

THE BILLIONAIRE SERIES



THE
CRYSTAL CODE

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BOOK IV *of*
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The day dawned under a clear winter's sky. The fleet of helicopters spread across the heavens like a flight of mechanical geese. But rather than heading south to escape the winter, this flock was going east, straight towards the snow of the Sierra Nevada.

Gerald peered out the window to the white-capped mountains below. Massive forests of conifers spread as far as he could see, like a never-ending plantation of Christmas trees. The glare from the empty blue sky made his eyes ache. He fumbled for his sunglasses, then adjusted the headphones over his ears and moved the microphone in front of his mouth.

‘How much further is it, Mr Fry?’

Seated in front of him at the joystick, his butler studied the flight plan clipped to a board by his elbow. ‘Our ETA is thirteen-thirty Pacific.’

Gerald shook his head. ‘Normal human language, please.’

Mr Fry cleared his throat. ‘Our expected time of arrival at Mt Archer is 1.30 p.m., about another twenty minutes.’

‘Thanks, Ace.’

‘Roger that.’

Mr Fry’s transformation whenever he was behind the stick in a helicopter never ceased to amaze Gerald. But it was nothing compared with the change that came over him when Alisha’s governess Miss Turner was around. And as she was now sitting next to Mr Fry in the front of the helicopter, the butler was at his most cheery.

A squadron of twenty helicopters fanned across the skies, carrying houseguests, ski gear and supplies.

‘I can’t believe it’s Christmas Eve already,’ Felicity said. ‘And we get to have Christmas at our own private ski resort. It’s going to be such fun. Epic.’

‘Won’t it be strange, though,’ Ruby said, ‘being away from your family?’

Felicity reached out and took Alisha by the hand. ‘Alisha and I were talking about that,’ she said. ‘We’re boarding-school brats—we’re used to fending for ourselves.’

Alisha nodded. ‘I’m a corporate orphan. When work calls, my father responds. He’ll be in Delhi all winter. But there’s always Miss Turner to keep me company.’

Ox puffed out his chest and nudged Alisha with his shoulder. ‘I can keep you company if you like.’

Alisha’s eyes dropped to where Ox’s shoulder was pressed against hers. ‘Are you always like this?’ she said. ‘Or are you making a special effort at being unpleasant just for me?’

Ox’s ears turned pink and he leaned the other way.

Gerald glanced at the back of Miss Turner's head. Her hair was pulled into a fierce riding-school ponytail. 'If she keeps Mr Fry happy,' Gerald said, 'that'll be the best Christmas present I could get.'

Felicity looped her arm through Gerald's and flashed him a smile. 'I can't wait to see what Santa brings me.'

Gerald let out a nervous laugh. 'Oh yeah,' he said. 'Good ol' Santa.'

He caught Ruby looking at him. The arrival of Alisha had tempered Ruby's attitude. But things were still frosty.

Then Mr Fry's voice crackled through the headphones. 'Welcome to Mt Archer.'

They swept over a ridge and there was a collective gasp from the back of the helicopter.

A winter playground was laid out beneath them. A ski field sat ready, complete with lifts and a dozen runs that wound through stands of redwoods down the mountainside, like an unopened gift waiting for someone to tug on the ribbon. At the base, on the shore of a frozen lake, was a magnificent chalet, built from red stone. It looked large enough to host a small army. Smoke curled up from the cluster of chimneys that poked through the snow-covered roof. The lake reflected the winter blue sky like a mirror. It was the sort of place that postcard photographers could only conjure in their most elaborate dreams.

'Mate?' Ox said to Gerald as they all drank in the view below.

‘Yeah?’

‘I love you.’

Not for the first time, Gerald could only marvel at the fortune his great aunt Geraldine had left him. An island in the Caribbean, a luxury yacht and a country estate in England were something, but a private ski resort was on another level altogether.

‘And we have this whole place to ourselves?’ Felicity asked, squeezing Gerald by the arm.

‘Yep. Apart from our folks and my parent’s closest thousand friends, this is our private playground for the next two weeks. Nothing to do but ski, snowboard, skate and eat.’

Mr Fry and Miss Turner cringed at the cheer that sounded out from behind them.

Mr Fry swept the helicopter through a broad arc and brought them down onto a helipad at the end of a row of identical choppers, all bearing the blue and gold insignia of the Archer Corporation. They had landed by a large hangar in a natural bowl in the hillside, out of sight of the main house.

