

The Scullery Maid

Part One — The Youngest Prince

Hope was a ‘scullery maid’, though she had never, so far as she knew, been in a scullery. She was one of a dozen or so ‘scullery maids’ whose job was to try to ensure that the Princes didn’t sow their wild oats among the many willing young ladies who would like nothing better than to conceive a child by one of them. Such a conception could cause havoc at a diplomatic or political level, where a treaty or agreement could be sealed by a Royal marriage or engagement.

The Princes knew that, of course, but they were young men and the tide of hormones in their bodies was high. This is where Hope and her fellow ‘scullery maids’ came in. By warming the Princes’ beds, they hopefully reduced the hormonal tide to the level where the Princes could manage to factor the diplomatic necessities of their positions into their thinking.

It seemed to work. The Princes managed to resist the charms of the many willing young ladies who were introduced to them. It should be no surprise that the ‘scullery maids’ became firm friends and confidants of the young Princes.

Hope and her fellow maids were handpicked. They were cheerful, friendly, and affectionate girls, and they understood that they would never end up with a Prince. Their strong sense of duty reinforced that of the Princes, and everyone liked them.

“What do you think of Lady Susan?”

“Lady Susan? It’s not for me to say, Phil.” said Hope.

Prince Philip sighed. “You’re right of course, Hope, but I value your opinion. Though it doesn’t really matter what any of us thinks, does it?”

“Yes, it does! If you can make a match with someone you like, and it is good politically, that’s a bonus, isn’t it?” She paused. “Actually, I talked to her for a while, and I like her. She’s nice to people, and I don’t think that it is put on. Mmm. She cuddled that little girl’s puppy, didn’t she? At the school. That was cute.”

Of course, Hope and one of her fellow maids were somewhere at the back at the time, while Lady Susan was mostly at the front, along with two of the Princes, Philip and Robert.

“I like Lady Susan better than that Earl’s daughter. Lady Nerida? She’s really snooty. She wouldn’t even talk to me and Sally,” she continued. “But Lady Nerida would be the better match politically, wouldn’t she?”

“You’re so wise. I think that you know this stuff better than me. Now kiss me!”

“Yes, Phil. Of course.”

Later she slipped out of the Prince’s quarters and passed a squad of the palace guard in the corridor.

“Hi, Hope,” said the Sargent. “Good night to you.”

“You too, Sarg, guys.”

All the girls woke up late, and their day was skewed with respect to the usual timetable of the palace. They breakfasted at ten, and then someone brought them up to date with the political goings-on.

“Morning Milly. Prince James?”

“Yeah, you? Prince Philip, wasn’t it? Jamie was imitating his father, the King. It was hilarious!”

“He’s a funny guy, isn’t he? Phil and I talked about his potential brides. I hope he chooses Lady Susan.”

Milly nodded. “But he should choose Lady Nerida. Pity!”

“How was Robbie, Carol?”

“Much the same. Poor guy. He’s really conflicted,” Carol said gloomily. Then she brightened.

“Say, get him to give you a massage next time you are with him! He gave me one, and his hands are so gentle. It was so relaxing. I think it relaxed him too.”

“That’s great! I’ll do that. Share it around!”

All the girls shared their news, even those who hadn’t been on duty. Their information gathering network was impressive as they could and did talk to almost anyone in the palace.

Later on they had a light lunch and in the afternoon they had school. Hope still attended now and then, but at nineteen she was the oldest of the group, and school was mostly about preparing for when they were no longer ‘scullery maids’. Hope had seen all the lectures several times. She didn’t know what she was going to do when she ‘retired’, but she was confident that she would be fine. She was sensible and squirrelled away as much as she could from her salary. She knew that she would only be a ‘scullery maid’ for a few years.

At five the Mistress of the Scullery informed them of the schedule for the night. Being scheduled on duty didn’t necessarily mean that they would be called on, but it usually did. If a girl was on duty the night before, she would probably have a free night the next night.

Hope loved the life. She was a butcher’s daughter and still in school when she had been selected for training, and though she loved her parents and visited them often, life in the palace was interesting and full of opportunities. If the Princes went skiing, for example, one or two of the ‘scullery maids’ would go along too. They probably wouldn’t be on duty, but they could enjoy the skiing, and keep an eye on the Princes and the girls that they met, at the same time.

One of the Queen’s ladies-in-waiting had been a ‘scullery maid’ before she had ‘retired’, but Hope wasn’t sure if she wanted to try for that sort of role. Of course, the lady-in-waiting was from an earlier group of ‘maids’. An idea struck Hope, and she calculated in her head. Yes, the former ‘scullery maid’ would have been with the King when he was still a Prince, and the Queen would know that, of course, but the former ‘scullery maid’ and the Queen had been best friends for a long, long time now.

She went down to the stables and helped the stable boys and girls groom the horses. The ‘scullery maids’ all helped out around the Palace, and their help was appreciated by all. Sometimes when Hope helped with the horses she got to exercise a horse, but today none were available, so she headed for the pool. It was her favourite place in the whole of the palace.

She changed and dived into the water. She could do ten to fifteen laps with ease, and her mind cleared as she swam up and down. The cares of the day dropped away, and she reached a sort of zen-like state.

She noticed that a boy had entered the pool room and was sitting on the edge with his feet in the water, so she swam up to him.

“Hullo, Alfred,” she said. “Are you going to have a swim?”

“Please call me Alfie, Hope,” said the youngest Prince. He was ten years old, and Hope hadn’t so far had a lot to do with him because he was so young and away at school much of the time.

