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THE CAT OF BUBASTIS

A Novella

by Alan H. Gael

About 35,000 words

CHAPTER ONE

I SEE THE EYES

"Good evening, sir. Bit gusty tonight?"

"Very much so, Constable," I replied. "Mind if I shelter here for a moment and light my pipe?"

"Be my guest—matches are useless in this wind. Worst of the storm's passed, at any rate."

I stepped into the recessed doorway of a shuttered newsagent's stand where PC Pryce had taken shelter and began the familiar ritual with my tobacco pouch and lighter. Pryce was young, solid, and possessed of that quietly imperturbable quality one still occasionally encounters in community policing—a man constitutionally suited to waiting in the rain for other people's emergencies. I had spoken to him several times before at this particular junction, which stood at the lower end of the old village high street in one of those outer suburbs where London finally runs out of arguments and concedes to quieter things.

"Your place is quite a way off the main road, isn't it?" he observed.

"That's precisely why I chose it. If I were easy to find, I'd never finish anything."

For I should explain a little about myself, since my circumstances bear directly on what followed. I was, at the time of these events, a freelance journalist of no particular celebrity but considerable independence. I wrote a regular column for The Planet, a digital news magazine of the serious kind, and

I had developed a podcast series on unsolved and historically unusual crimes that had gathered a moderate following without quite making me famous. Both occupations required quiet more than proximity to any particular place; and my cottage, half a mile up the lane from this junction, provided it in abundance. There was a garden wall that kept the world at a respectful distance. There was a room lined with books and a broadband connection and a telephone I could silence when I chose. That last detail is the essential one: a journalist who can choose when to be found has already won half the battle.

Pryce's radio interrupted us with the flat, unhurried voice of Central Dispatch.

"Sierra November from Central. Message for the officer at Highfield junction."

He answered, listened for a moment, and turned to me with the mild resignation of a man being handed an absurd errand at the end of a wet shift.

"The Red House," he said. "College Road. Someone rang the non-emergency line to say they think they may have left the side garage unsecured. Wants an officer to check and lock up if so." He raised an eyebrow. "You know it?"

"I know it very well," I replied. "It has been empty for over a year. There has been a letting board up since at least last spring."

"Maybe it's been let recently. Either way, someone's rung in."

"I pass that way on my walk home," I said. "Let me come with you and point it out."

We set off together through the wet streets, talking little, for the wind made conversation effortful and there was little enough to be seen. One figure passed us near the gate of the old chapel—a man in a heavy overcoat, walking at a slow and purposeful tramp—but otherwise we met no one from the crossroads to the point where the high brick boundary wall of the Red House came into view beyond a line of rain-darkened hedgerow.

Even then, approaching through the dark, the house had something of its usual quality. I had passed it hundreds of times and had never quite shaken the impression that it was watching. It stood well back from the road behind its wall, the upper storey visible above the hedge-line, with that particular stillness that distinguishes an empty house from a merely quiet one.

"This is it," I said. "The garage entrance is further along."

The main gates were padlocked, an estate agent's board fixed to each pier—the standard apparatus of an unlettable property. We continued to where a pair of wooden doors marked the garage entrance.

A key was in the lock. A second key hung on the same ring.

"Well," said Pryce. "That is a funny go."

He opened the door and directed the torch on his phone into the interior. Bare concrete floor. A shelf at the back bearing

several empty plastic jerrycans. The smell of damp and engine oil and vacancy.

And, close to the entrance, a large wooden crate—solidly built, braced with metal banding, of the kind used to ship heavy industrial components.

I noticed, with the particular attentiveness that the practice of my profession had made habitual, a device painted crudely on the nearer side of the crate in dark green: a seated cat, its tail curled, rendered with a formality that put me in mind, unaccountably, of very old things.

"If anything was here it's been taken," said Pryce, completing his circuit of the space. "Nothing worth a report, so far as I can see."

He crossed to the far door, tried the second key in it, and stepped through into the narrow service lane beyond. I could hear him a moment later, locking the door from outside.

"You'll back me up if there's any inquiry, sir?" he called, reappearing.

"Of course. Good night, Constable."

And I left him to it and walked on alone towards my cottage.

There is a poetic notion that unusual events cast their shadows before them. I have come to believe there is something in it, although the shadow, when it arrives, does not always present itself as shadow. That night it arrived as physical sensation: an abrupt, unreasonable certainty—arriving somewhere between the

gate of the Red House and the next streetlight—that I was not alone.

I had heard nothing. The street was empty for thirty yards in every direction. And yet.

I had covered perhaps another twenty steps when I turned.

At the far edge of the nearest light, fifty yards behind me, a shape stepped briefly into visibility and then was gone—drawn back into the shadow of a garden wall with a motion I cannot satisfactorily describe except to say that it was fluid in the particular way that has nothing to do with hurry. Not the retreat of a person who did not wish to be seen. Something more deliberate than that, and less human.

I stood still for a moment, staring at the darkness where the shape had been. Then I walked on, quickly, and I will not pretend that the sound of my own front door closing behind me was unwelcome.

Coates had left a cold supper on the kitchen table and retired for the night. Coates was a former sergeant-major—he had come to work for me some years earlier through a veterans' resettlement programme, and had since become indispensable in ways that neither of us had anticipated. He cooked, drove, managed the household accounts, maintained the cottage with a thoroughness that verged on the military, and possessed throughout a steadiness of character that I found, in the years of his service, genuinely comforting. He was not a man who asked unnecessary questions, which was another point in his favour.

I sat at the kitchen table and ate without appetite, and eventually took my whisky through to the bedroom.

The window there looked out over the kitchen garden and beyond, at a distance, the high hornbeam hedge that separated the cottage grounds from the lane. The storm had largely passed. Heavy clouds were crossing a near-full moon at speed, and the garden below shifted between bright silver and darkness at intervals of perhaps thirty seconds.

I stood there watching this for some time. I was tired and unsettled in a way I could not account for, and the rhythm of the moon—out, in, out—had the paradoxical effect of making the darkness between intervals feel more absolute than ordinary darkness.

And then the moon came fully clear of a thick bank of cloud, and the garden was brightly lit from wall to wall.

And I saw the eyes.

They were at the base of the hedge, low to the ground—large, green, and luminous, and they were looking directly up at me. I stood without moving. My rational mind supplied the obvious answer: a cat. The neighbourhood had several, and a cat's eyes catch the moonlight in exactly that way, and glow.

But these eyes were not a cat's eyes. They were too large, too still, and they held a quality of concentrated attention that I found, in that first moment, more frightening than I was prepared to admit.

I took one step back from the window.

When I looked again, they were gone.

The garden, in full moonlight, was entirely and perfectly empty. No shape at the hedge. No movement anywhere. And the hedge itself was unbroken.

But, somewhere near and then increasingly distant, the dogs had begun to howl.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SIGN OF THE CAT

When Coates brought in my tea at eight the following morning I surfaced from a troubled sleep with a start.

"Any rain after midnight, Coates?"

"A brief shower around three, sir." He set the tray on the bedside table with his customary precision. "Stopped by four."

"And have you been out to the garden this morning?"

"I have, sir. For mint, for the breakfast table."

"Which side of the cottage?"

"The kitchen side only, sir."

"Then before you do anything else, I should like you to walk round to this side—keeping to the path—and proceed as far as the tool shed. Do not step on the beds. I want you to look for spoor."

Coates, whose capacity for absorbing unusual instructions without visible reaction was one of his most useful qualities, did not blink.

"Spoor, sir. Of what kind?"

"Human. Someone was in the garden last night."

"Very good, sir."

He departed. I sat up in bed and poured my tea and listened. The night's storm had entirely gone. Through the open window came the smell of wet soil and the climbing rose on the south wall, and birdsong—ordinary, cheerful, indifferent to anything unusual. I found it difficult in this reasonable morning light to entirely

credit my memory of the previous night. The eyes. The shape on the road.

But the soil would tell.

I heard Coates moving along the garden path, then the pause, then his measured tread returning by way of the kitchen.

He appeared in the doorway.

"There are impressions in the bed between the hedge and the path, sir," he reported. "Three sets. The first very deep—consistent with a landing, I would say. The second disturbed, as though the subject had turned. The third with the heel marks pronounced, as one would expect upon pushing off to jump back."

"Jumped back over?" I stared at him. "Over the hornbeam hedge?"

"It appears so, sir."

"That is a considerable jump, Coates."

"It is, sir."

"And the prints themselves?"

Coates cleared his throat once.

"A woman's shoes, sir. Heeled. Narrow fitting."

I sat for a moment with this information, unable to assemble it into anything rational. Then: "Tea or coffee, sir?"

"Tea," I said. "And I am going out to look for myself."

The prints were precisely as he had described. The clean, deep landing impression four inches into the wet loam. The confusion of marks where she had turned—and she had turned towards the window, towards where I had been standing. Then the

heel-weighted push-off of the departure jump. The hedge itself was unbroken.

I stood in the morning sun and felt the strangeness of the previous night settle about me more solidly than it had in the dark. Whatever I had seen at the window, something had been there. Something wearing heeled shoes that had cleared a six-foot hedge in each direction without leaving a mark on it.

I returned to the house and ate my breakfast in a state of careful and thoroughly unproductive thought. The footprints were those of a woman. The eyes at the window had been something else.

I was still at the table when my phone rang. The caller was Marcus Webb, my editor at The Planet.

"Something very much in your line," he said, without greeting. "A body has turned up at the docks. I want you there now."

I asked, without great enthusiasm, for particulars. Ordinary criminal matters did not draw me—I was suited by temperament and experience for the kind of investigation that tested the edges of the explicable. But Webb's next sentence changed that.

"The body of Sir Marcus Mountfort has been found inside a wooden crate in the hold of the MV Oritoga at Limehouse Dock. The ship was due to sail this morning for the Caribbean."

I was already standing.

"When was it discovered?"

"Ninety minutes ago, during loading. Don't come in—go straight there. I'll clear it with your police contact."

I set the phone down carefully. My hand, I noticed, was trembling slightly.

I owed the reaction to history. Several months before, I had read in an online column the announcement of the engagement of Isobel Lytton—a woman I had known well, and for whom I had, at one time, entertained very different hopes—to one Eric Mountfort. Eric was cousin and heir to Sir Marcus Mountfort, who had inherited the baronetcy three or four years prior upon the death of his uncle, Sir Aldous. I had congratulated Isobel with the best appearance of good cheer I could manage and had said nothing of the rest. It was a foolishness I kept to myself.

Now Sir Marcus was dead. And Eric Mountfort had become, in an instant, Sir Eric Mountfort.

I called to Coates for the car and we were at the dock in forty minutes.

The scene outside the dock entrance had the quality common to all major criminal incidents in the modern London news cycle: a press pen, camera operators, two broadcast vans with their dish antennae raised, and a tight, purposeful crowd of journalists who had been told nothing and were managing that condition with professional patience. I recognised half a dozen faces. Several recognised me.

"Halliday," called a man from one of the broadsheets, "this one is genuinely extraordinary. Body in a shipping crate. The manifest lists it as machine components."

I did not stop. I had found, from long experience, that the most valuable moments at a crime scene belong to those who have specific reasons to be admitted before the briefing.

A uniformed constable stood at the door of a low stone building near the main loading area. Behind the tape, the gathered press watched our exchange with professional attention.

"I have an appointment with Detective Chief Inspector Harding," I said.

"He hasn't arrived, sir."

"Then tell him Jack Halliday is here when he does. He'll want to speak to me."

I stepped aside and waited. I had worked with Harding on three previous occasions—twice on cases that had ended in conviction, once on a matter that had ended in something less tidy but more interesting—and I knew him well enough to be confident that he would not object to my presence. He was one of the more genuinely intelligent officers I had encountered in the Met's senior ranks: thorough, unhurried, and possessed of an instinct for the irregular that made him, in the right circumstances, a rather dangerous opponent.

His car arrived ten minutes later—a dark Volvo, unremarkable, like the man who stepped from it. He was in his mid-fifties, broad-shouldered, very tanned, with close-cropped grey hair and the kind of open, apparently guileless expression that concealed, in my experience, a great deal of quiet observation. He nodded to the waiting press in a general way, saw me where I stood, and came directly over.

"Mr. Halliday. You have relevant information?"

"I may have, from last night."

A brief, evaluative pause. Then: "Come in."

He instructed the constable to hold the line and led me into the building.

The room was lit by four barred windows set high in the walls, and the morning sun fell in bright narrow bars across the paved floor. A scene-of-crime officer worked methodically near the far corner. The duty pathologist—a Dr. Anand whose unhurried competence I had encountered in the context of a previous inquiry—was crouched beside a stretcher with a tablet, making notes. A uniformed inspector stood near the door.

On the stretcher, covered to the chin, lay the man I had failed to recognise until I was close enough to see his face clearly.

Sir Marcus Mountfort had been a dark-featured, rather sardonic man in his late forties—I had met him twice at social events of Isobel's, and had formed no particularly warm impression. He was a person who wore his privileges with the studied carelessness of someone who had never had to think about them. He was now considerably altered. His face had taken on a terrible greenish-grey mottling, the features pulled into an expression of extreme distress, and the overall effect was deeply unpleasant.

I stifled an exclamation and looked away—towards the other object in the room.

The crate had been forced open, one entire side broken away. The metal banding was twisted and the wood splintered. Fragments of timber lay across the floor. But upon a board that had formed part of the top, propped now against the wall, I could see quite clearly—dark green against pale wood—the figure of a seated cat.

I was crossing towards it before I had consciously decided to move.

"You recognise it," said Harding, from behind me. It was not entirely a question.

"Last night," I said. "In the garage of the Red House, College Road. This crate was there—or one identical to it." I turned to face him. "It was there last night when I walked home. I was with the constable who was sent to secure the garage."

Harding looked at me for a moment with the particular quality of attention he reserved for information that surprised him. Then he produced his phone and made a brief note.

"You have just saved us several hours," he said, simply.

Dr. Anand stood, stretching his back. "Asphyxia is my preliminary view. Post-mortem this afternoon will confirm. Death occurred at least eight hours ago, possibly longer. No signs of violence consistent with cause of death—the injuries to the body appear to have been sustained post-mortem, consistent with the fall the crate took into the hold."

Harding nodded, then turned back to the evidence table where the personal effects of the dead man had been laid out and documented: a wallet containing cash and cards, a good watch with a cracked face, a phone with a shattered screen, a small leather

card case. And, among these modern objects, utterly incongruous, a small figurine.

"Have a look at this," said Harding, and held it towards me.

It was perhaps four inches tall: a crouching female figure with a cat's head, worked in green and gold enamel, the execution precise and formally stylised in the manner I knew well.

"Egyptian," I said at once. "A votive offering to Bast. This is genuine—Late Period or Ptolemaic, at a guess. These were produced in enormous quantities for pilgrims to the temple at Bubastis and deposited there. The site at Tell Basta was excavated in the eighteen-seventies and the objects were dispersed throughout the world. This is one of them."

"Valuable?"

"Possibly several thousand pounds. But its value here—" I indicated the painted device on the broken board, "—is a different kind."

Harding turned the figure once between his fingers, his expression thoughtful and still.

"We always come back to the cat," he said, almost to himself.

I agreed. And there was no longer any question in my mind. The crate before us was the same one that had stood the previous night in the garage of the Red House.

CHAPTER THREE

THE GREEN IMAGE

"I was not being entirely truthful," said Harding, "when I told the press you had specific information for me. That was somewhat ahead of the facts." He managed something close to a smile. "However it has since become accurate, which is a satisfying outcome."

We had stepped outside together while the scene-of-crime work continued. The dock yard in the early-morning light had that flat, industrial calm of working places before the working day properly begins. The press pen was still holding, just.

"The Red House connection," I said.

"Precisely. Everything else we would have reached through the carter, the letting agent, the ship's manifest. You have saved us the morning." He glanced back at the building. "I am going to suppress both pieces of evidence for now—the figurine and the symbol on the crate. I would rather have a few hours ahead of publication than a public theory that gets in the way of the real one."

"The press will have it by this evening regardless."

"This evening is acceptable. This morning is not." He looked at me steadily. "What can you tell me about the figure? Not the monetary value—the history of it."

I had been turning this over since the moment Harding had placed the figurine in my hand, and I was glad to have something I could offer with confidence.

"Bast was a cat-headed goddess of ancient Egypt," I said. "Her principal sanctuary was at Bubastis, in the eastern Delta—the site is now Tell Basta, near Zagazig. The temple attracted enormous numbers of pilgrims for centuries, and the custom was to leave a small votive image as an offering. The priests stored the accumulated offerings in underground pits, and by the time the site was excavated in the 1870s, thousands of these figures had been deposited. They were dispersed into collections across the world, legitimate and otherwise. The one in there is genuine—early Ptolemaic, I would say, Late Period or Ptolemaic."

"And the goddess herself? What were her qualities?"

I found myself pausing.

"She had two faces. The benevolent one—protector, goddess of music, guardian of households. But she could be treacherous as well. The texts describe her at certain times as playing with her victim as a cat plays with a mouse before delivering the final blow." I looked at him. "I have Maspero's Egyptian Art at home. I can mark the relevant passages if it would be useful."

"It would. I'll come to you this evening if I may."

He pocketed his phone. At the gate, the press pack had begun its inevitable reorganisation—camera operators seeking better positions, journalists filing preliminary copy on their phones. The ten-minute hold was nearly up.

"Sir Marcus's London address is a flat in Marylebone," said Harding. "From his cards. I should like to visit it immediately. Will you come with me?"

"Yes," I said, without hesitation.

Coates drove us. We made reasonable time across the city—Harding beside me in the back, making notes on his phone with the unhurried concentration of a man who does his best thinking in transit—and arrived at a mansion block in a quiet Marylebone street shortly before noon.

A constable in plain clothes was just emerging from the main entrance as we approached. Harding recognised him.

“Naylor. Who sent you?”

“Sir Marcus’s PA rang the incident line, sir—couldn’t account for his whereabouts since last night. Dispatch sent me to take a preliminary statement.”

“Very good. Report to me later.”

Naylor departed, and Harding and I went up.

The flat was on the second floor—good sized, furnished with the expensive carelessness of a man who has money but not much interest in how it is deployed. Books, a large screen, two or three decent pictures, and a general air of bachelor occupation. The man who met us at the door was Morris, Sir Marcus’s PA of six years, and he was in a state of quiet but unmistakable distress. He had been up all night, he told us, because Sir Marcus never stayed out without advising him, and the absence of any message had alarmed him well before the morning’s news had confirmed the worst.

Harding guided him to a chair with the practiced gentleness he reserved for useful witnesses in shock.

"I know this is a very bad morning," he said. "But the best thing you can do for Sir Marcus now is to answer my questions as carefully as you can. Everything you tell me stays with the investigation. Do you understand?"

Morris nodded. He was in his mid-forties, quietly dressed, with the contained and slightly formal manner of a man who has spent years making himself professionally invisible.

