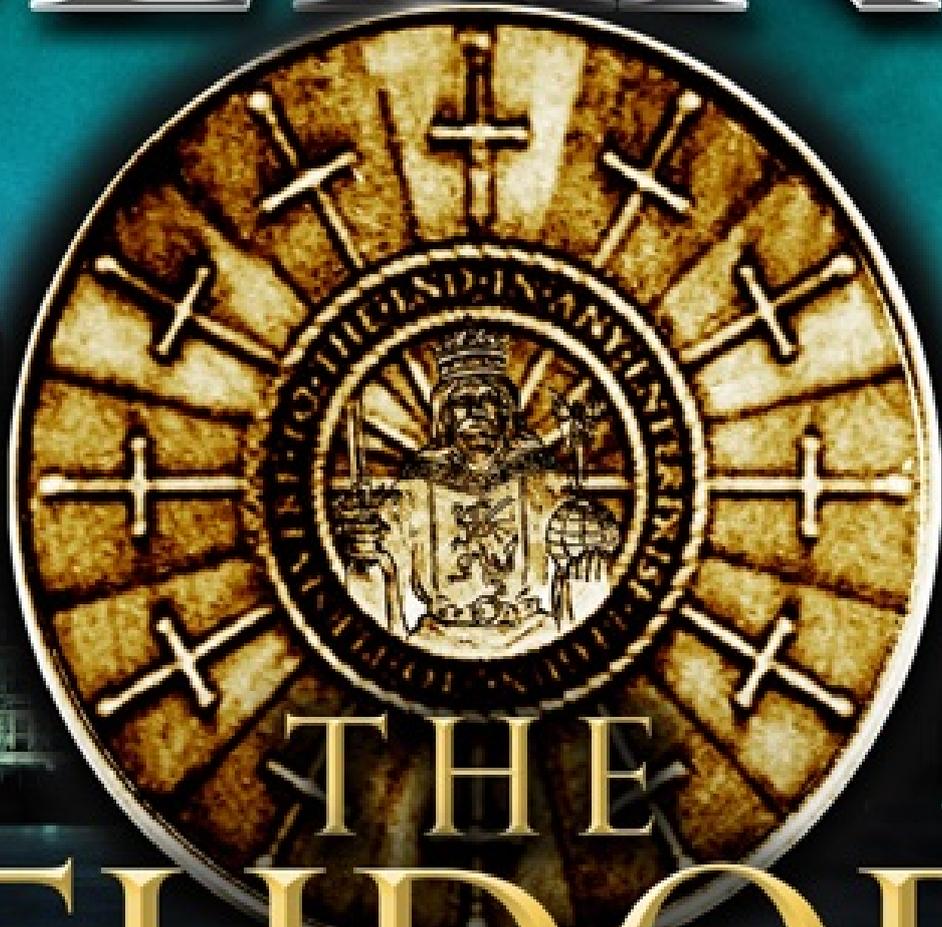


STEVE BERRY



THE TUDOR PLOT

BY STEVE BERRY

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The Columbus Affair

The King’s Deception

The Tudor Plot

Steve Berry



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Excerpt from The King's Deception

CHAPTER ONE

SEVEN YEARS AGO

Cotton Malone hated surprises.

And this one was no exception.

He'd arrived at Buckingham Palace ten minutes ago, bypassing a throng of tourists crowded around the front fence by motoring through a guarded side gate. Now he sat in a green silk upholstered chair and watched as the two men who'd brought him left the room. No one had spoken during the trip across town and he was beginning to wonder. He'd been in England less than two days and now, for some unknown reason, he was about to see the queen.

His waiting room appeared to be an office—the flocked wallpaper a mixture of pinks and blues, the ceiling adorned with cream-colored ornamental molding. A white marble fireplace consumed one wall, the deep-blue-and-gold carpet outlined by a parquet floor. A desk sat catty-corner to the windows, stacked with paper, neat and orderly. He thought perhaps the room belonged to someone on staff, the space elegant but not regal.

