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Opening extract from

The Queen At War

Written by

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Published by

Corvus an imprint of Atlantic Books

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Published in paperback in Great Britain in 2013 by Corvus,
an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

Paperback ISBN: 978 1 84887 055 0
E-book ISBN: 978 0 85789 679 7

Printed in Great Britain.

Corvus
An imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd
Ormond House
26–27 Boswell Street
London
WC1N 3JZ

www.corvus-books.co.uk



Prologue

The Darkened Room, 1854

A single candle flickered on the bedside table, casting the faces of a boy and girl into light and shadow. The boy bent over the bed, and wiping the girl's forehead with a damp cloth, spoke with a roughness meant to mask his anxiety.

'I am surprised at you, Grace; as the eldest in the family you're supposed to be the responsible one. Yet you've gone against Father's orders and returned from Italy. The climate there was helping you. Father says you were gaining strength each day and were on the road to a good recovery. How do you expect to get well in London's damp and fog? You had to take to your bed the moment you stepped off the mail steamer.'

The candle caught the girl's eyes, bright with something beyond the tears that filled them.

'James, I couldn't stay away any longer. I begged to return. I longed for the mists and rains, the soft green of England. I even yearned for the smoke and bustle of London. And I had to see you and Jack, to be with my dear wee brothers. You're growing so fast, the only truly little one left is Riordan. And then war is coming. Jack's regiment will soon be off to the East, to the Crimea. I know Father says I was getting better in Italy, but each day I woke, feeling I'd lost something, and feared I would never get it back. I am afraid . . .'

A hacking cough made the girl sit bolt upright in bed, struggling for breath. James rubbed her back vigorously, propping the pillows behind her. He busied himself, lighting a spirit lamp and warming a liquid over it, then measuring drops into a glass of water.

'Don't talk, Grace,' he said. 'It tires you so. Here, take this, it will help you to rest. Now do as your "wee brother" instructs, he's a good foot taller than you now.' James tried to smile, but it was a thin-lipped effort. Grace smiled back and, taking the glass of water, drank it to please him.

'You take such good care of me, James. You and Jack, such strapping fine young men now, and darling little Riordan; I want so much to see you grown, to . . .'

James interrupted, placing a finger against her lips. 'Rest, I said. Not talk, but rest. When did you become such a

chatterbox? Father says there's nothing wrong with you; that your fatigue is to be expected when a young girl becomes a young lady. It's exhaustion, too frantic a social life, too much dancing in crowded ballrooms. He thinks the waltz is the source of much evil.'

'Father says even worse. Don't you know it's all due to books? He feels I read too much and it's brought on this hectic fever. The lectures I've had on "over-stimulation of the female brain".' James and Grace both laughed, but hers was cut short by the persistent hacking cough.

'Rest,' was all James said, but his eyes said much more as he made her as comfortable as possible. 'I've left a bell next to the bed, and I'll move the candle over here onto the dresser. The Palace has arranged that I can sleep next door. Ring if you need me. Goodnight, dear Grace. Sleep well. I am certain you will feel better in the morning.'

'You are sweet to hope, James, but I doubt it will be so,' Grace murmured. The drops were beginning to take effect. She closed her eyes, breathing more evenly.

In the next room another girl waited for James, a girl with silky brown hair and serious grey eyes. She moved quickly across the room, holding back her long skirts with one hand.

'How is she, James?' Princess Alice asked. 'Do I need to call your father?' James looked bitter and weary, older than his years.

'My father continues to pretend that Grace is simply "delicate". I try to go along with this, but you know as well as I do what the truth is. Grace is an intelligent person and can see through the pretence as well. She's losing hope, and we're losing vital time.'

Alice drew a chair up next to the fire and coaxed James into it. 'If your father could put aside his pride and admit he was wrong about Grace's illness, could he cure her?' she asked.

