

## Chapter One

It was a strange thing for a working-class girl to call a palace home, but that's exactly what it was. Buckingham Palace, home of King George VI, with all its opulence and finery, had been home to Milly Hendry since she was ten years old.

As she stared at one of the paintings in the long, carpeted hallway, duster in hand, she contemplated the twists of fate that had brought her here and almost laughed at the ridiculousness of it all. Not many orphans ended up in a palace. If she hadn't been evacuated to a Devon farm, she might have died in the same air raid that had killed both her parents during the Blitz in 1941, and if her Aunt Edie hadn't taken her in, she might have ended up on the streets, poor and destitute like so many others.

Dear Aunt Edie.

But again, it seemed to Milly so strange that of all the places Edie could have worked, she'd found a job at Buckingham Palace and Milly had followed in her footsteps as soon as she turned fifteen. Only as a cleaner, mind, and one of hundreds at that. But it still seemed odd that she should be standing here now in one of the long crimson-carpeted corridors with gold on the ceilings and at the top of each enormous column, surrounded by paintings and statues, cleaning for a king and queen.

'Are you gawpin' at that paintin' again?' Edie's hushed voice, which couldn't be further from the plummy English accents some of the higher staff spoke with, not to mention the royal family themselves, slipped along the quiet corridor towards her.

'Shhhh!' Milly pressed a finger to her lips, smiling as she did so, and Edie lowered her voice as she drew level.

‘Don’t you shush me, you little terror. Now, get on with you. Caroline’s lit the fires, Davey’s refillin’ the coal scuttles and you and I better get this corridor done and dusted in the next five minutes or we’ll be behind schedule. Why do you keep gogglin’ at that paintin’ anyway?’

‘I don’t really know,’ Milly replied, crossing her arms over her chest. ‘I just like it, I suppose.’

It depicted a pack of hounds running in front of riders on horseback. She didn’t know who it was by. Milly didn’t really know anything about painting or artists apart from the fact that nearly everything in the palace cost a fortune and was by some famous person or other. All she knew was that she liked it. She liked the riders’ glossy helmets and fancy jackets, their shining black boots. But most of all she liked the freedom it showed. It would be amazing to just jump on a horse and ride off without a care in the world.

‘You do realise that’s a hunt, don’t you?’ asked Edie, her rosacea-covered cheeks matching the red of the carpet. They hadn’t always been this way. When Milly thought back, she remembered Edie’s pale skin and thick, tawny hair. It was peppered with grey now – inch-long fingers of it reaching out from the top of her head. ‘You know, where they all race around after a poor little fox then the dogs tear it to shreds?’

‘What?’ Milly’s eyes widened as she looked at her aunt.

‘Oh, my girl, sometimes I think I didn’t do you any favours bringin’ you here.’

It was true that her life had been somewhat cloistered, living with Edie in their small staff apartments in Buckingham Palace along with all the other housekeepers. And the gardeners, cooks, footmen, kitchen staff . . . too many people to mention. With so many below-stairs staff, and the seniors who worked directly with the King and Queen, the palace

was like a city within a city. It had everything they needed, and with the royal kitchen providing all their meals there wasn't any need to stray far.

So many people during the war, and in the years since, had had to buy or rent homes because theirs had been destroyed, to begin their life again after they'd lost literally everything. Milly averted her eyes from the fox she now spotted in the corner of the painting and counted her blessings. The pain of losing her parents still struck her, particularly on special occasions: birthdays, Christmas, that sort of thing, but at least she had memories of good times rather than bad.

'Sometimes,' Edie continued, brushing a strand of grey-brown hair behind her ear, 'I think I should have made you work somewhere else so you got out into the world a bit more.'

'Oh, come on, Aunt Edie. It's not like I never go into the city.'

How could she not? The bustling world of London was right on her doorstep. She and Edie often went to Oxford Street shopping, or to Bloomsbury to visit the British Museum. She'd even been to Covent Garden to see a show with one of the under-butlers, though he'd been dismissed for thievery so the less said about him the better. It wasn't that she didn't know anything about life outside the palace walls, she just didn't know everything.

Milly nudged her aunt with her elbow. 'I'm not that naive.'

'Really.' Edie crossed her arms over her chest, resting her ample bosom on top. She was what Milly had always called sturdy, with her short, round body but was as strong as an ox and had once proved it by arm-wrestling one of the kitchen porters after too much Christmas sherry. She nearly broke his arm.

'I'll be twenty-one tomorrow. And it's not my fault I don't know what that painting is about. These poshies are always off somewhere or other on a horse. Princess Margaret and

Princess Elizabeth love to ride. And why would anyone want to hunt foxes?’ She adjusted one of the pins in the straw-blonde bun at the nape of her neck.

‘Beats me, but there you are. Come on, what have I told you? The best servants are neither seen—’

‘—nor heard,’ Milly finished.