Harding took the evidence bag from his jacket pocket and held up the Bast figurine so that Morris could see it.

"Have you ever seen this before?"

Morris looked at it carefully, then shook his head.

"No. I am certain of that."

"Had Sir Marcus ever spent time in Egypt?"

"Not to my knowledge. Certainly not in the six years I worked for him."

"When did you last see him?"

"Yesterday evening at half past six. He was going to his club for dinner and then on to the New Avenue Theatre. I booked the seat myself."

Harding glanced at me very briefly—a fractional movement of the eyes that I suspected only I caught—and I felt a familiar cold sensation settle in my chest.

"He was going alone?" said Harding.

"Yes, sir."

"There was no arrangement to meet anyone at the theatre?"

Morris hesitated. The hesitation lasted perhaps two seconds, but in that kind of room, with a man of Harding's particular attentiveness in it, two seconds is a long time.

"I believe," he said carefully, "that there was a lady performing at the New Avenue Theatre in whom Sir Marcus had—an interest. I don't know her name. I don't know the details. Sir Marcus was unusually reserved about this particular—he was generally quite open about his social life, which made the exception noticeable."

"Unusually reserved," Harding repeated, in the mild tone he used when he wanted a witness to continue without feeling pressed.

"Yes, sir. Which suggested to me that perhaps he had not—made as much progress as he would have wished."

There was a brief silence. I stood to one side of Harding, looking at the books on the shelf and keeping my expression entirely neutral, which cost me something.

The New Avenue Theatre. Isobel was appearing at the New Avenue Theatre. She had been there for four months in a revival that had extended twice, and she was, by any measure, the most distinguished performer in the company. It was entirely possible that a man like Sir Marcus Mountfort—who had the social habits of a person accustomed to getting what he wanted—would have found his way to a stage door and decided to pursue an acquaintance.

The cold sensation in my chest had not improved.

"Did Sir Marcus have a car?" asked Harding.

"Not currently. He used car services."

"Other household staff?"

"Just me. He kept things simple."

"The Mountfort family property—Wraydon Park, I believe—is that occupied?"

"By Lady Aldous Mountfort, Sir Marcus's aunt. Sir Marcus and she were—not on good terms. She felt bitterly towards him, I think. Her own son, who would have been the direct heir, died some years ago. She never entirely forgave Sir Marcus for existing in that boy's place."

"What other family did Sir Marcus have?"

"Mr. Eric Mountfort—Sir Eric now, I suppose. Second cousin. The only other member of the family I ever heard of."

I turned from the bookshelves and looked at a watercolour on the far wall, which represented a landscape I didn't recognise and had no interest in identifying.

"Were Sir Marcus and his cousin on good terms?" said Harding.

Morris paused again—a different kind of pause this time, with more weight behind it.

"They were not, sir. They had never been particularly close. But some months ago there was a more serious quarrel. On one occasion it took place here, in this flat, and I thought it might come to something physical."

"What was the quarrel about?"

A longer pause. Morris folded his hands together on the table in front of him.

"I was never an eavesdropper, sir. But from what I could not avoid hearing—it was a woman."

I had kept my composure well enough throughout the interview. That sentence tested it considerably.

"You don't know who she was?" said Harding.

"No, sir. I did not know then and I do not know now. I swear it."

Harding studied him for a moment. Then: "You should try to get some sleep. There will be more questions over the next few days but they can wait until this afternoon at the earliest. Who was Sir Marcus's solicitor?"

Morris gave the name and address in a tired, level voice, and we departed.

On the stairs, Harding said nothing. In the car, as Coates pulled away from the kerb, he said: "I have a visit to make at the Met this afternoon. After that I should like to see the Red House again, and I would be glad of your company. Say four o'clock?"

"I'll be there," I said.

"And the Maspero this evening."

"Of course."

He got out at the next corner and walked off without looking back, in the way of a man who is already three steps ahead of the present moment. I sat in the car for a moment before telling Coates to drive.

The question was whether to go directly to The Planet, where a piece was expected of me by three o'clock, or to make a different detour first. The question answered itself in the length of time it took me to consider it.

"Coates," I said, "the New Avenue Theatre, please."

I did not know yet what I would say to Isobel. But I knew with complete certainty that before Harding arrived at that stage door, I intended to have been there first.

CHAPTER FOUR

ISOBEL

Ten minutes later I was standing in a sitting room that figured too often in my private thoughts. It was a flat in a converted Georgian terrace in Chelsea—not large, but arranged with the particular intelligence of a person who knows exactly what she likes and has resisted other people's opinions about it. There were books, good ones, and a kilim that had seen better days in an appealing way, and on the mantelpiece, among several framed photographs, one of me.

I had noticed the photograph on my first visit, two years before, and had chosen to say nothing about it, which is the kind of decision one makes when one is determined to be sensible and later identifies as a mistake.

Isobel had come in from the hallway still pulling on her coat—she had been about to leave, Marie had warned me as she showed me up—and for just a moment, before she composed herself into the warmth of a long friendship, something else crossed her face. I have wondered, many times since, what I would have done if I had been brave enough to understand it then.

"You nearly missed me, Jack," she said. "I was just heading out."

She was slim and graceful in a dark coat, and the particular quality of the morning light through the tall sash windows brought out the russet tints in her dark brown hair. She looked

at me with eyes that were quick and alive and guarded all at once, and I was struck, as I was always struck, by how thoroughly she rendered pointless any attempt at composure on my part.

By the very ease of her greeting, though, she drew me back to myself, and allowed me to push down the complicated emotion I had been carrying since the moment Webb had spoken Sir Marcus Mountfort's name on the phone that morning.

"I'm afraid what I have to tell you isn't pleasant," I said. "Though it does mean—in one sense—that you are now the future Lady Mountfort."

The warmth left her face. She understood the shape of what I was saying before I said it—she was quick like that, always had been—but I saw that she could not yet assemble the full meaning.

She sat down slowly in the armchair by the window. The light settled on her hair.

"Did you know Sir Marcus?" I asked, as gently as I could.

She met my eyes, and I held them, and nodded once.

"Oh, Jack. When did it happen?"

"Last night. But you haven't told me whether you knew him."

She looked down for a moment.

"Not—in any close way," she said. "Eric and he were not on good terms. They were never friends, even before the title changed hands. But I met him two or three times when Eric brought him along, years ago. Then Sir Marcus came into the baronetcy—four years ago, was it?—and went off to some posting in Eastern Europe, and I lost sight of him entirely."

She paused.

"Until quite recently," I said, because I could see she was deciding whether to say the next thing.

"Until quite recently, yes." She looked up. "He began appearing at the theatre. Sending his card to the dressing room. Given that he knew perfectly well about my engagement to Eric, his manner was—not particularly appropriate. I asked Marie to tell him I was unavailable whenever he called, and not to mention the visits to me at the time."

"But he persisted."

"He was very persistent. Marie told me later he'd sent his card up several times over the course of a month. I saw him occasionally in the stalls during performances." She hesitated, and when she continued her voice was lower. "He was there last night, Jack."

A silence fell between us. Through the window the sounds of a Chelsea morning continued, indifferent to everything.

I was assembling what Harding knew and what he did not yet know, and measuring the distance between the two. He would visit the theatre. He would speak to the stage door staff, to Marie. He would establish that Sir Marcus had been in that building the night of his death, and that the woman he had been pursuing was engaged to the man who stood most obviously to gain from his death. All of that was coming, and it was coming fast.

That was the moment Isobel's phone rang.

She glanced at the screen and her expression changed.

"It's Eric." She took the call.

I went to the window and stood with my back to the room, looking down at the street below, which is not the same thing as not listening.

What I heard was the murmur of her voice, low and careful, and then a longer silence, and then a question I couldn't make out. I heard the word "solicitor" spoken twice. The second time there was an edge in her voice that was not quite fear but was close to it.

When she came back into the sitting room her face had lost its colour entirely.

"He's with his solicitor," she said. "He says suspicion is bound to fall on him. Jack—what does that mean? What has he done?"

"Nothing, I should think," I said, with rather more certainty than I felt. "But a man who benefits directly from a death and cannot account for his movements the night of it is going to attract attention, however innocent he is. The question is whether he can establish where he was."

Isobel sat down again, very carefully.

"He phoned me early yesterday evening to say he had a business appointment he couldn't avoid. He was—odd about it. The tone was off. I noticed and asked if something was wrong and he laughed it off in a way that didn't quite work. We were meant to meet for lunch today."

She looked at her hands.

"He still hasn't told me where he was, Jack. He's keeping something back. I can feel it."

I stayed very still.

There was only one interpretation that naturally presented itself, and I declined to voice it. A man who refuses to account for himself is either protecting himself or protecting someone else, and Eric Mountfort's character, as I understood it, was not the kind that lends itself to self-protection above all other considerations.

"You should be with him when Harding speaks to him," I said. "And you both need a solicitor present. Will you go there now?"

"He's asked me to come. Yes."

"Then go immediately. I expect a detective chief inspector to arrive at this address within the next two hours. It would be better if he found you already in a solicitor's office than here."

Isobel stood, and something resolute came into her expression that I recognised and had always admired.

"You don't think he did it."

"No. I don't."

"Neither do I." She held my gaze. "But then we both know him, Jack. The police don't."

We left together and parted on the pavement—Isobel into a taxi heading east, towards Eric and the solicitor's; I on foot towards the Embankment, where I could think more clearly in the noise of the traffic than I could in the contained quiet of Chelsea.

I needed to write a piece for The Planet. I needed to write it carefully, in a way that served the public interest without

serving the police narrative before I understood what that narrative was. And I needed to do it without mentioning Isobel's name, or Eric Mountfort's connection to the New Avenue Theatre, or any of the things that Harding had not yet put into the public record.

Half of journalism is knowing what to leave out. That morning, it was the better half.

I found a cafe near the Strand, ordered coffee I didn't want, and opened my laptop. Underneath everything I was writing, like a current below still water, ran a single persistent thought: the cousins had quarreled over a woman, and Eric Mountfort could not account for himself on the night his cousin died.

I stamped down what I felt about that and wrote the piece.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE INTERRUPTED SUPPER

I arrived at the Red House before Harding.

A uniformed constable was on duty at the main gate—a young woman I didn't know—and she regarded me with appropriate scepticism until I gave my name and explained that I was expected. I stood on the pavement and looked up the drive.

The house was worse in daylight than I had imagined from my brief encounter with it in the dark the previous night. It was mid-Victorian, the kind of architecture that sets out to be imposing and achieves merely large, with a facade almost entirely obscured by a dead red creeper that had not been cut back in several seasons. The crescent-shaped drive was edged with laurel and rhododendron gone to unruly heights, and the whole property had the dishevelled, self-absorbed quality of a place that had been left to its own company for too long. Estate agent boards—two different firms—occupied prominent positions at the gate piers. If anyone had seriously intended to let this house, the boards had been there long enough to suggest that the market was not convinced.

Harding arrived within five minutes, accompanied by PC Pryce—who was now in plain clothes, which had the effect of making him look simultaneously more and less comfortable, as

though the removal of the uniform had also removed several inches of personal certainty. He nodded to me as he came up.

"Glad you came that night," he said. "This is a funny sort of business and no mistake."

"It is," I agreed.

Harding produced the keys he had obtained from the letting agent—we would come to that—and we walked along to the garage.

In daylight, the garage doors were more ordinary than they had appeared by phone-torch the previous night, and Pryce was able to demonstrate more clearly what he had done: unlocking the main door, stepping in, walking through to the secondary door at the far end, locking up and leaving by the back lane. He reproduced his movements with the methodical care of a man who knows he is performing for a record.

"One thing," he said, when he had finished. "The main door opened more easily just now than it did last night. There was some resistance last night—about halfway through the swing—that I don't feel today."

Harding had his phone out, photographing the upper section of the door frame on both sides. I followed his gaze and saw what had attracted his attention: a series of small holes in the timber, recently filled with some pale compound that didn't quite match the surrounding wood, and two shallow rectangular impressions in the paintwork where some flat bracket or fitting had been pressed against the surface.

"Something was mounted here," I said.

"Yes. And removed." He moved to the secondary door and found the same evidence—the same filled holes, the same ghostly bracket-marks. "Both doors. Pryce, thank you. You can go."

Pryce touched his collar where his collar badge was not, and departed. Harding stood looking at the doors for a moment longer in silence.

"Do you have a theory?" I asked.

"Several. None I'm prepared to commit to yet." He turned. "Let's see the house."

The front door opened onto a small entrance hall, and the first thing I registered was that it was furnished. Not well and not extensively, but furnished—a dark wool rug on the original encaustic tiles, a heavy iron fender before the fireplace, two upright chairs against the walls, and in the corner a large potted palm that had seen better decades but was still technically alive. The staircase ahead was carpeted.

Given the estate agent's boards and the general atmosphere of desolation, this was sufficiently unexpected.

"The place is furnished," I said.

"Partially." Harding was already on the stairs. "Come up."

At the first-floor landing I stopped and looked about me. Here, all attempt at habitation ceased absolutely. The landing boards were bare. The rooms off it—Harding opened them one by one—were empty in the way that rooms are empty when nothing has ever been done to make them otherwise: bare walls, bare floors, the smell of damp and unlived-in years. The contrast with the

furnished hall below was jarring enough, but Harding had something more specific in mind.

We came back down to the hall. Harding crossed to the door on the right—the only one he had not yet tried—and held it.

“I’ve saved this one,” he said. “It’s unlocked.”

He stood back, and I opened it.

The room beyond was small and square, and it was so entirely at odds with everything surrounding it that for a moment I could only stand and stare.

A Persian rug covered most of the floor—good quality, the colours still vivid. Heavy Madras curtains hung at the window, deep orange and blue, and the afternoon light came through them warmly. On the walls, a set of small watercolours in plain frames. A low upholstered settee and two armchairs. A carved cabinet against the far wall. And in the centre, a circular table on which a lamp with a mosaic shade stood unlit.

The table was laid for supper.

Two places, with linen napkins and good silver. A bowl of white roses in the centre, the petals just beginning to loosen—cut last night, I thought, or perhaps the night before. Covered dishes. A wine bottle in a silver ice bucket, the ice long melted to a shallow pool of water. A plate of fruit—apricots, nectarines—around which two or three large wasps moved with drowsy possessiveness through a window that someone had opened, or left open.

A clock on the mantelpiece ticked with a dull, measured note, as though it had been doing so without interruption since the previous evening and found nothing remarkable in the situation.

I looked at this scene for perhaps ten seconds before I looked at the mantelpiece.

Standing beside the clock, in a simple wooden frame, was a large professionally printed photograph of Isobel.

I am not sure how long I stood there. Long enough for Harding, who had come in behind me and was observing everything with his customary quiet attention, to say:

"This is where the mystery centres."

I did not reply immediately. I was doing the thing one does in moments of shock, which is to conduct a rapid and mostly futile negotiation with the evidence—searching for the interpretation that makes it mean something less than it appears to mean. I found none that would hold.

Harding moved about the room, lifting the edges of the Madras curtains to examine the window frame, pressing at the wainscoting, crouching to look at the skirting. His examination was thorough and methodical and he made no comment on the photograph.

I gathered myself.

"Look at it, Harding," I said. "Actually look at it. If you were laying a trap for someone—if you had planned this entire elaborate thing and then wanted to leave a signpost pointing at a

specific person—you would do exactly this. You would be that obvious.”

He paused and looked at me.

“Go on,” he said.

“Everything else in this scheme has been conducted with considerable subtlety. The letting—the arrangements—the timing. And then, in the one room that connects everything, you leave a photograph. A prominent, unmissable photograph. It is not evidence of guilt—it is the appearance of evidence, planted for exactly the moment when an investigating officer walks through that door.”

Harding was quiet for a moment. He looked at the photograph again—Isobel’s face looking back at us with the direct, composed expression of a theatrical headshot—and something shifted in his expression.

“You may be right,” he said, slowly. “Real evidence doesn’t usually stare at you like this. I’ll give you that.”

“She had nothing to do with this.”

“I am increasingly persuaded of it.” He turned away from the mantelpiece. “Though the question of who did, and how they came to have that photograph, is one we are going to need answered.”

He went back to examining the walls. His attention had focused on a section behind the settee—a deep recess, perhaps four feet wide, draped with a floor-to-ceiling velvet curtain of an extraordinary heaviness. He drew the curtain back carefully and examined the recess: empty, bare plaster, a single hook on the back wall. Then he looked at how the curtain was hung.

"Do you notice anything odd about this?" he said.

I looked. The curtain was fixed to a rod set close to the ceiling, but it was not on rings. It was sewn directly to rings that did not move.

"It can't be drawn back normally," I said. "You'd have to lift it aside bodily and let it fall behind you."

"Yes." He looked at it for a moment more, then released it. "There's one other thing. Do you see that?"

He was pointing to a small brass fitting just below the picture rail, almost invisible against the wall. A gas point, I thought at first—the old houses in this area still had them—but the position was wrong. I looked more carefully.

"That's a data or power socket of some kind," I said. "Retrofitted. Not original to the house."

Harding photographed it carefully from three angles and said nothing.

Outside in the overgrown garden, I lit my pipe and waited while Harding finished his notes. The afternoon had turned warm and the garden, for all its neglect, had a particular golden quality in the low sun. There were bees in the untended lavender. It would have been a pleasant scene under almost any other circumstances.

Harding came out and stood beside me.

"The letting of this property," he said. "I spoke to the agency this morning. The entire transaction was conducted at a distance. An email inquiry, a series of messages, a bank transfer

of twelve months' rent in advance from a prepaid account that has since been closed. The agency never met the tenant. A courier service collected the keys."

"No name?"

"A name was given and an address, but neither checks out. The agency didn't look too carefully—twelve months in advance has a persuasive effect on the instinct for due diligence." He paused. "The email account was created for the purpose and abandoned immediately after. The prepaid card was topped up with cash in three separate transactions at three different shops."

I turned this over.

"Someone who knows how to move without leaving a trace," I said.

"Someone who has thought about it very carefully indeed. The cabman who brought Sir Marcus here has been found—he picked him up near the stage door of the New Avenue Theatre and drove him straight to this address. Sir Marcus paid him off and went up the drive alone. The cabman drove away. He was the last person to speak to Sir Marcus while he was alive."

The sun moved behind a cloud. The bees continued in the lavender without comment.

"There is one thing more," said Harding, in a tone that had changed slightly. "Every instruction in this affair—the letting, the cab booking, the call to the police about the garage—every call we have so far been able to trace was made by a woman."

He left that there and waited.

I looked at the house, and at the window of the room with the laid supper and the clock still ticking and the photograph on the mantelpiece.

"Thank God," I said quietly. "Whatever else it means—at least it cannot have been Isobel."

Harding gave me one of his measured, straight looks.

"No," he agreed. "It cannot. But there is clearly a second woman in this case, Mr. Halliday. And she is not an ordinary one."

CHAPTER SIX

THE VOICE

A plain-clothes officer arrived at the gate of the Red House as Harding and I were leaving. He had the quietly satisfied air of a man who has just done something useful.

