



By Royal Appointment

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Chapter One:

It should have been the proudest moment of his career. After thirty years spent in this backstreet basement, eking out a meagre existence in a dying trade, Miko was finally about to be recognised for his art. And by royalty, no less! Little had he even dared hope when he had washed up on these shores as a penniless refugee from a forgotten war that he would one day earn the right to hang a royal crest above his door. England! The land of plenty. The place where any dream was possible. So sad, then, that his great achievement had been tainted to the point where he now sat sweating, waiting for the taxi that would take him to the palace to deliver his ultimate piece.

He stared at the box on the table with a confused mixture of beaming pride and sickening dread. He wiped the perspiration from his brow with the sleeve of his jacket. He was taking a huge risk, but what choice did he have?

It had begun two weeks ago when, late one evening, just as he had been placing his tools into the sterilizer ready for the morning ahead, he had heard a light, but insistent tap on the fitting room door. This was unusual in itself because, due to the delicate nature of his business, potential clients were advised by a polite notice on said door to 'buzz' for attention. The notice also quite clearly stated that his working hours were a strict nine to five and by appointment only. He remembered checking his watch to find that it was exactly one minute after closing. This was highly irregular. Miko's work had never attracted 'passing trade' before; the service that he offered was not normally the kind of thing bought on a whim. And he didn't come cheap. He was one of very few practitioners left in the capital and one most definitely at the higher end of the market. Most of his clients were referrals, with the rest in

response to the highly selective adverts that he placed in the superior specialist magazines.

His mysterious visitor was a smartly dressed, late twenties, Rodene girl, who wore librarian's glasses and a permanent expression of sullied disdain on her subtly aristocratic face. As ever, when meeting a new client for the first time, Miko couldn't help but begin to imagine the style of the potential order. He had been torn from this particular professional judgment when his visitor had pulled a single page contract from a file inside her leather briefcase and asked him to sign beside his printed name to say that anything that was about to be disclosed to him would be regarded as an official secret and that failure to comply with the rules herein would result in prosecution or imprisonment. Wary, but intrigued, he had signed the document. Life, he knew from bitter experience, was a series of risks and without his super evolved sense of perception; his unstinting ability to correctly judge which risks to favour and which to avoid, then he would never have made it out of his native homeland alive. He handed back the contract and gestured for his new client to join him on the plush velvet sofa that he used for first sittings.

'To be perfectly honest with you, Mr Miko-'

'Please, just "Miko", he had insisted, trying to make an obviously uncomfortable woman more comfortable. She smiled tightly in a way that told him that fraternising with his kind was something that she was neither used to nor comfortable with, but that she was making a supreme effort for the sake of her even statelier boss.

'My...employer requires your services...Miko, for a very special occasion but I cannot stress enough how important it is that this...transaction be undertaken with the utmost discretion.'

Miko had raised both hands at this juncture as a sign of surrender: a default setting where he came from.

'You have my word as a royalist and as a member of the Guild of Piecemakers', he promised solemnly.

Again the unaccustomed smile.

'And do I also have your word that apart from ourselves there is nobody else on the premises?'

'We are quite alone.' He had assured her.

The aide pulled a telephone from her briefcase and pressed a pre dialed number. It was answered immediately to which she simply replied, 'clear.'

Miko recognised his client as soon as she entered his salon. Her face was everywhere. This was the girl that in three weeks time was due to marry the prince. There was a distinct probability that she would one day be this country's queen.

He recalled chastising himself for gawping.

Her bodyguard took up position just inside the street door while the aide introduced her to Miko. She smiled an altogether more devilish smile than her aide had been able to muster even with two attempts.

Miko bowed deferentially, unsure of the correct protocol, but presuming that he was in the right ballpark.

'My Lady,' he acquiesced, 'how can I be of service?'

The soon-to-be princess giggled, then bit her bottom lip coquettishly before replying, 'It's a wedding present for my husband.'

The aide pursed her thin lips, but said nothing.

'He's a bit patriotic', she divulged, and the aide raised a single eyebrow to rest her case.

'It's for our wedding night,' she explained, 'He loves his country almost as much as he loves me so I want him to feel like he's taking both of us'.

Miko scratched his chin.

'So, some kind of portcullis design? Or his coat of arms?'

'I've already made up my mind, Mr Miko. I'd like a Union Jack, please.'

'An excellent choice, my Lady!'

Miko The Mirkin Maker had arrived'

Chapter Two:

It should have been the proudest moment of his career, but as Miko slid himself into the back of the black cab and placed his delicate cargo on the seat beside him, all he could think about was the shame of what he was about to do. He loved his adopted country. He had worked hard here and paid his taxes. He had made a positive contribution to the country in exchange for the sanctuary it had afforded him and yet this was how they treated him? What more could he have done? He had been used. They had been onto him from the start: watching him and waiting to activate him for their nefarious deeds when the perfect moment arose. You make one little mistake, he thought; contemplating his defence, as he was tried and condemned by the scornful eyes of the soapbox preacher at Speaker's Corner as the taxi ferried him onward toward his destiny.