“Sure, Alfie.” Only the family, the ‘scullery maids’, and a few others could call the Princes by their given names or nicknames, though the maids didn’t do it in public, of course. “So are you going to swim?”

Alfie sighed. "I guess." He stood up and dived in, then headed off up the pool and so did she, swimming quietly by his side.

"You're good," she said, and Alfie smiled for the first time.

"Thanks," he said. "So are you."

"I find it clears the mind."

"It does, doesn't it."

They swam a few lengths, then Alfie stopped. He sighed and climbed out and sat on the side of the pool. She was conscious that she was only wearing her swimsuit, and she didn't want to possibly embarrass the lad, so she stayed in the water.

"You seem sad, Alfie."

He sighed again. "Yes, well, I'm not needed, am I? My three brothers go to all the functions and the banquets and even if I get go to any of them, I have to stand at the back somewhere."

"It's quieter at the back, though. No shaking hands and smiling at people. No talking about nothing to dozens of people that you will never see again."

She put on a polite, interested smile and nodded, like she had seen his brothers do, many times, and he laughed.

"That's true," he said. "Say, do you want to come down to the farm with me, Hope? They've got some sheep, I heard."

"OK, let's get changed, then."

The 'farm' was not a working farm. It was an area within the palace grounds where a few vegetables were grown and a few chickens and pigs were kept. It was an oasis in a desert of manicured lawns and hedges, and very popular with everyone at the palace. Now they had imported a few sheep, it seemed.

Hope and Alfie looked at the sheep, and the sheep looked back at them.

"Father is thinking about letting them roam freely through the grounds, but he's worried about having to clean up after them," said Alfie. "We can't have the Ambassador of somewhere treading in sheep poo. It might be funny, but diplomacy doesn't work that way."

"Hmm," said Hope. She was a town girl and sheep were mysterious creatures to her. "Maybe your father could have a movable fence made, so that they could move around more freely, but he could still control where they went?"

Alfie stared at her. "That's a good idea! Maybe I'll mention it to Father. Maybe then he will take some notice of me!"

Hope was surprised at how bitterly Alfie said this. "Do your parents ignore you, Alfie?"

Alfie was almost in tears. "Oh, they don't mean to, I'm sure. I mean, it's because they are busy all the time, and they spend more time with my big brothers because, after all, they are all going to grow up to be important, but me? I'm a lot younger than them. I'm always going to be less important than them! Sometimes I hate my life!"

"Oh, Alfie!"

He sighed. "At least it means that I can slip off by myself and no one notices. The palace grounds are big enough to get lost in for a while. I should be getting back though."

"Ah. Will someone be looking for you?"

"Yeah! The Master of Protocol. I have to learn all that boring stuff. Even he says it is boring. But necessary."

He raised his eyebrows, and Hope laughed. "Well, if you want to slip off, and I'm free, I can slip off with you, if you like. Call me."

“Thanks, Hope.”

Hope raised her conversation with Alfie with Prince Philip. Phil was quiet for a long time.

“Thanks, Hope,” he said in the end. “I’d noticed that he was a bit quiet recently, but he didn’t say anything. I’ll raise it with the Queen, but I don’t know when I can get her alone for five minutes! What a family! We all love one another, but it’s hard to express that when there are always other people around. I’ll see if I can take him on some of my trips. That might help.”

Hope had worried that the Prince might be annoyed with her for raising it, so she sighed in relief. Then she kissed him and he kissed her back.

“I’m going to miss you when I get married next year,” Phil said. “You are my favourite.”

“You probably say that to all of us.”

He didn’t deny it, so she laughed and kissed him again. It was an in-joke.

Prince Alfred decided to act before Prince Philip could discuss him with their mother, but fortunately Hope had taken a few precautions, and shortly after breakfast one day, a page gave her a message from a gate guard. She made her way down to the gate.

“Hello Henry. What’s going on?”

“Prince Alfred,” said the guard. “You said to call.”

He showed Hope into the guard room where Alfie was sitting, scowling.

“He won’t let me go into town!”

“Yeah. That’s his job, sire. Don’t blame him for doing his job!”

“Oh, yes, you’re right. Sorry, Henry.”

“That’s OK, sire.”

“Henry, I should be on your list. I’ll sign him out.”

“OK, Hope. You’ll be back tonight?”

“We might stop over. My Dad’s place is in Pudding Lane. Thanks, Henry.”

“So, what were your plans, Alfie? Just to run away?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“What happened?”

“I went to see my Mother. Her secretary was there, but Mother wasn’t. Her secretary **pencilled me in** for next Tuesday! Pencilled me in!”

“Oh dear. Annoying! Do you have money? Somewhere to stay?”

“No. Not really. I didn’t think it through, did I?”

“I’ll introduce you to my Mum and Dad. They can put us up for a day or two. If that is OK with you?”

Alfie nodded. “I’d like that.”

The two big men examined the room. One of them took a good look out of the small window.

“This is ideal, Mrs Parsons. Very comfortable. And there’s a good view out of the window.”

“View? There’s only a view of Pudding Lane and the butchers shop across the road, Mr Smith!”

“Jones, ma’am. Just Jones. The view is ideal.”

Mrs Parsons was a little confused, but the big men were polite and friendly. They loved her homemade cake and drank gallons of her tea. One or other of them was always in their room or in the front parlour, looking out of the window, while the other one was often out somewhere in the town. She talked to them for hours about her family, and they told her of their time in the Forces. She

enjoyed having them lodging with her and was sorry that they said it would only be for a few days or maybe a week or two at the longest.

Alfie and Hope visited the zoo, and Hope had to stop him just walking in. "We have to pay, Alfie!" "What? Oh, I see. Sorry."

