

A DOOR IN DECEMBER

Part One

It was a cold day in late December and the Prime Minister had not had a good day. In fact, she had had a terrible day. The Opposition had opposed her, the press had asked her questions she didn't know the answers to, and the King had given her an enormous list of things that he thought were terrifically important but had no chance of ever happening because kings weren't in charge these days. Nor, she thought as she skimmed through a long list of emails from her civil servants and her advisors, were Prime Ministers.

Tonight was a typical December night, dark and grey and cheerless, and the streets of London were dark and grey and cheerless to match. Only the street lamps and the lights from the offices along Whitehall illuminated the drive into Downing Street.

"Just here?" asked Consett, her driver. It was his little joke, because they were outside Number 10 Downing Street which, as it was the Prime Minister's official residence, meant that she was back at the house which had been her home for two and half years now. Being Prime Minister was a bit like being a train, thought the Prime Minister: you went up and down the same tracks all day long until everyone decided you were too old or too rusty and shunted you off to a sidings somewhere.

She sighed as Consett opened the door for her. Once upon a time she had been an idealistic young woman, but now all she wanted to do was get through the day without someone shouting, "Prime Minister! Prime Minister!" at her: which, given that she was the Prime Minister, was extremely unlikely. For a brief moment, she envied the King, whose people tiptoed around him and talked in hushed tones like he was some sort of highly expensive vase that might topple off its pedestal any minute if subjected to noise or sudden movements.

Downing Street was quiet tonight and there were no reporters outside Number 10 as the Prime Minister walked up the steps and nearly walked into the front door. Normally when she went up the steps, someone inside Number 10 was already opening the door for her and all she had to do was step through it. But today the door did not open and the Prime Minister almost walked smack into it. Feeling rather foolish, she was about to knock when the duty constable said:

"Allow me, ma'am."

And he rapped on the door with his knuckles.

The door didn't open. Instead a muffled voice from inside said:

"Just a minute."

A terrible thumping ensued, like someone kicking a dead animal and then the door jerked open inwards. A moment later, a figure appeared, a man in blue overalls.

"Should be all right now," he said.

Inside Number 10, everything was neat and spotlessly clean except for one small area by the front door which was strewn with tools and tarpaulin and nails and sawdust.

"Thought we'd get it fixed before the New Year holidays," said an aide, whose name was Pomfrey. "It's been sticking for months."

"Has it?" said the Prime Minister. She supposed that one of the drawbacks of never opening a door yourself was that you never knew if there was anything wrong with the door.

"Oh yes," Pomfrey replied. "It was sticking so we had it looked at and," he went on, regretfully, "it was clear that all the wood in the door had rotted."

"All the wood?" asked the Prime Minister.

"Yes," said Pomfrey. He looked round, as though spies were hanging on his every word (perhaps they were, thought the Prime Minister). "So we had to - "

He leaned in and whispered.

"What?" said the Prime Minister.

"Yes," said Pomfrey. "We had to replace the whole door."

"That was quick," the Prime Minister said.

"You were abroad," Pomfrey replied. "And besides we always keep a spare."

"You do?" asked the Prime Minister, surprised.

"We have to," answered Pomfrey. "We can't have Number 10 without a front door. Anyone might walk in."

"I suppose so," said the Prime Minister.

"But," Pomfrey went on, "that door was rotten as well."

"Oh," the Prime Minister said. She was both fascinated by and losing interest in the story.

"And then we found this door," Pomfrey went on.

"What?" said the Prime Minister.

"I know, stroke of luck. And it's the right size and everything. Apart from a bit at the edge, which as you know, we had sanded down."

"Where," the Prime Minister asked, "was this door?"

"In a shed," replied Pomfrey. "Next door at Number 11. Where the gardener keeps his tools."

"Did he tell you about the door?"

"No, he said he'd never seen it in his life. Mind you," Pomfrey went on, "judging by the state of Number 11's lawns, he needs his eyes tested."

They both looked at the door.

"If that's all," said Pomfrey, and they parted company.

In the evening the Prime Minister had to attend a ball for the Queen of Sweden. It was a long dull affair and was only improved by the King making "help me" faces at her because he was sitting next to the Queen's husband, who was very dull. So she was extremely tired when finally she got back to Number 10 – the door worked perfectly – and went to bed.

That night she dreamed she was floating under water. The water was cold and blue and above her head were huge white clouds that she realised were ice floes. She swam to the surface and managed to scramble up onto one of the slabs of ice. Then she looked down at her feet. They weren't feet anymore, but enormous white paws. She saw her reflection in the clear water: she was a polar bear. Oddly, she wasn't concerned about this: she had turned into a Prime Minister, after all so why not a polar bear.

