

CHAPTER ONE

Kensington Palace, June 20th, 1837

When she opened her eyes, Victoria saw a faint sliver of light coming through the shutters. She could hear her mother breathing in the big bed on the other side of the room. But not for much longer. Soon, Victoria thought, she would have her own bedroom. Soon she would be able to walk down the stairs without holding Lehzen's hand; soon she would be able to do whatever she pleased. She had celebrated her eighteenth birthday last month, so when the moment came, she would reign alone.

Dash lifted his head and then Victoria heard her governess's quick footsteps. If Lehzen was coming now, it could only mean one thing. She got out of bed and went to the door, opening it just as Lehzen was putting out her hand to knock. The Baroness looked so comical standing there with her hand outstretched that Victoria started to giggle, but checked herself as she saw the expression on her governess's face.

"The messenger from Windsor is downstairs. He is wearing a

black armband." Lehzen lowered herself into a deep curtsy. "Your Majesty."

She felt the smile spread across her face before she could stop herself. Reaching out her hand, Victoria pulled Lehzen up to face her, and was touched by the devotion she saw in the older woman's worried brown eyes.

"Dearest Lehzen, I am so glad that you are the first person to call me that."

The governess looked over towards the sleeping figure in the bed, but Victoria shook her head. "I don't want to wake Mama just yet. The first thing she will do is to call Sir John and then they will start telling me what to do."

Lehzen's lips twitched. "But you are the Queen, Drina." She stopped, realising her blunder. "I mean, 'Majesty.' There is no one who can tell you what to do now."

Victoria smiled.

A door opened at the end of the corridor, and Brodie the hall boy hurtled through it, slowing himself down to a more respectable pace when he saw the two women. As he drew near, Victoria noticed him hesitate and then commit himself to a deep bow. She felt herself wanting to smile; he was almost as small as she was, so the gesture seemed droll, but she knew that it was her duty now to keep a straight face. A queen could laugh, but not at her subjects.

"The Archbishop is here," he announced, then hastily added, "Your Majesty." Brodie's small freckled face was suffused with relief at having addressed her correctly.

Lehzen looked at him sharply. "And you have told no one else?"

The boy looked affronted. "I came straight to you, Baroness, as instructed." There was a slight pause until Lehzen took a coin out of her reticule and gave it to the boy, who scampered away, all pretence at dignity obliterated by his delight with his prize.

"You should go now, Majesty, before . . ." Lehzen glanced over Victoria's shoulder at the figure in the bed.

Victoria pulled her shawl down over her nightdress. Although she

would prefer to get dressed first, she knew that by the time she had arranged herself, the rest of the household would be awake and her mother and Sir John would start to interfere. No, she would go now; she would start as she meant to go on.

Victoria followed Lehzen through the picture gallery, past the portrait of Queen Anne, who as Lehzen never ceased to remind her was the last woman to sit on the English throne. Passing Anne's sulky, disappointed face, Victoria hoped that she would never look so unfortunate. She caught a glimpse of herself in the looking glass. Her cheeks were pink, and her blue eyes were sparkling with excitement. She was not dressed like a queen, in a nightdress with her hair loose across her shoulders, but she thought that today she looked like one.

When they reached the top of the great staircase, Lehzen put out her hand, as she always did.

Victoria took a deep breath. "Thank you, Lehzen, but I can manage unaided."

Surprise and worry flickered in succession across the other woman's face.

"You know that your mother told me that I must always be there in case you are falling."

Victoria looked up at her. "I am quite capable of walking down the stairs without mishap."

Lehzen wanted to protest, but seeing the look in Victoria's eye, she subsided.

Victoria started down the steps and said, looking over her shoulder, "Things cannot be as they were, Lehzen. Now that I am Queen."

Lehzen stopped moving, her foot poised over the step, as if frozen in midair. Her words were slow and painful. "You will no longer be needing a governess, I suppose. Perhaps it is time that I went home to Hanover."

