

A DOOR IN DECEMBER

Part Two

That morning she was too busy to think about her dream: to be honest, thinking about dreams wasn't a very Prime Ministerial thing to do. She could hardly stop a cabinet meeting and interrupt the Chancellor's long speech about tariffs to tell everyone what weird dreams she had been having lately, could she? Although, as the Chancellor's speech seemed to be going on for ever, she did feel a strong temptation to do just that.

At last the Chancellor said what he called a few words in conclusion, and turned to the Prime Minister for her reaction.

"Why don't we," she found herself saying, "just give it away?"

"I beg your pardon?" the Chancellor replied. He was a red-faced man with a tiny sprig of hair on top of his head, like a tomato.

The Prime Minister hadn't meant to say that – in fact, she hadn't meant to say anything at all, but now she had said it, she couldn't take it back, because then the Cabinet would think there was something wrong with her. So she smiled enigmatically and said nothing.

At least, that was what she thought she was going to do. In reality, she heard herself speak again.

"The surplus," she said. "The leftover... things."

"Things?" asked the Home Secretary, in a slightly sarcastic voice. He had, she knew, hated her ever since she got the Prime Minister's job and he didn't.

"Yes, things," she said. "I mean, we have all these goods we haven't managed to export, all these things we've made, computers, and clothes, and food and drink and... and toys."

She could see the Home Secretary was about to say, "Toys?" in the same voice in which he had said, "Things?" so she continued:

"Yes, toys. Lots of children won't have toys this year, will they? And lots of adults won't have things they need. So maybe we could give some of it away."

There was a long silence.

"What a marvellous idea," said the Minister for Employment and Pensions, in a voice which didn't sound like she thought it was a marvellous idea at all. "But we already have provision for food banks and charity collections - "

"And financial relief for those who are entitled to claim it," added the Chancellor.

"Yes, I know all that, I'm the Prime Minister," said the Prime Minister, "But I meant – we should do something special, given the time of year."

"The time of year?" said the Home Secretary, more confused than sarcastic, "You mean December? What's so special about December?"

The Prime Minister didn't answer, so the Chancellor took the opportunity to make his report on imports of brawn from the Faroe Islands.

"Everything all right?" asked Pomfrey as he opened the door to Number 10. From the look on his face, he had clearly heard all about the Cabinet meeting.

"Fine, thank you," replied the Prime Minister. She wasn't fine, but she wasn't going to tell Pomfrey that. Instead she said:

"What's that smell?"

Pomfrey looked puzzled, then aggrieved.

"It's not me," he said.

"No," said the Prime Minister, "It's sort of - "

She sniffed the air.

"Tangerines and sandalwood and cinnamon and chestnuts and pine and wine - "

"Definitely not me," said Pomfrey, but the Prime Minister wasn't listening. She was walking around, still sniffing.

"It's coming from here," she said.

Pomfrey looked puzzled.

"The door?" he asked.

"Yes, what do you think?"

Pomfrey wrinkled his nose.

"It just smells of - *door* - to me," he said. He looked at the Prime Minister.

"Are you sure you're all right?" he asked.

The next day when she went out into Downing Street, the door of Number 10 was bright green.

"Must be the light," said Consett. "Sometimes when the sun strikes my front door, it seems sort of grey instead of blue."

But he gave her a look in the rear view mirror when he thought she couldn't see.

When the Prime Minister came back that evening, she said to Pomfrey:

"What's that?"

"What's what?"

The Prime Minister frowned.

"That," she said, pointing at the enormous object taking up half the hall. It was a pine tree, which someone had cut off at the root and put into a large stand. The tree was covered in shiny coloured chains and tiny objects like trumpets and sledges and angels.

Just like in my dream, thought the Prime Minister.

"This?" said Pomfrey. "It's a hat stand. We thought we'd get a new one. Do you not like it?"

The Prime Minister said nothing. The smell of tangerines and burning wood and all the other things was even stronger now. And she could hear something, too. An insistent jingling, like little bells. She thought of mentioning this to Pomfrey but, seeing his face, decided not to.

The next morning was a very busy one and the Prime Minister barely had time to pick up her flask of coffee as Consett set off for Parliament.

She finished the coffee as she walked into her office and saw with a sinking feeling that her desk was piled high with official boxes.

"A lot to get through today," said her secretary, apologetically, and handed her something.

The Prime Minister stared at the piece of paper in her hand. It was a letter; no, a list; no, a list and a letter. A letter to someone that listed, for some reason, a lot of things they wanted to be given.