James stared at the fire, seeing Grace's frightened glittering eyes peering back at him through the flames. His father was at the peak of his profession, physician to the Royal Household. 'I'm afraid his ability to charm the Queen holds more sway than his medical talents.' James blushed. 'I'm sorry, Alice. I would never be disloyal to the Queen, and I wish with all my heart I had a stronger faith in my father, but he is more likely to harm Grace than cure her.'

Princess Alice stood behind James, staring into the fire as well. 'Is there anyone else who could help – any other physician?'

James shook his head. 'There are doctors who have had some luck treating an illness like this. But that's the problem, it is just luck. Sometimes patients recover, yes; but at other times they waste away, or are gone within hours through a galloping fever. I've been reading everything I can: doctor's notes, university lectures, medical treatises. Each one contradicts the other. The only

certainty is that no one in this world knows enough to cure Grace.'

He slumped in the chair, and Alice looked down on her friend's bent head. 'If the answer isn't in this world, it might be in another,' she said. 'There's only one thing I can think of to do, and I'm going to do it now.' Patting James lightly on the shoulder, Alice went out of the room and into the corridor. Up the stairs and down she went, stumbling slightly on her skirts – they'd only just been let down to suit her years. 'It is a nuisance,' she mumbled to herself. '*She* was right about our clothes.' Moving aside a tapestry, she knocked softly on the door behind it.

'Ah yes, do come in,' said a low foreign voice from within, almost as if she were expected. It was a small room, more like a closet, with stone walls curved upwards to an arched ceiling. It had a strangely medieval feel, a forgotten room in the midst of a modern, bustling palace. Inside she found a tall man of striking pallor, sitting at a desk, poring over a manuscript. He stood as Alice entered, bowing deeply.

'You are up late, Princess.'

'I come from a sad vigil,' Alice replied. 'James O'Reilly's sister Grace. She is deathly ill.'

The tall, pale man offered his chair. 'It is indeed sad,' he said, 'when one so young is found in such a hopeless, helpless state. She has my sympathy.'

Alice did not sit, but stared at his desk absent-mindedly, hardly noticing the strange symbols etched on the

manuscript before her. She looked up, into the man's creased white face. 'It is hopeless for Grace,' she said, 'because no one in this world can help her. But you have other means, other ways. You know what brings me here?'

He smiled slightly and nodded.

'*She* must be called,' Alice added. 'I know you can call her.'

He smiled again, but this time shook his head in dissent. 'Are you quite certain you wish to make the call? Death comes to all of you. Grace knows this. She has resignation and fortitude. She has faith.' His lips gave an ironic twist at the final word.

Alice pressed her hands against the desk, palms down. She needed to remain calm. 'Grace can live,' she said. 'You, by making the call, by bringing her here, you might give Grace life.'

Taking up a long black walking stick, the man turned it slowly, examining the curious shapes engraved on its silver tip. 'You do remember the last time? The trouble? And though it's really not something we can discuss, I can tell you in confidence – the worst of that trouble is still brewing, building in fact.' Tapping the walking stick lightly against the floor, he shook his head as if to clear it. 'You talk of my giving Grace the gift of life? I doubt the Archbishop of Canterbury would approve of such talk,' he said in an attempt at a lighter tone. 'Me, creating life? A collective shudder would go through your Church.'

He did enjoy the cut and thrust of conversation, but Princess Alice refused to be put off by his banter. Circling the room, she came and stood before him again, holding out her clasped hands. 'Bernardo DuQuelle, you can help, and you must help,' she cried, losing patience. 'How can you tease me in the face of death? If Grace dies, James's heart will break. If you make the call, Grace might be saved.'

The tall pale man looked down on the princess. 'You are not the only one urging me to call her back.' He sniffed the air and shuddered in distaste. 'The others are pressing me; you'd hardly approve of what Lucia asks of her . . . and even if I did agree, who knows what would happen. To call her back, when there are many questions about what she really is . . .'

'I've never believed there is evil in her,' Alice replied. '*She* can only bring good. *She* is our friend, our companion. You think so too, I know. *She* can help. Please.' Alice took the man's long, cold hand. She had never touched him before.

