



Opening extract
from

The Tulip Touch

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You shouldn't tell a story till it's over, and I'm not sure this one is. I'm not even certain when it really began, unless it was the morning Dad thrust my bawling brother Julius back in Mum's arms, and picked up the ringing telephone.

'The Palace? Why ever would they want me at the Palace?'

Anyone listening might have begun to think of royal garden parties, or something. But even back then, when I heard people saying things like 'the black horse' or 'the palace', I got a different picture. And that's because I've lived in hotels all my life. I don't even remember the first one, the Old Ship. Mum says it was small and ivy-covered, with only six bedrooms. Then Dad was manager of the North Bay. And later he was moved to the Queen's Arms, where we were living then.

'So what's the Palace's problem?'

He listened so long, and sighed so heavily, that Mum had looked up from trying to placate Julius with

his favourite furry rabbit even before we heard Dad say,

'And I suppose you've forgotten I already have thirty beds to run here, not to mention a small son who makes sure nobody can even *think*.'

That's when he noticed us watching, and, turning his back, finished almost in a whisper.

'All right. I'll drive over. Just to take a look.'

I don't know what time he got back, but it was late. Our flat was above the kitchens, and the huge extractor fans had stopped humming. The only sounds left were the usual muffled telephones and scurrying footsteps.

At breakfast, he said to me:

'You ought to see it, Natalie. It's enormous. It's got over sixty bedrooms, and it sits on its lawns like a giant great wedding cake set out on a perfect green tablecloth.'

'When can we come?'

He glanced at Mum, worn out from another bad night with Julius.

'Soon. Before I finish there. I'll take you over for the day.'

But when we finally saw it, it wasn't for the day. It was with suitcases and boxes and bags.

'I'm sorry about this,' Dad kept saying. 'I really did think this was going to be a short job.'

Mum tried to resettle Julius in the hot crush of his car seat. He squawked and struggled. And, tense from the packing, she complained the whole way.

'A few lumps of plaster falling in the guests' hair, you told me. Three weeks at most, till all the ceilings were fixed. And now it's wet rot. And dry rot. And problems with the piping, and the fire doors. Why can't the old manager cope? He's the one who let it all happen.'

Dad knew there was no point in answering. He just drove.

'One man not up to his job,' Mum grumbled. 'And suddenly three weeks is three months, and Natalie has to come out of school a week before the holidays, and -'

We swung round the last bend, and she broke off. Before us stood the Palace, vast and imposing, silencing petty complaints.

Dad switched off the engine and Mum scrambled out. Julius immediately stopped struggling and fell quiet. Mum unstrapped him and lifted him into her arms. And as she carried him up the wide stone steps to the Palace, suddenly behind her the whole sky was ablaze. And on the lawns on either side of her, the peacocks spread their glimmering fans.

'See?' Dad whispered to me, triumphant. 'A good omen!'

But I felt differently. I felt so strange. I think I must have been dizzy from the ride. I stumbled out of the car, and suddenly the sky seemed too high above me, the grass too green. And then one of the peacocks let out the most unholy cry, and I was filled with such unease.

Everyone thinks they can see things when they look back. It's nonsense, really, I expect.

Forget Dad counting the bedrooms. The Palace had over a hundred rooms if, as well as the lounges and dining rooms and bars and verandahs, you counted hot attics and dark cellars. In less than a week, Dad had the last few stubborn guests shunted off. Then, within hours, some floors were taken up, some ceilings down, and I was living in a strange new world, peopled by men in overalls.

'Natalie, run up to the attics and tell Mr Forrester – he's the one with the beard – that some bloke's on the phone about his wallboard.'

'Oh, no! The new sinks! Natalie, run round to the terrace and ask Ben if a couple of his lads can do a bit of unloading.'

And off he'd stride, to sort out the plasterers, or make arrangements for work to start on yet another floor. Every so often he'd remember me, and the cry would go up.

'Where's Natalie? Anyone seen her?'

If nobody had, then he'd panic.

'Natalie! Can you hear me? Natalie!'

The shouts would echo through cavernous rooms and up lofty stairwells – 'Natalie! *Natalie!*' – till one of the workmen spotted me arranging dusty glasses in rows, like soldiers, on the copper cocktail bar. Or cartwheeling across the empty ballroom. Or leaning over till my panties showed as I peered in cracked urns on the terrace.

'There she blows! Perfectly safe!'

I spent the summer skipping down corridors that had their carpets rolled, and holding endless imaginary conversations with the stone boy in the lily pond. For weeks, the Palace seemed more chaotic each time I picked my way down one of its great swooping staircases. Then, suddenly, the order was reversed. Day by day, dust sheets were whipped off tables and armchairs and sofas. Drills went back into toolchests. And cleaning began, till even my favourite gold cherubs over the mirrors glinted at me one morning, gleaming and bright.

Then, off to cadge a peppermint from one of the painters, I heard Dad taking a call.

'A south-facing double room. Yes, indeed. And dinner on both evenings. Thursday and Friday next.'

I hurled myself at him, barely managing to keep quiet until he'd replaced the receiver.

'Is it opening again? Is that *it*? Are we going?'

Wincing, he reached down and lifted me onto the polished brown sea of the reception desk. He looked over his glasses at Mum, who'd been sorting out keys in the corner, and she sighed and gave a tired little nod.

'Natalie,' he said gently. 'I'm afraid we've got something rather awkward to tell you.'

'Stay?' I said, wide-eyed, when I finally understood just what it was they were trying to explain. 'Stay in the Palace for *ever*?'

They started to comfort me! How could they have known so little? How could they have got it so wrong? It had been my one dream all those long, long weeks. To stay! To somersault endlessly down the wide slopes of clover-studded lawn. Wander at will through drawing rooms, writing rooms, boathouses and conservatories. Bounce on the cherry-red sofas. Pick my way like a gymnast, toes pointed, arms outstretched, along the stone ledges of the terraces –

'Natalie?'

I stared at them.

'Natalie, sweet. You don't mind, do you? You won't pine for old friends? You will be all right?'

I nodded at them, dumb with joy.