"We have her, sir," he said to Harding. "Charing Cross custody suite."

Harding turned to me. "I'll go straight there. Can you provide me with those notes on the figurine this evening—the Maspero material?"

"I'll have them ready when you arrive."

"Good. Come after nine if you can manage it." He was already moving towards his car. "There's a great deal still to establish but I think we may be moving faster than our quarry expects."

He departed. Coates drove me home.

The cottage felt quieter than usual that evening—the particular quiet of a place where one has been sitting with uncomfortable thoughts long enough for them to become furniture. I changed, ate the supper Coates had prepared without much awareness of what it was, and went through to the study.

On the shelf above my desk stood a copy of Maspero's Egyptian Art—a large, heavy volume that had belonged to a professor I had interviewed early in my career, and that I had

acquired by means I preferred not to examine too closely. I took it down now and found the passages I had been turning over in my mind since morning.

She belongs, Maspero writes, to the innumerable family of cats which suddenly came forth from the ruins of Tell Bastah and were in a few years scattered over the whole world. She is Bast, a goddess of good family, the worship of whom flourished especially in the east of the delta. She was allied or related to the Sun, said to be his sister or wife, sometimes his daughter. She sometimes filled a gracious and beneficent role—protecting against contagious diseases, keeping off evil spirits, cheering men with the music of her sistrum. But she had also her hours of treacherous perversity, during which she played with her victim as with a mouse before finishing him off with a blow of her claws.

I sat with this for a while. The lamp on the desk made a small warm circle. Outside, the garden was dark and still, and I did not look at the window.

I copied out the relevant passages and set them beside the figurine—which Harding had left with me for the purpose of further examination—and looked at the two things together. The figure was no more than four inches tall, the enamel green-gold and perfectly preserved. A woman's body, a cat's head, one hand raised in a gesture that could be greeting or command. The casting was precise and entirely unself-conscious in the way of objects made for devotion rather than display.

I tried to determine the period more exactly. The style of the enamelwork—the quality of the inlay, the proportions—placed it, I thought, at the early Ptolemaic period. Third century BC, perhaps earlier. Four hundred years of accumulated belief had gone into the making of it, and then it had been buried in a pit in the Egyptian Delta, and then dug up in the 1870s, and then dispersed into private hands, and then placed in the pocket of a dead man in a crate in the hold of a ship at Limehouse.

I could make no more sense of that sequence than I had been able to that morning.

Harding arrived at half past nine. He declined the whisky I offered—he had been working continuously, he said, and needed his head clear—and settled instead into the armchair with the air of a man who has been standing all day and is grateful for a chair that does not tip.

I put the Maspero notes and the figurine on the table between us and waited.

"Marie," he said, and paused, organising the account. "She began by denying everything, as expected, and then changed to a version she has since maintained consistently. My view is that the second version is substantially true."

He settled back.

"Some weeks ago, Marie received a call from an unknown number—the caller had withheld the ID, and the number traced to a disposable SIM purchased for cash. The caller told her that Sir Marcus's attentions towards her employer were a nuisance, and

proposed a scheme to put him off once and for all. Marie was to tell him, when he next appeared at the stage door, that Isobel would meet him for a private supper after the performance, but that for discretion he should go on ahead to an address he would be given and wait. Isobel would follow in fifteen minutes."

"Marie agreed to this?"

"She was told it was a practical joke—that Sir Marcus would arrive at the address, wait, realize he had been made a fool of, and give up the pursuit. The caller also promised her five hundred pounds in cash."

I said nothing.

"The money arrived the following morning—an envelope pushed through the letterbox of her flat. Cash, used notes. Along with it came a physical key and a typed note with instructions: the address, the room on the right of the hall, the cab that would be waiting."

Harding paused and looked at the ceiling for a moment.

"She carried it out. Sir Marcus presented himself at the stage door during the interval. She passed him the message and the key. He came back after the final curtain, she told him Isobel would follow in fifteen minutes, and she watched him walk out to the car that was waiting. Then she went in, finished clearing up, and told herself she had played a joke on an unpleasant man. She had no idea what she had actually done until the morning."

The room was very quiet. The clock on the shelf ticked. Through the window the garden showed as a rectangle of lesser darkness.

"And Isobel," I said, carefully, "knew nothing of any of this."

"Nothing. Marie was keeping the whole business—the calls, the key, the arrangement—from her entirely. That part of her account I believe completely. It is consistent with everything we know about Miss Lytton's own account and with the evidence of the stage door staff."

I let out a breath I had been holding since approximately ten o'clock that morning.

"The cab," said Harding. "A private hire driver—we found him through the booking platform—was engaged via a phone number that traces back to the same disposable SIM. He was instructed to wait near the stage door and take whoever came out to the Red House. He drove Sir Marcus there without difficulty. Sir Marcus paid him off in cash, dismissed him, and went up the drive alone. The driver says he last saw him walking towards the front door."

"And the driver received his instructions from—"

"A woman," said Harding. "The cab booking, the call to Marie, the letting of the Red House, the call to the police about the garage—every voice we have been able to identify in this affair is a woman's voice."

He picked up the figurine from the table between us and turned it slowly in his fingers.

"That cannot have been Isobel," I said. "In any of it. Practically, it's impossible—she was on stage during most of these events, and before that she was—"

"I agree," said Harding. "It cannot have been Miss Lytton. But that does not make this simple." He set the figurine down again very carefully. "Think about what this scheme actually was, Mr. Halliday. The Red House was not arranged to commit a murder conveniently. It was arranged with extraordinary care to murder one man and simultaneously produce evidence sufficient to convict another. Sir Marcus was lured there. The supper was laid for two, with Miss Lytton's photograph prominently displayed. If the accident at the docks had not brought things to light within hours, we might have been looking at the evidence in that room without knowing a body had been found, while Sir Eric's absence on the night of the murder hung over him unexplained."

I had been sitting forward without being aware of it. I sat back.

"You are saying that Isobel was not the target at all. She was to be the instrument."

"The instrument by which Eric Mountfort was to hang," said Harding quietly. "Yes. That is what I believe this scheme was designed to achieve."

He stood, and moved to the window, and stood there with his back to the room for a moment. When he turned his expression was that of a man who has understood something he would rather not have understood.

"We always come back to it," he said, and picked up the figurine once more. "'She played with her victim as with a mouse,' your Maspero says, 'before finishing him off with a blow of her claws.'"

He looked at the small green figure for a long moment.

"She played with her victim," he repeated, almost to himself, "as with a mouse."

I found I did not want to be looking at the garden window. I moved my chair so that I was not.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE CAT OF BUBASTIS

For a long while after Harding left I sat without moving. The room had accumulated the comfortable archaeology of a long evening's thought—two glasses used, the ashtray requiring attention, the Maspero open on the table alongside my notes, the figurine standing on the corner of the desk where Harding had replaced it with a precision that suggested he had been reluctant to let it go.

I smoked a final pipe and looked at the figurine. It looked back, in the way of very old objects that have outlasted so many human concerns that one more makes no particular impression on them.

The room was quiet, and I should have been tired, and I was not.

Presently Coates appeared in the doorway.

"Shall you be going out again tonight, sir?"

"No. Turn in, Coates. I'll lock up."

"Very good, sir." He paused in the way that meant he had something further. "I took the liberty of checking the news

service about the theatre matter. Miss Lytton is reported as indisposed."

"I know. Thank you, Coates."

He withdrew. I heard the familiar sequence of sounds—his door, the bathroom, the light under his door going out—and then the cottage was as still as it ever got, which is to say that the refrigerator hummed, and a branch occasionally touched the guttering above the kitchen window, and from somewhere in the direction of the village a fox called once and then decided against it.

I picked up my phone and called Isobel.

She answered on the second ring, which told me she had not been asleep.

"I thought you might call," she said.

"How are you?"

A brief silence—the kind that contains more than silence.

"I'm all right. I'm sorry about the theatre—I couldn't face it tonight. They'll manage. And I'd been thinking about leaving the production anyway, so the timing is—well, the timing is not ideal, but the decision was already more or less made."

"Don't apologize. No one expected you to go on tonight."

"Inspector Harding came to the flat this afternoon," she said. "Before I reached the solicitor's. He was—actually very decent about it. Careful. He didn't push."

"He's a good officer."

"Yes." A pause. "But he clearly thinks Eric is involved. He didn't say so, but I'm not a fool, Jack. The questions he didn't

ask were as obvious as the ones he did. And I know Eric is being watched. A man sat outside the building in a car for three hours this afternoon."

"That's standard procedure in a case like this. It doesn't indicate charge or arrest."

"It indicates suspicion."

I could not very honestly argue with that.

"Has he said anything more to you? Given any account of himself?"

"Nothing. He came to the solicitor's as I asked, and he was—strange, Jack. Defensive and distant at the same time. Almost as if he resented me for being there. I can't understand it. He knows perfectly well that if he would simply explain where he was the whole thing could be cleared up, and instead he just—won't." Her voice was steady, but only just. "I asked him directly. He said it was his business. Those were his exact words."

His business. I sat with that for a moment and said nothing, because the interpretation that came naturally to me was not one I intended to share.

"It will sort itself out," I said, which was what one says when one cannot say what one thinks. "Try to sleep."

"I will. Good night, Jack."

"Good night."

I went back to the Maspero.

The fetes of Bast, I read, attracted pilgrims from all parts of Egypt. The people of each village crowded into large boats to

get there, men and women together, with the fixed intention of enjoying themselves on the journey—a thing they never failed to do. They accompanied the slow progress of navigation with endless songs, love songs rather than sacred hymns, and there were among them flute-players and castanet-players to keep time. Whenever they passed by a town they approached the bank as near as they could without landing, and the passengers threw volleys of insults and coarse remarks at the women standing on the banks; they retorted; and when they had exhausted words—

I finished my notes at this point, the behaviour of the ancient Egyptians at the festival of their cat-goddess having no direct bearing on the matter in hand. I moved to the passages dealing with the votive offerings themselves, and from there to those describing the attributes of the goddess in her less benevolent aspect.

She had also her hours of treacherous perversity. I had read the line three times already that day and found it no less arresting for repetition.

I became aware, somewhere past midnight, of the distant howling of dogs. It came from a direction I couldn't place—somewhere up the lane, or possibly further, sound carrying oddly in the stillness after the storm. I noted it without moving from my chair, in the way one notes an alarm clock that belongs to the house next door. Familiar enough to register, not one's immediate business.

I had been sitting perhaps another quarter of an hour, the book open but unread and my thoughts moving in slow circuits around Eric Mountfort's peculiar silence, when the doorbell rang.

It was ten minutes to one in the morning.

My first thought was Harding—some development requiring urgent attention. I went down the corridor and opened the front door.

A woman stood on the step.

She was tall—as tall as I am, or nearly—and elegantly dressed in a dark coat and wide-brimmed hat, with a long silk scarf arranged so that very little of her face was visible. The scarf was wound up across her chin and mouth, and the hat brim came down, and between these two things only her eyes were clearly present: large, and very bright, and fixed on me with an intensity that stopped me for a moment in a way I could not quite account for.

She glanced behind her, along the lane towards the road.

"I know this is an extraordinary hour," she said. "I must ask you to forgive me."

Her voice was low and a little husky, with a quality I can only describe as deliberate—the voice of someone who has cultivated its effects. It was not unpleasant. In fact it was, in some way I immediately distrusted, the opposite.

"Is something wrong?" I said.

She glanced behind her again, and this time something in the movement was not composed.

"I was walking back from a friend's house—just down the lane—when something began to follow me. I don't know how else to describe it. I saw your light." She hesitated. "And I saw your name on the gate post. I know who you are, Mr. Halliday. I've read your work."

I did not know quite what to make of any of this, but I knew what I had seen two nights before at the base of the garden hedge, and when she said the next words the hair on my arms stood up.

"Eyes," she said quietly. "Large green eyes, following me. Since the bridge at the bottom of the lane. Close to the ground."

I stood back from the door without having entirely decided to do so.

"Please come in," I said.

She moved through the cottage with the ease of someone accustomed to unfamiliar spaces—no hesitation, no apologetic hovering—and I showed her into the study. I offered water, which she declined with a small gesture, and whisky, which she also declined, and she settled in the armchair Harding had vacated an hour and a half before as though she had been sitting in it for years.

She had not removed the hat or the scarf. I did not ask her to.

In the lamplight I could see a little more of her face—the strong line of her jaw, and those remarkable eyes, which were long and narrow and of what appeared to be a dark amber colour.

Very beautiful, and very watchful, and rather relentlessly directed at me.

"You said you knew my name," I said. "From the gate post. But the name on the gate post is the name of the cottage."

A small pause.

"I knew you lived here," she said. "That is more accurate."

"I see. And the eyes that followed you—can you describe them more precisely?"

"Large. Green. Low to the ground, as I said. Not an animal I recognised. Not a dog." She looked at me steadily. "You've seen them too."

It was not a question.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because when I said the word 'eyes' on the doorstep, your expression changed in a way that had nothing to do with surprise." She tilted her head a fraction. "You're a journalist. You know how to keep your face. But some things are faster than control."

I regarded her for a moment. There was something in her manner—in the quality of her attention, in the particular stillness she held between sentences—that I found it difficult to look away from and equally difficult to look directly at. It was as though the eye kept sliding off the thing it wanted to examine.

I was about to speak when the light went out.

Not a gradual dimming—a complete and instantaneous failure. The lamp, the hall light, the faint orange glow of the kitchen: all gone at once, with the absolute totality that means a blown main fuse or a grid fault rather than a bulb.

In the dark I heard my own breathing, and the tick of the mantelpiece clock, and the sound of the chair—the faint shift of someone repositioning themselves. My visitor was still there. I heard nothing else.

I said: “I’ll find the fuse box—just a moment—” and reached to my left for the edge of the bookcase where I knew the matches were kept in an old tin.

And then I stopped.

Across the dark room, from the direction of the armchair, two points of light had appeared.

They were green. They were large—larger than any cat’s eyes I had seen, and I have seen cats’ eyes reflect in the dark and know exactly what that looks like—and they did not reflect the way eyes reflect. There was no light source for them to catch. They simply existed in the darkness, steady and self-contained and fixed on me, and they held in them something that my body understood before my mind did, because I was against the wall with my hand on the door handle while I was still trying to identify what I was looking at.

Then Coates called out from the corridor—the power cut had woken him—and a torch beam swept under the study door, and I heard the crash of a chair displaced quickly, and the sound of the window going up.

"Coates!" I called. "A light, quickly!"

He came in and directed the torch around the room.

The armchair was empty. The window stood open, the curtain lifting in the night air.

She had gone—evidently through the window, which opened onto a flower bed and the garden path, and from there to the lane. I crossed to it and leaned out into the darkness. Nothing moved. Somewhere, not close, a dog was still howling.

I turned back to the room and looked at the desk.

The Maspero notes were where I had left them. The pen lay where I had set it down. The ashtray, the glasses, the opened book—everything as it had been.

The figurine of Bast was gone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MY VISITOR

Harding arrived at the cottage before nine. He came alone, on foot from wherever he had parked, and Coates showed him through to the garden without ceremony, having already understood from the previous evening's events that the Inspector was the kind of guest who did not need managing.

We stood together in the flower bed outside the study window and looked at the prints.

They were exactly as they had been two mornings before on the other side of the house—the deep heel-weighted landing impression, the turning marks of someone who had paused and oriented herself, and then the hard push-off of departure. The same narrow heel. The same slight inward turn of the left foot. The same absence of any scuff or scramble on the window ledge above that might suggest difficulty.

"She went out as quickly as she came in," I said.

Harding crouched over the impressions and photographed them carefully, then straightened and looked at the garden wall beyond.

"Do you know the story of Spring-heeled Jack?" he said.

"Victorian London. The leaping figure that terrorised the suburbs for forty years and was never satisfactorily identified." I paused. "Are you saying that's what we're dealing with?"

"I'm saying that particular mystery was never resolved either, which is an analogy I find less comforting than I'd like." He looked at the ground once more. "Whatever the explanation, Mr. Halliday, the woman who visited you last night has a degree of physical capability that is well outside the ordinary range. This is not the kind of thing we can set aside. It is evidence of a kind."

"Of what?"

"I don't yet know. But it connects to the shoe prints in the radish bed, which connects to the garden hedge, which connects to this window. She has been here before—or she has been watching this house before. Last night she came inside." He turned. "She knew your name. She said she knew you lived here. That is not a casual fact."

We went back into the cottage. Coates had laid out the morning papers on the kitchen table alongside my laptop, open to the news services, and I had been scanning them while I waited. I indicated the screen.

The coverage was extensive and not, on the whole, helpful. Isobel's name appeared in three separate pieces, two of them accompanied by photographs from her recent run at the New Avenue—the kind of photographs that are designed to make a person look as attractive as possible, and which have the effect, in this context, of making her look guilty of something unspecified. Eric

Mountfort appeared as the new baronet and as a person whose whereabouts on the night in question remained unaccounted for. The phrase "police are keen to speak to" appeared in two articles.

"I find this intolerable," I said.

"It's what happens," said Harding, without much sympathy. "If it helps, the coverage is largely speculation built on the official statement, and none of it materially alters the investigation." He sat down at the table and looked at his phone for a moment. "Now. I need to ask you something directly."

I waited.

"Is there any possibility—in your genuine view, setting aside your personal feelings—that Eric Mountfort had a hand in his cousin's death?"

I had been expecting the question and had been preparing an honest answer.

"No," I said. "Not because I know him to be incapable of it—I don't know that about anyone—but because the method is completely wrong for him. The Red House scheme required weeks of patient, invisible preparation. Eric Mountfort is an impulsive person. He quarrels loudly and makes his feelings obvious. He is not the sort of man who sets elaborate traps in advance and then waits."

"That's a fair character analysis," said Harding. "But it doesn't eliminate the possibility that he had assistance."

"From whom?"

Harding turned his coffee cup once in his hands and looked at it.

"That brings me to something I've been sitting with since yesterday," he said. "You are aware that Sir Eric has a military background—he left the Army four years ago after twelve years of service."

"Yes."

"He was decorated. A commendation for service during an advisory posting to Egypt, about five years ago. It was mentioned in the citations that accompanied his appointment to a regimental role." He raised his eyes. "Egypt, Mr. Halliday."

I looked at him.

"You're connecting his posting to our cat-woman."

"I'm not connecting anything yet. I'm noting a coincidence and asking whether it seems significant to you." He paused. "The whole Egyptian thread in this case—the figurine, the symbol on the crate, the goddess, the traditions you have described to me—points towards someone with both knowledge of and access to that world. That could be an academic, a collector, an archaeologist, or simply someone who spent time in the country. Sir Eric spent fourteen months there."

"You're suggesting the cat-woman is someone he met in Egypt."

"I'm suggesting she might be a woman who met Eric Mountfort in Egypt and who has since developed a—let us say an interest—in him that extends to removing obstacles from his path." He watched me carefully. "A rival of Miss Lytton's. A jealous one. With

resources, and capability, and a particular way of operating that is not easily traced."