The door opened and a man in a three-piece wool suit strolled in, followed by a wheelchair that contained Victoria II. Malone had many times seen the queen on television and in photographs. Never, though, had she been pictured handicapped, and the sight was disconcerting.

Victoria had reigned his entire adult life. She was the only English monarch most Americans knew. Her face was wizened, her color drained, her body frail. Though her hair remained a familiar shade of silver, fashioned in her trademark layered bob, he noticed an oily sheen on her forehead and skin flaking at the sides of her nose. This, the stooped posture, and an expression that seemed frozen in place evidenced how Parkinson's now controlled her muscles. The one glimmer of hope was the radiant glow that seeped from her green eyes.

He came to his feet.

Victoria was being pushed by her husband, Prince James, the Duke of Edinburgh.

"Please, Mr. Malone, do sit," Victoria said. "I apologize for the wheelchair, but within the palace I find it much more convenient. Unfortunately, walking has become a chore—and, besides, I don't think pretense is called for." She threw him a smile. "I have brought you here under the most suspicious of circumstances. I could well understand if you were even angry with me."

"It would be difficult to be angry with so gracious a lady."

"And a flatterer. The reports on you were correct."

He wondered what reports she was referring to, but kept his mouth shut.

James stepped forward and faced him, a tall man with a beefy countenance.

“It’s good of you to be here, Mr. Malone.” The prince offered his hand, and he felt the power in the older man’s grip. “We have a problem that we hope you might assist us in solving.”

The third man, younger, wearing the three-piece suit, stood behind the desk. Apparently, this was his office. James motioned toward him. “My private secretary, William. He’s the one who found you.”

Malone acknowledged the man with a slight nod of his head, which was returned.

Victoria glanced at her husband. “Do tell him, James.”

The prince cleared his throat before saying, “Two days ago an individual contacted the palace and asked for a meeting. He said there was something of the utmost importance to the nation, and our family, that he needed to discuss. It concerned our son, Richard, and, our grandson, Albert. Beyond that he offered nothing but riddles. We were scheduled to talk in this office. Today. But that man died yesterday.”

“Died? Or was killed?”

“Unfortunately,” Victoria said, “that is hard to say. A car accident. But at a most inopportune moment, would you not say?”

“Depends on which side of that opportunity you’re on.”

James nodded. “Our thoughts exactly.”

“You said he spoke in riddles. What kind?”

“He talked of Arthur. Sent us information from ancient journals.”

“As in Pendragon? Camelot? The Round Table?”

The prince nodded. “Exactly.”

“Tell me, Mr. Malone,” Victoria said. “Do you fancy yourself a believer in Arthur?”

He shrugged. “I’ve read quite a bit about him. The Dark Ages are one of my favorite periods. But who knows? One thing I’ve learned is that all legend is based on some fact.”

“It’s a story,” James said. “Concocted by Thomas Malory. Who, by the way, has a lot in common with our dead messenger. Both were thieves, Malory the worst kind for his era since he robbed churches.”

Malone knew Malory’s bio. The scribe had spent a lot of time in and out of prison before being granted a royal pardon. But he was curious. “Your messenger was some sort of felon?”

“He was a newspaper publisher,” the queen said. “Of some infamous repute. He steals people’s privacy, their secrets, true or not, and publishes them for the world to know.”

He caught the bitterness. “So why exactly was I brought here?”

He’d come to England on assignment for the Magellan Billet. Three years ago the American embassies in Greece and Egypt were targeted by a terrorist named Peter Lyon, a South African who blamed the United States for the destruction of apartheid, a rise of black rule, and an overall dilution of the white race worldwide. He was also a nefarious arms dealer, particularly dangerous because of his personal wealth and close association with many

fanatical elements. The two embassy attacks had taken the lives of a dozen marines and six State Department representatives, including the deputy ambassador to Greece. Civilian casualties had topped 100. The Justice Department quickly linked Lyon with the killings, and four of those involved, all on Lyon's payroll, were captured last year by a team of Navy SEALs.

