

Alan G. Hagberg
Writing as Alan H Gael
P.O. Box 1197
Harwich, MA 02645
(774) 789-6647
info@alanhagberg.com

THE SEVENTH YEW

A Novel

by Alan H. Gael

about 53,000 words

CHAPTER ONE

BENJAMIN DARLING OF CHANCERY LANE

Toward the hour of six on a hot summer's evening, Mr. Benjamin Darling was seated in his private office in Chancery Lane, reading through a number of letters which Niles, his secretary, had set before him for signature. Only one more remained to be passed, but it was a long, confidential report upon a certain matter which Darling had prepared for the Home Secretary. He glanced with a sigh of weariness at the small clock on his desk before commencing to read.

"Shall detain you only a few minutes now, Croft," he said.

I nodded, smiling. I was quite content to sit and watch my friend at work.

Ben Darling occupied a unique place in the maelstrom of vice and ambition which is sometimes called London life. Whilst at present he held no official post, some of the most consequential problems of British security during the past five years—problems imperiling interstate relationships and on more than one occasion threatening to draw allied nations into open conflict—had owed their solution to the peculiar genius of this man.

No clue to his profession appeared upon the plain brass plate attached to his door, and little did those who regarded Ben Darling merely as a successful private investigator suspect that he was in the confidence of some who guided the destinies of the nation. Ben Darling's work in Beirut during the crisis months preceding the breakdown of the peace talks—though unknown to the

general public—had been of the most extraordinary nature. His recommendations were never adopted, unfortunately. Otherwise, the tragedy that followed might have been averted.

His surroundings as he sat there, gaze bent upon the printed pages, were those of any other professional man. So it would have seemed to the casual observer. But perhaps there was a quality in the atmosphere of the office which would have told a more sensitive visitor that it was the apartment of no ordinary man of business. Whilst there were filing cabinets and bookshelves laden with works of reference—many of them legal—a large and handsome Burmese cabinet struck an unexpected note.

On closer inspection, other splashes of significant colour must have been detected in the scheme: notably a very fine print of Edgar Allan Poe from the daguerreotype of 1848; and upon the man himself lay the indelible mark of distant latitudes. His clean-cut features had that hint of underlying bronze which tells of years spent beneath a merciless sun, and the touch of grey at his temples only added to the eager, almost fierce vitality of the dark face. Ben Darling was notable because of that intellectual strength which does not strike one immediately, since it is purely temperamental, but which nevertheless invests its possessor with an aura of distinction.

Signing the last page of the report, Ben Darling enclosed the document in a long envelope and dropped it into a tray containing a number of other letters. His work for the day was ended, and glancing at me with a triumphant smile, he stood up. His office was part of a residential suite, but although—like

some old-time burgher of the city—he lived on the premises, the shutting of a door which led to his private rooms marked the close of the business day. Pressing an intercom button which connected with the outer office occupied by his secretary, Ben Darling waited as Niles entered.

"There's nothing further, is there, Niles?" he asked.

"Nothing, Mr. Darling, if you have passed the Home Office report?"

Ben Darling laughed shortly.

"There it is," he replied, pointing to the tray; "a tedious and thankless job, Niles. It is the fifth draft you have prepared and it will have to do."

He picked up an envelope which lay unsealed upon the table. "This is the Rokeby affair," he said. "I have decided to hold it over, after all, until my return."

"Ah!" said Niles, quietly glancing at each envelope as he took it from the tray. "I see you have turned down the job offered by the Marquis."

"I have," replied Darling, smiling grimly, "and a fee of five thousand pounds with it. I have also intimated to that distressed nobleman that this is a business office and that a laundry is the proper place to take his dirty linen. No, there's nothing further tonight, Niles. You can get along. Has Miss Patel gone?"

But as if in answer to his enquiry, the PA, who with Niles made up the entire staff of the office, came in at that moment, a

business card in her hand. Darling glanced across in my direction and then at the card, with a wry expression.

"Colonel Juan Cardona," he read aloud. "Carfax Club." He glanced reflectively at Niles. "Do we know the Colonel?"

"I think not," answered Niles; "the name is unfamiliar to me."

"I wonder," murmured Darling. He glanced across at me. "It's an awful nuisance, Croft, but just as I thought the decks were clear. Is it something really interesting, or does he want a woman watched? However, his name sounds piquant, so perhaps I had better see him. Ask him to come in, Miss Patel."

After Niles and Miss Patel retired, a man of most striking and unusual presence entered. Colonel Cardona must have stood fully six feet in his boots, and he carried himself like a grandee of the golden days of Spain. His complexion was extraordinarily dusky, whilst his hair, which was close-cropped, was iron grey. His heavy eyebrows and curling moustache with its little points were equally black, so that his large teeth gleamed very fiercely when he smiled. His eyes were large, dark, and brilliant, and although he wore an admirably cut tweed suit, for some reason I pictured him as habitually wearing riding clothes. I almost seemed to hear the jingle of spurs.

He carried an ebony cane for which I mentally substituted a riding crop, and his black felt hat I thought hardly as suitable as a sombrero. His age might have been anything between fifty and fifty-five.

Standing in the doorway he bowed, and if his smile was Mephistophelean, there was much about Colonel Juan Cardona which commanded respect.

"Mr. Darling," he began, and his high, thin voice afforded yet another surprise. "I feel somewhat ill at ease to—how do you say it?—appropriate your time, as I am by no means sure that what I have to say justifies my doing so."

He spoke most fluent, indeed florid English. But his sentences at times were oddly constructed; yet, save for a faint accent and his frequent interpolation of such expressions as "how do you say?"—a sort of nervous mannerism—one might have supposed him to be a Briton who had lived much abroad. I formed the opinion that he had read extensively, and this, as I learned later, was indeed the case.

"Sit down, Colonel Cardona," said Darling with quiet geniality. "Officially, my working day is ended, I admit, but if you have no objection to the presence of my friend, Mr. Croft, I shall be most happy to chat with you."

He smiled in a way all his own.

"If your business is of a painfully professional nature," he added, "I must beg you to excuse me for a fortnight, as I am taking a badly needed holiday with my friend."

"Ah, is it so?" replied the Colonel, placing his hat and cane upon the table and sitting down rather wearily in a big leather armchair which Darling had pushed forward. "If I intrude I am sorry, but indeed my business is urgent, and I come to you on the recommendation of my friend, the Spanish Ambassador."

He raised his eyes to Darling's face with an expression of peculiar appeal. I rose to depart, but Darling stopped me.

"Sit down, Croft," said Darling, and turned again to the visitor. "Please proceed," he requested. "Mr. Croft has been with me in some of the most delicate cases which I have ever handled, and you may rely upon his discretion as you may rely upon mine." He pushed forward a box of cigars. "Will you smoke?"

"Thanks, no," was the answer; "you see, I rarely smoke anything but my cigarettes."

Colonel Cardona extracted a slip of rice paper from a small packet which he carried, then—dipping two long, amber-stained fingers into his coat pocket—brought out a portion of tobacco, laid it in the paper, and almost in the twinkling of an eye had made, rolled, and lighted a very creditable cigarette. His dexterity was astonishing, and seeing my surprise he raised his heavy eyebrows.

"Practice makes perfect, is it not said?" he remarked.

He shrugged his shoulders and dropped the extinguished match in an ashtray, whilst I studied him with increasing interest. Some dread, real or imaginary, was oppressing the man's mind, I mused. I felt my presence to be unwelcome, but:

"Very well," he began, suddenly. "I expect, Mr. Darling, that you will be disposed to regard what I have to tell you rather as a symptom of what you call nerves than as evidence of any agency directed against me."

Ben Darling stared curiously at the speaker. "Do I understand you to suspect that someone is desirous of harming you?" he enquired.

Colonel Cardona slowly nodded his head.

"Such is my meaning," he replied.

"You refer to bodily harm?"

"But yes—emphatically."

"Hm," said Darling; and taking out a tin of tobacco from a cabinet beside him he began in leisurely fashion to fill a briar. "No doubt you have good reasons for this suspicion?"

"If I had not good reasons, Mr. Darling, nothing could have induced me to trouble you. Yet, even now that I have compelled myself to come here, I find it difficult—almost impossible—to explain those reasons to you."

An expression of embarrassment appeared upon the brown face, and now Colonel Cardona paused and was plainly at a loss for words.

Darling replaced the tin in the cupboard and struck a match. Lighting his pipe he nodded good-humouredly as if to say: I quite understand. As a matter of fact, he probably thought, as I did, that this was a familiar case of a man of possibly blameless life who had become subject to that delusion which leads people to believe themselves threatened by mysterious and unnameable danger.

Our visitor inhaled deeply.

"You, of course, are waiting for the facts," he presently resumed, speaking with a slowness which told of a mind labouring

for the right mode of expression. "These are so scanty, I fear—of so phantom a kind—that even when they are in your possession you will consider me to be merely the victim of a delusion. In the first place, then, I have reason to believe that someone followed me from my home to your office."

"Indeed," said Ben Darling sympathetically, for this I perceived was exactly what he had anticipated, and merely tended to confirm his suspicion. "Someone from your household?"

"Certainly not."

"Did you actually see this follower?"

"My dear sir," cried Colonel Cardona, excitement emphasising his accent, "if I had seen him, so much would have been made clear—so much! I have never seen him, but I have heard him and felt him—felt his presence, I mean."

"In what way?" asked Darling, leaning back in his chair and studying the fierce face.

"On several occasions, on turning out the light in my bedroom and looking across the lawn from my window, I have observed the shadow of someone lurking in the garden."

"The shadow?"

"Precisely. The person himself was concealed beneath a tree. When he moved, his shadow was visible on the ground."

"You were not deceived by a waving branch?"

"Certainly not. I speak of a still, moonlit night."

"Possibly, then, it was the shadow of a trespasser," suggested Darling. "I gather that you refer to a house in the country?"

"It was not," declared Colonel Cardona, emphatically. "It was not. I wish to God I could believe it had been. Then there was, a month ago, an attempt to enter my house."

Ben Darling exhibited evidence of a quickening curiosity. He had perceived, as I had perceived, that the manner of the speaker differed from that of the ordinary victim of delusion, with whom he had become professionally familiar.

"You had actual evidence of this?" he suggested.

"It was due to insomnia—sleeplessness brought about, yes, I will admit it, by apprehension—that I heard the footsteps of this intruder."

"But you did not see him?"

"Only his shadow."

"What!"

"You can obtain the evidence of all my household that someone had actually entered," declared Colonel Cardona, eagerly. "Of this, at least, I can give you the certain facts. Whoever it was had obtained access through a kitchen window, had forced two locks, and was coming stealthily along the hallway when the sound of his footsteps attracted my attention."

"What did you do?"

"I came out onto the landing and looked down the stairs. But even the slight sound which I made had been sufficient to alarm the midnight visitor, for I had never a glimpse of him. Only, as he went swiftly back in the direction from which he had come, the moonlight shining in through a window in the hall cast his shadow on the carpet."

"Strange," murmured Darling. "Very strange, indeed. The shadow told you nothing?"

"Nothing at all."

Colonel Cardona hesitated momentarily and glanced swiftly across at Darling.

"It was just a vague blur—and then it was gone. But—"

"Yes," said Darling. "But?"

"Ah." Colonel Cardona blew a cloud of smoke into the air. "I come now to the matter which I find so hard to explain."

He inhaled again deeply and was silent for a while.

"Nothing was stolen?" asked Darling.

"Nothing whatever."

"And no clue was left behind?"

"No clue except the filed fastening of a window and two open doors which had been locked as usual when the household retired."

"Hm," mused Darling again. "This incident, of course, may have been an isolated one and in no way connected with the surveillance of which you complain. I mean that this person who undoubtedly entered your house might prove to be an ordinary burglar."

"On a table in the hallway of Mordaunt's Folly," replied Colonel Cardona impressively—"so my house is named—stands a case containing presentation silver plate. The moonlight of which I have spoken was shining fully upon this case, and does the burglar live who will pass such a prize and leave it untouched?"

"I quite agree," said Darling quietly, "that this is a very significant point."

"You are beginning at last," suggested the Colonel, "to believe that my suspicions are not quite groundless?"

"There is a distinct possibility that they are more than suspicions," agreed Darling; "but may I suggest that there is something else? Have you an enemy?"

"Who that has ever held public office is without enemies?"

"Ah, quite so. Then I suggest again that there is something else."

He gazed keenly at his visitor, and the latter, whilst meeting the look unflinchingly with his large dark eyes, was unable to conceal the fact that he had received a home thrust.

"There are two points, Mr. Darling," he finally confessed, "almost certainly associated one with the other, if you understand, but both of these so remote from my present life that I hesitate to mention them. It seems fantastic to suppose that they contain a clue."

"I beg of you," said Darling, "to keep nothing back, however remote it may appear to be. It is sometimes the seemingly remote things which prove upon investigation to be the most intimate."

"Very well," resumed Colonel Cardona, beginning to roll a second cigarette whilst continuing to smoke the first. "I know that you are right, of course, but it is nevertheless very difficult for me to explain. I mentioned the attempted burglary—if so I may term it—in order to clear your mind of the idea that my fears were a myth. The next point which I have concerns a man, a neighbour of mine in Surrey. Before I proceed I should like to

make it clear that I do not believe for a moment that he is responsible for this unpleasant business."

Darling stared at him curiously. "Nevertheless," he said, "there must be some data in your possession which suggest to your mind that he has some connection with it."

"There are, Mr. Darling, but they belong to things so mystic and far removed from ordinary crime that I fear you will think me"—he shrugged his great shoulders—"a man haunted by strange superstitions. Very well. You must understand, then, that although of pure Spanish blood I was born in Cuba. The greater part of my life has been spent in the Caribbean, where I held a senior post in the civil administration. I have property not only in Cuba but in some of the smaller islands, and I shall not conceal from you that during the latter years of my administration I incurred the enmity of a certain faction. Do I make myself clear?"

Ben Darling nodded and exchanged a swift glance with me. I formed a rapid mental picture of the political circumstances which had shaped Colonel Juan Cardona, and I began to consider his story from a new viewpoint. Seemingly rendered restless by his reflections, he stood up and began to pace the floor, a tall but curiously graceful figure. I noticed the bulldog tenacity of his chin, the intense pride in his bearing, and I wondered what kind of menace had induced him to seek the aid of Ben Darling; for whatever his failings might be—and I could guess at the nature of several of them—that this thin-lipped man knew the meaning of fear I was not prepared to believe.

"Before you proceed further, Colonel Cardona," said Darling, "might I ask when you left Cuba?"

"Some three years ago," was his reply. "Because"—he hesitated curiously—"of health motives, I leased a property in England, believing that here I should find peace."

"In other words, you were afraid of something or someone in Cuba?"

Colonel Cardona turned in a flash, glaring down at the speaker.

"I never feared any man in my life, Mr. Darling," he said, coldly.

"Then why are you here?"

The Colonel placed the stump of his first cigarette in an ashtray and lighted that which he had newly made.

"It is true," he admitted. "Forgive me. Yet what I said was that I never feared any man."

He stood squarely in front of the Burmese cabinet, resting one hand upon his hip. Then he added a remark which surprised me.

"Do you know anything of Obeah?" he asked.

Ben Darling took his pipe from between his teeth and stared at the speaker silently for a moment. "Obeah?" he echoed. "The Caribbean spirit religion?"

"Exactly—as it is practised in the darker corners of Cuba and the islands."

"My studies have certainly not embraced it," replied Darling quietly, "nor has it hitherto come within my experience. But since I have spent considerable time in parts of Asia and the

Middle East, I am prepared to learn that what outsiders dismiss as mere superstition may be something other—or may at the very least be exploited by those who know how credulous fear can make a man."

"It can be far more than that, Mr. Darling."

Colonel Cardona glared almost fiercely across the room.

"And do I understand," asked Darling, "that the danger which you believe to threaten you is associated with Cuba?"

"That, Mr. Darling, is for you to decide when all the facts shall be in your possession. Do you wish that I proceed?"

"By all means. I must confess that I am intensely interested."

"Very well, Mr. Darling. I have something to show you."

From an inside breast pocket Colonel Cardona drew out a flat case, and from the case took some irregularly shaped object wrapped in tissue paper. Unfolding it carefully, he strode across and laid the object upon the blotting pad in front of my friend.

Impelled by curiosity I stood up and advanced to inspect it. It was of a dirty brown colour, some five or six inches long, and appeared to consist of a kind of membrane. Darling, his elbow on the table, was staring down at it questioningly.

"What is it?" I said. "Some kind of leaf?"

"No," replied Darling, looking up into the dark face of the Colonel. "I think I know what it is."

"I, also, know what it is," declared Colonel Cardona grimly. "But tell me what it seems like to you, Mr. Darling."

Ben Darling's expression was compounded of incredulity, wonder, and something else as, continuing to stare at the speaker, he replied:

"It is the wing of a bat."

CHAPTER TWO
THE CLEARING

Memory has more than once returned me to that moment in Darling's office—the three of us standing over the blotting pad, looking down at the thing that lay there in its fold of tissue.

My friend was possessed of a quality I can only describe as a kind of foresight, a sensitivity to the significance of objects and moments that the rest of us, locked as we are in the present tense, rarely achieve. For my own part I can only record what I felt then, which was that I stood at the edge of something—a threshold, invisible but real, beyond which the ordinary texture of events would not apply.

I waited with great curiosity for Cardona to speak. But it was Darling who broke the silence.

"The wing of a bat," he murmured again, and touched it with one fingertip. "What species, Colonel? I'm quite certain this isn't from any British bat."

"It is emphatically not British," replied Cardona. "Even that fact alone, you must agree, would be strange enough."

"I want to hear all of it," said Darling. He looked toward the window, where the evening light was failing over the rooftops of Chancery Lane. "But first—you mentioned we were proposing a holiday from Thursday."

"Fishing in Norfolk," I supplied. "A fortnight."

"Ah." Cardona addressed us with a formality that was not without a certain appeal. "Then I must be brief, and ask you to

forgive the imposition. Would you be willing—both of you—to come to Mordaunt's Folly instead? I can promise you comfortable accommodation and, I regret to say, a situation that may require your very particular skills. As for other sport—" a faint, grim smile crossed his face "—I have reason to believe there will be other excitement, of a kind that may compensate for the trout."

Darling glanced at me. I gave the smallest nod. I had none of his passion for the piscatorial art, and the prospect of a fortnight on the Norfolk Broads, however peaceful, did not stir me as the Colonel's story had begun to.

"We will come," said Darling simply. "On one condition. That you tell me everything, now, before we leave this room."

Cardona inclined his head and resumed his seat. He began, without preamble, to roll his fourth cigarette of the evening.

"I first became acquainted with the particular significance of the bat wing—both the symbol and the object itself—about twenty-five years ago. At that time I was a junior administrator, perhaps thirty years old, posted to one of Cuba's smaller outlying territories in the eastern Caribbean. My remit included oversight of several state-managed agricultural estates, principally sugar. It was not a comfortable posting."

Darling listened without expression. I formed my own quiet picture of a young Cardona in that role—capable, proud, and, I suspected, not especially popular.

"My manager there, a man named Vega, was a capable civil servant of the old school. He came to me with a theory, which I initially dismissed, that a clandestine organisation had formed

among the estate workers and was operating against my administration. He had not been able to gather solid evidence. The workers were disciplined, outwardly, but there was an atmosphere—a refusal of eye contact, a quality of silence—that told its own story.”

“You investigated?”

“I conducted interviews. Examined records. Found nothing actionable. And yet I came to feel, as Vega had felt, that there were people nearby who intended me harm. That feeling was confirmed one evening when I was returning to the estate compound on horseback. Someone fired at me from the edge of the coastal wetlands—what we called locally the Black Creek—and missed only because my horse stumbled as I dismounted. The bullet passed through the crown of my hat.”

He paused to light the cigarette.

“No search party could be organised that night. The Black Creek was not a place anyone would willingly enter after dark, and I cannot honestly say I blamed them. It was genuinely dangerous terrain—mangrove, standing water, insects of considerable variety. Vega had long maintained that the organisation held its meetings somewhere inside it, precisely because no official would follow them there.”

“And that night?” prompted Darling.

“That night, over a bottle of rum, Vega proposed that we put his theory to the test. He had been given information by a young woman from the village who was close to him. She had not told him what the meetings were, or who led them. But she had described a

path through the wetlands to a clearing, and she had said that when the moon was full the clearing was in use."

He paused, and the deliberateness of what followed told me it was something he had carried for a long time.

"She died of a wasting sickness. Some months later. I mention this now because I will mention it again."

Neither Darling nor I spoke. The office had grown noticeably darker. Somewhere in Chancery Lane a taxi accelerated and was gone.

"The following evening was a full moon. Vega and I went into the Black Creek."

Cardona rose and crossed to the window, standing with his back to us, looking down at the street below. When he resumed, his voice was lower.

"I will spare you much of it. It was a journey of perhaps forty minutes through terrain that I would not wish on anyone. Mud that took your boot at every step. The smell of decomposing vegetation. Things in the water that I could not identify and preferred not to examine. Vega was some years older than I was and suffered considerably, but he was a stubborn man and would not turn back. He had his torch in one hand and a machete in the other, and he followed the path the young woman had described with extraordinary accuracy."

"At a certain point the trees thinned. We came to an open space—a clearing in the proper sense, almost circular, perhaps thirty metres across. The moon came fully through here, and the vapour from the ground was lit by it. And by torchlight."

"There were people in the clearing."

"How many?" asked Darling.

"Perhaps a hundred. Perhaps more. I could not count. They were gathered around the centre of the space where a fire burned. There were drums—I had heard nothing of them through the thickness of the wetlands, but once in the clearing the sound was everywhere. And there was a figure at the centre who was clearly the presiding authority—a tall man wearing ceremonial dress, with great wing-like extensions fitted to his arms, which he spread wide as he moved."

I listened carefully to how Cardona told this. He was not a man given to embellishment. He described it as one describes a road accident: this happened, then this.

"I recognised him. He was a man I had seen many times on the estate where he worked. But here he was something else altogether. I understood, watching him, that I had badly misjudged the situation. This was not merely a labour grievance or a political organisation. This was something much older and more serious, and I had walked into the middle of it uninvited."

"What happened?"

"We were not given the chance to withdraw quietly. Vega slipped in the mud beside me—a sound no louder than a branch falling—but it was enough. Heads turned. There was a change in the rhythm of the drums, and then the drums stopped entirely. I don't know how long we stood like that, at the edge of the torchlight, because time stopped working normally."

"Then Vega collapsed."

The Colonel turned from the window.

"We had both been walking through the mud for the better part of an hour, and we had both acquired leeches without realising it. This is not unusual in those wetlands. But the accumulation, and the exertion, and the heat, and whatever else was in the air of that place—Vega went down. I got him out. I have no clear memory of how. My next reliable recollection is of being on the veranda of the compound with Vega on the ground beside me, both of us in a state I will not describe in detail."

"Vega recovered?"

"He survived. But he was never the same man. He was invalided out of the service that winter and returned to Cuba. He died two years later of what the physicians called heart failure." Cardona considered this for a moment. "I was left with a very severe fever that kept me confined for three months and which no one could satisfactorily explain. I was ordered to leave the territory as soon as I could be moved. I arranged my affairs and went back to Havana."

"And the young woman? The one who gave Vega the information?"

"I told you she died of a wasting sickness. What I did not tell you is that on the morning she first fell ill, a bat wing was found attached to the door of her home."

Silence. Darling's pipe had gone cold; he had forgotten to maintain it.

"I returned to Cuba," continued Cardona. "For several years all was quiet. I advanced in the foreign ministry. I tried, as

one does, to reclassify certain memories as the product of stress and unfamiliar conditions. I was not entirely successful, but I was busy, and busy men are difficult to frighten."

"Until?"

"Until one night, some ten years after the events I have described, I was unable to sleep and stepped onto the balcony of my apartment in Havana. As I did so, a figure beneath me startled and moved quickly away. I would not have seen his face at all except that he looked back once, I think involuntarily. In the lamplight I knew him."

"The man from the clearing."

"Without question. I reached back for the revolver I kept by the bed and fired four shots at the retreating figure. Whether I hit him I cannot tell you to this day. I never saw him again. But that same night a bat wing was found attached to the main entrance of the compound."

He returned to the armchair and sat down heavily.

"After that I will be brief, as I promised. There were six attempts on my life in Cuba over the following eighteen months. None of them succeeded, and after the third I stopped being surprised by them. I crossed to the United States, reasoning that distance might make me harder to find. It did not."

"Washington?" said Darling.

"Washington. I was in my hotel room at something past midnight—I had been reading, which is a habit that keeps me up later than is wise—when I heard the door of the adjoining

bathroom move. Not the outer door. The interior connecting door, which I had locked."

He drew on the cigarette.

"I had perhaps three seconds of warning. Enough to roll from the bed rather than sit up. The blade went into the mattress. I threw the bedside lamp at the figure and he ran. The whole thing took less than twenty seconds."

"Did you see him?"

"Partially. He wore a dark coat and his face was in shadow. But he moved as a European moves, Mr. Darling, and his hands and wrists, caught for a moment in the lamplight, were those of a European. This is not the Caribbean faction acting alone. They have, at some point, acquired an associate from elsewhere."

Darling said nothing for a moment. I saw him look at the bat wing on the blotter.

"On the outside of the hotel room door," continued the Colonel, "a bat wing was found pinned to the wood."

The room was very quiet.

"After Washington," said Darling at last, "you came to England."

"I came to England. I found Mordaunt's Folly available to let, and I took it. I installed my cousin, Madame Brassard, as mistress of the house—she manages everything, which is remarkable given that she is largely confined to her chair. She has with her a companion, a young Englishwoman named Brandon, Miss Val Brandon, who came to us through an agency three years ago and who

has become, I must say, entirely indispensable to the household. And for two years I had peace."

"Until March," said Darling.

"Until March. And until four days ago." He leaned forward. "Four days ago my housekeeper found something attached to the oaken panel of the main entrance door at Mordaunt's Folly. She brought it to me on a tray, having wrapped it in newspaper, because she would not touch it with her hands."

He pointed at the object on the blotter.

"Another bat wing. The same as before. The same, I am told, as the one that appeared at the door of the young woman who helped us."

Darling stood and walked once around the room, which was a habit of his when assembling his thoughts.

"The entry to the house in April," he said. "Before or after the bat wing?"

"Before. The bat wing arrived four days ago. The house was entered some five weeks ago."

"And the shadows in the treeline?"

"Before both."

"I see." He stopped by the window and turned. "Wednesday of this week is the full moon."

"It is. Yes." Cardona met his gaze steadily. "You understand why I have come to you now."

There was a pause that seemed to settle something between the two men.

"We will be at Mordaunt's Folly tomorrow evening," said Darling. "What time suits you?"

"Dinner is at eight. I shall expect you both at seven."

He rose, collected his hat and cane, and bowed to each of us in turn with that particular courtliness which, I was beginning to understand, was not affectation but armour.

After he had gone I sat for a long moment without speaking. Darling stood at the window, looking down at the street where Cardona's tall figure moved with unhurried purpose toward the Strand.

"Well?" I said.

"Well," said Darling. He turned from the window. "Norfolk will keep, Croft. Norfolk always keeps."

CHAPTER THREE

THE VAMPIRE BAT

An hour had elapsed since the departure of our visitor. The evening had settled fully over Chancery Lane, and Darling and I sat in the study with the remains of a bottle of Rioja between us, the bat wing on the low table, and the particular silence that descends on a room after something significant has been said in it.

Darling had been on his phone for most of that hour, texting and receiving texts with the unhurried economy of a man accustomed to extracting useful information quickly and without fuss. I had poured the wine, eaten three biscuits from a tin on the shelf, and read the same paragraph of a book four times without taking it in.

At last he put the phone face-down on the arm of his chair.

"Well?" I said.

"I have spoken to a contact at the cultural attaché's office. Not the Ambassador—this is a quieter channel, which suits the purpose better." He picked up his glass. "Cardona is a real figure. A substantive one. His career in the foreign ministry spanned more than two decades and touched on several matters of genuine sensitivity. He left Havana in 2022. Officially: health reasons."

"And unofficially?"

"Unofficially, his departure was not unexpected. He had been a capable and, by certain accounts, a very hard man during a

particular posting early in his career—the one he described to us tonight. The decisions he made there cost people considerably, and those costs were not forgotten. Whether that constitutes guilt or merely consequence I leave to you.”

He swirled the wine in his glass.

“There are apparently a number of people in that part of the world who would be quite content never to see him again—and a smaller number, my contact implied, for whom his continued existence is a source of active irritation. The diplomatic community was not surprised when he left. What surprised them was that he left when he did rather than sooner.”

“Does that make his story more or less credible?” I asked.

Darling considered. “It makes it more complicated, which is not the same thing. There is one possibility we cannot afford to dismiss, Croft. That the Colonel is not well.”

“Mad, you mean.”

“Not precisely. But a man who has spent twenty-five years looking over his shoulder, who has survived multiple genuine attempts on his life, who carries a loaded revolver and wakes to the sound of shadows—such a man’s nerves are not unaffected. It is possible that an obsession has formed. And it is equally possible that someone who knows the history is deliberately feeding that obsession for their own purposes.”

“You mean the bat wing on the door could have been placed there by someone unconnected to the original faction? Someone exploiting the Colonel’s known fear?”

"Exactly. It is not a theory I favour, but it must be on the table."

"What theory do you favour?"

He did not answer at once. Instead he reached forward and picked up the bat wing with two fingers, carrying it under the reading lamp on his desk. He turned it slowly.

"I favour the theory that this is exactly what it appears to be. I have been looking at it while we talked." He set it back down. "It is the wing of a *Desmodus rotundus*—the common vampire bat. Native to tropical and subtropical America. They range from Mexico down through most of South America, with concentrations in the Caribbean basin. There is not a single breeding population of them anywhere in the British Isles, and there never has been."

"So it was imported."

"Deliberately and recently. Either as a preserved specimen from a collection, or sourced specifically for this purpose. Either way, Croft, that represents a degree of organisation and intent that is not consistent with an opportunist or a copycat. Someone went to some trouble."

I looked at the wing under the lamplight. It was quite dry—the colour of old leather, the membrane translucent at the edges.

"You mentioned the Colonel's story about the young woman," I said. "The wasting sickness."

"I have been thinking about it since he left. Anaemia, Croft—severe anaemia, progressively induced—produces exactly the symptoms one would describe as a wasting sickness. And anaemia

can be caused, in regions where these bats exist, by repeated nocturnal feeding that the victim never detects."