‘And you’ll be both if we don’t get a squiggle on. You do this side and I’ll do that one. I’m still tryin’ to get sticky finger marks off the wall from Prince Charles’s birthday party.’

The little prince had turned three just two days before and had been staying at Buckingham Palace, along with his baby sister, Princess Anne, rather than Clarence House as his mother and father, Princess Elizabeth, and Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, were on a state visit to Canada. The eldest princess had taken on more of her father’s duties since his illness back in September when he’d had a lung removed. It had been a pleasant day and a great success, but the clean-up had been awful. Cake crumbs lingered everywhere.

They worked on in silence for a few minutes, moving down the length of the corridor dusting every available surface. The palace was famous for never containing a speck of dust and all the housekeeping staff took pride in the fact that was down to them. Some of the staff had the pleasure of hobnobbing with the great and the good, but it was thanks to the cleaners they could show off the palace knowing it would always look its best.

‘Aunt Edie, why can’t we get one of those fancy vacuum cleaners? I saw them advertised in your *Woman & Home* magazine. They’d save us ever such a lot of time and make it easier to get this dog hair out. Those corgis really do shed.’

‘And how much noise would that make? What would Queen Elizabeth say to that? Never mind the poor old King who needs as much rest as he can get. Neither seen nor heard, remember? Cartin’ one of those things around, as well as the racket it’d make when we switch it on, would wake everyone.’

Out of the window, looking out on to the grounds at the back of the palace, the sun was just beginning to rise. A pale sky tinted by a watery sun was edging further out of the navy-blue dusk and climbing over the colossal trees that lined the edge of the garden. The leaves had all fallen now, swept away by cold winter winds leaving nothing but bare branches and birds’ nests. Even the birds hadn’t yet risen, but Milly had grown so used to the early starts she often forgot that while they worked as quickly and quietly as possible, the rest of the world was still asleep. Not just the royal family, but most of London too.

The sound of fast footsteps could be heard in the distance and Milly tried to place them. She knew the tread of King George and Queen Elizabeth, his steady and even and hers short and light. And she definitely knew the firm, military steps of Peter Townsend, the Deputy Master of the Household – one of their senior bosses. It definitely wasn’t any of them.

Just then, a woman Milly had never met before came bustling along the corridor. She could see from her clothes she wasn’t a member of the royal household. She wasn’t wearing the same immensely impractical white dress the housekeepers wore. Whilst clean and tidy, her slightly battered tweed suit was more East End than English royalty and her black hair was falling out from under her hat.

‘I say, excuse me,’ the woman said. ‘I don’t suppose you know where the telephone exchange is? The chap at the gates pointed me in the right direction but I was in such a panic I must have taken a wrong turn and now I’m completely lost.’

‘It’s easy to do here, love,’ said Aunt Edie gently. ‘But you’re in totally the wrong place. I don’t quite know how you’ve managed it.’

The woman’s cheeks coloured, and Milly stepped in, hoping to make her feel better. She was only a little older than her though a sadness seemed to weigh her down. ‘It’s all right for you, Aunt Edie. You’ve been here for – what, thirty years?’

‘Give or take,’ Edie replied with a slight nod.

‘You know this place like the back of your hand but for some of us it’s still a bit of a muddle.’ She turned to the woman. ‘I’ve been here since I was fifteen and there are some bits even I don’t know. With so many corridors and hidden stairs it’s easy to get lost.’

‘Gosh. I haven’t even come across any hidden stairs yet, thank goodness. Who knows where I might have ended up if I had.’

‘Maybe in the King’s bedroom,’ Milly said with a giggle and was pleased to see a smile lift the corners of the woman’s mouth. ‘I’m not sure that’d do his recovery any good.’

‘Milly!’ Edie scolded. ‘Don’t you go talkin’ about the King like that. Though he is a very handsome gentleman, in my opinion.’

The smile faded from the woman’s mouth as she checked her watch again. ‘I’m so sorry but which way do I go?’

‘That way,’ answered Edie, pointing down the hallway they’d just cleaned. ‘Follow it round, then down the steps, first left, second right and then second left. That’ll take you to the staff block. The telephone exchange is in that bit. Then you need to go . . . Actually, I won’t tell you any more. It’d be better to get someone to show you when you get there. Did you get what I said?’

‘I think so.’

Milly wasn't convinced she had.

The woman began to straighten her jacket and as she pulled down the hem, her elbow knocked into a vase sat on top of the side table behind her. The vase wobbled on its base and the woman spun, reaching out instinctively even though it was too late to stop it.

'No!' she cried out.

Milly watched as it fell sideways and rolled off the table and on to the ground, smashing to pieces. The sound of breaking porcelain echoed around the empty, silent hallway, the noise reaching every corner of the palace and bouncing back towards them, just like the dinner gong they used for special occasions. That thing always made Milly jump even when she was expecting it.

