



A Jemima Shore Mystery

YOUR ROYAL HOSTAGE

by the author of *Oxford Blood* and *Quiet as a Nun*

ANTONIA
FRASER

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Your Royal Hostage

Books by Antonia Fraser

YOUR ROYAL HOSTAGE (1988)

**JEMIMA SHORE'S FIRST CASE
AND OTHER STORIES (1987)**

OXFORD BLOOD (1985)

COOL REPENTANCE (1983)

A SPLASH OF RED (1982)

QUIET AS A NUN (1982)

THE WILD ISLAND (1978)

For Tasha
princess over the water
with love

Your Royal Hostage

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Innocent?

“WE DON'T WANT to hurt her. We must remember that. All of us. She is, after all, innocent.” There was a brief pause. Then the man who called himself Monkey repeated firmly: “She is innocent.”

He raised one eyebrow—the right, a familiar habit—and then smiled at them, lifting the left side of his upper lip as he did so to exhibit a flash of long slightly yellow tooth. It was as though he was willing them to agree.

The girl who called herself Lamb found that she was becoming increasingly fascinated by these physical tricks on the part of Monkey. No one was at first sight less like his chosen code name than Monkey (any more than she herself resembled a lamb); yet the more Lamb studied him, the more she found something significant about the choice. Monkey, for all his bulk, had something simian about him, with his long upper lip and flat splayed nostrils: a friendly monkey of authority who gazed at you calmly from his cage until you wondered which of the two of you dwelt in the outside world.

Similarly Fox was at first sight a somewhat languid young man, with a pale complexion and of slight build, most unfoxlike; closer

inspection revealed an oddly sharp nose and bright, small deeply set eyes. Even his slight build was belied by his surprisingly long and muscular arms. Also Fox could be cunning, as Lamb had learned, cunning as—well, cunning as a fox. As for Beagle: but it did not do to think about Beagle. So Lamb stopped herself thinking about Beagle, stopped thinking anything at all about him as she promised herself to do, and concentrated once more on Monkey.

"Well, isn't she? Of course she's innocent." Monkey happily answered his own question as one delighted at solving a difficulty. That was another familiar trick; Lamb imagined Monkey had used it to effect in innumerable committee meetings in the past. And after all, what was this except a committee meeting? If a committee meeting in rather an odd place of rather an odd sort.

Nobody else had spoken or showed any signs of doing so. So Monkey went on: "Quite a pretty story in the *Standard* this evening, by the way. Anyone read it?"

Lamb looked down automatically at the evening paper which lay on Monkey's lap although she had in fact seen the lunchtime edition. The original headline had been moved to the second half of the page. All the same, she could still read the words: PRINCESS: WEDDING SCARE.

The story itself, as Lamb knew, having studied it earlier, was fairly insubstantial. Something to do with the route the wedding cortège would take. But since no one yet knew officially what that route would be, it could hardly amount to a serious scare. There had been numbers of similar stories—or non-stories, if you like—recently: PRINCESS: WEDDING SNUB (some extreme Labour councillors who had refused to subscribe to a local wedding present).

PRINCESS: WEDDING HOPES (Some extremely loyal tenants on a grand country estate who believed the young couple would spend their honeymoon nearby).

PRINCESS: WEDDING EXCITEMENT—what on earth had that been about? Certainly nothing which was actually very exciting. The arrival of an unusually large number of American tourists in the capital perhaps. Just as PRINCESS: WEDDING FEARS might refer to the fact that exactly the same unusually large number of American tourists were staying at home. . . .

All that these numerous headlines went to prove was that any combination of the two words "Princess" and "Wedding" was deemed, probably rightly, to sell larger numbers of newspapers than for exam-

ple a similarly recurring combination of, say, "Government" and "Spending"; the public appetite for weddings having grown rather than diminished with the most recent example, that of the Duke and Duchess of York. In short, Princess Amy was News. Or rather, when in the process of getting married, Princess Amy of Cumberland was News.