"Never detects? Surely--"

"The bite is clinically painless. The vampire bat uses a compound in its saliva that prevents clotting and carries a local anaesthetic effect at the wound site. A sleeping person feels nothing. They do not wake. Over weeks, the cumulative blood loss is significant. The victim grows pale, fatigued, breathless. The physicians find nothing wrong."

I stared at him.

"Good heavens, Darling."

"It is, as I say, a horrible idea. But it is not an impossible one. And it explains something that otherwise puzzles me."

"Which is?"

"Why this particular method was not employed against the Colonel himself. He told us that after his visit to the clearing he suffered a severe fever--mysterious in origin, resistant to treatment, from which he recovered against expectation. I suspect that fever was the result of exactly such a campaign, and that his constitution proved robust enough to defeat it. Hence the switch to more direct methods: the rifle, the knife, the blade in the Washington hotel room."

"He recovered from what should have killed him," I said slowly. "So they stopped trying that way."

"So it would appear."

I was quiet for a moment. Outside, the city carried on its late evening business—taxis, a distant siren, the compressed roar of a bus accelerating.

"Darling," I said, "what appalling thing can the man have done that has sustained a vendetta for twenty-five years?"

Ben Darling gave a faint, half-apologetic shrug that reminded me unexpectedly of Cardona himself.

"I don't think the feud dates from the clearing," he said. "That was the beginning. But the thing that made it personal—that turned a collective grievance into a sustained campaign against one specific man—I think that happened later. When Cardona returned to Cuba and fired at the figure on his balcony."

"You think he killed him."

"I think it is probable. The figure disappeared, was never seen again, and shortly afterwards the campaign intensified dramatically. Six attempts in eighteen months, then pursuit across two continents. That is not the response to a failed assassination attempt. That is the response to a martyrdom."

"Which would also explain the European operative in Washington," I said.

"Precisely. If the original leadership was gone and the faction reorganised, new alliances would be formed. New personnel acquired. The bat wing as a symbol of intent would survive the transition—tradition is resilient—but the operational methods would modernise."

He picked up his pipe and began to fill it, which was always a sign that his thinking had reached a certain plateau of satisfaction.

"The whole thing is fantastically improbable," I said.

"My dear Croft," he replied, without looking up from the pipe, "the most commonplace life hovers on the edge of the improbable. But those of us who overstep that edge become preposterous in the eyes of those who never have—not because the unusual is untrue, but because storytellers have claimed the unusual as their exclusive province, and in doing so have divorced it from reality in the public mind. I am a myth, Croft. And so, I regret to say, are you."

He raised a hand and pointed to the photograph above the mantle.

"We owe our mythological existence to that American genius—whose portrait presides over this office with considerable satisfaction—who indiscreetly invented the character of C. Auguste Dupin. The doings of that amateur were chronicled by an admirer, and ever since no private investigator has been permitted to exist outside the pages of fiction. My most trivial habits confirm my unreality. I have a friend who records my cases. So had Dupin. I smoke a pipe. So did Dupin. I occasionally solve things. Here I differ: Dupin was invariably successful."

"You are deflecting," I said.

"I am making a serious point with the appearance of levity, which is a habit you have had twenty years to adjust to. The point is this: you say the situation is fantastically improbable.

You object specifically to a Caribbean tradition operating with lethal intent in the Surrey Hills. But I am thinking of it too, and what strikes me is not the improbability but the opposite."

He lit the pipe.

"A flight from Kingston to Heathrow takes nine hours and costs less than a weekend in Brighton. A person can leave the Caribbean on a Tuesday and be in Haslemere by Thursday. The diaspora communities of London, Birmingham, Bristol—cities to which people from those islands have been coming for seventy years—are not small, and not isolated, and not without their own internal hierarchies and old allegiances. You can maintain an international network from a smartphone. Why, precisely, should any of this be confined to tropical latitudes?"

"I take your point," I said.

"The world is not compartmentalised by geography, Croft. It never was, but it is especially not so now. The only fantastic thing would be if old grievances failed to travel. They travel with extraordinary efficiency. They always have."

He set down the pipe and stretched out in the long chair with an ease that belied the precision of everything he had just said.

"I am genuinely sorry about Norfolk," he added. "The Broads in July are irreplaceable. But Mordaunt's Folly has a competing claim, and I find I cannot resist it."

He looked at me with an expression I knew well—the one that contained both amusement and something considerably more serious underneath.

"I am also looking forward to meeting the Colonel's household. Madame Brassard, who apparently runs everything from a wheelchair with the authority of a field marshal. And her companion, Miss Brandon, of whom we know almost nothing, which is always interesting. Not to forget the Colonel himself, whose acquaintance I am extremely anxious to renew."

"The whole thing is wildly bizarre, Darling."

"Remember, Croft," he said. "Wednesday is the night of the full moon."

CHAPTER FOUR

MORDAUNT'S FOLLY

Ben Darling lay back on the leather seat and glanced at me with a quizzical smile. The large dark Mercedes that Colonel Cardona had sent to collect us from Haslemere station was climbing a steep Surrey lane with an engine so quiet it seemed to be making a philosophical point about effort.

"Some car," said Darling approvingly.

I nodded, but felt disinclined for conversation, being absorbed in the countryside through the window. It was very beautiful. The lane was narrow, winding, and over-arched by trees whose canopies had grown together overhead, so that we moved through a cool green tunnel speckled with afternoon light. On one side a wooded slope pressed close; on the other, the land fell away in successive dells into the cradle of the valley below. It was extraordinary to think that London was only twenty miles behind us.

Darling had spent most of the drive on his phone, reading, and had shared what he found with the economy of a man who knows what is relevant.

"Mordaunt's Folly was built in the 1860s," he had told me somewhere near Guildford. "The work of a wealthy eccentric with a mania for towers. His rival in this particular folly was William Beckford, who built Fonthill Abbey in Wiltshire—you may know the name from his novel *Vathek*. Two of Beckford's three towers are

still standing. Our host's choice of residence suggests either a fondness for the baroque or a taste for irony."

"Or both," I had said.

"Or both," he agreed, and went back to his phone.

Now, as the road curved southward and we entered the deeper shade of older woodland, I noticed I had no phone signal at all. I put it away.

We slowed at the gate lodge, where a young woman emerged to pull open the gates—elaborate iron scrollwork, ornate in a manner more suited to a Seville courtyard than the Surrey Hills. The drive beyond was a tunnel through dense trees. The house remained invisible until we were almost upon it.

"Looks like a monastery," muttered Darling.

It did. The north front was built of solid grey blocks with small, heavily barred windows at irregular intervals, the whole effect severe and uncompromising. An out-jutting wing closed us in to the west; to the east, an immense box hedge, trimmed with mathematical precision and pierced by a single arched opening, completed the enclosure. We stepped from the car into something very like a cloister bay.

The great oaken doors were already open. In the porch stood Colonel Cardona, taller and more commanding in the bright afternoon light than he had seemed in Chancery Lane.

"Gentlemen," he said. "Welcome to Mordaunt's Folly."

He came forward smiling, and introduced us to Mateo, his household manager—a compact, formal Spaniard of perhaps sixty, with the careful stillness of a man who misses nothing and

volunteers nothing. I formed no particular impression of him at that moment beyond a sense of professional reserve. He took our bags without a word and preceded us inside.

The interior was a revelation. The entrance hall was of extraordinary height, partly lit by a dome of amber and green glass that cast a warm, submarine light over everything below. It was furnished lavishly but in a manner that owed nothing to any English tradition I could identify. There were carved pieces from what looked like Central America, panels of dark timber, and hanging fabrics in deep reds and ochres. The oak staircase on the left was magnificent.

At the foot of that staircase, in a motorised wheelchair which she commanded with remarkable precision, sat Madame Brassard.

She had snow-white hair crowning the face of a comparatively young woman, and large, dark-brown eyes that reminded me, though I could not immediately say why, of some animal I had once observed very intently. Her hands were slender and beautiful, and when the Colonel presented us she extended her fingers with an air of complete assurance. Darling stooped and kissed them in Continental fashion; this Madame clearly expected. I followed suit.

But in truth, from the first moment I had scarcely been looking at Madame Brassard at all, my attention having been claimed entirely by the young woman who stood beside her.

She was not straightforwardly pretty—that is to say, if one tried to account for the impression she made by cataloguing her

individual features, the result did not quite explain it. Her face formed a pleasant oval, and there was a quality in her expression that I can only describe as a perpetual nearness to amusement—something gathered at the corners of her mouth that stopped just short of a smile. Her eyes were watchful and a little wistful. She had slightly curling dark hair and the line of her neck and shoulder was quite graceful. Of one thing I was certain immediately: she was very glad to see us.

"And this," said the Colonel, "is Miss Val Brandon, my cousin's companion and a valued member of this household."

She shook hands with each of us directly, in the way of a capable person who has no interest in ceremony, and her eyes met mine with a brief candour that I found unexpectedly refreshing. Her colour had risen slightly.

"Now," said Madame Brassard, with vivacity, "you are quite at home. Mateo will show you to your rooms and dinner is at eight. But first—" she waved a white hand with an authority that precluded argument "—you will have a late lunch."

She wheeled herself away under the arch on the right with impressive speed, Miss Brandon following.

"Is she not extraordinary?" said the Colonel, guiding us toward the staircase with a hand on each of our arms. "Twenty years in that chair and she has never once behaved as though it were an inconvenience. The house runs perfectly. I have never understood how she does it."

Darling and I had been placed in adjoining rooms. I had never encountered anything quite like them. Oak had been used

with an almost aggressive generosity—carved ceilings, panelled walls, floors polished to a ballroom lustre. My room was directly above the great box hedge, and the view from its wide window was of the grounds spreading southward in the afternoon light.

I had barely finished unpacking when I crossed to Darling's room, which occupied the end of the north front. I did not knock.

"Halloa," I said. "What have you seen?"

He was standing at the window with his back to me, quite still. He did not turn.

"What is it?" I asked, coming to stand beside him.

He glanced at me sideways.

"An impression," he said quietly. "It has faded. But it was there."

I said nothing. I had learned, over many years, to take these moments seriously. Darling possessed some quality of attention—I cannot call it anything more precise—that occasionally, under conditions he could not predict or summon at will, registered something in a room or a landscape that ordinary perception missed. He had described it to me once as a sudden drop in temperature that had nothing to do with the air. He could not reproduce it deliberately, and it sometimes failed him entirely. But when it came, it had never misled him.

Below the window lay the old herbal garden I had glimpsed from my own room—tiled paths, topiary in fantastic shapes, a sundial at the centre, borders full of late summer colour. A gardener was working at the far end, unhurriedly deadheading roses. It looked peaceful to the point of enchantment.

Darling turned from the window.

"The Colonel mentioned a tower," he said. "In the east wing."

"He said it was locked up."

"He said it was inconvenient," Darling corrected. "Which is a different thing. He seemed disinclined to pursue the subject. I should like to see it."

He looked back once more at the garden below, and I saw something settle in his expression—not worry, exactly, but a careful, deliberate attention.

"You believe the threat is real," I said. "Here. Now."

"I am certain of it." He turned fully to face me. "There is something wrong about this place, Croft—something I cannot locate yet. The bat wing business is not the whole of it."

"The servants?"

He shook his head. "The danger doesn't come from Mateo or anyone in that household. I'm confident of that. It comes from outside, and it has been here before us." He crossed to the door and opened it. "Now. Madame Brassard is expecting us for tea, and I should like very much to have a conversation with Miss Brandon."

CHAPTER FIVE

VAL BRANDON

The lunch was exceptional—the kind one would not have bettered at the Ritz. Since this standard appeared to be entirely customary at Mordaunt's Folly rather than staged for our benefit, a charge of ostentation would be unfair. Mateo served without a word and with complete competence. And because of the particular pleasure of finding oneself on the edge of unusual things, the enjoyment of an impeccably prepared meal, and the frank delight I took in watching the expressions that crossed Val Brandon's face, I count that lunch among the more memorable hours of my life.

Val Brandon puzzled me. It may seem curious that in such singular company I found myself attending chiefly to this young woman—so thoroughly English, so apparently straightforward. At the moment of meeting I had thought her attractively pretty. By the time the main course was cleared I had revised that assessment upward considerably. Darling caught me at it once and smiled in his dry, quizzical way. I felt vaguely guilty and looked elsewhere.

The conversation ranged widely, and Madame Brassard dominated it. Her English was less fluent than the Colonel's—she reached occasionally for a word and accepted the imprecision with impatience—but this did nothing to diminish the striking force of her intellect. She was a remarkable woman. With her white hair above the face of someone twenty years younger, and those extraordinary dark eyes that moved rarely even as her head moved

constantly, she seemed almost theatrical in her intensity. Her hands were in perpetual, expressive motion. She reminded me of someone, though I could not yet say who.

One thing was plain: she was devoted to the Colonel. When she looked at him her expression changed entirely, the restless vitality gentling into something almost protective. I could detect no family resemblance between them, and wondered if the cousinship were distant.

I found myself studying the three of them and trying to resolve the household into something coherent. The Colonel: aristocratic, formidable, genuinely afraid of something he would not name in full. Madame: fierce, capable, running the house from a wheelchair with the efficiency of a general. And Val Brandon, who sat between them, laughed at the right moments, and whose eyes, when they were not on mine, held a look I could only read as watchfulness.

She was not happy. I had made up my mind on that point before the pudding arrived. Once—only once—I caught her watching Madame Brassard with an expression that resembled something very close to fear.

The signal to rise was given by Madame, who reversed her chair from the table with remarkable speed and turned it toward the door.

"Off you go, Juan," she said to the Colonel. "Show your guests the garden while I sleep. Come, my dear—" this to Val "—sit with me a few minutes first."

She was gone, wheeling rapidly through the doorway, Val following with a brief backward glance that I chose to interpret as regret.

"Now, gentlemen," said the Colonel, refilling his glass and pushing the decanter toward Darling. "I am at your disposal—business or pleasure."

"I should very much like to see the tower," said Darling, "if it would not bore you."

"Certainly. Mr. Croft will come?"

Darling glanced at me across the table—the particular glance that means he wants me elsewhere.

"I'll take a turn round the garden, if you don't mind," I said. "I'll join you both shortly."

"As you like," said the Colonel, and led Darling out.

I sat alone at the table for a few minutes, finishing my coffee and turning over in my mind what I had observed. Then I went out through the French windows into the afternoon.

The grounds of Mordaunt's Folly were more extensive than they had appeared from above. The formal garden gave way to rougher parkland to the north, and to the east a sweep of lawn ran down toward old timber. The house from outside was severe and grey, even in sunlight—not unimpressive, but the kind of building that gives nothing away. I made a circuit of it, noting the shuttered windows of the east wing and the outbuildings that connected via a covered passage to the back of the house.

I came eventually to the base of the tower.

It was a square grey structure, quite plain, with uncurtained windows at three levels and a gallery visible at the top. From certain points in the Surrey Hills, Darling had told me on the drive down, it was visible for miles. It did nothing for the landscape. I could hear voices above—faint, carried downward on the still air. Darling and the Colonel, or perhaps Darling and Mateo, who had apparently been dispatched to escort him up.

I told myself that whatever the Colonel had described could have no part in this serene and reasonable countryside. The sun was warm on the grey stone. A wood pigeon somewhere was making its contented sound. Then, rounding the eastern base of the tower, I walked into a thicket of rhododendrons that blocked any further progress, and retraced my steps.

I found my way through the arch in the box hedge and into the Tudor garden.

Val Brandon was there, sitting on a grassy bank with a book face-down beside her.

"Mr. Croft," she said. "I thought you'd gone up the tower."

"Too energetic," I said. "Room for one more on that bank?"

She moved the book. I sat down.

We were quiet for a moment. The Tudor garden was small and sheltered, its tiled paths crisscrossed with afternoon shadow, its borders extravagant with late summer colour. A sundial stood at the centre. It was the kind of garden that makes a person feel they have wandered into a different century.

"I always think there should be peacocks," she said.

"And pages in yellow velvet," I suggested.

She looked at me seriously for a moment, then laughed—a real laugh, not the social kind she had deployed through lunch. It changed her face considerably.

“Do you know,” I said, watching her, “I find it difficult to place you in this household.”

“Yes,” she said simply. “I imagine you do.”

“Then you recognise that you are—”

“Out of place? Of course I do.”

She said it without self-pity, as a plain statement of fact.

“I’m very glad Mr. Darling has come,” she added. “I’ve heard of him. Someone mentioned him when I was in Nice.”

“You were in Nice before you came here?”

She nodded slowly, and her gaze went somewhere else for a moment.

“For over a year. Madame was recovering. We had a small flat near the Promenade des Anglais.”

“And before Nice?”

A pause.

“Lebanon,” she said. “I was there for about eight months, working with a French medical NGO that Madame founded. She had been running it for years—entirely self-funded, very substantial operation. I was a volunteer administrator, really. Junior.” She picked up a blade of grass and turned it between her fingers.

“Madame was travelling to one of our satellite clinics when the vehicle was attacked. An IED. Her husband was killed. She survived, but—”

She gestured, a small movement toward the house.

"I was in the convoy behind. I helped with the immediate response and stayed with her through the first weeks. She asked me to remain when she was transferred to Beirut, and then to Nice. I didn't feel I could leave."

"Of course not," I said.

"She lost almost everything in one day. The NGO collapsed without her. Her fortune was largely tied up in it. Her husband was gone. And then her mobility." She paused. "And yet she runs this house as though it were a military campaign, and she never once complains."

"She is extraordinary," I said sincerely.

"She is," said Val, "and I admire her enormously. But—" She stopped.

"But?" I said quietly.

"I am afraid of her sometimes. I don't mean in any rational sense. I can't explain it properly."

I waited.

"At Mordaunt's Folly she's different from how she was in Nice. Something here has changed her. Or perhaps it's the Colonel's situation that has changed her. There are nights when the house feels—" She shook her head. "I have nearly left twice. I had my bag packed once."

"What stopped you?"

She smiled, and it was a little sad.

"For one thing, I have nowhere particularly to go. My father died three years ago. That was why I went abroad in the first place. And for another—" she looked at me directly "—Madame needs

someone here who is not part of whatever this is. Someone ordinary."

I thought that was an unusually clear-eyed thing to say.

"You've been frightened at night," I said.

"Yes."

"Can you tell me how?"

"Not yet," she said. "I'm sorry. I don't want to tell it badly."

I understood that, and didn't press her.

"Will you show me the rest of the garden?" I said instead.

She stood and tucked the book under her arm.

"Come on then," she said, and set off along the tiled path at a pace that suggested she knew every turn of it by heart.

We were out there the better part of an hour, and with each passing turn I found some new thing to admire—the tilt of her head when she was deciding something, the way she named every plant in the herb border without slowing down, the particular quality of her laugh which managed to be both spontaneous and contained. Whatever oppressed her at Mordaunt's Folly, it had not reached the garden yet.

Darling and the Colonel rejoined us as we were coming back along the east path. I gathered from the half-finished state of their conversation that it had been Mateo, not the Colonel himself, who had taken Darling up the tower.

"I must apologise," said the Colonel, falling into step beside Darling, "for sending Mateo in my stead. My lungs are not what they were."

"Not at all," said Darling. "The view from the top was very fine. You can see the house clearly from there—particularly the garden."

Something in the way he said it made me look at him, but his face was perfectly neutral.

"Now, if Miss Brandon will excuse us," said the Colonel, "perhaps we might retire to the library for a while."

Val smiled, took her book from under her arm, and walked away along the path. At the turn she looked back at me once—a glance I did not attempt to interpret, though I found it occupied my thoughts for the remainder of the afternoon.

As we followed the Colonel through the French windows I noticed Darling glance upward toward the first-floor balcony. An awning was spread over it. Beneath it, reclined in a long chair, lay Madame Brassard. She appeared to be asleep; at any rate she did not move. But a needle of sunlight through a gap in the awning had found the ring she wore, and the diamonds caught it and threw it back in cold fire.

CHAPTER SIX

THE BARRIER

The library ran the full width of the south wing, lofty and cool behind its four long windows, and constructed, like every room in Mordaunt's Folly, in oak so lavishly applied as to constitute a philosophy. The windows gave onto a veranda, and from there the eye was drawn across a rose garden, down three terraced lawns, to a lake on which half a dozen swans moved with proprietary ease. Beyond, in the valley, cattle grazed on green pasture. A lark hung invisible high above, and the only sounds were bees in the roses and, very distantly, some garden machinery.

The room itself was another matter. The bookcases were ebony and gilt—a garish combination that somehow worked, laden as they were with volumes in half a dozen European languages. The furniture was Spanish and upholstered in tooled leather. There were suits of black armour and a great many Moorish decorative pieces. The paintings were fine and sombre.

One in particular stopped me. It was a portrait of a Spanish cavalier—Velázquez, unless every instinct I possessed was wrong—and the resemblance to Colonel Cardona was so striking as to be almost uncanny. The painted grandee appeared on the point of stepping from the canvas to take issue with anyone present. Our host had evidently brought his belongings from Cuba.

"Gentlemen," said the Colonel, "everything in this house is at your disposal."

He drew up two low chairs with extended arms fitted with small trays—the kind of chair one associates with a veranda in a hot climate—and settled himself on a long leather couch with the explanation that his health required a certain number of recumbent hours daily. He seemed mildly embarrassed by this admission.

“My dear Colonel,” said Darling, “you are clearly interrupting your afternoon rest to discuss what brought us here. I strongly suggest we defer it until after dinner.”

“No, no—ah, but here is Mateo with coffee. And I must insist you try this.”

The bottle he produced was square and opaque, the liqueur inside a particularly fine Havana curaçao. The cigars he offered were sealed in individual aluminium tubes. I am not a connoisseur in these matters, but I knew without being told that they were extraordinary. As I cut the seal on mine I had a sudden clear sense of the world the Colonel carried with him—an older world, deliberate in its pleasures, in which such objects were not luxuries but obligations of a certain kind of life.

We drank the curaçao and talked of other things. The afternoon moved at the pace it wished. Presently the Colonel’s drowsiness, which he battled with visible determination, became impossible to ignore, and Darling rose.

“We will talk this evening,” said Darling. “You must rest.”

The Colonel insisted on seeing us out through the French windows and onto the terrace steps, bowing as we descended into the garden with a formality that in another man would have been

absurd but in him was simply the manner of someone who had always lived this way.

I descended two steps and then, for no particular reason, looked back.

Cardona still stood in the window frame, in the shadow of the veranda. He had not moved, and he had not seen me turn. He believed himself unobserved, and his face showed it.

The expression I saw there is difficult to describe. The debonair bearing was gone, and gone also was the fierce, contained authority that had characterised him from the first moment in Darling's office. What I saw was not fear. It was something much quieter and in some ways worse than fear. I have seen it once before, in the face of a man who had been given a terminal diagnosis and had chosen not to tell his family. It was the expression of a man who has accepted something irrevocable and is carrying it alone.

I turned away at once, hoping he had not caught my glance. I felt oddly like an intruder.

"Darling," I said, when we had moved some distance along the rose path, "this will be the strangest case you have ever handled."

"Is, Croft. It already is. Wheels within wheels. Have you been studying our host?"

"Closely."

"And?"

"I think a conclusion is forming. I saw something just now, when he thought we had gone."

"His expression in the window."

I stared at him. He had not looked back. He had been three steps ahead of me on the terrace.

"How did you—"

"I didn't need to look back," said Darling. "I am satisfied of one thing, Croft. Colonel Cardona is not afraid of whatever Bat Wing represents."

"Not afraid? He came to you because he was afraid."

"He came to me because he felt he should. But he is no longer afraid. He is resigned."

"Resigned to what?"

"To death."

There was a pause. A bee moved lazily between two roses.

"You're right," I said. "God help him, you're right. That was precisely what I saw."

Darling stopped and turned to me.

"You saw the same expression I saw elsewhere today?"

"Where did you see it?"

He glanced about the empty garden, then looked at me directly.

"In the face of Madame Brassard."

"What?"

"Croft." He lowered his voice, though no one was within fifty yards. "She knows."

"Knows what, precisely?"

"That is exactly the question we are here to answer. But I am as certain as I can be of anything that whatever Cardona tells us tonight, there is one thing he will withhold."

"Which is?"

"The full meaning of the bat wing. He has told us what it is—a death token. But he has not told us why it was sent to him. There is a reason he will not name."

"You believe his explanation is false?"

"Not false. Incomplete. He is speaking to me through a barrier, Croft—a barrier he has constructed himself and which he has no intention of dismantling. He wants my help, but only up to a point. Beyond that point there is something he will not permit."

I walked on beside him, turning this over.

"Madame Brassard is devoted to him," I said. "I've rarely seen such feeling. She watches him in a way that is almost protective."

"She adores him," said Darling. "And she knows he is a doomed man, and she knows why, and she will not tell me either. It is, as I say, damnably mystifying."

He was quiet for a moment.

"Now. Your afternoon with Miss Brandon was not, I hope, entirely wasted?"

I gave him a look.

"My visit to the tower," he said, without apology, "was arranged with the specific purpose of giving you time alone with her. She has lived in this household for three years. She is

observant. She is not party to whatever Cardona and Madame are concealing—I'm certain of that—but she will have noticed things neither of them would think to mention. I would rather you asked than me. She'll speak more freely to you."

"That is a rather calculated thing to say."

"It is a practical observation. The fact that you find her charming is your own affair entirely, and I mention it only to note that it is useful." He smiled briefly. "I took photographs from the tower gallery, incidentally. The grounds are more interesting from above than from within."

He did not elaborate on this, and I knew better than to press him.

We had come to a point on the upper terrace from which the tower was fully visible—the grey square structure with its row of blank windows and the gallery at its crown.

"Ugly thing," I said.

"Very. But look up the slope, beyond the garden wall."

I followed his gaze. Above the treeline to the east, partly visible through a gap in the beeches, I could make out the corner of a roof and the top of what appeared to be a chimney stack in old red brick.

"That must be the Guest House," I said. "The property where Colin Thorne lives."

"Yes," said Darling. He stood looking at it for some time.

"Yes, I rather think it must."

He said nothing further, but turned and began to descend the terrace steps toward the lake.

"Let us go and interview the swans," he murmured.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AT THE MORTIMER ARMS

In certain moods Ben Darling was impossible as a companion, and I, who knew him well, had learned to leave him to his own devices at such times. These moods invariably corresponded with his encountering some problem whose centre he had not yet found. He did not become silent, exactly—he might answer a question, acknowledge a remark—but his attention was wholly elsewhere, turned inward, working through something by methods I could not follow. People might speak to him and he would hear them only dimly. Familiar faces might appear and he would not truly see them. He moved through the surface of the world whilst somewhere deeper he was entirely alone.

As we came to the lake at the foot of the terraced lawns, where water lilies grew and a small nation of swans had established itself, I felt this mood descend on him like a change in the weather. He stopped at the water's edge and stood there, apparently transfixed by the swans. He was not looking at them. I left him to it.

I pushed on across the valley to a swing gate that opened onto a public footpath. At the gate I turned. Darling stood exactly where I had left him, motionless beside the lake. I would have wagered that he saw nothing before him at all.

It was not yet three o'clock. I had time, and I was glad of it. I filled my pipe, found the footpath, and followed it into the valley.

It was a beautiful afternoon. The timber on the southern slopes was magnificent and the air carried that particular quality of English countryside in high summer—a compound of warm earth, cut grass, and something harder to name, which I have never encountered anywhere else. I passed a herd of Jersey cattle, crossed a stile, and found myself on a narrow road.

Almost at random I turned left. The road curved through a small village—a pub, a post office, a cluster of old cottages—and the pub was called the Mortimer Arms.

The Colonel's curaçao had made me thirsty. I went in.

The bar was dim and cool and smelled of old timber and something hoppy and pleasant. A woman behind the counter—small, neat, red-cheeked, with an air of running things efficiently—set a pint of bitter before me almost before I had settled. I thanked her and leaned against the counter.

There was one other person in the room.

He sat in an armchair to the right of the door, a glass of whisky on the windowsill beside him. He was perhaps forty, slight, and dressed in the quiet way of a man who owns reasonable clothes and pays them no attention. What arrested me was his face. It was a remarkable face—a high mathematical brow, dark eyes of unusual depth and intensity, a slight moustache above a small and rather sensitive mouth. His hair was worn rather long.

I had seen that face before. Not in life, but above a mantelpiece in Chancery Lane.

I did not intend to stare, but I must have done so, because the man looked up and spoke.

"You will pardon me, sir," he said. He had an American accent, faint but unmistakable. "But are you a literary man?"

He was not drunk, but he had been drinking steadily for some time. His manner was precise with the deliberate precision of a man maintaining it by effort.

"Journalism is one of several occupations in which I have failed," I said.

"You are not a fiction writer?"

"I lack the imagination for it."

He wagged his head slowly and took a sip of whisky.

"Nevertheless," he said, raising one finger, "you were thinking that I resembled Edgar Allan Poe."

I stared at him. The resemblance was so precise that I had been thinking of little else since I sat down.

"Good heavens," I said. "You resemble him in more ways than one, it appears. Would you tell me how you arrived at that?"

"I will tell you," he replied. "But first I must ask Mrs. Tupper to renew my glass, and I should be honoured if you would allow me to refill yours."

"Thank you, but no," I said.

"As you wish, sir," he replied, with grave courtesy.

He went to the counter, rapped twice, waited for Mrs. Tupper, and returned with a freshened glass. Then he settled back in the armchair as though preparing to deliver a paper.

"My name," he said, "is Colin Thorne, formerly of Richmond, Virginia, United States of America, and presently of the Guest House, Mid-Wexley, Surrey. At your service."

I returned the formality and gave my name.

"Delighted, Mr. Croft. Now. When you came through that door you glanced at me. Your eyes did not open wide, as happens when one recognises or thinks one recognises an acquaintance. They narrowed. That indicated retrospection—you were reaching for a memory. You looked away for a moment, focussing it. You found it. You looked back at me, and your successive glances read as follows: the hair worn uncommonly long; the mathematical brow; the eyes of a poet; the slight moustache; the small mouth; the weak chin; the glass at his elbow. The resemblance is complete. Knowing the resemblance to be complete, I ventured to test the hypothesis. It proved sound."

I had, in the course of my work, encountered some able minds. Colin Thorne's mind was of a different order. The reasoning was precise, the observation exact, and the deduction from both as natural as breathing. That he had deployed this faculty in an almost empty pub on a Tuesday afternoon, for the entertainment of a stranger, told me something about his present condition that was rather saddening.

"Your exposition is remarkable, Mr. Thorne," I said. "And quite correct in every particular."

