

Chapter One

London 2182

Ponderously, reverently, the voice of a broadcasting dynasty delivered his commentary to a global audience.

'You join us overlooking the gates of Buckingham Palace where, shortly, we shall catch a glimpse of the royal procession about to make its way on a journey unique in state ceremony. For this day, Saturday 31st August, is to be the Deathday of His Majesty, King William V and Her Majesty, Queen Catherine, the first royal Deathday to take place.

'Only a handful of people alive today might appreciate the significance of this date but history recalls the tragic circumstances under which the King's mother, Diana Princess of Wales, met her own unorchestrated Deathday, back in 1997.

'Then, a nation went into shock and poured out a grief unknown neither before nor since for a public figure. How different then are the feelings of joy ... exuberance... and festivity that surround today's event.'

As he spoke, the camera drew back from its shot of the Palace gates and panned down the Mall, taking in the plane trees that shaded the crowds either side of the road.

'In keeping with a long tradition on such occasions, hundreds of well-wishers have camped overnight in order to secure their places along the route. Many of them having travelled from overseas: America, Australia, South Africa, to name but a few of the countries represented

here today. Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth members alike, happy to wave the Union flag in recognition of the popularity of this King.

'I think we're able to go down now to our royal correspondent, Rehana Smith-Khan, who is amongst the crowds in the Mall.'

An unscripted silence accompanied the camera's trawl along the endless mass of anonymity, not royalist necessarily, just smiling and happy to play their part in whatever piece of history was being created. As ever, apathy was forecast but over one hundred thousand found it preferable to stand shoulder to shoulder with strangers and enjoy the experience of creating one sprawling, yet united, organism of mankind. They felt connected.

'Is she there?'

'Yes, Simon, I am here.' The presenter's face appeared on screen, grinning ecstatically.

'We thought you'd been swallowed up by the multitude!'

'Absolutely, Simon! The atmosphere is electric. It is quite overwhelming. I've been chatting to a number of people down here this morning and have been touched by everyone's love and support for the King. Beside me is Sayeed Patel who has flown in from India especially for the Deathday. Tell me, Mr Patel, what are your feelings for King William and what do you make of his decision?'

'Well, firstly let me say how pleased I was that the title of Head of the Commonwealth came back to him. It was ridiculous to my mind that the subject was debated for so long. He was the obvious choice. The republicans made their point during his father's reign...'

'I think many would agree with you there.' The presenter tried to interrupt before it became too politically profound for her remit. 'He's certainly a very popular monarch but do you think that makes today a more emotional, even controversial, event?'

‘Certainly he will be missed. There is no doubt about that but he hands over to a beautiful daughter who will, I am sure, be as impressive as her predecessors.’

An American voice piped up beside him, ‘It’s his right. It don’t matter he’s the King an’ all. He got the same rights to call it a day like the rest of us.’

The Indian gentleman looked slightly crest-fallen as his moment of fame was swiped away by a southern drawl.

‘It’s not like he’s abdicating or nothing. This is his time and we all know when you gotta go, you gotta go.’

Rehana’s smile remained intact throughout, ‘We’ll have to leave it there. Thank you very much. Back to you, Simon.’

‘That was Rehana Smith-Khan reporting live from the Mall. If you’ve just joined us, we’re enjoying shots now of St James’s, Trafalgar Square and Whitehall, all vital with anticipation on this...very...special day. And now we can see for the first time the procession’s destination.

‘Not since the days of Trooping the Colour has Horse Guards Parade witnessed such a spectacle for a member of the royal family and as some bookmakers predicted it is a feast of Africana. Many will remember the Olympics of ’32 of course, which was possibly the last time such a theatrical occasion graced the scene.

‘What we are privy to here, however, is not a festival of youth, strength and fitness but one of progression, thanksgiving and hope. Progression from terrestrial to celestial immortality, thanks for a life well served and hope for a forthcoming rest unsurpassed in grace and joy. Of these things, we can be certain.

‘This historic parade ground, now the focus for literally billions of eyes as they witness the closure of a truly inspiring life, a life whose love of the African continent never diminished despite the premature and tragic deaths of Prince Harry and Princess Olivia over ninety years ago in that appalling accident in the Sudan.’