Gerald jumped out, followed by the others. As the rotors wound down, a roar like a turbo-charged lawnmower came from over the rise. A snowmobile emerged over the lip and pulled a tight circle to come to a halt in front of them. A figure in a bright-yellow ski suit straddled the machine. He pulled a pair of designer sunglasses from his tanned face.

‘Hey there,’ he said. ‘Welcome to Mt Archer.’ He was about eighteen years old with blond hair, and he looked like he would be more at home riding waves at Maui. Gerald noticed that Ruby and Alisha were staring. Even Felicity’s eyes had widened a touch.

‘Howdy everybody. I’m Travis. I’m helping out here over the winter. Now, you guys are the last to arrive and since you’re about a hundred years younger than everyone else staying here, I figured you might like some fun on the way to the chalet.’

‘Sounds good to me,’ Gerald said. ‘What kind of fun?’

‘You Gerald?’ Travis asked, thrusting his hand into Gerald’s. ‘Good to meet you, sir. Fun, as in these little beauties.’ He pointed to a row of five gleaming snowmobiles beside the hangar. Each had a red sled attached to the rear. ‘It’s a bit of a hike to the house, so you may as well go in style.’

The next five minutes consisted of a quick tutorial. Sam managed to roll his snowmobile twice.

Travis led the way towards the house, followed by Ruby, then Alisha, Sam and Ox. As there was only one snowmobile left, Gerald pointed Felicity to the driver’s seat and he climbed onto the sled. The ride to the house took them alongside the frozen lake. They crossed a covered bridge and, in the final turn to the front of the chalet, Felicity gunned the engine, flinging Gerald from the sled and sending him airborne into a snow bank. He emerged laughing and covered in snow.

Felicity smiled at him. 'That's what happens if you're too slow to get to the driver's seat,' she said.

Mrs Rutherford was there to greet them at the front entryway. 'Miss Felicity, I've put you in with Miss Alisha and Miss Ruby. I hope you don't mind sharing. And Master Oswald—I can't bring myself to call you Ox, dear, no matter how I try—you'll be sharing with Master Sam. Master Gerald, your suite is across from your parents. There's a buffet lunch in the dining hall, and if you need anything, there's a service button in each room. Press one and we'll be there to help you with anything you require.'

A chorus of 'Thanks, Mrs Rutherford!' rang out. Gerald was on his way with the others to get something to eat when a large hand fell on his shoulder. He looked up to see his father.

'This way, Gerald,' Eddie Wilkins said. 'A word.'

Gerald waved his friends on and followed his father into a large library. A tall bank of windows looked onto the slopes outside. Eddie directed his son to a chair near a log fire that crackled and popped in the grate.

'Having fun so far, son?'

'You bet, Dad,' Gerald said. 'We're all going skiing after lunch. The snow looks perfect.'

'And your friends? They're all having fun too?'

Gerald eyed his father curiously. 'Uh, yeah. Like I said, we're going skiing after lunch.'

Eddie stared out the window, his hands clasped

behind his back. 'Good. Good. You should go skiing this afternoon,' he said. 'The snow looks perfect.'

'Dad?'

'Yes, Gerald?'

'Is something the matter?'

Gerald's father picked at some flecks on his trousers and flicked them into the fire. 'Matter? No. Not really.'

Gerald was not convinced. 'Dad.'

Eddie looked across at his son. 'Well, there are a couple of things.'

'Yes?'

'We've had some phone calls. The first was from Mr Prisk.'

Gerald braced himself. His family's corporate lawyer loved to pile Gerald with as much eye-glazing paperwork as he could. The last thing Gerald wanted to worry about during his holiday was the inner workings of the Archer Corporation.

'It was about some business leaders' association called the Billionaires' Club,' his father continued. 'They've invited you to join.'

Gerald shrugged. 'Do I have to do anything during the holidays?'

'No.'

Gerald shrugged again. 'Fine. Sounds good to me.' He went to get up.

Eddie placed a hand on his son's shoulder, pushing him back into his chair. 'There is one other little thing.'

But before Eddie could finish there was a cry from behind them. Gerald swung around to see his mother, leaning against the doorframe, as if about to fall into a deep swoon.

‘You’ve found him,’ she cried. ‘Thank goodness.’ She swept into the room like a silent-movie starlet appearing on screen, only louder. ‘My darling boy. You’re safe.’ She wrapped a fur-lined arm around Gerald’s neck.

Gerald struggled to get air. ‘Of course I’m safe,’ he said through a mouthful of fake ocelot. ‘Why wouldn’t I be?’

‘Oh, Gerald. My little soldier. We’ve just had a call from Inspector Parrott. It’s the most terrible news.’