Lyon remained a fugitive.

The International Court of Justice had assumed jurisdiction and Great Britain was chosen as the venue for the trial, with the United States prosecuting. A Justice Department team had been sent over to handle the matter, which included Malone. He'd been at his hotel, readying himself for trial, when men with badges appeared and politely asked him to come with them. They'd allowed a call to Atlanta and he spoke with his boss, Stephanie Nelle, who said that she wanted him to go with them, too.

But she'd offered no explanations.

Victoria settled back in her wheelchair, her right hand trembling. "My body is failing me, Mr. Malone. I am eighty-two years old and the one thing that keeps me alive is the realization that, after I'm gone, my son will succeed me. Richard is our most poignant disappointment. Like parents throughout the world with a troubled child, I wonder where we went wrong."

Malone was surprised by her frank admission.

"I have tried," Victoria said, "to convey to my son the importance of his position, but he remains resolute in defiance. Being a monarch in this century is difficult enough—without erecting artificial barriers. My son fails to understand this."

A quotation came to mind, so he said, "*His will is not his own. For he himself is subject to his birth: He may not, as unvalu'd persons do, carve for himself, for on his choice depends the sanity and health of this whole state.*"

Victoria gave a slight nod. "Shakespeare wrote Laertes' speech with great eloquence. Ophelia should have taken heed. So should my son. Thankfully, our grandson is more mature than his father. Albert will be our saving grace."

Now he understood. "So when an infamous newspaper publisher mentioned that whatever he wanted to discuss concerned Albert, your attention was piqued?"

She nodded again, a slight bob of the head, her neck muscles surely restricted by the disease. "He is our joy."

"And our hope," James said.

Malone turned toward the Duke of Edinburgh. "What's the problem?"

James motioned across the room. "William will explain."

He turned toward the desk.

"The Prince of Wales, as I'm sure you know, stays in the press. Over the past nine years I have charted the reports from every London newspaper. That survey shows the *Globe* printed well over 70 percent of the initial stories about Richard. Now, that could simply be from hard work, luck—"

"Or a little inside help."

"Precisely," James said.

“And the dead man? He published the *Globe*?”

“He was its founder and owner.”

“Have you spoken to Richard about this?”

James shook his head. “It would do no good. He could not care less about any perceptions, problems, or embarrassments.”

Malone sensed something in the prince’s tone. “What are you not saying?”

“It is our daughter,” Victoria said. “Eleanor is an ambitious woman. We fear that she might have something to do with all of this.”

That shocked him. “What would be gained by disgracing her brother? She’s far removed from the succession.”

“As long as Albert is safe,” James said.

“You think he might be in danger?”

“We don’t know what to think,” James made clear. “We hope this is all simply the paranoia of two old people with difficult children. But William is not so sure. Neither am I anymore. After the tapes incident, my mind was changed.”

He recalled the furor that had erupted a few months back when audiotapes of Richard’s private telephone conversations surfaced in the media. Calls made to various women, some married, others with less-than-stellar reputations. The conversations were juvenile and sexually explicit, displaying an amazing immaturity—which the press had exploited.

“Did you ever discover who recorded them?” he asked.

James shook his head. “They tried to blame palace security, but no one here made them. The conversations were all on open, mobile phones, so they could have been recorded by anyone. Bloody embarrassing for our family. But, as with everything else, Richard seemed unaffected.”

“The disturbing thing about those conversations,” William said, “was that they occurred over an extended period, on different mobile lines, in different parts of the country. How did someone happen to be tuned to the precise frequency at the precise moment?”

“What did your security people say?”

“They offered no explanation, and to this day we have no idea who made those tapes, nor who forwarded them to the press.”

“Let me guess,” Malone said. “The *Globe* had an exclusive.”