It was just an oversight. He soon got used to paying for stuff. They visited the Castle, and took a tour with a dozen or so others. They viewed the displays of the weapons and robes of Alfie's ancestors. Alfie was fascinated, and when Hope asked him why, he explained that he hadn't known how much people venerated his family. He felt humbled and awed.

"Maybe we should go on a tour of the Palace," he suggested.

"Too risky. Unless you want to get recognised?"

"You're right, Hope. Of course."

He was silent for a minute or two.

"I wonder why they haven't raised the alarm."

He looked a bit down in the mouth, but Hope reassured him.

"Well, number one, they know you are with me. And number two, what would happen if they announced that you were missing?"

"Oh. You left word when we left the Palace. Henry the gate guard would have had instructions. I understand. Hmm, what would happen? Oh, yes. Everyone would be looking for me and I wouldn't be safe. Someone might find me and demand a ransom or something. Anyway, I think that you are probably keeping the Palace informed, aren't you, Hope?"

"Yeah. Sorry. Through your brothers. It's necessary."

He sighed. "Never mind. If it reassures everyone, that's good."

Hope did indeed keep in touch with the Princes back in the Palace. She sent her messages to Prince Philip and asked that he pass them on to his two brothers.

The broadsheets and newspapers reported that the Queen and King had deferred all travel for 'personal reasons' and Phil reported that the Queen was missing Alfie, but told Hope not to tell him yet. Hope sent reassuring messages back through Prince Philip.

One day, at the end of the week, Alfie came to her.

"What's up, kid?" she asked.

Alfie laughed. "Kid?! I'm sure that's not protocol! I didn't think that I would, but I'm missing Father and Mother. I'm missing my brothers too. But I can't just go back!"

Hope nodded. It would be like giving up. She sent off a message to the Princes.

"Those ships were amazing," said Alfie, as they returned from a tour of the docks. "Maybe I could be a Captain of one of them one day. That would be awesome!"

"It's possible, Alfie, if you study. Even though you are a Prince, you'd need to be fully trained."

"Yeah. They are highly qualified, aren't they?"

Prince Philip was taking tea with Hope's parents when they got back, and Alfie gasped and ran and hugged his brother.

"What are you doing here, Phil? Oh, you want me to come back?"

"Yeah, squirt. Your mother is really missing you. It's been hard stopping her mounting a search, but we all knew you were OK with Hope. Will you come home?"

"Will Hope get into trouble?"

Phil laughed. "No, of course not."

The two big men watched Hope and the two Princes heading back to the Palace.

“Do you think that they spotted us, Smith?”

“Not a chance, Jones. But I’m sure that the girl has a good idea that someone was watching them.”

“I think that you are right, Smith. She’s very clever.”

When they got back to the Palace, the Queen was waiting. She swooped on Alfie and smothered him with kisses.

“Mother!”

“Oh, yes, sorry Alfie. Too public.”

“Never mind.” He hugged his mother.

She turned to Hope. “Thanks for looking after him. The Princes were sure that he was fine with you, but... Just, thank you.”

“You’re welcome, ma’am.”

Hope wandered back to her quarters. She felt a little flat and the Palace gossip didn’t interest her as much as usual. She wondered how long it would be before she got back into the swing of things.

Hope was summoned to a meeting, and she didn’t know why, so she was a little anxious. When she entered the room she became even more nervous, because she was facing the whole Royal family. She knew that a lot of things must have been deferred just to make this meeting possible. There was no one else in the room.

“Please take a seat, Hope,” said the Queen. “Tea?”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

The King was looking at her under his bushy eyebrows. He was smiling which Hope thought was a good sign. Princes Philip, Robert and James sat together on a sofa, also smiling and the Queen and Alfie sat on a big chair together. The Queen had her arm around him, and Alfie looked a lot happier than when Hope had found him at the pool.

“How long have you been with us, my dear?” asked the King.

“Um, about four years, sire, including the training.”

“And you are now how old?”

“Nineteen, sire. Nearly twenty.”

“So, you must be considering ‘retiring’ from your role? Well, the boys will be getting married soon, anyway.”

“Er, yes, sire.” Were they going to fire her? Surely not!

“We’d already been getting good reports about you, Hope, even before this latest... event.”

Hope sipped her tea. Her hand shook a little.

“We love how you helped Alfie. You warned Phil that he was feeling sad, but you guessed Alfie might try to run away, and you helped him when he did. Taking him out of the Palace for a few days and at the same time keeping him safe was a great idea. Inspired! It was exactly what he needed. Thank you.”

Alfie was nodding.

“Prince Philip...” she started to say, but the Prince interrupted.

“Prince Philip had almost nothing to do with it,” Phil said with a laugh. “I just went along with your plan, Hope.”

“We had made a terrible mistake with Alfie, Hope,” said the Queen. “We realise that now. We were still treating him like a baby, but expecting him to act grown up. And we kept him in the background.”

An expression of disgust crossed Alfie’s face and Hope smiled.

“What we have decided is that Alfie needs to become a full member of the team. He’s still a little young yet, so we decided to get him a Personal Assistant to guide him and to advocate for him with the rest of the Royal team. Our Private Secretaries and so on. Especially to make sure he gets more personal time with his family! We need to include him in everything. What do you think, Hope?”

“I think it’s a great idea, ma’am. I think getting Alfie a Personal Assistant would be a good idea.”

The Queen and the King exchanged a look.

“So, do you want the job, Hope?”

“Me?!”

“Say you will, Hope!” Alfie said, grinning. “Say you will! Then Mother would need to make an appointment to see me. You could probably pencil her in for me!”