"Yes," he said, and for a moment his expression was not sober or drunk but simply tired. "I have spent my life observing the behaviour of others. I cannot say it has been of particular benefit to me. Financially, I mean."

He looked at his glass.

"I would not have you think me a habitual drinker, Mr. Croft. I have been—there have been domestic difficulties, lately, and I find—" He stopped, emptied the glass, and set it down with great care. "I find this helps."

Mrs. Tupper appeared from somewhere behind the bar and addressed Thorne directly.

"I won't serve you any more today, Mr. Thorne," she said, not unkindly. "I've told you before and I'm telling you again. It's for your own good."

Thorne drew himself upright with dignity.

"Mrs. Tupper," he said, "am I to be refused?"

"You are," she said firmly, "and there's an end of it."

He looked as though he might contest this, then decided not to. He subsided into the armchair and seemed momentarily to have forgotten that I was there.

The door opened quietly.

A man stepped in from the afternoon light. He was slight and unhurried, East Asian in appearance, perhaps sixty, wearing a dark jacket and carrying a cloth cap in both hands. He looked directly at Thorne with an expression of patient familiarity.

"Mr. Thorne," he said, in quiet, accented English. "Mrs. Thorne asks if you might come home now."

Thorne looked up. Something moved in his face—a complicated thing, not quite guilt and not quite relief, but with elements of both.

"Ah Lum," he said, after a moment. "Yes. I see."

He sat still for another few seconds, staring at the empty glass. Then he stood, collected his hat and stick from the windowsill, and turned to me with a gravity that was entirely sober.

"Mr. Croft, I should esteem it a kindness if you would visit me before you leave Surrey. My visitors are very few. Anyone in the village will direct you to the Guest House. I believe we might find we have interests in common." He paused. "Good-day, sir."

He bowed, went down the step, and walked away with Ah Lum beside him—steadily, without hurry, as if the afternoon were simply continuing as planned.

I watched them go, then turned to Mrs. Tupper.

"The same most afternoons," she said, before I could ask. "Has been for the best part of six months. His wife sends someone to fetch him every time."

"What a waste," I said, thinking of that face, that mind. "Has he lived here long?"

"Three years or so. He took the old Guest House up at Mid-Wexley—it had been empty for years. Came down quietly enough with his wife and his books and what have you. Barely seen for the first two years. Then this started." She shook her head.

"Something wrong up at that house. I don't know what, but there's been something wrong for months."

"Is he a writer?"

"So they say. Academic sort of writing, I believe. Specialist."

She began tidying the counter.

"I should say," she added, with the confidence of someone whose bar has served as a confessional for thirty years, "that he is a very unhappy man. Whatever it is that's troubling him, the drink doesn't fix it, and he knows it doesn't fix it, and he keeps on anyway."

I put down my glass and thanked her.

"His invitation," she said, as I reached the door. "I wouldn't set too much store by it, sir, if you don't mind my saying. He has asked people before, in that state. When they've turned up sober at his gate, they've found it shut in their faces."

"I'll bear that in mind," I said.

And I came out of the Mortimer Arms into the afternoon with a great deal to think about.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE CALL

Of tea on the veranda that afternoon I retain several notable impressions. I saw Darling's apparent distraction for what it was—a studied performance. He was alert to everything, filing it all, and what he was filing most carefully, I gradually decided, was Madame Brassard.

She was extraordinary company. Her English was rapid and slightly imprecise, which she turned to advantage—reaching for a word, discarding it, choosing a better one with an impatience that was wholly French. She was vivacious to a degree that seemed to make the afternoon brighter around her, and it was difficult to believe that her gaiety was not entirely genuine. I decided it was half genuine and half performance, and that she could not herself have told you which half was which.

She was fond of Val Brandon—this was unmistakably real. She watched the girl with a close, almost proprietary attention, and when Val spoke she leaned forward with an interest that had nothing of condescension in it. For a woman of Madame's force of personality this was unusual, and I found it touching.

"Val, my dear," she said at one point, leaning across and touching the girl's sleeve, "those arms of yours are entirely wasted in long sleeves. I have told you before."

Val laughed and coloured.

"Oh, Madame."

"Do not 'oh, Madame' me. In France a woman dresses for maximum effect. In England a woman dresses to avoid notice. This is not a philosophy, it is a surrender."

"Some of us," said Val, composedly, "are not engaged in a campaign."

Madame threw up her hands.

"Juan," she appealed, "is she not impossible?"

"She is quite right," said the Colonel, smiling. "Not every woman is a strategist by temperament."

"Every woman is a strategist by necessity," Madame replied, with conviction. "The only question is whether she admits it."

Ben Darling, who had been apparently contemplating the middle distance, laughed at this with genuine amusement. Madame was delighted.

"You see?" she said to Val. "Even the Englishman agrees with me."

"I agreed only that it was well put," said Darling. "The proposition itself I reserve judgement on."

"Reserve what you like," said Madame cheerfully. "I am always right."

There was a warmth to the hour—the veranda in afternoon shadow, the scent of the roses below, the swans visible at the far end of the lawn—that made its underlying tensions all the more unsettling when I remembered them.

Presently Madame announced she was going into Haslemere. She rang a small bell and Mateo appeared.

"Is the car available? Tell Dawes to bring it round. Val, you will come with me."

As she wheeled briskly back through the drawing room, Val following, Colonel Cardona rose and moved to assist. Madame, who was already halfway through the door, turned sharply.

"Sit down, Juan."

Something flashed in her eyes—not irritation but something sharper, more urgent. The Colonel stopped, and for a moment the two of them regarded each other across the room. Then he sat down without a word.

I found this small incident peculiar. Whatever passed between them in that look was of long standing, deeply understood by both.

A few minutes later a compact estate car came around the gravel path. Dawes—the same driver who had collected us in the morning—helped Madame into the passenger seat with practised ease. She settled herself, gave the Colonel a brilliant wave, called "Au revoir!" to us both, and they were gone.

Cardona stood bareheaded on the veranda steps listening to the engine fade among the trees. He stood there until the sound was entirely gone. Then he turned back to us.

"Gentlemen," he said, "we have much to discuss. Perhaps the study would serve better than here."

"Your own study, I would suggest," said Darling.

The Colonel glanced at him quickly.

"You think there is a risk of being overheard?"

"I think we should neglect no reasonable precaution. Your own statement makes clear that this house has been under observation."

Cardona led us through the library to a smaller room beyond—a study in the practical sense, in contrast to the decorative richness of everything else in the house. There were files, a good desk, a wall of reference books, and on the desk a laptop and a secure phone. It was the room of a man who had once conducted serious affairs.

Darling took out his phone, opened his notes, and looked at Cardona directly.

"Several points remain incomplete," he said. "Let me address them in order. The incidents of last month—the surveillance, the break-in—occurred immediately before the full moon. Now the bat wing has appeared. This is the pattern repeating. Agreed?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now. When you returned to Cuba and fired at the figure outside your Havana apartment—you have said you don't know whether you hit him. I want to press you on this. In the months that followed, what changed?"

"The frequency increased. And the methods. Six attempts in eighteen months, where previously there had been only indirect approaches."

"That pattern is consistent with a leadership change within the faction," said Darling. "Someone killed or incapacitated, a successor taking a harder line. Can you tell me the name of the

man you saw that night in Havana? The man who led the ceremony in the clearing twenty-five years ago?"

Cardona was quiet for a moment.

"I knew him as Marchena. He had been on the island long before my posting there. He was perhaps forty when I first encountered him. In the clearing he wore the ceremonial bat-wing vestments. After I fired he was never seen again."

"And if alive today?"

"An old man. Seventy, perhaps more."

"Did he speak English?"

"A little. I was not aware that it mattered."

Darling made a note. "It may matter considerably. Now—you said in London that the faction employs what I'll call spiritual terror as a primary instrument. The bat wing as a death token. The effect on the recipient's mind. And yet the actual attempts on your life have been conventional—rifle, knife, blade. Can you explain the discrepancy?"

"I told you I recovered from the fever that followed my visit to the clearing. The physicians could not account for it. There was also the young woman who helped us."

"Whose wasting sickness you believe was induced."

"I believe it, yes."

"But the same method was not applied to you."

"No. I survived what should have incapacitated me. After that, I think they understood that a different approach was needed for me specifically." He said this without pride, simply as an observation.

Darling leaned forward.

"Colonel Cardona. I want to say something which may offend you, and I ask you in advance to hear it out."

The Colonel inclined his head.

"Your will to survive appears to have weakened. I have observed it since your arrival at my office yesterday. I have observed it again today. You are a man making peace with an outcome he has already accepted."

Cardona was very still for a moment. Then he stood up, and I saw the controlled anger in his face.

"You presume a great deal, Mr. Darling."

"I occupy the position of a specialist and you that of my patient. The most dangerous thing a patient can do is to stop fighting. I would rather see you angry than resigned."

The Colonel stood looking down at him for a long moment. Something worked in his expression. Then he sat back down, slowly.

"You are right," he said. "And I am ashamed of it. What I said was true: awake, I fear no man living. But asleep—"

He stopped.

"Tell me about asleep," said Darling quietly.

Cardona lit a cigarette and smoked half of it before speaking.

"You recall my telling you about the young woman who helped Vega? Who gave us information about the path through the wetlands?"

"She died of a wasting sickness," said Darling. "After a bat wing was found on her door."

"Yes. But there was something more. Before she died she was found by neighbours wandering at night, some distance from her home. She had no memory of leaving. The evidence suggested she was walking in her sleep, toward the clearing. As if she were being called there."

Darling said nothing.

"On the night of the last full moon," Cardona continued, and his voice was very steady, "I retired early. I have been sleeping poorly and the evening had tired me. I woke in the dark, very cold. I was standing outside, in my nightclothes, on the gravel path alongside the east wing."

"You had walked there in your sleep."

"I must have done. I had descended from my room, unbarred a side door I do not use, and walked entirely around the east wing of the house. What woke me was pain. I had cut the sole of my bare foot on the gravel."

A silence.

"Your room faces the lake," said Darling. "On the south of the house."

"Yes."

"And the path where you found yourself. Where does it lead?"

Cardona met his eyes.

"It leads to the Tudor garden. Beneath the tower."

Neither of us spoke. Outside in the garden a bird sang once and stopped.

"You had no memory of any dream that had drawn you there?" asked Darling.

"None. I woke with no sense of having dreamed at all. Only the cold, and the pain, and the gravel under my feet."

Darling was quiet for a moment. Then he looked at his notes.

"There is still the matter of the neighbour you mentioned in London," he said. "I think we are now at the point where you should tell me his name."

Cardona stood again and moved to the window. He stood with his back to us, looking out at the garden.

"Mr. Darling," he said at last, "I regret having raised that subject. What I have is not a suspicion. It is—a desperate doubt, founded on a single fact and nothing more. I feel it would be unjust to name this person without more to go on."

"What is the single fact?"

"He is, to my knowledge, the only person living within ten miles of this house who has ever set foot in Cuba."

A pause.

"I think I should like to draw my own conclusions from that fact," said Darling.

Cardona turned from the window.

"I ask you to forget that I ever mentioned him. I insist upon it."

He said it with a quiet finality that left no room for argument. The conversation was over on that point.

Darling sat back, and I saw in his face something I recognised: the particular quality of frustration that comes not

from lack of information but from being deliberately refused it by the very person who needs your help most. He had been given almost everything, and at the last moment the door had been shut.

The three of us sat in the study as the afternoon moved toward evening. I sensed that Darling was listening to something none of us could hear—working along the lines of that peculiar intuition that had served him so often before. And I sensed, too, that whatever he was beginning to perceive in the shape of this case, it was something that none of us would find it easy to accept.

CHAPTER NINE

OBEAH

The conversation in Cardona's study left me with an unpleasant residue that persisted through the remainder of the afternoon. I went up to change for dinner earlier than necessary, and finding Darling's room empty—which surprised me, as he had been gone a long time—stood at his open window for a while, looking down at the Tudor garden in the falling dusk.

It was very beautiful. The last of the sun came through the trees at a low angle, turning half the garden gold and leaving the rest in a violet shadow. The sundial caught a last precise needle of light. I thought of the Colonel waking cold on the gravel path, barefoot, in the dark, on his way here without knowing it. The beauty of the garden and the wrongness of that image sat together in my mind in a way I found hard to account for.

I noticed a book on Darling's dressing table.

It was a substantial academic volume, its spine reading Spirit and Shadow: Obeah, Vodou and Caribbean Ritual Belief. On the assumption that Darling had brought it specifically for this case I picked it up, switched on the lamp, and began to read.

The text was scholarly and careful, the author taking evident pains to treat its subject with accuracy and respect. I read for some minutes, following the broad history of Obeah as it had developed across the Caribbean basin from West African antecedents, carried by enslaved people and preserved in forms

that evolved through generations of adaptation and resistance. The author was clear on one point that I found striking: the traditions were not uniform, not static, and not the superstitious nonsense that outsiders had routinely dismissed them as. They were living, complex, and in certain communities still widely observed.

Then I found the underlined passages.

Darling had marked them in pencil—double lines beside two sections in particular. The first concerned the etymology of the word Obeah itself, tracing it to the term Obi, used on the east coast of Africa to denote sorcery and fetishism in a general sense, and from there to still older roots: Ob or Aub in the Egyptian language, denoting a serpent, with a lineage running back through biblical prohibition and the Witch of Endor to the ancient oracular deity Oubois, the royal serpent and emblem of the sun. I found this genuinely arresting. Whatever one believed about the modern practice, its conceptual foundations were ancient and far-reaching.

The second marked passage stopped me cold.

It read, in full:

"In a recent paper published in the Journal of Caribbean Religious Studies, the American scholar Colin Thorne offered a compelling if controversial argument regarding the central symbol of Obeah practice. Thorne proposed that whilst snakes and scorpions have long been recognised as sacred in Vodou tradition, the true totemic emblem—particularly in its Cuban and island

variants—is the bat, and specifically the Vampire Bat of South and Central America.

“Thorne further noted that the physiological symptoms reported in those believed to be dying under Obeah influence—progressive anaemia, wasting, unexplained decline—are closely and precisely paralleled by the documented effects of repeated nocturnal blood-feeding by *Desmodus rotundus*. He did not claim causative equivalence. He claimed something more unsettling: that the practitioners of these traditions, across several generations, appear to have been aware of this parallelism and to have deliberately exploited it.”

I set the book down on the bed.

For a moment I simply sat there, listening to the house settle in the evening and to the distant sounds of dinner being prepared somewhere below. My thoughts were moving very quickly, connecting things in a way that made the room feel smaller than it had a few minutes ago.

Colin Thorne. A published authority on exactly this subject. Living not a mile from Mordaunt’s Folly. Known to Cardona—or at least, known of—and withheld from Darling by deliberate choice.

I sat with this for some time, growing increasingly impatient for Darling’s return. When the door finally opened and he came in, I started up from the chair.

“Darling—I have just read something rather extraordinary.”

He stopped and looked at me. His expression was already charged with something; he was in one of his irritable moods, which I recognised, and beneath the irritability was the barely

contained energy of a man who has learned something he is not yet ready to organise.

"This book," I said, holding it up. "The passages you marked. The Colin Thorne article."

He stared at me for a moment with an odd expression.

"I found that book in my own library the night after Cardona visited," he said. "I marked it then. I brought it down this morning."

"But Darling—Colin Thorne lives here. He's the Guest House, up on the hillside. I met him this afternoon at the Mortimer Arms."

"I know."

"You know?"

"I learned it an hour ago. From the local police." He dropped onto the bed, reached for his pipe, and began filling it with controlled ferocity. "Which is precisely why I am annoyed with you, Croft. If you had mentioned meeting this man when you came back this afternoon, it would have saved me considerable time."

"I had no idea you didn't know. I thought you'd probably already found him in some database. How was I to know—"

"You are quite right," he said, dropping the irritability as quickly as it had come. "I am in a foul temper and it is not your fault. I apologise."

He lay back and stared at the ceiling.

"I had Niles arrange a car from London—I didn't want to use the Colonel's. I didn't want Dawes knowing where I was going. I drove to Mickleford to speak to the local police."

"What were you expecting to find?"

"Background on the household. On Thorne. On anything unusual in the area that might not have reached Cardona." He drew on the pipe. "What I found instead was one Inspector Aldridge."

The way he said the name suggested a man describing a natural disaster.

"A large person," Darling continued, "bearing a really interesting resemblance to a walrus, but lacking that creature's intelligence. He had never heard of me. He appeared to regard my interest in the case as suspicious in itself. It was not until I had someone call from London that he consented to treat me as a colleague rather than a person of interest. And his new manner was, if anything, more infuriating than the old one. The man adopted the bearing of a senior officer reluctantly hearing a complaint from a subordinate. If we are compelled to work with Inspector Aldridge before this is over, God help us all."

He said this with such complete conviction that I laughed, and his own humour returned with the speed it always did once he had finished being angry.

"Tell me about Thorne," he said, sitting up. "Everything."

I told him. He listened without interrupting, tying his bow tie by feel, watching me in the mirror. By the time I had finished he was dressed and had refilled his pipe.

"The resemblance to Poe," he said, turning from the mirror.

"Unmistakable. The photograph above your mantelpiece—he could have sat for it."

"And the deduction. His observation of how you were looking at him."

"Precise. Methodical. A better piece of reasoning than most professionals I have encountered."

Darling nodded slowly.

"And yet he is drinking himself to pieces in the local pub and being fetched home by his assistant. A man of that calibre."

"Domestic difficulties, he said."

"Yes." Darling stood up. "Croft, I must ask you to do something tomorrow that you may not welcome."

"Visit him."

"Visit him. You have an invitation of sorts—he extended it in front of a witness. The landlady will remember. That gives you a better reason to appear at his door than I would have."

"She warned me he may not remember making it."

"That is a risk we must take. In the circumstances, the connection between this man and everything we are dealing with cannot be left uninvestigated. I am not suggesting he is responsible for the threat to Cardona. I am saying that he knows things we need to know, and that you have the best chance of getting them."

I agreed, though not without reservations. Then:

"You don't seriously believe he's involved in the attempts on the Colonel's life?"

Darling took his dinner jacket from the chair and turned to face me.

"My dear Croft, you may recall that I mentioned recently the prospect of retiring from this profession."

"You said you'd be kicked out as an incompetent."

"The assessment stands. Because as to the precise connection—if any—between the Colonel's account, the bat wing on his door, and Mr. Colin Thorne who lives in the house on the hillside and has published academic papers on the very subject at the centre of this case—I have not the foggiest notion."

He looked at me with an expression I knew well—the one that combined genuine bewilderment with the particular pleasure he took in being genuinely bewildered.

"Auguste Dupin never confessed defeat," he added. "In this, at least, I have surpassed him."

CHAPTER TEN

THE NIGHT WALKER

If lunch had seemed extravagant, dinner at Mordaunt's Folly was excessive in the most enjoyable possible way. I had thought I knew good food. I discovered I had been naive. Cardona's chef had come with him from Cuba and clearly regarded each service as a personal statement. The Colonel was an epicure with an apparently unlimited budget, and the combination was remarkable.

Its excellence prompted a curious incident.

"You approve of my chef," said the Colonel, at one point, catching my expression.

"He is worthy of his employer," I said.

Cardona smiled and bowed in his courtly way. Madame Brassard beamed at me as if I had said something personally gratifying. Then the Colonel continued:

"He was with me in Cuba for many years. There are London restaurants that would take him on tomorrow."

"Surely he is not leaving you?" I asked.

Cardona became momentarily—and uncharacteristically—flustered.

"No, no. I was merely thinking that he might one day wish to-better himself. You understand."

I understood very well. The implication was unmistakable: he was thinking about what would become of his household after he was gone. He had said it without appearing to think, and he caught himself a half-second too late.

I glanced at Madame Brassard. Even through her carefully applied makeup I saw her colour change. She turned immediately to Darling and addressed some remark to him, but her eyes for that instant had been those of a woman watching someone walk toward a cliff edge.

Darling had seen it. I knew by the slight tightening around his mouth that he had filed it.

Val Brandon, across the table, met my eyes briefly and looked away.

I had been watching her throughout dinner and had come, reluctantly, to a conclusion I had been resisting: that her gaiety was maintained by effort, and that beneath it she was living under a sustained and specific dread. She was beautifully dressed, she laughed at the right moments, she gave as good as she got in conversation. But I had seen her, once, when she thought no one was looking, and the expression I caught in that unguarded second was one I will not easily forget.

Madame recovered quickly and dominated the second half of the meal with complete authority. She was discussing, of all things, blushing.

"Val, you have the most wonderful blush," she announced. "I would give half my pearls to be able to blush like that."

"Madame," said Val, colouring immediately and confirming the point.

"There, you see? Juan, is it not perfect?"

"I have seen Madame blush perfectly," said the Colonel, with a slight smile.

"Never," said Madame firmly. "My last genuine blush was when my second husband introduced me to my first husband's wife."

"Madame!" exclaimed Val.

"In fables we renew our youth," said Madame, with great satisfaction.

"Our youth," said the Colonel, with a different kind of smile, and a brief silence fell that contained rather a lot.

"Why sigh for it, Juan?" said Madame, immediately. "Old age is only tragic for those who have never been young. We have both been young. Gloriously young."

The Colonel looked at her for a moment, and the warmth in his expression was unguarded.

"Thank God for that, Marie," he said.

When the ladies had gone and the three of us were left with the port-Mateo serving, then withdrawing-Cardona settled back and offered cigars. Darling declined, produced his pipe, and received from Cardona the observation that a man should always smoke what he preferred. To Darling there was no more agreeable compliment possible.

The window was open onto the garden. The moon had risen and the lawns were extraordinary-a deep, still silver-green, the trees black against the sky. A warm night, and a very quiet one.

"Gentlemen," said the Colonel, "I hope you do not regret your fishing holiday."

"I could cheerfully spend the remainder of my days in such surroundings," replied Darling. Then, without changing his tone: "I have to remember, however, that I am here on business. I have

spoken with Mateo and some of the other staff about the entry to the house a month ago, and about the bat wing found on the door. I have learned everything there is to be learned from those sources."

"And your conclusion?"

"I might be able to form one if you would answer a simple question."

Cardona leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, rolling a cigarette with that automatic dexterity.

"Ask it."

"Have you any idea who nailed the bat wing to your door?"

The Colonel's eyes opened fractionally wider.

"You have heard my story, Mr. Darling. If I knew the explanation, why would I come to you?"

Darling drew on his pipe. His expression did not shift.

"I wondered specifically if your suspicions tended toward Mr. Colin Thorne."

The effect was immediate and startling. Cardona's face did something I can only describe as a convulsion—a brief, violent contraction of the features, quickly suppressed. He gripped the arms of his chair and then released them. When he spoke his voice was entirely level.

"What makes you say that name?"

"Do you know him?"

"We have never met."

"You know of him by reputation?"

"I have heard of him." The arrogance that occasionally surfaced in Cardona's voice appeared now, cooling the room slightly. "I have little in common with American academics, Mr. Darling."

Before Darling could continue, Mateo appeared at the door and addressed several quiet words in Spanish to the Colonel. Cardona rose with apologies, begged our indulgence, and withdrew.

Darling and I were briefly alone. He said nothing, merely refilled his pipe with great care. Then:

"I have some messages to send," he said. "Carry on with your old duties, Croft. Your new ones don't begin until morning."

He left me to find my own way to the drawing room.

The two ladies were seated on the long settee, Madame vivacious and talking rapidly. I drew up a chair. Val accepted the offer of coffee, Madame was already smoking, and we were settled comfortably when Mateo reappeared and spoke quietly to Madame.

She turned to Val. "My dear, I will be back shortly. I am sure Mr. Croft will manage without me."

Mateo helped Madame into her motorised chair with the ease of long practice, and she wheeled herself out with considerable speed, leaving Val and me alone.

I was, at that moment, purely and simply delighted by the situation. It was only a moment later that Val Brandon suddenly went still, her head turning slightly.

"Did you hear something?" she said, in a lowered voice.

"No. What sort of—"

"A sound. Almost like—" she paused. "The flapping of wings."

She had gone pale. I saw in her face then what I had only partially registered before: that she was frightened. Not startled by a sound, but carrying a persistent, deep-seated fear that surfaced when she dropped her guard. Her eyes were wide and very still.

"Miss Brandon," I said, "you alarm me. How long have you been frightened like this?"

"Every night," she said. "Every night since I don't know when. If someone had not come—" she stopped herself. "I had nearly decided to leave."

"Tell me," I said.

She glanced at the door. Then she turned back.

"There are footsteps in this house at night," she said. "In the corridor outside my room. I have heard them many times over the past two months. Always late, long after everyone has gone to bed."

"Servants?"

"No. I know the sound of everyone in this house. These are unfamiliar."

"Could you tell more than that? Man or woman?"

She hesitated.

"A woman. Light, furtive steps. And they always go in the same direction—toward Colonel Cardona's room, at the far end of the corridor."

I said nothing. The fire had died down to embers and the room was very quiet.

"The first time, they stopped right outside my door," she continued. "I was lying awake listening—Madame had told me the Colonel had seen someone in the grounds the previous night. I was already frightened. And then these footsteps came along the corridor and stopped. Right there."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing. I was too frightened to move. My heart was—" she made a small gesture. "Then they went on, toward the Colonel's end, and I heard nothing more."

"Your door was not locked?"

"It has been locked every night since," she said, with a brief, humourless smile.

"And this has happened repeatedly?"

"Many times. And the servants all sleep in the west wing—Mateo locks the connecting door at night. So whatever is moving through the corridor at two in the morning is not a servant."

She let that sit.

"You mean someone is inside the house," I said slowly, "who is not part of the household."

"What other explanation is there?" she said. "In a house this size, with the east wing entirely disused and the tower locked—what other explanation could there be?"

I had none to offer.

"There is something else," she said, and now her voice was very quiet indeed. "Twice I have been woken by a sound. I was deeply asleep both times, and I cannot be precise, but I sat up

knowing that something had woken me—a cry of some kind. Not close. Somewhere in the house.”

“You have no idea from which direction?”

“None. It was too brief and I was too confused. But it was not a dream.”

I sat with this. Then:

“You understand, I think, the relationship between Madame Brassard and Colonel Cardona?”

Val smiled slightly, without surprise.

“Is it so evident?” she said.

“To any observant person.”

“She would do anything for him,” said Val quietly. “Anything at all. Whatever is happening here, whatever she knows about it—and I believe she knows more than she has told anyone—she is protecting him in the only way she has left.”

Before I could respond the door opened and Madame Brassard returned, moving briskly.

“Oh la la,” she announced. “The Colonel has overtired himself. I have sent him to bed with my firmest instructions.” She looked at me. “He makes his apologies. He knows you will understand.”

I expressed concern.

“His health is fragile,” said Madame, more quietly. “He pushes himself too hard.” Then, in a different tone entirely: “But Mr. Ben Darling is here. We want no more unpleasantness at Mordaunt’s Folly. He will sort it out. Yes?”

She said this with a confidence that I suspected was, like most things about Madame Brassard, primarily a performance.

Darling rejoined us after another half hour, by which time Madame had told three anecdotes about people I had never heard of—all very funny, none entirely believable—and had gradually wound herself down into a mood of elegant fatigue. By ten o'clock we had all said good night.

At my door, Darling paused.

"Sleep well, Croft," he said. "I may be waking you early."

He offered nothing further, and went into his room and closed the door.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE SHADOW ON THE BLIND

Perhaps it was unreasonable of me, but Darling's curtness at my door sat ill with me. That he wanted to be alone was obvious. That he had formed some theory and was keeping it to himself until he could test it was equally obvious. But knowing what I knew from Val Brandon's account, and burning to share it with him, I found the exclusion hard to accept.

I stood at the window for a long while. The moon was almost full and the night was warm—warm in the deep English way that only comes a few weeks each summer, when the air holds the heat of the day long past midnight. Below me the box hedge was a dense shadow and beyond it, moonlit, the courtyard lay still. To my right the yews blocked the Tudor garden. The house was completely silent.

Eventually I turned in and, somewhat to my surprise, slept.

I was woken by a hand on my shoulder.

It was dark. My phone said 1:48am.

"All right, Croft," came Darling's voice, very low. "Don't make any noise."

I sat up.

"What's happened?"

"Nothing alarming. I want to talk while it's fresh. Don't put the light on."

"Why not?"

"It's nearly two in the morning. A light in your room might be noticed."

He settled on the edge of the bed. I could make out his silhouette against the dim rectangle of the window, and when I had found my cigarettes and lit one I could see his face—set, intent, working through something.

"I owe you a small confession," he said. "When I had the car sent down from London yesterday, that was not the only thing I had sent."

"What else?"

"A folding ladder. One of the emergency fire-escape type—compact, hooks over a window ledge. I brought it in under my coat last night. About eleven o'clock I used it to leave from my window without disturbing anyone in the house."

I stared at his outline in the dark.

"You went out."

"I did. I know it is a breach of the Colonel's hospitality, but then so is his behaviour toward me. He has withheld material information and I have a professional reputation to protect. I circled the house and the grounds for about two hours."

"What were you looking for?"

"First: whether there were any signs of an external watcher. Whether, for instance, the Guest House showed any lights at that hour. It did not. All dark."

"And second?"

Darling drew on his cigarette. There was a brief pause.

"Second," he said, "I wanted to confirm whether the manifestations from which Cardona has been suffering originate inside this house or outside it. On that point I now have evidence."

"One window in Mordaunt's Folly," he continued, "was lit."

"At two in the morning?"

"The light is, so far as I know, still there."

I felt the hairs on my arms rise slightly.

"Whose window?"

"Do you recall Miss Brandon mentioning a small smoke-room adjacent to the Colonel's bedroom? Southeast corner of the building?"

"She described hearing footsteps go in that direction."

"Yes. That is the room with the light in it."

I thought about this. "The Colonel couldn't sleep," I said. "He went to his smoke-room."

"Perhaps. But Madame sent him to bed several hours ago, insisting he rest. And the Colonel is not alone."

"What do you mean?"

"Twice," said Darling, "I saw a shadow on the blind."

I said nothing.

"Not his shadow. I watched carefully. There were two distinct shadows. The second was a woman's."

I considered this for a moment, then said, carefully: "The staff? Mrs. Tasker—I haven't met her but Mateo mentioned a housekeeper—"

"I interviewed Mrs. Tasker yesterday," said Darling. "She is a stout, short woman of about sixty, a local woman, been with the house for years. The outline of the shadow on that blind does not correspond to Mrs. Tasker in any possible configuration."

"Then Madame could have gone up—"

"Madame Brassard cannot manage the stairs unaided. You know that."

A pause.