Gerald was still spitting out fur. ‘What? That Mason Green has escaped?’

His mother took in a sharp breath. ‘You know?’

‘It’s no big deal,’ Gerald said. ‘It’s not like Green is going to come all the way out here. We’re a million miles from anywhere.’

‘But he was so cruel to you,’ Vi said. ‘Not to mention poor Aunt Geraldine.’

‘Mum, he’s just escaped from prison. He’ll be lying low somewhere.’

Vi cupped Gerald’s cheeks in her hands. ‘I so want us to have a nice family Christmas together.’

‘Gerald’s on the right ticket,’ Eddie said, ruffling his son’s hair. ‘The main road is snowed out for the season. The only way in is by helicopter or snow plough.’

We're as safe here as anywhere.'

Gerald wasn't entirely sure of that but he wasn't too concerned about Sir Mason Green. Green was a fugitive—he'd be keeping well out of view.

Vi gave Gerald's cheeks a squeeze and planted a moist kiss on his forehead. 'You are my brave little trooper, aren't you.' She glanced at the grandfather clock in the corner. 'Good Lord! Is that the time? Come along Eddie. We must find Mrs Rutherford and see about preparations for the Christmas Eve feast. Have fun, my dear.' Gerald's mother gave him one last squeeze on the shoulder then hurried Eddie out the door, brushing past Ruby on the way.

Gerald slumped back into his chair and Ruby dropped into the one opposite.

'Are they worried about Mason Green?' she asked.

'Not as much as about tonight's menu, apparently.'

Ruby leaned forward and put a hand on Gerald's knee. 'Don't even think about that horrible man. Greece is on the other side of the world, and there's no way he'd be able to sneak into the US. You've got nothing to worry about.' She thought for a second. 'At least not from Mason Green, anyway.'

Gerald grunted a half-laugh. They were the first civil words he and Ruby had exchanged since the start of the holiday. 'Look, about Felicity—' he started to say.

'Don't talk about it, Gerald,' Ruby said, taking her hand back. 'What you did was hurtful. Really awful. You

made me feel so small.’ She paused, and blinked back a tear. ‘And that’s not a nice thing to do to anybody. Especially a friend.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ Gerald said.

‘And look at the horrible position you put Felicity in,’ Ruby said. ‘Inviting her along on a holiday when you’ve invited me as well. How embarrassing for her.’

‘I didn’t think—’

‘No. You didn’t think, did you? But lucky for you, Flicka and I get along really well.’

Gerald paused for a beat. ‘You do?’

‘Yes. We had a really good talk last night at the hotel. I filled her in on some of your more annoying personality faults.’

Gerald sensed a slight thawing in the iceberg that had been Ruby. ‘Only some of them?’ he asked.

‘Well, it is a long list. But I think between the two of us we identified most of them. She’s now aware that “loyalty” and “commitment” might be a touch flaky. And “openness” and “communication skills” could do with some work.’

‘You were very thorough.’

‘I could have filled a notebook.’ Ruby said. ‘But for some reason, Felicity still seems to like you. It’s beyond me why she does, but at least now she’s fully informed.’

Gerald narrowed his eyes. ‘How can I ever thank you?’

‘You can promise that you won’t break Felicity’s

heart,’ Ruby said. ‘Because no one should have to go through that.’ Gerald looked away to the fire in the grate. ‘Flicka is lovely,’ Ruby said. ‘She has promised to take me riding when we get back to London. Lucky for you, after the embarrassing position you put her in, she’s a forgiving person.’

Gerald bit his bottom lip. ‘But we’re still friends? Even if the sun does shine out of my backside?’

Ruby pressed a knuckle to her eye. ‘That’s where Felicity and I differ. I am not a forgiving person. So don’t think for a second that I won’t make your life a living hell.’

‘Fair enough,’ Gerald said, trying to hold back a grin. Relief flooded through him. In her own way, it looked like Ruby was moving on.

‘It’s better like this anyway,’ Ruby said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I never liked you that much.’

Gerald wasn’t completely sure that Ruby was joking.

Ruby leaned forward. ‘There’s a half-dozen ski slopes out there with no queues at the lifts. Mrs Rutherford has fixed a lunch fit for royalty. There’s nothing to stop us from having a good time. Come on, before Sam and Ox scoff the lot.’

They set off in search of the dining hall. Gerald knew Ruby was right about one thing. Mason Green had better things to do than risk coming after him. Green wasn’t into revenge—that wasn’t his style. And what did Gerald have that Green could possibly want?