The touch seemed to affect him strangely. He looked at her hand. It fitted into his palm, delicate and warm as a newly baked pastry. Sighing and shaking his head, he went to his desk and closed his book. Bernardo DuQuelle wrapped his cloak around his shoulders, and taking up his black top hat and walking stick, bowed to Princess Alice. 'As I've always said, you are a true daughter of Queen

Victoria. Yours is a forceful nature, well hidden behind a gentle façade. Let us hope you are strong enough for what lies ahead.' The creases in his face deepened, but it wasn't a face to show much emotion. 'I shall do as you wish. Not for the reasons you think, and much against my better judgement. I shall send the message. But there is no need to clap your hands. I will call, but whether or not *she* hears it, that I cannot say.'



Chapter One

The Stranger in the Bed: Here and Now

A fire engine ripped down 89th Street, the sound of its blaring sirens ricocheting across the canyon of skyscrapers. It bounced upwards, finally reaching the eleventh-floor bedroom of Katie Berger-Jones-Burg. The many windows in Katie's apartment had no double glazing. 'Who needs the expense?' her mother Mimi explained. 'It's perfectly quiet this far up.' But then Mimi took so many pills at night, she was dead to the world. King Kong could come crashing through the windows, and Mimi would sleep on.

Katie didn't take pills. She had, according to her mother, a drearily non-addictive personality. Mimi was the lead

singer of Youth 'n Asia, a fading all-girl pop band. Her life had been filled with adventure, drama and a fair share of hallucinogenic drugs. By contrast Katie was, well, bland. Mimi had once complained that she was the only mother amongst their acquaintance who *hadn't* checked her daughter into the Betty Ford Clinic. 'Don't you have any obsessions?' Mimi goaded her. 'Addictions make a person interesting.'

'I read,' Katie countered. 'I read a lot.'

'Reading,' her mother sighed, 'so outmoded.'

An ambulance followed the fire engine, throwing its wail up through the windows. 'New York,' Katie said to herself. 'The city that never sleeps – well, that makes two of us.' Getting out of bed, she went to check on Mimi. Her mother was splayed across a beige cashmere duvet. On the wall above her, a multitude of Mimis were reproduced in block colours on canvas. Was it a real Warhol? Katie had her doubts. On the ceiling was a large mirror. The real Mimi was wearing a pink velvet eyeshade and earplugs with purple tassels. She wasn't wearing anything else. Katie plodded over to the bed – no need to tiptoe – and took hold of her mother's wrist – pulse rate fine. Mimi occasionally took that one pill too many. 'Goodnight, Mimi,' Katie said. 'Sweet dreams.' Katie wasn't certain anyone could dream through that amount of prescription drugs. Maybe that's why Mimi took them. 'Sleep tight, don't let the bed bugs bite,' Katie shouted towards the earplugs, and was greeted by an answering snore.

She padded into the kitchen, scuffing her fuzzy slippers against the tiles. A quick check of the refrigerator revealed its typical state of emptiness. Mimi was not a big eater. She'd spent enough of her working life in a Spandex catsuit to understand the dangers of food. There were some gluten-free, wheat-free, sugar-free, cereal-free biscuits, a bag full of nettles, six bottles of champagne and fourteen bottles of water. Mimi lived off water – special water, expensive water. Their housekeeper Dolores claimed it was water made from mermaid's sweat. Water and vitamins . . . and pills. Katie crammed a biscuit into her mouth and poured a glass of water. 'The water has more taste than these things,' she spluttered through the crumbs. 'Sawdust, it's like sawdust, only with fewer calories.' Katie talked to herself a lot – there was no one else to talk to.

Still grumbling, she headed back to bed. There was a glow coming from her room, which was strange, since she didn't have a nightlight any more. Something made her stop at the door and, looking in, she practically leapt out of her own skin. The ridiculous storybook words rang through her head: '*Somebody's been sleeping in my bed – and they're still here!*' But she didn't believe Goldilocks could have been as scared.