I sat with this. It had a terrible coherence.

"The photograph on the mantelpiece," I said slowly. "Planted there—you said so yourself, it was too obvious to be genuine. But if it was planted by someone who hated Isobel—"

"Precisely. Someone who wanted to destroy her by implicating her, rather than simply to commit a murder and be done with it." Harding set down his cup. "It's a theory, Mr. Halliday. I hold it lightly. But it fits the available evidence better than anything else I've constructed."

The morning light was bright through the kitchen window, and the garden beyond it looked entirely ordinary, and I thought about the prints in the flower bed and the eyes in the dark.

"What do you need from me?" I said.

Harding leaned forward.

"There is a line of inquiry I cannot easily pursue myself without creating difficulties with the family involved. It concerns a death—the death, several years ago, of Roger Mountfort."

"Lady Aldous's son. The direct heir."

"Who died abroad under circumstances described as a sudden illness. He was twenty-two. He had no prior medical history of note." Harding looked at me steadily. "He died while Eric Mountfort's path to the baronetcy was still obstructed. He died while Sir Aldous was alive and while there were two people ahead of Sir Marcus in the line of succession. And he died three years

before Lady Aldous's own health—according to local accounts—began its apparently irreversible decline."

A silence settled over the kitchen that had nothing to do with the morning.

"You want me to go to Wraydon Park," I said.

"I want you to go to Upper Crossleys—the village nearby—in your professional capacity, as a journalist with a legitimate interest in the family history. You can seek access to Wraydon Park and attempt to speak with Lady Aldous Mountfort, or with anyone who knows her circumstances. What you learn comes directly to me, not to The Planet. I'm asking you to act as my eyes where my own officers would draw attention."

He paused.

"I should add—since you asked what I need—that the things you have seen and experienced in the last two nights, and the theft of the figurine, tell me that we are not dealing with ordinary criminals. Someone already knows who you are and has demonstrated an interest in you that I find suggestive. You should be cautious."

"How cautious?"

Harding held my gaze for a moment.

"Take Coates," he said. "And do not go up to that house alone."

CHAPTER NINE

HANGING EVIDENCE

Every day that passed seemed to make the case blacker against Eric Mountfort. That was Isobel's assessment when I called on her the following morning, and I could not honestly contradict it.

She was in the sitting room when Marie showed me up, and she had the look of someone who had slept badly and dressed with too much care to disguise the fact. The kilim, the books, the familiar disorder of a room lived in by a person who thinks—all of it was the same. The photograph of me was still on the mantelpiece, which I noticed and again said nothing about. Only Isobel herself seemed different: a tightness around the eyes, a slightly elevated alertness, like someone listening for a sound they are not sure they want to hear.

"Every new thing that comes out," she said, "only makes it worse. He won't explain where he was. He won't speak to me properly. The surveillance—there's a car outside here now, did you see it?—he rang to complain about it for twenty minutes last night as though it were something I had arranged."

I sat down opposite her and chose my words.

"He is frightened," I said. "People who are frightened are often very difficult."

"He has nothing to be frightened of if he simply tells the truth."

"Yes. Which suggests that whatever he is keeping back, he believes it will damage him further rather than help him. That is not necessarily the calculation of a guilty man. It can equally be the calculation of a man who has done something foolish that he cannot see a clean way out of."

Isobel looked at me steadily, and I recognised the look—the one that meant she was deciding how much of her actual thinking to let show.

"You mean another woman," she said.

I held her gaze.

"It would explain the secrecy without requiring guilt," I said. "And it would explain why he seems to resent you for asking."

A silence settled. Through the window the morning traffic moved along the King's Road with its usual cheerful indifference to everything occurring in Chelsea sitting rooms.

"I had thought the same thing," said Isobel, quietly. "I wish I found it comforting."

The sound of the flat's entrance buzzer interrupted whatever either of us was going to say next. Marie's voice from the hallway, and then footsteps on the stairs that I recognised before the door opened: Eric Mountfort.

He had changed from the man I had known even two years ago. The fair, open-air quality was still there in the face, but the ease had gone out of it entirely. He was well-dressed, with the automatic precision of a person who maintains appearances under pressure, but his eyes had shadows under them and the set of his jaw was the set of someone who has been clenching it for days. He came into the room, registered my presence, and the hostile blankness that crossed his face was immediate and undisguised.

"Halliday," he said, with the precise intonation that makes a surname sound like a charge.

"Mountfort," I replied, equally.

He moved past me to Isobel and gave her a greeting that managed to be both perfunctory and proprietorial, which I noted and made no comment on.

"I need to talk to you," he said to her, with a look towards me that contained the rest of the sentence.

"Jack knows what I know," said Isobel. "Which is considerably less than you know. Why don't you simply tell us both where you were that night? Then we could all stop performing."

Eric looked at her with an expression that shifted through several states before settling on something like controlled fury.

"I've said everything I intend to say to the police," he replied. "I don't see why I should say it again to a journalist."

"Because," I said, keeping my voice level, "the journalist in question has spent the last two days establishing that you almost certainly did not commit this crime, and would find it

very convenient to be proved right before a coroner's jury decides otherwise."

He stared at me. The fury held for a moment, and then something underneath it—something much less comfortable—showed through.

"If you know what's good for you," he said, "you'll print what you know and leave the rest alone."

"Eric—" said Isobel.

"No." He had recovered the harder register. "I'm sorry, Isobel, but I'm not going to stand here being managed by Fleet Street. I know how these people work."

I stood up. There was nothing useful left for me in the room, and I had a piece to file and a call to make before noon.

"Good morning, Isobel," I said. "Mountfort."

He had already turned to the window. Isobel followed me to the door and I saw in her face, briefly, an expression that she replaced so quickly I almost missed it—something that had nothing to do with Eric and everything to do with an old disappointment she had made peace with, or thought she had. I said nothing. I went downstairs and out into the morning.

The walk to the Embankment cleared some of the anger the flat had left in me. I found a table at a café, opened my laptop, and worked through the afternoon on a piece that required all my attention precisely because it required me to say a great deal while revealing very little.

The editorial judgment of The Planet being what it was, my piece ran with three paragraphs cut and a headline I had not written, and I had just finished arguing about this with Marcus Webb when Harding called.

"Can you come to the Met? Now, if possible."

His voice had the particular quality of controlled urgency that I had learned meant something had happened that he did not want to discuss on an open line.

"Twenty minutes," I said.

The office Harding used at New Scotland Yard was small and remarkably tidy for a man conducting a complex murder investigation, which I had always taken as evidence that the real work happened elsewhere. He was standing when I arrived, and on the chair by the window sat a sealed evidence bag, darkly wet and smelling of the particular mixture of decay and cold water that belongs to things retrieved from urban lakes.

"Sit down," said Harding.

I sat.

"Sir Eric Mountfort left his flat last night at eleven-fifteen by the rear service door," said Harding. "He was carrying a holdall. He walked—not directly—to St. James's Park. The officer following him maintained distance and cover throughout. Near the lake, Sir Eric stopped for approximately four minutes, apparently alone. He then walked rapidly towards Isobel Lytton's building and was admitted at eleven fifty-five."

He paused.

"The officer marked the location where Sir Eric had stopped. A dive team recovered the holdall from the lake this morning."

I looked at the evidence bag.

"Show me," I said.

Harding opened the bag with gloved hands and laid the contents methodically on the desk. First, four river cobbles— heavy, smooth, packed in to weight the bag. Then, one at a time, the clothing: a dark hooded sweatshirt, worn and faded. A pair of black tracksuit trousers with a torn knee. Battered trainers, at least three sizes too large. A knitted beanie hat, black. And last, carefully unrolled from inside the hoodie, a long red woollen scarf.

The scarf was cheap and bright, the kind sold at street markets for a few pounds, and it was the kind of thing that once seen at night is not forgotten.

Harding looked at me.

"I know what you're going to say," I said.

"A pedestrian on College Road on the night of the murder," said Harding, "reported seeing a figure in dark clothing near the junction with the Red House lane. A distinctive red scarf. She mentioned it in passing as colour detail—hadn't thought much of it. We've since gone back to her."

I sat looking at the scarf on the desk. The scarf sat there and had nothing to say for itself.

"This is what you'd call hanging evidence," I said.

"It is the most damaging single piece of evidence I have seen in a murder investigation in fifteen years," said Harding,

without inflection. "A man under suspicion for murder, attempting to dispose of a disguise, caught on surveillance, recovered from a lake. Yes. Hanging evidence is precisely what it is."

I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes for a moment.

"And yet he did not do it," I said.

"Tell me why you are still certain of that."

"Because if he had done it," I said, "he would not have walked past the Red House in disguise. He would not have been anywhere near College Road that night. The scheme that killed Sir Marcus required weeks of invisible preparation and left no fingerprints—no trace, no name, nothing. A man capable of that level of planning does not then wander past the crime scene in a red scarf." I paused. "He was there because he had been told to be there. He was told Isobel would be meeting Sir Marcus. He dressed in dark clothing and went to watch. He saw exactly what he feared—Sir Marcus arriving alone at an empty house—and he drew entirely the wrong conclusion. And then he panicked, because he knew how it would look."

Harding was quiet for a long moment.

"That is also consistent with the evidence," he said at last. "I don't say you're wrong. But he has now made it almost impossible for himself to explain the truth, because explaining the truth requires him to admit he was there, which is what the whole of the disposal operation was designed to prevent."

"He painted himself into the corner," I said. "Someone painted it for him and handed him the brush."

"Yes." Harding began rebagging the evidence with careful hands. "Which is why I need you in Upper Crossleys, Mr. Halliday. The real killer is not Eric Mountfort. Every hour this evidence sits on my desk without an alternative explanation is an hour closer to a verdict that will be wrong."

He sealed the bag and looked at me directly.

"I mean it about not going up to the house alone."

CHAPTER TEN

THE SCARRED MAN

Coates drove. I sat in the passenger seat and looked at the countryside changing around us as we came clear of the M25 and into the long, rolling country of the Kent and Sussex border, and thought about Roger Mountfort.

He had died five years ago at twenty-two, in a hotel in Basel during what was described in the family solicitor's records as an educational tour. No prior medical history. No warning. A sudden illness, the kind of thing that happens and leaves no satisfactory explanation, except that in this case it had happened at a moment of remarkable convenience for certain interested parties, and the local and imported physicians who had attended him had apparently not been entirely agreed on what had killed him.

I had these details from Harding, conveyed over the phone the previous evening with the clipped precision of a man releasing information on a need-to-know basis. He had also given me the name of the village—Upper Crossleys, in the shallow valley below the Wraydon Park estate—and the name of the public house where I would find rooms. Beyond that: do not advertise your purpose, do not approach the house directly, and do not go anywhere on the estate grounds alone after dark.

Coates had listened to all of this from the hallway without expression and had packed for two nights.

The approach to Upper Crossleys gave no particular warning of what it was. The road came down through mixed woodland—birch and oak, with occasional stands of dark fir that pressed close to the tarmac—and then the valley opened and the village appeared below, compact and tile-roofed and, at first glance, entirely conventional. A church with a square Norman tower. A village shop. A scatter of old cottages and newer bungalows. A war memorial on the green. The kind of place that appears on weekend supplement covers between articles about slow food and house prices.

It was only when we came into the village street itself that the quality I had noticed began to assert itself.

Several of the older cottages were empty—not derelict, but unoccupied in the quiet way of places that have been left rather than abandoned: curtains still hung, a pot on a windowsill, a For Sale board with an agent's name bleached by several seasons of weather. The shop was open but its display looked thin. The pub—The Abbey Inn, a long low building of old stone at the far end of the street—had lights on and a car park containing three vehicles, which for a Friday evening in a village pub in high summer was on the lean side.

Coates said nothing. He pulled in to the car park with his usual economy of movement and switched off the engine.

"Quiet," he observed.

"Yes."

"I'll see to the bags, sir."

Pritchard, the landlord, was a large, quiet-spoken man with the particular manner of someone who has long since decided that observation is more reliable than conversation. He showed us to our rooms with minimal ceremony and rather good attention to detail—the rooms were clean and comfortable, and there was a reading light positioned where a reading light should be, which I have learned to regard as a reliable sign of intelligence in accommodation. When I came back down to the bar at half past seven he had a pint of local ale waiting without my having asked, and I put this down as further evidence in his favour.

The bar was quiet: two men at a corner table with the absorbed expressions of people settling a long argument, and at the bar itself a weathered, compact man of about fifty in the practical clothing of someone who works outdoors for a living—moleskin trousers, a waxed jacket hung over the stool beside him, a glass of bitter at his elbow. He had the sharp, watchful quality of a man accustomed to long periods of silence and stillness, and he looked at me with an attention that was frank without being hostile.

"Visitor?" he said.

"For a few days. Walking, mostly." I settled onto the stool two along from his. "Hawkins, is it? The estate keeper?"

He looked at me with slightly increased interest.

"How d'you know that?"

"Pritchard mentioned it." He hadn't, but it was the kind of thing a landlord might mention, and I had done my research before

leaving London. "I understand Wraydon Park is nearby. I'd hoped to have a look at the older parts—monastic foundation, I believe?"

Hawkins and Pritchard exchanged a glance of a kind I recognised: the particular communication of two people in a small community who have an established understanding about what to say to strangers.

"The Park's closed to visitors," said Hawkins, after a moment. "Has been for some time. Lady Mountfort—she doesn't receive."

"A shame. I'd heard the Saxon tower was remarkable."

"It is," said Hawkins, in a tone that closed rather than opened the subject.

Pritchard set another glass in front of Hawkins without being asked and withdrew to the other end of the bar. I spent a few minutes on my phone and let the silence settle into something comfortable, and then said, without particular emphasis: "The village seems quiet for this time of year."

Hawkins looked into his glass.

"Always was quiet," he said. "Gets more so."

"Why is that, do you think?"

He was quiet for long enough that I thought he had decided not to answer. Then: "Things go wrong in a place sometimes. Hard to say what it is. But you feel it."

Pritchard, at the other end of the bar, said nothing and busied himself with a glass that was already clean.

The door of the pub opened at half past eight and the conversation stopped.

He was perhaps twenty-five, sturdily built, dark-haired, and dressed in the self-conscious manner of a young man who takes pride in his appearance—a good jacket, a properly ironed shirt, leather shoes that had been polished. What drew attention was his face. The left cheek carried three or four parallel lacerations in the late stage of healing, pink and raw-edged, and a pad of surgical dressing was taped to the side of his neck above his collar. He walked to the bar with the assurance of someone accustomed to being noticed, ordered a whisky without looking at anyone in particular, and then—apparently for the first time—registered my presence.

The change in his expression was immediate and not subtle.

"Who is this?" he said to Pritchard, in a tone that had no good reason for its edge.

"Visitor," said Pritchard. "Stopping a few days."

The young man—Hines, I had already guessed; there was only one candidate, based on what I knew—looked at me with an expression that had moved past hostility into something closer to alarm.

"You should have told me," he said to Pritchard, with a heat entirely disproportionate to the situation. He snatched up his glass, held his free hand briefly across his face in a gesture of pure instinct, and walked out without finishing his drink.

The door closed. The two men in the corner exchanged a glance and returned to their argument.

Hawkins turned back to his glass. Pritchard polished the already-clean surface of the bar. The small drama was over as quickly and completely as a squall.

"Edward Hines," I said.

Hawkins nodded once.

"Prides himself on his looks," said Pritchard, which were the most consecutive words I had heard from him. He seemed to recognise this and retreated slightly, as though rebalancing.

I left a decent pause, in the way of someone who is mildly curious and not particularly invested, and then said: "What happened to his face?"

Hawkins and Pritchard exchanged their glance again. This time Hawkins seemed to win whatever the exchange was about, because he set his glass down and turned slightly towards me.

"A woman," he said.

"An argument?"

"Not what I'd call an argument. More like—" He paused, choosing the word with the care of someone who rarely tells stories but intends to tell this one accurately. "Like something went wrong that shouldn't have. He'd been meeting her—a lady from up London, he said. Very taken with her, for a few weeks. Brought her here one evening, showed us a present she'd given him." He paused again. "Then the third time he saw her, he came back looking like you see."

"And said nothing about what happened?"

"Not a word. But it wasn't a fall or a bicycle accident, if you're wondering."

Pritchard had moved back to our end of the bar by degrees, in the manner of a man drawn by gravity.

"Tell him about the present," he said quietly.

Hawkins looked at me for a moment.

"He brought it in here. Showed us. He said it was gold, though I doubt that. A little figure—a woman, he said, but with the wrong kind of head." He tapped his own jaw with one finger. "An animal's head. Cat, I think. Old-looking, he said. She told him it was worth a good deal."

He lifted his glass and finished it.

"A little figure like—a sort of cat," he said, and glanced at me with the unselfconscious curiosity of someone who has noticed an expression change and doesn't mind saying so. "You've heard of something like that."

It was not quite a question.

"Perhaps," I said. "Good night, Hawkins. Pritchard."

I went upstairs. Coates was in his room; I could hear the measured silence of him reading before sleep, which is how he passed every evening regardless of circumstances. I stood at my window and looked out at the village street, which was now entirely dark and entirely still, and at the far slope of the hill where the tree line of Wraydon Park showed as a denser darkness against the sky.

Somewhere up there, behind those trees, was whatever the rest of this was about.

I closed the curtains and did not open them again.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DR. LUCIAN SARN

It was a long time before sleep came that night.

I stood at the window for half an hour, looking at the dark street and the darker hill above it, and then lay down with the curtains open because the room was warm and the night was still. At some point I slept, and dreamed badly—the specific kind of bad dream in which one is being watched by something that need not hurry because it knows where one will be. I woke twice, certain of a presence, and found the room empty and the village outside quiet and the moon laying its light across the bedroom floor in a way that was entirely ordinary.

The second time I woke, something kept me at the window. Below, the village street lay in the clear cold light of three in the morning. The pub sign shifted in a light breeze. Nothing moved.

And then: voices. Low, unhurried, coming from somewhere below and to my left—from the shadow under the large oak that stood opposite the pub entrance. A man's voice, and a woman's. The kind of conversation conducted in tones that assume no one else is awake to hear it.

I could not make out the words. The woman's voice came less frequently and was lower; something in its quality pulled at a memory I could not locate. The man's voice was deeper, and had in it a note of authority—or perhaps command. I strained to hear and

caught nothing useful. Somewhere in the valley, a dog was howling.

Then the shadow shifted, and for one moment, from somewhere in the darkness below the oak, I saw green light. Two points of it, low and steady, regarding the inn with the unhurried attention of something that has plenty of time.

I moved back from the window. When I looked again, the shadow under the tree was empty. The voices had stopped.

I closed the curtains and did not sleep again.

In the morning the valley looked entirely benign. Coates brought tea from the breakfast room with the wordless efficiency of a man who has decided that the current situation requires maximum practicality and minimum comment, and I was grateful for both qualities. I ate well enough, exchanged a few words with Pritchard about the walking in the area, and was on the road by nine.