Up to this point, to be frank, the media had been strangely unaware of the potential news value of this particular twenty-two-year-old girl. The Cumberlands were after all not a particularly important branch of the Royal Family. Although the Duke of Cumberland himself, as a king's son, had retained his place in the succession, his marriage to a Catholic princess meant that his three daughters were actually outside it. None of this had seemed to matter very much at the time. The Duke, a bachelor soldier as it seemed, had surprised everyone by marrying at the age of fifty, and surprised himself even more by producing three daughters; the youngest, Amy, being born when he was already scurrying toward the end of his uneventful life. The children of the Duke's royal siblings being already grown up when the Cumberland Princesses were born, the latter had in effect skipped a generation.

As a soldier the Duke had once referred to a previous holder of the title—"Butcher" Cumberland of Culloden—as "a damn fine general who understood how to deal with the natives"—remarks which caused a sensation in Scotland where he happened to be at the time. Otherwise he had led a life of almost total obscurity so far as the Press was concerned. As for the Duchess, the fact that she had been a French princess, related to half the royal families in Europe, had somehow never cut much ice with the xenophobic English Press.

Ah, but a wedding! And the wedding of a princess who was in effect an orphan (never mind the continued existence of her mother)! And the wedding of a princess who was not only an orphan, but also the youngest of three sisters. . . . What was more, a Catholic wedding—in Westminster Cathedral—made a nice change, it was generally agreed, from the Abbey and St. Paul's; as well as providing excellent opportunities for interdenominational tolerance to be paraded in these ecumenical days. Already the possibilities so far as the Press was concerned were infinitely exciting, with words like "Cinderella" produced in all sorts of hopefully tactful combinations: if you could not after all exactly term the Princesses Sophie and Harriet of Cumberland "Ugly Sisters," you could somehow hint that poor little Princess Amy had

been neglected since her father's death; surely she must have been neglected, since she had been so signally neglected by the Press. . . .

It was fortunate from the point of view of contrast that Princess Sophie, pop-eyed, lively and rather bossy, had married an unnewsworthy Scottish landowner. Then Princess Harriet, melancholy, wraith-like, bonily beautiful like her mother but not particularly photogenic, had married a French businessman without a title (where did she *find* a Frenchman without a title? In any case, title or no title, a French businessman was if possible less newsworthy than a Scottish landowner). All this made Princess Amy's match with a real live prince, admittedly European, but a genuine prince for all that, shine yet more brightly.

What was more, Princess Amy, little (she was 5'3"), unpretentious (well, why not?), stay-at-home (she had no job that anyone could remember) Princess Cinderella-Amy, had captured a prince who could by a little stretching of the imagination be described as the richest young man in Europe. The fact that Prince Ferdinand, being thirty-three, was also a Prince with a Past, was almost too much joy.

No wonder that AMY MEANS I LOVE YOU, according to one enterprising if inaccurate newspaper headline, and a lot of enterprising if inaccurate T-shirts and buttons subsequently. (Curiously enough, it was the combination of Amy's blameless past and her poverty, together with Ferdinand's blameworthy one and his wealth, which had suggested the match to certain ageing royal relations in the first place; thereafter at various Royal Family gatherings and other weddings, a certain amount of discreet promotion had taken place.)

Lamb sighed and fingered the AMY button on her own brightly coloured handknit jersey. Beagle had described wearing the button as a cynical gesture when he pulled the jersey quite roughly over her head that famous night, the night she had temporarily decided not to remember.

"But I do love Amy," Lamb had protested, "I love her in my own way for what she's going to do for us—"

"Us?" queried Beagle, touching her; he was delighted and she thought surprised to find that she was naked under the thick garishly patterned wool.

"Us. Innocent Rights."

"I love her in my own way for what I'm going to do to her—no,

that's a joke, Lambkin. Believe it or not I've loved little Amy from a respectful distant for years."