Victoria stretched out her hand, and her face softened. "Oh, Lehzen, I didn't mean that. I don't want you to go anywhere. Just because I choose to walk down the stairs by myself, that doesn't mean I don't want you by my side."

Lehzen took Victoria's hand, and the colour began to return to her face. "I never wish to leave you, Majesty. My only wish is to serve you."

"And you will, Lehzen. But I don't need you to help me down the stairs anymore." Victoria looked upstairs to where her mother slept on. "That part of my life is over."

Lehzen nodded her understanding.

"And you can tell the servants that I will be moving into Queen Mary's bedroom tonight. I think it is time that I had a room of my own, don't you?"

Lehzen smiled. "Yes, Majesty. I think a queen does not sleep on a cot next to her mother's bed."

At the foot of the stairs, she paused. The Archbishop and the Lord Chamberlain were behind the library door. She had been waiting for this moment for so long, and yet now it was upon her, she had to fight a sudden impulse to flee to the comfort of her schoolroom.

She had never been in a room alone with a man before, let alone an archbishop. Then she heard the clatter of Dash's paws as he came down the wooden staircase. He sat at her feet, looking up at her expectantly. He, at least, was ready for the adventure that lay ahead. Victoria swallowed her fear and walked towards the door. She was the queen now.

The two grey-haired old men bowed as she entered the library, and Victoria heard the sound of the Archbishop's knee cracking as he knelt to kiss her hand.

"I regret to inform you that your uncle, the King, passed away at two thirty-four this morning," the Archbishop said. "Queen Adelaide was at his side."

Victoria looked up at the two whiskery faces looming above her. "My poor dear uncle. May God have mercy on his soul."

Both men bent their heads. Victoria wondered what she should say next, but her thoughts were interrupted by the feeling of a small,

rough tongue licking her foot. Dash was trying to get her attention. She bit her lip.

“The King’s last wish was to commend Queen Adelaide to your care.” The Lord Chamberlain looked down at Dash, and his eyelids flickered. Victoria knew that look, which she had seen many times before; it was the expression worn by a man who felt that what he was doing was beneath his dignity. His proper place, it said, was dealing with the mighty affairs of state, not pandering to a young girl and her dog.

Victoria pulled her shoulders back and stuck her chin in the air, trying to lift herself from four foot eleven inches to a full five feet—if only she had a few more inches. It was uncommonly hard to be regal when everyone could see the top of your head. But, she reminded herself, it didn’t matter how tall she was. She thought for a moment and decided to use the phrase she had once heard her Uncle King utter, and had longed to use ever since.

“Thank you, Archbishop, Lord Chamberlain. You have my permission to withdraw.”

She kept her face as still as she could as the two men bowed and proceeded to walk backwards out of the room. There was something irresistibly comic about the sight of these two old men retreating as if pulled by invisible strings, but she knew that she must not laugh. Being the Queen gave her the right to dismiss but not to ridicule. The thing every monarch needed was dignity. She remembered how embarrassed she had been when her uncle had started to sing a song about a drunken sailor in the middle of a state banquet. He had, she thought, been quite drunk, and as he sang, little strings of saliva had formed at the side of his mouth. She had looked down the table at the faces of the courtiers to see how they would react, but to a man they had kept their faces smooth and impassive as if nothing untoward was going on. The only sign that anyone had noticed the King’s drunken antics was a young footman whose shoulders were shaking with laughter until an older colleague nudged him to stop. She had resolved then that

she would never let this happen when she was Queen. The idea that her courtiers might be laughing at her behind those smooth faces was not to be borne.

Victoria looked about her, but as there was no one in sight she picked up the hem of her nightdress and started to run up the stairs, Dash barking at her heels. Running was forbidden under the Kensington System, the rules set up by her mother and Conroy to govern every aspect of her existence. Running upstairs would have been unthinkable only yesterday, but today she could do whatever she liked.