The camera took a few moments to survey the privileged positions of the wealthy and influential. In tiered stands, they were going to have the best view of what was about to unfold. It alighted briefly on the novel sight of a wheelchair-bound spectator parked in front of the stand. It bore a man of the customary youthful appearance whose piercing dark eyes stared out between the fiercest eyebrows and a huge, black beard. Everyone knew his age because everyone knew who he was and his age was very great indeed. They also knew he possessed no afflictions that could not be cured by modern science, but his wheelchair had become an accessory that was inextricable from his character. There were others like him who overtly expressed a complexity to their mental state which no physician or psychologist could touch. And no one bothered. To gain mobility at their great ages would have been to render them handicapped by responsibilities far beyond their inclinations; just as sight given to a man after a lifetime of darkness plants him in an incomprehensible world of objects, colour and movement.

The occupant of this wheelchair was none other than Sir John Thyme. He was not the sole representative of his family: his son, The Reverend Cyto Thyme, would be watching from the stand.

Cyto bounded up the steps slowing to look at the ascending letters: L, M, N. Here it is: row N. He did not need to look at his ticket to confirm the number of his allocated seat; there was only one left, bang in the middle of the row. He sighed and stroked his dog collar self-consciously, to obscure it but in so doing, drew attention to it. The habit would never leave him.

A Mexican wave of designer millinery conveyed him towards the seat.

'I'm sorry, excuse me, I'm so sorry, thank you very much, I'm sorry...'

Cyto sat down and did not flinch. He strained to hear

the tutting fade but instead became aware of a cold trickle of sweat running down his back. He longed to reach to it but dared not elbow his neighbours.

He fanned himself a little with the programme in his left hand and slipped a finger inside his collar to allow air to circulate.

'They could have organized a bit of shade, don't you think?'

His neighbour to his right spoke without looking at him.

'I'd almost prefer to be with the masses under the plane trees. Almost, but not quite.'

Cyto tried to justify his lateness. 'Security's insane,' he said at last.

'Did you find? We didn't seem to have too much trouble.'

'Totally unreasonable. Bordering on the obstructive. Yet more hangers-on trying to justify their existence,' he projected.

'Well I suppose you could make a case for having no security at all as far as the King's concerned,' his neighbour chipped in lamely. But Cyto wasn't feeling placatory: 'Oh of course, it's all for our own good. God forbid we get blown up and ruin everything.'

His loquacious new best friend saw it differently, 'Yes! Imagine! It's sort of a win-win situation at a Deathday, isn't it? Supposing someone does assassinate him; we can pretend it's 22nd November 1963 all over again or Sarajevo 1914. That's the beauty of a Deathday, there's only one outcome. You can't really ruin it for the Deathday boy or girl, unlike those other over-inflated anniversaries,' he flourished a finger skywards, 'you can never disappoint.' He lowered it and offered his hand towards Cyto, 'Jacoby Dawson.' Cyto shook his hand. 'You're here alone?' he enquired tentatively.

It was highly unusual practice to attend Deathdays alone. For some reason an etiquette had evolved which

conferred a slightly distasteful element on the solitary observer. Perhaps it was because Deathdays were, or rather were required to be, wholly joyous if not ecstatic occasions and the smiling, rejoicing loner was a contradiction, at least in this context. There was no problem in the freedom of expression within the now numerous churches which had sprung up to accommodate the extraordinary resurgence of Christianity. But the Deathday, that was different, altogether different. It was curious.

'Um, yes, I mean no. I've no other family in the stands but my father is down there.' He nodded towards the lower seats.

'You couldn't get seats together? That's awful! I should complain. It's positively barbaric. Good God! Oh I'm sorry.'

'I'm not bothered,' Cyto shrugged.

'You know who's down there, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'In the wheelchair.'

'Yes, I do.'

'It's Sir John Thyme,' Jacoby hissed. 'He's a complete arsehole apparently. Brilliant but a really nasty piece of work. Hangs around like a bad smell. I hope your poor father isn't anywhere near him!'

Cyto looked up at the sky and started fanning himself again.

'One look at that thunderous face is enough to scare the living...well, you know him surely. He's the reason we're all here if you think about.'

'That's truer than you will ever know,' Cyto murmured at last. As he spoke Cyto was running his middle finger round the Deathday company's logo printed on the programme: a white four-sided staircase giving the illusion of rising forever. A green parcel was placed at one corner. There was no need for any caption as the logo was synonymous with Euthanatics Ltd the world over.