William nodded. “The source was, as always, ‘unidentified palace insiders.’ Just like in today’s *Globe*. A front-page story about Richard and the daughter of one of the more vocal lords in Parliament. Pictures and all. A grand romp he had last weekend. Richard may be reckless and foolish, but he does not invite the press to follow him. Yet they were somehow alerted to that liaison.”

“But why is his sister suspect?” Malone asked.

“My daughter,” Victoria said, “tries hard to convince me that she is a good child. But she married into an ambitious family. Nigel Yourstone says he is a friend of the realm, yet his son is hardly the man I would have thought Eleanor would marry. Her decision to do so has always puzzled me. But the boy was fair born, of the right lineage, and pronounced fertile. That is all I

can require of her choice in a husband.”

“Our daughter,” James said, “is far more devious and capable than her brother.”

“You think she’s the leak?”

Neither parent answered him.

Finally, James said, “We simply don’t know.”

Silence passed between them.

“There is no one in the palace we can trust with this,” James said. “William has kept his concerns and his suspicions to himself. Victoria and I speak only between ourselves. We need someone independent to analyze the situation and tell us if there is any reason to be concerned.”

“Your intelligence people can’t do the job?”

The prince shook his head. “Far too sensitive. William is close with your supervisor. She told us where to find you and said you might be able to help us out for a few days.”

“You know Stephanie Nelle?” he asked William.

“Goodness, yes. She and I have been acquainted for years. Quite a delightful woman, wouldn’t you say? She said you were her best agent. We need the best here, Mr. Malone.”

“And we need to move with speed and authority,” James said.

But there was still the matter of the terrorists’ trial, scheduled to start in less than a week. He was merely assisting, but he hated to leave his colleagues in the lurch.

One of three phones on the desk rang and William answered. After listening for a moment he hung up. “The BBC has a broadcast running that the front office says we should see.”

William stepped over to an ornate cabinet and swung open its double doors, revealing a television. He switched on the set and adjusted the volume. An older man was standing before a bevy of microphones.

“That’s Lord Bryce,” James said. “A stubborn blowhard. No friend of the Crown. Though I rarely agree with Richard, his choice of sexual companion this time is fitting punishment for that bloke.”

Malone was puzzled and William explained about today’s *Globe* story, which detailed Richard’s tryst from last weekend with Bryce’s daughter. Bryce was no monarchist, and the on-screen announcer was explaining how he intended to move aggressively toward the abolition of the monarchy. No one gave his effort much of a chance, but the attempt would definitely generate more negative discussion about an institution that, the announcer noted, “had begun to outlive its usefulness.” The voice went on to say, “Tourist dollars generated from the millions who travel to Britain each year to experience royal culture should not be justification for perpetuating a national embarrassment. Is it too much to ask for the privileged to behave themselves?”

The image suddenly shifted to another man. Mid-fifties, handsome, with thick salt-and-pepper hair. He approached the microphones and spoke in a

deep, authoritative voice, expressing his loyalty to the Crown, but also his disagreement with the heir's immoral actions.

"*That* is Nigel Yourstone," James said.

He made the connection.

Yourstone's son was married to Eleanor.

"I have to agree with my colleague," Yourstone said. "Enough is enough. The time has come for some accountability from Buckingham Palace."

The Duke of Edinburgh's face hardened, and Malone spotted anger at the comments from the father-in-law of the third person in line for the throne.

But a tear tracked down Victoria's cheek.

Her gaze caught his own.

And he suddenly felt the pain of a mother who'd quite possibly been betrayed.