All around her were other ice floes and on each floe sat another polar bear. There were polar bears as far as the eye could see, just floating.

And then she saw it. A huge wave, racing across the waters. It was like a moving, rushing wall, higher than the tallest building and roaring like a thousand storms.

She closed her own eyes as the wave crashed towards her. The other bears and their slabs of ice were sent flying into the sky but somehow she managed to hold onto hers as it too was flung across the sea as the water beneath her churned and thundered.

And, just as quickly as it had started, the wave was gone. Now she and her ice floe were floating, calmly and silently, towards a shore. She must have been flung very far by the tidal wave, she thought, because the shore was in fact a sandy beach, bathed in sunlight and surrounded by clear tropical water. In fact, it was so warm now that her ice floe had almost completely melted. She jumped off the remaining lump of ice and paddled to the shore.

It only took her a few minutes walking to realise that the beach was part of a small island, which was almost completely round. In the middle of the island was a tall hill that looked somewhat like a pig's head. The island was devoid of vegetation except for a small clump of coconut trees near the beach. Seeing the shells of empty coconuts lying on the beach reminded the Prime Minister that she was hungry, and she was about to try and find some intact coconuts when she saw the man.

He was a big man, and he was wearing nothing but a pair of red and white underpants, which exposed his sunburned belly and legs. The man was sweating a great deal as he carried pieces of wood and placed them in a pile on the sand.

"What are you doing?" the Prime Minister heard herself asking.

If the man in underpants felt any surprise at being addressed by a polar bear on a desert island, he didn't show it. Instead he said:

"What does it look like? I'm making a bonfire."

And then she woke up.

"It's fine now," said Pomfrey as he handed the Prime Minister a red box.

"What is?" she asked.

"The door," Pomfrey said, as though it was obvious (to be fair, Pomfrey always talked as though everyone instantly knew what he was talking about, even if it was completely incomprehensible).

"Oh," said the Prime Minister and then, as Pomfrey seemed to be expecting more, "Good." She wasn't particularly interested in the door: she had had her fill of it yesterday and besides, she couldn't stop thinking about her dream. There was something oddly familiar about the man in his underpants on the beach. She thought for a moment of asking Pomfrey to search for images of men in their underpants and decided it was a bad idea.

He handed her a flask of much-needed coffee and opened the door. She stepped outside into the winter sunlight. December, the Prime Minister thought, was an odd month. It never seemed to know what it was actually supposed to be. December could be sunny, it could be wet, sometimes it could even be snowy: but it seemed a purposeless month, sandwiched between Bonfire Night in November and New Year's Day in January. Of course, there was Christmas Day, the Prime Minister reflected as she got into the car, but that was more of a religious event, like Easter. People enjoyed the day off, many of them – like her parents – would go to the church, but it wasn't what you'd call a *holiday*.

"Where to?" Consett asked, which was his other little joke, and without waiting to be told, started the car.

"Wait," the Prime Minister said.

"What is it, ma'am?" said Consett.

"Why is there - "

She stopped.

"Nothing," she said. "I thought I saw something. But there was nothing there."

“Very good, ma’am,” said Consett who, despite his fondness for bad jokes, was not the kind of man to go round telling people that the Prime Minister had started seeing things.

Which was exactly what had happened. Just as Consett had started the engine, something had caught the Prime Minister’s eye: something attached to the door of Number 10. Something round and green.

I must be tired, thought the Prime Minister, *I just hallucinated a wreath.*

That night, she had another dream. In this dream, she was walking through the West End of London at night and, even though it was cold, the streets were full of people. The pavements were crowded and the shops were crowded but everyone seemed to be in a good mood. Even more odd, there were lights everywhere. Lights in windows and lights on lamp posts, and lights strung over the road. There were neon animals and electric stars and strings of blazing bulbs and in some shop windows there were even pine trees festooned with lights and shiny decorations.

And everywhere she went, there was a man. He was large, and stout, and dressed in a red outfit with a white trim. Sometimes he had a hat, sometimes he wore glasses, but always he wore a beard. Sometimes he was a picture, sometimes his face was picked out on neon, and quite a few times he was just someone dressed up as him, but wherever the Prime Minister went, there he was.

She recognised him at once, of course. He was the man she’d seen on the beach.

“Can I help you?” asked a voice. It was a young man, dressed in a bizarre green and white costume, with a matching hat that had floppy cloth ears on it.

The Prime Minister gestured at the lines of people queueing up. Some were lining up to buy goods, but others had children and seemed to be waiting to see the man with the beard.

“What are all these people doing?” asked the Prime Minister.

The woman frowned.

“Why,” she replied, “They’re waiting to meet –

But the Prime Minister never got to hear the rest because her alarm clock went off.