Queen of King Street

Tom McLaughlin



Barrington Stoke

To ACJ, for all your help and inspiration

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CHAPTER 1

Ribena on the Rocks

Bertie picked up his glass and looked at the playing cards in his hand. He swirled the drink round. The ice clinking together was the only sound in the room before he took a gulp and held the glass up to his head so that the ice from his favourite cocktail would cool his thoughts.

Bertie scanned the room. It was dark and thick layers of cigar smoke twisted in mid-air, churned out by fellow members of the Empire Club. This was the place where great men with too much time on their hands and too much money in their bank accounts hung out. They

talked about the good old days as they dreamed up new and interesting ways to take money off each other.

"Another Ribena on the rocks with a twist. In fact, make it a double," Bertie said, and handed his glass to a waiter. Bertie scanned his cards again and looked at the table, where a pile of money sat just begging to be won at the end of another tense game of cards.

"Oh, do hurry up, Bertie," one of the other players said. "Some of us have dinner plans, you know!"

"Don't listen to him, Bertie, you keep playing!" Ginger snapped. He was the third player at the table and Bertie's oldest school pal. "I've got my eye on a Bentley, and your winnings would come in handy."

Bertie's nickname was "Unlucky". "Unlucky Bertie" everyone called him at the Empire Club, because of his amazing losing streak. Not once

in all his 57 years on the planet had Bertie ever won anything. Not a game of rugby, not a game of I spy, KerPlunk, polo, badminton – not a bean. And every time he lost, there was always a cry of, "Oh, unlucky, Bertie …!" So that's how his nickname began.

You might think that someone who lost as often in life as Bertie wouldn't have any friends, or any money for that matter. But there was one thing that Bertie had going for him: he was a blue-blooded royal – Prince Bertrand Montgomery, Duke of Scotland, to give him his full name. And his older sister – well, she was the queen of England.

Yes, that's right, even in the great game of life Bertie had come second. While his sister got to wear a crown and have people bow to her, Bertie had to make do with spending his time losing at cards and trying to stay out of trouble. So far it wasn't going well.

But maybe, just maybe, Bertie's luck was about to change.

He looked at his cards once again.

"OK, OK, I'll bet the lot!" Bertie said. Suddenly he just knew he had to win. Surely, *surely*, this time his luck would change. "I'll go all in!"

There were gasps from everyone around him.

"HOW ALL IN?" Ginger barked back.

"I'll throw in the Rolls-Royce!" Bertie said, frisbee-ing the keys across the table.

"I'll bet my country mansion!" Ginger said, getting caught up in it all.

"Which one?"

"The one in France!" Ginger grinned.

"I'll bet half of Scotland!" Bertie grinned back.

"Which half?"

"The top half," Bertie blurted out.

"I'll bet all I have!" Ginger said. "The houses, the bank accounts, the business, my seat at the cricket – EVERYTHING!"

"I'll bet my lot too!" Bertie said gleefully. "The jewels, the palaces, the crowns, the titles. If you win, you can have everything. You can be the king of England!" Bertie got out a notepad and wrote "IOU – everything!" on it.

The gasps got louder. Bertie looked at his cards again. All he needed was the right card from the pack to have the perfect hand.

He'd been watching the cards all game and he was pretty sure he knew where every single one was. There was one card left – face down

on the table. Bertie knew it was the one he needed. He took a deep breath and went for it; it was all or nothing, now or never!

He smiled a winning smile before picking it up from the table. "Master Plod, the policeman's son!" he said, throwing it down with the rest of his cards. "Happy Families!" he bellowed before downing his drink in one. "I'm not so—"

"Unlucky, Bertie!" everyone in the club cried out.

"What?!" Bertie said, looking down at his cards. A stupid smile grinned back at him from Mr Bun, the baker, and not Master Plod. "No, it can't be. Where's Master Plod?" he said, beginning to panic. What had he just done?

"I've got it!" Ginger smiled, showing it to Bertie. "That, dear old chap, is Happy Families. That makes you the loser and me – what was it again?" he said, looking at Bertie's IOU. "Oh yes,

king of England, and I still have enough for a Bentley!" he said, scooping the rest of the cash.



"Oh, Bertie, what have you done?" came the cries from the other club members, and that was the last thing Bertie heard before everything went black.