“Me? But what about all the senior...”

Prince Philip interrupted her for the second time. “That’s exactly what he doesn’t need, Hope! He needs someone closer to his own age. Say that you’ll do it, please!”

“OK. I’ll do it.”

The whole Royal family clapped her.

For the last time, Hope was on duty as a ‘scullery maid’.

“I hope that I can do this new job!” she said to Prince Philip.

He laughed. “Of course you can, Hope. Don’t worry. My brothers and I will help you out. So will my parents. I’ll get my Private Secretary to mentor you. Say, we’ll put your desk in the corner of her office until we can get you your own!”

“Desk? Office? Oh, my goodness!”

He paused. “You know I ran away when I was about Alfie’s age?”

“No!”

“Yes. I only lasted a day and a half, and I had nowhere near as much fun as Alfie did! I was miserable all the time, hungry, thirsty, and cold, and came back of my own accord.”

“Oh, that’s a shame.”

He got out of the bed and brought Hope a glass of champagne.

“But anyway...”

“Phil, I can’t... You shouldn’t... The rules...”

Phil laughed again. “It’s the last time. The rules don’t matter any more. Anyway, my Mother and Father provided the champagne!”

“Aw! Thank them for me, please.” She took the glass and said “Cheers!”

They touched glasses.

Part Two — Personal Assistant

Glenys entered her office and paused. There was a new desk over to one side, and behind the desk was a girl. Glenys had been expecting it of course, so she changed direction and approached the desk. The girl behind the desk looked petrified.

“Hope! How are you? Settled in? Got everything that you want?”

Hope nodded of course, though Glenys knew that Hope had no idea what she needed. Glenys looked at the girl. She was wearing a smart skirt, a white blouse and no doubt wore smart shoes. Glenys' outfit was much more relaxed. Comfortable slacks and tee shirt. Sneakers.

"Let's get some coffee," Glenys said, heading for the door. "Bring your notepad."

"What if Prince Alfred wants me, Glenys?"

"Alfie will find us," said Glenys.

In the outer office she said to the secretary "Beryl, please tell Alfie that we're in the Royal Lounge, if he comes looking for us."

"Sure thing, Glenys."

"The Royal Lounge is where we meet other Personal Secretaries and Assistants for informal chats and coffee. The Royals also come here sometimes."

Hope looked over her coffee cup. There were no Royals in sight.

"Sometimes," said Glenys, "you might get invited to a private lounge or office, say the Queen's, but most of our business with the Royals happens pretty much anywhere."

"So what do I do?"

"Anything! Well, you look after Alfie. Know where he is all the time. Arrange his trips, keep his calendar, attend meetings with the other PAs and PSs, get things for him. Oh, housekeeping look after his rooms, and wardrobe look after his clothes, so you'll need to liaise with them. Don't worry, they have been doing it for years."

Hope took a big mouthful of coffee. Her stomach felt hollow.

"Don't worry, Hope! It's not that bad!" laughed Glenys. "You'll soon pick it up! Oh, here's Alfie. Morning Alfie!"

"Morning Glenys. Morning Hope." His eyes flicked between them, and he sat down with his cup of tea.

"Right," said Glenys. "Hope, you will need to get control of Alfie's calendar. Ask the Queen's Private Secretary. He has it at the moment. You know how to access it on the computers?"

"I can show her," said Alfie. "OK, Hope?"

"Yeah, sure. Shall we go and do it now?"

"Sure."

Glenys looked after them. They'd work it out. She and her Prince, Prince Philip, had.

"You're looking smart today, Hope," said Prince Alfred as they headed for the door.

"I... Er... Well..."

Glenys smiled.

"Ah, Chris, I was hoping to catch you. Have you got a minute, please?"

Prince James' Personal Secretary stopped. "Hi, Hope. Sure. How can I help?"

"Well, Prince James' school visit. I wondered if Prince Alfred could go along too. I researched the school and the pupils are closer to Alfie's age than Jamie's."

Chris considered. "That's a good idea, Hope. I'll add Alfie to the schedule and send you a copy."

"Thanks, Chris." She smiled and walked away.

Chris also smiled. Hope had that effect on people. He thought about Hope. He had been worried that she was so young at first. She was easily the youngest of the PAs and PSs, but she'd quickly found her feet, and she wasn't easily daunted by the older and more experienced staffers, and neither was she brash or pushy. She was a real asset to the team.

Hope had been in the job for five months when one day the Queen called Hope to her office. Hope wasn't worried. The Queen had called her before, usually to discuss an amendment to Alfie's calendar or similar.

"Ah, there you are, Hope. I just got a message from Alfie." The Queen turned her computer round so that Hope could read it.

"Mother, I've left the Palace again. Look for me at the place where Hope showed me the sea serpent painting."

"He's run away again? I wonder how he got out of the Palace?"

"So the message says, but he's told us how to find him this time. Can you please find him for me? Do you know where he means?"

"Sure, ma'am. Yes, I know where he means. It's a big mural, down near the harbour. I'll just grab my bag, and I can be down there in fifteen minutes!"

"Good luck!"

Hope shot out of the door and the Queen's Private Secretary came in from a side room.

"There's something funny going on, there, Ellen."

"Yes, Peter. I think he's planned it better this time. Strangely, I'm not too worried."

Hope walked down the hill to the harbour. She wasn't in a good mood. She had Alfie's schedule neat and tidy, and now she would have to rearrange all his appointments for the day, which would have a domino effect on the next few days at least! She scowled at the sea serpent and looked around.

A large man appeared at her elbow. "Hope? Ma'am?"