The route to Wraydon Park climbed out of the village through a lane that wound between high hedgerows and then opened onto a track that ran along the edge of a wood. The morning was already warm, with the particular brightness that follows a night of no rain, and the walk would have been genuinely pleasant under circumstances where I was not attentive to every sound behind me.

I had told Coates to remain at the inn. His absence felt noticeable before I had gone half a mile.

The gate lodge, when I found it after some backtracking on the lane, was entirely closed up: windows dark, gate padlocked, a

rusted bell-pull that produced, when I tried it, a discordant clang somewhere deep in the building and then silence. I stood and waited and rang again. Nothing.

The drive beyond the gate disappeared into a dense avenue of firs, and above the tree line the upper section of a tower was visible—old stone, Saxon in character, the kind of thing that monastic builders put up to last and succeeded. Somewhere in there was the house. Somewhere in there, if the intelligence I had been given was accurate, was Lady Aldous Mountfort, or what remained of her circumstances.

I was still studying the tower through the gate bars when the sky darkened quite suddenly, with the speed that belongs to summer storms in enclosed valleys, and the first large drops hit the dusty lane around my feet.

I had gone wrong somewhere on the track. I had meant to find the main approach to Wraydon Park and instead, following what seemed a more promising path through the firs, found myself at the foot of a short run of stone steps leading up to a terrace. The building above was not the one I had been expecting: it was smaller, lower, and more intimate than the descriptions of Wraydon Park had suggested, and it had the settled, self-sufficient quality of a house that has arranged itself to its landscape rather than imposing on it. A light burned in a window to the right of a plain entrance.

The rain was now serious. I went up the steps.

Through the lit window I could see a room lined entirely with books—old ones, in foreign bindings, their spines worn and dark. Between the shelves stood cases of specimens, and on every available surface the flat stillness of Egyptian antiquities: shabtis, canopic jars, the painted lid of what appeared to be a small sarcophagus, and among them, unmistakably, several small green figurines of the kind I had last seen on Harding's evidence table.

At the table in the centre of the room a man sat reading, and he looked up as my shadow crossed the window.

He was very tall—I registered this even as he rose, by the proportions of the room around him. His hair was white and worn long, swept back from a high, angular brow. His face was clean-shaven and striking in the way of faces that have been shaped by intelligence and something harsher: the features were spare and predatory, the nose long, the eyes—dark, very dark, set wide beneath a prominent brow—with an alertness that was almost unsettling in its focused quality. He was perhaps sixty, or appeared so; he might have been older. His skin had the weathered pallor of a man who has spent long years in climates stronger than England's.

The window, I realised, was in fact a French door. He opened it.

"I beg your pardon for appearing like this," I said. "I took a wrong turning in the rain. I had hoped to find Wraydon Park."

He looked at me with those dark, concentrated eyes for a moment.

"You have not entirely missed it," he said. His voice was high and precise, with a clipped formality and an accent I could not quite place—educated English laid over something older, or further travelled. "This is the Bell House, part of the Wraydon Park estate. Please come in out of the rain. You are Mr. Halliday."

It was not a question.

I stepped inside, recalibrating several things simultaneously.

"You know my name," I said.

"I know a good deal about most people who come to Upper Crossleys with professional purposes. It is a small community and I have been here some years." He gestured towards a chair with the precise courtesy of a man to whom such gestures do not come naturally. "Dr. Lucian Sarn. I am Lady Mountfort's physician. I manage the household in her absence of active capacity."

He returned to his own chair. On the table beside his book sat a cold cup of tea and three or four volumes open at different pages. The walls of specimens closed around us. Thunder moved distantly over the hills.

"I had hoped to visit the Park," I said. "I'm writing a piece on the architectural history of the older monastic foundations in this part of the county, and Wraydon Park is the most significant example within twenty miles."

He inclined his head with a gravity that could have been acknowledgment or refusal and was perhaps both.

"Lady Mountfort's health does not permit her to receive visitors. She has been in a state of considerable frailty for some time. I am sure you will understand."

"Of course. Perhaps I might at least see the external fabric—the tower in particular is—"

"I would not recommend it," he said, with a pleasantness that had a very specific quality to it—the pleasantness of a man accustomed to being obeyed and choosing, on this occasion, to phrase it as advice. "The grounds are not maintained. There are hazards."

The rain drummed steadily on the terrace outside. In the silence between us I looked carefully at the room, and at the figurines on the shelves. There were perhaps a dozen of them, varying in size, in the characteristic postures of the Bubastite votives: seated, crouching, standing, all with the cat's head, all in the green-blue enamel of the ancient craft. One of them was considerably larger than the others and wore on its brow a tiny applied disc of gold.

"A remarkable collection," I said.

"I have spent a good many years assembling it." Something shifted in his expression—not warmth exactly, but a quality of private intensity, the look of a man glimpsing something he keeps mostly to himself. "Bubastite votive figures. The cult of Bast. I have a particular scholarly interest."

"As do I, as it happens," I said carefully.

The dark eyes came back to me with a directness that I found it easier to meet than to hold.

"Yes," he said. "I imagined you might."

We sat in the sound of the storm for another few minutes, during which he answered my questions about the general history of the estate with the controlled precision of a man who has decided exactly how much he is prepared to say and is saying it. I learned nothing I did not already know. But I was memorizing the room around me, and the collection on the shelves, and the quality of the man across the table.

When the rain began to ease I made my excuses and he walked me to the French door with his long, deliberate stride.

"Any time that you find yourself in the neighbourhood again," he said, "please do call. I have few visitors."

He said it with complete composure, and I thanked him and went down the steps, and walked back through the dripping firs towards the lane. I did not look back, though I was certain—in the way that requires no evidence but does not require any—that he had not returned to his book.

On the track, back in the open, I stopped and stood for a moment in the cooling air.

His voice. There was something in the quality of it—the precision of it, that particular high note—that I knew from somewhere. Not the man; I was certain I had never met him before. But the voice was not entirely a stranger.

I turned it over all the way back to the village, and did not find it.

But among the objects on his shelves, in addition to the Bubastite figures, I had seen something else. A small green

enamel figurine, standing apart from the others on a lower shelf, its size and style and the particular colour of its patina unmistakably familiar.

It was identical in every particular to the one that had been found in the pocket of Sir Marcus Mountfort's dead body.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE BLACK DOCTOR

I walked back through the firs slowly, turning the figurine over in my memory with the methodical attention I had been trained to bring to things that did not immediately make sense. By the time the lane emerged from the wood into the open valley, I had established two things to my satisfaction.

First: the figurine I had seen on Sarn's shelf was, to the limits of visual identification at eight feet in difficult light, identical in type, period, and condition to the one taken from the pocket of Sir Marcus Mountfort's dead body. Not merely similar—the same source, the same period, the same workshop tradition. Two objects from the same hoard, almost certainly.

Second: Dr. Lucian Sarn had known who I was before I opened my mouth. He had been expecting me, or someone like me, and had prepared his version of the conversation accordingly.

I did not hurry. A man who is being watched, and who knows he is being watched, gains nothing by changing his pace.

Coates was reading in the small lounge of the Abbey Inn when I came in. He looked up once, made a rapid assessment of my face, and returned to his book. I went to my room and wrote a full account of everything I had seen and heard at the Bell House—the collection, the figurine, Sarn's manner, his foreknowledge of my

visit, the quality of his voice—and sent it to Harding's encrypted number by secure message. Then I lay down on the bed and looked at the ceiling and thought about the Mountfort family.

Roger Mountfort, dead at twenty-two. Sir Aldous, dead two years later. Lady Aldous Mountfort, last seen publicly—when? I did not yet know. Sarn had been at the Bell House for seven years or more, managing the estate and the household and apparently the flow of information about both. Two men were dead. One title had changed hands twice. And in London, a third man was facing a murder charge that had been engineered with extraordinary sophistication.

I had a code word I had arranged with Harding for exactly this kind of development. His reply came in eleven minutes: CONFIRMED PROCEED. SHORT LEASH.

Short leash. Good.

There was a pub in the next village—Netherby, a mile and a half along the valley road—that Coates had mentioned seeing on the drive in. I walked there in the early afternoon, partly for the exercise and partly because the Abbey Inn, with Pritchard behind the bar and Hawkins occasionally at his elbow, was not a place where the conversation I needed was likely to happen.

The Threshers was a different kind of pub: older, less maintained, with a car park that held a dozen vehicles at two in the afternoon. The lounge bar had the cheerful noise of a place that functions as a genuine community room, and I spent a few

minutes at the bar being unremarkable before moving to a corner table with my pint and a packet of crisps, and waited.

The man I wanted found me, as I had expected he would. There is a type—older, local, with a long memory and a settled grievance about something specific—who is drawn to strangers with the instinct of a man who has been waiting to tell someone something for longer than is comfortable. He was in his late seventies, lean and rheumy-eyed, with large hands folded around his glass and the unhurried delivery of someone who sees no reason to shorten a story.

"Stopping in Upper Crossleys?" he said, settling into the chair across from me without particular ceremony.

"For a few days. It's a quiet place."

"Quiet." He looked into his glass. "Quiet's one word for it. Been quiet these seven years. Eight, come October."

I said nothing, which was the right answer.

"Wraydon Park," he said.

"I tried to visit this morning. The lodge was closed up."

"Always is. He keeps it that way."

"Dr. Sarn?"

The old man looked at me with a sudden sharpness.

"You've met him."

"Briefly. I got rained in at the Bell House."

A pause that contained a great deal.

"Then you've done better than most," he said. "Most people in this valley go years without laying eyes on the man. Which is how he likes it." He drank. "You know what Agnes Shale—she's gone

now, lived by the old windmill—you know what she said about him, the week he arrived? She said there's something wrong with that man. Not wrong like mad. Wrong like—broken in a way that doesn't show." He set his glass down. "She wasn't wrong."

"What specifically has he done?" I asked. "Beyond keeping the Park closed?"

"Specific." The old man seemed to consider this as a concept. "Well. Sir Aldous dies, Lady Mountfort falls ill, Sarn moves in. That's the sequence, isn't it. And since then—who runs that estate? Who makes every decision? Who decides who gets near the place and who doesn't? Gipsy Hawkins and his wife do what they're told by Sarn, and Sarn does what suits himself. And what suits himself, apparently, is keeping everyone out and Lady Mountfort in."

"Has anyone seen her recently? Lady Mountfort?"

He looked at me steadily.

"Not in over a year. Maybe more. She used to appear at the gate sometimes, in the early days—you'd see her walking the lane. Old woman by then, very thin, very quiet. Stopped after a while. Sarn says she's too frail to go out." He paused. "I'll tell you my view, for what it's worth. If that woman is still alive, she's not well. If she's not alive, Sarn's the only person in this valley who knows it."

The lounge bar continued cheerfully around us. Someone ordered a round. A fruit machine cascaded briefly and subsided.

"What about the family?" I said. "The Mountfort nephew—Sir Marcus, now deceased—did he ever visit?"

"Once. Three or four years back. Sarn sent him away. Said Lady Mountfort was too unwell to see anyone."

"And Sir Eric? The current title holder?"

The old man shook his head.

"Never, to my knowledge. Though—" He paused. "Sarn has a man staying with him. Has had for years. Comes and goes to the village sometimes, says nothing to anyone. Pritchard at the inn won't have him in the bar—had words about it once, apparently." He glanced at me. "I don't know much about the fellow. Sarn says he's an associate, a research assistant of some kind. Doesn't speak to people. Whether that's choice or incapacity I couldn't tell you."

"What does he look like?"

"Large man. Very dark. Foreign, I'd say, though where from I don't know. Quiet in a way that makes you uneasy without you being able to say why." He finished his pint. "Agnes Shale had opinions about him too, but Agnes had opinions about most things, and I'm cautious about passing them on since she's not here to qualify them."

I bought the old man another pint, asked a few more questions of limited specific use, and walked back to Upper Crossleys in the long light of the afternoon.

The picture that was assembling itself was not comfortable.

Sarn had arrived in this valley seven years ago, presenting himself as a physician and a scholar, and had proceeded to make himself the effective administrator of a dying estate. He had

positioned himself between Lady Mountfort and the world, with a gamekeeper for enforcement and a silent associate for whatever other purposes required silence. Two members of the family ahead of Sir Marcus in the inheritance chain had died. Lady Mountfort had not been seen publicly in over a year. And in London, the scheme that had killed Sir Marcus—killing him and simultaneously framing his cousin—had been conducted by a woman's voice, remotely, with the patient precision of a long-considered plan.

The same woman, I was increasingly certain, who had stood in my darkened study while her eyes burned green in the blackness. The same woman who had left high-heeled shoe prints in the loam of my garden and the flowerbed below my window. The same woman who had met Edward Hines on the lane outside the village and given him a cat-headed figurine as a gift.

And the figurine on Sarn's shelf that had no business being there unless Sarn and this woman were connected in a way that went far beyond doctor and patient, far beyond scholar and subject.

I sent another message to Harding before I reached the Abbey Inn. Brief, factual, as clear as I could make it.

His reply was four words: BE VERY CAREFUL NOW.

That evening I glanced into the bar before going up. Hawkins was there, at his usual stool. Beside him sat a man I had not seen before: very large, very still, with a glass of water in front of him that he had not touched. He had the quality of absolute physical self-possession that one associates either with

exceptional athletes or with people whose alertness is professional. He did not look up as I passed the doorway.

I went to my room and locked the door, which I had not previously done, and lay awake for a considerable time listening to the ordinary sounds of the village settling into its ordinary night.

The dogs did not howl. For reasons I could not have precisely articulated, I found this less reassuring than the reverse would have been.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I RECEIVE VISITORS

I had finished my breakfast and was considering the morning's options when Pritchard appeared at the door of the dining room.

"Lady to see you, Mr. Halliday. In the lounge."

He said it without particular inflection, which from Pritchard was the equivalent of a raised eyebrow.

I was not expecting anyone. I folded my napkin, took my coffee, and went through.

The lounge of the Abbey Inn was a low-ceilinged room with good light in the mornings and a scattering of chairs that suggested comfort without quite committing to it. She was standing at the window with her back to the door when I came in, and she turned at my step, and I understood Pritchard's tone immediately.

She was tall and dressed in the way that requires thought and conceals it—a dark linen jacket, good quality, worn with ease, and a wide-brimmed hat with a gauze veil that hung to her jawline, so that her face was visible in the muted way of faces seen through light fog. Even so, the eyes were immediately apparent: large, and long in their setting, and of a warm amber colour that was unusual enough to hold one's attention longer than politeness strictly allowed.

She was, I thought, quite extraordinarily beautiful. I noted this and noted that noting it was itself notable, and filed all of it away.

"Mr. Halliday," she said. "I do apologize for calling without warning. I'm afraid there was no way to do otherwise."

Her voice was low and very slightly husky, with a quality of careful enunciation that made every word feel considered. Something in it brushed against a memory I could not locate, as though I had heard the voice before in a different room, in a different context entirely.

"Not at all," I said. "Please—sit down."

We sat opposite each other. She arranged herself in the chair with a fluency of movement that was, in some quality I found difficult to analyze, slightly more graceful than ordinary.

"I'm staying at Wraydon Park," she said. "Lady Mountfort has asked me to come. Dr. Sarn mentioned your visit yesterday—that you had hoped to see the older parts of the house—and Lady Mountfort wanted to let you know that you would be welcome to visit, in spite of her not being well enough to receive in person."

I looked at her.

"Lady Mountfort sent word that I should come to the inn?" I said.

"She is confined to her rooms but she is not without interest in the world. She follows local matters through Dr. Sarn."

Through Dr. Sarn. I noted this also.

"That's very kind. Perhaps this afternoon--"

"Whenever suits you."

A pause. She did not show any inclination to leave, which meant that the stated reason for her visit was either not the only one or not quite accurate. I had no objection to this. Whatever she had actually come to say would be more interesting than the cover story, and in the meantime I was content to wait.

"You know the history of the place well?" I said, gesturing vaguely in the direction of the hill.

Her eyes brightened in a way that seemed involuntary--genuine animation where there had been careful composure.

"Very well," she said. "Better than most. The Mountforts have been in this valley since before the Conquest, you know--there are records of a Covearligh holding land here in the time of Cnut. The monks of Croix-de-Lis were their near neighbors for five centuries, and the family history is largely inseparable from the history of the monastery. When Henry's commissioners came in 1538, a Mountfort was among those who oversaw the dissolution and who subsequently acquired the buildings. It was not one of the more distinguished moments in the family's history."

She spoke about the Mountforts with a fluency and a familiarity that went well beyond the general knowledge of an interested acquaintance. She knew the abbots by name and the Mountforts by character--their quarrels, their alliances, their recurring habit of marrying badly and building well. She knew which tower predated the Norman church it stood beside, and why

the refectory roof had been rebuilt in the seventeenth century, and the particular legal arrangement by which the family had retained the Saxon chapel while the rest of the ecclesiastical buildings fell to decay.

I listened and asked questions and watched her, and the half-hour that passed felt considerably shorter.

At some point during this exchange I became aware of a third person in the room—a man in the armchair near the far wall whom I had registered on entering as a chance visitor with a newspaper, and who had since been so entirely still that he had ceased to register. He was shabbily dressed, with a cap pulled forward, and he appeared to be asleep over his paper. He was not, I thought, asleep.

But my attention was drawn back by something my visitor had said.

"I'm sorry—did you say the chapel has a crypt?"

"A sealed one. The entrance was blocked in the eighteenth century, supposedly for structural reasons, though the family records suggest a different explanation." She tilted her head slightly. "There are things under that hill that have not been disturbed for two hundred years."

She said it in the tone of a person conveying fact, but there was underneath it something else—a quality of personal feeling, proprietary almost, as though the things under the hill were in some sense hers.

Then the sound of a car on the gravel outside.

The change in her was immediate and complete. It was as though a current had been switched—the composed, careful woman was simply gone, replaced by something faster and far less controlled. She gripped the arm of her chair and looked towards the window, and for a moment I saw in her face an expression so raw that I looked away out of instinct.

"Please," she said, very quietly. "There is a door at the back of the room. I have a particular reason for not wishing to be seen here."

I was still deciding whether to be reasonable about this when I heard Pritchard's voice in the entrance hall and, behind it, a higher, more peremptory voice that I recognised.

"The small door," I said. "Behind the bookcase."

She was across the room before I had finished the sentence—that fluid, impossibly economical movement—and gone.

I was standing at the window with my coffee when Dr. Lucian Sarn entered.

He had to lower his head slightly for the doorframe, which the room seemed to register as an insult and recover from slowly. He was wearing a long dark overcoat despite the summer warmth, and his white hair and angular face had in the morning light the quality of a carved thing—precise and without softness. He looked around the room with his hawk's survey, registered me, registered the empty chairs, and settled into a stillness that was more threatening than movement.

"Mr. Halliday," he said. "I understood that my niece was here."