The woman's hands flew to her face. 'Oh no. What am I going to do? I can't afford to pay for that and it's my first day.' She shook her head as she spoke. 'I can't lose this job and I'm already late. First my father, then the bus, and then when I finally got here, I couldn't find the servants' entrance. It's all going wrong.'

'What happened to your dad?' asked Milly, wondering why she hadn't said more.

'Oh, it doesn't matter.'

Tears threatened the poor woman's eyes and Milly stepped forwards. 'Don't worry, we can clean it up and I'll tell them I did it.'

'I couldn't possibly let you do that. Won't you get into trouble?'

'No, she won't,' Edie said, 'because I'll tell them I did it. It's not one of the priceless ones. At least I don't think it is.' The woman's face paled. Clearly the idea it might have been was too much.

‘It still must have cost a fortune even if it isn’t priceless. Will they make you pay for it? I can’t possibly let you.’ Milly suddenly noticed how blue her eyes were and they shone even brighter with the glassiness of unshed tears.

‘It’s fine,’ Edie replied soothingly. ‘Accidents happen.’

‘Are you sure? It’s all far too kind of you. I don’t want you to get into any trouble because of me.’

‘I won’t have to pay for it, dear. They’re not monsters here. Besides, you can count the things I’ve broken on the fingers of one hand. If you’re goin’ to be a housekeeper at Buckingham Palace, you need to be careful. But you better get off, my girl, or you’ll be even later and then you definitely *will* get into trouble.’

‘You’re right. I’m really terribly sorry but thank you. Thank you so much. You’ve been so kind to me.’ A tear escaped her eye, and she quickly brushed it away.

‘Now, now, we don’t need all that. You’ve got first-day nerves, that’s all. I’m sure you’ll be fine.’

‘The day can only get better, I suppose.’

‘What’s your name?’ asked Milly before she left. ‘I’m Milly Hendry and this is my Aunt Edie.’ She stuck out her hand and, as she did so, saw Edie roll her eyes.

‘It’s Mrs Barnes to most people. Only Edie when we’re off duty.’

‘Helen. Helen Hill.’ Helen shook Milly’s hand and then Edie’s. Her gloves were cream. Well, mostly cream. They too had seen better days. ‘I really can’t thank you enough. You really are too, too kind.’

‘You said that already,’ Milly replied with a smile. ‘Go on, go, and good luck.’

Helen hesitated, casting her eyes once more to the fragments of vase that were scattered on the floor. ‘All right then. Goodbye and thank you ever so much, both of you.’

She dashed off and Edie and Milly crouched to collect the shards of porcelain, careful not to cut themselves.

‘Do you think they will mind?’ Milly asked, taking the pieces she’d collected to the small cleaning trolley.

‘I shouldn’t think so.’

‘How can you be so sure?’

A wry smile pulled at Edie’s mouth. ‘The King hates this vase.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘He told me.’

‘When?’

Edie straightened and glowed with pride at the memory. ‘He found me dustin’ it one day and said so. Like I said, he’s a gentleman and always talks to us if he can spare the time. Best to avoid him when he’s in his gnashes though. Got quite a temper sometimes.’

‘She seemed nice, don’t you think?’

‘Nice enough, but you know what some of these other departments are like. Some of them – not all, mind – but some think they’re better than us housekeepers just because we clean for a livin’.’

‘I don’t think she seemed like that.’

‘Hmm.’ Edie glanced back over her shoulder. ‘Anyway, I doubt we’ll see her again except in passin’.’

‘But you must think so too, or you wouldn’t have offered to say it was you who knocked the vase over. Do you think she’ll make it to the telephone exchange on time?’

‘Not a chance, my lovely. Not a chance.’

Two hours later, Milly and Edie were settled around a large table in the Household Breakfast Room. The team always gathered for breakfast together, particularly if they’d had an early start and breakfast was more like lunch. Relaxing a little, they ate buttered English muffins and drank strong, sweet tea. Eggs were still rationed, even for the royal palaces, and Milly longed for one boiled that she could dip her soldiers into, but she’d already had her ration for the week. She often wondered what the King and Queen ate for breakfast and if they stuck to the rules. Edie always said they did and Robert, one of the kitchen porters, said they only had extra eggs when they were laid by the hens kept by the ground staff. King George had been sure to make everyone use ration cards and Princess Elizabeth had even used her clothing coupons for her wedding dress back in 1947. It was hard to believe that, with the war over for six years already, they were still being rationed.