Jacoby looked at Cyto quizzically.

'I never got a chance to introduce myself. It's Cyto, Cyto Thyme.'

Jacoby's mouth dried to a crackle. Fortunately the tray of refreshments had just arrived. Cyto put a coin in the box and took a bag of sweets, all sugar-free, of course. You couldn't offer a nation the chance of immortality only to allow it to eat itself to death; and with the constant threat of boredom, that had already been on the cards long before the great Sir John Thyme arrived.

'Sweet?'

Jacoby took one, rolled it round his mouth and nodded his head incredulously. 'Wow. I'm such an idiot.'

'Really, don't worry.'

'I do worry, I'm such an idiot.'

'No, honestly, it's really fine.'

'I feel terrible.'

Cyto exploded, 'Look! He is an arsehole, okay?' The murmur of the crowd around them stopped for a few moments before resuming. Cyto lowered his voice, 'He's a genius, that's all, and geniuses aren't easy.'

"He's a genius that's all!" Jacoby mocked, "That's a good one! The geneticist who managed to turn off the telomeres. The man who put a stop to cell decay and death! That's all?!"

'I'm just saying they're not the same as you and me. My father's bound to be a bit weird.'

'Why?'

Cyto did a double take. 'What do you mean "why"?''

'Why is he bound to be a bit weird? You could say he is a messiah. He could be as humble and as gracious as our dear Lord.'

'Well, he's not okay? He's very human and a complete bastard, alright?'

'You may have a point. I mean who calls their son after a gene sequence?'

Cyto threw Jacoby a look but it glanced off. In fact Jaco-

by was trying to suppress a good degree of merriment. 'You came with Sir John Thyme! No wonder security was bloody tight! There are a good few folk who would like to have a close 'chat' with your old man and they'd make your average old-fashioned terrorist look very tame.'

'I'm perfectly aware of the controversy of the treatment and...'

'Controversy?! He's about as popular as Pandora without the hope in some circles,' Jacoby snorted, 'and without the gift of eternal life we would never have had the Endists.'

'They're one and the same really, aren't they?' Cyto interjected. 'Terrorists, I mean.'

'Well, true, true. Either way they'd like his guts on a plate and no mistake.' Jacoby started craning his neck around the stand. 'I wonder what they've done with them.'

'I think they've corralled them in Hyde Park. I saw some placards but they were so far away I couldn't be sure what they said,' Cyto lied. He knew perfectly well the tenor of their feelings and he had some sympathy, but he also knew that the seismic change that had brought society en masse to God owed itself to the redefining elements of longevity. Jacoby mused on, 'But I think he's a saviour. We can forever look and feel twenty five and then when it all gets a bit *passé* we can opt for the true eternal life. Those anti-Deathday Endists are walking advertisements for the treatment really. That's the irony. By sticking to their principles they just remind us all how,' Jacoby struggled for the right word, 'I mean look at them. Old age: It's got nothing going for it, has it?'

The band of the ghosts of regiments past struck up and the cocktail party hum of the crowd rose slightly with delight. The music faded quickly as the band marched away from them but was replaced with something more exotic; a different pulse had started far, far away and its resonance carried all the way to the parade ground. It had

a surprisingly sinister tone compared with the upbeat sound of the Household. Their music complemented and enhanced; it was designed to boost morale and bring the listeners together for bonhomie and bravery. It had a cadence which would eventually reach its conclusion. But the distant beat had no such musical topography, it would simply keep coming. Cyto and Jacoby switched on the monitors embedded in the seats in front and could hear the singing that accompanied the pulsating drum. Now it made sense. The screen showed a stunning spectacle over which the commentary continued.

‘One can only marvel at the splendour of such a display. Here we see in the national costumes of the tribespeople all the finery and vibrancy that King William’s beloved Africa has to offer.’

The camera obligingly zoomed in and then out again to take in the sight of four Indian elephants pretending to be African elephants. Every phalanx of tribesmen and women clapped as they danced as they sang, taking two steps forward and one step back. It was going to be a very slow procession towards Horse Guards.

The camera cut to a studio overlooking the spectacle where the commentator introduced two guests invited to give their slant on the day.