The bodyguard had reluctantly agreed to turn his back while Miko's esteemed client removed her royal knickers and arranged herself on his custom made adjustable chair. The aide; arms folded firmly across her tightly buttoned chest, looked on from the side, having refused to allow the velvet privacy curtains to be drawn, as Miko took

his measurements in silence.

The whole surreal experience was over in under thirty minutes and Miko was left to his musings. It would be his greatest work to date. Better! It would be the epitome of public wigs; the piece by which all subsequent box-toupees were measured! He would use only the finest grade human hair, plucked from a virgin of no more than eighteen years who had never so much as heard the word 'straightening irons'. The colours would shine as if lit by an inner light; the texture would be as soft as that of a two week old kitten, and it would look as natural and real as it was possible for a Union Jack coloured mirkin to look.

He was working late the following Tuesday when, at precisely one minute past five there came another out of hours knock at his shop door. He had opened up immediately, presuming to find his special client's sour faced aide, but was met instead by a weasley man in an expensive suit and an expression that said 'customs & excise'. He had brought two friends along with him in case whatever it was that he had to say was not taken seriously enough.

'Take a seat Mr Miko', said Pinstripe, who had pointedly failed to introduce himself or his pets. He produced a dogeared file from his briefcase and dropped it onto Miko's tool trolley, 'Miko Miko: specialty wigmaker; almost, but not quite yet, by royal appointment,' he recited from memory while Miko flipped through the file, '...always pays his bills on time, never so much as a parking ticket nor an unauthorised overdraft. No religious affiliations, no memberships to single interest organisations, no special interest magazine subscriptions, clean internet history; in a word: spotless.'

Miko closed his file and regarded the intruders, wondering what, if anything he should say to the man who was obviously awaiting some kind of pithy comeback. In the end he chose to remain silent.

'A model citizen,' Pinstripe continued, 'I think you'll agree. Shame he's been dead for nearly three decades, though, isn't it.'

They knew. They'd known all along. So why had they waited this long to deal with him?

'Where's the body, Miko? What did you do with your brother's body?'

'I didn't kill him, if that's what you're thinking. I came here to be with him, but when he died I didn't know what to do.'

'So you buried the body and took his identity. Very enterprising, I'm sure.'

'But I have paid my way-'

Pinstripe cut him off with a condescending smile, a shake of the head and a shushing index finger touched to his lips.

'I may be able to help you, though,' he said, stepping forward and putting out a hand toward the least scary of the two goons, 'You are, I believe, fulfilling a special order for a certain royal fiancée?'

Miko said nothing. It could have been a trick.

The goon passed Pinstripe a small vial of liquid.

'All you have to do is coat the finished article with this and we'll say no more about it.'
Miko took the vial gingerly.

'What is it?' he had asked.

'Make sure that you wash your hands properly afterwards.'

'I need to know.'

Pinstripe's smug smile evaporated in an instant.

'I need to know', Miko pleaded, unsure what use the information may have been to him, but knowing that he wouldn't get another chance to find out, 'in case whatever it is reacts against the colourants I use.' Pinstripe allowed him to continue, 'I'm presuming that whatever this is, you need it to work later rather than sooner?'

Chapter Three:

It should have been the proudest moment of his career, but as he stepped from the taxi and turned toward the palace gate, Miko felt his heart skip a beat. Just a nervous reaction to what he was about to do, nothing serious, though he caught himself wishing that it had been. Suicide would probably have been the sensible option, but for a man who had spent twenty seven days adrift on a flotsam raft, watching his friends lapse into comas of dehydration around him, life was too precious a thing to waste. He had developed a keen sense of self preservation and, although he was about to put himself directly in the firing line, he knew that a slight chance was always better than no chance at all.

He waited at the service entrance, the meter ticking away behind him like the timer on a bomb; the small cardboard parcel in his hands gaining weight with each tock until eventually she appeared, looking every bit as socially aloof as she had done on the two previous occasions that they had met.

'Mr Miko,' was all that she said as she reached for the parcel.

Miko held it tightly. 'Be sure to follow my instructions carefully,' he told her; perhaps a little more firmly than he had anticipated, before releasing his hold and heading back to his awaiting taxi.

Miko was no computer expert.

He was an artist, not a dealer, but as his trade had begun to wane he had had to adapt in order to survive and had taught himself the rudiments of the internet search. He had typed in the name of the chemical compound that Pinstripe had given him and, after several useless pages of ingredients and agricultural applications, he had stumbled upon what appeared to be a website dedicated to the art of homemade

bomb making.