CHAPTER TWO

Nigel Yourstone smiled at the cameras while reporters asked their questions. Lord Bryce's tirade in the House of Lords had been a classic. The crusty old gentleman had spent nearly an hour berating the monarchy, particularly Richard, for what he considered a *vicious assault on the pride and dignity of his family*. The press seemed to salivate at Bryce's promise that a bill would be introduced in the Commons calling for the monarchy's abolition. Such measures were nothing new, but the number of ministers supporting the idea was growing. Bryce himself had made no secret of the fact that the head of state should not be chosen by genetics, echoing what every schoolchild was taught from an early age. *At the very least, royals should be a mirror to our better selves*. Unfortunately, as Bryce had made clear, Richard Saxe-Coburg was a married man who cavorted like a schoolboy at the public's expense. And, as Bryce had so aptly said, *the clear incompetence of this feeble-minded individual, who owes his station to an accident of birth, borders on the amazing*.

Interestingly, Bryce's daughter had yet to publicly comment, but Yourstone knew the young lady would do exactly as her father instructed. The senior Bryce controlled the family finances, and her two brothers could easily be given her one-third share. She was certainly an enticing woman, and he was betting she wasn't stupid. A romp in the sack with royalty was not worth the millions of pounds sterling she might lose from her father's continued disapproval. So Yourstone was sure that when the good Lady Bryce finally spoke her words would be dignified and distressing, compelling the palace to respond.

He readjusted his posture before the microphones, delivering his standard line that the monarchy was good for England, but that did not mean he agreed with everything the royals did. Though he respected and admired Victoria, and was delighted Eleanor was a member of his family, his fondest wish was for the Prince of Wales to mature. He was next in line for the throne, father of Albert, the second heir, both of which demanded that he conduct himself as a proper gentleman. He finished his remarks with a sincere hope that God would continue to bless the people of England with good health for Her Majesty, Victoria II.

He thanked the reporters and surrendered the microphones to another colleague. Ordinarily, he would not have taken the time to even comment, but it was important that his views be clear.

With what was about to happen, he needed no misunderstandings.

He quickly departed the Parliament building, crossing the street to St. Margaret's Church. The white stone edifice, a patchwork of architectural styles, sat in the shadow of Westminster Abbey. It contained a collage of Tudor monuments that had survived two world wars, though the building had

not been as fortunate, now replete with 20th-century repairs.

A middle-aged man sat in one of the long pews.

The daily parade of tourists had already begun, and the aisles were crowded. He walked over and calmly sat beside the man, keeping his eyes ahead, toward the altar.

“What was so urgent?” he quietly asked.

“I believe you have a problem.”

He listened as his spy told him about a man named Cotton Malone, a barrister who worked for the American Justice Department, in a specialized intelligence unit known as the Magellan Billet.

“Never heard of it.”

The man explained that it handled highly sensitive investigations worldwide, working outside the established American intelligence community. Malone, a former navy commander, possessed a reputation for competence and was in England to help prosecute the terrorists’ trial, set to begin next week.

“At the moment, though, Mr. Malone is meeting with the queen.” The spy paused. “About you.”

He told himself to stay calm. All was in place. Too late now to turn back. “I don’t suppose you could discover the content of that meeting?”

“It would be difficult and might risk exposure.”

“Give it a try. Results would be most appreciated.”

“I was hoping you would say that.”

The other man stood and left, following the crowd toward the main doors. Money motivated most weak souls. This one particularly.

Or at least he hoped.

He sat for a few moments and considered this new development, unsure of its implications.

American Justice Department?

He’d not factored that into the equation.

He stood and ambled toward the far side and the east window. It was a magnificent stained-glass depiction, crafted in Flanders at the command of Ferdinand and Isabella in 1501 to celebrate the marriage of their daughter, Catherine of Aragon, to Arthur, the eldest son of Henry VII. Henry had been fascinated with the Arthurian legend and intentionally named his heir for the mythical monarch. After ending the Wars of the Roses and killing Richard III, the first Tudor king had been intent on resurrecting the English throne, beginning with his son, Arthur. Unfortunately, the boy died shortly after the marriage, even before the window rising before him had arrived on English soil. Poor Catherine eventually married Arthur’s brother, Henry VIII, and went on to suffer the disgrace of a forced divorce and an early death.