One of the older footmen had once told Milly that before Princess Elizabeth’s move to Clarence House with her new husband, she had often joined the family for breakfast, though Princess Margaret had a habit of being late, coming down when she wanted to even if everyone else had finished by then. Milly wasn’t entirely sure what she thought of Princess Margaret. In some ways she sympathised with her. It must be awful being born into a position you didn’t want to fill and to always be second best to a sister who would one day be queen. But she was lucky to have money, a family who loved her and a purpose in life – and so Milly couldn’t help thinking Margaret just a tad ungrateful. Though Milly and Princess Margaret were the same age, she felt much more of a kinship with Elizabeth. Milly had been brought up here and everyone had assumed she’d end up working at the palace just as

Elizabeth would one day follow her father to the throne, whether she wanted to or not. She heard a male voice and turned, thinking it was Timothy Ranger, one of the footmen, who had dark-brown hair and eyes like melted chocolate. He only had to glance at Milly and her heart would flutter uncontrollably. But it wasn't him. He must have been on duty.

Caroline, one of their newest recruits, gave an almighty yawn, bringing Milly's mind back to the present.

'Tired, Caroline?' asked Aunt Edie.

'Knackered, Mrs Barnes. Fair done in.'

'Shame, that,' Milly replied. In the six months since she joined, the young girl had become like a little sister to her. Or, at least, what she assumed a little sister would be like if she'd had one: annoying or sweet depending on their mood. 'We've got a lot more to do after breakfast. Better eat that up to give you some energy.'

'Maybe', Edie said, eyeing the young girl over the rim of her teacup, 'you should think about goin' to bed earlier. Don't think I haven't seen a light on under your door far longer than it should be.'

'I ain't got the foggiest what you're on about, Mrs Barnes. Honestly,' Caroline replied, shifting in her chair. She had a strong cockney accent whereas Milly's had changed over time, growing up around the royal family. 'If my light was on I must have just been to the loo. Or maybe I was reading.'

'You? Reading?' Milly spluttered.

'Hey! I can read. I like books actually.'

'Oh yes, what have you got?'

‘None of your beeswax, Milly Hendry. Don’t be such a noseyparker.’

Just as Milly was about to tease Caroline a little more, one of the postboys approached their table.

Buckingham Palace had its own post office, which was very handy for those with family to write to. Milly’s only family sat opposite her, wiping butter from the corner of her mouth. If Milly had written her a letter, Edie would have thought she’d gone mad.

‘Here you are, ladies,’ the postboy said. ‘Thought I’d find you all here. Caroline, there’s two for you.’

She took them eagerly, tearing the top letter open, her eyes scanning the words quickly. She received at least two letters every week and sent out goodness knows how many more. All her wages must go on stamps. Caroline’s lips moved, forming the words as she read, and Milly felt a stab of jealousy. No one ever wrote to her. There was no one outside the palace who needed to.

‘Here’s one for you, Mrs Barnes.’ The boy handed over another letter to her aunt. She had friends up and down the country and wrote almost as many letters as Caroline.

‘And last but not least, one for you, Milly.’

‘Me?’ She sat up straighter, knocking her cutlery on to her plate with a clatter. ‘Who’s writing to me?’

‘Birthday card maybe? We’re all looking forward to your little party. It’ll be nice to have something to celebrate. Goodness knows the mood’s dark enough around here at the moment.’

Since the King’s operation on his lungs in September, he’d had to rest for four weeks, and though he was up and about, and performing some of his normal duties, the mood in the

palace was sombre both above and below stairs. Doctors still haunted the hallways like ghosts, appearing and disappearing without warning. Everyone loved the King after the way he'd staunchly stayed at the palace all through the war, even when London was being bombed to bits. But the war had taken its toll on him, and an unspoken fear played on everyone's minds that his recovery was taking longer than it should. No one wanted to think of exactly what that meant, and no one voiced their concerns out loud, especially in earshot of the senior staff or the royal family.

Milly turned the letter over, inspecting it as if she'd never seen one before.

Edie's brow creased in concern, and she leaned forward, eyeing the letter in Milly's hand as though someone had handed her an incendiary device. 'What's that then?'

'Don't rightly know, Aunt. I can't think of anyone who'd want to write to me. Can you?'

'Don't just play with it,' Caroline said. 'Open it and see who it's from.'

Milly carefully lifted the flap on the envelope and pulled out a letter, scanning the thin pieces of paper. The writing was so messy it was difficult to read, and her face screwed up in confusion as she studied each line, slowly and carefully deciphering the scrappily written words. As she moved further and further down the page, her heart rate sped up just as it did when she saw Timothy, but this wasn't a pleasant sensation.

'Milly?' asked Edie. There was a note of tension in her voice. A slightly strangled tone that Milly had never heard before.

'Yeah, come on,' added Caroline. 'Don't keep us guessing.'

The muscles in Milly's stomach tightened as she got to the end of the letter. Reading the signature on the bottom, her hands shook, and she had to force the words out through her tight throat.

'It's from . . . It's from my mum.'