Jenkins, her dresser, was waiting for her. The black silk dress, the one that had been ordered last week when it had become clear that the King would not recover from his illness, was laid out on the chaise longue. Jenkins had wanted to order several dresses, but Sir John had said that it was a needless expense. That was another thing that would have to change now she was Queen.

Jenkins was looking at her curiously. Victoria realised that she was clenching her fists.

“You must order the rest of my mourning clothes now, Jenkins. I see no reason for further delay.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Jenkins’s round face was split by the width of her smile.

Victoria put her arms up, and the dresser pulled the black dress over her head. She turned to face herself in the cheval glass. The black silk dress with its caterpillar sleeves was quite different from the simple muslin dresses in pastel colours that her mother deemed suitable. The mourning dress made her look older, and the crenellated sleeves gave her outline a sharpness that she found pleasing. She smoothed the folds of silk at her waist.

Hearing a sound somewhere between a sigh and a gasp, Victoria turned to see Lehzen standing behind her.

“Oh . . . forgive me . . . Majesty. I am not used to seeing you in black, you look so . . . grown up.”

Victoria smiled at Lehzen. “I am glad. It is time that people stopped seeing me as a little girl.”

The door from the bedroom burst open. The Duchess of Kent rushed in, her hair still in curling papers, her paisley shawl flapping around her.

“*Mein Kind*, where did you go?” The Duchess’s voice was, as always, reproachful. But then Victoria saw her mother register the black dress, and watched as her expression changed from injury to shock.

“*Der König?*”

Victoria nodded. Her mother put her arms around her, and she allowed herself to relax into that lavender-scented embrace.

“*Mein kleines mädchen ist die Kaiserin.*”

Victoria pulled herself away. “No more German, Mama. You are the mother of the Queen of England now.”

The Duchess nodded, her curl papers shaking. She put a trembling hand to Victoria’s cheek. Her pale blue eyes were wet.

“Oh, my little Drina, have I ever told you about my journey from Amorbach across France when I was carrying you in my belly?” She mimed the bulk of an eight-month pregnancy.

Victoria nodded. “Many times, Mama.” But the Duchess was not to be forestalled.

“It was just a hired carriage, and so uncomfortable. But I was crossing my legs the whole time, so that you, *mein Liebe*, could be born in England. I knew that if you were born anywhere else, then those awful uncles of yours would say that you were not English and then you could not be Queen. But I held on.”

The Duchess smiled at her own obstetrical feat. She was right, of course; Victoria knew that. There were enough people already who doubted whether an eighteen-year-old girl would make a suitable monarch, but the idea of an eighteen-year-old girl who had been born in Germany would never be countenanced.

“If only your poor father could have lived to see this day.” The Duchess looked up at the life-sized picture of the late Duke of Kent, standing with his hand resting on a cannon, that hung behind them.

“But Mama, even if he hadn’t died when I was a baby, he would

never have seen me become Queen now, would he? The only reason I am Queen is that he is dead.”

The Duchess shook her head, impatient with Victoria’s pedantic insistence on the facts of the succession. “Yes, I know, but you know what I mean, Drina. He would be so happy to think that out of all his brothers, it was his child who was becoming the Queen. Just think, if I had not been what your father was always calling a Coburg brood mare, then that monster, your uncle Cumberland, would be the King.” The Duchess shuddered theatrically and crossed herself.

“Well, he isn’t. Not of England, anyway. But of course he is the King of Hanover now,” said Victoria. It was a wrinkle in the laws of succession that while she could inherit the British throne, as a woman she was barred from reigning over the German state that had been ruled jointly since the Elector of Hanover had become George I in 1713. Her uncle Cumberland, as the next male heir, had inherited the German duchy.

“Hanover! It is, how do you call it, a pimple, in the middle of Germany. Let him go and be King there, and leave us alone.”