But he admired Henry VII’s audacity. That first Tudor king had thought of the right idea.

He told himself to stay calm.

Be patient.

And finish what he'd started.

CHAPTER THREE

Malone followed William out of Buckingham Palace toward a guarded gate that led to the street. The afternoon had turned cool, but a brilliant sun warmed the clear September sky.

“We do appreciate your service to the Crown,” William said. “Stephanie said you would be quite helpful. And we definitely need assistance.”

He was curious as to why his boss had so readily volunteered him. He needed to speak with her.

“The car just over there will return you to the hotel,” William continued. “Let me give you my private mobile number. I am available around the clock. Call if anything is needed. I understand you possess an eidetic memory, so I assume there’s no need for me to write anything down.”

He listened and memorized the number.

“You can see how all this affects Her Majesty. I’m extremely worried. The strain is taking a toll. The doctors have repeatedly warned her about undue stress.”

“So let’s do what we can to ease her mind.”

Malone entered Osborne House.

The hotel prided itself on English tradition, but was sophisticated enough to offer all of the amenities modern business travelers demanded. Back in his room, he connected his Magellan Billet-issued laptop to the Internet and contacted Stephanie by email.

So wonderful of you to volunteer my services. I didn’t know you were royally connected. Now tell me what’s really going on.

I received a report yesterday from Langley. A small-time smuggler named Jonathan Kent was apprehended in Liverpool with some unusual lavender-colored material. Turns out it was C-83 explosive. Unfortunately, Kent died before any more could be learned. The car transporting him to London was found wrecked, all of the occupants, including two local policemen, dead. You won’t see a press story on it. The Brits squelched it. They want to see if more C-83 turns up. That’s a powerful explosive. And, by the way, one of the arms dealers who routinely handles it is Peter Lyon.

You think this has something to do with the trial?

That thought crossed my mind. Lyon is not going to sit back and allow us to try his people. I’m guessing he killed Kent and those policemen.

What has this got to do with the queen?

While Kent was in custody, the Liverpool police managed to extract a few tidbits from him. He muttered something about Richard and Albert and changing the course of history. After talking with William and hearing the same thing, I thought a closer inspection was warranted.

What do you want me to do?

Just look around for a couple of days. See if there’s anything to this. They could be separate, unrelated incidents. But my gut tells me they’re connected. If you find nothing, get

on with the trial and convict those SOBs. I'm sending you an updated profile on Peter Lyon, along with another file William forwarded to me, which, he says, you need to see.

He watched as the download indicator bar flooded with color. He opened the file on Lyon and absorbed the information. Not much there that he didn't already know. Lyon was a violent, amoral prick who made his living off other people dying.

He opened the second file.

Color photographs of a spherical cauldron, fashioned of silver or pewter, appeared. Remnants of gilding lined the edges. Eight tattered plates made up the walls, another the base. A scale indicator revealed the object was about eighteen inches long and at least that high. The crafted plates were all crowded with engravings, and he noticed the images—foot soldiers, animals, boar-headed trumpets, knotwork designs.

One plate was missing.

He maneuvered the mouse to a row of smaller images that towered on the right side of the screen and double-clicked. The screen filled with a close-up of one of the plates. The etchings depicted three soldiers toting long shields with bosses, one sounding a boar-headed trumpet.

He clicked on three more of the smaller images.

The enlargements revealed more warriors, boats, battle scenes.

One panel depicted death.

At the end was a narrative.

This vessel was found by a man cutting peat in Yorkshire sometime around 1857. The soil had preserved the silver remarkably well, along with the artistic depictions. Its purpose was surely ritual, hardly suitable for holding liquid, and the elaborate internal decoration on the plates would discount drinking as one of its preferred uses. It would seem illogical to craft something with such care only to expose it to caustic liquids. Investigation reveals the bowl to be Celtic. The serpent with ram's horns, the torcs worn by deities, and the stags and boar were all regular components of Celtic art. The depiction of the sea creatures and other oddities confirms that this was an accounting of a great event, memorialized in the only permanent way for the 5th to 6th century CE, which is an accurate dating for the vessel's creation.