"And Mateo locks the communicating door to the servants' wing at night," I said.

"Quite. Which leaves us, Croft, facing a situation that I find extremely puzzling. And I want to be fair to you: I have suspected, since early this afternoon, that there is someone in this house who should not be here. Someone not of the household. That is why I wanted to inspect the tower rooms during the day."

"You thought they might be inhabited."

"I thought it possible. They are not—I examined them carefully. But the footsteps Miss Brandon described in the corridor, heading toward Cardona's end of the building, are consistent with—"

"Stop," I said. "You've been waiting for me to tell you what Val said tonight."

"I have been rather obviously waiting, yes. I retired when I did partly because I could see you were bursting with it, and I preferred to hear it with a clear head."

I told him. The footsteps in the corridor. The pause outside her door. The direction they always went. The cries in the night, twice, that had woken her from sleep.

Darling listened without interruption. When I finished:

"The footsteps and the shadow on the blind are the same person," he said. "A woman. Not a servant, not a visitor, not anyone Miss Brandon recognises. Which means someone is moving through this house at night who has no visible reason to be in it."

"In a house this size," I said slowly, "with an entire disused wing—"

"Yes," said Darling. "Precisely."

We were quiet for a moment. Outside, the night was very still. Then I said:

"Darling, I thought I heard something just now. Like wings."

"You did," he replied. "An owl. It landed in the elm outside your window about thirty seconds ago."

I exhaled.

"Your imagination is less disciplined than mine," he said, without any unkindness. "Which is relevant, because it means you will understand something I am about to tell you in a way that I, with my disciplined imagination, cannot allow myself to."

"Go on."

"When the woman raised her arms—she did so twice while I was watching—the shadow on the blind took on a particular shape. I am obliged to describe it accurately."

"What shape?"

"Remarkably like that of a bat."

He said it quietly, as a simple statement of observed fact. The words settled into the darkness of the room with a weight that I felt physically.

Neither of us spoke for a moment. The corridor outside was absolutely silent. Then Darling stood.

Very slowly, very carefully, he crossed to the door.

I watched him. I saw him stop and tilt his head.

He raised his hand toward me—stay still—then turned the handle without a sound and opened the door an inch, then two, then wide enough to look through.

Then he stepped into the corridor and was gone.

I got up and went to the doorway.

He was standing a few yards away, completely still, listening. He looked back at me and mouthed: downstairs.

He moved silently to the head of the main staircase. I followed. We stood looking down into the hall, which lay in near darkness below, lit only by a faint glow from the tall window over the front doors.

Nothing visible. But there was a sound—barely audible—the delicate complaint of a floorboard under a careful footstep.

"Who's there?" said Darling, sharply.

His torch came on and swept the hall below. Empty. Several doors, all closed. He moved quickly down the stairs and I followed. He tried each door in turn. All locked. The servants' wing door: locked. He stood in the centre of the hall and turned in a slow circle with the torch.

Nothing.

He came back up the stairs, and as he reached me I heard it—the very faint sound of a door being closed at some distance, muffled by the thickness of the house.

“Did you hear it?” he said.

“A door closing.”

“Someone crossed this hall. And yet there is nowhere in this hall where anyone could have hidden from me.”

He looked at me, and his expression in the light of the torch held something I very rarely saw in Ben Darling’s face, which was genuine perplexity.

“The Colonel’s visitor has left him,” he said. “And unless something quite unforeseen occurs, Croft, I shall be throwing up this case tomorrow.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

MORNING MISTS

A member of the household staff whose name was Tomás woke me at half past seven with tea, toast, and a peach on a small tray. He was younger than Mateo and more communicative, with better English and a pleasanter manner.

"Breakfast is served at half past nine if you wish, sir," he told me, "but the ladies rarely come down. Would you prefer your room? Mr. Darling has asked for nothing."

"Is there a horse available?" I said, on impulse. I had not ridden in some time and the morning through the window looked exactly right for it.

"Certainly, sir. The groom Jim will take you out. The heath is the best place at this hour."

Twenty minutes later I was in the stable yard meeting Jim, a quiet and capable young man who knew every inch of the surrounding countryside and managed his horse with the ease of someone who had grown up around animals. We took the drive out at a walk, nodded to Mateo at the gate lodge, and turned east.

The lane down to the valley was extraordinarily steep—Jim described it as a seasonal stream in wet weather, and it was easy to believe—and we led the horses down on foot. Then we were on a good road and shortly after on the heath itself.

There was a heavy mist lying low over the heather, the kind that burns off by mid-morning and leaves a day of exceptional clarity. The scent of it—heather and damp earth and something

sweetly cool that I associate with English summer mornings and no other climate—was restorative in the most immediate way. We cantered side by side across the springy turf, Jim easy and quiet in the saddle, and the events of the previous night receded to something that felt, if not exactly manageable, at least more distant.

On the return we took a longer route that brought us up above Mordaunt's Folly. Through a gap in the beeches I caught a brief view of the house below—grey stone amid its lawns, the tower rising above the east wing, a faint mist still ghosting the grass. Then we rounded a bend and passed a Jacobean house so deeply set into its trees that even the morning sun had barely reached it, only the highest gable catching the light.

This, by its position, could only be the Guest House. It looked dark and slightly forbidding at that hour. Remembering that I had promised myself a call there later in the morning, I felt the agreeable confidence of the ride falter slightly.

We came back down through the valley meadows and into the stable yard from the south. I noted Madame Brassard's matched ponies in their stalls, and Jim mentioned she sometimes drove them in a light chaise—an image that charmed me, though I could not quite picture it.

I checked in on Darling on my way up. He was exactly as he had predicted: propped up in bed with the Times open on the coverlet and the Telegraph on the floor beside him, the former clearly finished and the latter in progress. His phone lay face-

down and apparently ignored on the bedside table. His pipe was going. He looked entirely content.

"Come riding," I said.

"Good heavens, no," he replied. "Exercise ruins concentration. How was the heath?"

"Excellent. The mist is almost gone."

"I am delighted to hear it," he said, and returned to his paper.

I bathed and dressed and went down to the south veranda for breakfast. The morning was by now fully established, warm and bright, and I sat with coffee and the kind of appetite that a ride and a good night's sleep produce together. I was reading something on my phone when a slight sound made me look up.

Val Brandon was standing at the veranda door with an enormous armful of roses. She was dressed simply in a pale blue summer dress with her arms bare, and she was smiling at me in a way that immediately improved the morning further.

"Good morning, Mr. Croft. Don't interrupt yourself—I'm just being useful."

She deposited the roses on the table beside my tray and began sorting them.

"I'm the official florist," she explained. "It justifies my existence. These will go on the luncheon table. Do you think we're rather barbaric, leaving you to breakfast alone?"

"I think the Colonel's approach to hospitality is exactly right," I said. "Allowing one's guests to perform at the breakfast table is the true barbarism."

"I quite agree," she said. "Only a very anxious host insists on his guests being cheerful before nine." She paused with a rose in each hand. "Did you ride?"

"Out to the heath. Your Jim is excellent company."

"He's been here since before I arrived. He knows the countryside better than anyone."

She worked quietly for a moment, sorting by colour with an attention that suggested she was thinking about something else.

"I passed the Guest House on the way back," I said.

She looked up.

"Did you? It always looks rather grim to me at a distance. All those trees."

"I am going to call there this morning, actually. I met Mr. Thorne at the Mortimer Arms yesterday."

She stared at me.

"Really? I had always thought he was completely unapproachable. Bit of an ogre."

"Not at all. He has considerable charm. I must say I was surprised—it isn't obvious from the outside."

"Well," she said, with a slight smile, "since you say so, I might as well admit that he has always seemed charming to me, the few times I've seen him on the lane. I've never spoken to him. Have you met his wife?"

"No. Is she American too?"

"I don't know. I've seen her a few times—she goes out early, usually alone. She's quite young. Very striking."

"Striking how?"

Val considered this.

"Small. Very dark. Something about her that makes you look twice, though I couldn't tell you exactly why. She always seems to be in a hurry, or perhaps just preoccupied. I've never seen her stop to talk to anyone."

"I'm curious to meet her," I said. "Though I'm not certain my reception at the Guest House will be a warm one. Mrs. Tupper warned me his invitations don't always survive the night."

Val's expression grew thoughtful.

"I should warn you of something," she said. "The name Thorne is—I don't know the right word. It isn't spoken here. The Colonel has never, to my knowledge, mentioned him directly. But it's in the air somehow. An aversion."

"He told us last night he had never met Thorne."

"I'm sure that's true. But the aversion is real regardless. And Madame feels it too—if anything more strongly. I've no idea what it means."

She dismissed the subject with a small gesture and refilled my coffee.

"I should go," she said. "I have things to do before Madame needs me."

She gathered up the remaining roses and then paused.

"One thing, before you ask."

"Was I going to ask something?"

"I think you were going to ask if I heard the footsteps again last night."

I waited.

"I didn't," she said. "Perhaps I imagined it all. Perhaps it was the house settling, or Madame moving around at odd hours."

She said it lightly, but her eyes, when they briefly met mine before she turned away, told a different story. There was something there she was choosing not to give me. She was drawing a curtain, deliberately and with a specific reason.

She went inside with her roses. I sat with my coffee and the changed morning, and thought about what she had not said.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
AT THE GUEST HOUSE

I presented myself at the Guest House at half past eleven. My state of mind was troubled in ways I found difficult to isolate. Perhaps I was merely tired, but it seemed to me that the atmosphere of Mordaunt's Folly had changed again that morning—had darkened, in spite of the blazing summer sky. The shadow that lay over the house was more palpable than at any point since our arrival.

The Colonel had appeared at breakfast looking entirely well, which was in itself slightly strange given Madame's account of his health the previous night. Madame herself was the change I could not account for. Her vivacity was there, deployed with its usual precision, but something in her eyes was different—a stricken quality, a bitterness of the kind that belongs to a person who has made a necessary sacrifice and is not reconciled to it.

I had said something of this to Darling as I left.

"Evidently you have forgotten," he replied, without looking up from his newspaper, "that tonight is the night of the full moon."

That was all. But it was enough.

The Guest House, glimpsed from the road, had an air of mild neglect. Close inspection revised this: the brass knocker and letterbox were polished to a high shine, the windows were clean, the curtains fresh. But the building itself wanted repainting and

the garden wanted proper attention. It was the home of someone who kept standards in the things that mattered to him and had no attention left for anything else.

Ah Lum answered the door. He gave me a long, level look.

"Is Mr. Thorne at home?" I asked.

"He is not available," said Ah Lum, and began to close the door.

"Would you give him my card?" I said. "I met him yesterday. He asked me to call."

A pause. Ah Lum considered this with the unhurried scepticism of a man who has seen several of Thorne's invitations come to nothing. Then he accepted the card, said nothing, and closed the door.

I waited on the step for perhaps two minutes. Then the door opened again and Colin Thorne himself appeared.

He was in a threadbare dressing gown with frayed silk cuffs, unshaved, his dark hair in disorder, a corncob pipe in his hand. He held my card at arm's length and looked from it to me and back again with the wary puzzlement of a man who has learned to be cautious about his own generosity in retrospect.

"Mr. Croft," he said at last, as though trying the name against some internal register.

"We met yesterday, Mr. Thorne. At the Mortimer Arms. I have been reading your paper in the Journal of Caribbean Religious Studies and wanted very much to speak with you properly, if the invitation still stands."

His expression changed immediately and completely. The wariness dissolved and something lighted in the remarkable eyes.

"You have read my work," he said. "That is unusual." He considered me for another moment, then stood aside. "Come in, sir. Come in."

He led me down a hallway of improbable density—heavy furniture crowded against both walls, bookcases jammed to overflowing, several stacks of volumes simply on the floor—and into a study at the far end which I can only describe as the outpost of an extraordinary mind in the process of consuming itself with its own work.

Every surface was occupied. Shelves bulged. Books were open on the desk, on the floor, on every chair, some propped against one another at the angles of active consultation. Volume seven of Burton's *Thousand Nights and a Night* lay on the littered desk with a dark ring where a mug had been set on it. Frazer's *Golden Bough*—the complete twelve-volume edition—was used as an ash tray in several places, the binding scorched.

Yet the chaos had its own geography. East met West in every corner without embarrassment. Roman tear-vases stood beside empty bottles; a carved wooden idol from the South Pacific occupied a shelf with a Coptic crucifix. Thuggee daggers from India lay alongside carved mammals' tusks and snake emblems from Yucatan. Against a Chinese ivory model rested an ancient Spanish coffer. A Persian rug with the monogram of Shah Jahan was thrown across a chair. Everything here had been acquired in the pursuit of a

specific intellectual purpose, and none of it had been acquired cheaply.

Colin Thorne swept an armful of volumes from a chair and gestured at it.

"Sit down, Mr. Croft. The visit of a fellow-student is a pleasure I rarely have. Now." He settled into his carved desk chair and fixed me with those remarkable eyes. "You find me at chapter forty-two of my present book. Consider this."

He placed in my hands a small dark-wood box of evident age. Inside were what appeared to be a number of shrivelled seeds.

I examined them and returned the box with an honest expression of ignorance.

"You are puzzled." He smiled, and in that smile the Mortimer Arms figure disappeared entirely. Here was someone quite different—younger, lit from within, almost boyish in his triumph. "These are seeds of the sacred lotus of Ancient Egypt. Found in a priest's tomb. I intend to cultivate them, Mr. Croft. Do you begin to see the significance?"

"From a botanical standpoint, certainly," I said. "But I confess the connection to your particular field of study is not yet clear to me."

"Then I will make it clear," he said, with the air of a man who has been waiting for precisely this question. He knocked the corncob against his heel, refilled it from a mound of coarse shag on a piece of newspaper, and lit it. "Chapter forty-two is the hub of the whole work. And the whole work—I say this without vanity, merely as a statement of fact—will require the

intellectual world to revisit every assumption it holds about the relationship between physical existence and what I shall call, for want of a better term, the life of the will."

He puffed and regarded me complacently.

I had revised my estimate of Thorne considerably upward since entering the room. The genius I had suspected was here, operating at full power. What I had taken for the blurred confidence of a man in drink was, I now saw, something far more interesting: the absolute certainty of a thinker who has pursued a line of reasoning to a place where his contemporaries cannot follow him and has ceased to mind.

"What we call Will," he continued, "is what the Ancient Egyptians called Khu. It is not a property of the mind. It is a property of the soul. And here I depart from my contemporaries." He pointed with the pipe stem. "All power, all light, all vital principle descends from a single source. That source is the sun. The sun governs Will, and Will is the soul. Tell me—if it were possible for a child to be born in a place permanently beyond the reach of sunlight, what would that child be?"

"Blind," I said. "Beyond that I cannot say."

"Then I will tell you. It would be a demon." He watched me take this in. "Why, in every ancient tradition, is the underworld depicted as below us? Because below means sunless, and sunless means soulless, and soulless means devil. That is not metaphor. That is cosmological fact, as yet unrecognised by conventional science."

"And the lotus seeds?"

He laughed—a sudden, genuine, unguarded laugh that made him look thirty years younger and entirely human.

“My proposition is that the vital principle survives within them. That if I can make them grow—seeds sealed in a tomb for three thousand years—I will have demonstrated the indestructibility of the will. Do you see? The sun made them. The sun has preserved them. If the sun can restore them, I have my proof.”

He set down the pipe and stood up.

“But let me show you something which will interest you more immediately.”

He went to a cabinet cluttered with objects of a dozen origins—carved bones, small inlaid boxes, manuscripts, images—and returned with what appeared to be a pipe of strange, rich brown wood.

“Examine it.”

I turned it in my hands. It was not a pipe; the bowl was carved inside, and the whole thing had the balance of an instrument made for a specific and unfamiliar purpose.

“I can’t determine its function,” I said, returning it.

“Watch.”

He struck the hollow of the bowl against his palm. A high, bell-like note rang out and seemed to linger in the air longer than it should.

“Now note the direction.”

He made a short, sharp motion as though ejecting something from the bowl. At the precise spot on the floor where an ejected

object would have landed, the bell note sounded again—at my feet. He struck upward and it rang from the ceiling. To my right and it came from the window. Toward me and the tiny bell rang beside my ear.

I will honestly confess I was startled.

"Dayak magic," said Thorne. "From Borneo. A property of acoustics not yet adequately explained by Western science, though it was known to the Egyptian priesthood—hence the Vocal Memnon—and to Madame Blavatsky. I note it as an example of a principle: nature conceals more than she reveals, and conceals it in plain sight." He returned the instrument to the cabinet. "The significant fact, which I mention purely for its interest, is that the note can only be produced between sunrise and sunset."

He resumed his chair.

"The most notable surviving example of what I call scientific darkness—the deliberate use of night-principle against light—is to be found in Haiti and the other islands of the Caribbean. You have read my paper. You know the subject I refer to."

"Obeah," I said.

He nodded, and refilled his pipe. As he did so I watched his face, and something happened to it—a shadow crossed it, a look I found impossible to characterise cleanly. It contained sorrow and exaltation in proportions I could not separate.

"A subject," he said, in a voice that was noticeably different from the one he had been using, "which I investigated at considerable personal cost, some years ago."

He was quiet for a moment.

"In the West Indies, Mr. Croft, I lost all and found all. Have you ever considered that sorrow is the price we must pay for joy?"

I had no answer for this. I was still turning it over when I heard a gentle knock at the door.

It opened, and a woman came in.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ISAURA THORNE

She hesitated in the doorway for a moment, and in that moment I absorbed a great deal.

Val Brandon had described her well. She was small and slight, with the particular quality of stillness that belongs to a person who moves slowly by nature and is always aware of their body. She wore a white apron over a simple dress, and her arms—bare below the short sleeves—had the smooth, warm brown of someone who has spent a great deal of time in a brighter climate than England. Her hair was the strangest colour I can recall seeing—a dark gold, very thick, drawn into tight close curls. Her eyes were a deep, slightly startled blue.

She looked quite young. Something about her expression—an open, unguarded quality—made her seem younger still, though I sensed she was not quite as young as she appeared.

She was clearly about to retreat. But:

"Isaura," said Colin Thorne, regarding her with an expression I found difficult to read—sorrow and pride in some proportion I could not determine—"allow me to present Mr. Malcolm Croft, who has honoured us with a visit."

He turned to me.

"Mr. Croft, it gives me great pleasure that you should meet my wife."

I think I had expected it, somewhere in the back of my mind. The parallel with the portrait in Darling's office was now, at a stroke, complete.

As Mrs. Thorne extended her hand, she seemed uncertain whether she was intruding. The look she gave her husband when her eyes moved to him was simply adoration.

"How nice of you to come and see us," she said. Her English was slightly imperfect, her accent pleasant, a little husky.

"Your husband has been carrying me to extraordinary places, Mrs. Thorne," I replied. "I have never known a morning to pass so quickly."

"Oh." She laughed, and the laugh was entirely spontaneous—a quick, unguarded delight. "Did he tell you about the book that is going to make the world good? Did he tell you it will make us rich as well?"

"Rich?" said Thorne, frowning slightly. "The only true riches are health and love. Now that you are here, Isaura, I shall ask Mr. Croft, in honour of the occasion, to drink a glass of wine with us."

I glanced at him. In the threadbare dressing gown, unshaved, with his disordered dark hair and the corncob pipe, he had the peculiar dignity of a man so entirely absorbed in his own intellectual world that conventional appearance has ceased to interest him. The resemblance to the daguerreotype of Poe, which I had first noticed at the Mortimer Arms, was now more striking than ever. I accepted the invitation.

Thorne clapped his hands and Ah Lum appeared. I noted at once what Thorne had told me: although it was Thorne who had summoned him, it was to Isaura that Ah Lum turned. She spoke to him in quick, fluid Cantonese. He nodded and left without looking at anyone else in the room.

"Ah Lum is properly Isaura's," Thorne explained to me. He said it without self-consciousness, a statement of natural fact. "Their arrangement predates mine by a considerable number of years."

"Oh," said Isaura, smiling at me, "Ah Lum looked after me when I was very small—I mean this small." She held her hand about four feet from the floor. "Can you imagine? Such a funny baby."

"He has been with you ever since?" I said.

"Ever since." She said it softly. "He will never leave, will he, Colin?"

"Never," said Thorne, and for once there was nothing of the philosopher in his voice. "You are all he cares about in the world."

There was a bell at the front door. Thorne excused himself and went out, leaving Isaura and me briefly alone.

She settled into a chair—the only one not covered in books—and looked at me with the frank, slightly anxious attention of a person not accustomed to visitors.

"You are staying at Mordaunt's Folly, Mr. Croft?" she asked.

She said it quietly, without any particular inflection, but her hands, I noticed, had closed together in her lap.

"I am," I said.

She nodded, as though this confirmed something she had already suspected.

"You are American, Mrs. Thorne?" I ventured. "Or—"

"No." She shook her head. "I was born in Cuba."

"Then it was in Cuba that you met Mr. Thorne?"

"Yes." A pause. "He was doing his research. He spent three years there. That is where we were married."

"And Surrey is your home now."

Something crossed her face—a rueful quality.

"It is a strange place for us both, I think. But Colin's family—they are very old Virginian, very proud. When he brought me home they were not welcoming. He has not been back since. He will not go back." She looked at her hands. "Surrey is easier."

I wanted to ask more, but heard Thorne's step in the hall. A moment later he returned, shaking his head—a wrong address, apparently—and Ah Lum followed shortly with a tray of wine and biscuits.

We talked for another half hour. Of what precisely I cannot tell you, because my mind was working elsewhere. The one fact that mattered was in front of me: Isaura Thorne was Cuban. Thorne had met her in Cuba while researching Caribbean spiritual traditions. They had come to Surrey. Meanwhile, Cardona—former Cuban official, carrying the weight of a twenty-five-year vendetta rooted in those same traditions—was their nearest neighbour.

This was not coincidence. It could not be. But if it was design, whose design? The Thornes had been at the Guest House

before Cardona took Mordaunt's Folly. Which meant Cardona had chosen to come here knowing they were already here. Why?

Presently Isaura excused herself for household duties, and Thorne led me out into the garden.

It was a perfect summer day. The garden was somewhat neglected but genuinely old, bordered in places by a crumbling wall. At the far end an arbour overhung a small ravine, through which a stream ran down the valley toward the lake in Mordaunt's Folly's grounds.

From here I could see the tower.

The Tudor garden was visible too, the sundial catching the noon light. The view was clear and direct. I realised that from this arbour, on a still night, one could watch the windows of the house, the garden, the tower gallery.

"I used to work out here in summer," said Thorne, gazing toward the house. "When Sir James Ashworth was at Mordaunt's Folly it was very pleasant. He laid out most of those gardens." He paused. "I gave up the arbour when the new tenant arrived."

He turned away and led me back toward the house.

"I shall be leaving Surrey in any case, before long," he said. "I am looking for somewhere suitable. The Guest House has served its purpose."

"I am sorry to hear that," I said, and meant it.

We had come back to where the path narrowed at an overgrown rose bush, and I had moved slightly ahead. I turned to continue the conversation.

I will never forget the change in him.

His face had gone the colour of paper. He was staring at me with an expression I can only describe as barely contained violence, his hands clenched at his sides, his composure entirely gone.

"Mr. Thorne—are you unwell?"

He moistened his lips.

"You are returning—to Mordaunt's Folly?" He spoke with difficulty, as if the words cost him something.

"I am. I am staying with Colonel Cardona."

The name seemed to strike him like a blow. He seized the collar of his dressing gown and wrenched it—the button flew off—and when he spoke his voice had dropped to something barely above a whisper.

"You are a guest of Devil Cardona." He said it with a loathing so intense it was almost physical. "You have been in my house—spoken with my wife—under false pretences. You are his spy. If I had known—"

"Mr. Thorne," I said, and I heard the edge in my own voice, "you forget yourself."

"Perhaps," he said, thickly. "Perhaps I do. Then go. I ask you—if there is any compassion in you—go. Leave this house."

His outstretched finger was trembling. I turned and walked back to the house in silence.

"Ah Lum!" he called from behind me, his voice stripped of everything except the emotion underneath. "Mr. Croft's hat and stick—quickly—"

Ah Lum was already at the study door with them. I took them without a word. He held the front door open. I walked out into the road.

My heart was hammering. I had been insulted, dismissed, and left without the first idea how to respond. I was angry and I was humiliated and I was not yet able to think clearly.

I had gone perhaps two hundred yards when I heard quick footsteps behind me. I turned.

Ah Lum. He held out a folded piece of paper without speaking.

I took it and opened it. A few lines in pencil, hastily written:

MR. CROFT. Please forgive him. If you knew what we have suffered from Senor Don Juan Cardona, I know you would forgive him. Please, for my sake. ISAURA THORNE.

I looked up. Ah Lum waited, watching me with the patient, steady attention I had observed in the study.

"Tell Mrs. Thorne that I understand," I said, "and that I will write to her."

He nodded, turned without a word, and went back up the road.

I stood there for a moment with the note in my hand, and then walked on toward Mordaunt's Folly, trying to order my thoughts into something that Ben Darling would be able to use.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

UNREST

I sat in Darling's room. Luncheon was over, and although it had been as impeccable as everything else at Mordaunt's Folly, the sense of tension I had felt throughout the meal made it very nearly impossible to enjoy.

The shadow was denser than it had been at any point since our arrival. In vain I attributed it to overwrought nerves. It persisted, and it was not mine alone. Madame Brassard's gaiety had become mechanical—she produced bon mots without conviction, like an actor who has not slept. The Colonel ate very little and drank rather more than usual. He was elsewhere. He sat at the head of his beautiful table with the air of a man who has already left.

When the ladies had gone, the Colonel looked at us.

"Gentlemen," he said, "if your enquiries have produced nothing tangible, at least you will have realised one thing."

Darling met his gaze steadily.

"I have realised," he replied, "that something is pending."

"Ah." Cardona pressed his hands on the table edge.

"And I have realised something further," Darling continued. "You asked for my help. I am here. You have also, deliberately, tied my hands."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you know considerably more about the nature of this threat than you have told me. Your hospitality is generous

and genuine and I am grateful for it. But as the professional you summoned, I am not able to be satisfied—or useful—and I do not thank you for the position in which you have placed me."

Their eyes held each other.

"You have something further to say, Mr. Darling?"

"I have this to say. I esteem your friendship. But I fear I must return to London without delay."

The muscles along Cardona's jaw tightened visibly. He was fighting something. Then:

"You would desert me."

"I have never deserted any man who genuinely sought my help."

"I have sought your help."

"Then give me what I need to give it!" Darling's voice stayed level but the feeling behind it did not. "You ask me to find an enemy who means to kill you, and you withhold every piece of information that could tell me where to look. What clue have you given me? What clue have you withheld?"

The Colonel sat very still. Then Ben Darling stood.

"This discussion is going in circles, Colonel Cardona."

Cardona rose also.

"Mr. Darling." His voice had dropped. "If I give you my word of honour—my word of honour—that I dare not tell you more, and if, having done so, I ask you to remain at least one further night, can you refuse me?"

Darling stood at the table end and looked at him for a long moment.

"You leave me no alternative," he said finally. "I will stay."

"I thank you." The Colonel straightened. "I am afraid I am not well today. May I beg to be excused for an hour?"

We bowed. He walked out with all his customary dignity, and the door closed.

Darling stood silent for a moment, then went upstairs. I followed. He paced his room while I told him about the Guest House—the study, Isaura, the garden, and Thorne's extraordinary eruption when I mentioned Mordaunt's Folly.

He listened without sitting down.

"Devil Cardona," he repeated, when I had finished. "He said that."

"With considerable conviction."

Darling resumed his pacing.

"Conundrums. This whole business is nothing but conundrums. Every open door leads to a darker room.' He stopped. 'Think about this. Cardona broadly implies he regards Thorne as an enemy. From your account, Thorne regards Cardona as something between an enemy and a demon. Mutual, deadly, and real. But Thorne has been at the Guest House for three years. Cardona is a recent arrival. We are therefore asked to believe that the threatened man deliberately chose to live within sight of the person he fears. Preposterous."

"Unless he chose it precisely because of Thorne," I said slowly.

Darling stopped pacing.

"Go on."

"I don't know what I mean yet. But—Mrs. Thorne is Cuban."

"Don't," said Darling, dropping onto the bed and reaching for his pipe. He said it with genuine anguish. "Croft, this case is going to be my Waterloo. Every time I think I have a thread, it leads me to three more rooms I cannot open."

He loaded the pipe with some violence.

"Why don't you remind me of Auguste Dupin?" he continued bitterly. "That great man would by now have assembled these fragments into an elegant solution and be waiting for our admiration. Whereas I have been outwitted, outmanoeuvred, and kept in deliberate ignorance by the very man who hired me."

He lit the pipe and smoked. I said nothing, knowing from long experience that these descents were brief and self-correcting.

Sure enough, after a few minutes:

"God help us, Croft," he said, and broke into a genuine smile. "How human we are. And how fortunate that we can still laugh at ourselves."

I exhaled.

"Come downstairs," he said. "There is a billiard room at the end of the east wing. I have reached the point where ideas work in circles and the only cure is either golf or billiards."

We played for an hour. Darling concentrated entirely on the game; I was less focused, finding myself repeatedly drawn to the window in the vague hope that Val Brandon might pass. She did

not. We saw neither of the ladies until tea was served on the terrace.

The billiard room, I noted, adjoined the last room of the east wing. The tower was very close.

On the terrace Madame made apologies for the Colonel, who was resting and hoped to join us for dinner.

"Is there a specific condition?" Darling asked. "A cardiac matter, perhaps?"

Madame looked at her teacup.

"It is difficult to name," she said. "An old trouble. It began years ago, in Cuba."

She said it quietly and without elaboration. Darling nodded, but I could see he was not satisfied.

Her condition was visibly worse than it had been that morning. Her hands, usually so assured, were noticeably unsteady. She spoke with effort, maintaining the performance of ease by will alone, and it was clear she was anxious to return to the invalid upstairs. When at last she withdrew, with Val beside her, I felt the strange doubled sensation of being glad they were gone and sorry to see Val leave.

Darling and I sat in the sudden quiet. From inside the house came the sounds of Tomás and Pilar taking Madame's chair up the stairs, as they apparently did whenever she wished to visit the upper floors. The sounds faded.

The garden was very still. Even the birds had gone quiet. After a moment I understood why—looking up, I saw a hawk hanging

at a considerable height above the grounds, barely moving against the blue.

Darling followed my gaze.