‘I have with me Michael Lazenby, Regius Professor of Ethics at the University of Westminster and Dr Anne Ijjima, from the Department of Mortality and Demography at Bath University. Welcome to you both. Anne, if I may address my first question to you. The subject was touched on earlier by Rehana in the crowd. This is emphatically not an abdication. That was the feeling. But still does such a day as today come as a surprise, the euthanasia of the monarch?’

The academic was earnest and eager to display her grasp of matters constitutional.

‘I understand your point and in the context of our

cultural heritage it does seem at odds. However I think it helps to consider the innately precarious position of any head of state from a historical and cross-cultural perspective.'

'You mean from coups and revolutions?'

'No, no. Those are comparatively arbitrary events often driven by a certain personality at a certain time. I mean at a far deeper level. I'm talking about the ambivalence that a people might feel towards their king.'

'Can you elaborate on that?'

'Of course. You see, I think you've got to appreciate what a ruler represents from both the royalist and republican points of view. With the former the monarch represents the good aspects of a kind and protective parent; with the latter they see the bad aspects, namely selfishness, arrogance, unearned superiority and, above all perhaps, unchallengeable authority which they wield in an inconsistent and fallible manner. All or none might be applicable to the officers but for those of us outside the court circle we can merely attribute them to the office.

'Add to this the real or symbolic power that a king has: power to exploit or to provide, to heal or send the rains so to speak. This will inevitably create a feeling of gratitude which leads to indebtedness which magnifies one's inferiority, provokes fear of servitude, and ultimately resentment.'

The doctor emphasized each element of her lists by sweeping her hands to the left and then to the right. Her fellow academic clasped his arms about him as though fearing they should want to join in.

'That's quite a harsh if not bleak perspective! A no-win situation you might say.' The commentator said this with half a laugh as he shifted in his seat supposedly to release his coat flap. He drew a breath with the obvious intention of addressing the Professor of Ethics but Dr Iijama continued and the Professor smiled on.

'All I'm saying is that if you look back at history and

perhaps the more 'primitive' societies you see that kingship and its almost divine qualities entailed many restrictions including what to eat, what to wear, who to touch, talk to or look at, how to comb one's hair, sit or sleep. They even had to pay attention to which direction they turned their head lest it brought bad luck to that point of the compass in the kingdom.'

'You make it sound like a sentence in itself.'

The doctor leant forward now and pressed her thumb and forefinger together in front of her face.

'Simon, you have hit the nail on the head. Some societies actually had to physically force the appointed one to take the office and so we have been 'killing' our monarchs one way or another since time immemorial.'

'Professor Lazenby, if I can bring you in at this point, would you agree with this line, that the burden of exaltation is more suffocating than anything else?'

'Oh, absolutely. Indeed the entire court structure that surrounds a monarch - its etiquette, ceremony, protocol, is ancient and has a two-fold purpose, neither of them benign: it is designed to protect the monarch from the people yet also can be regarded as the incarceration that the people impose as a punishment for the monarch's social elevation, his position of 'privilege'. And from such elevation of course there is only one way to go. So really, death comes as relief.'

Cyto found himself to be riveted to the discussion. 'You know,' he leant towards Jacoby, 'I've never viewed the monarchy that way before. It's never seemed a particularly enviable position to be born to but this certainly goes further than the usual gilded cage, poisoned chalice, pseudo sob story. This is positively Shakespearian in its tragedy and inevitability. Don't you agree?'

Jacoby certainly did, 'For a change they've actually managed to find some cerebral commentators who aren't just hired to fill in air time and peddle their own drivel.'

The commentator had the feeling the interview had run away from him. It was always a risk at such an emotive event and he prepared to link back to the external shots. His producer however demanded ten more seconds of illuminating discussion in his left ear, so he persevered. 'But our society is not comprised of savages, and this day like all Deathdays is a supreme expression of love not hostility.'

'Oh yes, you're quite right. But if we acknowledge the primitive motivations and unconscious drives that underlie our actions then we will get a clearer understanding of how and why they manifest as easily as they do. I refer to your original question of whether today comes as a surprise.'

The quiet of the studio was at that moment being invaded by a rapturous roaring from the crowd. 'We're going to have to leave it there. Professor Lazenby, Dr Ijama, thank you very much indeed. I've just been told that if we return now to the procession we can see the appearance of the King for the first time.' The camera trained itself once again on the forecourt of the Palace.