This bowl remained with a private collector until recently, when Nigel Yourstone purchased it. We believe this occurred because of a discovery, happened on by chance, at the National Museum in Reykjavik, where Yourstone found the missing panel from the cauldron. It was displayed with an assortment of objects that had been unearthed in Iceland over the past 300 to 400 years. The curator of the museum attached no special significance to the etched silver panel other than to note that it helped establish a 6th-century connection among Ireland, England, and Iceland. The curator thought nothing of that connection since historians have long known Irish monks routinely ventured across the northern Atlantic to Iceland on religious retreat during the 5th, 6th, and 7th centuries. Yourstone visited the museum and photographed the panel extensively. With all of the panels in hand,

our experts note that he now may be able to complete the message the cauldron was designed to convey.

Malone recalled what had been said at Buckingham Palace about the dead publisher who'd requested an audience with the queen.

He spoke of Arthur.

But how did that fit with this cauldron?

His next move was clear.

Time to pay a visit to Lord Nigel Yourstone.

CHAPTER FOUR

Yourstone dialed the phone resting on the corner of his desk. The line on the other end was answered after the third ring and he said, “We have a problem.”

The gravelly voice seemed unsurprised.

Over the course of the last decade they’d routinely communicated, the voice supplying otherwise unobtainable information—Yourstone ensuring that the resulting scathing stories about the Prince of Wales appeared in the media. The story about Richard’s presence at Lauder Place with the daughter of Lord Bryce had come to light thanks to the man on the other end of the phone.

“My and Lord Bryce’s comments on the monarchy will make an excellent story for tomorrow,” Yourstone said. “Buckingham Palace will have to make some sort of statement, and there’s the next day’s story. The media can then rerun the tryst photos with a comment from the darling-daughter-Bryce the following day.”

“I do believe you’ve come to both understand and appreciate this sordid business.”

“All I want is for that bloody peckerhead to be as welcome as yesterday’s coffee.”

“Such resentment for our future king Richard.”

“I hope such a title is never attached to that man’s name.”

“Based on the latest polls, you’re not alone in that sentiment.”

He’d read the same statistics. “I’ve always possessed a great deal of faith in the English people.”

There had been four Saxe-Coburg monarchs. The line was created in 1840 when Victoria I married a German prince of the Saxe-Coburg line. Edward VII, Victoria I’s eldest son, became the first Saxe-Coburg ruler. His son, George V, toyed with the idea during World War I of changing the family name to Windsor—a way to distance the royals from marauding Germans—but never did. The next son was Victoria’s father. But his sympathy to Germany in World War II, while Hitler’s bombs exploded over London, made him extremely unpopular. Victoria II was actually the first of the Saxe-Coburg line to rule with both popular support and no cloud of scandal.

Richard, though, had clearly inherited his grandfather’s weakness for women and a political ineptness.

His public gaffes were legendary.

Once he characterized the greenhouse effect as *poppycock*. He then recommended that all of the old terrace houses and Georgian buildings of London be razed and replaced with *more modern structures*. He openly criticized the gentry for driving *gas guzzlers* while being chauffeured about in a Bentley that offered less than ten miles per gallon. He regularly consulted a

psychiatrist and gulped down antidepressants, neither fact he thought private enough to ever refuse comment upon.

But his most offensive and alarming statements concerned Catholicism.

Since the 1701 Act of Settlement, no Catholic, nor anyone married to a Catholic, could succeed to the throne. Richard had made no secret of his fondness for the faith. He'd made several trips to Rome for audiences with the Pope. He'd been photographed attending mass and courted the disfavor of the Archbishop of Canterbury by recommending a full reconciliation between England and Rome, forever ending the schism Henry VIII created in the 16th century. Britain was a Protestant nation, and the sovereign was the symbolic head of the Church of England. The coronation oath called for absolute loyalty to the Anglican faith. For a monarch-to-be to doubt the validity of the national religion bordered on treason, and editorials in major newspapers had many times hinted at that conclusion.