"Yes." She hadn't noticed him until he spoke. "Who are you?"

"That doesn't matter, ma'am. Prince Alfred asked us to pick you up." He flashed an ID card at her. Another large man was sitting in the driver seat of the nearby car.

"Hmm." She looked at the car and the two men for a moment, and climbed into the car.

"We approve of the fact that you hesitated, ma'am," commented the large man in the front seat, "but we do work for the Crown. In this case for Prince Alfred."

"I've a feeling that I know you guys. Besides, only Prince Alfred would have known that I was coming here."

"Very observant of you, ma'am."

"Now, where's Alfie? Prince Alfred, I mean."

"Not far, ma'am. Not far, I assure you."

The car headed out of town, up into the hills to the north. They left the built-up areas and snaked through the hills, rising all the time. After they left the city behind, sheep and cows wandered through the fields to the sides of the road, and the occasional farmhouse flew past. Each farmhouse was surrounded by a windbreak, most had a wind-driven water pump, and there was usually a horse in a paddock near the house. The car reached the top of the hills, and the driver turned off the road onto a dusty track.

"Sorry, it might get a bit bumpy," said the big man in the driver seat, as the car dropped down into a gully. The track wound round hairpin bends, with thick vegetation on both sides, until the gully opened out to a view of the sea. A modern building perched on the edge of a steep cliff, and cables spanned the gap between it and a large island just off the mainland. On the island several buildings jutted from the luxurious vegetation, and the blue of a swimming pool peeked through the trees.

The driver brought the car around to the side of the building and parked next to it.

“Just go up the steps and through to the patio, ma’am,” said the driver. “They are expecting you.”

“Thanks, boys.”

“You’re welcome, Hope.”

She trotted up the steps looking for Alfie, but he was nowhere to be seen. The staff directed her through the building and out onto a patio overlooking the cables.

“Hello, Hope,” said Prince Philip. “How are you?”

“Where’s Alfie, Phil, and what are you doing here?”

“Slow down. Have a cocktail. Non-alcoholic, but you can have something stronger later if you wish. Alfie is over on the island. I’m here to stop you killing the little squirt.”

“What? This was all your idea? It must have made a mess of your schedules!”

“It was Alfie’s idea. Well, he set this up after he, the Queen, and I, noticed the problem. Glenys mentioned it too.”

“Problem? What problem?”

“You’re doing a great job on Alfie’s behalf, but you’ve let yourself become too intense. You’re all business now, and you haven’t had a day off in weeks, and neither has poor Alfie! You worried about the schedules just now, for goodness’ sake, but not how Alfie was feeling. You were hired for your empathy, and we expected you to carry that over to your new job as Alfie’s Personal Assistant.”

Hope felt like she had been shot. “Oh, that’s so true! Oh, no. Alfie’s lost his friend and advocate! Oh, I’ve totally messed up!”

Phil put his hand on her arm. “No, Hope. You’ve been doing brilliantly. You’ve stood up to the Queen now and then, which I didn’t think that you would dare to do. Those schedules are spotless. Even Glenys was in awe of that! You just need to dial up the personal side of things. Remember to be Alfie’s pal, first, and only secondly terrify everyone else.”

She was laughing and crying. “I wasn’t as bad as that, was I?”

“No, of course not. But go and join Alfie on the island, and relax. Be his big sister for four days. We can do without you. I’ll go and calm our Mother down. She doesn’t know anything about all this. Alfie didn’t tell her, the little ratbag!”

“Thanks Phil. It will be nice to relax for a few days.” She stood up and kissed him on the cheek, because she was no longer a ‘scullery maid’, but she was still a friend. She made her way to the cable car.

“By the way, there’s no phone coverage on the island,” said Prince Philip.

“Hey, Alfie!” Hope was sitting by the pool on a lounge. Alfie was bouncing on the springboard and bombing into the water.

“Yeah, Hope?”

“Nice plan. The two big guys who drove me up here could have been scary, but somehow they weren’t.”

“Smith and Jones? Yeah, but when they want to be scary, they are very scary.”

“That’s Smith and Jones? Wow, they’re legendary!”

Alfie swam to the middle of the pool.

“Phil said I should be a big sister to you, Alfie.”

“I’ve never had a sister as you know. It might have been nice. Fun.”

“I’ve never had a brother either. But I do know that sisters are supposed to make their brother’s life hell on earth.”

“You wouldn’t do that, Hope!”

“Wanna bet?”

Hope jumped up and ran to the pool.

Alfie saw her coming. “Aaaaaaargh!”

She bombed him, and he tried to dunk her, but she dunked him instead. He ended up laughing and coughing up water. She turned away and started to do lengths of the small pool, while Alfie tried to climb onto a blow up shark inflatable. When he succeeded, she tipped him off. The next time he was ready and fended her off.

Later they descended into a cave by way of a steep staircase carved out of the rock and walked through the cave into a private little bay with golden sand, rock pools, and a view out over an endless ocean. There were two little pedal craft moored to a small jetty.

Part Three — Growing Up

“This is about my friendship with Gemma, isn’t it?” asked Alfie angrily.

“You are getting older,” said the Queen. “We need to talk about these things.”

“Can’t I have a life! Can’t I be friends with someone without having to remember I’m a Prince? Without someone interfering?”

He jumped up and looked from his mother to Hope. He sighed and spun on his heel and headed out of the door. It shook in its frame behind him.

“Hope, would you please take over as Queen while I go and calm my son down?”

“Of course, ma’am,” said Hope, and they both laughed.

The Queen looked both miserable and annoyed. “Boys!” she said.