'As predicted, their Majesties have chosen an unorthodox method of travel for members of the British Royal family on a state occasion.'

Through the gates came an exquisitely decorated elephant. Its head painted with the same array of colours as a peacock's tail. Eyes seemed to look out amongst the swirls in every direction so that every member of the crowd felt touched by its gaze. A headdress of gold medallions hung across its forehead and down its face. The smallest female member of the purely ceremonial household cavalry sat behind its ears gently urging the great momentum forwards.

A little higher behind her sat a silk-swathed howdah. It amplified the elephant's every step with metronomic precision.

The view of the two hundred year old King and Queen was unimpeded: they sat pillion style to ensure both sides of onlookers had equal access. King William sat behind his Queen, casually dressed as he might have been at the age of thirty on vacation in Africa.

As with all those embarking on their Deathday he had undergone a slight physical degeneration. It was hard to pinpoint, but it was as though the soul had shrunk ever so slightly in anticipation of its imminent departure and the physical frame was thus reduced. A nanowatt of vitality had been switched off. You could see it about the eyes.

The wave had always been demure, bashful even; full of disbelief at the absurdity of its effect if not ambivalent about its inherent power and associated obligations, but now it was lacking in vigour. It spoke of resignation and a sense of relief that this was the final journey, the final performance on which this human being, fatefully born to inherit the throne, would be judged. Such evocations emanated from his being and yet, at another level, he had never looked so radiant.

Deathdays had always brought such opposing sentiments, (as death always has) right from their initial introduction all those decades ago. But the two big questions had been shown to be surmountable, namely, how were those left behind going to field the maelstrom of emotion and how would those choosing to move on, as eager as they might be, really embrace the finality and uncertainty of death? Both issues were soothed by the aid of pharmacology. Over and above this, however, worked a powerful tenet which no pioneer of immortality had foreseen: that, though we can engineer the physical body to go on and on, the soul is finite in embodiment. As one civil servant was overheard to say during its inception, 'after a life-time of soul-searching people are looking for ways to lose it'.

There was no more knowledge to be learned nor enthusiasm to be waxed, not even an inclination. The centenar-

ians opted to give up life because they loved it. When the flesh stayed willing but the spirit weak the family were called upon to organize the chosen farewell.

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Throughout the preamble to the procession, men and women, with trays slung from their necks worked their way down the Mall. They wore the uniform that had become synonymous with their role. It harked back to an era, probably as far back as the 1950s, when going to public entertainment such as the cinema or theatre was a special, innocent occasion. The girls wore full three-quarter length skirts of red cotton, a white shirt with a full collar overlain by a matching red scarf. The men were in complementing trousers. They had become a trademark of such events and wore a permanent smile to echo the product they distributed.

These were the Dispensors. They passed small trays of paper cups back into the crowd. The recipients threw back their contents before slugging on their bottles of water.

'Excuse me? Excuse me?' Jacoby caught the attention of one who was about to descend the stand. 'We haven't had ours in this row. There weren't enough to reach us in the middle.'

'To be pardoned, Sir.' The Dispensor sent another down the line.

'Isn't it a little early?' one spectator asked. There were furtive glances at watches and towards the sun as if to ascertain how long would be the wait until the crucial time.

'You can certainly hold off half an hour, Madam. We're just making sure we get round everyone. Or you can pop it now, either way you'll be fine.'

Jacoby looked down at the tray he was holding and saw one of the little cups was empty. Cyto had tipped back the water and was just coming up for air. He held it out

as he wiped his mouth. '*Arduus ad solem*, old chap.' Jacoby popped his too. The time for conversation was over. The links with the real world had been cut. The Deathday had begun.

Clouds moved quickly across the sky, as fast as one could blink. They moved across the sky with the slowness of eternity. Each one as faceless as the next yet utterly beguiling in its uniqueness, begging for its idiosyncrasy to be studied. Each one a friend. And the celestial bodies beyond beamed down and touched every earthly body in the crowd with its personal anointment. Now there was no doubt, no distinction, no them and us; no love nor hate or wondering which way to jump. There was just total unity in which every dimension in the universe was crisscrossed a thousand times, such that there was no need for senses nor even a leap of faith, just pure, simple understanding. And it felt like LOVE.