello? Sorry, I'm not here."

Everyone howled.

Colin gestured. "Come here, birthday boy. Here's my gift." James saw a stunning woman in a Burberry trench coat. From her bare legs and high heel pumps, he gathered what this "gift" had in mind. Then she dropped her coat, revealing just a bikini bottom, her bare breasts full and nubile.

At one corner of the table, Colin set a chair and, with a swipe of his arm, brushed aside the remaining packages. Grinning, James took the seat. But glancing down, he noticed an envelope that had been hidden beneath the other presents. On the envelope was a single word.

Bunny.

Stunned, James lasered his focus on the envelope, even as the dancer circled her arms across his shoulders. She pressed her breasts into the back of his neck, but he ignored her. He opened the flap. Inside was a single sheet of paper with these words:

ST. LAURENT RESTAURANT RESERVATION FOR MR. LAPIN.

TONIGHT, 11:30 P.M.

James looked around, suddenly very lucid. "Who sent this?" He held up the envelope to Colin.

Colin moved to the music, as the beautiful woman clung to James's neck. "Who knows?"

James shrugged away from the dancer. "Damn it. Who sent this?" He shook the envelope at his friend.

Colin stiffened. "Honestly, I don't know."

James stood and looked at his classmates. "Which of you bloody sent this?"

Each man pointed out his gift. The envelope had no giver. The dancer stood naked, waiting for her patron to return to his seat.

"Colin, give me your car keys."

"You can't be serious?"

"Please," James pleaded. "You've told me to seek the truth."

“Want me to go with you?”

“No, just keep her entertained.” He turned to the dancer and kissed her with a passionate force.

James knew the reservation was for him. Lapin was French for bunny.

The St. Laurent was halfway across town.

James looked at his watch. He had twenty minutes.

CHAPTER THREE

James assumed his mystery host must have wanted privacy because the St. Laurent had no nosy valet, just a self-serve parking lot with few customers. He pulled his ball cap down and his collar up. Inside the restaurant, he said to the hostess, “Reservation for Mr. Lapin.”

She glanced at the prince and faltered. “Your Highness?”

James shook his head slightly then asked, “My table?”

She regained her composure and responded, “Right this way.”

She led him to a table for two in the back of the restaurant. Before the hostess left, he handed her a large bill.

“No one knows I’m here.”

“Of course, Mr. Lapin.” She tucked the bill into her breast pocket and smiled.

Fifteen minutes ticked off. He waited because the person who sent him the note had written “Bunny,” the pet name only his late mother, Princess Christina, knew and used.

James fidgeted and ordered a drink. He scrutinized each person as they approached his table, but everyone passed him by. The waiting slowly pulled him down into despair. Who would do this? And why? He sat nursing a double rum and a triple hangover. With his glass, he made interlocking wet circles on the polished tabletop. Then he saw a woman’s face reflected in the table. He looked up expectantly.

“May we use this chair?”

“Don’t be presumptuous.”

As she turned about, the woman muttered, “Drunk.”

By his third double, he assumed he’d missed the contact and rose to leave.

Then behind him, a man’s voice whispered, “Sit down, and don’t turn around.”

James started to turn his head.

“I said, don’t turn around. Or I’ll leave.”

James sat back down and waited. After a long pause, he asked, “Who are you?”

“I’m just a messenger.”

“How do you know about ‘Bunny’? Who told you about—”

“Under the table,” interrupted the messenger.

James reached under his table, his hand moving in slow, expanding arcs. Two hardened lumps of chewing gum, one abandoned, the other orphaned. Then his fingers brushed a flat package taped there. He looked about then discreetly removed a clear, plastic sleeve. Inside was an unlabeled DVD. “All right, I got it. Now what?”

There was no response.

James slipped the disc into his coat. "Now what?"

Then he heard his bodyguard Vern's booming voice. "Okay Prince, you've gotten us in enough trouble. Let's go."

The other security man, Rex, came around the table and sneered, "Damn kid. I don't give a shit who you are. Our job is to watch you, and when you threaten that, it pisses me off."

James spun around. The messenger's table was empty.

Vern was more relaxed than Rex. "Blind date's over. Let's go."

"I have a car."

"You think we would let you drive alone?" Vern laughed. "We are done for the evening."

"But I have Colin's car."

Vern sighed and looked at Rex. "You drive that thing to the bookstore and trade places with the VW. I'll get the prince to the palace. If we hurry, we might salvage our jobs."

James kept the DVD close in the pocket of his coat. "It's nothing against you guys," he apologized. "I had plans Grandmother just didn't understand."

Vern admitted, "I know. I was twenty-one once. My parents begged me to celebrate with them and all my friends wanted me to go out with them."

"What did you do?"

He smiled. "I had a shitty night." He gave the prince a light shove. "But I'm sure yours was much more fun."

CHAPTER FOUR

Once in the car, James told his bodyguard, "I've got a splitting headache. Plus I'm exhausted. I'd like to go home."

"Sorry, that's not happening. We have orders to get you to the palace party, and we're following them."

James knew what the palace party would be: speeches, Mozart, and lots of pretty girls all groping for the glass slipper. Daughter of the duke of such-and-such. The sister of the earl of this-and-that. All smiles and capped teeth, all the perfect hair and millions in cosmetic surgery. With all the authenticity of plastic fruit.

And he knew, that they knew, that he knew, that everyone was actively currying favor for when he would become king.

"Take me home. Now!" James patted the DVD again, reassuring himself it was still there.

Once in his penthouse, James dismissed his butler. "I need absolute privacy until morning." James locked his bedroom door. He examined the DVD. Nothing was written on it. What could this DVD contain that required so much stealth? He placed it in his digital player and hit play.

Noise filled the screen.

Then an image of his mother appeared. Christina was wearing an elegant blue satin evening gown. She looked neither happy nor sad but ever so vibrant and alive. Tears ran down James's face as he heard her voice.

"Bunny dear, happy, happy birthday. But if you're seeing this, something dire must have happened to me. Listen, darling. You're the only one to tell my story. The true story. Because whatever they told you, whether it was a suicide, an overdose or an accident, don't believe them. It was murder. I have arranged for you to receive this when you turn twenty-one. Remember: trust no one. Remember me. Avenge me."

Looking down, Christina paused and sighed. Fighting the tears. "I will always be with you. I will always love you." She bit her lower lip as her image faded to black, then to a snowy noise.

He started it again, and when her face appeared, James froze the image and stared at the screen. His heart pounding, he trembled with disbelief and confusion. Sinking to his knees, he closed his eyes and put a hand to the screen. The lakes of pain instantly boiled away, replaced with something icy and full of cold fury.

"I swear I will uncover the truth. Nothing will stand in my way. Promise. I will avenge you."

Looking outside, the morning sky was a veil of crimson.

James had landed on a haunted shore inhabited by ghosts beckoning him to explore. But what might be waiting there filled him with despair.