I looked at him for a moment.

"Your niece," I said.

"Precisely. A young woman. Tall, well dressed. Pritchard tells me she came to see you."

"A woman did come to see me, yes. She said she was staying at Wraydon Park and brought a message from Lady Mountfort."

His eyes did not change—they had the quality of absolute steadiness, which in most people indicates composure but in Sarn seemed to indicate something more fundamental, as though the emotional state that produces readable expressions had been removed rather than controlled.

"And you are not aware of where she went?"

"She left about ten minutes ago. I'm afraid I didn't watch the direction."

A silence. He was assessing whether I was lying, and I was reasonably confident he was good at that, so I met his gaze and gave him as little to read as I could.

"I must apologize," he said at last, in the tone of a man apologizing for someone else's behaviour and resenting the necessity. "She has no business making visits of this kind. She is—she is not well. She sometimes acts impulsively."

"She seemed perfectly composed to me."

"I am sure she did." Something moved very briefly in his face. "She is accomplished in that way."

He stood for another moment that he was apparently using to decide something, and then he inclined his head with the stately formality I remembered from the Bell House.

"Good morning, Mr. Halliday. I trust the remainder of your stay will be uneventful."

He left. I heard the car on the gravel, and then the lane, and then nothing.

I looked at the armchair by the far wall. The shabby man with the newspaper was also gone, though I had not heard him leave. His cup of tea sat on the side table, barely touched.

I sat down and thought carefully about several things.

The woman had known I was at the inn before she arrived. She had known things about the Mountfort family that no casual acquaintance could know—the kind of things one knows when the knowledge is not learned but lived. She had been visibly frightened of Sarn in a way that had broken through every layer of control she possessed. And she had moved across the room with a speed and a physical economy that was not remarkable in isolation but that was, in combination with everything else, a specific kind of remarkable.

And her voice. That particular low, husky note in it. That quality of careful enunciation.

I had heard that voice before. Not here, not in daylight, and not from a woman sitting in a chair. I had heard it at my own front door, very late at night, from a woman on my step who had told me she was afraid of green eyes.

The same woman. She had followed me here, or preceded me, and she had reasons I could not yet name.

I sent a short message to Harding, which he answered in six minutes: NOTED. DO NOT PURSUE. WAIT.

Waiting, in the circumstances, was the hardest instruction he had ever given me.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE GOLDEN CAT

Leeways Farm lay half a mile beyond the far edge of the village, down a lane that turned from tarmac to compacted gravel to something closer to an agricultural track. The buildings were well maintained in the practical sense—fences sound, yard clean, machinery stored under cover—and the whole property had the prosperous, unsentimental quality of a working farm run by someone who takes it seriously. I found the entrance through a stone-paved yard and knocked at the main door.

The woman who answered was in her sixties, stout and clear-eyed, with the direct manner of someone who has spent a lifetime making assessments quickly and acting on them. She was, I guessed, Hines's mother.

"I'm sorry to call unannounced," I said. "My name is Halliday. I'm staying at the Abbey Inn. I'm a journalist—but I'm not here professionally, at least not in any sense that involves your son in anything unpleasant. I need to speak with him about a woman he met recently. It's connected to a police investigation in London and it matters rather a lot."

She looked at me for a long moment with an expression that suggested she had heard a great many explanations at this door and had become an accurate judge of them.

"He won't want to see you," she said.

"I expect not. But I think he'll want even less to explain the same things to a detective chief inspector at a formal interview."

Another pause. She stepped back from the door.

"He's up in his room. First on the right. Don't upset him."

The room was the organised disorder of a young man who has opinions about his possessions: sports prints, framed photographs of various women, a good guitar in a stand, two gaming chairs that cost more than the rest of the furniture combined. Edward Hines was sitting in one of them with his back to the door and swung round as I came in, and the expression on his face moved through several distinct states in about a second and a half before settling on something controlled and hostile.

The lacerations on his cheek were ten days old by my estimate—the healing stage where the new skin is pink and tight and the shape of the original injury is still clear. They were deep for fingernail marks: four parallel lines running from cheekbone to jaw, slightly curved in the way of wounds made by something hooked. The bandage at his neck had been changed recently.

"Whatever you're selling," he said, "I'm not buying."

"I'm not selling anything. I'm telling you that the woman who gave you those—" I indicated his face with a brief, unapologetic gesture—"is connected to the death of a man in London, and that if you'd rather discuss it quietly here than in a police interview room, now is the time."

The hostility didn't disappear but it changed quality—from defensive to calculating.

"What man?"

"Sir Marcus Mountfort. You'll have seen it in the news."

He had. I could see it register.

"I don't know anything about that."

"I'm not suggesting you do. I'm asking you to describe the woman to me, and to tell me about the figurine she gave you. That's all."

He looked at me for another moment, then reached past me to push the bedroom door to.

"Sit down," he said.

His account, once the decision to give it was made, was direct and largely without self-pity, which I respected. He had met her on the lane three weeks before—she had stopped him and asked the way to Wraydon Park—and what followed had been, by his account, a mutually agreed arrangement that had seemed entirely straightforward until it was not. He met her twice more over the following two weeks. Each time she was warm, interesting, and notably anxious to be home before dark. He had thought this was about maintaining appearances at the Park and had not questioned it.

"She always wore gloves," he said. "Every time. And a hat, something that shaded her face. I thought it was an affectation. She was—she was the sort of person who could get away with affectations, if you follow me."

"I follow you. And the figurine?"

He pulled open the drawer of a bedside cabinet and set it on the desk between us without ceremony. A small golden figure—a woman's body, a cat's head, the posture of a crouching animal about to rise—in a style I now knew as well as my own face in a mirror. The execution was fine. The gold was genuine.

"She gave you this at the second meeting?"

"At the end of it. Said she wanted me to have something to remember her by. Said it was old. Said it was worth a bit."

"It's worth considerably more than a bit," I said. "This is a Bubastite votive offering—Ancient Egyptian, third century BC at the latest. Genuine gold, not plating. Current auction estimate would be somewhere between three and five thousand pounds."

He looked at it with an expression that moved from surprise to something more complicated.

"Why would she give me that?"

It was, I thought, a very good question. In the original cult, votive offerings were made to Bast as gifts of appeasement or gratitude. I had a theory about why a woman who thought herself to be—or believed herself to be—Bast incarnate might give one to a young man she had singled out. But I kept that theory to myself.

"Tell me about the third meeting," I said.

A pause. He looked at the window.

"It was in the evening. She'd managed to get away later than usual—I'd arranged it that way, to be honest, because she always left so early. We were in the copse at the edge of the Hines

meadow, up past the track. It was getting dark. Not full dark, but the light was going."

He stopped.

"And?" I said.

"She took her gloves off." He said it in the flat tone of someone describing something they have since decided was the first sign. "I'd never seen her hands before. She had—" He paused. "Her nails were not normal. Very long, very—I don't know how to say it. Curved. Like they'd been shaped that way."

I waited.

"Then it got darker. Not gradually—I mean, the light just went, the way it does in a wood. And I looked at her face, and her eyes—"

He stopped again. He was a young man who thought well of himself, and what he was about to say clearly cost him something in self-image.

"Her eyes lit up in the dark like a cat's."

He said it simply and without decoration, like a man giving evidence.

"Not reflected light," he continued. "Not a torch beam or anything like that. They just—they were green. They were bright green and they were looking at me and they weren't human eyes, whatever else she was."

I sat very still.

"I made a noise," he said. "I'm not particularly proud of it. Some kind of surprised sound. And she must have taken it the wrong way, or—"

He touched his face.

"The next thing I knew she had her hands at my face and her mouth at my neck and she was—fast. She was very fast and she was strong and the whole thing was over in about ten seconds. Then she was gone."

The room was quiet. Outside in the yard someone was moving machinery.

"You didn't report it," I said.

"To who? 'A woman attacked me in a wood, officer, and her eyes glowed green'—how does that sound?"

"Honest. But I understand." I looked at the figurine. "I'd like to take this. Not permanently—I'll have it examined and returned to you. For what it's worth, I believe every word you've told me, and none of it is going in the press."

He looked at me for a moment.

"You've seen her," he said. It was not quite a question.

"I've seen her eyes," I said. "That's as much as I can tell you."

He nodded once, the nod of a man exchanging a recognition he'd rather not have, and let me take the figure.

I walked back to Upper Crossleys by a longer route, keeping to the open lanes, turning the interview over in my mind. The gold figurine was in my jacket pocket, wrapped in my handkerchief, and it seemed heavier than it should.

One detail of Hines's account had lodged itself and would not shift: she had been anxious, every time, to leave before

dark. The implications of that were something I needed to think through with the Maspero open in front of me.

Bast, Maspero wrote, had her hours of treacherous perversity—the hours, I now understood, were specific ones. The hours of darkness.

I turned into the lane that ran along the back of the village and was halfway to the Abbey Inn when I became aware of something I had learned, in the past week, to take seriously: the certainty, preceded by no specific sound or sight, that I was not alone on the road behind me.

I did not change my pace. I turned into the inn yard, went up the steps, and was through the door before I allowed myself to look back.

The lane was empty in both directions.

Coates was reading in the lounge. I stood in the doorway until I had my breathing under control, and then went to find Pritchard to ask if there was somewhere I could make a phone call in private.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE SECRET OF WRAYDON PARK

The private call I made from Pritchard's back office was to Harding's secure line, and he answered within two rings, which told me he had been waiting.

I gave him the full account: the Hines interview, the figurine now in my pocket, the eyes in the dark, the attack. Then I told him about the sensation of being followed on the way back.

A silence.

"How certain are you?" he said.

"Certain enough that I came in through the front door without looking back, which is not my natural habit."

"All right. I want you to do something this evening—tonight. But first I need to tell you that my position here has changed, and I need you to trust me on the detail for another twenty-four hours."

"That is an unsatisfying thing to be told in the current circumstances."

"I know. Do you trust me anyway?"

"Yes," I said, without particular pleasure.

"Then go to Wraydon Park tonight. Not tomorrow, not after thinking about it—tonight. Go late, go quietly, and find out whether anyone is actually living in that house. That is the single most important thing I need to know right now."

"And if Sarn's associate is still following me?"

"Take Coates to the lane with the car. If anyone approaches you on the grounds, Coates puts the headlights on and keeps the engine running." A pause. "The other thing: I'm arranging for the

figurine to be collected from you tomorrow morning. Sergeant Naylor. He'll make himself known."

Harding, I had concluded, knew considerably more than he was telling me. This was infuriating and also, on reflection, sensible. I went upstairs to find Coates.

The evening was warm and the valley still, and the walk to the back lane behind Wraydon Park took twenty minutes on a route that avoided the village street. Coates drove separately on the main road and parked at a point I had chosen that morning—a passing place in the lane with a clear line of sight to the wall—and I left him with his engine idling and his phone in his hand.

The wall was old stone, lichen-patched, and lower than it looked from the road: perhaps five feet at this point, with ivy giving adequate footing. I went over cleanly.

Inside was an overgrown kitchen garden—raised beds gone entirely to weed, a glasshouse with half its panes missing—and beyond it the grounds of the park proper opened up: old trees, an untended lawn, and in the distance the dark shape of the house against a sky still faintly luminous in the west.

I moved carefully, keeping to the shadow of the tree line. The lodge at the main gate showed a light through its window, and I gave it a wide berth, coming around through the orchard on the east side. As I passed within twenty yards of the lodge, something made me stop.

Through the lit window I could see two figures—Hawkins and a woman I took to be his wife—moving with the purposeful haste of

people who have been told to be somewhere else by morning. Open suitcases on the table. Cardboard boxes stacked against the wall. The systematic dismantling of a life in a hurry.

I watched for thirty seconds and then moved on.

Sarn was clearing the site. Whatever had been maintained here was being abandoned, and quickly.

The house itself was low and sprawling against the hillside—longer than I had expected, with a medieval wing on the left that included the Saxon tower I had glimpsed from the village, and a later addition running away to the right that was Georgian in its severe, unadorned way and had the look of a building that had not been maintained since the seventies. Weeds had colonised the terracing. Several ground-floor windows were dark behind closed shutters.

I moved along the side of the building, trying each window I passed. All shuttered or locked—until, on the south-facing terrace, a French door gave when I tried the handle. Not forced: simply unlocked, as though it had been that way for years.

I went in.

The room beyond was a long drawing room, entirely empty. Not recently cleared—empty in the way of rooms that have not held furniture for years: the pale squares on the walls where pictures had hung, the dust undisturbed on the floorboards in the particular even depth of rooms that experience no traffic. My

torch moved slowly around the space. A fireplace at one end, the grate cold and clean. A door at the far end, standing open.

I moved through the house for the next thirty minutes.

There were perhaps twelve rooms accessible on the ground floor. Of these, two contained a few items of old furniture covered in dust sheets, and one—a small study at the end of the Georgian wing—had a desk with some papers on it, long dried by mildew into stiff, unreadable rolls. The rest were completely bare. The smell throughout was of cold air and time and nothing else—no cooking, no habitation, no warmth. On the first floor the same: bare rooms, bare boards, one bedroom that still held a bed frame and a wardrobe, both filmed with cobwebs of many seasons.

Wraydon Park had not been lived in for at least a year. Possibly considerably longer.

Lady Aldous Mountfort had not been seen publicly for over a year. Dr. Lucian Sarn had, for that entire period, been informing anyone who came near the gate that she was inside, too frail to receive.

The implication of this was not comfortable to sit with.

I was back on the ground floor, near the front of the house, when I noticed the chapel.

It was visible through a corridor window—a small stone building set into the older wing, roofless now, its walls standing. And beside it, half-concealed by an overgrown yew, a lower structure of newer stone: a family mausoleum, padlocked, a

weathered wreath against the door that might have been placed there last winter or the winter before.

I stood for a moment looking at it through the glass.

Then I made my way back to the French door and let myself out onto the terrace. The grounds were quiet. The light in the lodge had gone out.

I was crossing the lawn towards the kitchen garden when I looked up at the Saxon tower.

A figure stood on the parapet.

He was quite still—a silhouette against the last of the evening light—and he was looking through binoculars at something in the distance. Not at the grounds around him. At something beyond the wall of the estate, in the direction of the village. He was entirely focused on whatever he was watching, and he had the particular quality of stillness of a person engaged in a precise technical task: both hands on the instrument, the posture controlled, the head motionless.

I crossed the rest of the lawn without changing my pace, went over the wall as I had come, and moved quickly through the orchard to where Coates was waiting. I got into the passenger seat and he pulled away without being asked.

We drove in silence for a minute.

"Anything?" said Coates.

"The house is empty," I said. "Has been for a long time. And there's a man on the tower with binoculars pointed at the village."

Another silence.

"At the village," Coates repeated, in the tone of a man who is filing information under a heading he hasn't named yet.

"Yes." I thought about the angle of the figure's gaze, the direction of the binoculars, and the sight line from the top of the Saxon tower across the valley. The Abbey Inn was the tallest building on the upper end of the village street. It stood on a slight rise. Its upper-floor windows would be clearly visible from an elevated position a mile and a half away.

I did not say this to Coates. I sent a message to Harding instead: HOUSE EMPTY. STOP. FIGURE ON TOWER WITH BINOCULARS. STOP. POINTING TOWARD VILLAGE.

His reply came as we pulled into the Abbey Inn car park: GET OUT OF YOUR ROOM. NOW. GO TO COATES' ROOM. LOCK THE DOOR. DO NOT PUT ANY LIGHTS ON IN YOUR OWN ROOM.

I read this twice and looked at Coates.

"Change of plan," I said. "I'll be sleeping in your room tonight."

If Coates found this surprising, which he may have, nothing in his expression confirmed it.

"Very good, sir," he said. "I'll take the chair."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

HARDING'S STORY

Coates took the chair by the window and was apparently asleep within ten minutes, which I have always considered one of his more extraordinary gifts. I sat on the edge of the bed in the

dark and listened to the inn settle into its night sounds and thought about the figure on the tower.

The sight line from the top of the Saxon tower across the valley to the Abbey Inn's upper floor was perhaps a mile and a half. At night, a lit window at that distance would be a fixed and identifiable target. A precision weapon, mechanically aimed and locked—not requiring an operator to be present at the moment of firing—could be triggered remotely, or on a timer, or simply left ready for a lit window to confirm the range.

The more I assembled this, the less I wanted to be anywhere near Halliday's room.

I was still sitting with this when a soft knock came at the door.

Coates was awake and beside the door before I had moved, which was a reminder that his sleep was nothing like as deep as it appeared. I joined him. We stood either side of the door frame in the dark.

"Halliday." A low voice, very close to the door. "It's Harding."

I looked at Coates. He looked at me. I opened the door.

The man who came in quickly and closed the door behind him was, in build and movement, unmistakably Harding. He had removed the cap and was in the process of peeling away the collar that had altered his jawline, and the face that emerged was the one I knew: broad, tanned, alert with something that was not quite controlled urgency.

"The man at the inn," I said. "The one with the newspaper."

"Since yesterday morning," he said. "I'm sorry I couldn't tell you. I needed to know what Sarn would do when you appeared at the Bell House, and I needed him to believe you were operating without police support."

"And what has he done?"

Harding looked at me steadily.

"He's made a decision. I confirmed it from your message about the tower. He's going to use the gun tonight." He glanced at the window. "Has your room been empty since you came up?"

"Yes."

"Good. I need to go in there for thirty seconds. After that, I need both of you in the room above—the one directly overhead—and I need you to stay there regardless of what you hear."

"What are you going to do?"

"Confirm a theory." He met my expression. "I'll explain everything. But I need to do this now."

There are moments in which one chooses, very quickly, between asking further questions and trusting the person in front of you. I had known Harding for three years, across two investigations and one incident that had ended in a way neither of us discussed. I stood back from the door.

"The room above is empty," I said. "The door was unlocked when I checked this afternoon."

Harding nodded once, took a small torch from his jacket, and went out. Coates and I went to the stairs.

We were on the landing above when we heard Harding's quick footfall on the stairs behind us. He was up in seconds, pulling the staircase door closed. In the darkened corridor he put his back to the wall beside me and said, very quietly: "Now we wait."

The inn was entirely silent.

I counted forty seconds.

Then the building moved.

It was not, at first, a sound—it was a concussive physical event, a shock wave that I felt in my chest before I heard it, followed immediately by a detonation that shook the floor under our feet and sent plaster dust sifting from the ceiling. A billow of foul-smelling air pushed under the staircase door. Below, voices—Pritchard, someone else—and the distant sound of breaking glass.

Harding had his back against the wall and his eyes closed, and he appeared to be counting something. Then he opened his eyes and looked at me.

"Gas shell," he said. "Probably a small charge—the burst itself wouldn't have been fatal from that angle, but the payload would have been. Give it ninety seconds to disperse and then we can open windows."

I stared at him.

"The gun on the tower," I said.