"A hawk," he murmured. "All the birds are cowering in their nests. Nature is a cruel mistress, Croft."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

RED EVE

Over the remainder of that afternoon, I will pass quickly. Looking back now, I cannot recall a single incident that deserves recording. But I think the real explanation is that great events overshadow small ones, and from this point onward my memory until the catastrophe is hazy with the quality of a dream half-remembered. What I do recall is a brooding stillness—in the house, in the garden, in Darling—and the continued absence of Val Brandon.

Darling was impossible company. I found him in the billiard room practising shots with the concentration of a man solving an equation. He glanced up when I appeared at the open window.

"Leave me alone, Croft," he muttered. "I am not fit for human society."

I laughed and withdrew, and spent an unproductive hour in the library pulling books from shelves and returning them unread.

When at last my watch told me it was time to dress for dinner I was more relieved than I can say. As I crossed the terrace I stopped.

The horizon was on fire. From north to south the sky blazed in every shade from deep gold to a crimson that the old poets would have called the Blood of Apollo. The countryside lay bathed in that strange, transfiguring light that comes only at the very end of a long summer day. I stood and watched it. Then I turned,

and there, rising cold and certain in the east, was the full moon.

I dressed mechanically, like an automaton. Tomás was moving about in Darling's room. I did not knock.

Instead I went back downstairs and out to the terrace, drawn by the evening in the way one is sometimes drawn by a thing one knows will not be pleasant. The dusk gathered. The shadows in the garden moved with the breeze and I watched them. Something invisible and specific lay over Mordaunt's Folly—not atmosphere, not mood, but a presence of a kind I had never felt before and have not felt since.

I walked toward the Tudor garden.

The sun had left it and the moon not yet reached it, and it lay in a purple half-light that made it look like a painted thing, unreal and without depth. I was thinking of Thorne's lecture—of Osiris and the black god, of light and dark as opposing forces, not metaphor but physics—when I descended the steps and saw Val Brandon.

She was coming toward me in a pale blue dress, her face as composed as always, and I knew at once from some quality in her eyes that she had been avoiding me.

"Miss Brandon," I said, "I have been looking for you all afternoon."

"I have been in my room," she said. "Writing."

We fell into step together along the path.

"I wish you would be frank with me," I said.

She glanced up quickly, then away.

"Am I not frank?"

"I don't think so. I think I understand why, though."

"Do you?"

"You can see that Madame Brassard and the Colonel are deliberately concealing something from Ben Darling. And you don't know where your own duty lies in that situation. Am I right?"

She stopped walking. She looked at me with what I can only describe as startled relief.

"Yes," she said quietly. "How did you know?"

"I have been paying attention."

She moved again. We walked in silence for a moment.

"I am oppressed by something I cannot explain," she said. "A dreadful foreboding. I have tried to put it down to the house, to the circumstances, to too much solitude—and I cannot."

"I have felt it too. Since this morning it has been worse."

"Yes." She paused. "I have just left Madame Brassard."

"Is she worse?"

"She broke down this afternoon. She came to my room and sobbed hysterically for nearly an hour. I have never seen anything like it—not from her. She is usually so absolutely in control of herself."

"Did she tell you what was wrong?"

"Nothing I could understand. And no one has called a doctor. No one has been sent for. I asked her, and she looked at me as if the question didn't make sense."

I thought about this.

"Have you seen the Colonel since luncheon?"

"No. He has been in his rooms all afternoon."

She was quiet for a moment, then:

"Whatever should I do if you were not here?"

She caught herself immediately, and I saw the colour rise. I said nothing, but I was aware of my heart doing something entirely unhelpful to clear thought.

"I mean," she said carefully, "if Mr. Darling were not here."

"Of course," I said.

We walked back toward the house in a silence that was not entirely uncomfortable, and entered the bright hall just as the dinner gong rang—a Chinese tubular chime that sent its single silver note through the building.

Madame Brassard came wheeling through the drawing room doorway immediately behind us, perfectly turned out, with no visible trace of the afternoon's distress. Darling followed at her wheel. The art of her appearance was extraordinary—she had remade herself completely.

"My dear Mr. Croft," she cried, "I find myself forever apologizing for someone. The Colonel is desolate but he cannot join us. I have already explained to Mr. Darling."

Darling caught my eye briefly and looked away.

"The Colonel asks us to smoke with him after dinner," he said.

"Ah," said Madame, settling herself at the table with Mateo's expert assistance, "troubles come in flocks or not at

all. But I suppose we should feel lonely without a few small sorrows, eh? It keeps the character interesting."

I have wondered since what I would have thought of Madame Brassard had I known, at that dinner, what I would eventually learn. France has produced a great many extraordinary women in its history, in every possible category of the extraordinary. I think she was among them.

She was at her most brilliant that evening. The food was extraordinary, Mateo supervised everything from the sideboard with his customary grave efficiency, and except for brief moments in which Madame seemed to be listening for something beyond the walls of the room, a casual observer would have detected nothing wrong.

Once, catching Val Brandon in quiet conversation with Darling:

"Do not encourage her, Mr. Darling," Madame said. "She is a desperate flirt."

"Madame!" Val went scarlet.

"You are, my dear, and you should embrace it. Flirt all your life, but never fall in love. It is fatal." She turned to me.

"Don't you agree, Mr. Croft?"

I looked into her extraordinary eyes, which concealed so much.

"Say rather that it is fate," I replied.

"More pretty, but less honest. If I could live my life again, M. Croft, I would build a stone wall around my heart. It could see over, but nothing could reach it."

The spirit of unrest lifted briefly in that hour, as it sometimes does before a storm—a false calm, beautiful and deceiving. When Darling and I went upstairs to the Colonel it had returned in full.

On the stairs I said: "An explanation of the Colonel's absence has occurred to me."

"The same one that occurred to me," Darling replied without turning.

"That he has taken cover."

"Yes. That tonight he considered himself too exposed downstairs."

He knocked at the smoke-room door. The Colonel's voice answered at once.

He was on the settee, reclining among cushions, the remnants of what had been a substantial dinner on the tray beside him. Tomás was removing it as we entered. I noted, with a vague discomfort I did not immediately analyse, a bowl of roses set on the silver tray. Fresh ones, newly cut. I thought of the shadow on the blind.

The Colonel was gracious and subdued. Port was produced, cigars offered, armchairs arranged. He seemed genuinely glad of our company.

"An old trouble," he replied, when Darling asked about his health. "A legacy from those who, before me, drank too deep of the wine of life."

"You have medical advice?"

"There is no physician in England who would understand the case. And there is nothing for it in any event but rest and the avoidance of excitement."

"Then I will not disturb you long," said Darling. "Though I thought you might have something to ask of us, given the particular significance of tonight."

Cardona looked at him quickly.

"You have remembered."

"Naturally."

"Your interest comforts me. I am sorry to have been so poor a host, and sorry that nothing has occurred to assist your investigation. Not that I am anxious for any new activity from that direction. But almost anything would be preferable to this suspense."

He said it with a particular intonation—not quite resignation, but something adjacent to it.

"Nothing new," asked Darling, "since yesterday? Nothing to suggest that whatever threatens might actually arrive tonight?"

"Nothing, Mr. Darling. Unless you yourself have observed something I have not."

"Let us hope," said Darling quietly, "that the threat is never fulfilled."

The Colonel inclined his head.

"Let us hope so."

He rolled a cigarette with his usual deft precision, and we talked of other things. I find I remember very little of what was said. What I remember is the man—his large, graceful figure among

the cushions, the thin voice, the courtesy that never for a moment deserted him, the cigarette burning between his long fingers. Magnificent courage, beyond any doubt. That quality was real and absolute. What he lacked, I think, was the one thing that might have saved him: the ability to trust another person entirely with the truth.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

NIGHT OF THE FULL MOON

I stood at Darling's open window looking down into the Tudor garden. The moon hung in a cloudless sky, its light so strong that I could read the time on the sundial below. More than an hour had passed since I had heard Mateo making his nightly rounds. Nothing had occurred.

Darling had descended on the ladder shortly after midnight, warning me that the brilliance of the moonlight meant he would have to make a wide circuit of the grounds to avoid being seen from the windows. He had told me to stay—that it was important one of us remained in the house. I had agreed, and regretted it immediately, because standing at a window in the dark with nothing to do but wait is not a comfortable occupation.

I wondered whether other rooms in Mordaunt's Folly were also sleepless tonight. I thought of the footsteps Val had described in the corridor, and of the shadow on the smoke-room blind, and I found these thoughts unwelcome.

The night was absolutely still. The moon laid sharp black shadows across the garden paths and lit the box hedge to a pale silver. Colin Thorne's words came to me unbidden: the scientific employment of darkness against light. The theories one dismisses in daylight take on a different quality under a full moon.

I was thinking this when I heard footsteps.

Gravel, directly below. Quiet but distinct.

I leaned out of the window. A tall figure crossed the path and descended the moss-grown steps to the Tudor garden. He was bare-headed but fully dressed—I could see the dinner jacket—and moving with a gait that arrested me immediately. Short, halting steps. Rigidly upright. Arms at his sides, fists clenched. He moved like a man walking against resistance he could not see.

It was Colonel Cardona.

I reached for my phone, then stopped. Any sound might wake him. The Colonel had described waking on the gravel path a month ago—cut foot, cold, no memory of how he had come there. He had been on his way to the Tudor garden then too. Now there was nothing to wake him.

He had reached the path that led to the sundial, moving in those short automatic steps that were unlike anything I had ever seen in a living man.

I got astride the window ledge and groped for the ladder rungs.

"Croft! Croft!" came softly from the gap in the box hedge. "What the devil are you about?"

Darling, returned from his circuit.

"Darling!" I whispered, descending. "Quick—the Colonel. He has just gone into the garden."

"What!"

The horror in his voice was absolute. He did not wait for more. He ran.

I freed my foot from the ladder and ran after him. I was almost at the garden steps when it happened.

The rifle crack split the night like something physical—a sound that seemed to strike me in the chest. It echoed from the wings of the house, off the tower, up the wooded slopes, dying in diminishing repetitions until the silence came back.

From ahead of me in the garden, Darling's voice:

"My God. I am too late. They have got him."

I went down the steps at a run. As I reached the bottom I heard another sound—and the memory of it still troubles my sleep. It came from somewhere in the direction of the hillside, or possibly from within the house, I was too confused to judge direction precisely. It was a short, shrill, choking sound. A laugh.

Darling was kneeling beside the sundial.

Face downward on the grass, arms outstretched, fists clenched, lay Colonel Cardona. I knelt beside Darling and saw what I had no wish to see. He spoke through clenched teeth.

"Shot through the head. He is dead."

I will not describe the wound. I looked once and looked away.

Darling rose and stood perfectly still, staring past the angle of the tower toward the hillside. I followed his gaze. Through the trees, a pale glow—a light had come on in the Guest House.

I heard Darling draw a slow breath.

Above us, almost silently, a bat circled—once, twice—dipped toward the trees and was gone.

Then the swans on the lake went up, their wings loud in the still air, and somewhere inside the house a door banged and voices began.

"No smoke," said Darling. "No flash. You saw nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Nor I." He turned and his face, beneath the tan that never left it, was pale. "Short of throwing a cordon round the entire hillside, Croft—" He stopped.

His eyes went back to the Guest House light.

A moment more he stood, then: "Back to the house. Keep the women away from here. Let no one touch him, and no one enter this garden until I return. Preserve every footprint. The police must be called immediately."

I was already pulling out my phone. He saw it.

"Good. Go."

I called 999 as I ran back across the grass. The operator answered on the second ring and I gave the address, a shooting, a fatality, everything they needed. Then I was at the gap in the hedge and through it, and the main doors were already open.

Mateo stood in the doorway in his dressing gown, pale and bewildered.

"Mateo—the ladies. Are they awake?"

He said something in Spanish, then: "Yes, yes—what has happened—what—"

"A tragedy. Collect yourself. Where is Madame Brassard?"

Mrs. Tasker appeared at the staircase—the stout, grey-haired woman I had spoken to briefly on our first morning. She looked at

me with one frightened glance, then made to hurry along the corridor.

"Mrs. Tasker—where are you going?"

"To Madame—to Madame—"

She was pointing toward the corridor off the hall. From somewhere along it I heard a cry, and then Val Brandon's voice, very clear and very steady:

"Go and fetch Mrs. Tasker, Pilar. And try to behave yourself—I have enough to manage here."

I went down the corridor and stopped.

Val was kneeling on the floor outside the door to Madame Brassard's room. Madame lay huddled on the floor beside her, a heavy dressing gown pulled around her. She had apparently been trying to drag herself from her room when she lost consciousness. Val looked up at me and I saw the fear in her eyes, carefully controlled.

"Mr. Croft. What has happened? Please tell me."

I stooped and lifted Madame. She was heavier than I expected but I managed, and Val led me into the bedroom and I placed her on the bed.

"Can you manage her?" I said.

"Yes."

"Then I must tell you."

She looked at me without moving.

"Someone has shot Colonel Cardona. He is dead."

She opened and closed her eyes. She put one hand out and found the bedpost. Then she looked at Madame's unconscious face, and something settled in her own.

"She must have known," she said quietly. "That is why she fell. I think—I think she knew the moment it happened."

She sat down in the armchair by the bed and folded her hands in her lap.

"Go. Mr. Darling will need you. I will manage here."

I went back to the hall. Dawes the chauffeur had come in from the gate lodge and stood in the doorway in his coat. Several other servants were gathered, in various states of dress, speaking in low and frightened voices.

"Dawes," I said, "the police are on their way. Go to the main gate and wait for them—the drive is long and they will need directing. Send anyone else you can spare to the stable yard and keep them there. No one is to go into the garden."

He went. I stood in the hall and breathed, and tried to think clearly about what Ben Darling needed from me next.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

INSPECTOR ALDRIDGE OF MICKLEFORD

"Now, gentlemen," said Inspector Aldridge, "I will take evidence."

Dawn was creeping grey over the hills. The library lamps burned with a yellowish pallor, and the exotic appointments of the room—the Velázquez, the armour, the Moorish pieces—had acquired in that cold light the unreal quality of a stage set seen from the wrong side. I sat on the couch where the Colonel had reclined two evenings ago. I tried not to think about what the scene-of-crime team was doing in the Tudor garden.

Inspector Aldridge stood squarely before the oak mantel. He was a large man, bulkily built, with a prominent auburn moustache tinged with grey, round brown eyes, and a double chin that undermined the authority of the rest of his face. He had puffy hands that he used for emphasis with an oratorical confidence that had not, so far as I could tell, been earned. I had formed a distaste for him within the first thirty seconds.

Darling sat in the armchair he had occupied during our last conversation with the Colonel. Dr. Renton of Mid-Wexley—brisk, fair, military in manner—stood by the window smoking.

"I have taken all necessary particulars concerning the position of the body and the nature of the wound," said the Inspector. "I now turn to you, Mr. Darling, as the first person to reach the deceased."

Darling watched him.

"Before we come to tonight's events I should like to be clear about your own position. You came to see me yesterday, Mr. Darling, and asked for certain information about the area."

"I did."

"The questions you asked were: did I know of anyone with Caribbean connections living in or about Mid-Wexley, and could I provide a list of residents within a two-mile radius of Mordaunt's Folly. Now it is your turn. Why did you ask?"

"I had been asked by Colonel Cardona to visit Mordaunt's Folly to investigate certain incidents that had taken place here."

"Oh, I see. You were here as a private investigator."

"Yes."

"And these incidents?"

"Someone broke into the house approximately five weeks ago. The Colonel had observed someone watching the grounds at night. And more recently, the wing of a bat was nailed to the main entrance door."

The Inspector lowered his eyebrows.

"You are not being funny at a time like this, Mr. Darling?"

"My sense of humour has failed me entirely. I am stating facts in response to your questions."

"Oh, I see."

He cleared his throat.

"The house was broken into and this was not reported to us?"

"It was reported to the local constabulary. Nothing came of it."

"I see. A bat wing was nailed to the door. Might I ask why you consider that significant enough to mention?"

"Because Colonel Cardona regarded it as the most significant episode of all. He believed it to be a death token used by a specific faction connected to his time in Cuba. It is associated with a tradition of spiritual practice known as Obeah, or Voodoo—originating in West Africa and widespread throughout the Caribbean. He believed this faction had been responsible for multiple attempts on his life over the preceding twenty-five years, in Cuba and in Washington."

Inspector Aldridge retrieved a handkerchief from his pocket, applied it to his nose, returned it, and cleared his throat.

"Am I to understand that the late Colonel Cardona had expected to be attacked?"

"That is correct. It explains my presence here."

"I see. It looks as though he might have done better if he had applied to us directly."

Darling glanced across at me.

"As I had predicted, Croft," he said quietly. "My Waterloo."

"What's that about Waterloo?" demanded the Inspector.

"A reference to a battle," Darling replied, "not to a railway station."

Aldridge stared at him for a moment, then:

"Very well. The Colonel thought a—a Caribbean faction wanted to kill him. Why?"

"He had previously been a senior official in the Cuban foreign service. During an earlier posting he had a serious

confrontation with the group in question. He believed he had killed their leader. They have apparently held a vendetta against him since."

"Twenty-five years ago?"

"According to his account, yes."

"And he came to Surrey and someone nailed a bat wing to his door."

"Yes."

"And he came to you rather than to us because—?"

"He was advised to seek specialist assistance by the Spanish Ambassador."

"I see. Coming from abroad. Well." The Inspector cleared his throat. "What were you doing tonight? I see you are both still in evening dress."

"We were keeping watch."

"Why tonight specifically?"

"The full moon. According to Colonel Cardona, this faction considers certain phases of the moon to be significant for their operations. He had previously experienced an episode of sleepwalking on the night of the last full moon."

"Why on the full moon?"

"This I cannot tell you."

"I see. Where were you keeping watch?"

"In my room. Northeast corner, overlooking the Tudor garden."

"At what time did you retire?"

"About half past ten."

"And when the shot was fired?"

"I was on the path outside. I had descended from my window—"

"How?"

"By means of a folding ladder I had brought with me for the purpose."

"A ladder." The Inspector's prominent eyes moved slowly to Darling's face. "That's rather extraordinary."

"I have extraordinary habits."

The Inspector cleared his throat once more.

"What part of the grounds were you in when the shot was fired?"

"Halfway along the north side. I had completed a full circuit of the building—east, south, and west—and was returning to my starting point when Mr. Croft, who was at the window, alerted me that Colonel Cardona had entered the garden."

"Could you see the Colonel yourself?"

"Not from ground level, no. Acting on Mr. Croft's information I ran toward the garden. I heard the shot while I was still on the path."

"What direction did it come from?"

"Impossible to be certain near a large building surrounded by trees. Within a hundred yards is my best estimate."

"A hundred yards and you have no idea of the direction."

"From the sound, no. The echo was complex."

"And what did you do to apprehend the murderer?"

Ben Darling looked at him.

"What steps would you have taken?" he asked.

The Inspector drew himself up.

"I rather think I should not have let the man slip through my fingers."

"Your theory is feasible," said Darling, in a voice with no tone in it at all.

"You were on the spot when the shot was fired, within a hundred yards of the murderer by your own admission, and you did nothing."

"I did nothing to apprehend a man I could not see, had not located, and who was armed with a rifle. No. I attended to my client."

The Inspector blew his nose.

"He should have come to us from the beginning. That's what we're here for. This kind of business—private arrangements—it's all very well, but look where it ends."

He said it with an air of satisfaction that I found, under the circumstances, difficult to admire.

Ben Darling removed his pipe from his pocket and began to fill it with the deliberate attention of a man whose patience has certain limits and who is monitoring them carefully.

Inspector Aldridge turned his prominent eyes in my direction.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

COMPLICATIONS

"I am afraid of this man Aldridge," said Ben Darling.

We sat in the deserted dining room. My account had been given, Dr. Renton had made his report, and the Inspector was now in the library interviewing servants. Darling and I had been allowed to withdraw. Outside, in the Tudor garden, the scene-of-crime team were still at work.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that he will presently make a blunder that cannot be undone. Good God, Croft—this man sought my help, and I watched him walk out to his death. I stood there and let it happen."

He struck the table.

"I am helpless. There was not a wisp of smoke, not a flash, and one man cannot search a county."

I said: "I keep thinking of that Kipling poem. 'A Snider squibbed in the jungle—somebody laughed and fled.'"

"I know," he said, almost savagely. "I heard that laugh, Croft. I heard it."

"Where did it come from? What was it?"

"Ask where the shot came from. In a courtyard enclosed by that building, with all those trees—the echo was a maze. But the shot came from the south." He leaned on the table, watching me. "The body's orientation, Croft. He lay on his face with his head pointing toward the hills."

I nodded.

"We shall need someone better than Aldridge," he continued. "I'll get onto the Homicide Command in London as soon as there is a reasonable hour to call. Until then—Aldridge must be managed."

He was staring past me, and I could see the grief and anger working in him. I put my hand on his shoulder.

"You have not failed yet."

"I have failed, Croft. He came to me for his life. I did not save it."

The door opened and Dr. Renton came back in.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I wanted to speak to you before I left. I have been with Madame Brassard again."

"How is she?" said Darling.

Renton crossed to the fireplace, dropped his match, and turned to us with a puzzled expression.

"Has anyone told her?" he asked. "About Colonel Cardona—that he is dead?"

"Not to my knowledge," said Darling.

"Then the connection between them was extraordinary," said the physician quietly. "Because she knows."

"You're certain?" I asked.

"Quite certain. She was presumably awakened by the shot, and by some form of acute perception she understood what it meant. I would attribute it to a sustained state of heightened anxiety over many weeks—she would have been attuned to any loud noise in the grounds, and the specific character of a rifle shot at that hour would have been unambiguous to her."

He paused.

"There is also a small bruise on her forehead," he said.

"Consistent with a fall against a doorframe. She did not simply fall from her chair, gentlemen. She walked to the door."

"Walked," I said.

"Yes. She has a serious trauma-related condition affecting her mobility—what we used to call, perhaps imprecisely, shell-shock. These conditions can, under extreme emotional shock, temporarily lift. It sometimes happens. She walked to the door, found she could not continue, and collapsed. Miss Brandon found her in the corridor."

Darling was very still.

"And her current state?"

"Cataleptic, essentially. She sits without moving, staring ahead. She appears to register only Miss Brandon's presence. The only words she has spoken are 'Don't leave me.'"

"She says nothing about the Colonel?"

"Nothing. She asserts nothing. She simply knows—and sits with it."

He was moving toward the door when Aldridge appeared.

"Ah," said the Inspector. "I have two more witnesses. Madame Brassard and Miss Brandon."

"Impossible," said Dr. Renton, turning.

"What's that, doctor?"

"Madame Brassard is dangerously ill. Miss Brandon is attending her."

"Could Miss Brandon come out for a few minutes?"

"She could. I don't wish her to."

"The law must be served, doctor."

"Quite so. And my patient's reason must be protected. I have expressed my view." Renton opened the door. "The responsibility is yours, Inspector. Good morning, gentlemen."

He left. Aldridge scratched his chin.

Darling stood up, yawning convincingly.

"If I can be of any further assistance, Inspector, ask. Otherwise, both Mr. Croft and I have been through a considerable ordeal and are extremely tired."

"Yes, yes, that's all very well," said the Inspector, "but I find myself at a complete deadlock."

"You surprise me," said Darling, pleasantly.

"I can't see what there is to be surprised about! One moment." He raised a finger. "There is a point I need to clarify. When this party broke up last night—approximately half past ten, you said—Madame Brassard had retired, and you two gentlemen remained up for your own reasons. But there is a fourth person who had evidently not gone to bed."

He looked from Darling to me with an air of significance.

I felt the question coming before he spoke it.

"I refer to Miss Val Brandon. When she was found she was fully dressed—as she had been at dinner. Yet the party had broken up at half past ten. So why, I ask myself, had Miss Brandon not retired? And why—if I may go a step further—had Colonel Cardona not retired either?"

The implication hung in the room.

"Your insinuations annoy me," I said, very quietly.

"Oh, they annoy you? Then perhaps you can explain the point, sir."

"I cannot explain it. Miss Brandon can, when you ask her."

"I'd like to ask her now."

"She has not refused to see you," said Darling smoothly.

"She is probably unaware you wish to. As for an explanation—the entire household was in a state of acute anxiety last night. It would have been extraordinary if anyone had slept easily."

"So everybody expected this to happen?"

"Consciously or subconsciously, yes. The apprehension had reached the servants as well."

"Hm. Speaking of which—can you tell me about the chef? He lives off-premises, I understand."

"His name is Deronne. He lives on the outskirts of Mid-Wexley. A Spaniard, small, amiable, very talented. I congratulated him on his cooking."

The Inspector looked slightly wrong-footed by this, as intended.

"Very well," he said. "I shall have further questions later."

"Naturally," said Darling. "Good night, Inspector Aldridge."

We went upstairs. Darling closed his door and dropped onto the bed. Dawn was well established now, the room grey-lit and cold. He looked exhausted.

"You heard the question about Miss Brandon," I said.

"I heard it. I am wondering what her answer will be when he puts it to her directly."

"Surely it's obvious? The house was terrifying last night. She was afraid to be alone."

"Yes," said Darling. "Perhaps." He drummed his fingers on the coverlet. "There is one person in this house who knows everything, Croft."

"Madame Brassard."

"She knew the moment that rifle fired. She walked to the door. She knows." His jaw tightened. "And our friend Aldridge has not yet thought to ask whether the Colonel had any enemies in the neighbourhood. He will by tomorrow, but it will be too late for caution."

"Thorne," I said.

"Yes. Now attend to this, Croft. The Colonel was shot through the head from in front. But the exit wound was at the base of the skull. Renton confirmed it at the scene."

I thought about this.

"The shot came from above."

"Exactly. From an elevated position, and from the direction of the hillside. From somewhere with a clear sightline down into the Tudor garden."

He looked at me steadily.

"And when you went to send for assistance," he continued, "I ran across the lawn, down through the gully, across the stream, and up the other side. I came out beside the summer arbour at the end of the Guest House garden. You have been there, Croft. You know exactly what is visible from that point."

"The sundial," I said. "The whole of the Tudor garden. You can see straight down into it."

"Yes. A lamp was burning in the kitchen window as I reached the harbour. I moved closer. I had a clear view of the only person in the room."

I waited.

"It was Ah Lum. He was standing at the window. As I watched he crossed to the lamp and put it out."

A silence.

"One possible explanation," said Darling, "is that he had been sent to find out what had happened. A perfectly innocent response to a rifle shot nearby. I held on for another minute or two but there was nothing more to see, and I came back."

He looked down at his feet.

"If Aldridge had possessed the observational instincts of a moderately trained police dog he could not have missed the yellow clay on my boots and trousers, or the thorns. He did not remark on them."

He settled back against the pillow, staring at the window.

"The morning after Waterloo," he said. "Sleep well, Croft."

CHAPTER TWENTY

A SPANISH CIGARETTE

Sleep was not for me, despite Darling's instruction. I was up early, and the house was already stirring with movements that set the imagination working—quiet voices, official footsteps, a sense of procedural machinery beginning its grind. The song of the birds outside seemed almost an affront.

Tomás prepared my bath, plainly having not slept himself.

No sound from Darling's room, so I left him and went downstairs. Mateo was in the hall with Mrs. Tasker.

"Is the Inspector here yet?" I asked.

"He returns at half past eight, he said."

"And Madame Brassard?"

"Asleep, thank God," said Mrs. Tasker. "But I am dreading her waking."

"And Miss Brandon?"

"She did not go to her room until after four, but Pilar tells me she will be down presently."

I went out into the courtyard, lit a cigarette, and waited. A car I didn't recognise was parked near the gate—official, presumably. I avoided the east side of the house and the billiard room, where I could see figures moving.

Val came down the stairs a few minutes later. She was pale with the pallor of no sleep, and there were shadows under her eyes, but she was composed.

"Good morning," I said. "I hoped to speak to you before the Inspector returned."

"Yes." She glanced at me. "He will want me to give evidence?"

"He will. We managed to keep him from you last night."

"I could not have left Madame."

"I know. But this morning you will have to face him."

We went into the library. The morning light lay across the rose garden and the terraced lawns, and the swans were moving on the lake as if nothing had changed. Val stood at the window with her hands clasped.

"I still cannot believe it," she said. "Even now. Who could have done it? Has Mr. Darling any idea?"

"He has not confided in me. But tell me—Madame. Has she been told?"

"No. No one has told her. I was with her all night, every moment until she slept." She paused. "But she knows, Mr. Croft. She knew the instant she heard the shot. I could see it in her face when I found her in the hall. There was no doubt in her—she was not hoping it was something else. She knew."

"Then she had been anticipating it," I said.

"Yes. All the things I couldn't explain—the look in her eyes, the things she said and didn't say, the strange performances of cheerfulness at dinner—it was all the behaviour of someone who was watching an inevitable thing approach and could not stop it."

I was quiet for a moment.

"If she was so certain," I said, "she must have had information that neither she nor the Colonel passed on to Darling. Can you think of any reason why she would have kept it from him?"

Val shook her head, then:

"Unless they were under some kind of obligation not to speak of it. A vow of some sort. I know that sounds absurd—"

"It doesn't sound absurd at all."

She turned from the window.

"There is one question the Inspector will certainly ask you," I said. "He has established that you were still dressed when the shot was fired. He wants to know why you had not retired."

She looked at me levelly.

"I was too frightened to go to bed. I sat in my room and waited. I knew something was going to happen. I knew it in a way I couldn't have explained to anyone."

"I understand completely," I said. "My experience was almost identical."

"When the shot came," she continued, "I unlocked my door. I was too frightened to go into the corridor at first—it was completely dark. Then I heard Madame's voice in the hall below. She was calling out something in French. I couldn't make out the words but I knew it was her. Then a sound like a fall."

"And you went down."

"Yes. I found the lights and ran. She was lying just outside the door of her room, in the corridor." She closed her eyes for a

moment. "I couldn't lift her. Mateo came through from the servants' side and then you arrived."

I took her hand briefly and released it.

"You have been extraordinary throughout this," I said. "I hope it continues."

She smiled—very faint, very tired.

"I should go and check on Madame. She may be waking."

We walked back to the hall, and there at the door was Inspector Aldridge, arriving at his announced time with the satisfaction of a man who keeps to his schedule.

"Good morning, Mr. Croft. This is Miss Brandon, I take it?"

"It is. I believe you wish to speak with her."

"I do, Miss, and I shan't keep you long."

Val gave me a brief glance, turned, and led the Inspector back into the library.

I went outside. Jim had the horses out and gave me a salute of quiet sympathy as I passed the stable yard. On the south terrace I counted four people—two uniformed, two not-moving slowly across the lawns and down the slope, examining the ground.