Lying in Katie's bed was a stranger – a girl, an extremely beautiful girl. She sank back on Katie's pillows, her chest rising and falling in the effort to breathe. She was so thin and pale, her eyes started out of her face – glowing eyes,

frightened eyes. She leaned forward to cough, pulling back the ruffles of her muslin nightdress and pushing her long damp red hair from her face; anything to stop the coughing and force that precious element, air, into her lungs. It was a desperate, but silent struggle. No sound came from the girl in the bed. As she turned her eyes towards Katie, words slipped like smoke from her mouth, circling around her head and dissolving into the darkness. '*Can you help*?'

And then she was gone. As vivid as the girl had been, nothing remained. Katie rubbed her eyes hard. She too was struggling for breath. Taking a pink blanket from the rocking chair, she crept into the living room and lowered herself, shaking, onto the big cream sofa. For the life of her, she wasn't getting back into that bed.

The visions were appearing – again. It had all happened before. But what exactly *had* happened the last time, the time under the bed? Katie willed herself to remember. But it was like one of those long complicated dreams. You woke up knowing all the information, but by breakfast it was a blur.

A while back, when the strange package addressed to Katie had arrived, she'd remembered everything. All the details of some huge adventure. But then Mimi had come home from the airport – in the midst of a personal crisis as usual – and by the time Katie had settled Mimi into bed, only the foggiest outline of the great events remained. The next morning the whole thing had gone. She'd lost the

facts, but she still had the feelings; the emotions of – well, of whatever it had been. Bewilderment, shock and terror; but there was also happiness – a great friendship had been forged. Who was it with? Why was it all just beyond her reach? She'd been somewhere far away on a journey rich with experience. But where?

Katie could have punched herself. Why hadn't she written it all down, right away? She was a prodigious keeper of diaries. Yet even when she rummaged back through the daily entries of her diary, there were few clues and only a brief mention of some visions: a tall man in a black top hat rising from the steam of the subway and a pretty girl with silky brown hair and serious grey eyes.

The most vivid was of a small plump woman in old-fashioned costume. She'd been wounded somehow, and slumped before Katie, bleeding, in the streets of New York. But then the woman had vanished. They'd all vanished. Like just now with the girl in the bed. Katie couldn't be certain whether any of this was real. Even when she'd written about these visions in her diary, she'd questioned them. Maybe she had an overactive imagination. Or she could be going that little bit insane. Katie read and re-read what she'd written, finally hurling the diary across the room in frustration, trying to knock the truth out of it. Still, she didn't know.

There was one more clue, a big one: the walking stick. It had arrived in a package one day, addressed in elaborate

script to Katie Berger-Jones-Burg. The doorman had said some kind of punk Goth had dropped it off. It was a fantastical object: black ebony with an elaborate silver head. Both the wooden base and the metal top were carved with strange letters and symbols. 'Kind of like something a magician uses,' their housekeeper Dolores had suggested. 'Maybe flowers will pop out of the end.'

'I don't think so,' Katie replied, turning the walking stick over in her hands. 'I've always hated magicians, especially at birthday parties. What kind of grown-up spends their life trying to fool a six-year-old? It's pathetic and bogus. But there's nothing bogus about this walking stick. It's the real deal.'

Dolores sniffed, 'Real, schmeal. And you don't know where it came from or why it's here. I'd just put it in the back of the closet and forget all about it.'

That was part of the problem. The walking stick had arrived for a purpose, and that purpose was *not* to forget. It had even come with a card. 'Aide-memoire,' the card said – 'to help her remember.' 'Irony,' Katie said to herself. 'This is a really great example of irony.' At the Neuman Hubris Progressive School they were doing Writers and the Martyrdom of Same Gender Preference – Oscar Wilde, Noël Coward, Truman Capote. Her teacher, 'call me Ted', kept pointing out the writers' use of irony as a weapon to ward off persecution. 'Irony and the walking stick,' Katie thought. 'I'd write an essay on it, but "call me Ted" would

think I was bonkers.' She picked up the card and read it again.

'Aide-memoire' – to help her remember . . . she could remember nothing.