"Yes. I found it two nights ago when I went up to the Park myself—before you went. I'd seen it before, actually, on my very first reconnoitre, and I made the mistake of thinking it was an antique left in situ. A small precision howitzer, Eastern

European manufacture, modified. It was mechanically locked onto a fixed bearing—no adjustment possible, no elevation change. I only understood what that meant when your message came through last night, and I saw the bearing again in my head and worked out where it pointed.”

“My window.”

“The upper front room of this inn. Whoever occupied it.” He paused. “The moment I switched on your bedside lamp just now, I gave Sarn—or whoever was on that tower—the confirmation that a target was present. The shot followed within forty-five seconds, which tells me the trigger was manual, not automated. Someone was watching.”

I thought about the figure at the parapet with binoculars, and felt something cold move through me.

“If I had gone to my room tonight—”

“Yes,” said Harding, without embellishment.

A silence. Through the wall came the muffled sounds of Pritchard dealing with the chaos below. An alarm somewhere in the building had started and then stopped, which suggested Coates had found the panel.

“He’s been waiting for the right moment for years,” said Harding. “The gun has been on that platform for at least as long as he’s been in the valley—possibly longer. He had it ranged to this room when Sir Marcus was still alive and Sarn thought he might invite him to Upper Crossleys. Sir Marcus never came, and then the London scheme succeeded instead. But the gun was still there.”

"And he decided to use it on me."

"Because of what you've found. Because of the woman's visits to you—the figurine, the cottage, this inn. Because you are now the most dangerous person within reach." Harding's voice was flat and factual. "He is a man who removes obstacles. You had become one."

We were still on the landing when Coates appeared at the bottom of the stairs.

"Fire, sir," he said to Harding. "Up on the hill."

We went to the window at the end of the corridor and looked out. Above the tree line on the hill, the sky had turned orange.

The Bell House was burning.

It burned with the thoroughness of something that has been set rather than accidental—clean sheets of flame, no hesitation, the kind of fire that has been prepared. As we watched, the roof of the east wing collapsed inward with a sound that reached us a second after the light, and a column of sparks rose into the dark sky and drifted.

Harding's expression was one I had seen only once before, on a man who has just realised that his case has been destroyed.

"Everything he had there," he said. "Every paper, every specimen, every record. He's been planning this exit for years." He was already at his phone. "All units to the Wexbury road—Bell House fire, suspected deliberate, suspect vehicle on the road—yes, now."

He made four more calls in the next ninety seconds, with the systematic urgency of a man closing a net he is fairly sure his quarry has already slipped through. When he finished he stood looking at the fire for a long moment.

"We've lost him," I said.

"Tonight we've lost him," Harding said carefully. "He has resources and he has a head start and he is, as I have said to you before, a man of considerable intellect." He paused. "But the Bell House is burning, which means he has destroyed his base. He no longer has the option of returning. And London is not Upper Crossleys."

He turned from the window.

"We go back in the morning," he said. "There are things in London that I believe he will still need to do."

I looked at the fire on the hill and thought about what things those might be, and about the fact that Sarn had tried to kill me tonight and that the woman who moved like a cat had been somewhere in this valley all along, and that both of them were now loose in the direction of the city I lived in.

Coates materialized beside me with two mugs of tea, as he had a habit of doing at the moments when tea was least expected and most needed.

"Pritchard says he's very sorry about the room, sir," he said. "He thinks the damage may be covered by the inn's insurance, if we'd be willing to make a statement."

I looked at the mug and then at the burning hillside.

"Tell him," I said, "that we would be very willing indeed."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE GREY MIST

We drove back to London through the early morning, the Bell House still sending a thin column of smoke above the tree line as we cleared the valley. Harding was in a separate car with his people; Coates drove and I sat in the back and thought about everything that had happened in Upper Crossleys and about where it was pointing.

Sarn had burned his base and run. That meant he was operating without a fixed position for the first time—exposed, dependent on resources he had prepared in advance, wherever those were. Harding believed he would come to London. I believed the same thing, and I believed the reason was the same reason we were returning: the case was not finished. There was still something here that Sarn needed to complete or protect.

He was also aware, now, that I was alive and that I had Harding beside me. The failure of the gas shell would not have surprised him—a man who plans as carefully as Sarn plans for failure—but it would have told him that the interval between us and him had collapsed. Whatever he intended to do next, he would do quickly.

I arrived at the cottage in the early afternoon to find Coates's methodical hand already at work restoring order. My messages were waiting. Among them: Sir Eric Mountfort had called at half past three, asking to confirm his arrangement to visit that evening at eight. He had something to tell me, his message said, that he should have said a long time ago.

I sat with this for a moment. Then I rang Harding.

"He's going to break his silence," I said.

"Good," said Harding, without surprise. "I'll be with you by seven. Don't see him without me."

What happened next, I can only partially account for, because the construction of it was only apparent after the fact.

At half past six, Coates's phone rang—a call appearing to come from a Met number, a voice identifying itself as one of Harding's team, asking Coates to bring the car to Paddington station to collect an evidence box too large and fragile to move by other means. Coates noted the request, told the caller he would need to clear it with me, and came to find me.

I was writing at my desk. I told him to go—Harding was due at seven, it was thirty minutes each way, it would be fine. Coates accepted this without visible doubt, which was a failure of instinct on both our parts that I have not forgiven myself for since.

At ten to seven, my own phone rang. The number was Harding's—or appeared to be. The voice was a man's, a little unclear, saying that Harding had been delayed at the yard and could I come to the junction at the end of the high street, the spot where the old police box used to stand, and he would be there in five minutes.

I put on my coat, told the empty house I would be back shortly, and went.

Harding was not at the junction.

I waited eight minutes, tried his number—it rang without answer—and started walking back. I was halfway down the lane when I heard a car behind me and stepped aside, and the car stopped and the window came down and Harding looked out.

"What are you doing out here?" he said.

I stared at him.

"You called me. You asked me to come to the junction."

The expression on his face—I had not seen it before. He was out of the car before I finished speaking.

"I made no such call," he said. "Where's Coates?"

"Paddington. Someone called him to—"

But Harding was already running, and I was running beside him.

The front door was on the latch. I had left it that way for Eric.

As it opened, the smell reached us before the sight did—faint, chemical, with something beneath it that the senses recognise before the mind identifies it: the smell of a thing that does not belong indoors, that is heavier than air and has settled along the floor.

Harding caught my arm.

"Don't go in. Windows first."

He went around the side of the cottage at a run and I heard windows being thrown up in rapid sequence—the kitchen, the study, the hallway—and then his voice: "All right. Keep low."

The grey mist was thin by then, dispersing slowly through the opened windows, moving in the particular sinuous way of heavy vapor along the skirting boards and around the legs of furniture. It was the colour of old dishwater and it had a smell that I recognised: the same smell that had been in my room at the Abbey Inn.

We found him in the study.

Eric Mountfort was on the floor beside the desk, one hand still closed around the handset of the cordless phone from the charging dock on the table above him. He was in a light jacket and dark trousers, dressed as someone who has made an effort for a meeting they consider important, and his face had the greenish-grey cast that I had seen once before, in a stone building at Limehouse, on the face of his dead cousin.

I turned away. Harding checked for a pulse, found none, and straightened.

For a moment neither of us spoke. Through the open window came the ordinary sounds of the lane—a car, a dog, someone calling something cheerful to a neighbor—entirely indifferent to the room.

"He came at eight," said Harding, very quietly. "Found the house empty. Tried to reach you on the landline. Picked up the handset."

He was looking at the phone dock on the desk. I followed his gaze.

The charging dock held a handset that was not the one I recognised. Similar—close enough that in a dim room, in a house you were visiting for the first time, you would not question it. But the cable running from it to the wall socket was not the standard flat broadband cable; it was a reinforced tube, and it ran not straight to the wall but in a loop that went across the desk, through the partially open window, and upward—towards the shed roof.

Harding went outside. I heard him on the shed roof. When he came back his face was controlled in the way it gets when he is managing something that deserves anger.

"Gas cylinder," he said. "Small, lightweight, stored in a waterproof bag. The tube runs through the window and into the body of the handset. The weight of picking it up released the seal. The whole charge in approximately four seconds."

He set his phone on the desk and called it in, in the flat clipped language of a man who has made too many of these calls, and I went and stood in the kitchen and looked at the garden until he was done.

"It was meant for me," I said, when he came through.

"Yes. They had been watching the house—someone saw a figure in a light jacket arrive at eight and assumed it was you. They made the call, drew you out, sent Coates away, and waited for the phone to be answered." He paused. "Eric came to clear his name. He saved yours."

The injustice of it was complete and exact and there was nothing to say about it.

"The same device," I said finally. "The same principle as the Red House. The fake handset, the gas, the victim summoned to the phone."

"The identical device," said Harding. "In fact—look."

He turned the fake handset over carefully with a gloved hand. On its underside, a sticker with a phone number. He took out his own phone and showed me the screen: the number belonged to the former occupant of the Red House.

"He used the same device twice," said Harding. "Once at the Red House for Sir Marcus. Once here, for you. He recovered it from the Red House before we could find it, and brought it with him to London."

Sarn had been in this house. In this room. Had handled these things, had planned this with the same careful patience he brought to everything.

I sat down in the kitchen chair and stayed there until the first officers arrived and the cottage stopped being mine for a while and became, instead, a crime scene.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE INEVITABLE

Telling Isobel was the worst thing I had done in a long time, and I had been doing difficult things for several days.

She was at Mrs. Sefton's house—the small, scrupulously neat terrace on the northern outskirts where her aunt had lived for thirty years and where Isobel had gone when London felt too large. I had telephoned ahead, which was the only mercy I could offer. By the time I arrived she already knew the shape of it,

and when I came in she was sitting very still in the small front room with the tea that Mrs. Sefton had made untouched in front of her.

We sat together for a long time without speaking. There are circumstances in which speech is a kind of impertinence, and this was one of them. Eventually I told her what I knew of the manner of it, quietly and without the details that served no purpose, and she listened without asking me to stop.

When I had finished she said: "He was going to tell you everything that night."

"Yes."

"He had finally decided to speak."

"Yes."

She looked at the untouched tea. I had not been in a position to say, and was not now in a position to say, that the silence Eric Mountfort had maintained for weeks had led directly to the circumstances of his death—that if he had spoken honestly on the first day, none of what followed would have had the shape it had. Some truths are accurate and serve no purpose, and this was one of those.

Harding arrived at half past nine. He came in with the particular quietness he brought to the parts of his work that were not investigation, and sat across from Isobel with a directness that was, in its way, a form of respect—no softening, no performance of sympathy, simply the presence of a man who took seriously what had happened.

"Miss Lytton," he said. "Eric Mountfort left a document in your care. I need to ask you to read it to us now."

She had it ready. She had taken it from her bureau when she heard I was coming, she said, and had been sitting with it for two hours without opening it. She tore the envelope carefully and unfolded three pages of handwriting.

She read it aloud in the level voice of someone who has decided that composure is the only thing she can offer the words.

Eric Mountfort had received an anonymous call on the afternoon of the murder. A woman's voice—withheld number. The caller told him that Isobel was meeting Sir Marcus that evening at an address he would be given, and that if he doubted it he should watch.

He doubted it. He went anyway.

He purchased, at a charity shop some distance from his flat, a dark hoodie, tracksuit trousers, trainers, and a red woollen scarf. He paid cash. He left his flat by the rear service door at nine o'clock and walked the length of the city to College Road, arriving at the Red House shortly before ten.

The house was dark and apparently empty. He settled in the shadow of the trees on the opposite side of the road and waited.

At approximately ten-thirty he saw a private hire car pull up, saw Sir Marcus pay the driver and walk up the drive alone. Isobel was not in the car. Isobel did not follow. Eric waited outside the Red House for over an hour in the dark, watching a

house with no lights, hearing nothing, understanding nothing. Then he walked away.

He knew nothing of the murder until the following morning.

He said nothing because he understood immediately, on learning of the death, that his presence on the road that night, dressed as he had been, would be construed in exactly one way. He had been in the area. He had disguised himself. He had then attempted to dispose of the clothes. Every instinct told him that the truth would not be believed, and every action he had taken since the night of the murder had made the truth harder to tell. He had been, he wrote, a fool. He was sorry.

He had prepared the document as a last resort—a sealed, signed account to be released only in the event of the worst. He had not expected, when he sealed it, that the worst would arrive so quickly or in such a form.

Isobel set the pages down. Mrs. Sefton, who had come in during the reading and stood in the doorway with a face that had moved through several expressions and settled on grief, came forward and took her hand.

Harding waited a moment and then said, very quietly: "He was an innocent man, Miss Lytton. That is now established beyond any question."

Isobel nodded. She looked at the pages for a moment.

"He was frightened," she said. "He was not brave. But he was innocent."

"Yes," said Harding.

I said nothing. There was a particular quality of silence in the room that belonged to the dead and it seemed right to leave it intact.

I left Isobel in Mrs. Sefton's capable hands and went back to the cottage with Harding. The crime scene team had finished; the cottage was mine again in a technical sense, though it would be some time before it felt that way. We sat in the kitchen—not the study, not yet—with the windows open to the cold clean air of the autumn night.

We had been sitting perhaps an hour, going through everything we knew and the shape it made, when a message arrived from Isobel. Brief, typed: a small parcel had been delivered to Mrs. Sefton's house that afternoon, she wrote. No return address. Inside was a green enamel figurine of a cat-headed woman, wrapped in tissue paper. No note.

Harding read it and his expression did not change, which was itself an expression.

"She is still out there," I said.

"Yes. And she knows where Isobel is." He set down his phone. "This is the one stolen from your desk. She has returned it to the person whose photograph was on the mantelpiece at the Red House—the person the whole scheme was designed to destroy." He paused. "Whether that is a threat or something else, I cannot say. But I am going to put a car outside that house tonight."

He made the call. I refilled my glass and looked at the garden through the dark window, and thought about a woman who

left cat-prints in garden beds and amber eyes in the daylight and green eyes in the dark, and who had just sent the evidence of her first crime back to the woman she had chosen as her enemy.

We had been sitting in silence for several minutes when Coates appeared in the kitchen doorway.

His expression, as always, gave nothing away. But there was something in the quality of his announcement that made both Harding and me put down our glasses simultaneously.

"Dr. Lucian Sarn," said Coates, "to see Mr. Halliday."

A silence of perhaps three seconds, which was long for the circumstances.

Then Harding stood up, and straightened his jacket, and looked at me.

"Show him in, Coates," I said.

He entered the kitchen doorway and had to lower his head for it, which the kitchen seemed to absorb without comment. He was not, I thought, a well man. The angular hawk face was drawn and the white hair slightly disordered, and he moved with the careful deliberation of someone managing a body that has recently announced its limits. But his eyes—dark, concentrated, hawk-sharp—were exactly as I remembered them.

Harding spoke first.

"Dr. Lucian Sarn, I am arresting you on suspicion of murder. You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence."

Sarn inclined his head with the stately gravity I had first seen in the Bell House library.

"Detective Chief Inspector Harding," he said, in that high, precise voice. "I had anticipated no less. I should tell you that I have not come here tonight to resist or to evade. I have come to make a full statement. I am aware that my remaining time is limited by circumstances you will shortly understand, and I would prefer that statement to be made before that time runs out."

He looked at us both with the expression of a man who is conferring a service.

"I will not be interrupted," he continued. "I say this not as a condition of my cooperation but as a practical matter. What I have to tell you is complex and will take some time. I would be grateful for a chair."

Harding pulled out the kitchen chair. Sarn sat.

He closed his eyes for a moment, and in that brief interval he looked merely old and tired and ill, and then he opened them again and they were everything they had been.

"Gentlemen," he said. "I should like to begin in Cairo."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

STATEMENT OF DR. LUCIAN SARN

He took out his watch—an old one, gold, with a hunter case—and consulted it with the deliberateness of a man for whom the gesture has meaning.

“I have perhaps an hour,” he said. “Possibly less. I will therefore not waste either of our time on preamble.”

Harding said: "You told us your remaining time is limited by circumstances we will shortly understand. Explain that now."

"Shortly before I came here tonight," said Sarn, "I received a subcutaneous injection of a compound I have myself spent some years developing. It produces death within two to three hours, leaving no trace that current toxicology will identify. The injection was administered by the person to whom this statement principally concerns. She has never lacked the courage of her convictions."

He looked at us both with that hawk gaze, inviting neither sympathy nor objection.

"You have been poisoned," said Harding flatly.

"I have been poisoned," agreed Sarn. "It is, in a certain light, an appropriate conclusion. I created the compound. I used it on others. Now it is being used on me." He folded his hands in his lap. "I am not telling you this to elicit assistance. I am telling you because it explains the limited time available and because it will save Detective Chief Inspector Harding the effort of wondering why I am here rather than running."

I looked at Harding. He looked at me. He picked up his phone and called for an ambulance in a voice that did not change timbre. Sarn watched this with the expression of a man observing a courtesy he considers unnecessary.

"I would prefer not to be interrupted again until I have finished," he said, when Harding had ended the call. "What I have to tell you will not survive abbreviation."

He began in Cairo. The year was 2004.

He spoke about himself first, with the brevity of a man who has thought carefully about what is relevant. He was British and South Asian by heritage, both in exactly equal measure, educated in London and subsequently in Paris and Zurich, with doctorates in medicine and in the biological sciences. He had returned to Britain expecting a career in academic research and had found, instead, the particular form of obstruction that does not announce itself—the committee that does not quite get around to approving one's application, the grant that is always almost awarded, the senior colleagues who are consistently, warmly, unhelpfully discouraging.

"I do not say this as complaint," he said, in the tone of a man to whom complaint would be beneath dignity. "I say it as context. I had private means. I had the time and the inclination to work independently. And I had, by my late thirties, a hypothesis that no established institution would have sanctioned in any case."

He had spent two decades traveling—Abyssinia, Syria, the remoter provinces of western China—gathering evidence for what he called the Lucian Sarn Law. His voice carried, when he spoke about this, something close to pride.

The law, as he described it, proposed that certain rare anomalous characteristics in a child—characteristics that suggest the nature of an animal rather than a human being—arise not from any biological encounter between species, which is an impossibility, but from a process occurring in the mother's mind

at a critical moment. The mother's mental state, the object of her terror or fixation, impresses itself on the developing child through mechanisms that conventional science had not yet begun to understand. The ancient world had known it, he said. The myths of the were-wolf, the jackal-man, the cat-woman: not superstition but garbled memory of a genuine phenomenon.

He had found his evidence in remote communities where such births had been recorded across generations, and had documented them with the exhaustive thoroughness of a man who knows he will never be believed and intends to be irrefutable.

"I was building towards publication," he said. "Towards the establishment of a fact that would have placed my name alongside those who have permanently altered the understanding of life. And then I came to Cairo."

Sir Aldous Mountfort and his wife had arrived in Egypt in early 2004, newly appointed to a government advisory post. En route from Port Said to Cairo their train was delayed by a line failure and they were obliged to stop overnight at Zagazig.

Sarn paused.

"You know the name," he said, looking at me.