“I’ll track him down, ma’am.”

“Thanks, Hope. Do you think he’s going to run away again?”

“No, Ellen.” She stood up. “He’s not done that for a while. He spends much more time away from the Palace these days, and I think he’s lost the urge to run away.”

She left the Queen’s office and headed towards the Prince’s quarters. Then she had second thoughts and headed for what everyone called the ‘back door’, a mundane name for a rather ornate entrance at the back of the Palace. She looked down towards the ‘farm’ and sure enough, the Prince was striding off in that direction.

When she caught up with him, he was watching the pigs in the sty. He threw them a handful of the pellets that were their main food and watched them snorting and rooting about.

She put her hand on his shoulder, and he first tensed, then relaxed.

“It’s a cliché to say that they haven’t a care in the world, isn’t it?” he said. “For all we know their heads are full of piggy insecurities and worries. Ah well.”

Alfie was still a centimetre or so shorter than her but growing fast. He stroked what he fondly called his moustache, which was still next to invisible to anyone else. He scratched a pimple and it started to bleed.

“Oh, Alfie, come here a minute.” She pulled out a tissue, and he let her stem the flow. “Hold that there for a minute.”

“Thanks, Hope.” He sighed. “I’ll go and apologise to Mother later. Still, she needn’t worry about Gemma. She’s going home in a day or two, but we’d pretty much split up anyway.”

“Pity. She was a nice girl. You know it’s not about stopping you making friends, don’t you? It’s about doing the right thing.”

“It’s always about doing the right thing, isn’t it?” he said, with a touch of the irritation that he had displayed earlier. “What if I don’t want to do the right thing!”

“Then we’d cope, somehow.”

“Oh. Right!”

Alfie thought about that for a bit. They were quiet for a while.

“Were my brothers as bad as this when they were my age, Hope?”

“Well, they and I were a bit older when I met them. They did have their moments, especially Jamie.”

“Jamie? But he’s the quietest of us all!”

“Yeah, but he is the Crown Prince. He is going to be King someday. Jamie has far fewer options than you do, and he’s accepted it, after a bit of kicking back against the restrictions. He’s still a funny guy in private, isn’t he?”

She remembered a time when it took two ‘scullery maids’, the Mistress of the Scullery, and Jamie’s valet to put Prince James to bed. Someone had told the Palace that Jamie was getting drunk and becoming a nuisance, so Smith and Jones had gone into the town and brought him back. Jamie had thrown up messily, just missing his valet.

“Yeah. Poor old Jamie,” said Alfie. “I’ve been away at school and I didn’t realise. I’ll have to give him as much support as I can.”

“You already do, kid.”

He laughed. “You only call me ‘kid’ to tease me and cheer me up.”

He regarded the pigs again. “You know that Robbie has decided not to get married. At least, to a woman.”

“Yeah, and if he decides to retire himself from the line of succession that bumps you up to number three. Until Jamie or Phil produce an heir, that is.”

“Good luck to Robbie and his boyfriend, I say! Did you know when... You know.”

“When I was a ‘scullery maid’? Yes, we knew.”

She was silent, reflecting on that time. Robbie was still trying to do his duty and be a ‘normal’ Prince. The girls had helped him out, helped him to understand himself, even though they didn’t really know what Robbie was going through themselves. It was a tough time, but she was proud of how she and her fellow maids had handled it. She might tell Alfie about it one day, but not now.

“That reminds me,” she said. “The Queen and I have discussed employing some new ‘scullery maids’.”

Hope’s cohort had dissolved when the Princes James and Philip had married. Quite a few of them had done well after their term as ‘scullery maids’, both in the service of the crown, and in the wider world.

“What? But I’m the only Prince left... Oh!”

“Yes, exactly. But you are not old enough yet. And we need to find the girls. And we need to train them. And make sure they know what they are signing up for. And you. We need to ensure that you know what **you** are signing up for too.”

“Oh. I see.”

“The maids are going to be your friends, Alfie. They are going to help you with all the young ladies out there who will want to take you into their beds and give you children, hoping that you will marry them. You can’t do that, and you can’t leave illegitimate children everywhere either. Well, you could, but it would cause problems! Ideally, you need to marry someone who makes the best match from the Crown’s point of view.”

“But Phil chose Sue over Nerida. Nerida was the best political match.”

“Yes, and there was endless discussion about it at the time. The King and Queen considered that there wasn’t too much of a political disadvantage if Phil married Sue, so they let him. I was so pleased. Phil really wanted to marry Sue.”

They contemplated the pigs. “I haven’t got any sisters,” said Alfie. “I wonder if I had a sister, would there be ‘scullery boys’ too?”

“I don’t know. But I think that your Aunt, the King’s sister, had a couple of male ‘companions’. It was a bit before my time, and I never asked. You could ask your Mother. She might know about it.”

“So, now you’re engaged to Sue’s cousin,” Alfie chuckled.

“Yes, I am, aren’t I?”

Sue and Hope were already great friends when Sue invited Hope to a party. Phil insisted that she come.

“You need a break from my baby brother,” he said. “He can cope without you for the weekend!”

Hope enjoyed herself. There were many interesting people of all ages at the party. She was welcomed by Sue’s parents, introduced to Sue’s older brother, and her younger sister.

Hope was cast up by the ebb and flow of the party near the buffet. She reached for a sausage roll at the same time as someone else. They both paused.

“After you,” he said.

“Thanks.”

They munched on their sausage rolls. He was a few years older than her, she guessed.

“You’ve got a flake of pastry, there,” she said, pointing.

“Thanks.”

“I’m Hope.”