I gave the library a wide berth and turned along the second terrace, and there among the rhododendrons near the east wing I found Ben Darling.

He was fully dressed, looking alert and focused in a way that seemed impossible given the hour. He beckoned.

"Come here," he said, speaking quickly and quietly. "This is the door, Croft."

He indicated a low, heavy door set into the side of the east wing, facing due south.

"Mateo found it unlocked this morning. The Colonel's bedroom is directly above where we're standing. This is the door he came out through when he walked in his sleep a month ago." Darling looked at it with the attention he gave to things that mattered. "And I was walking around the west side of the house last night at precisely the time the Colonel was walking around the east. We passed each other without knowing it. He came through this door, rounded the wing, and entered the Tudor garden from the north. I came through the courtyard and entered from the west."

He reached into his jacket pocket.

"And now look at this."

He showed me a half-smoked cigarette. Not a conventional cigarette. A small, hand-rolled one.

I stared at it.

"It was lying in the shadow of the doorframe," said Darling. "Dry weather for over a week, so it could have been there some time. But to me it looks fresh."

"It is one of his," I said. "His own hand-rolled type. There is no mistaking it."

"No," said Darling. "There is not." He put it carefully away. "It may mean nothing. Or it may be among the most significant things I've found. I am not yet sure which."

He glanced toward the south terrace.

"There's a constable down there making signals toward the library. We are being observed. Come with me, Croft—quickly."

Without further explanation he plunged into the rhododendron thicket and I followed. We threaded through the bushes at a pace that left my jacket considerably the worse, rounded the corner of the tower, and came out on the far side where the terrace was shielded.

He stopped and turned.

"I am not losing my mind," he said, catching his breath. "I need to speak to Colin Thorne before Aldridge does. If the Inspector finds me and starts asking more questions, we will lose the morning. Are you prepared for another wade?"

"Evidently," I said, looking down at my shoes.

He led the way to the shrubbery at the edge of the grounds, down the bank, across the shallow stream—cold, ankle-deep—and up the other side. We pushed through rank grass, nettles, and a belt of weeds that came nearly to the waist, negotiated a dry ditch, and emerged onto the road about a hundred yards west of the Guest House gate.

We stood for a moment, catching our breath and surveying each other. Darling was tidy compared to me.

"I predict a hostile reception," I said.

"I expect you're right," he replied. "But he has every reason to talk to us. Croft—one thing before we go in."

He stopped and faced me.

"I need you to understand the position. When I—when we—are obliged to tell the police everything we know, I doubt if there is a barrister in the country who would take on the defence of Colin Thorne."

The words settled over the morning.

"You think he's guilty," I said.

"I said nothing of the kind. I said his position will be very difficult to defend."

"Then you think he's innocent?"

"My dear Croft," he replied, turning toward the gate, "I have not yet met Mr. Colin Thorne. I will give you my answer when the interview is over."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE WING OF A BAT

We knocked for some time without result. The door brass was polished to a high shine—Ah Lum had been up for hours—but the house offered only silence. Darling, growing impatient, applied the knocker with real purpose.

The door opened. Ah Lum looked at us without expression.

"My name is Ben Darling," said Darling. "I need to speak with Mr. Thorne on a matter of some urgency. Please give him this."

He handed over one of his cards. Ah Lum took it, studied it, and showed no indication of moving.

"Also tell him," said Darling, "that the police will be here within ten minutes. He will want to speak with me first."

A pause. Ah Lum withdrew, leaving the door open. We could see the length of the dim hallway—heavy furniture, bookcases, the same academic disorder I remembered from my own visit.

Presently a muffled voice from somewhere within:

"Tell them to go away! No spy of Devil Cardona shall ever pass my doors again!"

Ah Lum reappeared.

"Mr. Thorne is not available."

Darling looked at me briefly. Then, to Ah Lum:

"Please tell Mr. Thorne that Colonel Cardona is dead."

Ah Lum went back. There was a silence of perhaps fifteen seconds. Then rapid footsteps, and Colin Thorne appeared at the far end of the hall.

He was shaved this morning, but otherwise in the same frayed dressing gown and slippers. His mood was not the incoherent fury of my previous visit—it was colder and more deliberate. He walked toward us with his eyes fixed on Darling's face, and ignored my presence entirely.

"I am told," he said, "that your name is Ben Darling."

"It is."

"And you send me a very remarkable message. I am well acquainted with the methods of Señor Cardona, therefore I am not easily deceived. The gate, sir, is directly behind you."

"The scaffold, Mr. Thorne," replied Darling, "is directly in front of you."

"What did you say?"

"I said that the police are close behind us."

Those large, deep eyes moved slowly from Darling's face to his boots and back again.

"I have been called a hasty man," said Thorne, "but I can scarcely be accused of leaping to a conclusion when I suggest that you are mad. You have interrupted my work, sir. Good morning."

He stepped back to close the door.

"Mr. Thorne," said Darling.

Something in the tone stopped him.

"My name is unfamiliar to you. You regard Mr. Croft and myself as agents of Colonel Cardona. In fact I am a criminal investigator, retained professionally by the Colonel to investigate certain incidents at Mordaunt's Folly. Mr. Croft is assisting me."

Thorne's expression did not change but he was listening.

"And you told my—" He stopped. "You said the Colonel is dead?"

"He was shot through the head at shortly after midnight. He is dead."

Colin Thorne went very still. Something moved behind his eyes—a profound and complex thing I could not read.

"Do you mean," he said, carefully, "that he was murdered?"

"I do."

"Good God," he whispered. He stood quite motionless for a moment. "So that was the meaning of the shot."

Then he stood aside and held the door.

He did not speak as he led us down the hall. In the study the desk lamp was still burning—he had clearly been at work through the night. Manuscript pages lay scattered across the floor around his chair. The room smelled heavily of pipe smoke. He cleared two chairs of books with a precision that suggested he was buying himself time to think.

When we were seated, he remained standing. He looked at me.

"Mr. Croft," he began. He paused. "I accused you of something, when you last came here, of which I would not lightly accuse any man. If I was wrong I wish to apologize."

"Only a matter of the most urgent necessity could have brought me back," I replied. "Your behaviour was inexcusable."

He rested his hands on the desk, looking at me across it.

"Whatever I did and said—one charge was graver than the rest. I accused you of friendship with Juan Cardona. Was I unjust in that?"

"I was retained professionally by the Colonel," said Darling, quietly, "and Mr. Croft accompanied me at my request. His visit here was also at my request, not the Colonel's."

Thorne looked at Darling, then at me.

"Mr. Croft." He moved around the desk and stood before me. "I have grossly insulted you. If you knew what had prompted my behaviour, I believe you could find it in your heart to forgive me. I do not ask you to. I accept the shame of having mortally offended a guest under my roof."

He bowed formally.

It was an odd thing to feel in the circumstances, but I felt more the beneficiary of a pardon than the grantor of one. I stood and gave him my hand.

"It was a misunderstanding," I said. "Let us not speak of it further."

His eyes lit briefly, and he gripped my hand.

"You are generous. And now, Mr. Darling—"

He returned to his chair.

"Mr. Thorne," said Darling, cutting across further preamble, "I sent you a message through Ah Lum that the police would be

here within ten minutes to arrest you. This was not an empty warning."

"So I supposed," replied Thorne. He drew a piece of newspaper toward him and began filling the corn-cob from the shag on it. His voice was steady. "Since I have not rendered myself amenable to the law, it leaves me moderately unmoved. But I appreciate your coming. On your second point: you say Don Juan Cardona was murdered."

"Shot through the head from an elevated position, shortly after midnight. He had walked into the garden in his sleep."

Colin Thorne set down the corn-cob. He stood up again.

"He was sleepwalking?"

"Yes."

"Good God."

He crossed to the study door and locked it. Then he came back and sat down, very composed now, his remarkable brain fully engaged.

"I appreciate my position," he said. "Preposterous as I know the suspicion to be, it is perhaps natural that it should fall on me. Before I say anything further, will you tell me your exact standpoint? Do you represent the late Colonel's interests, the police, or your own?"

"My own," replied Darling, simply. "I was hired to find a threat to the Colonel's life. I failed to prevent his death. Nothing interests me now except the truth."

Thorne looked at him for a moment, assessing.

"Very well. What were these incidents you were investigating?"

"The one most directly relevant to you," said Darling, "is this: approximately one month ago, the wing of a bat was nailed to the entrance door of Mordaunt's Folly."

Thorne leaned forward.

"A bat wing? What species?"

"A South American Vampire Bat."

The effect of those words was remarkable and, I think, entirely genuine. Every trace of personal anxiety left Thorne's face, replaced by the undisguised excitement of a specialist confronted with his own material. Whatever he knew, whatever danger he was in, the thing that leapt into his eyes at those words was the pure intellectual pleasure of a man who has found something he has been looking for.

"It is the death-sign," he said. "The primary death-sign of the tradition."

He stood again—he was constitutionally incapable of remaining seated when interested—and crossed to one of the cabinets against the wall. He pulled open a drawer, searched briefly, and took out a shallow wooden tray.

Darling was watching him with an expression I had rarely seen on my friend's face, which was that of a man who has just encountered the supreme puzzle of his professional life.

Thorne held up an object between his finger and thumb.

It was the wing of a bat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

COLIN THORNE'S SECRET

"I brought this bat wing from Haiti," he said, replacing it carefully in the tray. "It was found beneath the pillow of a local pastor who had died under obscure circumstances during the night."

He returned the tray to its drawer, closed it, and stood erect. He raised his clenched hands.

"With no thought of blasphemy," he said, "but with sincere reverence, I thank God from the bottom of my heart that Juan Cardona is dead."

He sat again. Darling watched him without expression.

"'The evil that men do lives after them.'" Thorne rested his chin on his hand. "A bat wing nailed to his door. Am I to understand that this was what led you to the Guest House?"

"It was."

"I see. Then let me set my specialist's instincts aside and confine myself to the matter in hand. Did Cardona understand the significance of that token?"

"He had encountered it before, in the Caribbean. He feared it greatly."

"Ah, the black-hearted devil. But I see I am already making myself more suspect." He straightened. "Perhaps it would serve us better if you questioned me directly, Mr. Darling."

"Very well. When and where did you last see Colonel Cardona?"

"I never met him. We have never spoken."

"Not once?"

"Not in any circumstance."

"Hm. Where were you at midnight last night?"

"Here. Writing."

"And Ah Lum?"

"In bed."

"Did anything disturb you?"

"Yes. A rifle shot."

"You identified it immediately as a rifle?"

"Unmistakably."

"What did you do?"

"I was in the middle of a critical passage and should probably have done nothing, but Ah Lum knocked at my door. My wife had been awakened by the shot. She rang for him, fearing—I think—that the sound had come from this room. He came to reassure himself I was unharmed, then reported back to her. She was still uneasy and asked him to bring her a glass of milk. He came back downstairs and went to the kitchen to fetch it."

Darling's expression changed.

"He lit the kitchen light for that."

"Naturally—" Thorne stopped. The intelligence in his eyes focused and sharpened. "Of course. You saw the light from Mordaunt's Folly." He nodded slowly. "And given the timing, you understood exactly what it might mean. Yes. I understand at last."

We were quiet for a moment.

"How long between the shot and Ah Lum's knock at your door?"

"I cannot say precisely. I was absorbed. A minute, perhaps two."

"The shot was loud?"

"Startling, in that stillness. But these hills are full of game. It crossed my mind that it might be a poacher, and then I returned to my work."

"You thought no more about it."

"Not until you arrived."

Darling looked at him steadily.

"I wonder, Mr. Thorne, if you fully appreciate the position you are in."

"I can anticipate every question I shall be called upon to answer," Thorne replied. He had begun to fill his pipe and was watching the operation with great care. "Shall I outline the case against me? It may save time."

"Please," said Darling.

Thorne lit the pipe and drew on it once.

"I made no secret of my hatred for Cardona. Many witnesses. He was in Cuba during the period I was conducting my research there. Evidence could be produced that we were in the same cities in the United States before I came to England and leased this house. He subsequently became my nearest neighbour. These are the foundations."

He smoked with short, reflective draws.

"The bat wing was nailed to his door. He associated this sign with a threat to his life. The tradition of which this sign

is part-Obeah practice in its most serious forms—is not well understood outside the communities where it lives. I have made it my particular study. The one who wears the bat-wing regalia in that tradition holds the highest ceremonial authority and is known simply as ‘Bat Wing’—a title of both reverence and terror. In this county, I am almost certainly the only person with sufficient knowledge to have employed this token in its proper context. Since I was alone when the shot was fired, since no alibi is possible for me, and since the Tudor garden of Mordaunt’s Folly is clearly within rifle range of this house—to fail to arrest me would be, frankly, an act of professional negligence.”

He regarded us with something approaching satisfaction. He had stated his own case for the prosecution with the detachment of a chess player analysing a lost position.

Ben Darling glanced at his watch.

“Mr. Thorne. I have just suffered the worst defeat of my professional career. The man who hired me to keep him alive was killed almost within arm’s reach. There is one thing, and only one, that can redeem it.”

“Apprehend the murderer,” said Thorne.

“Ultimately. But first—I must ensure that to the assassination of Colonel Cardona a judicial murder is not added.”

Thorne looked up sharply.

“You mean you believe I am innocent.”

"I mean that if you killed Cardona, you are a madman. And in the course of this conversation I have formed the view that you are brilliantly sane."

Colin Thorne rose and bowed in his grave, old-fashioned way.

"I am obliged to you, Mr. Darling. Has Mr. Croft told you of my recent habits?"

Darling nodded.

"They will naturally be offered as evidence of sustained premeditation. And there are precedents for treating dependency of this kind as a form of diminished responsibility, which can cut either way." He sighed and lay back in the chair. The analytical mood was fading, replaced by something quieter and more human. "I have suffered greatly in pursuit of the truth, Mr. Darling. Suffering is the gate beyond which we find compassion. Perhaps what I have said sounds frivolous, given that a man died within a quarter of a mile of where I sit. But I revere truth above all other laws. I cannot, and I do not, regret the death of Cardona."

He paused, and looked at his fingers.

"Nevertheless, I have three reasons for wishing not to pay the penalty of a crime I did not commit. First: it would be bitter to know that even in death, Devil Cardona had destroyed me. Second: my work, which is unfinished. And third—"

He did not speak the third for a moment.

"My wife."

I had been watching him carefully throughout, and I understood then, as I think Darling did too, that what had

appeared to be egotism was something else entirely. A man who places his wife third—after bitterness at an enemy and the claims of his work—might seem cold. But the weight with which he spoke that third reason made it the heaviest of all.

"I hear you," said Ben Darling, quietly. "And you have led me to the point I most need to examine. Your drinking. Your stated hatred of the Colonel. I am going to ask you, Mr. Thorne, to tell me the nature of both—the domestic troubles that drove one, and what history produced the other."

Colin Thorne stood. He had the particular quality of stillness, when he chose it, that makes a room feel very quiet.

"Mr. Darling," he replied, "I cannot answer those questions."

Darling inclined his head.

"You will be required to under circumstances that will not accept refusal."

Thorne met his gaze without flinching.

"'The fate of every man is hung around his neck.'"

"In this secret history you refuse to tell," said Darling, with considerable restraint, "the truth that exculpates you may be hiding."

"It may be so. My determination remains."

"Then you have given me a giant's task, and I cannot thank you for it."

From outside came the sound of a car pulling up on the road.

Colin Thorne looked toward the window, then back at Darling. He sat down in his carved chair with the composure of a man who has made his preparations and has nothing left to do but wait.

"The police," said Darling. "The opportunity has passed."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

INSPECTOR ALDRIDGE CROSS-EXAMINES

"Oh, I see," said Inspector Aldridge. "A little private conference, was it?"

He distributed a stare of reproach between Darling and me.

"These gentlemen were kind enough to come and inform me personally of what had happened at Mordaunt's Folly," said Colin Thorne. "Will you sit down, Inspector?"

"I conduct my examinations standing. Thank you."

He turned to Darling.

"Might I ask, Mr. Darling, what concern this is of yours?"

"I am naturally interested in anything related to the death of a client."

"Oh, I see. You slip in ahead of me, having deliberately withheld information from the police, and expect to take all the credit. Is that it?"

"That is it, Inspector," replied Darling, pleasantly. "A case of professional jealousy."

"Professional jealousy! Allow me to remind you that you have no official standing in this case whatsoever. You are a member of the public. Nothing more."

"I am happy to be recognized as a member of that much-misunderstood body."

"Ah. Well, we shall see. Now, Mr. Thorne." He raised his finger. "I have been informed by Miss Brandon that the late Colonel Cardona regarded you as a dangerous neighbour."

"If those were her exact words," I said, "I am rather surprised."

"Mr. Croft!" He turned on me with his fullest official weight. "Another word from you and I will have you removed."

He held the glare for some seconds, then returned to Thorne.

"I say: were you, or were you not, an enemy of the late Colonel Cardona?"

"I was."

"What did you say?"

"I say I was. I hated him, and I hate him no less in death than I hated him in life."

The Inspector opened his notebook with the deliberateness of a man who needs a moment to compose himself.

"I am placing that on record," he announced, and did so. Then: "Where did you first meet the Colonel?"

"I never met him."

"I beg your pardon?"

"We never met. Not on any occasion, in any place."

Aldridge looked at him steadily.

"I will repeat the question. Where did you first meet Colonel Juan Cardona?"

"And I have answered it."

"I see. Declining to answer. I will note that as well." He made another entry. "And where were you at midnight last night?"

Thorne repeated his account, briefly and accurately, as he had given it to Darling. When he finished:

"I shall want a word with your assistant. Mr.—Ah Lum, is it?"

Thorne inclined his head and called out. Ah Lum appeared in the doorway.

The Inspector looked him over with the focused attention he presumably brought to unusual animals at the zoo, then:

"Your name is Ah Lum?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Give me an exact account of your movements last night."

Ah Lum did so: Mrs. Thorne's bell, going upstairs, reporting back, fetching the milk, lighting the kitchen lamp. Precise, unhurried, complete.

Aldridge tried several approaches to find a crack in it, and found none. Ah Lum answered each question in the minimum number of accurate words. After four minutes of this the Inspector gave up with bad grace.

"Now," he said, "firearms in the house?"

"An early Dutch arquebus, which you see in the corner," said Thorne, "and a Colt revolver in this drawer."

He placed the revolver on the desk. Aldridge inspected the chambers, peered down the barrel, sniffed at it with an expression suggesting he hoped to find it had been recently fired. He was disappointed.

"Nothing else? No sporting rifles?"

"None. I never shoot."

"I see."

The door opened and Isaura came in. She was simply dressed, and looked, if anything, younger than when I had seen her before. Ah Lum had clearly briefed her on what to expect, but even so, her wide-eyed composure in the face of it—the strange quiet of her—was not easy to dismiss. Even Aldridge visibly moderated his manner.

She glanced at me and gave a small, grateful smile. Thorne presented her briefly, and she shook hands with Darling.

"I am sorry to trouble you, Mrs. Thorne," the Inspector began, "but I believe you were awakened last night by a shot."

"Yes. After midnight, Ah Lum told me."

"Was the sound loud?"

"Loud enough to wake me."

"Did you think it was in the house?"

"No. Farther away than that."

"And your husband—when did you last see him before the shot?"

"At dinner. He works through the night when he is writing."

"I see. And to your knowledge—when did your husband first meet Colonel Cardona?"

The colour went from her face with a completeness that was painful to see. She looked at Thorne, and something passed between them, then she turned back.

"As far as I know—they never met."

"Could you swear to that?"

"Yes."

The Inspector nodded without conviction, returned his notebook to his pocket, and announced that he was going to look at the garden. My respect for him increased marginally—at least he knew the garden needed examining.

We all followed him out. A police sergeant was stationed in the hall. Ah Lum stood by the front door and, as we emerged, Darling said a few words to him quickly in Cantonese. Ah Lum nodded and led us around the side of the house.

Darling fell into step beside me.

"I feel slightly guilty," he murmured. "For any civilian to speak Cantonese in front of a police inspector is positively ungentlemanly."

In the garden, Aldridge moved about humming to himself, surveying the grounds with the self-sufficiency of a man who has already formed his conclusion and is collecting confirmation for it.

He stopped before the summer arbour. The right-hand window, beneath which a fixed wooden bench ran the width of the hut, commanded a clear, unobstructed view down the slope and across the valley to the Tudor garden at Mordaunt's Folly. The sundial was distinctly visible, a bright speck in the morning light.

"Oh, I see," muttered Aldridge.

He stepped inside to examine the shelves.

Darling was staring at the view through the window with an intensity I recognised. He was counting something. I followed his gaze and understood: between this arbour and the sundial, in a rough line, stood a row of yew trees.

"One," he said, very quietly, almost to himself, "two, three, four, five, six-seven."

He straightened up abruptly.

"Pardon me a moment, Inspector."

He moved past Aldridge, who objected, knelt on the bench, and looked through the open window. He held that position for perhaps ten seconds. Then he stood.

"That will settle it," he said.

"Oh, I see," said the Inspector. "Counting will settle it, will it? Allow me to tell you that in my view it was already settled."

"Really?" Darling's eyes were bright and his colour was slightly up-both signs, I knew, that he had found something. "You have decided, of course, that the murder was committed by Ah Lum."

The Inspector's eyes enlarged.

"Ah Lum!"

"Surely it is the obvious reading," said Darling. "Of the three people in this house, Ah Lum is the only one who could possibly have done it."

"Ah Lum who could-who possibly-" The Inspector ran out of words.

"Consider the evidence," Darling continued, calmly. "Mrs. Thorne was awakened by the shot and rang for Ah Lum. There was a brief interval before he appeared-and when he appeared he was wearing an overcoat. Note that: an overcoat. He sleeps in the room adjoining the kitchen, on the ground floor. You saw the

location as we came through. If Mr. Thorne had fired from this arbour, he would still have been making his way back through the garden when Mrs. Thorne rang. He would have had to pass Ah Lum's room undetected, in darkness, and then reappear in the study within the time that Ah Lum took to go upstairs and take his mistress's instructions. I submit that this is not possible. Mr. Thorne is eliminated."

The Inspector had gone quite red, but Darling pressed on without mercy.

"I should add, however, that I have also eliminated Ah Lum. He lacks the first and second fingers of his right hand. I have yet to meet the marksman who can put a shot between a man's eyes at a hundred yards in moonlight using the third finger as a trigger. There are other points, but these are sufficient to show you that the matter is somewhat more complex than it might appear."

Inspector Aldridge did not reply. He turned and made his way back toward the house, leaving us in the garden.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

AN OFFICIAL MOVE

We came back to the study to find Isaura sitting very close to her husband's chair. Inspector Aldridge stepped into the hall for a moment to issue instructions to his sergeant, then returned.

"I should like to make a statement," said Ben Darling, before Aldridge had opened his mouth.

The Inspector looked at him with an expression suggesting he had hoped this particular individual had ceased to exist.

"I have not invited a statement from you."

"Quite. I am volunteering it. I believe you are about to take a significant official step. Having in view certain steps which I am also about to take, I would ask you to defer action—purely in your own interests—for at least twenty-four hours."

"I hear you," said the Inspector, with elaborate sarcasm.

"This case is not what it appears to be. The facts, as you currently have them, are misleading. If you act now you will be acting prematurely and you will cause unnecessary harm to innocent people. I am prepared to put everything I know at your disposal. I would also strongly suggest that you request specialist assistance from the Met Homicide Command. This is not a one-man inquiry."

"Have you concluded your statement?"

"For the moment."

"Good. Then let us get on."

He took his position before the mantel with full official gravity. Isaura watched him. Thorne sat still, entirely composed, though paler than before.

"Mr. Thorne, I find your answers to my questions very unsatisfactory."

"I am sorry to hear it."

"One moment, Inspector," said Darling. "You have not cautioned Mr. Thorne."

Inspector Aldridge's repressed wrath chose this moment to surface.

"Then I will caution you, sir!" he shouted. "One more word and you leave this house."

"I am going to venture one more word," said Darling, entirely unruffled. He turned to Thorne. "I happen to be a member of the Bar, Mr. Thorne, although I rarely accept a brief. Have I your authority to act for you in this matter?"

"Gratefully," said Thorne, and stood and bowed.

The expression on Inspector Aldridge's face was extraordinary to witness. He was a man of limited resources but not unlimited patience, and both were running out simultaneously.

He gave the formal caution. Then:

"Did you, or did you not, at or around midnight last night, shoot with intent to murder Colonel Juan Cardona?"

Isaura was on her feet before the question was finished, her hand on her husband's arm.

"I did not," said Thorne, quietly.

"Nevertheless, I am going to detain you pending further enquiries."

Thorne inclined his head.

"As you think fit."

The small fingers on his arm slowly relaxed. Isaura made one long, soundless exhalation, and slid to the floor in a faint.

"Isaura!" Thorne caught her and lifted her in one movement.

"Mr. Croft—the door, if you would."

I had it open before he had finished speaking.

He walked toward the hall, pale as chalk, his head very erect, carrying her.

Aldridge stepped forward.

"Let someone else attend to Mrs. Thorne. You will remain—"

Darling's arm went across his chest like a bar.

Thorne passed through the doorway without a word, except to glance back once—and in that glance was a quality of feeling I will not try to put into language. He went up the stairs.

Darling dropped his arm and went to the window. Aldridge charged to the door.

"Sergeant! Keep that man in sight. He is to come straight back down."

Heavy footsteps on the stairs. Aldridge turned back into the study and closed the door.

"Now, Mr. Darling. You are a barrister, I understand. You will therefore be aware that you have just physically obstructed an officer of the law in the execution of his duty."

Darling turned from the window.

"Is that a charge or a warning?"

They looked at each other.

"From this point forward," said Aldridge, "I will have no more trouble from you. I shall be verifying your Bar credentials, and I suggest you confine yourself to your proper duties and leave mine to me."

"I have attempted from the beginning to assist you in every way available to me," replied Darling, his good humour entirely restored—which meant he was sure of something. "You have declined every offer, and now on the flimsiest of circumstantial evidence you have detained a perfectly innocent man."

"Perfectly innocent?"

"Perfectly. There are numerous points you have overlooked. For instance: do you seriously suppose that Mr. Thorne had been sitting up here night after night on the off-chance that Colonel Cardona would choose to appear in the garden?"

"I have that worked out."

"Have you, indeed?"

"Mr. Thorne has an accomplice at Mordaunt's Folly. There was a witness who was very reluctant to name him at all. After considerable questioning I obtained the name. And Colonel Cardona did not retire last night—neither did this other party. That other party, Mr. Darling, knows exactly why the Colonel was in the garden at midnight."

It took a moment to penetrate. Then:

"You preposterous fool!" I said.

It was the last straw. Aldridge strode to the door.

"Be good enough to leave the house, Mr. Croft. I am about to have it officially searched and I will have no unauthorized persons present."

I walked out. I took my hat and stick, opened the front door, and left.

It was only as I reached the gate that I registered the full absurdity of the situation—dismissed from the Guest House for the second time. The thought struck me as funny in the way that extreme irritation sometimes becomes funny, and I was laughing at myself when Darling came out behind me.

"Now, Croft," he said, falling into step. "We have a great deal to do."

"I am too angry to think clearly."

"Understandably. Though I think I would have substituted a different word for 'fool'." He walked quickly. "I had anticipated the arrest. I am afraid there is worse to come."

"But surely your argument in the garden demonstrated he couldn't have fired the shot?"

"Words. I could pick a dozen holes in it myself. I only hoped to buy time. The real problem is this: I cannot currently see what the defence rests on."

I said nothing.

"Two things immediately. We need to examine the Tudor garden properly—there's a constable standing on the steps and he may let us through if we press. And we need the Chief Constable, whoever he is, and through him the Met Homicide Command. With a competent

team from London I might have a chance. With Aldridge holding the keys, none."

"You heard what he implied about Miss Brandon?"

"Yes. I had expected it. It is the idea he formed last night and he is not the kind of man who releases an idea once acquired. If the Chief Constable shares his temperament, we are in considerable difficulty."

We walked in silence for a moment.

"Are you certain Thorne is innocent?"

Darling didn't answer immediately.

"Thorne is a man of unusual intellect," he said at last.

"Planning a crime as this one was planned would have been child's play for him—child's play, Croft. But can you believe that a mind of that quality would have overlooked the single most essential detail? An alibi?"

"You cannot."

"Precisely. Which forces us, if we persist in viewing him as the murderer, to conclude it was an act of blind passion. But look at the execution, Croft. The elevation. The range. The darkness. This was not the act of a man who lost his head."

"Then what is your reading?"

Darling was quiet for a few steps.

"Consider all the evidence against Thorne. Every single point of it. There is almost no conceivable prosecution case that could be more complete. The hatred—documented. The proximity—visible. The expertise—published. The opportunity—provable. The alibi—non-existent."

He glanced at me.

"Where an Aldridge rushes in I fear to tread," he said. "The analogy with an angel was accidental, Croft." His expression grew serious again. "It is all too perfect. Every datum points the same way. That is not how guilt presents itself. That is how a frame looks. But I have failed once already, and I cannot rule out that in my anxiety to recover I am finding subtlety where there is none."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ALDRIDGE'S THEORY

Mordaunt's Folly was busy with strangers and a furtive institutional activity that made the grounds feel different. We came back via the meadow footpath rather than the main drive, entering through the private gate directly opposite the lake, and as we crossed toward the terraced lawns I could see unfamiliar figures on the veranda and moving along the east wing.

Darling led us through the rhododendrons and around to the northeast front, approaching the Tudor garden from the tower side. A constable stood at the top of the steps.

"Sorry, sir," he said, when Darling gave his name.

"Inspector's orders. No one in the garden."

"I am acting in this case."

"I'd have to ask the Inspector to authorize it, sir."

Darling turned away with a word of frustration, contained but audible.

"This costs us time we cannot afford," he said, as we moved off. "Come. There is another direction I can move in."

In the courtyard, Tomás was admitting the coroner's officer—a lugubrious individual in a dark suit. Darling called out to him.

"Tomás—ask Dawes to bring a car round immediately. I need it now."

He turned to me.

"I am going to the Chief Constable. Aldridge must be superseded, whatever it costs. I should be no more than an hour. In the meantime, Croft—keep Aldridge away from the women if you possibly can. I know it's not a small thing to ask."

"It isn't," I agreed.

"How you must regret," he said, with a brief, grim smile, "that we did not go fishing."

Then Dawes came round with the car and Darling was gone, with that particular quality of focused energy that meant he had found his angle and was moving on it.

I stood in the courtyard for a moment. The black evidence against Colin Thorne, which in the man's presence had seemed surmountable by sheer intelligence, felt heavier now. I turned it over, trying to see it as a barrister for the prosecution would see it. The result was not encouraging.