Monkey had finished speaking. He picked up the *Evening Standard* and turned to the City pages.

"As a matter of principle, I don't think she's innocent and nor does Pussy here." It was quite unexpected for Tom to speak like this. He did not generally say much at meetings, having been introduced comparatively recently by Beagle.

Pussy was a distinctly large middle-aged woman. Her code name was actually Cat, but they had all given in lately and called her Pussy since she insisted that she preferred it. Certainly "Pussy," with its comfortable overtones of fireside and hearth, suited her appearance. That meant that Beagle's friend, introduced to them as Tom, had been able to adopt the code name of Cat. Except that he had, slightly humorously, announced that if the previous Cat was a Pussy, he was undeniably a Tomcat. So that Tom was how he was generally known.

"No real names, if you please," Monkey had put in on this occasion. "Sorry to be tiresome but if Tom's your real name—"

"Oh but it's not," replied Tom blandly, "just a *nom de guerre*."

"All the same, I believe Beagle did call you Tom." In his charming way Monkey could be very persistent.

"Cut it out, Monkey." Beagle used the slightly crude tone he tended to adopt towards Monkey as if determined, however pointlessly, to shake him from his chairman-of-the-board composure. "Supposing we say that Tom's real name is double-barrelled? Will that satisfy you? And let's say his Christian name is hyphenated. Will that do?"

"Hyphenated as in Tom-Cat. But not actually Tom-Cat, of course." Tom smiled with a charm equal to Monkey's own.

Now Lamb turned her attention back to the argument concerning the innocence or otherwise of Princess Amy. This particular argument had occurred once previously (before Tom joined them). Lamb wondered what Monkey felt about the subject being thrashed out all over again, especially since time was on this occasion short. And they had to decide on the next meeting before they parted.

Of course they had all discussed the subject of Amy herself, discussed it very thoroughly at the first of their regular meetings. It was the other middle-aged woman in their group, the one known as Chicken, who raised it. (And Chicken did have something suitably

scrawny about her appearance: even if, in view of her age, Hen might have been even more appropriate.)

Lamb knew more about Chicken than she knew for example about Tom. Something in Chicken's manner, a mixture of diffidence in the details of everyday life and confidence when on her own subject, reminded Lamb of one of her teachers at school. And sure enough, Chicken had revealed herself to be a retired teacher, if from a very different kind of school from the one Lamb had attended. What a thoroughly nice woman, what a reliable person, that would be the first reaction of most people to Chicken. As it had been to Lamb's teacher, known as Miss Ursula. Yet Miss Ursula had contained something oddly desperate inside her outward shell of responsibility; witness the fact that she had got into the papers for assaulting the woman with whom she lived not many years after Lamb left school. Was there then something desperate struggling inside pleasant, slightly didactic Chicken?

"Of course some people would reckon us *all* to be desperate, especially since—" But once again Lamb stopped herself thinking along those dangerous lines. Instead she cast her mind back to the previous argument about Princess Amy. Monkey had been cheerfully patient with them all, although Lamb suspected that he had intended to bring in an "innocent" verdict all along. Chicken had delivered herself of a well-turned little historical lecture on the attitude of the British Royal Family to animals. In the course of it, she mentioned King Charles II: "A lover, as we know, of spaniels."

Beagle interrupted: "And a few other things too, ho ho." That had mercifully leavend the serious atmosphere—and equally mercifully, cut Chicken short.

Without Tom, Pussy had merely clicked her tongue over a Press story, unproved, that Princess Amy had commissioned a coat of rare white Arctic fox. Other than muttering: "She may be innocent but she's a spoiled brat," she had not played much part in the discussion.

It was Fox, who for all his bonhomie, had proved quite persistent in his personal condemnation of she whom he termed "our little Royal Madam"; until Monkey cozened him out of it.

Lamb had said little or nothing on that occasion. So that now she thought she would come to the aid of Monkey.

"After all she's never hunted; Princess Amy."