"Tell Basta," I said. "The site of ancient Bubastis."

"Precisely. I had spent time there some years before, researching a local tradition that during a particular period of the summer—corresponding approximately to the old Sothic month once sacred to Bast, the titular goddess of the place—unusual births were recorded in the town at a rate statistically above

the ordinary. I had found what I sought there, or the beginning of it. And I had been told by a local scholar that the tradition attached specifically to a certain date."

He consulted his watch again.

"Lady Mountfort was shown to a room in the one available hotel. During the night, a large cat—the town has always had a remarkable density of semi-wild cats—entered the room through an open window. Lady Mountfort woke to find the creature at her bedside. By her own later account, it was an unusually large specimen, and its appearance in the dark was not that of an ordinary domestic animal."

He said this without expression.

"She was pregnant," he continued. "And she was alone. And it was the night of the Sothic date. And whatever it was that stood at her bedside, the encounter left a mark on her that no subsequent reassurance was able to remove."

In Cairo, he explained, the usual European physicians were unavailable. Sarn was called to the Mountfort residence some weeks later, when Lady Mountfort's condition had deteriorated. He had known, he said, from the moment the name of Zagazig was mentioned, what he might be about to encounter. He had prepared accordingly.

"I will not describe the details of the birth," he said. "They are in my notes, which are destroyed. I will say only that the child confirmed, beyond any reasonable scientific doubt, the central proposition of the Lucian Sarn Law. She was the most

perfect and complete example of a psycho-hybrid that I had, or believe any researcher has, encountered."

The child was not seen by Lady Mountfort, who was told she had not survived. Sir Aldous saw her briefly and accepted without question that the birth announcement would appear in the appropriate column of the appropriate paper. The old family nurse who had accompanied them from England was given a false account.

"And you kept her," said Harding.

Sarn met his gaze.

"I kept her. I had raised no monster. I had found the living proof of a lifetime's work."

Her name was Lamia. He had given her the name from his knowledge of older traditions—it carried meaning he considered appropriate and declined to explain.

For the first eleven years of her life they had been in Cairo. He described those years as the most scientifically productive of his existence, and described Lamia's development with the precise enthusiasm of a man cataloguing a remarkable specimen. For most of the year she was, he said, almost entirely a normal child—exceptionally beautiful, exceptionally intelligent, quick and graceful and fierce in the way of children who have been raised to consider themselves extraordinary.

But during a period of approximately four to six weeks in the summer—corresponding to the ancient Sothic month—she was not quite that.

Her eyes, which by day were amber, changed after dark. The change was not metaphorical. In darkness, they produced their own luminescence: a cold green that was not reflected light but generated light, steady and unblinking and profoundly unsettling to anyone who encountered it without warning.

Her agility during these periods became extraordinary—she would climb the Bell House walls bare-handed, scaling surfaces that offered no visible purchase, with the unhurried confidence of a cat ascending a tree. She could move through dark spaces with an accuracy that required no light. Her nails, which she habitually wore covered by gloves, thickened and curved at the tips in a manner that was not cosmetic.

And she was, during these weeks, someone rather different from her usual self. More volatile. More predatory in her attentions. Drawn to admiration in a way that became, at its extremes, something closer to need. Dogs, universally, refused to settle in her vicinity. Their howling, when she passed through a neighbourhood, was a reliable signal to Sarn of her nocturnal movements.

"I should note," he said, "that she has also, throughout her adult life, shown the pulmonary susceptibility characteristic of all such cases in my documentation. She will not live long. A year, perhaps two. The condition will take her before any other agency has the opportunity."

He said it with a clinical dispassion that was, in the circumstances, the most terrible thing I had heard him say.

She had, by the time she was twelve, learned the circumstances of her birth. He did not say how—he had forbidden her nurse to speak of it, and the nurse had apparently complied until she did not. After that, Lamia's understanding of herself had taken a direction that Sarn described as intellectually coherent if practically inconvenient.

She believed she was Bast. Not a descendant of Bast, not a reflection of Bast—Bast, the cat-headed goddess, incarnate in a human body during all but four to six weeks of every year, when the original nature reasserted itself. She pursued this belief with the systematic rigor of a person who is not, in the ordinary sense, deluded—she did not confuse her life with fantasy—but who has organised everything around a single organising proposition and has found, to her satisfaction, that the proposition explains all observed data.

She was also, he said, a Mountfort. And she knew it.

The inheritance—the title, the estate, the belonging to an old English family—had become an obsession of a kind that Sarn found, when he was being honest with himself, perfectly understandable. She had been denied everything by her birth. She wanted it back.

The move to England had been Lamia's demand and Sarn's capitulation. He presented it as a scientific decision—a new environment, new opportunities for observation—but he spoke about it with a candor that suggested he knew, had always known, that he had simply been unable to say no to her.

He had confronted Sir Aldous Mountfort at Wraydon Park within a month of settling at the Bell House. He described the encounter with a cold precision that I found difficult to listen to: the implication of what Sarn knew, the threatened disclosure, Sir Aldous's comprehensive collapse. The financial arrangements that followed were made without lawyers, at Sarn's specification. The Bell House was his. His expenses were met.

"And then Roger Mountfort," said Harding.

A pause.

"And then Roger Mountfort," said Sarn.

He described the poison concisely. He had developed it from a compound he had encountered in northern Sichuan, and had spent several years refining it in his laboratory at the Bell House. Its mechanism was dermal absorption: applied to fabric, it transferred through the skin, produced progressive cardiac disruption that mimicked natural failure, and left no compound detectable by standard forensic toxicology. He had given the contaminated article to Roger Mountfort's tutor in Basle, with instructions he had not made explicit. The tutor, he said, had believed he was participating in something medical.

"Roger Mountfort died in Basel five years ago," said Harding. "The certificate records cardiac failure."

"It would," said Sarn.

Sir Aldous had suspected the truth and had been powerless to act upon his suspicion for reasons Sarn did not elaborate. He had declined, then deteriorated, then died. Lady Mountfort had followed, more slowly, in a mental illness from which she never

recovered. She had died, quietly, in her rooms at Wraydon Park, and Sarn and his associate—he said only “associate”; he did not use a name—had buried her in the family mausoleum at night.

He had continued to maintain the fiction of her existence for a further eighteen months, through Hawkins and through occasional glimpsed figures at a distance, until the scheme could be concluded.

The scheme against Sir Marcus and Eric Mountfort was, he said without a flicker of false modesty, Lamia’s conception. He had provided the technical means. She had provided the design.

“She had observed Sir Marcus’s pursuit of Miss Lytton,” he said. “And she had observed Mr. Mountfort’s jealousy of that pursuit. She perceived that if Sir Marcus could be killed at a location apparently connected to Miss Lytton, and if Mr. Mountfort’s presence in the vicinity on the night of the death could be established, both would be destroyed simultaneously—one by death, one by the law. It had an elegance that I was unable to deny.”

He spoke of the RedHouse arrangements with the same academic detachment he had used for everything else: the letting by email, the cash, the gas device, Marie’s bribery, the photograph of Isobel placed on the mantelpiece. The woman’s voice that had conducted everything was Lamia’s voice. He had arranged the technical elements. She had arranged the human ones.

He paused here and looked at his watch, and this time the pause was different—longer, and for a moment the controlled expression flickered.

"The howitzer on the tower of Wraydon Park," said Harding.

"A precision piece," said Sarn. "I acquired it some years ago from a specialist dealer. I had developed the gas—I called it LK Vapor—during a period when I believed I might sell the formula to a government. I did not. But I retained the weapon. I had it installed on the tower platform when Sir Marcus was first expected in the valley. He never came, as you know. When you came instead—" He looked at me. "Lamia's interest in you had become a risk I could not afford. I decided to resolve it."

"You tried to kill me three times," I said.

"Three times," he agreed. "I regret the failure of each attempt rather less than you might expect me to."

He was quiet for a moment. His breathing, I noticed, had become slightly more effortful. When he spoke again his voice was lower.

"I had always known this conclusion was possible," he said. "I created a compound that kills without trace. I used it to kill Roger Mountfort. I developed LK Vapor and used it to kill Sir Marcus Mountfort. I attempted to use it to kill you. Lamia is not the first person to draw the obvious conclusion."

He looked at his hands.

"She came to me before I left tonight. She was angry—she has been angry since the Bell House burned, since everything that was

ours was destroyed. She said that I had failed her and that she would not be failed again."

A silence. He appeared to be thinking about something that was not in the room with us.

"I think," he said at last, "that she was also saying goodbye. She has a quality of—I have never found the right word for it. It is not affection. It is more complex than affection. She is, in every sense that matters, my creation. And she knows it. And she is also—"

He stopped. Whatever the end of that sentence was, he had decided against it.

"She is free now," he said instead. "The Bell House is gone. The estate is finished. She is not bound to anything. She will be—" He paused. "She will be what she has always been. I can only tell you that she will not be well for long."

He reached into his coat pocket and produced a sealed envelope, which he set on the table between us.

"A written supplement," he said, "for whatever use it may be. The locations of the burials at Wraydon Park. The composition of the poison, in sufficient detail for your toxicologists. The technical specifications of the weapon. I have also noted, for the record, that my associate perished in the fire at the Bell House. He set it at my instruction. He understood the instructions. He died doing what I asked of him, which is more than most people achieve."

He said this without sentiment, which was perhaps the only honest way to say it.

The spasm, when it came, was violent and swift—a seizing of the whole body that lasted perhaps ten seconds. He gripped the arms of the chair and rode it, and when it passed his face was grey and the sweat stood on his brow in bright points.

“Detective Chief Inspector Harding,” he said, when he could speak again. The voice had lost some of its precision but none of its intent. “I did not come here to ask for mercy and I am not asking for it now. I came because the record should exist. Because the Lucian Sarn Law is real—Lamia is its proof—and because whoever reads this account will at least understand what she is.”

He looked at me.

“You have seen her,” he said. “Not as Hines saw her, or as those other unfortunate young men saw her. You have seen her as something more than that.”

I thought of the eyes at my cottage window. The amber gaze across the lounge of the Abbey Inn. The face I had never quite been able to focus on, always slightly turned, always half-veiled.

“I have,” I said.

“Then you will understand,” he said, “that she is extraordinary. Whatever she has done—whatever I have done—she is the most extraordinary thing I have encountered in sixty years of looking at the world. I am not sorry for what I built. I am only sorry that it was built at such a cost.”

He rose to his full height—a considerable height, and he held it for a moment—and then he sat back down again, heavily, in a way that had nothing of his usual deliberateness.

The ambulance was in the lane. I heard it.

Harding was already at the door. I stayed where I was and looked at Dr. Lucian Sarn, who had closed his eyes and was breathing with the careful concentration of someone using a skill they have practiced in advance.

He did not open them again.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE CLAWS OF THE CAT

The ambulance crew worked for eleven minutes before calling it. Sarn had been prepared, and there was nothing to prepare against. Harding and I stood in the kitchen and listened to the professional sounds from the hallway, and when the crew came through to speak to us their manner confirmed what I had already known from the moment Sarn's eyes closed.

The sealed envelope was in Harding's possession. He had opened it while the crew worked, and had read its contents in silence. He said nothing about them directly—a courtesy to the dead, or perhaps to the ongoing investigation. Later I would learn that the envelope contained precise directions to the family mausoleum at Wraydon Park, where Lady Aldous Mountfort lay beside her husband, and the full technical formula for the compound that had killed Roger Mountfort.

We were still in the kitchen when my phone rang.

Isobel.

I knew from the first syllable that something was wrong—not from fear in her voice, but from the particular quality of control she was using to keep fear out of it.

"The dogs," she said. "All of them, Jack—the whole street. And something just scratched at the upstairs window."

I was on my feet.

"Which window?"

"The spare bedroom. Third floor."

Third floor. The house was tall and narrow and old, and the third-floor windows were above the reach of any standard ladder. I looked at Harding, who was already reading my face.

"Lock the bedroom door," I said. "The room you're in right now—lock it and don't open it for anyone until you hear my voice. Is there anyone else in the house?"

"Aunt Alison was called to identify someone at a hospital—a patient who had asked for her. Marie went with her."

The same pattern. The same methodical emptying of the house.

"Where is the police car?" I said to Harding.

He was already on the phone. A brief exchange, and his expression told me everything.

"A disturbance two streets away. They've been gone eight minutes."

We ran.

Harding drove and I held the phone to my ear and talked to Isobel—not because there was anything useful to say but because the alternative was silence, and silence in that house was not something I was prepared to leave her in. She spoke back in level, careful sentences, the way she had read Eric's statement: composure as a discipline, not a condition.

Then the call died.

Not a lost signal—a lost signal has a particular soft failure. This was cut, clean and immediate.

"Faster," I said to Harding.

He did not reply. The car went faster.

The street was quiet when we arrived. The police car was still absent. Mrs. Sefton's house stood with its ground-floor lights on and its upper floors dark, behind the brick wall and the iron gate that Isobel had described to me as pleasingly old-fashioned and which now looked merely inadequate.

We rang the bell. No answer.

We rang again. Then Harding pointed upward.

At the first-floor window—the sitting room where Isobel had been—a silhouette moved against the faint ambient light. Isobel, trying to push the curtain aside and look out. And then a second shape, longer and faster, reaching from behind her, and she was pulled away from the glass before I had time to count to two.

The sound that reached us was muffled, and I will not describe it further.

“The tree,” said Harding.

I had already seen it—an old elm, one branch reaching past a second-floor window whose glass was gone, the frame gaping. She had come in that way. The branch was thick and close and the distance was achievable if you did not allow yourself to think about it.

I do not climb trees as a matter of habit. I climbed this one.

Harding followed, catching the sill as I went through the window, and we ran along the upper corridor and took the stairs at a pace that would have alarmed me under any other circumstance, and hit the sitting-room door together.

It opened.

Isobel was on the settee in the window bay, pressed back against the cushions, one arm raised. Standing over her, with her back to us, was a tall dark-clad figure whose hands were at Isobel’s throat with a focused deliberateness that was, in its way, even more frightening than rage would have been.

She did not look back. She did not startle or flinch at the sound of the door. She moved—in the way I had seen before, in the dark of my study, in the lounge of the Abbey Inn, in the garden prints outside my window—with a speed and economy that was simply not ordinary. In one motion she released Isobel, crossed the room, took the window sash, and went through it.

I was at the window in four steps. Three floors below, the garden path ran pale in the lamplight from the street. Nothing moved on it. I looked in both directions along the wall and saw nothing. The drop was thirty feet onto stone and there was no sound of landing, none at all, and no figure anywhere in the garden or the street beyond.

Harding blew his whistle from the window above me, and I heard voices from the street and running feet. I went back to Isobel.

She had not been seriously hurt. The local doctor who came confirmed this with a thoroughness I was grateful for, and Mrs. Sefton, who had arrived back from the hospital—the call, as we now knew, having been false—was brisk and furious in the way of small, neat women confronted with an outrage in their home. She made tea and made clear to Harding that she considered the whole episode a failure of institutional protection, and she was not wrong.

Isobel sat in the chair by the fire with a bruise forming at her throat and held her aunt's hand, and when she looked at me across the room her expression was one I recognised: the look of

someone who has been genuinely frightened and is choosing, with conscious effort, not to remain so.

"Did you see her face?" I asked, when the doctor had gone.

She shook her head.

"She was behind me the whole time. I heard her—I heard something on the stairs—and then she was just there."

I nodded. I had not seen her face either. In all the encounters, across all the weeks of this, I had never quite seen her face.

The search that Harding set in motion that night was comprehensive by any standard I could measure. It did not find her.

By morning, every point of departure from the city—rail, road, air, sea—had been covered. Her description had been circulated to every force in England. Harding had officers on the streets within a mile of Mrs. Sefton's house within twenty minutes of the attack. They found nothing. No trace, no witness, no footprint. The garden wall showed marks consistent with someone having gone over it, and that was all.

She was simply gone.

In the weeks that followed I saw Harding several times, and we spoke about the case with the particular quality of conversation that belongs to things that are not concluded and will not be. Eric Mountfort was formally cleared: the inquest recorded that he had died as a result of a criminal act, not his

own, and the circumstances of his presence at the Red House on the night of Sir Marcus's death were entered into the record and vindicated him completely. It was, as vindications go, as hollow as the kind that comes too late always is.

Roger Mountfort's death in Basel was re-examined. The Swiss authorities reopened the file. What they would ultimately establish was a matter for other people and a longer time than I had.

Lady Aldous Mountfort was found in the family mausoleum at Wraydon Park, exactly where Sarn's note had indicated. She had been there for nearly two years. The cause of her death was, after some considerable forensic work, established as natural: the illness Sarn had described. She had simply declined, as Sarn had said, and he had buried her quietly and maintained a fiction, and the fiction had served his purposes until it hadn't.

Hawkins and his wife were interviewed at length. They had genuinely believed Lady Mountfort was alive but too unwell to be seen. Whether this belief had been entirely without doubt was a question Harding said he could not answer and would probably never be able to.

One evening, some time after all of this, Harding came to the cottage. We sat in the kitchen—I had not returned to the study as a regular habit—and he said, without particular introduction: "I have read Sarn's statement three times. I am not certain what I believe about its more extraordinary claims."

"About Lamia," I said.

"About the nature of the woman. The eyes, the agility, the—the rest of it. I have not seen these things myself. I have seen the effects of them, and the testimony of people I consider reliable. But the explanation that Sarn provides—" He paused. "A man who believed what he believed, who organised his entire life around a theory that the establishment rejected—such a man might find the evidence he was looking for, whether or not it was there."

"You think she was an ordinary woman," I said. "Dangerous and unusual, but ordinary."

"I think," said Harding carefully, "that I prefer not to commit myself. She has not been found. She may not be found. In which case the question becomes, in a practical sense, academic."

He swirled his glass and looked at it.

"Sarn said she has perhaps a year. The condition he described is not conjectural—tuberculosis is documentable. If he was right about that, she will not require finding."

I thought about this for a long time after he left. I thought about what I had seen: the eyes in my garden, the eyes in my study, the amber gaze in the Abbey Inn lounge and the knowledge—not inference, not guesswork—that those eyes and these eyes were the same eyes. I thought about footprints that cleared six-foot hedges without breaking a branch and about the thirty-foot drop onto stone from which no landing sound had come.

I was unable to adopt Harding's position. I had been too close.

I do not know where Lamia is now. I do not know if she is alive. Harding's people have occasional reports—a woman matching elements of her description, seen in various places, always briefly, always gone before anyone can be certain. Some of them are clearly unrelated. Some of them are less easy to dismiss.

There is one thing I do know. Isobel still wakes sometimes in the night. I know this not because I am there when it happens—it is too soon for that, and we are both old enough to understand the difference between what exists and what is ready—but because she has told me, in the way she tells me things now, which is directly and without the old guards she used to keep.

She wakes, she says, with a name on her lips that she cannot quite remember in the morning. And with an image: two green lights in the dark, watching her with an attention from which there is no looking away.

The green eyes of Bast.