"What is this?" she asked. Her secretary looked puzzled.

"It's that list you asked for," he said. "The quotas for car exports next year."

The Prime Minister looked at the paper again. It was covered in figures.

"Oh," she said. "Thank you."

The secretary nodded and left, and the Prime Minister sat down and took a swig from her flask. She nearly spat it out in surprise: there was some sort of sweet

flavouring in her coffee. She recognised the taste: it was gingerbread, and very pleasant, so she drank it as she thought about recent events.

What is happening to me? she wondered, but didn't like to think of the obvious answer. Several of her predecessors had broken under the strain of the job: one had been found naked scurrying across the roof to Number 11 while another had had to be prevented from declaring himself King of the Water and jumping into the Thames to rejoin his subjects. Compared to that, she supposed the odd bit of seeing things was nothing but it was still far from ideal. She needed a break, she decided, and made a mental note to book a few days away when it was convenient or before they came for her with a straitjacket.

There was still a drop of the extraordinary coffee left but she couldn't see the flask anywhere. And then she saw it, on the floor by the fireplace. She walked over to pick it up and saw something beside it. A small pie on a plate, with a carrot next to it. She bent down and, hoping nobody was about to come in, sniffed the pie. It smelt a lot like the hallway in Number 10. Before she knew what she was doing, she took a bite. It was the best thing she had ever tasted; sweet and spicy and juicy and flaky all at once.

There was a knock at the door. Putting the carrot in her pocket (why?), the Prime Minister turned. It was her secretary, and he looked nervous.

"The King wants to see you," she said.

Even without a police escort, the drive to Buckingham Palace was short and swift, and in no time at all the Prime Minister was walking across a thick and elderly carpet towards the King, who rose to greet her.

"Prime Minister," he said. He bore, she thought, a close resemblance to the actor Hugh Grant.

"Your Majesty," she replied.

They sat down.

"I've been thinking," the King said. "I'd like to address the nation."

She tried not to grip the arms of the chair.

"I hope that –" she began, but the King interrupted her.

"Oh no," he said. "Nothing like that. I have no plans to step down. It's just that I feel I should, you know, *say something*. To the people."

"Do you have a particular subject?" she asked.

"No," said the King, looking troubled. "I merely wanted to say a few words. At this time of year."

"Winter?" replied the Prime Minister.

The King looked uncomfortable. Then he smiled.

"Never mind," he said, "Only a whim. But," he went on, "I do feel that something is happening and I don't know what."

"I know exactly what you mean," said the Prime Minister.

"Really?" replied the King. "Well, if you do find out what it is, please let me know."

Consett parked outside Number 10 and she got out.

"Cold tonight," she told the constable on duty.

The door opened and the Prime Minister stepped into a wasteland of wind and snow.

She stood, almost in shock, her shoes sinking into the snow. The sunlight sparkled on the whiteness all around her, and it was cold, so cold that she could feel her

breath freeze in her throat. Panicking, she turned and saw the door behind her, incongruous in the snowy waste. Shivering so much that it was as if she were having a fit, she grabbed the door's ice cold handle, but it wouldn't turn. She pounded on the door, and the sound of her fist against the thick wood echoed in the empty air around her.

She was freezing, she was terrified and she had no idea where she was and how she had got there, but she was the Prime Minister. She reached into her coat with a hand that hardly did what she wanted, pulled out her phone and stabbed at the screen, calling up a number that would bring help immediately, wherever she was in the world. Her fingers were stiff, though, and the phone slipped from her hand and, as she watched, into a hole in the ice. She lunged forward to grab it, but it sank into the water.

"Oh great," said the Prime Minister.

She knew that the only thing she could do, as long as she was able to, was to keep moving. Her feet crunched into the snow as she kept herself moving forward, with each step feeling the cold wrap itself around her bones. She walked onwards, her face feeling like it had been carved from ice, her body racked with cold, her clothing entirely inadequate. She had no idea how much time she had left before she froze, or collapsed, or fainted: but as long as she could walk, that was what she was going to do.

And then she saw it.

A house.

"Oh come on," she said through lips that felt like frozen slugs. None of her hallucinations so far had been of the least use, and this one was just taunting her. But she had nothing else to do, so she headed towards it. As she drew nearer, she saw that it was quite a small house, painted white, with a red and white picket fence, and it had one window and one door, like a child's drawing. Outside the house, she could see quite clearly as she drew near was a sign attached to a post that had been driven into the ground. The sign leaned at a cheery angle and in large alternating red and green letters it said:

NORTH POLE.