Val Brandon appeared from the corridor that led to Madame's room.

She saw me and the welcome in her eyes was immediate.

"Thank God you're back," she said. "Tell me what happened. I feel as though I've caused all of this."

"You know where Aldridge went after he left you?"

"To the Guest House."

"He was directly behind us. And Mr. Thorne has been detained."

She made a small, distressed sound.

"Oh. Oh, I could hate myself. What could I have done differently? What could I have said?"

"Tell me exactly what he asked you," I said.

She took a breath.

"He had established from one of the servants that there was some enmity between Mr. Thorne and the Colonel. He asked if I knew of it. I said I did, but that I had no idea of its origin. He didn't believe me."

"He has a tendency to disbelieve whatever fails to confirm what he's already decided."

"Then he seemed convinced that I was somehow personally acquainted with Mr. Thorne—which I am not. I have never exchanged a word with him, though whenever we've passed in the lane he has always been perfectly courteous."

She paused, and I could see from her expression that the worst was coming.

"And then he suggested—he actually suggested openly—that I had not come downstairs when I heard the shot, but had been in the corridor already. That I had come in from the door by the east wing. That I had been outside."

"He implied you had been in the grounds."

"He dared to suggest I had been to keep an assignation."

"The man is a fool," I said.

"I told him something very like that. Rather plainly." She looked almost amused for a moment. "I am afraid I have made an enemy of Inspector Aldridge."

"You are in large company. His enemies are all people of sense."

She smiled, but tiredly.

"How did Mrs. Thorne bear it? When he was detained?"

"She fainted. Thorne carried her upstairs. He was—it was very hard to watch."

Val was quiet for a moment.

"I want to go to her. I keep thinking of her over there in that house, alone now except for Ah Lum. We have never spoken, but I have watched her sometimes from a distance, and I know she is a kind person. Do you think she would see me?"

"I think she would be glad of it."

"I feel entirely responsible."

"You told the truth when asked questions under caution. You are responsible for nothing."

She nodded, but not as if she fully believed it. Then:

"Whatever should I have done if you had not been here?"

It was the second time she had said it, and she caught herself, and I thought perhaps this time she did not correct it.

"Is Madame awake?" I asked.

"Yes. Dr. Renton is with her now. She asked for me when she first woke and wanted to know immediately. I told her."

"How did she receive it?"

"As though she had been waiting for it. Composure beyond anything I have seen." Val shook her head. "She simply listened, and then thanked me, and asked Dr. Renton to come."

Dr. Renton appeared along the corridor at that moment, brisk as ever.

"Ah, Mr. Croft. She wishes to see you and to hear your account of events. I think that is the right course."

"Is she well enough?"

"She is remarkable. In these trauma-related conditions a great emotional shock can sometimes produce a temporary clarity of the kind I saw last night—she walked to that door, Mr. Croft. Whether that persists I cannot say; these things are unpredictable. But her mind is entirely her own, and she has the courage of ten."

"Oh, I see," said a loud voice behind us.

We turned. Inspector Aldridge, coming across the hall toward us, his notebook already in hand.

"Good morning, Doctor. I understand your patient is well enough to be interviewed?"

"She is somewhat improved. If she is willing to see you, I won't forbid it."

"Good of you, doctor." He nodded formally to Val Brandon, avoiding my eye with deliberate care. "Perhaps, Miss, you could ask Madame Brassard if she will see me for a few minutes?"

Val glanced at me, then turned and went toward Madame's door.

Dr. Renton departed with the speed of a man who has already spent too much of his morning in Aldridge's vicinity. The Inspector stood in the corridor consulting his notebook with the profound air of a man reviewing important evidence. I stood nearby and said nothing.

Val returned.

"Madame Brassard will see you, Inspector Aldridge," she said. "She asks that Mr. Croft be present as well."

"Oh," said the Inspector, his chin subsiding. "I see. Very well, then."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

IN MADAME'S ROOM

Madame Brassard's room was large and unmistakably French—the window drapes, the lampshades, the slim-legged furniture, the scatter of silver-framed mirrors and pictures, all of it expressing a single personality with complete consistency. The colour theme was violet and silver, and within it nothing was tawdry or glittering. Bowls of roses were everywhere. She lay in a high, wide bed amid a considerable number of silk pillows, her white hair dressed, a trimmed robe of ivory silk over her nightgown.

The night had changed her. She was recognisably herself—the force was intact—but something was different in the quality of her stillness. Where before there had been performance, there was now simply presence. I thought of certain portraits of women who have endured great public losses and learned to carry them in their faces without complaint.

Above the dressing table hung a large photograph of Colonel Cardona—not a formal portrait but something more immediate, taken outdoors in strong light, in riding clothes, hatless. A strikingly handsome, proud face. The resemblance to the Velázquez in the library was still there.

"M. Croft," she said, when I came to the bedside chair she indicated. "You are here. Good. Val, stay close. And this is Inspector Aldridge."

The Inspector, who had entered the room with his full official confidence, seemed to leave some of it by the door.

Madame gestured to the brocaded chair.

"Sit down, Monsieur l'Inspecteur," she said, and it was rather a command.

He sat.

"M. Croft, your friend—does he think he has failed? Does he think I condemn him?"

"He knows he has failed, Madame," I replied. "But his absence now is because at this hour he is following a lead he believes may point toward the truth."

She caught my arm.

"Tell me again. Tell me that again."

"He is on a trail, Madame. He hopes it will lead somewhere."

She looked at me for a moment with an expression I found impossible to read—sorrow and something else, a wary, painful thing, as if hope were something she no longer entirely trusted.

"If I could believe it," she said.

"Why should you not?"

She shook her head slightly.

"If you knew. If you knew."

Then, with a deliberate shift:

"Tell me, M. Croft. It was swift?"

"Instantaneous."

"A good shot?" she asked, with a strange directness.

"A very good shot."

She was quiet for a moment. Then:

"They say he must be moved. But I have told them: not until I have seen him."

"Madame," said Val, gently.

"My dear." Without looking at her, Madame extended one hand toward Val in that characteristic gesture, fingers slightly curled. "You do not know me yet. M. Croft—men who pay attention understand women better than women understand themselves, is it not so? You will understand that I must see him once more."

"Your courage is almost terrible," I said.

She shrugged.

"I am not proud of it. Animals are brave. Many cowards are proud. Now: you are sure he suffered nothing? He was not awake?"

"Certainly not awake. He felt nothing."

"Dr. Renton told me the same. It is the best way to die." She said it simply, without drama. "And yet he, who was brave and had faced death many times, would have counted it—" she snapped her fingers toward the window, "a trifle. The way one snuffs a candle."

She turned then, as if she had completed some private ceremony, and looked at Aldridge, who was sitting very still in the brocaded chair with his cap between his hands.

"And now, Inspector. What is it you wish to know?"

He stood up, in an effort to recover authority.

"Be seated, please," said Madame. "I will not be questioned by one who stands."

He sat.

"Very well, Madame. I've come to ask about a Mr. Thorne. You know him, no doubt?"

"I have never met him."

"I beg your pardon?"

Madame glanced at me with the expression of someone confirming that the situation is exactly as bad as she had been told.

"I have never met Mr. Thorne."

"His wife, then?"

"I have never met his wife."

"But it is a fact that Colonel Cardona regarded this man as an enemy?"

"It is a fact, yes."

"And the cause of this enmity?"

"I cannot tell you."

"Do you mean you don't know, or you won't say?"

"I mean that I cannot tell you."

"That doesn't help me much."

"No," agreed Madame. "It does not."

She twirled a ring on her finger and waited.

Aldridge cleared his throat and continued with the previous attempts on the Colonel's life, the surveillance, the break-in. Madame confirmed each item simply, without elaboration. I noticed that he never once raised the bat wing or any aspect of the Caribbean connection—he had decided it was irrelevant, and his peculiar brand of obstinacy would not permit him to use anything that had originated with Darling.

"Now, Madame. You heard the shot last night."

"I was already awake."

"Oh. Where did you think it came from?"

"Beyond the east wing, behind the house."

He turned ponderously to orient himself by the window.

"And then what did you do?"

"I was so startled that I ran to the door before I remembered I could not walk."

She glanced at me, briefly, with a tired expression that acknowledged the inadequacy of the phrasing.

"You forgot you couldn't walk?" said Aldridge, with genuine bafflement.

"I expressed myself poorly. The fright gave me the strength to reach the door. And there I fell and fainted."

"The fright. Yes. Were you frightened because of the shot, or for some other reason?"

"My cousin had been living in fear of assassination for some time. He had communicated this fear to me. When I heard the shot—"
" she stopped. She placed her hands before her face. After a moment she said, very quietly: "Something told me that it had come."

Val was watching her closely. The examination had gone on long enough, and anyone with ordinary perception would have withdrawn.

Inspector Aldridge did not withdraw.

"One more thing, Madame. Have you any idea what took Colonel Cardona out into the grounds last night? It's not natural for a man to be walking the garden alone at midnight when he's unwell."

"What do you mean, not natural?" said Madame, still quietly.

"Well—if there was a lady in the case it might be different."

"A lady," said Madame. "Yes. Continue."

Her voice was very soft. Aldridge took this as invitation.

"The young lady sitting beside you was still in her evening dress when I arrived last night. I established that."

What happened next was the finest thing I saw in all my time at Mordaunt's Folly.

Madame Brassard turned to Val Brandon and drew her close with one arm, pulling her in so that Val's head came to rest against her shoulder. She held her like that, and sat perfectly upright, and fixed her extraordinary eyes upon the face of Inspector Aldridge.

I had spent three days trying to identify the quality in those eyes. I found it now. They were not cold, they were not hostile—they were simply absolutely without any concession whatsoever to the person they were aimed at. They regarded him as a problem to be removed, and nothing more.

"Oh, Madame," said Val, in a muffled voice. "How dare he."

Madame raised her chin.

"Leave my room."

Her left hand extended, pointing to the door, the fingers still characteristically curled.

"Stupid, gross fool."

"I am only doing my duty, Madame," said Aldridge, standing.

"Go," said Madame. "I insist that you go."

He went. Those eyes followed him to the door without blinking.

I stood also.

"Madame Brassard," I said, "I love your spirit."

She threw her head back and smiled at me. I will not attempt to describe the entirety of what that look contained. I would not do it justice.

"My friend," she said, and held out her hand.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

AN INSPIRATION

Aldridge had gone when I came out of the corridor, and Mateo was waiting to remind me gently that I had not eaten. The fact that I was ravenously hungry struck me as slightly indecent under the circumstances, but I agreed to take breakfast on the south veranda, as I had done the morning before.

The papers were on the table—Dawes drove into Mickleford each morning to collect them from the station newsagent—but I did not open any of them. Mateo served me in person, and I could see that the man wanted badly to talk. When he brought the second round of coffee I gave him the opening.

"This has been a terrible blow to you, Mateo."

"Terrible, sir. I lose a fine employer, I lose my position, and I am a long way from home."

"You are from Cuba?"

"Yes, sir. I was with the Colonel in Havana. Many years."

"Did you know of the previous attempts on his life?"

"Nothing, sir. He told me nothing of that."

"The bat wing, Mateo. When you found it—what did you think it meant?"

He looked at me with a careful expression.

"I thought it was meant to frighten, sir. I have heard of the sign but I had never seen it used. I knew it was Obeah."

"Who did you think had put it there?"

"I had heard the Colonel say that Mr. Thorne was his enemy. So I thought perhaps someone connected with him had done it."

"But why would Mr. Thorne have hated the Colonel?"

"I cannot tell you, sir." He hesitated. "I wish I could."

"Was the Colonel well liked in Cuba?"

Mateo considered this with the careful honesty of a man who respected the dead but respected the truth more.

"Perhaps not so well liked, sir. In certain quarters."

"No," I said. "I had formed that impression."

He withdrew. I sat in the morning sun listening to the skylarks over the valley and thought about human complexity and its consequences.

There was little I could usefully do until Darling returned. Common decency kept me away from Val Brandon until she had recovered from Aldridge's insinuations, and I had no wish to become caught up in the official procedures now grinding through the house. But I felt I should remain within reach, in case there were things Mateo could not handle and which must otherwise fall to Val.

I filled my pipe and walked down to the sloping lawn. A gardener was working at the far corner with a sprayer, looking up briefly as I passed before returning to his work. I thought there was something apt about it—the business of maintaining a garden continuing regardless, unmoved by any human event within the walls above it.

I turned along the east path and came in sight of the door in the side of the east wing—the door through which Cardona had

come out on both his sleepwalking episodes, the second of which had been his last. His bedroom was directly above. I stopped in the shadow of the tower and looked back up at the smoke-room windows. I thought of the shadow Darling had seen on the blind, the woman in the loose robe making gestures of despair. I was uncomfortably aware that when Aldridge learned of this episode—and he would, eventually—it would fuel his existing suspicions in a direction that would cause real damage.

I pushed through the rhododendrons and out the other side, and walked along the outer path. After a minute I came to a clear point where the Guest House gable was visible through the trees, and the summer arbour at the end of its garden.

The arbour window was closed. A constable moved slowly about the garden below it. The afternoon sun caught the buttons of his uniform now and then.

I thought of Isaura Thorne. Alone in that house now except for Ah Lum, her husband in custody, the police in her garden. She knew almost no one in the neighbourhood. The housekeeper Mrs. Pendle was away visiting her daughter. I found myself unable to stop thinking about the quality of that solitude.

I was still thinking this, turning it over with a compassion that was entirely real, when I stepped out from the shadow of the tower into the full morning sun, and the seven yew trees came into my sightline.

I stopped.

The thought arrived complete. Not gradually, not as a building of evidence toward a conclusion, but all at once—a

single, fully formed, terrible understanding that arranged every fragment of the last three days into a pattern so clear and so cold that I stood in the path unable to move.

"My God," I said aloud. "I see it all."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT
MY THEORY OF THE CRIME

It was well into the afternoon before Ben Darling returned.

My conviction was strong enough that I had spent the intervening hours not seeking conversation but refining the theory, testing it against every fact I could bring to bear, and finding it held. I did not intrude on Madame Brassard's grief. Around midday the body was removed, and an oppressive stillness settled over Mordaunt's Folly that I found I preferred not to sit with in the library.

I walked to the Mortimer Arms for a sandwich and a pint of Mrs. Tupper's excellent ale. The bar was unusually full for that hour. Conversation stopped when I came in. Mrs. Tupper greeted me with a subdued expression.

"Well, sir," she said, "of course you've heard."

I replied that I had, without identifying myself as a guest at Mordaunt's Folly.

"Well, well." She shook her head. "It had to come to something. All these foreign folk."

She withdrew, and I drank my beer in a silence that had the quality of a verdict already reached. As I left, an old farm labourer broke it.

"Ah, well," he said, to no one and everyone, "we know now, don't we. We know why he was drinking himself under."

A murmur of agreement went around the bar.

I walked back to Mordaunt's Folly knowing that in the village, at least, Colin Thorne had already been tried and found guilty.

Val Brandon remained with Madame, and I had Aldridge's reporters turned away at the gate—five of them between noon and Darling's return, some persistent enough to linger in the lane. I waited in the library.

I heard the car, and Darling came up the front steps in the purposeful way that meant he had done what he had gone to do.

"Any developments?" he called.

"Nothing except the press. They were turned away."

"Good. I expected you had already seen to that."

We went into the library. He dropped into a chair.

"I was longer than I should have been," he said. "The Chief Constable is a reasonable man but a proceduralist. The facts I put to him weren't sufficient to supersede Aldridge, in his view. So I went on to London."

"London? You've been to the Home Office?"

"I have. That tedious report which I completed on the night before we left Chancery Lane proved rather more useful than I had expected. The Met Homicide Command have been assigned. The inspector in charge should be here within the hour. Until then I'm tied."

He looked at me.

"You're holding something. What is it?"

"A theory. I believe I understand what happened."

He sat forward at once.

"Tell me."

"All right. Step by step. Do you recall Val Brandon's account of the footsteps in the corridor—unfamiliar ones, a woman's, heading toward the Colonel's end of the building on multiple nights?"

"Yes."

"And you yourself heard someone crossing the hall that second night, and we both heard a door close."

"We did."

"And you saw the shadow of a woman on the blind of the smoke-room."

"Yes."

"Very well. We have agreed that no woman in the household accounts for any of this. All staff eliminated. So: there is a door on the south side of the east wing, close to the tower, opening into the rhododendron shrubbery. The Colonel told us it was the door he used during his sleepwalking episodes. But now—suppose that account was untrue, in one particular."

Darling's expression changed in exactly the way I had hoped it would.

"You mean he was not sleepwalking."

"I mean his account of why he used that door may have been untrue. Suppose he was using it for a different purpose entirely—to admit a visitor. At night, when the household was sleeping, after Mateo had bolted it. Perhaps he even unbolted it himself in advance. It would be a simple matter."

"Good God, Croft," said Darling, very quietly. "Go on."

"Hence the footsteps passing Val's door. Hence the shadow on the blind. And the door we heard close that night was the shrubby door—the visitor leaving."

Darling said nothing. He was looking at me with the complete attention he gave to things that mattered.

"Now consider the enmity between Thorne and the Colonel. Inexplicable on the surface—two men who by their own account never once spoke. But if we add the visitor, the enmity becomes entirely explicable."

"You are saying Cardona was Mrs. Thorne's lover," said Darling.

"Don't you think so?"

"It is feasible. Dreadfully feasible. Continue."

"Isaura Thorne is Cuban. Cardona spent many years there. It is entirely possible that a connection existed before her marriage to Thorne—that she knew Cardona, perhaps intimately, and that the connection was not entirely severed. Then Cardona, his infatuation undiminished, leases the property next door. Thorne eventually learns of the renewed affair. Hence the drinking—a man drowning something he can't bring himself to confront directly. He loves his wife. He cannot leave her and he cannot bear what is happening. That expression he wore in the Mortimer Arms—that was not the face of a man planning a murder, Darling. That was the face of a man in sustained private anguish."

"And the shadow on the blind," said Darling, "the gestures of despair."

"A final meeting. She had told him she would not come again. Perhaps Thorne had found out and confronted her, and she had promised. Cardona refuses to accept it. He sends a message somehow—we don't know how—asking her to come one last time. She comes. Those were the gestures of someone ending something. The shadow, the hour, the movements you described—all of it fits."

Darling was very still.

"She failed to come the following night. So Cardona, impatient or agitated or drawn by whatever force was pulling him into that garden, walked out himself. He was not sleepwalking, Croft. He was waiting for her. Or looking for her. And Thorne, who may have intercepted his wife, or may simply have been awake and watching from the arbour, saw him standing by the sundial in the moonlight."

"And could not hold back," said Darling quietly.

"And could not hold back."

A silence. The library clock ticked.

"Your theory does not accommodate the bat wing episodes," said Darling.

"If Cardona lied about his purpose in the garden, he may have constructed the entire Caribbean vendetta story to give himself cover—to explain his fear, to explain why he needed you here, without ever revealing the real reason."

"Why would he do that?"

"Because to tell you the truth would have meant destroying Isaura Thorne's reputation and his own. He may have thought the lie would serve. He may even have believed he could have it both

ways—your protection against Thorne's anger, without the truth ever emerging."

Darling sat back and was quiet for a moment.

"Croft," he said at last, "this is a genuinely brilliant piece of reasoning. In several particulars it brings me closer to the truth than anything I have managed myself. But its final confirmation or refutation rests on a single thing."

"What thing?" I said. "Not the bat wing—I know you'll say the bat wing could have been part of the deception—"

"Not the bat wing at all," he replied. "I am thinking of the seventh yew tree from the northeast corner of the Tudor garden."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

A LEE-ENFIELD RIFLE

I had no answer ready for the seventh yew tree, but I was not given time to attempt one. The library door opened and Inspector Aldridge came in.

"Ah, Mr. Darling. You've come back. I thought you'd thrown up the case."

"Did you?" Darling was pleasant. "No, still persevering in my ineffectual way."

"And still convinced that Colin Thorne is innocent, I suppose."

"In one or two particulars my evidence remains incomplete. But as to his innocence—yes, I don't doubt it for a moment."

I was surprised by the directness of this. Darling did not speak against his own beliefs, even for tactical purposes, and he had not said one word during my entire presentation of the theory to suggest he agreed with it.

Aldridge was visibly triumphant—the particular satisfaction of a man holding a card he has not yet played.

"He remains detained," he said. "And I've detained the man Ah Lum as well. He was an accomplice."

"Was he really?"

"And once I've established who lured the Colonel out into the grounds last night, my case is complete."

I looked away. Darling, unhelpfully, looked directly at the Inspector.

"Your manner suggests you have made a significant discovery."

"It does, does it?" Aldridge managed to look simultaneously modest and extremely pleased with himself. "I don't do things by halves. I didn't content myself with staring out of that little hut and saying 'one and one make two'—I examined every book on those shelves, every page of every book. Then I had the floor up."

"The floor of the hut."

"The planks were loose. I had satisfied myself it was a likely hiding place."

"And found what? A dead rat?"

Aldridge turned to the door.

"Sergeant Butler."

The sergeant came through from the hall carrying a sports bag. Aldridge took it and placed it on the library floor with the care of a man presenting evidence in court.

"This," he said, "is the hanging evidence I found beneath the floor of the hut."

He opened the bag and lifted out a rifle.

I saw Darling's hands, in his jacket pockets, clench into fists. The movement of the cloth was just visible.

"A Lee-Enfield," said Aldridge. "Service pattern. It contains four cartridges—three undischarged and one fired. He had not even troubled to eject the spent round."

He returned it to the bag with the quiet drama of a man who has been right all along.

"Fancy theories about bat wings and Caribbean religions," he said, "may satisfy you, Mr. Darling. I think this rifle will prove more satisfactory to the coroner."

He picked up the bag and walked out.

Darling stood looking at the closed door for a long moment. Then he turned, very slowly, and went to an armchair and sat down.

"Has this surprised you?" I asked carefully.

"Surprised me," he said in a low voice. "It has appalled me."

"Then despite appearing to find my theory credible, you continued to believe Thorne innocent?"

"I believe so still."

"Even now?"

"Croft." He leaned forward. "We established that a man of Thorne's intelligence, having decided on murder, would have arranged an alibi so watertight that we spent the better part of an hour arguing about why he hadn't. Are we now to accept that this same man hid the weapon so incompetently that the most literal-minded policeman in Surrey found it in forty minutes? Preserve your balance. Theories are wild horses. They run away with us, and I am as guilty of this as anyone, which is precisely why I avoid speculation until I have a solid base of fact beneath me."

"But how could Thorne have anticipated that someone would pull up the floor planks?"

Darling looked at me with the patience of a teacher who has been asked this before.

"Do you remember your first meeting with this man?"

"Of course."

"What was the nature of his conversation?"

"He identified that I had been thinking he resembled Poe. From a glance."

"Precisely. Not entirely sober, under stress, meeting a complete stranger—and he reads the content of that stranger's mind from a single look. You want me to believe this same man did not foresee, in absolute detail, what the police would conclude the moment Cardona was found shot within a hundred yards of his garden?"

I had no answer.

"This case," said Darling, "is like an archaeological site. Every time we clear one layer we find evidence of more complex activity beneath it. I am beginning to think we have not reached the bottom yet."

He filled his pipe.

"Tell me about Madame Brassard and Aldridge."

I told him. He listened without interrupting. When I described Madame throwing her arm around Val and the expulsion of the Inspector, something crossed his face that was not quite a smile but was not entirely serious either.

"Good," he said. "At least he has his theory, to which he is admirably loyal. I find myself constantly being forced to revise

mine." He glanced up. "Though your contribution has moved me considerably further forward than I was this morning."

"But you have a theory that differs from mine."

"Not entirely different. Less complete. I have, as I said, been operating on what I would describe as a negative hypothesis—focused entirely on demonstrating what did not happen, rather than what did. I have one firm conviction and one promising direction."

"What conviction?"

"That Colin Thorne did not commit this murder."

"And the direction?"

He was quiet for a moment.

"When the Inspector walked in with that rifle, Croft, I began to think very hard. I cannot say more until I have tested my hypothesis about Thorne's innocence—the seventh yew tree is central to that test, and I cannot reach it until the Homicide team arrive and give me access to the garden."

He looked at me directly.

"You are not a man whose ideas I laugh at. You gave me a platform this afternoon that I am already using. But I must be honest with you about this much: I have not yet been able to build my theory to the point where I can name the person who did kill Cardona. What I have are three pieces, and without all three I cannot construct the answer."

"Tell me the three."

He counted them on his fingers.

"A bat wing. A yew tree. And a Lee-Enfield charger-loader."

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE SEVENTH YEW TREE

Detective Inspector Westhorpe arrived at five o'clock. He was a quiet, resourceful man with the bearing of someone who had done serious work in difficult places, and he carried his seniority lightly. His first act on entering the library was to shake Darling's hand with the unaffected respect of one professional for another. I was glad to see him.

"Thank God," said Darling. "Now I can move."

We went into the hall to meet Aldridge, who had just returned. Darling handled it with his characteristic tact.

"No reason for us to be at loggerheads, Inspector Aldridge," he said. "This case has depths that neither of us has fully reached yet. You have a reputation to protect, as I do. I am quite certain you will welcome the assistance of Detective Inspector Westhorpe."

"What's this?" Aldridge looked from Darling to Westhorpe.

"Quite proper procedure," said Westhorpe, pleasantly. "Your detainee is an American citizen. His Embassy contacted the Home Office. You should regard my arrival as additional resource rather than any reflection on your work."

"Oh," said Aldridge. "I see. Well. If that's the way of it."

"Good," said Westhorpe. "Now—before anything else—Mr. Darling, I understand there is something you want to examine in the garden."

"There is," said Darling. "Inspector Aldridge, would you ask the constable on duty at the Tudor garden steps to allow us through?"

Aldridge blew his nose with energy. Then:

"You are wasting your time, Mr. Darling," he announced. "But go ahead if you must."

He stamped out. Darling and I followed him through the courtyard. Westhorpe waited in the library.

We came down the steps into the Tudor garden. The afternoon light was long now, everything gold and shadow. Darling walked straight to the sundial and stood for a moment looking at the flattened grass where Cardona had fallen. Then he turned and stared up toward the Guest House on the hillside, and then along the bank of yew trees that bordered the northeast edge of the garden.

He started counting from the far end.

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven."

He climbed the bank and began to examine the trunk of the seventh yew from the northeast corner. He worked his way carefully around it, checked the branches, moved to the next tree, shook his head, and moved to the next. Then:

"Croft. Come here."

He was kneeling. I scrambled up the bank and crouched beside him. Embedded in the bark of a yew trunk was what appeared to be a large nail or bolt.

I looked more closely. It was not a nail. I understood immediately what it was.

It was the bullet that had killed Colonel Cardona.

Darling stood up. His face was slightly flushed and his eyes very bright.

"We leave it exactly where it is," he said. "The depth of penetration may tell us something—yew is among the hardest of British timbers. And I want Westhorpe to see it in place."

We climbed back down to the path.

"Darling," I said. "This is another point for the prosecution. Unless—unless the calibre—"

"No. It is a Lee-Enfield round. The same weapon."

I stared at him.

"Then I am entirely out of my depth. The case against Thorne is now complete beyond any reasonable doubt. The only remaining question is motive, and I believe I have identified that."

"I am inclined to think," said Darling carefully, "that there is considerable truth in your theory."

"Then you do believe Thorne did it."

"On the contrary. I am certain he did not."

I stopped walking.

"Darling. You said the bullet is from a Lee-Enfield. It is lodged in a yew tree directly in line with where the Colonel fell. The shot came from the Guest House direction. How, precisely, does any of this exonerate Thorne?"

"You have persistently overlooked one detail, Croft," said Darling, walking on. "I asked you, on several occasions, to note the seventh yew tree from the northeast corner of the garden."

"I have noted it. The bullet is in it."

"No," said Darling. "The bullet is in the ninth."

I stopped again. I stood quite still on the path and thought about this.

I was still thinking about it when we came back into the library and found Aldridge in full flight, presenting his case to Westhorpe before the mantelpiece.

"—every detail slots into place," he was saying. "The housekeeper, for instance—a Mrs. Pendle who had worked at the Guest House for two years and never taken a holiday—was sent away to her married daughter in London just recently. Her room is at the back of the house. Her evidence would have been awkward. Ah Lum is a liar—I decided that immediately. Mrs. Thorne is the only innocent party. She was asleep at the front of the house when the shot was fired and I believe her on the distance question."

"A very interesting case, Inspector," said Westhorpe, glancing at Darling. "I understand the wound was clean—straight through?"

"The bullet entered at the juncture of the nasal and frontal bones," said Darling precisely, "and exited between the base of the occipital and the first cervical. A perfectly straight wound. No ricochet."

"Regulation rifle?"

"We have it," said Aldridge.

"And the range?"

"Roughly a hundred yards," said Aldridge.

"Possibly somewhat less," said Darling.

Westhorpe nodded slowly, with the expression of someone working through a calculation.

"A wound of that type, at that range—the bullet passed clean through. So I would expect to find it somewhere behind the deceased." He looked at Darling. "Where was it, Mr. Darling?"

Aldridge turned his prominent eyes slowly toward Darling.

"That is why you wanted the garden," he said. "Oh, I see."

"It is lodged in one of the yew trees," said Darling. "I found it there a few minutes ago."

"There you have it," said Aldridge, recovering himself. "Complete confirmation."

Westhorpe looked at Darling with open curiosity.

"I must say, Mr. Darling—I've rarely seen a clearer case."

"Neither have I," said Darling pleasantly. "Which is why I would like to ask Inspector Aldridge to return here after dark. There is an experiment I wish to make that would definitively establish my case."

"Your case?" said Aldridge.

"My case. Yes."

"You're still persisting with this business about Thorne being innocent?"

"I am not prepared to say he is innocent until I have conducted the experiment. I am prepared to say that I have not yet encountered one single piece of convincing evidence for his prosecution."

Aldridge stared at him. Westhorpe stared at him. Even I stared at him, and I was beginning to understand.

"Mr. Darling," said Westhorpe carefully, "are you saying--"

"I am saying," replied Darling, "that when you have witnessed what I propose to show you this evening, you will understand why I regard the discovery of the rifle as deeply alarming rather than reassuring--and why I believe we are faced with a considerably larger task than anyone in this room, myself included, has yet fully appreciated."

"And what task is that?" demanded Aldridge.

