ROYAL CIRCLE

One

May 1911

A slightly built, blond young man stood beneath Dartmouth Naval College's flamboyantly splendid portico. Hands deep in his pockets, he stared glumly across a broad terrace to where twin flights of steps led down to manicured gardens and beyond the gardens to a steeply sloping, tree-studded hillside.

At the foot of the hill lay the River Dart, thick with boats of all shapes and sizes. More than anything in the world he wished that, like many of the other cadets in his group, he were aboard one of them. Although he hated the academic side of his training, he loved being out-of-doors and active. The time spent aboard a sailing cutter, with the wind of the estuary blowing against his face, was the only thing that made life at Dartmouth bearable.

His cadet captain strolled from the shaded recesses of the grand entrance hall and drew to a halt alongside him. 'Off on a weekend's leave?' he asked affably.

David nodded, making an effort to look happier about it than he felt.

His captain hesitated slightly, as if about to say more. Then, thinking better of it, he merely nodded and, one hand hooked in the pocket of his naval uniform, strolled on his way.

David watched him, his eyes bleak. He knew very well that his captain had been about to offer his usual good-bye to cadets going home on leave: "Give my best to your parents." Which, given David's unique circumstances, would have been a familiarity not at all appropriate.

It was for the same reason that the cadet had fudged calling him by name. He simply had too many of them. Seven, to be exact. Edward, after both his grandfather and an uncle who had died as a young man. Albert, after his great-grandfather. Christian, after one of his godfathers. George after his father, or was it because George was the patron saint of England? He wasn't quite sure. Certainly Andrew was after the patron saint of Scotland, Patrick after the patron saint of Ireland and David after the patron saint of Wales. With that little lot to choose from, it was no wonder people paused before addressing him.

Within his family circle he was known as David – and David was how he always thought of himself. If he'd had any close friends, it was the name he would have liked them to use – only he didn't have any close friends.

'It wouldn't be wise,' his father had said grimly, hands clasped behind his back, legs astride. 'Not in your position. That's why you're at Dartmouth and not Eton or Harrow. When you leave Dartmouth your former classmates will be pursuing careers at sea and you will rarely, if ever, see them. That wouldn't be the case at Eton or Harrow. Any friendships formed there would run the danger of continuing after your education and would become a burden to you. And you don't want that, David, do you?'

'No, sir,' he'd replied dutifully, thinking there was nothing he'd like better than to have a couple of lifelong friends.

As if he had read his thoughts, his father's blue eyes had narrowed.

'If that is all, sir…?' David had said, eager to be free of the familiar knot of fear forming in the pit of his stomach; eager to once again be on the other side of the Library door.

Beneath his trim beard and waxed moustache his father's mouth had tightened, but the expected explosion of temper hadn't come. He had merely made a sound in his throat that could have meant anything and given a curt nod of dismissal.

As his cadet captain disappeared from view, David gave a heavy sigh, knowing all too well that in a few hours time there would be a similar interview at the castle and that this time his father's ferocious temper might very well not be held in check.

He stepped from beneath the portico and began walking along the terrace fronting the college. Weekends at home were definitely not weekends he looked forward to, but they did have one redeeming feature. They gave him the opportunity to practise his driving. Slightly cheered, he rounded the building and strolled across the broad gravelled drive to his Austro-Daimler.

As expected, Captain Piers Cullen was seated behind the wheel.

'No, Captain Cullen,' he said pleasantly. 'I'm doing the driving – at least until we're in sight of Windsor. Crank-start her up for me, there's a good chap.'

Reluctantly, Piers Cullen stepped out of the open-topped car and, with even deeper reluctance, began cranking the engine.

David put on goggles and a pair of driving gauntlets. The car had been an early seventeenth birthday present from his German first cousin once removed, Willy, and was the best present he could ever remember receiving. It had, of course, annoyed his father who believed it had been chosen purely for that purpose. "Damn Willy's impudent cheek!" he had said explosively. "He's only sent it because the model is named *Prinz Heinrich*!'

David hadn't cared about Willy's motive. The motorcar went faster than he'd ever hoped a motorcar could go and though his father had been led to believe that on

public roads Captain Cullen acted as his chauffeur, in reality he, David, drove it every opportunity he got.

As he drove out of Dartmouth and into the rolling green countryside, he saw with pleasure that Devon was looking its best. Even though it was nearly the end of May, primroses still massed the grassy verges of the country lanes and bluebells carpeted the floor of every wooded valley they passed.

He neared the market town of Totnes, wondering just what the weekend ahead held. His father would probably want to engage in what was commonly referred to as a 'small shoot' and, as far as exercise was concerned, that would be it. For someone like himself, whose sense of well being depended on a lot of physical activity, it wasn't going to be enough.

He thought again of the inevitable interview in the Library and grimaced. His marks during the year had been nowhere near what his father expected of him, though God knows he had tried hard enough and had even come top out of fifty-nine in German and English. In history he had come second and in French third. It was maths – any form of maths - that let him down. "Forty-eighth in geometry and forty-fifth in trigonometry?" he could just hear his father bellowing. "Forty-*eighth* and forty-*fifth?"*

'Steady on the speed, sir,' Piers said warningly when they were out in open country again. 'That last corner was taken very wide….'

David made a non-committal sound not very different from the one his father often made. Cullen was a killjoy and having him alongside for a two hundred mile journey was tiresome, if unavoidable.

His low spirits worsened as they crossed the county border into Dorset. His younger brother, Bertie, wouldn't be home, as Bertie's leave from Dartmouth came much nearer the end of term. Which meant that there would only be his fourteen-year-

old sister Mary for company, as Henry and Georgie were too young to really count and his youngest brother, John, was locked away from sight in deepest Norfolk. And though he liked Mary a lot, finding something fun they could do together wouldn't be easy. Though Henry and Georgie's nursery could be raided for board games, his father always insisted such games be played with no uproarious laughter, which, to David, defeated their point. And they wouldn't be able to play cards, because there wouldn't be a pack to be found.

As Dorset merged into the airy uplands of Hampshire, the loneliness he always fought to keep at bay swept over him with such force he could hardly breathe. He had no one he could truly call a friend. Piers Cullen was too dour a Scotsman to be someone whose companionship he would voluntarily seek. And as far as Dartmouth was concerned, his father had never had to worry about friendships, for the boys he would have liked to have made friends with kept their distance and the others toadied up to him - and he hated toadies.

He was so deep in thought he didn't see the blind bend ahead until it was too late for him to slow down. As Piers Cullen gave a shout of alarm, he took it far too wide and far too fast.

Too late he saw what was in front of him. Too late he saw that short of a miracle, there was going to be an accident of tragic proportions.

He slammed his foot on the brake. Slewed the wheel to the left. And with a girl's screams, Cullen's desperate '*Jesus God!*' and horrendous barking ringing in his ears, he plummeted into a future beyond all his imaginings.

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