"And she loves dogs. How sweet. She loves all animals. Even

sweeter. We *know* all that, Lamb." Tom was becoming uncharacteristically vehement. "But surely you realize that a princess is more than just a nice little girl. She's a *symbol*, Lamb, ever heard of a symbol? And a symbol, Lamb, is *never* innocent." Lamb felt quite alarmed by Tom's expression: why was he looking at her in that particular way? Lamb was increasingly frightened by Tom, even if he was Beagle's friend.

"This is all quite unnecessary, Tom." It was remarkable how Monkey could pull a meeting to order, even by a gesture like putting a *Standard* beneath his arm, even a meeting as weirdly placed as this one. "I merely mentioned Princess Amy's innocence in the context of the fact that we have to be careful, extra careful, not actually to harm her. Or harm anyone for that matter. It would hardly do for us, my dear Tom, who oppose all violence and mean to say so publicly in our own way, to be accused of any form of real violence ourselves. It's especially important in view of the radical nature of The Plan, critical in fact. . . . But we've been through all that, haven't we? After all we're not *petrol-bombers*!" exclaimed Monkey in a voice of disgust although the subject of petrol-bombing had not actually been raised. "So that the general question of Princess Amy's innocence is surely irrelevant."

Monkey stood up. "This is my stop."

The Tube train shuddered slightly as it came into the station.

"Next week same time but on the Northern Line between Golders Green and Leicester Square. It's a good long line; we can use it right down to Kennington if necessary. Usual procedure for joining each other. I'll get on the train at Golders Green station. One stop each in reverse alphabetical order this time which starts with you, Tom, at Hampstead and ends with Beagle at Euston. Watch for me in the last carriage as the train enters the station. We'll work down if we have to, once we're all gathered. Follow my lead. When I judge we're safe, I'll open my *Standard* at the City pages."

"What about Mornington Crescent?" questioned Fox plaintively; he was studying his Tube map. "I see I'm to get on at Mornington Crescent—"

Monkey smiled at him. "Follow the map, my dear Fox, that's all."

"Actually, I get on at Mornington Crescent," remarked Chicken to no one in particular. As so often with Chicken, she sounded politely superior.

The Tube doors slid open.

In stately fashion Monkey descended from the train. The others watched him go, a heavily built man in a dark-grey pin-stripe; the sort of man you would not be surprised to see wearing a bowler or at least carrying a furled umbrella. But Monkey had never so far carried an umbrella since the presence of an umbrella was the emergency signal to abandon the meeting. As for the bowler, that was the final signal for the disbanding of the group.

The others watched him go and remained silent. It was against the rules for anyone to speak to anyone else once the meeting was over, except for Chicken and Pussy, who used their agreed cover as a couple of middle-aged ladies to continue to chat.

In this way it was not breaking the rules, only breaking the spirit of them, for Pussy to remark aloud to Chicken in a small defiant voice: "I still think I'm right. Of course she's guilty. Youth is simply no excuse."

No One To Blame But Herself

PRINCESS: WEDDING SCARE: Jemima Shore was relieved to find that headline in the *Standard* which she bought at Tottenham Court Road Tube station. She did not bother to read any further. Another made-up tale about these tiresome nuptials. All the headline meant to Jemima was that the story, her story, was not yet out.

For Jemima Shore Investigator had just been sacked by Megalith Television. That was the plain truth of the matter, however much lawyers, spokespersons and purveyors of official statements might attempt later to wrap it up, for one reason or another. Undoubtedly Jemima Shore, the star reporter of Megalith, was News (much as Princess Amy getting married was News). Television companies like Megalith were also on the whole News, especially when enjoyable things were taking place, like management coups, or the arrival of so-called hard-faced businessmen and the abrupt disappearance of household names from the company's employment—household faces might be a better phrase under the circumstances. The combination was liable to prove irresistible to the Press: thus Jemima was under no illusions but that her peremptory dismissal would make the headlines when it emerged.