He had hoped, rather naively, that the man from the ministry had intended to play some kind of practical joke on the bride-to-be; that maybe the mysterious vial contained some kind of itching powder or at worst, a dose of liquidised crabs. But in his heart he supposed that he had always known that that was unlikely. He had been considering the outwardly innocuous, though apparently extremely volatile liquid in front of him when his client and her retinue had arrived for the fitting.

He had been so proud when he had unveiled his masterpiece to its bearer, and she had been as delighted as he had hoped she would be; if the fit of demented giggles that she immediately fell into was anything to go by. The current trend toward minimalistic pubic styling on younger women or, as was the case with the client staring up at him: 'full commando', had its positives as well as its negatives.

True, it had drastically reduced the number of single ladies that he fitted these days, but it did save him the bother of having to shave those that he did: in Miko's view, his least favourite part of the job. With her feet in the chair's stirrups and her knees apart, Miko skilfully placed the mirkin on his client's mound and began to work it into place as if arranging a glace cherry atop an iced bun. The fit was perfect, as he had known that it would be; he just needed to do a little fiddling with the mustachioed area and give it a final trim and it would be ready for its big day.

'This might tickle.' he warned her, which elicited yet more giggles from below and a sudden embarrassed cough from the aide who had resolutely refused to leave his side throughout the appointment.

'So.' he continued, as congenially as he could under the circumstances, 'have you managed to keep the secret?'

'We have,' replied the aide before the client had had the chance to answer, 'only the people in this room know anything about it and that's the way we intend to keep it, so if the press were to find out, Mr Miko, then the source would be quite obvious.'

The implication was painfully clear.

But somebody had blabbed and it wasn't him. That left three possible candidates.

Miko understood people.

It was a peculiarity of his profession; perhaps, he had often wondered, due to the somewhat revealing nature of the service that he offered, that his clients regularly used him as a form of cheap psychotherapy; a sounding board for their hopes and their fears. Over the years he felt that he had fine tuned his ability to read people, not just by what they said, but equally by what they didn't say. He hoped that he wasn't deluding himself because lives now depended on that super sense of his. He discounted the bodyguard on the grounds that he would have been chosen for his position because of his unstinting loyalty, his zealous patriotism and his willingness to follow orders. He discounted the royal fiancée because having met her, he believed that she was naive enough to think that she could keep a secret within the royal household. That only left one possibility.

There was very little between the two women in age and, he presumed, their backgrounds. Perhaps she was jealous? He didn't doubt her loyalty to the crown, but a disgruntled worker was always the most obvious source of a leak. A whinge to a trusted friend after a few drinks at the end of a long day running round after miss lucky knickers and within six points of separation the secret service have a plan in motion to keep the commoner from the throne and an excuse to start a war into the bargain. He doubted that she even remembered doing it and he didn't think for one moment that her intent had been malicious.

But the damage was done and now at least one of them was going to have to pay the price with their lives. As sorry as he was, he decided that it had to be the aide.

Chapter Four:

What should have been the proudest achievement of his life would now be remembered as his greatest disappointment, as the masterpiece in question was

destined never to see action.

He had made his final adjustments and spent a good few moments admiring his handiwork from all angles. The last thing that he had to do was to attach the self adhesive panel to the back and coat the hair in MI5's 'Q department' superspy liquid. Inert whilst wet, it was at it's most dangerous once dried and completely invisible, the internet had informed him; the ultimate espionage tool. Under normal conditions the compound remained inert indefinitely, but if brought into contact with either heat or friction it would have fatal explosive consequences. He placed it in its tissue lined box, closed it up and sat down to write his note. He hated himself for what he was about to do, but he had been forced into an impossible situation and it was the only way that he could think of to save both his life and the lives of the royal couple and to be seen to be following his instructions in good faith. Miko was a quiet man. In all the time that he had spent in England he had managed to keep his head down and stay out of trouble. He just wanted to live a peaceful life providing a useful service to his fellow human beings. He saw it as a kind of atonement for the things that he had done in his youth; the crimes that he had committed in the name of purity and patriotism.

Back then he wouldn't have balked at taking a single life for the good of the cause. Back then he had been a different man. Back then he had had a different name. But then wasn't now. He thought he had escaped all that. He thought that he had moved on; that human life meant more to him now than it had in the bad old days. But scratch the surface of any old door and you'll find the previous colour underneath. He consoled himself with the thought that at least this time the decision over who lived and who died was made for sounder reasons than it had been during the war. The note was to the aide. He had already shown her the correct way to fit his client's piece: starting at the bottom then smoothing in an upward and outwardly motion.

There was one instruction left to give. He wrote it neatly and clearly:

**BRUSH VIGOROUSLY IN AN EMPTY AND WELL VENTILATED ROOM
APPROXIMATELY ONE HOUR BEFORE APPLICATION.**

He switched on his television to watch the wedding.