“I’m Rick. It’s short for ‘Edrick’.” He made a face and she laughed. “Hope? Oh, yes, Sue’s friend from the Palace. She’s mentioned you. Prince Alfred’s Personal Assistant.”

“That’s right. Are you a friend of Sue’s?”

“Her cousin.”

“Oh, I see. Are you from the capital?”

“Yes, I’m a lawyer back there. Boring!”

She laughed “Surely not!”

When the party started to wind down, they realised that they had been talking for hours, and arranged to meet again, back in the capital.

There were dozens of girls who wanted to work at the Palace, and the Queen and Hope selected twenty-four of them. Since they were all so young, the Queen and Hope made sure that their parents knew what the nature of their duties would be, and a few dropped out at that stage. Some joined the housekeeping staff instead.

The girls didn’t meet Alfie at first, but Alfie’s brothers dropped in to chat to them after they had been training a while. They provided the Queen and Hope with feedback. So-and-so is very awestruck, so-and-so is a bit forward, and so on. A few more girls went home, for one reason or another.

As they all got older, the girls were told exactly what their duties would be. Hope talked to them. She told them that they should consider if they wanted to go on. They could withdraw at any time, and the Crown would give them a gift and a reference. Some of them did withdraw, and Hope personally thanked them and wished them well.

“They’re calling you ‘Mistress of the Scullery’, Hope. Did you know?”

“No! That’s OK, Phil, I guess. It was never a real title. I wonder if...”

“If the former Mistress of the Scullery was originally a 'scullery maid'? No, she wasn’t. She was a cook.”

“So she’d know what a scullery really was?”

They laughed.

“What do you think of the girls, Phil?”

“They’re all very nice. There’s one or two that stand out, though. Ava, the dark haired one. Rose, the one with the curls. Rose reminds me very much of a 'scullery maid' that I used to know! And Evie, with the long blonde hair. You’re planning to select out the best ones?”

“Yeah, the top four. Or maybe three.”

Time passed. Some girls dropped out. Others were told ‘thank you, but you have not got the job’. A few girls were recruited from within the Palace staff. Hope agonised daily over this girl or that girl. She brought in psychologists to ensure that the girls were fine, that they were not feeling pressured in any way to take the job.

There were four girls left, all rapidly approaching the age of consent. Rose, Evie, Ava, and Kaylie. The Queen and Hope decided to wait until six months after the last one reached the age of consent before they scheduled any of the girls on duty as ‘scullery maids’. They reasoned that the girls would be fully aware of the situation by then. Alfie would be well past the age of consent as well.

“Alfie, have you talked to your brothers about the ‘scullery maids’?”

“Yes, of course, Hope.” He laughed. “They’re being real dicks about it. I’d have expected nothing else from them!”

“So they haven’t helped you?”

“Oh, no, they have! In between the jokes about me wearing a paper bag over my head. They tell me that the ‘scullery maids’ helped them through an important stage of their lives. They say that you kept them cheerful, helped them relax, and you were useful to discuss things with, and often you knew more than they were officially told. There was no jealousy, no backstabbing, and no politics with the ‘maids’.”

“Aw, that’s nice of them. But Alfie, we’re going to give you some lessons, me and the Queen. About respect, and consent, and how to treat the girls and women in general. Then you will get to meet them.”

“Gulp!” said Alfie.

“Exactly.”

“I meant the lessons!”

“I know you did!”

Alfie was introduced to the ‘maids’, first in a group, and then in a series of face to face meetings. Then one or more often seemed to be around when Alfie was not busy. They went on official trips with him, while staying in the background.

At one place the Duke’s granddaughter made a nuisance of herself, sticking close to Alfie’s side, pointing out things to him, and putting her hand on his arm. Alfie kept moving away from her, but she didn’t take the hint.

“Alfie’s getting angry,” said Rose to Ava. “Let’s sort her out!”

They moved to either side of her, linked arms, and walked her away.

“Get off!” she said, surprised.

“Leave the Prince alone, girl!”

“You can’t make me! He’s not your Prince!”

Rose laughed. “Well, in a way, he is. But while we can’t make you, they can.”

She indicated the two big men who were looking on from a distance with arms folded.

“I’ll tell my grandfather! You’ll be sorry!” The girl stomped off.

“Well handled, girls,” said one of the big men. “We were wondering if we should step in, but it would have been tricky. That way was much better.”

“Thanks,” said Ava. “You sure can move quietly!”

“Known for it. I’m Smith and he’s Jones. We’ll see you around, girls.”

“Sure. See you later, guys!”

The two big men seemed to fade into the crowd.

Evie pushed his hand away. “No, Alfie!”

“Ah, what?!”

“Hope says not to!”

“Ack! ‘Hope says not to’?”

“Yes!”

Evie and Alfie were alone a small sitting room. They were having what Alfie called, in a disgusted tone, ‘an official necking session’. Hope called it ‘a familiarisation session’, and it often started with a private meal for two.

Alfie sat back. “Sorry, Evie, it’s not your fault.”

“Never mind.” She leaned forward and kissed him. “I’ll mention it to Hope. Maybe...”

Alfie sighed. Then he suddenly leaned forward and tickled her. She shrieked and giggled.

“Stoppit!”

“Yeah, maybe... Soon, I hope. Oh, well. That’s totally destroyed the mood!”

He kissed her and hugged her and stood up. At the door he paused and looked back.

“Hope knows what she’s doing. I trust her. But sometimes I think she’s just testing my self-control! See you later, Evie. Thank you!”

He left and went back to his rooms. Evie sighed. “Yeah, I trust her too.”