Richard was surely a disappointment to Victoria, but in her customary manner never had she publicly commented. Yourstone recalled what George V was known to have said regarding his son—*after I am dead the boy will ruin himself in twelve months*. More than likely Victoria had privately repeated that same prediction about her eldest. Which was why Richard could not be in a position to inherit the throne once the queen died. So, for nearly a decade, he'd made sure Richard Saxe-Coburg stayed in the news.

London's tabloid press had blossomed thanks to the heir apparent's exploits. Photographs of him in various parts of the world with a variety of women kept the British people talking. He was a weak soul who could not appreciate the good fortune life had bestowed upon him. Nor did he seem to mind that he was a nearly constant source of ridicule.

Which made him excellent prey.

"There's a new problem," Yourstone said.

And he told his accomplice what he knew about Cotton Malone and the Magellan Billet.

"I'll investigate," the voice said. "And report back."

A knock on the study door interrupted his call. "I have to go," he said. "Let me hear from you soon."

He ended the call.

The door opened and Eleanor entered the room.

He stood from the desk and approached his daughter-in-law. She was wearing a full-length silk charmeuse gown that tightly gripped her shapely frame. The bodice was trimmed in cream-colored lace, and her bare legs slipped in and out of a seductive slit cut high on her thigh. A kimono-style robe covered her shoulders, open in front. Its gold coloring matched her hair.

"Strange attire for the middle of the day," he said.

She approached his desk.

He stepped toward a red lacquer cabinet that housed a bar, dropped a couple of ice cubes into a crystal tumbler, and splashed vodka over them.

"Anything for you?"

She came close and nodded.

He took in her perfume as he poured her a vodka with no ice. Aragon was truly one of the world's great scents.

He handed her the glass.

She always drank her liquor straight and behind closed doors, and he caught the swell of her breasts as she savored a sip.

"You haven't answered my question about the gown," he said.

"I was lonely."

"Where is your husband?"

"Your son is out. At the races today, I believe. He so enjoys his life of leisure."

He knew better. "You accept your husband's infidelities with great patience."

She sipped her drink and appeared unaffected by his crude declaration. She was like that. Able to misdirect her emotions with the skill of a parlor magician.

"My only concern is that he be discreet," she said. "I assure you, his sexual prowess is not worth fighting for."

He chuckled. "You do your family proud."

"I do what is necessary. As do you, my loving father-in-law." She finished off her vodka. "How is your plan progressing?"

The Act of Settlement proclaimed that a male heir always inherited the throne first, which meant Richard and Albert stood in Eleanor's way. Shortly before her marriage to his son, he'd explained what he had in mind and was gratified to learn that she, too, wanted to be queen of England.

And she'd proven herself invaluable.

She was the link to Richard.

The hapless fool cherished his sister and regularly sought her counsel. Through her, Yourstone possessed a direct line into the prince's innermost thoughts and fears, and it had been easy to manipulate both.

"We are less than twelve hours from completion," he said in a hushed tone, though there was no one who could possibly overhear them. His town house was empty, save for them. He employed a house staff, but only during certain hours, and none lived on the premises.

"My precious mother could die at any time. The bloody doctors can't say anything for sure. If that happens and we are still where we are now, this whole thing is over."

"I'm aware of the risks."

"So has the deal been made?"

He nodded. "Our South African friend has assured me it will be done."

She moved closer to the hearth. The fire he'd started earlier had burned down. The charmeuse of her gown shimmered with every step. He wondered what possessed his son to leave a woman of such beauty alone.

She noticed his gaze on her.

"Can the father succeed where the son is lacking?"