"The task of discovering who actually shot Colonel Cardona."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE
ISAURA THORNE'S CONFESSION

Darling departed with Westhorpe and Aldridge for Mickleford, where the Colonel's body had been taken for the post-mortem and where Thorne and Ah Lum were held. I had volunteered to remain at Mordaunt's Folly, for reasons that were not entirely unselfish.

"Manage the reporters, Mr. Croft," Westhorpe said as they left. "Refer them to me. Tell them as little as possible yourself."

The car had barely cleared the drive when I encountered Val Brandon coming from Madame's corridor.

She was still pale, but her expression when she saw me had a quality of relief in it that I found very gratifying.

"Have they all gone? I confess I have been hiding. Did you know?"

"I suspected as much. Yes, all gone. How is Madame?"

"Calm. Unnaturally calm. She is writing."

We walked together toward the library.

"What does Mr. Darling think of Aldridge's insinuations about me?"

"He thinks they are foolish," I said. "As I do. More to the point, Aldridge has been superseded—the case is effectively under Darling and Westhorpe now."

"Thank God for that." She was quiet for a moment. "I have been thinking about Mrs. Thorne all day. She must be entirely

alone over there, except for Ah Lum, and now even he has been taken away."

"You want to visit her."

"I keep thinking about her. Would you come with me?"

"I should very much like to," I said. "For more reasons than one."

She looked at me carefully.

"You won't try to question her? I only want to be kind."

"I will follow your lead entirely."

So we walked across the meadow path in the late afternoon light. With Mordaunt's Folly behind us the day did seem brighter—the skylarks were still up, the valley was beautiful—and yet I felt an odd remorse at being capable of enjoying it, given everything that lay behind and ahead.

Mrs. Pendle opened the Guest House door. She was a stout, pleasant woman who informed us she had returned from London only an hour ago, summoned back by telegram. She showed us into a small drawing room that reflected a sensibility entirely distinct from the rest of the house—neat, warm, personable, with flowers on the table and nothing out of place. Thorne's study was scholarship in ordered chaos; this room was Isaura.

She came in a few minutes later. She was very pale, her extraordinary hair unbound, still in the clothes she had been wearing when we called the previous day. The sight of Val Brandon produced an immediate, visible softening in her—two young women, strangers until that moment, recognising something in each other that required no introduction.

I left them together and went into Thorne's study to smoke my pipe. I did not remain long. When I returned, Val met my eye with a look that told me something significant had happened.

"Mrs. Thorne has something she wants to tell you," she said. "She thinks you should know."

Isaura was sitting very upright. She glanced at Val once, finding something steadying there, and then turned to me.

"The truth cannot hurt Colin," she said. "He has nothing to conceal. But I have kept things from him, and now I must say them."

"Please," I said. "Whatever you can tell us may help."

Val reached across and took her hand. Isaura held it, looked at it once, and then looked up.

"Before my marriage," she began, "my name was Isabella de Vega. Isaura was how I said it as a small child, and the name stayed."

She spoke clearly and with care, as a person does who has decided to say a difficult thing properly.

"My father managed an estate on a small island near Cuba. My mother was mixed heritage—her family's roots went back to the island's enslaved population—and she died when I was very small. Ah Lum was her servant. I have almost no memory of her, but I remember him carrying me in to see her."

She paused briefly.

"My father quarrelled with the Church because they would not give her a proper burial. I think he stopped believing after that. He was good to me. I was loved, by him and by the people

who worked there. I felt that. But he sent me to a convent school in Cuba when I was twelve, and there I understood, for the first time, what my mixed blood meant in that society. What I was considered to be. What possibilities were closed."

She said this without bitterness, as a plain statement of historical fact.

"When I came home at fifteen I knew who I was and what was likely to become of me. I was lonely. Ah Lum understood, in the way that he always understood. When my father was away from the house at night, Ah Lum slept outside my door."

Her eyes filled, and she blinked quickly.

"Then, when I was not yet twenty, Señor Cardona came to inspect the estate. He had not been on the island since a rising, years before. My father was afraid when he heard he was coming, and tried to arrange for me to be sent away, but before it could be done, Cardona arrived."

She was quiet for a moment.

"He came with a companion—a French lady, very elegant, a wonderful horsewoman. Madame de Stämer. Her hair was dark then. She seemed to me everything a woman of that world should be—brilliant, assured, beautifully dressed. She made me feel exactly as the convent had made me feel. That same sense of being something lesser, not quite real."

I said nothing. I understood now why Isaura had always hurried past Val in the lane.

"The first evening, Cardona saw me. That same night he—began. He made his intentions clear. I was trying to get away

from him when Madame de Stämer found us. She called me something I will not repeat. My father heard it and ordered her out of the house. Cardona intervened. My father struck him."

She looked down at her hands.

"I cannot describe what followed properly. They fought. I was too frightened to move. In the end my father was the one still standing. Then Cardona left the island. And shortly afterward my father had to go to Cuba to arrange our affairs—because of course everything was finished there."

She lifted her eyes.

"He never returned. They said it was an accident on the road to Havana. I was told this afterward, much afterward, and I have never known whether to believe it."

There was a silence.

"On the first night my father was away," she continued, "someone came to the door with a message that Ah Lum had been taken ill and was lying at a house along the road. I did not stop to think. I went. Of course it was a trap."

She said this quietly, without drama.

"I was taken to another of Cardona's properties—an island called El Manas—and kept there. He was careful never to show me violence. He offered me everything—money, jewellery, estates. But he thought, because of what my mother had been, that this was permissible—that I was not owed the same consideration as a woman of his own class."

Her chin came up slightly.

"He was wrong about my spirit."

Val's hand tightened on hers.

"After some weeks he offered to marry me. I thought if I agreed, I would gain enough freedom to escape and find Ah Lum. We were married in the house by a Spanish priest. And then Cardona took me to Cuba, to his house there. I thought I was safe. I thought I was his wife."

She paused again. What she said next she said simply, without any attempt to soften it.

"Ah Lum found me. He came onto the balcony of my room one night. He told me it had been a false ceremony. That the priest was not properly ordained. That Cardona had done the same to my mother, years before—that he had known exactly what he was doing, and had felt no shame, because he did not consider women of my mother's background to be owed a real marriage."

She looked at us directly.

"That night, with nothing—no money, no jewellery, none of the things he had given me, because I would not take them—I left with Ah Lum. We made our way to a half-sister of my father's in Puerto Príncipe. She was ashamed of me. She told me I had disgraced the family. She tried to make me leave. And then I made her understand that what everyone in those islands had assumed I had accepted, I had not known. I had believed myself his wife."

She allowed this to settle.

"Eventually she helped me. And it was while I was hiding there that I met Colin. He was doing his research. He came to speak with my aunt about the history of the island. And I—"

For the first time something broke through the composure.

"I had never known that kind of love. I did not understand it, at first. It frightened me. When he asked me to marry him, I told him everything. I did not dare not to. And he forgave me, and we were married, and we came away."

She wiped her eyes once, decisively, as if that was the end of sentiment.

"We went to the United States. Some acquaintance of Cardona had told Colin's family the story—or a version of it. They refused to see us. Colin would have been wealthy. It made no difference to him, but it cost him everything he should have had. He never once said a word about it that I did not beg him to say."

She looked steadily at nothing for a moment.

"Then in Washington I saw Cardona in our hotel. I knew he had been following us. I did not tell Colin why—I only asked him to leave, and he agreed at once. We came to England. We came here. For two years we were genuinely happy. No one knew us. Then Sir James Ashworth sold Mordaunt's Folly."

She looked up.

"When I heard who was coming I thought I would die. And there was something I had never told Colin—the one thing. In all my account of what had happened, I had not given him the name. I was afraid of what he would do. And on the day I first saw Cardona walking in the garden of Mordaunt's Folly, I knew I had to tell him."

She closed her eyes briefly.

"He had so often asked. And so I told him the name."

She opened her eyes.

"He was very bad for a while. There is a weakness in his family. He knows it. He began to drink, and I lived in dread of what he might do. But he did not do anything. He came back. He was working again. He had promised me he would stop drinking, and I believed him."

She stopped speaking.

Then, suddenly, she left her chair and dropped to her knees before me.

"He did not kill him." She clasped her hands. "He did not. I know his soul. I tell you he did not. You believe he did—I can see it—"

"I do not believe it," I said, firmly.

She searched my face.

Val dropped down beside her and put her arms around her.

"Of course he didn't," Val said, with a heat that brooked no argument. "It is unthinkable."

"But these others—" said Isaura, her voice breaking. "They will never believe me. They see only what they expect to see."

"Mr. Ben Darling has promised to clear him before tonight is out," I said.

She looked up at me with something that was almost too painful to witness—hope being very cautiously allowed back in after a long absence.

"He has promised this?"

"He has."

She was still for a moment. Then she pressed Val's hand tightly, and her face changed.

"Then I believe it," she said. "May God bless him."

I left them together and walked through the hall and into Thorne's empty study.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO
BEN DARLING'S EXPERIMENT

I shall pass lightly over the walk back to Mordaunt's Folly. Val Brandon and I walked across the meadow in the long evening light, and she told me something of her life and I told her something of mine, and by the time we came to the house I was in a condition that I can only describe as delightfully bewildered. Aldridge's suspicions were forgotten. The shadow on the Colonel's blind was forgotten. I knew that love had come to me, as it always comes—without appointment, without warning, and apparently without any intention of leaving.

Darling and Westhorpe were already back. Darling was on the bed loading his pipe. Westhorpe was at the window, hands behind his back, staring out, which was his way of thinking hard.

"I have had an interesting conversation with Mrs. Thorne," I said.

"Tell me everything," said Darling at once.

I did. Neither of them interrupted. When I finished, Westhorpe turned from the window.

"Well," he said slowly. "The one gap in the prosecution case—motive—seems to be filled."

"It does look that way," agreed Darling. "Though Mrs. Thorne's account and Cardona's account of the Cuba years differ in some important particulars. There is one crucial matter your interview did not settle, Croft."

"Whether she had visited Mordaunt's Folly."

"Exactly. But even that question will shortly have a different significance. The experiment I have in mind will determine it."

"I'll be honest with you, Mr. Darling," said Westhorpe. "I have followed everything you've told me today, and I still cannot see how you propose to clear Thorne. The evidence against him is the most complete I have encountered in twenty years of this work."

"The most complete you have ever encountered," said Darling. "Precisely. Have you ever, in twenty years, encountered a murder case with such comprehensively damning material for the prosecution?"

Westhorpe thought about this.

"No," he admitted. "I have not."

"Keep that in mind. Now: you have met Thorne. You have been able to form a view of his intelligence. You will agree he is a brilliantly clever man."

"Undeniably."

"His field of study includes the very tradition at the centre of this case. He was in Cuba at the same period as Cardona. He was in the same Washington hotel. He is Cardona's nearest neighbour. His hatred of the man is documented. He has no alibi. And a rifle matching the fatal shot was found under the floor of his garden hut." Darling set down his pipe. "Westhorpe—in the whole of your experience, have you ever seen a more perfect frame-up?"

Westhorpe stared at him.

"What?"

"A frame-up," said Darling quietly. "The term will be familiar to you."

"Good God," said Westhorpe, very slowly.

There was a silence.

"The physical evidence is complete," Darling continued. "Too complete. That is where it fails. The psychological evidence—meaning the evidence of what kind of man Colin Thorne actually is—points in the opposite direction entirely. A mind clever enough to have planned and executed this crime—and Thorne certainly possesses such a mind—could not simultaneously have been fool enough to leave such an obvious trail of incriminating facts. It is humanly impossible. This has been arranged to look like Thorne. The question is by whom, and from where."

He stood up.

"The geographical point is the key. I saw it when I counted the yew trees from the arbour window yesterday morning. The discovery of the rifle nearly defeated me, because it was the most brilliantly placed piece of evidence I have ever encountered—placed precisely where the most methodical policeman in Surrey would find it, in the one location that seemed to make the case absolute. For a few hours I wondered whether the thing could be defeated at all."

"And the yew trees?" I said.

"Tonight," said Darling. "You will see for yourself tonight."

Dinner was out of the question. Val had sandwiches sent up to Madame's room and the three of us ate in the library. Dr. Renton called at seven, reported Madame calm, and left with the expression of a man who has correctly diagnosed something distressing.

Aldridge arrived at eight, morose and impatient, making clear that he was here under protest and expected the matter to be brief.

"I'll be as quick as I can," said Darling. "Would you please take Westhorpe and Croft to the Guest House by the high road? Walk down to the harbour and wait. I will join you there in a few minutes."

Aldridge started to object, thought better of it, and grunted.

We set out—Westhorpe, Aldridge, and I—down the drive and along the tree-lined road. Aldridge was silent and resentful. Westhorpe smoked his pipe and said nothing. I was turning the frame-up theory over in my mind, trying to see who could have done it and how.

Mrs. Pendle answered the door of the Guest House. She raised a finger immediately.

"Quiet, sir, please. I have got her to sleep."

She said it with the tenderness of someone who has been watching over an exhausted child.

"We won't disturb her," I said. "We only need the garden."

She led us through and out into the overgrown garden. Above the ravine, the harbour stood in the last light. Below, the

grounds of Mordaunt's Folly lay spread out in the dusk—lawns, terraces, the Tudor garden, the sundial catching the last of the sky.

We stood and waited. The stream bubbled in the gully below. A faint scatter of cloud drifted over the western horizon but the night was otherwise clear, and the moon was up.

Then, from the gully below:

"Croft! Give me a hand up—I want to avoid the barbed wire."

It was Darling, who had come cross-country. I scrambled down and helped him up.

"You sent us the long way round on purpose," I said.

"Of course. I needed you here without knowing what was in the garden first. Now—each of you in turn, please go to the harbour window and tell me what you see."

Westhorpe went first. He opened the sliding panes, knelt on the wooden bench, and looked down.

"Nothing unusual," he said.

"Thank you. Inspector."

Aldridge stomped in, looked, and stomped back out.

"I can see the garden. The sundial. The yew trees. Nothing unusual."

"And Croft."

I looked. The Tudor garden below was clearly visible in the moonlight—the sundial, its shadow lying like a dark band on the path, the line of yews along the northeast bank.

"Nothing unusual," I reported.

"Good. Now follow me."

He led us out of the arbour and eastward along the crest of the hill, through rank grass and weeds. At several points he called back to ask if anyone could see anything unusual in the gardens below. None of us could.

After perhaps two hundred yards he stopped.

"Note this point carefully. From here eastward, the ground formation means the Tudor garden is no longer visible—not from the crest, not from the road below, not from anywhere. The only vantage points from which that garden can be seen are the arbour we have just left, and the approach path down from the lodge. That concludes the first part of the experiment. Follow me back."

He led us back down the slope, through the stream—to Aldridge's considerable displeasure—and up the other side into the grounds of Mordaunt's Folly. Through the rhododendrons, around the tower, to the steps of the Tudor garden.

He stopped at the top of the steps.

"Look at the sundial," he said.

We looked.

Beyond the sundial and slightly to its left, at about head height, a tiny light flickered. Pale, steady, barely visible—but there.

Aldridge made a sound in his throat.

"Follow me," said Darling.

He went down the steps and along the path to the sundial, past it, and stopped at the yew tree we had found the bullet in the morning.

He extended his finger and pointed.

A short candle, perhaps four inches, had been nailed to the bark of the tree, its flame burning directly in front of the embedded bullet.

No one spoke for a good ten seconds.

"Good God," said Westhorpe, very quietly. "I have known you to do clever things, Mr. Darling. This is something else."

"Clever things!" said Aldridge. "I call it a lot of—"

"It has saved an innocent man's life," said Westhorpe, and there was a quality in his voice that stopped Aldridge mid-sentence. "That is what it is."

"What!" said Aldridge. "What?"

"This candle," said Darling, "was burning here when you looked through the harbour window. You could not see it. From the crest of the hill—the only other elevated position from which this garden is visible—you could not see it either. The candle flame marks the position of the bullet embedded in this tree."

He let this settle.

"The wound through Colonel Cardona's head was a straight wound. No deflection. The shot was not deflected after it entered the skull or after it exited. It continued on a straight line from the point of firing, through the Colonel's head, and embedded itself in this tree."

He paused.

"But this candle is invisible from the Guest House harbour. Which means this tree is invisible from the harbour. Which means the bullet in this tree could not have been fired from the harbour."

The moonlit garden was very quiet.

"Which means the rifle found under the floorboards of the Guest House hut had nothing to do with the murder of Colonel Cardona."

Another silence.

"The second part of my experiment, gentlemen, will determine from where the shot was actually fired."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

BEN DARLING'S EXPERIMENT CONCLUDED

Aldridge had not yet grasped it. He was still staring at the candle on the yew tree with the expression of a man who knows he should understand something and is finding the effort considerable. Darling reappeared from wherever he had briefly withdrawn, carrying an ash staff about six feet long and a sheet of cardboard with a circular hole cut in it. I heard Aldridge mutter something to himself.

Westhorpe, beside me, was watching Darling with the close, hungry attention of a colleague who has recognized that something important is about to be demonstrated.

"You will see," said Darling, "that I had some boards laid over the turf near the sundial. The garden is naturally damp and this section of grass has worn thin."

Westhorpe lifted the boards. Darling crouched and directed the beam of his phone torch onto the exposed ground.

"The footprints of Colonel Cardona," he said. "Here he left the tiled path. Three paces toward the sundial. And then he stood still. You see the depth of the toe impressions—he fell from this exact point. And here is the impression of his knee."

He moved the light to a darker patch of grass. Then returned it to the footprints.

"The prints indicate that at the moment he was shot, he was standing facing roughly south."

"Straight toward the Guest House," said Aldridge.

"Roughly. But a man standing upright faces a direction with his body while his head may be turned entirely elsewhere. Now."

He drove the pointed end of the ash staff into the turf between the two prints.

"Colonel Cardona stood six feet and one inch in his shoes. This staff is six feet. The chalk mark indicates the ground level. The slot at the top is at eye height." He wedged the cardboard sheet into the slot with the hole facing outward toward the yews. "The hole represents, approximately, the position of his forehead."

Westhorpe made a sudden sound.

"By God," he said quietly. "You're going to sight back along the bullet's path."

"Precisely." Darling walked back to the yew tree and bent the candle nail upward slightly so the flame was level with the base of the embedded bullet. "In ten minutes we shall know from where the shot was fired."

"I see," said Aldridge, in a tone that indicated he did not see at all. "So we're still going to be here in ten minutes, are we."

"You will not regret it, Inspector," said Westhorpe. His voice had a quality that discouraged further comment from Aldridge, and achieved it.

Darling crouched beside the yew tree and looked upward across the garden, over the sundial and through the hole in the cardboard.

He was silent for a moment.

"Yes," he said, under his breath. "As I thought."

He stood up abruptly.

"Come, gentlemen. Quickly."

He walked rapidly out of the garden and up the steps, and we followed without asking. Mateo was waiting in the hall with a ring of keys.

"The tower stairs," Darling said. "Shortest way."

Mateo led us along the corridor and through a heavy oak door into a disused drawing room coated with the dust of apparent years, and from there through a second door into a small, square, unfurnished room at the base of the tower. A third door, and the stair.

We climbed in single file. At the first floor Darling went to the north window, looked briefly, and shook his head.

"Next floor."

More uncarpeted stairs, more settled dust, the echo of footsteps in empty rooms. We climbed to the second floor. Darling went to the north window. He stood there for a moment, and then turned to face us.

"Gentlemen," he said, "the experiment is complete."

He waited until we had gathered in the room.

"The ash staff represents the upright body of Colonel Cardona. The cardboard represents his head at the height of his forehead. The hole in the cardboard corresponds, approximately, to the entry wound."

He paused.

"If a bullet follows a straight line—and this one did, as the wound confirms—then sighting back from the bullet embedded in the ninth yew tree, through the position where Cardona stood, we arrive at the point where the rifle rested. That point is the one place from which it is possible to look across the garden and see the candle flame through the hole in the cardboard."

He stood aside.

"Croft. Come here."

I crossed the room. Darling directed me to the left-hand angle of the north window and told me to crouch. I did so and looked out.

Below and across the moonlit garden I could see the sundial, and the pale upright of the ash staff beside it, and the piece of cardboard at its top, and—through the cut hole—the faint, steady flame of the candle on the ninth yew tree.

I stood up slowly.

I was aware of my own heartbeat and of a cold moisture on my forehead and of the particular quality of silence in a room when everyone present has understood the same thing at the same moment.

"It was from this window," I said, in a voice I did not recognise. "The shot that killed him was fired from this window."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR
THE CREEPING SICKNESS

We did not leave the library until close to midnight. By the time we rose, the facts had penetrated even to Inspector Aldridge, arranged by Ben Darling in a sequence so lucid that it was difficult to see how any other conclusion could ever have been reached. The shot had come from within Mordaunt's Folly. Colin Thorne was innocent. He had been deliberately framed, by a man who had spent months constructing the case against him.

Aldridge returned to Mickleford to make his report and arrange for the release of Thorne and Ah Lum. Westhorpe shook Darling's hand without speaking for a moment, and then asked a number of quiet, precise questions about the rifle he had found in the tower shutter-case. When they had gone, Darling and I stood in the hall, looking at each other.

Val Brandon came quietly from Madame's corridor.

"Mateo has told me what you have found," she said. "Oh, thank God. But what does it mean? Who in this house—"

"That is the hardest question still remaining," said Darling. "If the first task was difficult, what remains looks closer to impossible than anything I have attempted."

She shivered.

"I have felt for weeks that there was someone in this house who should not be here. You know I told Mr. Croft about the footsteps."

"You did," I said.

Darling started pacing, which was his way of being unable to pace.

"Does Madame Brassard know?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes. She asked me to bring you both to her. She has been writing all day and all evening—there is quite a stack of manuscript beside the bed—and she says she will not sleep until she has spoken with you personally."

"Writing?" said Darling.

"She will not tell me what. She will not show me. She seems perfectly calm, but it is a kind of calm that frightens me."

We went in.

The room was as I had last seen it—violet and silver, warm with lamplight, the roses beginning to let their petals fall. Madame was propped against her pillows. She had dressed herself with her customary art—the pearls, the trimmed robe, her hair up. On the table beside her stood a medicine bottle and a glass, a plate of untouched sandwiches, and a cup. On the farther side of the bed was a small stack of violet notepaper, closely written.

She had changed since the morning. The fierce quality in her eyes was gone, replaced by something softer and more final. She looked beautiful and exhausted and composed in a way that has no precise name.

"Ah, M. Darling," she said, as we came to the chairs Val placed for us, "you are here at last. I was afraid you had deserted me. Set the chairs close, Val dear. Sit beside me."

She waited until we were settled.

"Now. Tell me of your discovery. Tell me from the beginning."

Darling told her, quietly and completely. As he finished:

"Ah," she said softly, and lay back. "So tonight he is free again, the poor Colin Thorne. And his wife is happy."

"She will be, yes," I said.

"Only the pure in heart can thank God," said Madame, "but I am glad for them. I have written, here—" she gestured toward the stack of notepaper "—how glad I am. Among other things."

Darling looked at the papers. So did I. So did Val, with an expression I could not read.

"I am curious to know what you have written," said Darling.

"I will tell you, and then you may read it if you wish." She turned to me. "You spoke with Isaura de Vega this afternoon?"

"With Mrs. Thorne, yes."

"Isaura de Vega. I knew her as that. Golden hair, little feet. Beautiful in her particular way. She told you she had met me, in Cuba?"

"She said that."

"I told the fat inspector that I had never met her. We women do lie so conveniently." She smiled. "And she told you, no doubt, in what capacity I had accompanied Juan to the Caribbean?"

"She did not, actually."

"No? How kind of her. Well, I will tell you myself. I was his mistress."

She said this without shame and without bravado, with the certainty of someone stating a historical fact that does not require apology.

"I met him in Paris. My sister was married to his cousin—that is how it happened. I was married myself. Not unhappily, but not happily either. And when I met Juan—ah. There is no adequate description for that kind of thing. There is only the thing itself."

She looked at the ceiling for a moment.

"I went with him. To Cuba, and then to the island. And there he saw Isaura de Vega for the first time, and—well. You know what he was. They did not call him Devil Cardona for nothing. There was a scene. More than one scene. I had my pride. I left him."

Brief pause.

"I went back to France. I tried to forget by working. I spent a great deal of my fortune on a field hospital, and I worked in it myself, and this child—" she touched Val's hand "—worked beside me. I think I wanted to die. I tried to die, more than once, in ways that I will not detail. And then, as you have heard, the bomb found us."

She looked at Val.

"How many times did they come for us, in the end?"

"Many times," said Val, in a low voice.

"At last they succeeded. They killed M. de Stämer. They left me as you have seen me. Or as you thought you had seen me." She paused. "I went to Nice to recover, with this child beside me. And there, to wake the fire in my heart, came Juan."

She said this simply.

"He had been searching for Isaura de Vega since she disappeared from his house in Cuba. He had lost her. He was broken, in mind and in pride. He still cared for me, you understand—I am not a woman who is easily forgotten. But the great passion in him was revenge. That, and one other thing."

Darling was watching her very carefully.

"He was ill," said Madame. "Very ill, in a particular way." She described it with precision.

"In that island there is an illness called, by the people who live there, the Creeping Sickness. It is associated with the wetland areas—the toxic soil, certain parasites, perhaps certain insects; the mechanism is not fully understood. It comes in two forms. The first is rapid. Those who suffer it decline and die quickly. The second appears to resolve. The sufferer recovers, more or less, and believes himself well. But then—"

She raised one finger.

"In a week, a month, a year, the pain returns. One sharp attack, like a needle, very precisely located. It lasts only a few moments and then it is gone. It leaves nothing visible. But it is a warning. And the location of the pain is its message. If here—" she touched her hand "—you may have ten years. If here—" she touched her chest "—you may have months. As it progresses toward the heart, life shortens."

"It recurs," said Darling.

"Three times, four times, advancing toward the heart. And the last attack finds it."

We were all very quiet.

"Juan had the Creeping Sickness and had seemed to recover. But then the first warning came. He went to a specialist in Paris who understood the condition. The specialist told him: with complete rest, no exertion, no passion, perhaps one year. Without that care—days. Perhaps weeks."

"Good God," said Darling.

"Yes. So you see what his life was. A man of Juan's temperament living in permanent waiting for a moment of agony that might kill him. And he had with him in that waiting the knowledge that Isaura de Vega had been found at last—that she was living not five hundred yards away, with the man who had taken her from him. And he had beside him me, who loved him enough to do what he required. On these terms he came back to me. On these terms I took him."

She looked at her hands.

"He asked me to end it for him. When the waiting became more than he could bear. I said yes. I have no doubt that it was the right answer. I cannot explain it to those who have not loved this way, and I will not try."

She paused.

"But there was more to his plan than that. He wanted his revenge first. He wanted Thorne destroyed. And so he arranged everything—with that brilliant, wicked patience of his. He was the one who broke into Mordaunt's Folly. He nailed the bat wing to the door. He placed the false rifle. He planted every piece of evidence. He summoned you, M. Darling, as the most credible

expert witness available, so that when Thorne was arrested, the arrest would be unimpeachable."

She looked at Darling directly.

"You nearly ruined it. On the night before, when you made your circuit of the grounds—he was coming out of the shrubbery door at exactly that moment and had to wait. I was watching from the window above. I nearly lost my nerve then. But you went on, and he came out, smoking his last cigarette as he walked."

She closed her eyes briefly.

"I had been in the tower room for some time. I had entered by the internal door from the corridor—it had been prepared for me, silently, over many weeks. The window had been carefully oiled. I opened it and it made no sound."

She was quiet for a moment.

"He walked out to the sundial and turned his face toward me. He threw me a kiss. And I fired."

The room was absolutely still.

"He was walking to his death with full knowledge and no fear. He died as he had lived—with magnificent courage. I will not ask you to forgive what he was. But you must understand what he was, before you judge what I did."

She gestured toward the manuscript.

"It is all written there. Everything. Signed. The two rifles, the bat wing, the sleepwalking—which was entirely his own invention—the entry to the house, the frame, all of it. It is a complete account and I have nothing to add to it and nothing to retract from it."

She reached for the medicine bottle beside the bed. She poured the entire contents into the glass, lifted it, and drank.

Darling was on his feet in the same instant.

"Stop her—"

But Madame held up one hand, very calmly, and he stopped.

"No fuss, dear friends," she said. "No unpleasantness. It is too late, and it would be unkind to try. I shall simply go to sleep, and when I wake Juan will be there."

Her face in that moment was as beautiful as anything I have ever seen. She put her hand on Val's head with the tenderness of a mother.

"Be good to her, my friend," she said to me, softly. "She is English, but not cold as some suppose. She can love. Trust her."

She closed her eyes.

She lay back against her pillows.

She did not open her eyes again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

AN AFTERWORD

This shall be brief, for there is little left to say.

As Madame had promised, there was nothing to be done. She had prepared carefully. Dr. Renton arrived within thirty minutes, but Madame Brassard was already past any assistance he could offer, and she died before the night was out, peacefully and on her own terms.

There are a few further details worth recording.

The post-mortem examination of Colonel Cardona found no trace of organic disease in any of his organs. Darling, using the information in Madame's written account, traced the Paris specialist she had named—a researcher in tropical parasitology who has since published on the condition, though under a different classification than she described. He confirmed her account entirely. The illness, he said, was produced by a specific organism that left no diagnostic trace in standard pathological examination. It was, and remains, very rare.

The Colonel's estate, as Madame had arranged, passed principally to her. Her own will, prepared some time before, divided what she possessed between several charitable organisations and Val Brandon.

I thus found myself, when all the legal processes had concluded, engaged to be married to a young woman who was both considerably wealthier than I had supposed and, as I had always known, more than I deserved.

Colin Thorne returned to the Guest House within forty-eight hours of his release and went back to work the following morning. He and Isaura have since moved to a property in the west of Ireland, which Thorne describes as having the appropriate combination of solitude, sea light, and unreliable weather for serious scholarship. He writes; his book is, by all accounts, nearly complete. Ah Lum is with them.

I understand that Isaura and Val correspond regularly.

Of Mordaunt's Folly and its history I try not to think too often. But in honest moments I must acknowledge that the Bat Wing which cast its shadow over those Surrey hills was never a thing of the Caribbean, never a death token from any ancient tradition, never the instrument of a twenty-five-year vendetta. It was the invention of a single dying man with a brilliant mind, a talent for theatre, and a capacity for cruelty that he carried alongside his equally genuine capacity for love. It was a magnificent and terrible piece of misdirection, and it very nearly worked.

Ben Darling does not speak of the case often. When he does, it is usually to observe that he very nearly recommended Norfolk.

THE END