Victoria tugged at the bodice of her dress so that it lay straight. Her mother had tried to frighten her with the man she called “your wicked uncle Cumberland” ever since she could remember. He was the reason that Victoria had always slept in her mother’s bedroom, the Duchess believing that if Cumberland were to come for Victoria in the night then she would at least be able to interpose her body between the assassin and her child.

Victoria had no difficulty in believing her uncle capable of murder; he was almost comically villainous in appearance—tall and cadaverous with a livid dueling scar down one cheek. When Cumberland’s valet had been found with his throat cut, it had been generally assumed that Cumberland had been responsible. She had less confidence in her mother’s ability to defend her. Determined as the Duchess was, Victoria did not think even she would be able to fend off a six-foot man with a cutthroat razor.

Her mother was fussing now. “Why didn’t you wake me up at once?” She looked reproachfully at Lehzen. “You should have told me, Baroness.”

The Baroness bowed her head, but said nothing. She could hardly say she had been acting on the explicit instructions of the daughter. Before the Duchess could remonstrate further, the door opened and Sir John Conroy walked in, planting himself, as he always did, in the middle of the room as if taking possession of a newly conquered territory.

The Duchess turned immediately and fluttered towards him. “Oh, Sir John, have you heard? That awful old man is dead, and our little Drina is Queen.”

Watching the Duchess lay a hand on his arm, Victoria felt a shiver of revulsion run through her. Why couldn’t her mother see that it was beneath her dignity as a royal duchess and now the mother of a queen to be always fawning on this odious fellow as if he were a man of rank and fortune instead of her paid advisor?

Conroy spoke in his deep, booming voice with its slight Irish inflection, his words, as ever, uttered with total conviction. “The first thing to decide is how you will style yourself. Alexandrina is too foreign, and Victoria is hardly the name for a queen. You could adopt Elizabeth, perhaps, or Anne. Yes”—Conroy’s long, handsome face was flushed with his proximity to power—“Elizabeth II sounds very well. Very well indeed.”

He turned to the woman who had followed him into the room. “Don’t you think so, Lady Flora?”

Victoria stared straight ahead. She thought that if she did not look at Conroy and Flora Hastings, they might realise that they were not welcome.

But she heard the rustle of Lady Flora’s curtsey, and her murmur, “To be called Elizabeth would be a reminder of a great queen.” The implication could not have been clearer. It would take more than a name to turn a little girl into a monarch.

The Duchess turned back to Victoria. "Has the Archbishop come? I will just be getting dressed and then we can go and see him together."

Victoria turned to face her. She could feel her heart pounding as she said in a voice that was braver than she felt, "Thank you, Mama, but that won't be necessary. The Archbishop and the Lord Chamberlain were here earlier. They have already kissed hands."

The Duchess looked at her in horror. "You saw them alone! But Drina! What were you thinking?"

Victoria paused before replying as evenly as she could, "A month ago, on my eighteenth birthday, I became old enough to be Queen, and therefore quite capable of seeing my ministers alone."

The Duchess looked, as she always did in times of difficulty, to Conroy. Victoria was pleased to note he was developing a slight twitch in his left eye.

There was a crash as Conroy banged his silver-topped cane on the wooden floor. "This is not a game! In the future—" He hesitated, but managed to form his lips around her new title. "—ma'am, you will always be accompanied by your mother or me. You cannot do this alone."

Victoria could not help but take a step backwards as he loomed towards her. But she told herself there was no reason to be frightened; there was nothing he could do to her anymore. At her feet she heard Dash growling.

Bending down, she picked up the spaniel. "Oh, don't worry, Sir John, I have no intention of being alone." Ignoring her mother's imploring face, she turned her head to look straight at him. "You see, I have Dash."

And discretion being the better part of valour, she walked out of the room, holding Dash tightly in her arms. She ran down the corridor and then stopped, her head still throbbing with the sound of Conroy's cane as it struck the floor. She knew that there was nothing to be frightened of anymore, but still the act of defying him had left her breathless.