The corridor lights had been dimmed for the night, so it was nowhere as near as bright as in the business areas of the Palace. Kaylie was making her way back to her quarters from a ‘familiarisation session’ when a man stepped out in front of her. She gasped.

“What do you want, sir?”

“You have access to the Princes. A friend of mine wants to talk to them.”

“Sorry, I can’t help you.” She stepped back.

“Listen, little girl,” the man said, with menace in his voice, as he stepped forward, “I’m not asking. I’m telling you. Now, you will...”

“Ahem!” Someone cleared his throat behind him.

“What?” The man looked round, and a large man stood with crossed arms, just behind him.

Kaylie stepped forward and kneed the man hard in the groin. He went down, groaning.

“Nice one, ma’am, but I was just about to handle him.”

“That was for me! Little girl, indeed!”

The big man smiled. “Yes, well. I’ve been following that guy for a while. We weren’t sure what he was up to, so, my apologies that he managed to stop you, ma’am.”

“That’s OK. It’s Smith, isn’t it. Where’s Jones?”

The big man’s smile grew broader. “Yes, I’m Smith. Jones is not far away, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Smith. And Jones, of course. Goodnight, guys.”

“Goodnight, ma’am.”

She disappeared through a door.

“She took that well,” said Smith. “Tough cookie.”

“Yes. Very composed. I don’t think that she could have handled this guy by herself, though.”

“She’s bright. She wouldn’t even have tried.”

“True.”

Smith pulled the man up from the floor.

“Excuse me sir, we need to ask you a few questions. Like, who let you into the Palace?”

Smith and Jones assisted the limping man away.

Alfie passed the pool room and paused. He could hear shrieking and yelling. He looked in. Hope and the girls were playing with a ball in the pool.

“Hi Alfie! Want to join us.”

“Sure!”

Alfie rushed off and changed. He dived into the pool and they all cheered. An impromptu game of water polo commenced, and for some reason, Alfie was always getting dunked by one girl or another. He didn’t mind.

‘Hey, Alfie, some of us are playing tennis after lunch. Some people from the kitchen staff are coming too. Want to join us?’

Alfie looked at Hope.

“There’s nothing much on the schedule, Alfie. I can rearrange it.”

“Thanks, Hope. What time, girls?”

“Hey guys. Look over there.”

The speaker was one of the boys from the stables staff. He was surrounded by a selection of the younger folk from the Palace. They had hired a section of a park in the capital for a picnic, and they were all relaxing after eating.

“What is it, Greg?” asked Robbie, Prince Robert.

Robbie was probably the oldest person there. He and his boyfriend had been talking to a girl from the kitchens. Alfie and two of the ‘scullery maids’, Ava and Kaylie, stopped their chat with the boy and girl from the gardening staff. Over to one side, a girl from the King’s wardrobe staff raised her head from the lap of a girl from the Admin group.

“There’s someone watching us. Over there! Come on, come out!”

Two small girls crept from behind a bush.

“Are you a Prince?” they asked Greg, who was closest to them. “Cos Daddy said the Princes were over here.”

“No, I’m not,” said Greg, looking at Robbie for guidance.

“I’m a Prince, dear. Prince Robert. And that’s my brother, Prince Alfred. Are you and your sister twins?”

“Yeah. Allie and Petra,” said one of the little girls. “Are you Princesses?”

The girls all laughed.

“No, we’re not. Would you like an ice cream, girls?” said Ava.

“Yeah!”

Alfie and Ava made sure that the girls had an ice cream each.

“How did you get through? There’s people stopping people coming here.”

“Slurp! I dunno. We just came.”

“Come on, girls. Let’s find your Daddy,” said Alfie, leading the girls out of the private area.

“Sure. Bye!”

Their Daddy was not far away, and Alfie returned to the picnic, passing two large men who were playing a leisurely game of pole tennis.

“I wonder how two small girls managed to make their way through a strict security cordon,” he said, as if to himself.

“I’ve no idea, sire,” said one of the large men.

Alfie nodded, smiled, and went back to the picnic. It was about time for them to pack up and leave, anyway.

He looked at her. “Really?”

Alfie and Rose were cuddling and kissing on a sofa in Alfie’s rooms. He’d just touched her in a place which would previously have caused Rose to push his hand away.

“Yeah. Hope says to go ahead. Oh, I’ve been waiting for ages!”

“Me too.” Now that the time had arrived he hesitated.

“Let’s move into the bedroom,” he said.

“Yeah. Let’s go!”

Giggling and laughing they almost sprinted to the bedroom.

Rose slipped out of Alfie’s quarters and Hope joined her. They walked towards their quarters.

“Everything OK?” Hope asked.

“Yes. I might be a little sore...”

“Uh huh. But otherwise.”

“Yes. He’s lovely, isn’t he?”

“Yeah. Always has been, even when he was small.”

Hope sighed. “You remember, of course, that some Duke’s daughter is going to take him away, sooner or later.”

“Yeah. That’s the point, isn’t it? It’s our job to make sure it doesn’t happen too soon and it doesn’t happen in a way that isn’t planned. That’s why there are four of us, and it’s why it’s a job, and not... something else. But he’s ours for now.”

“I think it was easier for me and the other girls back then,” said Hope, feeling a little old. She was less than ten years older than them! “We had three Princes, and so we didn’t get too fixated on any one of them. It will be harder for you, I think. You’ve only got Alfie!”

“Yeah. But we will survive!” Rose said cheerfully as she turned into her quarters. “Goodnight!”

Hope sent Rose a bunch of flowers in the morning. She did the same for the other ‘scullery maids’ when it was their first turn.
